## Literature review

# Women's Role in Peace and Security in Yemen

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## Introduction

This literature review was commissioned as part of research for the project 'Enhancing women's role in peace and security in Yemen'.[2] The research is being led by the Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient (CARPO) and the Yemen Polling Center (YPC) in partnership with Saferworld, and will inform programme activities to support women's peacebuilding efforts in Yemen by Saferworld in cooperation with the National Foundation for Development and Humanitarian Response (NFDHR) and Wogood for Human Security. The review intends to provide an overview of women's interactions with peacebuilding efforts in Yemen, in view to informing current strategies on how to enhance their role.

The review considers the following questions:

- What role have women played and what political involvement have they had in Yemen historically?
- What impact has conflict had – including the ongoing conflict – on women's lives and on their political participation?
- What social norms govern women's activism in Yemen?
- What examples of previous involvement of women in peacebuilding processes exist, what strategies were used, how were obstacles overcome and what results were achieved?

### Key findings

- Women's role and political participation is influenced by two opposing yet often coexistent cultural phenomena in Yemen: firstly, the notion that women are physically and emotionally weak and need to be protected and controlled for their own safety and the safeguarding of the family honour; and secondly, an "egalitarian ethic" (Adra 2016: 316) particularly among Yemeni tribes and a traditional role of women in the local economy in rural areas.
- The norms of seclusion, family honour, and the need to protect and control the 'weak', which tend to limit women's activism in Yemen, are often invoked in discourse as an argument of 'what is right', but are then often ignored in the face of pragmatic considerations.
- The absence of men and 'male protection' due to the ongoing war in Yemen has resulted in a significant increase in the domestic workload of women who are now also the providers for their families; many women have also taken on the role of first responders and humanitarian workers, contributing to the alleviation of their communities' suffering.
- In many tribal areas, women are either directly or indirectly involved in tribal conflict mediation.

- Female civil society activism tends to focus on development, humanitarian issues and human rights rather than on peacebuilding. There remains a significant lack of knowledge in regard to:
  - how to become active in peacebuilding as a woman at the local level;
  - data (e.g. on drivers of conflict at the local level, existing initiatives, needs, etc.);
  - the potential role of women in conflict prevention, based on "women's perspectives on tensions in social relations, their awareness of threats to personal, family and community security, their knowledge of the flow of small arms and light weapons through communities and their interpretation of extremism in local discourses" (Shakir 2015: 26);
  - and efforts directed at monitoring, coordination and communication.

# Women's political participation in Yemen

Women's political participation in Yemen's public sphere has been limited to select members of the elite. It has been influenced by different historical legacies of state-building, competing nationalist and religious discourses, changing socio-economic conditions, and urban-rural divides within Yemen.

The legacy of two very different political cultures is still felt in Yemeni politics to this day: that of the northern Yemen Arab Republic (YAR); and, that of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), which united to form the Republic of Yemen in 1990. Yemeni women, as Badran (1998: 501) puts it, "are heirs to two separate feminist pasts."

In the north, women have been struggling against conservative interpretations of Islam regarding women's role in society, which see the role of women limited to family affairs. In urban areas, where the seclusion of women was the social ideal,[3] these struggles for political participation were limited to a small educated elite. Northern women, according to Badran (1998: 503), "had to enact a piecemeal feminism, pioneering incrementally to stake out new roles and a claim on public space." The Family Law of 1978 also reinforced and "preserved patriarchal privileges" (ibid.).

In the south, in contrast, socialist ideology brought forth two generations of highly educated and empowered women leaders in urban areas (particularly in the former capital Aden). The PDRY constitution obliged the state to "deliver rights to women within a framework of equality" and the "Family Law promulgated in 1974 was legendary in the Arab and Muslim world, rivalling the Turkish Civil Code of 1926 and the Tunisian Personal Status Code of 1956 as an egalitarian instrument" (Badran 1998: 502). Post-unity and particularly after the north's military victory over the south in the civil war of 1994, the south experienced political, economic and cultural marginalisation that also silenced many southern female voices (Dahlgren 1999). Conservative values prevailed in the Yemeni Women's Union which had merged the two Yemeni women's unions from north and south after unity[4] and resulted in a withdrawal of many formerly active women from the public sphere or their disengagement with feminist issues. At the same time, a sense of gender equality continues to prevail particularly in Aden, where conservative norms are reiterated while co-working in offices, for example, and free interaction between men and women has remained the standard (see, e.g. Dahlgren 2010: 187). Since the rise of the Southern Movement,[5] moreover, its activists in Aden and beyond have taken particular care to promote a civic culture that allows both women and men to participate on an equal footing (see, for example, Augustin 2015).

