



POLICY BRIEF: WOMEN, PEACE, AND SECURITY IN YEMEN

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The protracted conflict in Yemen has deeply fractured the country's political and social fabric, intensifying structural inequalities and displacing millions. Amid this devastation, Yemeni women have emerged not as passive victims but as vital peace actors, leading in grassroots peacebuilding, mediation, and humanitarian response throughout the conflict, often without protection, funding, or formal recognition. Their work has filled institutional voids left by state collapse, often under threat and with minimal recognition or protection.

In 2020, Yemen's first National Action Plan (NAP) on UNSCR 1325 marked a milestone in national acknowledgment of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda. Developed through collaborative efforts among ministries, civil society, and international partners, the NAP aimed to integrate women into peace and recovery efforts. However, implementation fell short due to severe fragmentation of authority, ideological resistance, particularly in areas under Houthi control, shrinking civic space, and the absence of accountability or funding mechanisms.

Despite these challenges, women-led initiatives have become foundational to localized peacebuilding, humanitarian access, and survivor-centered advocacy. In regions like Marib and Taiz, women have mediated tribal disputes, resolved revenge killings, and facilitated critical services for displaced populations. Across all regions, they continue to adapt the WPS framework to local realities, even when forced to avoid its explicit language due to politicization and repression.

This brief outlines Yemen's political and security context, the gendered impact of the conflict, the evolution of the WPS agenda, and women's transformative roles. It concludes with strategic recommendations to institutionalize women's leadership, ensure their protection, and anchor inclusive peacebuilding within Yemen's future transition.

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Over a decade of conflict in Yemen has led to the collapse of state institutions, the rise of armed actors, and one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises. Women have faced growing repression and insecurity, yet have remained central to community survival, conflict mediation, and rights advocacy.

The WPS agenda offers a framework to formalize and protect women's contributions to peacebuilding. In 2020, Yemen adopted a National Action Plan (NAP) on UNSCR 1325. While the plan represented an important step in institutionalizing women's roles in peace and security, however, the NAP's fragmented implementation, limited geographic reach, and lack of political will have constrained its transformative potential.

Drawing on Yemen's context analysis, gendered impacts, achievements, challenges, and recommendations, this brief distills critical findings on the updated WPS in Yemen and integrates insights from Yemeni women across the country's divided regions. Amid state collapse, ideological repression, and persistent gender-based violence, women's participation in peacebuilding has taken root at the local level. Through the lens of the WPS agenda, this brief emphasizes the urgent need to center women not only as beneficiaries of aid or victims of war but as agents of peace, justice, and long-term recovery. The brief synthesizes these inputs to assess Yemen's WPS agenda from both policy and grassroots perspectives, offering a roadmap for inclusive peacebuilding in an unstable context.

POLITICAL AND SECURITY CONTEXT

Yemen's political and security landscape remains deeply fractured, shaped by the collapse of centralized governance, competing armed actors, and entrenched ideological divisions. Since the outbreak of conflict in 2014, the country has been governed by multiple power centers: the internationally recognized government, the Houthi de facto authorities, southern transitional actors, and various tribal and armed groups. This fragmentation has produced uneven access to rights, justice, and basic services, particularly for women.

In Houthi-controlled areas, an increasingly restrictive socio-religious order has institutionalized the exclusion of women from public and civic life. Women face formal travel restrictions, shrinking civic space, and rising surveillance, particularly those affiliated with civil society. Terms such as "gender" and "WPS" have been stigmatized, forcing activists to reframe their advocacy in less politicized language such as "women's empowerment." Women's mobility, participation, and protection are regularly curtailed through both official regulations and informal enforcement at checkpoints.

In areas under government control, while civic space is relatively more open, structural weaknesses and institutional volatility persist. Ministries such as the Ministry of Human Rights and the National Women's Committee suffer from limited mandates and underfunding. Women's representation in formal political bodies remains tokenistic or altogether absent. The Presidential Leadership Council, formed in 2022, includes no women, and peace delegations continue to marginalize feminist voices. Political

decision-makers often treat women's rights as secondary to broader security and sovereignty concerns.

This context has emboldened exclusionary narratives and patriarchal actors across the political spectrum. Emerging armed groups, whether ideological, tribal, or paramilitary, have filled the void left by state institutions, often promoting agendas hostile to gender equality. The result is not only a vacuum in inclusive governance but also an expanding ideological backlash that views feminist discourse as a threat.

