



3. Research Findings: The Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah Party)

3.1. The Islah Party's Understanding of the WPS Framework

The Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah Party), founded in 1990, has significant political experience and an interest in women's political participation and in protecting their rights. The party's by-laws and internal regulations guarantee the representation of women in the party's structures at all levels of the organization, starting at the district and governorate levels, and in all sectors, such as in the education and political and social sectors.

However, practice on the ground differs, as women's participation in decision-making positions remains weak, especially at the top level. Until 2000, women in the Islah Party were not represented in some of the higher structures, including the Shura Council. This changed during the party's second General Conference, when four women were elected to the Shura Council. In the third General Conference (held in two sessions, in 2003 and 2005) nine women were elected. In the fourth General Conference (held in 2007 and 2009), 13 women out of 130 members were elected, making up 10% of the Islah Party's leadership. Though this represented a clear step forward in increasing women's participation in decision-making, more is still needed, as stressed in the interviews.

In 2009, during the second session of the fourth General Conference, party leaders decided to establish a Women's Department within the organisational structure of the General Secretariat, which has branches in every governorate and organisational units in every district. Since the General Conference is the highest authority in the Islah Party and its decisions are binding, the Women's Department is like the rest of the departments of the General Secretariat, and women supervise all political, economic, social, and media fields that constitute the departments of the General Secretariat. When women's work in the party expanded, the by-laws and regulations were reviewed, studies and proposals were prepared, and dialogues were conducted to encourage the development of the structures and regulations in a way that would develop women's work and facilitate supervision, follow-up, and improvements to their work.

In addition, the women and men interviewed spoke of Yemen's commitment to all international agreements regarding women, which the parties are obligated to fulfil. In addition, interviewees expressed a demand for the inclusion of women's rights through constitutional provisions in the party's internal regulations and enacting laws – such an inclusion would guarantee protection for women and girls and act as a supervisory mechanism with laws to protect women and girls from violence and uphold their rights.

3.2. Official Policies and Commitments to the WPS Framework

Islah Party regulations stipulate that women within the party have as much right to reach senior leadership positions as men. As part of the political system that constitutes the Internationally Recognised Government (IRG), it still adheres to the outcomes of the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) in which it participated with 50 seats, 15 of which were allocated to women for 30% participation. According to interviewees, even before the NDC, women were well represented in Islah Party structures, with a representation rate in the higher structures equal to 10%.

The Islah Party therefore considers itself bound to the agreed upon outcomes of the NDC, which include a women's participation rate of 30%. However, this percentage has not yet been translated into the party's bodies and must be implemented within the lists of candidates of any upcoming elections. Some of the interviewees noted that all Yemeni parties face the same issue. The matter becomes clearer considering that women within the Islah Party are still demanding that the principle of equal opportunity be affirmed between the sexes, and that women be effectively empowered to access all of the party's various bodies and councils in proportion to their size within the party, and also granted positions in decision-making.

The interviewees explained that the participation of women in the Islah Party increased with the outbreak of the peaceful popular youth revolution in 2011. Accordingly, the Women's Department in the party began working, along with experts, to update regulations to promote the Women's Department to the Assistant General Secretariat – this would have brought about more women's representation in the party's leadership structure. However, the political transformations that Yemen underwent after 2011 led to the postponement of this proposal. After the youth revolution, Yemen entered a transitional phase that witnessed the election of Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi as president of the country, the forming of two national governments, and the convening of the NDC. However, in September 2014, civil war broke out.

The current conflict situation in Yemen has affected the political work of the Islah Party, as Ansar Allah now has control of the capital, Sana'a, and the rest of the Yemeni cities, including the Islah Party's headquarters. All of this has caused a delay in holding the party's fifth General Conference, and thus delayed the process of developing and modernising the party's systems and regulations to be more responsive to women's participation in politics, leadership, and decision-making. However, in the summer of 2023, the Islah Party began forming preparatory committees at the governorate level for the fifth conference, which indicates it will be held in the near future.

3.3. Current Situation and Practices Related to WPS

The war has provided an environment conducive to male hegemony in Yemen, especially in areas that suffer from weak awareness of women's rights and the promotion of customs and traditions. The war has amplified the restrictions imposed on women, such as persecution and restriction of freedom of assembly, expression, and movement, which hinder women from participating in public life, political processes, and gaining access to decision-making positions.

Some of the interviewees indicated that, after eight years of armed conflict, the political gains that Yemeni women had achieved over five decades have almost evaporated with the smoke and dust of war. Women have become unable to protect their most basic rights and have been subjected to various violations

by armed actors spread throughout the country. As for the situation with women in the Islah Party, it may be worse, given that the activity of the party as a whole, including the activity of women leaders, stopped in the governorates under the control of Ansar Allah, and their activity in the governorates under the control of the STC then decreased significantly.

Many women leaders and members of the Islah Party have been displaced from their regions to other cities, so their social activities have stopped, and movement between governorates has become a security risk for them. Some of the interviewees reported that once their identities are known at the security checkpoints, many women are subjected to harsh treatment, including being detained for days or not being allowed to pass.



