Measuring Women’s Status in Yemen
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Introduction

Yemen features one of the most chaotic political and social landscapes among the Gulf States. Observers note that Yemen’s fractured society has allowed Islamic extremism to flourish. The country’s instability is exploited by extremist elements making Yemen a potential staging ground for groups like Al-Qaeda (AQAP). Yemen is home to about 24 million people most of which reside in the mountainous rural terrain. Conservative cultural attitudes prevail in much of Yemen, resulting in wide gender gap. Women often face discrimination in all aspects of their personal and public lives. Yemeni women typically suffer from an array of domestic abuse and violence, while also receiving severely limited access to education and health care, as well social restrictions on participation in public affairs.¹

As part of a collective effort to understand the status of rights (in practice and beliefs) of Muslim women around the world, D3 Systems, Inc. sponsors and manages the Women in Muslim Countries Study (WIMC).² Survey research has a role to play in quantifying widely held assumptions about women’s desires, hopes and experiences amongst the general populations of Muslim-majority countries. It can be also be used to inform and shape women’s status policies from the perspective of each population.

The WIMC study is designed to measure women’s empowerment in daily practice, by providing an in-depth look into the oft-perceived gap between current public policy and empowerment initiatives as well as actual practice on the personal and local level. The answers are intended to yield a metric for promoting excellence in public policy by informing observers of women’s status about female attitudes toward a variety of socio-economic issues in Yemen. This WIMC study intends to explore the gender gap among urban Yemeni women as well as identify solutions to the problems that urban females in Yemen are often confronted with daily. This

² The 23 country Women in Muslim Countries study includes data from: Afghanistan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan, and Yemen.
study also finds that Yemeni women residing in the urban areas may express a greater degree of freedom than those who reside in the rural parts of Yemen. This study also compares and contrasts women’s attitudes and economic practices across seven Gulf States: Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, the UAE, Yemen and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Nationally representative general population samples in these countries are being used to collect the data for this report. The studies were conducted face-to-face within a six month time frame starting in 2007. The nationwide Yemen survey, the focus of this report, consists of 360 women, virtually all of which are Muslim. The respondents were interviewed in person, from January 3rd to February 29th, 2009. With 95% confidence, results from this survey have a margin of error of +/- 5.2 percent. The sample is taken from three cities in the Yemen: Aden, Al Mukala and Sana’a. The majority of respondents (69%) in this survey come from the Aden area of Yemen. The results presented here do not include the opinions of expatriates living in the Yemen.

Background

Understanding Yemen’s complicated history is important to understanding the current problems facing the country as a whole. Yemen is one of the poorest countries in the world with nearly 45% of its population living in poverty. Since independence, Yemen has suffered the constant presence of social and political conflict within the country. While conflict is the result of many factors both internal and external, often the country’s civil conflict has been fueled by citizen struggles to secure access to basic resources. ‘Water wars’ are not atypical in the country’s rural areas.

Moreover, the country features a heterogeneous mix of tribal, ethnic and religious identities. Sectionalist clashes occur often in the streets of Sana’a, the Northern governorates such as Sadah, and in the Southern governorates of Aden and Abyan. Instability in Yemen has also been caused by the presence of foreigners, whether Ottomans, the British, or Al-Qaeda.

In 1918, North Yemen (Yemen Arab Republic) broke away and claimed independence from the Ottoman Empire. Soon after, South Yemen (People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen) proceeded to do the same and became independent from the United Kingdom in 1967 after being

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declared a crown colony. After nearly 75 years, North Yemen and the Marxist dominated South Yemen, united in 1990 to form the Republic Yemen.\(^4\) However, peace between North and South Yemen has been tenuous. North-South hostilities have resulted in civil conflict for many years since the reunification. Over recent years, the separatist movement has been rekindled in Southern Yemen. Since North and South Yemen were united, there has been an increasing tension and dissatisfaction among those who reside in the southern parts of the country. Many citizens of the South feel that they are being oppressed, politically, culturally, and economically, by the North. Not until recently has this dissatisfaction among Southern Yemeni citizens developed into an organized effort to secede from those who consider Southerners to be second-class citizens.\(^5\)

