



Women of South Yemen:

# Challenges and Empowerment's Hardships

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## Summary:

The issue of women's empowerment has recently attracted a lot of attention. However, the general conditions of Yemeni women have been exceptional in a negative way. The historic narrative of the political changes and the different stages through which Southern women particularly have experienced show the degree of decline in their participation and representation rate within the decision-making centers.

This research document explores the impact of political changes on Southern women and focuses on the obstacles and challenges they face in the empowerment issue. This is based upon a number of interviews the Researcher conducted with Southern women from across Southern governorates.

The research paper concluded with a number of **recommendations**:

- It is important to press the disputing parties and the UN Envoy to Yemen "Hans Grundberg" to involve women and support their representation in the comprehensive solution peace negotiation including Southern women on a basis of equal footing with their Northern peers.
- It is important to press Southern women who are currently involved in the decision-making centers to show responsibility by pushing for women's participation and enhancing their presence so as to enjoy priority in the next political phase.
- Harnessing the Southern media outlets to play an enlightening role by employing the media message for raising the society's awareness in a way that contributes to changing the prevailing stereotype about women which is only limited to certain roles.
- Making sure that all segments of the society are aware that stability, security and sustainable development can't be achieved amid women's absence from the political, economic and social arena.

- Securing the support of the regional and international bodies to the Southern non-governmental organizations and the research centers which are interested in making researches about women's participation and empowerment at various levels, and the impact of this support on the decision-making process and the circumstances surrounding it.
- Establishing a database about women's status in the different decision-making organs in South Yemen for backing a larger female representation.
- It is important to prepare a generation of Southern women who could make impact, presence and achievements, as well as open communication channels with local and external experiences for backing their rights and demands.
- Southern women shouldn't confine themselves in dealing with their affairs only, but they have to involve themselves in other variable issues that open for them wider empowerment and participation horizons.
- Studying women's status, activities and influence in light of the needs of each area, and absorbing women across different regions as part of engagement in the political, social and other activities. In other words, there should be no focus on certain governorates at the expense of others.
- The empowerment of Southern women at the political, economic and social levels ensures representation of the demands of them and other marginalized sections in the local community, and makes the decision-making process more responsive to their needs.



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### **Thanks and Appreciation**

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South24 for News and Studies would like to express thanks and gratitude to all the Southern women who participated in supporting this document with their cooperation and valuable contribution through a series of interviews the researcher conducted with them.



## Introduction

In general, Yemeni women have been involved in a long and extended battle in their local community for empowerment politically, economically and socially. Since they began agglomerating and structuring themselves based upon a bundle of clear ideas that demand the right to participate in the decision-making roles at different levels, they have encountered challenges and hardships that oppose their empowerment. However, this gave them more persistence while moving forward.

The suffering of the Yemeni women, whether in North or South, are the same, and has further increased since 2014 after the eruption of the war. However, highlighting the conditions of Southern Women is due to the lack of research data about their history and present. Such deficiencies to deliver their messages makes it important to focus on those women and give them some space within the readings of those interested. Most of Yemeni history was written by men about their life and works in different issues including politics, war, economy and other fields. Women were rarely mentioned and usually portrayed within stereotypical roles which sometimes belittle and marginalize them. Certainly, any reader is affected and judges according to former writings and deeds. On the other hand, the female writings or opinions are vitally different in style and context, as they express women's own awareness of what they experience and suffer on the personal level. Their ability to deliver ideas is probably more effective than men. Therefore, one of my reasons behind writing about Southern women in particular is to highlight their past, present and perspectives, as well as showing their points of view which differ from those of men by reciting relevant facts and analyses, especially that it is not as tangible for men as it is for women.

My selection of this issue was based upon a historical, descriptive and analytical approach which portrays the phases experienced by Southern women over three different periods that have left their direct impact and changed much of their reality. The first part of this document demonstrated a glimpse on women's history in South Yemen during British colonialism and the ensuing stage that witnessed a rise up for women's role as part of the Socialist state which emerged after 1967. The consequences of post- 1990 Unity acted as a setback for women.

In the second section, I discussed the conditions of the Southern women in the post-2014 War, the violations against them as well as the extent of the social and political level within which they have participated. The third and last section of this research piece is based on a number of interviews I conducted with Southern women from different Southern governorates who experienced some challenges and hardships related to the empowerment in addition to the role played by some of them in making individual initiatives that made success within their local communities for enhancing peace in spite of the continuous alienation of them as being influential women.

### **First: a glimpse on women's history in South Yemen**

Southern women played prominent roles before the October 10th, 1963, Revolution. They struggled along with their brothers, men, in more than one front through delivering supplies and ammunition to the revolutionaries. They also contributed in securing the supply lines and hiding the revolutionaries in the cities and villages during the British Army's raids following each of their operations. The sacrifices of Southern women were not limited to their relief efforts in the fronts along with men but some of them lost their lives for liberating their nation from British colonialism. For example, Daara Saeed Thabet is considered one of the earliest female guerrillas (fedayat) who engaged in many anti-colonialism battles since the Tribal Uprisings in 1956 and 1957. Daraa was a member of the Liberation Army Command in Radfan and previously engaged in Northern governorates battles against Imamate in Hajah, Khawlan and Bani Hushaysh.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Daara Saeed the Heroine of the Two Revolution, October 14th, 2020, <https://www.khlaasa.net/news637376.html>





Photo1: Women from South Yemen are trained on how to use submachine guns. ([almadaniyamag.com](http://almadaniyamag.com), Journalist Hassan Qassem).

