

# US Complicity in Yemen's War and the Impact on Women and Girls: Fact Sheet

**The war in Yemen, fueled by US military support for the Saudi-led coalition, has unleashed a humanitarian crisis. Women and girls - who have been disproportionately impacted - hold vital solutions to peace and must play a key role in the peace-building process.**

In late 2014, Houthi rebels took over government institutions in Yemen's capital, Sana'a. In March 2015, a coalition of states led by Saudi Arabia, and backed by the US, launched a military offensive against the Houthis in support of the Yemeni government.

Since then, the conflict has caused a severe humanitarian crisis by destroying infrastructure, schools, and hospitals; pushing the country to the brink of famine; causing thousands of civilian deaths; displacing millions; and worsening gender-based violence. The US has played a key role in the war, providing the Saudi coalition with intelligence, refueling, technical assistance, and billions of dollars of arms sales. Saudi coalition airstrikes have killed families. The US and Saudi-led blockade has prevented vital aid, including food and medicine, from reaching starving and sick communities.

**The war has claimed thousands of civilian lives, with the majority killed by Saudi coalition airstrikes on families and communities - often using US bombs.**

- An estimated 10,000 civilians have been killed since March 2015. Aid groups estimate the real figure to be much higher.

- Saudi-led airstrikes, which have benefited from US operational support and arms sales, have caused the majority of civilian casualties. Many of these strikes - which hit women and families at their homes, weddings, schools, hospitals, and markets - could constitute war crimes, and the US is complicit.

- As recently as mid-March 2019, the conflict intensified in Taiz, Yemen, resulting in fighting and the shelling of homes. Taiz has been besieged for more than three years now, causing thousands of deaths and injuries, and worsening the region's water shortages. Further, gender-based violence, including the abduction and sexual assault of children by members of militias backed by the Saudi coalition, has increased. *Source: The Women's Solidarity Network.*

**The scale of the humanitarian crisis is devastating, with Yemen on the brink of famine. And the Saudi-led blockade and airstrikes, supported by the US, have made things much worse.**

- The war has worsened food insecurity by destroying Yemen's infrastructure and economy, displacing more than 3 million people, accelerating unemployment, and doubling food prices.

- The Saudi-led blockade on vital supplies has made it more difficult to get food and medicine to struggling Yemeni families. Saudi-led airstrikes have damaged roads and hospitals, escalating the humanitarian disaster.

- As of January 2019, the IPC reports that up to 15.9 million Yemeni people - or 53% of the population - are facing severe food insecurity. Save the Children estimates that 85,000 Yemenis under age 5 have died of starvation.

- Preventable diseases, like cholera, are spreading rapidly because Saudi bombs have destroyed Yemen's water infrastructure, restricting access to clean water. In just the first three months of 2019, the WHO recorded over 100,000 suspected cases of cholera. The health care system has collapsed, with as many as half of health centers closed and serious shortages in medicines and equipment. This means that poor communities can't access life-saving vaccines or crucial medicines. Due to road closures and active fighting, injured and sick people cannot access hospitals.

- An estimated 16 million people need access to clean water and sanitation. In Al-Haymatayn, Yemen, women and girls had to walk for up to 8 hours simply to access water. *Source: MADRE partner Food4Humanity.*

**Entrenched gender inequality and traditional gender norms mean that women and girls are hardest hit by the conflict that the US has fueled.**

- About 76% of Yemen's 3 million internally displaced people (IDPs) are women and children.
- Women and girls are more likely to experience hunger and starvation. Forced to put their own well-being last, they often eat only after men and boys, thus receiving less nutrition. Women and girls are at heightened risk of contracting cholera, given their traditional roles as caretakers of sick family members and in handling water and preparing food. About 1.1 million pregnant women and new mothers in Yemen are acutely malnourished.

- The conflict has made women and girls more vulnerable to gender-based violence, particularly given the collapse of basic institutions, such as the justice sector. This violence, including rape, sexual assault, domestic abuse and forced marriage, increased more than 63% over the course of the conflict. Studies also show that displacement increases the risk of violence against women. *Source: WILPF.*

- As men are killed or injured, or lose their jobs, women increasingly must take on the double burdens of being both the primary breadwinners and caregivers.