In rural areas in both north and south Yemen, men usually represent their families as 'exterior ministers' in public venues. As a result the number of rural women involved in formal politics is extremely low. There are a number of factors to consider that limit women's political participation including: discursive (particularly Islamist movements (Adra 2013: 2; 2016: 326–327)); structural (related to issues of poverty, for example (Adra 2016: 318)); and systemic. The latter also relates to the first-past-the-post single-member district electoral system, which has made it hard for women to be elected as they cannot mobilise supporters as

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[3]   This is related to the fact that the "*hijra* lifestyle", as Gingrich (2001: 231) calls it, where the women of the religious Zaydi elite, the *sada*, who are considered descendants of the prophet Muhammad and from among whom came the ruling Imams of the past, had remained secluded in order to demonstrate and symbolically maintain their purity of blood.

[4]   This became particularly salient in the discussion over the personal status law in which "family values" were given precedence over the previously existent rights in regard to divorce, child custody and housing in the PDRY (see Carapico 1998: 155; Würth 2003).

[5]   The Southern Movement first evolved in 2007 when military officers, who had been forcibly retired after the defeat of the South in 1994, took to the streets to demand their reinstatement into their former positions or the payment of pensions. These protests were soon joined by forcibly retired employees of the former Southern civil sector and the police, by journalists, intellectuals, students and many more to protest against the economic, political and cultural marginalisation of the former South as well as against the corruption and lack of rule of law throughout the country. When President Ali Abdallah Salih met these protests with increasing violence, the protesters began to demand secession ('liberation') from the North and the establishment of an independent 'South Arabia'.

traditional authorities can, resulting in an unwillingness of parties to choose female candidates (al-Mikhlafi 2005: 97). Legal obstacles are generally not cited as the constitutional framework is considered adequate.

Women's political participation is thus non-linear and often reflects competing yet concurrent developments in political, social and economic spheres (see Carapico 1998: 199–200). Due to the unwillingness of political parties to encourage active female political participation and provide respective support, women's involvement in high-profile politics has decreased. Forty-two women ran for parliament in 1993 (winning two seats), 19 in 1997 (two seats), and 11 in 2003 (one seat).[6] At the same time, however, political parties have advocated for more women voters. An increased role of women in second-row party politics, as voters (42% in 2006), in workers' unions and the administration was observed particularly in the 1990s (e.g. Adra 2013: 2; Clark & Schwedler 2003; Heinze 2006: 41–42). Likewise, economic recession has pushed more women into the workforce resulting in a backlash from unemployed men (Carapico 1998: 200). An enhanced education system has produced more university-educated women than ever, yet more recent school books promote an increasingly conservative picture of women's roles and gender relations than before. The increasingly conservative Islamist environment has limited women's presence in public spaces; at the same time democratic state-building rhetoric (pre-2011 as well as post-2011) has promoted the role of women in Yemeni politics (see Adra 2013: 2; Carapico 1998: 200).

The spread of Islamism is often considered to have limited women's opportunities for political activism. However, Yadav (2010: 1) points out that:

> "Islamization has been brought about in part through the activism of women themselves, conducted in ways that are spatially private but substantively public in intent and effect. This contributes [to] what may be conceived of as a 'segmented' public. Their success in shaping the national debate on women's political participation through such segmented public activism has provided Islamist women with the political leverage to begin undermining segmentation, further expanding the range of opportunities for women's activism."[7]

During the Yemeni 'revolution' of 2011, women experienced a short-lived spring of liberalisation from patriarchal norms (Strzelecka forthcoming). Women from across the social spectrum joined the protests, staying overnight on protest squares.[8] Although widespread participation of women and their leadership in many protests surprised many outside observers, this actually built on the traditional role of women in Yemeni society:

> "The principles that sustain customary law are not limited to communities that self-identify as tribal. They have informed values and 'trickled up' into the daily lives of most Yemenis. Consensus, legal process, respect for, and protection of, women and the unarmed population have long been valued throughout the country. Trade guilds that historically regulated urban markets follow similar rules of mediation and consensus building. Until the late 1980s, women could travel safely and confidently throughout Yemen." (Adra 2016: 320)

After the events of 2011, many women throughout Yemen have voiced a feeling of lasting empowerment and self-confidence in regard to openly voicing their demands (Saferworld 2012: i-ii; al-Sakkaf 2012: 1). This remained even after the political, tribal and religious elites on both sides of the protests once more closed down discursive as well as physical spaces for women's involvement. At the same time, however, Yemeni women have reported that the deteriorating security situation in some areas of Yemen has limited their ability to engage in political activism (Saferworld 2013: 5).

In the post-2011 transition process – i.e. after President Ali Abdallah Salih signed the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Initiative that detailed the steps ending his presidency and the subsequent process of reforming the political system and transitional justice – women who had been active throughout 2011 felt sidelined once more by formal politics. Their struggle to bring women's voices into the political arena resulted in the establishment of a number of groups, among them the Campaign on Constitutionalising Women's Rights, the Women's Independent Network, the Amal Coalition (for women with political affiliations), the Advocating for Women's Rights Coalition, among others (Shakir 2015: 5–6). In the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) that took place from March 2013 to January 2014, women gained important victories; the most important being the 30 per cent quota for women in all government institutions.[9] The Women and Youth Forum, assisted by the Office of the Special Adviser on Yemen, also created the Women's Charter,

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6    Numbers according to Mashhur 2005: 36.

7    It should be pointed out, however, that while Islamist organisations may be inclusive and have expanded the space of women's activism, the message of these Islamist organisations and their impact has been to further push women into dependency on men.

8    On the role of women in the 2011 protests see, for example, Odeh 2014.

9    The recommendations from the NDC have to be incorporated in the new constitution.

"that required all NDC outcomes related to women's rights to be used as an advocacy and reference tool for others" (Shakir 2015: 6). Women also played an important role in the writing of the draft constitution. How women's achievements of the transition phase will actually play a role in post-war politics is unforeseeable at this point in time. Many women activists have voiced concern that women's gains would be the first to go in political compromises among those currently leading the war efforts on both sides.

# The effect of conflict on women's lives in Yemen

Conflict impacts all aspects of women's lives.[10] Regarding food security, women and girls "are more exposed to malnutrition because they have limited access to resources" (Oxfam et al. 2016: 3, 38-39). Significantly, gender-based violence (GBV) against women has risen. This is exacerbated by the absence of male family members due to fighting, injury or death, who would traditionally take responsibility for protecting women in their families (Adra 2016: 317). This is coupled with the ongoing weakening of respective social norms since the breakdown of the social and political order in 2011 (Heinze & Ahmed 2013: 14). According to data gathered by UNFPA, GBV and sexual harassment in homes and on the street has increased since the beginning of the hostilities (UNFPA 2016b; Oxfam et al. 2016: 11). Since 2011, women without social networks or the protection of communities, such as the *muhammasheen* [marginalised], refugees and migrants from outside Yemen as well as internally displaced persons (IDPs), have been particularly affected (Adra 2013: 2; Oxfam et al. 2016: 11; UNFPA 2016a). Moreover, early marriage cases have increased due to economic hardships as a result of the ongoing war and previous insecurities post-2011 (Adra 2013: 2; Oxfam 2015; Raghavan 2016; UNFPA 2016d). So has polygamy as dowry payments decrease "as parents are more determined to marry their girls" (Oxfam et al. 2016: 18).

