



Understanding the drivers of VAWG in the Yemeni Conflict, and the barriers to and opportunities for preventing and responding to it.

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Query: How has the conflict in Yemen impacted upon different forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG), including but not limited to conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV)? What are the main barriers to prevention and response efforts, and opportunities?

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1 Overview

This report reviewed literature for evidence on how the conflict in Yemen since 2015 has impacted on forms and prevalence of conflict-related sexual violence and other forms of VAWG, drivers of this violence and barriers and opportunities for prevention and response. The strongest evidence available relates to violence by armed groups, IPV, and forced marriage. There are significant gaps in evidence relating to prevalence and whether and how the conflict may have impacted this. **There is also a trend to significant under-reporting of all forms of VAWG** due to cultural norms, restrictions on women's movements, fear of reprisals by survivors and their families, a culture of impunity, and few facilities or services dedicated to the needs of survivors. This means that most incidents of VAWG remain unrecorded.

VAWG was highly prevalent in Yemen prior to the conflict. However, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), **incidents of gender based violence (GBV) increased by over 63% during the first two years of the conflict. CRSV occurs in many forms, particularly perpetrated by armed groups.** There has been a reported rise in multiple forms of physical and sexual VAWG in both private and public spaces, and a growing impunity for perpetrators. However, incidents are rarely officially reported and little systematic evidence exists. The 2018 report of the UN Secretary General to the Security Council on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence noted 472 reported cases of sexual violence. The majority of cases of CRSV reported to the UN could not be directly attributed to armed groups, and instead were linked to increased risks of violence, pre-existing gender inequality, and an incapacity of government institutions to protect civilians during conflict. **Since the emergence of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in 2011, kidnappings in Yemen have been increasingly used by armed and extremist groups to extract large ransoms from the families of their captives and has increasingly targeted women.** No specific evidence

was found to establish whether these kidnappings involved sexual violence although some detainees were kept captive after ransom and are suspected to be subject to forced marriages. **Early and forced marriage have increased across Yemen, including kidnapping for marriage.** Evidence that is available strongly suggests that **IPV has increased following the start of the war, due to economic pressures, women's changing roles and other stresses at household level as well as the experience and trauma of conflict.** Women are active within armed groups in Yemen, including as armed combatants and in support roles, but **there is little evidence regarding the extent to which female members of armed groups may be at risk of VAWG or, indeed, perpetrators of VAWG.**

Key drivers of VAWG during the conflict include: displacement, with female-headed households and adolescent girls at particular risk due to the lack of male protection, greater food insecurity and lower monthly income; **a stark increase in poverty** which is cited as a key driver of early and forced marriage as well as IPV; **changing roles of women**, particularly within the aid sector, economic activity and peace activism; the **collapse of infrastructure**, including the targeting of public service infrastructure; **the rise of Islamism and radical religious rhetoric.**

There are multiple barriers to VAWG prevention. Challenges that limit the effectiveness of WRO's to engage in VAWG prevention include funding constraints, competing agendas and roles and security risks. **Patriarchal social and extreme religious norms justify violence against women** increase the risk of VAWG both in public spaces and in domestic settings. **Social protections against VAWG have diminished in Yemen**, with a decreased likelihood of family or community members intervening to prevent violence as they would traditionally have done. **Women's exclusion from peace talks** poses a significant barrier for WROs advocating for VAWG prevention. **No evidence could be found that women within security services acted as a preventative measure against VAWG.**

Opportunities for VAWG Prevention include **support for Women's Rights Activists** to enable them to advocate for women's rights, provide VAWG prevention and response services and influence the humanitarian response, peace process and planning for the post-conflict period. Supporting and promoting gender-sensitive peace dialogue offers scope to integrate VAWG prevention into Yemen's peace agreements and post-conflict planning.

Barriers to VAWG response include: an **acute lack of services for survivors**, including an absence of appropriate facilities, poorly trained and overstretched staff and a lack of funding; **an inability to reach the women and girls most in need** due to security concerns, lack of access and cultural norms; a **lack of consultation with, and participation of women's organisations and women and girls in the planning and response;** **the absence of a functioning state has reduced access to justice for victims of physical and sexual violence;** **the Yemeni criminal code discriminates against women** which further deters women from seeking formal justice. These factors, along with the breakdown of law and order in Yemen have led to **widespread impunity for perpetrators of VAWG.**

The humanitarian, security and justice sectors present **key opportunities to improve responses to VAWG.** Key humanitarian agencies operating in Yemen, including IRC, CARE and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), have set out the steps needed to scale up and increase the impact of VAWG response services, including mainstreaming VAWG response across sectoral programmes as well as establishing services for survivors in line with global and Yemen-specific policy commitments such as the Call to Action on Protection from Gender Based Violence in Emergencies and its Roadmap 2016-2020 (Call to Action, 2016). **Realising the potential of these established VAWG response systems requires increased funding to health sector and other VAWG-related elements of the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), including multi-year commitments to reduce the constant threat of closure of services.** Formal security and justice services have reduced due to destruction of infrastructure, control by armed forces and breakdown in public administration, presenting additional barriers to women accessing policing and legal provision in an

already weak system. However, in some areas, women play an active role in security and some communities are supportive of women's greater engagement in local security, particularly in relation to VAWG and family matters. **Women, peace and security actors in Yemen have proposed localised security fora in stable areas to bring together women activists and civil society leaders with security agencies, humanitarian response and protection agencies, local government and community leaders to address local issues related to women, peace and security. There is also potential to support women working in the police services.** A key barrier to women reporting VAWG is the absence of female officers and associated fear of further violence from police officers.

2 Methodology and evidence gaps

This report is based on a rapid review of the literature. A search was conducted in key databases¹ using key search terms including Women AND Girls AND violence, conflict related sexual violence, intimate partner violence, gender based violence, movement restrictions, forced marriage, FGC, FGM, AND Yemen AND barriers to prevention, barriers to response, justice system, health system, GBV services, VAWG services, police. Given a scarcity of academic or other rigorous studies, the report also uses grey literature sourced from key NGOs and think tanks focussed on Yemen, as well as monitoring reports and articles from UN agencies and human rights bodies. Given that the query focusses on trends related to the current conflict in Yemen, **sources dating from 2015 onwards were prioritised**, with earlier sources presented for background or comparison.

