

# EMPOWERING YEMEN'S DISPLACED WOMEN

Internal Displacement in Yemen Has Hit Yemeni Women the Hardest. Humanitarian Organizations Need to Develop Policies with Women's Needs in Mind

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Yemeni citizens first began to be displaced from their homes in 2004 when a six-year civil war broke out between government forces and the Houthis. The war brought a humanitarian crisis to the city of Saadah, the stronghold of the Houthis, as people fled their homes seeking safety in the biggest camp of internally displaced people in the country, Al-Marzaq, located in Yemen's northwestern Hajjah governorate. Even after the civil war ended in 2010, the camp remained open because of the need for humanitarian assistance provided to these displaced persons.

The peace that was declared in 2010 was short lived. The years since have seen Yemen plagued by political tension and outright war between the Arab military coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the Iran-backed Houthi rebels. This internal conflict has resulted in one of the biggest humanitarian crises in the world, with 75 percent of Yemen's population in dire need of assistance and protection. Despite this conflict, there has not been a large number of Yemeni refugees across the Middle East and Europe as is the case with Syrian refugees. However, internal displacement was and still is the primary way that many in Yemen have avoided ground fighting and aerial bombardment across their country.

The humanitarian crisis in Yemen affects Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) more than anyone else, and among them women IDPs remain the hardest hit in terms of protection and needs. It is worth noting that already existing unfair social norms

▷ A woman and her daughters sit outside their tent at a camp for internally displaced people near Sanaa, Yemen, August 15, 2016.  
*Khaled Abdullah/Reuters*

exacerbate these women's vulnerability, and reduce their resiliency and ability to cope with the crisis. Analysts and policymakers must focus on displaced women in Yemen and draw the attention of humanitarian agencies to design effective policies that engage with women IDPs as partners in identifying what they need. Rather than focus on immediate needs, the



agencies should put their attention in strategic needs for resources that enable women to develop their future livelihoods, avoid dependency on humanitarian assistance, and design their own protection mechanisms.

Humanitarian agencies have an obligation to respond to these needs and protect women IDPs. Unfortunately, the primary concern of these organizations is in providing life-saving assistance which—while important—means that aid organizations pay little attention to, and provide few funds for, the strategic needs of women. It is necessary to respond to the strategic needs of Yemeni women and apply a gender lens to the problem that will discern the differences between the needs of men and women.

### **Profiling the IDPs of Yemen**

The people of Yemen do not have the luxury of choosing asylum or immigration over internal displacement. There are two reasons for the low number of Yemeni refugees compared to Syrians. First, Yemen ranks among the poorest countries in the world, so the majority cannot afford the cost of fleeing the country.

The other reason is geographical; Yemen is located in the farthest southwest corner of the Arabian Peninsula, trapped by rich Gulf countries and two sea lanes. The Gulf countries do not have a system for asylum-seekers or recognize refugees of any nationality, including Yemenis. Saudi Arabia, for example, does not exempt Yemeni laborers from the Saudization of jobs; due to this many Yemenis have returned home to a Yemen at war.

There are multiple layers of complexity in the armed conflict in Yemen, and addressing displacement is even more complicated due to the high number of IDPs and the various forms of displacement.

According to the most recent data, there are almost two million IDPs across the country. These IDPs are not a homogeneous group and they are divided by class, caste, ethnicity, and gender. The west coast of Yemen, where the cities of Al-Hudaydah and Taiz are located, has the highest rate of displacement due to the fighting there between Houthis and forces backed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. During the first phase of internal displacement in Saadah, back in 2004, people living in extreme poverty and without social support to ease their vulnerability often resided in makeshift shelters or finished/unfinished public buildings, such as schools, health centers, and so on. Lucky IDPs were spotted by humanitarian organizations, such as UNHCR, and were accommodated in camps. Some IDPs resided with extended family members or rented homes, or had a second home in the hosted area already. The majority of the displaced in Yemen survived and now continue to survive on assistance from communities, host families, and humanitarian agencies. Presently less than a quarter of the displaced have been living in camp-like settings.

