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Navigating Marginalization in Peace Processes: The Engagement and Disengagement of Yemeni Women Activists in the Diaspora

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Abstract

This paper explores the interplay between women's activism, war-generated diaspora, and peacebuilding in Yemen, focusing on Yemeni women's engagement and disengagement in peace processes. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork among Yemeni diaspora activists in Western Europe, mainly Germany and the Netherlands, between 2021 and 2024, it examines how structural, social, and individual factors, together with the dynamics of homeland and host-country politics, shape women's agency and political activism. Moving beyond the binary of inclusion versus exclusion, the analysis traces non-linear trajectories of activism marked by pauses, reorientations, and transformations. The findings demonstrate that the war in Yemen continues to provoke strong emotional responses among diaspora women, often channeled into renewed mobilization and peace-related efforts rather than complete withdrawal. Exclusionary practices in formal peace talks, while constraining, also generate resilience and counter-resistance, prompting many activists to reconfigure their engagement into alternative political, social, and cultural forms.

Keywords

Yemeni women activists – activism in exile – diaspora – peacebuilding – engagement and disengagement – Yemen – Netherlands – Germany

1 Introduction

Diasporas and refugees from conflict-affected countries are increasingly recognized as important actors in peacebuilding.[1] Yet, women's participation, particularly their trajectories of engagement and disengagement in peace processes, remains significantly under-researched. Existing scholarship on this topic tends to fall into three largely disconnected streams. First, research on diaspora activism and the role of transnational communities in conflict and peacebuilding often adopts a gender-blind lens, overlooking both the specific contributions and the structural barriers faced by diasporic women.[2] Second, feminist peace studies, while advancing the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda and highlighting women's roles within conflict-affected states, devote little attention to the distinctive experiences of women from these contexts once they are in exile.[3] Third, gender and migration studies have deepened the understanding of women's lives as migrants and refugees, but seldom connect these insights to their peacebuilding activism.[4] As a result, an integrated framework is lacking to examine how women in the diaspora navigate the opportunities and constraints of transnational political

1 Mari Toivanen and Bahar Baser, "Diasporas' Multiple Roles in Peace and Conflict: A Review of Current Debates," *Migration Letters* 17, no. 1 (2019): 47–57; Cindy Horst et al., *Participation of Diasporas in Peacebuilding and Development: A Handbook for Practitioners and Policymakers*. PRIO Report: 2 (Oslo: PRIO, 2010).

2 Bahar Baser, "The Awakening of a Latent Diaspora: The Political Mobilization of First- and Second-Generation Turkish Migrants in Sweden," *Ethnopolitics* 13, no. 4 (2014): 355–76; Dana M. Moss, *The Arab Spring Abroad: Diaspora Activism against Authoritarian Regimes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Eva Østergaard-Nielsen, "The Politics of Migrants' Transnational Political Practices," *International Migration Review* 37, no. 3 (2003): 760–86; Rogers Brubaker, "The 'Diaspora' Diaspora," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28, no. 1 (2006): 1–19; Yossi Shain and Aharon Barth, "Diasporas and International Relations Theory," *International Organization* 57, no. 3 (2003): 449–79; Caecilie Svop Jensen and Elise Feron, eds., *Diasporas and Conflict Transportation: Challenges and Creative Practices* (Tampere Peace Research Institute, 2021).

3 Aiko Holvikivi and Audrey Reeves, "Women, Peace and Security after Europe's 'Refugee Crisis,'" *European Journal of International Security* 5, no. 2 (2020): 135–54; Sengul, Irem, Ebru Demir, and Bilge Sahin, "Rebuilding Peace in Exile: Bringing Together the Women, Peace and Security Agenda and the International Refugee Protection Regime in Turkey," *Global Change, Peace & Security* 34, no. 1 (2022): 53–75.

4 Élise Féron, "Gender and Diaspora," in *Routledge Handbook of Feminist Peace Research*, eds. Tarja Väyrynen, Swati Parashar, Élise Féron, and Catia Cecilia Confortini (London: Routledge, 2021), 428–36; Nadje Al-Ali, "Gender, Diaspora, and Transnationalism: The Case of Iraqi Women in Britain," in *New Approaches to Migration? Transnational Communities and the Transformation of Home*, eds. Nadje Al-Ali and Khalid Koser (London: Routledge, 2007), 96–109.

engagement in peace processes, and why some choose to remain active while others disengage.

This article addresses these gaps by examining the intersection of gender, diaspora, and peacebuilding through a case study of Yemeni women activists who sought self-exile in Western Europe following the outbreak of Yemen's civil war in late 2014 and its escalation into a regional conflict in 2015. While numerous policy-oriented reports on women and peacebuilding in Yemen have been commissioned by international organizations and donors,[5] there is a striking absence of longitudinal, empirically grounded academic studies of Yemeni women peace activists, especially those in the diaspora. This article investigates how war and exile have reshaped women's activism and how structural, collective, and individual factors, along with the interplay of host-country and homeland politics, shape women's agency and decisions about whether, when, and how to engage with or disengage from peace activism.

Delving into the overlapping fields of gender studies, peace studies, and forced migration studies, this article integrates their insights while foregrounding the underexamined role of diasporic women as peace actors. Feminist peace scholarship has traditionally emphasized the structural marginalization of women in peace processes, framing the analysis largely in terms of exclusion versus inclusion.[6] Within this lens, Yemeni women have often been portrayed primarily as victims of patriarchal systems that perpetuate gender discrimination and exclusionary practices in public and political life. These portrayals have been reinforced by Yemen's persistent gender disparities in economic, educational, health, and political indicators, which have placed the country at or near the bottom of global gender equality rankings, including 155th out of 156 countries in the World Economic Forum's

5 Maryam Alkubati, Huda Jafar, and Esham Al-Eryani, "Grassroots Voices: Women and Everyday Peacebuilding in Yemen" (Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, 2023); Marie-Christine Heinze, *Women's Role in Peace and Security in Yemen: Literature Review* (London: Saferworld, 2016), https://www.saferworld-global.org/resources/publications/1095-womenas-role-in-peace-and-security-in-yemen; Marie-Christine Heinze and Marwa Baabbad, "'Women Nowadays Do Anything': Women's Role in Conflict, Peace and Security in Yemen" *Saferworld, CARPO and YPC*, June 2017, https://www.saferworld-global.org/resources/publications/1125-awomen-nowadays-do-anythinga-womenas-role-in-conflict-peace-and-security-in-yemen; Mareike Transfeld and Marie-Christine Heinze, *Understanding Peace Requirements in Yemen: Needs and Roles for Civil Society, Women, Youth, the Media and the Private Sector*, CARPO Report no. 6 (Bonn: CARPO, 2019).

6 Simona Sharoni, "Conflict Resolution: Feminist Perspectives," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Laura J. Shepherd, *Gender, UN Peacebuilding, and the Politics of Space: Locating Legitimacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

Global Gender Gap Report in 2021.[7] While these metrics capture important dimensions of inequality, they are embedded in universalized measurement frameworks that may privilege Global North experiences and risk reinforcing reductive portrayals of women in the Global South. Such measures can obscure the situated forms of resistance, resilience, and political creativity through which women negotiate, challenge, and transform adverse conditions. To address this, the study shifts the analytical focus from a static theoretical figure of patriarchy and exclusion toward a critical analysis of women's participation in civil society and public political life, highlighting the dynamic and context-specific ways in which Yemeni women activists in the diaspora engage with, and at times disengage from, peacebuilding.

Building on this reframing, the article traces how the trajectories of Yemeni activists unfold in contexts of war, displacement, and resettlement, moving beyond the inclusion-exclusion binary to offer a more nuanced understanding of women's agency in peace processes. The concept of "activists" here refers to individuals engaged in sustained collective action within movements, groups, or campaigns aimed at political and social change. Peace activism is understood broadly, in line with Johan Galtung's concept of positive peace, which extends beyond the absence of war (negative peace) to encompass the social, political, and economic conditions necessary to prevent violence and promote justice and well-being.[8] Under this broader conception, a wide range of humanitarian, developmental, political, and cultural initiatives are often rebranded during war as peacebuilding. Within this landscape, Yemeni women in the diaspora engage with the United Nations (UN) and Western donor-driven peace architectures in varied and shifting ways, sometimes collaborating with consultative mechanisms, and other times advocating from the margins, or deliberately withholding participation to contest the very terms of inclusion. Their activism illustrates how exile reshapes not only opportunities, but also the dilemmas of engagement, as women navigate Track 1.5 and Track 2 diplomacy through civil society organizations, independent efforts, party-linked initiatives, or transnational networks. In doing so, they have sought to foster dialogue, mediate conflicts, and advocate for justice, while simultaneously confronting and, at times, directly critiquing the

7 Yemen has not been included in the *Global Gender Gap Report* since 2022. World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report* (2021), https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2021/.