- Rates of child marriage increased during the war and rose to 66% in 2017. UNICEF estimates that 72% of Yemeni girls are married before age 18. In the context of poverty, starvation and the lack of livelihoods - worsened by the US-backed blockade - Yemeni girls are often pulled out of school to be married even earlier for dowry money to feed their starving families.

**Women must play a key role in Yemen's peace process. The US must advocate for the inclusion of women from frontline communities most marginalized by war and conflict in negotiations for peace in Yemen.**

- The evidence is clear. Broadened peace processes - that are inclusive of women and civil society groups - are 35% more likely to last at least 15 years. However, women represent only 4% of major peace accord signatories in the last 20 years.
- US law, including the Women, Peace and Security Act of 2017, requires a government-wide strategy to improve the meaningful participation of women in peace and security processes -- which the Trump administration has delayed releasing.

- We know that when women leaders have been included in peace-building, those peace processes have gained broader legitimacy, addressed the root causes of conflict, and met key community needs that set the stage for a long-term, sustainable peace.

- Today in Yemen, women are playing a key role in peace-building by brokering local peace agreements; providing vital humanitarian aid, psychosocial support, and health care to communities; reintegrating child combatants; and defending detainees.

- Despite their crucial role in fostering peace, women are excluded from Yemen's peace process. Even after much advocacy by women's groups, their representation in peace negotiations has not improved. In the recent December 2018 peace talks in Sweden, only one woman was actually at the negotiating table among all delegates from both sides of the conflict, and only 8 women had been invited to join the discussions. And today's peace agenda lacks a gender lens, failing to sufficiently incorporate issues raised by women. Yemeni women must not only be at the table, but play a significant role in the peace process.

### **The US must provide support for grassroots women-led efforts to provide aid and bring peace to conflicting communities.**

- Given the US role in fueling this humanitarian crisis, the US has a responsibility to provide aid and support efforts to resolve conflict through peaceful means.

- Women at the grassroots are engaging in the vital work of opening humanitarian corridors to ensure aid can reach struggling families. MADRE's partners in Yemen are bringing emergency food supplies and clean drinking water to besieged communities. Women are bringing peace to communities conflicting over land and water resources; evacuating schools; caring for victims of the war; and addressing gender-based violence. And they are risking their lives in doing so: women human rights defenders have been caught in the crossfire and faced threats and attacks.

- US aid should increase support for grassroots women's groups that are already mobilizing for peace and providing aid at the local level. Not only do women at the grassroots intimately understand community needs, they are actively building trust among war weary communities to lay the groundwork for a lasting peace.

## Narratives of the War's Impact on Yemeni Women and Girls

**(1) Women and girls, including human rights defenders, have been killed or injured as a result of the conflict - often by Saudi coalition airstrikes.**

▪ Women, children, and families have been victims of shelling, bombings and airstrikes, including by the Saudi coalition. These indiscriminate attacks on civilians could constitute war crimes. On February 8, 2019, a coalition airstrike hit the entrance of Al-Thawra General Hospital and a fish market located in Hodeidah, Western Yemen. The attack killed 55 civilians and wounded 170 others. The strike further debilitated the Al-Thawra Hospital, which was already struggling with the high rate of child malnutrition and cholera in the region. The Hospital put out a call for support, including humanitarian aid and blood donations, in order to respond to the crisis. *Source: Yemen Center for Human Rights report, shared by MADRE's local contact, Hind Qatran.*

▪ On August 9, 2018, a Saudi coalition attack struck a bus carrying students and a few teachers who were on a field trip in Dhahyan City. At least 50 individuals were killed in the attack, including 34 children, and more than 78 people were wounded, including 55 children. The attack was so brutal that it left body parts scattered across the roads and even on the roofs of nearby homes. *Source: Report shared by MADRE's local contact, Hind Qatran.*

▪ Eman, a 21-year old woman in Aden, was leaving her aunt's house with her husband when several mortar shells hit. She fell down, and saw her husband lying on the ground. He was dead, having been hit with shrapnel. Eman couldn't feel her legs, and saw that both her legs were gone. She was taken to a hospital by resistance fighters, where she went into a coma due to internal bleeding and swelling. Although she survived, both her legs were amputated. *Source: "The War in Women's Memory" documentary, shared by MADRE's local contact, Lina AlHasny.*

