

Women Peace and Security in Yemen

A plea for the re-engagement of local voices

A brief history

Five years after the Fourth World Conference on Women, which led to the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995, UNSCR 1325 was adopted on the 31st of October 2000. UNSCR 1325 was backed by decades of feminist advocacy and emerging insights from peace and gender studies, and reframed peace and security beyond state-centric military approaches. It introduced a human security perspective that acknowledged the need for inclusive and gender-sensitive approaches to build sustainable peace. As the most translated Security Council resolution ever, it laid the groundwork for a broader Women Peace and Security agenda articulated in nine subsequent resolutions.¹ The four pillars of the agenda (prevention, participation, protection, and relief and recovery) are operationalized through National Action Plans (NAPs), adopted by state authorities. The importance of adopting UNSCR 1325 NAPs is the recognition by states and international bodies of the importance of translating global commitments into tangible, coordinated, and context-specific strategies.

There has been a varied level of interest from states in the South West Asia (SWA) region to adopt UNSCR 1325 NAPs. Yemen specifically adopted its first NAP by December 2019 only, and it already

expired in 2022. Despite significant progress, challenges remain in fully realizing Women Peace and Security (WPS) goals. Women's representation in formal peace negotiations in Yemen is still disproportionately low². Gender-based violence and protection risks for women and girls continues to undermine peace and security as witnessed globally as well.

The underlying study

In South West Asia (SWA) the WPS agenda stands at a pivotal crossroads, shaped by the intersecting realities of protracted conflict, militarization, and the persistent contestation of statehood, as well as resistance towards gender equality and limited space for women's movements in the region. It is within this context that Oxfam, Pax, War Child and CARE International decided to commission a study undertaken by independent consultants Ola Saleh and Joya Elias, with the aim to (i) clarify how WPS has been institutionalized and domesticated in SWA; (ii) surface the contradictions between policy text and lived experience; and (iii) outline what a women's-rights based application of the framework demands of donors, states, and international actors.

The primary audience is the activists seeking analytical tools and strategies. A secondary audience includes international

¹ 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009), 1889 (2009), 1960 (2010), 2106 (2013), 2122 (2013), 2242 (2015), 2467 (2019), and 2493 (2019)

² The Women, Peace and Security Agenda: 20 years after <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/mosambik/17353.pdf>

NGOs, multilateral organizations, and diplomats who shape funding and policy architectures, and researchers who document and translate feminist practice into influence.

Drawing on interviews with women's rights actors and peacebuilders across Palestine, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, as well as a survey of 147 respondents³ and a comprehensive review of regional literature, the study investigated the limitations of a WPS framework that privileges state-centric, technocratic solutions over liberation and justice. This particular policy brief is based on the original study⁴ findings by Saleh and Elias, highlighting the case of Yemen specifically.

Introducing the case of Yemen

In Yemen, the struggle lies in both the deep fragmentation of political authority between the northern and the southern parts of the country, exacerbating women's exclusion and vulnerability, and the hyper-militarization of everyday life. The politically and institutionally fragmented nature of the state has enabled armed actors to target human rights and women rights activists more specifically with gendered violence (kidnappings, killings, smear campaigns, and physical threats), all while excluding them from formal and informal negotiations. Despite this, female insider mediators⁵ continued to establish

themselves in spaces that are impenetrable by other actors, and work to broker local ceasefires and reopen humanitarian lifelines in areas controlled by Ansar Allah (also referred to as the Houthis), often without funding, protection or acknowledgement.

Yemen's WPS NAP structure (approved in December 2019 for 2020-2022 by the Internationally Recognized Government) has been characterized by optics—public visibility to donors and international actors—rather than by genuine ownership from Yemeni women. Civil society groups that were involved were not resourced to contribute to its implementation and later sidelined.

