

## *Original Paper*

# The Politics of Women's Empowerment in Yemen

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### **Abstract**

*Despite the existence of women's empowerment strategies since the late nineties and qualified women in decision-making positions in charge of implementing them, these strategies failed to significantly improve women's conditions and the situation of Yemeni women in the Republic of Yemen remains dismal. This article attempts to explain this failure through a mixed-method approach, surveying and interviewing Yemeni women leaders who were involved as authority figures or people of influence between 2006 and 2014 in said strategies. Findings from this research have strong policy implications on future development and gender equality policies in the country placing the experiences of women as policy makers, activists, advocates at the center of the analysis.*

### **Keywords**

*Yemen, women's empowerment, policies, development, patriarchy, Feminism, political will, gender equality*

### **1. Introduction**

Yemeni women remain critically disadvantaged in terms of their health, education, and economic rights compared to men according to several international development indices, such as the WEF's Gender Gap Index, the Economist Intelligence Unit's Women's Economic Opportunities Index, United Nations Development Programme's Gender Inequality Index, to state a few.

This was not always the case as women enjoyed a range of freedoms and rights in what was known as the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen), especially compared to women in what was known as the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) (Molyneux, Yafai, & Mohsen, 1979; Kruks, Rapp, & Young, 1989). The Unity of both Yemen's in 1990 resulted in the Republic of Yemen (RoY). The socio-political factors of RoY did not help push the women's movement forward, even more since positions of power in the united country were in the hands of the conservative north. The fact that northern population at the time of unity was three times larger than that of the south, (Note 1) did not

help either. Southern women today complain that they were better off in terms of political rights such as representation in the parliament before unification with the conservative north because the number of female candidates in elections deteriorated rapidly (Note 2) compared to the number of voters (Shamsheer, 2004). Moreover, many southerners were concerned about aspects of traditional YAR [North Yemen] society such as tribal influence and greater circumscription on the role of women (Choueiri et al., 2002).

However, since the late nineties, the RoY created a number of women-related institutions with the sole purpose of empowering women. It has also appointed women in charge of these institutions and tasked them with promoting and improving the overall situation of Yemeni women especially in health, education, and the economy. Examples include the Women National Committee (WNC), a government body created in 1996 to design national strategies for women's development; the Higher Council for Motherhood and Childhood established in 1999; the creation of women's departments in all ministries and government institutions in 1999; and the introduction of women's departments in the local governing bodies around the country in 2001. As per the mandate of these departments and institutions, women in leadership positions played the role of gate keepers and acted as intermediaries between the larger female population and Yemeni state institutions. In addition to creating organisations concerned with women's rights and affairs, the Yemeni government appointed women as deputy ministers or at least director generals in the health, education, and trade ministries—among other ministries—and tasked them with the responsibility of foreseeing the advancement of women in those fields since the year 2000 onwards, when Yemen became party to the Millennium Development Goals.

Consequently, several policies aiming at women's empowerment and gender equality on the national level were issued. Examples of these are the National Strategy for Women Development designed and implemented by the WNC in 2001, 2003, 2006, 2008, and 2015. It has also issued regular reports on the status of women and implementation of the CEDAW. Other strategies include the National Strategy on Reproductive Health (2006-2010), and many of the national strategies in other sectors included a strong component on women's empowerment, such as the National Agriculture Strategy (2012-2016) and the National General Secondary Education Strategy (2007). Additionally, one of the main successes of the WNC was integrating a women's empowerment component in the National Plan for Socio-Economic Development and Poverty (2006-2010). This component included four main issues: combating violence against women, women's political participation, economic empowerment for women, and amendments of discriminatory legal texts. Similarly, a women's empowerment component was also included in the 4th 5-year socio-economic development and poverty reduction national plan (2011-2015), also including the same four themes mentioned above.

Even during the political transition years between 2012 and 2014, which was also a time when the country was going through an economic crisis, gender mainstreaming was proclaimed as a priority, even if only in theory. For example, the transitional program for stability and development (2012-2014) “included a component on women's empowerment in three main themes: social development

(education-health-rights), economic empowerment, and political empowerment.” (Women National Committee, 2015).

Despite the existence of qualified women in decision-making positions and the presence of empowerment strategies since the late nineties (Al-Sakkaf, 2020), these policies failed to significantly improve women’s conditions and the situation of Yemeni women in the Republic of Yemen remains dismal. This article attempts to explain this failure through a mixed-method approach using quantitative and qualitative data collection tools. The research population is women leaders who were involved in women empowerment policies between 2006 and 2014 as implementers and/or persons with influence. Since women leaders in positions of authority in government institutions were responsible for designing and implementing women’s empowerment policies and strategies, they presented a reasonable source of information on the dynamics of such policies and their impact on the larger women population.

There are many studies on the status of women in Yemen, especially quantitative ones producing development indicators. This research differs from such studies in the sense that it focuses on the gender-power dynamics behind the scenes in circles of decision making at the highest levels of government relating to women’s empowerment. It is done from the perspectives of the women leaders’ themselves holds a unique strength in that it grants unprecedented access, and hence inclusion, of a substantial number of Yemeni women leaders. The timeframe between 2006 and 2014 was chosen considering the increased attention on women’s empowerment by the government of Yemen and international non-governmental organizations funding women related projects in the country. The 2014 limit is due to the armed conflict that engulfed the country until now, such environment is not conducive for the research in hand.

Findings from this research validate earlier work on women empowerment in Yemen attributing the difficulties women face to the constraining socio-cultural traditions. Moreover, this research agrees with research that attributes the discrepancy between women’s so-called political empowerment and their lack of access to basic rights in education and healthcare for example, to the practice of “window dressing” (United Nations Development Program, 2005), which the Yemeni government practiced similar to other countries especially those of authoritarian regimes, to appeal to international donors (Tajali, 2016).