Women's access to healthcare has been impacted by the conflict, particularly maternal healthcare. According to the United Nations, 14.1 million people (of a population of approximately 26 million) are in need of health assistance. A lack of access to reproductive health services, according to UNFPA (2016c), "can result in an estimated 1,000 maternal deaths among 68,000 pregnant women" thus putting the lives of 3.4 million women of reproductive age at risk. In a recent study implemented by Oxfam et al. (2016: 12-13) women (and men) with disabilities, i.e. physical disabilities, mental disorders or chronic illnesses, were identified by respondents as among the most vulnerable population groups.

Young women's and girls' access to education has been severely affected. In December 2015, Oxfam (2015) reported that 1.3 million girls were out of school either because the schools were unfit to reopen, had been destroyed during conflict or were hosting IDPs or because the security situation did not allow it. While this situation affects both boys and girls it is likely that the increase in tasks women have taken on during the conflict has also resulted in more girls being taken out of school in order to help with the household. With the destruction of university campuses in Ta'iz, the difficult security situation in Aden, and the problem of air strikes and lack of transportation in Sana'a, many male and female university students have had to discontinue their higher studies.

The current conflict has resulted in many women becoming the sole providers for their children and families; either because they have been widowed or because their husbands and fathers are away from home for the war. This has made life particularly difficult for women who have no broader family networks to sustain them (e.g. the *muhammasheen*, refugees and migrants from outside Yemen, and IDPs) (Adra 2013: 2; Oxfam et al. 2016: 11; The Organization for World Peace 2015). As well as the threat of violence in public spaces, the absence of men and 'male protection' has also resulted in a significant increase in the domestic workload of women who have to "try to scavenge around for food to feed their families, to walk for miles to access water, and to get by almost entirely without electricity" (OCHA 2015). This is exacerbated by the fact that many female-run businesses have been closed down as an effect of the war, more so than those run by men (UNDP 2015).

In the absence of men, many women have also taken on the role of first responders and humanitarian workers, contributing to the alleviation of their communities' suffering in a number of ways: "participating in search and rescue, assessing needs, coordinating distributions, using social media to spread information, organising hosting arrangements and documenting human rights abuses, among many others" (OCHA 2015; see also Oxfam et al. 2016), thus expanding women's roles. According to recent estimates "30 per cent of displaced women may now be heading their families" (Oxfam et al. 2016: 10).[11] While some women have reported a sense of empowerment as a result of these obligations, many also felt burdened by the

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[10]  Sex segregated data from 2016 according to humanitarian clusters can be accessed at OCHA Yemen 2016: 10.

[11]  According to statistics from 2013, about 92 per cent of Yemen households in pre-war conditions were headed by men (Oxfam et al. 2016: 7).

responsibilities laid on them: "'Everything is on the head of women because most men are away fighting […]. The women are everything and everything is on them'" (OCHA 2015).

Oxfam et al.'s (2016:15) recent report also notes that in some communities the conflict has brought about "some positive changes in the roles and responsibilities of women and men as a direct consequence of the prolonged conflict, including changing perceptions of 'appropriate' behaviour or work for men and women." Men reported to have taken on previously female tasks of getting firewood and water after the war forced them to stay at home and opened their eyes to the difficulties women were facing in their daily chores. Also, according to the report (ibid.), "there is also an increased openness to women engaging in professions that used to be considered 'shameful' (such as butchers, barbers, or chicken sellers) and were associated only with marginalised groups." Such pragmatic adaptations to the current conflict should not necessarily be seen as an indicator of long-term social change, however. So far, there are no indications that the general ideal of the secluded woman (see section below) has faded away.

## Social norms governing women's activism in Yemen

Women's role and political participation can be said to be influenced by two opposing yet often coexistent cultural phenomena in Yemen: firstly, a conservative and widespread perspective that accrues to women the role of 'interior minister' in the family and to men the role of 'exterior minister' and thus emphasises the latter's 'natural role' in public life. The second is an "egalitarian ethic" (Adra 2016: 316) particularly among Yemeni tribes, a traditional role of women in the local economy in rural areas, and "Yemeni notions of honour and men's respect for and attachment to their mothers and sisters" (ibid.). This results in an openness of men and women towards female leaders and a pragmatic acceptance of the importance of women for society.

