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Visibility without protection: Yemeni women's activism between war-time opportunity and backlash

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The war in Yemen has challenged traditional gender roles, pushing women into public life as both activists and breadwinners. Yet, these gains are fragile: Increased visibility has sparked backlash, from social shaming to threats. Ensuring women's safety is critical if they are to sustain these roles and contribute to peace and recovery.

About the conflict

The war that escalated in 2015 is rooted in longstanding political, religious, and regional tensions. The Houthi movement, which arose in response to Saudi-backed Sunni influence threatening Zaydi identity in northern Yemen (Michael Knights, 2018), seized the capital Sana'a in 2014 and rejected a proposed federal model, triggering full-scale conflict (Salisbury et al, 2015). Since then, Yemen has fragmented among rival authorities—including the Houthis, the internationally recognized government, and the Southern Transitional Council—while extremist groups such as AQAP and ISIS have exploited the instability, worsening the country's humanitarian crisis (Elayah, 2019).

Context

Yemeni society has long been shaped by tribal hierarchies and patriarchal traditions that uphold male authority and restrict women's participation in public life. Within most families, decisions concerning women's mobility, education, work, and civic engagement are controlled by male relatives (Maha Awad et al., 2019). These arrangements reinforce a gendered social order in which women's behavior is seen as a direct reflection of family and community honor.

Before the war, Yemen's overlapping legal, cultural, and tribal systems maintained a rigid gender structure that constrained women's economic and political participation. This system was difficult to challenge.

However, the 2011 revolution and, later, the consequences of the 2015 conflict began to subtly shift social boundaries. Massive displacement, shifting family structures, and economic collapse forced communities to renegotiate women's roles - reshaping gender relations in both progressive and regressive ways.

This brief draws on interviews conducted in March and April 2025 with sixteen Yemeni women activists involved in grassroots community work, civil society leadership, and national-level advocacy across both government- and Houthi-controlled areas. Their stories show how war, displacement, and demographic change have reshaped women's roles in public life in complex ways. While conflict has opened new opportunities, often out of necessity, the gains are fragile and heavily contested within Yemen's patriarchal landscape. The experiences these women activists share reveal both greater responsibilities and the social and political pressures that come with increased visibility.

As one of the women explained:

"After the war, when my village saw that I was the only person who could help with first aid, some families finally started sending their daughters to school."

Her story illustrates that war sometimes created unexpected openings; unlike top-down reforms, these shifts emerged not from ideological commitments to gender equality but from necessity.

Another example comes from the collapse of traditional kinship networks across Yemen, which placed unprecedented economic burdens on households. In many cases, men were killed, injured, or disappeared, leaving women to assume responsibility for income generation and community leadership. As one informant explained:

"The conflict forced many families to allow women to work and contribute economically. In areas like Taiz, where we live under siege, women gathered firewood for entire villages, prepared food for neighbours, and organized informal support networks to reduce financial strain and help each other survive. Before the war it was shameful and not accepted for a woman to do anything outside her house. But despite this shift, attitudes toward women's autonomy still haven't changed."

This example shows that families recalibrated their expectations not because they embraced women's rights, but because women's skills became vital for community survival. As (Cynthia Enloe, 2000) highlights, wartime disruption often blurs the boundaries between public and private life, forcing women to assume new roles simply because the structures that once restricted them have weakened.

Furthermore, displacement has produced significant demographic shifts that affect gender norms in uneven ways across regions. Informants from different areas highlighted these contrasting impacts. One woman from Marib, historically governed by conservative tribal norms, noted:

"The demographic transformation in Marib is profound. It used to be a very conservative city. I remember that before the war, my friend tried to open an English-language institute in Marib but faced severe social backlash and

was unable to continue. Today, the city hosts at least nine women-led civil society organizations, many of them founded by displaced women. What is notable is that women originally from Marib have also begun engaging in public life, including in ceasefire negotiations and humanitarian coordination.”

Her testimony signals a significant yet fragile redefinition of gender boundaries in Marib. In contrast, a informant from Aden explained:

“Aden has been reshaped by the influx of displaced people from more conservative regions. This demographic change brought a more rigid view of women’s roles.”

Women’s motivations for public engagement

A recurring theme among informants is that women’s entry into public life was often precipitated by trauma—particularly the disappearance, detention, or death of male relatives.

One informant shared:

“My house was attacked by Al-Qaeda members and my husband was arrested. They beat me and broke my infant son’s leg. That is what pushed me to work in peacebuilding.”