However, this research provides new insights into the approach taken by the Yemeni government in terms of women’s empowerment policies, indicating that most strategies focused on providing services and improving women’s access to resources, without exerting enough efforts to create behavioral change and social demand for such services. For example, strategies that aim to increase girls’ education by provision of access to schools without addressing the social barriers against girls going and staying in school. Similarly, there is a difference between building a road that could improve women’s access to markets and the increase in their agency at home, as the degree of empowerment through increased agency is highly dependent on context and norms that govern the gender relations

both in public and private spheres. The findings also show that the desire to achieve gender equality has to be fully owned among decision makers and not just as a reaction to international pressures from donors.

Additionally, feedback from the women leaders show that they find themselves fighting two battles; one with the patriarchal formal institutions where they work, and the other with the traditional community that requires its women to conform to established societal norms. As a consequence, women leaders found themselves in continuous battles not only with the conservative society they hoped to change, but also with their own institutions where their efforts were directly and indirectly undermined.

The findings recommend that to ensure political commitment, there needs to be a strong vibrant women's movement that is able to hold the politicians accountable as well as create popular support for women pioneers and the feminist agenda at the grassroots level.

## **2. Research Methodology, Design and Analysis**

Understating the complexity of gender and women's empowerment in Yemen requires more than statistical analysis of Yemeni women's empowerment indicators, which is an approach already taken by many international development organisations. Therefore, using a mixed-methods approach provided a more comprehensive picture of the issue. The use of multiple methods provided a more holistic and encompassing understanding of the researched issue (Jick, 1979). In this research, survey findings were analysed applying quantitative descriptive statistics to show overall trends for a much larger N than the interview population. Next, interviews were used to provide a qualitative contextual explanation for the research puzzle.

The use of closed ended questions was especially useful in conducting statistical analysis of the data (Johnson & Reynolds, 2005). Moreover, the use of surveys as a technique is argued to facilitate responses more than other methods when it comes to sensitive or personal issues, as some of the reluctant responders could be comforted by the lack of physical contact and feel more at ease typing in their answer than speaking face to face and watching the reaction to their input. Considering that the research topic discusses the social power gender relations in a conservative Yemeni society and the failure to empower women, this technique became an obvious choice. The multiple choices were designed to provide a range of potential answers within that sub-topic so as to allow the respondents to choose the option that best represents their opinion. Several questions had a representation of the Likert scale (Allen & Seaman, 2007), where the respondents chose a degree of their answer ranging from Never to Always. In some cases, it was a simple dichotomous Yes/No choice, however, many of the questions the choices were nominal data with labelled variables as options with no specific order or ranking. This was designed to provide qualitative feedback from the respondents regarding the proposed framework, the results of which guided the interview questions. This was particularly helpful when identifying the potential pathways or sub-mechanisms through which women's empowerment

policies were undermined.

The criteria for the research sample selection focused mainly on women who held the position as department head and higher in the relevant institutions. Purposive sampling, also called non-probability or judgement sampling, was used since the researched women were identified based on their knowledge and experience and not on an underlying theory. In terms of access to the population, snowball sampling was used iteratively whereby an informant recommends another, and many times multiple snowballs were thrown in different directions to cast a wider net and ensure variety and coverage. Iterative sampling was also used since there were aspects of the research topic that unfolded as the research developed.

Consequently, 186 women leaders took interest and accessed the electronic survey, although only 65 women leaders eventually returned a complete response. These women held public positions ranging from project manager, or head of department, to government minister. Also, it included women who worked in the private sector at the top of their businesses, and women who were involved in feminist campaigns and civil rights organisations. The surveys were followed by in-depth elite interviewing with three leading women in politics, education, healthcare, and the economy (Dexter, 2006). These were women who were politically influential in gender equality efforts in Yemen, as well as those at the highest level of office in health, education, and the economy between 2006 and 2014. They were chosen for their roles in the gender equality agenda, and therefore, elite interviewing was chosen as a technique because it is known for its exploratory nature focusing on the interviewees' special knowledge and take on the researched issue. Through the interviews, the women leaders were prompted to tell their stories from their own perspective on how women's empowerment was addressed in the political spheres including an analysis of their surrounding dynamics of gender politics. They described how all this reflected on them professionally and personally, and what their contributions as leaders in the women's empowerment movement were. The interviewees were questioned on aspects relating to their daily lives as women in positions of power and how they pushed on – or not – to achieve their professional and personal goals in their institutions and professional environments. This included an investigation of the obstacles and limitations they faced in their careers because of them being women, and their own interpretation of the reasons behind the failure of women's empowerment policies, if they agreed with this conclusion.

### **3. Gender Politics and Women's Empowerment: Theoretical Framing**

In terms of Yemeni women's visibility in the political space and in decision-making positions, Yemen witnessed a strong trend of high-level appointments of women in positions of authority in various government institutions since the late nineties. The percentage of women in high-level government positions, such as department director and deputy minister, reached 14.46% in 2014 (WNC, 2014), compared to 9.5% in 2008. In 2008, the number of women holding appointed leadership positions were two ministers, two members of the Consultative (Shoura) Council, 27 diplomats serving in missions

abroad, 16 deputy ministers, 37 judges, and 72 director generals (WNC, 2009). The highest rank a woman achieved in the judiciary was in 2006, when a female judge was appointed as member of the Supreme Court. (Note 3) In the same year, the Supreme National Authority for Combating Corruption was created and headed by a woman. Moreover, in 2012, a presidential decree appointed two women in the 9-member Supreme Committee for Elections and Referendum, which was the body that monitors elections in the country.

These appointments give an indication of the government's political will to empower women politically. Yet when compared to the reality of women in the legal and social domains, it becomes visible that there is much room for improvement. For example, the first reference to women in the constitution is in Article (31), which states: "women are the sisters of men. They have rights and duties, which are guaranteed and assigned by Shari'ah [Islamic Jurisprudence] and stipulated by law." This is an amendment of the 1991 unity constitution, in which Article (27) stated: "all citizens are equal before the law. They are equal in public rights and duties. There shall be no discrimination between them based on sex, colour, ethnic origin, language, occupation, social status, or religion." It could be argued that the change from the 1991 to the current text in the constitution was a deterioration in terms of the state's attitude towards women.