The first strand of discourse assigns to women particular importance for home and family, while men are seen to represent the family towards the rest of society, who protect it and its honour and provide for its members. Here, women are honoured for the important role they have in raising the next generation and for providing a comfortable home for the men of the family. They require protection not only because the honour of the family is directly linked with their behaviour (a woman is *hurma*, i.e. sacrosanct and thus in need of protection), but also because they are considered to be physically as well as emotionally weak. With the onset of puberty, hormones are considered to influence women in such a way that they cannot "apprehend reality rationally" (vom Bruck 1996: 149) like men can. Moreover, the greater sexual attraction of the female body has the power to cause *fitna* [chaos], which is why the female body and female behaviour needs to be checked and controlled. Women are thus believed to be best placed under male authority and to have her father and brothers, and later her husband, take decisions on her behalf (vom Bruck 1996: 149–150).[12]

The notion that women require protection (and need to be controlled in their behaviour) has a direct impact on women's activism in Yemen.[13] Men feel pressured to control the behaviour of women in their household in such a way that it will not a) threaten the women's security; and b) disgrace the family in the eyes of their community (Ba Obaid 2006: 169). A woman who moves about freely in public spaces without male protection can easily gain a bad reputation (Saferworld 2013: i). This is particularly the case in urban areas, where the seclusion of women is the norm. In rural areas, in contrast, women move about much more freely, not only within their own communities, but also between communities and to and from local markets (Adra 2016: 317). Also, due to its different historical experience, independent working women in Aden are much more common and less in danger of 'losing reputation' than their female counterparts in Sana'a (as long as they return at a time that is considered appropriate, usually mid-afternoon; see Dahlgren 2010: 189).

The norms of seclusion, family honour, and the need to protect and control the 'weak', which tend to limit women's activism in Yemen, are often invoked in discourse as an argument of 'what is right', but are then often ignored in the face of pragmatic considerations. For most families in Yemen, every income counts and a working woman is generally accepted even if her sole devotion to family and household would be the preferred model closer to the professed norm. Adra (2013: 2) points out that rural women have necessarily always been included in the local economy as part of the work force, whereas it was the urban women of the elite whose families were able to afford their socially desirable seclusion. Seclusion in families with new-

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12    It is important to note that the lack of social potency is not only accrued to women, but also to men who 'lack descent'. This notion is particularly dominant in the highlands of Yemen and directly linked to the Zaydi-tribal social compact of the last millennium. People of descent were either those who could link descent to the prophet Mohammed or to those who were of tribal descent. Men of other backgrounds were considered to be lacking descent, to require tribal protection and were often also accrued 'feminine characteristics' such as a lack of rationality and an inability to control their emotions; see vom Bruck 1996.

13    On a positive note, this responsibility of men to protect women has resulted in the fact that direct violence against women (and sexual harassment) in the public space remains a rare phenomenon (Adra 2013: 2) in comparison to other countries of the Arab world, even though it has increased in the past years as the influence of elders on young men has decreased in certain areas due to the social upheavals and the interrelated weakening of social norms.

found wealth, however, as Carapico (1996: 192) points out in reference to the development of a cash economy in Yemen in the 1970s, resulted in the loss of women's economic autonomy, making them fully dependent on their husband. This also removed women from female networks, increasing physical and emotional abuse. In recent decades, the rising level of education among women has brought forth a small female educated elite in urban areas, who have joined civil society organisations, government institutions etc., and whose agency and assertiveness is generally accepted (Adra 2013: 2; Carapico 1996: 192).

# Previous inclusion and involvement

Regional and cultural differences in norms governing women's activism in Yemen mean that previous inclusion and involvement of women in peacebuilding varies from region to region. In the tribal highlands, for example, outside urban areas, cases relating to disputes that concern the community are not only discussed among men, but also among women in separate meetings nearby. Children channel back and forth between the male and female gatherings and update both sides on the deliberations of the other. In the evenings, families discuss the matter and the "next day, the men bring the opinions of their wives, mothers and sisters with them to the discussion" (Adra 2011: 3). Gingrich (1997), too, has found that women actively take part in mixed gender mediation in northwest Yemen, among the Munebbih, where he did his research. Al-Dawsari (2012: 10) mentions the existence of female tribal leaders in al-Jawf and Grabundzija (2010) has portrayed a female tribal mediator from al-Jawf. Respondents to Oxfam et al.'s recent study (2016: 47) moreover highlighted the role traditional female leaders "within extended families or the community" play "in providing consultation and representing women in a culturally appropriate manner in front of men in the family or community leaders." Women's participation in conflict mediation on the local level is considered "astonishing" (Shakir 2015: 28), particularly as this stands in stark contrast to the often repeated claim by Yemenis that women play no role in tribal mediation. These observations indicate that the rhetorical lip-service paid to existing norms does not necessarily reflect how people actually behave on a daily basis.