Over the past year, Yemen has been in the spotlight for an array of issues, mostly related to terrorism, but political and economical strife have also been a main point of contention. Some analysts note that Yemen is fighting a three-front war;

- The Houthi rebel rebellion in the North,
- The North-South conflict, and
- Elements of Al-Qaeda, most notably Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).\(^6\)

In recent years, outside observers of international security have focused primarily on the increase in terrorist activity in Yemen. Yemen’s population is growing exponentially, at about 2.9% annually since 2006\(^7\). Since 1994, the population has grown 35% and has more than doubled since 1975, making Yemen the second most populated country on the Arabian Peninsula.\(^8\) With the population growing, a lack of a viable and sustainable economy and dwindling resources, Yemen is on the verge of becoming a failed State. As pointed out earlier, radical extremists are exploiting the largely un-policed countryside as a safe haven. More disturbingly, Yemen is being used as a training ground for violent extremist networks, such as Al Qaeda, to carry out...
large-scale terrorist plots against Western countries. Over the past year, Yemen has been connected to recent events such as the 2009 Christmas Day bomb scare on a jetliner headed for Detroit and the Fort Hood shooting rampage carried out by an alleged follower of an extremist Yemeni cleric who was later identified as being a member of Al Qaeda. Additionally, aside from insurgents adding to the instability, Yemen has also been regarded as a “police state” in regard to the ‘unlawful killings, arbitrary detentions, beatings as well as an overall crackdown on basic freedoms’ against the southerners by the government of President Saleh. The combination of both internal and external conflict creates an environment which is extremely susceptible to violent instability.

While violent extremism draws attention in and outside of Yemen, it is important not to overlook Yemeni women’s economic participation at home and in the public realm. An attempt is made to place these findings within the context of important themes regarding culture, domestic responsibility, self-awareness, and motivation. From household finances to entrepreneurial pursuits, the results shed light on how women perceive their roles in the home and in the public space. The development of women’s rights in Yemen has been stagnant and is slowly catching the attention of much of the Western world.

Female Attitudes in Yemen

For centuries, the cultural attitudes and prevailing “patriarchal traditions and religious beliefs” have placed women in a low status in both familial and communal matters. Yemen is a predominately Muslim society and the majority follows Shari’a law, leaving women with very limited access to ownership rights, civil liberties and a voice in family matters. In 1990, the unification and of the civil war led to the “modification of the constitution and the family law; marking a clear regression toward more conservative and gender-biased provisions.” The Yemeni government signed the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1984, but CEDAW has not been fully implemented. Despite the delay in the full implementation of CEDAW as well as other constitutionally based laws that discriminate against women, treating them as “inferior or minors who need perpetual

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10 Ibid.
11 Social Institutions & Gender Index. Gender Equality and Social Institutions in Yemen.
13 Ibid.
guardianship\textsuperscript{14}, urban Yemeni women still believe that their rights guaranteed them under CEDAW are protected in various ways. Half (51\%) of the Yemeni women surveyed indicate they believe their rights under CEDAW are well protected, while 34\% indicate their rights are somewhat protected within Shari’a (Islamic law). Only 4\% of Yemeni women believe their CEDAW rights are not well protected, an interesting finding in a historically oppressive society such as Yemen.\textsuperscript{15}

