



Strong voices

**Yemeni women's political participation
from protest to transition**

Yemen: People's Peacemaking Perspectives



**Based on consultations with women
in Sana'a, Aden, Ta'iz and Sa'ada**

May 2012



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The People's Peacemaking Perspectives project

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Executive summary

ONE OF THE BIGGEST SURPRISES OF THE PEACEFUL PROTESTS that swept Yemen in 2011 has been the visibility and participation of women in the calls for change. This report is developed from a desire to better understand the dynamics and impact of women's involvement in the protests, to assess the priorities of women in the transition period, and to hear first-hand about ways in which local, national and international policies can best support the political participation of women in Yemen. It is driven by the belief that women's voices are valuable and that incorporating their priorities, concerns and ideas into Yemeni politics will further Yemen's chances for peace and prosperity.

Based on focus group discussions with women from different backgrounds in Aden, Sa'ada, Sana'a and Ta'iz, the report seeks to shed light on the participation of women in street and institutional politics during Yemen's change processes in 2011 and 2012, as perceived by women themselves. According to the consultations, women see their participation as part of a wider struggle against broader systems of oppression and in support of justice and equality for all Yemeni citizens. Issues of livelihood and insecurity emerged at the top of their agenda; including the poor state of the economy, unemployment, price rises and the lack of basic social services, such as healthcare and education. For women in Sa'ada and among internally displaced persons from Abyan, chronic insecurity was a major driver of anger and frustration and a reason for protest. In Aden, the Southern Issue was a cross-cutting problem. In all of these instances, the political establishment and system of rule was seen to contribute to the economic, social and security problems affecting women in their daily lives.

Women are universally proud of women's participation in the protests, whether or not they supported the protests themselves. Their participation has been generally accepted within Yemeni society. In some cases, women strategically utilised the special cultural protection they receive to put themselves on the frontline of the protests to protect young male protesters. However, many women who participated in the protests also faced harassment, threats, or slander by some religious and/or pro-regime forces as a result of their participation. Attempts to include or exclude women and their intimidation, or encouragement, were used as strategies by political forces to weaken, or strengthen the protests. When convenient, political parties encouraged their women supporters to protest, but women complained of public harassment at the hands of these same political parties when their participation was seen to be 'out of control,' or when it was no longer convenient.

Politically, women agreed there had been few, if any, tangible gains from the change processes in the country, although they noted that at the time of consultations (March 2012) the transition process had just begun. However, women were unanimous in feeling that they had gained immensely from a moral and social perspective, increasing

their self-confidence and self-belief, not just socially, but also politically. Women from all over Yemen and from all backgrounds overcame high social barriers in order to protest and demand a better life; many will no longer be content to let a small clique of people (women or men) speak on their behalf. Thus, while there was recognition that women needed to unite to ensure that their demands were heard, some were angry at Sana'a-based political parties and elites who they felt attempt to speak on behalf of all Yemenis. This was felt most strongly by women from Southern governorates, who were dissatisfied with the way the transition was going and the lack of genuine inclusion of Southern voices and the Southern Issue.

Women's political priorities focused on the creation of a 'just' and 'equal' state and undertaking a restructuring of the security and military sectors, in order to address growing insecurity throughout the country. Almost all participants called for protection for women's rights in a new or redrafted constitution; however, there was no agreement over how such protection should be articulated. Some women want an explicit guarantee of women's rights, while others agree that women's rights need protection, but in the context of equal rights for all citizens.

Women have many suggestions for how to get their voices heard. In Ta'iz and Sana'a, many suggested continuous participation in events and protests. In Aden, Sa'ada and among woman activists in Sana'a and internally displaced women from Abyan, the media was seen as an important tool. In Sa'ada, women suggested organisations dedicated to and staffed by women. What emerged was a need for women to unite their voices, while also respecting regional specificities. For example, in the South the Southern Issue is a cross-cutting aspect of participation. In Sa'ada, women's participation is still in its early stages, compared to places such as Ta'iz, and there was a desire from women in the North to learn about the experiences of women activists in Ta'iz and elsewhere.

Saferworld identifies the following recommendations, based on the consultations, to build on the small gains made by women in making their voices heard in Yemen's transition process and beyond:

- Support opportunities for a **united voice for women**, but recognise and respect regional difference.
- Encourage **new and emerging women's voices** from among political parties and young activists, through networking and capacity building initiatives.
- Work at the **local level** to sensitise local authorities towards women's participation and to encourage women's participation and representation in local councils.
- **Work with men** to support women through raising awareness and advocating for just and equal laws and policies for all.
- Undertake **further research**, particularly with women whose voices are not often heard, and ensure there is feedback.

1

Introduction

“We never voted for women before, but now we will.”

“If I nominated myself now for election, would you vote for me?”

“Yes!”

Sa'ada FGD

Protests were launched in Yemen in 2011 as activists called for “a peaceful and popular youth revolution, with one demand: peaceful change and the pursuit of a free and dignified life in a democratic and civil state governed by the rule of law.”¹

The key role women played in the protests has been remarkable, particularly in the first few months, before political parties and military elites seized the momentum of the protests for their own political ends. During the course of the consultations conducted for this research, it became clear that women throughout the country are excited by the energy unleashed through their participation and want to play an active role, as women, in the country's future.

To date there is very little information available on the role women played during the protests, and it remains unclear how they perceive their own priorities and demands will shape Yemen's transition process in the coming years. This lack of information is partly down to the conscious decision of many female activists in Yemen to place their own rights within a broader revolutionary discourse of justice and equality for all Yemeni people. Nevertheless, there remains a need for a gendered analysis of the calls for change and of how women can ensure they secure their seat at the table in the country's transition process.

In a country where the cultural, political and economic gaps between men and women remain large (the adult female literacy rate is 45 percent, compared with 80 percent for men²), women throughout Yemen are understandably concerned that the large gains they have made in visibility and political participation may be reversed. Despite this, the change processes taking place in the country provide a small window of opportunity for women – and men – to work together for long-term peace and justice.

