Beyond Change Square

Expanding Yemeni Women’s Participation in Public Life

Women demonstrators demanded a trial for Yemen's former President Ali Abdullah Saleh in Sana in early May 2012. Photo Credit: Khaled Abdullah

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September 2012
Dissertation Statement of Originality

“Beyond Change Square: Expanding Yemeni Women’s Participation in Public Life”

This thesis is the result of my own independent work/investigation, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by explicit references.

Signed (candidate) Date 27 September 2012

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Signed (candidate) Date 27 September 2012
This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Development and Emergency Practice.

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Abstract

Yemeni women took centre stage during the 2011 non-violent uprising, earning them unprecedented international recognition, and, the activist Twakkul Karman, the Nobel Peace Prize. Although women in the Arab world have been studied extensively, very little has been written about the situation of women in Yemen. This dissertation seeks, in a modest way, to add to the studies in this little explored area.

This study investigates how Yemeni women are participating in public life and how they do so despite the many obstacles they face. Yemen is a deeply patriarchal society heavily rooted in patronage networks. Further barriers to participation include: the weak economy and legal system, food insecurity, radical influence from Saudi Arabia, protracted conflict, and the many constraints of the struggling, nascent state.

It also identifies and evaluates current activities and strategies for increasing women’s place in the public sphere. Some of these emerged out of the Arab Spring, where women joined with men in occupying Sanaa’s ‘Change Square,’ and the following period of political transition. Others pre-date it.

The study is built on secondary literature, particularly focusing on non-Western women’s activism, and the struggles and strategies of women’s movements. These are reviewed, analysed and integrated with data from eighteen semi-structured interviews. These were conducted by phone and from the UK. The sample included: foreign analysts, Yemeni activists and non-partisan Yemeni observers.

Voices of Yemeni women are given prominence throughout the discussion and reveal not only frustration and despair, but energy, ambition and hope. Although women’s participation in politics continues to be limited and circumscribed by tradition, there is evidence of increasing involvement in the creation of a new constitution and preliminary committees for the forthcoming National Dialogue.

The discussion of women with prominence in the current context reveals disparate agendas for activism, as well as a number of common characteristics. One of the more striking traits they share is the reliance on securing ‘protection’ to enable public participation.

Recommendations for enhancing women’s participation include: economic empowerment, raising awareness of women’s issues and investing in women leaders, Greater attention needs to be paid to local articulations of the women’s agenda for change as well as the specific obstacles present in a particular environment.

While the challenges and barriers are undoubtedly great, there are signs of incremental progress. These are often overlooked by Western observers. Taken together in all their continuing diversity, the study suggests that women’s activities are collectively expanding the public space available to them.
Acknowledgements

I would like to all those I interviewed, particularly as most of the interviews fell during Ramadan. I hope my dissertation adequately reflects the energy of Yemeni women that came across so clearly throughout the research process. I am also exceedingly grateful to Martin Jerrett - for his unyielding patience, my father – who helped me find a way out of the ‘soup’ on countless occasions, and Henry Thompson - for his insights and immense generosity. Finally I would like to thank all those at Oxford Brookes whose guidance I sought.
Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................. 3

Table of Contents ............................................................................................................................. 5
List of Figures ....................................................................................................................................... 7

1. Introduction .................................................................................................................................... 8

2. Methodology and Research Limitations ......................................................................................... 11
2.1 Secondary Data Sources ................................................................................................................ 11
2.2 Primary Data Sources .................................................................................................................... 12
2.3 Limitations of this Approach ......................................................................................................... 12
2.4 The Sample .................................................................................................................................... 13
2.5 The Interviews .............................................................................................................................. 15
2.6 Ethics ............................................................................................................................................ 16

3. Literature Review .......................................................................................................................... 17
3.1 Introduction ................................................................................................................................... 17
3.2 Controlling Gender ......................................................................................................................... 17
3.3 Faith-based Women’s Activism ..................................................................................................... 18
3.4 Struggles and Strategies of Women’s Movements ......................................................................... 19
3.5 Participation is Important for Development and in Transitional Periods ......................................... 21
3.6 Western Preconceptions ............................................................................................................... 22
3.7 Universal Rights? .......................................................................................................................... 23

4. Key Concepts: Perspectives and Definitions ................................................................................... 24

5. Background .................................................................................................................................... 26
5.1 The 2011 Uprising and its Aftermath ............................................................................................ 26
5.2 Yemen: Development and Gender Indices .................................................................................... 28
5.3 Women in Yemen ............................................................................................................................ 30
5.4 Recent Participation in Public Life ............................................................................................... 31
5.5 Participation and Representation in Political Life .......................................................................... 33

6. Women’s participation .................................................................................................................... 37
6.1 Introduction to Key Players ........................................................................................................... 37
6.2 Participation in the Uprising ........................................................................................................... 39
6.3 Participation After The Uprising .................................................................................................... 42
6.4 Participation After the Uprising: Prominent Women Activists and Their Approaches .............. 47

7. Questions and Analysis ................................................................................................................... 57
7.1 Principle Challenges and Barriers to Participation ................................................................. 57
7.2 Participation as Part of a Bigger Women’s Agenda: What are the Strategies for Pursuing Women’s Issues at the Political Level? ................................................................. 65
7.3 What Are Women’s Aspirations and Priorities? ......................................................................... 69
7.4 What is the Perceived Impact of the Revolution on Women? .................................................... 70
7.5 How and What Changes are Likely to Happen? ....................................................................... 72
8. Reflections and Recommendations for Action ................................................................. 75
8.1 Two Key Approaches: Islam and Tradition .................................................................. 75
8.2 The Need to Listen to Local Voices ............................................................................. 76
8.3 What Can Be Done? ...................................................................................................... 78
8.4 Approaches and Activities that Complement and Coexist ......................................... 80
9. Future research .............................................................................................................. 83
10. Conclusions .................................................................................................................. 84

Bibliography ......................................................................................................................... 87

Appendices ............................................................................................................................ 96
Appendix 1: A Note on Secondary Sources - Women in the Yemen .................................. 96
Appendix 2: Reflection Form ................................................................................................. 98
Appendix 3: Interview Questions .......................................................................................... 99
Appendix 4: Interview Summaries ....................................................................................... 102
List of Figures

**Tables**

Table 1: Overview of interviewees
Table 2: Views on giving equal rights to women
Table 3: Views on women in social and professional roles
Table 4: View on women in political roles
Table 5: Reasons for not supporting women’s political participation
Table 6: Traits of prominent women activists

**Diagrams**

Diagram 1: Barriers to increased participation in public life
Diagram 2: Approaches for ‘Framing’ Women’s Issues in the Transitional Period
Diagram 3: Defence of Approaches for ‘Framing’ Women’s Issues in the Transitional Period
Diagram 4: Activities increasing women’s participation in the public sphere

**Graph**

Graph 1: The Relationship between Protection and Controversial Activism and Protection in Yemen
1. Introduction

‘If we are going to see real development in the world then our best investment is women’

(Desmond Tutu, 1984 Nobel Peace Prize)\(^1\)

In 2012, the United Nations wrote that political transitions ‘offer unprecedented opportunities for progress on women’s human rights, despite there being a risk of regression and new forms of discrimination’ (UN News Centre 2012). In the Middle East, initial hopes of freedom have often been dashed. Examples include the 1979 Iranian revolution after which women’s freedoms were curtailed as new powers took force and

\(^1\) UNISDR (2012)
restrictive laws were introduced (Afary 2006). And in the Palestinian Territories, after the 2000 Intifada, the ‘window of opportunity’ for women’s rights was missed.\(^2\)

Conflict over arable land and water is escalating in Yemen as the population swells and increasing numbers of people slip deeper into poverty.\(^3\) Inequity in the distribution of resources, particularly access to basic services and development opportunities, provokes many local-level conflicts and, importantly, the grievances that fuelled the mass uprising in 2011 (UNDP 2011).

President Saleh stepped down on 23 November 2011, after a 33-year rule. Many protestors saw Saleh’s departure as the emergence of a new dawn, yet the old regime still clings on as the power has been passed down to elites (Sohlman 2012). Positive change seems to elude much of the country and the divide between the haves and the have-nots is greater than ever (Alley 2010). For many, the revolution is virtually dead; the priority is food not politics.\(^4\) Will Yemen go the way of early revolutions in the Middle East or will the Arab Spring lead to significant change in the position of women in Yemen?

Although the role of women in the Arab Spring has received considerable media coverage, there has been relatively less focus on the situation in Yemen, particularly women’s engagement in the post-revolutionary period. The same is true for women’s contemporary participation in public life more generally, where literature on most other countries in the region dwarfs that on Yemen. This paper seeks to help begin to fill part of this gap by:

1. Understanding and explaining the complexities of Yemeni women’s contemporary participation in public life.

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\(^2\) In periods of change, Marchland (2000) argues, women and family often become the repositories of cultural identity, thereby pushing against some possible progress.

\(^3\) Informal conversation with HT 2012

\(^4\) Interview with Yemeni consultant (I-2) 10 August 2012
2. Identifying and appraising existing strategies and activities of Yemeni women that, in the current and very challenging socio-political context, are contributing to opening the space available to women.

By quoting extensively from the experiences and views of the Yemeni women I interviewed, I have sought to allow their voices to speak. Drawing on both available literature and my own findings, I make several suggestions as to how the many challenges facing Yemeni women may be addressed within the political, social and cultural systems.

Given the security situation, that prevented me from visiting the country, and the inevitable limitations of time, I realise - as I have progressed - that I have only begun to explore the issues involved and that a far more in-depth study is needed.
2. Methodology and Research Limitations

A variety of primary and secondary research methods were employed. Qualitative findings have been compared with secondary data and contrasted or corroborated accordingly. Desk-based study facilitated a greater understanding of the issues at hand as well as helping to inform the selection of primary research methods. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and evaluation of data analysed with an ‘inductive approach’.\textsuperscript{5} I endeavoured to ask questions sensitively. Notes were taken by hand and a ‘reflection form’ filled out soon after to capture impressions and encourage ‘expansive thinking’. (See Appendix 2).

2.1 Secondary Data Sources

Secondary data have formed a major part of the dissertation. Sources included: reports, journal articles, notes of meetings, books, podcasts and material published. Relevant questions for interviews were developed after considerable background reading. Chapter 4 cites statistics from three extensive surveys published in 2010, and two in 2012.\textsuperscript{6} Although statistics provide a useful baseline for understanding the situation of women, they often leave little room for nuance and invariably fail to provide a fuller picture of the vibrancy of Yemeni society and the strong and active role Yemeni women play in their communities.

\textsuperscript{5} ‘The primary purpose of the inductive approach is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies’. (Thomas 2006:238)

\textsuperscript{6} The first opinion survey was conducted and published by the Yemen Policy Centre in 2010. It targeted 1,000 respondents from twelve governorates with an almost equal male-female ratio. The second survey was overseen by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) and conducted by Yemen Polling Centre as part of the ‘Status of Women in the Middle East and North Africa’ (IFESIFES) programme. Statistics were derived from responses from over 2,500 Yemenis. Respondents’ demographics matched the Yemeni population as far as possible, in terms of illiteracy etc.
2.2 Primary Data Sources

In order to collect as broad a range of perspectives as possible, data was gathered from Yemeni women and men who are close to the subject areas and from more distanced informants, such as non-Yemeni academics, NGO employees and Yemeni women professionals. ‘Purposive’ and more specifically ‘theoretical sampling’ techniques were used to identify most potential interviewees, which were appropriate methods given the sensitivity of the subject and the challenge of working from outside the country. Other potential interviewees were introduced via a pre-existing personal contact and through ‘blind calling’ and emailing individuals and organisations whose details were online.

2.3 Limitations of this Approach

The drawback to these methods is producing findings that are neither randomised nor representative of the population. They also risk only interviewing ‘the usual suspects’; a bias that is compounded by them introducing me to people similar to themselves. The need to conduct interviews in English and by ‘phone, further limited the diversity of the Yemeni women sample to that of an educated urban minority. Efforts to mitigate this bias included speaking with a number of men from rural areas and other respondents with experience of development and rural projects. However, this meant informants were giving their more or less well informed opinions on what others think.

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7 NGO is an acronym for non-governmental organisation.
8 Purposive sampling involves the active selection of participants by the researcher (Bernard 2006:189-190). The third set of statistics are from data collected by Gallup and presented in a report of six Arab countries, including Yemen. Yemeni data was collected from across the country between 2009 and 2011.
9 Theoretical sampling does not aim to gather a representative picture but rather looks to test the theory being developed (Ragin 1994 98-101).
10 Regrettably it is not uncommon for research to be limited to a tiny educated minority, as with the 2001 book Yemeni Voices: Women tell their stories, edited by Marta Paluch. The women interviewed in this study represent a minority of prominent women, some of whom have been exposed to Western ideologies.
Other limitations included difficulty in arranging and holding interviews, (particularly during the month of Ramadan), limited resources, \textsuperscript{11} time constraints and problems of access. A different methodology would have been developed had fieldwork been possible, particularly if I had had access to rural and traditional areas and been accompanied by a translator.

A more general limitation concerns my knowledge of Islam. As Waded writes: ‘adequate knowledge of Islam is a prerequisite to formulating adequate analysis in Muslim Women’s Studies’ (Wadad 2006:72). I have attempted, within the limited time available, to become a little more familiar with Islamic intellectual discourse and Yemeni culture so as to compensate for cross-cultural and religious differences.

\textbf{2.4 The Sample}

The table below gives basic details. Unless specified, all Yemeni interviewees are from major cities. 72\% of those interviewed were Yemeni and 56\% were Yemeni women. The majority were in their 30s and 40s.

\textsuperscript{11} Such as having no access to translators or hired interviewers.
Table 1: Overview of Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding Number</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Relevance</th>
<th>Residence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yemeni</td>
<td>Politically active Masters student</td>
<td>Yemen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>50-55</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>British</td>
<td>Yemen expert</td>
<td>Yemen / UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>40-45</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>British</td>
<td>Oxfam policy officer for Yemen</td>
<td>UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Yemeni</td>
<td>Youth and Women’s Activist</td>
<td>Yemen / UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yemeni</td>
<td>U.S based lawyer, part-time journalist, political analyst, prominent family</td>
<td>0-18 years in Yemen, afterwards US</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yemeni</td>
<td>Civil Servant</td>
<td>Yemen until 2008, US thereafter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Lebanese</td>
<td>Yemen officer for British NGO</td>
<td>UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yemeni</td>
<td>Head of major Yemeni NGO, prominent family</td>
<td>Yemen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>35-45</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Yemeni</td>
<td>NGO founder with focus on women’s rights using an Islamic lens</td>
<td>Yemen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>35-45</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Yemeni</td>
<td>Head of Yemeni Women’s coalition, not from a major city</td>
<td>Yemen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Iraqi</td>
<td>Head of Yemen desk for National Democratic Institute, an American NGO</td>
<td>U.S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yemeni</td>
<td>Medical doctor, former employee for major international NGO</td>
<td>UAE until age 25 then Yemen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>25-35</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yemeni</td>
<td>Prominent youth blogger / women’s activist</td>
<td>Yemen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Danish</td>
<td>Middle East gender researcher at KVINFO, a Danish NGO</td>
<td>Denmark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yemeni</td>
<td>Political analyst, current head of American NGO</td>
<td>Yemen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yemeni</td>
<td>Head of international NGO, recently relocated to US headquarters</td>
<td>Yemen until 2012, US thereafter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yemeni</td>
<td>Prominent women’s activist, member of WATAN coalition</td>
<td>Yemen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yemeni</td>
<td>Professional woman who chose not to participate in the uprising</td>
<td>Yemen</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.5 The Interviews

A ‘semi-structured’ style of interview was chosen as it allowed for a sensitive and flexible approach while being sufficiently focused. This enabled meaningful comparisons, patterns and variables to emerge. Non-directive questions were used wherever possible, unless seeking confirmation of discrete facts.

Throughout the interviews I was aware that participants might answer according to social orthodoxy and that they might tell me what they think I want to know. There is also the risk that interviewees incorrectly recall events or facts. Additionally, the researcher can add another layer of distortion when interpreting interviewee responses.

Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted by ‘phone and three conducted in person between 3 July and 20 August 2012. Poor ‘phone connection was a common challenge. Interviews lasted between ½ hour and 2 ½ hours. (Summaries of each interview are provided in Appendix 3).

I have quoted extensively from my interviews since they bring the data alive. Interviewees are referenced in the text by the letter ‘I’ and a corresponding number in italics, e.g. (I-12). Due to the size of the sample and number of concepts covered, I have not separated Yemeni and non-Yemeni data. I do however note when a quote is from a ‘foreigner’ rather than a Yemeni. Given the small sample size, I naturally make no claim to them being representative of Yemeni women.