The searches revealed very few reports focussed solely on CRSV or other forms of VAWG in Yemen and therefore primarily utilised reports covering:

- broader gender inequality and conflict in Yemen but containing sections focussed on VAWG.
- gender equality and/or VAWG across the MENA region more broadly but inclusive of Yemen

Inclusion Criteria:

To be eligible for inclusion in this rapid review of the literature, studies had to fulfil the following criteria

- **Focus:** Research and monitoring reports focussed on VAWG/CRSV in Yemen and the broader MENA region as well as those focussed on broader gender equality issues
- **Time period:** 2000 – March 2020.
- **Language:** English.
- **Publication status:** publicly available – in all cases published online.
- **Geographical focus:** Yemen and broader MENA region

Gaps in Evidence

This review identified the following **gaps in evidence**:

- Systematic quantitative data on VAWG in Yemen generally and CRSV specifically. Identified sources are primarily qualitative in nature, with one significant exception (Gressman, 2016)
- Differentiation of trends across different geographical locations with some areas rarely featuring in studies (with the focus being on the western and highland region or the tribal south)
- Analysis of what works in responding to VAWG in Yemen specifically
- Analysis of the challenges faced and lessons learned in responding to CRSV.

¹ Including Google, Google Scholar and PubMed

Key definitions

Conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) refers to “rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, forced marriage, trafficking in persons when committed in situations of conflict for the purpose of sexual violence/exploitation and any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity perpetrated against women, men, girls or boys that is directly or indirectly linked to a conflict” (UN, 2017, p. 3). This link may be evidenced through, among others, the profile of the perpetrator (for example, a member of an armed group), the profile of the victim (for example, a member of a persecuted minority group), the climate of impunity created or exacerbated by the conflict (for example, the collapse of justice and security services), or cross-border consequences of conflict (for example, displacement or trafficking of persons) (UN, 2017).

3 How has the conflict in Yemen impacted upon different forms of VAWG, including but not limited to CRSV?

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) was highly prevalent in Yemen prior to the conflict.

92% of women interviewed during a nationally representative 2013 Demographic Health Survey stated that VAWG was common in the home (Republic of Yemen, 2013). In another survey, almost all (90-99%) women interviewed said they faced sexual harassment on the street, and over half believed a husband was justified in beating his wife (Gressmann, 2016). Other common forms of VAWG included early and forced marriage.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), and corroborated by other sources, **incidents of gender based violence (GBV) increased by over 63% during the first two years of the conflict** (Al Naami & Moodley, 2017; ERC O'Brien, 2017; OCHA, 2017; Sikurajapathy & Al-Fotih, 2017). These incidents include but are not limited to rape and sexual assault, intimate partner violence (IPV), and early and forced marriage (ERC O'Brien, 2017). In 2016 alone, over 10,000 cases of rape, domestic violence, forced and child marriage, and physical and psychological abuse against women and girls were reported (Sikurajapathy & Al-Fotih, 2017). 64% of the incidents of GBV recorded by the GBV Information Management System (GBVIMS) were cases of emotional, psychological or physical abuse (OCHA, 2017). Given the multiple barriers to reporting, including social norms that discourage reporting, OCHA predicts that the actual levels of VAWG in Yemen are much greater than those documented by the GBVIMS (OCHA, 2017). A study conducted in 2018 across 8 districts experiencing different levels of conflict and involving 674 focus group participants and 49 key informants, noted that informants in all areas perceived increased vulnerability of both boys and girls to GBV, a rise in multiple forms of physical and sexual GBV in both private and public spaces, and a growing impunity for perpetrators. Informants described incidents of rape within families, in schools and by armed men from security forces and militias as well as kidnappings, groping and verbal harassment of women (Al-Amman et al, 2019).

The strongest evidence available regarding VAWG in Yemen relates to violence by armed groups, IPV, and forced marriage. There are significant gaps in evidence relating to prevalence of specific types of VAWG in Yemen and whether and how the conflict may have impacted this.

3.1 Impact on types of VAWG

Conflict-related Sexual Violence and other forms of VAWG committed by armed groups

Evidence of VAWG committed by armed groups is limited due to chronic under-reporting, particularly amongst some groups of people. **The 2018 report of the UN Secretary General to the Security Council on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (delivered March 2019) noted 472 reported cases of sexual violence, often targeting multiple individuals, but the reality is likely considerably higher.** 341 of these involved sexual violence against displaced people. 70 of these incidents involved minors with 131 children affected (80 boys and 51 girls) and include 122 cases (affecting 73 boys and 49 girls) perpetrated by community members and relatives, with 56% of them occurring in settlements and host communities for internally displaced persons in Hudaydah,

Amanat al-Asimah and in Hadramawt Governorates. Additional cases of sexual violence against children were verified as having been committed by members of armed groups. Two cases involving boys were attributed to the Popular Resistance and one case was attributed to the Houthis. The areas and detention centres under militia control were noted as of grave concern yet the United Nations does not have access to those areas in order to document human rights violations. Six cases against children (four boys and two girls) were attributed to members of the Yemeni government forces (UN Security Council, 2019). This research also found **reports of displaced women who had been arbitrarily detained by armed groups, held in migrant detention centres, and subject to sexual violence, rape and torture** (Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, 2019).

The majority of cases of VAWG and sexual violence reported to the UN could not be directly attributed to armed groups, and instead were linked to increased risks of violence, pre-existing gender inequality, and an incapacity of government institutions to protect civilians during conflict (Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, 2019; UN Security Council, 2019). Barriers to reporting, including risk of further violence, social norms, a culture of impunity, and a lack of access to justice services may contribute to this gap in evidence and so the lack of evidence should not be assumed evidence of a lack of prevalence.

