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## **Explaining the Lack of Progress in Yemeni Women's Empowerment: Are Women Leaders the Problem?**

By Nadia Al-Sakkaf<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

Despite the existence of women's empowerment policies and the appointments of women leaders to oversee the implementation and sometimes design of those policies, the Republic of Yemen has repeatedly ranked last in the WEF Gender Gap Index since 2006. Is this a problem of capacity? Are the women leaders, who are driving the national women's development agenda forward, lacking in this field? This article investigates this question through a mixed-method research by surveying and interviewing Yemeni women leaders who were involved in empowerment policies in health, education, economic participation and political empowerment between 2006 and 2014. Findings from this research show that the women leaders were highly qualified in terms of expertise, education, and professional skills. Furthermore, findings show that the patriarchal system punishes women leaders when they challenge it, which forces many of them to refrain from antagonising the patriarchy. Those who do, risk their professional and even personal well-being in their plight against practices that negatively affect women's empowerment of the larger women community. This finding has significant implications for women's empowerment policies in Yemen and countries of similar contexts, by directing funding and support from the traditional individual capacity building efforts to those concerning harnessing the collective power.

*Keywords:* Feminism, Yemen, Women's empowerment, Policies, Capacity, Women leaders

### **Introduction**

Capacity often comes up as a qualifier for successful empowerment policies, especially those implemented in a top-down manner at the national level (Howlett, 2009). The literature on capacity describes it as a variety of professional and interpersonal skills and abilities, which combined, dictate how a person or an institution achieves desired outcomes (Besley, Montalvo & Reynal-Querol, 2011). When it comes to women's empowerment in Middle Eastern feminist debates, the question of women's ability to lead is often raised. The main problem in the developing world is that due to socio-economic contexts, women are considered disadvantaged in terms of experience or the exposure to become good leaders. Some extreme arguments made by conservative traditionalists and rigid religious scholars claim that women are essentially lacking in their physical and mental composition to become leaders and that this is not a matter of education or experience (Yaseen, 2010).

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Against expected trends, Yemeni women were able overcome traditional and religious barriers and arrive at positions of power. Their efforts and achievements in the public domain made them more visible collectively and individually to the Yemeni public and decision makers, as well as the international community. Consequently, the past two decades saw a surge of female appointments in various governmental and state related positions. Upon appointment, the women leaders were tasked with the responsibility of overseeing the implementation of women related policies. Despite that, the country maintained a poor record regarding women's health, education, and economic participation. Is the failure to improve the overall situation of Yemeni women caused by the failure of the women in power? Is it a problem of capacity? This article aims at addressing the element of women leaders' capacity as a potential cause contributing to the failure of women empowerment policies in Yemen.

The failure of women's empowerment policies in Yemen, especially in light of the advanced public and political positions Yemeni women enjoy, has not been adequately addressed in the scholarly literature on gender politics in Yemen. Aiming to contribute to answering this question, this article surveys and interviews Yemeni women leaders who were involved in women's empowerment policies in Yemen in health, education, economic participation and political empowerment between 2006 and 2014.

Specifically, there were three dimensions or sub-mechanisms, through which capacity was seen to have influenced policy success. These are: the education and qualifications of the women leaders; their management, communication, and other soft skills; and their risk-taking and defiance against the patriarchy within their workplace. Results from surveys and interviews in this research reveal an abundance in women leaders' qualifications and skills. Hence, the findings suggest that lack of capacity of the women leaders as implementers of women's empowerment policies was not a strong contributor to the policies' failure. The data shows that women leaders had high capacities whether professional or personal. Moreover, the women leaders had access to networks and experts who could provide them with technical and professional expertise to enable them to better the quality of policies and relevant efforts.

However, their risk-taking and defiance abilities against the patriarchal systems in the workplace varied. The interviews provided an explanation for this variance in detail showing its consequence on women's empowerment policies and the gender equality plight in Yemen in general. An interesting finding in terms of Yemeni women leaders' capacity was that many women, especially those in the middle and lower levels of management, would rather not challenge the structures or address gender inequalities in their workplace or their projects for fear of antagonising their superiors or the system in general, and consequently, diminishing their career development chances. This is not an attribute limited to women when the competition over power is considered a zero-sum game (Ruthig et al., 2017). Interviews revealed that not every woman who is in a position of formal authority a) has actual power, b) has the ability to champion gender equality causes, and c) has the desire or strength to challenge systematic adversity, especially if this could be detrimental to her career.