8 Johan Galtung, "Peace, Positive and Negative," in *The Encyclopedia of Peace Psychology*, ed. Daniel J. Christie (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

contradictions of predominant liberal peace frameworks that often reproduce hierarchical North-South relations.

To fully grasp these patterns of engagement and disengagement, it is necessary to situate them within the broader political and institutional frameworks that structure opportunities for activism. The very spaces in which Yemeni women participate, or from which they withdraw, are shaped by international peacebuilding logics grounded in liberal peace theory. Rooted in liberal political thought, this paradigm assumes that democracies and free markets are inherently more peaceful than other systems, and that values such as human rights, gender equality, the rule of law, and individual freedoms create conditions less conducive to conflict.[9] While this paradigm has shaped much of the architecture of international peacebuilding, it has faced sustained criticism from postcolonial and grassroots perspectives for its universalist and Eurocentric assumptions, its underlying colonial rationality, and its tendency to sideline local agency and everyday peace practices.[10] These critiques resonate strongly in the Yemeni context, where internationally supported interventions, particularly those led by the UN and Western governments, have tended to rely on hegemonic, technocratic packages of peace- and state-building that privilege top-down strategies over bottom-up, people-centered, locally grounded approaches.

The reach of liberal peace logics extends beyond Yemen itself. They are also embedded in the policy environments of Western European countries where Yemeni women activists now live in exile, shaping both the opportunities available to them and the constraints they encounter. While such policies often present themselves as supportive of women's rights and political participation, they operate within a contradictory assemblage of liberal peace conditionalities, securitized migration governance, and donor-driven gender agendas. This configuration frequently channels activism into time-bound,

9 Louis-Alexandre Berg, "Liberal Peacebuilding: Bringing Domestic Politics Back In," in *Peacebuilding Paradigms: The Impact of Theoretical Diversity on Implementing Sustainable Peace*, ed. Henry Carey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 77–93.

10 Ibid; Meera Sabaratnam, "Avatars of Eurocentrism in the Critique of the Liberal Peace," *Security Dialogue* 44, no. 3 (2013): 259–78; Roger Mac Ginty, *Everyday Peace: How So-Called Ordinary People Can Disrupt Violent Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Séverine Autesserre, *The Frontlines of Peace: An Insider's Guide to Changing the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Ruben Gonzalez-Vicente, "The Liberal Peace Fallacy: Violent Neoliberalism and the Temporal and Spatial Traps of State-Based Approaches to Peace," *Territory, Politics, Governance* 8, no. 1 (2018): 100–16; Suthaharan Nadarajah and David Rampton, "The Limits of Hybridity and the Crisis of Liberal Peace," *Review of International Studies* 41, no. 1 (2015): 49–72.

output-oriented projects designed to be legible to funders and integration bureaucracies, thereby narrowing the scope of political action and privileging secular-liberal repertoires of resistance over other forms of women's agency.

A critical, postcolonial feminist lens contests these hierarchies by questioning the authority of Western liberal peace models to define what counts as legitimate political agency.[11] Such a perspective broadens the field of peacebuilding to encompass practices that are often dismissed or rendered invisible within dominant frameworks: community care, the exercise of moral authority understood as non-institutional but socially powerful forms of legitimacy, cultural expression, everyday acts of mediation, and transnational solidarities that extend beyond formal negotiations. It also shifts the focus from merely counting women's seats at the negotiating table to interrogating the coloniality of power that structures the table itself: who sets the agenda, who is invited, and under what terms. Viewed from this angle, Yemeni women's peace activism in Western liberal democracies is shaped not only by the enduring legacies of war and politics in their homeland, but also by the policies of host countries, particularly in relation to gender, migration, refugees, migrant integration, and foreign-policy orientations toward conflict-affected regions. This perspective makes it possible to trace how structural conditions intersect with individual factors to influence women's activism, and to assess whether host-country contexts create enabling or restrictive conditions for sustained political engagement. In doing so, the analysis underscores how women's agency, homeland politics, diaspora dynamics, and host-country policies converge to shape decisions to sustain, adapt, or suspend peace activism.

2 Methodology

This study draws on long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2021 and 2024 with a total of 34 individuals residing in Western countries.[12] These include 29 Yemeni activists (22 women and 7 men) who were forced to leave Yemen due to the ongoing war, along with 5 international female

11 Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

12 This study was done under the auspices of the Peace Women project, funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 101024992, https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101024992. See: Ewa K. Strzelecka, "Rethinking Peacebuilding: Women, Revolution, Exile, and Conflict Resolution in Yemen: Introduction to the Peace Women Project." *Jemen-Report* 53 (2022): 81–82.

experts based in Europe and North America. The activists, now living in the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Belgium, and Canada, have pursued diverse peacebuilding trajectories that encompass both participation in UN and donor-led dialogues and the development of alternative, community-driven initiatives conditioned by the internationalized peace process surrounding Yemen.

The ethnographic research was carried out primarily in the Netherlands over the course of more than two years (November 2021-January 2024) and during a three-month period in Germany (February-May 2022). It combined in-depth interviews and a life history method, aligned with an "activist career" approach, to trace patterns of engagement and disengagement shaped by shifting political, personal, social, and structural conditions. The interviews were complemented by extensive participant observation, including time spent with activists in their daily lives; attendance at Yemeni political and cultural events; participation in NGO workshops and peace forums; visits to refugee camps and integration programs; and collaboration in joint initiatives. Additional online interviews and sustained communication via WhatsApp extended the research to activists based in Austria, Belgium, and Canada, and to experts in the Netherlands, Germany, and the United States. Most interviews were conducted in English, with four in Arabic. Several participants were interviewed more than once to capture evolving trajectories. For the purposes of this paper, I concentrate on eight case studies of Yemeni women activists for deeper analysis.

As a non-Yemeni academic researcher and female migrant from a forcibly displaced Polish family, I approached this work with empathy for people navigating exile and contested identities. This positionality facilitated access across sharp political and ideological divides: Yemeni actors from opposing factions who would not engage with one another were nonetheless willing to speak with me as an external but trusted interlocutor. Some participants were known to me from earlier fieldwork in Yemen, where I spent nearly three years, between 2007 and 2013, documenting women's political activism before, during, and after the 2011 uprising.[13] The remaining participants were identified through snowball sampling. Between leaving Yemen in 2013 and beginning this ethnography with the diaspora in 2021, I undertook smaller academic projects on Yemen and maintained regular contact with Yemeni

13 For more information on this research project, including the data and interviews with women, see Ewa K. Strzelecka, *Mujeres en la Primavera Árabe: construcción de una cultura política de resistencia feminista en Yemen* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2017).

colleagues and friends inside and outside the country. Since 2025, I have also worked as a consultant on research projects concerning Yemeni women and peacebuilding commissioned by UN agencies and Western governments. These collaborations, especially with Yemeni NGOs and researchers in both Yemen and the diaspora, have enabled me to sustain closer professional relationships and to observe how asymmetric power dynamics between international donors and local actors shape both peacebuilding initiatives and the production of knowledge.

My sustained engagement with Yemeni activists over the years has facilitated trust-building and enabled deep, reflective conversations about their lived experiences. Interviewing the same women first in Yemen and then, roughly a decade later, in the diaspora has provided a unique perspective on the impact of exile and war on their activist trajectories. Since their displacement, the participants have navigated multiple stages of activism, including continuation, transformation, interruption, cessation, and re-engagement. This study therefore asks: How do intersecting structural, social, and personal factors, in both homeland and host-country contexts and politics, shape Yemeni women's peace activism in exile? Why do some women sustain activism in the diaspora while others place it on hold or disengage altogether?