For Southern women, it was not just a revolution against the English colonists but also against ignorance and obsolete traditions which deprived them of education, jobs, opportunities and thinking. So, the October 14th Revolution and the following incidents was a significant turning point in Southern Women's history. After that, pioneering women emerged across all life fields in South such as the political and human right activist "Radhya Ehsan", Activist "Saida Ahmed Yahya" who ran many schools in Aden, "Hamida Zakaria", the first female justice in the Arab Peninsula, "Noor Haider", the teacher who prepared a lot of female cadres, Fawzia Muhammad Jaafar" who joined the National Front Organization in 1964 and led its secret work, "Aida Ali Saeed", Head of the Yemeni Women's Union, Najwa Mekkawy, the first female in Aden who joined the guerrilla field work during the British colonialism period<sup>2</sup>, and "Radhia Shamsheer", a pioneer of the feminist movement in South Yemen. The pioneering Southern women left

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<sup>2</sup> Excerpts from the First Documentary Exhibition held by the Southern Women's Bloc in Aden 2021. The bloc shared in Germany to introduce the role of women in other political and educational life in South Yemen.



an impressive fingerprint on their generation females. Their participation varied between trade unions, student movement, anti-colonialism secret work, armed battles, and anti-colonialism demonstrations in which some of them were martyred such as Latifa Ali Chowdhury who were killed by British sniper's bullets while she was in the forefront of a mostly- female peaceful demonstration in the city of Crater in 1965.<sup>3</sup>



Photo2: Journalist Mahia Nagib, the Founder of the feminist newspaper "Fatat Shamsan" in Jan1st 1960 (source, Twitter muthanw@)

The emergence of the civil newspapers in Aden contributed in cultivating the seeds of political awareness, the first of which is "Fatat Al-Jazeera Newspaper" which was founded on Jan 1st, 1940, with Muhammad Ali Luqman as its first Editor in Chief. The newspaper used to publish reports about the feminist movement and the activities of Adeni Women Association, led by Roqaya Luqman.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Mahia Omar Jarjara, better known as Mahia Nagib, a leader of the aforementioned association, the first feminist magazine in the Arab Peninsula under the name of "Fatat Shamsan", which were interested in

<sup>3</sup> Yemeni Women and the Epic Victory in the Liberation War for Independence", Rajaa Atef-Zohor Al Saeedi- Al Thawra Newspaper. October 14th, 2017, <http://althawrah.ye/archives/497050>

<sup>4</sup> "Aden's Girls in the Face of Colonialism". Khuyut, October 14th, 2020, <https://www.khuyut.com/blog/aden-girls-occupation>

covering public issue and women affairs, including the news of the female community, women rights in education, work and selecting their life partners.<sup>5</sup>

Since the withdrawal of the British colonial rule from South, or what was known as “The Federation of South Arabia” in 1967, women rights became a priority in the recently independent social state. The formal so-called women liberation policy was a result of the National Liberation Front’s anti-imperialist “progressive” approach. In light of this, women were invited to participate in the public arena, education, employment, politics and military affairs “along with their brothers” as stated in the official speech,<sup>6</sup> regardless of social, racial, age or civilian status. Additionally, there were attempts to eliminate the misogynistic attitudes in the public sphere. The Family Law has been drafted shortly after independence (Law1, 1974)<sup>7</sup>, which contributed in deepening the respectful and equal relationships between male and female in bearing the burdens of family life.

This had created a contrast with what existed in North Yemen which was known as “Yemen Arab Republic”, as its Family Law (Law3, 1978)<sup>8</sup> was more conservative in the matter of family planning, and more affected by tribal customs and traditions that limit women’s moves in contrast with their freedom to move, work and access opportunities. Moreover, People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) while North Yemen was not among the signatories, but it was obliged to adopt it after the Unity as the commitment moved to the new state (Yemen Republic). South Yemen had no reservations about CEDAW except for Article 29, in the first section related to settling disputes.<sup>9</sup> It was a slight reservation compared to those of other Arab states due to the contradiction between some parts and the Islamic Sharia, while South Yemen had not any objections about that. This means that the Southern Law gave women many rights.

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<sup>5</sup> The same source

<sup>6</sup> Revisiting the Issue of Women’s Rights in South Yemen: Susanne Dahlgren, <https://journals.openedition.org/cy/2039>

<sup>7</sup> The same source

<sup>8</sup> The same source

<sup>9</sup> “Maximum Use of Available Bread, Afrah Nasser, Goethe Institute, <https://www.goethe.de/prj/ruy/ar/fra/21549306.html>



Photo3: Women in the army of the former state of South Yemen (almadaniyamag.com, Journalist Hassan Qassem).

At the beginning of the 1970's, Southern women were the first in the Arabian Peninsula who worked as Deputy Minister, Dean of the Faculty of Economics (first University to do so), T.V and Radio Presenter, Civil Aircraft Pilot,<sup>10</sup> and to drive a

car. Aden was the first Arab city to embrace a women movement in the Arab Peninsula.<sup>11</sup> Almost all of those positions were not held by any women in the Arabian Peninsula at that time.

### ● After the Yemen Unity (1990)

In 1990. Two years after the Unity, the two Southern (1974) and the Northern (1978) Family Laws were abolished, and a new more conservative Personal Status Law was passed with a presidential decree. Many Southerners didn't welcome this news, especially the Southern women who engaged in a long battle for freedom and got rights and a lot of opportunities in the public field.

In this regard, The Yemeni activist, Afrah Nasser, said: "The reforms of the Family Law following the Unity was considered a progressive step for the Northern women and a setback for the Southern women, because South Yemen had

<sup>10</sup> Footages for Southern Women in South Yemen before Yemeni Unity in 1990, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7sk4J1WX5sl&t=9s>

<sup>11</sup> Southern Women Rights Before the Yemeni Unity. Nabiha Saleh, General Federation of Egyptian Women, January 23, 2017.

created more progressive female rights than North, such as the legal equality regarding family affairs.<sup>12</sup>



Photo 4: Women in Aden during an art event (almadaniyamag.com. By Journalist Hassan Qassem).