This research shows that the lack of capacity in terms of expertise, and qualifications in education and skills were not the main factor contributing to women's empowerment policy failure. In terms of their risk-taking and defiance against the patriarchy within their workplace, and ability to create change in the social attitude towards women, further interventions are in order. The findings of this research have strong policy implications in the field of women's empowerment in Yemen, especially in terms of political empowerment and donor interventions towards supporting Yemeni women leaders. This study makes an important contribution to the vast

academic literature on feminism and politics by shedding light on an overlooked topic in an overlooked country. Moreover, this study covers the period between 2006 and 2014, thereby making an important empirical contribution to the literature on Yemeni gender politics, which often focuses on historical comparison of the status of Yemeni women in different timelines. Academic research on more contemporary women's empowerment efforts and gender politics is lacking, especially from a local insider's standpoint. Moreover, the time frame of this study is helpful in evaluating the impact of around two decades<sup>2</sup> of international funding aimed at women's empowerment. It is worth mentioning that the coup d'état in September 2014 and the subsequent outbreak of armed conflict limited the time frame of this project to 2014. In the context of Yemen's ongoing war, access was difficult, hence collected data would have been unreliable and the women's situation could not be generalised.

### **The Situation of Yemeni Women**

The Republic of Yemen (RoY) is deemed to be one of the worst places to be a woman (Adams, 2016), with the gap between men and women (Gender Gap Index)<sup>3</sup> persistently ranking as the highest globally since 2006.<sup>4</sup> Located at the southern point of the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen is the least developed country in the Middle East and one of the poorest in the world (CIA Factbook). It was formally established on 22 May 1990, when the Yemen Arab Republic in the north and the Peoples' Democratic Republic of Yemen in the south were united. The RoY is home to around 29 million inhabitants. It is surrounded by the Red Sea from the west, the Gulf of Aden from the south, Oman from the east and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from the north. Oil and gas are its main sources of income, accounting to around 65% of the national revenue (CIA), and which are rapidly declining. The Yemeni society is a largely conservative one and more than three thirds of the population live outside the urban centres (World Bank, 2012).

Despite having a wealth of natural and historical resources, the country is plagued with corruption, mismanagement, and instability, which rendered it one of the most challenging countries to live in. However, Yemeni women suffer the greater impact of hardships; even in times of relative prosperity, they remain critically disadvantaged in terms of their health, education, and economic rights.

With regards to health, two primary gender-specific risks include pregnancy and childbirth. Giving birth presents a 1 in 39 death risk in Yemen (Cooke, 2018), with seven women dying every day due to childbirth and pregnancy complications (Al-Raiby, 2012). In 2015, the maternal mortality ratio was reported at 385 deaths per every 100,000 live births (WHO, 2015: 56). Similarly, in education, according to the World Bank's 2015 indicators, only one in two Yemeni women—aged 15 and older, can read and write. This is half the female population. UNICEF's 2013 statistical indicators confirm Yemen's gender-specific challenges in the education sector, indicating that the percentage of girls who actually attend school drops from 64% at primary level

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<sup>2</sup> Since the Millennium Development Goals in 2000 and its 2005 country needs assessment.

<sup>3</sup> The Gender Gap Index is a composite index that compares women's development to men as a mathematical aggregate of health, education, economic, and political indicators. See more about how the Global Gender Gap Index is calculated including political empowerment: <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2016/measuring-the-global-gender-gap/>

<sup>4</sup> GGI of 2018. This index is published annually by the World Economic Forum. Yemen ranked last at 149 out of 149 countries in 2018, remaining as the worst country in terms of gender equality continuously since 2006. For more details on the various indicators involved in the calculation see <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2017/dataexplorer/#economy=YEM>

to only 27% at the higher secondary level. This means that only one in three Yemeni girls actually graduates from high school. As for the economy, women only constitute 6% of the formal labour force and their employment is usually limited to the education and the medical sectors (ILO, 2015: 7). Paradoxically, women constitute a much higher percentage in the informal sector, mostly as unpaid farmers in rural areas.

However, despite being a conservative and traditional society, Yemen has witnessed a surge of appointments of women in positions of authority since the early 2000s. For example, since 2003, Yemen has always had at least two female ministers in every cabinet. In fact, for the first time in the country's history, and the proportion of women in ministerial positions reached a high of 11.4% in 2015, when four women were appointed as ministers.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, the Yemeni state has continuously created women-related national bodies and instruments since 1996.<sup>6</sup> It has also appointed women to be in charge of these institutions and tasked them with promoting and improving the overall situation of Yemeni women especially in health, education, and the economy. As per the mandate of these departments and institutions, women in these leadership positions played the role of gate keepers and acted as intermediaries between the larger female population and Yemeni state institutions. In addition to creating organisations concerned with women's rights and affairs, the Yemeni government appointed women as deputy ministers or at least director generals in the health, education, and trade ministries—among other ministries, and tasked them with the responsibility of foreseeing the advancement of women in those fields since the year 2000 onwards.

However, as demonstrated earlier, statistical and anecdotal evidence shows that, while there were several Yemeni women in prominent political positions, and despite the existence of women's empowerment institutions and policies—also led by women in senior positions, Yemeni women's conditions continue to remain dismal rendering the country the worst in the world in terms of gender equality since 2006.