Yet the voices of the women and consultants I interviewed have a validity of their own. What they said was true for them. Although the conclusions and findings in this study may have some general relevance elsewhere, they are specific to Yemen during the summer of 2012; a specific historical moment of tremendous flux.
2.6 Ethics

An ethics form was submitted and signed by Oxford Brookes University. Confidentiality was respected. At the start of each interview, the purpose of the study was discussed and written permission to include information from the interview was obtained. Most interviewees opted for anonymity, particularly as it allowed them to be more critical and speak independently of any institution they belong to. Others were happy to be named but for consistency and to enable more candid statements, I have opted to make all the interviews anonymous. The use of direct quotes have been cleared with respondents.
3. Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

Due to the difficult security environment, most academic discussions on gender issues have taken place outside Yemen. There are a number of regional and national platforms and forums addressing women’s issues however, which have been particularly active since the beginning of the Arab Spring.\(^\text{12}\) Currently the bulk of English language discussion takes place online, in activist blogs, through activist networks and on newspaper sites such as the Yemen Times. In addition to the literature reviewed below, the main body of the text makes many references other published literature.

3.2 Controlling Gender

Gender roles, in particular women’s seclusion from the public sphere, are at times legitimised with versions of religious history and tradition (Kerr 2004, Afkhami 2004, Mernissi 1996). Authors also suggest that seclusion may be part of a larger exercise in social control or political power (Mernissi 1996, Kerr 2004).

A pertinent example is of the government wishing to depoliticise and diffuse the women’s agenda when it crops up, as it is often seen as disturbing settled notions of the family and public-private distinctions (Sapiro 1998). Another theory is that men secure their status by controlling women’s freedoms and life decisions (Mernissi 1996). Conversely, Malik

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12 At the regional level these include ALWANE ‘my colours’, which stands for Active Leaders for Women’s Advancement in the Near East, and the Women and Memory Forum. At the national level, worth particular mention is the Women for Social Peace Coalition (WATAN), and, albeit largely run from outside of the country, the online platform called Support Yemen.
(2012) argues that oppression of women in the Middle East should not be examined as a purely gender issue but is social, cultural and institutional.

A seminal theoretical approach is that of Kandiyoti’s ‘patriarchal bargain’ (1998). She argues that without empowering alternatives, women hold onto male protection, which is necessary to provide them with greater social freedoms. Yet women consciously strategise within the constraints they encounter, she argues, and ‘resist projects that tilt the delicate balance they strive to maintain’ (Kandiyoti 1991:29). In a related approach, Nelson (1979) explores domestic empowerment as a means to public activism.

### 3.3 Faith-based Women’s Activism

Islamic activists find the tools to refute gender discrimination within religious texts. As Ahmed (1992) explains, the subversion of a sexual hierarchy, often instituted in the Abrahamic religions, is part of each religion’s ethical voice. In this view, the challenge is to secure the rights and privileges women are entitled to rather than ‘free women from Islam’ (Pruzan-Jørgensen 2012:3). Amina Wadud, a contemporary Islamic feminist with a progressive focus on Qur’anic exegesis, advocates a ‘pro-faith perspective’. She also provocatively calls for ‘gender jihad’, which means seeking the full inclusion of women in all aspects of Muslim thought and praxis.

Authors argue that a patriarchal system that subordinates women is not true to Islam (Fawzi 1994, Wadud 2006). Some emphasise how human rights and Islam are complementary (Chase and Alaug, 2004). As Mernissi also explains: ‘Muslim men who wish to live democratically would have no difficulty in unearthing from the past, Muslim women who were the partners in the game of politics’ (1996:89). Role models from Islamic history include the Prophet Mohammed’s first wide Khadiha\textsuperscript{13} and the Queen of Sheba.

\textsuperscript{13} Khadiya was older than her husband and described as a forceful character (Walters 2005).
In the Yemeni context, some women’s activists reference Islam explicitly but many do not. Some may largely take ‘Islamic embeddedness for granted’ (Badran 1998:500). Since Islamic frames of reference may confer greater legitimacy than secular approaches, they are sometimes considered a more effective method of pursuing women’s rights (Pruzan-Jørgensen).14

Rather than aspiring to the same rights as men, most Islamic women’s activists see the sexes as having different yet complementary roles, possibilities and obligations (Pruzan-Jørgensen 2012). For some women activists within Islah, equality means ‘equity in the free exercise of differently delimited rights’ (Yadav 2010:2). This connects to concepts of ‘piety,’ and with the notion that ‘women activists make no claim of temporal equality, but neither do they accept claims of women’s inferiority or justify their exclusion from public work’ (Yadav 2010:24).

3.4 Struggles and Strategies of Women’s Movements

‘Women’s political organisation and activities differ in strategy and ideology in the breadth of their issue concerns, in their degree of self-containment, in the directness with which they approach women’s problems as political problems, and political problems as government problems’ (Sapiro in Philips 1998:178).

For over three decades, studies of female activism have emphasised its distinctive and varied character (Bassnett: 1986).15 The range of movements include: activities seeking to minimise difference between the sexes and those seeking greater recognition of

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14 It risks excluding secular and non-Muslim minorities, of which there are very few in Yemen.
15 See Molyneux (1998) for a thorough introduction to the historical study of women’s movements within political science and development disciplines. See Paidar (1995) for an examination of the role of women in the Iranian revolution.
gender differences in order to enhance women’s position in society (Molyneux 1998). Common criticisms of women’s movements are: a lack of conceptual clarity, fragmentation, personality driven styles of leadership and failing to be intergenerational or supportive of emerging leadership (Adeleye-Fayemi, Facio, Criquillion, Fransisco 2004).

Kerr (2004) critiques the tendency for women’s discourses to become institutional and thematic silos. This is commonly the case with development and human rights approaches. While a shared vision is something to be strived for, a unified movement is not necessarily beneficial (Afkhami (2004). Criquillion (2004) weighs the pros and cons of unity, noting how internal conflict destroys credibility. Yet a huge amount of energy is often wasted resolving differences for the sake of unity and at the expense of other activities. Being part of a supportive community or an alliance, on the other hand, often gives women confidence (Walters 2005).

Kerr (2004) and Molyneux (1998) argue that solutions should ideally focus on identifying strategies for effective social and political transformation that tackle institutional patriarchal cultures - the ‘real strategic gender interests’ - rather than spending more effort on producing short-term and technical outputs. A similar critique is applied to the ‘gender mainstreaming’ approach, which risks depoliticising rights and becoming a technical exercise at the expense of the original intent (Griffin and Msimang 2004).

16 These include women seeking to reclaim a ‘traditional’ place in the private sphere (Molyneux 1998).
17 ‘Gender mainstreaming perspective is the process of assessing the implications for women and men in any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes.’ (ECOSOC 1977)
3.5 Participation is Important for Development and in Transitional Periods

‘Shrinking gender differences in voice and agency within society’ is a key priority area identified in the 2012 World Development Report (WDR).

The necessity for women to take part in the decisions that affect their lives is often the justification for increasing women’s participation in public life, (Afkhami 2004). However, there are multiple other benefits at social, political and economic levels. For example, demographic pressures can be partially addressed by giving women the opportunity to work for economic and political independence (Mernissi, 1996). In countries with greater women’s participation in community affairs, there has been a decline in birth rates (ibid). Increasing women’s agency also positively impacts families and society in general (World Bank 2012). In addition, ‘women’s involvement in decision-making contributes to redefining political priorities, placing issues on the political agenda which address women’s gender-specific concerns, values and experiences’ (Adeleye-Fayemi, 2004:42).

Seen in reverse, ‘The exclusion of women from government restricts their ability to gain equal access to those [human development] gains and limits the effectiveness of policies and programs designed to address these gaps’ (Yadav 2009:38).

At a more basic level, gender equality makes ‘smart economics’, according to the World Bank (2006). Women’s engagement in public life is part of a wider battle to diminish gender discrimination and improve other development outcomes. Increases in women’s individual and collective agency can also benefit men (Ibid). ‘Disempowerment’ of Yemeni women was identified in the latest UN Common Country Assessment as one of the four underlying reasons for lack of development in Yemen (Waddah 2012). According to Oxfam, the lack of coordination between national institutions, weak capacity and a fragmented women’s movement have all contributed to there being little progress on women’s issues and on poverty reduction more widely (2003).
In all situations of major political and social transition, women’s participation is invaluable, or, as Adeleye-Fayemi remarks - ‘No society can rejuvenate itself without the active participation of women’ (2004:47).

3.6 Western Preconceptions

Fawzi (1994) explains how essentialising and romanticising a vastly heterogeneous population as entirely secluded from public life has never had much relevance for women in the Arab world. Women’s influence on decision-making and society can easily escape Western frames (O’Barr 1984). In her ethnography of Yemeni women in tribal areas, Maklouf (1979) described how women’s decision-making activities in the private sphere affected the public domain. Such nuances may be opaque to Western eyes.

At a general level, there is increasing recognition that women have diverse gender interests and ideas about the social arrangements that would best suit them (Kandiyoti 1991, Fawzi, Kerr and Bracke 2004). In fact, the feminist strategy, ‘intersectionality’ was developed to reflect the ‘multidimensionality’ of women’s experiences (Crenshaw, 1989:139, in Nash 2008:2). However, Western feminists are often reported as struggling to recognise refutation of patriarchy when it is voiced in languages other than their own, or within Islamist frameworks (Kandiyoti 1991, Mernissi 1996).

Some groups, including the Islah party in Yemen, have argued that the conflict between the sexes is a Western import (Molyneux 1995). Others, such as prominent feminist, Amina Wadud, assert that Western feminism emerged without concern for Muslim women; that it often views biblical traditions as ‘beyond redemption’. It is therefore irrelevant to Islamic women’s activism, she explains (2006).
3.7 Universal Rights?

Non-Western activists frequently debate the cultural authenticity of many of the attempts to improve the status of women (Sabbah 2007). Conversely, others argue since all people stand up to injustice any Western non-Western distinction is simply misleading (Mernissi 1996, Malik 2012). However, as Akhhami (2004) explains, whether or not there is an underlying framework of universal rights in the mind of women’s activists, the need to understand their activism within a specific cultural and political context is of the utmost importance.

Many activists (Western and non-Western) use the universality of human rights as a framework for activism. Where it is upheld, differences between women can be seen to reflect the varying ways they experience and affirm those rights (Bunch 2001). According to cultural relativists however: ‘given our understanding that the experience of gender and disempowerment is specific to culture and location, we can no longer assume the existence of certain ‘universal’ moral principles that guide our framework’ (Dhanraj 2004:93). With this in mind, Yadav (2010) argues women may be working towards goals that ‘we may not recognise as ‘advancing’ them as women’.

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18 Mernissi (1996) explains that viewing feminism as intrinsically Western implies that ‘the Arab woman is a semi-idiotic submissive subhuman who bathes happily in patriarchally organised degradation and institutionalised deprivation’ (1996:13).
4. Key Concepts: Perspectives and Definitions

There are a number of recurrent concepts used throughout this study. My interpretations are described below:

**Gender:** Borrowing from the World Bank (2012), I define gender as referring to: ‘The social, behavioral, and cultural attributes, expectations, and norms associated with being a woman or a man’ (World Bank 2012). It is a sensitive word in much of Yemen.

**Gender Equality – Gender Equity:** ‘Equality’ is a relative concept (Sullivan 1992). It is often defined as how gender determines relations between men and women ‘and the resulting power between them’ (World Bank Online). Authors writing on Yemen often use the term ‘gender equality’, though ‘gender equity’ is, I contend, often preferable.

**Political Participation:** can be defined taking part in the preparation and implementation of public policies (Parry, Moser, Day 1992).

**Public Participation:** means ‘to involve those who are affected by a decision in the decision-making process (International Association for Public Participation).

**Public Sphere:** This study uses a broad definition including: the political sphere, labour sector, civil society and even the private sphere – where an act intentionally impacts the public sphere. Borrowing from Yadav (2010), the ‘publicness’ of an act is measured by intent and effects, not by its spatiality. In Yemen, many community level political decisions are made in the private sphere (Makluof 1979).

**Tradition and Modernity:** The tensions between a highly traditional society and the desire to extend women’s rights are particularly marked in Yemen. Notions of development and modernity have at times been conflicting (De Regt 2009). Indeed, the
The concept of modernisation is hugely contested. Some academics associate the process of ‘modernity’ with increased alternatives for action and potential for self-fulfilment, (Maklouf 1979). ‘Modernity’ is however a relative concept with no inevitable consequence.

**Universality of Rights:** The universality of Human rights are contested, particularly on the grounds of moral relativism and as serving Western interests. I find it most relevant in the Yemeni context to understand the universal aspirations for freedom through a relativist perspective in which the voices of rural and urban women take primary place in defining the terms of ‘rights’, ‘equity’ and ‘equality’. This in no way discredits Yemeni organisations working within a human rights framework.

**Women’s Activism:** The ideological starting points for Yemeni women’s activism vary, as do their strategies for realising their goals. They do not all fit neatly into typically Western definitions of ‘feminism’, another controversial term. I preference the term ‘women’s activism’ which can encompass secular and Islamic approaches and the spectrum of relativist to universalist understandings of ‘rights’.

**Women’s Movements:** Following Molyneux (1998), a women’s movement comprises a number of small-scale associations or the ‘collective action’ of a larger number of individuals.
5. Background

5.1 The 2011 Uprising and its Aftermath

On 15 January 2011, a day after Aine el-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia fled the country, Twakkul Karman, director of an organisation devoted to protecting female journalists, gathered a group of friends in the square in front of Sana’a University (Filkins 2011).19 Inspired by the protests sweeping across a number of Arab countries, the crowd soon swelled into the hundreds in what became ‘Change Square’. Initially, the protestors were educated urban middle-class youth, but over time there grew an unprecedented mixture that some people saw as ‘a paradise of diversity’ (Mothana 2011). After Karman’s high-

19 Karman has since been described as ‘the mother of revolution’.
profile arrest and the killing of ten protestors by police in Aden, levels of participation in the uprisings surged (Filkins 2011).

Though the demands of the uprising, or ‘pro-democracy movement’, were not clearly articulated, in essence it called for an end to the anti-democratic rule of the Saleh regime and its accompanying corruption (Save the Children 2011). The vast majority of the population had grown tired of continued ‘political and economic disenfranchisement’ (Aryani 2011).20

Saleh stepped down on 23 November 2011, after a 33-year rule and the National Reconciliation Government was established in early December 2011. Former vice-president Abd Rabbuh Mansur Al-Hadi was the uncontested consensus candidate in presidential elections in February 2012. During the current transitional phase the government is expected to address issues of transitional justice and launch an ‘all-inclusive’ National Dialogue Conference with the aim of preparing a new constitution and new election laws before February 2014 (International Crisis Group 2012).

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20 While events elsewhere in the region certainly impacted the scale and persistency of the demonstrations in Sana’a, the grievances and protests were not new, having begun in 2007. There are multiple protracted conflicts in Yemen that predate the 2011 revolution but explain some of the root causes to the events that took place. In addition to a growing southern separatist movement, there is the resurgence of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and a tribal secessionist movement in the north. Conflict over arable land and water is also escalating in Yemen as the population swells and increasing numbers of people slip deeper into poverty. Inequity in the distribution of resources, particularly access to basic services and development opportunities, provokes many local-level conflicts and, importantly, the grievances that fuelled the mass uprising in 2011 (Filkins 2011).
5.2 Yemen: Development and Gender Indices

It is ironic that an area that was known as "Arabia Felix" in Roman Times, because of its fecundity, is today one of the poorest countries in the world and the poorest country in the Middle East and North Africa (Mohsen 2012). It currently ranks 154 out of 177 countries in the United Nations Human Development Index (UNDP 2011) and is eighth in the failed state index (UNFP 2012). There is a 'prevailing climate of lawlessness,' (Prados and Sharp 2007) and a 'neo-patrimonial style of rule' (Alley 2010:392). As Nouiehad (2012) explains, 'behind the façade of democratic institutions, political parties and elections lies a complex system of tribal, religious and regional affiliations that have long prevented the emergence of a strong state' (Ibid).

The immediate impact of the 2011 protests stressed the fragile stability of the country and deepened the humanitarian crisis (World Bank 2012). Yemen is highly dependent on international markets for food. Consequently, the global rise in food prices, added to the ongoing fuel crisis, power outages and protracted conflicts have had devastating consequences. The Yemeni government recently said it needs $11.9bn to help fight the food and security crisis.

Reports in August 2012 showed half the population were food insecure, five million severely food insecure and almost half of children younger than five chronically malnourished (International Federation of the Red Crescent 2012). Natural resources are fast disappearing, and income from oil is expected to cease by 2017 (World Bank 2007). Sana’a may also be the first capital city to run out of water (Boucek 2009).

