



Middle East Youth Initiative

Gender, Development and Governance in Yemen, 20 Years On

Editor's Note – Following the 20 year anniversary of North-South unification in Yemen (May 22), the Middle East Youth Initiative spoke with Raufa Hassan al-Sharki about a wide range of issues pertaining to Yemen's development. Al-Sharki is the president of the Cultural Development Projects Planning Foundation and professor of Media and Gender Studies at Sana'a University.

Middle East Youth Initiative (MEYI): This month, Yemen celebrates 20 years since unification. Having been one of the primary observers of Yemen's development over the past years, what are the major social and economic achievements you have seen in the country? Also, what challenges remain in achieving more equitable development? A very big question.

Raufa Hassan al-Sharki: It is. Actually, thinking of 20 years of challenges, I believe that they are now arriving to their peaks. The unification was a unification between two systems of states that are different. To make that marriage into one system acceptable by both was not an easy task. Of course, several other problems have arrived because of that – the first war erupted in 1994 and other regional issues were already persistent, like what happened in the Gulf. Close to 1 million Yemeni migrants had to return to Yemen.¹ These people were responsible [for] financing families that varied from four to five people at least per person, so we are talking about almost 6 million Yemenis who have been affected directly by the returning of these people. So the new state had to face its own internal difficulties with these people who came back and the difficulties of creating new jobs while not yet handling the old situation.

Also, a lot of political issues were there and continue to be...How [are] we going to [take the]...system that existed in one part of the country and how can that be unified in one system? It took a long time. At the same time, there were other issues that were coming and...will continue... like women's issues. Unification has come while the issue of Yemeni women had not been solved, neither in the south nor in the north. The southern part had focused on one aspect – it looked like it liberates women legally, but there are a lot of social constraints that

¹ When the Gulf War broke out in 1990, many Yemeni workers were expelled from Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states when Yemen refused to join the coalition against Iraq. The estimates of the number of Yemenis expelled range from 800,000 to over 1 million. See, for example: Marina de Regt, "[Migration to and through Yemen: The Case of Migrant Domestic Workers](#)," The Forced Migration and Refugee Studies Program, American University of Cairo, October 2007. "[Pawns of Gulf war live forgotten in Yemen camps](#)," *Guardian*, January 7, 1993.



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have continued there. Beyond the city of Aden, very few [things] have been done for women. The issue of illiteracy was very large and it is still today.

...Education is one of the persistent issues for women, and for the state. Also the participation of women in paid work was also a problem. Women are working, but in rural areas which represent 70 percent of the population they work in family farms and are not being paid. Whatever...they produce is not even counted in the general national income of the whole country. So that denies them specific rights, including pensions and other things, such as health protection.

Also, in both systems before unification, they have had, sort of, the beginning[s] of social and health network care, but it was very limited. The infrastructure was limited. A lot of health problems and more poverty [were] continuously happening with a high percentage of demographic growth. Yemen represents a place where three-quarters of the population are under the age of 25. So that means a lot of people are being born, in schools, and looking for jobs... and that is going to be [increasing] every year. So it's a continuous problem.

Issues for women were taking second or even third priority of interest for all concerned stakeholders in the country. These challenges continue until now. We are in 20 years [since unification], problems related to democracy, corruption, other aspects have resulted in some armed conflict inside the country, one in the northern part of the country which was Sa'adah and the problems with al-Huthis, and the other was – which is, not was, still continuous – the rebellions in some of the areas at the ex-borders of south/north Yemen. There are some movements of angry crowds who are not finding jobs and not finding possible solutions because they cannot go and find jobs in the surrounding countries...

A third one is an international problem – terrorism – that has helped radicals or so-called al-Qaeda, to find roots inside the country. They are still small and minor, but could benefit from the worsening of the developmental and economic situation of the state.

So, all these are challenges for the time being. Twenty years, and Yemenis are facing these situations, clearly now [for] everybody inside the country. Everyone is thinking about it, and it doesn't seem that there are easy solutions, but perhaps the call from the president for dialoguing might lead to that. We are still waiting for things to come.

MEYI: You raised the issue of gender in particular, and obviously this is one of your areas of expertise. Are opportunities for young women in Yemen changing now? It seems that there have been improvements in education and access to education for young women in Yemen, but



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with an adult female literacy rate of just 43 percent (WDI 2008), it seems that even basic educational attainment is still a challenge. Further, you mentioned that many of them are providing basically free labor, not being counted in national statistics, they are working on family farms, and there aren't as many employment opportunities for young women. Is that changing for young women in Yemen as they move through the education system?

