

BACKGROUND

In 2023, 21 million people in Yemen are estimated to be in need of humanitarian assistance and protection (OCHA 20/12/2022). Eight years of conflict have left millions of women, men, boys, and girls suffering from the compounded effects of armed violence, an economic crisis, and the disruption of public services. These have affected the lives of large segments of the population, particularly women and girls, marginalised groups, and certain socioeconomic categories. The social dynamics in Yemen have also changed over time, including gender roles within households and communities. The conflict is affecting men, women, boys, and girls differently. Men and boys comprise the vast majority of direct victims of armed conflict, recruitment, and arbitrary detention. Women and girls are left to bear the burden of running their households and disproportionately suffer gender-based violence (GBV).

Yemen ranked last in the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report from 2006–2021. In 2021, Yemen ranked among the five countries that had the worst standing in terms of women’s economic participation, political empowerment, and educational attainment. It also ranked third to the last out of 170 countries in the 2021/22 Global Women Peace and Security index (GIWPS 22/10/2021; WEF 13/07/2022).

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ABOUT THE REPORT

Aim: the report provides an overview of gender dynamics in Yemen at the household and community levels, especially regarding access to basic needs and essential services. It is meant to support gender-sensitive programming, especially in the health, education, food security, and protection sectors. There are deep-rooted sociocultural and economic gender inequalities in Yemen. Responding effectively to the humanitarian crisis, while providing gender-sensitive platforms for resilience, requires in-depth context understanding.

Methodology: this report was drafted in close collaboration with the gender network in Yemen. The key sectors analysed in this report were selected based after a consultation with humanitarian responders.

This analysis is based on the following:

- key informant interviews with 19 humanitarians working with local and international organisations with a specific expertise on gender, protection, education, food security, or health
- a literature review of research related to gender dynamics and conflict in Yemen. The review encompassed studies by international organisations and academic institutes.

LIMITATIONS AND INFORMATION GAPS

- Gathering information on gender dynamics in Yemen is challenging as it is considered a sensitive topic, even among the humanitarian community.
- Access to recent and comprehensive primary data in areas under the control of the de-facto authority (DFA) in the north of Yemen (also known as the Houthis) is limited.
- GBV is a sensitive issue in Yemen. Women and girls do not report violence out of fear of reprisals (Oxfam 03/02/2021).
- Data on people with disabilities and other marginalised people is limited.

While the information gaps are substantial, they should not diminish the importance of the findings and the use of this document to support improved gender-sensitive programming.

SECTION 1: CHANGES IN GENDER DYNAMICS AND ROLES THROUGHOUT THE CONFLICT

Changes in gender dynamics

Change in gender dynamics are shaped by religious, cultural, and social customs and traditions, which are not homogeneous across Yemen. There are differences across regions, tribes, rural and urban areas, and generations.

Before the conflict that started in 2015, Yemeni women and girls were already experiencing systematic discrimination and marginalisation. They could not, and still cannot at present, marry without the permission of their male guardian (Mahram), nor do they have equal rights to divorce, inheritance, or child custody. The lack of legal protection also leaves them exposed to domestic and sexual violence (Oxfam/Saferworld 30/01/2017).

The Government of Yemen has approved its women's development and women's health and development strategies and ratified important global instruments, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1984 and the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991 (UN 01/07/2008).

Before the conflict escalated in Yemen in 2015, there had been progress in gender equality in several areas, including education, political participation, and health. For example, prior to the conflict, there were steady improvements for women and girls in education and for women in terms of political participation. Nearly a quarter of National Dialogue Conference representatives were women. Certain egalitarian policies had also been approved; for example, there was a 30% quota for women in public life. These developments have since fallen through, with women finding themselves side-lined from decision-making (IRC 29/01/2020).

GBV incidents are widespread in Yemen. Women become victims of sexual harassment, early marriages, female genital mutilation, the denial of inheritance, and mobility restrictions (K4D 30/03/2017). For example, 32% of Yemeni girls marry before turning 18 (UNICEF 28/02/2022). These practices have intensified and worsened since the war started in 2015. Specifically, there has been a 50% increase in GBV in the form of physical assault, a 35% increase in sexual abuse cases, a 25% increase in psychological abuse cases, a 17% increase in the denial of resources, and an 11% increase in child marriages (Deem 01/08/2022; Oxfam 09/2020). On the other hand, men face specific protection threats, including exposure to forced recruitment, arbitrary detention by armed groups, and the risk of being injured or killed as a result (IRC 29/01/2020).

