



The Status of Yemeni Women: From Aspiration to Opportunity

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Introduction: Yemen is on a path of transformation, one that can open opportunities for more inclusive societies and economies, or for greater risk and regression. This transition period will be especially vital for Yemeni women. For years, Yemen has ranked last or near last in global indices of gender gaps and female empowerment. Some gender gaps have narrowed in recent years, yet considerable challenges remain, and it is likely that crises faced by Yemen in recent years reversed some of these hard-earned gains. As Yemen moves forward, it should strongly prioritize gender equality as an important goal in its own right but also because doing so will be vital to lay the foundations of a more inclusive country and society.

The objectives of a new report on the status of gender equality in Yemen are two-fold: first, to take stock of the status of gender outcomes in Yemen and understand the forces that are driving the strong gender inequalities; and second, drawing on these insights and outcomes of the study, to highlight promising areas for policy action in this crucial transition period. The report explores how individual aspirations and opportunities in the areas of education, family formation, and labor force participation are constrained by the severe gender gaps in Yemeni society.²

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² The report draws on the conceptual framework of the *World Development 2012: Gender Equality and Development*,



Yemeni School Girls – World Bank Photo Collection

The report's analytic approach is unique in threading together three bodies of evidence and analysis to shed new light on significant trends and causes underpinning Yemen's large gender disparities. The report presents: i) a fresh look at available survey data on human development and socio-economic indicators; ii) a brief history and in-depth analysis of the most critical legal barriers to women's and girl's full participation in Yemeni society; and iii) insights from a rich qualitative dataset collected in January 2011. The findings highlight the powerful roles of social norms and legal rights and entitlements in placing women and girls at a disadvantage and constraining not only faster progress on gender equality but also on economic development.

Main findings: Yemen has made important progress in closing key gender gaps: female literacy rates and life expectancy have grown over twice as

and the regional report on gender equality, *Opening Doors: Gender Equality in the Middle East and North Africa*.

fast as in MENA over the last decade. Yet many challenges remain: significant differences between boys and girls in school enrolment and educational attainment, significant unmet reproductive and child health needs, no legal minimum age of marriage for girls, legal restrictions on women's mobility and decision-making, limited agency and voice for women within and outside the home, barriers to female participation in the labor force and in political life and few opportunities for paid work and entrepreneurial activity. These stark gender gaps are influenced by and set within the context of conservative and strict gender norms.

Enrollment and gender gaps in education: Data from 2005, the most recent national household survey available, indicates a net enrolment rate of 63% for boys and just 40% for girls of school-going age (6-13 years old). Enrolment is limited due to weak enforcement of universal education laws, lack of girls' schools and female teachers - an acute problem in rural and remote areas. The family's lack of resources is another key reason for ending education, in the survey and qualitative material. Despite similar aspirations, girls face far greater challenges than boys. Gender disparities in education in Yemen are not only driven by poverty, but also the urban-rural divide with its differences in access and normative practices. Rural Yemeni children, poor or non-poor, are far more likely to have never attended school than urban counterparts. In addition to lack of schools for girls and of female teachers, limited interest by families in continuing the education of daughters, concerns for the safety, honor and reputation of adolescent girls, combine with the tradition of early marriage to counteract education's positive value as expressed by participants in the qualitative study.

Reproductive and child healthcare: Yemen has made progress on important child and maternal health measures, yet child mortality rates and access to antenatal services remain worrying. Maternal mortality rates and fertility rates are the highest in MENA. In 2010, only one in three Yemeni women gave birth while attended by a medical professional, a problem particularly severe for women with no education, and women in rural areas. In rural areas, only 20% of women receive antenatal care, disproportionately increasing mortality risks.

-Women's limited autonomy in family formation decisions and redress for family conflict: The unification of the North and the South in 1990 entailed the merging of two disparate legal systems, with the conservative principles of the North dominating over time. The current Yemeni legal framework, and in particular the Personal Status Law, significantly restricts choice, mobility and decision-making for women.

A notable example is the lack of a clearly defined legal minimum marriage age, which would prohibit child marriages and lower rates of early school dropout, risky childbearing and domestic violence. The majority of Yemeni women are married by age 17 or younger, sometimes as young as 8 in rural areas. The Rights and Freedoms working Group, one of the 9 working groups in the National Dialogue Conference, has now passed by majority vote a draft constitutional article setting minimum age of marriage at 18 years. Under the Personal Status Law, women require a male guardian's (a father, grandfather or brother) permission to marry. Women also have limited control over decisions on when and how many children to have.

According to men's and women's focus groups, domestic violence occurs when women disobey norms surrounding household roles and proper behaviors for women in the public and private domains, and also when the family is under economic stress. Survey findings indicate that 37% of Yemenis agree that violence against women is justified if they are disobedient. Norms defining domestic violence as a private matter and a source of shame for women lead to systematic underreporting and little formal institutional support for redress. The figure of the male guardian implies a significant gender imbalance in who can initiate the process of family separation, retain legal resources, and obtain child custody.

Some laws directly inhibit women's ability to access economic opportunities. For example, under the 1992 Personal Status Law, women have a general duty to obey their husbands. Married women require a male guardian's permission for a passport. Since 1998, married women need their husband's permission to work outside the home.

Constraints to economic participation: Yemeni women and men in urban and rural locations face unemployment and lack of opportunities. Women, face additional barriers that severely limit their labor force participation despite the financial needs of their families. More than 90% of working age Yemeni women do not participate in the labor force (i.e. neither employed nor looking for work) compared to 20% of men. Worryingly, more than 90% of Yemeni women who work, and almost all rural Yemeni women who work, do so without pay. Strict gender norms limiting women's role and identity to domestic work, religious traditions, mobility restrictions and the practice of seclusion, time constraints, limited education, and concerns for women's honor and safety mean that women's economic activities are often in the private sphere of homes. Working without pay—for instance, farm work and home-based sewing and handicraft activities—is part of women's typical household responsibilities, particularly in rural communities.