Dr. al-Sharki: There are two ways to compare things. If we compare the situation of women today and their opportunities in the labor market from the point of view of what the situation [was] in 1990 when the unification took place...then we will find huge progress that has been achieved, because now we do have women in every level, and in every group, and in every skill inside the country working, which was not the case 20 years ago. So, that is one way to look at it. But if we look at what should things be and how the situation compares to other countries and compares to the hope of the whole population, then it is still far ...from being achieved. It is not just a problem for women – it is more for women – but it is a problem for the whole population.

The unemployment [problem] for youth is so big that people are not finding jobs, regardless of their gender. In some situations, actually from a gender point of view, you find that women have access to work while men don't. Like to tackle the situation of the lack of education for girls in rural areas, the Ministry of Education, and the civil service also, offer jobs for women who...only [have a] high school [education] while it does not give this opportunity at all to men. So men have to be graduates in order to obtain jobs. Somehow, it's ...affirmative action because very few girls [have a] high school [education] in rural areas, so you need to give them jobs in order to teach in schools and to motivate others to go, so that's sort of a solution. But it's still sort of a gender bias. [At] the same time, there are places where it is blocked in the face of women. There are some military sections where women could go and join, but not the rest. So, the men have more opportunities to find jobs with the military than women. You have also a lot of work related to fisheries and to other labor markets and businesses inside the country that are more offered to men than to women. But, it has to be looked at not just as being against or with women, it is all related to social aspects and also related to imaginary roles of what women should do and what men should do...

MEYI: Tell us about the work of the Cultural Development Projects Planning Foundation which you head in Yemen. What is the foundation's long-term vision, and what activities does it carry out to achieve its goals?



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Dr. al-Sharki: We mainly work in gender issues, but it is cross-cutting in different subjects. Our work is in five pillars, and they are all related to gender issues. The five pillars we are working in [include] one on identity and modern history in Yemen. We believe that the modern history that has been written – and some of it is not yet even written, and oral history methodologies could be used – we believe that we have to tell the stories of women and their role in these modern times, because we know that the writing of history most of the time denies women their real place. ...In this pillar, we started with a lot of research, seminars, international and national gatherings to discuss this issue, especially with the German [case] – we believe that the unification of Germany is worth looking at, and they do have some similarities with us, with a lot of differences, of course ...Now we are going to make a museum, so in this pillar we are working toward ...writing of the history of women as a part of the history of men and jointly telling the story of modern Yemen. So, that's one pillar.

The second pillar is what we call democracy and human rights. In democracy and human rights, we've been working in this for almost 20 years because we are one of the oldest NGOs in the country. We have worked on the question of elections. We started first to create a tradition of women as voters. ...Now it is a part of the rights that cannot be denied for any Yemeni women to be a voter and to have the registration capacity as soon as she gets to be 18 [years old]. We worked on that, and we worked on the candidacy issues, because it is easy to be a voter, but it is more difficult to run for a higher post to be elected. So, we are still working on that. Over the last 10 years, we have been on this subject, but it's a difficult thing. I think it is all around the world – it's not just a problem in Yemen. We are now creating a network in this field – it is called "Ansar" meaning "the victorious," which are supporters for women's candidacy in several places, actually eight governorates inside the country. These "victorious" are ...networking to support candidates whenever they come, so we are not focusing on the candidates themselves but on the social environment that can support them. This is the second pillar.

The [third] pillar we are working on good governance, because we believe that with good governance, and democracy and participation...and transparency and all of that will lead to better equal chances for women. On this, we are working over the national budget of the state. The national budget...and its relation to the MDGs [Millennium Development Goals] specifically to three of the goals of the MDGs: one is the balance between genders, the second is the mortality rate for mothers, and the third is the mortality rate for children. So we are trying to see where the money goes for these three goals and what the commitments [are] that Yemen has signed and how it is being translated in money [and] action in the budget...Now, we are also



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participating yearly in an international report among 85 other countries on how much transparency is being done within the budget and that is work toward something that we call the “budget of the citizen,” or the citizens’ budget, and hope to arrive to it. It is a lot of work, but as you say that is one way of working in that pillar. Good governance could go [toward] several other issues, like the language itself and how the concepts are being developed and what people are doing in their daily life with their understanding of what good governance should be.

