

Empowerment Lies Within:

Opportunities and Challenges for the Implementation
of the Women, Peace & Security Framework
by Political Movements in Yemen

Policy Brief

March 2024

WHAT is the policy brief about?

This policy brief aims to enhance our understanding of the role that political movements in Yemen can play as implementers of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) framework, especially when it comes to ensuring the protection and participation of women and girls in peace and security issues. It provides specific recommendations for how international actors can enhance support for WPS policies and practices in relation to political movements in Yemen. While the study primarily focused on three political movements in Yemen – the Islah Party, the Southern Transitional Council, and Ansar Allah and – we believe its findings could be relevant and beneficial for other political movements and the wider WPS community worldwide.

WHY is the topic relevant?

Although state governments have made significant progress implementing the WPS framework thus far, we believe that the framework's full potential has yet to be realised, as states are not the only governance actors responsible for and capable of upholding women's rights, especially in conflict areas beyond their control.

For WHOM is it important?

The policy brief is primarily addressed to the international WPS community operating and interested in Yemen, including policymakers, donors, and inter-

national civil society organisations (CSOs). It is also of interest to academics focusing on the WPS agenda in conflict and fragile areas, as well as to local CSOs and members of armed and/or political movements engaged in the implementation of WPS issues.

Key recommendations

- ≡ Recognise political movements as potential stakeholders for the implementation of the WPS framework.
- ≡ Help provide recognition for women's activism within political movements.
- ≡ Support efforts to strengthen policies on gender and to revise relevant regulations within the movements.
- ≡ Recognise the link between protection and participation, and support measures to make women's participation in politics and conflict resolution safe.
- ≡ Build the capacities of both men and women in addressing WPS.
- ≡ Support more extensive capacity building for women in the movements and provide support for women's efforts that promote the rights of women and girls.
- ≡ Engage both male and female leadership in dialogue.
- ≡ Collaborate closely with and support local efforts to implement the WPS framework in a conflict- and context-sensitive way.
- ≡ Lead by example – “walk the talk” when engaging with the leadership of political movements by promoting the WPS framework and involving both men and women in such efforts.

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1. Introduction

Women and girls in conflict-ridden countries such as Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Palestine are facing intensified violence due to ongoing conflicts. In 2000, the United Nations Security Council adopted [Resolution 1325](#) – (UNSCR1325) – a landmark resolution acknowledging the critical role that women play in peace and security issues and aiming to mainstream a gender-sensitive approach to peace and conflict within the UN system and its members. Throughout the years, UNSCR1325 has been complemented by numerous resolutions that have come to constitute the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda or framework.¹ Although significant progress has been made on the implementation of the WPS framework by state governments, its full potential has yet to be realised, as states are not the only actors responsible for or capable of upholding women’s rights, especially in conflict areas beyond their control. Such areas are often governed by or under the control of political movements. This policy brief aims to enhance our understanding of the role that political movements² in Yemen can play as implementers of the WPS framework, especially when it comes to ensuring the protection and participation of women and girls in peace and security issues.

Yemen’s political landscape is deeply complex; it is shaped by decades of conflict, regional tensions, and internal power struggles. The use of violence as a political tool, rooted in patriarchal structures, exploits the state’s fragility and undermines women’s rights to political participation and protection.³ While both political parties and various armed actors have historically been part of the conflict, they have also played a role in conflict resolution and power-sharing agreements. To best understand this context, it is helpful to take a long historical view: one that includes the past 60 years and encompasses the 1990 unification of Yemen, the 2011 protests, the Gulf Cooperation Council-brokered transition, and the 2014 war.⁴

¹ “Framework” is used in this policy brief to replace the more commonly used “agenda” to avoid any negative connotation of “agenda” as being something that is imposed by somebody on someone else, following feedback from research participants in Yemen.

² It is crucial to acknowledge Yemen’s unique social-political norm, whereby the government, political parties, and non-state armed actors are viewed as interconnected aspects of “politics.” Notably, research in Myanmar used the term “political and armed movements,” while Yemeni participants in this study resisted the use of the term “armed” to be linked to the concept of “political movements.” This resistance is not only understandable, but also suggests that political struggle remains a valued goal for the different actors.

