

# CDDRL

## WORKING PAPERS

Number 140  
July 2013

### *Yemeni Women in Transition: Challenges and Opportunities*

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Working Paper of the Program on Arab Reform and Democracy at CDDRL, published as part of the “Political Reform Prospects in Yemen” series edited by April Longley Alley, Erica Gaston, and Nadwa al-Dawsari.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Jamila Ali Raja** is founder and manager of Consult-Yemen which focuses on politics, conflict resolution, media, human rights, gender, and development. She is member of the Yemeni National Dialogue Committee and works with the National Dialogue Support Programme (NDSP) funded by German government as a consultant and senior researcher on state building. She is an active participant in a number of meetings and conferences worldwide, including the Regional Consultation on Transitional Justice Developments organized by UNDP, the OHCHR and UN Women, 7-9 November 2012, in Cairo, Egypt and the Podstam/Berlin meetings for dialogue preparation in March 2012, arranged by Berghof Foundation for peace building and conflict transformation. She has worked as consultant with OXFAM on preparing an advocacy and campaigning strategy for women during the transitional period in Yemen, and has been involved in mediation and facilitation efforts between International humanitarian agencies and the Huthis in Sa'ada in December 2012. She participated in a mission to Sa'ada to assess the human rights situation resulting from the military confrontations between the Huthis and the Salafis in Damag area in 2011, and in the first Southern Conference held in Cairo in November 2011.

Ms. Raja has worked with youth activists during the youth uprising (after her temporary resignation from her post as advisor to the Foreign Ministry) as a volunteer to provide training on concepts of the civil state, rule of law, and political settlements. She was also one of the consultants in the initiative for the establishment of an independent human rights commission in Yemen funded by EU and participated in preparing the draft law for the commission. She designed a roadmap for a consultative group of Yemeni women to reach the parliamentary elections in 2009 and 2010 (funded by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung), and participated in preparing a Training Guidebook for Yemeni Women Leadership in Political Parties funded by the PDF and the European Union. In addition to writing articles on corruption, development, and other political issues, she has been editor-in-chief of a newspaper issued from the Yemeni media center in Cairo. Ms. Raja has been a diplomat for more than 20 years and was Yemen's nominee for the Arab League Undersecretary post in 2004. Ms. Raja holds an MA in Journalism from the American University in Cairo. This paper was presented at a conference on Yemen at Harvard University in October 2012.

## **The Condition of Yemeni Women before the 2011 Revolution**

Prior to the 2011 Arab Spring, the political, economic and social outlook for Yemeni women was not promising. Women make up approximately half of Yemen's 25.1 million population<sup>1</sup> which is stricken by poverty,<sup>2</sup> corruption and dysfunctional governments. Yet, females often suffer disproportionately from conflict and economic hardship.

Starting in 2004, women were among the victims of six rounds of conflict waged by government forces against Houthi<sup>3</sup> rebels in the northern governorates of Sa'ada and Al-Jawf. The conflict produced a significant number of internally displaced people (IDPs), creating a humanitarian crisis and trauma that negatively affected families, especially women.<sup>4</sup>

In 2007 and 2008, large floods in the eastern governorates of Hadramout and Al-Mahara further disrupted economic and social activities. Then the worldwide Food-Fuel-Financial (FFF) crisis of 2008 increased food prices and hunger, particularly among vulnerable social groups. Also in 2007, a group called the southern movement or al-Hirak began peaceful protests. Protesters initially called for economic and political rights, but by 2010 were actively calling for southern independence.<sup>5</sup> Women in the South grieved twice. When North and South Yemen unified in

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<sup>1</sup> - World Bank, fact sheet, April 2012.

<sup>2</sup> The Human Development Index (UNDP, 2011) ranks Yemen 154th out of 184 countries assessed.

<sup>3</sup> The group takes its name from Hussain Badrdeen al-Houthi, a Zaidi/Shia leader, whose claimed regenerative reading of the Zaidi doctrine set him apart from the traditional Zaidi ulama and some of the Believing Youth (Ashabab al-Mu'min). The expansion of his thought and followers was marked by what was named as The Scream (As-sarkha) after each Friday prayer in the great mosques of Sa'ada and Sana'a cities. It spelled out Hussain al-Houthi's protest against American world polarization and dominance influenced by the Israel's politics. The Yemeni Authority, which could neither contain nor control this movement, soon waged six consecutive wars against the rebellious Houthies in Sa'ada governorate in which the Houthies fought back. Their leader Hussain was killed during the first war in 2004. Their official name today is Ansar Allah (God's Advocates).

<sup>4</sup> Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDCM), March 2011: indicated that there were 342,000 IDPs from the northern governorate of Sa'ada and 200,000 IDPs from the southern governorate of Abyan (2010-2011).

<sup>5</sup> The protests initially began as a peaceful movement by al-Hirak to protest the central government-mandated early retirement of southern military cadre and civil servants. It started as a right-based

1990, southern women lost the progressive family status law of the socialist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, which offered a degree of protection for women's rights. Then, along with the rest of the southern population, women suffered from the post-unity plundering and looting of land and real estate and the forced retirement of southern military and civil servants by the central government.

Internal wars, political unrest, natural disasters and economic shocks damaged the economy of the afflicted areas and slowed the pace of national development plans. There was only slow progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and national Five-Year Development Plans, along with severe mismanagement of aid funding.<sup>6</sup>

Structurally, Yemen faced long-term challenges related to rapid population growth, increased poverty rates, unemployment in the rural areas,<sup>7</sup> and lack of adequate nation-wide infrastructure and basic services. The demands for basic health and education services remained unmet, with water sources vanishing rapidly due to mismanagement and the resulting depletion of ground water reserves. Meanwhile, the state continued to depend on its dwindling oil resources while neglecting the imperative of economic diversification. As a result of the government failures, unemployment soared particularly among youth and women.

In this context, gender development suffered. In 2010, the illiteracy rate among urban females was 65 percent and as high as 70 per cent among rural females.<sup>8</sup> The enrollment rate of girls in schools continued to be low, particularly in rural areas. One in 39 Yemeni women died of maternal health complications, with maternal deaths accounting for 42 per cent of all female deaths among women between 15 and 49 years of age. Women accounted for only 28 per cent of the labor force.