While evidence was limited, **reports highlight that women and girls face increasing risks of violence and harassment, both sexual and other, from armed groups at check points** (Gressmann, 2016). Women of the Muhamasheen community, an ethnic minority, reported to Oxfam that they were increasingly subject to sexual and physical violence at check points from armed groups (Moodley, 2016). This was particularly the case in the Taiz governorate, due to the large number of checkpoints, military presence and active conflict (Moodley, 2016). This form of violence is particularly the case for women from marginalised groups and women travelling alone or without male relatives (Harb, 2019; Gressmann, 2016). One example of this type of harassment is the practice of head-shaving, used particularly by Houthi authorities. This practice involves shaving the heads of women, especially new brides, travelling between governorates to meet their husbands. In many cases, survivors of this abuse are at risk of divorce, subject to public shaming and suffer from psychological distress (Harb, 2019). Many survivors are also reluctant to report abuse for fear of backlash from their community and security officials (Harb, 2019).

Finally, female Yemeni **activists report that during demonstrations calling for the release of loved ones in front of the UN Envoy's office, women were harassed, beaten with rifles, had their scarves pulled, and were dragged on the street by security forces** (Harb, 2019). In 2018, qualitative research² found that women activists were also subject to murder threats from armed groups with influence in the community (Heinze & Stevens, 2018).

Kidnapping by armed groups

Yemen has a long history of kidnappings between tribes with individuals, usually male, held and looked after whilst inter-tribal disputes were settled. Kidnapping of foreigners has also been used more recently as a tool to negotiate with the government. In the 1980s and 90s, Yemeni tribes frequently kidnapped Westerners, male and female, and held them captive to extract concessions from the government, such as a new school or hospital in their area, during which time captives tended to be treated well and shown high levels of hospitality by their captors (Dean, 2015). However, since the emergence of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in 2011, **kidnappings in Yemen have been increasingly used by armed and extremist groups to extract large ransoms from the families of their captives.**

² 94 in-depth, semi-structured interviews and 6 focus group discussions with women active in preventing conflict and working for peace and stability in their area; traditional and religious leaders; and local authorities such as village councils, political parties and other forms of local government or administration

Between 2011 and 2013, AQAP alone made an estimated \$20 million in ransom money, both from high profile Western and Yemeni hostage taking (Dean, 2015). Reports from 2019 find that **Houthi rebels have captured multiple women and girls in the rebel-held capital Sanaa, in order to secure ransom payments from their families, detaining them in secret and illegal prisons** (Mahmood, 2019). Many of these women were detained under the guise of a 'crackdown on prostitution', although women activists say very few of these women have actually been engaged in prostitution (Mahmood, 2019). Further, following ransom payments, and despite the promise of release, reports suggest some of these women were relocated to secret villas across Sanaa, where they continue to be held in detention (Mahmood, 2019). **The abduction of young girls and female students is also understood to be escalating at an unprecedented rate**, with an estimated 35 girls kidnapped from schools and off the streets of Sanaa in one incident (Memo, 2019). Again, the intention of this kidnapping seems to be to hold the families of those captured to ransom. Women activists seeking to raise awareness of these abuses and demand the release of hostages report threats of and actual violence by Houthi rebels (France 24, 2018). No specific evidence was found to establish whether these kidnappings involved sexual violence although some detainees were kept captive after ransom and are suspected to be subject to forced marriages.

Kidnappings of activists, or of the loved ones of activists, also seem to have increased since the start of the war. An example of this is the kidnapping of a 12 year old girl from Taiz in 2016 who was detained for 23 days (Jarhum, 2016). While the family refused to provide further information and the perpetrators are unknown, media reports indicate that her father was engaged in activism and that this may be linked to the motivation for the abduction (Jarhum, 2016). Further, journalists, aid workers, and human rights defenders are at increasing risk of being kidnapped themselves, increasing pressure to force them to scale back their activities (Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, 2020; Gramer, 2019).

Forced Marriage

The rate of forced and early marriage of girls has increased significantly since 2015. Estimates of the percentage of girls married before the age of 18 prior to the conflict vary between 50% and 53%, including 14% of girls married before the age of 15 (CARE, 2015; IRC, 2019; UNFPA, 2017; UNICEF USA, n.d.). **While reports suggest the practice of early marriage had been reducing prior to the conflict, the war seems to have reversed this trend** (Moodley, 2016; Rohwerder, 2017). For example, between 2017 and 2018 alone, child marriage rates are estimated to have increased threefold for girls under 18 years old (OCHA, 2019). In research conducted in 2017, 72.5% of respondents aged 15-49 stated that they had been married prior to the age of 18, with 44.5% stating they had been married before reaching 15 years old (UNICEF, 2017). Interviews with over 250 community members, local leaders, and survivors of child marriage in Yemen support these estimates, finding that most participants believe the war had led to a significant increase in the number of incidences of child marriage (UNFPA, 2016a). According to focus group discussions with community members in Abyan and Adan, the risk of kidnapping prior to marriage is also increasing in both contexts, preceding 24% and 17% of marriages in each respective region (Gressmann, 2016). **Reports also suggest an increase in the number of girls being forced to marry members of extremist groups, although exact numbers could not be found** (Rohwerder, 2017).

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

There is a clear lack of evidence related to the prevalence of IPV in Yemen and the potential impact that the war may have had on this. However, **the evidence that is available strongly suggests that IPV has increased following the start of the war, including rises in numbers using helplines or face-to-face services operated by women's rights organisations.** Reports by NGOs highlight that internally displaced women are at particular risk of IPV, whether physical, sexual and/or economic such as a husband withholding food or supplies from his wife (Moench, 2018).

Honour Killings

A human rights report on Yemen commissioned by the United States Department of State notes that **honour killings, where a family member murders the victim of rape or sexual abuse to 'protect**

the family honour', are particularly prevalent in rural areas (United States Department of State, 2016). Exact numbers are not available and it is believed that the majority of cases go unreported, with authorities rarely investigating these incidents when they are (United States Department of State, 2016) and lenient punishment even when prosecuted for this form of murder under the Yemeni penal code where other forms of murder would be subject to the death penalty. No evidence was found that indicated whether or how the conflict may have exacerbated these incidents.

