



# Obstacles to Women's **Participation**

in the Yemeni Scene During the War

— Policy Paper —

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## About project:

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Research Guidance Project (RGP), implemented by Resonate! Yemen with funding from Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), aims at promoting youth role through engaging them in public policymaking and supporting Yemen's peacebuilding process to enable youth to influence public policies and solve problems related to community cohesion and local governance. This effort is within Resonate! strategic goal of promoting youth voices and bringing them to decision-making positions.

## Executive Summary :

More than 14 million women in Yemen live under the constraint of certain societal customs and traditions, the siege of religious groups, and the disregard of political organizations, despite the adoption by the United Nations Security Council of Resolution (1325) on women, peace and security in Yemen<sup>1</sup>. This has reflected in the exclusion of women from influencing public life. However, women did not stand idly by, for pioneering Yemeni women emerged, who were able to succeed in reaching the forefront of society in various fields, and reaching positions of influence in the decision and membership of committees and international organizations. Moreover, despite the deliberate official and societal exclusion of women and the reduction of their presence in the public scene, many Yemeni women struggle to prove their presence in society, strive for qualification and development, and to participate in community activities, initiatives and political events. Most of these attempts were crowned with the success of Yemeni women in their strong participation in the political events of 2011. In addition, they were granted a quota for women at the National Dialogue Conference, the outcomes of which included emphasizing the role of women in society and their participation in public life<sup>2</sup>.

“Despite the recovery of women's participation in social and political life during the period 2014 - 2011, all the gains achieved by women during that period have regressed and a deliberate exclusion approach for women has been applied since 2015 from various political and societal parties.”

The events of September 2014 and the start of the internal conflict represented a clear obstacle that stopped the wheel of participation of Yemeni women, which had recently started. Several political parties entered the arena to push the wheel of women back and replace them with the wheels of the tank and cannons with the outbreak of war in 2015. This led to the weakening of the role of women and their absence in many cases from active participation in society as a result of a number of obstacles that blocked the way of Yemeni women due to the war and the current crises.<sup>3</sup>

This paper addressed the most prominent obstacles of the war that limited women's participation in the Yemeni scene, including: the decline in the application of constitutional and legal texts supporting the participation of Yemeni women in society, the restrictive practices against women during the war by the existing authorities, the promotion of the practice of customs and traditions that restrict women's participation in society, the discourse of religious and media incitement against women's participation in public life, the policy of gender segregation, movement restrictions, and the impact of relief works on the human rights work of civil society.

The study also reached a set of recommendations that focused on the dimension of community awareness and advocacy campaigns to change the image and enhance women's participation in the Yemeni scene, the role of international organizations in promoting women's participation in society, and finally the pivotal role of decision-makers and official bodies in promoting women's participation in society as a constitutional and legal obligation within the framework of unified citizenship.

**Keywords:** Yemeni women, community participation, war in Yemen, women's participation.

## Introduction :

Reflecting the international orientations, in October 2000, the United Nations Resolution 1325, the first official legal document, was issued by the Security Council on women, peace and security. It affirms the importance of the role of women in conflict prevention, resolution and peacebuilding, and the importance of their equal contribution with men and full participation in society<sup>4</sup>. However, more than two decades have passed since the issuance of the resolution. Yemeni women are still looking to obtain their rights that they have lost amid political conflicts and social restrictions imposed on them due to the war and the decline in development indicators in Yemen.<sup>5</sup>

The years-long war in Yemen has contributed to a significant weakness of state institutions, making community-work more necessary to cover the government deficit resulting from the war and help those in need and affected by the conflict.<sup>6</sup> The purpose is the continuousness of the wheel of development in a country that lags far behind the rest of the world in all sectors. It was necessary to join all efforts to participate in the renaissance of society and mitigate the damage of war.<sup>7</sup>