Furthermore, the relationships of the biggest Yemen's donor country, the KSA, with President "Ali Abdullah Saleh", at that time, pushed the latter to turn a blind eye towards the extremist Sunni Wahhabi ideology that was exported from Saudi Arabia during what was known as the

Islamic awakening (Sahwa) especially after the return of "Arab Afghans" from Afghanistan, most of whom were affiliated with Al-Qaeda organization and the Yemeni Islah Party which is ideologically belong to the Muslim Brotherhood. The religious extremist approach led to the spread of conservative garments across the Middle East, and not just in Yemen, over the last few decades.<sup>13</sup> Such changes caused a kind of depression for many Southern women, especially those in Aden who were more open than others before the Unity. Unlike other Arabian Peninsula states, the former Socialist South Yemen made many reforms for women and empowered them to access many fields. Girls were allowed to study in mixed schools, and women were encouraged to enter the labor market and to take off "hijab". Additionally, polygamy had been banned at that time.<sup>14</sup>

As for women's political experience after the Yemeni unity, the first parliamentary election, held in 1993, which witnessed about 15% female

<sup>12</sup> "Maximum Use of Available Space, Afrah Nasser, Goethe Institute, <https://www.goethe.de/prj/ruy/ar/fra/21549306.html>

<sup>13</sup> Aden's Women Lament Freedoms lost by Unity, Reuters, Jan 23th 2010, <https://www.reuters.com/article/oegtp-yemen-women-ah1-idARACAE60M03W20100123>

<sup>14</sup> Reuters, the Same source



turnout of all registered women, revealed the fragile ability of parties in pushing women to participate in the election process, and the basic reliance upon men's turnout, although the number of the participating parties were twenty-two. Among 24 independent and 18 partisan female candidates, only one woman of each category won a seat. This is equal to 0.66% of the total parliamentary seats. This demonstrates the lack of seriousness towards activating the feminine engagement at the beginning of the democratic experience.<sup>15</sup>

It is worth mentioning that the feminine election participation declined after the 1994 War. For example, in the second parliamentary election after the Unity in 1997, the number of female candidates decreased to 17 women while there were 42 in the 1993 Election. This was a remarkable decline in women participation in political life. In the 2003 Election, only one woman was elected in the House of Representatives (0.33%).<sup>16</sup> This result was considered a setback and negative indicator about how parties look at women participation and the deficient method which accepts them as voters while refusing them as elected candidates. Similarly, this applied to the municipal and presidential elections.

### ● **Post 1994 War:**

After the Summer War of 1994, Southern women have been subjected to injustice and marginalization. They were excluded and alienated from most governmental jobs contrary, as happened to men, and they faced a war under the pretext of religion, customs and traditions in contrast with the freedom they enjoyed before the Unity regarding political, social and civil rights. They were forcibly retired from many administrative jobs, factories and other state institutions in South Yemen which provided safe areas for feminine work and protected their privacy according to the Southern Labor Law.

Otherwise, the freedom and moves of the Southern women, especially in Aden, was restricted. Women of Aden who were models in elegance and freedom of clothing, thanks to the freedom they had enjoyed, became forced to wear black cloak (Abaya)<sup>17</sup> In some areas, they received threats of burning their faces if they refuse to wear "niqab".<sup>18</sup> For example, members of the religious hard-core party "Islah", which allied with President "Saleh" to invade South Yemen in 1994,

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<sup>15</sup>The Political Participation of Yemeni Women, Moed Yakrab Al-Hamdani, Dar Muhammadiyah Hamdaniyah, V. 2 P.74, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> The same Source

<sup>17</sup>Abaya: It is a black cloak worn by women in some regions of the Middle East and North Africa, especially in the countries of the Arabian Peninsula, over ordinary clothes when going out.

<sup>18</sup> Niqab is a black cover that conceals all the face features except for the two eyes

published threats of throwing burning acid<sup>19</sup> in the face of any female who doesn't wear Niqab in the university or any other places in Dar Saad Directorate in the Capital "Aden".

The political developments during the 1990s and the beginning of the 21st Century were not in favor of the Southern women, The political and economic situations paralyzed most Southern feminine activities, as all active local forums in the main governorates were closed, and the internal divisions hit the Yemen Women Federation which was being merged after the 1990 Unity and It included activists from various political parties. It suffered from many problems to create a unified front Personal Status Bill law 1992<sup>20</sup>, which was passed two years later. Prior to this, South Yemen had the "Family Law" which was described by Southern Women as being fair.

In light of this, members from the Islah party in the House of Representatives attempted to insert some new rules related to the House of Obedience in the Personal Status Law in the 1990s to suit their radical ideology. The rules allow husbands to call police for forcefully bringing back their wives who go to their fathers houses due to disputes. A group of Women's rights activists in Aden and Sana'a had discussed the proposal and denounced it as a form of violence against women. A national campaign was launched against it, and the embassies of the donor countries were informed by this. For President Saleh, this was an opportunity to appear as a defender of women rights. In other circumstances, he would not follow the same line due to his attempt to make a balance between his position and other parties. He decided not to sign on the proposed law, and he was being looked upon in a positive way among human rights and feminist activists across the country.<sup>21</sup>

### ● **The Southern Movement "Hirak" and the Yemeni Revolution for Change (2007-2011):**

The peaceful Southern "Hirak" began with human rights demands to bring back Southern military personnel to their jobs and pay their allocations after being forcefully retired due to the collapse of most governmental and military institutions after the Southern war. However, Saleh's regime responded to such demands by violence, live bullets and arrests. The peaceful demonstrations were suppressed by the security bodies in a way that led to the expansions of

<sup>19</sup> Southern Women Rights Before the Yemeni Unity, previous source

<sup>20</sup> Personal Status Law, National Information Centre, [https://yemen-nic.info/db/laws\\_ye/detail.php?ID=11351](https://yemen-nic.info/db/laws_ye/detail.php?ID=11351)

<sup>21</sup> Revisiting the Issue of Women's Rights in South Yemen, same source.



the peaceful movement in 2007 and the following years as well as gaining a large popular support.