This argument was based on the notion that in the current constitution, women are considered an affiliate (sisters) of men instead of positioned on the same standing. Moreover, there is the direct mention of Shari'ah as a base of gender rights and duties, which is controversial and ambiguous as it is highly dependent on the interpretation of the religious scholars of the country who are always men. Furthermore, this amendment had occurred immediately following the 1994 secession civil war between the traditional north and the liberal south, post their unity in 1990 to form the Republic of Yemen. Consequently, the outcome of the war, in which the conservative north won maintaining the united Republic of Yemen, largely determined the state's attitude towards women since. Moreover, "the Personal Status Law, the Penal Code, the Citizenship Law, the Evidence Law, and the Labour Law contain provisions discriminating on the basis of gender" (OECD, 2014).

Moreover, previous research on gender politics in Yemen suggests that aspiring Yemeni women feel let down by their political system represented by the political parties whether ruling parties or opposition (Yadav, 2009). Their grievance was that women were treated as an object of political debate rather than an equal participant. For example, women were welcomed as voters but not as candidates. This observation is not new; the Arab Human Rights Development Report of 2005 stated that women in power are "often selected from the ranks of the elite or appointed from the ruling party as window dressing for the ruling regimes, especially those that are autocratic, or in response to external pressure." (UNDP, 2005, p. 97) In fact, this "window dressing" was clearly described as a tool to appeal to either international players or local voters (Tajali, 2016).

Feminist theorists such as Dworkin (1989), Moser (1993), Malhotra and Schuler (2002), and Phillips (2003) argued that socially-endorsed inequality, especially in the personal sphere, was an intrinsic

cause of women's lack of empowerment, and that without acknowledging and consequently addressing this inequality, any processes aiming at improving the situation of women would be inadequate. Since the very meaning of empowerment is essentially a change in power relations, whereby the less powerful gains more power (Kabeer, 1999). It becomes reasonable to conclude that the entry point to women's empowerment in patriarchal societies, such as Yemen, would be to challenge, across all spaces of structural antagonism, existing social values that consider women inferior to men and discriminate against them. Therefore, policy makers were expected to design policies to transform the social power balances in the society so as to remove gender disparities as means to achieving women's empowerment. "Unfortunately, the concerns of gender planners have not always centred around women's empowerment and the transformation of gender relations" (Wieringa, 1994).

Consequently, as a country, Yemen finds itself in a conflicting reality between its conservative traditional nature and its attempt to present itself as a modern democracy that empowers women. The institutional and political environment where the women leaders operate represents the structures surrounding women leaders that strengthen—or weaken—their agency and dictate their access to resources and opportunities. Political researcher Mervet Hatem adopted an understanding used in welfare states of Scandinavian societies and defined state feminism as "ambitious state programs that introduce important changes in the reproductive and productive roles of women." This state policy also requires the removal of structural barriers to gender equality and turning the concern and control over women's welfare from the society through its individuals—mainly the men who hold the dominant social power—to the state as a governing body of all citizens.

The bulk of literature on gender and politics considered "women as objects of state policy," and recognized the role of state policies in constructing gender concepts and relations. Consequently, women's empowerment efforts by policy makers, while visibly publicized as gender equality initiatives in line with the country's portrayed democratic aspirations, reflect the policymakers' backgrounds and their predispositions towards social gender-power relations. Keeping in mind that they themselves, are part of the gender-power-relations system at the institutional level, and at the personal level in their private lives. This contradiction was reflected in the gender policies in terms of content and sustainability.

In her research on the state and gender politics, Manea (2012) argued that for authoritarian regimes to survive, they need to strike a balance between their obligations to women as a part of their constituencies and a group of interest internationally, and their need to appease traditional forces that keep the politicians in power. In essence, the Yemeni state has been pressured by the international community—mostly western democracies—to promote gender equality as a part of human rights and democratisation initiatives (Sreberny, 2000). This included a surge of donor-led development projects by international development organisations (Note 4) aiming at improving women-related development indicators, to which the Yemeni state was a recipient of funds and an implementer. The Yemeni government readily welcomed these interventions, not because of its political position toward gender

equality as such, but rather, it pursued gender politics in an opportunistic manner (Manea, 2012). Oxaal and Baden (1997) argued that in addition to the above, empowerment requires the state to create an environment that strengthens civil society and grassroots-organizations, including marginalized groups, through creating policies that would involve them in the political processes. A connection between empowerment and governance has been established in previous studies indicating that good governance enables empowerment especially of disadvantaged groups such as women, which in turn, when empowered, demand good governance. This notion also suggests the question of whether empowerment is a bottom up or a top town process. Since it has been explained earlier that state's interventions to empower citizens are essential, it can also be argued that empowerment is not only achieved through top-down approaches by the state, as some researchers point out that it is important for the to-be-empowered to have their own social formations in order to collaborate in actions that would eventually bring justice or remove oppression, and hence create empowerment processes from the bottom-up. These researches build the case for the importance of having a strong women-rights' movements and civil societies to demand empowerment policies and good governance by holding the decision makers accountable to promoting the best interest of the female demographic of their constituencies.

Okeke-Ihejirika and Franceschet (2002) indicated that women's empowerment and the achievement of gender equality were directly proportional to the strength of democracy, which allowed for resilient women's movements in post pre-democracy political transitions. The argument here is that the stronger the feminist movement is, the more capable it is in demanding women's rights and pushing gender equality up the agenda of political priorities. Simultaneously, the success of the women's movement as a social phenomenon is heavily dependent on popular support (Escobar, 2018), among other elements. Therefore, in communities where gender equality is not a popular concept—such as Yemen (Alsharjabi, 2013), feminist pioneers experience a disconnect not only from the larger population, but more importantly, from women's groups, who are the primary stakeholders in this issue.

