

Women's Digital Expression: Advocacy for Women's Rights in Post-2015 Yemen through Social Media

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses women's advocacy in Yemen through social media following the outbreak of civil war in 2015 between the Houthis and the government of Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi. The novelty of this study is its integration of women's engagement in physical public spaces into digital ones and its emphasis on social media's role as an alternative public space for advocacy amidst the ongoing conflict, which limits conventional civic participation. The presence of Saudi Arabia as one of the major powers in the Middle East in the Yemen conflict has actually worsened the political instability in the country due to the intervention carried out by Saudi Arabia to prevent the Houthis from taking power in Yemen. To analyse, this study applies liberal feminist theory using a qualitative research design and analyses data narratively, drawing on primary and secondary sources. Through a case study of women in Yemen, the findings demonstrate how Yemeni women engage in digital advocacy by sharing personal experiences of gender-based violence, promoting legal awareness regarding women's protection rights through written content, and fostering solidarity among women. Overall, the study shows that social media plays a crucial role in enabling women's advocacy at a time when the state has been unable to ensure women's safety and protection.

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INTRODUCTION

Yemen is one of the countries in the Middle East that continues to face ongoing conflict. The crisis erupted in 2015 with the outbreak of a civil war rooted in the political power struggle between the Hadi government and the Houthi-Saleh alliance. After the Houthis took control of Yemen's capital, Sana'a, Saudi Arabia responded by forming an international coalition in support of President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, who had fled to Saudi Arabia (Sharp, 2017). Saudi Arabia's concern over the growing dominance of the Houthi-Saleh alliance, which received direct support from Iran, led to a military airstrike campaign launched in March 2015. The goal was to intervene against the Houthis, restore the internationally recognised government of President Hadi, drive the Houthis out of the capital and major cities, and maintain security in Yemen from threats, including ISIS (Farras, 2019). This conflict divides Yemen into two groups: the first group that supports President Hadi's government, and the second is loyal to the Houthi-Saleh group (Farras, 2019). The division prompted the UN Security Council to pass Resolution 2216, which called on the Houthis to leave the areas they controlled (Sharp, 2017), also the Security Council should impose an arms embargo on Houthi forces, sanction individuals who destabilize Yemen, demand the return of seized weapons, and declare Houthi-Saleh actions illegal under President Hadi's government (Albasoos & Al-Hina, 2020).

According to UN reports, Yemen's internal conflict is the world's tenth worst humanitarian crisis, noting that around 80% of the population has required some form of assistance since 2015 (Concern Worldwide, n.d.). Besides that, the crisis impacted around 11 million children and forced more than 3.3 million Yemenis to flee their homes (Elayah & Fentiman, 2021). Furthermore, the parties have primarily targeted basic infrastructure and essential services, restricting access to clean water and sanitation, limiting healthcare facilities, increasing food insecurity, and worsening widespread malnutrition. According to the report in Humanitarian Needs in Yemen, currently 7.4 million people struggle to obtain

food, and 3.2 million require treatment for malnutrition, including 2 million children under the age of five (UN OCHA, 2019).

Since the civil war began in 2015, the situation in Yemen has steadily deteriorated. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index showed the country 144th out of 144 nations for gender inequality (Awadh & Shuja'adee, 2019). The ranks prove that the war exacerbates gender inequality and heightens the risks faced by women (United Nations Development Programme, n.d.). Around 63% of women faced the risk of sexual violence by armed groups, while gender restrictions, such as travel bans imposed, further constrain the limits of their mobility in Yemen (Rohwerder, 2017). Organisations such as Oxfam, CARE, and GenCap report that the conflict places internally displaced women among the most vulnerable during the conflict, as they have lost their source of income. Furthermore, an estimated 10 to 30 per cent of women have taken on new roles as head of household, taking over the responsibilities from men who are fighting on the front lines. Sadly, many women struggle with difficulties in obtaining humanitarian aid and must navigate unsafe conditions, which heightens their insecurity (Rohwerder, 2017).