Next to that, women peacebuilders have been systematically excluded from Track 1 peace processes⁶ and the rise of all female security forces such as the Zainabiyat, and Al Fatimiyat, reveals a strategic instrumentalization of womanhood for the purpose of surveilling, disciplining and repressing other women⁷. Their roles are less about gender equity and more about expanding patriarchal control under the guise of moral policing with strong religious connotations. In the southern areas under the control of the internationally recognized government (IRG), female police officers are active in the Family Protection Department in Aden, but they face limitations in authority and recognition.

³ 30 of which from Yemen

⁴ Saleh, O. & Elias, J. Returning to the Radical Roots, October 2025.

⁵ Read here the story of one of these mediators: <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/water-peace-woman-leader-rural-yemen-supports-conflict-resolution>

⁶ Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. (2021). Strategizing Beyond the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda in

Yemen: The Importance of CEDAW. <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/14915>

⁷ Read more about an incidence of repression and violence by female security forces against female peacebuilders: [Yemen: Attack on women protesters in Aden reflects systematic repression, demands urgent investigation and accountability](#)

In Yemen, women's organizations⁸ in places like Taiz⁹ (under IRG control) have continued to operate under fire, literally and figuratively. After being harassed, expelled, and threatened by Houthi forces, women-led groups in Taiz negotiated their way back in. In 2019-2020 they rebuilt trust with local leaders and re-entered areas under siege to secure humanitarian access and implement water infrastructure projects. Their survival was a political strategy of resistance. Civil society activism here looked more like collective leadership, and a grassroots force of nature.¹⁰

While these practices do not 'fit' into the state-centered architecture of the WPS framework, they expose its narrowness. These are examples of how Yemeni women's organizations have made UNSCR 1325 their own. As a famous Arabic proverb goes: 'necessity is the mother of invention'. These women carved out civic space not because the political climate welcomed them in, but because their survival needed it. If these actions had taken place in official spaces or along recognized state-controlled areas, the predisposition would be to call it "progress." But when they occur in places where the regime has collapsed, where donor frameworks have no coordinates, where statehood is no longer the organizing principle, they simply do not make it to reports. Due to the narrow state-based character of the current WPS framework, many grassroots initiatives by

Yemeni women don't fit the WPS framework and its indicators and have not made it into donor reports, yet they do demonstrate a local translation and application of WPS principles worth showcasing. Women Lead Organizations and Women's Rights Organizations tackle extremely complicated and sensitive issues as only they know how. They navigate the complexities by approaching it in a 'Yemeni' way rather than methods imposed by external actors based on a global 'one-size fits all' approach.

The main challenges of women's participation in Yemen

The majority of respondents¹¹ found the civic space in Yemen criminalised or closed with a small margin for operation. In Aden (the areas under IRG control) specifically, civic space is highly militarized, with multiple armed groups constraining women's organizations and limiting safe activism. The 2011 uprising catapulted women from token reformers to 32% of the National Dialogue seats, more than any party bloc, paving the way for criminalizing child marriage and winning six cabinet seats in the 2014 cabinet, yet by 2015 the same visibility put them on militia black lists, pushing many into exile or into anonymous, underground community work that confined itself mostly into the digital space. UN Women, alongside Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed (Former Special Envoy for Yemen)'s team, launched the "National Women's Consensus on Peace and Security" in 2015-2016. They gathered 62 women from

⁸ Led by Sheba Youth Foundation for Development

⁹ Taiz is a frontline, it is divided between Houthis and IRG control and in the latter women activists have slightly more space to operate (comparatively).

¹⁰ Read more about the role of women in the water crisis negotiations in Taiz: <https://www.shebayouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Womens-Local-Mediation-Efforts-in-the-Water-Issue-in-Taiz-Governorate-Case-Study.pdf>

¹¹ 24 out of 30 (80%)

across all governorates and took them to Cyprus. This consensus lasted three years but increased social fractures among women. A Technical Advisory Group (TAG) was later formed to advise donors, UN Women, the UN Special Envoy's office, and others on the situation of women in Yemen. Initially comprising 62 women, the group was reduced to 8 and then 6 members. The TAG team was, over time, quietly dissolved, without any email sent or explanation given.

