

A stylized map of Yemen composed of a grid of grey dots, with several dots highlighted in red to indicate specific locations.

# Yemen's Women and the Quest for Change

Political Participation after the Arab Revolution

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- Yemen has witnessed a drastic change in the attitude towards women and minorities, including their involvement in political life.
- The sudden surge of empowerment due to the uprising is neither sustainable nor based on strong foundations.
- A 30 per cent quota for women was demanded by the women's movement in March 2012 as a result of the National Women's Conference.
- The international community needs to support Yemen in its effort to become a genuine democracy that promotes rights and freedoms for all.

## Introduction

The winner of the World Press Photo of the Year 2011 was a picture taken by Samuel Aranda in Yemen. The photo shows a Yemeni woman covered entirely in black except for her white-gloved hands with which she holds her son, injured in the 2011 uprising against the regime, to her chest. Having a Yemeni woman as the subject of an international photo contest is something entirely new to Yemen and its culture. Thanks to the uprising of 2011, the visibility of women in Yemen has skyrocketed, which can be attributed to the revolutionary activist Nobel Peace Prize winner Tawakkul Karman, as well as the thousands of women who took to the streets demanding change. For reasons that are largely political, the cultural stigma against Yemeni women's participation in the public sphere has suddenly disappeared. In fact, political parties competed on the size and activism of their women's presence. Even the most conservative party – the Islamic Islah – pushed its women in huge numbers, asking them to raise their voices against the former regime. Although women's presence in the 2011 events was primarily politically driven, this presence has nevertheless resulted in a change in Yemenis' attitude towards women and public participation. This change provides an opportunity and an entry point for a stronger and more sustainable cultural change, if it is supported by educational institutions and political will.

Immediately before the start of Yemen's chapter of the Arab Spring, it was unheard of for women – especially those coming from conservative backgrounds – to be photographed by strangers, let alone take to the streets in protest. Then suddenly it was not only ok, but also good for women to demonstrate in order to give strength and legitimacy to the demands of politicians, who were mostly – if not entirely – men. This change in attitude was not limited to marches: women were also encouraged to sleep in tents in Change Square, the revolution's sit-in area in the capital Sana'a or other cities.

The 2011 uprising brought a new dimension to the average Yemeni woman's life. While in the past discussing politics was a man's business or that of a few elite educated women, politics in Yemen have since entered into the realm of women's social gatherings and domestic environment. Although this is a positive trend improving women's involvement in public life and their political participation, ironically, this new awareness has also caused problems – either within families whose members have

alternative political inclinations, or among friends and social groups. Many stories have been told about how politically active family members – especially fathers or other dominant male figures – tried to force their beliefs on other members of the family. This makes it even more difficult for girls to develop their own informed political opinions – despite their interest – which is relatively new.

## Historical Memory

Despite being a very conservative society, in which stereotyped gender roles are the norm, Yemenis easily accepted being led by a brave woman and lined up behind her. Tawakkul Karman is a striking example of strong a Yemeni woman. According to psychologists, nations have historical memories that are passed down from one generation to the next. In Yemen's culture, great historical figures such as the Queen of Sheba and Queen Arwa have always been a source of pride. When Karman became a leading figure in the 2011 protests, she was nicknamed the new Queen of Sheba. This evoked memories of the nation that was at its prime when it was led by a woman, and explains why the overnight transition in women's positions from followers to leaders went so smoothly. What was needed was a heroic woman to bridge the gap between the historical memory and the current situation of women in Yemen. Karman came forward, and thus serves as example for other Yemeni women, who possess the courage and expertise, to demand their position as leaders in the community. This background and current opportunity provide women in Yemen an advantage over other women in the region. Moreover, strong support is also evident in the donor-led development programmes working for women's empowerment. These programmes are far more present in Yemen than in other countries in the region, particularly given that Yemen is the only Least Developed Country in the Middle East North Africa region.

## Shallow Awareness

The Yemeni constitution allowed equal rights for all citizens regardless of gender, religion, race, or origin. Article No. 24 declares, »The state guarantees equal opportunities for all citizens politically, economically, socially, and culturally, and issue the laws to achieve this equality.« Until very recently, however, the socio-political practice was a discriminative one that privileges white Muslim

men above any other group in Yemeni society. Women, dark-skinned people, and Yemeni Jews are examples of groups who have been generally excluded from political activity and decision-making roles.

It is worth mentioning that women's movement in Yemen had two different histories, which have made it what it is today. Due to the socialist culture, women in the south were allowed to take part in public events – particularly through the Yemeni Women's Union, which was established in 1968. In fact, Aden Women's Club – which included Yemeni women – was established in 1956 and managed by British women living in Aden at the time under the British rule. Women in southern Yemen participated in the marches against British occupation and in the events sponsored by political parties. The story was quite different in the north, however, where women were not really present in the political and public spheres. When the unity between north and south was achieved in May 1990, there was a surge of optimism in the north among women who hoped to gain from the privileges the southern women had enjoyed for decades. Unfortunately, the political management at the time was more interested in political gains that endorsed men's interests and political deals, and that to a large extent cropped women's existing rights. This is because the political coalitions that came to power included an Islamic conservative party, the *Islah*, which pushed against women's rights.

