

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Statement by Ms. Linda Al Obahi
UN Security Council Briefing on Yemen
12 September 2024

President, Excellencies,

Thank you for the opportunity to brief you today. My name is Linda Al Obahi. I am a Senior Political Affairs and Mediation Adviser, representing the [Peace Track Initiative \(PTI\)](#) and the [Women Solidarity Network](#). Our work focuses on supporting inclusive peacebuilding in Yemen and advocating for women's rights.

My statement today will focus on the deterioration of women's rights in Yemen. Women and girls are 49%¹ of the 18.2 million² people in need of humanitarian assistance,³ and face food insecurity,⁴ water shortages,⁵ disease,⁶ lack of access to basic life-saving services, such as health care and education, poverty and deprivation of economic opportunities, and systematic exclusion and suppression of their rights.

6.3 million⁷ Yemeni women and girls are at heightened risk of gender-based violence, including domestic⁸ and sexual violence,⁹ and many have been forced to resort to extreme coping mechanisms, including forced and early marriage, with over 30% of girls married by the age of 18.¹⁰ Women and girls from minorities and marginalized groups, including the Muhamasheen¹¹ and Baha'i,¹² are further disproportionately impacted. Muhamasheen women and girls are increasingly subjected to targeted attacks, including sexual violence, torture, and exploitation.¹³

Women's human rights, particularly their freedom of movement, are heavily restricted by all the warring parties in Yemen.¹⁴ The imposition of a mahram, dress codes, and restrictions on freedom of expression, especially in Houthi-controlled areas, impede women's ability to work, including in the humanitarian sector, to access healthcare and education, and to participate in public life.

Yemeni women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and peacebuilders are often subjected to public defamation, online violence and threats to their safety.¹⁵ In the past few years, PTI has supported over 150 WHRDs fleeing Houthi-controlled areas with protection support.

During this conflict, all parties¹⁶ have carried out enforced disappearances and arbitrary arrests.¹⁷ UN experts on Yemen have consistently documented¹⁸ arbitrary detention, physical and mental torture, rape,¹⁹ and forced confessions of women and girls, particularly in Houthi prisons,²⁰ with some detainees as young as 14 years old.²¹ Local Yemeni women's organizations have further documented brutal forms of sexual violence such as mutilation and forced abortion in detention.²² Detainees have been kept incommunicado and, in some cases, in solitary confinement.²³ Women who have completed jail sentences are denied release without a male guardian,²⁴ and are deprived of their legal rights, including communication with lawyers and family members.

Releasing detained women must be a priority in all negotiations, as their suffering is often completely overlooked, compounded by violence, neglect, and societal shame.²⁵ Local women leaders and mediators' efforts to support women detainees are curtailed by significant access and resource constraints. It is deeply concerning that no women are part of the Prisoners and Detainees Exchange Committees and that women are almost entirely excluded from the lists of those to be released²⁶.

Your Excellencies,

Yemeni civil society have documented detention of at least 3,600 individuals by the Houthis since 2017, often without legal proceedings, proper warrants, charges, or communication with their families. However, the recent Houthi crackdown since 31 May²⁷ targeting individuals²⁸ working for the UN, and international and national NGOs with arbitrary detention,²⁹ enforced disappearances,³⁰ and accusations of espionage³¹ is unprecedented. The UN has documented arbitrary detention of at least 60 Yemeni civilians,³² including six women, some with

their children and spouses³³—but we are concerned that the number is likely much higher. Further, support for these detainees' families has been inadequate, with limited information, financial resources, and psychological support. UN and NGO staff who remain on the ground have been instructed to “carry on with business as usual,”³⁴ without proper safety measures, such as relocation support, placing them at further risk.

These blatant violations of international human rights and humanitarian law appear to be part of a broader strategy³⁵ to suppress the remaining civic and political space in Houthi-controlled territories, create significant fear, and threaten humanitarian operations in Yemen. Today, I am here to convey not only the gravity³⁶ of these violations, but also the profound disappointment felt by the majority of Yemenis regarding the tepid international response to these developments. We urge UN agencies and international organizations operating in Yemen to advocate far more strongly for the immediate and unconditional release³⁷ of the detainees and to do much more to publicly defend them from the Houthis' unfounded allegations of espionage. Most importantly, I urge the international community to act decisively to protect humanitarian efforts in Yemen, which are so critical for the lives of millions of Yemenis. This includes setting clear red lines on actions regarding aid distribution and engagement with civil society, consistently upholding and demanding respect for international human rights and humanitarian law, and holding the Houthis accountable for their actions.

President, Excellencies,

Yemenis are exhausted by the ongoing conflict and desperately seek security, peace, and stability. Deep divisions and mistrust among Yemeni parties, compounded by external interference and attempts to pursue unilateral agreements, continue to impede a political resolution. Despite these challenges, there is hope for a breakthrough to resolve Yemen's crisis. The Special Envoy's efforts to advance negotiations towards an inter-Yemeni political process, while addressing urgent humanitarian and economic challenges, represent the most viable path to stability. Although consulting with diverse women representatives³⁸ is commendable, without the opportunity for women to meaningfully influence the UN-led peace process, these efforts may remain symbolic.

For the first time³⁹ in 24 years, there are no women⁴⁰ holding government positions, nor are they part of the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC).⁴¹ Women are nominally represented by 10% of the Consultation and Reconciliation Committee (CRC), 14% of the Economic team, and 22% of the Legal team supporting the PLC as advisors.⁴² They are also totally absent from the recently formed Presidential Committee to address the demands of the people of Hadhramaut.⁴³ Furthermore, women are completely absent from peace process negotiation committees, including those under UN auspices, such as the Committees on the Prisoners Exchange, Security and Military, and Taiz, despite multiple statements and resolutions by this esteemed Council calling for women's meaningful participation.⁴⁴ Yemeni women leaders and civil society have worked to combat this exclusion by developing the Feminist Peace Roadmap.⁴⁵ Despite these efforts, and more than a decade after the adoption of a minimum 30% quota for women's political participation during the National Dialogue Conference,⁴⁶ we remain sidelined.

Excellencies, I would like to conclude by calling on the Security Council to take the following actions:

- Urge all parties to establish a comprehensive, inclusive, just and sustainable peace that centers transitional justice and human rights. All negotiations must ensure the meaningful participation of women, youth, minorities, people with disabilities, marginalized groups, victims and survivors of rights abuses, human rights defenders and civil society. Women must be included in all decision-making processes, including mediation and ceasefire efforts, and in all UN-supported peace committees, starting with the implementation of the minimum 30% quota for women.
- Call on all parties to respect international humanitarian and human rights law, and ensure accountability for all crimes committed. I urge you to reject general immunities or selective justice.
- Demand that all parties respect the human rights of women, including by lifting restrictions on their movement, ending the targeting of women human rights defenders, and immediately ceasing all acts of gender-based violence.

- Condemn all threats to humanitarian workers and demand the immediate and unconditional release of all those who have been arbitrarily detained, including women, as well as all UN and NGO staff. Their human rights must be respected, and they must have access to their families and legal representatives, and receive comprehensive support.

Excellencies,

Yemen is in a state of limbo: neither at war nor at peace. Our decade-long suffering will echo through generations if the conflict persists. It is time for peace.

Thank you.

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