Restrictions on women's movement

The conflict has also exacerbated restrictions on movement for women, with the requirement that women are accompanied by a Mahram, a male guardian, when she leaves the house becoming more widespread, especially in regions such as Abyan and Lahj, which have been held by extremist groups at various points (Gressmann, 2016; Moodley, 2016). While cultural norms remain the most significant factor identified by women as posing an obstacle to their freedom of movement, the significance of various factors has changed since the start of the war. One survey³ found the proportion of women ranking cultural norms as the most significant obstacle to women's freedom of movement decreased from 51% in 2015 to 37% in 2016, while those who ranked lack of security as the most significant obstacle increased from 12% in 2015 to 36% in 2016 (Gressmann, 2016). Of the men interviewed, none rated cultural norms as a significant obstacle to women's freedom of movement, with 55% citing a lack of security and 44% identifying the cost of transportation as the reasons for these restrictions (Gressmann, 2016).

Female Genital Cutting (FGC)

Evidence suggests that FGC was prevalent in Yemen prior to the conflict and in some areas remains prevalent today. Between 2004-2015, 19% of women and girls in Yemen had undergone some form of FGC, while 75% of women aged 15-49 had heard of it and believed the practice should end (UNICEF, 2016). In many governorates, FGC is not practiced, but in some areas, especially coastal regions, up to 84 of women and girls are cut (OECD Development Centre, 2019). However, **while evidence of prevalence of FGC is available, there is a gap in evidence relating to whether this prevalence has increased as a result of the conflict.**

Gaps in evidence

No evidence could be found of the prevalence of forced prostitution, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilisation or people trafficking in Yemen or the impact that the conflict may have had on this. This is likely linked to the lack of adequate resources to collect reliable data on these types of VAWG, with NGOs and INGOs in Yemen focused primarily on providing humanitarian assistance to local populations (United States Department of State, 2018).

3.2 Impact on drivers of VAWG

Internal displacement

In 2019, 75% of internally displaced people (IDP) in Yemen were women and children, with 20% of female headed households in IDP populations headed by girls under the age of 18 (IRC, 2019). **Displacement increases risks of GBV significantly (Peace Track Initiative et al., 2018), with female-headed households and adolescent girls at particular risk** due to the lack of male protection, greater food insecurity, lower monthly income, and traditionally female roles such as water

³ The assessment built on CARE's and OXFAM's gender assessment tools and used a combined methodology including a secondary data review, 544 household interviews, 40 Focus Group Discussions, and 32 in-depth interviews with significant individuals and officials. The geographical scope included the areas in Yemen with the most severe needs - Aden, Taiz, Hajjah, and Abyan governorates.

collection, which leave them exposed to attack (IRC, 2019). Women who live in makeshift shelters, which is particularly common in Taiz and Hajjah districts, in areas with insufficient access to basic services, such as Abyan and Hajjah, and in areas controlled by Islamist groups, such as Abyan, are also at particular risk (Gressmann, 2016). Displacement also leads to an increased risk of sexual exploitation. For example, women in displaced settings report being asked for sex in exchange for basic services (IRC, 2019). Finally, since IDPs often travel with very few belongings, they are also at risk of exploitation by host communities. One key example of this is the pressure placed on families by individuals in some host communities to marry their daughters for a low dowry (INTERSOS, 2016).

Economic distress and shifting social norms

In 2019 an estimated 40% of Yemeni households had lost their primary source of income, with poverty affecting between 71 and 78% of the population, up from 50% prior to the conflict (World Bank, 2019). Further, 80% of the Yemeni population were “at risk” of hunger and disease, with roughly 14.3 million people in acute need of assistance in 2019 (World Bank, 2019).

The stark increase in poverty associated with the conflict in Yemen has been identified as a key driver of VAWG. For example, while child marriage was prevalent prior to the conflict across social classes, rising poverty exacerbates this practice, as parents seek to marry their female children to relieve them of the cost of their care and in order to receive a dowry payment (OECD Development Centre, 2019). The economic pressure on internally displaced families is especially clear, with increasing poverty leading to a persistent reduction in the value of dowries, leading many internally displaced girls to be married into host communities, where they may face limited protection and increased risks associated with the perception that they are “outsiders” (UNFPA et al., 2018).

Women are also more economically active than they were before the war, as men have been injured, killed or lost their jobs. This has brought a sense of empowerment for women but has also caused tensions between men and women, increasing the risk of domestic violence. Poverty coupled with patriarchal gender norms that require a ‘real man’ be the sole provider of a family, has led to an increase in intimate partner violence in some cases (Butcher, 2019; Heinze & Stevens, 2018, 2018; IRC, 2019). This often occurs in contexts where non-violent routes to manhood have been blocked, leading some men to turn to violence in order to assert their masculinity (Wright, 2014). Reports suggest that distress due to loss of livelihoods, restricted mobility, and pressure to perform tasks traditionally associated with women, especially in cases where women have become the sole earners within a household, can lead increases in IPV perpetrated by men against their wives (OCHA, 2017; Gressmann, 2016). Perpetrators tend to be close family members including fathers, brothers, husbands and extended family members (Peace Track Initiative et al., 2018). It is important to note that it is not the case in all contexts that economic hardship leads to IPV. In some communities, men’s engagement with traditionally female roles has instead led to an improved understanding of how gender roles are mutually reliant and caused more men to support their wives with collecting firewood and water (Gressmann, 2016).

Increased risks due to humanitarian operations

Women across Yemen play a key role in the distribution of aid and implementation of humanitarian operations (Heinze & Stevens, 2018). This puts them at particular risk of violence from armed groups and communities, especially in cases where humanitarian distribution provokes tensions by not providing for everyone in the community, assessing areas without providing follow-up support, or targeting only one segment of a highly vulnerable population. Testimonies from female humanitarian actors in Yemen indicate that they have been subjected to beatings and robbery by armed groups because they had prioritised food distribution to internally placed people rather than to militia (Heinze & Stevens, 2018). Female activists in Ta’iz also faced murder threats whilst distributing money to families of those killed or wounded in the war (Heinze & Stevens, 2018). Some women were caught in conflicts and shootouts between armed actors and community members over the distribution of food aid (Heinze & Stevens, 2018). Thus, even where this violence was not explicitly directed at women, it impacts women disproportionately due to their role in humanitarian operations and the

distribution of aid and due to the barriers they face to accessing appropriate services following this violence.

