

US Complicity in Yemen's War and the Impact on Women and Girls

The war in Yemen, fueled by US military support for the Saudi-led coalition, has unleashed a humanitarian crisis. Women and girls—who have been disproportionately impacted by the conflict—hold vital solutions to peace and must play a key role in the peace-building process.

In late 2014, Houthi rebels took over Yemen's capital, Sana'a, through an armed coup. In March 2015, a coalition of states led by Saudi Arabia, and backed by the US, launched a military offensive against the Houthis in support of the Yemeni government.

Since then, the conflict has intensified the humanitarian crisis by destroying infrastructure and hospitals; pushing the country to the brink of famine; causing thousands of civilian deaths; displacing millions; and worsening gender-based violence. The US has played a key role in the war, providing the Saudi coalition with intelligence, refueling, technical assistance, and billions of dollars of arms sales. Saudi airstrikes have killed families.[1] With people struggling to survive amid coalition airstrikes and rebel attacks, the US and Saudi-led blockade has prevented vital aid, including food and medicine, from reaching starving and sick communities.[2]

The war has claimed thousands of civilian lives, with the majority killed by coalition airstrikes on families and communities—often using US bombs.

- An independent organization, ACLED, recorded 6,480 civilian casualties of the conflict between January 2016 and November 2018.

- Saudi-led airstrikes, which have benefited from US operational support and arms sales, have caused the majority of these deaths.[3] ACLED found that the coalition killed an estimated 4,614 civilians between 2016 and November 2018.[4] Many of these strikes—which hit women and families at their homes, weddings, schools, hospitals, and markets—could constitute war crimes, and the US is complicit.

In August 2018, a Saudi-led airstrike hit a school bus full of children in Northern Yemen, killing more than 40 and wounding at least 60, the majority of whom were children.[5] The bomb that killed these children came from the US, which sold it to Saudi Arabia.[vi] In October 2016, a similar US bomb was used in a strike on a funeral hall which killed at least 100 Yemenis and wounded more than 500.[6]

- As recently as March 2019, the conflict escalated in Taiz, Yemen, resulting in fighting and the indiscriminate shelling of homes. Taiz has been under attack for more than three years now, causing thousands of deaths and injuries and worsening the region's water shortages. Further, gender-based violence, including the abduction and sexual assault of children by members of armed groups backed by the Saudi coalition, has increased.[7] *Source: The Women's Solidarity Network.*

The scale of the humanitarian crisis is devastating, with Yemen on the brink of famine. And the Saudi-led blockade and airstrikes, supported by the US, have made things much worse.

- The war has exacerbated food insecurity by destroying Yemen's infrastructure and economy, displacing more than 3 million people, accelerating unemployment, and more than doubling food prices.

- The US-supported blockade on vital supplies has made it more difficult to get basic food and medicine to struggling Yemeni families. Saudi-led airstrikes have damaged roads and hospitals, worsening the humanitarian disaster.

- As of January 2019, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) developed by the UN found that up to 15.9 million Yemeni people—or 53% of the population—are facing severe food insecurity.[8] Save the Children estimates that 85,000 Yemenis under age 5 have died of starvation.

- Preventable diseases, like cholera, are spreading rapidly because bombs have further destroyed Yemen's already limited water infrastructure, restricting access to clean water.[9] In just the first three months of 2019, the World Health Organization recorded over 100,000 suspected cases of cholera. [10] The health care system has collapsed, with as many as half of health centers closed and serious shortages in medicines and equipment. This means poor communities can't access life-saving vaccines or crucial medicines. Due to road closures and fighting, injured and sick people cannot access hospitals.

Randa Almuqbili, a 25-year old woman, was injured by a mine explosion planted by Houthis while on her way to collect water in Taiz. Randa and her children were admitted to a local hospital, where both of her legs were amputated. Days later, Randa passed away due to an infection, worsened by the lack of access to quality health care. *Source: Food4Humanity and The Women's Solidarity Network.*

- An estimated 16 million people need access to clean water and sanitation.[11] In Al-Haymatin, Yemen, women and girls must now walk for up to 8 hours simply to access water. *Source: Food4Humanity.*

Entrenched gender inequality mean that women and girls are hardest hit by the conflict that the US has fueled.

- About 76% of Yemen's 3 million internally displaced people (IDPs) are women and children.[12]

Abeer and her children were displaced by violence from their home in Aden. Abeer sold her wedding ring and all her belongings in order to feed her family and to be able to afford to rent an apartment for a month. When the bombing ended, she returned to her home in Aden. The house was a pile of ashes and all their belongings were completely destroyed. "We are now without a home," said Abeer. "We cannot be happy." *Source: "The War in Women's Memory" documentary, To Be Foundation for Rights and Freedoms.*

- Women and girls are more likely to experience hunger and starvation. Due to common gender norms, they often eat only after men and boys, thus receiving less nutrition. About 1.1 million pregnant women and new mothers in Yemen are acutely malnourished.[13] Women and girls are also at heightened risk of contracting cholera, given their traditional role in caring for sick family members, preparing food, and managing the household.

- The conflict has made women and girls more vulnerable to gender-based violence, particularly given the collapse of basic institutions, such as the justice sector. This violence, including rape, sexual assault, domestic abuse and forced marriage, increased more than 63% over the course of the conflict.[14] Studies also show that displacement increases the risk of violence against women.[15]

- As men are killed or injured in the war, women increasingly must take on the double burdens of being both the primary breadwinners and caregivers. [16]

- Rates of child marriage have increased during the war. UNICEF estimates that 72% of Yemeni girls are now married before age 18, compared to 50% before the crisis began.[17] In the context of poverty, starvation and the lack of livelihoods—worsened by the US-backed blockade—Yemeni girls are often pulled out of school to be married even earlier for dowry money to feed their starving families.

A.S. fled from Taiz to Aden due to bombings and active fighting. After her husband died of diabetes due to lack of access to health care, she singlehandedly had to care for her five children, and was forced to beg for a living. Due to poverty, A.S. had her three daughters, all under the age of 16, married to older men. *Source: Peace Track Initiative.*

Women must play a key role in Yemen’s peace process. The US must advocate for the inclusion of women from frontline communities most marginalized by war and conflict in negotiations for peace in Yemen.

- The evidence is clear. Broadened peace processes—that are inclusive of women and civil society groups—are 35% more likely to last at least 15 years. However, women represent only 4% of major peace accord signatories in the last 20 years.
- US law, including the Women, Peace and Security Act (WPS) of 2017 and the Trump administration's WPS Strategy, which was issued after a lengthy delay in 2019, requires the meaningful participation of women in peace and security processes.
- We know that when women leaders have been included in peacebuilding, those peace processes have gained broader legitimacy, addressed the root causes of conflict, and met key community needs that set the stage for a long-term, sustainable peace.
- Today in Yemen, women are playing a key role in peacebuilding by brokering local peace agreements, reintegrating child combatants, and defending detainees.

- Women are providing vital humanitarian aid, psychosocial support, and health care to besieged communities. And they are risking their lives in doing so: women human rights defenders have been caught in the crossfire and face ongoing threats and attacks.

Muna Luqman founded Food4Humanity, which facilitated an end to a water-related conflict in Taiz governorate. In Al-Haymatain, a remote area in Taiz, water shortages escalated into an armed conflict. Food4Humanity raised funds to repair the community’s water station. Not only that, they led a mediation process, bringing together 16 people to represent the community, including Food4Humanity volunteers. With the group’s facilitation, community leaders signed a local peace agreement and formed a council to prevent future conflicts. *Source: Food4Humanity.*

- Despite their crucial role in bringing peace, women are excluded from Yemen’s peace process. In December 2018 peace talks in Sweden, only one woman was at the negotiating table among the approximately 24 delegates from both sides of the conflict.[18]
- And today’s peace agenda lacks a gender lens, failing to sufficiently incorporate issues raised by women—such as the establishment of an international fund for reconstruction and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programs for women and child soldiers.[19] Yemeni women must not only be at the table, but play a significant role in the peace process.
- Given the US role in fueling this crisis, the US has a responsibility to provide aid to support the vital work of grassroots women’s groups that are mobilizing for peace and delivering humanitarian assistance at the local level. Not only do women at the grassroots intimately understand community needs, they are actively building trust among war weary communities to lay the groundwork for a lasting peace.

