

Yemen: Warring Parties Restrict Women's Movement

Movement Barriers Violate Political, Social, Economic Rights



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Women walk at the "Change Square" outside Sanaa University's gate, Sanaa, Yemen. © 2021 Reuters / Khaled Abdullah

- The authorities across Yemen are increasingly restricting women's freedom of movement.
- The restrictions have harmed women's ability to access work, education, and health care, and are a form of discrimination.
- All governing authorities should immediately end policies that restrict women's movement and ensure that checkpoint officers are trained to protect all Yemeni residents' fundamental rights.

(Beirut) – Parties to the conflict in [Yemen](#), including the Houthis, the Yemeni government, and the Southern Transitional Council (STC), are systematically violating women's right to freedom of movement, Human Rights Watch said today.

The authorities are barring women from traveling between governorates, and in some cases from travel abroad, without a male guardian's permission or being accompanied by an immediate male relative. Houthi authorities have drastically expanded restrictions against women's movement in their territories since taking control of Sanaa, the capital, and much of northern Yemen in the last nine years. Yemeni government forces and STC have restricted women's movement in the south.

"Instead of focusing their efforts on ensuring that people in Yemen have access to clean water and adequate food and aid, warring parties are spending their energy raising barriers to women's freedom of movement," said [Niku Jafarnia](#), Yemen and Bahrain Researcher at Human Rights

Watch. “These restrictions have a terrible impact on women’s lives and impedes their ability to get health care, education, and work, and even to visit their families.”

Human Rights Watch spoke with 21 women, mostly activists or women working with nongovernmental organizations, between August and November 2023 about the movement restrictions that they faced, and the impact this has had on their lives; as well as two men who work as private drivers transporting people between governorates. The women are from governorates around Yemen, including Aden, Taizz, Hudaydah and Sanaa. In addition, Human Rights Watch reviewed Yemeni laws and regulations, as well as recent Houthi guidances to car companies and travel agencies that restrict women’s movement.

Based on Human Rights Watch research, movement restrictions have affected women across all sectors of Yemeni society. Several people interviewed also said that some checkpoint officials specifically targeted women working with nongovernmental organizations and humanitarian workers. The UN Panel of Experts on Yemen in its [2023 report](#) said it has received reports of women being prevented from traveling in Houthi-controlled areas.

Human Rights Watch specifically researched movement restrictions in areas under Houthi, Yemeni government, and STC control, as they control the majority of territory in Yemen. However, several people interviewed said that groups that control other areas, including al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Islah, have also restricted women’s movement.

While Yemen’s law does not require women to travel with an immediate male family member, Human Rights Watch has [previously reported](#) that some of Yemen’s laws and practice restricted women’s movement long before the outbreak of the current conflict in 2014. Yemen’s 1992 Personal Status Law says that women can lose their right to spousal maintenance if they leave the marital home without their husband’s consent or for a “legitimate reason.”

In practice, if a male guardian reports a woman to the police for traveling against their wishes, the Interior Ministry and security offices can arrest her at checkpoints. Furthermore, while Yemen’s 1990 Passports Law gives all Yemenis over age 16 the right to obtain an ordinary passport, in practice, the authorities require a woman to have both the permission and presence of their male guardian to obtain or renew their personal identity cards or passports.

An activist living in Aden, said that “even though what [women] had before the war wasn’t great,” since the conflict began in 2014, “the women’s movement has regressed more.”

In the north, Houthi authorities increasingly began requiring women to travel with a male relative or to provide evidence of their male guardians’ written approval after taking control of Sanaa, a policy that had not existed before the war. In 2019, local media reported that the Houthi authorities had issued directives to local bus transportation companies requiring women be escorted by a male relative when traveling between cities in Yemen.

In December 2022, UN human rights experts [reported](#) that the Houthis’ Land Transport Regulatory Authority had issued a verbal directive in August 2022 requiring women who travelled anywhere within Houthi-controlled areas or outside the country to be accompanied by a male relative.

Two women said they had decided to leave Sanaa, Houthi-controlled territory, and move to Aden, in STC-controlled territory, in 2023 because of the increasing restrictions on women and nongovernmental organizations that the Houthis have imposed over the last few years. “I personally can’t rent a car because I have no husband, brother, or father,” one woman said.