3 The Yemeni Context and Profiles of Research Participants

The activists featured in this research come from diverse political and professional backgrounds. They originate from various parts of Yemen (Sana'a, Taiz, Dhamar, Ibb, Aden, Mukalla, and elsewhere), but at the time of the 2011 uprising or the outbreak of the 2015 war, most were living, studying, and working in Sana'a and Aden. Their professions included academics, educators, journalists, writers, lawyers, doctors, pharmacists, UN experts, NGO professionals, and politicians. All have higher education degrees, and many earned Master's or PhD diplomas at leading European universities after being displaced from war-torn Yemen. Almost all belong to the political, social, economic, or intellectual elites, which placed them in positions of privilege within their communities. A smaller number, particularly from the younger generations, come from an urban middle-class background. Although their family origins were not necessarily rooted in economic privilege, their trajectories differ markedly from those of the average Yemeni woman. Their access to higher education in Yemen or abroad, English proficiency, high-level professional experience, international networks, and visibility on social media

elevated their status to that of semi-elites. Most were able to relocate to Western countries because of their economic privilege, international connections, university enrollment, professional opportunities, family ties, or marriage to Yemenis already living in Europe. In some cases, relocation occurred in stages, and they moved through several countries before reaching Western Europe. For example, some participants initially moved from Yemen to Turkey following the outbreak of the war, but after the 2016 coup attempt and democratic backsliding in Turkey, they sought safety mainly in the Netherlands and Germany.

The formation of the Yemeni war-generated diaspora has been an evolving process rather than a fixed state. The presence of Yemenis in Western Europe grew substantially between 2014 and 2019, doubling to more than 11,000, and has continued to rise in subsequent years.[14] Germany and the Netherlands emerged as preferred destinations for war-induced migrants and asylum seekers, becoming key hubs for Yemeni activists and transnational networks advocating for peace and change. For this reason, my fieldwork was conducted primarily in those two countries. In 2014, at the onset of the Yemeni war, only 652 Yemenis resided in the Netherlands.[15] Since then, the number of newcomers has risen by more than 1,400 percent, with an additional 9,411 Yemeni refugees and asylum seekers registered between 2014 and 2024, 23 percent of whom were women.[16] A similar trend occurred in Germany, where in 2024, 6,871 Yemenis were registered as refugees and asylum seekers, with women comprising 25 percent.[17]

Although Yemeni international migration remains male-dominated, there has been a noticeable increase in women migrating independently as students, professionals, and asylum seekers, rather than solely as wives or family members. While the exact number of Yemeni women activists in the West is difficult to determine, they hold a notable presence in transnational civil society networks.[18] In terms of legal status, only two of the research

14 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), "Yemen: The Implications of Forced Immobility," 2020, https://api.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/202006-yemen-policy-paper.pdf.

15 CBS, "Population; sex, age, generation and migration background, 1 Jan; 1996-2022," *Statistics Netherlands*, 2022, https://opendata.cbs.nl/#/CBS/en/dataset/37325eng/table?ts=1764251292276.

16 UNHCR, "Refugee Data Finder," 2024, https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/.

17 Ibid.

18 Marie-Christine Heinze and Ewa Strzelecka, *The Role of the Diaspora in Peacebuilding in Yemen: Potentials and Opportunities, Challenges and Constraints*, *CARPO Briefs* no. 22 (Bonn: CARPO, 2022), https://carpo-bonn.org/media/pages/publikationen/carpo-briefs/

participants held dual Yemeni and Western citizenship at the outbreak of war. Some secured residency through marriage or job contracts. The majority initially traveled to Western Europe on tourist or student visas and applied for asylum only when no other options for legal residency remained. A few research participants applied for asylum directly upon arrival at European airports while transiting between countries for professional purposes, such as giving talks or attending workshops.

Most participants were already prominent in Yemen's political and civil society spheres, having played significant roles in government institutions, civil society organizations, international organizations, the 2011 uprising, and Yemen's short-lived political transition toward democracy. Although Yemeni women were historically underrepresented in formal politics,[19] they gained political experience through activism in public spaces, often outside traditional political institutions. Most participants in this study were engaged in what scholars describe as "street politics," encompassing grassroots activism, protest movements, and public mobilization.[20] All took part in the Yemeni uprising of 2011, which brought together people from different social and political backgrounds against President Ali Abdullah Saleh's 33-year rule. During this period, they positioned themselves variously as independent activists, youth representatives, members of the Southern Movement (al-Hirak), or as sympathizers or members of political parties such as Islah, the General People's Congress (GPC), the Yemeni Socialist Party, and the Nasserists. I also attempted to include representatives of the Houthi movement (Ansar Allah) in the study; however, I was only able to interview male members of one Yemeni association in Germany that others described as "Houthis." The association itself has rejected this label, instead self-identifying as opponents of the Internationally Recognized Government and of Saudi and Emirati foreign intervention in Yemen.[21] At the time of the interview in 2022, they reported that

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the-role-of-the-diaspora-in-peacebuilding-in-yemen/451eb1a15a-1733145167/carpo_brief_22_08-11-22_en-printerfriendly.pdf.

19 For instance, on the eve of the 2011 uprising, there was only one female MP out of 301 (0.3%), two women in the Shura Council out of 111 members (1.8%), and two women ministers out of 33 (6.1%), with a minimal presence in other political bodies, see Ewa Strzelecka, "Women's Participation and the Politics of War and Peace in Yemen," in *Yemen at a Crossroads: What Remains of Arabia Felix?*, eds. Stephan Reiner and Alexander Weissenburger (Vienna: Federal Ministry of Defense, 2024), 115–129.

20 Maartje van Gelder, "Street Politics," in *Early Modern Streets: A European Perspective*, ed. Dirk van den Heuvel (London: Routledge, 2023), 111–133.

21 "We are not Houthis, but we are anti-Internationally Recognized Government (IRG), anti-regime. (…) We recognize the government in Sana'a. For me, the capital city is still Sana'a… The Houthis are only one part of this government; there are also other parties and political

women were still not formally included in the association's board and structure, although they maintained contacts with female sympathizers.

Following the 2011 uprising, Yemen's transition was formalized through the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Initiative and its Implementation Mechanism, signed by President Ali Abdullah Saleh in November 2011. The agreement transferred executive authority to Vice President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi and laid out a roadmap for a National Dialogue Conference (NDC). Convened from March 2013 to January 2014, the NDC sought consensus on a new constitutional order. Women secured 166 of 565 seats (29%), enabling provisions on equal citizenship, women's rights, and a 30 percent quota in public and political life.[22] The process unraveled in September 2014, when the Houthi movement seized Sana'a along with key state institutions. In early 2015, President Hadi and several cabinet members fled house arrest, first relocating to Aden and later to Riyadh. The Saudi-led coalition's subsequent military intervention in March 2015, aimed at reinstating the Internationally Recognized Government (IRG), marked a turning point that transformed Yemen's fragile transition into a protracted regionalized war.

This escalation also reshaped the trajectories of many women activists. Some of the participants in this study happened to be out of the country in early 2015 for short-term visits, which allowed them to seek humanitarian or political asylum in Europe at an early stage. Others departed later, compelled by political repression, deteriorating security, and the deepening humanitarian crisis. The militarization of politics and the war's entrenchment severely curtailed women's access to formal political power. Within the IRG, there is currently no women's representation whatsoever in the Presidential

forces in Sana'a… We do not consider Hadi a legitimate president, as he invited foreigners to attack Yemen… We oppose this foreign intervention, or invasion, and the IRG, which has lost its legitimacy on the ground." Yemeni male activist, interviewed online by the author, Germany, March 24, 2022.

22 Nadia al-Sakkaf, "Negotiating Women's Empowerment in the NDC," in *Yemen and the Search for Stability*, ed. Marie-Christine Heinze (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2018), CFR, *Women's Participation in Peace Processes: Yemen Case Study* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2024), https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/yemen; Connie Christiansen, "Gender, Development, and Security in Yemen's Transition Process," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 13, no. 4 (2019): 415–31; IPTI, *Yemen (2011–2015): Women in Peace & Transition Processes* (Geneva: Inclusive Peace & Transition Initiative, The Graduate Institute Geneva, 2018), https://www.inclusivepeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/case-study-women-yemen-2011-2015-en.pdf; Elham Manea, "Lost in Translation: Reflections on the International Approach to Gender Inclusion in Conflict Zones: The Yemeni Case," *Middle East Law and Governance*, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1163/18763375-bja10001.