Because women are half of the population of Yemeni society (about 14.8 million women),<sup>8</sup> women's participation was very important in the renaissance of society before the war. Yemeni women achieved many successes, held many senior positions and contributed to decision-making<sup>9</sup>. A study in this regard indicated that %81 of the women surveyed confirmed that they had good jobs and social status before the war, but the war returned women to square zero, and Yemeni women returned to demand their rights to work and social and political participation as before. Because of the obstacles inflicted on Yemeni women due to the war and conflict, many companies and businesses that were available to women have faltered, leaving them with two options: surrender to the obstacles of war and the resulting circumstances, or to face of obstacles<sup>10</sup>. Indeed, several women emerged during the war period, and they played heroic roles in relief and community work, and even at the economic level, where many women struggled to support their families and succeeded in creating business projects and in working despite all the obstacles they face because of the war, family, and society. Yemeni women still face these obstacles until the moment of writing this study.<sup>11</sup>

This paper sheds light on the obstacles that limit women's participation during the war, whether those related to practices and decisions that hinder Yemeni women's participation in public life or those related to the social and security conditions that women face in participating in public life during the war period. The paper concludes with a set of recommendations to reactivate the role of women in society under the current circumstances.

Moreover, the data was collected during September and October 2022, where 23 in-depth interviews were conducted. The interviews were conducted with 15 Yemeni women inside Yemen, and 4 women outside Yemen. Four of them were with civil organizations, and seven interviews with representatives from the private sector, consultants and journalists.

The interviews were conducted online via Zoom (on mobiles) due to the security conditions and the difficulty of carrying out direct interviews. The target sample in the interviews were Yemeni women who have been socially involved inside Yemen and abroad. They were from several governorates (Sana'a, Taiz, Dhamar, Aden, Hadhramout) and those from abroad were in Egypt and Turkey. Although many women were contacted, some politely refused to participate for security and social reasons, for they believed that they may be exposed to risks from parents and society if participated in this study. Previous library sources that discuss the reality of Yemeni women's participation in society were also consulted, and electronic platforms were used to search for the obstacles to women's participation and issues that concern them.

### **Decline in the implementation of constitutional and legal provisions that support the participation of Yemeni women in society**

Despite the Yemeni constitution's affirmation of women's right to engage and participate in community and political life and decision-making, and despite the women's efforts in the past twenty years through women's rights committees in the Ministry of Human Rights, the Yemeni Women's Union and internal and external human rights associations, the participation of Yemeni women in society remains very weak<sup>12</sup>. The war has affected the decline in the status of women and deprived them of the legal rights that they had acquired for decades in Yemen<sup>13</sup>. According to the World Economic Forum's report on the status of women in the world, Yemen ranked last among 142 countries in terms of women's economic, political, academic, health and domestic violence rights. Similarly, Yemen came in the penultimate position in the Global Equality Index between Men and Women, making it worthy of the title of the worst country for women<sup>14</sup>. This is in consideration of the lack of equal opportunities in education, work, and community and political participation of Yemeni women at the present time, not to mention the many obstacles that stand in their way, which

have been greatly exacerbated by the war, such as the dropout of girls from school, the high rate of illiteracy among women, the high rate of child marriage, the increase in societal violence, persecution and marginalization, rape cases, and the inferior view of society towards working women, in addition to the frightening security conditions for women, the stifling economic and living conditions and other difficulties that increases every day<sup>15</sup>. Despite the recovery of women's participation in public life during the period 2014 - 2011, all the gains achieved by women during that period have been reversed and a deliberate exclusion approach of women has been applied since 2015 by various political and societal parties.

“The authorities and the dominant groups prevented the application of constitutional and legal texts, and even practiced many violations that violate women's rights and prevent their participation in the political and social scene.”

Although the governments of Sana'a and Aden have prepared analyses and draft plans for the implementation of Resolution 1315, where the Ministry of Interior in Sana'a has prepared a plan for the implementation of Resolution 1325, it has only been implemented within narrow limits, and many of them have been retracted. Similarly, Awam Organization, as funded by Oxfam, has prepared an evaluation document and a proposed execution plan for the application of Resolution 1325. However, the document and plan could not be carried on despite being prepared in Arabic and English to obtain support. In fact, they were stopped due to the unwillingness of the Sana'a authority to

implement them. On the other hand, the legitimate government prepared a plan to implement Resolution 1325 and the Cabinet approved the draft. The plan was further prepared in more depth, accuracy and it was analyzed by (SOS) Organization in Aden under the auspices of the Women's National Committee. But the draft document until the time of preparing this paper is still circulating in the corridors of the official authorities and has not appeared to reality.<sup>16</sup> This reflects the weak and declining role of official actors in implementing policies that support women's participation or even protection.