Lastly, the conflict has affected pregnant women when the ongoing instability has limited their access to proper medical care. UNFPA reported that around 500,000 pregnant women don't receive safe and adequate healthcare services (Rohwerder, 2017). In 2020 and 2021, a social media post shared the story of a young woman in Al-Mukalla who was forced into marriage and abuse by her husband. Prompting widespread expressions of sympathy and support for survivors of domestic violence (Noman, 2021). Facebook is the most widely used social media platform in Yemen, but Yemeni women often use it with caution. Women and girls are frequent targets of online abuse. Instead of being a safe space for advocacy, social media sometimes becomes another site of victimisation, particularly when women speak out against injustice and insecurity in the country (Noman, 2021).

Previous research has also emphasised the conditions and responses of women in Yemen following the 2015 conflict. During the war, Yemeni women were not afraid to appear in public spaces to challenge injustice, oppressive laws, and the violation of their rights (Holt, 2020). Through this bravery, Yemeni women have emerged as civil society actors capable of initiating democratic change (Yadav, 2020). This new face of Yemeni women's activism is evident in their efforts to rise again, such as negotiating with local communities and providing aid to other women, particularly in Northern Yemen. In Southern Yemen, women have also begun taking on new roles, such as entering the business and industrial sectors (Yadav, 2020). Meanwhile, research by Jain (2022) highlights that in today's digital era, advocacy brings both hope and challenges due to the ever-evolving nature of technology and legal frameworks. In response, Jain (2022) argues that digital platforms can serve as a strategic space for women to fight for their rights, even though many marginalised women still face disproportionate vulnerability online. For example, research by Li et al. (2020) examined the hashtags #WhyIDidntReport and #MeToo on Twitter, where survivors of sexual violence, mainly women, shared their experiences of powerlessness as a form of resistance against gender-based violence. Twitter, in this context, became a tool for social change and a space for supporting survivors (Li et al., 2020).

So far, social media advocacy has also been used in another Middle Eastern country—Syria, which is also still engulfed in conflict. There, human rights advocacy has been carried out by diaspora journalists who mobilise civil society through media channels such as news and petitions (Arafat, 2021). Figenschou and Fredheim (2019) further emphasise that social media advocacy can serve as a motivation to raise awareness among target groups, and can be analysed through key components such as constituents, platforms, activities, and objectives (Figenschou & Fredheim, 2019). Considering that Yemen remains mired in civil war and that women are among the most vulnerable actors in this conflict, there is an urgent need for advocacy to uphold human rights and ensure the survival of Yemeni women. Cases like #WhyIDidntReport on Twitter have shown how gender-based violence can be voiced through social media, and neighbouring countries like Syria have used digital platforms to advocate for human rights. Although advocacy on social media presents several challenges, it is essential to utilise these platforms to raise voices and garner support for the protection and promotion of women's human rights in Yemen. Building on this gap, this study offers a distinct contribution by positioning Yemeni women not merely as victims of conflict, but as active digital advocacy actors who strategically use social media as an alternative public sphere to voice, negotiate, and defend women's human rights amid

prolonged conflict and weak state protection. Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap by exploring how Yemeni women used social media to advocate for human rights in the aftermath of conflict.

To answer the research question, the author uses the theory of liberal feminism by Katrina Lee-Koo as the conceptual framework to analyse the issue at hand. From the perspective of liberal feminism, the theory supports the individual's right to seek fulfilment, pursue their interests, and be treated equally before the law. Liberal feminism emphasises the importance of advocating for women's rights, asserting that discriminatory practices such as denying women access to education and full citizenship deprive women of the opportunity to fulfil their potential as human beings. **Now**, liberal feminists continue to argue that gender-based discrimination denies women equal rights and the ability to pursue their own political, economic, and social interests. Liberal feminism views the state as the appropriate authority to lobby and enforce women's rights. The state is seen as capable of acting as an intermediary or mediator in cases of gender-based discrimination and violence. The implementation of liberal feminism, which began in the 19th and 20th centuries, has been practised in Western countries. Over time, many leading women's organisations have also adopted liberal feminist perspectives, campaigning for rights and the rule of law (Koo, 2017).

METHODS

This study uses primary and secondary data sources in qualitative methods (Neumann, 2014). Primary data were collected through content observation using the Instagram account @yemenifeministmovement, which serves as a digital platform to voice and advocate for women's rights during the conflict. The observation focused on the posts featuring personal stories, discussions on gender-based violence, advocacy activities, information about the legal, and demonstrations on female solidarity. To support the primary data, secondary sources were gathered from relevant books and websites, journal articles, and reports published by international organisations such as UN Women (UN Women, 2025).