Leadership Council, the cabinet, or the parliament.[23] This exclusion from core state institutions is reflected in Track 1 peace negotiations, which, since 2015, have focused primarily on ceasefires between armed factions and have been dominated by longstanding political parties and actors with military leverage. Yemeni women's participation in UN-led Track 1 talks has remained minimal: 7.1 percent in Geneva in 2015 (1 of 14 delegates), 14.2 percent in Geneva in 2016 (2 of 14), 12.5 percent in Kuwait in 2017 (2 of 16), and 4.2 percent in Stockholm in 2018 (1 of 24).[24] In other key negotiations, including the September 2014 Peace and Partnership Agreement between the government and Ansar Allah, the 2019 Riyadh Agreement between the IRG and the Southern Transitional Council (STC), the 2020 IRG-STC ceasefire, and the April 2022 truce initiative between Saudi Arabia and the Houthi militia, women's representation fell to zero.[25] Analyses of Yemeni political party structures and negotiation teams further confirm that, even when women are appointed as delegates, they are often relegated to advisory roles with limited influence, frequently representing political party interests rather than independent feminist positions.[26]

At the same time, women activists have carved out parallel channels of engagement. Their marginalization in formal negotiations does not imply an absence from the peace process altogether. Under the Women, Peace and Security agenda, the UN established consultative mechanisms such as the Yemeni Women's Pact for Peace and Security (TAWAFAQ) and the Women's Technical Advisory Group (TAG).[27] While these platforms have succeeded in amplifying women's perspectives in Track 1.5 and Track 2 diplomacy, they have not translated into meaningful participation in Track 1 talks. Women's involvement has remained largely consultative, reinforcing their peripheral status rather than positioning them as key decision-makers. The persistent

23 Ewa Strzelecka, "Women's Participation and the Politics of War and Peace in Yemen," op. cit.

24 Elham Manea, "Lost in Translation: Reflections on the International Approach to Gender Inclusion in Conflict Zones: The Yemeni Case," op. cit.; Nadia al-Sakkaf, *Yemeni Women's Involvement, Representation, and Influence in Political Parties and Components* (Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, OSESGY, 2022); CFR, *Women's Participation in Peace Processes: Yemen Case Study* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2024), https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/yemen.

25 Elham Manea, "Lost in Translation: Reflections on the International Approach to Gender Inclusion in Conflict Zones. The Yemeni Case," op. cit.

26 Nadia Al-Sakkaf, Yemeni Women's Involvement, Representation, and Influence in Political Parties and Components," op. cit.

27 United Nations Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen. "Women, Peace and Security," https://osesgy.unmissions.org/en/women-peace-and-security-5.

failure to meet Yemeni women's long-standing demand for a 30 percent quota in political processes underscores the gap between international rhetorical commitments to gender inclusion and the realities of peacemaking, where women's voices remain marginalized.

This marginalization from meaningful participation in formal negotiations has been central in shaping many women activists' trajectories. Some of the women interviewed for this study were or are members of TAWAFAQ or TAG, and many have also engaged in transnational advocacy networks pressing for women's inclusion in Yemen's peace processes. Their trajectories reveal how structural exclusion, the militarization of politics, the narrowing of entry points into internationally driven negotiations and mediation, and the upheavals of forced migration have collectively shaped both their peace work from exile and their decisions over whether to sustain, adapt, or suspend their activism.

4 Political Mobilization and Host-Country Contexts of Yemeni Diaspora Activism

Academic debates on migration highlight diasporas as transnational actors who influence both homeland and host-country politics through diverse forms of mobilization.[28] Often described as a "domestic abroad," diasporas shape the politics of their home country from a distance while also participating in the political, social, and cultural life of their host societies.[29] They frequently act as bridges between contexts, facilitating the transfer of ideas, political strategies, and advocacy networks. In wartime, this influence can take divergent forms: diasporas have been studied as both peace-makers and peace-wreckers, shaping trajectories of war and peace through political, social, and economic remittances.[30] Researchers Félix Krawatzek and Lea Müller-Funk conceptualize "political remittances" as the transfer of political ideas, practices, and

28 Steven Vertovec, "Conceiving and Researching Transnationalism," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22, no. 2 (1999): 447–62; Thorsten Sökefeld, "Mobilizing in Transnational Space: A Social Movement Approach to the Formation of Diaspora," *Global Networks* 6, no. 3 (2006): 265–84.

29 Latha Varadarajan, *The Domestic Abroad: Diasporas in International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

30 Hazel Smith and Paul Stares, eds., *Diasporas in Conflict: Peacemakers or Peace Wreckers?* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2007); Bahar Baser, *Diasporas and Homeland Conflicts: A Comparative Perspective* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015); Päivi Pirkkalainen and Abdi M. Abdile, "The Diaspora-Conflict-Peace-Nexus: A Literature Review," *Diaspeace Working*

narratives across borders and cultural boundaries by migrants and their descendants.[31] Such transnational exchanges position diasporas as active agents in reshaping political landscapes, with the capacity to influence decision-making and advocacy in both their countries of residence and origin.

Host-country policies, whether enabling, passive, or restrictive, directly shape the scope and effectiveness of diaspora mobilization.[32] Supportive environments can amplify activism, whereas restrictive policies constrain it. This dynamic is clearly visible in the Netherlands and Germany, which not only host the largest Yemeni refugee and asylum-seeker populations in Europe but also rank among Yemen's most significant European donors for peacebuilding and development.[33] Both countries provide financial, diplomatic, and technical support across multiple sectors, engaging directly with Yemen's humanitarian crisis, poverty alleviation, security, and peace strategies. Their investment in civil society has strengthened Yemeni NGOs, enhancing their capacity for peace and human rights advocacy, governance, and social cohesion. For example, the Dutch government has provided substantial funding to both international and Yemeni NGOs active in peacebuilding.[34] Notable initiatives include the Yemen International Forum, an annual civil society-led peace dialogue organized by the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies,[35] as well as feminist peacebuilding efforts such as the Feminist Peace Roadmap,[36] led by the Peace Track Initiative (PTI) in partnership with the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF).[37]

These resources have not only supported Yemen-related projects inside and outside the country but, when combined with host-country policies and political agendas, have also encouraged – and in some cases compelled – the

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Paper no. 1 (2009), https://www.diaspeace.org/working_papers.html; Cindy Horst et al., *Participation of Diasporas in Peacebuilding and Development,* op. cit.

31 Félix Krawatzek and Lea Müller-Funk, "Two Centuries of Flows Between 'Here' and 'There': Political Remittances and Their Transformative Potential," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46, no. 6 (2020): 1003–24.

32 Mari Toivanen and Bahar Baser, "Diasporas' Multiple Roles in Peace and Conflict," op. cit.

33 For Germany, see: The German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, "Yemen," https://www.bmz.de/en/countries/yemen. For the Netherlands see: The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Yemen," https://www.nlontwikkelingshulp.nl/en/web/osportaal2021#/countries/ye?tab=summary&countries=YE.

34 Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Yemen," op. cit.

35 The Yemen International Forum (YIF), https://sanaacenter.org/yif/2023/.

36 Yemen Feminist Peace Roadmap, https://www.peacetrackinitiative.org/en/roadmaps.

37 Towards Feminist Peace in Yemen, https://www.wilpf.org/towards-feminist-peace-in-yemen/.

creation of Yemeni-led NGOs in Europe. Within this landscape, Yemeni women-led organizations have gained particular visibility, often situated within the politics of branding and rebranding peacebuilding strategies in explicitly gendered terms.[38] Liberal democratic governance frameworks, such as those in the Netherlands and Germany, frequently make the existence of a legally registered association a prerequisite for accessing funding, participating in formal consultations, or engaging in initiatives such as national Women, Peace and Security (WPS) platforms.[39] Establishing an NGO therefore becomes both a strategic decision and, at times, a formal requirement for interaction with donors, UN agencies, and state institutions. This dynamic reflects a broader political economy of diaspora activism, where migrants' agency operates within structures that both enable and constrain their work, granting visibility, resources, and advocacy platforms while simultaneously channeling activism into donor-aligned frameworks and projectized outputs.

At the same time, these policies and funding mechanisms shape who gets to represent Yemeni women in international arenas. International donors, UN agencies, and Western governments often privilege actors aligned with liberal peace agendas, channeling funding and support toward projects that reflect their priorities and values. While such frameworks create opportunities and amplify the voices of some women, they can also marginalize or sideline those whose approaches or political positions diverge from dominant narratives. This dynamic breeds frustration with donor-driven power hierarchies and, in some cases, leads to activists' disengagement from formal peace processes.