This article examines the capacity of women leaders who were in charge of women empowerment policies as a potential explanation of the failure of such policies. The women leaders were chosen as the targeted population of this research for two main reasons: a) their direct professional roles as champions of the women's empowerment agenda and their respective positions of authority, and b) their insights as women who are supposedly empowered and yet in touch with the larger less-empowered female population. Clearly, as an elite group in positions of authority, these women leaders influenced gender policies in Yemen, which made them an ideal sample in this research endeavour.

### **Theoretical Framing**

Combining the fields of political theory and feminism, this research centres on the concept of empowerment, which is found in different disciplines such as “community psychology, management, political theory, social work, education, women studies, and sociology” (Hur, 2006: 524). In the literature, power paradigms are predominantly presented as neutral without any explanation of how power is dispersed socially whether according to gender, class, or race (Rowlands, 2016). This creates a serious flaw in the design of empowerment policies targeting

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<sup>5</sup> In the 2014 cabinet there were four women ministers in a total of 35 ministers.

<sup>6</sup> The state represents the a) people: officials at the highest levels, this means the president, the cabinet, and political party leaders in positions of authority; and the b) political systems and culture, which is encapsulates institutions, laws and regulations, as well as ways of work.

women, especially those designed for conservative and male-dominated societies such as the Yemeni one. The empirical data addresses the issue of women leaders' capacity as a potential reason for their failure to achieve empowerment for the general women's population. In the context of this research, empowerment is understood not only as the woman's ability to gain more power due to her personal agency (which includes elements of capacity and confidence), but more importantly, due to the structures that surround this woman and enable (or disable) her to gain more power. The combined approach to empowerment through the interaction of agency and structural elements, is the founding theoretical framework for this research. Here agency is defined as the "ability to make meaningful choices and act upon them" (Kabeer, 1999: 438) through increased capacity and personal strength. Whereas, the structures of opportunities represent the resources, institutions, established practices (traditions, moral codes, gender norms), and other enabling factors that foster the empowerment process and are necessary for agency to manifest (Alsop, Bertelsen & Holland, 2006; Narayan, 2002 & 2005; Muñoz, Petesch & Turk, 2013: 144).

In terms of the capacity element of professional qualifications, there is an increasing amount of scholarly research on the importance of policy makers' characteristics and education/qualifications on policy outcomes (Besley, Montalvo & Reynal-Querol, 2011). One of the direct manifestations of capacity is the field-related expertise and know-how, which is usually acquired through relevant education, on-going qualification, job-related hard skills, and expertise. The relationship between improved capacity through educational qualifications on the one hand, and implementation efficiency and service quality on the other, has been promoted by many scholars especially those concerned with public administration and management (Burgess, 1975; Honadle, 2018). Research shows that a leader's competence is directly related to education and qualification (Besley, 2011). In addition to the educational and professional qualifications mentioned above, a more inclusive and generic set of soft skills is proven to directly contribute to performance efficiency and goal achievement. These skills include management, communication, and networking (Heckman, 2007). Studies show that organisational and individual success is dependent on strong management skills as well as robust management systems. This includes both human management, and resources' management including finances (Hou, 2007), and information technology (Ling, 2002). Such fluid skills interlock with technical capacity so as to enable the women leaders working in a position of authority to address challenges beyond the specialisation-specific issues of their projects.

Finally, capacity is also considered in this research in terms of the women leaders' risk-taking and defiance against the patriarchy within their workplace. Effective leadership is associated with high performance. Research showed that good leadership is a source of "clear focus and well-defined goals, and it is linked to characterises such as credibility and vision" (Andrews & Boyne, 2010: 444). In their daily lives, women continuously test their agency by confronting livelihood concerns and power norms including gender roles (Narayan et. al., 2000: 219). This manifestation of agency was examined at the women leaders' institutional level, as their work environment was very much influenced by the social gender norms spilling over from personal spheres. An increase in a woman's agency enables her to resist constraining and limiting circumstances instead of enduring them. Her internal strengths allow her to aspire, to question the unequal gender norms, and to seek change through utilising potential opportunities and achieving desired outcomes. Resistance actions also carry great risks for women pioneers who take on the patriarchy, with implications that could become detrimental to their careers and/or social life. Even then, perceived empowerment and increased freedoms may not always imply change in

discriminating social norms, which “permeate daily life and are the basis of self-regulation, hence affecting individual agency” (Muñoz Boudet, Petesch & Turk, 2013: 34).

## Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach as it combined descriptive statistical analyses of surveys with qualitative in-depth elite interviews. The use of more than one research method provided a more inclusive understanding of the research topic (Jick, 1979; 603), and increased the validity of the findings through triangulating results from the two methods (Denzin, 1978: 291). Surveys were used for their effectiveness in identifying the research sample’s attitudes regarding the researched issue (Johnson & Reynolds, 2005: 276), which in this case, is a predefined hypothesis regarding the relation between lack of capacity and policy failure. Surveys are also recognised for their ability to solicit responses especially in sensitive and personal issues such as gender equality in traditional contexts (Johnson & Reynolds, 2005: 276). Therefore, a survey<sup>7</sup> of 65 Yemeni women leaders was conducted, followed by specialised/elite, semi-structured interviews with twelve key women leaders, three in each of fields of health, education, the economy and politics. Elite interviewing presented itself as the most suitable technique to obtain qualitative information from people who are in high level positions (Dexter, 2006). Access to the participants was achieved through a multi-directional snowball scheme via several Yemeni women leaders’ networks.

The objective of both the surveys and interviews was to identify, from the perspectives of the Yemeni women leaders, to what degree the lack of capacity has contributed to the failure of women’s empowerment policies in Yemen. Lack of capacity was understood as that of the women leaders themselves as implementers of the policies. It included their technical qualification and education as well as their communication, management and networking skills, as well as their risk-taking and defiance against the patriarchy within their workplace.

For elite interviews, the twelve women leaders were purposefully selected for their direct involvement in the women’s empowerment policies as the most senior-level women in decision-making positions and as persons of authority on the subject matter. It must be highlighted here that the inclusion of these women leaders in a single comprehensive study provided an unprecedented value to the academic literature on gender policies and women’s empowerment in Yemen. These women have held the following positions:

- Health: 1) deputy minister of health from 2008 to 2012, 2) president of the Higher Council for Motherhood and Childhood between 2001 and 2013 and former head of the Yemeni Coalition for Safe Motherhood, 3) a high-level official at the Ministry of Health.<sup>8</sup>
- Education: 1) deputy minister of education since 2013 until now, 2) deputy minister of vocational training and technical education from 2009 to 2014, 3) professor of political sciences and gender at Sana’a University since 2004 and co-founder of AWAM Foundation for Cultural Development.
- Economic participation: 1) minister of social affairs and labour between 2006 and 2014, 2) advisor to the minister of industry and trade and former director general of the Working Women’s

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<sup>7</sup> Link to the survey: <http://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/nadiaPhD/>

<sup>8</sup> This interviewee is currently living in Sana’a-Yemen, which is under the control of the rebel forces, and therefore, for her own safety her identity has been protected.

Directorate at the Ministry of Industry and Trade between 2000 and 2018, 3) founder and chair of the Council for Yemeni Businesswomen since 2007.

- Politics: 1) minister of human rights from 2012 to 2014 and former chair of the Women National Committee, 2) minister of culture from 2014 to 2015 and chair of the Rights and Freedoms Committee at the National Dialogue Conference, 3) director of the Sisters' Arab Forum for Human Rights, lawyer and feminist pioneer.

## Main Findings

Findings from this research revealed sub-mechanisms through which capacity could influence the success of women's empowerment policies. These are: the women leaders' professional qualifications, their management/communication skills, and their defiance against the patriarchy.

The survey questionnaire was sent to 186 Yemeni women leaders and yielded 121 partial responses and 65 complete responses, resulting in a 35% response rate, which is high compared to the average of external surveys response rate (between 10-15%) (Fryrear, 2015). In terms of geographical spread, the survey responses represented 13 of the 21 governorates of the Republic of Yemen. This geographical distribution is representative of the spread of women leaders as the areas not represented were remote underdeveloped regions that did not witness a comparable number of women in leadership positions. The respondents included prominent Yemeni women between 30- and 65-years old spanning across three generational cohorts in the history of Yemeni feminism. In terms of professional representation, over half of the survey respondents worked in the public sector, which understandably provided the largest space for leadership positions through political appointments. The second largest group worked in the NGO sector, which is relatively new and where Yemeni women activists are still navigating their place in the transition from charity-based work to development and rights-based civil society campaigning.<sup>9</sup> Only 12% of the respondents reported working in the private sector, and 14% with international organisations. To clarify, some of these professional disciplines overlap as many of the women leaders tend to work across sectors and not limit their professional careers and activism to one field.

In order to assess the sample's capacity, questions were posed relating to the ability to design efficient action plans to achieve goals, the ability to manage the projects, professional expertise, as well as the confidence and ability to exercise authority over a given issue. Questions also included qualifications, the ability to network with stake holders and potential donors, and technical proficiency, or at least the ability to secure specialised expertise to provide it. The sound framing of strategies and action plans and their relevance to achieving desired outcomes was also considered part of policy-design capacity, as it was a testimony to the policy makers' strategic abilities. This applied to budgeting, target setting, stakeholders' involvement, monitoring and evaluation processes as part of the overall efforts to empower women.

