Moments of Hell!

Ansar Allah (Houthi) Group Practices Gravely Undermine Women’s Rights

March 2022
The Iranian-backed Ansar Allah armed group (Houthis) has gravely undermined the rights of women and girls in areas under its control, Mwatana for Human Rights said. Ansar Allah (Houthis) should immediately end the targeting of women and particularly their presence in public space.

Ansar Allah has significantly harassed women traveling without a mahram, expelled and prevented women from work, imposed gender segregation in some universities, demanded women dress a certain way, and endangered women by preventing access to reproductive healthcare in some areas under its control. Ansar Allah has also fanned the flames of misogyny in areas under its control through different platforms.

Some Ansar Allah officials have sought to blame incidents targeting women or restricting women's rights as the actions of individual members of the group. But, given the frequency with which Ansar Allah members have targeted and harassed women, the complete impunity for Ansar Allah members involved in doing so, the breadth of restrictions imposed on women, and that some of these restrictions are a result of official Ansar Allah policy, responsibility lies with the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group.

"Ansar Allah’s dangerous and disgraceful efforts to restrict women’s rights undermines the gains Yemeni women worked for decades to make, and undermines their presence in public space,” Radhya Al-Mutawakel, Chairperson of Mwatana for Human Rights, said. “Ansar Allah should stop this ideological targeting of women, Yemeni women don’t need guards of virtue; they need their rights respected, and accountability for all those who violate them.”

Women and their families face social stigma for openly discussing harassment and abuse that women face. Often, after abuse, women themselves are blamed. Mwatana has not included identifying details for any of those interviewed. This statement provides a snapshot of the ways in which Ansar Allah has undermined women’s rights in areas under its control. It does not provide an exhaustive accounting.
Ansar Allah harasses women traveling without a mahram

Yemeni law does not require that women travel with a mahram, but, for the past few years, Ansar Allah officials and Ansar Allah gunmen have frequently scrutinized and questioned women traveling alone. Ansar Allah members have told women they should only travel with a mahram (male relative), and demanded men traveling with women prove they are related to the woman, for example, by showing the couple’s marriage certificate, or identification cards, if the man and woman are otherwise related.

In 2021, Ansar Allah stepped up restrictions on women traveling.

Recently the most prominent incidents are taking place in Naqil Yaslah checkpoint about 40 kilometers south of Sana’a, stepping up restrictions on women traveling, confiscating their passports in some cases. Mwatana for Human Rights documented a number of these incidents.

At around 11:00 p.m. in November 2021, after a long journey form a southern governorate, four women reached the “Naqil Yslah” checkpoint. Ansar Allah group’s “Houthis” gunmen stopped the car until 5:00 a.m. They exposed the women to verbal harassment, accusations because they were traveling without a mahram. A woman of the four said:

“They referred to us as a “prostitution cell.” They were seven armed men who verbally harassed us, put us under terrible psychological pressure for six hours, took our passports, prevented us from getting out of the car, and searched our phones, computers and bags. Was moments of Hell.”

According to the women interviewed: “where is the mahram?” was among other questions addressed to them.

Ansar Allah only allowed them to leave after signing pledges that they would never travel without a mahram again. The women were threatened with imprisonment at the Security and Intelligence Bureau if they leave Sana’a again without a mahram.

Another documented incident was in the middle of the day in mid-January 2021. Ansar Allah gunmen stopped a 30-year-old woman for several hours at a checkpoint near Hajjah city, about 123 kilometers northwest of the capital, Sanaa. The Ansar Allah
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Gunmen told the woman they stopped her because she was traveling without a mahram. They used offensive language and threatened her. She said:

The gunmen were looking at me as if they had caught me in an indecent act... I was insulted and verbally abused. The officer even asked if I was still a virgin?! He also threatened me with imprisonment and disciplining.

Ansar Allah only allowed her to leave after one of her relatives “mahram” came from another governorate and signed a pledge that his relative would never travel without a mahram again.

In a two-day period, Mwatana for Human Rights recorded 10 similar incidents in Hajjah governorate.

Ansar Allah members told some of the women that they stopped that they were implementing orders they had received from higher up in Ansar Allah that prohibited women from traveling without a mahram. Especially with the cars belong to organizations.

Another circular issued in September 2021, states: “It not allowed for a woman to use transportation means without a mahram. This order is applied in the city of Hajjah, those who violated them will be fined 200,000 riyls (approximately 330 US dollars) and a cow.”

Ansar Allah’s restrictions on women’s movement, and harassment of women when doing so, has affected women’s ability to move freely, to participate in public and private life, and to work—many of the cases Mwatana observed involved women traveling for work. Some women told Mwatana that they have limited their movement in order to avoid harassment.

**Ansar Allah endangers women by preventing access to reproductive health care**

Ansar Allah has prevented and impeded women’s access to reproductive health care in many areas under its control.