The case of Amal,[40] a younger-generation activist, illustrates this dilemma. Having come to Europe independently as an unmarried woman and sought asylum upon arrival, she is now a student at a leading European university. Yet, despite her strong commitment to the rule of law and democratic

38 Examples of Yemeni women-led NGOs in the diaspora include the South Arabian Women's Association, founded in 2018 in Germany; the Yemeni Organization on Women's Policies (YOWP), established in 2016 in the Netherlands, which is a signatory member of the Dutch National Action Plan for UN Resolution 1325; and the Peace Track Initiative (PTI), founded in 2017 and incorporated as a Canadian non-profit after being incubated at the Geneva Center for Security Policy. Staffed largely by Yemeni women activists in the diaspora, PTI advocates for a feminist peace agenda and the implementation of a 30% quota for women's participation in Yemen's political and peace processes.

39 For example, to become a civil society signatory to the Dutch National Action Plan (NAP) 1325 Partnership, an organization must be formally registered as an NGO in the Netherlands, binding it directly to the implementation framework of Women, Peace and Security (WPS) efforts, https://www.nap1325.nl.

40 All the names of the interviewees have been changed to protect the identity of the research participants.

participation, Amal chose to distance herself from internationally-backed peace processes. Her disengagement was driven by deep disillusionment with liberal peace frameworks and what she perceived as the international community's instrumentalization of Yemeni activists. Although she had been active in Yemeni women's networks for peace and justice, she ultimately stepped back, rejecting the expectation that activists must conform to what she calls "Western" ideologies to secure funding. As she explained: "I left these women's peace networks because I had to speak the language of Western donors to get funds and to be part of the circle, and I couldn't do it. I just couldn't."[41] Amal criticized donor-driven initiatives for disregarding local needs and marginalizing diverse voices, while also condemning liberal Yemeni activists for internalizing Western hierarchies of value: "The problem is that these liberals see our culture and our beliefs as lesser in comparison to Western civilization. We shouldn't work against our culture and our roots but work within them and build on them. The problem with the projects for change in Yemen is that they always come from a Western perspective, from books that we don't fit in. And our liberal activists do not consider the fact that you have to work on what you have."[42] Her experience underscores how ideological dissonance and donor conditionalities can alienate activists, leading some to disengage from peace networks. At the same time, such dynamics risk reinforcing binaries of "us" and "them," entrenching mutual stereotypes between Yemeni women and Western actors.

Leila's trajectory reflects similar dynamics, though from a different positionality. A Yemeni refugee with higher education but fluent only in Arabic, she had been a leader in the 2011 uprising, with strong ties to the Yemeni Socialist Party and other political leaders. Once active in peace processes, she eventually withdrew after disheartening experiences in donor- and diplomat-sponsored platforms. She described persistent discrimination, recalling how her voice was dismissed and how she felt treated as an inferior, ignorant, and powerless woman from a country too often depicted as tribal and backward. In her words: "The West doesn't see Yemeni people as equal partners capable of leading their own path to democracy and peace, but as needing the assistance of the superior West with its privileged know-how."[43] Many Yemeni women I interviewed described similar experiences as "neo-colonial," pointing to the ways donor practices confine their participation to training

41 Yemeni woman activist "Amal," interview by the author, the Netherlands, February 16, 2022.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

sessions and workshops on democracy, peace, and women's rights rather than addressing their demands for inclusion as political actors in peace negotiations, where critical decisions affecting their lives and communities are made. Leila's case highlights how structural barriers, such as linguistic exclusion and racialized perceptions, constrain diaspora women's capacity to sustain meaningful engagement in internationally backed processes.

As the case study shows, many activists reorient, transform, or suspend their political engagement in response to disillusionment, frustration, or experiences of hierarchy and inequality within dominant peacebuilding frameworks. Their trajectories reveal that engagement and disengagement are shaped not only by exclusion from homeland politics but also by the political economies of host-country environments and the liberal peace frameworks underpinning internationally backed peace processes. In Western democracies, entry points for participation often emerge through gender equality policies, NGO funding mechanisms, and WPS initiatives. Yet these same frameworks can also produce ideological dissonance, tokenism, and new forms of exclusion, leaving activists torn between accessing opportunities and resisting imposed agendas. Attending to these power dynamics is therefore crucial for understanding not only who participates, how, and when, but also why some women choose to continue their engagement while others decide to disengage from political peace processes.

5 Gendered Pathways of Engagement and Disengagement

Diasporas are far from homogeneous; they reflect internal diversity shaped by gender, social stratification, political ideology, economic status, and migration histories. In times of conflict, diaspora communities often reproduce homeland divisions, yet they can also forge new cross-political and intra-regional alliances, reshaping the landscape of activism.[44] Yemeni diaspora formation and politics exemplify this dynamic. The current wave of war-induced displacement intersects with earlier flows of students, workers, and refugees, producing distinct communities with their own political and cultural infrastructures. For instance, educational, cultural, and diplomatic exchanges between socialist East Germany and South Yemen before the dissolution of both states in the 1990s laid the foundation for a Southern Yemeni community in Germany. This legacy, combined with the dynamics of the ongoing war,

44 Bahar Baser, *Diasporas and Homeland Conflicts,* op. cit.; Mari Toivanen and Bahar Baser, "Diasporas' Multiple Roles in Peace and Conflict," op. cit.

positioned Germany as a strategic hub, where the Southern Transitional Council (STC) established its EU office in 2018. Registered as a German association by the local court of Charlottenburg (Berlin), the STC's office was founded to address the Yemeni conflict and advocate for the Southern secessionist cause. Similarly, independent activists and various Yemeni factions, including the Islah movement, pro-IRG groups, and anti-IRG actors, have established associations within the diaspora that mobilize around their own political outlook These range from agendas of secession and political Islam to broader forms of advocacy, research, development, and humanitarian relief. Alongside partisan formations, cross-cutting coalitions, such as the National Peace Movement,[45] emerged in an attempt to transcend political divisions, framing their work in terms of peacebuilding and national unity.

Within this complex dynamic, the activist trajectories of Yemeni women in exile reveal that participation is negotiated, contingent, and often cyclical rather than linear. Engagement and disengagement emerge from the interplay of structural constraints, ideological frameworks, personal aspirations, and shifting opportunity structures. Initial involvement is often fueled by strong commitments to justice and socio-political change, rooted in collective identity, moral responsibility, and emotional investment.[46] Yet sustaining activism over time proves difficult, as motivation erodes under the weight of disillusionment, competing priorities, and the cumulative toll of activism.[47] Classical models of participation, which frame activism as joining, sustaining

45 National Peace Movement, https://nrm-yemen.com.

46 Charles Goodwin and James M. Jasper, eds. *The Social Movements Reader: Cases and Concepts* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2003).

47 Ibid.

Daniel Silver, "What Are the Factors That Lead to the Disengagement in Activism over an Individual's Lifetime in the Global South?" *LSE Social Policy Working Paper* no. 02–18 (London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 2018).

Marc Corrigall-Brown, *Patterns of Protest: Trajectories of Participation in Social Movements* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

Jamile Santos Nascimento, Bert Klandermans and Marjo de Theije, "Recruitment and Disengagement: Two Sides of the Same Coin or Different Phenomena?" *SN Social Sciences* 1, 145 (2021): 1–31.

Marilena Simiti, "Disengaging from Political Activism: A Critical Review of the Literature," *The Greek Review of Social Research* 162 (2024): 3–28.

Doug McAdam, "Recruitment to High-Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer," *American Journal of Sociology* 92, 1 (1986): 64–90; Bert Klandermans and Dirk Oegema, "Potentials, Networks, Motivations, and Barriers: Steps Towards Participation in Social Movements," *American Sociological Review* 52, 4 (1987): 519–531.

