

## Update on women, peace and security in Yemen March 4<sup>th</sup> 2019

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The Informal Expert Group of the Security Council on Women, Peace and Security discussed the situation in Yemen in March 2017 ([S/2017/627](#)) and November 2017 ([S/2017/1040](#)), with the participation of the Special Envoy and the Resident Coordinator. This update summarizes relevant developments since then.

For the second half of 2018, the situation in Hudaydah was the primary focus of developments in Yemen. The UN-brokered Stockholm Agreement – reached in Sweden on 13 December 2018 between the Government of Yemen and the Houthi movement under the auspices of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen – successfully prevented a battle for the Red Sea ports and city of Hudaydah that would likely have sparked a major famine. Thereafter, the Security Council adopted two short **resolutions** on Yemen. Security Council resolution 2451, adopted on 21 **December 2018** with the purpose of endorsing the Stockholm Agreement and authorizing the establishment and deployment of an advance team to support immediate implementation of the Hudaydah ceasefire and related redeployments, included the following language: “*Welcomes the Special Envoy’s presentation of a Framework for Negotiations in Stockholm (...) and underlines the importance of the full participation of women and the meaningful engagement of youth in the political process*” (OP4). OP 10 of this resolution also reiterates that aid should be disbursed on the basis of need and be gender and age sensitive.

Previously, a **presidential statement** adopted by the Security Council in **March 2018** (S/PRST/2018/5) stressed the need for humanitarian assistance to be gender and age sensitive and to remain responsive to women and children’s differentiated experiences and needs; noted that women are particularly at risk in periods of humanitarian crisis and food scarcity; and called upon all parties to the conflict to engage in good faith with the UN-led process, with the meaningful participation of women and other underrepresented groups at all levels, in order to overcome obstacles and reach a political solution to the conflict. In another presidential statement in 2017 (S/PRST/2017/7), the Council had emphasized the importance of an inclusive political process and called on the parties to ensure at least 30 percent representation of women in peace negotiations and on the UN to regularly report on consultations with women leaders and women’s organizations in line with resolution 2122.

Throughout 2018, various coalitions of women’s organizations sent letters to the Security Council, the Secretary-General, and his Special Envoy, denouncing that **the 30 percent requirement was not being met** by either the parties or international partners, that the UN is falling short in pressuring the parties sufficiently on this point, and that direct participation of women in the talks had been minimal or restricted to advising the Office of the Special Envoy. Specifically:

- A preparatory consultative meeting in London in August 2018, convening 22 Yemeni leading figures, included only three women.
- Women were largely absent from the round of consultations in Geneva in September. There was only one woman in the government delegation and none in the Houthi delegation.
- **Only one woman out of the government’s 12 delegates participated in the round of talks in December in Stockholm, and the Houthi delegation did not include a single woman.**
- In 2018, the Office of the Special Envoy set up an eight-member **Technical Advisory Group** formed by women from civil society, including from the larger Yemeni Women’s Pact on Peace and Security, which had had a similar function. In Stockholm, they prepared strategy papers and

proposals, but were reportedly not afforded enough time or access to influence the talks. The **Stockholm Agreement and related texts are gender-blind and do not address women's rights or the situation of women and girls in the conflict, nor refer to the importance of their participation in future talks.**

- More recently, the Special Envoy has announced that women will be significantly represented in a civil society mechanism linked to the committee that is tasked with reaching consensus on the situation in Taiz. So far, the committees set up to implement the Stockholm Agreement, including the Redeployment Coordination Committee, the Supervisory Follow-up Committee, and the Joint Mechanism in Taiz, do not have any women.