In a recent study conducted by the U.S.-based Freedom House, 15 of 18 Muslim countries recorded an increase in women’s suffrage. The study suggests that while women’s lives in the majority of the Middle Eastern countries (15 of the 18) are improving, Yemen appears to show a decline in rights over the past five years among women. The decline in women’s status is directly related to the internal conflict and the increase in religious extremism found in Yemen. A narrow majority (at 53\% the highest among the Gulf States) of Yemeni Muslim women respondents indicate they would like better education as a means to leading a happier life. Closely following was better health (24\%) and more money or greater income (14\%). Among the Gulf States, Yemen ranks the highest (14\%) in the percentage of women who believe that greater income or more money would make their lives happier. Yemen ranks last among the Gulf States for those who believe that there is ‘no change necessary’ for leading a happier life (3\%), suggesting that Yemeni women could be happier if certain aspects of their lives were to be altered. For further illustration please see Figure 1.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} The findings presented here primarily suggest the opinions and beliefs of women who reside in urban areas of Yemen.
Yemen is crippled with extremely high illiteracy rates, so it’s not surprising the data show Yemeni women being the most likely to be unable to read or write. According to the UNDP, the estimated literacy rate among adults in Yemen is 54% while the estimated literacy rate of females is 35%.\textsuperscript{16} Illiteracy rates among females remain high due to a variety of societal reasons including dropping out of schools because of marriage, poverty, urban versus rural settings and even familial beliefs. CEDAW reports indicate a slight rise in enrollment rates of girls aged 6 to 14 years old in basic education programs; however, the UNDP estimates that just 43% of females attend school. Over the past years, the Yemeni government, along with NGOs, has allocated a great deal of attention to the issue of improving the educational opportunities for women, recognizing the economic importance of an educated civilian society.\textsuperscript{17} For example, the World Food Programme funded a school nutrition project in 88 districts in Yemen. Even though


CEDAW reports indicate enrollment rates maybe increasing, the gender gap for education between male and females remains large.

Yemen’s health care system is woefully underdeveloped and largely non-existent in the rural areas.\(^{18}\) Perhaps because of the fact that Yemen’s health care system is scarce in rural areas, our survey suggests that 85% of urban Yemeni women do not view their gender as an obstacle to receiving health care. In regard to civil society, Yemen is among the first of the Gulf States to grant full voting rights to women as well as giving women the ability to be nominated in elections. Despite these efforts and the attempts at gender equality, the societal pressure, lack of education and disempowerment has limited women’s access and voice in the political sphere. Increasing female public participation in civic events can help shape the policies that attempt to address the gaps in rights between men and women.\(^{19}\) While civic participation is low, half of the women who were surveyed indicate they had voted in the last national election or referendum. As Yemeni women become more exposed to such public participation, their status will most likely improve.

**Economic Opportunity**

Yemen’s strategic location has proved vital to the country’s economy for many centuries, most notably through the country’s exportation of agricultural products such as oil, coffee, grain, livestock and Qat.\(^{20}\) Despite the fact that Yemen borders one of the largest shipping lanes in the world, Bab el Mandeb\(^{21}\), Yemen is still regarded as one of the poorest Middle Eastern countries. The current GDP per capita is a mere 2,500 USD with a 3.8% growth rate and ranks 178\(^{th}\) in the world in GDP per capita\(^{22}\) with most citizens living on less than 2 USD a day.\(^{23}\) Yemen is still considered by the UN as one of the least developed countries in the world.

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\(^{20}\) Qat or Khat is a shrub grown in Yemen that produces an amphetamine like substance which people chew.


According to the UNDP 2010 Human Development Index, Yemen ranks 133 out of 169 countries and is considered among the lowest in human development. As resources dwindle and population increases, Yemen is left with an economy struggling to sustain itself. Coupled with depleted oil resources and a severely underdeveloped economy, Yemen has attempted to diversify economically as a way to bolster monetary flow, most notably in areas of natural gas, coffee and tobacco.

Currently, just 28% of the Yemeni labor force is made up of women. With respect to the workplace, the Yemeni government along with several NGOs is seeking to increase the country’s labor force by promoting an increased female presence in the workplace, especially in the government sector. Daily work for women in Yemen is onerous. Typically, women are forced to serve in a limited work capacity, relegated to manual labor duties such as collecting water and firewood. Moreover, women are tasked with raising the children, while taking on daily agricultural duties such as tending to land and grazing animals.

