5. Research Findings: Ansar Allah

5.1. Ansar Allah's Understanding of the WPS Framework

On July 17, 2023, the leader of the Ansar Allah Movement, Mr. Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, gave a televised speech,[27] in which he touched on several aspects related to women, most notably: consultation with women, the role of women in public life, family building, faith awareness for women, women's responsibility and protection, women's care for children, and women's rights. The speech had two main starting points: the religious perspective towards women, and the conservative customs and traditions in Yemeni society that define stereotypical roles for women, with reference to the West and its view of women, which he said sought to demean the fundamental and pivotal role of women in the family and raising children.

Some of the members approached for this research hesitated to participate – as indicated by several interviewees – because there was no clear and consistent vision for women's participation in Ansar Allah, especially in the higher political leadership. Women were more responsive to the research because the issue affected them directly. Some preferred to receive and answer written questions. Mr. Abdul-Malik al-Houthi's speech coincided with the period of conducting the interviews, which led to a kind of reluctance to participate in the research among some of the interviewees, especially with regard to their vision and understanding of women's roles in public life. Considering that the speech made this (e.g. women's roles in public life) clear, most of the answers were that the speech implicitly explained this, by reviewing Imam Ali's commandments to his son Al-Hassan, and that there was no room to add to this.

The speech outlined how women's advice should not be taken regarding topics in which they have no experience and in areas that are specialised for men. As for the role of women in life, they were described as one entity with men, since God has referred to them as "human being", just like men. They are viewed as equal to men in humanity, as is the degree of faith. There is no difference between men and women, and the same applies to responsibility, taking into account the diversity of roles in reality, according to the formation, nature, and psychological reality of both of them, and pointing out that the role of women suits their nature.

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27 Speech by Mr. Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, 17 July 2023. Available at: https://www.saba.ye/ar/news3252193.htm.

Regarding the issue of protection, the speech specified that it is the man's role to ensure protection; this is within the responsibilities assigned to man by the text of the Qur'an (guardianship). The man is the one who manages the family's affairs, supporting it financially and providing protection for it, while the very important role of women (according to the speech) is limited to the upbringing and care of children. The speech noted that keeping women away from these roles carries great risks.

The speech presented a comparison between the view of women in the West and in Islam, where in the former they are used as a commodity for economic profit, and work in professions that degrade their dignity, while Islam exalts them and raises their status, and everything related to their care, protection, and financial support falls on men.

The speech also explained the rise of various practices in the recent period, namely the separation between women and men in public places, such as universities and workplaces. When asked about this, interviewees tended to confirm the points of their leader's speech, or refrain from answering altogether, while others justified their leader's words by talking about the advantages of separating women and men, saying how it creates a suitable and comfortable environment for women and gives them more privacy in their workplaces or places of education, and that the first priority is to pay attention to girls' access to education, work, and other services.

Most of those interviewed agreed that restrictions for women do not necessarily stem from religious teachings, but rather from Yemeni culture and society. On a political level, the group fears the West is using women's issues as a political card with the aim of undermining Yemeni society for colonial goals. Therefore, Ansar Allah does not view women's issues as a priority at the present time. It sees the war and reaching lasting solutions to stop it as a first priority, and maintains that only once the war ends must attention be given to all oppressed segments of society – not just women – in order to reach social justice.

5.2.   Official Policies and Commitments to the WPS Framework

Current public policies are represented by the national vision of state-building of Ansar Allah. According to its general foundations, the participation of women in public service should be no less than 30%.
When the National Salvation Government was formed in 2016, the same three ministerial portfolios that were previously held by women before 2014 continued. In addition, four women were appointed to the Shura Council of the Sana'a government (representing different political sects), five women were appointed to the positions of deputy ministers, and a number of women were appointed as general managers.

The regular speeches of the Ansar Allah leader often include general guidelines on family and the building of society and women's pivotal role in this. They support women's issues, and address the need to protect women, especially from the "soft war"[28] waged by the West, and consider that women's general activity must be in accordance with Quranic culture and faith identity. From the point of view of most interviewees, this does not conflict with women's rights, it "only [means] that they must observe religious controls in all their movement," whether in public or private.

Women have become highly valued in official and religious discourse, which often focuses on their community participation and steadfastness,[29] and in public events, where special spaces are allocated to them. The interviewees indicated that women are encouraged to participate in society, to support the military and popular committees, or to participate in demonstrations called for by the concerned authorities.

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28   According to the understanding of Ansar Allah, "soft war" is the methods and programmes the West uses to separate Muslims from their identity, weaken their religion, and subject them to the desires of others without thinking. It is usually used in parallel with military wars.

29   According to the interviews, Ansar Allah views steadfastness as the ability to remain resilient and persistent in the face of aggression and war. This has been exemplified over the past eight years, spanning from 2015–2022, as women within Ansar Allah have displayed unwavering determination in the midst of conflict. They have taken on multiple roles in the resistance efforts, beginning with political engagement through public demonstrations that reject the aggression and its effects on society. Furthermore, they have provided essential community support to the fronts by offering financial and nutritional aid. Their extensive advocacy efforts have also helped mobilise society to embrace the values of steadfastness, perseverance, and confrontation, ultimately contributing to their participation in the public sphere.

Women participated in the 2013-2014 National Dialogue Conference (NDC), and were represented in the government and in public institutions. Their participation peaked in 2014, but with the outbreak of war, quota obligations received less attention and new restrictions were imposed on women.

Some interviewees pointed out that the former President of the Supreme Political Council, Saleh al-Sammad, was committed to promoting women's rights, and he organised a special meeting with women in which he praised the role of women from all walks of life and in all fields and stressed the need for all segments of society enhance steadfastness and development. However, this trend declined after his death in 2018 following an air strike in Hodeidah, in the west of the country.

Although the legal system and the Constitution – which are still in place – have formal regulations to uphold women's legal rights, these rights do not cover all women's rights (such as inheritance and the right to hold public positions) and such regulations are not implemented or enforced on the ground.

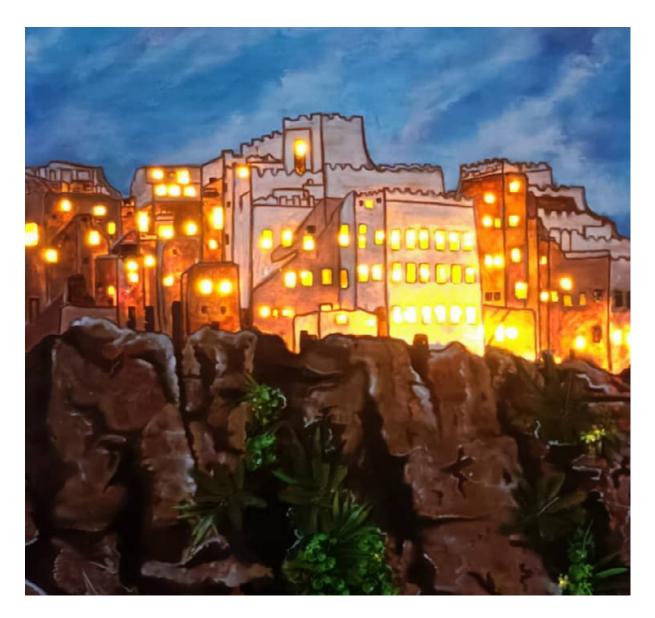## 5.3. Current Situation and Practices Relating to WPS

The war has caused the cessation of most basic services, such as water, electricity, and cooking gas, which became available only with great difficulty and at double the price. However, the cessation of salary payments to male and female government employees, especially teachers, has doubled women's suffering. This has especially affected those who financially support their families, and has had damaging effects on the education sector and the situation of families as a whole. Government schools no longer provide acceptable education services, and the costs of private schools are high. Accordingly, many girls have dropped out of education, and this has caused a major decline in development indicators and in the future status of women.

One of the interviewees pointed out that women face great impediments in obtaining their share of family inheritance, and noted how the judiciary typically procrastinates in deciding cases that concern women. There are no official procedures to alleviate their suffering.

Although there are women in official positions and in senior leadership positions, they do not always have strong influence in decision-making; this includes women who work in security services, where the presence of women is a recent breakthrough. According to interviewees, women do not participate in developing plans and programmes, nor do they participate in policy-making. Their role is limited to implementation alone. In addition, they are prevented from participating in foreign policy and negotiation issues due to security considerations (the war and the security situation that resulted from it). However, the matter does not concern women only, but has a specific impact on them.

In practice, women also face restrictions due to policies limiting their participation in activities, events, and workshops aimed at building women's capacities, or focusing on women's issues, because the priority is placed on confronting the "aggression" (a term given to the Arab coalition leading the war on Yemen). Furthermore, their participation in external events is impeded by restrictions imposed by security authorities on Sana'a airport and the lack of safe corridors. According to some of those interviewed, although there are high-level decisions requiring the abolition of some restrictions imposed on women (such as prohibiting women from traveling unless accompanied by a mahram), this is due to the opinions and jurisprudence of mid-level leadership who imposes these restrictions, who are often strict with regard to women and have the authority to take such measures without any declared directives.