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movement requesting equality under the law. The retirees were young in age and received a low wage that was not enough to support their families.

<sup>6</sup> In 2009, the Yemeni government admitted to the media that it was unable to disburse the USD\$6 billion pledged to support Yemen at the Donor Consultative Group Meeting in London 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Yemen Report 2010, UNDP Report on the Progress of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG's): indicated that 76% of the Yemeni population are scattered across 133,000 settlements.

<sup>8</sup> Yemen Report, 2010 UNDP/MDG.

Though Yemen is signatory to the majority of international human and women rights conventions, it exhibited one of the lowest women representation rates in public and political life. One woman Member of Parliament represented the entire Yemeni female population, while males were represented by the remaining 300 parliament members. The Shura Council, a consultative body with no legislative authorities, contained two women and 109 male appointees. Since 2006, there have been two female ministers within a 30-member cabinet.

In part due to the lack of representation, women's rights violations were, and still are, common. Existing laws that supposedly protect women and girls are either inconsistently applied or lack enforcement. There are no laws to protect girls from early marriage—a persistent practice in the country—or to protect women from rape and harassment. And, contradictory to Islamic *sharia* law, women in some areas have been deprived of their inheritance rights.

Some researchers attribute violations to Islam, but these violations are more likely a product of the growing influence of fundamentalism and other radical religious teachings that violate the wellbeing of not only women, but all of humanity. In Yemen, former President Saleh tactically aligned with fundamentalists to challenge political rivals like the socialists and the Islamist party, Islah.<sup>9</sup> In return for their support, Saleh gave religious hardliners a virtual pass in parliament to obstruct a proposed law in 2009 aimed at setting Yemen's minimum age for marriage. Saleh continued using the hardliners in his confrontations with the southerners, especially the Socialist Party, as well as against the Houthi/<sup>10</sup>Zaydi in Sa'ada. Most of the time, these maneuverings were made at the expense of the advancement of Yemeni women.

In spite of all these obstacles, and contrary to the poor rating of Yemeni women in the development reports and the stereotypical image of the helpless, veiled-in-black Yemeni woman, the 2011 Yemeni revolution was mostly inspired, triggered, and mobilized by outstanding

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<sup>9</sup>The Islah party consists of members from the Muslim Brotherhood, tribal leaders, and hardline preachers.

<sup>10</sup>Zaydsim is a Shi'a sect named after Zayd bin Ali, the grandson of al-Hussain bin Ali, the grandson of the prophet Mohamed. Zaydi Islamic jurisprudence is prevalent in Yemen. It is the closest school of Shi'a thought to the Sunni thought.

Yemeni women, including Nobel Peace Prize laureate Tawakkol Karman in Sana'a, Bushra al-Maqari in Taiz, and many others.<sup>11</sup> The Yemeni women in the Taghyeer (Change) and Hurriya (Liberty) Squares, the main revolutionary protest squares in Sana'a and Taiz, surprised the international media and the world in their numbers, eloquence and uninhibited, well-articulated public demands. Female students, housewives and activists voiced their aspirations for dignity and change by demanding the regime to leave.<sup>12</sup> In the aftermath of the revolution, women have found a host of not only challenges, but also new opportunities to reshape their role in Yemen's future.

### **Women's Role in the Yemeni Revolution**

Women's participation in the Yemeni revolution can be divided into three stages.

Stage one began on January 16, the start of the protest movement, and ended on 21 March 2011, following the massacre of youth in Sana'a's Change Square, an incident known as "The Friday for Dignity" (*Juma'at Al Karama*). During this stage, women's response to the uprising was spontaneous, self-driven and advanced by a small group of female activists. Working women, female students, housewives, daughters, sisters and mothers joined the squares individually or

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<sup>11</sup>In addition, these women played an active role in supporting other Arab revolutions during the Arab Spring of 2011. On January 16, 2011, following the toppling of Ben Ali in Tunisia, an activist suggested a stand of support for the Tunisian people in front of the Tunisian Embassy in Sana'a. A group of women activists responded to the call. Among these women were Bilqis Al Lahabi, Tawakkol Karman, Amal Basha, Sara Jamal, Reem Al Mujahid and others.

<sup>12</sup> These are some of the Yemeni women activists during the uprising: Farida al-Yarimi, Jamila Al-Wajarah, Fakhria Hugaria, Sahar Abdullah Al-Ansi, Arwa Abdo Othman, Bushra Al-Amri, Fatma Al-Ahghabari, Bushra Al-Surabi, Haifa Sawbal, Thuria Damage, Samia and Majada Hadadd, Ishraq and Amal Al Ma'akhathi, Huda Al Attas, Nelly Nagi, Intisar Sinan, Tahani Al Khaba, Maha Awad, Huda Al Hababi, Amat Al Salam Al Hajj, Intisar Shaker, Nabila Al Zubair, Samah Shaqdari, Wamid Shakir, Ilham Al Kibsi, Suha Basharin, Imtinan and Rabab Al Midwahi, Sumai Al Qawas, Sa'ada Al Alaia, Asia Thabit, Qaida Al Sabri, Najlaa Al Umari, Bushra Al Ansi, Shatha Al Harazi, Hind and Mai Al Nassiri, Laila Rabee, Maha Al Burahi, Horia Mashoor, Rana Garhoom, Nadia Al Kawkaban, Ibtisam Al Mutawakul, Amal Hajjar, Amal Al Qafari, Samira Al Sami3a, Ashwaq Al Jarbani, Aswan Shafer, Samah and Haifa Subai, Jihad Al Jiffri, Amira Al Arasi, Qabool and Radia Al Mutawakul, Intisar and Yasmin Al Qadi, Nabila Al Mufti, Mona Safwan, Samah Radman. Amani Qadi, Faiza al Sulaimani, Huda Jaafar, Sawsan Al Ariqi, Samira al Fuhaidi, Rana Ghanim, Arwa Al Khatabi, Ibtisam al Dufri, Ilham Al Kibsi, Afraa al Haboori, Maha Salah, Wahbai Sabra, Jamila Ghalib, Shafiqa Al Wahsh, Shafiqa Murshid, Wafaa Al Walidi. Wafaa Al Shabani, Shafiqa Al Qadasi, Om Marwan, Om Al Ahrar, Maha Al Shagabi, Alia Al Sha'ab, Ilhsan Dughaihs, Intisar Al Hadali. Women doctors: Samah Abdul Al Mughni, Jamilaya Aqoob. Afrah Al Zoba, Arwa Awn and Iman Hamoud Al Qairi, Amat al Salam Al Tharihi

