



Policy brief

Women's role in peace and security in Yemen

The project studied women's experiences of the war in Yemen and their societal roles in the current conflict context. Research was conducted in four locations for that purpose – two districts in each of Aden and Ibb governorates. The research objectives were to better understand a) how women have been affected by the conflict in the research locations, b) what roles women play in conflict transformation and peacebuilding in the two targeted areas, c) what opportunities exist for women to play a role in peacebuilding in their areas.

The research demonstrates the ways in which women in Aden and Ibb have been affected by the conflict, highlighting nationwide phenomena as well as localised experiences of the conflict. It provides information on the roles that women play in engaging in war efforts or striving to mitigate the devastating impacts of the conflict and build peace. In turn, an understanding of women's experiences of the conflict and their roles in society provides a strong basis for identifying opportunities for women to play an active part in peacebuilding in Yemen, and defining ways for national and international actors to support ongoing efforts.

Key findings of the research

First and foremost, this research shows that women are having a positive impact on sustaining community cohesion and promoting peace at the local level through diverse strategies, including within their families, in humanitarian work, psychosocial support, and in civic life. Research participants offered a holistic understanding of what constitutes peace - which they perceived as not only being about ending the war but further about ensuring access to basic services, including security. This highlights that women's roles in relation to peace and security during the conflict have not always aligned with preconceptions about their roles in Yemeni society. In particular, some women in Aden reported that the war has empowered them and made them more resilient and more self-reliant than before, emphasising how conflict can affect gender roles in positive as well as negative ways. It has to be stressed however, that the conflict has also had an isolating impact on women, as a gendered understanding of risk obliges them to stay at home. In fact, women identified several security obstacles to their public participation, including checkpoints, restrictions by their families due to security concerns, threats posed by armed groups, and the resurgence of restrictive gender norms promoted by conservative groups.

Women's biggest concerns related to the provision of security and livelihoods. The proliferation of weapons and armed groups and the general sense of lawlessness were the most often cited security concerns. Unemployment, inflation, currency depreciation, shortages in essential goods, and the threat of losing the head of household constituted significant livelihoods concerns. In addition, it appeared that women displaced by the war are the most vulnerable and are often excluded from community protection mechanisms. Child protection also emerged as an important area of concern, with participants citing random shootings and unexploded ordinance, recruitment of children into armed groups, exposure to violent political and religious ideologies, as well as drugs.

Furthermore, participants reported that the war had negatively affected women's mental health, especially in Ibb. While in Aden the war is seen to be over, people in Ibb feel that they are still experiencing the worst of

the conflict. Community cohesion has also suffered more profoundly in Ibb, where respondents described an increase in divisions due to political and sectarian rhetoric. In contrast, in Aden the conflict has largely been understood as one between 'outsiders' (Ansar Allah/Saleh forces) and the community.

Finally, women's understanding of their contributions to peace varied according to their specific conflict experiences. In Aden, women's activities such as preparing and delivering food and water for fighters, nursing the wounded, manning checkpoints, and – in a small number of cases – taking up arms were cited as contributions to peace. Participants identified opportunities for women's participation in peacebuilding, including campaigns against violence and the bearing of arms; awareness-raising campaigns about community peace and education, particularly engaging youth; promoting the inclusion of women across all levels of decision-making, including in the security sector; psychosocial support within their communities; and child protection initiatives.

From the research findings relating to the challenges faced by women-led initiatives, it became apparent that those initiatives need direct financial and institutional support, including from the international community in areas not directly related to humanitarian efforts. Capacity-building in technical and practical subjects should also be offered in areas such as psychosocial support, child protection, conflict transformation, and disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR).

Implications for practitioners and policymakers, and key recommendations:

The conclusions presented below are to be understood in the context of a country fragmented by war, with no unified national government. As such, in many areas of the country the civilian population suffers from a governance vacuum, compounded by economic crisis. This has led Yemenis to come together at the community level in order to fill in the gaps as well as adapt to absent – or at best dysfunctional – government services in the areas of security, healthcare, sanitation, and education, to cite a few. Consequently, the role of local authorities is ever more important in regard to governance, security, and service provision. It is however important to stress that a lack of revenue and capacity constitutes a significant challenge for local authorities to respond to the population's needs. The analysis presented therefore accounts for this reality, where decisions are primarily made at the local level, even more so than before the conflict.