The survey structure included 19 questions profiling the respondent as well as determining her capacity level. Indicators of capacity included: education, expertise, years of experience, awards and recognition, communication skills including languages and computer literacy, networks and outreach, exposure and awareness, training and development, ambition, and

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<sup>9</sup> For more information on the milestones in Yemen's civil society see Al-Sakkaf, N. (2016) "Yemen's relapse into tribalism" in *Beyond Islamists and autocrats*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/BeyondIslamists-Yemen.pdf>, (accessed 13 July 2018).



activism. Moreover, this section ended with a direct question on whether the respondent believed—from her own experience—that it was the lack of capacity that derailed women’s empowerment in her given area. Interview questions were designed similarly, however since they were semi-structured, they allowed for follow-up questions and clarifications based on the answers from the interviewees.

The following quotes come from interviews that took place on several occasions in an on-going process throughout 2017 and 2018 as part of my PhD thesis. I first approached the women in 2017 and each subsequently signed release forms in 2018.

The general outlook of the findings from both surveys and interviews was that there was an abundance in the two first dimensions of capacity and a relative scarcity in the third.

### *Capacity in Terms of Technical and Professional Skills*

Around 94% of the women leaders have at least a university degree with approximately 59% holding postgraduate degrees. Of the interview sample, all of them have obtained at least a post-university high diploma. Furthermore, six of the interviewees are PhD holders, two are medical doctors, and two are lawyers. With regards to personal development and professional education opportunities, a sweeping 84% of surveyed women explained that they have had at least one significant capacity-building training in the last two years. This includes language and computer skills, and many more aspects of professional growth and training based on their specialisations. At least a third of the surveyed sample explained that they personally sought regular training and capacity building activities on their own, whereas 60% received training through their work.

“At the Social Affairs and Labour Ministry, the staff in the General Directorate for Working Women’s Development and its branches in the various governorates, which are specialised with women’s issues in the labour sector, go through continuous training,” said Dr. Amat Al-Razzak Ali Hummed—former minister of social affairs and labour. “They also avail support from international experts, especially from the International Labour Organisation, and the Arab Labour Organisation, which trained the staff on designing plans and strategies.” The ministry worked with other women’s departments and directorates on relevant issues, such as working mothers’ rights, integrating gender equality in business, work ethics, and working women’s unions. To this end, coordination was with various stakeholders such as the Federation of Chambers, the General Union for Labour Syndicates, the Women National Committee, and the Yemeni Women’s Union.

Dr. Nafisa Al-Jaifi, former head of the Higher Council for Motherhood and Childhood, said that some women leaders were appointed based on merit and they were competent and had a lot of capacity, while others were appointed based on their political affiliation, yet all of them received various high-level training to build their capacity. Given their competency, once they left their government positions, many of these women were hired in leadership positions in international NGOs. Some are working as international consultants, while others established their own NGOs and initiatives.

Similarly, Lamia Al-Eryani, former deputy minister of the Technical Education and Vocational Training Ministry agreed that there are ample women leaders with high capacities who are responsible for designing and foreseeing the implementation of women’s empowerment strategies at the Ministry. In fact, Al-Eryani perceived this level of capacity as the direct cause of the relative success the ministry had in increasing the number of women joining the vocational

training field, even if this increase contextually did not create a substantive difference in the overall difference in Yemeni women's education.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, Al-Eryani explained that the increased technical capacity of the women working in the vocational education sector had resulted in an improvement in the enrolment rate of women in the various vocational training institutions affiliated with the Ministry, even in vocations that were not considered traditionally female oriented. "The improvement in capacity was not limited to the women—and men—working at the girls' education sector at the ministry but also in related entities," Al-Eryani said. "They received training in leadership, management, gender issues, and obviously specialised training on specific vocations." She added that within the Ministry of Technical Education and Vocational Training there were certain policies that were implemented to facilitate women's entry to this field, such as reducing entry requirements and enrolment conditions, which explains the increase in enrolment rates.

In general, the decade between 2000 and 2010 witnessed a surge of training and technical capacity events for women working in women's departments or directorates. For example, this was the case in the Health Ministry, where director generals and department heads undertook intensive training on gender mainstreaming in health programmes and how to take into consideration women's needs during planning and implementing health projects.

Moreover, the narratives of interviewed women leaders showed that their efforts to further develop their professional skills never stopped, as they were 'achievers' from a young age. "The women leaders were highly educated and continuously searched for ways to improve their capacities because they knew that they would have to prove their worth," said Hooria Mashour former minister of human rights.

On another front, all of the interviewed women are authorities in their respective fields. In the larger sample of surveyed women leaders, results indicated that 14% of the respondents claimed that they are in fact among the foremost specialised authorities in their respective field in the Arab region. A majority of 65% of the respondents considered themselves an expert in their field, while around 21% admitted that although they may not be experts, they are good at their jobs.