Some Yemeni women also report that the war has left the idea of women's participation back, especially women who have been involved in community and political work for years. The activist Lamia Al-Eryani believes that women's participation was under development, and there was an international trend and pressure that supports women's participation and guarantees their rights with the government, parties and all internal and external entities, but after the development of the conflict in Yemen, the work of many of the committees concerned with the conflict was suspended. Women's rights, and political parties are dealing with the women's file in a way that corresponds to their intellectual and political agenda only.

### Practices restricting women during war by existing authorities:

As a result of the effects of the ongoing conflict, the parties of the conflict tend to prove their superiority by controlling the most vulnerable group in the conflict and imposing sanctions and laws on them. In the case of Yemeni society, we can observe the application of this perspective to women, as they are the group that is focused on by all parties. There are attempts to control and impose hegemony over women. From decisions to prevent mixing men and women, and attendance in places of gatherings, travel bans, restrictions on dress and appearance, limiting places and hours of presence outside the home, to attempts to control methods of regulating pregnancy and childbearing. N. A., a field coordinator in the awareness campaigns of the Family

During the war, the parties of the conflict in Yemen routinely restricted women's participation in public life and practiced violations of women's rights, where women were among the most vulnerable groups to violations and restrictions on their freedoms.

Planning Center in the capital Sana'a indicates that armed groups have blocked their way more than once, and they have been prevented from carrying out awareness campaigns on methods of pregnancy and reproductive control. They were forced to change the name of the center and prevent the use or distribution of contraceptives for Yemeni women, under the pretext that this is contrary to religion and that society needs more fighters "men" in the future.

During the war, Yemeni women paid a heavy price at the expense of their lives and money. They were killed, targeted by air, kidnapped, and subjected to violence and torture<sup>17</sup>, just as is the case equally with men, according to the Rights Radar Report recorded of Human Rights. There were 16,667 cases of violations of women's rights in Yemen during the years 2014 - 2019<sup>18</sup>, in addition to the loss of hundreds of Yemeni women their valuables, which they were forced to sell as a result of the difficult economic conditions, and the loss of many jobs and opportunities of commercial profit for women. Abeer, an owner of a perfume and accessories kiosk project in one of the malls of Sana'a, says that she was

harassed a lot by the authorities responsible for the mall. She was accused of trading in prohibited and immoral tools, and her income decreased dramatically. She suffered losses estimated at 800 thousand of riyals due to the accumulation of rents, forcing her to close her project and start working online<sup>19</sup>.

These obstacles make the role of women in society weak and often ineffective. They reduce the desire of Yemeni women to participate in society and increase their desire to leave Yemen or move to places that give them a space of comfort and freedom. Many of the participant women in the study expressed their desire to leave Yemen if the appropriate opportunity is available to get rid of the societal restrictions imposed by the war on them<sup>20</sup>.

### **Promoting the practice of customs and traditions that restrict women's participation in the Yemeni scene**

According to the interviews data collected from respondents in several governorates in Yemen, participants complain about the ideas instilled in society about women within the frameworks of old customs and traditions. The war deepened practices and traditions that restricted women that had previously diminished. Zahra, 26 years old, believes that war is not the only reason for the weakening of the role of women in society, but rather an extension of a cultural heritage, customs and traditions that society has been raised on since ancient times<sup>21</sup>. Nadia, a journalist, says that there have been attempts to correct some ideas through education, media and political awareness campaigns, but the conditions of the war make it difficult to educate people about the need for the role of women and the demand of their rights. This difficulty is due to the lack of response from the officials because of the seriousness of this period. They only comment that the time is not appropriate to pay attention to women's demands.<sup>22</sup>

Despite this, many Yemeni women still play an influential societal role through the practice of relief, awareness, cultural and other activities, but these participations are fraught with many security and moral risks, which cast a shadow on women's desire to participate in these activities in the future. That is because women often tend to avoid problems and cherish peace over demanding their rights, not to mention that parents stop sending their daughters to community activities for fear of society's viewpoint, or fear of exposing them to problems and harassment, or else because of the difficulty of having a mahram (male relative) who could accompany them while moving or traveling, just like Mona (29 years old), who was prevented by her parents from leaving the house and practicing most of the activities she used to practice before the war. The reason was their fear of exposing their daughter to what happened to X who were arrested and accused of shameful moral charges<sup>23</sup>.

