

Conflict and gender dynamics in Yemen

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Question

What is the understanding of, and evidence base related to, the impact of the current conflict on gender dynamics in Yemen?

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1. Overview

The current conflict in Yemen, which began in 2015, has resulted in a humanitarian catastrophe. As of March 2017, 18.8 million people are in need of humanitarian support, and 10.3 million are in acute need (Sikurajapathy and Al-Fotih, 2017). Women, men, boys and girls have been affected in different ways by the conflict. This rapid reviews looks at the impact of the conflict on gender dynamics in Yemen.

Most assessments conducted on the situation in Yemen since March 2015 have been 'gender blind' (Basharen, 2016: 1). However, a very small number of research studies and surveys have been carried out by a variety of UN organisations and non-government organisations (NGOs) working on the current response in Yemen, which have focused either on gender more broadly, or specifically on women and girls. Much of the evidence focuses on the impact of conflict on women and girls. The available evidence is based on a variety of qualitative and quantitative data gathered in Yemen and secondary sources. Academic literature addressing gender in the current conflict appears extremely scarce. Grey literature often refers back to the same few studies. The reports

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produced by organisations working in Yemen, such as OXFAM, Saferworld, and CARE, provide recommendations and on-the-ground perspectives of the priorities, needs and aspirations of conflict-affected communities.

Yemen ranks last out of the 144 countries included in the 2016 World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index, a position it has held for the last 10 years. Even prior to the conflict, Yemeni women and girls experienced systematic discrimination and marginalisation. However, some progress was being made and the 2011 uprising challenged the norm of women's limited participation in society with women actively participating in the protests, while women represented more than one-quarter of participants in the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) in 2014. Conflict threatens to reverse the advances made in recent years to address gender equality in Yemen.

Some impacts of the current conflict on gender include:

- **Threats to safety:** men and boys make up the vast majority of direct victims of armed conflict, forced recruitment and arbitrary detention, while women and girls are at risk from airstrikes, 'kidnapping' and sexual and gender based violence.
- **Recruitment by armed groups:** boys face higher risks of recruitment by armed groups, which can be an appealing source of income for young people in the absence of other opportunities. Women have been involved in fighting for or supporting armed groups.
- **Gender based violence:** displacement and the breakdown of protection mechanisms have dramatically increased the vulnerability of women and girls to violence, including domestic violence. Men and boys have also experienced higher levels of gender based violence.
- **Child marriage:** poverty and social insecurity as a result of the conflict have reversed trends and led to an increase in child marriage, which is used as a coping mechanism by conflict affected families.
- **Freedom of movement:** men and women face a variety of restrictions and harassment at checkpoints which affects their ability to get around and go to work.
- **Displacement:** displaced women are among the most vulnerable and face problems accessing humanitarian assistance.
- **Female headed households:** the loss of men to conflict has led to an increase in female headed households with women having to take on new roles as heads of households, which many are ill-equipped for. This can heighten their vulnerability and leads to them turning to negative coping mechanisms. However, some women have felt empowered by these additional responsibilities.
- **Employment and livelihoods:** more women are entering the labour market and becoming their family's primary breadwinners, as men are working less due to the conflict, leading to more openness to women engaging in different professions. Some men have felt resentful over this change in roles.
- **Poverty:** the increase in poverty has led to negative coping strategies such as child labour; child marriage; survival sex; and begging.
- **Household tasks:** men are participating more in household tasks since the conflict began, although women still spend more time on them. Tasks such as collecting water and fuel take longer as a result of conflict and can be more dangerous.
- **Access to services such as nutrition, education, water and sanitation, healthcare, and electricity:** women struggle to access assistance due to high levels of illiteracy. They have experienced higher levels of malnutrition; faced problems accessing education; increased danger as a result of inadequate access to water and sanitation; problems accessing healthcare, especially maternal healthcare; and safety risks as a result of lack of electricity and fuel.

- **Pregnancy:** there has been an increase in the number of pregnant women since the conflict began.
- **Decision making at the community level:** community level decision making has become even more male dominated as a result of the conflict, although some women are involved in community committees.

Gender dynamics also come into play in the humanitarian response and peacebuilding efforts:

- **Humanitarian response:** women have been active as first responders and humanitarian workers in the absence of men in their communities.
- **Women's activism:** women have been engaged in a variety of women's empowerment, development, human rights, democracy and governance, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding work. Their work has been curtailed by religious leaders and wartime conditions.
- **Peace talks and conflict resolution:** women have been excluded from the current formal peace talks by parties to the conflict, reversing the small gains in women's political participation made previously. While they have engaged in local level peace initiatives, they lack the resources to maximise the positive impact of their role.
- **Political leadership:** vacuums in political leadership due to departures as a result of the conflict have allowed some women to step into roles and positions of responsibility in their communities.