The transition from President Saleh's rule faces a number of challenges. The country faces the worst humanitarian crisis in its history: ten million Yemenis are food insecure, double the estimates from 2009,³ and the United Nations estimates that nearly one million children under five are suffering from acute malnutrition.⁴ Security concerns

¹ Nobel Laureate Tawakul Karman, in her acceptance speech to the Nobel Prize Committee, 10 December 2011. www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2011/karman-lecture_en.html#, accessed 24 May 2012.

² World Bank, 2009. data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.FE.ZS and data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.MA.ZS, accessed 24 May 2012.

³ World Food Programme, *Food Security Survey to Reveal Alarming Levels of Severe Hunger in Yemen*, News Release, 14 March 2012. www.wfp.org/news/news-release/food-security-survey-reveal-alarming-levels-severe-hunger-yemen-0, accessed 24 May 2012.

⁴ United Nations, *Emergency Relief Coordinator's key messages on Yemen*, Issue No. 4, 31 May 2012. [ocha.net.unocha.org/p/Documents/31%20May%20ERC%20Key%20Messages%20Yemen%20\(media\).pdf](http://ocha.net.unocha.org/p/Documents/31%20May%20ERC%20Key%20Messages%20Yemen%20(media).pdf), accessed 24 May 2012.

remain a debilitating factor that constrains hopes of an economic recovery and affects the day-to-day lives of millions of Yemenis. These factors make it difficult for the majority of Yemenis to feel included in national level transition processes. Additionally, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative, promoted by international actors as the main framework of Yemen's transition, has been criticised by many Yemenis for its weak focus on promoting inclusion and ownership in the country.

If women are to build on the momentum of the protests and avoid marginalisation in the transition process, there is a need for both women and men to act quickly to utilise the enthusiasm and gains made. More research, networking opportunities and capacity building are therefore urgently needed, in order to assist women in the most appropriate way possible; this report is a small contribution to this task.

Approach and methodology

This paper is based on 12 focus group discussions (FGDs) with a total of 107 women from different backgrounds, in Sa'ada, Sana'a, Ta'iz and Aden. The focus of the consultations was on women's recent political participation during and after the protests, as well as their demands for political reform.

The consultations took place between 7 and 24 March 2012,⁵ following the one-man presidential elections in February 2012 that saw the formal instatement of President Hadi to lead the country's transition process. The consultations were conducted, in part, to contribute to the National Women's Conference, which was held in Sana'a between 19 and 20 March 2012, and also to raise awareness and understanding among policymakers and other actors of women's political demands for change and reform.

The consultations and the production of the initial report were overseen by a lead researcher with extensive experience of working on women's issues in the country. The lead researcher managed a team of eight Yemeni women with previous experience in gender, human rights and participatory rapid appraisal techniques.

Who was consulted?

Although all 12 FGDs were conducted in main cities, diversity was the key feature of the sampled women's groups and the research team ensured that the women selected represented a diverse group, including housewives, civil and political activists, students and women affected by armed conflict. In each of the cities (Aden, Sa'ada, Sana'a and Ta'iz), three focus groups were conducted with:

- Community women/'ordinary' women,⁶ including housewives and women with little or no civic or political activism;
- Women activists, including civil society activists, journalists and members of political parties;
- Younger women under the age of 25, including university students and those involved in youth initiatives.

One of the focus groups in Aden consisted of women from among internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Abyan.⁷ This, in addition to the focus on women who were directly affected by the conflict in Sa'ada, allowed the research to capture the views of women directly affected by conflict and insecurity. 77 percent of consulted women were aged between 20 and 35, 23 percent were aged between 36 and 55. Further information is highlighted below.

⁵ Most of the field research was completed by 14 March. However, due to complications the field research in Aden had to be repeated, which extended the period of research to 24 March.

⁶ The use of the term 'ordinary' is preferred by participants, in reference to its common usage in Yemen to refer to the protests that began in 2011 as the 'revolution of ordinary people' (*thawrat al-nas al-'adiyeen*).

⁷ Following the departure of government forces and the take-over of the governorate by militant groups associated with Al-Qaeda, the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimates the total number of IDPs from Abyan governorate to be 200,205 as of February 2012. reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/A4_idpsaccessAden_Abyan_Lahj_270312final.pdf, accessed 24 May 2012.

Educational level	Percentage
Illiterate	23%
Primary school	17%
Secondary school	13%
Higher education and above	47%

Challenges and constraints

The research was conducted within a very short timeframe and there were limitations on the number of women consulted and the locations chosen. All the women who were involved in the process, including consultations Saferworld had with women leaders in Sana'a, emphasised the importance of conducting similar research, but with a greater reach, timeframe and budget, and indicated the importance of follow-up and local ownership.

The consultants faced difficulties conducting the consultations with women activists from Aden. The reasons stated by the women in Aden were disappointment with the international community, the central government and women activists in Sana'a, who pay little attention to engaging with activists in Aden and the Southern governorates. This highlights the growing and cross-cutting issue of North-South relations, that needs to be given appropriate priority in any national dialogue process.

2

Women's participation in the protests

A DESIRE FOR CHANGE DROVE MANY WOMEN to support the protests in their cities and women in all FGDs claimed to have participated in some way in the protests. Although the causes underlying the protests in Yemen are complex and multi-faceted, economic and governance factors are particularly salient and in the South, the Southern Issue⁸ emerged as a cross-cutting concern that affected all other problems.

Women participated in all aspects of the protests, from marching in the front lines over providing food and medical care, to more subtle or private displays of solidarity, including letter-writing and prayers. The forms of their participation and the dynamics of their interaction with other actors is elaborated below and in greater detail in Annex 1.

Motivations for protest

“The economic and social situation is hard and development has come to a standstill, as if time has stopped in Yemen. That is why mothers allowed their sons to go out to Change Square.”

Young woman from Sana'a

Livelihoods and security

When asked about their motivations for protesting, women offered a broad range of reasons, many of them related to the major challenges they are currently facing. In this sense, they tended to view protest as an ongoing initiative and their motivations reflect the multi-faceted challenges women are grappling with in Yemen today, rather than a straightforward list of initial grievances.

For many women, particularly for those with families, a desire for a better life for their sons and daughters drove their support for and participation in the protests. All groups cited economic issues, such as unemployment, price increases, especially for fuel and the need for economic development, as motivating women to protest.