Women made a prominent and strong presence in the peaceful Hirak march in Aden, Hadramout, Abyan, Mahra, Lahij, Shabwa and Dhale, as they participated in the peaceful demonstrations and symposiums, as well as organizing festivals and delivering speeches for supporting the peaceful march and encouraging their Southern peers to participate. They were prone to live bullets and poisonous gases,<sup>22</sup> and some of them were martyred even if they were inside their homes without making any wrongdoings or declaring any political position, like what happened with Fairouz Al Yafei who was killed inside home next to her 40-days baby girl, after the Central Security Forces raided the house next to the martyr's.<sup>23</sup>

The violations and crimes against Southerners, both male and female, didn't stop even after the fallout of Saleh regime, such as martyr "Nada Shawky" who was shot in 2012 while walking in the main street in Al-Mualla neighborhood in Aden,<sup>24</sup> and martyr "Sameeh Al Yazidi" who was shot while attempting to save her. Moreover, Zahra Saleh. The prominent leader in the Southern National Movement was injured along with two other people after being hit by a grenade in the city of Tawahi, Aden in April 2014. It was not limited to Aden, as the city of Dhale witnessed unprecedented violations and massacres compared with other Southern cities. A pregnant woman and her two daughters were killed after the Yemeni Army threw a bomb on their house in Dhale.<sup>25</sup>

At the social level, in addition to the tribal culture and the domination of the patriarchal system over the social relationship, and suppressing women by enhancing the authoritarian logic which further increased due to the change of the political, social and religious circumstances after the 1994 War, This exacerbated the sufferings of the Yemeni women in general amid the spread of the densest violence phenomenon against them, and the increase in underage marriage cases.

As for underage marriage issues from the perspective of the religious elite, it is worth mentioning that the Yemeni parliament had discussed a bill that proposed a suitable minimum marriage age for females and males (17 and 18 respectively)

<sup>22</sup> A video of a southern activist, talking about shooting and toxic gases, which were subjected to a women's march in Aden, August 28th, 2014

<sup>23</sup> The Crime of Killing Martyr Fairouz Al Yafei by Yemeni Occupation Forces. October 22nd, 2012

<sup>24</sup> Report: 2012 is the most bloody and tragic year in Aden, Karam Aman, Jan 2nd, 2013, <http://sahafa.net/show947977.html>

<sup>25</sup> The killing of a pregnant woman and her two daughters in an army shelling in South Yemen, Website 24, January 18th, 2014.

In fact, this law was met with strong opposition and refusal from some Islamic streams. Yemen Scholars Association, led by the Islamic preacher Abdul Majeed Al-Zindani, had issued a statement against the Bill, in which it described specifying marriage age as a prohibition of what "God permitted". The clerics of the parliamentary bloc, Muhammad al-Hazmi, Abdullah al-Adini, and Hazza al-Masuri, refused to pass the legislation for the same reasons.<sup>26</sup>

As for the political participation, most independent and partisan women, specially affiliated with the Yemeni Social Party, engaged in the Southern Hirak, and later in the Yemeni Revolution for Change which broke out in 2011 against Saleh Regime. The presence of Northern and Southern Yemeni women was unprecedented in the squares and across Yemen. To the extent that Southern women who didn't participate in the Southern Hirak march were motivated to take part in the Revolution for Change alongside their Northern peers against repression and the marginalization of women rule for long decades.

However, the militarization of the revolution, the Islah's control of most revolution squares in Sanaa, Taiz and Aden, as well after General Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar, who is accused by many Southerners of committing massacres and violations against them especially in the 1994 War, led to the withdrawal of most Southerners, male and female, and to return to the Hirak fields calling for restoring the former Southern state.

Even during the National Dialogue Conference, most participating Southern women didn't have a clear political stance reflecting the Southerners' demands to restore the former state. Most members of the Southern Movement boycotted the conference. Although Southern women participation was remarkable compared with other events, most of the selected names were in the same line with the political stance that opposed independence demands according to critics. All of them fall within the framework of dealing with the southern issue within Unity in any of its forms, whether combinatorial or a federation).

Furthermore, In spite of the big Yemeni women(Northern and Southern) participation in the Dialogue conference( about 30%) as a result of pressing for women "quota" in contrast with their fragile engagement in all modern stages after the Unity, much criticism was raised against the conference due to its participation organizational mechanism, as the large feminine percentage in the conference was because of being under the UN sponsorship and that such

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<sup>26</sup> A study: The impact of religious orientation on the public opinion in Yemen. Mentality dangers and destruction of generations. "South24 Center for News and Studies", <https://south24.net/news/news.php?nid=835>

female participation wouldn't occur if the conference was under the Yemeni political patronage. This fact was affirmed during the following years, especially after the outbreak of the Yemen Civil War in 2014, and its ensuing governmental formations that alienated women from political participation.

## **Secondly: The real situation of Southern women during the war since 2014**

The Houthis' control of Sana'a on September 21st, 2014, and their signing of "the Peace and National Partnership Agreement" with other political formations and powers exacerbated the state of political collapse and pushed Yemeni President, Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi to escape to Aden. This came although the "Khaled Bahah" government was appointed in November of the same year included three women, two of which from North and one from South.<sup>27</sup>

The ensuing developments of events was demonstrated in the plan by the Houthis and the forces affiliated with former President Saleh to invade the southern areas and launch a war in the direction of Aden. The then allied forces tightened their grip over large parts of Aden until March 2015 amid widespread individual popular resistance. On the dawn of Thursday March 26th 2015, Operation "Asifat Al-Hazim"<sup>28</sup> began with the participation of 10 Arab states led by the KSA to return the "legitimate government" to Sana'a.