In addition to the daily, but informal involvement of women in conflict mediation in tribal areas of Yemen, female civil society activists have engaged in efforts relevant to the local population in urban areas. Few of these efforts, however, as Shakir (2015) points out in her assessment of the role of women in peacemaking in Yemen, conducted between December 2014 and April 2015, are directly related to peacebuilding: "While women's advocacy groups [...] are involved in conflict resolution and peacebuilding, their core work remains within the diverse sectors including development, women's human rights and humanitarian issues" (Shakir 2015: 6). She adds that "[i]t was difficult to identify organisations, projects or women's groups that call themselves peacebuilders. These organisations, projects and groups perform conflict resolution and/or peacebuilding work within a wide spectrum of other sectors such as women's empowerment, development, human rights, democracy and governance" (ibid.). The only projects that specifically addressed matters of peacebuilding and conflict resolution, which also aimed to include female actors mentioned in Shakir's report are those by Saferworld and Partners-Yemen (a project on 'Supporting Transitional Awareness and Reconciliation Techniques'). One reason for the lack of organisations that particularly address women's role in peacebuilding may be that no national frameworks based on UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1889 exist.

While women inside and outside the Yemeni Women Pact for Peace and Security – a group of female activists established in Larnaca with the help of the United Nations – continue to advocate for the inclusion of women in the peace talks as well as in all other peacebuilding efforts on the national and regional level (see Jarhum 2016; UN Women 2015), there remains a significant lack of knowledge. Knowledge gaps include: how to become active as women on the local level; data (e.g. on drivers of conflict on the local level, existing initiatives, needs, etc.); and efforts directed at monitoring, coordination and communication. The latter also relates to the fact that women who are active in groups like the Yemeni Women Pact for Peace and Security are often completely disconnected from women outside the urban areas. Efforts to bridge this gap and to feed local knowledge into their work are thus required. Shakir (2015: 26) also points out that the potential role of women in conflict prevention, based on "women's perspectives on tensions in social relations, their awareness of threats to personal, family and community security, their knowledge of the flow of small arms and light weapons through communities and their interpretation of extremism in local discourses" remains completely untapped.

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***About the project: Enhancing women's role in peace and security in Yemen***

This project aims to empower women activists and civil society organisations to engage in local peacebuilding processes and initiatives and raise awareness of women's peace and security concerns. Qualitative research will be conducted in four locations to better understand the impacts of conflict on women and the roles women are playing in peacebuilding at a local level. Building on the research findings and community mapping assessments, the project will establish women, peace and security action groups and support the groups to design and implement their own initiatives and raise awareness among communities and local/national authorities of women's security concerns and the role that women can play in peacebuilding processes. It is jointly funded by the European Union and Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (N.W.O.).

***About CARPO***

CARPO was founded in 2014 by Germany-based academics trained in the fields of Near and Middle Eastern Studies, Political Science and Social Anthropology. Its work is situated at the nexus of research, consultancy and exchange with a focus on implementing projects in close cooperation and partnership with stakeholders in the Orient. The researchers in CARPO's network believe that a prosperous and peaceful future for the region can best be achieved through inclusive policy-making and economic investment that engages the creative and resourceful potential of all relevant actors. Therefore, CARPO opens enduring channels for interactive knowledge transfer between academics, citizens, entrepreneurs, and policymakers.

www.carpo-bonn.org

***About Saferworld***

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. With programmes in nearly 20 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and Europe, we work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. We believe that everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from insecurity and violent conflict.

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