Initiatives such as the TAG, reveal how international actors have participated in creating so-called “feminist” structures that are both temporary and extractive. These platforms were intended to be inclusive, yet functioned as information harvesting mechanisms, drawing legitimacy and local data from Yemeni women while offering no real transfer of power or accountability in return.

What is urgently needed is not merely re-entry into formal spaces, but to restore the WPS framework, centering the voices of local women leaders, and refusing the instrumentalization of women as mere statistics.

The achievements: mobilization and informal peace-making

- Through sustained mobilisation by women's civil society organisations, women secured 32% of the seats in the 2013-2014 National Dialogue and successfully pushed for the inclusion of a child-marriage-ban clause.
- Women held 4 of the 17 seats on Yemen's Constitution Drafting Committee in 2014, making up about 23,5% of its members, a level of

representation that, while notable, was still below the 30% quota set by the National Dialogue Conference. The committee's members continue to hold their positions and remain active until a referendum on the new constitution takes place.

- Since the beginning of the conflict in Yemen in 2015, women have played instrumental roles as informal peacemakers in their communities. Despite being excluded from formal negotiations, Yemeni women have mediated inter- and intra-community disputes including the release of detainees, opening humanitarian corridors and stopping the recruitment of children by armed actors. Women mediators in Taiz reopened water-truck access and hospital safe-passage in the first-ever humanitarian-led mediations with Ansar Allah.
- Yemeni civil society organizations and women's groups advocated for increased female representation in the judiciary, particularly in the Supreme Court, leading to the first female judge in the Supreme Judicial Council in 2022.
- In 2024 women's organisations advocated for the appointment of more women in local decision-making committees in Aden. Through their efforts, the general administration appointed 365 women to assume various decision-making roles across the community committees, substantially exceeding the initial expectations set by the advocacy campaign. This outcome marked a significant milestone in promoting gender equality and empowering women within the political and social spheres of the community. This

example demonstrates how grassroots women's advocacy has translated into concrete WPS outcomes at the local level, even within a fragmented governance context.

Best practices: Re-engagement of local voices through hybrid peace tracks

In Yemen, where elite peace negotiations are inaccessible and disconnected from the realities of women outside the epicenter of power, women have built hybrid tracks rooted in local legitimacy and collective voice. Through decentralized listening sessions and trusted intermediaries, they refused to conform to frameworks of Track I or II diplomacy. Yemeni women leaders have also exposed international actors who champion inclusion rhetorically but rarely use their leverage to demand it materializes. The historical experience of UN Special Envoy Jamal Benomar's intervention, however, is a rare but powerful counter example. It demonstrated that international actors do, in fact, have tools at their disposal to shift political dynamics, when they are willing to use them. One activist mentioned: 'The whole status of the UN was very strong with UN Special Envoy for Yemen Jamal Benomar. He fought to include women in public policy spaces. During a meeting to form a new government after the National Dialogue, political parties refused women's participation. He pushed back against it and used soft power on political parties to allow youth and women into the meeting, and thus, be included in the negotiations.'

The tactic of using trusted intermediaries, like community committees and local

mediators, to carry concerns upward mimics oral traditions and community organizing methods long practiced by feminist movements worldwide. It is a best practice of how international actors can be true allies by using their influence in an indirect, relational, and cumulative way; a form of model of pushing for the full, equal, direct, safe and meaningful participation of women in transitional justice processes, one that is not performative, but deeply political.

In conclusion, these good practices and tactical innovations from Yemen contest a common myth: that inclusion in formal WPS spaces inherently brings power. Instead, women leaders need policy spaces that prioritize foundational knowledge over procedural acceptance, that value critique over tokenism, and that are accountable to movements, not mandates. By investing in grassroots advocacy, activism, and community agency, social movements fighting for women's rights are not just influencing policy, they are seeking to create it.