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<sup>10</sup> Despite efforts, Yemeni women's illiteracy rates remain one of the highest in the world with at least half of the women population aged 15 and above unable to read or write. World Bank, 'Yemen - Literacy rate, adult female (% of females ages 15 and above)', cited in Trading Economics [tradingeconomics.com], <https://tradingeconomics.com/yemen/literacy-rate-adult-female-percent-of-females-ages-15-and-above-wb-data.html>, (accessed 1 January 2016).

**Figure 1: Responses to Level of Expertise**



### *Capacity in Terms of Communication, Networking and Management Skills*

Another mechanism by which capacity affects policy success is communication, networking, and management skills, as the women leaders used their diverse networks as well as communication skills to manage their teams and organise their work. The findings show that in terms of experience, all interviewed women had a minimum of 15 years of professional experience, and of the surveyed women, half of them had 15 years or more of experience. Moreover, most of the interviewed women represented Yemen on many prestigious international platforms and had received international awards in recognition for their outstanding work and high capacity, such as the Forbes Most Powerful Arab Women list,<sup>11</sup> Outstanding Arab Woman Takreem Award,<sup>12</sup> and the Alison Des Forges Award for Extraordinary Activism,<sup>13</sup> among others. Likewise, among the survey respondents, around 45% had received a local award, while 12.5% had received local or regional recognition, and three had received international awards.

<sup>11</sup> Forbes Middle East, (2014). "Most powerful Arab women in government", Forbes, <https://www.forbesmiddleeast.com/en/list/200-most-powerful-arab-women-2014-government/item/33/>, and, <https://www.forbesmiddleeast.com/en/list/200-most-powerful-arab-women-2014-government/item/36/>, (accessed 12 July 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Takreem, (2014). "Outstanding Arab woman laureate Amal Basha", *Takreem*, <http://takreem.net/profile-details-56>, (accessed 12 July 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Human Rights Watch, (2014) "Rights activists honoured", *Alison Des Forges Award announcement*, , Human Rights Watch, 16 September 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/09/16/rights-activists-honored>, (accessed 12 July 2018).

“I was recognised as a successful pioneer businesswoman and was invited to conferences and events all over the world to share my experience,” said Fawzia Nasher, President of the Yemeni Businesswomen Council. “For example, in 2005 I became member of the Arab Women Investors Union representing Yemeni women.”

Dr. Bilkis AbuOsba, professor of politics and gender at Sana’a University and CEO of Awam Research Foundation, explained that there is an abundance of women academics/specialists, however, there are management and leadership challenges that prevent the optimum utilisation of their skills. She recounted two particular projects she worked on that she deemed successful: a cooperation with a German university for gender and political studies in 2006, and a masters’ degree in gender and development through a cooperation with a Danish university that would result in qualified gender experts. “Unfortunately, in all cases there was no substantial impact of the Gender Research Centre affiliated with Sana’a University on the higher education’s gender policies including the university of Sana’a where the centre was based, not for the lack of capacity or expertise, but rather because of bad management and the lack of desire at the top to gender-sensitise the higher education system.”

Dr. Jamela Al-Raiby, former deputy minister of health for the Population Sector, explained that “the technical support we received from donor countries and international organisations including UN agencies, was invaluable and helped me personally overcome many of the technical and organisational challenges I faced as I started working in reproductive health policy and advocacy.”

The role of international organisations in improving the capacity of women working in the government bodies was highlighted repeatedly. Dr. Nafisa Al-Jaifi, former head of the Higher Council for Motherhood and Childhood, said that after ratifying the CEDAW<sup>14</sup> and Child Rights Convention in Yemen, the Yemeni government established special governmental structures to promote the women/mothers and child rights’ issues such as the National Women Committee and Higher Council of Motherhood and Childhood on the central and governorate levels. Consequently, general departments for women – and led by women – were created in most ministries to ensure that women’s concerns were taken into consideration in the ministries’ strategies. Also, the Yemeni Women Union, international organisations such as Oxfam, UN agencies, and other NGOs played a significant role in supporting women’s empowerment projects. The government used to appoint women to head the national, regional and international meetings focused on women and child rights issues as well as two of UN general assembly meetings. There was considerable progress in preparing national strategies and action plans to empower women in a variety of fields.

### *Capacity in Terms of Risk-Taking and Defiance*

This element relates directly to women’s capacity to resist patriarchy and prove themselves as worthy leaders in traditional environments, which view women as the inferior gender. In fact, Yemen’s patriarchal system punishes women leaders when they challenge it, which puts women resisting leaders at risk personally and professionally.