2. Gender in Yemen

Gender relations in Yemen are shaped by diverse religious, cultural, social and political traditions across the regions, between rural and urban areas, and between different tribes and generations (CARE, 2015: 1; Gressmann, 2016: 3). The North has been traditionally more conservative than the South (CARE, 2015: 1). Historically women are seen as 'weak' and have generally had less power in society than men and have been the primary care givers at the household level (CARE, 2015: 2; Gressmann, 2016: 3, 13; Heinze, 2016: 2).

Yemen ranks last (144th of 144 countries) in the 2016 World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index¹, a position it has held for the last 10 years (Gressmann, 2016: 13). Even prior to the conflict, Yemeni women and girls experienced systematic discrimination and marginalisation (Al Naami and Moodley, 2017: 5). They cannot marry without permission from their male guardian; they do not have equal rights to divorce, inheritance or child custody; and a lack of legal protection leaves them exposed to domestic and sexual violence (Gressmann, 2016: 45). The entrenched gender inequalities and prevailing social norms also limited women's access to services, livelihoods and other opportunities (OCHA Yemen, 2016: 16). The heavy care burden women had responsibility for, limited their ability to engage in paid work (Gressmann, 2016: 14). Girls were less likely to attend school as a result of time consuming gendered tasks such as fetching water, lack of appreciation of girl's education, and inadequate facilities in school (Gressmann, 2016: 14). Gender based violence prior to the conflict was a serious problem and included sexual harassment, forced marriage, early marriage, exchange marriage, female genital mutilation, denial of inheritance and restrictions to mobility (Gressmann, 2016: 25; Jarhum, 2016: 3). 52 per cent of Yemeni girls marry before they are eighteen, and 14 per cent before they are fifteen (Gressmann, 2016: 26).

¹ <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2016/> Retrieved 29/3/17

The government has made efforts to improve the rights of women in Yemen, including via the formation of a Women's Development Strategy and a Women Health Development Strategy (Gressmann, 2016: 13; Jarhum, 2016: 2). However, poor enforcement of this legislation, along with many cultural and religious norms has meant Yemeni women have failed to have equal rights to men (Gressmann, 2016: 13).

The 2011 uprising challenged the norm of women's limited participation in society with women actively participating in the protests (Gressmann, 2016: 29; Pandya, 2015: 1; Heinze, 2016: 3; Jarhum, 2016: 2; Alwazir et al, 2016: 12). Women represented more than one-quarter of participants in the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) in 2014 (Gressmann, 2016: 29; Alwazir et al, 2016: 15). Through their involvement in the NDC, women were able to achieve important agreements for the new constitution, including a 30 per cent quota for women's political participation and a law to increase the age of marriage to 18 years (Gressmann, 2016: 29; Heinze, 2016: 3). Overall, there were more than 173 articles and outcomes related to women in this constitution, which has not been adopted (Gressmann, 2016: 29). However, their involvement was not uncontentious and women delegates were publicly threatened for participating, and were even physically attacked (Gressmann, 2016: 29). Support was provided by NGOs and the UN Special Advisor for Yemen and his team to encourage women's participation (Gressmann, 2016: 29). Pre-conflict, women were also increasingly active in civil society organisations or partisan and political frameworks at the local level (Gressmann, 2016: 29; Alwazir et al, 2016: 8).

3. Gender and the current conflict

Conflict affects men, women, girls and boys differently due to deep-rooted socio-cultural and economic inequalities at home and in their wider community (Gressmann, 2016: 3). Men and boys make up the vast majority of direct victims of armed conflict, forced recruitment and arbitrary detention, while women and girls become more vulnerable, especially to gender based violence, during emergencies (Gressmann, 2016: 3). Conflict has, in many cases, exacerbated the pre-existing limitations experienced by women and girls (OCHA Yemen, 2016: 16). IASC (2015: 1) note that there are 'shifting regional and tribal variations of gender equality, human rights and living conditions for women and girls across the country, depending on which group has the upper hand in a given location at any given time'. Research by Oxfam², CARE³ and GenCap in Yemen⁴ found

² Oxfam is continuing to work with Yemeni women on mainstreaming programmes and on specific projects such as Women's Peace and Security and Women's Access to Justice. It delivers gender programmes through partnerships with local and national organisations, and focuses on building the capacity of local partners to ensure the sustainability of their work. When possible, Oxfam support the participation of Yemeni women activists in national and international forums, to allow them to express their concerns for their country and to lobby directly to office bearers.