with their families. Even women who were affiliated with opposition political parties engaged in the square's activities independently. Young women were presenters and speakers on the Change Square stage. Tribal men brought their wives and daughters to the squares and women gained respect for their participation. Squares were bustling with women and their contribution varied from simply praying for the youth protesters, to being in the forefront of the demonstrations. Women erected their own tents for providing food and medical services, as well as for raising political awareness. Women's roles and spontaneity were the same in the protest squares of the cities of Taiz, Aden and Hodeidah. Women in this phase joined the protests for different reasons including, but not limited to, unemployment, nepotism, corruption, injustice, lack of services, centralization of power and services, inequality, lack of the rule of law, frustrations and grievances of the southerners and Houthis, government mismanagement and unfair distribution of wealth.

The second stage started on the 21 March 2011 with the defection of the Commander of the First Armored Brigade, Major General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, to protect the youth of Sana'a's Change Square. This period continued through 3 June 2011 when former President Saleh barely survived an assassination attempt. Mohsin's defection marked the official joining of the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP)<sup>13</sup> opposition bloc of the youth protests. During this period, Islah, the most dominant and highly disciplined part of the JMP bloc, began to gain control over the squares while some independent groups, including women, began to withdraw from protests. Observers note that Islah party hardliners and their allies, such as Islah member, tribal figure and powerful businessman Sheikh Hamid Al Ahmar, and the powerful commander Ali Muhsin, were at the forefront of changing tides in the squares which ensured Islah dominance over independents and other political parties.

The third phase began with the signing of the Gulf Cooperation Council Initiative in November 2011, an agreement under which Saleh transferred power to his deputy, Abd Rabbuh Mansour

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<sup>13</sup> The Joint Meeting Party (JMP) was formed officially in 2003 from six opposition parties. It includes the Islamist-oriented Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah) and the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), which represents some the remnants of the former South Yemeni leadership (YSP), Hizb Al-Haq (a semi-religious party), the Nasserite (Unionist) party, the Popular Forces Union party and Al Baa'th party.



Hadi, in return for domestic immunity. At that point, many Yemeni women became certain that their new gains during the early stage of the revolution were at jeopardy, while their pre-revolution challenges endured. Further complicating matters, new challenges regarding safety and security began to overshadow the primary political and economic demands for change that were raised in the uprising.

### **Factors behind Female Participation in the Yemeni Revolution**

Several factors inspired, facilitated, and encouraged unprecedented female participation in the Yemeni revolution. First, the demands of the protesters for equal citizenship, justice, political reform and a better life, appealed to men and women alike. Both chanted for regaining their dignity and pride. And, women protesters at the early stages of the demonstrations assumed that their leading role in the revolution would guarantee them the same civil and human rights as their male counterparts and consolidate their position as genuine partners in the building of a new Yemen.

The Tunisian revolution also inspired Yemeni women to go out and to protest against a faulty 33-year regime, which deprived them of a decent and dignified life. Tunisian women's vigorous and active role in their popular outburst, followed by the toppling of President Ben Ali's regime, induced Yemeni women to engage in a similar act of protest.

The availability of international media coverage was another main factor encouraging female participation. Television cameras captured the millions of protesters (*Al Milioniya*) in the Egyptian revolution in Tahrir Square. Women became the champions of broadcast television. Programs, talk shows and debates that began hosting Egyptian and Tunisian women captivated the world. On the web, young female bloggers and social media activists were at the heart of the revolution, mobilizing youth protesters through exchanges of information. It was not long before the Yemeni revolution and Yemeni women were also at the epicenter of the global media. Through Arab news coverage and talk shows, Yemeni women, even those who could neither read nor write, became well aware of political developments and understood the need for change.

However, it was mostly educated women who took to the streets during the Yemeni revolution, and would subsequently continue the struggle during transition.

The female protesters who first initiated the demonstrations in Taghyeer and Hurriya Squares resided in the major cities of Sana'a, Taiz, Aden and Hodeidah. As such, they had better education and work opportunities, and greater exposure to Arab and world media, than their rural counterparts.<sup>14</sup> In general, they came from the 35 per cent of Yemeni women who were literate and the 5 per cent of women who are wage earners. They were the wives, mothers, daughters and sisters of the most educated urban male population. And, they all shared a certain amount of political/social awareness. It was these educated and enlightened young women, youth and men who kindled the uprising.

Yemeni women who engaged in the demonstrations had also been empowered by scholarships and fellowship opportunities to study in universities abroad. Though small in number, these opportunities opened doors for most women activists. Additionally, English language learning institutes connected young women to the vast world of knowledge and information, especially that available through the internet. With knowledge came ideas of change.

Additionally, young and active Yemeni women who defied the regime during the Yemeni spring were from the same generation who grew up enjoying the short-lived liberties and freedoms that thrived between the 1990 unification of North and South Yemen and the subsequent 1994 civil war that brought the political opening to an end. They had lived in a time filled with the potential for genuine democracy and they cherished democratic value. Even after the 1994 war, which defeated a separatist movement in the south, and the recession of diversity and plurality that followed, these women continued to carry with them the seeds of that brief period of political liberalization and they fearlessly embedded it in the soil of Taghyeer and Hurriya Squares in 2011.

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<sup>14</sup> The first tent in Taghyeer square was set up on 16 February 2011. Women had four tents for sleeping (Jamila Al Wajarah, Farida Al Yarimi, Intisar Shaker, Samah Abdul Kafi and Ihsan Dughaish) in addition to Tawakkul's family tent.