Yemeni woman activist "Aisha," interview by the author, Germany, March 10, 2022.

involvement, and eventually leaving, are insufficient here.[48] In reality, activism often unfolds in cyclical patterns of partial withdrawal, strategic retreat, and selective re-engagement, shaped not only by evolving personal circumstances but also by the shifting political economy of peacebuilding. Determinants of disengagement range from interpersonal tensions and unmet collective goals to the pressures of balancing activism with personal, family, and professional responsibilities.[49] Disappointment in social relationships, shifts in priorities such as marriage and parenthood, and the resulting competing loyalties between activism and domestic life often play a decisive role. Political repression, stigmatization, and a hostile political climate further restrict safe participation, often prompting disengagement.[50] When the emotional, political, and economic costs of activism outweigh its perceived benefits, and when collective support proves insufficient, disengagement becomes not only understandable, but also a strategically rational choice.[51]

The emotional and psychological strain of sustained activism is a recurrent theme in Yemeni women's narratives. Feelings of frustration, powerlessness, and burnout can push even the most committed activists toward withdrawal or partial disengagement. Aisha, a doctor by profession and Southern Transitional Council activist now based in Germany, exemplifies this trajectory. Driven by her conviction in the Southern cause, her own experiences of injustice, and a sense of responsibility to speak out, she immersed herself in protests and advocacy in international forums, publishing extensively on women's rights and civil society.[52] However, persistent threats, harassment from political opponents, and the perception that Southerners were being marginalized by international actors and major Yemeni NGOs (who seldom invited her to high-level peace forums) gradually depleted her resolve. Constant stress and the absence of tangible results from her efforts compounded this frustration. Over time, the need to focus on her medical career, safeguard her well-being, and invest in her

48 Marc Corrigall-Brown, *Patterns of Protest: Trajectories of Participation in Social Movements* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

49 Jamile Santos Nascimento, Bert Klandermans and Marjo de Theije, "Recruitment and Disengagement: Two Sides of the Same Coin or Different Phenomena?" *SN Social Sciences* 1, 145 (2021): 1–31.

50 Marilena Simiti, "Disengaging from Political Activism: A Critical Review of the Literature," *The Greek Review of Social Research* 162 (2024): 3–28.

51 Doug McAdam, "Recruitment to High-Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer," op. cit.; Bert Klandermans and Dirk Oegema, "Potentials, Networks, Motivations, and Barriers: Steps Towards Participation in Social Movements," op. cit.

52 Yemeni woman activist "Aisha," interview by the author, Germany, March 10, 2022.

new marriage outweighed the demands of frontline activism. Today, she engages only occasionally, prioritizing her personal life and mental health.

Sectarian dynamics, essentialist identity framing, and the radicalization of political identities in war-torn Yemen further shape patterns of engagement and disengagement. The imposition of labels based on family name, tribal affiliation, sectarian belonging, or political alignment often stigmatizes activists and narrows their political space. Defamation campaigns are strategically deployed to exclude them from public arenas and silence their voices both online and offline.[53] Fatima, an educator and writer with a Master's degree, was a highly active figure during the 2011 uprising and Yemen's political transition, becoming a well-known voice in public debates. Since the Houthi takeover, however, she has faced persistent smear campaigns that compelled her to step back from frontline political activism. Because of her Hashemite family name, she was frequently accused of being aligned with the Houthis, despite her consistent advocacy for social justice, equality, and democracy, all positions in fundamental opposition to the Houthi ideology. Reflecting on this, she explained: "People see your last name and immediately label you as a Houthi. (…) When the war started, some of my friends turned against me just because of my last name. It's hurtful and bad for society when we put people in boxes."[54] Social prejudice and reductive stereotypes collapsed her identity into a single, politicized marker, compounding both personal and political pressures. She and her family also endured online hate speech and hacking attacks, intensifying the emotional toll. Yet rather than abandoning activism entirely, Fatima reoriented and transformed her engagement. While she remains committed to peace and justice, she now channels her efforts into writing, storytelling, and art, forms of activism that operate beyond the formal political arena, but which she sees as equally powerful tools for fostering social change, challenging prejudice, and reshaping collective mindsets.

Mona, a well-travelled activist with a Master's degree, currently leads a Yemeni NGO known for its outspoken advocacy for women's rights and inclusion in political processes. She and her team are frequent targets of

53 See also *Social Media and Conflict in Yemen: A Lexicon of Hate Speech Terms*, which maps offensive language on social media and situates these expressions within Yemen's conflict dynamics. The resource identifies the post-2011 intensification of sectarian discourse, the normalization of such rhetoric by political actors, the widespread use of Facebook and WhatsApp, and the potential for online harassment to escalate into offline harm. Jacqueline Lacroix, *Social Media and Conflict in Yemen: A Lexicon of Hate Speech Terms* (Washington, DC: PeaceTech Lab, 2019), https://peacetrackinitiative.org/en/resources/121.

54 Yemeni woman activist "Fatima," interview by the author, online, November 22, 2021.

systematic smear campaigns, both online and offline. "We are always under attack. The first time I was subjected to a smear campaign, I ignored it… but now I am taking action. Since I am based here (in the West), I have started reporting it to the police and getting a lawyer to obtain a judge's ruling to reveal the identity of the website owner who attacked me."[55] Unlike others who reduce their public activity after being attacked, Mona has persisted, pursuing legal remedies and speaking openly about online harassment. Her organization conducts research on hate speech, misinformation, and harassment, producing policy briefs to inform decision-makers. Yet Mona's trajectory also reflects a recurring source of disengagement among Yemeni women: disillusionment with political leadership and exclusion from decision-making spaces. Initially a strong advocate for both women's rights and the Southern cause, she withdrew her public support for Southern politics, criticizing the leaders, including those within the Southern Transitional Council, for failing to promote women to leadership positions: "I lost faith in all male leaders. They are all opportunistic and exploit the cause. My current focus is more on wanting peace in Yemen, regardless of how, politically, it's going to be. I have retreated from the Southern cause. As a woman, I was attacked by both the Southerners and the Northerners. It felt like I was an alien… I don't belong to the North, and I don't belong to the South. I decided that the only thing I truly belong to is women, and my only cause is women's rights."[56] Mona's experience of marginalization and repeated attacks illustrates how women may withdraw their support from political spaces that exclude them and instead redirect their energies toward gender justice as a central priority in their activism. In Mona's case, this was not disengagement, but a strategic refocusing and re-prioritization of her efforts. Exclusion, far from silencing her, became a catalyst for agency, prompting her to reconfigure strategies of resistance and reposition herself within activism in ways that directly challenge the very structures that sought to marginalize her.

Salma, a health professional with a Master's degree, was known for her involvement in the Islah movement during the Yemeni uprising of 2011. She moved to Germany in 2013 after marrying a Yemeni citizen living there. Overwhelmed by the challenge of balancing activism with professional and family responsibilities, she partially disengaged from political work: "In Yemen, I lived with my parents and only studied. I didn't cook. I didn't do anything at home. We had help and domestic workers. I had plenty of time for activism. Now, I don't have any time. I have two children. (…) Living in Europe

55 Yemeni woman activist "Mona," interview by the author, online, November 24, 2021.
56 Ibid.

is not like in Arab countries. In Europe, I have to do everything myself."[57] In addition to these everyday constraints, Salma struggled to find employment as a hijab-wearing woman, experiencing what she perceives as discrimination against Muslim women. Politically, she still aligns with some of the values of political Islam but has become disillusioned with Islah leaders: "I'm angry now because I trusted them; I hoped that they could bring change through Yemen's revolution. Since I moved to Germany, my awareness and opinions have changed. I don't know anymore what is right and what is wrong. I feel confused."[58] She explains that she has often been approached by male leaders of Yemeni NGOs in Germany to join activities or speak at events, but she frequently refuses, not wanting to be used as a token representative: "Unfortunately, sometimes they use young women as tokens, like décor, because they need to show a woman is present. It is not the right way."[59] Since arriving in Germany, she has only occasionally accepted invitations to international forums, where she testifies about the situation of women in northern Yemen. She believes that her primary role in the West is to raise awareness about Houthi atrocities, arguing that peace cannot be achieved unless the Houthis are defeated. Salma's trajectory illustrates how everyday socio-economic challenges in exile, combined with frustration at political tokenism and disillusionment with male-dominated leadership, can lead to partial disengagement from broader political activism. At the same time, her case shows how such disengagement does not have to imply complete withdrawal, but can manifest itself as a reorientation toward selective, issue-specific advocacy that reflects both her convictions and the structural constraints she navigates.

6 In-Betweenness: Yemeni Women's Activism Across Homeland and Host Societies

While relocation to Western Europe has opened new political and personal spaces for Yemeni women activists, it has also exposed them to intersecting forms of structural inequality that have significantly shaped their trajectories of engagement and disengagement. Although most women in this study were perceived as elites or semi-elites in their country of origin, forced displacement relativized their privilege, forcing them to confront deeper asymmetries of power and constraints as migrant or refugee women in host societies. War-

57 Yemeni woman activist "Salma," interview by the author, Germany, February 18, 2022.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.

induced mobility often entailed the loss of properties, financial security, professional status, and social support systems that had previously facilitated their activism. In Europe, many have been compelled to rebuild their lives from scratch as they navigate unfamiliar labor markets, structural discrimination, housing insecurity, the need to revalidate qualifications and diplomas, and new bureaucratic and socio-political systems. These transitions involve not only material losses, but also a reconfiguration of status and identity, as these women find themselves racialized and subjected to gendered stereotypes in societies that frequently view them through orientalist or Islamophobic lenses.

