

Is more women entering Yemen's labor market really progress?

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Yemen ranks last out of 144 countries on the World Economic Forum's [Global Gender Gap Index](#). Yemen is also one of the world's poorest countries and the region's poorest country, with its proportion of impoverished citizens almost doubling during the ongoing conflict to reach 61% of the population in 2016 compared to 34% in 2014, according to mid-2016 [World Bank estimates](#).

Yemen's vicious civil war has altered many aspects of society so that women are forced into the family's breadwinning positions, which may not necessarily reflect a milestone in gender equality.

The [implications of the conflict](#) on the daily lives of all Yemenis have been tragic. When broken down based on gender and age, the tragedy becomes even more grievous. Women and children are always considered the first casualties of wars, and Yemen is no exception.

According to UNICEF, more than [1,300 children have died](#) as a direct result of the war since its outbreak in March 2015. Many school-aged children cannot go to school due to the displacement or destruction of their schools. Girls face a higher-than-ever risk of being married off before turning 18, as families seek to lessen their burdens by marrying off their young girls, while boys [as young as 10 years old](#) face recruitment by both warring parties: the [Houthi-Ali Abdullah Saleh](#) alliance and the pro-Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi militias.

Like everyone in Yemen, women in the country have been severely affected by the war. And as a subgroup of the population, they are vulnerable to gender-based violence. In September 2016, an [OXFAM report](#) indicated that [women and girls in Yemen](#) have been subjected to violence, abuse and exploitation — including [sexual](#) — by the different armed groups since the outbreak of the conflict, particularly at checkpoints.

The implications of the war for men are immense, from death at the battlefield to unemployment and the psychological stress of failing to provide for their families. More women are [entering the labor market](#), especially in rural areas where most of the men are day laborers, and becoming the breadwinners of their families. This, of course, enables women in rural areas to assume greater power in the decision-making in their households and also forces the men to participate more in household tasks such as cooking, cleaning and taking care of children.

While the increasing representation of women in public spaces can be considered a positive development, should their increasing participation in the labor market in such atrocious circumstances and conditions be [applauded as a milestone](#) on the road toward gender equality, or is war-torn Yemen simply heading for equality in misery?

The June 2016 World Bank report stated that 52% of the internally displaced persons in Yemen — [more than 3 million people](#) — consist of women, many of whom are now heading their displaced households. In a Yemeni context, this absence of adult men can be interpreted as the death of the male heads of those households, their joining one of the warring groups or leaving for nearby cities to look for jobs. Crucially, the absence of adult men from households makes displaced women's accessibility to humanitarian aid extremely difficult.

Women in conflict-affected areas are often unable to access the humanitarian aid of which [almost 19 million people](#) in Yemen are in need. They are stifled by social restrictions on their freedom of movement, fear of abuse at militia-held checkpoints and the rising costs of transportation, as many roads are closed or have been destroyed because of the ongoing fighting.

The findings of the OXFAM report do not include Sanaa, the capital of Yemen, where almost 3 million people reside. Recent observations by Al-Monitor from the capital indicate that many employers have resisted laying off male employees as they are assumed to be the breadwinners of their households, and many female employees have lost their jobs despite also being heads and breadwinners of their households.

While everyone is wishing for a gleam of hope coming from Yemen, the country cannot afford to depoliticize its deep-rooted problems. More men cooking and cleaning in their households is not the answer to gender inequality, nor can it be portrayed as a positive outcome of the war when most Yemenis, both men and women, have been living in atrocious conditions since its outbreak and are in dire need of humanitarian aid.

Women in Yemen did not need a war to test their resilience. It is highly disturbing to see certain outcomes of the war portrayed as victories for gender equality. This vicious war has been the worst in Yemen's modern history, and its impacts have been devastating to every gender, segment and age group in the country.

Read more: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/01/yemen-gender-equality-women-labor-war.html#ixzz4YgyGGJSw>