Closely linked to livelihoods was the delivery of basic social services, such as healthcare and education. Women saw access to social services as being defined by corruption

⁸ Long divided into North and South, Yemen's unification in 1990 was followed by civil war in 1994. Since then, perceived continuous economic and political injustices committed by the North against the South have led to growing discontent in Southern governorates. Since 2007 this has manifested itself in street protests and later in calls for secession by members of the Southern Movement.

and nepotism and therefore asked for the equal distribution of basic social services to be enshrined in the constitution. This was articulated particularly strongly in the Southern governorates, where women made positive references to the legacy of the Southern People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. Problems with education, including corruption within schools, lack of resources and complaints about the new curriculum were common motives for politically inactive women to protest.

An end to violent conflict and insecurity was a third major concern for women. Though women acknowledged that insecurity was a chronic problem in Yemen, many felt insecurity had increased, which motivated them to protest. Internally displaced women from Abyan were most concerned about security at home in Abyan, as well as the day-to-day struggles of living in Aden city. Meanwhile, women in Sa'ada, which has seen six wars since 2004, emphasised the desire for greater security from violent conflict as a reason for supporting the protests and highlighted that their major concern was the outbreak of a seventh war. In Aden, women were also very concerned by a lack of security, which has led to an increase in the possession of small arms, frequent shootings and extensive drug use among young men.

Politics and governance

Additionally, many women protested for explicitly political motivations, including the fall of the regime, in support of people who have been falsely imprisoned, against "Salafist" parties in government, in favour of a civil state, and in favour of upholding the constitution.

The issue of women's rights to social, political and economic participation emerged as an important issue, but not with regularity and not as a driving motivation for protest. When women's rights were mentioned, women were usually highly specific, for example complaining of child marriage or the unfair inheritance laws (in Ta'iz), or "deprivation of employment rights for women and their children" (in Aden). Some women in Aden felt that women's issues did not come up in the protests and have not been brought forward or discussed since.

Part of the reason why women-specific demands are not highlighted as driving causes of protest may be due to the way in which many women activists in the country articulate women's participation within the wider context of equal rights for all citizens.⁹ At the same time, the women consulted had very specific ideas for how the participation of women can best be supported in Yemen's transition period and these are highlighted in greater detail in 'Expectations for the constitution and wider transition process' in section 3 and in section 5.

Dynamics of participation

"For the first time, we saw the whole family gathered in a public place."

Housewife from Sana'a

Women participated in all aspects of the protests, from being on the frontline, protecting young protesters from attacks by security forces, to more indirect forms of participation, through providing food and medical support to protesters. The visible role that women played in Yemen's protests was a source of pride for women in the FGDs. Many felt that their participation was accepted by family members and within society. Some of the women from Ta'iz, Aden and Sana'a received active support from men for taking part in the protests. Others experienced begrudging acceptance in that those who did not allow their own daughters, wives or sisters to go to the squares, nevertheless respected other women's participation.

⁹ For more information on how women's participation and broader women's rights were articulated by youth at the height of Yemen's protest movement, refer to Saferworld's previous publication, *Public protest and visions for change: People's peacemaking perspectives Yemen*, November 2011. www.saferworld.org.uk/downloads/pubdocs/Public%20protest%20Nov%202011.pdf, accessed 24 May 2012.

Women contrasted the acceptance they experienced from “society” with aggressive and negative responses they experienced from “political forces.” For instance, one woman activist from Sana’a suggested that “the rejection of women’s participation was politically motivated rather than motivated by society.” What emerged most strongly from discussions around women’s participation is that the response of political forces, be they encouraging or deterring, was often strategic and highlighted how the issue of women’s participation was used as a tool by all parties to the conflict. Ultimately, women’s participation was rejected when no longer politically convenient. Proponents of the regime used slander, physical and verbal abuse against women to discourage their political participation, while opponents of the regime encouraged women to go out on the streets in areas where such political participation was previously forbidden. Yet, once women’s mobilisation took place outside of clearly circumscribed and controlled channels, the opposition also used these tactics to control and deter women’s participation. In both circumstances women demonstrated a remarkable ability to carve out spaces of resistance, defying harassment and utilising small openings in participation to make their voices heard.

Slander, threats and harassment

At the beginning of the protests, women in urban centres used the cultural status and protection they receive from Yemeni society to shield young protesters from attacks by security forces. Women in the FGDs were proud to have taken on such a pivotal role and discussed how they had subversively utilised the shame associated with threatening or attacking women to protect male protesters from violence.

However, this was not always successful and women from Abyan, Ta’iz and Aden all said that they, or women they knew, had received threats and harassment as a result of their participation in the protests. Exemplifying the experience of women in Ta’iz, a woman who is not usually politically active said: “Those who were with the revolution were saying that participating women are fighters and they used to encourage them. Those who were with the regime were publically slandering and insulting women, damaging their reputation and sending thugs to beat and kill the women.”

In Aden too, women were threatened. “A lot of women were threatened during their participation in the revolution,” said one young woman. “This led some to withdraw from participation, while others carried on.” Women from Sa’ada barely discussed the issue of threats and harassment, but one activist said simply “threats,” when asked about the biggest challenges facing women during the protests. “Women here fear speaking up,” said a female activist from Sa’ada, hinting at the deeper issue that women in Sa’ada face many challenges, which they are unable to speak about openly.

Slander, as a means of deterring women from protesting, was a common tool used during the protests and women discuss it on the same level as physical violence. For example, one young woman in Ta’iz complained of “attempts to ruin the reputation of some women who participated in the protests, some were beaten and were verbally abused.” Slander and “shame” were also raised by politically non-active women in Aden and Sana’a and women activists in Sana’a, the latter at an institutional level: “The regime was trying to defame women, but its attempts failed.”

There is evidence that women are uniting in their disbelief of slanderous rumours. “Now we respect women in all provinces and we do not believe the public slander and attempts to damage the reputation of women in Yemen. Like what happened with the activist Bushra Al-Maqtari,¹⁰ we stood by her and supported her against the statements issued about her,” said a woman activist from Sa’ada.