To explore the meaning, recurring themes, and advocacy strategies that are present in digital women's stories that are distributed through social media, this article employs a narrative analysis approach (Riessman, 2008). This study aims to better understand how Yemeni women use the courageous platform as a public alternative forum for advocacy in conflict situations involving minimal national security and independence. In addition, this article uses a second-order source to analyse and highlight more extensive findings in social, political, and human realities that affect women in Yemen.

RESULTS

The Impact of Prolonged Conflict on Women in Yemen

Since the outbreak of the conflict in 2015, women have continuously been subjected to both physical and psychological violence. The war has affected multiple dimensions of women's lives, leading to the erosion of harmony within personal and family spheres, as well as the weakening of relationships among women themselves. Prolonged conflict has also disrupted women's social relations, including family life and community-level social solidarity. These findings are consistent with reports indicating that ongoing conflict and political fragmentation in Yemen have further deteriorated women's security and rights (Holt, 2020; Yadav, 2020).

The Use of Social Media by Women in Yemen

Before analysing the advocacy efforts undertaken by women in Yemen, this study first illustrates the proportion of social media usage among women in Yemen through the graph below. Based on data obtained from a report published on the *DataReportal* website, the percentage of female social media users in Yemen in 2025 is estimated at approximately 30.3%, while 69.7% of users are male (Kemp, 2025).

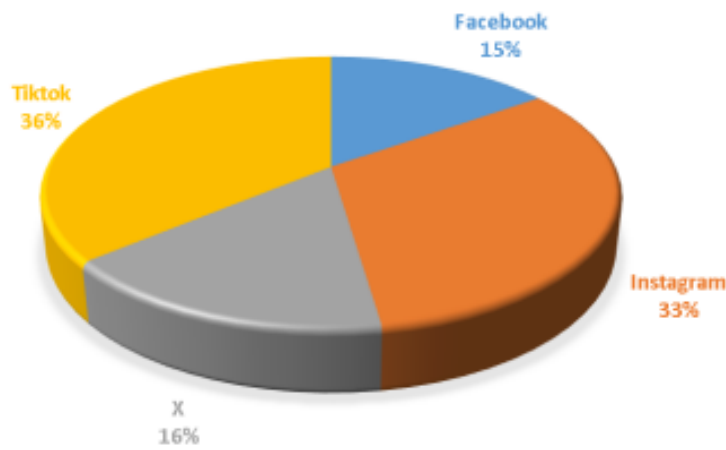


Chart 1: Social Media Platform
 Author [source]

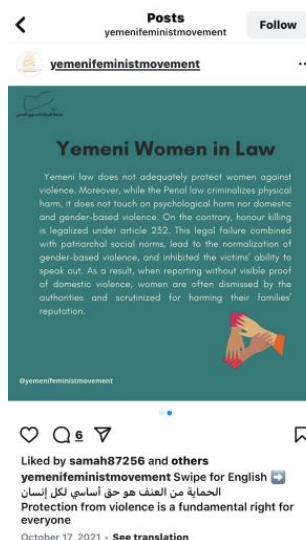
The data shows that social media usage in Yemen is significantly biased towards men. The relatively low number of women social media users in Yemen does not mean that they don't use social media. The data shows that social media is a tool that Yemeni women use to communicate and share their aspirations. Yemeni women communicate their aspirations and share valuable content on social media. They utilise Instagram and TikTok primarily as they can share information and content to a large audience without the constraints of the Yemeni public.

Advocacy through Instagram @yemenifeministmovement

The observation through the Instagram account @yemenifeministmovement shows that the strategies in the Yemeni feminist movement are clear on this account. First, the document page of women victims of gender-based violence, including the arbitrary detention cases, social stigmatisation, aggravated by armed actors. Second, the features include advocacy campaigns and text-based informative flyers that increase the legal awareness and rights protection advocacy of women (Ergene & Eken, 2025). Third, the platform functions as a collective space for building solidarity by encouraging participation, moral support, and connectivity among women. Overall, these findings demonstrate that social media is utilised as a strategic medium for advocacy and information dissemination in the context of prolonged conflict, where access to conventional public spaces remains severely limited (Saxton et al., 2015; Kareem & Akoja, 2017).