### **● Violations against Southern women:**

Southern women found themselves in the midst of a fighting they didn't create but forced to be part of it for self-survival. They carried weapons in Aden and other Southern areas alongside men. They also organized checkpoints and bore the responsibility of providing living sustenance during the absence of the breadwinner who engaged in the battle fronts. Furthermore, they formed relief cells at the levels in Aden districts. They educated their children by themselves as the schools closed their doors. The same thing applied for Northern women, as Yemeni women in general suffered a lot before and during the war. In a report

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<sup>27</sup> The government formed on 7-11-2014, included three women, National Information Centre, [https://yemen-nic.info/government/government/gov\\_2014.php](https://yemen-nic.info/government/government/gov_2014.php)

<sup>28</sup> King Salman launches "Operation Asifat Al-Hazm against the Houthis, Arabiya.net March 26th, 2015

issued in late December 2019, Amnesty International classified Yemen as the worst country for women in the world.<sup>29</sup>

A team from “Rights Radar”<sup>30</sup> documented statistics that 166 women aged between (18-78) were injured across 9 Yemeni governorates including 3 Southern governorates as a result of sniping activities by the Houthi group against women.

Number of injured women	Governorate
18	Dhale
6	Aden
3	Lahij

The explosive devices and the landmines planted by the Houthis and hit Southern women who were seriously injured and lost all or some of their upper and lower limbs were as follow:

Number of injured women	Governorate
13	Dhale
4	Aden
2	Lahij
1	Shabwa

The Houthis also, according to “Radar” used Kalashnikovs, machine guns and light weapons to commit violations against Southern who were harmed as shown below:

Number of injured women	Governorate
12	Dhale and Aden
6	Lahij

<sup>29</sup> Yemen: One of the Worst Places in the World to be a Woman, Amnesty international, 16 December 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2019/12/yemen-one-of-the-worst-places-in-the-world-to-be-a-woman>

<sup>30</sup> Yemen: Women in the Wind”. A human rights report about the violations of women rights during the war, March 2020, <https://rightsradar.org/media/pdf/reports>

The number of Southern women who were affected by the Houthi random bombings were as illustrated below:

Number of injured women	Number of injured women
72	Aden
38	Dhale

- **The participation of women at the civil society and political level:**

Southern women have been active in many civil domains, whether at the human rights level by monitoring violations against women during war. Raising the awareness about violence based upon gender and providing the psychological support for those women affected by the war as well as making some activities related to prisoners and detainees' conditions and other acts to back women and children. Women also participated in the awareness-raising community initiatives that they presented and led some of them, such as raising awareness about the danger of drugs and the danger related to the spread of weapons after the war in major cities. In addition to establishing institutions and initiatives aimed at promoting peace and supporting local communities.

As for the level of political participation, although women are hit by the most tragic repercussions of the war that seriously affected their lives, they are often alienated as an active party who can play a basic role during mediation operations or peace-making negotiations. However, several Yemeni women blocs and networks emerged before and after the 2014 War. They include, for example, "The Southern Women Bloc"<sup>31</sup>, "Women Solidarity Network"<sup>32</sup>, "G9"<sup>33</sup> and other organizations which stressed on the importance of feminine involvement in the process of building peace.

<sup>31</sup> The declaration of the Southern WOMEN Block in Aden, Feb 10th, 2017, <https://alyoum8.net/news/2059>

<sup>32</sup> Women Solidarity Network, 2013 was the beginning of its activities, <https://www.womensolidaritynetwork.org/>

<sup>33</sup> About the Feminist Group "G9", <https://www.khuyut.com/blog/08-21-2020>



However, The Southern Women Bloc was the most active among them as it adopted a clear political stance along with civil activities. It included a big number of independent and partisan Southern women. The bloc focused on boosting women's conditions politically, economically and socially in South Yemen, especially after Southern women were harmed by the 1994 War's ramifications. Additionally, it sought to participate in the all-out peace solution negotiations in Yemen according to the bloc's declared political references, like other Southern political entities emanating from the Peaceful Hirak in 2007.

Moreover, Southern women blocs were established abroad including networks in Britain, Germany, Egypt and others. All of their activities have focused on the participation and empowerment of Southern women at the political, economic and social levels.



Photo 5: Women event organized by the Southern Women Committee, sponsored by the STC, April 2019. (Source: the STC)

We should not ignore the importance of the UN Security Council Resolution No. 1325<sup>34</sup> issued in 2000 which is considered the first official recognition by the United Nations of the role played by women in the field of peace and security, a

<sup>34</sup> Landmark resolution on Women, Peace and Security, <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/>



resolution that affirms the right of women to participate in decision-making related to the conflict and post-conflict stages, including negotiations and decisions resulting from them or governance. This is what Yemeni women, in South and North, demand, to participate in negotiations for a final solution to the war in Yemen.

As for Southern women's participation in parties or at the level of representation in local councils or governmental positions, the numbers and statistics indicate an exceedingly small percentage. There is a noticeable decline in the activity of traditional Yemeni parties in general, in contrast to the rise in the activity and role of other non-partisan political entities. For example, there has been a remarkable decline of women activities in the “Arab Southerners League”, in which the number of active female members in Aden declined from 118 to just 25 today<sup>35</sup>. This could apply to other political parties but there are no available accurate statistics about the number of their female members due to the counting hardships after the war, and because those members are scattered across a number of Southern provinces.