An example of this is seen in the changes to family laws, which in the south were very supportive of women in terms of marriage and divorce rights, minimum age for marriage, etc. The new political coalition created a new family law that allowed girls to be married at any age, and took away some of women's rights in marriage and divorce. Gradually, a new culture for women emerged, one that is much more conservative and limits women's participation and endorses a social stereotype that the women's place is home. In actuality, it was not entirely the fault of those dominating the political scene, but the responsibility is also shared by the constituencies being discriminated against. Until January 2011, there was reluctance among the majority of Yemenis to be involved in politics because they did not feel they had a say or that politics is an issue that should concern them.

M. B. is a twenty-nine-year-old Yemeni woman from Sana'a, who after completing her high school education stayed at home waiting to be married. She lives near Sana'a

University, which became the centre of Yemen's uprising against the regime. Sharing her reflections on the 2011 uprising she said, »I used to look from my window and see how these youth, including women, gathered and protested for change. I even knew some of them and was intrigued by the reasons for what they are doing.« After many discussions, she decided to support the uprising. Although her family would not allow her to join the protestors personally, she helped by providing them with water, food, and blankets. Today M. B. reads the newspapers and has learned to use the Internet to broaden her understanding and overcome her lack of background. Like her, there are many Yemenis who were »converted« into surface-level politicians.

Until now, the educational systems – both formal through institutions and informal through mass communication tools – have endorsed stereotyped gender roles, and do not support the political education, involvement, or integration of the masses. For example, elementary Arabic schoolbooks repeatedly narrate a family scenario where the mother is cooking, the father is at work, the daughter sewing, and the boy playing football. It is left to individuals and their own networks to create their perceptions and understanding of what is going on.

## No Sustainable Empowerment

It is very likely that Yemeni women will be represented in decision-making positions more than many other countries in the Gulf region – countries which were far ahead in terms of the political presence of women until 2011. For example, Yemeni women had the right to vote and be political candidates from the very beginning, unlike Gulf women who are still struggling for their rights to be established. The 2011 Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum ranked Yemen 131 in political empowerment, which is one rank better than its rich neighbours Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

There are already three women in the coalition government and women represent 25 per cent of the transitional structures responsible for shaping the future of the country. Nevertheless, a recent survey<sup>1</sup> by the Euro-Arab Center for Studies based in Paris concluded that although women did participate in the Arab Spring across the region, they were excluded in the transitional phases that followed. The sur-

1. [http://www.ceea.com/new/resume\\_events\\_detail.php?fid=189](http://www.ceea.com/new/resume_events_detail.php?fid=189)

vey showed that 56.7 per cent of the surveyed sample said that the »Islamic« movements that led the revolutions ignored women when it came to appointments in decision-making positions after the revolutions. This contradiction could be explained by the particularity of the Yemeni society, which provides unique circumstances, especially concerning women. This means that while in other Arab Spring countries the Islamic movements were oppressed and so when they came to power the first thing they did was to try to end some of the secular practices in their countries, the Islamic movement was quite popular in Yemen even before the 2011 uprising.

Compared with Tunisia and Egypt, the presence of Yemeni women in the public sphere was very limited before the uprising. Therefore, it felt like a national victory when women were accepted as sudden revolutionary heroes. When the political scene was turned upside down, it made women visible and they, in turn, aspired to be part of the decision-making process. Nonetheless, the euphoria Yemenis are experiencing – especially among young people because of their success in changing the regime – could work against the country's evolution to a real democracy, because they suddenly feel empowered and that they can change regimes. This feeling obscures the fact that they have no real experience, organisational skills, or even a vision or strategy. Consequently, this shallow engagement with politics is as dangerous as non-involvement because the attitudes and positions of new politicians can be easily manipulated by seasoned politicians.

There is no sustainable empowerment of women as such. Sustainable empowerment requires an actual change in the socio-economic infrastructure, including access to capital, laws against discrimination, reform of the educational system, etc. Moreover, a cultural change is required in terms of changing stereotypes and traditional values. This change has already commenced, but its success will require an intense, deliberate strategy on the part of various governing institutions, using local media and other channels.

## Media Boom

In the last two years, four private channels were created but they broadcast from abroad since local laws do not allow private broadcasting. In addition, a semi-private radio station that is affiliated to the former regime began broadcasting on January 2012, and a new independent private

FM community radio began broadcasting in August 2012. Moreover, dozens of newspapers have emerged, which are primarily affiliated with political parties but still provide alternative viewpoints to citizens. Interestingly, the media boom has also extended online, as over 700,000 Yemenis have Facebook accounts and a couple hundred thousands have Twitter accounts. Blogging has become a new socio-political dimension for educated Yemeni youth, especially women. Yemeni women revealed that they feel liberated online because they not judged since their identity can be easily concealed. »I feel that for the first time I am not judged by the fact that I am a woman, but rather by what I am saying,« said S. H. a young female Yemeni activist who has found herself greatly empowered online.

