

Yemen Frontline Insights – February 2022

Compiled by the Yemen Response Team

Like many Yemeni women today, Hajar is the sole breadwinner for her five children. The number of female-headed households has been increasing in Yemen since 2015, when a political conflict escalated into a war that has resulted in thousands of widows. The war has also precipitated a devastating economic crisis that is creating severe psychological impacts, in addition to physical ones. Cases have been reported of fathers killing their own children, rather than seeing them live on the streets, because they could no longer provide shelter for them.¹ Hajar, meanwhile, was left alone to care for her family when her husband became mentally unstable several years ago, and simply departed. With her husband gone, Hajar continued to live with her children in a rural area, where, like millions of other Yemeni women, she had to walk a long distance twice daily to collect water from an unprotected well. What was unusual in Hajar's case, is that none of her children helped with this task. All five of her children were born blind, a disability that makes helping with many basic household chores in rural Yemen more dangerous.

Within Yemen's vulnerable population groups, women and children are often at most risk—especially among the displaced, and households that have lost their male breadwinner. According to a United Nations (UN) Humanitarian Update published in October 2021, 6.1 million women in Yemen urgently need protection services. Analyses indicate that an increasing number of women and girls are engaging in negative coping mechanisms in order to survive, including coerced sex work, begging, child labor and human trafficking, and even suicide. At the same time, protection programs for women including medical assistance, psychosocial support, emergency shelter, and legal assistance are also among the most underfunded.

After years of caring for her children alone, with a little help from neighbors, Hajar experienced a bit of new relief when a local organization began installing rainwater harvesting tanks in her village in 2021. As soon as she heard about the project, Hajar ran to look for the team. Thankfully, her family was selected and registered as beneficiaries. After the rooftop system was installed at her home, Hajar no longer had to make so many trips to the well. She told the team that even though they couldn't see it, happiness was sparkling in the eyes of her blind children. Now she has more time to spend taking care of them.

Unfortunately, women like Hajar are already far less likely to receive aid in 2022, leaving them and their children more vulnerable than ever to death from starvation and disease. Nearly two thirds of major UN aid programs scaled back or closed altogether in January, and according to UN humanitarian chief Martin Griffiths, food rations that were reduced for 8 million Yemenis in December may become no rations at all in March. "The scale of the current gaps are unprecedented in Yemen," Griffiths said. "We have never before considered giving hungry people no food at all." Griffiths warned that if the lack of funding - which has led to slashing life-saving programs - is not addressed, it will be a "death sentence" for people whose coping mechanisms have been completely exhausted.² This might include women like Kateba - a mother of five, like Hajar.

Kateba's husband died 11 years ago. She's now 55, and the years of care and worry have left her thin and pale. Her ability to cope and provide for her family was significantly reduced when their village became a front line in the conflict, and they were forced to flee. They had to move from house to house in the village where they were displaced because Kateba couldn't pay any rent. When an aid organization registered her to begin receiving a monthly food basket in 2021, it brought the first taste of stability her family had experienced in a long time.

Food and WASH (WATER, Sanitation, and Hygiene) assistance has both short- and long-term impacts for children in households like Kateba's. Those receiving assistance are more likely to enroll in and succeed with school, and they are less likely to have absences due to illnesses caused by inadequate nutrition, water, hygiene, and sanitation. Meanwhile, both food security and school attendance reduce children's vulnerability to child labor, early marriage, and recruitment as child soldiers. However, without a surge in funding to meet the critical gaps relief organizations are facing, households like Kateba's may lose their lifeline of aid in 2022.

As the year opened with critical aid programs being cut, Yemen's conflict also escalated in January, making it the deadliest month for civilians - due to fighting - since 2018. According to Save the Children, one civilian was killed or injured nearly every hour.³ Since October 2021, when the UN Human Rights Council voted to end the mandate of the experts tasked with investigating war crimes in Yemen, civilian casualties have risen sharply.⁴ "The sharp escalation of violence in January caused death and injury among civilians, as well as major damage to civilian infrastructure, including health facilities, a school, telecommunication infrastructure, a prison, and a water facility," said Save the Children's Country Director, Gillian Moyes. "This new escalation is only aggravating the plight of an already vulnerable and exhausted population."⁵

On March 18th, partners will hold a national day of fasting and prayer for Yemen. To learn more, click yemen.pray4movement.org. In the coming weeks, please join them in praying for peace, reconciliation, and provision for the Yemeni people.

¹ <https://republicanyemen.net/archives/19094>

² <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/02/1112042>

³ <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-january-deadliest-month-2018-one-civilian-killed-or-injured-every-hour>

⁴ <https://www.nrc.no/news/2022/february/yemen-civilian-casualties-double-since-end-of-human-rights-monitoring/>

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SXwIA0Ebbzc>