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## Discourse of religious and media incitement against women's participation in society

Armed groups did not limit the administrative and security measures to restrict women's participation in society, but also found intellectual and cultural practices faced by Yemeni women, represented in religious and intellectual discourses through mosque sermons and television programs. Dr. Akram, 36 year old, stated that the preacher of the mosque next door spoke in some sermons about the prohibition of women's work, violations of mixed-gender environment, and the obligation for women to sit in their homes<sup>24</sup>. Several television and radio programs were also carried out talking about similar matters and provoking women's labor in civil society organizations as well as women who violate customs and traditions.<sup>25</sup>

Amani (a teacher) says that if the incitement against women's work is ignored, and the continuity of activities implantation is insisted, there is a high probability of verbal violence, accusations, society's inferiority view and many other risks against these women in society<sup>27</sup>. UNFPA has reported an increase in incidents of gender-based violence in Yemen by %50 in the case of physical assault, %35 of sexual assault, and %25 of psychological assault, and the baseline study shows that verbal abuse is the most common form of gender-based violence in Yemeni society.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, Wahda Nasher, one of the workers in distributing aids to IDPs in the camps, adds that there are people in the community who refuse to receive aid from women working in organizations, and they are subject to several types of insults, slander and humiliation from society because of their field work, in addition to the lack of acceptance by IDPs due to mixed-gender distribution teams. As a result, women got attacked and assaulted by IDPs more than once.<sup>29</sup>

“ Mosque sermons emphasized rigorous speech on women working in mixed-gender spaces, allowing women to work only in girls' schools or women's health facilities, and preventing women from working in cafes and restaurants.”<sup>26</sup>

## Gender Segregation Policy

In 2020, decisions were issued in some regions of Yemen (the Northern Governorates Authority) ordering gender segregation in universities, schools, graduation ceremonies, restaurants and cafes, then the decision developed to prevent mixing in public activities and events<sup>30</sup>. This has made it imperative for Yemeni women to carry out activities and organize events separately from men, and thus their participation becomes more difficult, due to the difficulty of obtaining licenses and material and logistical support to carry out their own activities. Najat Al-Shawafi, a program coordinator at one of the organizations, says that gender segregation decisions have made the implementation of community activities complicated and expensive, in addition to low quality of work when it is based on only one gender<sup>31</sup>.

Taking into account that public spaces and places for the implementation of major activities in Yemen are very limited, any decisions to close these places or allocate them to one gender means obstructing community work and hindering the other party from implementing community plans and projects.



Kholoud, -25year-old, grew up in a conservative society that believes in customs and traditions, but was able to practice the hobby of photography, and participated largely in cultural and social activities in Dhamar governorate, until the war outbreak. Kholoud's situation became difficult with many obstacles to practicing her favorite activities or leaving the house. Such obstacles are represented in the fear of parents, and the restrictions imposed on the movement of women and the difficulty of obtaining entry and photography permits in many places<sup>32</sup>. Wahda Nasher also recalls a situation she witnessed, when an armed group stormed a cafe in the capital Sana'a, assaulted a number of young people, closed the cafe after expelling all the customers and arresting the owners with the excuse of mixed-gender and immoral programs implementation that spoil youth.<sup>33</sup>

## Movement Restrictions

Despite the issuance of Article 57 of the constitution stipulating the right to freedom of movement and departure for every citizen, and the freedom to stay, reside and move anywhere in the republic<sup>35</sup>, the Ministry of Transport in Sana'a issued a decision to mass and private transport companies between Sana'a and other Yemeni governorates to prevent the booking of women's travel tickets without a mahram (male relative) or without a written consent document from a guardian<sup>36</sup>. This was implemented in addition to the inspection and control procedures imposed on women at security points between cities and airports.<sup>37</sup>