The role of women in the frontline of the rallies was also a strategic one. They took advantage of a regime that was culturally bound to customary laws and traditions in dealing with women. According to customary laws, it is prohibited to attack or kill women. Knowingly, Yemeni women activists served as the protest vanguard in rallies and marches. In one way, they were protecting their fellow youth from a regime that would be embarrassed to attack or crack down on women-led demonstrations and, in another way, women activists were resetting their own social roles. Even when the former regime resorted to imprisoning Tawakkol Karman,<sup>15</sup> it was only a matter of days before authorities were forced to release her under the pressure of traditional norms and in response to popular protests rejecting her unlawful detention. Since then, the regime limited its imprisonment of women, and resorted instead to discrediting female political activists' honor and reputation.<sup>16</sup>

Despite their short history, local Non-Governmental Organizations' (NGOs) work and activities related to human, civil and women rights also had an impact on women, youth and media activists.<sup>17</sup> Many local NGOs were founded and managed by women. Their participation in regional and international workshops and conferences gave them exposure and improved their effectiveness and empowerment. Coordination and networking at the local and regional levels expanded these women's experiences and approaches. The undetected impact came to light during the uprising at an individual level as individual female activists built on their personal experiences and networks to help coordinate and broaden activism.

Last but not least, the United Nations (UN), through its years of work in Yemen, had set the basis for progress and advancement for Yemeni women according to the requirements of international human and women's rights conventions and global standards. The UN International Conventions on Women and Human Rights were regarded as an official reference point and support document for women in their struggle for equality at the national level.

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<sup>15</sup> Tawakkol Karman was detained on 23 of January 2011. She was released a couple of days later.

<sup>16</sup> Refer to the incidents subsequently described in this paper.

<sup>17</sup> These NGOs have also worked on issues related to the freedom of the press, corruption, transparency and accountability.

## Challenges for Women in Post-revolution Yemen

The experience of the revolution raised the profile of women activists and opened new opportunities for advancement. Nevertheless, the original problems confronting women remain unresolved, and the Yemeni Spring has brought with it many new challenges.

### *Deteriorated security, economic, and humanitarian conditions*

The peaceful protests that started in January 2011 turned to military confrontations between the proponents and opponents of the former regime in May 2011.<sup>18</sup> Women were once again victims of a conflict that they had neither instigated nor were able to stop. As a result of the ensuing fighting, hundreds of men and women were killed and many more were injured. The infrastructure of the country was destroyed. Power cuts and fuel and water shortages multiplied the suffering and the country plunged into a severe political, economic, and humanitarian crisis. Considering the critical situation, UN Security Council Resolution 2014, issued on 21 October 2011, called for ending the violence. Then on 23 November 2011, the GCC Initiative<sup>19</sup> and implementation mechanism established a road map for a political settlement and a peaceful transition of power. The first task for the consensus president, Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, along with the National Unity Government<sup>20</sup> was to restore peace by forming the Military Affairs

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<sup>18</sup> In May 2011 military confrontations broke out between Hashid tribal leader Sadiq Al Ahmar backed by his tribesmen and brothers and allegedly by the defected Commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Brigade, Ali Muhsin on one side and the Commander of the Republican Guards and son of the former president on another. The fighting took place at Al Hasaba, Sofan and Bani Al Harth areas, north of the Capital Sana'a. Soon after, the clashes spread to Arhab and Nihm (north of the governorate of Sana'a). These new fighting zones included tribesmen, said to be spiritually led by clergyman Abdulmajid al-Zindani, to fight the pro former regime republican guards stationed in those areas. Moreover, the Houthis and pro Islah tribesmen continued their fighting in Sa'ada, Al Jawf, Hajjah, and Amran. In Taiz, a city located south of Sana'a, the youth suffered from brutal crackdowns by the former regime's military and security forces. Meanwhile, in the south of the country, Al Qaeda (Ansar Al Sharia) took hold of the Abyan governorate and challenged the local council and the stationed military units.

<sup>19</sup> The Gulf Cooperation Council Initiative mechanism was signed by former President Saleh, head of the GPC party, and their partners and by the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) and their coalition. Other components such as the Houthis, al-Hirak, the youth, CSOs, and women were not part of the signature but were included as active components in the national dialogue process.

<sup>20</sup> The new government was sworn in November 2011.

Committee for Achieving Security and Stability. The Committee's first duty was to end all forms of armed conflicts and division in the armed forces and to remove roadblocks and checkpoints.

Due to the escalation of violence that lasted for nearly a year, women's peaceful demands for change and pursuit of dignity, which had had augmented their political influence at the beginning of the revolution, retreated to simply keeping their families and themselves safe. Their aspirations were reduced to securing electricity, water, fuel, and food. And, though President Hadi's and the Military Committee's efforts ended armed clashes and improved the security situation, women were still concerned about the schism in the capital that remained between the defected First Armored Division and the former regime's Republican Guards. The number of checkpoints decreased but women worried about those that remained. Women observed the replacements of senior military, security, and air force commanders by the President, yet they still awaited the unification of the Yemeni Army under one chain of command.

In addition to the above, women feared the threats of al-Qaeda and the explosives which were planted throughout Sana'a, Aden, and Mukhalla, as well as the assassination attempts targeting the President's senior supporters and top Socialist Party leaders. In the southern governorate of Abyan, women continue to be deeply concerned about planted booby traps. These explosives targeted the leaders of the Popular Committees, locally organized groups who fought alongside the government to expel al-Qaeda from Abyan in June 2012. To this day, explosions, bombs and assassinations are part of daily life in Yemen, hindering the work of international humanitarian relief agencies and deterring the prospects of an inclusive national dialogue, which is the cornerstone of the transition agreement.

Women's grievances, concerns, and thoughts in regard to the security situation, remain unheard. And their "asserted need for a full, equal and effective participation at all stages of peace-processes given their vital role in the prevention and resolution of conflict and peace building"<sup>21</sup> remains unmet. Furthermore, the Committee on Military Affairs for Achieving Security and Stability lacks any female representation.