A political activist living in Taizz described the challenges her sister, who lives in Sanaa, faces when traveling. “[She’s] a woman in her 50s and was forced to get her approval from her son – who was 14 years old – to travel. What a shame! That means that the Houthi[s] don’t recognize women as full citizens.”

In the south, while there has been no reported official guidance from the Yemeni government or the STC that similarly requires a woman to travel with a male relative, all but one of the 21 women interviewed said that they have been forced to turn around or been stopped at checkpoints, sometimes for many hours, when trying to move from one governorate to another without a male relative.

Many also reported being harassed and humiliated at checkpoints. The activist from Aden said she had been stopped for hours at an internationally recognized, government-controlled checkpoint entering Marib. She said that after five hours someone she had called to help her came to the checkpoint with a military ID and told the checkpoint officer that he was her relative and would guarantee her stay. The checkpoint officer's response was, she said, "But she's working with NGOs and women who work with NGOs are [a derogatory expletive]."

The UN has reported that these movement restrictions have forced many Yemeni women to leave their jobs at local and international nongovernmental organizations and UN agencies, because they do not have a relative who can accompany them on their crucial work travel, losing much-needed income for their families, and cutting off Yemeni women and girls from receiving humanitarian aid.

The restrictions have also impacted women's ability to access higher education. In some cases, drivers have refused to take women to campus because they know what they will face at checkpoints, including in the south. "I dreamed of studying for a master's degree in political science," said a woman in Taizz. "But this simple dream seems to be impossible now because of the *mahram* [male relative] requirement."

"Psychologically we've been broken down," a women's rights activist told Human Rights Watch. "To speak about women's empowerment feels ridiculous when we can't even move around."

The Yemeni government, the STC, and the Houthi' movement restrictions violate Yemen's obligations under the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the Arab Charter on Human Rights, and contradict Yemen's constitution which also guarantees these rights.

Human Rights Watch wrote to the Human Rights Ministries of the Houthis, the Southern Transitional Council, and the Yemeni government on January 8, 2024. The STC replied on January 17, denying that checkpoints under their authority have stopped women if they were traveling without a male relative. Human Rights Watch evidence directly contradicts this. The Houthis and the Yemeni government did not respond.

"The impacts that these movement restrictions have on women's lives are disastrous not only for women, but for all of Yemeni society," Jafarnia said. "All governing authorities should immediately cease any policies in place that restrict women's movement and ensure that checkpoint officers are trained to protect all Yemeni residents' fundamental rights."

Houthi Violations of Women's Freedom of Movement

Since the Houthis took over the capital, Sanaa, in 2014, the group increasingly began imposing restrictions on women throughout its territories, which now includes most of northwest Yemen where the majority of the population lives. Mwatana for Human Rights, a Yemeni civil society organization, has [documented](#) how the Houthis have introduced requirements that women travel with an immediate male relative or with their male guardian's permission, imposed [dress codes](#), required [gender segregation](#) in some public spaces, and impeded access to [women's contraceptives](#). The Houthis have also imprisoned women based on charges relating to "indecentcy," including the Yemeni model and actress [Intisar al-Hammadi](#), who remains unlawfully detained.

Mwatana has said that before 2021 the Houthis' imposed restrictions on women's movement at random and mainly through harassment at checkpoints but that after 2021 checkpoints around Sanaa began to consistently block women traveling without a male relative.

The UN [reported](#) that in July 2022, the Houthi Land Transport Regulatory Authority (LRTA) directed travel and car rental offices to require women to obtain written consent by a male guardian, attested by the neighborhood leader, to travel or rent a car. In August 2022, according to the UN, the LRTA issued orders to transportation offices and car rental companies, instructing them to prohibit women from traveling without the accompaniment of a male relative.

In February 2023, the Houthi authorities [responded](#) to the UN, stating there was no new directive from the Land Transport Regulatory Authority, and that “all the rules in force today have existed for many years” and otherwise claiming that “the requirement of a male relative is not a discriminatory measure.” However, Human Rights Watch has reviewed permission forms from local transportation companies that reflect these Houthi directives.