21 Yemen is characterised by a 'neo-patrimonial' as opposed to sultanate style of rule (Alley 2010).
22 An indication of its dire need is that it is to receive $6.4bn (£4bn) in global aid from the World Bank ‘to help stabilise the impoverished nation as it battles food shortages and post-Arab Spring unrest.’ (BBC 2012)
The population is just under 25 million and is predicted to double by 2035 (World Bank 2012). Almost half the population is under the age of 15 (Care 2008). There are also 550,000 refugees, mostly from Somalia and Ethiopia. (OCHA 2012).

Men on average receive 5.9 years of education while women receive 1.3 years (World Bank 2012). There appears to be some improvement in girls' education, with increasing acceptance of mixed education (Care 2008). Estimates in 2007 showed literacy rates among adult women at 40% in urban areas and 74% in suburban areas, though literacy is notoriously difficult to quantify. Population growth and low levels of education contribute to high unemployment rates (Care 2008), approximated at 53% for 15-24 year olds and 44% among 25-59 year olds (UN Women 2011).

Since 2006, Yemen has ranked last in the Gender Gap Index, a framework used by the World Economic Forum (Hausmann 2011). In 2011, out of 135 countries, it was in the bottom five countries for gender disparity in economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment and political empowerment. Women represented just 0.6% of the formal labour force in 2006 (World Bank 2012). They do 70% of the agricultural work (Ghanem 2008), but only 7% are remunerated for their efforts (IFES 2010). The prevalence of child marriage has decreased in recent decades, but is still high. 14% of girls marry before reaching fifteen years of age, and over half before their eighteenth birthday (UNICEF 2006). About 70% of the population have no access to healthcare services (Yemen Post 2012).

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Data reported in UN Women 2011 Country Assessment.
5.3 Women in Yemen

‘There is a bad phrase, which is, ‘woman has to stay in her house, from house of her father to house of her husband to the grave.’

(Twakkul Karman speaking at Chatham House December 2011)

Gender relations in Yemen vary significantly according to region, class and tradition (Care 2005). In more traditional areas, women are often seen as completely dependent on their husband or male relatives for protection. Likewise in urban areas, women are unable to travel alone or without the permission of a male relative, so as to protect family honour. Where a woman has strong familial support however, she is able to do things that society does not easily accept (Paluch 2001). Also, women from the urban upper classes tend to have more potential for participating than many men in the country (Care 2005). Yet due to the intensely patriarchal social system the vast majority of women are associated with reproductive roles and domestic or agricultural work (Sabbagh 2007). Their unequal access to basic services and education further increases vulnerability to poverty.

The influence of austere forms of Islam on society, largely imported from Saudi Arabia, has increased in recent decades. Women who grew up in cities in the former socialist south or before Saleh came to power feel the changes acutely, as an activist described (I-17):

‘My generation is the ex-regime generation; we were raised during the 33 years [of Saleh’s rule]. We were in Taiz and my father used to bring home dresses for my eldest sister and she would go out wearing them without an abaya.24 Things have drastically changed.’

24 An abaya is a loose black robe from head to toe.
5.4 Recent Participation in Public Life

Women’s engagement in public life and freedoms have always varied from region to region. Over the last two decades, the influence of political Islam and Wahhabi traditions have grown. A 2011 survey by Gallup found that 68% of women and 53% of men believed women should have the same legal rights as men (Gallup 2012). As the table below shows, this is the lowest percentage among men of five other Arab countries and the second lowest among women, after Libya.

Table 2: Views on giving equal rights to women

Do you agree with the following statement? ‘Women and men should have equal legal rights?’ (% Agree)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Men (%)</th>
<th>Women (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libya</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gallup survey (2012:7)

25 Public life has a broad definition in the context of this study and includes civic and political participation.
26 Sheila Carapico describes un-veiled women in northern tribal areas as being much more assertive than women from some towns in the more politically liberal South.
27 The expulsion of almost one million Yemeni workers from the Gulf in 1990 contributed to the increase of Wahhabi traditions in Yemen.
28 The Gallup 2012 report used data collected from 6,000 interviews conducted between February 2009 and July 2011, 2,000 of which took place during the uprising when arguably women and men had gained a new freedom of speech. As such, it is only slightly indicative of the societal changes. It was a large and countrywide poll.
29 Data was collected between 2009 and 2011. * Denotes data collected 2010
In terms of the formal economy, women’s participation is still very low. The following table shows a high intolerance towards professional women in 2010. The likelihood of respondents answering according to social orthodoxy however must be noted. In urban areas, women’s labour force participation has been rising for fifteen years and rural women play crucial public roles in their local communities. Both of these indicators are however usually overlooked.30

Table 3: Views on women in social and professional roles

Percent who strongly / somewhat oppose women in social & professional roles, by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Men (n=508)</th>
<th>Women (n=1,993)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women traveling without a “mahram” (male relative escort)</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women working in tourism sector</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women in army</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women working in national security</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(IFES survey, 2011:7)31

Patriarchal culture is entrenched in the work place (Ghanem 2008). According to the Yemen Polling Centre 2010 report, on average, 67.3% of men and 82% of women would accept a job where their superior was female. During my interviews, a female civil servant described how a large proportion of business is done at qat chews, which are male-only affairs (I-6). She also added:

30 A Yemeni woman (I-5) explained that women from mountainous tribal areas have historically participated more than their urban sisters, particularly in the battlefield as communities are smaller and rely on all of their population for survival. When men have moved to cities for work or are injured in combat, rural women have taken on a lot of their responsibilities. And in recent decades, there has been a shift to double-income families in upper-middle class urban areas, which has increased the number of women in the labour force.

31 Data collected throughout Yemen in June 2010
‘I often hear the phrase ‘if a woman has the qualifications, she can get the job’. This is ridiculous not only because there are a lot of skilled woman but because Yemen has illiterate people in parliament.’

Negative attitudes towards women in professional roles are particularly acute where women interact with men. One interviewee, a female doctor, described how she was ostracised when men from the town presented a petition to the local Imam requesting she be removed from an emergency room where she treated both sexes. Seeking advice from a senior academic at Sana’a University on her professional aspirations, she was told there was no future in Yemen for a female forensic doctor and that she should not pursue any further education. She described how she felt (I-12):

‘Being told you can’t do what you want to do is very frustrating. I feel like I’m a dead person just floating. I am equal to men. Women have the right to dream, to work, to wear what we want, to travel.’

5.5 Participation and Representation in Political Life

‘The fundamental patriarchalism that is evident in literacy rate differentials and sex ratio is also found at high levels of government.’ (Fish 2002:28)

Women’s representation in political decision-making bodies is extremely low (Badran 1998). Only 14.5% of employees in the president’s office were women in 2007 (Ministry of Planning 2007), and in 2010 there was still just one female member in the 300-strong parliament (UN Women 2005). There have been no female judges since unification in 1990 (Ghanem 2008). ‘The parties welcome women as voters, but either explicitly reject or ignore them as candidates’ (Yadav 2009:42). Female candidates have reported discrimination during the registration and campaigning processes (Chatham House 2011). Against this there has been an increase in public awareness about the presence of women in political life (Yemen Polling Centre (YPC) 2010).

The numbers of women turning out to vote has also increased in recent years and women’s engagement in elections has been actively encouraged since the 1993
parliamentary elections. In the 2003 parliamentary and council elections, 42% of registered voters were women and out of a total of 1,396 candidates, there were eleven women, of whom only one was successful. This points to the gap between fairly ‘progressive legislation, supported by the work of the women’s movements, and the reality of Yemeni society’s very negative view of women, consecrated by the tribe and its value system’ (IDEA 2005:13). The table below highlights continuing opposition to women’s political participation and the specific political roles that are more or less objectionable.

Table 4: View on women in political roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent who strongly/somewhat oppose women in political roles, by gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women in political protests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women work on candidate campaign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women as govt ministers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women members of parliament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women member of political party</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

IFES survey (2011:8)  

The attitudes this table reflects are partially rooted in the widespread belief that women have insufficient capacity to participate in public life (Freedom House 2010). A 2010 poll by Yemen Polling Centre (YPC) substantiates this view, and details other reasons for not supporting women’s political participation, as the following table below shows.

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32 Data collected throughout Yemen in June 2010
Table 5: Reasons for not supporting women’s political participation (non-supporters)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religious reasons</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social reasons (customs and traditions)</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>20.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women are incompetent</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>31.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family’s responsibility is more important</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>25.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not know</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

YPC (2010:30)\(^{33}\)

In general, women continue to be less politically active than men (IFES 2010). Only 2% of women have ever expressed a view on a political or social issue through an activity such as a protest or calling a radio station (IFES 2010). Yet, in spite of the lack of an enabling environment, the number of female activists engaging in the political sphere is growing. The best known of them usually hail from major cities and are highly educated and professional. Some act from within political parties and others are independent. A number of interviewees argued that all women participating in the protest movement should also be counted as political activists, though they disagreed whether they are necessarily women’s activists too. Many women who challenge their traditional role in society or criticise the government become victims of media smear campaigns.\(^{34}\) A report by UN Women in 2011 found that activists were routinely intimidated and detained without justification.

The major opposition party, Islah,\(^{35}\) has had relatively more women supporters and women in senior decision-making bodies than most other parties, though none holding powerful positions. A ‘Women’s Sector’ within the party has been described as more consumed with recruitment and mobilisation than issues of concern to women (Clark and

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\(^{33}\) Data collected in 2010

\(^{34}\) Article 19, (2008) describes articles that claim of women of being spies, lesbian or guilty of infidelity and apostasy so as to damage her reputation.

\(^{35}\) ‘The Yemeni Congregation for Reform’ is an Islamist party containing various groups including the Muslim Brotherhood.
Schwedler 2003).36 At times Islah has objected to women’s candidacy on ideological grounds, as it would give women authority over men (Yadav 2009, 2010).37 For this reason, there is deep cynicism among some women’s activists about Islah’s commitment to women’s inclusion. The picture is blurred, with deep fissures within Islah resulting in considerable support for women from progressive Muslim Brothers and disapproval from hardliners (I-16).

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36 Yadav (2010) claims, however, that women within Islah have developed leadership capacity, which they are using to enhance their standing in the party. Moreover, she explains that women within Islah have also been central to shaping the national debate on gender and women’s participation. The successes of Nobel Peace Laureate Twakkul Karman and the popularity of Amat al-Salam Raja, the head of Islah’s Women’s Directorate, are by no means typical however.

37 This is also corroborated by a 2005 report by IDEA highlighting a trend of opposition from within Islamic jurisprudence to women holding public positions.
6. Women’s participation

Women attend a protest against President Saleh in Taiz, April 2011.
Photo Credit: Khaled Abdullah

6.1 Introduction to Key Players

The Women’s National Committee (WNC), created in 1996, is the main government body concerned with women’s affairs (Haddash 2012). The WNC expresses state policy regarding women and takes the lead in preparing National Gender Strategies. Every government ministry has a women’s department, all of which are reported to be under-resourced and primarily symbolic (Cordes 2012). Most political parties also have women’s divisions. Some are considered to be on a tight leash in cross-party discussions and others given more autonomy.

The best-known women’s organization is the Yemeni Women’s Union (YWU), established in 1990. It is sometimes considered a rival to the WNC. It has a wide network of branches throughout the country and implements projects that ‘empower and defend the rights of

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38 The current Strategy is for the years 2006-2015 and was developed in partnership with the UN.
women,’ as enshrined in international frameworks and Islam (YWU 2012). Its independence from the government is disputed. Some interviewees describe it as ‘quasi-independent’ and ‘managed by a traditional elite.’

In addition, there are many NGOs and prominent independent activists, community leaders and journalists who together comprise the ‘women’s movement’. A handful of them have been on the national and international radar for years. Others became more widely known as a result of their involvement in the 2011 protest movement. In political circles however, the group of active women is extremely small.39

According to some interviewees, there is a latent activism among the female population, which makes all women ‘key players’ in the women’s movement. A young woman remarked (I-18): ‘I want to change the situation of women, every woman wants to change it,’ and according to another, (I-17): ‘Yemeni women have to be activists. We have to fight everyday, to be recognised by our families. We don’t choose this … it is about being a human being.’ What became clear from the interviews is that woman share a common desire for greater freedom but have different ideas of what this means. For example, some feel the choice to exercise greater freedoms is most important while others focus on the actual barriers they want to overcome.40

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39 During the interviews, the same women were mentioned over and over indicating just how small the group is.
40 For example, some but not all women felt that rights are externally bestowed through international frameworks.
6.2 Participation in the Uprising

Many Yemeni women broke social taboos and traditional perceptions of their roles by joining the public protests in 2011 (Ghazaryan 2012). They were ‘leading figures’ and took on ‘leading roles’ during the revolution. Women mobilised protestors, camped out in the ‘Change Squares’, shielded male demonstrators (UN Women 2011), contributed to media coverage and gave speeches. They also formed committees and delivered food and medical care. In tents in the Change Square in Sana’a, they conducted symposiums on subjects such as transitional justice (Al-Ansi 2012). While all this was happening, there were also large numbers of women who were not participating, either because they were unable, or through opposition to the approach or demands of the protesters themselves.

It is difficult to gauge, but estimates show a fifth of the street protestors were women (Saferworld 2012). They turned out from many different places and parts of society to show that persistent corruption and exclusion affected them too. Some women demonstrated with the permission of their families, others without. They were, for the most past, warmly received and stood beside men in the squares. ‘Women were protecting the revolution in my opinion. They didn’t want the men and youth to go home, they wanted them to continue what they had started,’ stated one female activist (I-17).

In rural areas where women were unable to travel the long distances to the cities, they participated locally, going to nearby demonstrations to protect their brothers and sons. They also gave speeches and supplied food (I-5). Where conservative practice prevented

41 Journalist Maysaa Shuja al Deen speaking at a Chatham House event, 2012
42 Whether or not they supported the protests according to Saferworld (2012), all women were proud of women’s participation.
43 For a thorough description of the various motivations for and ways in which women protested, see Saferworld 2012
44 One interviewee described the experience. ‘WATAN organized a [the first] women’s demonstration and we marched to the square to join the men. We were so well received when we got there. I will never forget it. Yemeni society is so welcoming to women.’ (Suha Bashren 2012).
women from attending protests they contributed differently, by, for example, writing petitions. Haddad (2012) describes how in each area women ‘demonstrated a remarkable ability to carve out spaces of resistance, defying harassment and utilising small openings to make their voices heard.’

Saleh’s regime and some of the traditional Islamic oppositional groups accused women of un-Islamic behaviour, appealing to religious sensitivities in Yemeni society. Many commentators suggest they did so not because of their horror at the sexes mixing, but as a means of undermining and discrediting the protest movement. While accounts differ, it appears that the Islamist women protestors responded to this criticism and the issue blew out of proportion (I-1). A fence was then erected to segregate men and women. Some female protestors left the demonstrations, feeling manipulated by various political groups (Catholic Online 2012). Religious attacks on female protestors, some of a violent nature, increased during the uprising. Women were also threatened, lambasted in the media and jailed for their activities.

Only one statement of women’s demands was released during the protests. Women differed on the changes they would like to see happen (Fidh 2011). Some activists said women expected that greater democracy would enable them to participate equally in

45 According to Haddad, women from Sa’ada gathered in schools to pen anonymous letters to corrupt local officials (2012).
46 Rahma Hugaira, president of Yemen's Media Women, reported this event saying: ‘Traditional gender segregation had insinuated itself into the center of the revolt from the Islamic groups who put a fence around them.’
47 Saferworld (2012) report that women complained of being public harassed by the same parties that at other times in the protest were encouraging their participation.
48 Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, (online).
49 WATAN coalition circulated a charter for women and organised a women’s march (Interview with Suha Bashren 2012). It was criticised in a report by Saferworld (2012) for focusing on women’s participation rather than concrete issues facing women.
50 A view corroborated by the NGO Saferworld: ‘Women see their participation as part of wider struggle against broader systems of oppression and in support of justice and equality for all Yemeni citizens’ (Saferworld 2012:i).
public life. As it developed, the uprising’s agenda was co-opted with the various interests and messages of different sections of the population. In this context, the prominence of the women’s agenda rose, (and later fell). Twakkul Karman commented: ‘We have led two revolutions - one against Ali Saleh’s regime and one against bad customs’ (Shackle 2012).

The energy and hope among women during the uprising and in the days after Saleh stepped down was palpable. Their central role in the revolution amounted to an empowered ‘awakening’ about their rights and the belief that things could change for them (Kimball 2012). As described by journalists at the time, Yemen ‘often forgets that it is their wives, daughters, mothers and sisters who are the very foundations of society. Yemen woke up to discover this past year the treasures it was carrying’ (Asa’ad and Onassis 2012).