Against this backdrop, the WPS agenda in Yemen must contend not only with the consequences of conflict, but with a multilayered ecosystem of repression, underrepresentation, and institutional fragility. Advancing women's participation and protection requires both policy reform and transformative shifts in political culture.

WOMEN'S ROLES IN CONFLICT RESPONSE AND PEACEBUILDING

Yemeni women have played a critical role in mediating local disputes, delivering aid, reopening services, and facilitating reconciliation between communities. In the absence of functioning institutions, they have stepped in as de facto peacebuilders and service coordinators.

Women have led grassroots negotiations to release detainees, prevent child recruitment, and resolve tribal or familial conflicts. Their embedded presence in schools, neighborhoods, and humanitarian work has enabled early warning and rapid de-escalation in areas prone to violence.

Civil society organisations—many of them women-led—have served as essential bridges between communities and humanitarian actors, negotiating access and coordinating relief in areas where international agencies struggle to operate.

Women's groups have also organized consultative dialogues, developed survivor-centered justice proposals, and participated in national and regional advocacy to advance gender-sensitive peace frameworks. However, their participation in formal peace processes remains minimal and often symbolic.

Despite threats and shrinking space, Yemeni women continue to build peace from the ground up, using localized, adaptive strategies that respond to political, cultural, and security constraints.

GENDERED IMPACT OF CONFLICT

The war in Yemen has profoundly impacted women and girls, intensifying existing inequalities and exposing them to intersecting forms of violence, insecurity, and deprivation. Women constitute over 75% of Yemen's displaced population, and nearly

one in four displaced households are now female-headed most without reliable income, legal protections, or access to essential services.¹

Gender-based violence (GBV) has surged amid the collapse of protection systems. Displaced women and girls face acute risks of early and forced marriage, sexual violence, and exploitation, particularly in informal camps where overcrowding, lack of privacy, and fear of reprisal hinder any safe reporting. Justice mechanisms remain dysfunctional or absent, and in some areas, authorities actively block access to GBV services.

Houthi-imposed mahram rules restrict women's mobility, blocking access to work, education, or healthcare. These restrictions are enforced through checkpoints and bureaucratic barriers, and women have been arrested or publicly shamed for non-compliance.

The collapse of the healthcare system has had a devastating impact on maternal and reproductive health. More than half of the country's health facilities are no longer functional. Pregnant and lactating women suffer from acute malnutrition, and life-saving services, including emergency obstetric care and family planning have become inaccessible in many regions. Meanwhile, mental health support remains largely unavailable despite widespread conflict-related trauma.

Economic hardship has forced many women into new roles as providers and protectors of their families, yet they continue to face legal, social, and logistical barriers to secure employment. Most work in informal sectors without protections, exposing them to further exploitation and risk.

Beyond the immediate harm, the conflict has limited women's ability to organize, advocate, and lead. Their resilience remains a pillar of community survival and adaptation, but without structural support and recognition. Their contributions risk being overlooked, and their needs ignored in both humanitarian response and long-term recovery planning.

EVOLUTION OF YEMEN'S WPS AGENDA

The 2020–2022 Yemen NAP on UNSCR 1325 marked a foundational step in institutionalizing the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda within a deeply fragmented conflict landscape. Developed through multi-stakeholder consultations led by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, with substantial input from civil society and international partners, the NAP aimed to mainstream gender across governance, protection, and recovery efforts.

Framed around four pillars— participation, prevention, protection, and relief and recovery— the NAP reflected on intersecting challenges faced by Yemeni women. It acknowledged not only the physical risks of war but also the structural barriers to women's mobility and participation. The plan's integration with international legal

¹ <https://www.care.org/media-and-press/an-average-of-six-women-killed-every-week-in-yemen-as-a-result-of-the-ongoing-conflict/>

frameworks such as CEDAW and the Geneva Conventions anchored it within a global accountability structure.

Despite its promise, implementation of the first NAP faced profound challenges. Fragmented governance, lack of operational funding, limited institutional capacity, and the criminalization of gender, particularly in Houthi-controlled areas, undermined its rollout. Many ministries lacked designated gender units or budgets to operationalize the plan, and parallel authorities questioned the legitimacy of a unified national framework.