¹⁰ A prominent protester from Ta’iz. After Al-Maqtari published an article called “First Year Revolution,” several imams began a campaign tarnishing her reputation in mosque sermons. See Alwazir A, “Yemen: No spring without women,” *Al Akhbar*, 14 February 2012. <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/yemen-no-spring-without-women>, accessed 24 May 2012. For more on Al-Maqtari’s story, see: Worth R F, “Yemen on the brink of hell,” *The New York Times*, 20 July 2011. www.nytimes.com/2011/07/24/magazine/yemen-on-the-brink-of-hell.html?pagewanted=1&_r=3, accessed 24 May 2012.

Political support for women's participation: genuine or tactical?

"Political parties only support women when they can benefit from it."

Woman from Sa'ada

Some women, particularly in Ta'iz and Sana'a, complain that as women became more visible, more respected and therefore more influential, attitudes towards their participation changed. A young woman from Sana'a explains:

"The society has gone through phases. Women came out into the streets. Then there were disputes and threats by the conservative groups. At the same time, there seemed to be an acceptance of women's participation and men were willing to bring their wives to Change Square. Islah and other political parties even accepted this as part of a policy to allow women to participate, in order to have a great number of people at the protests. Then they started preventing women from participating, when it was not convenient for them anymore."

In general, respondents express anger towards Islah's practices during the protests and trepidation about how an Islah-dominated government might affect opportunities for genuine women's political participation. Stories told by respondents reveal systematic political exclusion committed by Islah in all squares. This reflects a concerted attempt to take control of the Change Squares throughout the country and included, according to consulted women, Islah paying its supporters to protest. Sana'a activists discussed how the gender segregation policies that Islah applied in the squares served as much as a strategy to divide and weaken the protest movement as it served to avoid mixing of genders for religious or cultural reasons. Women were forced to sit in a separate yard inside the square, covered by heavy curtains and locked with an iron gate. In Ta'iz, Islah members attacked some tents because women who attended awareness sessions conducted there uncovered their faces. In Aden and Abyan, women strongly criticised what they called the "discriminatory practices" of Islah members against women who are not members of the party.

While women were considerably more positive about the independent elements of the protest movement and their support for women protesters, some felt the views of women were not taken up very strongly by those groups either. For example, on 8 March 2011, a huge celebration for International Women's Day was organised in Sana'a's Change Square by the WATAN Coalition – Women for Social Peace, which brought thousands of men and women together. Women activists from different political and social backgrounds delivered speeches emphasising their demand for the building of a civic state that would guarantee women's rights. At the time, this received widespread support from activists. However, when the Charter of the Peaceful Youth Revolution was formulated and came to be considered the main reference document for the protest's objectives, it contained none of the specific demands that women had called for.

Box 1: Women's political participation in Sa'ada

Compared to women in other parts of the country, women consulted in Sa'ada did not complain of as much outright intimidation. This is not because society in Sa'ada is more accepting of women's political participation; on the contrary, constraints on women's participation in Sa'ada meant that many of their protest activities had to be sanctioned and facilitated by local men. Women described how their participation was organised by the (staunchly anti-regime) new local authority run by the Houthis, which organised separate women's gatherings in schools, in support of the protests.

"The revolution was the only gathering that our community did not criticise and those of us who left Sa'ada [to protest] participated. In fact, we had encouragement from our community... we did not go out, but we found other ways of participation," said a woman activist from Sa'ada. One woman pointed out that the protests were the first time women had been able to leave the house for a social occasion and it was therefore extremely important in building women's self-confidence and self-awareness.

Despite their limited and closely regulated participation, women in Sa'ada were in broad solidarity with the women who protested elsewhere in the country, particularly in Ta'iz, which they see as the heart of the protests. "Women who went out to the squares in other governorates received a lot of respect" from community members.

What emerged from consultations with women in Sa'ada is that, compared to other parts of the country, expectations of how women can engage politically are much more dependent on the actions and opinions of men in the community. Thus, while one woman vowed to "continue to confront everything that stands in our way," ultimately, she claimed, "We [women] demand our rights through men."

Not all women in Sa'ada are content with this state of affairs. "No one will support a woman unless men support her... sadly, this is the reality of our community," said a senior female teacher.

However, there is evidence that women are capitalising on the small opening provided by the sanctioning of female-only protests, to organise themselves further. One activist recalled how women who mobilised for the anti-regime protests formed a group called *mujahidat* as the women's wing of the Houthis' armed *mujahideen*. After the protests, the *mujahidat* group continued to organise socio-economic activities for women in Sa'ada, including education, mobilisation and social care for widows who lost their husbands during the wars.

One of the women activists in Sa'ada, who used to write anonymous letters to people who commit what she considers to be wrong deeds, said: "I was dreaming of the day when I could raise my voice... Now I can say whatever I see right in front of women during the festivals. But, now that I have done this, a feeling inside me is growing every day telling me that I am not satisfied. I am hungry for something more. There must be other things, other projects for me as a woman to do."

All this highlights the limited success women have had within the pro-change forces for making their women-specific demands heard, or taken up directly. While the WATAN Coalition produced a charter for women, it did not include any of the concrete issues affecting women, but instead focused on the rights of women's participation. Similarly, women activists had limited success in uniting and developing a strong women's movement within the protest movement itself. For many women activists consulted, this makes women vulnerable in the transition process. They feel that women have been easily excluded and missed the opportunity to become a political force. They also feel that they have lost the opportunity to engage in the political process and build on their own experience, which could empower them to formulate detailed demands.

3

Taking stock and securing gains

“WOMEN PROVED THEIR EXISTENCE” is a phrase that came up several times in consultations with women throughout the country and there is no doubt from the FGDs that they are universally proud of the pivotal role women played in the protests, whether or not they supported the goals of the protests themselves. However, there was agreement that besides finding a voice, few tangible gains have been secured from the protests. Women increasingly fear marginalisation by political parties and elites and have little faith that the GCC transition process will secure them a seat at the table.

“We have voices now”

Women were unanimous in their feelings that as a result of their visible participation in the protests, women have rediscovered their voice and gained immensely from a moral and social perspective. As one woman from Abyan said, “We changed the type of relationship between the woman and herself, the woman and the man, the woman and the society, the woman and the world, and the woman and other women as well.”