The vast majority of English language media coverage described women’s participation as ‘a break-through’. But interviewees saw it differently. ‘A miracle didn’t happen overnight’ a man said (I-4. Another activist commented (I-16): ‘I am not surprised that women were participating in the revolution. I have seen men and women working together before.’ And a third said: ‘It is a misconception that women were locked in their houses until the revolution, a crow called and they all ran out.’

51 Interview with Yemeni woman journalist and lawyer, (I-5)
52 Many women see women’s role in the revolution as a huge step forward for women generally in public life. Whether this was a break through is disputed. Women’s engagement in political and public life did not begin with the revolution and is often, perhaps, underestimated.
6.3 Participation After The Uprising

6.3.1 Participation in transitional institutions

Despite reservations among much of the population about the terms of Saleh’s exit, unprecedented numbers of women turned out for the uncontested election of President Hadi. Now in its second phase, the transitional agreement involves electing one body to oversee preparations for a National Dialogue and establishing another to frame the new constitution.\(^{53}\)

Six out of twenty-five people on the key technical committee are women, a higher number than was expected. The women involved are described as strong, independent activists within their communities \((I-8)\). But some commentators are sanguine, viewing their participation as token and pointing out that women’s issues appear to have slipped down the agenda \((I-6)\).

6.3.2 Participation at the government level

Although the dynamics of women’s participation in political life have changed since the revolution, not least the presence of women on the committees of the transitional processes, the numbers of women in senior political positions have not. There is one female member of parliament out of 300, two women in the upper house out of 111, and one ambassador alongside 56 men. The Women’s National Committee is seen to have little power, being overly dependent on personalities. There are still no women in senior leadership positions in the major political parties. There is some talk of the need for a

\[^{53}\text{Saferworld (2012:12) found out that most women agree the constitution should focus on ‘justice, equality and the provision of social services’ but differ about whether or not it should be based on the Quran or ‘guarantee a secular state’.}^\]
'wholesale cultural revolution’ (Coleman 2012).54

6.3.3 Participation in the main opposition party: Islah

A number of women outside of the NGO scene view Islah with considerable suspicion.55 The high-profile relationship between Islah and Twakkul Karman, which is sometimes cast as being ‘mutually dependent,’ is an unusual case.

A male women’s activist (I-10) explained that Islah has a policy to push women as voters first and will later engage them on women’s development issues. The rationale is that it takes a very long time to change the ideas of party members. Another interviewee added that it is in Islah’s interest to show they are moderates (I-15). The internal leadership seems split on the issue of women’s inclusion and there are competing views on whether the hardliners or liberals have the upper hand at present.

6.3.4 Participation in new political parties

There has been a surge in political groups registering as religious and secular parties in recent months, many of which are described as being more inclusive to women than the older parties.56 In a few cases, women have co-founded the party and are co-managing it. The Justice and Development Party has, unusually, no women’s division, arguing that there should be no differentiation between the sexes. Some people are sceptical of party claims of support for women and are reserving judgment until more women are holding senior positions.

54 Isabel Coleman, Council on Foreign Relations speaking to Akl, Aida of Voice of America, 2012. Saferworld found the same view from their consultations with women protestors: ‘Protestors argue …that Yemeni women cannot be free unless the wider oppression of the state and the culture over the people is abolished’ (Saferworld 2012:15).

55 Zabara, head of the Centre for International Development and Gender at Sana’a University, argued that Islah misunderstand the meaning of the word gender and have been spreading concern among their supporters that is prohibited according to Islam and part of a Western effort to infiltrate the society with their customs. (Cordes 2012).

56 See Al-Ariqi July 2012 for an overview of the relationship of new parties to women.
6.3.5 Participation of young and rural women

Regional conferences have been held on key issues for the National Dialogue, mostly sponsored by the ‘Friends of Yemen Group’.\footnote{The Friends of Yemen Group comprises key Gulf countries, the G8 and intergovernmental organizations. It has a ‘comprehensive approach’ hoping to the Yemeni government tackle underlying issues in the country as well as short-term challenges.} Representatives of NGO and youth groups\footnote{The youth were reported to have frequently announced that they want to be observers of the transitional government and assess how their demands and issues are being addressed, rather than assume political positions. (Yemen Fox, 2012)} have been invited to some of these events, in addition to the niche ‘elite’ group of ever present politically affiliated, urban women. Many of the younger activists regard this personality driven ‘old guard’ that dominate the women’s agenda as disconnected from the grassroots and the younger generations. While the ‘independent’ generation of established women’s activists are widely believed to hold popular legitimacy with political youth, their lack of party membership creates additional obstacles to becoming elected.\footnote{They are neither part of Saleh’s former party or the main oppositional group}

Reflecting on inclusion, a young woman activist, (I-13) who gained prominence during the uprising, observed:

‘The National Dialogue is trying really hard, but again it’s always the same people. I shouldn’t be invited every time. They need more people from rural areas. I wish [those invited] wouldn’t only represent themselves but represent others who are not at the table.’

Many interviewees agreed that leaders representing rural women’s interests, who are the majority, are missing from discussions. ‘The 75% of women in Yemen who live outside of Sana’a need to get their priorities heard,’ a young activist explained (I-13). ‘The exception is with the Islamists, who have a better grassroots relationship’ (I-13). When journalists have engaged them, rural women have proved to be very outspoken.\footnote{Journalists and NGOs have reported their surprise when rural women they assumed were thought were demure because of their traditional culture showed they were very vocal (I-1)}
would arguably help rural women become involved in finding political solutions to their needs *(I-13).*

6.3.6 Female participation at its worst: discord at the national conference on women

The high profile National Conference on Women was held in Sana’a in March 2012 to discuss women’s demands in the transitional period.61 Attended by civil society leaders from across the country, it was, however, dominated by the ‘old guard’. Pre-uprising agendas were on display throughout the various workshops, particularly among women with party affiliations, which made common ground harder to come by.62

Angry exchanges took place between the two largest women’s organisations - The Yemeni Women’s Union and the Women’s National Committee – reportedly because some women were for and others against the revolution and both were objecting to each other’s language.63 Whatever the case, the conflict was not about the agenda for development.

6.3.7 Participation, quota systems and token inclusion

A list of recommendations and demands for the transitional period did emerge from the conference however. One legal and political priority identified was a 30% quota for women in all committees related to the National Dialogue and in all state agencies.64 Yemenis interviewed agreed a quota system was a useful temporary solution in the current context.65 A larger survey reported that 45% of men and 59% of women

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61 Sponsored by foreign donors, the conference carried the slogan ‘Advocating for the rights and empowerment of women in light of the new changes.’
62 Pre-uprising agendas include marginalisation of the South, the demonization of Islah and the sectarian victimization of the Houthi women, explained a foreign NGO employee (I-7)
63 The reports describe scenes of women throwing shoes at one another across the room.
64 Minutes of Meeting with Donors following the March 2012 National Women’s Conference (shared by an interviewee).
65 There was disappointment that the quota was not 50%
supported a quota of 20-30 parliamentary seats for women (YPC 2010:31). Without quotas, activists doubt whether women are electable, or that parties will give more advanced positions to women. Considered a starting point by many, it is expected to provide a physical political presence for a larger number of women and the opportunity to develop female political leadership. Interestingly, who is elected matters little to some women just as long as the democratic process is strong. ‘This society just needs to see women in [the] political scene,’ an activist commented (I-17).

Opinions varied on the likelihood that the quota is adopted, let alone implemented. ‘30% won’t happen, but asking for these things was a step in the right direction’ said one female student (I-1). This is despite a number of parties approaching young women for membership since the start of the uprising in an attempt to increase their legitimacy in the eyes of the local population and international community.

‘Tokenism’ is a possible side effect of quotas. In the current system, the few that are ‘just hired to sit in parliament’ are not given ‘the staff or resources to do their job,’ a public sector employee explained (I-6). She also described her frustrating personal experience of the National Dialogue to demonstrate how official inclusion is only half of the battle in the context of a patriarchal political system. Referring to a preliminary session of the Southern Dialogue Committee, which will engage the National Dialogue, she said:

‘I was asked to participate because I speak English and because I am a woman. As soon as I started sharing my opinions I was shut down. I wasn’t even being particularly opinionated; I just had a personality.’

It is important to note that their gender does not guarantee that women in leadership positions or senior political appointments will pursue gender sensitive or liberal policies

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66 Interviewees spoke about the difficulties of assuming decision-making positions in the political parties. An additional irritation to many is the apparent discrepancy between the expected requirements for men and women holding political positions. ‘I often hear the phrase ‘if a woman has the qualifications, she can get the job. This is ridiculous not only because there are a lot of skilled woman but also because Yemen has illiterate people in parliament who we don’t question,’ a Yemeni female public servant explained (I-6).
(Yadav 2010). They may not have the ability or desire, (Clark and Schwedler 2003). Nevertheless, primary and secondary data point towards there being a greater chance of a pro-woman agenda with more women decision-makers. Without addressing root causes of inequality, however, women in positions of power may perpetuate or even reinforce the patriarchal culture (Afkhami 2004).

6.4 Participation After the Uprising: Prominent Women Activists and Their Approaches

Interviews detailed a number of different styles of activism and critiques of each. Patterns also emerged about how prominent women have arrived at their current positions and strong opinions about how they conduct themselves in public. The various approaches and characteristics of ‘prominent women,’ will be briefly described. Contrasting opinions about these approaches will then be presented. Given how close people interviewed are to some of these figures, I have avoided using names in this section, apart from some brief comments about the Minister of Human Rights, Hooria Mashour, and Nobel Laureate, Twakkul Karman.

6.4.1 Different approaches and the importance of patronage and protection

There appears to be a continuum in terms of the public behaviour of activists. At one extreme, women activists adhere strictly to traditional societal norms of a ‘respectable Yemeni Muslim woman.’ At the other, women break away from a traditional role through their activism. None of those interviewed, however, thought they should ignore Yemeni social norms and indeed many are very aware of the need “to play the game” to achieve their ends. A Yemeni civil servant (I-6) described the strategic importance of adherence to prescribed roles:

67 There is an additional irony that solutions are often focused on getting individual women into the very institutions that have been identified again and again as holding the roots of patriarchy (Msmimang 2004).
‘Women have to conform 100% to get into a decision-making position. The more respectable you are the more chance you have of gaining a platform and assuming a decision-making role. You need to have your husband in the meeting, a good family and children in order to be accepted. These are the cultural indicators for warming up to each other.’

A focus on maintaining respectability is common to almost all women activists. Related to the concept of “respectability” is the notion of “protection”. This is traditionally derived from family, but is strengthened by or, in some cases, partially interchanged with party allegiance, popularity or foreign support. For the vast majority of Yemeni women, however, including activists, their protection depends primarily upon meeting cultural expectations of their traditional role in society. Women activists appear to carefully navigate the boundaries of what is acceptable, while simultaneously seeking to subvert and extend those boundaries, (in a manner highly reminiscent of Kandiyotí’s (1988) ‘patriarchal bargain.’)68

Whether or not they are in the spotlight, ‘women are fearful - when stepping beyond the traditional role - of bringing shame to their family or putting themselves at risk,’ explained a young woman (I-1). The following anecdote also illustrate the issue of respectability (I-6):

‘I spoke to one minister about attending a meeting and he said it would be in the presence of tribesmen so I understood that it’s a room full of men chewing qat. I couldn’t go because of concern about my reputation and safety. … One female minister in the current government attended a meeting with businessmen but left once she realized she was the only woman.’69

68 Yadav (2009) also speaks about the importance of protection for activists, writing that the most successful examples of women becoming prominent is where they have ‘skillfully used their ties to the independent media and civil society organizations to weave networks of protection and support’ (2009:4).
69 While I do not think the principle is misleading, the experience of another interviewee contests the aspect of the story relating to tribal men. This woman said she felt more welcomed by tribesmen than urban men and was unafraid of sitting and chewing qat with them (I-18).
There is also the concern of a backlash if they push too hard. Women are frequently discredited in the media for violating the code of conduct by religious and cultural standards. They [the media] try to attack your power, attack your reputation. A lot of women cower. It’s a good tactic,’ one woman explained (I-13). Yet even those women who have fled the country to escape death warrants (fatwas) issued by religious authorities would not be considered ‘radical feminists’ by Western standards. In practice, however, very few people have really challenged their gender identity in recent years (I-2).

‘Radicals’ or activists, who reject more sensitive aspects of discrimination, are often criticised by fellow activists for being insensitive and their activities seen as counterproductive. ‘There are so many negative examples of women activists and their extreme liberalism’ one male activist observed (I-10). ‘They can advocate for people not to wear hijabs but don’t personally attack women who do’, said a woman about some liberal activists (I-16), ‘I have a problem with their approach not their agenda,’ she added.

Cultural sensitivity was generally seen as a strategic priority for activists and NGO employees. ‘You need to respect the community in order for them to respect you’ explained one woman (I-8). This means doing as others do, or avoiding particularly sensitive issues, two others observed (I-16, I-8). Another said (I-13), ‘I covered my face in Sa’ada, though I would never normally, because I didn’t want my face not being covered

70 The media is very tabloid driven has politically weakened numerous men and women.
71 The case of Olfa Hasan is particularly pertinent, as described by an interviewee (I-6): ‘Olfa was an outspoken Yemeni women, very qualified, smart and connected. She was an advocate for gender and women’s rights – devoting her life to this. People misunderstood something she said to the point that there was a price on her head. There was a rumour that she had said ‘a women should have the same rights as men which includes four husbands’. This was misinterpreted, she didn’t say that but became an easy target for Islah. She fled to the Netherlands for four years. She was fighting to create awareness and she was, very aggressively demoralized and sent away. She wasn’t exactly advocating for gay rights, but for many issues in the male domain such as speaking out against child marriage. One Salafi was offended by her being a woman and speaking out like that so she was targeted.’
to be the reason why they didn’t hear my message. It was more important to me that my message came across.

Religion is considered so sensitive that a few interviewees suggested women activists should focus on rights divorced from political and religious dimensions. On the other hand, many others believed using the language of Islam was an effective and well received way to communicate a gender message in Yemen.

6.4.2 The Relationship between controversial activism and protection

Women’s capacity to challenge their gender roles are partly governed by the protection they have. The graph below suggests that the need or reliance on protection increases in relation to the controversy of an approach or activity. What is considered controversial varies, as the two lines on the graph indicate.

Greater protection is needed moving up the vertical axis. There is also a greater risk of being discredited in the media or threatened by strict conservative forces in society. The horizontal axis represents a spectrum of activities and approaches aiming to limit or expand women’s freedoms. It extends far beyond the range of activities in Yemen in both directions. The spectrum reflected in this graph ranges from Islamic and culturally sensitive activities to the left, to ‘shocking’ and controversial activities to the right.

72 A northern governorate which is tribal and conservative.
73 In contrast, one woman explained that she is considerate of local customs but wearing the niqab (face covering) is a personal choice and that she would not until convinced of it.
6.4.3 Enabling factors: patronage and family support

As well as being of strategic importance for women’s activism, patronage and family support - and particularly encouragement for education - were seen as the greatest factors enabling women to participate in public life.74 ‘Those women who are shining are not independent of patronage, the rest are marginalized,’ one woman explained (I-6). ‘I have opportunities because of my values and family. They encouraged me to have an ambition’ a young woman remarked (I-17). In the work place, women described being dependent on leadership that is sympathetic to women’s rights in order to come into more

74 It must be noted that all the women engaged in this study are highly educated and most of them directly involved in women’s activism. While they all mentioned personal obstacles that result from their gender, they agreed without exception that the vast majority of Yemeni women meet far greater challenges on a daily basis.
senior decision-making positions. A female journalist spoke of another protecting factor (I-13):

‘The support I have from men in my immediate family protects me and enables me to be as outspoken as I am. Also, though, when you are more vocal and are writing, if you get attention and support, the government backs down a bit, [and] you become less of a target.’

This may be the case with Twakkul Karman: ‘If I speak like Karman I’ll get put in jail and no one will come and get me out. If Karman is put in jail, she’ll be out the next day,’ one woman said (I-12). Someone else suggested that (I-10): ‘without a Muslim brotherhood [Islah] and tribal affiliation, Karman would have been harmed by now.’ However, the role that political affiliation plays in facilitating women’s access to influential positions was disputed in the interviews.

6.4.4 Different characteristics

The following table lists some common and differing traits of the ten or eleven women most frequently discussed during interviews. The characteristics common to most prominent women activists (Column ‘Often True’) can be taken to be ‘enabling’ factors. Emergent issues are discussed below.

75 Asked whether she would be further along in her career if she was a man, one woman answered: ‘There is a huge culture of nepotism and cronyism that affects men and women. I have come into a more senior decision-making position in my place of work because the boss is a champion of women’s rights. There are now more women than men employed here.’