In the words of the interviewees, many of whom were women who have held senior decision-making positions, the position of authority did not necessarily translate into power. The interviewees explained that in addition to the acknowledged elements of capacity, it also included

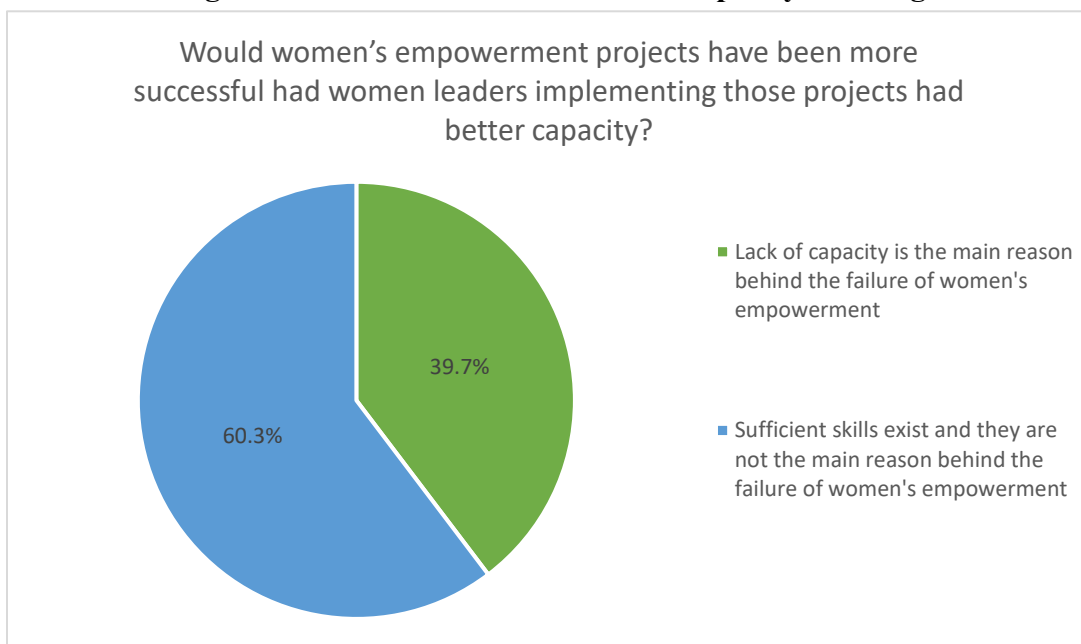
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<sup>14</sup> The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

the ability to create changes in the environment contributing towards achieving the end goals. In other words, even though a woman holds a leadership position, due to cultural values that dominate the society and dictate how people behave even in official institutions, her authority is not necessarily recognised by male colleagues or even subordinates. In order to contest this, some of the women leaders were able to harness their skills and address the gender-power struggles, albeit some to a better extent than others.

When asked directly in the survey whether women leaders needed more capacity to be successful in their women’s empowerment efforts, 60.32% stated that sufficient skills exist, and this was not the main reason behind the failure of women’s empowerment policies in the respondents’ respective fields. However, 39.68% said that a lack of capacity amongst women in their fields contributed to the failure of women’s empowerment projects.

**Figure 2: Women Leaders' Need for Capacity Building**



Further investigation into this finding with the interviewees shed light on the survey responses. To start with, it was readily apparent from the surveyed and interviewed women’s profiles that Yemeni women leaders did not lack capacity in either of the first two dimensions. Most of them were experts in their fields, or at least were efficient in their professional responsibilities. Therefore, the issue of lacking capacity did not strike as significant explanation, when it comes to the failed women’s empowerment policies. From the interviews, it was clear that all of the women interviewed had a high degree of expertise including academic qualifications and professional experience. They had, furthermore, secured their position after working their way up during many years in the public and private sectors and, in doing so, have overcome many personal and professional challenges. This is a testimony to their agency in terms of confidence, strength of character, and various technical and communication skills. This finding was expected as most Yemeni women who attain positions with decision-making responsibilities have displayed exemplary career histories and/or are known figures in the community.

That being said, what explains the 40% responses in the survey which said that empowerment policies would have had a greater chance of success had women leaders had more capacity? When conducting the interviews, this result was shared with the subjects, who explained that the general know-how and professional training for Yemeni women leaders was not lacking. What was lacking was capacity in the sense of the ability to exercise power over others in the workplace and be acknowledged as an authority figure.

For example, Arwa Othman, former minister of culture, said that women's capacity is not the issue, and in fact there are highly qualified women with degrees from the internationally recognised universities. "What good would high qualifications and capacity do if the entire system is flawed? The main issue is the state - or rather lack of state - as civic structures that truly enable progress don't exist."

Similarly, Dr. AbuOsba of Sana'a University described women leaders' capacity in two ways; the professional and personal capacity on the one hand, and the leadership capacity to mobilise social change on the other. There is a lack of capacity among Yemeni women leaders regarding the latter kind, she said. Noting that there are highly educated and remarkable women who do not take interest in the public sphere or do not engage in societal change even if they know this change is important. "Sometimes they are interested but don't know how to engage, and many times they would rather just go about their business and not get involved in matters beyond their job even if these matters affect their job one way or another."