³ CARE has been continuously active in Yemen since 1992. Its work in Yemen has a common focus on community self-help and women's empowerment, including women's literacy, skills development, water management, capacity building of local organisations, natural resource management, emergency response and relief assistance to refugees.

⁴ The assessment built on CARE's and Oxfam's gender assessment tools, and used a combined methodology including a secondary data review, 544 household interviews, 40 focus group discussions, and 32 in-depth interviews with 'key informants' – activists and leaders carried out in the first half of 2016. The assessment was supplemented by case studies/stories collected from participants and civil society to validate and exemplify the research findings. The geographical scope of the assessment included the areas in Yemen with the most severe needs – Aden, Taiz, Hajjah and Abyan governorates.

that there is a general pattern of ‘deteriorating gender relations and the marginalization of women from participation and leadership in decision-making forums’ (Gressmann, 2016: 3). The deteriorating overall humanitarian situation ‘increases the risks to women and girls of violence, harassment and abuse, sexual and labour exploitation, as well as early, child, and forced marriage’ (Gressmann, 2016: 11). Basharen (2016: 1) notes that there are concerns that lack of gender-sensitive humanitarian programming could at worst do harm to previous advances in women and girls’ empowerment and preventing gender-based violence by being blind to them. The conflict threatens to reverse the advances made in recent years to address gender equality in Yemen (Basharen, 2016: 1; Gressmann, 2016: 4). The ‘stress and chaos of the crisis, coupled with entrenched gender inequality, have left women and girls extremely vulnerable to violence, abuse and exploitation’ (Gressmann, 2016: 9).

Threats to safety

According to focus group discussions conducted by Oxfam, CARE and GenCap in 2016, the main threat to women’s and girls’ safety in Hajjah and Taiz is the risk of airstrikes (according to 51 per cent and 36 per cent of respondents respectively), while the risk of ‘kidnapping’ is more prominent in Abyan (24.4 per cent) and Aden (17 per cent) (Gressmann, 2016: 27). The risk of sexual violence against women and girls is considered the highest in Taiz as a result of the large presence of marginalised groups (Gressmann, 2016: 27). Girls from marginalised groups are reported to be especially at risk from violence, frequent harassment by armed groups at checkpoints, and kidnapping (Gressmann, 2016: 11).

The implications of the conflict in Yemen for men are also immense, ‘from death at the battlefield to unemployment and the psychological stress of failing to provide for their families’ (Nasser, 2017). Civilian men and boys have suffered from humiliation and denigration at the hands of armed groups, as well as arbitrary detention and summary execution (Gressmann, 2016: 14).

Recruitment by armed groups

OCHA Yemen (2016: 38) report that boys face higher risks of recruitment by armed groups. There are reports that boys as young as 10 being recruited by all warring parties (Nasser, 2017; Gressmann, 2016: 15). There are also reports of women joining armed groups as fighters, and reports that women have volunteered to support armed groups (especially in Aden and Taiz), especially when their family members and relatives are active in these groups (Jarhum, 2016: 7; Pasha-Robinson, 2017; Gressmann, 2016: 32). Joining armed groups appeals to young people as a source of income in the absence of other employment opportunities (Gressmann, 2016: 12, 14). Households in southern parts of the country are often more hesitant to send their young men to fight with salafi groups as they often come back influenced by the ideology and traumatised (Gressmann, 2016: 15). There are reports that membership of armed groups has resulted in young males behaving in negative ways that would not have been culturally acceptable before the conflict; for example, kidnapping girls who they do not have permission to marry (Gressmann, 2016: 27).

Gender based violence

An estimated 2.6 million women and girls⁵ are at risk of gender based violence as [‘d]isplacement and the breakdown of protection mechanisms ha[ve] drastically increased the vulnerability of women and girls to violence’ (Sikurajapathy and Al-Fotih, 2017; OCHA Yemen, 2016: 16). The absence of male family members due to fighting, injury or death, who would traditionally take responsibility for protecting women in their families, has exacerbated the increase in gender based violence (Heinze, 2016: 4). There has been reported to be a 63 per cent increase in incidents of gender based violence since the conflict began (Sikurajapathy and Al-Fotih, 2017; Al Naami and Moodley, 2017: 5). Over 10,000 cases of rapes, domestic violence, forced and child marriage, physical and psychological abuse and trauma against women and girls were reported in 2016 alone (Sikurajapathy and Al-Fotih, 2017). The true extent is likely to be higher due to social norms that discourage reporting (OCHA Yemen, 2016: 16). Focus groups with men have reported ‘distress due to loss of livelihoods, restricted mobility, and being forced to perform “women-specific roles”’, which in turn can sometime lead to increased levels of domestic violence (OCHA Yemen, 2016: 16; Gressmann, 2016: 15).