In **November 2018**, during China's presidency of the Security Council, a **Yemeni representative of civil society**, Rasha Jarhum, briefed the Security Council. She highlighted women's exclusion from the peace process, the increase in gender-based violence, child marriages, and attacks on human rights defenders, and the leading role played by women in negotiating the release of detainees, opening humanitarian corridors, preventing local conflicts over water or land, and implementing relief projects, with little support or visibility. For example: *The women in the besieged city of Taiz spend long hours walking through rough terrain or traversing areas controlled by armed groups, where they are repeatedly harassed. They do this to provide their families with basic life necessities, and to protect their men from forced recruitment, abduction, detention and torture. Young women, including Sana'a University students, have been subjected to violent repression by Houthi armed groups, including by Houthi women thugs known as Al-Zainabiyat. Some young women were beaten, electrocuted, arrested and released on the condition to refrain from engaging in activism. Others had male family members detained on their behalf (...). We are particularly proud to share that the Association of the Mothers of Abductees Sons – who regularly demonstrate and call for the release of their sons, while enduring risks and abuse – were able to release 336 detainees. This is compared to zero detainees released through the UN-sponsored process. Other members of the network are actively working to stop the recruitment of children as combatants (...). Meanwhile, the United Nations suspended since 2016 its own programmes on disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration targeting children, citing security concerns and waiting for a political solution.*

The **humanitarian situation** continues to be catastrophic, with 24 million people (80 percent of the population) in need of assistance and millions at risk of famine. For example:

- Fifty-two per cent of displaced persons live in female-headed households with nearly 21 per cent being headed by girls (under 18).
- Child marriage rates have soared to 66 percent in 2017. Among IDPs, the number of girls married before the age of 15 reached 44 percent.
- UNFPA estimates that the maternal mortality rate has more than doubled since 2015, when it was already one of the highest rates in the region and the world.
- There are an estimated 7.2 million women of reproductive age in Yemen and 3.5 million of them are in acute need of assistance. Out of those expected to be pregnant and deliver within the next year, the lives of 85,000 of them are at risk if they do not have access to life-saving maternal healthcare. Only 50 percent of health facilities are functional and only 18 percent currently can provide quality maternal and newborn health services.
- Food shortages have left an estimated 1.1 million pregnant women malnourished. If famine strikes, an additional 2 million malnourished pregnant and lactating women will be at risk of death.
- 16 million people lack access to safe water and sanitation. In most households, women and children are responsible for collecting water, and the burden of this task alone is and often-reported reason for girls dropping out of school. In addition, due to their role as caregivers, women are at greater risk of contracting cholera, as 11.3 million people were affected by water-borne diseases in 2018.

In addition, women and girls continue to suffer violations of their rights. **Women's rights activists and female journalists have been arbitrarily detained or disappeared.** This includes the recent arbitrary detention by the Houthis of Awfa Alnaami, a peacebuilder and women's human rights defender, member of the Women Solidarity Network, and country manager of Saferworld, which prompted the mediation of the UN for her release. Focus group discussions with women asylum-seekers, refugees and migrants revealed that over 70 percent had been sexually harassed, abused, or exploited during their time in Yemen. It is estimated that three million women and girls are currently at risk of sexual and gender-based violence.

The mandate of the **sanctions** regime for Yemen speaks of violations of international law but does not single out explicitly sexual and gender-based violence, and the panel of experts does not have a dedicated staff for gender-based crimes. In the last two years, there has been an increase in the reporting of widespread sexual and gender-based violence, but difficulties remain to obtain evidence due to insecurity. To date, only five individuals have been listed, and none for human rights violations. In 2018, Saudi Arabia announced a royal decision "pardoning all military men who have taken part in the Operation Restoring Hope of their respective military and disciplinary penalties."

The **Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen** did include a gender expert from the UN Women's joint roster with Justice Rapid Response. It found that sexual violence had proliferated in Yemen between September 2014 and June 2018, and that the capacity to address sexual and gender-based violence in the criminal justice system had collapsed. The Group considered that there were reasonable grounds to believe that government personnel and Security Belt Forces had committed rape and other forms of serious sexual violence, and that the Government is responsible for violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law. In investigating allegations of sexual violence committed by Security Belt Forces in Aden, the Group of Experts noted a common practice involved security forces abducting and raping women, or threatening to, as a way to extort money from families and communities. The Group also investigated cases of sexual violence in the Bureiqa migrant detention centre in Aden, which housed several hundred migrants, asylum seekers and refugees who had been detained by the Security Belt Forces. The Group of Experts noted that "rapes and sexual assault reportedly occurred in various parts of the facility, often in full view of other detainees, including family members, and guards. Survivors and witnesses described to the experts how each night guards selected women and boys for abuse".