On gender norms and conflict

A significant research finding concerns the distance between society's expectations and the realities of women's role in society. Women are not passive spectators of the conflict in Yemen but are actively involved: from contributing to the war effort and combat, to protecting their families, to leading humanitarian relief efforts, or reducing tensions and promoting cohesion within their communities. Regardless of whether women's efforts are promoting or reducing conflict, women are playing a significant role, alongside men, in shaping their country's trajectory. However, the reality of women's roles in the current conflict context in Yemen does not reflect expectations about women's roles, which usually see them confined to the domestic space, or as primarily humanitarian in the public sphere. From those women – especially in Aden – who reported having extended their role in their community, we can see one of the unexpected ways in which wartime affects gender roles and may open up opportunities for longer term gender norm changes.

In order to provide appropriate support to peacebuilding and conflict mitigation efforts in Yemen, intervening actors need to understand the diverse roles that women play in the present conflict context. In fact, women's roles are as varied as their perspectives on the conflict, and while some women will be active in preventing young men from joining the fighting, others will mobilise fighters and encourage men to enlist. Gender analysis of conflict dynamics should therefore underpin effective peacebuilding and conflict mitigation interventions.

On responding to the threats posed to women

This research has documented some of the specific security threats that pose challenges to women's involvement in public life. It has further provided insight into the growth of conservative notions around women's participation, and the threats posed by armed groups to activists and civil society groups. While many women confront those threats, the creation of a more secure environment is essential for widening women's participation in conflict transformation and peacebuilding. Local and national authorities should promote and protect women's participation in the public sphere. Any peacebuilding and stabilisation interventions should therefore be designed around a thorough understanding of the threats that women face in the particular conflict context.

Another obstacle to women's participation is the notion of female vulnerability in times of insecurity, which leads to increased restrictions on women's movement by their families. While high levels of insecurity have a humanitarian impact on all Yemenis, and women face specific threats from gender-based violence, gendered interpretations of risk and vulnerability within the family also create constraints for women. Many of the security concerns raised by women, such as banditry, murder, theft, abduction, and harassment, are not just gender specific but general public security issues, which require a policing and criminal justice response. This stresses the importance of addressing threats to public security, in particular in Aden and other governorates where new security institutions have been set up. Effective and accountable policing is therefore an essential measure for tackling these security concerns. Equally, and as mentioned by Adeni research participants, efforts to enhance the standards of security provision should further take into account roles for women in the police force.

Additionally, the threats posed to children by the ongoing violence and the psychological impact of the conflict on communities were a major concern expressed by research participants. This suggests a need for greater child protection and support to existing local initiatives, ranging from preventing exposure to unexploded ordinance, education initiatives (including the reopening of schools and encouraging re-enrolment in schools), and preventing child enlistment in armed groups. In addition, psychological trauma responses must be supported, including through capacity-building, funding, and international exchange programmes offered to local Yemeni organisations.

On supporting women's peacebuilding efforts

Research participants identified specific ways in which women's peacebuilding can be supported by local and national authorities as well as the international community. In particular, local women-led initiatives require direct financial and institutional support. The scale-up of humanitarian activities after the escalation of conflict in 2015 led to a decrease in funding for Yemeni civil society organisations and NGOs. Consequently, many Yemeni organisations are struggling to sustain themselves with limited opportunities for funding while facing a multitude of other challenges. Women-led initiatives usually require only small amounts of funding; donors should therefore redesign mechanisms for making funds available in order to suit the needs of smaller entities. In addition, capacity-building in technical and practical subjects should be offered; areas that are relevant include psychosocial support, child protection, conflict transformation, local governance, and DDR.

At the same time, this support must not overlook the important role women play within their communities, particularly in rural areas where civil society activity is less common. For example, women in the rural research location have – through their focus on their families, neighbourhoods, and their assistance to IDPs – made important contributions to peace and security, which a narrow focus on conflict resolution or mediation efforts is likely to overlook. It is therefore necessary to embrace a broad understanding of peacebuilding in order to strengthen organic efforts. These include the everyday contributions of women to their families and communities, which may seem ordinary but are in fact vital for social cohesion. The possibilities of supporting women's conflict mitigation and peacebuilding strategies are thus as pluralistic as the strategies themselves, and should be built on and strengthened.