³ BTI Transformation Index, 2022 Country Report, Yemen, page 7. Available: <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/YEM>.

⁴ See references from El-Sakkaf Abubaker (1997), *The Contemporary Yemen: Working Papers of Hamburg’s Seminar*, Sana’a: CEFAS, 1997. IFES (International Foundation for Electoral Systems) (2011), “Next Steps in Yemen’s Transition”, Middle East and North Africa Briefing Paper, IFES, 6 March 2011. DfID (Department for International Development) (2012), “Operational Plan 2012-2015 for Electoral Systems”, DfID Yemen, August 2012.

Based on participatory research conducted among three political movements in Yemen – the Islah Party, the Southern Transitional Council, and Ansar Allah – this policy brief provides specific recommendations for how international actors operating in and on Yemen can enhance support for WPS policies and practices through engagement with political movements. Beyond Yemen, the findings may have relevant implications for other political movements as well as the wider WPS community and policy actors worldwide.⁵

The research was conducted by local researchers and Fight for Humanity in April-December 2023, with the support of Berghof Foundation and thanks to funding from the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO). Researchers produced both a written report (Shakir, Sjöberg, and Gorkem, 2024) and a video of their findings.⁶ Preliminary findings were shared with representatives of the three movements in separate consultation sessions, and the final report was then shared with other national and international stakeholders.

In 2024 and beyond, Fight for Humanity and Berghof Foundation aim to sustain their work on the role of armed and/or political movements in the implementation of the WPS framework by providing knowledge and tools, building capacities, producing training resources, and conducting outreach activities.

2. Key Findings

The research endeavoured to provide empirical data on the implementation of the WPS framework in three political movements in Yemen: the Islah Party, the Southern Transitional Council (STC), and Ansar Allah. In order to do so, a team of well-positioned and highly experienced national experts conducted interviews and Focus Group Discussions with members and individuals close to these movements, to enquire about:

- their understandings of the WPS framework;
- their official policies and commitments pursuant to the WPS framework;
- their current situation and practices related to the WPS framework;
- the actors and factors conducive to the implementation of the WPS framework; and
- the opportunities and recommendations for overcoming challenges in relation to the implementation of the WPS framework.

The aim of this enquiry was to gain a better understanding of how external actors can support the needs and interests of these actors, and further strengthen their efforts to promote the participation and protection of women in a context-sensitive and participatory way. In this section, we will examine key trends that emerged from the research findings, which we believe may hold relevance for other contexts as well.

⁵ See also the previous policy brief on the role of armed and political movements in implementing the WPS agenda in Myanmar (Sjöberg, Dudouet, Schmitz, and Papesch 2022).

⁶ The video will shortly be available on the websites of Berghof Foundation and Fight for Humanity.

2.1. Political Movements and Women Peace, and Security

One key achievement is the successful involvement of all three movements in this research. Movement members demonstrated both a commitment to participating in the research process and a willingness to share their experiences surrounding the WPS framework's implementation. Movements further engaged on issues related to the framework by outlining recommendations and possible next steps. Even so, research indicated that members' knowledge surrounding the WPS framework remains limited within all three movements.

Conclusions:

- ≡ Political movements are engaged with the WPS framework directly and indirectly.
- ≡ The movements are willing to participate in research on the WPS framework and beyond.

2.2. Women in the Movements

On the ground, the research revealed that women in all three movements were clear about their own role in peace and security processes, including politics, humanitarian issues, and peacebuilding. This indicates that all the movements are supportive of women playing a role in these sectors. In fact, women in the three movements actively participate in security and protection-related activities, including leading community committees, advocating for and facilitating the release of prisoners of war, supporting the families of the martyrs and the wounded, providing logistical support to the battle fronts, and defending the rights of women and girls to freedom of movement, education, and economic empowerment. It was found that women within the movements are sensitive to and active in addressing issues of displaced women, various humanitarian activities, and livelihood and resilience activities, in addition to their work to defend and protect the rights of women and girls against violence. They are also open to local and international civil society activities related to peacebuilding and humanitarian interventions and, importantly, they have demonstrated an openness to participating in activities with women from other political movements, as required for peace.