This has increased women’s self-confidence and self-belief. “We now know just how great our potential is, and our ability to truly participate,” said a housewife from Sa’ada. Most of the women said that new freedoms of expression and political participation had been gained, mainly through participating in the protests, seminars, discussions and revolutionary coalitions. Women from Sa’ada said, “We have voices now; our voices were mute for six wars.” While intangible and potentially fragile, the emergence of women considering themselves to be political agents and a public force (rather than only privately influential) is a powerful outcome of the 2011 protests.

“We can say ‘no’ now,” said women from Sana’a and Ta’iz. “We can say our thoughts. We can say to a corrupt person, ‘you are corrupt’” For some women, this new-found voice meant that they had the option not to participate in processes they deem illegitimate. As a woman in Sa’ada, who had just been issued with an electoral card for the first time, said; “I realised my voice is valuable, and so when I got the electoral card for the first time I chose not to vote in the [February 2012] presidential election¹¹ because it was not a legitimate one. It was not the right thing to do to my valuable voice.”

¹¹ On 21 February 2012, a presidential election was held under the GCC-brokered transition initiative, which saw President Saleh officially transfer power to his former vice-president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur al-Hadi. Hadi was the only candidate in the election and the consensus candidate of Yemen’s main recognised political parties. While the turnout was larger than many had expected, various groups boycotted the elections, including elements of the Southern Movement, Al-Houthis, and independent youth activists, deeming the process illegitimate.

It is not only women who have taken notice of their own ability to make their voices heard: women in Sa'ada felt that men now better "understand" and "believe in" women's political role. Women from the focus group of IDPs from Abyan and the groups in Sana'a highlighted the emergence of female role models such as Tawakul Karman,¹² as positive for women's political participation and visibility in Yemen.

Tangible gains remain elusive

"The parties are all talk and no action."

Woman in Aden

At the time consultations took place in March 2012, women were almost unanimous in stating that they have yet to see any tangible gains as a result of the protests. "The political figures in the current scene are the same ones we protested against," said one young woman from Aden. A young woman from Sa'ada said: "They were only promises; we did not see tangible actions."

Most felt that women-specific issues had not made any headway either. A young woman from Sana'a expressed a fairly common view: "It is hard to say what has been accomplished for women, because this phase has ended and will be followed by many other phases. The important thing now is for women to work on themselves to attain their goals."

In the transition period, women have not received more ministerial positions than they held before. "We have got only the two traditional ministries of Human Rights and Social Affairs which were historically occupied by women," a young woman from Sana'a noted. Moreover, women have not advanced in other government positions or in political parties. Consulted women deemed the number of women participating in the transition committees to be inadequate, while seeing the GCC initiative itself as being gender-insensitive and giving insufficient attention to integrating women-centred demands. There is little in the GCC initiative to involve and support women directly; however, there are clauses that provide some space for women to push for better representation.¹³

Women thus express increasing concern that the gains they made during the protests are fragile and may be lost. Already, some think that, in the words of a woman activist from Sana'a, "women's participation in this phase [of transition] is less than it was in the revolution." This concern is exacerbated by women's disappointment with elite politics and the political parties, who have taken over in leading the country out of the political and military deadlock it faced at the end of 2011.

There is a sentiment among some that discussion about women's issues will come after 'revolutionary' politics. One women activist in Ta'iz, when explaining why the opportunity to discuss women's issues has not arisen, said that "the parties are busy with the politics and the revolution is still on-going." A housewife from Ta'iz echoed these sentiments saying, "I am optimistic that in the future there will be a role for women in political life ... but not in the near future."

On the other hand, there is widespread disappointment, verging on anger among some women activists, with what is perceived to be the inaction of political elites on broader reform goals and women's issues specifically. In Aden, this lack of political action is

¹² Tawakul Karman was awarded the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize, along with two Liberian women, "for their non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women's rights to full participation in peacebuilding work," according to the Nobel Prize Committee. www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2011/karman.html, accessed 24 May 2012.

¹³ For example: Part III, First Phase of the Transition, Clause 10(a), which states, "Each party shall account for 50 percent of nominees for the government of national unity, and due consideration shall be given to the representation of women."; Part IV, Second Phase of the Transfer of Power, Clause 20, which states, "With the beginning of the second transitional phase, the President-elect and the government of national unity shall convene a comprehensive Conference for National Dialogue for all forces and political actors, including youth, the Southern Movement, the Houthis, other political parties, civil society representatives and women. Women must be represented in all participating groups."; and 21, "The Conference shall discuss the following issues: (g) 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"; and Part VI, Concluding provisions, the first of which is 26: "Women shall appropriately be represented in all of the institutions referred to in this Mechanism." www.yemenpeaceproject.org/wordpress/?p=458, accessed 24 Jun 2012.

viewed as a symptom of the centralisation of authority in Sana'a: "We are still waiting for the change in the province to happen and women have very little to say [at this time]," said one woman.

"Political parties must reconsider how they view women," an internally displaced woman from Abyan demanded. Many women expressed their scepticism about whether political parties were concerned with promoting the genuine participation of women. "Women have been used by a lot of parties on a number of occasions and their role has been viewed as a decorative one," said one woman activist from Ta'iz. A young woman from Aden agreed: "The parties benefit from women as voters and use their votes for their own benefit." Similarly, a woman from Ta'iz complained, "politicians all lie and have used women as a means to ascend to the [political] positions they want."

In Sa'ada, some women associated with the *mujahidat* outreach programmes say that they are happier with their current situation than they were before the protests. Women discussed the support they receive in terms of vocational training, literacy programmes, healthcare and other programmes under Houthi control. "We are satisfied with our reality, and hope for change within the boundaries of the Islamic Sharia law," said one woman. However, this needs to be seen within the context of probable self-censorship in the Houthi-controlled areas, discussed above, and the possibility that participants were not able to speak as freely as elsewhere.

Across Yemen, women expressed anger towards some women within the established political parties, who were perceived to toe the party line at the expense of promoting women's genuine participation. Activists in Sana'a and Ta'iz highlighted the need to build networks with these women in order to strengthen their voices within the parties and encourage them to promote women's political participation more broadly.

Box 2: Who speaks for Southern women?