This understanding of capacity was also highlighted by other interviewees. "If by capacity you mean the skills and qualifications, most if not all of the women in high positions are extremely qualified, on many occasions much more than their male colleagues," said Amal Basha, director of Sisters Arab Forum for Human Rights, adding that women often have to work twice as hard to prove their worth:

"But then there are other factors that limit the success a woman in a position of authority can achieve in her work on gender equality, such as limited resources, a lack of support from her boss, a lack of support in her personal life, and logistical challenges such as travelling or having to attend men's meetings<sup>15</sup> to be in the loop. Only women who are able to conquer these challenges are able to be successful."

## Conclusion

This research questioned the potential lack of capacity on behalf of the women leaders implementing women's empowerment policies in Yemen as possible explanation of the low quality of life that the majority of Yemeni women suffer from. Capacity refers to the personal agency and ability a woman has, which in this context is the women leaders' ability to implement the women's empowerment initiative she was responsible for in her field.

The findings indicated three mechanisms or dimensions of capacity: professional, managerial, and defiance against the patriarchy. The results show that the women leaders were highly qualified in the first two dimensions and were challenged in the third especially if they worked in environments hostile to gender equality. The third dimension is closely linked to the structures surrounding women leaders and is affected by the political culture of gender power dynamics in general. Putting together the findings from the three dimensions of capacity and its

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<sup>15</sup> In reference to the Qat sessions where business agreements are made, or official matters are discussed in a men only social setting. Such as men's clubs in the western world.

relevance to the success of women's empowerment policies, it can be concluded that women leaders' capacity, as such, has low explanatory power regarding the central question of why women's empowerment policies failed in Yemen.

This study shows that the problem behind lack of adequate progress in women's empowerment policies in Yemen is not an issue of capacity of the women leaders responsible for implementing such policies. In general terms, there is no need for further training of already qualified women leaders. However, an interesting finding showed significant need for collective power, in that women leaders' ability to mobilise resources and support for their projects on gender equality and for women's issues in general is lacking. If Yemeni women leaders were supported in creating unions or similar entities that protected them in their struggle to achieve results in their work, this could—as indicated by the women leaders themselves—help them significantly.

This finding not only resonates with arguments on empowerment in the feminist literature but also is reflected every day in Yemeni women's struggles to be seen, heard, and appreciated for their valuable contributions to the society at large. Women's movements, especially across party-lines and cultural and geographic backgrounds provide women with much needed drive and support to succeed as leaders. I am personally involved in a public campaign led in December 2020 by the Yemeni Women's Solidarity Network to demand representation of women in the government and all positions of power.<sup>16</sup> Having leading Yemeni women from all walks of life come together for one cause has given this campaign momentum like never before. It was interesting to note that some women leaders—albeit very few comparatively—stood against this campaign questioning the motives of the women behind it and accusing them of looking for their own interests. Women who benefit from patriarchy must be called out; women competing with other women is a strategy of patriarchy and, as also indicated by the interviewers, the patriarchy will use anything at its disposal to maintain the status quo in favour of men.

However, as this research indicates, the socio-cultural environment of Yemen with its patriarchal norms represents the hardest and longest obstacle against women leaders. Addressing the social gender-power imbalances has to start with socialization of children in the home for long term change; boys must be taught to recognize the humanity and equality in girls and fathers must encourage their daughters to be leaders. Such change cannot be brought in by economic crises that temporarily change the social attitude of women in terms of work because such change is needs-based and not rights based. A change in mentality is needed and this can only happen through long-term strategic educational and awareness policies: change must be comprehensive and occur at all levels from interpersonal relationships, relationships in the home, schooling that promotes gender awareness rather than reproducing existing norms and looking to historical periods where women have been active agents and their voices valued—all are critical.

Furthermore, this research indicates that there are other factors beyond the control of the women leaders themselves that have derailed the progress of Yemeni women in general. Further research needs to explore other aspects surrounding empowerment policies and other contributing factors to the failure of women's empowerment policies in Yemen.

This conclusion has important implications on gender policy and politics in Yemen and in other countries with similar contexts. It opens the door for investigating alternatives to the current Yemeni women's empowerment approach. Alternatives that are supported by empirical data derived from the local stakeholders themselves. Not only do the findings provide a basis for a

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<sup>16</sup> <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2020/12/19/yemen-in-focus-womens-group-demands-participation-in-government>; <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/yemeni-activists-slam-new-government-for-lack-of-female-representation-42750>; <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/yemen-cabinet-excludes-women-anger>

drastic shift in women's empowerment strategies and donor interventions, they also present a foundational step for future research that would enhance our understanding of women's empowerment in developing nations, especially those with patriarchal societies.



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