“While women elsewhere in the world have reached space on their own, Yemeni women are still unable to travel from one city to another without the written consent or accompaniment of their guardian.”<sup>34</sup>

The same is happening in Aden and some southern governorates, where women are subjected to severe security restrictions during movement, and accusations of betrayal and treason from several parties. Even if travel permits are not requested at checkpoints, money will be demanded in exchange for allowing them to pass without causing problems or obstructing their way for long hours.<sup>38</sup>

Tahani (an employee of a civil organization) reports that she was detained for long hours at checkpoints between the cities of Sana'a and Aden, despite receiving a memorandum from the organization in which she works stating that she was assigned to travel on an official mission. But the authorities did not allow her to pass because there was no accompanying mahram, which sometimes forced her to pay sums (illegal facilities). Sometimes she had to wait a long time or call one of their known personalities to be introduced and allowed to move on<sup>39</sup>. The same thing happens with Rasha, a journalist whose work requires traveling between cities and traveling to several governorates, but she is harassed by inspection committees and exposed to several security risks. She is required to accompany an escort which will cause additional travel expenses, as her employer does not pay travel fees for non-employees.<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, Rana (28 years old) says that after the issuance of Saudi Arabia's decision to allow Umrah without a mahram, my mother and I went to one of the offices to book for a Umrah. But we were surprised when the office rejected our

request, justifying that the passports will be seized if a mahram accompanying us is not brought at least to the city of Al-Abr. Then they can travel alone upon crossing the Saudi border. She added that these decisions are biased and racist against women, and that Yemen has become a large prison for women who cannot move even inside it without the consent of their guardian.<sup>41</sup>

The same is true with Taghreed, 37 years old, who used to travel annually to spend the Eid Al-Adha holiday with her family in the city of Aden. This year she was stopped and prevented from traveling despite her son's written consent, and she was returned to Sana'a to verify the validity of the consent.<sup>42</sup>

### The impact of relief work on the human rights work of civil society

Despite the increasing effects of these obstacles on women, women's organizations and human rights organizations have been preoccupied with humanitarian relief, due to the ongoing war conditions. The role of women is still unknown in the absence of psychological support, laws to protect women in armed conflict, the failure of warring parties to abide by international women's rights laws, and the absence of the role of international bodies in supporting women's participation in Yemen<sup>43</sup>. Sumaya, 35 years old, stated that the role that women desired from international organizations in Yemen was not as expected. The international organizations were preoccupied with relief and peacebuilding and ignored that women should be key partners in these processes<sup>44</sup>. Many believe that organizations are currently the only supporter of women in Yemen and are most keen on their participation in some areas such as education and commercial empowerment. But there are still clear shortcomings in the role of these organizations, especially in their application of equality within their internal systems and employment and targeting policy<sup>45</sup>. Ahmed Nour Al-Deen (International Development and Gender Consultant) believes that international organizations working in Yemen call for granting opportunities for women and their participation, but in reality these organizations do not give key jobs to women.<sup>46</sup>

On the other hand, organizations are another obstacle for women in Yemen currently. Some international organizations operating in Yemen face charges of betrayal and treason, and the implementation of an external agenda and schemes according to various incitements against international organizations<sup>47</sup>. Therefore, the employment of women in these organizations is part of the aggression plan to implement programs that destroy the values of the Yemeni people, and that women employees in these organizations are unpatriotic and a shame on society. Employees of the organizations who participate in training programs in Aden were also accused of going to receive training that violates community ethics to implement unethical programs later<sup>48</sup>. This prompted some parents to prevent their daughters from working in organizations, or dealing with them and benefiting from the programs they provide.

“It is difficult for Yemeni women to seek their rights of community participation in light of the organizations' focus to provide primary aid and relief due to the war, ignoring the role that women can play in conflict resolution and peacebuilding.”