Picture 1: Social Media Platform
 Instagram: @yemenifeministmovement [source]



Picture 2: @yemenifeministmovement advocates for the legal protection of women's rights.
 Instagram @yemenifeministmovement (2025) [source]

Beyond individual advocacy, the findings of this study identify the development of collective and organised women's solidarity networks. The presence of organisations such as the Women's Solidarity Network and the Yemeni Feminist Movement demonstrates that women do not act solely as individuals, but also engage in cross-community and inter-organisational collaboration to advocate for women's rights and peace.

The Women's Solidarity Network, led by Muna Luqman since 2016, involves more than 270 women members and feminist organisations actively engaged in constitutional discussions, women's rights issues, and peace-building processes (Women's Solidarity Network, n.d.). Previous studies indicate that women's networks play a crucial role in sustaining advocacy efforts in conflict settings, particularly when formal political spaces are closed or inaccessible (Paffenholz et al., 2016).

These findings affirm that women's advocacy in Yemen is not sporadic in nature, but rather structured through solidarity networks that strengthen women's collective capacity to navigate political and social pressures.

DISCUSSION

In analysing this article, the author uses Katrina Lee-Koo's liberal feminist perspective. Katrina Lee-Koo assumes that the liberal feminism perspective emphasises individual rights, such as the pursuit of self-fulfilment, the freedom to advance interests, and equality before the law. Liberal feminists assume the defence of women's rights and the removal of structural barriers that hinder women's participation in politics, economics, and social spheres. After the end of the civil war in 2015, Yemen faced political fragmentation, which affected national organisations and undermined their ability to protect the country's citizens.

In 2017, polarisation increased, making the Houthis' movement more legitimate, while President Hadi and his coalition did not particularly focus on the Houthis' repression. Criticism of Hadi's leadership indicates that his inability to build a strong command structure has resulted in considerable losses for the Saudi-led coalition and other allied forces (Clausen, 2020). These conditions have placed women in Yemen in a position of compounded vulnerability, both as victims of armed conflict and as subjects of persistent gender-based discrimination.

Effective legal enforcement and institutional accountability have enabled Yemeni women to actively participate as advocacy agents outside of official political circles. It is clear that internet platforms, especially Instagram through the account @yemenifeministmovement, have become essential for documenting gender-based violence, highlighting individual rights, and educating people about the law. These practices emphasise liberal feminism in individual and political participation that is racial, even without the presence of responsible national organisations.

In analysis, violence and exclusion show how women contribute to the resumption of private education as a foundation element for collective and public engagement. Through a feminist liberal lens, practices represent independent claims to individual rights that are based on unavailable or unresponsive institutional channels. Yemeni women acknowledge the existence of harassment and refer to acts of harassment and legal principles. At the same time, they assert their role as defenders of their own rights within the nation, even as they confront the realities of armed authority and fragile national security. In this setting, social media functions as a space for public critique that can challenge and weaken established state mechanisms.

In addition, using social media as a tool for education and legal advocacy undermines digital feminist practices, where private issues are transformed into political tools to oppose structural and patriarchal violence (Mendes et al., 2019). Content that emphasises legal awareness and protecting people's rights shows that digital advocacy is not just symbolic but also serves to build individual capacity by enabling people to understand and respect their own rights. From a liberal feminist perspective, this strategy emphasises women's autonomy and realism as active political subjects.

This research also highlights the importance of collective solidarity and solidarity networks, such as the Yemeni Feminist Movement and Women's Solidarity Network, founded by Muna Luqman in 2016, which consists of 270 women in the

group to support women's steps in advocating for women's rights and peacebuilding initiatives (Women's Solidarity Network, n.d.). This collective dimension reduces the individualistic orientation common in liberal feminism and highlights the importance of communal strategies in fostering advocacy during times of insecurity.