Changes in gender roles within the household

Traditionally, women are the primary caregiver at the household level. Women bear the primary responsibility of cooking, cleaning, and collecting water and firewood for their homes. They are tasked with taking care of the children, the elderly, the sick, and people with disabilities. Women also provide 90% of the labour in crop cultivation in rural areas but earn 30% less than men. On the other hand, men are tasked to financially provide for the family (WB 30/03/2022; CARE et al. 20/10/2016; KII 29/12/2022; KII 30/12/2022).

The current conflict, economic decline, and a lack of livelihood opportunities have led to a certain shift in these gender roles. Women's contribution differs considerably between households, but there are signs that women in Yemen have expanded their presence in economic activities, hence their role within the household (SCSS 15/12/2019). Men either have joined the front lines, have lost their jobs as a result of the economic decline and the closure of some businesses, or are not receiving regular salary payments given the transformation of the civil servant structure in DFA-controlled areas (MEI 23/02/2023). As a result, men who remain idle and are unable to find paid employment end up playing an increasing role in the home. In contrast, women have become more involved in both paid and subsistence labour. In general, women who work bear a double burden, as they have to earn an income while still being in charge of household tasks, including cooking, cleaning, and childcare (USAID 30/01/2020; KII 29/12/2022).

According to a literature review, the limited ability of men to earn an income and their 'idleness' often result in domestic conflict and violence. Reports indicate that there is increased conflict between husbands and wives because of the enhanced roles of female household members in earning an income and managing the household, while men often see themselves being forced to take on the traditional roles of women in homemaking, including collecting water, cooking, and childcare. Forms of violence enacted by men at the household level comprise verbal and physical abuses on women and violence on children (CARE et al. 20/10/2016; USAID 30/01/2020; Oxfam 09/2020).

Establishing economic power might put women at a growing risk of violence. Research suggests that the risk of violence against women is greatest when they gain sole decision-making authority alongside their economic empowerment, suggesting that violence may be the fruit of men's feelings of powerlessness. When household authority is shared, the risk of violence appears to be lower (SCSS 15/12/2019).

Decision-making and control over resources

Men are the main decision makers in Yemen inside and outside the home, although women are able to exert influence in decision-making depending on different factors and

circumstances, such as age and experience, the absence of a male family figure, and if the women are generating income.

As Yemeni women age and gain experience in managing household assets, they become increasingly involved in deciding how family resources are spent for essentials, the purchase of household appliances or land, and other familial matters, such as the marriage of their children (SCSS 10/03/2021).

When the husband works abroad, the woman takes over the main responsibility of managing the household, from providing for the family to decision-making. She becomes in charge of deciding how to spend and save the money that the husband sends home (USAID 30/01/2020).

Conversations with key informants indicated that women gain decision-making authority when they contribute to the household budget (KII 30/12/2022). This is echoed by ACAPS' recent coping strategies research in Yemen, as well as by other reviewed literature. In ACAPS' coping strategies research, the dynamics in one of the households changed when their seven sources of income before the war dwindled to only one during, and this was the salary of one of the female members. She explained that this new situation strengthened her position within the household. Although her father remained in charge of handling the money and making executive decisions, she had a say in most issues (ACAPS 22/05/2022).

Research by the Sana'a Center indicated that women who worked gained influence in domestic affairs and more space to express their opinions, particularly if their husbands were not working and they were providing them with cigarettes and qat, the mildly stimulating leaves many Yemenis habitually chewed. Some young women said they gained influence over household decisions after they started providing for their families' financial needs (SCSS 15/12/2019).

Women have control over the spending of any of her own income or inherited assets, including her Mahr (pride price). Women mainly own gold in Yemen, which they receive at their wedding as part of their Mahr. At any point that they have their own savings, women often buy gold to add to their security. Men do not have direct access to women's gold. If the husband wants to sell gold, he must negotiate to borrow it from his wife (SCSS 10/03/2021; ACAPS 22/05/2022).

Gold serves as economic security for women. Having no gold makes women vulnerable to social and economic shocks and leads them to lose their security within the family. A woman saves her gold for the most serious situations, such as the death of her husband, divorce, or a family medical emergency. When the war started, and many men either lost their jobs or had inconsistent salaries, women sold their gold either to cover health expenses, pay accumulated debt, or open small businesses to help the family cope (ACAPS 22/05/2022).