In practice, the authorities will allow women to travel without a male relative only if they have the prior written approval of a male guardian, and began actively overseeing the implementation of this order within their territories. A doctor from Aden who works in Sanaa told Human Rights Watch that for women to get permission to travel alone without a male relative, “the relative needs to go to the transportation offices or car rental companies, prove that they are the women’s guardian, state that they don’t mind [their female relative] traveling alone. Then, the transportation office or rental companies should communicate with Houthi authorities to get their approval and have the women’s name sent to their checkpoints, so that they can travel without being stopped or harassed.”

Since the new directives, many Yemeni women have faced significant problems traveling in and out of Sanaa. Two women interviewed said that in the last year, they made the difficult decision to leave their homes in Sanaa and move to Aden, in large part because of the difficulties of getting in and out of Sanaa, which they regularly needed to do for work and to visit their families in other areas of the country.

“[The restrictions] forced me to rent a house in Aden,” said one woman. She said that despite having lived in Sanaa since 2007, and feeling more at home there than in Aden, she had returned to Aden in December 2022 because of the difficulty of traveling in and out of Sanaa as a single woman.

Many women do not have a father, husband, or brother, who can serve as their guardian to provide permission or accompany them when they need to travel. One woman said that in November 2022, authorities at the Yasleh checkpoint at the entrance of Sanaa stopped the bus she had taken from Sanaa to Aden because she was traveling without a male relative. She said the officer at the checkpoint reprimanded the driver, stating that it was forbidden to transport a woman without a male relative. Though the driver told the officer that the woman’s father was unwell, the officer stated that regardless of the father’s health or other circumstances, the father, as the woman’s male guardian, was required to obtain permission from Houthi authorities for the women to travel alone.

“I cried and told them that my mother had a stroke, and that I will travel to Aden even if I have to walk all the way,” she said. She said that after three hours and a fine to the bus driver, the male travelers on the bus were able to pressure the guards to let the bus through.

Even for women who do have a male relative, the restrictions impose an undue burden to their movement, and are a form of discrimination.

A woman from Sanaa working at a nongovernmental organization in Aden said that in July 2023 she was stuck in Sanaa for two days when trying to return home to Aden with her mother and sister after visiting family in Sanaa. The officer at the Yesleh checkpoint in Sanaa stopped them, stating that her brother or father would need to get approval from the Interior Ministry for the women to travel without a male relative. “My brother is good, he lets me go,” she said. “But what if there is a girl with a different family or a different environment? She can’t go anywhere.”

Another woman said that: “Women traveling alone can face real dangers. They might be stopped, interrogated, insulted, and humiliated by the Houthi forces. Even if they have the travel consent signed by their families and male relative, they will still face challenges at checkpoints.”

The UN also [reported](#) that since December 2020, Houthi authorities have increasingly enforced a requirement that aid agencies, including local and international nongovernmental organizations and UN agencies, must include a male relative's name when submitting travel requests for any female Yemeni staff traveling for work. According to the UN, Many female staff do not have such a male relative, which led many to leave their jobs, losing much-needed income for their families.

In addition, as part of the Houthi Land Transport Regulatory Authority's August 2022 guidance, they issued restrictions in areas they control requiring that women no longer be permitted to travel outside the country without a male relative.

In December 2022, several United Nations human rights experts sent a [letter](#) to the Houthis detailing the group's "systematic violations of women's and girls' rights," including their rights to freedom of movement, freedom of expression, health, and work, as well as widespread discrimination.

Government and STC Violations Against Women's Freedom of Movement

Women traveling in areas of the country controlled by the Yemeni government and Southern Transitional Council (STC) have also reported being blocked from traveling at various checkpoints, despite no official guidance restricting women from traveling without a male relative from either group.

Several women said that they had been stopped many times at various Yemeni government and STC checkpoints, particularly at the entrances of governorates, including al-Hangar checkpoint in Taizz, al-Rebat and al-Hadid checkpoints in Aden, and Nihm checkpoint in Marib.