Each form of displacement is an indicator of different levels of poverty, which are associated with various needs and protection issues, especially among women. Poverty increases the tendency of IDPs to choose less protective forms of displacement, and women pay the highest price under these conditions.

### **Displaced Women's Concerns**

The situation of displaced women in the current conflict is a reflection of pre-existing social norms and unjust traditions against women in Yemen.

The period from 2011–14 witnessed the emergence of hope among Yemeni women that the newly drafted constitution would tackle one of the most urgent and controversial women's and children's issues such as eighteen becoming the new minimum age of marriage. However, this hope of improved women's marriage rights faded with

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the failure of the political transition and the arrival of a new era of armed conflict in 2014. Some of the women who participated in the political transition phase had fled the country. From this point, Yemeni women were starting from zero in their fight to achieve human rights.

Those who stayed in the midst of the conflict took the heaviest brunt of being IDPs. According to the World Health Organization, women and children currently represent three-quarters of IDPs. Many of the displaced women are left alone with their children and have no societal protection and income, while their husbands abandon them to join the fighting or seek income elsewhere.

Thus, protection and meeting strategic needs such as food, water, and shelter are the most significant concerns of displaced women.

According to a UN Population Fund (UNFPA) report in 2018, an estimated three million women and girls in Yemen are at risk of gender-based violence including sexual violence. The number could be higher because it is challenging to quantify

the extent and frequency of this kind of violence in a conservative society like Yemen where victims tend not to report attacks out of the fear of stigma and honor killing. Unfortunately, addressing sexual violence is an intensely private matter in Yemen.

Another pressing issue related to protection is the existence of child marriage in the displacement sites. Child marriage is not a new phenomenon, but the current conflict increases the likelihood of girls being married off by families worried about their safety or the scarcity of resources. All of this increases dropping out of school and becoming wives and mothers prematurely. A common story circulating in Yemen which illustrates this issue is when a family that is displaced marries off their female children in order to procure a home—that is in order to stay at the home of the groom’s family.

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In terms of needs, the primary concern of displaced women is to survive and thrive in their new lives. In order to develop and grow, displaced women need food, water, and non-food items such as clothing and housing. The other category is the strategic needs in which livelihood opportunities and resilience measures are addressed to support families in the longer term and contribute to community development.

Women labor to provide for basic needs such as water and food, which is usually obtained from humanitarian organizations. However, in order to get the nutrients they need, displaced women are often forced to queue for hours. These women also work to manage the scarcity of their resources, such as collecting wood for cooking and engaging in humanitarian assistance models called Cash for Work (CFW). Yet, even in CFW programs, there is a limit to the work that internally displaced women can do that is socially acceptable, so some of the time they are excluded from these programs, or their participation is curtailed. As such, CFW programs do not build the capacities of the beneficiaries, including women, and are not sustainable.

## The Humanitarian Response

The high rate of poverty and the intense vulnerability related to the displacement of IDPs, especially among women, has led international and national humanitarian agencies to support life-saving assistance programs, yet ignore other needed programs that could enhance the lives of displaced Yemeni women. Programs which enhance recovery and livelihoods of female IDPs are ignored or are the least funded in the humanitarian response in Yemen.

Humanitarian agencies support the IDPs with life-saving assistance arguing that the country is still under ongoing armed conflict and there is chronic poverty. This approach will undoubtedly create a lazy and dependent community and add layers of vulnerability, especially to female IDPs who are already at risk due to displacement and a long history of subordination. Unfortunately, even in meeting the immediate needs of displaced women, gender blindness is dominant in most humanitarian organization reports on Yemen.