OCHA Yemen (2016: 37) also note that in 2016 higher rates of men and boys have been experiencing assault. Sexual violence has been used by armed actors against men and boys as a form of torture, with such cases usually not reported for fear of putting the reputation of the entire family at risk, especially in the northern governorates (Gressmann, 2016: 26; Chughtai and Paul, 2015: 4). Survivors of gender based violence often have no access to support services, which puts them at particular risk of fatality or complications from physical injury, HIV contraction, sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy (Gressmann, 2016: 11; Basharen, 2016: 2). In addition, they risk facing stigma and rejection from their families and communities (Gressmann, 2016: 25). Jarhum (2016: 8) notes that there have been large gaps in humanitarian funding aimed at addressing gender based violence.

Child marriage

There are reports that the conflict has led to an increase in child marriage as families ‘seek dowry payments to cope with conflict-related hardship’ and to protect their young daughters from harassment and destitution (Al Naami and Moodley, 2017: 5; Moodley, 2016: 13; Gressmann, 2016: 26). Research⁶ by INTERSOS⁷ (2016: 5) suggests that prior to the conflict the practice of early marriage had reduced but the conflict has reversed this trend as a result of poverty and social insecurity. Displaced families were felt to be more vulnerable to the practice and girls were more likely to be married off to adult men (INTEROSOS, 2016: 5). There are some suggestions that host communities exploit the vulnerabilities of internally displaced families and get them to marry off their daughters (INTEROSOS, 2016: 6). In addition, there are reports of young women being ‘forced into becoming ‘brides’ to members of extremist armed groups in order to help their families’

⁵ <https://www.unfpa.org/news/two-year-mark-yemens-conflict-takes-heavy-toll-women-and-girls> Accessed 29/3/17

⁶ Qualitative and quantitative data were collected from 251 stakeholders.

⁷ INTERSOS is an independent humanitarian aid organization committed to helping and supporting endangered populations, victims of wars and natural disasters. In Yemen, it has worked with UNFPA on gender based violence response and prevention.

(Moodley, 2016: 13). The 2014 draft Child Rights Law which established 18 as the minimum age of marriage has not been approved as a result of the conflict and objection from conservative groups (INTEROS, 2016: 15).

Rule of law

The weakness of rule-of-law institutions and protection systems in the conflict 'disproportionately affects women, boys, and girls, making them more vulnerable to grave violations of their rights, exposing them to exploitation and ensuring they face multiple barriers to justice' (Gressmann, 2016: 14).

Freedom of movement

The conflict has brought new restrictions on freedom of movement for men, particularly to other towns or governorates, which negatively affects their ability to search for work (Gressmann, 2016: 34; Moodley, 2016: 9). According to male focus groups in the Oxfam, CARE, and GenCap study, 'men are especially targeted at checkpoints and risk arrest or detention when travelling', while women in areas controlled by less conservative militias are more respected and stopped less than men (Gressmann, 2016: 34; Moodley, 2016: 9). This has led to some households sending women rather than men to markets, although it should be noted that 'women and girls, and especially members of marginalised communities, remain extremely vulnerable to harassment in many situations' (Gressmann, 2016: 34; Moodley, 2016: 9). In areas controlled by radical Islamic groups, men at check points are increasingly insisting that women are accompanied by males in public, making it difficult for them to go to work (Gressmann, 2016: 34; Moodley, 2016: 9). Prominent women leaders have also been banned from travelling (Jarhum, 2016: 6).

Displacement

Over 3 million people are displaced and 52 per cent of the internally displaced persons (IDP) population in Yemen are women, many of whom are leading their displaced households, which makes their access to humanitarian aid extremely difficult as a result of being stifled by social restrictions on their freedom of movement, fear of abuse at militia-held checkpoints and the rising costs of transportation (Nasser, 2017). Women and girls are reported to 'often remain invisible to humanitarian actors and miss being targeted with aid assistance' (Gressmann, 2016: 35). Assistance is mainly collected by male adults (88 per cent in urban and 74 per cent in rural areas), and to a lesser extent by female adults (9 per cent in urban and 14 per cent in rural areas) (Gressmann, 2016: 35). Lack of official papers also makes it difficult for women and children to register for assistance (Gressmann, 2016: 35).

According to focus group discussions conducted by Oxfam, CARE and GenCap, IDP women are 'most vulnerable, as many have lost their property and access to livelihoods as a result of the conflict' (Gressmann, 2016: 11). Vulnerability increases when women live in makeshift shelters (most common in Taiz and Hajjah), where there is insufficient access to basic services (Abyan and Hajjah), and in areas controlled by Islamist groups (Abyan) (Gressman, 2016: 11; Moodley, 2016: 13).