The fourth pillar that we are working on is capacity building for NGOs. We are known to be one of the strongest NGOs in the country in creating other NGOs, and training them, and helping them to work. With that we encourage the participation of women or women-led initiatives to create NGOs. Of course that means all our pillars of work cross-cut to gender balance issues.

The fifth is not really one specific pillar, but it is ...the issue of health and the issue of *qat*. *Qat* is this bad habit that Yemenis are habituated to, and we are trying among all our programs to encourage certain behavior that is against *qat* and against smoking, of course.

So, it is a lot of work. That is what our foundation, in a very short [description], is doing, but it’s work of 20 years and in a lot of places inside the country with a lot of volunteers. Some of our projects are financed and some of them are really in difficulty.

MEYI: It is really an impressive list of areas that you are trying to cover. Coming back to the issue of maternal health, in general, and mortality: some of our research here at the Middle East Youth Initiative, we’ve been looking at the circumstances facing young women across the region and how increasing educational attainment affects when they marry. In this way, delayed marriage may be a positive thing. But for Yemeni women, the issue you always hear about is early marriage and how women are forming families so early, and all of the risks that come along with that. Are you doing specific work with young women on education, or civic participation, or alternatives to combat early marriage? How do you see this issue? Because I know it is a complicated one.

Dr. al-Sharki: Actually now, it has become a very highly political issue, but for us we have worked in several aspects of it. Health, and especially health of women, has been a very main concern for us during the 20 years. In the 1990s, we made a huge program where we reached every high school and the last two years of basic school: whatever school that has girls age 11 and above. We worked all around the country ...on girls’ health education program. We did it in



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cooperation, actually, with a private sector group – they wanted to publicize women’s tissue [products] and we wanted to have young women understand the issues related to the development of their bodies in the age of adolescence. That work was a real breakthrough, and at that time it was supported by acceptance from the Ministry of Education. By the end of it, the certificates of the trainers and the people who did the lecturing in all the schools [were] co-signed by me, as the head of the foundation, and the minister of education who was, at that time, Dr. Yahya al-Shaibi.

...So this is one of the things we did earlier...and also, the second was that we did a lot of work on the issue of girls’ education. We believe, and we will continue to believe, that only guaranteeing that girls study until they have a high school [degree] will make 35 percent less early marriage stories and [reduced] mortality rates. This is unbelievably true, and all the studies and all the research have guaranteed that. So...in cooperation with ADRA [the Adventist Development and Relief Agency], it’s an American NGO, and with UNICEF and the recent minister of education we produced a book that illustrates the gap between girls and boys education and the factors that influence that: the social factors, and the governmental factors, and the school itself and its system... All these reasons now that have been illustrated in that book are part of the new plan and strategy of the state. It seems to me with all the donors that they are now trying to realize the solutions, or recommendations, that were suggested in that study.

I think that this is some of the contribution that we are doing. Also, we share with the groups that are working for safe motherhood either as organizations, coalitions, groups, meetings... We work with them. But we don’t have now, in the time being, a specific program as such. We do have a component in all of our networking and capacity building training which includes reproductive health and the health of mothers. We did in cooperation with the French Embassy a project in Socotra – we have a loan program...we are the only national NGO inside Yemen that is working there, but a lot of international organizations are working there... We worked there on the issue of reproductive health with the cooperation of [inaudible]. So, it’s a continuous cross-cutting subject. It’s like the gender issue, it is our concern, on our agenda, and we will continue...

MEYI: Looking at both of the internal conflicts in Yemen: how much are the issues that are coming up in these conflicts centered on economic development and grievances? To what extent do you believe equitable and sustained economic development in Yemen could



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contribute to improving the country's conflicts in both the Sa'adah region and in the south? Or, if you want to just pick one and speak about it...

Dr. al-Sharki: Actually, regardless of where, it is the same problem: it is good governance that is not actually good...that is the reason for most of the problems. Second, the economic issues that are related to development. The state has had a lot of difficulties to finance infrastructure and projects and health and education...donors were very, very tight toward Yemen in comparison to other countries in the region or [compared to other countries] in the world that are facing problems like [Yemen]. We've been neglected, actually, for a very long time, and only when things erupted to make a threat [to] international peace, then people look at us from mostly a geopolitical aspect in regard to safety and military issues. That is what made the development question the least on the agenda for donors.