A gender-equal perspective is broadly supported in humanitarian agencies' officially stated agendas and guidelines for Yemen. However, the implementation on the ground is something different indeed. First, all the reports address only the immediate needs of IDPs at the level of households, without consideration of the differing needs of men, women, boys, and girls within the same households. Second, the household is the basic unit of Yemeni society, and it is mostly male dominated due to the prevailing patriarchal norms. Subsequently, there is a high risk that women's input within these households might not be reflected during the process of needs assessments. Third, in the reports, there is no indication that the feedback from female-headed IDP households—households which may in fact have much different feedback than male-headed households—is accounted for.

For example, according to published statistics by CARE International in 2015, before the conflict, Hajjah had the second-highest number of female-headed households, at 19.4 percent. Certainly, the number of female-headed households has gone up all across Yemen and is now higher than the 19.4 percent reported from Hajjah, since this is a time of great conflict. An increase in female-headed households suggests that humanitarian agencies should improve their response to women IDPs and recognize that women have different needs.

The insufficiency of addressing the differing humanitarian needs of men, women, boys, and girls, or in other words, ignoring the gender perspective in the humanitarian response, will subsequently lead to gender-insensitive activities. For example, we see this in setting a time for humanitarian assistance distribution that does not suit women due to their double roles and their restricted movement. This weakness of gender perspective in the humanitarian response increases the risk of sexual and gender-based violence, and jeopardizes the protection of women.

To relate a personal story regarding a lack of gender-based perspective in humanitarian aid in Yemen, I witnessed a humanitarian assistance distribution point in Hajjah in 2016. The place was overcrowded with IDPs, women, men, and children. There was no order and no separate queues for men and women, which forced some of the women to drop behind unserved. Meanwhile some other women were trying to find a space in the male-dominated crowd, which exposed them to sexual exploitation and harassment.

The poor or inadequate assistance, especially for female-headed households, may result in female-headed families being forced to engage in transactional sex—though no data about that is available—to raise the money to buy needed survival items such as food and water.

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Meeting the strategic needs of displaced women will subsequently lead to empowering them to protect themselves and their families from being exposed to various forms of violence and resorting to negative solutions, such as child marriage. Adding to that a response to the strategic needs of the community and women, in particular, will avert the beneficiaries' dependency on humanitarian assistance and ensure long-term development for the country when the conflict reaches its end.

Although some humanitarian workers argue that CFW programs are helping IDPs earn money to support their families, I profoundly disagree with this notion. The present humanitarian aid application in Yemen is blind to the gendered dynamics at play among Yemeni IDPs and amounts only to supporting basic activities that have no capacity for the development of beneficiaries and does not provide long-term means to livelihood. Secondly, those programs are in favor of male beneficiaries, at least in Yemen, because men have no restrictions on the kind of work they do or when and how they can receive aid, unlike Yemeni women.

## How to Help

The protection of Yemeni displaced women's strategic needs is essential for building these women's resilience and the impact of doing so will resonate widely in Yemen as women are treated as individuals.

Humanitarian organizations respond to IDPs and women in particular as passive recipients of aid without recognizing that these women have capacities that can be enhanced to restore their livelihoods. Humanitarian organizations should identify these women's strategic needs in order to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian action.

Moreover, humanitarian agencies have to identify and consult with displaced women about the different types of income-generating activities they can do to restore their livelihoods. It is essential for humanitarian agencies to facilitate the process from vocational training, to small loans, to start-up income-generating activities. Improving the livelihoods of Yemen's displaced women will encourage them to stop marrying off their young daughters. Also, establishing humanitarian programs that connect with the needs of internally displaced women will empower women to challenge the factors that contribute to gender-based violence.

The responsibility to employ a gender-sensitive approach in their work in Yemen lies with humanitarian agencies. In doing this, it will be critical to avoid generalization when addressing the needs of internally displaced Yemeni households. A good way to create a gender-sensitive approach to humanitarian activities would be to include the input and voices of female-headed households when developing aid programs. Either of these approaches will help women improve their livelihoods and avoid dependency on humanitarian aid.