Simultaneously, while the government and its institutions internally maintained a conservative attitude toward gender equality, Yemen's growing – yet still relatively weak - civil society, increasingly created pressure on the state to improve the situation of women. Most of these nongovernmental organizations were supported by international donors who were concerned with Yemeni women's conditions. Those donors put pressure on the Yemeni state directly through its bilateral relations and indirectly by supporting change agents from within the country. Consequently, the Yemeni state portrayed a positive position toward women's empowerment and gender equality by granting women political rights, signing international conventions and implementing national policies, and appointing women in positions of power. At the forefront of the women-related international conventions is the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which was ratified by south Yemen in 1984, and endorsed by the united Yemen in 1990. Yet the various reports on the country's implementation of any of the international agreements it ratifies, often indicate that there is



lack of political support needed to truly implement those agreements and hence improve the situation of women in Yemen.

Moreover, the international donor community took it upon its responsibility to support the Yemeni government in achieving its development goals concerning women both technically and financially. For example, in order to improve women's access to economic opportunity, the government of the Netherlands in cooperation with International Labor Organization created and funded a capacity building project on Decent Work and Gender Equality, as part of the Decent Work Country Program (2008-2010) worth USD 7.7 mln, for the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor in 2009. Another example was the training guide on gender responsive budgeting developed by Women National Committee with support from Oxfam and GIZ, and which was approved by the Ministry of Finance and included in the curricula of the Finance Institute in 2012. Additionally, there were several projects aiming at improving the capacity of public servants working in women's health, and relevant projects were continuously funded by donors, especially the World Health Organization that spent millions of dollars in the duration between 2006 and 2011 promoting women and reproductive health in joint projects with the Ministry of Health. It must be clarified that accurate estimations of the total foreign aid spent on women's health in Yemen does not exist since international organizations and embassies are not legally obliged to disclose their expenditure to the Yemeni government beyond the signing of intention protocols. Moreover, the Yemeni government did not keep updated records on its public spending due to political instability, lack of capacity, and lack of transparency, and therefore, much of the statistical data since 2006 are inconsistent and unreliable.

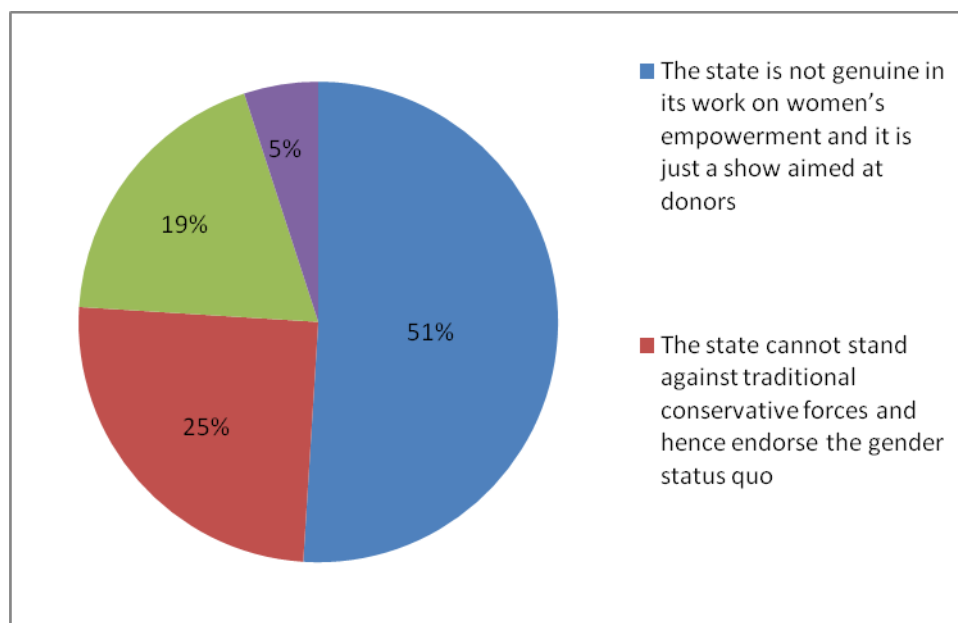
#### **4. The Political Will to Empower Women in Yemen: Research Findings**

The literature on women's empowerment emphasises the importance of enabling structures for the empowerment process to be successful (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007). These include the socio-political environment where women leaders operate. Therefore, the socio-political dynamics surrounding women leaders in their workplace significantly affect their success in achieving their goals towards gender equality for the larger women population. Positive manifestation of these dynamics include the political leaders' direct support for women leaders and facilitation of their work, sincere political commitment to the gender equality cause through adoption of policies, and the dedication of resources geared toward changing the social gender power imbalances.

Despite representing an elite group, Yemeni decision makers are in essence part of the larger Yemeni community and hence, are influenced by the dominant social values and traditions. Their interest in gender equality and women's empowerment, therefore, would be a result of a combination of their personal beliefs, obligations to their political position as authority figures, and their interaction with influencing forces locally and internationally. This influence becomes problematic when the decision makers' personal beliefs are in contradiction with their alleged commitment to gender equality. This discordance becomes clearly visible in institutions where women leaders work and try to push forward

the women agenda, withstanding the resistance they face from male colleagues and the political culture in which they operate.

An outstanding 95% of the survey participants responded that they experienced a lack of political support for gender equality. Within this 95%, around 51% of respondents said that the state was not sincere in its work on women's empowerment and it was just a show aimed at appeasing or securing support from donors; 25% agreed that the state could not stand against traditional conservative forces and hence endorsed the social gender power imbalances; and 19% said that the state superficially worked on women's empowerment and did not truly address the issue of gender discrimination that prevented women's progress.