For many Southern women, dissatisfaction with the outcome of the events of 2011 is deeper than simply its failure to secure political gains for women and incorporates what many in the South see as the continued failure to address the Southern Issue. The frustration felt by many women from Aden is not limited to being sidelined as women, but also being sidelined as Southerners.

"This [transitional] phase requires us to start a revolution over the revolution," said one young woman from Aden, in reference to the GCC initiative's transitional phase and her perception that the Southern issue was not a priority in transition discussions. Some women expressed their support for establishing a Southern state, with some stating that their reasons for protesting were due to "the failure to discuss or put the Southern case forward."

A growing resentment towards relatively influential Sana'a-based women who stand for women's issues is apparent among some of the women interviewed. The experience of a young woman from Aden highlights the need to broaden the group of women with influence on policy development and to reach out to women throughout the country as discussions on a new constitution, national dialogue and the North-South issue take place:

"They announced that women will engage in political life, but the problem is that they are ignoring them, especially the Southern women. Evidence of this is that during the last meeting of our women's network, we were invited to the National Women's Conference, organised by the Ministry of Human Rights, in Sana'a; they said they need 15 Southern women to go to Sana'a. But the problem is that the Southern women were invited a day and a half before the conference. [A representative of ours] went and then we sat to discuss what they talked about. We found that they did not respect Southern women and the Southern Issue was not even included."

Despite these sentiments, women from Aden expressed some optimism for the future, and were constructive in their suggestions for how the constitution should be (re)drafted. See also section 4 below.

Expectations for the constitution and wider transition process

"I have a vision of a democratic state, which is proud of its religion, with a government that is for all people and not in the hands of one family, where power is ceded in a peaceful manner rather than through war."

Woman in Ta'iz

Most respondents described the state that would best support the livelihoods of women in Yemen as:

- A civil state where all people, including women and other marginalised groups, enjoyed equal citizenship rights and had equal access to opportunities for employment and political participation.
- A democratic state that was controlled by all social groups and not one family or group of people.
- A state that provided safety, security and stability and promoted peace and development.
- A state with no corruption, with a fair judicial system and laws.
- A state that provided basic social services, including education and healthcare.

Overall, there was a large degree of agreement among women that the new constitution should include a focus on justice, equality and the provision of social services. The only area of explicit disagreement was between women from Sa'ada, who stressed that the constitution should be based on the Qur'an, and some activists from other parts of the country, who wanted to see the constitution guarantee a secular state.

"If the constitution was based on the Qur'an's teachings, then women would not suffer injustice," said an activist in Sa'ada. Another agreed that women's rights "will be better within an Islamic framework and within Shari'a law."

Almost all women consulted raised the need to include some form of explicit protection for women's rights in the new or redrafted constitution. In Aden and Ta'iz in particular, women considered the protection or guarantee of women's rights *per se* necessary in the constitution. "We demand that the constitution guarantees women's rights in all areas," said young women in Aden, echoing a sentiment heard throughout all the consultations.

There was a subtle difference between these views and those of some of the women from Sa'ada and Sana'a, in that while they agreed women's rights needed protection in the constitution, they often phrased this in the context of people's or citizens' rights. "The most important phase is drafting the constitution, since it allows women and men's participation. It should also highlight equality," said an activist woman from Sana'a. Young women in Sa'ada stated that, "the constitution should meet the public's needs, not parties' needs, because the latter do not represent the public in its entirety. Women are part of the public; they should have rights."

However, even in Sa'ada, women put forward the need for "a law specialising in custody and foster care, and another which guarantees divorcees' and widows' rights (such as residence, income etc.)." In Aden, women requested that the constitution has a law "criminalising violence against women and children."

Finally, many women requested the inclusion of clauses in the constitution relating to unemployment or job-provision, free healthcare and free and equal access to education. This included mandatory primary education and the allocation of places for girls at universities, to give girls greater opportunities to attain university-level education.

In Aden, the emphasis was on the provision of social services, such as healthcare, education and jobs, "in a fair way," in reference to concerns around nepotism and corruption. A woman activist in Aden discussed how she felt the constitution might go some way to addressing these issues: "The constitution should have laws that address the corruption in social care and protection; this should guarantee the rights of the poor, the needy and the impoverished to get assistance and aid. The rightful eligible recipients of the assistance and aid are being deprived of it, especially women and children. The assistance instead goes to family, relatives, friends and those who have enough money and who are not eligible for it."

4

Challenges

MANY WOMEN EXPRESSED GUARDED OPTIMISM FOR THE FUTURE. The focus group of young women in Ta'iz was notable for its positive attitude towards the position of women: "We are very optimistic especially that a woman has been appointed to the position of Minister of Human and Women's Rights and are optimistic that women will have a bigger role, because the revolution changed the image of women for the better."

Nonetheless, challenges remain. The two pressing concerns that emerged from the consultations relate to the political priority of addressing the Southern Issue and the need to ensure security and stability in all areas and unify the military and security services. These are discussed in greater detail below.

The Southern Issue

Many women in Aden said they protested partly because of the Southern Issue and specifically because it had not been put forward yet for proper discussion. This also had a specific gender dimension: Southern women were concerned about whether their specific concerns and voices were being adequately represented in Sana'a policy-making circles. Women also wanted to have a greater say in South-South, as well as North-South, dialogue.

All members of the focus group of young women activists in Aden were very concerned to discuss the Southern Issue and while many prefer separation from the North, there is a degree of flexibility about what a future solution would look like. Many made constructive suggestions about how to proceed. For example, one young woman activist said: "I think the first step is the international recognition of the [Southern] Issue and the second step is the North-South dialogue."

Another went into detail:

"The solution is the right to self-determination. Conflict and insecurity is rising and we need someone who can address our problems. It should be up to us to do so. The people who will sit and discuss the issue do not represent Southern people, unless they come up with some solutions and outcomes that might give us a little hope..."

Growing insecurity and lawlessness

"We didn't vote in the elections. We will practise our right to vote when we are actually citizens, rather than displaced people," said an internally displaced woman from Abyan,¹⁴

¹⁴ Overall, internally displaced people in Yemen now number close to half a million. For the most up-to-date figures, see the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4f97fb4e2.html, accessed 24 May 2012.

raising an important consideration: how can effective participatory politics take place in a context where insecurity remains a primary concern for many citizens?