Increased risks due to peacebuilding activities

Women activists across Yemen are engaged in a variety of peacebuilding activities. For example, women in Aden are engaged in activities to counter violent extremism and radicalisation, support social cohesion, facilitate disarmament and reintegration of combatants, and provide psychosocial support for the population (WILPF, 2017). Similarly, women in Ta'iz have been involved in negotiations with militia leaders for the release of prisoners of war, at times across kinship groups they are tied to through marriage (WILPF, 2017). Further, women in Sana'a are engaged in advocating for the release of detainees (WILPF, 2017).

Engagement with peacebuilding activities comes with particular risks for women. For example, in order to participate in UN-facilitated peace consultations, activists are forced to make the dangerous journey to Sana'a. Reflecting the danger these women face on this journey, the UN requires activists to sign a waiver to say that they are not responsible if anything happens during this trip (WILPF, 2017). Further, women activists, peacebuilders and human rights defenders face threats of assassinations, restrictions of freedom of expression, and threats of other forms of violence (Anderson, 2017; Heinze & Stevens, 2018; WILPF, 2017). For example, one WRO who had reported a rape case in late 2016 experienced subsequent threats and was forced to halt its activities for a month (Anderson, 2017)

Participation in armed groups

Some literature suggests that **women are active within armed groups**, including as armed combatants and in support roles such as delivering food and water to fighters, smuggling arms to resistance fighters, and guarding checkpoints to help search women (Anderlini et al, 2017; Anderson, 2017; Heinze & Baabbad, 2017). This is especially the case when family members and relatives are active, especially in Sanaa, Aden and Ta'iz (Gressmann, 2016; Jarhum, 2016).

A Yemeni human rights defender recounted violence that she experienced at a women's protest against forced disappearances in Sana'a in 2015 when women activists were attacked, intimidated and briefly detained by Houthi women (Jarhum, 2016). The majority of evidence related to this participation was anecdotal and so we should be careful about the extent to which we can generalise from it (Heinze & Stevens, 2018). However, media reports indicate that in Taiz women and girls are being recruited within both the army and resistance fighters to secure controlled areas – this was done through an open call for applications which resulted in 130 women being recruited (Jarhum, 2016).

This research found little further evidence from Yemen regarding the extent to which female members of armed groups may be at risk of VAWG or, indeed, perpetrators of VAWG. However, evidence globally suggests that women's engagement with armed groups can increase the risk of child marriage and intimate partner violence for those women (Annana & Brierb, 2010) as well as posing barriers to reintegration and risks of VAWG as a result of backlash following their exit from the groups (Clugston & Stevens, 2020). It further finds that female combatants can be perpetrators of VAWG. For example a cross-sectional, population-based cluster survey of 998 adults aged 18 years or older over a four week period in 2010 in the North and South Kivu and Ituri regions in the DRC found that 41.1% of female survivors of sexual violence had experienced sexual violence perpetrated by a woman (Johnson et al., 2010). The failure to recognise this also leads to a context of impunity.

Collapse of infrastructure

The collapse of infrastructure across Yemen is another driver of VAWG. The breakdown of water systems means that women and girls, who traditionally collect water, have to travel further to find water leaving them exposed to attack for longer periods of time (IRC, 2019). At the same time, closure of schools due to targeted bombings further increases the risks of early marriage for girls. Overall, targeting of public service infrastructure has reduced provision of health-related and other VAWG-support services.

Extremist discourse and religious narratives

Changes in the religious environment and the rise of Islamism and in radical religious rhetoric, have had particular effects on women, especially in areas such as Ta'iz and Lahij, where women activists have experienced severe threats of violence and women more broadly are subjected to restrictions on movement (Heinze & Stevens, 2018). In 2015, local NGOs confirmed a case of Al Qaeda stoning a woman in Hadramout, though it is noted that the family and community were reluctant to discuss the incident (Jarhum, 2016). These reports reflect an increasing dominance of extremist groups in certain geographical areas, although some communities have resisted the rise of extreme versions of Islam through efforts to promote moderate teachings. In addition to new forms and patterns of violence, religious extremism impacts on women's access to health services, for example, there is increasing opposition from the Houthis (Ansar Allah) to the provision of family planning (IRC, 2018).

4 What are the main barriers to and opportunities for prevention and response efforts in Yemen?

4.1 Barriers to VAWG Prevention

Challenges facing women's rights organisations

Women's rights organisations (WROs) can be key actors in VAWG prevention, engaging in activism and awareness raising against VAWG and providing services for survivors of VAWG. However, WROs in Yemen face a multitude of challenges that limit their effectiveness to engage in VAWG prevention activities:

- **WROs face significant funding and focus pressures** from international donors. For example, reports highlight the risk that donors who use WROs as conduits for aid distribution may inadvertently limit the scope for them to focus on their own agendas (Anderson, 2017). This is particularly the case in humanitarian operations, where the a-political nature of humanitarian principles can lead to reduction in funding for activities deemed 'political' such as activism. Given limited funding opportunities for WROs in Yemen, donor priorities are likely to hold particular sway with WROs. It is important donors are mindful of this when designing funding opportunities.
- **WROs face significant security risks** as a result of the ongoing conflict and threats from extremist groups, which systematically target women for their political participation. During the National Dialogue, female delegates were publicly threatened and in some cases physically attacked for participating (Gressmann, 2016). There is also evidence of human rights defenders being attacked at home, subject to smear campaigns, and subsequently forced into hiding or to flee the country (Heinze & Stevens, 2018). High security risks for women engaging in activism have led WROs to scale down or halt activities.

Social and religious norms

Patriarchal social and extreme religious norms which justify violence against women increase the risk of VAWG both in public spaces and in domestic settings. Given that extreme religious views are increasingly held and backed by armed groups across Yemen, this allows extremists the scope to enforce their beliefs among the population, placing women and gender non-conforming people in particular at significant risk of violence.

Social protections against GBV have diminished in Yemen, with a decreased likelihood of family or community members intervening to prevent violence as they would traditionally have done. Bystanders to violence in public spaces have also become less willing to intervene due to fear stemming from a general rise in violence and weapons proliferation (Al-Ammar, 2019).