Women maintain political representation in all three movement structures, albeit at a low percentage. They also actively participate in the process of political diplomacy and peace talks, whether through their movements or through participating in the activities of civil society and international actors. Even so, women could further participate in holding dialogues and formulating proposals for reform in the governance and organisational structures of the movements and their internal regulations in a way that responds to gender equality needs and further enhances the participation and empowerment of women overall. Such activities are extremely important and should be encouraged.

Even though women clearly play a role in political processes, the research found that these roles need to be more recognised and supported by the movements themselves, and recommends that hindrances preventing women from reaching their full potential should be addressed.

Conclusions:

- ≡ Women in the movements already engage in some activities related to the WPS framework.
- ≡ The movements are allowing women to play a role in these activities.
- ≡ Women's roles in the movements should be recognised.



2.3. Policies, Rules, and Laws on Women’s Political Participation and Protection

During the research it was stressed that the existing rules and laws in Yemen are not necessarily bad for women’s participation, but they could be improved, especially since women were not yet participating in political processes when most of the current policies, rules, and laws were created, such as the by-laws of the political movements.

Regarding the concept of protection, the research found that the regulations and by-laws of the three movements studied – the Islah Party, STC, and Ansar Allah – and other movements as well – are devoid of the concept of protection for women and girls, especially in times of armed conflict.

The research highlighted an important link between women’s participation and protection: when women or their rights are not protected, their participation remains limited and undermined. During armed conflict, women’s political participation was not considered safe by (male) leaders. It is important to note that the contrary is also true: the lack of women’s participation contributes to a continued protection failure, as women are less able to advocate for their own needs and place them on political agendas.

Conclusions:

- ≡ The laws and rules are not hindering women but could be improved to support women’s participation, especially the by-laws of the movements.
- ≡ Greater women’s participation and protection should be encouraged and facilitated within the movements and a revision of the relevant policies and regulations would be a good way forward.
- ≡ Movements should prioritise and take further measures to ensure women’s safe participation in politics and conflict resolution.

2.4. Capacity Building and Dialogue

Each movement identified gaps in training and education, particularly for women and girls, and a lack of opportunities for women and girls to develop their skills and capacities to fully participate in political and conflict resolution processes. The research highlighted a need for both women and men to develop tools and processes to better support existing efforts and explore new ways to promote the protection and participation of women and girls, notably through the promotion of education, but also through restructuring processes within the movements that could increase women’s representation and create gender policies and other related tools.

The movements also each identified a need for dialogue surrounding women’s protection and participation, both within the movements themselves and among wider communities and actors (notably civil society and international organisations).

Conclusions:

- ☰ Both women and men in the movements need to build their capacities to address the WPS framework, with a specific focus on capacity building for women.
- ☰ Dialogue on women’s protection and participation is encouraged within the movements and beyond, including across political movements.

2.5. Conducive Factors, Actors, and Opportunities

Each of the movements identified a number of factors conducive to the implementation of the WPS framework; these included the role of international actors, organisational restructuring processes, and existing institutions, laws, customs, agreements, discourse, and programmes. Women’s organisations and CSOs working on women’s rights in the territories controlled by political movements could also be key actors in promoting and improving WPS implementation.

However, the research found that efforts to promote the participation and protection of Yemeni women and girls were most effective when they were integrated into a local context and deeply internalised by both men and women in the movements. It found that women within the three movements had developed a local experience and understanding of WPS, rooted in the concept of human security. This local experience is worthy of attention and support to enable women to play leading roles in improving women’s political participation and protection, and could in turn contribute to conflict prevention efforts on movement, society, and state levels.

The opportunities identified by the research need to be translated into programmes and interventions, such as:

- establishing dialogue channels to discuss women’s issues between the women’s movements and leaders of the political movements;
- integrating women’s visions for the WPS framework into the process of organisational and governance development by political movements;
- training and capacity development activities for women and men in the movements;
- enhancing women’s participation with the support of local and international civil society activities;
- providing political, programmatic, logistical, and financial support to women’s activities; and
- supporting economic empowerment and community resilience projects, education, protection efforts and psychological support for women and girls at all levels.