At the level of political entities including the “STC” which represents the widest grass-root base in South Yemen, the number of females in their basic structural bodies are distributed as follow:

Number of female members	Name of the body
3 of total 26 members	STC's Presidency Board
26 of 303	Southern National Assembly
2 of 21 heads of committees	National Assembly's Administrative Board

Based upon these facts, it is noticeable that the number of women in the main bodies is few in comparison with men. In spite of some appointments of a number of women in the structure of the STC's subsidiary bodies last year including the foreign affairs, the numbers didn't reach the required level. However, this could be deemed as a step forward regarding supporting women's participation and empowering them politically. Likewise, other political Southern entities appointed a number of women in their bodies, as members or

<sup>35</sup> Interview conducted by South24's Researcher with Manal Moheem”, Member of the Executive Committee of the “League Party, November 2021

spokeswomen such as “The Supreme Council of the Southern Revolutionary Movement”<sup>36</sup>

As for appointments in the Parity Government which was formed after the Riyadh Agreement on December 18th, 2020, headed by Maeen Abdulmalik, there has been full absence of Yemeni women at both Northern and Southern levels.<sup>37</sup> This is the first time since 2001 in which a government is without any women representation. This has aroused much controversy and been deemed a setback in the political history of Yemeni women. The government’s pretext for this was that the selection process is in the hands of parties and other political entities. However, it should be said that Aden Governor “Ahmed Hamed Bin Lamalas” appointed 3 Southern women as “General Managers of the executive Bureaus of the ministries’ branches in Aden.”<sup>38</sup> These decisions have been widely welcomed by Southern women, especially in Aden.

In fact, in spite of the decline of women participation at different levels during the conflict period, their advisory roles in the offices of the three UN Envoys to Yemen was noticeable. This role was repeatedly praised by the UN Envoys during their briefings in the Security Council, in addition to the frequent invitations to the Yemeni disputing parties to include women in the peace negotiations delegations.<sup>39</sup> However, women's participation in the offices of the UN Envoys faces widespread criticism, as their role does not go beyond the consultative framework. This requires them to depart from this circle to other direct circles, parallel to the parties to the conflict in the peace talks.

### Thirdly: empowerment’s challenges and hardships

Southern women face many challenges that have made them lose confidence in their ability to play an active role in various aspects of public life, especially after the outbreak of the recent war in 2014. The issue of women's empowerment in South Yemen and their participation in political life in particular was considered

<sup>36</sup> The Revolutionary Movement Council appoints Zina Al-Ghalabi as its spokesperson, June 19th, 2021, <http://www.aljanoobalyoum.net/46834>

<sup>37</sup> The announcement about forming the Yemeni Government, head by Maeen Abdulmalik, December 18th, 2020, <https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/yemen/2020/12/18>

<sup>38</sup> Governor Lamalas appoints three women in big positions in Aden <https://gulf365.com/alymn-news/9799338/>

<sup>39</sup> Joint Press Statement, issued by UN Women and Office of the UN Special Envoy to Yemen

one of the thorny issues. This was not a nascent matter but a dilemma that women faced over the past decades leading up to the war.

In this regard, it can be said that the nature of Southern society has changed after Unity, as it has been overwhelmed by religious and patriarchal approaches. This made men control the main roles at the political, economic, decision-making circles levels while many women were alienated away from the political positions. In spite of the pale presence of few women, the majority who work in the public field focus on the feminine matters.

- **Between hardships and empowerment's challenges (Interviews with Southern Women):**

As for the challenges and hardships faced by Southern Women, Dr. Nazlin Ahmed Omar, a member of "Southern Dialogue Team" said: "Through the Southern Women Forum in Britain, we seek to secure wider participation in all events, protests and charity work. We also want to leave an imprint in the political decision". She believes that suffering is common among men and women in South as a result of the marginalization that affected all after Unity". She added that "Southern women abroad seek for qualification and support especially in negotiations and political interviews and peace building".

According to Dr. Nazlin, "political participation represents the most upscale form of expressing democracy, and a main citizenship feature, as well as one of the most important components of the modern national state which are based upon citizenship and equality in rights and duties".

Omar listed the prominent obstacles in the face of women including "cultural, social and educational heritages, the absence of family support and encouragement to engage in organizations, associations and public life, the lack of feminine participation in political work due to fears from the formal authorities and religious groups, women's lack of awareness about the importance of their political and social involvement in addition to not giving women opportunities in decision making".

She indicated that "some political regimes used women as tools in the process of political propagandas during elections so as to gain the support of the international community for achieving certain goals".

Regarding ignoring women's participation at different levels, the political activist and the Head of the "Southern Women Bloc" Aisha Abadel said: "the issue of women, like many others, is not deemed important by anyone, as it doesn't produce financial gains that serve the personal interest of others. Being women, we are stuck in a patriarchal society which suppresses women, and at the same time it lost all potential for building or achieving justice and peace".



Aisha Abadel

"There are always pretexts claiming that it is not the appropriate time to look at women's demands. In my opinion, it is an inferior perspective about females whose alienation hampers benefiting from the abilities of half of the society, and obstructs recognizing their demands and needs, as well as prohibiting their participation in the main processes in drafting constitutions, road maps and peacemaking, in addition to the political and economic structures and all related to building the state"<sup>40</sup>..she added.

As for the marginalization suffered by Southern women, "Manal Moheem", Head of Future Foundation for Rehabilitation and Development of Awareness and Capabilities, and a Member of the Executive Committee of the "League Party", said that "Women are partners in building this nation as being a main pillar in building and developing nations, as the building process can't be accomplished or survive in the absence or weakness of this pillar, because we have the inherent right to determine the fate of this country and choose its path. We are the ones who incurred a heavy price for losing a father, brother, husband or son as a price for building and liberation. It is not fair to find marginalization in all aspects of life".