▪ The work of women human rights defenders is fraught with danger. Members of the Women's Solidarity Network have been directly harmed or threatened by armed groups. Safa'a Hazza, a human rights defender, was caught in the crossfire between state military forces and a non-state armed group, Abou Abbas, affiliated with the Hadi government and allegedly backed by the UAE. Safa'a was shot in the abdomen in Taiz, Yemen in April 2018. She was immediately taken to a hospital in Taiz. Safa'a eventually survived due to the support of women's groups who campaigned for her to have access to vital medical treatment in Yemen, and eventually, in Egypt. *Source: MADRE partner, The Women's Solidarity Network.*

**(2) Women and girls are malnourished with Yemen on the brink of famine. Starvation has been exacerbated by the Saudi-led and US-supported blockade that prevents hungry families from accessing humanitarian aid.**

▪ Fawzia Mohsen al-Jami'i, who lives in Sana'a, had six children, but two were killed during the war. Her daughter, Hanadi, is turning two years old, but her family doesn't hear her voice anymore. In fact, they no longer see her play or sing. Hanadi has tuberculosis and suffers from malnutrition. She is one of 85,000 starving children under the age of 5 in Yemen. *Source: "Determined for Hope" documentary (Contrast VR).*

▪ Fatima and her daughter, Khadija, are in Al-Thawra Hospital in Hodeidah. Khadijah is malnourished and suffers from depression. Her health deteriorated after the war took a psychological toll on her. After she experienced a bombing in Zaidiyah, Yemen, she became afraid of airplanes and began to become depressed. She stopped eating and lost a lot of weight. Khadija has nine brothers and sisters. Her father has a mental illness, and is unable to work. The family barely has money to buy bread, and Fatima is struggling to feed her ten children. *Source: "Determined for Hope" documentary (Contrast VR).*

### **(3) Poor access to and quality of health care services, worsened by the US-backed blockade, is leading to high mortality rates of women, girls, and families and exacerbating poverty in Yemen.**

▪ Yemen's health care system has collapsed, with only half the country's health centers fully functional, leading to high mortality rates among victims of the war. The US-supported blockade has intensified the crisis, making it more difficult for medicine to reach vulnerable communities. Randa Almuqbili, a 25-year old woman, was injured by a mine explosion while on her way to collect water in Taiz with her two children. Randa and her children were admitted to a local hospital, where Randa's left leg was amputated. Two weeks later, her right leg was also amputated. Days later, Randa passed away due to an infection, worsened by the lack of access to quality health care. Humanitarian group Food4Humanity has worked to provide financial support to her children, who are cared for by family members in the aftermath of her death. *Source: MADRE partners, Food4Humanity and The Women Solidarity Network.*

▪ In some cases, injured or sick women and girls are not able to access hospitals due to roadblocks and active fighting. For example, Asma Kaed Sultan is a dialysis patient who lives in Taiz. Asma, an orphan, was forced to travel for long distances to obtain treatment because of road closures due to clashes and the siege in Taiz. She could not afford to regularly travel to access health care, so she moved closer to the health center. Even then, she could not afford the cost of treatment and was forced to sell everything she owned - including her cattle, her source of livelihood - to be able to afford the payments of 150,000 Yemeni Rials, or about \$600 USD. *Source: MADRE partner, Peace Track Initiative.*

▪ In another example, Ahlam, a woman in Taiz, was pregnant and sought to travel to a local hospital to give birth. However, due to security checkpoints and damaged roads, she was unable to access the hospital, and the baby was delivered stillborn. *Source: Shared by MADRE's local contact, Lina Alhsny, TO BE Foundation For Rights & Freedoms.*

▪ In many cases, the death of a family member due to lack of healthcare has a multiplier effect, plunging the family into poverty. A.S. was living in Taiz with her husband and five children. A.S.'s husband, who had diabetes, died in Taiz due to lack of access to health care. Her husband's death left A.S. as the sole caregiver and earner in her family. She lived in poverty and resorted to begging to feed her five children. Eventually, left with few options, she had her three daughters, all under the age of 16, married to older men. *Source: MADRE partner, Peace Track Initiative.*

### **(4) Child marriage has increased since the war started, a response to poverty worsened by the US-backed blockade.**

▪ Rates of child marriage have increased during the war. Poverty and starvation has been exacerbated by the Saudi-led and US supported blockade, which has made it more difficult for humanitarian aid to reach struggling Yemenis. In this context, Yemeni girls are often pulled out of school to be married even earlier for dowry money to feed their families.