Female headed households

The number of female headed households has increased since the conflict began (IASC, 2015: 1). The absence of men and 'male protection' due to the ongoing war in Yemen widowing women or taking men away from the household, has resulted in a 'significant increase in the domestic workload of women who are now also the providers for their families' (Heinze, 2016: 2, 4). The loss of men due to conflict means that women are forced to take on social roles that are normally the preserve of men (Gressmann, 2016: 14). However, it is difficult for them to take on these roles as a result of social exclusion and lack of mobility due to cultural norms, and limited access to resources (Gressmann, 2016: 14). Their difficulties accessing humanitarian aid and other means of survival lead to heightened risk of exploitation and abuse, as well as increased vulnerability (Gressmann, 2016: 14).

Female headed households, who are estimated to make up between 10 to 30 per cent of IDP households, struggle to provide for their families in a difficult environment, 'potentially relying on negative coping strategies that leave them susceptible to exploitation and abuse' (OCHA Yemen, 2016: 16; Gressmann, 2016: 35). They are generally at higher risk of food insecurity to lack of employment opportunities for women (Gressmann, 2016: 12, 39). The most vulnerable groups of female-headed households were identified as marginalised groups ('*Muhamasheen*'⁸), women who are disabled, widows, divorcees, prisoners and wives of prisoners, wives whose migrant-worker husbands fail to send remittances, female refugees, IDPs, youth and elderly women (Gressmann, 2016: 12). Women who have no broader family networks to sustain them struggle most (Heinze, 2016: 4). While some women have felt empowered by these additional responsibilities, many have also felt burdened by them, as it is often a role they were completely unprepared for (Heinze, 2016: 4-5; CARE, 2015: 3).

Employment and livelihoods

Half of the conflict affected people have lost their livelihoods (Gressmann, 2016: 38). Since the beginning of the conflict men are working less (Gressmann, 2016: 22). More women, especially in rural areas, are entering the labour market and becoming their family's main breadwinners, giving them more decision making power in their families (Nasser, 2017; Gressmann, 2016: 32-33; Heinze, 2016: 1; Moodley, 2016: 16). In addition, men participate more in household tasks as a result (Nasser, 2017). This has led to some changing perspectives of 'appropriate' behaviour or work for women and men (Gressmann, 2016: 15). Some focus groups participants in Oxfam, CARE and GenCap's research reported positive experiences, including 'an increased appreciation of women's and men's roles, and an improved sense of how gender roles are mutually reliant' (Basharen, 2016: 4; Gressmann, 2016: 15). In addition, 'there is also increased openness to women engaging in professions that used to be considered 'shameful' (such as butchers, barbers, or chicken sellers)' and it is more acceptable for women to get involved in managing the household affairs and contributing income (Gressmann, 2016: 15). However, observations by AI-Monitor in Sanaa suggest that many employers have resisted laying off male employees as they are assumed to be the breadwinners of their families, while many women have lost their jobs despite being their family's main breadwinners (Nasser, 2017). In addition, women's socio-economic vulnerability has been further increased by the disproportionate impact of conflict on female-owned small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which have closed in greater numbers (OCHA Yemen, 2016: 40).

⁸ An ethnic minority historically treated as an underclass.

Nasser (2017) argues strongly that due to the conditions of work, increased female participation in the labour market should not be seen as an outcome of the war that is a victory for gender equality. In addition, Heinze (2016: 5) points out that such 'pragmatic adaptations to the current conflict should not necessarily be seen as an indicator of long-term social change'. The newfound role of women as primary breadwinners in the family has also brought challenges as 'many men say they feel resentful and ashamed that they are now unable to provide' (Moodley, 2016: 16).

Poverty

Poverty rates are estimated to have doubled to 62 per cent since the beginning of the conflict, exacerbated by the collapse of social safety nets and the increase in the price of basic commodities which have risen by around 26 per cent (Al Naami and Moodley, 2017: 6). Poverty can result in conflict affected households engaging in negative coping strategies such as child labour (both boys and girls); sharing shelter (raises the risk of lack of privacy and sexual exploitation); child marriage; trading sex to meet basic survival needs; and begging (subjects women, boys and girls particularly to exploitation, harassment and physical or sexual assault) (OCHA Yemen, 2016: 36; Gressmann, 2016: 38).

Household tasks

The conflict has led to an increase in men's participation in household tasks but on average, women still spend 8.7 hours on household tasks compared to 2.8 hours for male household members (Gressmann, 2016: 15). Household tasks such as collecting water and firewood and child care are taking longer during the conflict (Gressmann, 2016: 16). Men and boys are increasingly carrying out tasks such as collecting water and grazing livestock as they have become more dangerous due to the conflict and the presence of armed groups (Gressmann, 2016: 17).