They said that these restrictions had not existed prior to the conflict and have grown more common in the last few years. Several women said that a [social media campaign](#) in 2022 by a fake account under name of "Sumaia al-Khoulani" against Yemeni women working in nongovernmental organizations, and subsequent religious discourse, had led to increased discrimination against and restrictions on women. "In Taizz, they spoke about this [social media campaign] at Friday prayers," one woman said. "These hate speeches pushed some of the parties to the conflict to create all of these restrictions to 'protect' women."

An activist living in Aden, describing the government's and religious leaders' increasing repression of women across southern Yemen, said, "There's no electricity, there's no water, but what do they do? They focus on women."

Interviewees said they believed that checkpoint officers specifically target women who appear to be working for nongovernmental organizations, and as a broader practice often treat women – and men – worse if they believe they are from Houthi-controlled areas.

Al-Rebat checkpoint, controlled by the STC, is at the border between Aden and Lahj governorates. Several women reported being harassed, humiliated, and in some cases blocked from traveling by officers at the checkpoint when trying to pass through it without a male relative.

One woman said that when she traveled to Aden with a female colleague in February 2023, they were stopped by the STC officers at the al-Rebat checkpoint and were told to get out of the car. "They asked where we were going and why we were traveling without a *mahram*," she said. "I told them we are the relatives for each other, and we are traveling for work, but he refused to allow us in."

A private driver who frequently makes the journey between Taizz and Aden said that al-Rebat checkpoint "doesn't respect women." He said that checkpoint officers at al-Rebat allow women traveling with their families to easily pass through, but that women traveling alone, "especially women working with nongovernmental organizations and civil society organizations" are stopped and interrogated.

Several women also reported problems crossing through al-Hangar checkpoint in Taizz. “Once, I left Aden a bit late, so I arrived in Taizz in the evening, around 7 p.m.,” one woman said about a february 2023 incident “They stopped me at al-Hangar checkpoint, and ask me why I came late, and why I’m alone.” She said the only reason she was ultimately let through was because she told the officer that a person on the bus was her relative.

Women reported being harassed at checkpoints by officers, including verbally and physically. A woman who described being harassed by officers at multiple checkpoints around the south, said, “When I arrived at the first checkpoint in Al-Dhalea, I showed them five IDs for the university and the hospital that I work with in Sanaa, but they kept asking why I’m traveling alone and questioning what I’m doing in Sanaa, implying to unethical and dishonorable things. They continued harassing me very badly.”

Several women said that they had complained directly to the government and the STC but didn’t believe that either group had taken any action to address their complaints.

Dr. Olfat Al-Dubai, a prominent Yemeni women’s rights activist, said that the Yemeni government is aware of the violations and problems women are facing, but are not doing anything to respond to them. “[Civil society organizations] are reporting these violations to them regularly, but the government doesn’t do anything to stop these behaviors and violations,” she said. “I myself submitted an official complaint to the prime minister about the incitement campaign against women, but they did nothing ... they claim that they care about women’s rights, but in reality they are doing nothing in response to the challenges and the violations women are facing.”

She added that the government agencies concerned with women have failed to address violations against women, including the Ministry of Human Rights, the National Committee of Women, and the Ministry of Religious Endowments, none of which have done anything to halt these violations.

Harm Caused by Movement Restrictions

Male guardianship policies [deprive women](#) of their legal status to make decisions about their own lives and can cause deep harm. Discriminatory restrictions on women’s mobility within their country and to travel abroad violate women’s rights to freedom of movement, work, and study, to access health care, and to marry.

“My wedding is in December, and I can’t travel,” one woman said. “That’s why I’m sitting here planning and thinking about how I can get to Aden because I don’t have a male guardian who can take me from Sanaa to Aden.”

Movement restrictions have also taken a mental health toll on women. “Travel becomes a big thing that must be well planned, and women must think a thousand times before making the decision [to travel],” another woman said.

Many women described how the movement restrictions have affected their work, and the work of their colleagues and friends.

“I had a colleague from al-Hudaydah who used to come from al-Hudaydah to Aden for training opportunities,” said one woman. “[Checkpoint officers] turned her away from the checkpoints multiple times ... she was deprived of participating in these training programs.”