76 A male women’s activist (I-10) also felt that the Muslim Brotherhood is smart to keep her in front. ‘They get an income and maintain regional interest’ he said.

77 One woman (I-16) suggested that women who focus on the women’s agenda have as much of a chance of manoeuvring into an influential position as women who focus on party issues. This depends on them having strong personalities and determination, she added.

78 A fuller picture with numerous indicators could be derived from a larger number of in-person interviews.

79 This table is only indicative however and not everyone interviewed agreed there are ‘types’, as one woman explained (I-1): ‘Senior figures got to their position in spite of saying what they want and say. They have all been
Table 6: Traits of prominent women activists

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Often true</th>
<th>Sometimes true</th>
<th>Rarely true</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Urban</td>
<td>• Independent from political parties,</td>
<td>• High popularity with women in rural areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Highly educated</td>
<td>• Affiliation with an NGO</td>
<td>• Involved in the protest movement from very early on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• In the formal labour sector</td>
<td>• Strict adherence to traditional women’s role</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Powerful family</td>
<td>• Part of the newly emerged generation of activists</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Engaged in National Dialogue</td>
<td>• Have been attacked / slandered by national media</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Popularity with Western donors</td>
<td>• Participation in previous government</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Minister of Human Rights, Hooria Mashour, shows a number of the characteristics described above. She is often cited as someone whose strength of character rather than political affiliation has got her to where she is. ‘She doesn’t have particularly strong connections to leverage her into, or protect her in her position,’ one woman explained (I-6). Mashour nevertheless comes from a well-respected family who supported her education and pursuit of a career. She is considered mid-career, ‘new blood’ and not without her critics.80

6.4.5 Opinions about individuals and their approaches

Concern about the legitimacy of prominent women activists and leaders were raised throughout the interviews. A male activist questioned the popularity and relevance of certain activists (I-10): ‘Their members [Islah] are … much better than the crazy leftist

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80 One interviewee (I-2) said Mashour is more interested in receiving personal accolades than promoting human rights. Also, while most informants felt more positive about the newly emerging generation of activists, a couple of young women said they respected the older generation of women who had overcome personal hurdles and connections with the former regime.
women who have five friends each and the international community’s adoration.’ A few women are also accused of having vested interests in keeping the “status quo” so argue that change will bring about a loss of culture and tradition. Others are seen to have greater allegiance to their political party, or to building a family name, than to the protestors. One young woman complained (I-18): ‘I am in the educated class in society. That I don’t know her [prominent women activist] means that she is fighting for herself, not for me.’ On the other hand, women may be known only locally. Another common complaint was about self-marketing, as one man vented (I-10):

‘These women all like to market themselves. They say something crazy, they say it in a smart way that they can’t be sentenced to death but create a huge stink. It is a source of financial income. This is part of an individual game. They have to be charismatic. The West loves them. These smart female activists [give] us such a headache. You must distinguish between the natural progressive approach, which takes into account the full experience of women, and people playing small games for self-benefit.’

What constitutes provocation varies however. Acts that subvert or challenge the status quo are interpreted differently throughout society. Women may be considered strong in one setting but submissive in another. The need for different approaches and advocacy strategies for specific circumstances is therefore very great. They have limited geographic and social suitability. This is perhaps reflected by the gamut of leaders to have emerged in rural and urban areas during the past year.81

81 There are a number of Islamist women activists from rural areas, according to the interviews but are still unknown to much of the international community or organisations in Sana’a. In the city of Taiz, a couple of women have found widespread support among the local youth population since the beginning of the 2011 uprising. They are reported to have strong, politically independent voices and to resist some aspects of their traditional role as women.
One of the women to have surfaced as a leader from the protests is Bushra al Maqtari, a young journalist and outspoken activist based in the city of Taiz. She is reported to be enormously popular among young people and was considered by some interviewees as a ‘true revolutionary’ for her leadership in the uprising. While she is loosely affiliated with the Yemeni Socialist Party, she believes politicians should not preach from a distance (Jubran 2011). A fatwa was issued against her and some fellow journalists after writing that God was not present in a village where protestors had been badly treated (Maqtari in Spiegel 2012). She is considered too ‘radical’ and not sufficiently pious by many other activists and an ‘infidel’ among the religious establishment (Spiegel 2012).

What is clear is that activists are variously suited to different methods of activism. Some are more equipped for hard independent lobbying in the transitional processes, others operate best from within the political sphere, and some have most impact focusing at the rural areas, engaging, for example, sympathetic imams. However, another woman remarked (I-13): ‘We need all of them,’ and explained that:

“Looking at the whole political spectrum there aren’t many women in Yemen on the radical left. Radicals in Yemen are very much moderates for other places. The more the spectrum expands the better the middle is I think”.  

And what of the most celebrated woman activist - Twakkul Karman? One man observed (I-10):

‘I much prefer her. She speaks their [women’s] language. Looking outside of the window at my cousins on the farm who aren’t allowed to speak to me, for them it is hugely positive when they see a female taking the frontline on TV.’
Some urban educated interviewees felt very differently (I-6):

‘Karman is not my role model. We were almost breaking away from that. She was considered progressive for wearing coloured headscarves. This is not progressive for many Yemeni women.’

A foreign man (I-11) explained that although Karman is reported to have become more liberal in recent years, she comes from a religious background and is not going to reject her Islamic education.82 ‘She says that she has her limits,’ he explained, ‘She is happy to help push other [more liberal activists] into key positions. She will make a bargain with them.’ These limits are also seen as due to her relationship and dependence on Islah (albeit a mutually-beneficial agreement), which compromises her ability to impact the agenda.83 To some people’s minds, she will bring real progress, though it will not be recognised by the West, a foreign man predicted (I-11). Others emphasised how she has changed under the spotlight. ‘She is less active on the women’s agenda than before’ a woman said (I-15).84 Karman has suffered a number of personal attacks in recent months. To fulfil a political ambition you have to pay a price’ another activist warned (I-6).

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82 Tradition also plays a role. Like some other prominent women activists, Karman brings her husband to public events to protect the image of a respectable woman.

83 Tawakkul Karman is the daughter of a former minister and a member of Islah.

84 Jealously of fellow activists may also play a role in the criticisms Karman has faced in recent months.
7. Questions and Analysis

7.1 Principle Challenges and Barriers to Participation

There are multiple barriers and challenges to greater women’s participation in public life depending on individuals’ agendas for change; a number of which are shown in the diagram below. The subsequent comments draw on both the interviews and published literature. They relate to the experiences of the women interviewed and women more generally.

Diagram 1: Barriers to increased participation in public life

7.1.1 Development challenges

‘The worse the economic situation is, the more you hide your face and women’s rights decrease’, explained one Yemeni woman (I-6). There is no doubt that socio-economic
issues greatly impact women’s ability to participate in society. The majority of Yemeni women suffer acute poverty, a lack of education and limited access to healthcare. For the ten million Yemenis currently affected by famine, food is naturally their greatest priority. The recent hike in food prices has affected urban as well as rural areas, whilst intermittent electricity and other services are making everyday tasks more cumbersome. ‘The whole country is going through pain’, one woman said (I-18). High unemployment rates have led to a lack of ambition among young people and, a few suggested, a greater reliance on tribal laws.

### 7.1.2 Physical insecurity

Physical insecurity has increased restrictions on women, thereby curbing access to activities in the public sphere, as one woman in Aden explained (I-18): ‘before the revolution fathers would think once or twice about allowing them to go to college. Now they are too worried about their physical security and won’t let them go.’ According to Saferworld, growing insecurity is ‘the most immediate obstacle preventing women from making their voices heard’ (2012:14), and Oxfam reports that conflict is ‘limiting women’s roles in shaping Yemen’s future (2012:1).

### 7.1.3 Legal challenges and practice

Protecting their international image, modern nation-states have typically granted equal political rights before egalitarian family laws, flaunting the former as an indicator of democracy (Badran 1998). Governments pledge support and ratify partnership agreements conveniently ignoring their inherent contradictions.

Discriminatory laws and legal practice emerged as another common obstacle for Yemeni women. However, It is worth noting that the majority of the Yemeni men and women do not know whether the law gives them equal political rights (YPC 2010). Examples of

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85 The Yemen Polling Centre (YPC) reported that only 15.6% of the broad sample said that the law does not provide equal political rights to both sexes (2010:28).
legal challenges women face include: their description as ‘sisters of men’ in the constitution and the unequal Personal Status Laws. An arguably greater issue is actualising existing laws and rights. In many cases, the actions and opinions of lawmakers and leaders are often at odds with the laws and constitutions of the country (Adeleye-Fayemi 2004). Women’s programmes imbued with donor values of ‘gender equality’ are implemented in partnership with the government that has ongoing gender discrimination issues.

7.1.4 Patronage politics

A number of interviewees described the male-dominated patronage system as hindering women’s ability to participate. Patronage networks have, for a long time, been relied on to control political decision-making, political parties, the political reach of civil society organisations (CSOs), the national budget, the procurement system and the military-commercial complex (Cavatorta 2011, Alley 2010). The production and transfer of power largely continue to flow through these networks (Alley 2010). The revolution has done little to change this dynamic and Yemen still ranks high in corruption and low in transparency rankings.86

The patronage system has controlled much of civil society and many of the older NGOs were frequently characterised as lacking independence. An NGO employee remarked: (I-4), ‘CSOs don’t survive without political backing’, and added that aligning civil society organisations (CSOs) was prevented ‘because it would be powerful and threatening’.

Yet the patronage system has been slowly weakened over time, enabling gradual reform and greater change for women to participate (Alley 2010). A fairly recent development has been the emergence of some CSOs and grassroots leaders operating virtually

86 A Yemeni doctor remarked: ‘There is corruption in the ministry of health, although they are getting support from the UN and US, villages don’t have a single clinic. It is corrupted, becoming more about business than medicine.’
outside formal patronage networks. While this has been a space that women have successfully claimed, wider society is still largely governed by an elite. Patronage traditions have largely prevailed during the transitional period, with the same families holding key government positions and controlling Yemen’s economic resources, (ICG 2012).

7.1.5 Tribal influence

A number of interviewees argued that tribal laws and culture are the greatest hindrance to women’s progress and the root of conservative trends. Thus the Women’s National Committee (WNC) reported in 2009 that low levels of political participation were attributable to tribal and conservative culture. A minority of interviewees rejected this view. ‘They should bother to talk to tribal men and women before saying it’s their fault,’ explained a woman who has experience working in tribal areas (I-16). She added:

‘Tribal culture is tolerant in terms of women in public life. Women have more influence particularly in the domestic sphere compared to urban areas. I always felt highly respected in tribal areas. In the past weddings were mixed. Men and women worked and played together and women did not wear black. It is true though that the Wahhabi education since the 1970s has made tribal areas more conservative.’

7.1.6 Religious challenges

Religious history and tradition has been used to legitimise the seclusion of women in the public sphere. Gender roles and identities are often controlled using religion, and is sometimes part of a larger exercise in social control or political power (Kerr 2004). However, as one woman explained (I-1), ‘nothing in Sharia’a is against gender equality – if you do not misinterpret Islam for political purpose or manipulation’. Indeed, there

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87 Yadav explains: ‘Political parties, an early source of optimism, have largely disappointed women, who are today channelling their activism into the associational sector-comprised of a range of civil society organizations, media and professional associations-with some remarkable successes.’ (2009: 44)

88 Wahhabi is a conservative branch of Sunni Islam, coming from an eighteenth century Saudi theologian.
appears to be nothing in Islamic scriptures to make Muslim societies inherently patriarchal. Some scholars argue that this means women’s status is mutable (Fish 2002).

While religion is beyond criticism, traditions and culture are more open for discussion. One woman (I-12) explained there is a the fine line between tradition and religion and that ‘many people are confused and think that traditional things are religious.’ Discrimination is not rooted in religion and must not be used as an excuse for the oppression of women, interviewees explained. This was echoed at the political level in criticism of the Islah Party, which interviewees accused of manipulating religion. ‘They tell the population that Islam says ‘x’ and they all believe it,’ declared a Yemeni man (I-9). An opposing view, shared in a few of the interviews, is that Islah has ‘evolved’ and become more pro-women’s rights in the past twenty years.

The growing conservative ‘radical’ influence of Saudi Arabia is seen as a threat to women’s progress in Yemen. While not dismissing it, some informants were quietly confident that women would stand up and defend themselves against any great attack on their liberties and that conservative attitudes did not have deep roots in Yemeni society.

However, another analyst argued that political Islam has been exported from the Gulf States to other parts of the region where it is transforming societies at the roots of society.89

‘Places in North Africa that have a long tradition of Sufism find their culture under threat as puritanical Islamists bulldoze Sufi shrines and declare practices contrary to Islam. It’s true that Gulf traditions of Wahhabism do not have roots there, or in Yemen. Their rise is due to it being exceptionally well funded. It is a powerful re-imagining of Arab culture yet one that simultaneously claims to be a return to historical Islamic roots. No one has yet developed an ideology to counter this challenge.’

89 Informal conversation with Martin Jerrett August 2012.
7.1.7 Patriarchy

Patriarchal customs in Yemeni society are generally understood as permeating all social and institutional structures. They are said to subordinate women and to hinder their ability to participate fully at all levels of society. As already highlighted, support from male relatives enables women to push the boundaries on what is acceptable to society. All women interviewed, however, reported suffering from some cultural taboos, notably in the labour sector. Viewed as principally homemakers and mothers, women explained their struggle to prove themselves in other spheres.

Explanations found in existing literature for why women’s public role is limited, include the suggestion that limiting women’s freedoms sends a message to the whole society that the public should not interfere in the public sphere (Mernissi 1996). Another explanation is that women are excluded from public spaces, because of an Islamic paradigm that conceives of a public space defined by men with women being seen as objects of utility in their family roles (Wadud 2006). Women’s roles may be additionally resistant to change, since they are, as Sullivan (1992) suggests, ‘repositories of cultural identity as defined by religious ideologies’ (Sullivan 1992).

According to the interviews, social customs limit freedom of movement and impede women’s advancement in the public sphere. It also weakens the chance of ‘fellowship’, which was identified by some informants as key to successful women’s activism.

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90 Sabbagh argues that ‘women’s daily lives and practices are reinforcing patriarchy’ (2007:11). Not everyone agrees on the extent of patriarchal grip on society. One Yemeni male women’s activist described the scene from where he spoke to me: ‘I am talking to you looking out of my window onto fields where the women are controlling the land. My uncle consults his wife before making any decision. Women decide who marries whom and take a big part in decision-making. Things are not as they are reported to be.’

91 This view is echoed in a 2008 report by CEDAW Report for Yemen.

92 Fellowship, one informant explained, is important for women: in families, within political parties and new media - to surround and push her.
7.1.8 Challenges in the political sphere

Political participation is curtailed by what interviewees said were both legislative and cultural problems. There is unequal state support for women’s political participation, and discrimination in the political parties and electoral systems.

Great cynicism towards the political parties was often expressed. ‘They continue to use women as they see fit; as voters or as people who can attract more voters’, a woman complained (I-6).93 Within the parties, they are often confined to traditional roles, in women’s only committees or administrative positions. Religious parties particularly require obedience and, as discussed above, are sometimes criticised for manipulating religion. Unable to discuss aspects of Sharia’a, women from religious parties are described as unable to engage in negotiations with women from across the political spectrum. ‘They are on a very short leash. They have no decision-making authority and less ability to compromise’, one woman explained (I-1). Consequently, there has been a problem agreeing on a cross-party women’s agenda, which contributes to some of the fragmentation apparent in the women’s movement.

7.1.9 A united women’s movement?

There are numerous challenges to unity and the inclusion of marginalised voices. IDEA (2005) found the women’s movement in Yemen to be ‘institutional as opposed to grassroots-based’ (2005:15). There is also a perceived tension between older and younger generations of activists, particularly those who did not join the protests until very late.

According to one international NGO, (2003)94, the slow pace of women's development and poverty reduction can be attributed to ‘weak women’s movements, the

93 This is reminiscent of Clark and Schwedler (2003) who described the government and political parties as inconsistently supporting women, co-opting or manipulating their agenda, as a strategy to respond to particular political challenges.

misinterpretation of "gender" and the paucity of coordination between national bodies'. A lack of cooperation among women activists was repeatedly mentioned during the interviews. Yemeni women are aware of the disagreement on every agenda item but find it hard to reach ‘an alternative cooperative structure,’ remarked a foreign analyst (I-2). Others attribute some of the conflict between activists to their lack of conceptual clarity (Adeleye-Fayemi 2004).95

There has been ‘in-fighting’ among activists for some time. This may be linked to the recognition that ‘gender’ is a valued “development niche” that levers sponsorship, funding and invitations to give high-profile speeches. Further, as one activist explained (I-5): ‘there might be one or two real issues but the vast majority of the fighting is personal and petty.’

Some of these ‘real issues’ were highlighted in an account of discussions held in March 2012 with women from different parts of the country. ‘They were unable to work together because they disagreed with each others’ prioritisation of issues,’ a foreign NGO employee explained (I-7). ‘The women from Sana’a and Taiz wanted to talk about political participation, whereas Southern Hadramut women wanted to talk about women’s advocacy on schools and education’ he added.

7.1.10 Civil society and NGOs96

A few of the interviewees pointed to a lack of citizen participation and civic duty in Yemen as a partial explanation for current levels of participation.97 It was suggested that this is partly attributable to Yemen’s colonial and tribal history and linked to what, some said, is a reluctance to take on the responsibility that comes with positions of leadership. The civil

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95 Adeleye-Fayemi, et al (2004) point to common challenges of women’s movement, all of which are relevant to Yemen at this time. They include: a lack of conceptual clarity, fragmentation, personality driven styles of leadership and failing to be intergenerational or supportive of emerging leadership.
96 In this section the terms non-governmental organisation (NGO) and civil society organisation (CSO) are interchangeably used.
97 This requires further investigation particularly given how important civil society has been in recent months elsewhere in the region.
society that has emerged through cracks in the patronage system is nevertheless quite active, though challenges within the sector affect how successful its efforts are to increase women’s participation.

Other common issues that emerged through the interviews included: the lack of funding, inefficiency in CSO capacity building programmes and poor connection between donors and CSOs. In addition, the women’s agenda is sometimes perceived as part of a Western agenda.

7.2 Participation as Part of a Bigger Women’s Agenda: What are the Strategies for Pursuing Women’s Issues at the Political Level?

7.2.1 Space for the women’s agenda

The majority of people interviewed felt the women’s agenda is no longer a priority in the current period. Some interviewees suggested it is because security concerns are dominating the attention of government funding and guiding the transition. Many attributed the lack of attention to women’s issues to limited opportunity. A lack of clarity and cohesion among women activists was also blamed, alongside the fact that women and youth are not used to taking responsibility for civic and political matters. Women were also criticised for not being proactive enough and failing to claim the space available on the political agenda. A prominent activist explained it is men encouraging women to step forward (I-8).

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98 One interviewee suggested that The Friends of Yemen includes Saudi Arabia and as a result, donors are more widely not taking care of women’s issues.

99 One interviewee (I-2) argued that many Yemenis shy away from responsibility as it leaves them open to criticism and failure. ‘They prefer the myths’ he said. Another interviewee said that having been brought up to trust their leaders and elders, the youth feel reluctant to lead the change themselves and take charge.
The space available for women at the political level was contested. Some reported it was shrinking as the political system has similarly devolved through the revolution. For those who said there is always a space, the focus was on how to use it strategically. ‘They need to make the most of the space because it will be taken away from them if they don’t step into it,’ a foreign man remarked *(I-11).*

**7.2.2 Three ways of framing women’s issues in political sphere**

The following section looks beyond visions of gender equity and issues of prioritisation among the female population to the competing ways women’s issues are framed in the political sphere. Three approaches emerged from analysis of primary data.

The first argues that women’s issues must be addressed explicitly throughout the constitution drafting process and the women’s agenda should be visible and separate throughout the National Dialogue. Supporters of this strategy include some progressive men, activists and NGO workers. They fear that without a separate women’s agenda, women’s rights will get lost in the transitional period and no gains will be made. A foreign woman explained, where constitutions include women’s issues - as discrete from citizen rights (as in Tunisia) - women are faring better than in Egypt where a more integrated approach has been followed *(I-14).*

Advocates of this position fear the forces in Yemen wanting women out of politics may successfully reverse existing freedoms. ‘Money talks in Yemen’, commented a foreigner *(I-14)*, ‘the more support Yemen gets from Saudi Arabia, the less women there will be in public life.’ *(I100)* An added concern is that men will get their citizen rights but not women

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100 Comparative remarks are only suggestive. They need contextualising within the greater socio-political environment and keeping in mind the rights and freedoms of women before 2011.

101 Wahhabi influence from Saudi Arabia has increased in Yemen over the past few decades.
because the rights will not account for women’s multiple roles in society (I-17).102

Support for the second approach for ‘framing’ women’s issues comes largely from the rural population. It too calls for women’s issues to be articulated as a separate agenda item. Unlike the first approach, the entire focus is on areas such as healthcare and inheritance, not political rights (I-15). Limiting the agenda to ‘a narrow range of gendered pursuits’ may also be reflective of more conservative voices in society (Saferworld 2011:3). ‘The constitution already provides women with citizen rights … it is women’s rights related to social, economic and cultural issues that are hindering women in society and that need addressing,’ an NGO employee explained (I-6).

In contrast, a women’s agenda is not separated out in the third approach. Rather, it sticks to demands of the protest movement, specifically - a political and economic revolution through which citizen rights are granted on an equal basis. Karman is associated with this position having explained she did not protest because she is a woman, but because she is Yemeni (I-5). She reasons that before women can demand their gender specific rights, Yemeni women must get their citizenship rights.103

The diagram below illustrates the three approaches, and how characteristics of the second approach apply to the first. It is important to note that at the time of research, preparations for the National Dialogue and Constitution writing committee were in their nascent stages. Consequently, discussions about framing women’s needs at the political level during this period were often opaque with regards to the specific process they had in mind for each approach.

102 This view resonates with earlier descriptions of women’s call for citizenship, as in Badran (1998:512), who wrote: ‘Yemeni women are insisting on the unitary nature of citizenship, inclusive of the ‘public’ and the ‘private’, and the necessity of equality in the construction of citizenship.’

103 Arguing for women’s rights in the context of citizen rights is a strategy that Saferworld (2012) argues has successfully exposed many men to the marginalisation of women. It is also more popular among women from cities in the North of the country, they argue.
Critics of the first two approaches describe activists squabbling over the ‘small piece of the pie’ they have been allocated at the political table. Rather than demanding ‘a larger slice’, activists argue over ideology, political sponsorship, funding and even invitations to conferences.

A Yemeni journalist described a related issue (I-5):

‘Female activists in Yemen are told everyday that women’s rights are your discreet area and you must battle for them and battle alone. The discourse has developed like that, as a Muslim woman in the Arab World. I hope the focus moves away from this towards fighting for citizen rights, not only female citizen rights.’

According to this argument, if Karman is only asked to speak on women’s topics, she will lose her power. By focusing solely on gender issues, the conversation is going nowhere and they are pigeonholing themselves (I-9). While they choose to be separate, they will continue to be excluded (I-6). The principle defence and rationale behind each approach is summarised in the diagram below:
7.3 What Are Women’s Aspirations and Priorities?

Interviews highlighted that women across the social and geographic spectrum want to have the choice of exercising greater freedoms. ‘Women want the opportunity to travel, get a job, and importantly the opportunity to prove themselves,’ said one man (I-10). An activist described speaking with a group of girls in a rural area in Sa’ada governorate earlier that summer (I-13): ‘they complained about always having to be accompanied to school by their younger brothers’. ‘This has been going on all of our lives’, they said. Even there – all they knew was having to be accompanied yet they still wanted more independence.’ In contrast, a foreign analyst argued that some women rather ‘go with the flow of creeping conservatism’ than take the responsibility that comes with sticking your neck out or with leadership (I-2).

As already discussed, there are disagreements among activists around prioritisation of women’s issues. NGO workers I interviewed emphasised healthcare as a priority of rural women (I-3, I-8, I-15). Reports by Oxfam (2012) and Saferworld (2012) also highlighted
issues of livelihood and insecurity. Women interviewed for this study, who prioritised access to political life, saw it as an essential precondition for tackling wider women’s issues. They often argued that women in decision-making positions would positively impact policies affecting women, particularly reproductive issues and education.

7.4 What is the Perceived Impact of the Revolution on Women?

7.4.1 Negative impact since the revolution

There were mixed views of the impact of the revolution on women. Some said there is less space for women in public than before, and that the security situation has worsened. They felt the revolution is dead and that they have no ownership of the transitional processes. The gap between the political conversation in Sana’a and the people on the ground seems greater than before. The priority has become food not politics. Recent humanitarian reports substantiate this position (Oxfam 2012, WFP 2012, IFRC 2012). A particularly pessimistic (foreign) analyst explained (I-2):

‘It’s broadly speaking business as usual. There is nothing to hang onto - no flotsam that gives hope. And they all know that hunger is only staved off by Saudi money. They fear the eventual famine.’

7.4.2 Positive impact since the uprising

The interviews also reflected positive social and psychological impacts of women’s participation. The urban bias of the interview sample must however be taken into consideration in the following extracts from the interviews.

‘There are lots of opportunities for women to be engaged in public life, especially now, through NGOs and political parties’ a female student said (I-1). Since the uprising, political parties have sought out young women to rejuvenate their parties, though some saw this as a continuation of women’s ‘token inclusion’.

104 This is similar for men and women alike.
Greater public awareness of gender issues was seen as an undisputed dividend of women’s involvement in the uprising. There is increased support for women’s involvement and integration in public life and leadership positions since the revolution, interviewees explained. One woman also observed that it is easier to convince people that youth and women are part of the solution not the problem (I-8).

Despite how gender was manipulated by various political forces during the uprising, many women saw their role as a huge step forward and indicative of an ‘awakening’ among women (I-15). The psychological impact of participating was often described in grand terms. ‘It was emotional and empowering and changed the society forever’, said one young protester (I-14). Another explained (I-1): ‘since the beginning of the revolution you can now say ‘no’. The new culture of saying ‘no’ is spreading.’

Furthermore, while tangible benefits are yet to be felt by more than a handful of women, all the interviewees felt they had enjoyed a huge boost of self-confidence. ‘The revolution has given comfort and strength to women to be more active,’ an analyst remarked (I-5). Female support for prominent women has also increased it would seem: unprecedented numbers of women publically defend fellow activists who were attacked.

New voices also emerged through the uprising: ‘Before the revolution all the women leaders were the same few faces but now there is new blood in politics, new ideas … young voices’ one woman enthused (I-15). Networking has increased and there are greater numbers of citizen journalists and participation from expatriates using social-media, significantly expanding the pool of activists. Some Yemenis consider the young

105 Saferworld corroborated this, writing: ‘The protest movement provided an opportunity to educate men on gender issues’ (Saferworld 2011:34).
106 In December 2012, Saferworld published a report about Yemeni women’s experience of the 2011 protests. They quote a woman from Abyan who lucidly explained the impact: ‘We changed the type of relationship between the woman and herself, the woman the man, the woman and the society, the woman and the world, and the woman and other woman as well.’ (Saferworld 2012:9)
107 Saferworld 2011 also found women’s self-confidence had increased, both social and politically.
educated activists, typically students or mid-career professionals, to be the next generation of leaders. ‘They have been part of the revolution and already have the mindset that ‘this is my right’ and that they need to ask for bigger rights and not to be put into a corner for being women,’ a foreign NGO employee observed (I-11).

Women from other social circles have a greater interest in political developments and the public agenda. ‘My sisters-in-law are housewives and since the revolution talk about the constitution,’ a woman explained (I-16). In rural areas, more women are seeking out local organisations, and are capitalising on increased awareness of women’s positive contribution to society.108 Some Yemenis also spoke optimistically about there being more space for women in public and a multiplier effect, by which women encourage others to take a role and move into that space.

7.5 How and What Changes are Likely to Happen?

7.5.1 How change happens

There is a huge opportunity for political and social change, according to many of the interviewees. In part this is because more people are asking for their civil rights and for equality. According to a young activist (I-1):

‘We are now working on political change. Social change is also important but takes a long time. It will follow. There is some social change now though. A mixture of people in Change Square and tribal men leaving weapons at home [to join the protests] is a huge feat in itself.’

Most people agreed political change affecting women would happen faster than social change. It is not yet recognised, but it is increased awareness of women’s issues and

108 How the experience of participation in the revolution relates to recent rural activities is unclear, as less is known about rural women in general. NGO employees interviewed for this study reported a rise in organized efforts to improve local healthcare and increase available education.
their useful role in society that will create the change in the long-term, according to one woman (I-16). The interdependence of both was often mentioned, mostly as political change driving and acting as the leverage to cultural change (I-9).\textsuperscript{109}

Some of the older people interviewed spoke about change differently, arguing it needs to come directly from women. The government and society responds and reacts positively to women who have ‘proved’ themselves with personal achievements and through actions that benefit the local community, they said.

In fact, given the social barriers to women’s participation it was surprising how many interviewees viewed Yemeni society as generally supportive of women who ‘prove’ themselves. Working in the ‘right direction’ was considered essential for support however (I-8). Moreover, the widespread encouragement of women’s participation during the uprising was, in many women’s minds, a reflection of the society’s true nature ‘that came back from the unconscious’ (I-17).

7.5.2 The future

While the opportunity for change was recognised, there was optimism as well as cynicism from interviewees over the future of women’s freedoms and potential participation. ‘The revolution has turned everything upside down. Everything is in flux still and it is too soon to say what is happening,’ a woman explained (I-5). Others were worried that if women don’t get a place at this time they will be forgotten forever (I-17).

Those who were optimistic often spoke about the new faces that have joined the older generation in the political arena. They explained that international pressure for women’s representation in the political sphere during the two-year transition would also provide women with more chance to be involved in political processes and pursue women’s

\textsuperscript{109} One man warned against the international community falsely implying that democratic change happens in a short space of time. ‘Democracy is a process not a result’ he explained, ‘you need to slowly build capacity, how to negotiate and advocacy approaches. It is a very long process.’
issues. In the face of increased religious justification of gender discrimination, a number of women seemed confident they would successfully defend their existing rights. Others feared a great struggle if more conservative forces took hold.

Less hopeful women said the chances to participate were shrinking. They mainly attributed this to a lack of leadership devoted to women’s issues and how the National Dialogue and security situation are dominating political conversations.
8. Reflections and Recommendations for Action

8.1 Two Key Approaches: Islam and Tradition

Two areas needing greater consideration by activists and NGOs alike emerged from the research process. The first is to promote gender equity through an Islamic paradigm, as a very small number of NGOs are doing at present. The second is to encourage men and women to explore the concept of tradition in a non-threatening way. This is an unexplored area, as far as I am aware.

I have already made reference to a small portion of the vast literature arguing that Islam promotes equity for the sexes and contains possible role models for women. Both this articulation of Islam and the memory of Yemeni women’s participation appears to be missing in the doctrine of the literal Islamists who are espousing stricter codes for Yemeni women. In fact, social mores for women, such as veiling customs or requiring a male escort, are often accompanied by claims that this is Yemeni ‘tradition’ or prescribed by Islam. Yet according to the women interviewed in this study and the available published data, Yemeni women do not want the space available to them to shrink and are interested in enjoying greater freedoms.

Promoting gender equity through an Islamic paradigm is a useful and culturally appropriate approach for many parts of Yemen. ‘Yemenis are quite religious and attached

110 The Yemeni NGO YORECSUD is one NGO promoting gender equity in an Islamic framework. Their approach is to work within a perspective of Sharia and with Imams and religious leaders to question gender injustices in wider society.

111 This trend is related to the greater role political Islam is gaining in mainstream politics in Yemen. Why this is the case is beyond the scope of this study but may in part be due to disappointment with Arab Nationalism and secular politics. At the same time, there is increasing importance given to visible demonstrations of religiosity, which protects men and women’s reputations.

112 It is worth noting that not all women may be willing to fight and suffer for greater liberties.
to their own belief and creed. You need to use language that speaks to them’ explained one interviewee. Discussing Islamic teachings is extremely sensitive in Yemen and so requires a context specific and very delicate approach. However, an NGO employee said his experience of engaging various rurally based Imams and powerful men had been very positive (I-9). There is only a scattering of activities at present engaging women’s issues in this way.

Second, there appears to be a gap in organized activities and NGO projects in terms of encouraging discussions about what constitutes the ‘traditional’ in Yemeni society. Debating and recording living memories of women’s roles in public life and the ways they have engaged society might spark a useful debate about ‘tradition,’ and it’s different renderings in contemporary Yemen. This idea is developed further in Chapter 9.

8.2 The Need to Listen to Local Voices

NGOs and activists engaging women’s issues are often criticised for failing to address the needs of the people they hope to assist. In part, this is due to a narrow definition of the ‘public sphere’, which impedes their ability to understand local dynamics and identify existing roles and participation. The way women rely on protection and reputation as a means of enabling their activism is an example of what outside intervention needs to work with and not against.