SECTION 2: GENDER NEEDS AND DYNAMICS IN SPECIFIC SECTORS

Access to basic needs and essential services like healthcare, education, and food is a struggle across the country, where gender dynamics play a role on the level of access for women, men, girls, and boys. It is essential to consider these gender dynamics to ensure effective humanitarian programming and equal access to basic needs and services.

Healthcare

Since the war started in 2015, access to the healthcare system has been disrupted, with over 20 million people projected to be in need of healthcare services in 2023. According to the Health Resources and Services Availability Monitoring System, 49% of health facilities in Yemen are either non-functional or partially functional (OCHA 20/12/2022). Even fully functional ones struggle to provide health services because of staff shortages, inadequate supplies and equipment, the inability to meet operational costs, and power outages resulting from the countrywide lack of fuel.

The crisis has affected women and men in different ways. Maternal mortality rates in Yemen are high. It is estimated that one woman dies in childbirth every two hours (UNFPA 31/03/2023).

Female doctors are needed for the maternal health of women. There is a cultural taboo in Yemen against women being treated by male doctors for pregnancy-related issues and overall reproductive health. The lack of recruitment of female doctors in rural and remote villages makes it hard for women to access maternal health (KII 20/12/2022; IRC 29/01/2020; CARE et al. 11/2016; KII 21/12/2022).

Men have the lead in family planning and decide how many children to have, which includes decision-making about the spacing and use of contraceptive methods. People living in areas under the DFA control also have limited access to family planning and birth control (Mwatana 08/03/2022; KII 21/12/2022).

Conversations with key informants and a literature review indicated that men maintain control and decide over healthcare expenditures, which is challenging when men have different priorities than women. Women often have to receive permission from and be accompanied by a male guardian, including when seeking reproductive health services (KII 20/12/2022; IRC 29/01/2020).

Women are the primary caretakers and are responsible over health and hygiene in the household. A family member falling ill affects women's daily activities the most, as they are in charge of caregiving at home. Access to valid information about the practices that support good hygiene and health for both women and men are essential, especially for women who

serve as the primary caretakers of their families. Any information gathered determines how they will respond to a certain emergency. Women's access to information is limited and often channelled through female friends and family members. Men are more mobile and have access to a range of information sources, including mosques, markets, and community gatherings (IRC 29/01/2020).

Education

Years of conflict have impeded access to education for children. Nearly 8.6 million school-aged girls and boys need education assistance. Protracted displacement, the irregular payment of salaries to teachers, distant schools, safety and security risks, and child labour and recruitment in armed groups encourage girls and boys to drop out of school (OCHA 20/12/2022).

An estimated 2.7 million children are out of school, with girls comprising up to 47% of this number, including many of the 1.5 million displaced children who have stopped going to school as a result of multiple displacements. School-going girls and boys in areas of high displacement are forced to cope with overcrowded and unequipped classrooms (OCHA 20/12/2022).

Different gender dynamics and context specificities affect the access of girls and boys to education. Historically, girls in Yemen have had less access to education compared to boys (IRC 29/01/2020). A variety of factors influence the gender gap, including:

- Safety and security concerns among families regarding girls attending schools, particularly in conflict-affected areas and where distances to schools are much longer. Boys who travel long distances to access school, such as those travelling from one village to another, are also at risk of kidnapping (IRC 29/01/2020; KII 20/12/2022; KII 21/12/2022).
- Challenges to girls' school attendance differ by region. In the northern regions, girls are held back from school to help their mothers with domestic chores. In the southern regions, transportation is a more significant challenge because schools are far from communities (IRC 29/01/2020).
- There is a lack of female teachers in the rural areas, as finding female teachers with adequate training and experience is a challenge outside urban regions. In urban areas such as Sana'a and Aden, qualified and experienced female teachers stop teaching as a consequence of low salaries. School toilets are also not always gender-sensitive and not adapted for girls' menstrual hygiene needs. Because of a lack of funds, there is a lack of water supply in schools (IRC 29/01/2020).
- It is the father who usually makes decisions regarding the enrolment of daughters in schools. If he refuses, the mother or grandmother typically tries to influence him into

agreeing. The general practice is for girls to get married and leave for their husband's house. Statistics indicate that 52% of Yemeni girls marry before they reach eighteen, and 14% before they are fifteen (CARE et al. 20/10/2016). On the other hand, boys are generally expected to end up running a family and as a result need education to generate an income. Sometimes, boys drop out of school to support their family by working in agriculture, with livestock, or in shops and restaurants (KII 22/12/2022; KII 28/12/2022; IRC 29/01/2020).

