



## [SDDirect COVID-19 Pandemic Blog Series](#)

### The transformative power of women leaders within the COVID-19 response, from the grassroots to government: Perspectives from Yemen

*As the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 approaches, Noha Yehya of the [Yemeni Women Union \(YWU\)](#), tells us why now, given the COVID-19 global health emergency, it is critical Governments renew their commitment to the [Women, Peace and Security](#) agenda and harness the power of all women leaders, from heads of state to those working on the frontline in their communities, as part of the COVID-19 response.*

In recent weeks, many [major news outlets](#) have praised the success of women heads of state and their management of the COVID-19 outbreak. Angela Merkel of Germany, Jacinda Arden of New Zealand and Mette Frederiksen of Denmark have succeeded in curbing the spread of the virus in their respective countries and are credited with saving hundreds of thousands of lives as a result. Their [success](#) is attributed to their listening to scientific advice and taking early and decisive action to prioritize the health and wellbeing of their citizens, e.g. by closing borders, urging citizens to stay at home, limiting public gatherings, and rigorously testing, tracking and tracing cases of COVID-19 as they emerged. They are also credited with cultivating and nurturing a sense of citizenship and a shared responsibility to protect one another from harm during the pandemic. For example, Angela Merkel has so far eschewed the use of [war rhetoric](#) adopted by other leaders during the crisis, and has instead used her addresses to the German people to draw attention to how infectious disease outbreaks remind us of how “[vulnerable](#)” we all are, and how our collective wellbeing depends on the wellbeing of every single citizen, and how “[every life and every person counts](#)”.

As public interest in women’s leadership in response to COVID-19 grows, now is the time to also shine a spotlight on women’s leadership at the grassroots level, where in fragile and conflict-affected states such as Yemen, women are working on the frontline responding to acute humanitarian needs. Yemen already faces the world’s largest humanitarian crisis. As confirmed cases of COVID-19 start to grow in Yemen, the WHO and humanitarian experts foresee a ‘[perfect storm](#)’ with catastrophic consequences as restricted humanitarian access due to conflict is compounded by lockdown restrictions and flight suspensions whilst the funding shortfall grows. At the same time, the international community is assessing how it can support parties to the conflict to tackle the COVID-19 crisis, identifying the [maintenance of the ceasefire, engagement in UN-led political talks and improvements to humanitarian access as key](#).

With this in mind, as part of the [SDDirect COVID-19 Blog Series](#), [Michelle Spearing](#) and [Laura Martineau-Searle](#) of [SDDirect](#) spoke with Noha Yehya of the [Yemeni Women Union \(YWU\)](#) about the impact of COVID-19 in Yemen, and why she thinks Governments need to

harness the power of all women leaders, from heads of state to those working on the frontline in their communities, as part of the COVID-19 response.

**1. Noha, please tell us more about yourself and your role with the Yemeni Women Union (YWU).**

As a Yemeni woman, living in a country plagued by conflict and host to the world's worst humanitarian emergency, I understand better than most the disproportionate impact crises have on the lives of women and girls. All my life I have felt so frustrated by the pervasive gender inequality that exists in Yemen, where women and girls experience multiple forms of violence, and are held back from contributing to the peace and development of their country. And yet history shows the potential for women leaders to bring prosperity to their people, just as Bilqis, the Queen of Sheba, once did. The Koran refers to this wise and diplomatic ruler, who continues to be an inspiration to Muslim women all over the world. I also draw inspiration from the women of South Africa, who influenced the transitional justice process following the apartheid era.

I am an unwavering advocate for women's participation in leadership. For this reason, I have spent the past twenty years working with national networks and local women-led organizations, such as the YWU. The YWU was first founded in the 1960s, but it has grown significantly in size and reach in the past 25 years following the unification of the North and South, and now the organization has more than twenty branches in different governorates across the country and 163 centers at village and district levels. The YWU brings together women of all backgrounds and political affiliations to join hands and promote women's right to participate in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the country.

In my current role as the GBV Sub Cluster Co-Lead, I work in partnership with different humanitarian actors to provide critical and life-saving services to women at risk at of multiple forms of gender-based violence, including domestic violence, early child and forced marriage, and, abuse and harassment. This role is not easy. At times it is heartbreaking. There are also times when I am subject to abuse from people within my community, who accuse me of promoting a Western agenda. And yet still, whatever they say, whatever the risk to my own personal safety, I continue to fight for a woman's right to live a life free from violence. I think it is only when women are free from the threat of violence that they can contribute fully to the development of their country.