Lack of female presence in security provision

There is a general incapacity of government institutions to protect civilians (Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, 2019; UN Security Council, 2019). Evidence globally finds that in some cases, integrating women in security forces, whether

armed groups or police forces can help improve the extent to which these security providers are responsive and accountable to women and girls (Clugston, 2020). For example, in Nigeria, reports suggest that female members of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), an informal armed group, acted as liaisons between the Nigerian Army and women in communities. This was because women in communities trusted female members of the CJTF ahead of members of the Nigerian Army, who were known for committing violence against women and girls (Nagarajan, 2018). Further, evidence from Nepal suggests that introducing female officers to handle domestic and gender based violence cases, increased the extent to which women trusted the police and their confidence to report abuse (Bennett, 2014; Enfield, 2019). Some women also linked this initiative to a decrease in violence by men in the community (Bennett, 2014; Enfield, 2019). **While evidence suggests that Yemeni women are engaged in armed groups and security forces in some areas, no evidence could be found of these women acting as a preventative measure against VAWG.**

Absence of women's voices in peacebuilding and planning for post-conflict period

Women have been consistently and systematically excluded from peace talks in Yemen, along with other typically marginalised groups such as youth (Al Naami and Moodley, 2016). These talks represent a key opportunity to advocate for a zero-tolerance policy in Yemen towards VAWG moving forward and to demand appropriate services, recompense, and response to survivors of VAWG. **Women's exclusion from these talks poses a significant barrier for WROs advocating for VAWG prevention, likely limiting their impact.**

Looking forward: women's potential exclusion from Demobilisation, Disarmament and Reintegration programmes

Evidence globally finds that, despite their involvement in armed groups, women are often excluded from Demobilisation, Disarmament and Reintegration programmes (DDR) (Clugston & Stevens, 2020). It also finds that women associated with armed groups, and especially women who have had children from male members of these groups, often experience severe and often violent backlash from communities following their exit from the groups. This is the case regardless of whether their involvement was voluntary or forced (Clugston & Stevens, 2020). Looking to the future, **a key barrier to preventing VAWG against such women is their potential exclusion from DDR programmes.** As a result, those designing DDR programmes in the future should be mindful of the importance of including women and girls where relevant.

4.2 Opportunities for VAWG Prevention

Support Women's Rights Activists

Yemeni WRO representatives are clear that working on gender justice and equality in parallel to humanitarian programming is critical to the resolution of the conflict and the long-term stability of Yemen (Anderson, 2017). It is also clear that the work they do can and does have a positive impact towards protecting women's rights. For example, the Women's Solidarity Network has supported the mother of a 12 year old girl in Aden, who had been married to a man 10 years her senior. The network supported the mother to both reimburse the dowry money and to file for her daughter's divorce (Peace Track Initiative et al., 2018). Interviews with WROs across Yemen identify the lack of flexible funding and training as key barriers to their continued functioning and impact (Heinze & Stevens, 2018).

Donors and international actors, including INGO's such as CARE, International Rescue Committee and Saferworld, are in a strong position to support WROs to engage in this form of activism with funding, capacity building and accompaniment. By granting WROs greater flexibility in terms of the activities they carry out, WROs will be better placed to pursue their own objectives alongside humanitarian aid provision.

Support women's engagement in peace talks

There is evidence that women's engagement in official peace talks can lead to change. This is arguably most clearly illustrated with reference to the National Dialogue, a transitional dialogue conference held in 2013. As a result of lobbying by women's groups and the Special Advisor, the

quota for the number of women on the National Dialogue's Preparatory Committee increased from 19% to 30% across all constituencies (Heinze & Stevens, 2018). This led to most constituencies including women as part of their delegation, with the exception of the Houthis who left seats in their delegation empty rather than include women (Heinze & Stevens, 2018). Arguably as a consequence of women's engagement, the National Dialogue discussed a variety of issues related to gender inequality such as:

- Increasing the legal age of marriage to 18 years old
- A 30% quota for women in Parliament
- The right to education
- Paid maternity leave
- The criminalisation of violence against women and girls and sex trafficking.

While recommendations were submitted to the Constitutional Drafting Committee, this progress was suspended due to the deterioration of the security situation (Heinze & Stevens, 2018). Nevertheless, this example illustrates the potential impact that women's engagement in official peace talks can have on bringing issues that affect women into the national dialogue.

Supporting and promoting gender-sensitive peace dialogue offers scope to integrate VAWG prevention into Yemen's peace agreements and post-conflict planning. Many Yemeni activists speak positively of "dialogue tents" set up during the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) and with support this initiative could be revived in partnership with local women activists and CSOs, integrating a focus on family-related issues and conflicts which are considered acceptable for women to engage in (IRC, 2018). If discussions on these key gender equality issues were resumed with targeted support, Yemen could see quite rapid progress at the legal and policy level on gender equality broadly and prevention of VAWG specifically.

4.3 Barriers to GBV Response

Inadequate public health services

The acute lack of services for survivors of gender-based violence is a clear barrier to achieving an adequate VAWG response. Public health service provision in Yemen has decreased since the outbreak of the conflict, from an already inadequate base. This lack of service provision includes damaged facilities, lack of medical personnel, cost of access to facilities, and shelters for survivors of GBV in only four governorates (CARE, 2015; Gressmann, 2016; PeaceTrack Initiative et al., 2018; UNFPA; 2016c). Only 50% of health facilities are now functioning due both to direct targeting of public facilities and staff and on the breakdown of government administration and public financial management. Yemen has seen an increase in the number of pregnant and lactating women since the beginning of the conflict, yet even early in the conflict WHO estimated that only 35% of maternal and new-born health services are fully functional (WHO, 2016).

Remaining facilities rely on NGO support for medicines, equipment, and staff and an estimated 14.8 million people lack access to basic healthcare (IRC, 2019). Health workers are most often not trained to respond to cases of sexual violence, including providing emotional and psychological support, and medical supplies are insufficient. The lack of female health professionals and safe spaces for GBV survivors also act as a deterrent for women and girls accessing the few available services (IRC, 2018). There are therefore critical gaps in reproductive and other VAWG-related health response services across the country. Reports suggest that many in the population are likely suffering adverse psychosocial and emotional consequences from the conflict. Women are particularly likely to face barriers in accessing psychosocial treatment needed as a result of experiencing the conflict, including as survivors of conflict-related VAWG (Al-Ammar et al, 2017).