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<sup>21</sup> UN SCR, Resolution 2014 (21, 10, 2011), Adopted at the Council's 6634th meeting.

Armed conflict has prevailed over the peaceful movement for change, deviating from its simple purpose to improve lives and living conditions. The conflict has left much of the country's already inadequate infrastructure badly damaged, and plunged Yemen into a financial fiasco. The country has suffered from unprecedented deterioration of both the humanitarian situation and livelihoods.

According to a Joint Socio Economic Assessment (JSEA) conducted for the Yemeni government in 2012, one year of the crisis increased poverty from 42 per cent in 2009 to 54.5 per cent by the end of 2011.<sup>22</sup> Female-headed households were affected the most. Meanwhile, the World Food Program (WFP) reported that 10 million people were food-insecure in March 2012, "registering an increase from 32 per cent in 2009 to 45 per cent in 2012, with half of that number, or 5 million, being severely food insecure. Additionally, one million children under the age of 5 are acutely malnourished. The UNHCR has estimated 806,600 people to be considered most vulnerable due the conflicts, including children who have been directly involved in or affected by the infighting and violence, as well as 213,000 vulnerable returnees and war-affected persons in the north, 203,900 refugees and asylum seekers, and approximately 150,000 displaced people in the South."<sup>23</sup>

At the same time, social service delivery has been dramatically affected across Yemen, including health, education, and social safety net payments. This service decline has further impoverished and increased hardship for an already vulnerable population. The dramatic and immediate negative impact of the 2011 crisis on individuals' health and well-being can be directly traced to Yemen's chronic under-development, particularly of basic social services.

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<sup>22</sup> "The Joint Social and Economic Assessment (JSEA) 2012 was prepared in response to a request from the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MoPIC), and was undertaken jointly by the World Bank, the United Nations, the European Union, and the Islamic Development Bank. The JSEA's main purpose was to assess the social and economic impact of the crisis in Yemen, and to identify challenges and key priorities for early interventions, primarily for the transition period, which is expected to stretch into the first half of 2014". Joint Socio Economic Assessment Report (JSES) 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Joint Socio Economic Assessment Report (JSES) 2012.

In terms of economics, the Joint Social Economic Assessment (JSEA) has noted that since the conflict, production and exports levels have been reduced and business and industries virtually terminated. Consequently, the unemployment rate amongst youth and women is estimated to have increased.

#### *Undocumented risks and incomplete data*

It is difficult to ascertain the impact the crisis has had on women based solely on the JSEA report and more information is necessary to properly assess women's situation post-revolution.

Segregated data based on gender might have revealed a disproportionate negative impact on females. Furthermore, gender disaggregated data could have contributed to the development of the Planning Ministry's Transitional Program for Stability and Development (TPSD).<sup>24</sup> The TPSD 2012-2014 states that youth and women are crosscutting elements in political, security and stability building and in socio-economic recovery and it devoted a whole sector for women in Annex (2), but with the absence of specific gender budgeting, many women's issues might still be lost in the general context of the implementation process.

Finally, though the TPSD recommends the need to enhance gender analysis and encourage budgeting and allocation of funds to finance gender-related issues and stand-alone projects, Yemeni gender specialist or activists<sup>25</sup> have been absent or poorly represented in the Consultative Group and Friends of Yemen meetings in Riyadh and New York.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The Transitional Program for Security and Development TPSD 2012-2014 was developed to implement an initial program of economic stabilization and development that addresses the immediate needs of the population in all regions of Yemen.

<sup>25</sup> Two women were invited to attend the CG in September 2012 but only one woman NGO (SOUL) made it to that meeting. At the next Friends of Yemen meeting the same year, no woman was asked to participate in the event. The Friends of Yemen (FoY) group started as a result of the London Conference in January 2010 to focus on: 1. Resolving political challenges 2. Consolidating state finances 3. Generating income in the economy 4. Improving the institutional framework. FoY's last meeting took place in London on March 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Yemen Donor Conference, Riyadh, 4 September 2012. FOY meeting in New York on September 27, 2012.

### *Lack of consistent female representation in the GCC transition plan*

While the UNSCR 2014 and the GCC implementation mechanism have acknowledged women's sufferings and assured them a recognized role in the transition, the GCC<sup>27</sup> two-year plan has refrained from defining a 30 per cent women representation quota in all the transitional bodies, entities and National Dialogue. Instead, it has resorted to the use of the term "appropriate representation",<sup>28</sup> which leaves women's actual participation to the whims of the major political players. The word "appropriate" reveals the two signing parties' unwillingness to adopt quota representation of women during transition. And, so far, the term "appropriate representation" has been interpreted differently by different groups. In November 2011, due to the lack of a definite percentage, only three women were nominated in the consensus government composed of 32 ministers. Additionally, no women were represented in the Military Affairs Committee for Achieving Security and Stability nor in the President's Advisory Committee.<sup>29</sup>

It was not until the women's national conference on March 2012 that the 30 per cent women representation was reaffirmed explicitly in Prime Minister Mohamed Salim Ba Sindwa's speech and in the conference statement. And during the national dialogue process,<sup>30</sup> the formation of the contact committee included 24 percent women,<sup>31</sup> though this percentage then dropped to 19 percent when the technical committee (TC) for the preparation of the NDC was formed.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) agreement mechanism, Article (26), states: "Women shall appropriately be represented in all of the institutions referred to in this Mechanism."

<sup>28</sup> The two signing parties (the GPC, then ruling party, and JMP, then opposition coalition) refused the proposed 30% women quota and requested Jamal Benomar to use the term "appropriate representation" instead.

<sup>29</sup> The Presidential Advisory Committee consisted of four men (Two from the GPC and two from JMP).

<sup>30</sup> Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) mechanism Article (20) affirms: "Women must be represented in all participating groups" in the National Dialogue"

<sup>31</sup> Two women, Raqia Humaidan and Nadia Al Saqaff, were appointed with six other men in the Contact Committee (Abdulkarim Al Iriani, Yassin Saeed Noman, Abdulwahab Al Anis, Abdul Qader Hilal, Hussain Arab and Ja'afar Basaleh.