So, we do have a lack of support for development issues inside the country – we face a lot of problems. It is a country that is poor and it has disparities between places and geographical areas where people live. The majority of the land of the country is not good for agricultural production, and this country should be dependent on tourism, but then with the safety that is not guaranteed, there is no tourism. So development is the last and the least, and that is the problem. If good governance and development are supported, I think most of the problems for the region that are caused by Yemen could be solved easily.

MEYI: Perhaps related to this issue of governance and transparency: the Yemeni government recently ratified a 10-step agenda, led by Deputy Finance Minister Jalal Omar Yaqoub, for governmental reform, including the goal of increasing the effectiveness of the civil service. One step in the plan included opening up a number of government jobs to young candidates based on merits and qualifications to reduce the role of personal connections in obtaining government employment. Do you think, first of all, that this is a worthy issue? Is it still perceived to be a problem in Yemen, that government jobs are obtained through personal connections? I would also ask if this has any potential to help out young women, or if it would have more of an impact on young men.

Dr. al-Sharki: I think it will be good for everyone and it's still valid. In my opinion, there are some problems in look[ing] at the state and its organs, from some of the opposition groups and people who support the opposition, which is a tendency to weaken the government... That, I think, is not good, because civil societies and others will not be replacing the state – still the state has to do its role. So if one of the things that the state starts to do is to control itself and



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work in a good governance basis and be transparent on everything, then I think a trust will be mutual with the people and then initiatives, also, in the private sector will be done with safety. Because still even the private sector is not feeling safe enough to invest. Not just only the international, but even the local, and when we are talking about the local, we are talking about businessmen, or companies, who have strong capacity that functions in other countries and do very little inside the country, because they just need guarantees and safety. They want also transparency in what they are being asked to give and what is being given to them ...

So, [the] fight against corruption is also one of the things that the government itself cannot do it, but it has to be shared with everybody. I forgot to tell you that in our foundation, we are now the coordinator of a Yemeni anti-corruption NGOs' coalition. We are focusing on three aspects: the water issue and agriculture and health. These are the three issues that we think, as different NGOs, that we could jointly work on that. This is supposed to be in cooperation with the World Bank, so its still in early stages...So, we are trying to set a certain criteria for what it should be.

I believe the 10 points, if the state commits itself to them, will be good. But we just know that there are a lot of challenges – that they have to take some priorities, even from the 10 points themselves. Their financial and economic problems are the worst, and especially now with the prices of oil and the very limited resources of petrol in Yemen, we do not have that much access to revenue that could support all the ambitions of the country without being helped by the other friends of the country, it will be very difficult for us to do alone.

MEYI: Given your background in media and communications, what do you see as the role of the international media? We have spoken about the role of international donors, and how they only focus on Yemen when it has fit with some larger geostrategic issue. What about the media? Could the international media play a more constructive role in highlighting the development challenges and opportunities facing the Yemeni population?

Dr. al-Sharki: The international media has played a very negative role in representing Yemen to the world. It has been always only covering our news if there has been a bomb or a kidnapping issue happening, and nothing in between. So it looks like we do not exist as people who achieve things, or do things, or survive. So if we have even sometimes a little thing, it is exaggerated and presented as the image of the country. That has been the worst [role] that the international media has played for a very long time.



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Now I think it's time that they help us in our road toward peace and toward development and building up our state as it should be...and also confronting the challenges that are facing us. I think looking at us as partners in this planet and feeling a little bit responsible, also, for what we are paying for. For example, al-Qaeda is not our creation and we are paying back for something that we did not create...

I think also that there are also responsibilities of neglect that have made our borders on the sea and the ocean open without being helped in how to handle protection for that huge space. And when the problems happened with the pirates of Somalia and others, then people noticed that we do have a deficiency...

So, there are lots of other things that the international media could shed light on them and make people see that they could help, that they could do, that it is not a hopeless case. There are people who are eager to change, There are people who are democrats, who are working toward democracy, who are fighting corruption, who are not accepting the status quo as it is, and who are expressing how they feel and their frustration. So, their cry should be listened to, and I think media is supposed to transfer the voice of the people.