



## **Nadia Al-Sakkaf: War in Yemen gives women more responsibility but not empowerment**

[CNN](#)

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It was an all-female gathering after a funeral for a family mourning their son, killed in Yemen's on-going civil war.

The interesting thing about this gathering was that there were relatives present who were fighting on opposing sides of the conflict.

Nevertheless, the women came together in grief. They were simply women talking about losing their sons to the war and about how life has become so hard for everyone in Yemen.

The conflict, which started in 2014, has claimed the lives of many Yemenis directly through combat or through disease and hunger. UN statistics said that up until September 2017, over 5,000 people had been killed in the war -- 20% of which were children.

But the war has also had a much longer-term impact on Yemeni society: it has changed the country forever -- especially for women.

It is Yemen's women who during the conflict have maintained the social fabric of society and kept communities together. They are the nurturers, mediators, peacemakers, and keepers of tradition.

Because of the conflict, the entire socio-cultural balance of the society has been tipped over.

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Across Yemen, women find themselves in charge of managing the poverty afflicting their communities -- and they do so with very few resources and, in some cases, no qualifications. They bake bread at home and sell it. Some have become maids and offer their cleaning services to others for little money.

Very few women have gone through what one would call empowerment, as they are not really acquiring more power.

Instead, they are being given more responsibilities. In some cases, this gives them more freedom of mobility as they are forced out of their homes in search of income. It is not that cultural values have changed; it's that war has increased the burden on women.

It's not just a fear for their lives or economic insecurity that has placed so many Yemeni women in this situation. It is also the lack of routine, such as children not knowing whether they can or should go to school, parents not knowing whether they have a source of income or how to put food on the table and sick people not having access to healthcare. The list of basic needs goes on.

The situation in Yemen was bad before the war. But with the conflict, it has reached unprecedented levels of desperation.

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How does a Yemeni mother, wife, sister or caretaker appease her loved ones and take care of her responsibilities when she has nothing to work with? The social gender power balances in Yemen have always favored men over women, but the conflict has made matters worse as men take their position as decision makers at all levels across all fields.

Even during humanitarian aid delivery, it is usually men who take charge and decide where and how to distribute aid -- if it is distributed at all.

But as the instability extends over the course of the conflict, women are gradually finding themselves in charge, as the men in their lives are either killed, out fighting, or become too depressed to be useful. The problem of being in charge without basic resources is a very consuming one.

The situation for Yemeni women differs depending on which side they happen to be on. For example, Yemeni women of the Shiite Zaidi north find themselves sucked into an ideological battle, giving away their men and young sons as feed to a political fire that will eventually consume them.

Houthi women find themselves in strange new roles, such as the newly created women militants who carry arms and kill opponents.

There are Houthi women whose task is to recruit new soldiers for the fight, convincing other mothers to send their flesh and blood knowing that they will probably never come back.

There is a faction whose role is to raid houses and loot money for the "cause."

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This is new for Yemeni women. Not because Yemeni women have never held a gun -- on the contrary, many of the women who become militants were originally trained in their tribes pre-conflict. Yemeni tradition has it that women would guard Qat fields from the rooftops of their homes and shoot -- or scare off -- potential thieves. In some tribes where the men go abroad for work, women are taught how to use a firearm for their own protection. The new aspect in this is the violence and the political engagement at a public level.

But again, this is not empowerment. The women are recruited, told what to do and given approval by men to engage in such actions. They do not do it of their own accord.

And even those women who are not directly involved suffer greatly because of the discriminating attitude promoted by the Houthis against women.

But whichever side they are on, all Yemeni women grieve and try to make sense of their lives as they stand in the midst of chaos.

The women of the dominantly Sunni northern regions are equally involved in the conflict, sending off their men to the front lines knowing that they may never see them again. But they do so out of self-defense rather than ideology.

While life is relatively peaceful in most of Yemen's southern cities, hardships still exist for women, due to an identity crisis that has grown out of what groups control which areas.

How much freedom southern women have sometimes depends literally on which street they live on and who controls it. If it is predominantly the liberal socialists, then they have more freedom of movement and dress than say in an area controlled by the Yemeni version of the Muslim Brotherhood, or even worse.

The story of a Yemeni woman living in the unstable Yemen of today has many dimensions and facets. But all the women of Yemen share their amazing resilience that pushes them forward. And when tragedy strikes, they all grieve their loved ones the same way.