Access to information and registration

Women's access to assistance and other services is reduced as a result of their high levels of illiteracy (66 per cent) posing an obstacle to accessing and understanding relevant information (Gressmann, 2016: 36, 39). This poses a challenge to registering for official forms of identification, which are needed for entitlement to humanitarian aid (Gressmann, 2016: 36). This is especially challenging for women who are heads of households and their families, particularly in areas where women cannot travel alone to the registration point (Gressmann, 2016: 36).

Nutrition

The conflict and rising food shortages has resulted in about 3.3 million acutely malnourished children and pregnant or lactating women (1.1 million of the total figure) (OCHA Yemen, 2016: 11, 30). The targeting of health facilities, the closure of nutrition treatment facilities as a result of air strikes, fighting on the ground, and health workers leaving mean that children and pregnant and lactating mothers are not receiving appropriate nutrition services (OCHA Yemen, 2016: 31).

Education

Access to education has been severely affected by the conflict. Estimates of between 800,000 to 1.3 million girls are unable to access education as a result of the destruction of schools,

displacement, and the dangers of conflict (Al Naami and Moodley, 2017: 6; Gressmann, 2016: 40; Heinze, 2016: 4). Girls are more likely than boys to be held back from school as the education of boys is seen to be more important and girls are needed to work at home (OCHA Yemen, 2016: 38, 39; Gressmann, 2016: 40; Heinze, 2016: 4).

Water and sanitation

Over 14 million people do not have access to clean water or sanitation, increasing the risk of the spread of diseases (Al Naami and Moodley, 2017: 6). Women and children are primarily responsible for collecting water and due to the conflict they are having to travel further to collect water, posing additional threats to their safety and dignity (OCHA Yemen, 2016: 26; Pandya, 2015: 4; Gressmann, 2016: 41). In addition, women and girls, especially in IDP collective centres or spontaneous settlements, are facing greater risks as a result of the lack of separate toilets with locks and lights (OCHA Yemen, 2016: 26).

Healthcare

Access to healthcare has been impacted by the conflict and the health system is operating on less than half of its previous capacity and lacks medicines, equipment and staff (Al Naami and Moodley, 2017: 6; Gressmann, 2016: 36). Women's access to maternal healthcare has been especially affected (Heinze, 2016: 4). UNFPA⁹ estimates that the health and protection of more than 2.2 million Yemeni women and girls of child bearing age are at risk (Sikurajapathy and Al-Fotih, 2017). They find that around 500,000 pregnant women may be unable to find safe and affordable medical services (Al Naami and Moodley, 2017: 6). Reproductive health services are only available in 32 per cent of assessed IDP and host community locations; falling to 28 per cent of returnee locations (OCHA Yemen, 2016: 28). The country has one of the highest maternal death rates in the Arab region, a situation compounded by the lack of food, poor nutrition and eroding healthcare as a result of the conflict (Sikurajapathy and Al-Fotih, 2017). Conflict parties, along with gender norms, have placed more restrictions on women and girls already limited mobility, which further reduces their access to services (Gressmann, 2016: 33-34). Men are at particular risk of injuries and often in need of specialist services to address disabilities or to provide rehabilitation or psychosocial support (Gressmann, 2016: 37). Women (and men) with disabilities have been identified in studies as being among the most vulnerable population groups (Heinze, 2016: 4).

Electricity and fuel

Due to power cuts and the decrease in access to electricity (on average from 84 per cent before the crisis to 61 per cent today) many women and children in the coastal areas where temperatures are high are suffering and not able to refrigerate food and medicines for longer periods, with resulting negative health consequences (Gressmann, 2016: 42). Participants in the focus groups also pointed out that the fragile security situation is exacerbated by the lack of lighting, increasing the risk of gender based violence, particularly for women and girls practising open defecation at night time (Gressmann, 2016: 42-43). However, women have also taken the opportunity to train

⁹ UNFPA works on providing sexual and reproductive health care and services addressing and preventing gender based violence in Yemen. It has equipped health facilities to provide emergency obstetric and new-born care; provided dignity and reproductive health kits; family planning services; and psychosocial support, legal aid, safe haven or other services to survivors of gender based violence,

as technicians for household solar energy systems in the booming solar energy industry, with prevailing social norms making it much more acceptable for women to enter homes and perform this function than men (Moodley, 2016: 17).

Conflict has resulted in cooking fuel shortages and tensions are rising between IDPs and host communities over firewood and deforestation (Gressmann, 2016: 43). 'Pregnant and lactating women together with their children have been most affected by the lack of fuel, and are the most vulnerable to the risk of fire; this is particularly the case within marginalised groups and for IDPs in makeshift shelters (tents and huts)' (Gressmann, 2016: 43). Women are increasingly responsible for collecting firewood, especially in rural areas and among IDPs in host communities, which increases their risk of exposure to gender based violence (Gressmann, 2016: 43).