When asked about their current work status, 55% of women in the Yemen self-identify as homemakers whereas 16% reported they were working outside of the home. Of the Yemeni women who indicate they are working, a plurality (12%) indicate they are a private servant, 9% reporting being a government employee while 5% indicate being a sales clerk or working in an office. Additionally, 5% own a business, while 14% are currently unemployed. Finally, 4% are paid by someone else, while 89% are paid directly.

With regard to personal economic desire, a number of Yemeni women seek the opportunity to receive training and funding to start a business, despite the country’s fragile and unstable economy. Forty-seven percent of Yemeni Muslim women surveyed indicate they would be interested and able to take advantage of the opportunity to start their own business. Twenty-five percent indicate they are not interested. Those who were most interested in taking advantage of an opportunity to start their own business were typically unemployed. Among the age groups, those who are 18 to 24 years old are more likely (59%) to be interested and able to take advantage of the opportunity than those who are fall into older categories. Please see figure 2 below.

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Figure 2.

*If you had access to training and startup money to start a business, would you not be interested, be interested but prevented by other factors in your life, or be interested and able to take advantage of the opportunity?*

![Bar chart for Figure 2](chart)

Daily purchasing power in Yemen is generally considered to be a joint decision (31%). In Yemen, women appear to have a moderate amount (29%) of self-purchasing power when making daily purchases for the household. Yemeni women have a comparable self-purchasing power when compared to the surrounding Gulf States. According to the survey results, those who typically have self-control over the household daily purchases are those who are working (32%). Those who are housewives (45%) are more likely to have joint control over the household daily purchases. Please refer to Figure 3 of an illustration of Yemeni women who profess self control over daily household purchases compared to the six other Gulf States.

Figure 3.

*Who in your household decides what purchases are made to meet daily household needs like food, clothing and cleaning supplies.*
Turning to household finances, family savings in Yemen is typically a joint effort (36%), while 24% of Yemeni women surveyed indicate having sole control over household savings. Most women in Yemen exercise some degree of financial control in the domestic space through their control or joint control of savings and purchasing decisions.

**Media Habits**

Yemen’s constitution outlines the protection of free press and freedom of speech as long as it is “within the limits of the law”. However, while the Yemeni constitution allows for freedom of the press, the media often faces opposition when it becomes critical of the government. The sources through which people primarily receive information in Yemen are much like Western cultures, via television, newspapers, the Internet and radio. The media habits of urban Yemeni

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28 Ibid.
women are similar to other women from the surrounding Gulf States, resulting in a large majority (84%) of urban Yemeni women indicating their primary news source is television. Yemen has the largest amount of women watching television as their primary news source of the seven Gulf States surveyed. Twelve percent indicate receiving their information from newspaper and magazines. Because political activism among women is a main area of concern for the Yemeni government as well as political parties, NGOs, and gender advocacy groups, television may provide the best medium of campaigning gender rights awareness among the urban Yemeni women.

With regard to new media, the percentage of women having access to the Internet appears to be very low. In fact, Yemen has the lowest percentage of females (23%) accessing the internet among all the Gulf States surveyed. Of the 23% that do have access to the Internet, 44% access the Internet everyday while 40% access the Internet four to six times per week.

Conclusion

Overall, urban Yemeni women indicate that their rights are well protected by CEDAW, but Yemen still ranks last among Gulf States who believe ‘no change is necessary’ to make their lives happier. This tells us that Yemeni women want change in their lives. Because Yemen is a Muslim society that closely follows Shari’a law, the government initiated rights of women conflicts with those Islamic practices. Political parties tend to overlook and dismiss the needs and rights of women due to the social stigma that is often introduced when the two are mixed. However, female political activism should be an issue that is examined more thoroughly by the Yemeni government and made more accessible to the Yemeni women.

It becomes apparent that the cyclical nature of poverty, lack of education and high rates of illiteracy, war, and an unstable voting bloc, coupled with intensifying internal and external conflicts creates an unstable environment in which women may not be fully aware of their rights granted to them and unfortunately unable to act on those rights. Yemeni women have constitutionally guaranteed rights based on the signing of CEDAW in 1984, but are often overlooked due to the conservative nature of Islamic interpretations.