Minimal consultation with a diverse group of local people about their priorities is a significant failing. Though new female figures have recently emerged beyond the major cities, the political elite and international community are still not engaging them. More

An ‘art house’ opened to female artists in Sana’a recently. It is currently considered reprehensible for girls to express their views through painting. The in-house artists are using painting as medium to display Yemeni history and cultural tradition.
generally, rural women’s activists are excluded from discussions on development or political topics. According to interviews, development agendas are driven and defined outside the country and NGOs have developed a culture of business rather than a culture of needs, leading to misallocation of resources.

In the worst cases, development projects aiming to empower Yemeni women have reproduced the very social inequalities they seek to reduce (Peutz 2007). More often though, they are pilloried for focusing on technical, short-term solutions at the expense of addressing the root causes to discrimination.\textsuperscript{114}

A culturally sensitive approach is reliant on successfully identifying the common strategies and language used by local activists and within communities. New activities must have appropriately framed objectives and complement existing approaches; ‘embeddedness’ is key.\textsuperscript{115} ‘The changes must be part of the religion and society,’ a Yemeni man advised (\textit{I-10}) and approached gradually (Pruzan-Jørgensen 2012).

Some respondents felt that a solution would only be found internally and that efforts should be focused on building unity at the local level, though ensuring men are not excluded.\textsuperscript{116} The agenda should bubble up from the grassroots, they said. This also avoids a potential backlash against ‘outside’ interference. The onus ultimately lies with women to step up, particularly those in NGOs, the private sector and government positions, they explained. The need for a strong personality was often emphasised as a requirement for leadership or decision-making roles. And as one man remarked (\textit{I-10}): ‘we need more courageous women but the changes have to be made slowly.’

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8.3 What Can Be Done?

A number of areas where activities may be useful in increasing women’s participation in public life emerged through the research process and are briefly discussed below.

8.3.1 Wider discussions

A need for dialogue across different groups and parts of society was raised throughout the interviews. The cacophony of voices, approaches and agendas underscores how beneficial informal discussions would be. Some argued that the vocabulary used to talk about women’s issues is outdated and that old paradigms need shaking up. A foreign analyst explained this referring to young men and women:

‘The more the youth are involved in the National Dialogue, the more they share their lives on Facebook and fetch up in groups, get invited by foreign governments to workshops abroad the better. They compete with each other but also listen and learn about each other, which is essential.’

Although some Yemenis argue that these activities damage culture, most of the interviewees felt the opposite. Discussions also help with articulating priorities, conceptual clarity and understanding different viewpoints.

8.3.2 Raising awareness

Public awareness of women’s issues was expanded as a result of their participation in the revolution and is an area interviewees suggested is built upon in the current period. In addition, awareness of rights, according to one activist (I-15): ‘makes women want to participate. It encourages women to argue and defend their role in society.’

117 Awareness among women of their political rights is also expected to impact on the number of women voting according to family or tribal lines.
8.3.3 Economic empowerment

A number of interviewees felt that by working on the economy and economic empowerment, social change (that benefits women) will slowly follow. ‘Economics is the right way to change,’ a student remarked (I-1), ‘there’s only fifteen years left of oil. Terrorism, fuelled by hunger, is a huge threat.’ Encouraging women to be entrepreneurial would, others agreed, increase women’s public participation.118

8.3.4 Education

Education is a top priority and understood to directly contribute to improving gender disparities and enabling greater female participation. This applies to both rural and urban women, although educational needs and opportunities for participation vary across the society. Education will affect women’s aspirations, their agenda and approach. As one woman explained to Yadav (2010:17), ‘When women can read they can learn. When they can read they can seize their rights’ (Raja, in Yadav 2010:17). However, it will not automatically lead to greater resistance to patriarchy as some, such as Fawzi (1994), assert.

8.3.5 Investing in women leaders

A key area for civil society appears to be investing in and increasing the pool of new women leaders and future decision-makers. Indeed, a missing link was reported between being an activist and becoming a decision-maker. Developing leadership is also pinpointed as a priority in the wider literature, often being prioritised over grassroots activities (Basu 2012). In Yemen, incremental steps can be taken at all levels of society. Priorities include work with CSOs119 to increase women’s knowledge of the political system and helping people articulate their needs and agendas.

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118 Micro-finance projects in Yemen have received positive reception, according to a number of NGOs employees.
119 Civil Society Organisation.
8.4 Approaches and Activities that Complement and Coexist

8.4.1 The need for a consolidated approach

According to an international NGO (2003)\textsuperscript{120}, there is a need for a more consolidated approach that brings together the main institutions involved in promoting gender equity. IDEA\textsuperscript{121} also emphasise the role of the state: ‘Gender issues are best promoted through specific structures inside government as well as specific public institutions such as an ombudsperson on discrimination against women’ (IDEA 2005:6).

Gender scholars from around the world also see a benefit in embracing a diversity of ideologies and priorities while working collectively (Leeson 2004). ‘Support opportunities for a united voice for women, but recognise and respect regional difference’ recommends Saferworld in its work on (2012:ii).

8.4.2 Acceptance of a pluralism of approaches

Three areas where activists have opposing views have been considered during this study.\textsuperscript{122} I will address each of these in turn before arguing that greater acceptance among activists for a pluralism of approaches is not out of reach and activities are already coexisting to increase the public space available to women.

The first area of discord among activists was over the prioritisation of issues. It largely dissolves if multiple issues can be worked on simultaneously and collectively. What becomes important is the allocation and availability of resources. A ‘two-track’ approach was recommended by some activists, one advised having concurrent political and community level activities. And another suggested building awareness among the

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{120} Unpublished international NGO proposal.  
\textsuperscript{121} International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance  
\textsuperscript{122} Further research would no doubt reveal more areas of disagreement. 
\end{flushleft}
population for women’s issues, while enhancing women’s ability to participate through training (I-15).

The second issue, framing women’s rights at the political level, does not in practice cause conflict. Whether as a discrete agenda or as part of citizen rights, these efforts to improve the protection and rights of women do not counteract or work against each other. They are different and have their respective drawbacks, yet are complementary.

And third, activists had divergent criticisms for the whole range of approaches to working on women’s issues. Greater acknowledgment and respect for women’s different aspirations and articulations of their needs, when working on their behalf or on an agenda affecting them, may resolve much of the conflict. Different approaches reach out to different audiences, explains Pruzan-Jørgensen (2012). Similarly, as the theory of ‘intersectionality’ contends, women have subjective experiences of discrimination and therefore require specific strategies for addressing marginalisation (Nash 2008).

All of this again underscores the need for greater discussion. Convening open debates to deepen understanding of the rationales behind different activities and approaches would, in a best-case scenario, also increase activists’ respect for alternative approaches. In the medium-term, it may lead to greater cooperation. Following the views of Fransico, Griffen and Leeson (2004), I would prioritise multiple informal gatherings over formal and one-off conferences.123

123 Fransico, Griffen and Leeson argue that meeting to discuss and share ideas is more important, they argue than ‘stamping it with a network, organisation or other identity’ (2004:78). Criquilllon (2004) also explains that a huge amount of energy is often wasted resolving differences for the sake of unity and at the expense of other activities.
8.4.3 Coexisting and Complementary Activities

According to Pruzan-Jørgensen (2012), complementary secular and faith-based activism is an ideal to strive for. While this may be true, I see the dominant approaches of women activists, and the activities working to increase women’s participation, as already largely complementary and co-existing in the current climate.

While there is at present some intolerance for the diversity of ideologies and prioritisation, collaboration is not out of the question. Moreover, as the (non-exhaustive) diagram below illustrates, women are participating in public life through these various activities. Furthermore, these activities are, in their disparate ways, expanding or consolidating the public space available to women. This includes all activities: from the ‘shocking tactics’ of some more ‘liberal’ activists, to training to improve the advocacy skills of female politicians, right through to women’s groups protesting corruption in local government. This argument assumes that each activity is successful within its individual parameters. Also, at the time of writing, counteracting forces were not stopping these activities.

**Diagram 4: Activities increasing women’s participation in the public sphere**
9. Future research

This study has been a preliminary investigation into a wide range of areas. Further inquiry into bridging the gap between women activists and decision-makers may be of use to NGOs. There is also too little known about burgeoning activism in rural areas, which would help focus future interventions. In addition, the gamut of NGO approaches, including the ‘rights based approach’, politicizing women’s rights, and gender mainstreaming could be usefully contrasted and evaluated in terms of positive impact in the Yemeni context.

A more substantial suggestion concerns ‘tradition’. This is a contested concept that appears to be somewhat of a paradox. It is central to the way society is becoming more conservative yet also refers to past activities which women no longer have the freedom to enjoy. Recording women’s roles and positive memories of participating in society, (from dancing at mixed-weddings after nightfall to preventing honour killings in tribal areas) would itself be of ethnographic value. More beneficial though would be to debate women’s historical role in society, through which the concept of tradition could be explored. This would avoid much of the potential controversy and could be discussed in relation to how ‘tradition’ is currently applied to limit women’s options.

Finally, an area I have not been able to address in this present study, but is important to the subject, is around ‘modernisation’, and specifically, its impact on the perception of women’s roles. For a discussion see Mernissi (1996), Sapiro (1998), Fawzi (1994), De Regt (2009).124

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124 Mernissi (1996) and Sapiro (1998) examine these dynamics in depth and Fawzi (1994) argues the concept of ‘modernisation’ should not be equated with westernisation or homogenisation. De Regt (2009) also shows that notions of development and modernity can be conflicting.
This study has explored how Yemeni women participate in public life. It has both identified and examined culturally specific approaches and appraised strategies for increasing that participation. Issues of inclusion in political processes, civil society, and to a lesser degree, the labour force, have also been considered.

The existing literature identified many of the causes underlying the low levels of Yemeni women’s engagement in public life. It also highlighted some of the barriers to change. My interviews allowed me to explore these issues further and in greater depth. Given that the obstacles are very great, it becomes crucial to find ways to identify successful strategies
and to support key actors. I have consequently highlighted certain approaches and areas where progress could be made.

The Arab Spring brought long-standing problems to light, including areas of concern to urban and rural women. Progress is hard to measure, partly because there are so many challenges and change happens slowly, but also because ‘progress’ means different things to different people. What appears beyond doubt however is that the experience of participating in the 2011 uprising was a great boost to women’s confidence.

Although this study pays greater attention to urban women, interviewees did refer to new initiatives in rural communities. The rise to prominence of women leaders such as Karman, at one end of the spectrum, and Maqtari at the other, has created new female role models for whom there is unprecedented grassroots support. More generally, the pool of well-known women has dramatically expanded.

In terms of political participation, there is cause for optimism. For prominent women activists, the transitional processes and modest political realignment are providing a useful focus, whilst their agenda has attracted more (but still limited) international attention. The proportion of women on the preliminary bodies of the National Dialogue and Constitution Writing Committee is much greater compared to their parliamentary representation. This is progress. There is currently a greater chance of instituting a quota for women in government bodies than at any time since unification. And in addition, political parties are reshuffling, and in some cases creating new opportunities for women to be more influential.

With a longer period in view, incremental increases in women’s participation in civil society organisations are encouraging, as well as the growing numbers of women in the formal labour sector. To take but two examples: In Abyan governorate, a group of women are working to increase women’s access to education and are supporting a women’s platform to run for office.125 ‘This is a small change for us, but for the community in their town, to be active and be fighting against local corruption, for example, is massive and a

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125 This work is supported by Attanweer Association for Social Development.
huge jump,’ an Iraqi NGO employee explained (*i-11*). A second project provides advocacy training on women’s rights to women from different political parties.126 The fact that they come together from across the political spectrum and agree on a goal and objective is in itself an encouraging development.

Looking at issues of participation more widely, the root causes of women’s lack of opportunity and participation have not changed as a result of the revolution. Indeed, many ‘ordinary’ Yemenis who supported the uprising have lost faith in the process. More alarming is the current humanitarian crisis: more than 40% of the population are ‘hungry or on the edge of hunger’ (World Food Programme 2012). It is not surprising therefore that the vast majority of NGO reports and media articles paint a very bleak picture of Yemeni society, particularly about women’s status and future. Thus a September 2012 Oxfam report found that many Yemeni women felt far less safe than a year ago. They feel ‘sidelined by the transition process and ... shut out of decision making by political parties and the government’ (2012:6).

My interviews highlighted these and other huge obstacles but they also revealed a far more nuanced situation. There are positive signs and small shifts within what is still a deeply patriarchal society. In spite of the challenging environment of the transitional period and barriers in society, women’s activities are continuing in all their diversity. In sum, they collectively expand the public space available to women.

My interviews revealed not only frustration and despair, but energy, determination, ambition and hope. This is something that Western observers often fail to see. As one activist told me (*i-15*):

‘I heard someone from UN Women talk about women in Yemen. She underestimated them. She said women don’t want to work together, that they are limited, that there is no women’s movement just individual figures looking after their own interests. I was outraged. These people are supposed to be supporting Yemeni women. We know we have problems and we want to overcome them.’

126 This work is supported by Awssan Centre for Legal and Social Rights.
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Fall 2009


Appendices

Appendix 1: A Note on Secondary Sources - Women in the Yemen

Academic readers and reference guides about women in politics and books about Arab gender often make no reference to Yemen. Examples include: Ahmed (1992), O’Conner (2010), Krook and Childs (2010). There are just a handful of English language books and academic articles that focus specifically on Yemeni women, of which the majority are ethnographic. Seminal works include: Maklouf 1979, Mundy 1996, Badran 1998, and Miller 2002. In most cases, where academics refer to Yemeni women’s participation in public life, they do so indirectly, through discussion of issues such as civil society (Carapico 1998), or in comparison with other Arab countries (Ahmed 1992, Keddie 2007). Where it is directly addressed, most works focus on Islamic women and political life. Of note are: Molyneux 1995 and 1998, Clark and Schwedler 2003, Clark 2004, Yadav 2010, Pruzan-Jørgensen 2012.

There is little published material on Yemeni women in the post-revolutionary period, which the organisation Saferworld explain ‘is partly down to the conscious decision of many female activists in Yemen to place their own rights within a broader revolutionary discourse of justice and equality for all Yemeni people,’ (2012:1).

The majority of up-to-date information and policy analysis is produced by INGOs, think tanks and international institutions. There are significant numbers of reports available online. Where they relate to women’s issues, most focus on humanitarian challenges or political participation. A few large surveys and reports have been conducted in recent years, providing useful data about attitudes towards Arab women in public roles and

127 Academics in Yemen writing on this topic have all attended foreign universities, often in the West and have therefore published in English or, to a lesser degree in French. English remains the dominant academic language for the subject but this does not necessarily mean there is nothing written in Arabic.

The gender development research studies centre at Sana’a University was re-established in 2003, having suffered a number of set backs over the years; not least the attacks by ‘conservative’ politicians. Their new website promises a forthcoming study on: ‘The Role and Participation of Yemeni Women in the Transition Process’. A new MA in International Development and Gender was also launched in 2011, and a gender library is in the pipeline.

The most up-to-date report, ‘Still Waiting for Change’ was released by Oxfam on 24 September 2012. Findings were based on a series of focus group discussions held throughout the country. It reports that 80% of Yemeni women say their lives are worse than a year ago and that there is ‘acute malnourishment’ among a quarter of women aged between 15 and 49, (2012:3). ‘Although a transition towards democracy is under way, women’s hopes for a better life are wearing thin,’ the report said, adding that a ‘deepening humanitarian crisis and conflict are limiting women’s role in shaping Yemen’s future [and] exacerbating deep-rooted gender inequalities.’
Appendix 2: Reflection Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What stood out for me? (anything surprising or puzzling?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Are there emergent ideas, insights, questions, problems or concerns?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What possible next steps were generated?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Did you find anything challenging?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Is there anything else to take note of?</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Summary
Appendix 3: Interview Questions

According to the profile of each interviewee, combinations of the questions below were asked during semi-structured interviews.

**Personal**

1) Where is your family from (how old are you?)

2) Have you ever found that being a woman has stopped you in your career? Would it have been easier to get to where you are as a man? *(Please include a specific instance if possible)*

3) What helped you get to where you are? (Family support, living in a city etc…) Do you have more protection than the next person?

4) Do you vote? Are you the member of a political party?

5) How do you understand the terms of women’s rights / gender equality?

**Civil Society / Government**

6) Are you involved in activities with youth / women?

7) Is there any increase in interest from women to join such activities since the revolution? Is there any change in support from the community for your activities?

8) There are women in senior positions in civil society organisations and NGOs but not many in government. Why is that and how can that link be strengthened?
Challenges
9) What are the greatest challenges to:
   a. Increased female participation in political decision-making
   b. Greater participation in labour force / civil society
   c. Greater gender equality? (Patriarchal culture, corruption, tradition, religion etc.)

Aspirations / Uprising
10) What do you want (and your opinion of others wanting) in terms of:
    a. Participation in politics
    b. Freedoms
    c. Rights

11) Have their demands changed as a result of the revolution?