**Figure 1. Are State Policies the Reason behind the Lack of Concrete Progress in Yemeni Women's Empowerment?**

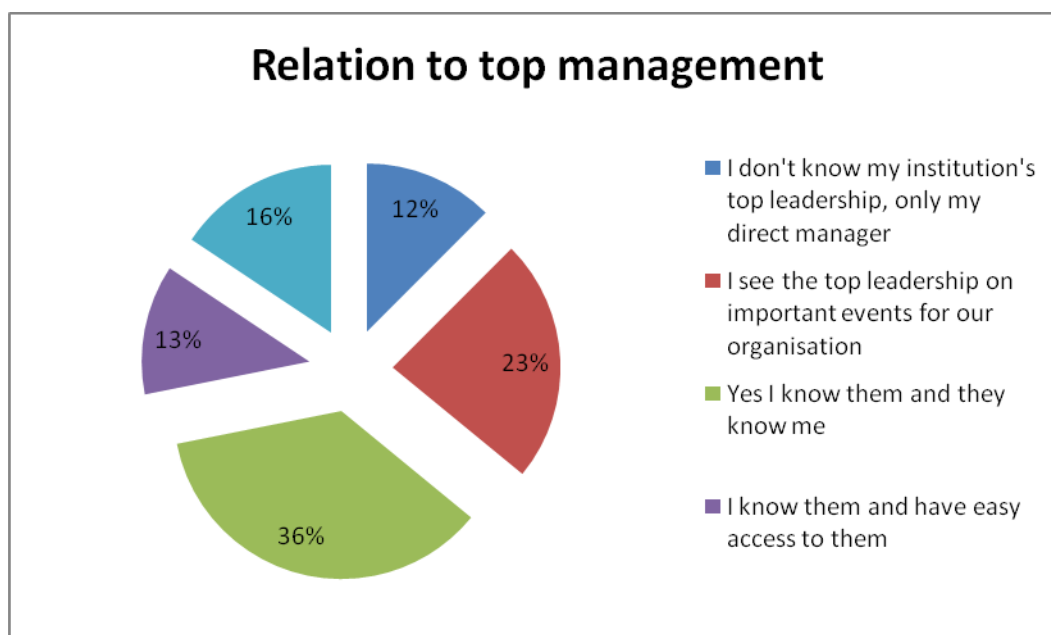
To this end, four inter-related dynamics within the political system had a strong impact on women's empowerment policies in Yemen. These are: patriarchal culture with institutions, window-dressing as a low cost solution to comply with international pressures to empower women, limited-impact empowerment policies, and inadequate grassroots support for women leaders.

#### *4.1 The Informal Culture of Formal Institutions*

This aspect pertains to the cultural spill-over from the social domain to political institutions. Muñoz Boudet, Petesch, and Turk (2013) argue that formal structures and organisational cultures are influenced by dominant social traditions and values. Institutional regulations and informal rules are shaped by the belief systems of those in charge as well as the dominant majority in the workplace (Appadurai, 2004).

Around 23% of the surveyed women leaders said that the management in their professional

environment was hostile to their success, while 34% explained that their management was indifferent and did not interact much with them. Only 15% said they felt that their bosses supported them and 20% said that the entire work environment was positive giving them a feeling of support from both management and colleagues. Another relevant question was regarding the respondents' familiarity and access to top leadership in their institutions. Only 15.63% said that they had a good relationship and received support from the highest levels of management. The remaining respondents ranged from 'I don't know who they are', to 'I know them and have easy access', as explained in the chart below:



**Figure 2. How Do You Perceive Your Relation to Top Leadership in Your Institution in Terms of Access and Support?**

Nonetheless, aspects of institutional support to women leaders cover more than direct support through endorsement and recognition, as it also included the facilitation of success through dedication of resources. It is both emotional and material and the women leaders' experiences indicated that they faced more challenges in accessing resources than in being praised or recognised.

For example, Dr. Nafisa Al-Jaifi former president of the Higher Council for Motherhood and Childhood, explained that political leaders and decision makers portrayed a positive attitude toward projects that would improve women's health, such as supporting reproductive health projects, family planning, and health facilities targeting women's health needs. Yet, this was not accompanied by sufficient financial resources for the implementation. Additionally, she said that the support women leaders got from their institutions was highly dependent on the attitude the top leadership had toward gender equality.

Interestingly, the finding showed that the support/resistance women leaders experienced was dependent on their level of authority or perceived power, in the sense that the more senior the women's position

was, the more resistance she faced from her male colleagues and male subordinates. Another interesting finding relating to women leaders' interaction within her working environment was that they found that so long as the efforts to empower women did not pose as a critical threat to the social power gender relations, they and the women behind them were supported even if only superficially. This was because the "Yemeni cultural system is inherently biased against women especially in the rural areas, and this is reflected even in the government institutions and at the leadership level because it is influenced by the culture," according to Arwa Othman, former minister of culture. Dr. Bilkis Abu Osba added that patriarchy was the main reason for hindering women's empowerment. "I would say that the most formidable challenge to women's empowerment are the social values that discriminate against women even at the highest decision-making levels," she said. "The Yemeni society presents itself as protector of women but in reality, what it does is enforce constraints preventing women from attaining their rights or achieving their personal agencies."

As mentioned above, this patriarchal attitude towards Yemeni women becomes more visible when the woman is perceived as a threat directly because of her position of authority, or because of the potential impact her work on women's empowerment can create in real life. For example, Dr. Eshraq Al-Hakimi explained that during working in the education sector prior to her appointment as deputy minister of education, she assumed that by becoming deputy minister she would be able to better influence policy and improve the status of girls' education than through her previous less-senior positions. Contrary to this assumption, she discovered that for Yemeni women it was harder to achieve results as a female senior official than it was for her at lower levels because of the strong resistance and dominance of patriarchy. "I feel alone as I see the male senior officials disrupting my efforts to improve girls' education", she said.

Dr. Bilkis Abu Osba, professor of politics and gender and CEO of Awam Research Foundation, explained that even in terms of space for women to share the decision-making positions in the education or academic sectors there is high resistance against women's career development to become deans of colleges or heads of departments at the universities. "There would be many qualified women who deserve the promotion but either the senior leadership of the academic institution would not want to give them the space, or the women themselves would not be confident enough to demand and fight for their right to be promoted," Abu Osba said. She recalled the outcome of the National Dialogue Conference (Note 5) (NDC) in 2013 for a 30% women's quota for decision-making positions, and how she and members of the NDC who were also in academia decided to push for an implementation of this quota in higher education. However, they faced resistance from the management as well as from the women candidates who were discouraged from putting themselves out there or present themselves as deserving of this quota. "We discovered that there was no genuine political will to implement the 30% quota, and with the NDC outcomes not being translated into an approved constitution, we lack a legal standing to demand this quota even if we found the women who were willing to nominate themselves," she explained.