<sup>32</sup> At the beginning, five women were appointed in the technical committee: Raqia Humaidan, Tawakul Karman, Amal Al Basha, Radia Al Mutawakil, Nadia al Saqaff, Liza Al Hassani alongside twenty men. The men were; Abdul Karim Al Iriani, Yassin Saeed Noman, Abdul Wahab Al Anisi, Abdul Qader Hilal, Ja'afar Basaleh, Hussain Arabb, Ahmed Awad, Tamam Basharahil, Hussam Al Shargabi, Sultan Al Attwani, Saleh Basura, Saleh Habra, Salah Al Siadi, Abdulaziz Bin Habtoor, Abdullah al Asnaj (replaced by Lutfi Shatara), Magid Al Mathagi, Mohamed Abdul Salam, Mohamed Abu Luhoom and Nasr Taha



It was only when the national dialogue bylaw report was submitted to the president of the republic and president of the NDC Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi on 22 December 2013 that the 30 percent quota for women was clearly stated in the NDC documents. This achievement was the result of the TC's women endeavors. Hence, when the national dialogue conference commenced on 18 March 2013, women's actual participation reached 28 percent. And while there were no women in the national dialogue conference's presidium,<sup>33</sup> with the exception of a deputy female rapporteur, a third of the nine dialogue working groups were led by women.<sup>34</sup> Twenty-nine percent women judges were appointed in the standards and order committee and 25 percent women were members of the consensus committee.

These inconsistencies in women's engagement in the political process reveal the absence of serious commitments by the leadership and the political players. It might also be taken as an indicator that women's acquired gains and voice might still be undermined during the remaining process of the national dialogue, the constitution drafting, and the general elections.

Thus far the women's movement in Yemen has been scattered and fragmented, with no united strategic vision of what can be done during the transition process. There are women in leading positions in transitional institutions, but without organization, they will not have the proper backing to prevent the inconsistencies in women's representation. Women activists participating

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Mustafa. This was a 27 percent women representation. On 17 September 2012 a presidential decree added six new men members to the TC: Yasser Al Ruaini, Mohamed Musa Al Amiri, Abdullah Al Nakhbi, Abdul Qawi Rashad, Abdul Rashid Abdul Hafid and Ali Hassan Zaki. This addition made the women quota drop to 19 per cent.

<sup>33</sup> The president of the NDC selected five male deputies in the conference presidium, a male rapporteur and a female deputy rapporteur (Nadia al Saqaff).

<sup>34</sup> Women presided over three of the nine Sa'adah, liberties and rights and transitional Justice working groups. These women, in the same order, are: Nabilah al Zubair, Arwa Abdo Othman and Afrah Badwailan. Eleven other women out of 27 members of the NDC were selected as either deputies or rapporteurs for the WGs such as Bilqis al lahabi, first deputy of the southern team, Najat Juma'an, first deputy of the sustainable development WGs, Wafa Ismail as first deputy of the liberties and rights team, Taibah Barakat, as first deputy of the transitional Justice team, Iman al Khateeb, became first deputy of the independent organizations, Liza al Hassani, Alia'a Faisal Abdul Latiff and Rana Ghanim became the second deputies of the defense and security, transitional justice and state building teams. While Shatha al Harazi, Nora al Shami and Halima Jahaff were chosen as the rapporteurs of the independent organizations, liberties and rights and transitional justice teams.

in the NDC are being attacked by clergymen as being advocates of ill-reputed gender terms. At the same time, these women lack a coordination mechanism to support each other in the nine working groups. As a result, women's interests and rights will likely remain poorly defended.

*Women in confrontation with fundamentalists and some tribal and military leaders*

After the Arab Spring revolutions, the Muslim Brotherhood seemed to be the only well-organized political group able to fill the political vacuum. Thus, women activists across the Middle East feared for their status gains. In Yemen, however, the situation was somewhat different, as women activists' concerns and worries stemmed mostly from the tripartite alliance of fundamentalist religious leaders, and a few military and tribal leaders who denied women's specific demands for gender equality (infamous term) by condemning them as part of a diabolic Western agenda.

In Yemen, the Muslim Brotherhood, which served as the backbone of the Islah party, represented the relatively moderate version of Islam. Meanwhile two other factions within Islah, represented by the hardline clerics and some tribal leaders, were on the extreme side of the religious spectrum. Many advocates of a civil state have been apprehensive about the perceived dominance of the hardliners over the Muslim Brotherhood in matters related to real power change and to women's specific demands.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, women activists also feared the prevalence of Islah over the expected more progressive Socialist and Nassirist parties within the JMP alliance.

Some Yemeni and Western observers believe that the country's revolution was, at a certain stage, taken over by clerics like Sheikh Abdulmajid Al Zindani and his followers, the al-Ahmar (mostly Hamid) tribal family, and the powerful commander of the First Armored Division, Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar. Observers affirm that though it seemed that the JMP and particularly the Islah

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<sup>35</sup> Some analysts agree that hardline Salafi ulama, some tribal leaders, and defected army divisions have sided with the youth revolution not of sheer believe in change or in the democratic values of a civil state—they were mostly fed up with the former regime's increasing concentration of power around Saleh's immediate family and some of them were settling old scores.

youth<sup>36</sup> were dominant in number in the protest squares after 18 March 2011, it was actually the fundamentalist leaders,<sup>37</sup> the First Armored Division and Hamid al-Ahmar, who determined the new rules of engagement in the squares. They were the squares' financiers. Hamid al-Ahmar, for example, paid for food, logistics and other supplies (tents, stages, sound systems, televisions and more). With money came the power to control. Four incidents described by women activists are evidence of this new threat to women's progress in post-revolution Yemen.