Living in safer and wealthier democratic countries often grant these women greater access to opportunities, education, rights, freedoms, information, and international networks, compared to those who remain in war-torn Yemen. Yet these advantages are offset by the challenges of integration, frequently compounded by the uncertainties of the asylum process, which many describe as "painful." Countries like the Netherlands and Germany offer civil integration programs, language courses, and vocational training intended to facilitate adjustment. My participant observation of Dutch integration programs (*inburgering*) in 2023, however, revealed that these programs—particularly within language courses, labour-market preparation, and social-orientation modules—place strong emphasis on cultural adaptation and compliance with dominant socio-cultural norms.[60] Arab migrants and refugees, frequently constructed as "others" in public and political debates in Europe, are often expected to modify cultural practices portrayed as incompatible with European values. This scrutiny is particularly acute with regard to Islamic customs and traditions, especially gender-related norms and family practices , which are widely framed as irreconcilable with European democratic principles and legal frameworks.

In practice, navigating between homeland and host-country cultures is far more complex, entailing continuous renegotiations of identity, belonging, and cultural boundaries. Many Yemeni women in the diaspora resist assimilation and instead undergo processes of identity reconfiguration, constantly renegotiating cultural boundaries and freedoms. Migration and identity studies show that displacement can generate either stronger cultural belonging or the

60 Government of the Netherlands, "Civic Integration (*inburgering*) in the Netherlands," https://www.government.nl/topics/integration-in-the-netherlands/civic-integration-in-the-netherlands.

formation of hybrid or transnational identities.[61] Developing a sense of self that incorporates elements from both origin and host cultures can open new meanings and possibilities in the so-called "third space of in-betweenness."[62] For example, some Yemeni women, after moving to Western Europe, decide to remove the veil or to more openly identify as feminists, assigning these identity markers their own meanings. Life in Europe inevitably reshapes their ways of thinking and living, influencing their motivations and priorities in activism. Their participation is directly affected as they negotiate between the expectations of European societies and their enduring personal, political, and affective ties to Yemen.

Despite geographic distance, Yemeni women in the diaspora – particularly those from conservative families – are often expected to uphold gender norms related to clothing, public appearance, and moral conduct, since these remain closely tied to family reputation and honor. Such expectations shape not only the form their activism can take, but also its public visibility. Engagement in exile, therefore, cannot be reduced to questions of individual agency or political conviction; rather, it is deeply conditioned by cultural negotiations of social expectations back home, especially when close family members continue to reside in Yemen. These pressures create a complex double bind, as women navigate both the demands of host societies and the surveillance of transnational family and community networks. Amal, the refugee-turned-student who sought asylum during a layover at a European airport, vividly illustrates these entanglements. Coming from a conservative family, her decision to travel alone and remove her veil directly clashed with the conservative gender norms she was expected to uphold in Yemen. Her activism and the pictures she posted on social media without a hijab led to her family in Yemen being threatened, while they perceived her behavior as dishonoring their reputation. Ultimately, her father and brothers repudiated her in court, declaring that she no longer belonged to the family. The estrangement from her relatives in Yemen weighed heavily on her public activism and well-being, leaving her feeling conflicted. Yet she has never openly criticized her family's attitude or Yemeni traditions, but rather made an effort to understand and frame them as structural issues: "It's a problem of education, inequality, and institutional injustice, and not a simple women–men conflict. (…) I understand them… it's just their way of loving me. I don't blame them. It's much

61 Steven Vertovec, "Transnationalism and Identity," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 27, no. 4 (2001): 573–82.

62 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

bigger than an individual issue."[63] She also explained that her family's repudiation paradoxically gave her comfort and relief, because they could no longer hold her activism and lifestyle responsible for jeopardizing their reputation and safety.

Khadija, another activist representing the 2011 youth revolutionaries, came to Europe independently during the war as an unmarried woman, facilitated by an invitation from an international activist she had met online. Like Amal, she rebelled against her conservative family, facing intense pressure once she became publicly active and visible on social media. Unlike Amal, however, she was far more outspoken in her criticism of Yemeni gender norms and expectations: "I was fighting with my family a lot because of my activism. They were always telling me to stop and behave like a proper woman. (…) The constant battles at home made it so hard to focus on my work. I was always stressed and worried about what my family would say or do next. It affected my mental health deeply. I fell into a big depression at one point because I felt so alone in my fight."[64] Her trajectory highlights the non-linear, multifaceted nature of engagement, where personal sacrifice, familial disapproval, and structural obstacles intersect. At the same time, Khadija embodies a generational shift among Yemeni youth activists who openly challenge conservative gender norms, refusing to confine themselves to roles deemed acceptable by families or communities. As a refugee, her activism expanded beyond peace and gender justice in Yemen to encompass issues of migrant integration and equality in Europe. She is also one of the few Yemeni activists to openly express support for LGBTQ rights. Despite enduring ongoing conflicts with her family and disapproval from fellow Yemenis regarding her worldview and lifestyle, Khadija remains committed to her cause, working to advance human rights and advocate for change in both her country of origin and her host society.

These trajectories illustrate how activism in the diaspora is shaped not only by opportunities and constraints in host societies but also by ongoing negotiations and conflicts with homeland cultural norms and social expectations. For women in particular, public activism is subject to heightened scrutiny and potential stigmatization, since their morality, behavior, and public appearance remain directly tied to the honor and reputation of their families. At the same time, they navigate an in-between space marked by contradictions, where access to democratic freedoms and new political

63 Yemeni woman activist "Amal," interview by the author, the Netherlands, February 16, 2022.

64 Yemeni woman activist "Khadija," interview by the author, Germany, February 22, 2022.

opportunities coexists with experiences of racialization, gendered asymmetries, the pressures of social integration, and shifting processes of identity reconfiguration. This entanglement of structural constraints and intimate personal struggles shapes patterns of both engagement and disengagement, deeply binding diaspora activism up with questions of identity, belonging, and psychological well-being.

7 The Psychological Costs of Activism: War, Displacement, and the Politics of Exhaustion

Recent studies have documented how activism can both empower individuals and exact mental health costs such as exhaustion, depression, or hopelessness.[65] Burnout – defined by emotional exhaustion, disillusionment, depersonalization, and a diminished sense of accomplishment – undermines not only activists' personal sustainability, but also the effectiveness of collective movements, playing a critical role in processes of disengagement.[66] Psychiatric and social research shows that such stressors affect activists across nationality, ethnicity, culture, and religion, including refugees, migrants, and local populations.[67] Yet activists from conflict-affected regions and refugees face heightened risks due to prolonged uncertainty, trauma, insecurity, and structural violence.[68] Vivienne Matthies-Boon's research on Egyptian revolutionary activists in the 2011 Arab Spring movement demonstrates how collective trauma, political polarization, and the disillusionment produced by unmet revolutionary aspirations and the absence of meaningful social change contributed to profound psychological deterioration and the eventual

65 Leslie Carmel Gauditz, "Activist Burnout in No Borders: The Case of a Highly Diverse Movement," *Transcultural Psychiatry* 62, no. 2 (2025): 167–80.

66 Laurence Cox, *How Do We Keep Going? Activist Burnout and Personal Sustainability in Social Movements* (Helsinki: Into-ebooks, 2011); Leslie Carmel Gauditz, "Activist Burnout in No Borders," op. cit.; Juan Carlos Aceros, Tatiana Duque, and Virginia Paloma, "Psychosocial Benefits and Costs of Activism among Female Migrant Domestic Workers in Southern Spain," *Journal of Community Psychology* 49, no. 7 (September 2021): 2905–21; Carmen Geha, "Activists Escaping Lebanon: Disruption, Burnout, and Disengagement," in *Migrations in the Mediterranean*, ed. Ricard Zapata-Barrero and Ibrahim Awad, IMISCOE Research Series (Cham: Springer, 2024).