Amal Basha, director of Sisters Arab Forum for Human Rights (SAF), agreed with this conclusion, stating that pervasive negative cultural conceptions of women as less capable than men remains a challenge for women and a barrier to attain senior positions. “Unfortunately, only cosmetic-minimal representation is allowed, and even then, it is confined to women affiliating to the ruling political party/ies,” she said.

Consequently, despite the progress made to increase women’s presence in public and political spheres, the narration of the women leaders in positions of authority explained that authority does not directly translate into power, as many of those women leaders found themselves negotiating their roles with male colleagues and even subordinates who defied their orders. Hooria Mashour, former minister of human rights, explained that the state’s commitment was not always genuine and decision makers were often influenced by the traditional social power groups. “It was a very hard struggle because we [gender equality advocates] were working against the tide,” she said. “Even when we managed to pass laws or strategies in support of women, there would be a problem with implementation either because of lack of political commitment or dedicated budget.”

Likewise, Jamela Al-Raihy, former deputy minister of health, admitted that on many occasions, the director of the finance department, who is hierarchically below her, often discarded her instructions even though they were in line with her role and authority. “This finance director was a very traditional man who was also a preacher in a mosque. I soon realised that he was not very happy with me being a woman in a senior position or even with the concept of women working in public in general. The word gender to him was synonym with the devil himself,” she said.

#### *4.2 Authoritarian Regimes and Window-Dressing*

Despite the state’s policy of appointing women in visible political positions, the women leaders—whose mere existence in authority was a credit to the state—explained that this trend is superficial low-cost response to donor pressure to promote gender equality. In this research, more than half of the surveyed sample said that the state’s gender policies were not genuine in creating a difference in women’s lives but were directed towards the donors to give them a shallow image of Yemeni women’s progress. Former culture minister Arwa Othman said that the appointments of women to senior positions were merely decorative, and the women in authority found themselves victims of the very political system that supposedly empowered them.

Furthermore, this finding resonates with Manea’s (2012) explanation of authoritarian regimes, as around 22% of the survey responses said that the state cannot challenge the social forces that discriminate against women because of their ability to remove the politicians from power. According to Amal Basha, director of Sisters Arab Forum For Human Rights, in an authoritarian regime, such that which exists in Yemen, the gender concept is a suspicious one. It is perceived as a threat to the political structure of the state and moreover as an imported Western concept. “Traditional and conservative forces who are strong and gaining power over time are declaring Jihad against gender equality promoters,” she said. “Female activists are in a real and serious battle with conservatives to achieve

gender equality.”

Former minister of human rights Hooria Mashour explained that sometimes she was appalled that she had to struggle to gain the support of highly educated male officials for gender equality, some of whom have had their fair share of exposure and were even educated abroad. Behind closed doors, some of the friendlier officials explained that it came down to resource scarcity, as the country is going through difficult economic times and there were other priorities. Moreover, she was told that promoting the cause of gender equality was against the culture and politicians risked angering the conservative forces who helped keep them in power.

Dr. Nafisa Al-Jaifi, former president of the Higher Council for Motherhood and Childhood explained that politicians are wary of being associated with projects or initiatives that visibly challenge the traditional gender values. Consequently, politicians would leave women leaders and activists to fend for themselves in the face of the backlash from conservative forces. “In the early marriage campaign, the female advocates for a law to ban child marriages were opposed and even attacked. They were labelled as infidels and accused of promoting a western agenda against Islamic principles,” she said. “If the issue at hand deeply concerns the social traditional values of the Yemeni society especially regarding gender roles, it faces extreme resistance. The further the issue is from the gender power relations the more likely it is to pass without resistance.”

#### *4.3 Gender Policies and the Redistribution of Social Power*

This finding relates to the requirement that for women’s empowerment policies to work, they should address the gender power imbalances in the society. The findings from the survey and interviews indicated that there is consensus among the respondents—many of whom have played various roles in implementing women’s empowerment projects in education, healthcare, and the economy – that projects aimed at improving the situation of women in specific fields without addressing the socially-embedded causes of the gender gap in the first place do not have an effective or lasting impact on women’s empowerment. Feedback from the research sample indicates that women leaders had to camouflage gender equality efforts as development projects or abandon them altogether in favour of short-term development targets. For example, former minister of human rights, Hooria Mashour said that when she was working in the Women National Committee (WNC), she realised that her work was cut out for her as there was a huge resistance to the concept of gender equality in Yemen. It was considered a western-imposed controversial value that had to be fought by conservative religious groups. She and the WNC team decided to lobby for gender equality without confrontation and replaced the term with women’s empowerment, which was less controversial. However, even using women’s empowerment as an objective faced resistance by both government institutions and the public because of the dominance of patriarchal culture and a social power imbalance in favour of men.

In terms of empowerment efforts and social norms, both surveys and interviews indicated that the various women’s empowerment efforts approved by the government between 2006 and 2014, although aimed at improving women’s conditions, did not enjoy full support from the decision makers either in

terms of financial resources, or in the form of championship at the national level in a way that would have created a social impact. Most of the respondents felt there was much to be improved on in terms of the state's handling of women's empowerment, and that policies were superficial and aimed at donors rather than a serious attempt at addressing gender inequality. Comments from the survey indicated that "interest in women's issues is superficial and not substantial," and that "the state's policies and laws were not supportive of women and there wasn't real political will to change the social attitude toward women or to change the many injustices in the local laws."

The results of the interviews agreed with this conclusion. Despite the various structural attempts, donor support, and evidence of staggering needs, Yemeni women's empowerment remained a low priority in the political agenda and was especially ignored in recent years with the instability and armed conflict dominating the country today. "The gender policies were shallow and were not accompanied by projects on the ground that aimed at creating behavioural change. Moreover, the approach to women's empowerment was not holistic or sustainable," said Amal Basha director of the Sisters Arab Forum for Human Rights.