In early 2017, Ansar Allah began impeding access to contraceptives in Saada governorate, in northern Yemen, and firmly under the group’s control, by banning contraceptive injections in some health facilities. In late 2019, Ansar Allah expanded the
In early 2020, Ansar Allah suspended reproductive health activities in four districts in Saada, depriving residents of reproductive health services, including counseling on family planning methods. In mid-2020, Ansar Allah intensified restrictions on the sale and circulation of contraceptives and other methods used for family planning, including birth control pills and condoms, in all government health facilities, private clinics and pharmacies in Saada governorate. At the end of 2020, Ansar Allah banned IUDs (intrauterine devices) in Saada governorate. A man from Saada told Mwatana, “Obtaining contraceptives happens in secret and at great risk.”

In May 2020, the Ansar Allah-controlled ministry of public health and population in ‘Amran governorate issued a circular, of which Mwatana has a copy, to health centers in the governorate restricting women’s access to contraceptives. The circular, among other requirements, directed health centers to only provide women contraceptives in the presence and with the consent of their husbands. A 35-year-old cleaning woman said, “I had three miscarriages in the past six months because my husband refused to provide me with contraception.” The woman explained she had miscarriages a few weeks into each of her three pregnancies.

On January 24, 2021, the Ansar Allah-controlled ministry of public health and population in Hajjah governorate issued a decision on “family planning methods.” The decision required health centers and pharmacies in Hajjah governorate not to provide any method of family planning to women unless they had a prescription, the presence and consent of their husbands, and had shown the facility their marriage certificate. Ansar Allah said the decision was needed to preserve the “religious identity.” A 37-year-old homemaker in Hajjah governorate said,

I came to the health center to pick up my contraceptive pills. They refused to give them to me and asked me to bring my husband so he can give his approval. This is a significant burden.

In January 2021, Ansar Allah ordered health workers to stop using an illustrated guidebook that was used in counseling sessions to help explain various family planning methods. Ansar Allah said the guidebook “opposed the religious identity.”

Under international law, women’s right to health includes women’s sexual and reproductive health, including access, without discrimination, to reproductive health care services, goods and facilities. Preventing or restricting women’s access to
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reproductive health—including by subjecting women’s access to birth control to approval by husbands or male relatives—can have an enormous impact on women’s physical and psychological health, and her ability to pursue work, education and broader cultural and societal participation. Ensuring a woman’s right to health implies respecting her ability to make decisions about her own body.

Ansar Allah expels and prevents women from work

In a blatant violation of women’s rights to work, the Houthi armed group in September 2021 issued a circular banning woman from working in relief organizations in Hajjah governorate.

Mwatana verified that the circular is implemented in districts of Kahlan Afar, Bani Al-Awam, Shaghadra, and Najra district of Hajjah governorate. The circular claimed that the ban aims to protect women from “sexual extortion”. Mwatana did not know if Ansar Allah had charged anyone or any organization or taken any measures related to sexual extortion.

Earlier, On Saturday, January 23, 2021, at about 6:30 pm, seven Ansar Allah gunmen stormed a restaurant in Sana’a, searched it, and expelled all the women working there. A witness said, “The gunmen said that reports indicated that the women working in the restaurant were wearing make-up and talking to the men!”

After storming the restaurant, the Ansar Allah gunmen took the restaurant’s manager and some of the male staff to a police station, where the manager was forced to pledge in writing that the restaurant would “not employ women in any branch of the restaurant.” Thirty women lost their jobs.

While the restaurant began to re-employ some of the waitresses in women’s only sections after about two weeks, some of the women lost their jobs permanently. Before the Ansar Allah raid, the restaurant had imposed additional measures on female staff, like requiring all female staff, including a couple of non-Muslim female staff at the restaurant, to wear a hijab while at work.

Ansar Allah’s expulsion of working women from their jobs in Sana’a had a chilling effect, with some employers indicating they’d now prefer not to hire women to avoid similar problems. A couple of months later, Mwatana documented another incident.
in which Ansar Allah banned a number of women from having jobs in Al-Hodeida governorate.

**Ansar Allah imposes gender segregation in educational facilities, cafes and restaurants**

Ansar Allah has increasingly imposed gender segregation in universities, cafes, and restaurants, particularly in the capital, Sana’a.

**Universities and educational facilities**

On August 8, 2020, the president of Sanaa University, who was appointed by Ansar Allah, issued a decision requiring that male and female students be separated during graduation ceremonies and projects at the university.

On Wednesday, September 30, 2020, Ansar Allah officials raided a rehearsal for a graduation ceremony at a private Yemeni university. The armed Ansar Allah men forced the female students to leave, claiming they were preventing “mixing.” A 28-year-old woman said:

When I saw the military crews and vehicles in the university’s yard, I did not expect that the reason for their raid would be to prevent mixing. The gunmen shouted at the female students, “Cover up... and leave immediately.”

The university held the graduation the next day, and the women attended, but the university changed the graduation’s timing from the evening to the daytime, and those who attended reported feeling nervous afraid during what was meant to be a celebration.