## Women's experiences during the war:

The war and the obstacles associated with it have not prevented Yemeni women from community work and the establishment of pioneering community entities, through which they can implement their community activities, deliver their voice to people, and play their effective role in society despite the circumstances and pain. Such as the Yemeni Women Pact for Peace and Security, and the Women's Solidarity Network, which were able to influence public opinion on more than one occasion, and contribute to community and political activities that benefit women and Yemeni society, like the pressure campaign to open Al-Rayyan airport, campaigns to protect women's rights in conflict areas, and many others<sup>49</sup>. In addition, they were able to establish dozens of women's entities and initiatives aimed at ending the war in Yemen, calling for peace, and women's participation in building society<sup>50</sup>. They also work to bring the voice of Yemeni women to international platforms, create women solidarity in order to alleviate the suffering of civilians, especially women and children, combat gender-based violence, support protection programs, follow up on the issues of prisoners and detainees, build capacity and provide humanitarian and relief assistance.<sup>51</sup>

## Recommendations

In order to overcome the obstacles of the war on women's participation in the Yemeni scene, it is important to handle several topics according to the roles of the influential parties that can achieve change and a positive impact on reality, as follows:

### For international and local organizations

1. To positively influence social, political and institutional awareness through:
    - a. Establishing an electronic platform, a university for coalitions, women's entities, and women leaders to practice its community activity away from security and political harassment and to reach women's voice to society, official bodies, and the international community.
    - b. Implementing advocacy campaigns for official bodies responsible to raise awareness and decision-makers of the need to protect women and grant them the necessary freedom to participate effectively in society. It is also necessary to be aware of women protection from risks of violations and rights that women have been deprived of during the war period.
    - c. Implementing awareness campaigns for Yemeni women and inform them of their rights and the importance of their participation in the decision-making process.
    - d. Implementing awareness campaigns for the community and families about women's rights to encourage them to play their role for the renaissance of society.
    - e. Implementing awareness campaigns in schools and via the media to raise awareness about the need for women's active participation in society, and their right to access opportunities and decision-making.
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2. Building women's capacities and enabling them to play more effective roles in society:
  - a. Implementing a package of capacity building programs geared towards developing effective and influential leaders in various sectors, and for political parties, organizations and the private sector.
  - b. Enabling pioneering women in society to work on incentive programs to rehabilitate and develop the rest of the women.
  - c. Developing the capacities of women, women's groups, women's organizations, women's coalitions, community leaders, media professionals, and partisans to network, in order to coordinate efforts and enhance their pressure capacities to obtain their rights and overcome obstacles to participate in public life.

### For the international community:

1. Linking international aid and relief work to women's participation and pushing the conflicting parties towards ensuring women's political rights by enhancing their participation in public life.
2. Obliging official bodies and decision-makers to develop an action plan to involve women and ensure its implementation.
3. Not accepting requests for consultations and negotiations between the parties of the conflict without a fair share of women in the committees representing both parties.
4. Work through capacity-building and awareness programs with political parties to activate women's committees and women's associations and ensure their active participation in the political scene through partisan frameworks.
5. Work with local and international organizations to involve women in development programs, and equitable representation in leadership positions.

### For official authorities and decision makers:

1. Accelerate the launch of a national plan to implement Resolution 1325 to ensure the protection and participation of women during conflict. Obliging official bodies and decision-makers to develop an action plan to involve women and ensure its implementation.
  2. Facilitate the procedures for obtaining licenses and permits to implement community activities and initiatives by women. Work through capacity-building and awareness programs with political parties to activate women's committees and women's associations and ensure their active participation in the political scene through partisan frameworks.
  3. Commitment to the implementation of the constitution, the law and the policies in force in support of women's rights, such as the right to travel, the right of assembly, and the right to participate, with a strict commitment to apply penalties to those who commit violations against women and obstruct their
  4. participation in society within the framework of the rule of equal citizenship.  
Provide a safe space for women to exercise their right of assembly and safe participation and protect them from individual and security violations.
  5. Establish a hotline dedicated to complaints by women of harassment and abuse while carrying out activities in public.
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## About Resonate! Yemen

Resonate! Yemen is a non-profit NGO that has commenced working as a youth initiative in January 2010 and was officially registered at the Ministry of Social Affairs in August 2011, The Foundation is working to create a new environment conducive for developing more sustainable policies, where young people as are engaged as key partners in the development and evaluation of public policies. Resonate! Yemen aims to make the voices of Yemeni youth part of the policy discourse in Yemen, and to support youth work at national and international levels.





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