Nevertheless, the NAP served as an important reference point for feminist advocacy and policy dialogue. Women's organisations leveraged its language to claim space in local governance, integrate WPS principles into humanitarian programming, and train women in mediation, negotiation, and transitional justice. Given political sensitivities, activists adapted the discourse, substituting terms like "WPS" with "women's empowerment" or "community resilience" to sustain engagement in hostile environments.

Localization emerged as a key strength of the first NAP. Women-led groups translated the plan's priorities into community-based action across diverse governorates, ranging from Taiz to Marib and Hadramawt, where central authority was absent. These bottom-up efforts demonstrated both the adaptability of the WPS agenda and the capacity of local actors to build peace despite national-level paralysis.

The 2020–2022 NAP created a policy precedent, fostered cross-sectoral coordination, and opened space for dialogue on gender and peace. The delayed second NAP must now build on this foundation with more inclusive consultations, sustained funding, localized ownership, and mechanisms for accountability.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

Key Achievements on Women, Peace, and Security in Yemen

- **Adoption of Yemen's First National Action Plan (2020–2022):** The NAP represented a foundational step toward institutionalizing the WPS agenda. It was developed through collaborative consultations among ministries, civil society, and international partners, aligning with UNSCR 1325's four pillars and laying the groundwork for gender-responsive peacebuilding frameworks.
- **Formation of the National WPS Coordination Committee:** This multi-sectoral body, comprising government institutions and civil society, was established to oversee implementation, monitor progress, and mobilize stakeholder engagement around WPS priorities.
- **Capacity Building and Political Empowerment:** Through civil society-led efforts, significant number of Yemeni women have been equipped with skills in mediation, transitional justice, constitutional processes, and human rights documentation, broadening their engagement in peacebuilding, accountability, and transitional governance across diverse regions.
- **Localization and Grassroots Action:** Civil society organisations localized the WPS agenda by integrating its principles into humanitarian, protection, and education programs. In contexts with limited state presence, local actors

adapted WPS language to culturally resonant terms like "social cohesion" and "women's safety," enabling sustained engagement.

- **Women-Led Mediation and Social Reconciliation:** Yemeni women played instrumental roles in mediating local conflicts, securing detainee releases, and negotiated ceasefires. In governorates like Taiz and Marib, women led community dialogues on land disputes, access to services, and tribal retaliation, reinforcing their legitimacy in peacebuilding.
- **Humanitarian Leadership and Service Delivery:** Women's networks helped deliver aid in conflict-affected and hard-to-reach areas, supported displaced populations, and filled critical governance gaps through informal service coordination and community mobilization.
- **Survivor-Led Protection and Legal Advocacy:** Feminist organisations developed legal proposals, documented violations, and supported survivors of gender-based violence, arbitrary detention, and cyber-harassment. Their advocacy contributed to the creation of responsive mechanisms, including protection units and digital safety campaigns.
- **Regional and International Engagement:** Yemeni women's rights defenders and peacebuilders engaged in Track I and Track II processes, UN consultations, and Arab regional networks. Their voices shaped international understanding of the conflict and emphasized the centrality of women to just and sustainable peace.

KEY CHALLENGES

- **Fragmented Governance and NAP Implementation Gaps:** Yemen's deeply divided political landscape and institutional fragmentation have severely hindered the rollout and monitoring of the 2020–2022 NAP. The absence of unified authority across territories made coordination, accountability, and follow-through on WPS commitments nearly impossible.
- **Ideological Resistance and Criminalization of Gender Discourse:** The WPS agenda has faced growing ideological pushback. In areas controlled by de facto authorities, particularly the Houthis, terms like "gender" have been stigmatized or banned, forcing women-led initiatives to reframe their work under depoliticized terminology to avoid rejection or punitive measures.
- **Mobility Restrictions and Shrinking Civic Space:** Enforced "mahram" policies and surveillance have curtailed women's mobility in northern governorates, severely limiting their access to healthcare, livelihoods, and participation in peacebuilding. Across all regions, civic space has contracted, with women activists targeted by harassment, detention, and digital intimidation.
- **Security Threats and Protection Risks:** Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and peacebuilders operate under constant threat. Arbitrary arrests, smear campaigns, and retaliatory violence against women working with international organisations or in advocacy roles have eroded trust and silenced many local voices.
- **Institutional Weakness and Limited State Capacity:** Ministries and public institutions, especially those mandated to work on gender, lack the political

authority, staffing, and financial resources necessary to implement WPS mandates. In contested areas, these institutions are often non-operational or stripped of their legitimacy.