The effect of this was visible through the design and focus of women's empowerment governmental efforts. "We often focused on the service delivery and not on the demand side. In many of our strategies we could have focused more on behavioural change," said Jamela Al-Raiby, former deputy minister of health. "We did do a media campaign on reproductive health, but I recognise that it was not enough to change attitudes. Our health policies also have weaknesses in baseline research, monitoring, and evaluation in order to see the impact we made."

Similarly, former culture minister Arwa Othman said that most of the proclaimed changes in women's conditions were temporary and easily reversible because they did not represent real change in the cultural values or societal norms. "You see it easily when there is any change in the political or economic situation or even when donors stop their projects," she said. "The so-called transformations or empowerment vanishes immediately." Consequently, the women leaders find themselves pushed to implement projects—funded by donors—that do not create a difference in reality because they were superficial and did not affect the cultural value system. "Women's empowerment has to come from within the government, and the donors can support the process of cultural change, but they are not responsible for it, nor can they do it, it has to be a national policy to which the state has to be genuinely committed," said former culture minister Arwa Othman.

Furthermore, the resistance toward initiatives that would potentially challenge the social power relations was not limited to government institutions but included other stakeholders such as the private sector. Dr. Amat Al-Razzak Hummed, former minister of social affairs and labour, said that "one of the main obstacles against the Working Women's Directorate in the ministry was the lack of cooperation from some of the private sector companies, which did not comply with the Dignified Working Conditions Policy's recommendations and did not carry out supportive measures for working women," she said. "We tried to change the businessmen's attitudes toward women in the economic sector

through awareness initiatives and lobbying through unions and syndicates. But in general, men usually have the highest salaries and leadership positions in the private sector, which is a reflection of gender discrimination in that sector.” Furthermore, research published by the Working Women Directorate showed a prevailing attitude in the Yemeni society that a woman’s place was at home, and that there were dominant cultural values that deprived women of equity and access to capital such as land ownership.

Dr. Nafisa Al-Jaifi, said that from her experience, campaigns combating early marriage faced great opposition and that it was turned into a power struggle between political rivals. Dr. Al-Jaifi’s added that there was insufficient political support for women leaders to prepare legal reforms for a variety of women-related issues, including inheritance, divorce, and early marriage. She said that unfortunately, despite efforts, the religious political opposition was a serious obstacle that prevented the implementation of the reforms.

Survey responses concurred with this finding showing that the laws did not reflect the commitments the state made to Yemeni women or the international community. Around 44% of the respondents said that there was no equality between men and women in the laws, and 53% said that the laws were not the problem, rather the problem lied in implementation. The issue of adapting the local laws to international women rights treaties, mainly the CEDAW, was a controversial one in the Yemeni society precisely because of the dilemma authoritarian regimes face as described in the previous section. The women leaders who attained senior official positions, such as those in the interview sample, said they witnessed this dilemma personally. During her work in the Women National committee, Hooria Mashour explained that there were several efforts to help the Yemeni authorities identify the legal barriers against gender equality. However, even though the laws were identified, only a few of them were actually amended, which indicated a strong resistance by the parliament to eliminate discrimination against women in the legal texts. “Had there been political will at the highest level to genuinely support women, this would not have been the case since the ruling party had a majority in the parliament and could have easily passed any amendments it desired. This actually happened several times in the past regarding other matters unrelated to women,” Mashour said.

#### *4.4 Yemeni Women Leaders between Two Battles*

The struggle Yemeni women leaders faced as pioneers of the feminist movement in Yemen was clearly described through the interviews and survey responses. This was indicated by their comments on the disillusionment they faced in their professional environment, i.e. from the political leadership. The interesting finding was that women leaders expressed an additional let down by their own communities at the grassroots level, including some women’s groups and the women population in general. Furthermore, when asked about potential explanations for the failure of women’s empowerment policies in Yemen, some of the survey respondents commented that the weakness of a women’s movement has contributed to this failure, as it was not strong enough to hold the politicians accountable to their promises to women. For example, a respondent commented: “the weak women’s



movement and its fragmentation has added to the failure of women's empowerment policies. This fragmentation in the civil society is actually a reflection of the disintegration of society as a whole."

To this end, Fawzia Nasher, of the Businesswomen Council, said that she realised early on that strength was in numbers, and therefore, creating strong women networks was an early objective in her career. "The more women we have in the business sector, the stronger we are as an entity and so we can demand change and ensure its sustainability," she said. "The problem was that the culture does not encourage women's presence in the public sector and so women themselves shy away from opportunities because they are afraid of what they will lose socially, or of the challenges they will have to face by breaking the stereotypes." She created the first database for Yemeni businesswomen and made sure that women among the general public, who had an interest in becoming entrepreneurs or entering the economic sector, knew there was a body to support them. "We need to make the Yemeni society ready to accept women as empowered independent individuals equal to men," she said. "Unless this happens, all our efforts will remain incomplete."

Similarly, Dr. Bilkis Abu Osba, of Sana'a University, explained that a part of the woman leader's power comes from the support she receives from her female colleagues. "It is not only that a woman leader should have sufficient capacity or agency, but more so, to be taken seriously many times she has to have support from other women leaders, who have her back, and as a collective group, demand women's rights," she said. Dr. Abu Osba further explained that women's individual capacity is not enough, the weakness of the Yemeni women's movement greatly limits the impact a woman's agency has in her workplace. An additional problem as Dr. Abu Osba explained, was that even highly qualified women such as university professors did not always support women's empowerment or gender equality. "It is sad to see that women's empowerment was not always a priority even for educated women, such as academics or lecturers who would rather not be involved in any activity demanding social change or empowerment of women even if it was women's empowerment in the education system, which they were part of," she said. Dr. Abu Osba emphasised the role of civil society as more significant than any other sector to create change in the Yemeni society in favor of women.