For this woman, the violence inflicted on her family was what triggered her engagement in peacebuilding initiatives, including documenting violence against civilians and participating in local peace negotiations. Her activism became a way of surviving as well as showing resistance.

Many informants also spoke about developing a broader sense of civic responsibility as the war unfolded:

“My activism started during the democratic transition. The biggest motivator was my responsibility toward my community and my country—especially knowing that women suffer the most in war.”

Finally, for those who were able to access education and employment before the war, displacement exposed them to the struggles of women in other parts of Yemen who faced harsher restrictions. One informant explained:

“I was lucky—I never struggled with education or work. But through displacement, I realized that in other parts of Yemen, women suffer silently and are punished just for thinking, that what drove me to start my organization.”

Seeing and experiencing such grave inequalities motivated several of the women to engage in peace initiatives. The conflict created a sense of solidarity among women who shared the same pain.

Another informant explained:

“Because my husband had forcibly disappeared, I used to sit near the prison demanding information. There I met other women going through the same situation, and we decided to start a movement together, later our coalition contributed to the release of over 900 forcibly disappeared people.”

Backlash

As women’s visibility increased, so did attempts to police, shame, and silence them. In the face of women taking on public roles, the society they are part of reacted with defamation campaigns, threats, and social ostracization. These reactions can be understood as efforts to reassert patriarchal control in a context where traditional mechanisms were perceived to have weakened.

One informant explained:

“Whenever they see a woman doing something out of the ordinary—like working—they say, ‘This is the blessing of the activists,’ which is meant as an insult.”

This narrative portrays women’s agency as disruptive or morally suspect, fueling a sense of moral panic. Women’s activism was framed as an external, corrupting force. In the most extreme cases, the backlash escalated to direct threats.

“They printed my picture on posters and put them everywhere saying I should be killed if found on the street.”

Such threats are not just personal attacks; they are also symbolic acts designed to reinforce collective norms and punish those who challenge them.

This backlash was even more severe in areas governed by the Houthi authorities. The group has imposed strict ideological and social codes that curtail women’s mobility and autonomy, including mandatory male guardianship (mahram) for travel and prohibitions on women’s work in several sectors (Human Rights Watch, 2024). These measures are often justified through religious rhetoric that seeks to enforce gender segregation and reinforce male authority. Women also face barriers to reproductive health services and are subject to dress-code directives aligned with the Houthis’ interpretation of Islamic law.

One informant explained that because women cannot travel alone in areas controlled by the Houthis, most NGOs and companies have stopped hiring women or have dismissed female employees, as employers cannot afford to cover the cost of a guardian for work trips. Women who participate in peacebuilding activities are also threatened or targeted for intimidation by the

group. These measures reflect a broader effort to control the public sphere by restricting women's presence and silencing them.

Despite these obstacles, women have persisted – organizing, documenting abuses, supporting victims' families, and advocating for peace even as institutions have collapsed around them.

Conclusion

Taken together, the testimonies of Yemeni women activists reveal the complex and often contradictory transformations produced by the war. Their experiences show that although the conflict has intensified pre-existing inequalities, it has also disrupted social structures in ways that pushed many women into new public roles. For most, activism emerged not only from personal suffering but also from a growing sense of civic responsibility toward their communities. Yet these openings were tolerated largely out of necessity – not because families or society accepted women's participation in public life. As a result, these shifts remain fragile and easily reversible once wartime pressures subside.

Women's rising visibility has been met with an intensifying backlash. The conflict may have expanded women's economic and social roles, but it has not fundamentally challenged patriarchal authority. Instead, increased visibility has amplified attempts to police and control women, particularly in areas governed by Houthi authorities, where women's public presence is treated as a threat. In this context, visibility heightens the risk of state-level restrictions and intimidation. From society, women's activism is frequently reframed through moral narratives that label it as shameful, foreign-influenced, or corrupt – mechanisms that delegitimise women and justify further restrictions, harassment, and even physical violence, including death threats.

These dynamics complicate global agendas that encourage women's participation in peace and political processes, such as the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) framework under Resolution 1325. The Yemeni case demonstrates that participation without adequate protection can provoke severe counterreactions from both authorities and communities.

This underscores the need for context-sensitive approaches to understanding gendered shifts in conflict. Expanding women's roles requires more than creating

openings for participation; it demands sustained attention to the escalating forms of cultural and political violence that target women as their public visibility grows. Meaningful progress therefore depends not only on recognising women's emerging roles, but also on safeguarding them as they navigate both opportunity and risk in the public sphere.

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