In summary, while it remains important to find local and internal solutions, it is critical that women enhance their skills and confidence so they can better contribute to peace and security matters; these contributions need to be officially recognised and supported both by the movements and external actors. It is important to remember that the process of achieving women’s full participation and protection is a gradual one, especially in complex conflict contexts such as Yemen. Hence, even “tokenistic” participation in political governance and peace processes can be a first step towards enabling women to learn to “observe and act” on their own.

Conclusions:

- ≡ International efforts towards the implementation of the WPS framework should be localised and aligned with internal visions, processes, and policies upheld by political movements and the women therein.
- ≡ Support structures are required to boost women’s ability to advocate for, and improve, their participation and protection in times of conflict and in peacebuilding processes.





3. Recommendations for International CSOs, Donors, and Policy Actors Operating in Yemen

Recognise political movements as potential stakeholders for the implementation of the WPS framework. They already engage with the WPS framework directly and indirectly and could engage further if their efforts are acknowledged by external stakeholders.

Help provide recognition for women’s activism within political movements. Women in the movements already engage in implementing WPS pillars, such as participation and protection. The movements are allowing women to play a role in these activities, but women’s role in the movements should be further recognised by leadership and external actors.

Support efforts to strengthen gender policies and to revise relevant regulations of the movements. While existing laws and rules may not directly hinder women from participating, by-laws can be amended to fully support women’s participation.

Recognise the link between protection and participation, and support measures that make women’s participation in politics and conflict resolution safe. Offer to movements and external actors the support (technical, political, financial, etc.) required to make women’s participation during armed conflict safe.

Engage both male and female leadership in dialogue. Dialogue on women’s protection and participation is required within the movements and beyond. Inclusive dialogues on the status of and next steps for the implementation of measures to improve women’s participation and protection can help empower movement leadership to expand their work on both policy and implementation levels. Dialogue and exchange on the WPS framework at a technical level could also take place across the different political movements.

Build men’s capacity to address and implement WPS, along with building women’s capacities.

Capacity-building support for men can give them the chance to become co-owners of the participation and protection work; capacity-building support for women can allow them to increase their confidence to engage in political discussions. If only women are prioritised for capacity-building efforts, the responsibility is laid entirely on them, and men’s motivation to take co-ownership of the issue will decrease.

Support more extensive capacity building for women in the movements and provide support for women’s efforts that promote the rights of women and girls. Capacities beyond WPS and increased efforts are needed to further the participation and protection of women in the movements and those who are affected by their policies and practices.

Collaborate closely with and support local efforts to implement the WPS framework in a conflict- and context-sensitive way. This could be done through local CSOs, especially women’s organisations, and support for and cooperation with these actors on any issue related to gender and the WPS framework is crucial for effective and sustainable action; this would also ensure that sensitivities and opportunities are taken into account.

Lead by example – “walk the talk.” When engaging with the leadership of political movements, and promoting discourse on the WPS framework, communication should be delivered in a consistent manner, come from the highest level of international agencies, and, when possible, include male and female leaders. This would help underscore that promoting and protecting women and girls’ rights is the joint responsibility of both women and men.

4. References and Further Reading

BTI Transformation Index, 2022 Country Report, Yemen. Available here: <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/YEM>.

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About Fight for Humanity and Berghof Foundation

Fight for Humanity is an independent non-governmental organisation that works to convince non-state armed actors of the need to respect people's rights in the areas of their control or influence. The organisation works to fill a gap in the prevention of human rights abuses in situations of violence and conflict. In addition to this project that covers Yemen and Myanmar, Fight for Humanity also works in Syria and Iraq on projects to protect people's rights in areas controlled by non-state armed actors, as well as within the context of the peace process in Colombia. It has also worked on joint projects with partners in Cameroon and Senegal, as well as at a global level.

The **Berghof Foundation** is an independent, non-governmental organisation supporting people in conflict in their efforts to achieve sustainable peace through conflict transformation. Since 2005, Berghof Foundation has engaged with non-state armed groups around the world and has developed in-depth experience and professional expertise in conducting participatory action research and capacity-building support with their (current and former) members, to encourage transitions from war to peace and democratic politics. It has also developed a gender-specific curriculum targeting female combatants and women associated with armed groups to support inclusive negotiations, political participation, and post-war community leadership.

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