Findings from the interviews emphasised this point by explicitly mentioning the relation between the Yemeni women's movement and decision makers. Amal Basha, of the Sisters Arab Forum for Human Rights, explained that the voices of feminists and human rights activists were scattered and did not receive much grassroots support compared to the more traditional and conservative rhetoric. "Our collective impact is weak," she explained. "And we always faced defamation, opposition-campaigns, and protests against us and our demands... the women's organisations are also not mature enough nor are they sufficient in numbers."

Another dimension of this issue was highlighted by Lamia Al-Eryani, who said that the political fragmentation at the top level often trickled down to middle and lower levels of management. This made women's empowerment a subject to the whims of the decision makers and their genuine interest—or lack thereof—in gender equality. "This was compounded by the lack of women's presence

at the lower levels at the ministry, which were closer to the public, and which resulted in a disconnect between women's presence at the highest levels and that at the lower, almost grassroots levels," Al-Eryani said. From her perspective, women's visibility across the ministry's various sections and levels was limited not because there weren't many qualified women, but rather because of the persistent traditional attitude against women's abilities that grew stronger the closer one gets to the general community.

In fact, findings showed that as the management ladder goes down, attitudes toward gender equality and women's empowerment tend to become more negative. Dr. Amat Al-Razzak Hummed said that it was not a problem with the top-level politicians per se, as there was political commitment to women's empowerment through the creation of the Women National Committee and its various women departments in all ministries, and the support of nongovernmental organisations such as the Yemeni Women's Union. As such, when women's issues were discussed at the senior leadership levels, there would be a positive response and interest in women's welfare, but the actual hindrance would come from the middle and lower levels at the implementation levels. "For example, when deciding the budgets of all departments of the ministry with the corresponding authority at the ministry of finance, a decision would be agreed on to a certain funding for women's issues," she explained. "But when money is to be dispersed and the funding is to be made, the agreed amount reduces significantly."

It could be argued at this point that had the top-level leadership sincerely believed in the cause of women's empowerment, they would have ensured that their directives were followed through. However, as discussed in the earlier sections, politicians find themselves reluctant to live to their commitments to gender equality efforts in fear of the backlash from conservative forces, as well as for some, their lack of genuine interest in gender equality because of their personal beliefs. Yet perhaps a strong women's movement could have held the politicians accountable rivalling the pressure politicians faced from traditional powers.

Moreover, findings revealed that the collective support for gender equality even among the women themselves was highly relevant to their direct involvement in the women's empowerment work especially at the highest levels. This means that in the case of most Yemeni women, unless their professional interests were aligned with the gender equality cause, they would not be motivated to support women's empowerment efforts or the women/people behind them. As the interviews revealed, the concept of gender equality was not a popular one not only with the male dominated political circles but even among the population of Yemeni women themselves. Amal Basha said that "many of the women who were not in decision-making positions did not really support women's empowerment ... and did not adopt women's causes." She added that the sheer number of modern thinkers was minimal compared to traditional conservatives and this meant that culturally, the Yemeni society may not have been ready to be supportive of feminist pioneers.

Additionally, Dr. Bilkis Abu Osba explained that until there is a strong women's movement made of relentless women who demanded their rights and had the courage to be at the forefront of the resistance

to patriarchy, women's empowerment will always be incomplete and reversible. She recalled an example in Sana'a University when there was a vacancy in the political studies department. The best candidate was a woman, but the department's management wanted to appoint a man instead. When Dr. AbuOsba and some of her female colleagues stood their ground and demanded that the woman candidate get the job as she was clearly more deserving, the management relented, and the woman was given the position.

Arwa Othman agreed. "Change can only occur if there is a strategic vision that builds civil society and creates an environment for development and progress," she said. Othman added that the education system endorses the cultural biases and does not encourage creativity and individuality. "We should not expect much from the masses because they are not given the education that would create a strong civil society or a strong women's movement," she said. "Unless there is change at the strategic level that builds a country that uplifts the entire society, we should not expect a real improvement in women's conditions."

## 5. Conclusion

Findings from this research conclude that women's empowerment in Yemen is a complex issue that requires more than top-down policies addressing development indicators such as prevalence of reproductive healthcare, enrolment in schools, and access to economic resources. Although these development targets are important, they only address women's empowerment from the supply side, ignoring the need to create popular demand for these services. Without adequate efforts to address the gender power imbalances in the society and create popular demand for gender equality, supply-oriented policies will remain incomplete and unsustainable.

The findings also showed that the desire to achieve gender equality has to be fully owned among decision makers and not just as a reaction to international pressures from donors. Additionally, to ensure political commitment, there needs to be a strong vibrant women's movement that is able to hold the politicians accountable as well as create popular support for women pioneers and the feminist agenda at the grassroots level.

Finally, this research emphasised the importance of differentiating between authority and power, and how the spill-over from the cultural to the institutional dominates Yemeni official institutions, creating a façade of political support for women's empowerment without truly supporting the empowerment cause.

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### Notes

Note 1. In 1990, the population of the north was seven million inhabitants compared to only 2.5 million in the south. Post unity, the currency name was maintained of the north as Riyal compared to the south's Dinar. The capital was that of the north: Sana'a, and even the country call code for the united Yemen was that of the north.

Note 2. In the 1993 parliamentary elections there were 42 female candidates and 18% female voters, in the 1997 parliamentary elections the candidates went down to 19 and female voters went up to 27%, and in the 2003 parliamentary elections the number of female candidates decreased to 11 only whereas the voters increased to 43%.

Note 3. However, the judicial system continued to be male dominated. Women National Committee, the seventh National Report, op. cit.

Note 4. Also, many of the development organisations and international agencies mere existence depends on development projects especially those concerning women. S. Carapico, “Foreign Aid for Promoting Democracy in the Arab World”, *Middle East Journal*, 56(3) (2002).

Note 5. The National Dialogue Conference is a significant political event that lasted between March 2013 to January 2014 and resulted in a framework as basis for the new constitution which is still a draft today because of the war. See Wikipedia entry on the NDC at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_Dialogue\\_Conference](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Dialogue_Conference).