Regarding the role played by Southern women in different directions, Moheem added that "Southern women contributed in the security committees in the struggle squares, the national events and the revolutionary activities as being the main and pioneering pillar in the fields of awareness, guidance, sound instructions for countering extremism and violence and prevailing peace to limit the sabotage activities which aggravate the problems of security turmoil and instability". In spite of all these sacrifices, they are still substandard. There is still a big gap between ambitions and hopes that could be reduced through the

<sup>40</sup> Interviews conducted by the South24's researcher with Aisha Abadel, November 5th, 2021

mutual relationships between women and stability”.<sup>41</sup>

For intensifying the efforts of southern women at various levels and fields, Head of Future Foundation believes in the importance of “implementing a bundle of awareness and educational programs which address women with an aim to raise their awareness of their rights and how to defend them. The alienation of women in any stage including moving towards building the state and enhancing democracy is worrisome, as they should be present in the appropriate form and manner with their efforts and aspirations, and avoid serving narrow political interests that do not meet the aspirations and aspirations of the people of the South and their goal of liberation, independence and building the Southern federal state”<sup>42</sup>



Manal Moheem



Kholoud Muhammed

Talking about hardships encountered by Southern women in their society, Kholoud Muhammed, Director of the Department of Female Education in the Education Office in Shabwa Governorate pointed to “the issue of insecurity due to killing which became common during the war in the face of Shabwa’s women”.

She also spoke about the” hardships emanating from security forces measures “during investigating women who travel alone without men. This issue is exhausting for me many times, as it acts as a barrier in front of my work and activities during my moves among governorates because of the nature of my work”.<sup>43</sup>

At the career level, Kholoud said that “men dominates the most top positions including General Manager regardless to Competencies and qualifications which are supposed to give me the rights to be promoted to be the GM, but the society attitude which looks at this as dishonorable and other considerations, makes us unable to be promoted beyond a director of a department, or some

<sup>41</sup> Interview conducted by South24’s Researcher with Manal Moheem”, Member of the Executive Committee of the “League Party, November 2021

<sup>42</sup> The same source

<sup>43</sup> Interview conducted by South24’s Researcher with Kholoud Muhammed, November 10th, 2021

important positions could be given later to females after men take the most important ones".<sup>44</sup>

Sana Mubarak, a doctor, a writer and a political activist, believes that the "biggest hardships at the local level is to collide with society which deals with women with much intransigence, especially those who grow up as well as the general look towards women who leave their country and experience a level of freedom and openness. Thus, women are being marginalized".<sup>45</sup>

As for the suffering of expatriate women abroad, and depriving them from their representation rights, Sana Mubarak said: "it is always said that the expatriate women should experience our sufferings in order to feel us and convey our reality, but it's a very intriguing notion as the supposed motive behind interesting in an issue should be the principle and affiliation. Therefore, such a slogan led to much marginalization. We should not also forget that the society in which there is a decline in opportunities witnessed a type of exclusivity. In other words, the public work, especially representation, is characterized by quotas, nepotism and corruption. Independent bodies, international supporters, or humanitarian and human rights organizations are supposed to be watchdogs on domestic corruption, but unfortunately, they themselves are completely mired in it."



Sana Mubarak

She pointed to "a state of mistrust towards the local female competence and misallocation of tasks, as a man could be appointed in a certain position although he has only one quarter of a woman's efficiency and qualifications, but his history in struggle, his relatives and his popularity in social media outlets help him".<sup>46</sup>

As for the challenges and difficulties related to age differences, Bushra Al Saadi, a social and human rights activist, and the head of "Maan Nartaqi" (Together we can rise), a Community Organization, and a founder member of "Southern

<sup>44</sup> The same source

<sup>45</sup> Interview conducted by South24's Researcher with Sana Mubarak, November 4th, 2021

<sup>46</sup> The same source



Women for Peace, based in Abyan said: “Young women face big hardships, as work doesn’t give them large opportunities, not only in the external community but the local one also which doesn’t look to the competence standard but relies on age. women's activities in Abyan are zero, as nepotism and selectivity undermine the process of choosing nominees for any activity, event or training workshop. Abyan women are largely marginalized especially if they are independent and don’t adopt a certain political stance towards any party.”<sup>47</sup>



Bushra Al Saadi

It is worth mentioning that Bushra played a big role in ending the confrontations that occurred in Shaqra, Abyan in July 2020 by holding a number of meetings with the disputing parties on the fire line between the “governmental forces”, the “STC forces” and the “Saudi Commission”. The initiative aimed to create peace roles and advocacy campaigns that work to stop confrontations between the parties, in order to alleviate the suffering of Abyan in particular. Indeed, a truce was announced, and committees were established to monitor the situation in the region, and things gradually settled in Shaqra.

In this regard, Al Saadi said: “women’s involvement in the war and conflict zones changed many people’s views about Abyan women. This indicates the strength of women and their real desire to change the reality of society there. One of my duties as a young woman was to shed light on the suffering of Shaqra and the rest of the governorate’s districts during the conflict period, in order to provide aid and support to it and its residents.”<sup>48</sup>

Talking about marginalizing the role of Southern women, Hind Omairan, a human rights activist and a founding member of the “Independent Southern Group”, said: “There are systemic alienation and marginalization of women although they can create a solution for this conflict for security, peace and sustainable development. We live in a patriarchal society that does not accept

<sup>47</sup> Interview conducted by South24’s Researcher with Bushra Al Saadi, November 6th, 2021.

<sup>48</sup> The same source

women as partners, and when we argue with them about this exclusion, pretexts are always ready, that this is not the time for women.”<sup>49</sup>

Omairan agrees that women’s participation in the parties or the recently formed government is 0%, and if women are present in certain positions, this is always met by comparisons and questions whether they are qualified for holding it”.

She believes that “signing on CEDAW, and the Security Council Resolution No. 1325 which urged the member states to increase women representation at all decision making oblige all disputing parties to include women as part of any settlement process”.<sup>50</sup>



Hind Omairan

On the level of women’s presence in peace paths, Omairan said: “we want to be in the first track, and not in other tracks, we want to secure places for us in the government’s bodies and sit with disputing parties on the same table. As feminist organizations, we hope that our voices could reach the new UN Envoy Hans Grundberg to press the disputing parties for women’s engagement in the peacemaking process”.<sup>51</sup>

Arwa Al-Maflahi, Women's Affairs Coordinator at Aden Refinery Company (Masafy Aden) said that “That "the factors created by war and imposed by the status quo made women to step aside to impose a patriarchal status under the principle of (what does the stage dictate). Accordingly, women have no presence in the government, and their presence in political parties is not effective and under the desired proportion. If we ask about the laws that give women a 30% quota, the response will be that we are in the midst of war which imposes its own laws.”<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Interview conducted by South24’s Researcher with Hind Omairan, November 13th, 2021.