A pharmacist living in Aden said, “Many [job] opportunities have come my way, but I couldn’t seize them due to the challenges with travel.”

Women said that checkpoint officers, both in the north and the south, specifically target women believed to be working with nongovernmental organizations. “At checkpoints, they ask us whether we are affiliated with organizations or not, and if we say yes, they conduct harsher interrogations, which may lead to additional risks,” one woman said.

The restrictions have also had critical impacts on aid agencies, including on women who have jobs with these organizations who must travel to various areas of Yemen; on families who rely on humanitarian aid; and on aid assessments that include the needs of women and girls. In their letter to the Houthis regarding the requirement to be accompanied by a male relative, several UN special rapporteurs [said that](#) “[i]nability to travel means critical work tasks cannot be performed, which leads to loss of work experience, and there are many reports of female aid workers leaving employment and therefore losing much needed income for their families.”

They also said that the requirements are “effectively cutting off” Yemeni women and girls from receiving humanitarian aid ... as it is generally considered inappropriate for male staff to deliver support.”

The increase of restrictions on women’s movement has also limited women’s access to education, particularly as many women in Yemen must travel to larger cities like Aden, Taizz, and Sanaa to attend a university. A student living in Taizz said that, “Women’s opportunities to pursue higher education are very limited, and there are very few options, and even with these very few options women are restricted by requirements for a male relative.”

One woman described her difficulty in continuing to attend college after her brother died in 2019. “After my brother’s death, I wanted to travel, and there was no one who could travel with me, especially with my father’s deteriorating health. I contacted my family, my paternal and maternal uncles, but due to divisions and fear of traveling to areas under the control of Ansar Allah, they refused to travel with me. My cousin said, ‘We are not male relatives to travel with you.’”

She said that on one of her visits back home from her university in 2022, she was stopped at al-Hangar checkpoint in Taizz and asked where her male relative was. She stated it was only after she was able to verify that she had family in Taizz that they let her through.

The woman who lives in Taizz, wanted to travel to Sanaa to attend graduate school in 2022, but said that her father refused because he was concerned about her safety traveling back and forth between the two cities. She said that her father told her, “I can’t let you go there, it is not safe. How can you freely travel back and forth through the checkpoints? It will pose a big risk for you, especially since we can’t afford to pay a relative’s expenses each time.”

The requirements also have an impact on women’s health, as many women must travel to other governorates, or even abroad, for health care. One woman said that her aunt, who is an older woman, needs a male relative to escort her back and forth between Houthi-controlled Taizz and government-controlled Taizz to get treatment. She stated that once, her mother’s health deteriorated and she needed to go to the hospital, but she had to wait for her son to first travel from Sanaa to Hawban in Taizz (a 6-8 hour journey) to then take her.

The [UN Panel of Experts on Yemen](#) and the [World Health Organization](#), among other international actors, have described the severe impacts that movement restrictions have had on women’s abilities to access health services. According to the International Rescue Committee, “Lifesaving and urgent services, including for sexual and reproductive health, the treatment of sexual violence related injuries, and the prevention of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, cannot reach women and girls who need them.”

Legal Obligations

Yemen’s constitution provides that “all citizens are equal in rights and duties,” and that “freedom of movement from one place to another within the country is guaranteed for all citizens and may not be restricted except by law and for reasons necessitated by the security and safety of the people. The law shall regulate entry and exit from Yemen.”

Restrictions on women’s movement also violate international human rights law. Yemen is a state party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the Arab Charter

on Human Rights, all of which obligate states to ensure freedom of movement and nondiscrimination, including to enter one's own country and to leave any country, including their own, and freedom of movement within the country.

Discriminatory movement restrictions also breach women's right to equality before the law, as well as their related rights including to work, study, marry, access health care, provide care to their children in their child's best interests on an equal basis with men, and be free from violence.

The Houthis and the STC, as armed non-state groups that exercise de facto control over territory and populations, are obligated to respect and protect the human rights of individuals and groups living under their territory. The Houthis have controlled large swathes of Yemen since 2014, and the STC controls Aden, as well as other areas in southern Yemen, and both exercise significant governance-like functions. Their control over these territories obligates them to protect the right to freedom of movement for those living within their territories.