3.4. Actors and Factors Conducive to the Implementation of the WPS Framework

Women within the Islah Party enjoy a large presence at the middle leadership level. Perhaps the most prominent factor in achieving this, according to the interviewees, is that the Women's Department enjoys independence in drawing up plans and determining activities and means for women's activities.

Women within the Islah Party also participate in all training programmes organised by the party or those organised by local and international bodies. The Islah Party has supported women in education and training in various specialisations, jobs, and skills according to available capabilities.

However, while the war has been a hindrance to women, it has also been an opportunity for widespread involvement in activities that were previously limited to men, and women have demonstrated their ability to manage community initiatives and peacemaking. They are also engaging in political and human rights activism; for example, with the Association of Mothers of Abductees and Forcibly Disappeared as well as many activities with the wounded and the families of martyrs.

The interviews also indicated that local and international organisations play a major role in providing qualification and training opportunities, although not always in the desired manner. Training and capacity development, especially in the legal, media, political, financial, security, peace, governance, and related fields, are extremely important for the WPS framework. Of equal importance is a need for international organisations to focus on women's education (especially girls), strengthening psychological support programmes, and supporting women's issues.

The interviews also noted how women tend to be less affected by the legacy of political rivalry and the crisis of trust prevailing between the various Yemeni parties. Women have a high appreciation for joint work, and this needs to be seen more among women in the various parties.



3.5. Opportunities and Recommendations

From the point of view of the interviewees, there are many opportunities connected to the WPS framework that those involved with the Islah Party could explore and strategize around, the most prominent of which are:

☐ Feminist intellectual production of religious and social teachings

The participation of women in the Islah Party in general, and through its four conferences in particular, and its formulation of visions based on religious teachings and social norms, in addition to its knowledge of matters of democracy, governance, and human rights, have demonstrated that it is possible to build on the religious and social culture of Yemeni society, such as urging morals and respecting and honouring women. These visions represent a great opportunity to implement the WPS framework, whether in investing in the teachings and norms that enhance women's participation in politics, or social teachings and norms that promote the rights of women and girls to protection. The participants added that investing in this opportunity necessarily requires that it be part of a broader combination of interventions, including awareness-raising programmes about the legal and constitutional rights of women and the dangers of violence against women and girls, in parallel with advocacy and support campaigns for women's and girls' issues in this regard.

☐ Promoting the involvement of women in new fields

During the war, women became involved in fields that were previously exclusive to men. This proved their worth and is an indication of their desire to depart from traditional roles. This represents a valuable opportunity that can be extended through a greater openness to involve women in the fields of politics, media, economics, and sports, whether within the party or outside of it. Interviewees emphasised their interest in empowering women economically and supporting projects that contribute to meeting women's needs to achieve security and peace. In addition, they stressed the need to enable women to participate in peace negotiations, and to increase the representation of women in all committees associated with humanitarian operations, peace, and development, which can help the committees to focus on issues concerning women (relating to displaced women, rural women, abused women, detainees, security personnel, politicians and jurists, etc.). Finally, interviewees proposed the expansion of women's involvement and work in politics, media, law and finance within the party, and called for enhancing cooperation between women within the party and women in the government and its local authorities.

≡ **Joint work with women from other political parties**

By adopting unified work programmes and engaging in common advocacy activities and campaigns in favour of the WPS framework, women can work together across the various parties to enhance their work. This joint work represents a valuable opportunity, especially if such work comes with coordination from outside parties. The interviewees pointed to organisations and bodies working in the field of women's rights both inside and outside of Yemen to play this coordinating role.

≡ **Translating commitments into reality**

The Islah Party's commitment to the outcomes of the NDC include a commitment to allocating 30% of party leadership positions at various levels to women. Preparations for the fifth conference of the Islah Party represent an important opportunity for holding dialogues, discussions, and mobilising support for approving this 30% quota for leadership positions and electoral lists, or, at the very least, agreeing on a long-term interim plan and implementation mechanisms for the quota system within the party and the government.

≡ **Supporting peace initiatives**

According to interviewees, women have proven to be more capable than men of managing peace initiatives in various governorates. Therefore, they must be supported and encouraged, and the necessary measures provided for the continuation of these roles, such as economic empowerment, and training and developing capabilities for women in the fields of human rights, media, law, politics, finance, security, peace, and governance sectors, and related fields.

≡ **Supporting the education of women and girls**

Interviewees also recommended a focus on education for women and girls. This could include addressing the reasons behind drop-out rates for girls' education and finding ways to increase the rate of education among women and girls in particular. In addition, interviewees pointed to the importance of more training for women in managing various state institutions, as well as training for senior leaders – both men and women – on how they can integrate gender into various education and development programmes within the party.

≡ **Psychosocial supports**

The interviewees also noted the expansion of violations against Islah Party members because of the surrounding security risks. They therefore noted the need for designing special protection programmes for women members that do not ignore aspects of mental health and social support.