While only a fraction of documented incidents of **gender-based violence** can be directly attributed by the parties to the conflict, most are the result of the increased risks and vulnerabilities brought about by the conflict and the collapse of the economy and the rule of law, and there was a reported increase in sexual violence incidents in the last quarter of the year, especially following the escalation of hostilities in Hodeidah and the related displacement into neighboring governorates. Migrant, refugees and asylum-seekers arriving at coastal and urban areas are at significant risk of being arbitrarily detained, in many cases in 'secret' or 'unofficial' detention centres, where human rights are routinely being violated. In 2018, of the 472 reported cases of sexual violence, 341 involved gender-based violence against refugees and asylum-seekers (of which 70 cases were against refugee and asylum-seeker children). Of the reported 472 sexual violence cases, 131 cases were perpetrated against children (80 boys and 51 girls). Perpetrators included both armed forces and armed groups.

The United Nations has continued to provide **assistance to all survivors of sexual violence** through comprehensive case management including referrals for psychosocial support, psychiatric support, medical services, legal assistance and representation; as well as cash assistance, material in kind support (NFIs, hygiene kits), life skills training and vocational training, and referral to safe shelters, as appropriate. During the year, more than 130,000 dignity kits were distributed to newly displaced women and girls to preserve their basic dignity and mitigate risks of gender-based violence. The United Nations has also continued **working with religious and tribal leaders** to challenge harmful cultural norms and practices.

### **Recommendations for the Security Council and the Informal Experts Group**

Many of the recommendations from 2017 are still relevant, and the IEG should suggest ways to address them. For example:

- The Office of the Special Envoy should be asked about the specific plans to engage women directly in the peace process, and to address the feasibility or desirability of the many modalities that have been raised by civil society, beyond advising the Special Envoy. These include insisting on the 30 percent minimum as a precondition for any UN-led activity and as the basis of the composition of any bodies set up by the agreements, such as committees on de-escalation, reparation, reconstruction, redeployment coordination, or the committee to reach consensus on how to address the situation in Taiz; formally tasking the Technical Advisory Group to review any draft language or text coming out of any talks; establishing an independent all-women cross-party delegation; supporting broader engagement of national stakeholders in a political dialogue that builds on the outcomes of the National Dialogue Conference, including if the negotiations among the warring parties stall. If necessary and relevant, UN Women, the Department of Peacebuilding and Political Affairs could support the Office of the Special Envoy with modalities and proposals for resource mobilization to put in place some of these ideas.
- The reports to the Security Council on implementation of resolution 2451 have not made any references to women, but women leaders and women's organizations should be consulted on the compliance of the parties with regard to implementation of the Stockholm Agreement, including redeployment of forces from the city of Hodeidah and the ports of Hodeidah, Salif, and Ras Issa, prisoner exchange and Taiz as well as the delivery of humanitarian assistance in these areas.
- During the meeting, the co-chairs could invite representatives of the Office of the SRSG on Sexual Violence in Conflict and/or the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for an assessment of the current capacity of the UN to monitor and report conflict-related sexual violence, including in the context of trafficking, and inquire about the establishment of monitoring arrangements as called for by resolution 1960. In follow-up to the meeting, the co-chairs and other IEG members should insist on the importance of avoiding amnesties for serious crimes, including sexual violence, in any negotiations.
- Peru, as the chair of the sanctions committee, and the United Kingdom as the penholder on Yemen in the Security Council, should reach out to other Council members to revisit the possibility of including more robust language in future Security Council products on Yemen. This includes suggestions to add sexual and gender-based violence as stand-alone criteria for sanctions, as with other sanctions regimes, and to call for dedicated capacity on gender-based crimes in the Panel of Experts; that all attacks on women's rights activists and women human rights defenders be condemned and that the UN should report on its plans or interventions to protect them or enable them to safely report concerns about their security; to recall existing obligations under the Arms Trade Treaty and call for the cessation of weapons transfer to parties; stronger language recalling the 30 percent minimum agreed in the National Dialogue and emphasizing the need for an inclusive political and peace process based on diverse representation by region, age, social group, and gender, and that takes gender issues into consideration in its agreements; and inviting international partners to support women's peacebuilding and conflict resolution work at the local level.
- As a follow-up to the recently concluded High-Level Pledging Event in Geneva, the Security Council and its Members should remind the international community to prioritize funding for gender-based violence and the urgent reproductive health needs of Yemeni women and girls as life-saving interventions.