An IRC internal assessment on VAWG prevention and response in Yemen found that **around 70% of survivors felt it was safer to keep silent and not seek help for fear of experiencing stigmatisation or reprisal** (IRC, 2018).

Weaknesses in humanitarian responses to VAWG

With public service capacity decimated, the health system relies on the humanitarian system for staff, salaries, facilities and supplies. This system includes provision of services to survivors of VAWG, including a GBV sub-cluster. However, **there are serious constraints in terms of availability or services as well as quality and appropriateness** (IRC, 2019). The effectiveness of the humanitarian system to address VAWG is constrained in several ways.

Even where they exist, **lifesaving and urgent services, including for sexual and reproductive health, the treatment of sexual violence related injuries, and the prevention of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, cannot reach women and girls who need them.** The lack of humanitarian access granted to severely conflict-affected areas, including denial of visas and travel permits for aid workers, hinders provision of GBV response services whilst access to services is further limited by increased restrictions on women and girls' mobility (IRC, 2019).

The humanitarian system generally has been under-resourced to meet humanitarian needs in Yemen. This is reflected in the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) and associated funding appeal launched in 2018 for \$4.19 billion to support the UN-coordinated humanitarian effort. In late 2019, the HRP was 71% funded, with significant funding gaps in the health, education and shelter sectors (OCHA, 2019, November 26th) whilst in March 2020 funding for annual needs stood at 15% (OCHA, 2020). **VAWG response is often not considered a life-saving intervention and is therefore not prioritised given the overall funding shortfall whilst local organisations are equally underfunded which undermines their ability to provide reliable services to survivors of VAWG** (UNFPA, 2016c).

Despite the serious and potentially life-threatening consequences of VAWG, including physical injuries and psychological and emotional trauma, and pregnancy complications, reproductive health and GBV services are not prioritised in humanitarian programming processes, for example needs assessments often lack a gender lens and gender disaggregated data is rarely available which makes it almost impossible to respond to the specific needs of women and girls (CARE, 2016). The lack of evidence available on the prevalence and types of VAWG within Yemen poses a persistent barrier to developing an evidence-based response, with appropriate provision of legal, health, social or economic services for survivors.

The lack of consultation with, and participation of women's organisations and women and girls in the planning and response to the conflict is a key factor which compounds the lack of an adequate gender-sensitive response in Yemen. It also disregards the multiple and significant roles that women have been playing during the conflict, including as first responders at the local level (IRC, 2018).

Inadequate legal and justice sector laws and services

Across all governorates the absence of a functioning state is reported to have reduced access to justice for victims of physical and sexual violence (Al-Amman et al., 2019). Even early in the conflict access to legal services was severely limited for women, with 97% of women in rural areas suggesting legal services are 'rarely' or 'never' available, and access to legal services in urban areas at about 10% (Gressmann, 2016). Even where services still exist, women's ability to access these is limited due to increasing restrictions on their movement, safety concerns and social norms. This contributes to low reporting rates and very few prosecutions.

The Yemeni criminal code discriminates against women in several areas, including inheritance and marriage laws as well as laws relating to VAWG, which further deters women from seeking formal justice. Whilst it criminalises physical violence against women and rape, there is currently no legislation in place in Yemen that specifically addresses domestic violence (OECD Development Centre, 2019). Further, in Yemeni law, a woman's testimony is considered worth only half of that of a man's and must be corroborated by a man in order to be accepted (UNFPA, 2016b). In cases of rape, unless the perpetrator confesses, the victim must have four male witnesses to the crime (United

States Department of State, 2016). Further, in cases where authorities do not charge the perpetrator, the survivor may be prosecuted on charges of fornication (United States Department of State, 2016).

These factors, along with the breakdown of law and order in Yemen have led to **widespread impunity for perpetrators of VAWG** (UN Security Council, 2019). This in turn discourages women from reporting experiences of violence (UNFPA, 2016b). **Fear of reprisal from family members and communities contributes further to underreporting of most forms of VAWG** (UN Security Council, 2019) and reflects a broader culture of impunity. Incidents may be dealt with through compensation or other negotiation within and between communities rather than through the formal justice system. This culture of impunity also plays out amongst parties in the conflict. During research conducted by Stevens in 2018, participants mentioned the kidnap of a 12 year old girl from Sabr al-Mawadim, who had been raped by a fighter in the resistance forces (Heinze & Stevens, 2018)). Following this, the criminal was arrested for a few days and subsequently released. It is understood that his release and relative impunity was linked to him belonging to resistance forces.

4.4 Opportunities for VAWG Response

Opportunities within the humanitarian system

Key humanitarian agencies operating in Yemen, including IRC, CARE and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), have set out the steps needed to scale up and increase the impact of VAWG response services, including mainstreaming VAWG response across sectoral programmes as well as establishing services for survivors in line with global and Yemen-specific policy commitments such as the Call to Action on Protection from Gender Based Violence in Emergencies and its Roadmap 2016-2020 (Call to Action, 2016). This should include integrating the Minimum Initial Service Package (MISP) into all humanitarian response, as well as psychosocial support to both women and men (and specifically to couples/households and communities) affected by conflict, violence and economic hardship to support survivors and address the drivers of VAWG perpetration, in line with global evidence (IRC, 2018). Multiple studies have highlighted that interventions which work with both men and women, intervene at the relationship level (i.e. with couples), or work holistically with the whole community, are significantly more effective in preventing VAWG than single-intervention or women/men-only engagement (IRC, 2018).

Providing support and training to women involved in humanitarian activities, such as psychosocial support, training them to be 'family experts' for other women in their communities, and to build networks with other women in similar roles beyond their area could further increase the effectiveness of these measures.

Realising the potential of these established VAWG response systems requires increased funding to health sector and other VAWG-related elements of the HRP, including multi-year commitments to reduce the constant threat of closure of services (IRC, 2018).

Opportunities within the security and justice sectors

As noted above, **formal security and justice services have reduced due to destruction of infrastructure, control by armed forces and breakdown in public administration, presenting additional barriers to women accessing policing and legal provision in an already weak system**. However, in some areas, women play an active role in security and some communities are supportive of women's greater engagement in local security, particularly in relation to VAWG and family matters (Heinze & Stevens, 2018). Women, peace and security actors in Yemen have proposed localised security fora in stable areas to bring together women activists and civil society leaders with security agencies, humanitarian response and protection agencies, local government and community leaders to address local issues related to women, peace and security. Child and youth security is identified as a locally appropriate entry point and Ma'rib is suggested as a good location to start with, which may include work with school-based groups such as peace clubs (Heinze & Stevens, 2018). Lessons are available from similar approaches in other contexts supported by the UK government, such as Nigeria (DFID, 2017).