On Thursday, December 31, 2020, before the start of the graduation ceremony for students of the Faculty of Commerce at Sana’a University, armed Ansar Allah men entered the hall and stopped the celebration, again claiming they were doing this to prevent “mixing” of men and women. In addition to expelling the audience, the Ansar Allah men arrested some of the students who had objected to Ansar Allah’s stopping of the event.
Ansar Allah has also imposed or promoted gender segregation in other education facilities. In October 2020, Ansar Allah expelled three eighth grade girls that were studying in a private school in Amran governorate because they studied in the same classroom as boy students. The girls had to leave and attend a school farther away from their homes.

In January 2021, one of the oldest private English language teaching centers in Sanaa, began formal procedures to separate men and women in their classrooms. A 44-year-old teacher said, “This decision may lead to a decline in girls’ education indicators in the long run.” The teacher explained that the center might wait to start courses, or stop courses, if the required number of men and women did not enroll for each of the newly gender-segregated classes.

Ansar Allah has also tried to impose its view of how women should dress. In late 2020, Ansar Allah forced a number of public and private universities—including the Lebanese International University and the German University—to post circulars and posters with rules for how female students should dress.

Cafes, restaurants, and public places

Sana’a’s Old City is home to many popular places to visit, to drink tea or coffee, or to sit with friends and family members, for example near Al-Sa’ila or in the ancient cafés “Samsara”. These places have traditionally been frequented by men and women. Ansar Allah has issued directives forbidding women from many of these public places.

Some café and restaurant owners in Sana’a have also begun to enforce gender segregation, or to prevent the entry of men in some cases, to avoid Ansar Allah closing their businesses, or imposing fines. A number of halls and cafes have also stopped hosting cultural events, which were attended by men and women in past years.
Ansar Allah fans the flames of misogyny

Ansar Allah has adopted a militant view of women and women’s place, and fanned the flames of misogyny.

In areas controlled by Ansar Allah, a number of Friday sermons and post-prayer sermons in mosques have been filled with misogynistic speeches about women, including stereotyping women’s roles, like claiming women should be relegated to housework and childbearing, describing women as incomplete entities or humans, and objects that bring or carry evil and shame, and saying women’s rights are “evil” and “delay victory.”

More recently, there has been considerable preaching in mosques claiming family planning methods are used to implement “Western and hostile ideology”, that family planning must be confronted and prevented, and that family planning violates Islamic law.

Ansar Allah leaders have repeatedly sought to justify imposing restrictions on women’s rights as necessary to “preserve the religious identity.”

At various points, Ansar Allah members have even confiscated mannequins displaying women’s clothing in storefronts and windows, claiming they caused desire and contradicted the religious identity. For example, in 2018, Ansar Allah members covered the faces and bodies of women on billboards and the heads of mannequins on a street that sells wedding dresses. In 2021, Ansar Allah gunmen stormed shops and sidewalk salesmen on a street in Sana’a, confiscating dozens of mannequins.

After the COVID-19 pandemic began, Ansar Allah ordered beauty salons for women to close, but allowed barbershops for men to stay open.

Further restriction of women’s personal freedoms in Hajjah governorate in a circular, of which Mwatana has a copy, issued on September 21, 2021, includes orders to “prevent songs and night parties during women wedding ceremonies and specify a time for the wedding parties.” Additionally, songs, acoustics systems, and celebrations after sunset are prohibited whether the party is at home or at a wedding hall. Mwatana documented at least one incident in which two popular women singers were detained because they were performing at a wedding ceremony in Hajjah.
Ansar Allah said the circular was needed to “prevent intellectual invasion and, and not to allow the West to corrupt the morals of youth, especially females.”. It states: “Not allowing girls and women to have smart mobile phones, claiming that they “allow girls to browse immoral websites and corrupt their ethics. Moreover, any man whose wife, daughter, sister, or relative has a mobile phone, will be fined 200,000 Yemeni riyals, and a cow. “Mwatana verified that this circular is applied in the district of Kahlal Afar, Shaghadra, and some of the villages of Hjjah Almadina, such as Sharqi Abs, Bait Al-Hosn, Al-Marwa and Al-Rat`ah.

Also, the circular includes “preventing girls and women from wearing makeup for weddings and parties, banning the wearing of short outfits, tight Abaya, or short head coverings. Mwatana has verified that these orders are imposed in the city of Hajjah. Ansar Allah “Houthis” has recruited women employees in wedding halls, to check if the women are wearing make-up. They wipe the cosmetics off those who wear make-up and ask them to leave. Only women who wear Abayas and wear no make-up are allowed to participate in the party.

In light of practices that crudely perpetuate patriarchy and restrict women’s personal freedoms, Yemeni women are trapped in a long dark tunnel with a distorted understanding of its current and future consequences.
Mwatana is an independent Yemeni organization established in 2007 and advocates for human rights. Even though the former regime of president Ali Abdullah Saleh declined to provide the organization with the permit to conduct its work, Mwatana was able to implement its activities and participate with other parties in advocacy campaigns against the violations of human rights committed in various parts of Yemen, including those committed against the peaceful Southern Movement sit-ins, during the Saadah wars, and the arrests of activists, opponents and journalists. Furthermore, “Mwatana” cooperated and coordinated with international partners in documenting human rights violations in Yemen.

In February 2021, Mwatana for Human Rights and Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) were nominated for the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize.