



## Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General  
13 December 2020

Original: English

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### Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-fifth session

15–26 March 2021

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”

### Statement submitted by TOBE Foundation for Rights & Freedoms, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council\*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

Yemen has always ranked last in the Gender Equality Gap Index. Discrimination against women is embedded in laws, institutions and traditional social norms. Grave violations and abuses against women and girls have reached a level that we have not witnessed before in the history of the country.

The war and the humanitarian crisis, coupled with spread of COVID-19 and other fatal outbreaks, as well as, the floods that hit a number of governorates, have worsened access to basic services such as health, education, and shelter. This disproportionately affects women and girls, puts them at higher risk of gender-based violence, and increases the vulnerability of displaced women, migrant and refugee women, as well as women from other marginalized groups.

In spite of the global call for ceasefire, new battle fronts and hostilities opened and escalated. This has caused mass displacement where women and girls have been subject to horrific conditions of malnutrition, indiscriminate shelling and lack of basic needs to survive. The proliferation of arms has increased due to the conflict including by state parties to the Arms Trade Treaty.

The government is not able to provide an adequate COVID-19 response. The health system is suffering from many challenges including lack of equipment and medical supplies, shortage of fuel and cuts of electricity, as well as, cuts and interruption of health workers salaries. The current case fatality rate for COVID-19 is almost ten times the global average. Additionally, the Doctors and Nurses Union announced that 63 doctors have died due to contracting the virus. Many hospitals and clinics have shut down due to under-preparedness to respond to COVID-19 cases, impacting women and girls especially pregnant women and girls – who are early marriage victims – from accessing health services.

Before the conflict, around half of the population were already living in poverty on average of 1.90USD per day. The number of people living in poverty has increased including due to non-payment of salaries to civil servants and loss of livelihood opportunities. People living under Houthi-controlled areas have to travel to government-controlled areas to collect their salaries. Women take this responsibility of traveling and collecting the salaries as a way to protect the men in their families from being kidnapped at checkpoints. Many people are not even able to afford food and when they do women and girls are usually last to eat increasing their risks of malnutrition. Early marriage has increased, since families resort to marry off their daughters as a means to make income from dowries. Poverty and hunger have also been a powerful contributor to the increase in child recruitment.

Children are recruited to be soldiers and combatants by multiple parties to the conflict as confirmed by United Nations bodies, including the Group of Experts on Yemen. Boys and girls have been recruited into armed groups or armed forces and used in hostilities in many forms, including in the frontlines, in recruiting other children, and for spy work.

Schools are either damaged or used for military use in areas both under the government and Houthi control. Yemen was already suffering from high dropout rates among girls before the war but these rates have further increased. We documented the use of six girls' schools in Taiz by pro-government armed groups in areas under the government control. The schools were either completely or partially used by militants. Many girl students reported that they were harassed and eventually got pulled out from schools by their guardians. The education system in the areas under Houthi control has been corrupted by radicalization and ideological indoctrination.

Sexual violence against women, men, children, and LGBT persons has been used as a weapon of war by parties to the conflict. Since 2018, we documented kidnapping, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, torture, including sexual violence and rape, electrocution, and beating, against 26 women human rights defenders. The majority of the cases were in Houthi controlled areas. The targeted groups include women political activists, women civil society representatives, women humanitarian workers, and women peacemakers. Women were arbitrarily detained for their participation in demonstrations against hunger and were beaten in their homes for sharing videos calling for disbursement of salaries.

Southern women calling for self-determination and disengagement from unity are at risk of capital punishment. Article 125 of the Panel Code envisages the death penalty and confiscation of property as punishment to those threatening Yemen's unity. Southern forced retirees and women calling to address their compensation and reclaim their lands and properties continue to demonstrate calling for their rights. During the National Dialogue Conference, recommendations were put forward to the government to remedy these grievances through reparation. The government established a reparation fund which was reported to receive a donation of 350 million US dollars from Qatar.

Rural communities rely heavily on women in agriculture and livestock. Women provide 60 per cent of labour in crop farming, 90 per cent in livestock rearing and only 10 per cent of wage labour. Yet, rural women are deprived of many opportunities and rights. They have limited rights of ownership or control of assets. Less than 1 per cent of agricultural landowners are female.

Internal displacement due to the conflict had caused the agricultural sector to lose nearly 50 per cent of its workforce. The Saudi-led coalition launched more than 50 per cent of airstrikes in agricultural land and the Houthis have planted mines in land and the coastal and sea areas, which have prevented farmers and fisherpersons from securing their livelihoods.

The country was already facing a very serious water shortage, however, the conflict has greatly exacerbated the situation. The burden of fetching water falls on women and girls, having to walk long distances to reach water sources, which exposes them to multidimensional insecurities including falling victims to mines.

Yemen is on the brink of an environmental crisis as the Safer oil tanker situation deteriorates and risks to leak 1.1 million barrels of oil into the sea affecting Yemen and neighboring countries. This ecological disaster will destroy the marine system in the Red sea and further increase food insecurity and malnutrition in the country, which will disproportionately affect women and girls.

The government developed a National Action Plan for Women, Peace, and Security in 2019 which was not officially launched due to COVID-19. The plan was not developed in a meaningful consultative process and have missed opportunities to integrate recommendations put forward by women, including but not limited to issues related to addressing child recruitment, reparation for women and girls, protection needs of women human rights defenders, and responding to the needs of disabled persons.

Women leaders were the first to call for a ceasefire to focus efforts on COVID-19 response. The women mobilized resources for the hospitals and clinics, trained first responders, and raised awareness on COVID-19. Women are leading peacebuilding efforts including mediation efforts to end armed conflict over water and land resources, facilitating release of arbitrary detainees, addressing child recruitment, negotiating humanitarian aid access, and facilitating ceasefire initiatives to evacuate families, however, their public contributions remain invisible and

underappreciated, and they continue to be viewed by some actors as passive victims, and consequently are largely excluded from UN-led peace process. Women's participation in the peace process as such continues to be limited to the sidelines.

We conclude with an urgent call for supporting a permanent, comprehensive, and just peace for Yemen and urge states supporting Yemen to:

- Halt all illicit and licit arms transfer to Yemen or/and that end up in Yemen and support the establishment of an international reconstruction fund for Yemen.
- Support in long-term sustainable protection programmes for women and girls in Yemen including specific protection programmes to protect women human rights defenders and allocate multi-year flexible funding for women led civil society organizations working on gender, peace, and security and humanitarian response in Yemen.
- Allocate conditional funding to UN-led organizations including the Office of the Special Envoy to facilitate an accountable and inclusive peace process, ensuring women's meaningful participation and youth engagement in all diplomatic tracks.
- Support Yemen's National Action Plan, technically and financially, urging the government to revise the plan with women-led civil society organizations to integrate their comments.
- Urge the government of Yemen to establish an accountability framework based on transparency and anti-corruption principles to improve basic and social services delivery of health, education, and social protection including disbursing civil servant salaries, prioritizing services for women and girls eradicate.