Food security

Yemen is among the countries with the highest number of people facing Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or worse food insecurity levels. Conflict, displacement, reduced agricultural production, and economic decline are the main drivers of worsening food insecurity and access to services in the country (OCHA 20/12/2022).

People's purchasing power has decreased. Households have been limited into purchasing only essential items, which generally comprise rice, sugar, and vegetable oil. They are no longer able to purchase things previously considered as necessities, such as cheese, milk, and eggs.

According to an assessment by the International Rescue Committee in five governorates in Yemen where they had focus group discussions with 296 women, women-headed, child-headed, and elderly-headed households are the most food-insecure households in these regions. They usually do not have sufficient food to meet their daily needs, unless one or more family members have stable employment or consistent access to cash transfers and rations through humanitarian assistance (IRC 29/01/2020).

Households are resorting to different coping strategies to meet their basic needs. These range from relying on the support of different social networks, such as neighbours and family members, to taking on credits, to limiting food consumption and eating less nutritious food (USAID 30/01/2020). This echoed the International Rescue Committee research where women indicated that their diets are not rich enough in vitamins and minerals given limited household resources to purchase fruits and vegetables in markets (IRC 29/01/2020).

According to the findings of ACAPS' recent coping strategies report, many households prioritise children and people with critical health conditions over other household members in the allocation of food. Some households reported begging for food from restaurants. Women and children are usually the ones who beg, as it is considered culturally shameful for men to do so. Sending women and children to beg could expose them to verbal abuse and harassment (ACAPS 22/05/2022).

According to key informants and available literature, girls who get married at an early age

are less knowledgeable about correct breastfeeding practices. As a result, their children are more likely to be malnourished (IRC 29/01/2020). Over 1.3 million pregnant and breastfeeding women and 2.2 million children under five are estimated to require treatment for acute malnutrition in 2023. Acute malnutrition puts newborns at risk of severe stunted growth (OCHA 20/12/2022).

Protection

Prolonged conflict, displacement, and a lack of livelihood opportunities put men, women, boys, and girls, particularly IDPs, at risk of protection risks. Gender dynamics affect their exposure.

In conflict-affected areas, men and boys are more likely to be killed or injured. They can be at risk of arbitrary detention from armed groups. This leads to an increasing number of women-headed households. Women and girls are exposed to street harassment and are at risk of GBV, including sexual violence. Early marriage is a complex phenomenon in Yemen that is culturally seen to protect girls from sexual harassment and abuse and often relates to building social alliances and networks. Girls from displaced households face increased security concerns and are more vulnerable to early marriage (IRC 29/01/2020; SCSS 15/12/2019; Oxfam 09/2020).

The requirement for women to be accompanied by a male guardian (Mahram) is not a part of Yemeni law, and authorities have not made any formal changes to legislation or related policies in relation to this, but the DFA has been increasingly enforcing it through verbal directives (AI 01/09/2022). The requirement bans women from travelling without a Mahram or without a written approval from her Mahram across governorates under DFA control and some areas under the IRG such as Abyan and Ad Dali governorates. These restrictions affect women's participation in different aspects of life, such as politics, the social sphere, and for career opportunities and progression. This is more acutely felt by women-headed households, as the requirement also restricts their mobility as the main breadwinners of their families (ACAPS 22/11/2022).

Comprehensive data about GBV is rare in Yemen because of the sensitivity of and taboos about discussing the topic. That said, conversations with key informants and a literature review indicated a general increase in GBV incidents in Yemen since the war started. These include acts of domestic violence, the raping of girls and boys, child marriage, and the harassment of women and girls in public spheres (SCSS 15/12/2019; Oxfam 09/2020; Deem 01/08/2022).

According to a study conducted by Oxfam, women and girls do not report violence out of fear of being killed, detained, or exposed to further violence. The baseline findings show

that 71% of the community members interviewed in four governorates justified a husband's violence against his wife. Women themselves agree that a woman deserves to be punished by her husband, referring to the societal practices that give male guardians the right to punish women and girls if they disrespect certain social norms. Male interviewees said that a man has the right to punish a woman by either hitting or shouting at her when she makes mistakes, neglects family duties, or misbehaves with her mother-in-law. Gender relations in Yemen are formatted by cultural, religious, and social traditions, and men sometimes misuse their power and authority (Oxfam 09/2020).

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