Pregnancy

Conflict has seen an increase in the number of pregnant and lactating women: 23.4 per cent of households reported having pregnant and lactating women in their family before the crisis started in March 2015, compared to 44.3 per cent in October 2016, especially in households which have never been displaced (Gressmann, 2016: 11, 38). Focus groups suggest that this may be because husbands are spending more time at home due to unemployment and families not having access to contraceptives (Gressmann, 2016: 11). Some women are reported to try and get pregnant to access food assistance that is only available to pregnant women (Gressmann, 2016: 38). Community leaders have also been encouraging women to reproduce so that there are offspring to help the country recover after the war (Gressmann, 2016: 11).

Polygamy

Research by Oxfam, CARE and GenCap finds that conflict has led to an increase in the number of men who are married to more than one woman, as a result of marriage being considered a coping mechanism, both for protection against harassment outside the extended family and to reduce economic pressures (Gressmann, 2016: 18). Polygamy has also risen as dowry payments have decreased due to parent's determination to marry their daughters (Heinze, 2016: 4; Moodley, 2016: 13). For some men, polygamy was a strategy they used to increase their income through begging conducted by multiple wives (Gressmann, 2016: 19; Moodley, 2016: 13).

Decision making at the community level

As a result of the conflict, women's already limited role in local government authorities and service management committees has declined further and they are now entirely dominated by males (Gressmann, 2016: 30). Other powerful decision makers, especially sheiks and tribal leaders, as well as high-ranking officials with extensive networks, cultural and academic members of the community, religious leaders and businessmen, are mostly men (Gressmann, 2016: 30). Development and charitable societies were characterised by women's leadership (Gressmann, 2016: 30). Conflict has stopped the activities of those in the north of the country, while the number of societies in Aden and Abyan has increased as a result of enhanced external funding of humanitarian assistance activities (Gressmann, 2016: 30). Male and female community leaders, especially in rural areas, were relatively active before crisis but their decision making power is considerably reduced now, unless they are affiliated with the conflict party in control of the area (Gressmann, 2016: 30). The armed groups, which are exclusively run by men, now have

substantially increased their decision making power at the community level (Gressmann, 2016: 30). The main channels for decision making with the participation of women today are international NGO-supported community committees formed in some communities as a result of the conflict to provide health services, protection services or humanitarian aid, in which some women participate, although there are few of these (Gressmann, 2016: 30-31).

4. Gender and peacebuilding

Humanitarian response

Heinze's (2016: 1, 4) literature review to inform a project aimed at enhancing women's role in peace and security in Yemen found that women have 'taken on the role of first responders and humanitarian workers, contributing to the alleviation of their communities' suffering' in the absence of men in their communities due to the war. Oxfam, CARE and GenCap's research also finds examples of women's resilience during the conflict that challenge the predominant portrayal of Yemeni women as passive victims, with women having increasing roles in distributing community-level humanitarian assistance, hygiene promotion, and leading on gender based violence protection projects and facilitating women's access to services (Gressmann, 2016: 3). Yemeni women have reported their involvement in carrying out rescue missions, searching for and providing medical, housing, and food resources for those in need, creating hotlines to report wrong doing, using social media to mobilise charity, providing psychological support, documenting crimes, and more (Pandya, 2015: 1-2). At the beginning of 2017, it is reported that there are hundreds of women-led initiatives to address the effects of the conflict (Al Naami and Moodley, 2017: 2).

Women's activism

Norms of seclusion, family honour, and the need to protect and control the 'weak' tend to limit women's activism in Yemen, but are often ignored in the face of pragmatic considerations (Heinze, 2016: 1, 5). Shakir's (2015: 6) research¹⁰ between December 2014 and April 2015 into women's participation in inclusive conflict resolution and peacebuilding found that few of the women-led efforts at the time directly related to peacebuilding, and instead, the 'organisations, projects and groups perform conflict resolution and/or peacebuilding work within a wide spectrum of other sectors such as women's empowerment, development, human rights, democracy and governance'. Alwazir et al (2016) also provide examples of actions Yemeni women activists have taken since the conflict began. They note that it would be 'a mistake to assume that all or most politically active women are politically progressive' or unifying figures, as political positions divide groups (Alwazir et al, 2016: 14; Pandya, 2015: 4). In September 2016, a fatwa was issued by Islamic scholar Abdullah al-Odaini, which banned women activists from mixing with men. This has contributed to curtailing the work of women activists (McKernan, 2017). Pandya (2015: 1, 2) also suggests that 'the surge in political and humanitarian activities by women is unlikely to lead to significant changes in gender roles in Yemen' as a result of extremist religious forces combined

¹⁰ Involved an integrated field survey and literature review of women's conflict resolution and peacebuilding activities implemented by eight national and international organisations as well as two women activists in Yemen.

with wartime conditions suffocating their ability to enact real or lasting change in their gender status.