The most immediate obstacle preventing women from making their voices heard is the growing insecurity felt by many throughout the country. This includes lawlessness; fear of and lack of protection by security forces; the spread of violence; banditry – which is making travel increasingly difficult; the kidnapping of girls; the increased prevalence of small arms and drug use among youth; and the perceived spread of chaos and disturbance by political factions.

In Aden, young women in the focus group highlighted banditry, road closures and changing transport routes as causing difficulty in getting to work places, schools and homes. For women in Aden, there are concerns about the increased prevalence of weapons, which is a result of, and contributes to, a feeling of growing lawlessness and insecurity. “Security is the biggest obstacle. The women could not express their opinion because they fear people, since there is no law to protect them.”

Women from Abyan cited security-related issues as the greatest challenges facing them, including the “lack of security with Al-Qaeda’s presence,” the “lack of military and security institutions” and the “exiting of the local authority from Abyan, [which has] abandoned its responsibilities.” Furthermore, being an IDP brings new security challenges, including food insecurity, economic difficulties and personal insecurity. These women, most of whom are currently living in schools and other municipal buildings, are therefore extremely vulnerable.

In Sa’ada, women were concerned that another war could break out at any moment. “Throughout six wars and attempts at suppression, there were damages, loss and casualties,” summarises one young woman. “Economic insecurity is becoming severe since women have lost their providers, who were either killed or imprisoned.”

5

Conclusion and recommendations

WOMEN'S VOICES ARE VALUABLE and incorporating their priorities, concerns and ideas for Yemen's future into Yemeni politics will further the country's chances for peace and prosperity. Yet, while women are proud of their role in the country's protests and slightly awed by their own power, they are also fearful: for their own security, for the loss of gains they have made and for their children's future.

Having joined the protests as Yemenis first, demanding justice and equality under a strong and enforced rule of law, many women are only recently beginning to discuss women's rights as an issue on its own, separate from the broader revolutionary goals of overthrowing the regime. Even Southern women, who may not be in favour of a unified Yemen, consider that they have much in common with women from elsewhere in the country and desire more unity among women. A common theme in all the focus groups was the need for unity among women. "Women [should] not compete with each other in a bad way. This wastes women's votes," one woman explained.

Striking the delicate balance, between advocating for freedom for all Yemeni people and negotiating equal rights for women specifically, remains a challenge. Protesters argue that if Yemenis are free, Yemeni women will also be free and that in fact, Yemeni women cannot be free unless the wider oppression of the state and the culture over the people is abolished. But women in much of the country nevertheless feel that women's issues need to be raised now and that this can only be done if women are able to organise to make their demands heard.

The women who participated in the research for this paper had many suggestions for how to make sure women's voices are heard. In Ta'iz especially, and also Sana'a, many women argued that continuous participation in events and protests was the best way to ensure women's voices continue to be heard. In Aden and Sa'ada, among women activists in Sana'a and internally displaced women from Abyan, the media provide important channels for women's voices. In the Sa'ada FGD, participants suggested organisations dedicated to and staffed by women would be effective for making their voices heard.

Given Yemen's diversity, there is a need for more research to examine and address more closely many of the specific issues that have been identified in this report. Nonetheless, there are several emerging areas where quick action can build on the opportunity for peace in Yemen and thus cement the gains that women have already made.

Support opportunities for a united voice for women...

In all the consultations, women across the country have recognised the need for greater unity among women's voices, to ensure their demands are heard at national level. While women are conscious of the need to unite if they are to be listened to, the GCC initiative is weak on inclusion and the political process will continue regardless of whether or not women are an organised political force. Consequently, assisting in the organisation of lobbying among women could help integrate women's demands into the National Dialogue and the phase of constitution formulation.

It is important to encourage opportunities for women from across the country to unite and lobby for their demands: cross-country consultations are necessary for women activists to get a better understanding of the demands of women in other parts of Yemen and how they can be supported at national level. The transition process provides a short, but timely window for women to lobby for better policies that encourage the participation of women and integrate their demands into the National Dialogue Conference.

...but recognise and respect regional difference

While it is necessary to encourage unity amongst women, it is important to consider and respect socio-cultural and political differences across the country. Ensuring these are considered is essential in order to support women's participation in a conflict sensitive way that does no harm. The diversity of views between women from different geographic areas is striking. An activist from Ta'iz, talking about development indicators and citizens' rights, has markedly different priorities to a young girl in Aden, who is fearful of being kidnapped, or a housewife from Sa'ada, who is simply relieved that the wars have finished.

For example, women in the urban centres of Ta'iz and Sana'a operate under different limitations and use different approaches to women in Sa'ada. While young activists in Ta'iz are able to protest visibly to demand their rights, in Sa'ada women face difficulties in leaving the house without permission from male family members. Additionally, while public advocacy may work for some in Sana'a, women in Sa'ada suggested undertaking anonymous activities. These include writing their demands on unsigned papers or using aliases, as well as using male intermediaries to ensure their voices are heard. While this option is not preferred, women in Sa'ada argued that it can still help women to slowly expand their space, "spread women's ideas" and also "encourage other women to participate when they see it is possible."

Differences are not limited to socio-cultural nuances, but also relate to cross-cutting political issues. Specifically, the Southern Issue cuts across demands for unity among women. Women from the South will need to be considered as equal stakeholders in calls for unity. Women from Aden, and presumably other Southern governorates, are frustrated with the central government and angry that the Southern Issue has not yet been addressed. Giving these women a stake in their own future, through their involvement in formal and informal North-South dialogue and actively engaging them in debates during the transition period, may go some way to allaying their frustration. If they continue to feel that their voices and experiences as 'Southern women' are not respected, then calls for uniting women will fall flat.

Encourage new and emerging women's voices

Yemen's peaceful protest movement is the largest in its history and the longest-running of the Arab spring uprisings. Although it has been overshadowed by violent power struggles within the elite, the protest movement has given unprecedented hope to millions of Yemenis and has brought to the surface a new generation of male and female youth activists. As politics returns from the streets back to the elite circles associated with powerful individuals and well-established political parties, there is a need to engage with Yemen's new women activists to ensure their voices remain heard by decision makers.