- **Legal and Protection Voids:** Gender-based violence (GBV) is pervasive and underreported, with survivors having little access to justice or survivor-centered services. Law enforcement mechanisms are inconsistent, politicized, or entirely absent, especially in remote and conflict-affected areas.
- **Exclusion from Services and Mental Health Neglect:** Urban bias in service provision has excluded rural, displaced, and marginalized women from essential support. Psychosocial trauma remains largely unaddressed, with few mental health services available and stigma deterring help-seeking behaviors.
- **Dependence on Donor-Driven Models:** Much of the WPS work in Yemen remains externally funded and project-based. This limits sustainability, constrains local ownership, and often prioritizes donor timelines over community-rooted transformation. Localization and long-term institutional support are urgently needed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Yemeni Institutions and Civil Society

- **Develop a Second-Generation National Action Plan (2025–2028):**
Build on lessons from the first NAP by ensuring localized consultations, inclusive ownership across regions, and stronger mechanisms for monitoring, accountability, and financing.
- **Safeguard Civic Space for Women:**
Advocate for legal and institutional protections for women activists and rights defenders. Push back against mahram-based mobility restrictions, defamation, and arbitrary detention targeting women in public life.
- **Institutionalize Women's Roles in Peace and Governance:**
Enforce gender quotas in transitional and national institutions. Ensure women's meaningful participation in ceasefire monitoring, political dialogue, and transitional governance frameworks as co-leaders.
- **Advance WPS Localization:**
Support community-driven initiatives that adapt WPS principles to humanitarian, protection, and education programming. Prioritize rural, conflict-affected areas where women are already playing informal leadership roles.

For International Donors and Partners

- **Ensure Long-Term, Flexible Funding for Women-Led Efforts:**
Shift from short-term, project-based support to sustained core funding models that empower women-led and community-based organisations, especially those operating in high-risk areas.
- **Strengthen Survivor-Centered Protection Systems:**
Expand access to legal aid, psychosocial services, trauma-informed care, and

GBV case management across both government- and Houthi-controlled territories. Ensure these services are safe, confidential, and culturally sensitive.

- **Foster Cross-Territorial and Regional Coordination:**
Facilitate learning and strategy-sharing across Yemen's fragmented territories. Support knowledge exchange platforms, joint advocacy spaces, and collective capacity building among women's groups and peacebuilders.

Cross-Cutting

- **Link WPS to Transitional Justice and Legal Reform:**
Support women's roles in documentation, legal literacy, and survivor advocacy to inform future justice and accountability frameworks. Ensure women's experiences shape transitional justice mechanisms from the outset.
- **Integrate WPS in Humanitarian Strategy and Service Delivery:**
Embed gender-sensitive approaches and women's leadership in all aspects of relief, recovery, and resilience programming. Promote intersectional protection frameworks for displaced, rural, and marginalized women.
- **Mainstream Gender-Responsive Governance:**
Encourage the institutionalization of WPS principles across ministries, public institutions, and local councils. Invest in inclusive policy reform, gender-responsive budgeting, and institutional gender units.

CONCLUSION

Yemeni women have emerged as the backbone of community resilience, peacebuilding, and rights advocacy throughout the country's protracted conflict. Their leadership, often informal and under-recognized, has proven essential in a context of state collapse, militarization, and ideological repression. Despite systemic exclusion, shrinking civic space, and ideological backlash, they have led mediation efforts, sustained humanitarian responses, and defended basic rights in the most fragmented and hostile environments.

The 2020–2022 NAP represented a milestone in acknowledging women's roles in peace and security. Yet, its limited implementation revealed the need for a deeper structural transformation, one that not only protects women but empowers them as core actors in shaping Yemen's future.

As Yemen stands at a crossroads, the next generation of the WPS agenda must go beyond traditional frameworks. It must recognize Yemeni women not simply as stakeholders but as architects of peace, justice, and sustainable recovery. Achieving this vision demands inclusive governance, localized ownership, and a collective political will to institutionalize women's leadership across all levels of decision-making.

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