Recommendations

To UN member states and donors

- Support and uphold women and girls in Yemen's right to full, equal, direct, safe and meaningful participation at all levels of formal and informal decision-making bodies that work on conflict prevention, mitigation and resolution, peacebuilding and peacemaking. It is essential to recapture the transformative intent behind the WPS agenda by identifying ways to engage women and girls in a

systematic, timely and transparent manner. UN agencies, member states and donors should thus ensure that the peace processes or negotiations they host or fund have the full, equal, safe and meaningful participation of diverse women's organizations and individual women, including in decision-making roles. This includes providing timely support and proactively funding their participation in peace processes, in line with UNSCRs 1325 and 2242.

- Expand the legal WPS framework and NAPs to recognize oral histories, embodied experience, non-academic theories, and southern-led knowledge processes as legitimate forms of expertise, challenging Eurocentric hierarchies that privilege donor or academic narratives over lived realities.
- The safe participation in the UN system of women's organizations, including women peacebuilders and human rights defenders. The WPS framework adopted by the UN Security Council (UNSC) requires that women's participation in decisions that will impact their lives and communities is required on a regular basis and must enable them to shape these decisions, not just participate in consultations. The UN system, particularly the UNSC, must lead by example in this respect. For example, UNSC Members should be proactive by inviting and supporting women civil society representatives to speak on all country situations on the

Council's agenda, prioritizing invitations to briefers who have been independently selected by civil society networks and represent a diversity of views and constituencies. They should provide political, logistical and financial support, including assistance to obtain visas or access the necessary technology, so that civil society briefers can fully and safely engage with the Council in person or virtually free of the risk of reprisal. This would then model to the rest of the UN system what good practice looks like in relation to the full, equal, safe and meaningful engagement of women civil society leaders.

- Reorient their approach to how the WPS framework is applied by centering the lived experiences of women and girls in conflict affected communities at all times, particularly in relation to issues around protection, participation, and accountability
- Support alliances and international solidarity that amplify marginalized voices and foster collective action across the region and beyond.
- Use soft power and intermediaries (fed by demands from the grassroots) to influence political processes in Yemen, leading to full, equal, direct, safe and meaningful participation of women.
- Create regional feminist funds and economic initiatives led by women to reduce dependency on unpredictable international aid.
- Promote South-South cooperation for resource and knowledge exchange as well as international solidarity and movement building.

To WLOs, WROs and activists

- Invest in the documentation of women's experiences and the creation of local knowledge that aligns global theories with lived realities.
- Institutionalize mechanisms for regular feedback on WPS from grassroots actors and conflict-affected communities.
- Develop flexible, locally driven action plans based on context-specific gender and conflict analysis that reflect community needs, priorities and realities.
- Ensure the inclusion of diverse women, especially from marginalized backgrounds, in agenda-setting and the implementation and evaluation of NAPs.
- Engage Men as Allies and actors of change: involve men and boys as partners in challenging structural barriers, recognizing the diversity of their experiences and roles.
- Use digital tools, alternative media, and the arts to circumvent censorship, expand reach, and preserve feminist memory.
- Invest in digital safety training and infrastructure to protect activists from surveillance and harassment.
- Create mentorship and leadership development programs that prioritize marginalized and underrepresented groups.

Conclusion

The WPS agenda, as currently implemented, too often functions as a technocratic shell—one that risks reinforcing the very structures of violence and exclusion it was meant to dismantle.

Yet, the region's social movements fighting for women's rights, specifically those from Yemen, have demonstrated extraordinary resilience, creativity, and political imagination. In their context of conflict, and fragmented governance, Yemeni women have refused to be silenced—building alternative ways of care and resistance and forging new forms of solidarity that transcend borders and generations. Their strategies—ranging from sustained mobilization to informal peace-making—offer a blueprint for a radically reimagined WPS agenda.