12) Did the women’s agenda rise in prominence as the protest movement went along?

13) What was the impact of their participation?

14) Do you sense any change in society in terms of supporting women who want a bigger role in political life?

15) Were the women protest leaders women’s activists?

Changing levels of participation
16) Do you see an increase in the space available for women since the revolution? Is there more participation than before? Is there a genuine interest in women’s views or is it token inclusion?

17) Is there increased influence of Islah on women? In your view is this positive or negative?

18) Are you optimistic about the National Dialogue process?
a. Does it fairly represent women’s issues?
b. Are there sufficient female participants?
c. What do you think of the women elected onto the supreme committee for debate (in the ND?)

**Strategy**

19) Do most women think it is a better approach to pursue women’s rights as citizen rights (rather than separately)? Do you agree with this strategy?

20) On women’s rights, what comes first: political or social change?

21) Does working for political party representation / more ‘radical’ activism counteract the efforts to increase women’s basic rights? Can’t they co-exist?

22) Do you change your behaviour depending on the environment? Why?

23) Is there good coordination between women activists / NGOs? Any recommendations?

24) Is the international community doing what it should to support your work and women’s rights more generally? Is it counterproductive for them to be pursuing a women’s rights agenda?

**The Future**

25) What might women’s participation look like in the future? Scenarios
Appendix 4: Interview Summaries

**Coding number: 1**

**Age:** 25-30  
**Gender:** F  
**Nationality:** Yemeni  
**Relevance:** Politically Active Masters Student  
**Residence:** Yemen

- Appropriate term is ‘gender equality’. Feminism has negative connotation.
- There are more women in Islah and other religious parties than in the liberal parties (as they never represented their interests). Now liberal parties are asking for women’s participation (the opportunity is there) but there is still a problem that they are not really able to progress into more powerful positions (either because of lack of capacity or institutional culture). Need to look for ways to improve chances of women getting into more senior positions.
- Religious political parties require obedience so there cannot be criticism of aspects of Sharia’a. Women don’t become senior or in positions of power particularly in the religious party. Therefore when they are negotiating with women from liberal political parties, they are on a very short leash and cannot compromise so there has been a problem finding a common agenda. This may well count for a lot of the fragmentation apparent in the women’s movement.
- There are real changes from the revolution. So much energy and excitement. Fearful from seeing how it may become Iranian student revolution.

**Coding number: 2**

**Age:** 5-55  
**Gender:** M  
**Nationality:** British  
**Relevance:** Yemen expert  
**Residence:** Yemen / UK
- There are many conflicts. Vertical (between protestors and political elites over the broken social contract) and horizontal (between political parties, tribes and other elites).

- It is the latter conflict, about power dynamics and terrorism, which the international community fixates on and monitors intently. They look less at the broken social contract and how the vast majority are impoverished, powerless and can’t effect change at the top.

- Yemenis don’t like accepting responsibility. Having responsibility means there is something for others to criticize and chuck out. Making decisions also requires you are a competent technocrat. They are terrified of loss of face and failure. They lack confidence on anything economics based or on the details of how something works. People show a lack of understanding of the details even knowledge of basic economic figures. There is no starting point. No idea of the budget, numbers of people required for a certain project, no intellectual detail. ‘They prefer the myths’.

**Coding number:** 3  
**Age:** 40-45  
**Gender:** M  
**Nationality:** British  
**Relevance:** Oxfam policy officer for Yemen  
**Residence:** UK

- The National Dialogue (ND) process was messed up by the preliminary session being quite exclusive and then the first session inclusive – but people came already annoyed for the earlier exclusion and without preparation on the topics.

- There is a general lack of activist inclusion in the ND and other arenas. At the same time it is too fragmented and complex to invite all.

- Donor pressure on youth to organize was premature and counterproductive for inclusion in the long-run and ownership of the process. They are not taking up the
message on gender messaging since the meeting of women’s organizations. In particular, the 30% quota.
- The donors of the Friends of Yemen (Security Council) have ignored their own gender language. In the 2014 UN Resolution they asked for full and equal participation.

Coding number: 4
Age: 2-25
Gender: M
Nationality: Yemeni
Relevance: Youth and women’s activist
Residence: Yemen / UK

- The international community doesn’t realise that it may not be the appropriate time to champion women’s rights. There could be a backlash – as there was in Afghanistan. It must be driven from inside. Start with education.
- It’s a misconception that women were locked up in their houses before the revolution. There’s an important range of women’s day-to-day experiences – from farming rural to mountainous, city, North and South, poor, middle and upper class. The picture is more complicated than it may first seem.
- How successful / how easy / what are the challenges involved in: translating women’s participation in CSO (which they’ve been able to do for decades) into political decision-making roles?
- Women’s power in Yemen is a deep thing. (Including the power they hold arranging marriages – political act). It has survived the British, the socialism in the South… It is very strong. Women learn about the history of Queen Sheba growing up and are taught to be powerful.

Coding number: 5
Age: 30-35
Women should fight for a bigger slice of the political pie, not over the small piece they have been given. There is a perception in society that women are more dependable, that they don’t spend the afternoons chewing qat, that they are harder workers than men.

The number of (elite) women in senior positions in CSOs has increased in recent years but it has not translated into political or governmental roles. Over the last 15 years, more or less, the upper middle and upper classes in cities shifted from reliance on single income families to double income families. A need for women to work was therefore developed.

In many tribes in the North, women have historically been more participatory, even in the battlefield. This is tribal mountainous areas rather than farming communities in the middle high-grounds. Tribal mountainous communities tend to be smaller so depended on all members to fight for survival.

LA knows women from there who are not educated but very vocal and not shy in public spaces.

Reputation is so important in Yemen and sensitive to attack which makes women politicians / prominent women easy targets.
Karman is a terrible role model of what Yemeni women should be. She is not the picture of modernism as she’s been made out to be. Islah saw Karman speak up against Saleh so came around to supporting her and women. Islah uses women’s voices at the ballot boxes.

The Western idea of citizen participation is very different in the Yemeni context. Yemenis see the government as meant to be providing everything. There is weak sense of civic duty and cultural awareness of what people can do themselves.

Women are starting to get boxed up. The trends seem to be very bad. The national dialogue is seeking women as tokens and there’s only the 30% to work towards.

On my field trips I met many illiterate women who wanted to read and write. One woman said she had a private letter written to her by her husband in S. Arabia that she couldn’t read but didn’t want to have to ask a man to read it to her.

Coding number: 7
Age: 30-35
Gender: M
Nationality: Lebanese
Relevance: Yemen officer for British NGO
Residence: UK

Setting women’s activism very much within context of protests (less gendered or gendered when strategic for political parties / women).

Bushra Maktari, when she was verbally attacked – women stood by her (and by other similar women). They vocally defended her. This is a new development!

There is a generational dimension to women’s agendas: there is great frustration among young women activists towards the older and established women activists (10-11 of them). The older activists did not join the protest movement until later on and are now more involved than younger protesters. The younger generation does respect the older activists but also seem them as very much part of the old system.
- At two roundtable discussions during the research for this report, women were divided on the issues they wanted to talk about and could not work together because they disagreed with each others’ prioritisation.
- Unity needs to come from an approach of the ground upwards. The gateway to progress [in rural areas] is through speaking to powerful men. The blessing of the Sheikh makes more impact than female lobbying.

**Coding number:** 8  
**Age:** 40-50  
**Gender:** F  
**Nationality:** Yemeni  
**Relevance:** Head of major Yemeni NGO, prominent family  
**Residence:** Yemen

- The onus is on Yemeni women to step up and take responsibility. They shouldn’t limit themselves to women’s issues but prove themselves on general issues too, that way they will be accepted by society. Emphasis on a strong personality as a requirement for a woman leader for greater participation.
- Since the revolution there is now greater conviction among the population that women should be integrated into leadership positions. Youth / women can be seen as part of the solution not problem.
- At the conference the fight wasn’t about priorities and agendas but was because some women were with the revolution and others were against it. When they began the discussion some women referred to the ‘revolution’ while others were calling it a ‘crisis’. The conflict at the meeting was political not based on an agenda for development.
- I don’t believe in conflicting with the community on sensitive issues. For example, if I am convinced I shouldn’t wear the headscarf I should still wear it to respect the community and to help them listen to what I have to say.
Coding number: 9
Age: 35-45
Gender: M
Nationality: Yemeni
Relevance: NGO founder with focus on women’s rights using an Islamic lense
Residence: Yemen

- Political change is the driving force for cultural change. It is the leverage and helps cultural change happen.
- The perspective of women’s involvement in public life is improved amongst the community since the revolution (some fanatics will still oppose) but so many tribal members will have returned home from the change squares with a different perspective.
- Islamic approach – no one interpretation of Sharia. Yemenis are conservative and will believe anything if it is said to be in Islam to you need to question how Islam is used to justify unjust practices.
- “Women need to take more leadership roles.”

Coding number: 10
Age: 24-45
Gender: M
Nationality: Yemeni
Relevance: Head of Yemeni women’s coalition, not from a major city
Residence: Yemen

- Women are supported by the community (men and women) when they achieve success – in education, work. Fellowship is important for women: in families, within political parties and new media - to surround and push her.
- There might be two camps – those who like Amal Basha and Nadia Sakka, Bushra etc.. who tend to be from Sana’a and Taiz and those who prefer more mild mannered / traditional people – Karman, Mashour etc..
- Muslim policy is to push women as voters first then move onto development and into different ideas. It takes a very long time to change ideas. A lot of the struggle is to convince the internal membership of political parties for change.

- We must be sensitive with language and not use a sharp model for fear of it being seen as a foreign invasion. The changes must be part of the religion and society. These social / economic rights are sensitive.

- Looking outside of the window at my cousins on the farm who aren’t allowed to speak to me, for them it is hugely positive when they see a female taking the front line on TV. There are others like Karman too. They [these activists] may be constrained by tribal constraints but are allowed education and inspire.

Coding number: 11

Age: ?

Gender: Male

Nationality: Iraqi

Relevance: Head of Yemen desk for National Democratic Institute, an American NGO

Residence: U.S

- The women who don’t agree with Twakkul on women’s rights with citizen rights are asking not for political rights for education, health etc and are mainly rural.

- You need grassroots work and at the same time women pushing at the policy level. You need both simultaneously.

- Democracy is a process not a result. Putting people in front of the media (like with USAID conference) is not the same as getting something implemented, which is what we are interested in. You need to slowly build capacity, how to negotiate and advocacy approaches. It is a very long process.

- The fact that the current dialogue is willing to nominate women to be on the committee is progress. There has been some increase in acceptance for female participation from the community but mainly in towns and cities, less in rural areas.

Coding number: 12
Age: 30-35
Gender: F
Nationality: Yemeni
Relevance: Medical doctor, former employee for major international NGO
Residence: UAE until age 25, thereafter Yemen

- If I speak like Karman I'll get put in jail and no one will come and get me out.
- There is corruption in the ministry of health, although they are getting support from the UN and US, villages don’t have a single clinic. It is corrupted, becoming more about business than medicine.
- There is a very fine line between tradition and religion and it is mixed up. Many people are confused and think that traditional things are religious. If they are religious they are from God and not open for debate, unlike tradition which is human made.
- It’s been a family revolution so far. It hasn’t affected women yet, or human rights. The outcomes are not yet satisfying.

Coding number: 13
Age: 25-35
Gender: F
Nationality: Yemeni
Relevance: Prominent youth blogger, women’s activist
Residence: Yemen

- What is important for Yemen’s future is decentralization and federalism. This is key and we have a good amount of the structures for it already. Tribes have their own laws etc. If federalism is really used then people (men and women) in each local area, who know more about the area, can decide on the priorities and men and women can take a more active part in it. This is better than waiting for a central power.
- There is a link missing between the rural areas and Sana’a. You need representation in government to [articulate] these priorities. The women’s
movement in the capital is too disconnected from the streets, except with the Islamists.

- Looking at the whole political spectrum there aren’t many women in Yemen on the radical left. Radicals in Yemen are very much moderates for other places. The more the spectrum expands the better the middle is I think. [You need them to level it out a bit, not let it all become conservative].

Coding number: 14
Age: ?
Gender: F
Nationality: Danish
Relevance: Middle East gender researcher at KVINFO, a Danish NGO
Residence: Denmark

- Issue of multiple definitions of every key term – public participation, gender, rights etc. There is talk about CEDAW, gender, and equality but when you look deeper into it, there is a balancing act between this level of equality and an equal name but different.

- Revolutionary participation was very important even if it’s now disappeared. Important for empowerment, sense of freedom and ability to change something.

- When you look deeper at the feminists, deeper into discussions it emerges that they are not clear about where they stand. Just look at Karman – she is not very solid – in her arguments about equality and women’s role in Yemeni society.

- I am skeptical. The women’s agenda gets more easily dropped if it is not an integrated part of citizen rights – I fear with Karman’s strategy it will be forgotten. Particularly because there as such strong forces in Yemen wanting women out of politics. A lot of this is about the economy too – there is no money. Money talks in Yemen. The more support Yemen gets from Saudi Arabia, the less women there will be in public life.
One of our mistakes and mistakes of the international community is that no one is looking at rural self-started initiatives. There is too much focus on urban women, particularly in Sana’a, Taiz and Aden- partly due to security - and the rest are ignored.

There is a distinction between the need for women’s representation on National Dialogue committees – where they represent women from the south etc - as separate from the need to advocate that women’s concerns are included in the constitution and that women’s rights are on the agenda as a specific concern.

The Friends of Yemen – established by the UK, a donor group that includes Saudi Arabia, adopts certain policies. Because Saudis are included and are against women’s rights, donors are not taking care of women’s issues. Saudi Arabia and therefore the Friends of Yemen are in fact making the situation worse.

I am ambitious about the future. There are new faces coming up. The old faces are still in the political arena but there are also new faces, who are using new models – social media etc.

- It is perfectly reasonable to advocate for people not to wear hijabs but don’t attack women who do wear them. I have an issue with their approach not their agenda.
- I am frustrated to see some activists after each other rather than working together. Karman has been receiving some very personal attacks. Others should take advantage of her position to strengthen the women’s agenda. I think it is pure jealously that drives the attacks.

- There is a great deal of awareness being built up since the beginning of the revolution. No-one seems to see this but it is what will create the change long-term.

- Women in tribal areas have more influence than in urban areas, particularly in the domestic sphere where they have acted as conflict resolution actors. Men are different in tribal areas, I felt highly respected all the time, which is different from urban men who don’t always respect you.

- A huge Partners Yemen 3 year project. There are a lot of success stories from this project – women changing in communities, playing important conflict resolution roles. The important point here is that there was no clear obstacle to their participation of any kind.

**Coding number:** 17  
**Age:** 30-40  
**Gender:** F  
**Nationality:** Yemeni  
**Relevance:** Prominent women’s activist, member of WATAN coalition  
**Residence:** Yemen

- My generation is the ex-regime generation; we were raised during the 33 years. We were in Taiz and my father used to bring home dresses for my eldest sister and she would go out wearing them without an abaya. Things have drastically changed.

- I heard a woman appointed by UN Women give a talk about women in Yemen. She said women don’t want to work together, they are limited, there is no women’s movement just individual figures looking after their own interests. I was outraged. These people are supposed to be supporting Yemeni women. We know we have problems but we need to overcome this – this is the issue.
Give me any woman, I will respect her. This society needs to see women in political scene, not so much who is the problem. Give me the percentage. It is not fair that we ask if women are representative, qualified etc while there are some men in the parliament that are illiterate.

A problem certainly is that independent women will not get into decision-making positions. I am not against Karman but she would not be where she is if she were independent of Islah. Bushra Maktari is more of a leader. She is a true revolutionary. Much more than Karman. She belongs to the socialist party but they don't support her.

**Coding number:** 18  
**Age:** 25-30  
**Gender:** F  
**Nationality:** Yemeni  
**Relevance:** Professional woman - IT consultant, chose not to take part in the uprising.  
**Residence:** Yemen

- Before the revolution fathers may have thought once or twice about allowing their daughters to go to college. My neighbour has a little girl who wants to go to school but her father said no because the security situation is too bad. You can’t wait forever for the security to improve.

- The prophet, peace be upon him, said that a woman is not something you put in the home and save. She goes everywhere. The values in Islam mean that a woman can do everything, be a judge if she wants to.

- If we talk internally and focus on an internal solution there will be progress. We should ask people what the problems are. If there are different opinions then they should be allowed to come to the surface. We should be asked to vote on the issues, Houthi, South issues, by free and fair voting.

- I am in the educated class in society and I didn’t know about Twakkul or Amal before the revolution. This means that she is fighting for herself, not for me, for women in society. The nobel prize was all for herself.