There is potential to support women working in the police where these exist in order to make security provision more effective in prevention and accessible to survivors of VAWG. Women police officers could be trained and supported to provide more effective security on the street for women, address family issues and respond to VAWG sensitively and appropriately which may increase reporting and support the emergence of effective referrals to other services. Strategic communications work on women's roles and GBV could also incorporate positive images of policewomen. Research by the Yemen Polling Centre highlights the importance of public perceptions in support for and uptake of policing services (Yemen Polling Centre, 2013 & 2017). Small-scale, piloted support where the community seems receptive and policewomen are already present (e.g. Ma'rib city) could sow the seeds for larger scale community safety work. Lessons on community policing in Yemen and its potential to address VAWG have been documented by Saferworld (Wright et al, 2016).

Women rarely report VAWG (or other crimes) due to an absence of female officers and fear of further violence from the police, and yet evidence suggests that women, particularly those most marginalised (IDPs, muhammasheen), would like to do so. Longer-term security and justice programming could include establishment of women's sections in police stations in urban centres with a separate entrance for women, female staff, separate women's cells and bathrooms. This could be an expansion of the two activity areas above, and linked to local reform of security and justice services where possible, establishment of local Family Centres, shelter homes and support to women-led CSOs. This would be an important step in encouraging reporting and response to GBV and in strengthening women's participation in local security (Heinze & Stevens, 2018). Beyond formal security provision, there is also scope to establish local 'family centres' with female staff only as a place women can turn to for advice and support, together with local activists and with the support of local authorities. **Women supporting other women around conflict and violence is considered acceptable even under hard line Islamist restrictions and there is space for women's agency to support other women but there are currently no established services where women can go for help beyond the family** (Heinze & Stevens, 2018)

5 Implications of COVID-19 on VAWG in Yemen

Publicly available resources, together with verbal consultation with the Yemen Women's Union (YWU) and insights from a range of seminar's and workshops since the start of the COVID-19 response, raise the following issues for Yemeni women and girls, as of May 2020:

- **Women are expected to bear the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic in Yemen.** Five years of conflict, limited nutritional intake and low levels of immunity are making Yemeni women increasingly vulnerable to contracting COVID-19, according to UNFPA. This is compounded by greater exposure to infection due to their roles caring for the sick within families and communities, with women constituting a majority of frontline health workers (UNFPA, 2020a).
- **Access to COVID-19 health care may be more limited for women than for men**
 - Women and girls have less access to the financial resources needed to seek health services in response to COVID-19, including money for transport
 - Women are often not able to determine whether they go to a health facility as this is often dictated by male family members, who in many cases must accompany them (UNFPA, 2020a; YWU)
 - Women face additional risks in moving outside of the home to seek care and the restrictions of lockdown may increase this risk, as seen in other countries where security responses have been authoritarian rather than cooperative.
- **Specialist services for women have already reduced and more are under imminent threat of closure.** Without additional funding, more than 90% of UNFPA-supported reproductive health facilities could close (UNFPA, 2020a). **UNFPA predicts that more than 48,000 women could die** from complications of pregnancy and childbirth in Yemen due to severe funding shortages and the closure of reproductive health facilities during COVID-19 response (UNFPA, 2020b). **Lockdown due to**

COVID-19 has already led to a reduction in services to support survivors of violence, including closure of safe spaces, community centres and specialised health services needed by survivors (YWU). Restricted movement further prevents women from accessing health and security services where they exist.

- **Armed group engagement in provision of healthcare is likely to impact on Yemeni women**
 - Risks of sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment (SEAH) surrounding healthcare provision are likely to increase due to greater presence of armed personnel and breakdown in usual safeguarding procedures. This was seen during the Ebola response including particular risks for female health workers as well as those seeking services (Sandy et al, 2017).
 - Presence of military (government and houthi in respective areas controlled by them) in health facilities may deter women from attending due to fear based on previous violence committed by armed groups and stigma (YWU informant)
 - Both men and women may be deterred from attending hospitals due to patterns of attacks on healthcare facilities during the conflict. Attacks on health facilities increased, with 6 occurring in the first quarter of 2020, and one occurring in April 2020 despite the onset of COVID-19 and the declaration of ceasefire which has not yet translated into a cessation of fighting on the ground (OCHA, May 2020).
 - Women are largely being excluded from decision making around COVID 19 and the risk that their needs will be neglected is high, relating to VAWG and more broadly (YWU informant)
- **Women's rights organisations have started using hotlines to record cases of VAWG**, provide counselling and refer to other sources of support where possible. **Reporting rates have remained steady despite the fact that huge numbers of women do not have access to these services** as they have no personal mobile phone, no signal or no privacy to make a call. This suggests that rates have risen overall (YWU)
- **Loss of women's incomes due to lockdown has been reported as a driver of violence within households** – violence perpetrated by husbands, fathers, and brothers due to the reduced economic value of women within the household which had become more important since conflict began due to men's loss of earnings.
- **Cases of early and forced marriage due to the economic strain of lockdown have already been reported** – in some cases WRO's have supported girls to challenge these marriages but this causes strain within communities

Women's Rights Organisations are demonstrating high levels of flexibility, resilience and innovation in adapting to address the additional challenges of COVID-19 whilst maintaining efforts to influence the broader peace process. **A shift to online engagement offers potential for women to be more engaged but all actors involved must facilitate this intentionally** – something the international community can support. Women activists already report an increase in online harassment and threats – mirroring their experience on the ground – and additional support to overcome deliberate efforts to derail women's engagement may be necessary. **Consultation with WRO's during the period of lockdown can help to ensure that the realities of women in Yemen are understood and can inform COVID-19 response.** WRO's can help to inform a gendered analysis of COVID-19 response by supporting remote data collection and gathering perspectives from key civil society stakeholders as well as survivors.

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