▪ Eman, a 12-year old girl in Aden, was forcibly married off to an older man by her father for financial reasons. Eman's mother strongly objected to the marriage, and with the help of women activists, was able to obtain the funds to pay back the dowry money. After she secured her daughter's freedom, Eman filed for her daughter's divorce. *Source: Nour Suraib, Journalist, member of The Women Solidarity Network.*

▪ In another case, a woman, A.S., was forced to flee from Taiz to Aden due to bombing and active fighting. After her husband died of diabetes due to lack of access to health care, she singlehandedly had to care for her five children, and was forced to live in a deserted building on the outskirts of Aden. Though it was unsafe, she had no option but to leave her children each night and beg on the streets in order to try and earn a meager living. Soon after, due to poverty, A.S. married her three daughters to older men. Her 16-year old daughter was married to a 40-year old man, her 15-year old to a 29-year old man, and her 14-year old to a 25-year old man. *Source: MADRE partner, Peace Track Initiative.*

#### **(5) Women and families are displaced and plunged into poverty as a result of the war.**


Abeer and her children were displaced from their home in Aden when the city was besieged by coalition airstrikes, including rockets and mortar shelling. Abeer, along with her seven sisters and their children, were all forced to flee their homes due to the bombing. Abeer sold all her gold, her wedding ring, and her belongings in order to feed her family and to be able to afford to rent an apartment. When the bombing ended, she returned to her home in Aden. The house was a pile of ashes and all their belongings were completely destroyed. "We are now without a home," said Abeer. "We cannot be happy." *Source: "The War in Women's Memory" documentary, shared by MADRE's local contact, Lina AlHasny.*

#### **(6) Yemeni women peace-builders are using their creativity and leadership to deliver vital humanitarian aid, resolve conflicts, and broker local truces.**

**Solving a water-related conflict:** Water scarcity has been exacerbated by Saudi-led and US-sponsored aerial bombing campaigns, which destroyed much water and sanitation infrastructure. The shortage of water in Yemen has fueled local conflict, resulting in over 4,000 casualties across the country each year.

Despite the challenges, women leaders are risking their lives to broker peace in communities on the frontline of war. Mona Luqman founded Food4Humanity to build peace and provide humanitarian aid in struggling communities. Food4Humanity has worked in Taiz governorate, a highly militarized area severely impacted by the humanitarian crisis. In Al-Haymatain, a remote area within the governorate, the water shortage had escalated into an armed conflict. There was only one source of water, and women and children were forced to walk for 2 to 8 hours daily simply to access water.

Food4Humanity raised funds to repair the water station in Al-Haymatain. Not only that, they facilitated a mediation process, forming a team of 16 people - including five Food4Humanity volunteers - to represent the community. This group facilitated a peace agreement to end the water conflict, which community leaders signed. Afterwards, the group created a community council with representatives from local leaders of surrounding villages to ensure that conflicts are prevented in the future. *Source: MADRE partner Muna Luqman, Food4Humanity.*



**Resolving a protracted land dispute:** Sumaia Al-Hussam is a lawyer and human rights defender from Hajja governorate, an area that faced a land dispute which escalated into protracted violence. Despite many attempts to resolve the conflict in the past, peace never held and violence erupted on numerous occasions. Sumaia used her skills, networks, and status as a member of the National Dialogue Conference to work towards a resolution.

She met with community members to understand the context; facilitated a peace mediation between the conflicting parties; and involved community and tribal leaders as well as local authorities. In total, she communicated with over a hundred community members and leaders, gaining the trust of all parties to the conflict. Through her tireless advocacy, a committee was formed to revive the mediation process, a ceasefire was reached, a tribal arbitration meeting was organized in Sana'a, and the local conflict was brought under control. *Source: MADRE partner Peace Track Initiative.*