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Synthesis of the risks and likelihood of pushback against the abandonment of harmful practices
Country Snapshot

Yemen

▮ RISK OF EXPERIENCING PUSHBACK: HIGH

RISK OF
EXPERIENCING
← PUSHBACK

The absence of a legal minimum marriage age, high rates of child marriage, and entrenched harmful practices place **Yemen** among the highest-risk countries for violations of child rights. Conflict and food insecurity have exacerbated child marriage and FGM, as families turn to these practices as coping mechanisms. Reform efforts face strong resistance from conservative and religious factions, while protracted conflict further limits intervention.

The level of risk of pushback has been determined through a desk review and in-country consultations, undertaken in 2024.

Synthesis of the risks and likelihood of pushback against the abandonment of harmful practices

Child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM) are widespread in Yemen. FGM is most prevalent in the governorates of Al-Mahrah, and Al-Hodeidah. Nationally, 34 percent of women aged 20-24 were married before 18, with the governorates of Raymah, Al Mahwit, Dhaher and Al Bayda recording the highest prevalences.¹ FGM persists along the Red Sea coast, influenced by cultural traditions from migrant populations.² Displaced communities face disproportionate risks due to economic hardship

and a lack of protection mechanisms.³ The ongoing conflict and worsening economic crisis have exacerbated the prevalence of harmful practices, as families turn to these practices as coping mechanisms for economic and social pressures.⁴

Economic instability, patriarchal norms, and limited education drive child marriage and FGM. Families in rural and conflict-affected areas view these practices as a means to secure dowries and alleviate financial

¹ UNICEF-UNFPA, 'Child Marriage Country Profile Yemen', 2021.

² Al-Taj, Mansour Abdu, and Motahar Hassan Al-Hadari, 'Prevalence and drivers of female genital mutilation/cutting in three coastal governorates in Yemen, *BMC Public Health*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2023, 1363

³ Hunersen, Kara, Bothaina Attal, Allison Jeffery, Janna Metzler, Tareq Alkibsi, Shatha Elnakib and W. Courtland Robinson, 'Child Marriage in Yemen: A Mixed Methods Study in Ongoing Conflict and Displacement', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 34, no. 4, December 2021, pp. 4551–4571.

⁴ UNICEF-UNFPA, 'Child Marriage Country Profile Yemen', 2021.

burdens. In northern Yemen, conservative religious justifications and cultural drivers persist, with people citing historical precedents, while, according to in-country consultations, education and advocacy appear to be slowly shifting norms in southern urban areas.^{5,6} FGM is also upheld by grandmothers and older women as a means of preserving family honour and ensuring girls' purity. Some believe early marriage and FGM protect girls from early pregnancies that could harm their reputation and social standing.⁷

Yemen is one of only two countries globally without a legal minimum age of marriage, and no laws prohibit FGM. A 2009 attempt to set the minimum marriage age at 17 faced strong opposition from conservative factions, citing religious justifications.⁸ Efforts to engage de facto authorities (DFA) in northern Yemen have stalled, limiting dialogue and hindering progress.^{9,10} With 82.7 per cent of Yemen's population living in multidimensional poverty, humanitarian responses prioritize immediate survival needs over long-term child protection strategies.^{11,12,13} Nevertheless, progress is being made, with the Ministry of Social Affairs & Labour (MOSAL) having recently completed a national plan of action which, among other things, aims to enhance the protection of children, including against child marriage and FGM.

Evolving Trends and Discourse on Harmful Practices

Faith actors continue to play a central role in shaping discourse on child marriage and FGM. Organizations such as UNICEF, UNFPA, the Yemen Women's Union, and the Shamekhat Network engage communities through awareness campaigns and capacity-building programmes. In southern Yemen, partnerships with the Ministry of Endowment have helped challenge harmful practices by emphasizing the health risks and the lack of religious justification for FGM. However, many youth-led advocacy groups have disappeared

due to the ongoing conflict, weakening grass-roots engagement.¹⁴

In northern Yemen, DFA-controlled religious institutions actively promote FGM and child marriage as religious obligations, replacing local imams with state-controlled clerics. In these areas, authorities also imposed severe restrictions on advocacy efforts, limiting community engagement in gender-based violence and preventing awareness campaigns. Intelligence officials in the Ministry of Social Affairs have altered policies by replacing terms such as 'GBV' and 'rape' with 'social justice', further minimizing the urgency of addressing these issues.¹⁵ Furthermore, migratory influences from Sudan and Somalia have reinforced norms that associate FGM with modesty and family honour.¹⁶

Social media has provided a platform for shifting attitudes, particularly among urban youth in southern Yemen. However, rural and displaced communities remain largely unreached due to poverty, misinformation, and limited digital access.¹⁷ Governance restrictions in the north severely limit digital advocacy, whereas integrated approaches linking education, health, and child protection have gained traction in the southern part of the country.¹⁸

With access constraints in DFA-controlled areas to northern areas, UNICEF and other humanitarian agencies have focused programming efforts in southern Yemen, where progress is more feasible. However, concerns remain that neglecting the north – the most populous and at-risk region – could undermine long-term progress.¹⁹ The imprisonment of humanitarian workers and gender advocates continues to be a significant barrier to the delivery of humanitarian assistance in DFA-controlled areas, which impacts efforts to combat child marriage and FGM under the pretext of protecting national values.^{20,21}

⁵ KII26, UNICEF CO Yemen

⁶ KII27, UNICEF CO Yemen

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Human Rights Watch, 'How Come You Allow Little Girls to Get Married?', 2011.

⁹ KII26, UNICEF CO Yemen

¹⁰ KII27, UNICEF CO Yemen

¹¹ UNDP, 'Measuring Multidimensional Poverty in Yemen', 2023.

¹² KII27, UNICEF CO Yemen

¹³ UNICEF-UNFPA, 'Addressing global challenges with local solutions to eliminate female genital mutilation', 2023.

¹⁴ KII27, UNICEF CO Yemen

¹⁵ KII26, UNICEF CO Yemen

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ KII27, UNICEF CO Yemen

¹⁸ UNICEF-UNFPA, 'Child Marriage Country Profile Yemen', 2021.

¹⁹ KII27, UNICEF CO Yemen

²⁰ UN News, 'UN Highlights Urgent Need to Tackle Child Marriage and Female Genital Mutilation', October 2024.

²¹ KII26, UNICEF CO Yemen

To advance efforts to address harmful practices in Yemen, targeted strategies must take into account the complex political and humanitarian realities. While legal reform remains a long-term goal, immediate action should focus on expanding community-based protection mechanisms in inaccessible areas, integrating child protection into humanitarian aid, and ensuring that cash assistance and education programmes reach at-risk girls.

Strengthening engagement with influential religious leaders and local power structures to challenge harmful norms in both formal and informal settings is key. Meanwhile, diplomatic efforts should prioritize negotiated access for child protection actors to reach vulnerable populations in restricted areas.



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