**2. Noha, please tell us about what impact you think COVID-19 might have on women and girls in Yemen, particularly in relation to their vulnerability to gender-based violence.**

Yemen has already confirmed its first case of COVID-19. This is deeply concerning, as we know from the recent cholera outbreak that it is easy for infectious diseases like COVID-19 to spread, given the fact that most people live in crowded conditions, which makes social distancing impossible, and poor water, sanitation and hygiene provision makes it difficult for people to regularly wash their hands. Furthermore, five years of conflict have destroyed the public health system, so should people fall seriously ill,

there are very few places they can go to seek medical assistance. To make matters worse, 79% of the population are dependent on humanitarian assistance for their day-to-day survival, but due to COVID-19, many international organisations and staff have suspended their aid operations.

I am very concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls, who I think are most at risk of being infected with the virus, given the primary role they play in caring for the sick. At the same time women and girls face specific barriers to accessing the limited health facilities that are available. They may require permission of male family members to attend a health facility and they may be further deterred by military engagement in providing health-care responses to COVID-19.

I am also concerned that measures intended to curb the spread of the virus, such as restrictions on freedom of movement, might limit women and girls' access to organisations like the YWU. This is very worrying, as women and girls are so vulnerable in the current situation. Many Yemeni women work outside the home as street vendors to support their families, but they are no longer able to do this work given the COVID-19 outbreak and restrictions on freedom of movement. This will create tensions in the family home, which might result in domestic violence. Fathers might also decide to force their young daughters to marry older, wealthier men, with the aim of reducing the number of mouths he has to feed. The YWU continues to record a similar number of reported cases of violence against women despite the reduced opportunities that many women have to access services due to lockdown, which we believe indicates that levels of violence overall have risen.

**Noha, please tell us more about what you and your colleagues at the Yemeni Women's Union (YWU) are doing to respond COVID-19 and why now, as the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of UNSCR 1325 fast approaches, you think it is more important than ever that Governments renew their commitment to Women, Peace and Security agenda.**

We at the YWU are adapting our work to help respond to the COVID-19 outbreak. For example, we are using Women and Girls Safe Spaces to train women and girls on how to produce face masks and hand sanitizers, which they can then distribute in their communities. We are also using the hotline and tele-counselling services which women and girls can call for advice if they are at risk of/or experiencing GBV, or even seeking psychological support, legal aid, or referral, as physical access to our branches may be restricted during the outbreak. One of the challenges with this approach, however, is that many women and girls in Yemen do not have access to a mobile phone, which will of course limit their ability to benefit from this service.

Now, more than ever before, organisations like the YWU need the support of the international community. As a Yemeni woman, living in a country affected by conflict and host to the world's worst humanitarian emergency, I know first-hand the disproportionate impact crises have on women and girls. Women and girls in Yemen live with the daily threat of violence, be this perpetrated inside or outside the home, by relatives or by community groups and are denied the opportunity to meaningfully contribute to the development of the country. UNSCR 1325 and the Women, Peace and Security agenda is therefore every bit as important now as it was twenty years ago.

As international organisations might withdraw their staff from the Yemen and shut down their aid operations due to the COVID-19 outbreak, it is women-led organisations like the YWU, which will remain, working on the frontlines to respond to the needs of communities and specifically for women and girl affected by the conflict and now the pandemic. If the international community would only work with us, by listening to us, by funding us, by building our capacity, then together we might save many lives. If we as women can first prove ourselves as humanitarian responders, and earn the respect of our communities in the process, then this will open doors to us as peacebuilders, and then one day we can help bring an end to the war, and who knows maybe one day a woman can lead Yemen again.

**Noha, thank you so much for making the time to speak with us, to inform us, and to inspire us.**

SDDirect, drawing on its expertise in gender, social inclusion and safeguarding, has launched a [COVID-19 Blog series](#), with the aim of inspiring and supporting the international community to identify, prioritise and respond to the needs of the most vulnerable individuals and nations as part of both the immediate humanitarian response and long-term recovery planning. Crises bring with them opportunities to reflect on lessons learned and build stronger, more resilient and more equal and equitable societies. The COVID19 pandemic has taught us that our collective wellbeing depends on the wellbeing of every single citizen and indeed every single nation, including the people and nation of Yemen.

We welcome constructive feedback on this blog and are keen to collaborate with organisations that share our values and our commitment to ensuring no one is left behind as part of the COVID-19 response. If you would like to share feedback or explore opportunities for collaboration, please email [laura.martineau-searle@sddirect.org.uk](mailto:laura.martineau-searle@sddirect.org.uk).