Similarly, women's general disappointment with political parties has highlighted the need to work with women within these parties, to empower them to advocate for women's rights more broadly. Key to this is building alliances across party lines and with various women's networks politically, in civil society and in the media. Capacity building for these new and emerging women activists will be essential to ensure a diverse representation of women's voices.

Work at the local level

New local authorities have taken power following the events of 2011, particularly in Sa'ada, Ta'iz, Aden and Abyan. It is important to work at local level with these new service providers, to ensure that women's demands and rights to political participation are being listened to and integrated into new policy and legislation and that networks and relationships are built between local level service providers and women.

In Aden, women consulted suggested the idea of appointing a woman at community level, as "the neighbourhood's wise one," throughout Yemen. This woman would be closer to other women and thus able to follow up on issues important to them. According to them, the experiment is already happening in the Crater district of Aden. One woman remarked wryly that, "there could be the opportunity for healthy competition between men and women for the services of this work."

Work with men to support women

For many women, their struggles in the protests were seen to go hand-in-hand with the struggles of youth and Yemeni citizens calling for greater justice and equality. There was recognition that while much needed to be done, any effort to support women's political participation needs to involve men and that women's rights falls within broader advocacy work for just and equal laws and policies for all.

While many focus group participants felt that women's activities during the revolution had begun to change men's opinion of women, there was general agreement that there was still some way to go in changing the attitudes and behaviours of both men and women before women can be equal partners with men. "Women proved themselves and won a Nobel Prize. Men started to trust their judgment and opinions and believe they can do anything and have an important role within society," said a young woman from Sana'a. Nevertheless, more needs to be done to change attitudes and behaviour, particularly of men and boys.

Many women suggest being proactive in involving men in support of women. "Men's awareness must be dealt with first ... there is no point in educating and raising the awareness of women, if men do not believe in the importance of women's political participation," said a woman activist from Sa'ada.

Undertake further research... but ensure feedback

Yemeni women – and men – have widely differing opinions and needs, based on their region. Many women outside Sana'a emphasised the importance of more detailed research, with concrete follow-up plans. It is essential that further research explores women's opinions and experiences beyond the capital. The time-limited nature of these discussions has barely scratched the surface of some profound issues affecting women. For a more in-depth analysis, it is likely that trust-building exercises (between women and men from a community) will be necessary, before embarking on some extremely sensitive discussions.

The scope of research for this report was limited. However, it has tried to engage with women who are not often given a chance to speak about their political participation. Women from the consultations in Sa'ada and the IDPs from Abyan expressed their disappointment that this research was the first time they had been asked about their

situation and that no civil society organisation or women's organisation (national or international) had come to visit them.

At the same time, feedback is important. Women from Aden are clearly frustrated with being asked for input and not seeing any results, demonstrated by the refusal of one group of women to engage with the research at all. Some of the frustration felt by women in Aden can be allayed by meticulous provision of feedback of any research. Similarly, young women in Ta'iz vented their frustration at the lack of feedback they had received from previous participation. Providing feedback is a strong way of showing people how their voices are being used and also provides them with a tool for their own advocacy and awareness-raising. Moreover, when opinions are considered, but not taken into account – for example, because they are in a small minority – people are often content to be informed that their opinion has been noted.

ANNEX 1: Dynamics of women's participation in the protests

Yemeni women from different political and social backgrounds participated in the protests, especially during the first months, before political exclusion and violence deterred many. All respondents from the four governorates asserted that women's participation was not only widespread, but also an effective contribution during the protest period.

Women and girls use the word “participation” broadly to refer to all the types of contribution or activities they undertook. There are a number of common contributions that women and girls from all governorates carried out, such as:

- Women participated in demonstrations, sit-ins and protests with their “souls and bodies,” as they were wounded and killed (during their participation). In Ta'iz, a local human rights initiative documented 14 females who were killed. Respondents from all areas referred to the sacrifices of the women from Ta'iz, considering these to be an honour for all women in Yemen.
- Women mobilised others to participate in the protests, including their sons, husbands, brothers, other male relatives and women peers. In Yemen, women face constraints on their mobility and direct contact and communication with men who are strangers, so instead they mobilise those who socially and traditionally they can communicate with. The exceptions are the cases of women activists in Aden, Sana'a and Ta'iz who could reach a wider community, either by face-to-face communication, or through the media and Facebook.
- Women provided the protest squares with food, tents, blankets, medicines and cash on a non-formal basis.
- Women organised fundraising and cash donations, especially in Sa'ada, where people donated weekly (every Friday) for the Sana'a, Ta'iz and Aden protests. Women activists in Sana'a and Ta'iz also conducted similar activities.
- Women participated in discussions and seminars being held in the squares and/or other meeting places.

There are also some specific activities mentioned by women in the focus groups, which they considered unique:

- A group of women (mainly housewives) from Aden participated in establishing protest camps and the organisation and management of the camps. This was considered unique, as Aden used to have two main protest squares, one established by Islah Party in Crater District and the other established by the Southern Separation Movement in Al Mansoura District, but women and young people established a third one in Dar Sa'ad District, where community women had the opportunity to participate in managing the camp.
- Women from different backgrounds in Sa'ada prayed for the protesters to succeed and to be safe by “reading the Qu'ran 10,000 times.”
- Young women from Sana'a participated in organising concerts and art exhibitions, in writing slogans and in video and camera documentation and recording.
- Activists from Sana'a participated in forming youth coalitions, in writing statements, in training, in conducting awareness seminars, in the square's security committees and organising fundraising and clean-up campaigns.
- ‘Ordinary’ women from Ta'iz participated in civil disobedience and other strikes.
- Women in Sa'ada did not go onto the streets, because of the conservative society they live in. Instead, they conducted bi-weekly gatherings in schools. Women considered this participation a huge change in their lives, as they left homes for purposes other than social activities.

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COVER PHOTO: Women protesters shout slogans during a protest outside Sana'a University on 24 February 2011. This was the first women's demonstration organised by the Women for Social Peace (WATAN) Coalition to protest the rule of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh.

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