Women in urban areas participate in the workforce at almost three times the rural rate –working for pay, mostly in the public sector- but they also have higher unemployment rates (affecting nearly one in eight urban women). Urban areas provide more outlets for women who wish to engage in paid work beyond their homes, but many of the norms that discourage rural women from economic participation—or that limit participation to jobs that are extensions of domestic roles—are also reported. Urban men also struggle with unemployment, but at less than half the rate of urban women.

Entrepreneurship and Women: Entrepreneurship can provide outlets for women, including working from home, and may therefore be more compatible with prevailing conservative norms. However, only about 6.5% of firms have female owners, women make up only 5% of permanent full-time workers in enterprises, and firms with women top managers are very few. The strong gender hierarchy governing marital relations and control of assets makes it very difficult for women to pursue business without their husband's support. Women business owners struggle to raise capital through formal and informal venues, putting up assets as collateral. More promising, microfinance services are beginning which do not require tangible collateral—women account for nearly 90 % of their customers in Yemen.

A window of opportunity to improve wellbeing and inclusion: The country's large gender disparities in education and work, and women's limited autonomy over crucial family formation decisions, reflect deeply held norms, discriminatory laws, and years of accumulated disadvantages. Norms and awareness can be very slow to change, but it is not an option to wait. Policy action across diverse fronts will be needed to reduce and remove severe and interlocking constraints on women's aspirations, capacities and opportunities for inclusion. Interventions are also needed to provide promising outlets for men and boys to participate and thrive as well. The findings from this report point to the following areas for action:

Expand access to quality education and health care, especially in rural areas: While the physical availability of girls' schools and classrooms remains a critical constraint to girls' educational attainment, especially in rural and remote areas, complementary, gender-sensitive, and gender-targeted interventions are also needed. Local norms must be taken into account for effective interventions and there is scope for civil society to raise awareness about the importance of education for girls.

In addition to expanding access to educational facilities, education can be brought closer to home through the provision of safe, reliable and affordable transportation. Schools need to be staffed by a cadre of qualified female teachers, perhaps drawing on local women. For out-of-school girls and adult women, well designed literacy and remedial classes with appropriate curricula can expand basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills, while allowing some girls to continue their education. These may be combined with incentive-based approaches to increase enrolment and retention. In other countries, these incentives were successfully linked to deterring early marriage; this could be piloted in Yemen. The government, with World Bank support is expanding a pilot conditional cash transfer program to up enrollment and retention of girls in grades 4-9 and investing in female teachers.

In the case of health, broad-based gender neutral programs to improve the distribution and quality of healthcare facilities, water supply, and sanitation can have significant impacts on female and child mortality. Targeted interventions are needed to

bridge the gaps in maternal and child health needs, and spread awareness on the benefits of timely preventive and curative care. Investing in children will require bringing services closer to the people, especially in rural Yemen, through mobile service delivery, or investing in skills of community midwives and local health staff.

Expand productive economic opportunities: Given the extremely low rates of women's participation in the workforce, and the significant incidence of women working without pay, it is critical to better understand unpaid work and constraints to female participation. This can lead to appropriate policy interventions addressing these constraints. Given the strong social norms around women working for pay and working outside the home, normative change will need to be actively fostered - in schools, communities, and in the workplace.

Over and above the need for boosting private-sector job creation, there are opportunities to expand men's and women's equal access to productive employment through reconstruction, public works and humanitarian assistance. Another key policy area is supporting self-employment and female entrepreneurship, especially in rural areas and agriculture-based activities. These need expanding access to credit and markets and investing in business skills. Similar efforts are being implemented by the Social Welfare Fund and the Social Fund for Development, it is important to ensure that these reach women as well as men.

Bring Justice Home: As in many countries in the region, Yemen's legal framework also imposes significant constraints on women's agency, voice and mobility. The absence of a legal minimum marriage age poses even more fundamental constraints to women's human development, economic empowerment and agency within and outside the home. This is an urgent priority for reform, and one that has been taken up by the National Dialogue. In Morocco, advocacy campaigns were critical to successfully raising the minimum marriage age, and building support through a broad-based coalition of stakeholders will be important in Yemen as well.

Complementary interventions such as encouraging the registration of births and marriages will also be needed to support the implementation of a

minimum marriage age law. Specific legislation on gender-based violence and the means to monitor domestic violence need to be enacted. Even where existing laws are meant to protect women, there is little awareness of them and implementation is weak. Thus efforts are needed for more effective redress for women facing domestic violence, divorce, and family conflict through the formal and informal legal system, by building capacity to demand rights at the local level and enabling local judicial systems to respond.

Establishing peace and security, and moving to address development emergencies: Ushering in political reform, stabilizing security, and providing law and order are critical pre-conditions for any sustainable improvement in outcomes for women. An inclusive political transition that allows for women to freely participate in constitutional reforms, elections and elected bodies, as undertaken in the recently concluded national dialogue, is an important step. There will need to be accompanied by concrete efforts to enhance women's participation in civic and political life: a 30% parliamentary quota for women has now been adopted but also needed are, additional quotas, mentoring, capacity building and mobilization around key issues. At the same time, urgent humanitarian needs for food, supplies and services need to be addressed. If well-targeted, such programs can disproportionately benefit women and children, who are most at risk.

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