<sup>50</sup> Interview conducted by South24’s Researcher with Hind Omairan, November 13th, 2021.

<sup>51</sup> Arwa Al-Malaki Interview conducted by South24’s Researcher with Arwa Al-Maflahi, November 13th, 2021

<sup>52</sup> The same source



Arwa Al-Maflahi

Al-Maflahi indicated that “Southern Women didn’t adequately appear in the peace talks in spite of the existence of Women who are worthy and able to conduct high-level official discussions. The presence of any woman in the talks schedule is marginal and nominal not in the main table of the disputing parties”.<sup>53</sup>

Al-Maflahi described the “challenges and difficulties in the face of Southern women as very gross, including psychological, social and financial challenges. This makes them bear burdens beyond their capacity, especially in light of the deteriorating living conditions in various aspects”.

## Conclusion:

The above mentioned historical overview of the role of Southern women since the British colonization and after 1976 which witnessed ascending stage during the period of “South Yemen”(People's Democratic Republic of Yemen) and the following decline of their roles after the Yemeni Unity in 1990 show that the their empowerment issue has related to the level of political regimes within which they live, and the penetration of the traditional culture and religious radicals that emerged in their local communities, especially after the return of extremist islamists from Afghanistan War to Yemen, and their political engagement with the regime for more than three decades.

The political, religious and societal changes that occurred after 1990 affected the reality of women in South Yemen and caused them to have a noticeable decline in participation at the level of public life in its various fields.

Through the interviews that were conducted with a group of Southern women, it is clear that there is systematic alienation and marginalization to the role and presence of women. There is a constant use of the notion that women’s participation and political empowerment in the current status quo of the Yemeni crisis is exaggerated and should be postponed”.

<sup>53</sup> The same source

**The outcomes of this research papers could be listed as follow:**

- The circumstances and the political transformations in Yemen, beginning with Unity till the latest 2014 War have largely obstructed the progress of Yemeni women across all political, economic and social levels.
- There are clear general alienation and marginalization to Yemeni women in South and North, despite the fact that Yemen has signed UN agreements and resolutions that support the participation and representation of women on an equal basis with men, during the conflict period and its aftermath.
- Facts proved that women are committed and more serious than men in building the tracks of the peace process and reconstruction during the conflict period. Women in South Yemen played a major role in this regard, through their continuous activities at the internal and external levels.
- The strong presence of Southern women in feminist blocs and networks as well as the variety of their participation involvement in the public field enhances their role during the post-war transitional period. Likewise, their work and experience impact the course of the peace process.
- The failure to absorb the current female competencies at least or making use of their participation and experiences as one of the main parties on the negotiation table delay the peace process and impact stability and security.

**Accordingly, there are a number of recommendations as follow:**

- It is important to press the disputing parties and the UN Envoy to Yemen "Hans Grundberg" to involve women and support their representation in the comprehensive solution peace negotiation including the Southern women on an equal footing with their Northern peers.
- It is important to press the Southern women who are currently involved in the decision-making centers to show responsibility by pushing for

women's participation and enhancing their presence so as to enjoy priority in the next political phase.

- Harnessing the Southern media outlets to play an enlightening role by employing the media message for raising the society's awareness in a way that contributes to changing the prevailing stereotype about women which is only limited to certain roles.
- Making sure that all segments of the society are aware that stability, security and sustainable development can't be achieved amid women's absence from the political, economic and social arena.
- Securing the support of the regional and international bodies to the Southern non-governmental organizations and the research centers which are interested in making researches about women's participation and empowerment at various levels, and the impact of this support on the decision-making process and the circumstances surrounding it.
- Establishing a database about women's status in the different decision-making organs in South Yemen for backing a larger female representation.
- It is important to prepare a generation of Southern women who could make impact, presence and achievements, as well as open communication channels with local and external experiences for backing their rights and demands.
- Southern women shouldn't confine themselves in dealing with their affairs only, but they have to involve themselves in other variable issues that open for them wider empowerment and participation horizons.
- Studying women's status, activities and influence in light of the needs of each area, and absorbing women across different regions as part of engagement in the political, social and other activities. In other words, there should be no focus on certain governorates at the expense of others.

- The empowerment of Southern women at the political, economic and social levels ensures representation of the demands of them and other marginalized sections in the local community, and makes the decision-making process more responsive to their needs.

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34. Interview conducted by South24's Researcher with Sana Mubarak, November 4th, 2021.
35. Interview conducted by South24's Researcher with Bushra Al Saadi, November 6th, 2021.
36. Interview conducted by South24's Researcher with Hind Omairan, November 13th, 2021.
37. Arwa Al-Maflahi interview conducted by South24's Researcher with Arwa Al-Maflahi, November 13th, 2021.

## **Appendix:**

Agreements that Yemen has signed and ratified with regard to women's issues and other social issues:

- UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education 1960.
- International Labor Organization Convention No. 100 concerning equal remuneration for male and female workers for work of equal value, 1976.
- Convention for the prohibition of prostitution and its exploitation.
- International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women 1984.
- International Convention on the Political Rights of Women 1987.
- Agreement on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage, and Registration of Marriage Contracts 1987.
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of Women 1987.
- Arab Convention No. (5) on working women, 1988.
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- Convention for the Suppression of Traffic in Persons 1989.
- 1993 Vienna Conference on Human Rights.
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1994.
- Plan and Platform for Action (Beijing) 1995.
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# Women of South Yemen: Challenges and Empowerment's Hardships

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