Previous research supports the significance of women's networks in conflict-affected settings, particularly when formal political participation is restricted or dangerous. According to Paffenholz (2017), the organisation of women's collectives plays a crucial role in advocating, advancing, and hindering the process of peace in the context of political decision-making. In Yemen, solidarity networks enable women to engage in daily activities, maintain their integrity, and reduce risks related to individual behaviour. In this way, even while liberal feminists mention women's advocacy, their reality is based more on collective and relational practice than just individual action.

Social media serves as another public arena that allows for the formation of sentiment-based communities and the mobilisation of aid across borders. Papacharissi (2015) argues that the development of affective publics, a form of public participation fueled by the sharing of personal experiences, feelings, and interconnected shared narratives that promote political understanding, can be facilitated by the digital sphere. Given the scarcity of actual public spaces and the looming threat of armed repression, this study shows that socially supported communities are crucial for Yemeni women to express their aspirations.

However, this study also highlights the negative impact of liberal feminism in a conflict environment. According to Human Rights Watch, efforts to support women frequently result in negative consequences such as stigmatisation, harassment, and discrimination against women's activities (Holt, 2020). Yemen's protracted humanitarian crisis has received limited attention from the international community, forcing women to take a more active role in voicing the rights of those affected by violence and patriarchal structures. As stated by Human Rights Watch:

“Women activists have successfully played a significant role during the conflict, advocating for better protection of rights and protesting mistreatment.”

Clearly, this statement is in line with the realities that are observed in the field. According to Human Rights Watch reports, advocating for women's rights creates controversy and helps to increase discrimination against women, reducing them to a symbol of physical appearance and health (Holt, 2020). Therefore, the findings of this study not only reaffirm the relevance of liberal feminism in explaining the struggle for women's rights but also show that this approach has limitations when researchers implement it in conflict situations where the government is not always able to provide and enforce legal protection effectively for its citizens, especially for women.

Using a liberal feminist perspective, Yemeni women utilise social media as an alternative platform to fight for justice, strengthen solidarity, and participate in political life. Unfortunately, the country's prolonged political chaos is irrelevant to the liberal feminist belief that the state is the primary protector of women's rights, as women there feel a sense of insecurity. When political instability occurs in a country, the government and other state institutions should play a role in guaranteeing their freedom of expression and providing a sense of security without threats. Both are crucial aspects of guaranteeing citizens' rights. This study further underscores the importance of applying liberal feminist theory to conflict situations and utilising non-governmental and digital platforms to comprehend women's ongoing struggles in Yemen.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, liberal feminist theory as an analytical framework demonstrates that this method is still used to explain the social and political dynamics in the Middle East, including Yemen. According to liberal feminism, women's rights are guaranteed and protected by the state. Unfortunately, Yemen's prolonged conflict shows that the government has been unsuccessful in carrying out its responsibilities. Many forms of gender-based violence have persisted unchecked for the past ten years as a result of the government's failure to address structural discrimination and domestic violence against women.

When the government fails to protect them, women in Yemen are taking action on their own and becoming agents of change. They strengthen each other through community groups, establish organisations, and are actively in non-governmental organisations as part of their struggle for justice, recognition, and a more open political space. Instagram and Twitter are the main social media platforms to share and voice their struggles. They express themselves to tell personal stories, share educational content, and launch visual campaigns. Through these efforts, they raise awareness, advocate for their rights, and extend their movement beyond national borders to reach their struggle on an international level.

The results also show that even from a distance, digital advocacy offers a great chance for researchers, international organisations, and global civil society to interact with and gain a deeper understanding of the plight of Yemeni women.

Additionally, the research findings show that digital advocacy enables interaction with researchers, international entities engage, and global civil society to give understand the situation of the women in Yemen. Online activism can promote international sponsorship of women's rights in wartime and engage in transnational advocacy. However, online advocacy entails visibility and exposure, which means that women activists have to deal with serious criminal online harassment, cyberbullying, as well as the crimes of gender hatred, and this can have an impact on their mental health and safety.

Despite the limitations of this study, it contributes to the literature on digital feminist activism. It advocates the use of social media as an advocacy tool, ignoring the tangible outcomes. For instance, the impacts of digital activism on public attitudes towards women and government policies, or the attitudes of the international community towards women in wartime. Such studies would greatly improve the understanding of the enduring challenges and impact of feminist activism in the context of armed conflict in Yemen.

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