Combatting Women’s Vulnerability in Yemen

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This policy brief was compiled by the World Health Organization to call for increased humanitarian aid from the international community to address the immense humanitarian crisis occurring in Yemen, particularly to address the needs of women and women’s health. It will be distributed to the United Nations, national governments, the Yemeni government, and other NGOs as they have the power to lessen the impacts of this crisis.

Executive Summary

The civil war in Yemen has had massive implications for women and girls and their situation has declined considerably since the outbreak of the conflict. Malnutrition, health risks, domestic violence, and child marriage are very prevalent and mortality rates among this demographic have sharply increased. Women constitute the majority of those who have been displaced and struggle to feed their families and afford medical care. Factors such as blockades, bombing, and simply not enough assistance from the international community have impeded the humanitarian response, exacerbating these issues. Women have been largely excluded from the peace process, leading to further negligence of their needs. In light of these issues, the UN and the international community should focus on increasing women’s participation in peace-building efforts, improving access to healthcare services and proper nutrition, providing support to victims of gender-based violence, and combatting child marriage.

Context

Following protests in 2011, the conflict in Yemen broke out in 2015 with a coalition led by Saudi Arabia waging war against the Houthis after they took control of Sanaa, Yemen’s capital, in 2014. Since the beginning of the civil war, over 10,000 Yemenis have died as a result of the fighting. Millions of people have left Yemen or fled their homes to other parts of the country, and lack of food, shelter, and healthcare for those who remain in Yemen have become major humanitarian issues.[[1]](#endnote-1) While people from all demographics have been enormously impacted by the conflict, it has affected women and girls the most.

https://images.theconversation.com/files/202102/original/file-20180116-53317-14d49uj.jpg?ixlib=rb-1.1.0&q=45&auto=format&w=754&fit=clip

Yemeni women were in a difficult position before the war broke out and their situation has steadily deteriorated. The country is among the poorest in the Arab world and ranks lowest in the region on gender equality indexes.[[2]](#endnote-2) Many women took part in the 2011 demonstrations against president Ali Abdullah Saleh, but since the Houthis took power women’s rights have been suppressed. Men are traditionally the breadwinners and heads of the household in Yemeni society, so women have increasingly had to take on those roles as their husbands have left to fight, become injured, or been killed. As a result, women struggle to feed their children and afford basic needs such as shelter and healthcare. Child marriage has skyrocketed as families go to desperate measures to survive. Women and girls make up 76 percent of those who have been displaced and almost 21 percent of those households are supported by girls under the age of 18.[[3]](#endnote-3) Domestic violence has long been an ongoing issue and it has been exacerbated since the conflict began.

Areas of Need in the Current Situation

Women are typically the most impacted group in areas affected by conflict, and Yemen is no exception. In countries that have had breakdowns in governance, legal systems, and security, women and children’s mortality rates increase considerably due to deteriorating public infrastructure such as healthcare, in addition to population displacement, and insecurity. As of 2014, over 75 percent of those needing humanitarian aid globally were women and children, and they are fourteen times more likely to die in a disaster than men.[[4]](#endnote-4) This pattern is certainly visible in the case of Yemen, as women are suffering immense health risks, make up the majority of displaced people, and are increasingly vulnerable to violence. While humanitarian aid organizations have tried to fill the healthcare and food needs that women and children have, it has been difficult due to the scope of the conflict, the scale of humanitarian need, and the inadequacy of the response from the international community, including the United States, to provide assistance.

**Health**

Healthcare needs are among the most pressing issues for many women, especially those who are pregnant or have newborns. According to aid organization CARE, over three million young women face high health risks, with a million pregnant and lactating women suffering from malnourishment. One in 370 Yemeni women dies during pregnancy or childbirth, compared with one in 909 throughout the rest of the Middle East and North Africa.[[5]](#endnote-5) Lack of access by humanitarian aid groups prevents them from getting the assistance they need and it is very difficult to leave the country. Many doctors have fled the Yemen, leaving unlicensed and unqualified doctors to take their places. Because many people cannot afford healthcare, they often wait until the problem gets so bad that they have to see a doctor, in which case it may be too late. Increased attention on the part of aid organizations is needed to help fill the gaps in healthcare, particularly concerning women’s health.

**Gender-Based Violence**

Violence against women has increased significantly since the conflict broke out although it was already a problem before the war. UNFPA reports that three million women and girls in Yemen are likely to experience gender-based violence in their lifetimes, with 60,000 at risk for sexual violence and many instances going unreported due to cultural norms and stigma. Child marriage, rape, and physical assault are also included. GBV has long-term consequences, leading to psychological trauma, fear, and unwanted pregnancies.[[6]](#endnote-6) There is a lack of laws prohibiting domestic violence and low confidence in the police, further perpetuating this issue and making it culturally acceptable.

**Child Marriage**

Child marriage has become one of the biggest consequences of the war in Yemen, having huge implications for girls’ health, education, and

https://www.care-international.org/files/files/YemenGenderReport171116.pdf

futures. According to UNICEF, over two thirds of girls are married before age 18, compared to about 50 percent before the crisis emerged.[[7]](#endnote-7) This human rights violation is especially prevalent in displaced populations as families are forced to go to extreme measures to feed and protect their children, and marrying a daughter off theoretically puts her under her husband’s protection and financial responsibility. Yemen is one of the only countries in the Middle East that does not have a minimum legal age for marriage, although there were attempts to put one in place before the conflict broke out. Child marriage has enormous consequences for girls as it almost certainly ends their educational prospects and opportunities, increases their vulnerability to violence and abuse, and leads to health risks. [[8]](#endnote-8)



https://static.independent.co.uk/s3fs-public/thumbnails/image/2016/03/26/13/yemenfoodaid.jpg?w968h681

Gaps in Humanitarian Assistance

The people of Yemen have been deprived of humanitarian assistance due to the hardships of getting aid and supplies through the war-torn country and an insufficient response from the global community. Over a million pregnant women suffer from malnourishment as a result of the difficulty of accessing food in conflict areas

and the price of food has risen considerably as ports have been blocked off preventing food imports.[[9]](#endnote-9) More than 8.8 million women and girls desperately need food assistance.[[10]](#endnote-10) The same goes for health services, as medical supplies have been equally difficult to transport due to the blockade and conflict on the ground. There is a funding gap that must be met to fulfill basic humanitarian needs such as food. The World Health Organization has made efforts to fill the gaps in healthcare, having provided a $9 million emergency response grant in February 2018 to help improve the situation, yet immense need remains to account for the ongoing cholera outbreaks and major reduction in operating healthcare facilities.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Women’s Sidelining in the Peace Process

Another aspect of the conflict that has been detrimental to women is their exclusion from the peace process. Yemeni women have historically been disadvantaged in society but they played a key role in the 2011 protests. Since the conflict broke out, their participation and visibility has been extremely suppressed. The UN has called for women’s involvement yet has not demanded the inclusion of a delegation of women in negotiations. In 2015, a group of fifty Yemeni women created the Yemeni Women Pact for Peace and Security in an attempt to bring women together to increase their participation in peace building efforts.[[12]](#endnote-12) Despite this, women’s committees are not very present in decision-making and their voices have been increasingly suppressed as the conflict has gone on. Studies have shown that while women’s direct inclusion in peace negotiations does not ensure that agreements will be reached, it increases the likelihood, is not detrimental to the process, and it improves outcomes for women.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Recommendations

**Yemen Crisis in Numbers:**

* 3 million women face major health risks
* 60,000 women and girls at risk for GBV
* 72% of girls married before age 18
* 8 million women in desperate need of food assistance
* 48% of women are illiterate
* 76% of those displaced are women and children
* **Engage women in the peace process** **–** the UN should invest in increasing women’s political participation and role in the decision-making process. It should actively train Yemeni women in this capacity and work to combat gender norms that exclude them from peace-building and political activity.
  + When women are involved in peace building, the likelihood of ending violence can increase by up to 24%.[[14]](#endnote-14)
  + Gender-sensitive provisions are more likely to be implemented in negotiations when women are involved, addressing issues such as sexual violence and including women in the follow-up.
  + There should be gender mainstreaming in the UN’s response, filling in information gaps on women’s needs.
* **Improve the healthcare system –** the UN and humanitarian groups should focus on strengthening health services in areas most affected by the conflict and filling in gaps. They should focus specifically on women’s health needs and take action to combat malnutrition which has been prevalent throughout the conflict.
  + Increase mobile medical teams so that women are not deprived of medical attention because they cannot reach a hospital
  + Train doctors specifically in the field of women’s health and increase the number of female medical staff
  + Provide more aid and humanitarian assistance for food and nutrition
* **Increase food assistance –** throughout the conflict, malnutrition and lack of food and water security has been a major issue, with 55 percent of the population without access to safe water and 25 percent in desperate need of food assistance.[[15]](#endnote-15)
  + International community must step up to provide basic essentials such as food and water
  + US government should pressure Saudi coalition to end blockades and assault on Hodeida as it endangers ports and limits entrance of supplies
* **Provide support to survivors of gender-based violence –** provide healthcare and mental health services to women who have experienced GBV, work with other humanitarian groups to eliminate gender-based violence, and teach men that ending GBV is their responsibility.
  + Engage men and teach them about the consequences of GBV and how they can end it
  + Raise awareness about the prevalence of GBV in communities and help women become aware of services that are available to support victims
  + Work with communities to eliminate other harmful practices such as FGM and child marriage
  + Put pressure on the Yemeni government to implement and enforce laws that establish a minimum age for marriage and prohibit domestic violence.

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