Sources

- [1] Human Rights Watch, "Hiding Behind the Coalition: Failure to Credibly Investigate and Provide Redress for Unlawful Attacks in Yemen" (Aug. 24, 2018), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/08/24/hiding-behind-coalition/failure-credibly-investigate-and-provide-redress-unlawful>
- [2] Amnesty International, "Yemen: Restrictions to life-saving supplies putting millions of civilians at risk" (Jun. 22, 2018), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/06/yemen-restrictions-to-life-saving-supplies-putting-millions-of-civilians-at-risk/>
- [3] Sudarsan Raghavan, Washington Post, "U.S. allies have killed thousands of Yemeni civilians from the air. After 22 died at a wedding, one village asks, 'Why us?'" (Jul. 26, 2018), https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/us-allies-have-killed-thousands-of-yemenis-from-the-air-after-22-died-at-a-wedding-one-village-asks-why-us/2018/07/25/3c3e4801-164e-42ae-ac08-bec09044e52a_story.html?utm_term=.f8edc56f5204
- [4] ACLED, "Press Release: Yemen War Death Toll Now Exceeds 60,000 According to Latest ACLED Data" (Dec. 11, 2018), <https://www.acleddata.com/2018/12/11/press-release-yemen-war-death-toll-now-exceeds-60000-according-to-latest-acled-data/>
- [5] UN Security Council, Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen, S/2019/83 (Jan. 25, 2019)
- [6] Human Rights Watch, "Yemen: US-Made Bombs Used in Unlawful Airstrikes" (Dec. 8, 2016), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/08/yemen-us-made-bombs-used-unlawful-airstrikes>
- [7] Amnesty International, "Yemen: Ta'iz authorities must tackle child rape and abuse under militia rule," (Mar. 8, 2019), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/03/yemen-taiz-authorities-must-tackle-child-rape-and-abuse-under-militia-rule/>
- [8] IPC, "January 2019 IPC Acute Food Insecurity Analysis on Yemen" (Dec. 2018), http://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/1_IPC_Yemen_AFI_Situation_2018Dec2019Jan.pdf
- [9] Shehab Khan, The Independent, "Suspected Yemeni cholera cases 'almost triple' after Saudi offensive on Hodeidah region, says charity," (Oct. 2, 2018) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/yemen-cholera-cases-hodeidah-saudi-arabia-civil-war-save-the-children-houthi-a8564421.html>
- [10] WHO, (Mar. 26, 2019), www.emro.who.int/yem/yemen-news/two-years-since-world-largest-outbreak-of-acute-watery-diarrhoea-and-cholera-yemen-witnessing-another-sharp-increase-in-reported-cases-with-number-of-deaths-continuing-to-increase.html
- [11] Save the Children, "Fact Sheet" (Jun. 2018), <https://www.savethechildren.org/content/dam/usa/reports/emergency-response/yemen-crisis-fact-sheet-june-2018.pdf>
- [12] UN OCHA, 2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview, (Dec. 4, 2017), p. 17, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/yemen_humanitarian_needs_overview_hno_2018_20171204_0.pdf
- [13] International Rescue Committee, "4 ways 4 years of war in Yemen has impacted women and girls," (Mar. 25, 2019), <https://www.rescue.org/article/4-ways-4-years-war-yemen-has-impacted-women-and-girls>
- [14] UNFPA, "At two-year mark, Yemen's conflict takes heavy toll on women and girls" (Mar. 23, 2017), <https://www.unfpa.org/news/two-year-mark-yemens-conflict-takes-heavy-toll-women-and-girls>
- [15] WILPF, "Changes Ahead: Yemeni Women Map the Road to Peace" (Dec. 2018), p. 6, https://wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/WILPF_Yemen-Publication_web.pdf.
- [16] Neha Wadekar, Washington Post, "A man-made war paid for by women and children," (Dec. 13, 2018), https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/world/yemen-civil-war-women-children/?utm_term=.8bca56bcf21c
- [17] Sarah Ferguson, UNICEF, "After Years of Civil War, Child Marriage Is on the Rise in Yemen" (Dec. 13, 2017), <https://www.unicefusa.org/stories/after-years-civil-war-child-marriage-rise-yemen/33762>
- [18] Afrah Nasser, Atlantic Council, "Yemen: Women, War & Political Marginalization" (Jan. 25, 2019), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/yemen-women-war-political-marginalization>
- [19] Jammie Bigio & Rachel Vogelstein, Reuters, "Yemen peace efforts miss a critical factor" (Dec. 18, 2018), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bigio-yemen-commentary/commentary-yemen-peace-efforts-miss-a-critical-factor-idUSKBN1OG2IP>