Even at the societal level, there is a decline in the norms that were prevalent in Yemeni society and that provided a kind of protection for women. This may be due to the fact that women, because of circumstances caused by the war, have left their traditional family roles and have become involved in economic empowerment projects offered by organisations and official bodies to the families of martyrs, or that society has gradually begun to lose this characteristic for several internal and external reasons.

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

The interviewees highlighted the importance of the Families of Martyrs Programme, which works to empower targeted families to be economically self-sufficient. It is one of the important factors that provides women with the kind of security lost as a result of the war, especially since these families usually have lost their breadwinners. In the same way, creative social campaigns and opportunities for more decent livelihoods emerged.

The interviewees also indicate that, despite the decline in the level of protection and safety provided by traditional customs for women, their impact is still significant in achieving positive discrimination in favour of women in conflict areas, and without it, many women would have fallen victim during armed confrontations.

The interviewees spoke about the trend of women receiving greater protection from violations in places of detention or prisons. The security authorities have enabled this trend, and they have also made efforts to follow up on blackmail cases to which women are exposed, which have increased significantly in recent times. Among their procedures, the security authorities specify a toll-free phone number for reporting any extortion operations.

5.5   Opportunities and Recommendations

There are several opportunities that can form the basis for work to serve the framework of WPS relating to Ansar Allah, perhaps the most prominent of which are:

Small projects:

The development of small projects for women is one of the possible opportunities that will enable women to rely on themselves and, as a result, increase their self-confidence and reduce their dependence on others to provide for their needs, which increased significantly during the war period.

Adopting a dialogue approach:

Dialogue encounters between the local community and government agencies can also play a role in raising awareness of women's issues and rights and recognising their roles in community resilience and peacebuilding. International organisations can also develop evaluation and follow-up programmes for the implementation of women and peace programmes and provide the necessary expertise and guidance to achieve the goals of these programmes.

The interviewees indicated the need to strengthen the relationship between Ansar Allah and the rest of the political parties, as this would achieve a feeling of security. This is something that has been missing over the past years, as a crisis of confidence prevails between the various political parties and an almost complete rupture of communication at all levels related to women. Rebuilding such bridges may represent an opportunity not only to dispel fears, but also to expand the circle of discussion about the marginalisation and exclusion that women are subjected to, regardless of their political affiliations.

Activating the Constitution and laws:

Since the Constitution of Yemen still exists and is recognised, it represents a valuable opportunity: work can be done to help women benefit from the texts that support women's rights, and also benefit from the legal system and the national vision for state building. Ways need to be found for these texts to be activated on the ground.

From the point of view of the interviewees, religious discourse does not constitute an obstacle to women obtaining their rights and is consistent with the laws in force, but the problem arises from a lack of implementation of the laws, and from an interpretation that is subject to social norms and strict practices towards women.

Building on community participation:

There is another important opportunity which was pointed out by all of the interviewees, which is the participation of women in the process of steadfastness and their support of the military and community efforts. Just as these roles have led to entitlement for men, women can also find entitlement through these activities, whereby they can obtain their rights and participate in decision-making. The presence of women in decision-making positions and in security agencies would enhance this opportunity. However, effective communication must be achieved between decision-makers, the security sector, and the communities for this to occur.

☰ The role of international organisations:

Most of the interviewees believe that increased support and direction from international organisations for small projects for women could enhance the role of women in society and their ability to ensure their rights, thus reducing the poverty and destitution caused by war and siege. Several organisations and agencies working in this field were mentioned. However, the role of international organisations in advancing women's empowerment and achieving peace and security should be conditioned by a neutral position on all parties to the conflict. One of the interviewees stipulated that she had a clear position on "aggression," and the importance of activating international protection laws for women in a concrete manner because, she argued, silence about the violations to which women are exposed has caused a loss of confidence in the international community and its laws amongst the movement.

While some of the interviewees underlined the opportunity represented by the role of the international community in enabling women to play greater roles in peace and security processes, others rejected the idea and stressed that external organisations and the international community should not be relied upon. Any work in this direction must take into account that excessive sensitivities to the work of international organisations is often a result of the organisations themselves having not taken into account the sensitivities of the societies in which they work – their terms and concepts – and this highlights the opportunity and need for organisations to adopt the concepts that society accepts; this can help further participation processes and the integration of women's issues in their work.

Those who held favourable views of the focused interventions of international organisations suggested that greater support be given for training, qualification, and the implementation of programmes that enhance women's rights and enable them to participate effectively. They also recommended that support be given to girls' education, to psychological and health supports, and to political support for women, which could involve pressuring decision-makers to include their issues and strengthening the legal system, which protects women's rights, to be a more integrated system.