Yemen’s War Against Women - Oppression Takes On Radical Undertones

Note to readers: I have included in this article comments I have collected from women over the past few months as part of a research paper I’m conducting on Yemen as well as already published quotes from reputable rights organisation so that victims could be given a voice and their trauma told in their own words.

If women in the Middle East continue to face oppression by virtue of their gender, at a point in our history when debates over equality and discrimination have allowed for global emancipation, Yemen is fast becoming the land where all hopes come to die ... If one keeps in mind that Saudi Arabia rationalised abuse as a national cultural standard, arguing that physical violence and rape under the sanctity of marriage are not a thing, Yemen has indeed sunk pretty low to claim the title of worst abuser against women.

“My husband broke my leg as a punishment for being late after I visited my parents. My family has kept silent, asking me to be patient and telling me that as his wife I should obey his command. I feel like a trapped animal.” Ameera

And yet it truly has ... from the proliferation of child marriages to force virginity tests on young girls to satisfy
bigoted future in-laws and standardised physical violence, the women of Yemen have been dehumanised to stomach-churning extremes. Underneath it all lies not moral degradation but Islamic radicalism. For every inch of ground women have lost over the years echo the lunacies of religious zealots – words of hate speaking of enslavement and isolation.

“My husband took me out of school the very week we got married ... I was 15. Even though he promised my family he would allow me to finish school he decided that education for women is too dangerous. ‘A woman’s only role is to serve her husband and raise children’, he said to me. Even though I begged him he refused.” Ebtessam

And if many will argue that Yemen has more immediate crises to address before one could venture on the subject of gender equality, I will posit that Yemen’s almost systemic violence against the fairer sex, is a harbinger of worse things to come - a foreteller of the hold and control extremists now exercise over this war-torn nation of Southern Arabia.

The case of model and actress Entesar Al-Hammadi, whose great crime was to violate the Houthis’ strict Islamic dress code by holding unveiled pictures of herself on her phone, and social media accounts should attest to such a dangerous trend. The young woman is currently awaiting trial on charges of corrupt behaviour and noncompliance to Islamic norms.

The victim of a broad state-run campaign against so-called ‘religious dissidents’, Al Hammadi is but one among many to have been brutally kidnapped by police for daring imagine herself free.

An Amnesty International report describes Yemen as “one of the worst places in the world to be a woman.” It said that the women survived in oppressive, deteriorating conditions, stripped of equality. The organization quoted a woman from Marib on condition of anonymity as saying:

“I don’t feel like a human being. The Yemeni woman continued that there were increased gender roles in the region, “I can’t breathe properly like other human beings. We suffer from the forced niqab [hijab and purdah system], child marriage, divorce shame, domestic violence and honour killings.”

Pursued, persecuted, violated, threatened with rape, women in Yemen are owned by their male guardians without any hope for recourse. When the law reads intolerance and religious indoctrination, women have no voice and no name. The victims of a system that no longer sees them as human beings, pain has become their daily bread.

“I was traveling with three children when we were stopped at a checkpoint by Houthi forces. They detained us, with no food and water during under very hot weather. We begged them to let us pass but they refused. They insulted us and threatened us with rape. We panicked and started crying... when they were done with us, they left us on the street at night in a secluded and isolated area... We were afraid, and the children terrified.”

In 2017, a UN reported that 52% of Yemeni women had been married before the age of 18. Anecdotal accounts suggest those rates have soared upwards since March 2015, when the war broke out. While it is difficult to draw an accurate picture, it appears so far that North Yemen has witnessed the brunt of such social disintegration as poverty, hunger and the miseries of war have accelerated women’s precarious social standing – in coordination with a sharp rise in religious fundamentalism.

“I was beaten with my mum at a checkpoint by men with riffles. They grabbed us both and called us whores for venturing outside the home without a male guardian. My father died a few years ago and we have no male family member living with us at present. We pleaded with them to stop but they laughed and kicked us.” Maryam

If Yemen was always lagging in terms of its ‘acceptance’ of women as equal to their male counterparts under the presidency of late President Ali Abdullah Saleh, it is nevertheless true that great strides had been taken by his administration to address the gender gap as to normalise women’s access to the workplace and education. In under a decade Yemen has lost whatever ground it once claimed, reducing more than half of its population to bone fide
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