### Incident one

It took President Saleh only one remark during his Friday speech on 14 April 2012 to set back women's vigorous participation and to appease the religious hardliners in the squares.<sup>38</sup> In his remark, Saleh warned against the inappropriate mixing of the sexes in the rallies and in the protest squares. Though women responded by going out in unprecedented numbers and accusing Saleh of slandering and blemishing their honor, the damage had already been done. The speech worked to the advantage of the Islamist hardliners. Previously, they had been reluctant to take any step against women's participation. Saleh's remark provided them with a golden opportunity, and they proceeded to attack a small group of men and women activists who had spontaneously joined one of the response rallies. The attackers ordered the women activists to join the other veiled women in a space separate from the men's. Women activists who refused to obey were beaten, surrounded and prevented from advancing. During interrogations and investigations, the embattled women identified students from al-Iman University, owned and run by Sheikh Abdulmajid Al-Zindani, and soldiers from the First Armored Brigade as their assailants.

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<sup>36</sup> Yet it was also true that the Islahi women following the Friday of Dignity became predominant in the squares in an admirable discipline. The square stage was by then controlled by the security committee and the vibrant and dynamic independent women were struggling to remain ahead and on stage.

<sup>37</sup> Tawakkul Karman in one of her Facebook comments admitted that Taghyeer Square and the organizational committee were controlled by a hardline scholar teaching at Sana'a and Al Iman universities, named Saleh Al Sanabani.

<sup>38</sup> On the 15 April, President Saleh, who was aggravated and outraged by women's pivotal and vigorous role in the protests, warned against having women inappropriately mixing with men in the demonstrations and in the squares.

### Incident two

Following Saleh's remarks, female protesters who had occupied a central space in front of the stage since the beginning of the revolution were moved to a less visible side of the square. Soon after, a rope was set up around the women's assigned space to mark the segregation line. Shortly after, additional plastic sheet barriers surrounded the women's area and blocked the men from seeing the women and vice versa. Finally, a private women's route that led directly to their area in the square was designated and secured and guarded by a small metal door and members of security committee. At this stage, Islah youth led the security committee.<sup>39</sup> During this period, the black abaya dress code prevailed. Eventually, the security committee discouraged women from staying in the square, especially after military confrontations erupted in an area called Hasaba district that is close to the protest area. The security committee also forbade women from spending the night in their tents.<sup>40</sup> Women protesters complained about these infringements on their rights as well as the attacks to JMP leaders, and especially to Islah, but party representatives were unable to rein in the security committee, which was controlled from outside the square by a faculty member from both Al Iman and Sana'a Universities.

### Incident three

In April 2011, Islahi women in Taghyeer Square, prevented Zaydi (Ahrar at-taghyeer) women<sup>41</sup> from conducting marches with their own demands and slogans. Instead, rallies and marches were organized almost exclusively by the Organizational Committee,<sup>42</sup> a group composed of different political components but run and influenced by Islahi members. When Zaydi women

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<sup>39</sup> The security committee started in February 2013, few days after the beginning of the youth revolution. It was mainly formed from volunteering youth. When Taghyeer Square expanded, JMP youth led mostly by Islahis, took over.

<sup>40</sup> Tawakkul Karman, the Nobel Prize laureate and member of the Islah Party, was the only one who continued to live in a square tent with her husband.

<sup>41</sup> Driven by the fear of an Ali Muhsin or al-Ahmar-dominated post-Saleh regime, the Shi'a /Zaydi Houthi movement sent their youth and women to Taghyeer and Huriya squares to join the revolution. The Sunni Islahi women often conflicted with the Shi'a Zaydi and Houthi women in both space and activities.

<sup>42</sup> The Organizational Committee at the beginning included members from different revolutionary ideological backgrounds. Its task was to collectively run Taghyeer Square. In no time, it proved to be inefficient and incapable of controlling the Security Subcommittee and many members resigned from it after acknowledging the fact that it was run from outside the square.

insisted on organizing their own march, Islahi women confronted them and physical altercations ensued on more than one occasion.

#### Incident four

In December 2011, some members of *Jamiat al-ulema* (group of religious scholars),<sup>43</sup> issued a fatwa against Bushra al-Maqtari, a young female activist and protester from Taiz's Hurriya Square. The fatwa accused al-Maqtari of apostasy. Scholars issued the fatwa in reaction to a publication in which al-Maqtari wrote, "God seemed to be absent in Khidar," a village where Taizi protesters were mistreated during a 260 kilometer long "Life March" from their city to the capital. Later, she clarified that she did not deny the existence of God, but only questioned his presence that specific day. Yet, the religious leaders did not accept her explanation. Since then,<sup>44</sup> al-Maqtari, a member of the Socialist party central committee, has been harassed, physically attacked and slandered in the media, and threatened her life more than once.

The above incidents present some evidence for a growing alliance between religious extremists and some military and tribal power brokers that may hinder advancement in women's rights and participation, especially if this coalition continues to gain influence during the transition. The tripartite alliance could limit opportunities for women to assume meaningful decision-making roles in shaping Yemen's future.

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<sup>43</sup> *Jamiat al-ulema* is a religious leaders association that includes nearly 100 signatories. It is noted for condemning the quota system for women and some of its members have accused some liberal writers and journalists of apostasy.

<sup>44</sup> In a telephone interview with Bushra al Maqtari on 23 May 2013 she mentioned that following the march to Sana'a incident her family house was surrounded by extremists, following the Friday prayers, demanding her repentance. They also demanded the withdrawal of her Yemeni nationality. In another incident on 11 February 2013, Bushra was attacked by 300 veiled women, who hid batons under their abayas (long dresses). Her male and female youth companions fought back against the aggression. The third incidence occurred a month later when Bushra was about to enter Sana'a Taghyeer Square and was thrown with stones by some young youth who were trying to prevent her from entering the square and were calling her a "secular" and a disbeliever. Again, other square youth secured her exit.

## Opportunities

### *Official international and national validation of women's leadership*

Despite the challenges that arose following the one-year uprising, the same events have also given rise to a unique set of opportunities for women. For instance, UN Resolution 2014 /2011<sup>45</sup> acknowledges women's vigorous engagement in protests and confirms their right to full participation at all stages of the peace process and their key role in creating the fabric of society. It also calls for their involvement in conflict resolution and for taking into account their perspective and needs in this process.