The danger is that there is no professionalism in the traditional media and no supervision over new media or a code of ethics that protects citizens against false information. There are many misconceptions that are predominantly fed by the media and political parties. Politicians who have money or control over media are using it to endorse their political positions, abusing the naivety of the public. At the same time, though, the media boom presents an amazing opportunity for actual socio-political change that would genuinely empower women and youth. Media can be used to promote equal citizenship, human rights, and values based on Yemenis dream for a modern state.

## A Quota System

In the March 2012 document presented by the Women's National Committee in collaboration with national women's movements on the occasion of International Women's Day, the number one demand was a 30 per cent quota in all elected and non-elected decision-making positions. This demand has not emerged from a vacuum – in fact, in 2006 female activists held wide-ranging demonstrations and marched to the presidential palace demanding a quota for women, which was a new concept at the time. This was prior to the 2006 presidential and local council elections in which the General People's Congress party of the former regime vigorously competed with former opposition, the Joint Meeting Parties. At the time, President Saleh promised to install a 15 per cent quota for women in elected and non-elected positions. However, neither his party – the General People's Congress (GPC) – nor any of the other parties lived up to this promise in the elections that soon followed, or at any other time after that.

Unfortunately, the women's movement did not persistently follow up on this issue despite individual efforts here and there, and now there is no quota for women at all. Inspired by the space women filled in the 2011 uprising, this demand has resurfaced and even doubled to 30 per cent as presented by the Women's Conference in March 2012. The demand was presented to the president and the prime minister in an official, signed document. Again, the document has not gone far and no decree has been made to increase the representation of women in decision-making positions. This is partially because of the lack of persistent follow-up, but mainly because the demands met resistance among conservative political leaders who are now very powerful in Yemen.

A ray of light came from outside Yemen through the technical support provided to Yemen in terms of executing the Gulf Council Countries Initiative's (GCC) Implementation Mechanism. This initiative was the world's peaceful answer to Yemen's Arab Spring and the demands for regime change. It was brokered in 2011 by the GPC and the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) under supervision of the GCC countries and the United Nations. It was signed in November 2011 and included an implementation mechanism to sail Yemen through a two-year transition ending with elections in February 2014. In the implementation mechanism, it was mentioned that there should be adequate representation of women in the various committees overseeing the implementation. The first committee of this sort was the Communication or Outreach Committee, which included 25 per cent women. The next committee, which is the Preparatory Committee of the National Dialogue Conference, included six women in its twenty-three members, about 26 per cent. These committees were created by the president based on advice from the UN and Friends of Yemen.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the technical international teams and local expertise involved in shaping the future of Yemen are already somewhat convinced that there should be strong representation for women. However, having an actual quota for women embedded in the phrasing of the constitution or new decrees remains a controversial topic. The social awareness and conviction of women's right to a quota system in order to be empowered, is still weak. It will require strong political will and a national media campaign for it to be a politically and publicly accepted. The quota system remains Yemeni women's only structured mechanism to

enforce their rightful position in decision-making positions – at least until the society evolves into a modern one based on a general belief in equality and human rights.

## The Way Forward

There are several directions that could be taken to support political empowerment for women in Yemen. There are the gradual cultural changes that need a steady, long-term campaigns and institutional changes in the educational system. At the same time, there are the strong measures that would endorse women's political empowerment in the short term, such as a quota system. While the international community needs to continue its support for women's empowerment through training, projects, and so on, in both cases it needs to build these interventions on local values and not those imported from abroad. Home grown solutions, jargons, and values need to be the bases for these initiatives in order to receive legitimacy and long-term impact.

Today, Yemeni women face an amazing opportunity to jump miles ahead in terms of political and public empowerment. The uprising has given women the legitimacy to demand their rights, and the international interest in Yemen provides additional support and protection against the old, traditional, conservative tone. The women's movement in Yemen needs to get its act together, so that it can seize this opportunity and capitalize on the changes. This can be done in coordination with other women's movements in the region especially in countries that have already made achievements in this regard, such as Tunisia. There are many projects today between the Arab Spring countries that allow better interaction and exchange of lessons. Furthermore, »women in the media« is a new trend especially in online media such as Facebook and Twitter – which was used as tool for political lobbying by both women and men during the uprising. This trend needs to be nurtured further and expanded to all areas around the country and not just in the urban centres that enjoy better infrastructure and Internet services.

Yemeni women have led in the past and are now on the verge of a historical turning point to present them as leaders of today. Building on historical memory, national uprising, sudden cultural change, and international support, this can be the one chance for Yemeni women that may not come again for a very long time.

<sup>2</sup> Friends of Yemen is an international group of twenty countries lead by KSA and the UK, which came together in order to support Yemen's development and its quest for peaceful transition.



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