Peace talks and conflict resolution

Peace talks in Yemen have failed repeatedly to meaningfully include women or their concerns as a result of the exclusionary system of elite-male Yemeni politics (Al Naami and Moodley, 2017: 5; Heinze, 2016: 1). This is despite what happened in 2011, when 'Yemeni women successfully challenged a system that initially excluded them, to achieve representation in the National Dialogue Conference, the six-month peace talks that followed the uprising' (Al Naami and Moodley, 2017: 2). Women's participation in the UN-led peace process has been extremely limited (Al Naami and Moodley, 2017: 10; Gressmann, 2016: 30; Jarhum, 2016: 2). Al Naami and Moodley, (2017: 10) suggest that this is 'primarily because the warring parties and their international supporters have failed to make meaningful concessions, and excluded not only women but other key elements of Yemeni society, such as youth' and they have blocked women from travelling to the peace talks (Gressmann, 2016: 30; Alwazir et al, 2016: 1). The UN has made some efforts to include women through supporting the 'Yemeni Women Pact for Peace and Security', which brings together Yemeni women leaders representing different views to improve women's inclusion in peace-building processes; although the women involved have been unsure about what their role as 'observers' entailed (Al Naami and Moodley, 2017: 10; Gressmann, 2016: 30; Jarhum, 2016: 2; Alwazir et al, 2016: 10). Their involvement has been 'relegated to unofficial discussions with minimal relevance to the main negotiations on political and security arrangements' (Al Naami and Moodley, 2017: 11). There are concerns that 'women's gains would be the first to go in political compromises among those currently leading the war efforts on both sides' (Heinze, 2016: 4; Alwazir et al, 2016: 1). Chughtai and Paul (2015: 3) suggest that the conflict has already undermined and reversed the small gains achieved by women participation in political discussions and decision making.

Oxfam and Saferworld¹¹ report that, despite their marginalisation from national and international peace talks women have continued to be involved as informal peacemakers and peacekeepers, even though they lack the resources to maximise the positive impact of their role (Al Naami and Moodley, 2017: 2). Recent research by Oxfam found that women leaders play an active role in promoting peace and solving day-to-day problems within extended families and the broader community (Al Naami and Moodley, 2017: 7). For example, they mediate between displaced families and host communities around the equitable distribution of firewood (Al Naami and Moodley, 2017: 7). Other women's groups work together to help women detained for petty crimes to get out of prison and back home to their families, as well as manage local conflicts flaring up due to the intense financial pressures on families and communities, for example (Al Naami and Moodley, 2017: 9). Heinze (2016: 1, 6) also finds that in many tribal areas, women have been involved in tribal conflict mediation. Jarhum (2016: 3) provides examples of women led peace initiatives, including child soldier rehabilitation and efforts by journalists to combat hate speech and promote reconciliation. There is still a gap between these local grassroots efforts and the women

¹¹ Saferworld has been working in Yemen to support women's participation in politics, security and peacebuilding since 2011, publishing research, organising debates and workshops with Yemeni civil society and government, and providing training and support to women's organisations. Working with partners across Yemen, Saferworld Yemen's current Gender Peace and Security Programme is focused on enhancing women's participation in peacebuilding at a local level.

leading peace efforts at the national and international level, such as the women who are active in groups like the Yemeni Women Pact for Peace and Security who tend to be elite and educated (Al Naami and Moodley, 2017: 12; Heinze, 2016: 6).

Heinze (2016: 2) identifies a significant lack of knowledge in regard to how to become active in peacebuilding as a woman at the local level; and the potential role of women in conflict prevention, based on their perspectives on tensions and treats in their community (see also Shakir, 2015: 26). Oxfam and Saferworld recommend that Yemeni women's participation at local, national and international levels should be broadened and supported with accessible financial, technical and political support (Al Naami and Moodley, 2017: 2).

Political leadership

IFES (2016: 15) finds that the departure of political leaders as a result of the conflict has 'caused a leadership vacuum inside Yemen that has offered local leaders, particularly women and youth, the opportunity to step into roles and positions of responsibility to provide basic services for neighbourhoods, communities and villages'. These leaders will require technical capacity building assistance to be integrated into formal party, government, and transitional structures (IFES, 2016: 15). However, women interviewed by Pandya (2015: 4) said that their ability to participate politically had deteriorated.

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