67 Leslie Carmel Gauditz, "Activist Burnout in No Borders: The Case of a Highly Diverse Movement," op. cit.

68 Joanna Lewis, *Women of the Somali Diaspora: Refugees, Resilience and Rebuilding after Conflict* (London: Hurst, 2021).

withdrawal of many activists from political engagement.[69] Similarly, Carmen Geha's study of former Lebanese activists who self-exiled to Mediterranean countries after the multiple crises in post-2018 Lebanon conceptualizes self-exile and political withdrawal as embodied experiences of burnout, combining self-preservation and agency to the pursuit of dignity, well-being, mobility, employment, and safety.[70]

In this same respect, Tianne Haggar and Hanna Kienzler have conceptualized the "politics of exhaustion" embedded in the UK asylum process.[71] They argue that the asylum system operates as a form of structural violence that undermines the mental health and well-being of asylum seekers by systematically eroding their resilience to cope with ongoing adversity.[72] Through intersecting policies and practices of hostility, discrimination, and deprivation, the asylum system in the UK deliberately generates exhaustion and perpetuates poor mental health, producing a vicious cycle of psychological harm. Comparable dynamics emerged in my research with Yemeni activists who sought asylum in the Netherlands and Germany. Further evidence comes from a study led by Abdulhakeem Al-Tamimi on Yemeni refugees in the Netherlands, which found that, despite experiencing significant mental distress, many delayed seeking mental healthcare due to mistrust of institutions, linguistic barriers, and cultural as well as informational obstacles, factors that further worsened their mental health.[73]

Many Yemeni women activists I interviewed reported high levels of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder, which profoundly shaped their activism and capacity to sustain political and professional work. Their mental health struggles were not only linked to war-related trauma, but also to post-revolution grief, as they mourned both the loss of their country and the collapse of the hope for change sparked by the 2011 uprising. Experiences of asylum seeking and refugee life further amplified these conditions. Many women requested that their mental health struggles not be disclosed

69 Vivienne Matthies-Boon, "Shattered Worlds: Political Trauma amongst Young Activists in Post-Revolutionary Egypt," *The Journal of North African Studies* 22, no. 4 (2017): 620–44.

70 Carmen Geha, "Activists Escaping Lebanon: Disruption, Burnout, and Disengagement," op. cit.

71 Tianne Haggara and Hanna Kienzler, "The Politics of Exhaustion and Its Impact on Mental Health among People Seeking Asylum in the UK: A Service Provider Perspective," *SSM – Mental Health* 7 (2025): 100460.

72 Ibid.

73 Abdulhakeem Al-Tamimi, Martina Parić, Wim Groot, and Milena Pavlova, "Yemeni Refugees' Health Literacy and Experience with the Dutch Healthcare System: A Qualitative Study," *BMC Public Health* 23 (2023): 902.

publicly, fearing stigma and judgment. This sense of shame was often compounded by the stark contrast between their highly successful lives in Yemen or other countries and their current vulnerabilities and precarious conditions in Europe. Yet some activists chose to speak openly about their struggles, incorporating them into their activism as testimonies of both personal journeys and structural injustices. For example, Jamila, a Yemeni human rights lawyer with a Master's degree, described the asylum process in Germany as deeply humiliating and psychologically devastating: "Applying for asylum and not being able to work or study for two years broke me. I'm a person who loves to work and be productive, but this period of enforced idleness was worse than the fear I lived with in Yemen."[74] She shared her testimony on social media and other platforms, denouncing the traumatizing process of applying for asylum, the poor living conditions in refugee camps, prolonged waiting times, dependence, bureaucratic hurdles, and the severe psychological and emotional toll. Her reflections exemplify the "politics of exhaustion," revealing how asylum procedures operate as forms of structural violence and inequity that Yemeni activists, regardless of their prior social class or privilege, are compelled to endure.

Amira, a former journalist and UN expert with university degrees, faced similar struggles in the Netherlands. At the time of her application, the Dutch authorities had backed off from routinely granting protection to Yemenis and were assessing claims on a case-by-case basis. This shift subjected Amira to long, uncertain, and highly bureaucratic procedures, consistent with what scholars like Haggar and Kienzler term "exhausting by design."[75] She waited almost three years for a decision, all the while separated from her children. Once granted asylum, she immediately entered another draining process of family reunification, trying to bring her children and other immediate family members to the Netherlands. During her asylum application, she described feeling trapped and overwhelmed by multiple uncertainties and griefs: "I don't know how I'm going to be reunited with my family. (…) I don't know what my professional life is going to look like. It's a lot of uncertainty. What makes it worse is the process taking that long. You cannot focus. (…) I feel like I'm in a cage… like on an island in the middle of the sea where I don't know where I am. This is horrible."[76] Although mental distress, separation from her family,

74 Yemeni woman activist "Jamila," interview by the author, Germany, February 21, 2022.

75 Tianne Haggara and Hanna Kienzler, "The Politics of Exhaustion and Its Impact on Mental Health among People Seeking Asylum in the UK," op. cit.

76 Yemeni woman activist "Amira," interview by the author, the Netherlands, October 10, 2023.

the burden of trauma, and a frequent sense of insecurity in refugee camps affected Amira's activism and work, it did not extinguish her resilience. While waiting for a decision, she established an association, conducted online workshops, and initiated campaigns for peace and women's rights. Her engagement has been non-linear, cycling between pauses and renewed activism, shaped by both rational and emotional responses to her circumstances and by the structural conditions of life in the diaspora.

8 Conclusion

Taken together, the narratives in this study illustrate that the engagement and disengagement of Yemeni women activists in exile cannot be reduced to simple binaries of inclusion versus exclusion in peace processes. Rather, their trajectories are shaped by multiple and layered personal, social, cultural, political, economic, and psychological factors, which are deeply intertwined with the political economies of both homeland and host-country contexts. Across these dimensions, women demonstrate considerable agency. They do not passively accept their marginalization in formal Yemeni politics, but instead engage in alternative forms of political, social, and cultural activism, persistently advocating for inclusion. They also display resilience and resistance when navigating host-country policies, asylum regimes, and donor-driven peacebuilding frameworks.

One key finding is that, in the current context of protracted war, Yemeni activists in exile rarely disengage completely. Even when they place their frontline political activism on hold, the ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis continues to anchor their engagement. The continuing conflict provokes strong emotional responses that are often channeled into on-and-off mobilization for peace-related efforts and other civic or community initiatives. Activism in the diaspora, therefore, cannot be understood as a linear trajectory of engagement, sustained action, and cessation. Rather, it is dynamic and non-linear, characterized by pauses, reorientations, and strategic adjustments. For some, adversity itself becomes a catalyst for rethinking priorities and reshaping activism into more meaningful forms of collective action. This process often results in a reconfiguration: a shift from direct political engagement toward alternative cultural, social, or artistic forms of resistance.

The reasons why some women sustain their activism while others step back are shaped by both individual choices and structural constraints. Intersectionality plays a central role: opportunities, needs, priorities, and challenges differ according to women's social positions, identities, and lived

experiences. The research behind this study also reveals gendered patterns of activism. Men and women often follow distinct trajectories of engagement and disengagement, influenced by structural conditions and gendered expectations. Yemeni women face heightened risks of stigmatization, harassment, and violence, both online and offline, particularly when they challenge conservative gender norms. Attacks on men typically target political or sectarian affiliations, whereas smear campaigns against women more often police morality, reputation, and family honor. While men are more likely to sustain their participation in formal political arenas or movements, social pressures on women contribute to greater discontinuity in their frontline political activism, often prompting them to reconfigure their efforts into less visible yet enduring forms, such as community organizing, advocacy-coalition work, art, or writing. Furthermore, persistent social expectations regarding primary responsibility for household labor and childcare further constrain women's ability to balance professional work, family life, and diaspora activism.

Exile and forced displacement significantly reshape the social positioning of activists. Women who were considered elites or semi-elites in Yemen may find their privileged status diminished in Western Europe, as privilege is highly context-dependent. This was particularly evident during the asylum process, where the "politics of exhaustion" severely impacted women's well-being and mental health. Crucially, mental health cannot be separated from political and structural conditions: war, displacement, and resettlement profoundly shape activists' psychological experiences. Decisions to engage or disengage in activism are therefore both rational and emotional, shaped by intersecting personal, social, and structural dynamics.

Individual agency remains crucial in determining how women respond to adversity in both homeland and host-country contexts. For most research participants in this study, moments of profound disillusionment, trauma, depression, or burnout marked not an endpoint but a turning point. These crises often initiated processes of personal and collective healing that created space for renewed purpose and motivation, ultimately leading to more transformative and embodied forms of activism. Such transformations challenge top-down approaches to women's inclusion in official peace processes, and instead reframe what meaningful participation can look like, even when formal arenas remain exclusionary, instrumentalized, or misaligned with women's values and lived experiences.

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