The GCC-brokered transition has also affirmed women's representation in all bodies, committees, participating groups and parties during transition.<sup>46</sup> The national dialogue process has validated the need for inclusive participation and equal representation for women. And, the GCC agreement has called for protecting the rights of vulnerable groups and the advancement of women.<sup>47</sup>

All of these documents and their content provide women with new opportunities to ensure their active participation, and are reference points for their consistent representation.

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<sup>45</sup> UN Resolution 2014 /2011 preface reaffirmed "its resolutions 1325 (2000), 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009), 1889 (2009) and 1960 (2010) on women, peace, and security". It reiterated "the need for the full, equal and effective participation of women at all stages of peace-processes given their vital role in the prevention and resolution of conflict and peace building reaffirming the key role women play in re-establishing the fabric of society and stressing the need for their involvement in conflict resolution in order to take into account their perspective and needs"

<sup>46</sup> The National dialogue process validates an inclusive participation and equal representation from the 8 constituencies nominated in the Mechanism: the National Coalition (General People's Congress and its allies), the National Council (Joint Meeting Parties and their allies), other political parties and political actors, the youth movements, representatives from the South (including Southern Hirak), the Houthis, civil society organizations and women's groups.

<sup>47</sup> Article 20 in the GCC mechanism section (g) called for "the adoption of legal and other means to strengthen the protection and rights of vulnerable groups, including children, as well as the advancement of women"

### *Women breaking new ground*

Despite instances like the killing, maiming, kidnapping and slander that accompanied demonstrations and armed conflict, women have continued to break previously prohibited boundaries. Through the early demonstrations, Yemeni women explored, discovered, and experienced the power of their new voices.<sup>48</sup> They enjoyed their influential resonance in their everyday life encounters. Arguably, they have gained greater moral and social respect from their male partners, colleagues and family members. After this new awakening, women are less likely to retreat to the peripheries of private and secluded life. More importantly, some women groups are meeting more regularly through a gender network and are attempting to work together through sharing updates and information, to ensure that in the transitional period, they are not marginalized.

### *Increasing female representation during the transition*

When the former ruling party, the General People's Congress, and the JMP signed the GCC Initiative, they agreed an "appropriate"<sup>49</sup> women's representation during the transitional period, as opposed to allowing for a 30 per cent quota. And if the former regime's rationale for ignoring this quota under the pretext that there were not enough qualified women to fill in executive, legislative and judicial positions or to run for elections (assuming that men were chosen according to their qualifications), this reasoning has since been refuted during the Yemeni revolution, in which women demonstrated their capacity to lead and their political acumen.

The demand for a 30 per cent quota for women has been forcefully reiterated in the outcomes and recommendations of the Women's National Conference, held after the popular uprising on March 2012. In his speech on this occasion, P.M. Basindwa acknowledged these demands and vouched for the 30 per cent women quota. Later, as presented earlier in this paper, the quota was

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<sup>48</sup> Safer World Report, 2012 "Moving Beyond Promises".

<sup>49</sup> Both parties, the GPC and the JMP, refused Jamal Benomar's request for a 30% women representation and suggested instead the use of the word "appropriate" to define women's representation in all the transitional bodies.

clearly emphasized in the technical committee's bylaw report and NDC's guidebook. Accordingly, 28 percent of the national dialogue conference 565 members are women. Soon after, women headed three of the nine dialogue working groups. Based on these affirmations, women may now, through collective and consistent pressure on the Yemeni government, transcend the “appropriate” representation dictated in the GCCI agreement.

### *Development opportunities*

The dedication of a separate women’s section in the Transitional Program for Security and Development displays the growing awareness and comprehension of the connection between women and development within the Yemeni government bodies. But the crosscutting approach can only be useful if gender budgeting is adopted and separate female-targeted projects are designed. Women activists have to build on this awareness, advocate for gender budgeting and gender segregated data and analysis, and increase the women participants in the Friends of Yemen (FOY) and Consultative Group (CG) meetings.

### **Recommendations**

The future for Yemeni women is rife with challenges. At the same time, the Yemeni Spring provides a chance for women to find their voices and use this empowerment to enact change.

Developing and sustaining new leadership roles for women requires assistance from international agencies, the G-10 and other donors. It also requires support from Yemeni constituencies, including political leaders, government agencies, women activists and women’s organizations. These individuals and institutions must work together to accomplish the following objectives:

1. Ensure women’s full and active participation—particularly as decision makers—consistent with the 30 per cent quota for remaining transitional bodies, including the constitution drafting committee, the supreme council for elections, referendum subcommittees and other bodies related to the preparations for general elections.



2. Include women members of the NDC and non-members in all capacity-building programs for political empowerment during the NDC stages and during the transition.
3. Ensure Yemeni women's actual participation in the upcoming preparations and meetings of the Friends of Yemen and the Consultative Group meetings by including gender and women specialists, including from CSOs as well as businesswomen.
4. Guarantee women's engagement in the monitoring and evaluation process throughout the implementation of the Transitional Program for Stabilization and Development on both the government and donor sides.<sup>50</sup> Women should be well represented in the executive office to implement the Mutual Accountability Framework.
5. Ensure that future development studies and assessments focus on gender segregated data and analysis for greater accuracy.
6. Support the building and strengthening of a Women's Movement or Alliance as well as a strategy for women during the remaining transition based on the report on the Empowerment of Yemeni Women<sup>51</sup> during the transitional period.
7. Provide support to the women in the national dialogue conference to develop a coordination mechanism during the remaining period with the assistance of UNFPA (UN agency responsible of gender) and other INGOs such as Oxfam and others.
- 9- Provide urgent awareness sessions on the gender concept, which was used to attack women members in the NDC by extreme clergymen. These awareness sessions should take place inside the working groups and outside the NDC with the preachers of the mosques as well as clergymen

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<sup>50</sup> Mutual Accountability Framework (MAF)

<sup>51</sup> *Empowering Women in Yemen Transition*, an Advocacy Campaign, 2012, Oxfam, by the author.

