

SHAMING WOMEN TO SHAME MEN: A CASE STUDY OF THE HOUTHIS AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HONOR CULTURE IN YEMEN AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN THE YEMENI CIVIL WAR

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Abstract

The factors that influence an armed group's use of sexual violence against women during times of conflict is a much studied area due to the prevalence of the phenomenon, and the significant implications it has for human rights. Studies on the subject have generally contended that cultural attributes and practices present during peacetime play a significant role in determining whether or not an armed group will incorporate sexual violence as a part of their strategy. A relatively under-researched cultural practice that could influence the use of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) is the presence and importance of honor culture in a society experiencing conflict. This article seeks to expand on the understanding of its influence by analyzing the relationship between honor culture in a society and how its characteristics influence the groups operating within it to use sexual violence against women as part of their strategy, using examples of female victims of CRSV carried out by the Houthis in Yemen. It concludes that the honor culture of the society the group operates within influenced them to use more CRSV. This understanding has significant implications for policymakers and academics in predicting the severity of sexual violence that might occur in a given conflict happening in an honor-based culture.

Keywords: *sexual violence, intrastate war, women, Middle East, honor*

1 INTRODUCTION

There have been several civil wars in Yemen's history, but this paper will focus on the most recent one. The current Yemeni Civil War has been ongoing since 2014, with several temporary ceasefires and attempts at peace talks. The major actors in the conflict include the Houthis (the main focus of this paper), a rebel group originating in Yemen and partially supported by Iran; the official government of Yemen, which is supported by Saudi Arabia and formerly the United States; and the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which is supported by the United Arab Emirates (UAE)¹. Other, more minor actors with significantly less influence than the three main groups include several Islamist groups, such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Yemeni branch of the Islamic State (IS, commonly referred to as ISIS). The map of Yemen displays the areas of control of the STC, the official government of Yemen, the Houthis, and AQAP².

The Houthis, whose official name is Ansar Allah, are an Islamist armed group with control over much of Northern Yemen. Their goal is to raise the Houthi clan and its other tribal allies to be the preeminent governmental power in the country and to implement their version of an Islamic state³. This is a way for the Houthis to justify their rule using Islam and to shape the laws of the country to fit their needs. This would likely include the continued use of sexual violence against women by the group in order to maintain power. They currently control Yemen's former capital Sana'a and several important ports⁴. The region under Houthi control is cut off from the international community.

The official government of Yemen is backed by Saudi Arabia, with former support from both the UAE and the United States. The international community is divided on supporting either the official government of Yemen or the STC, although most of the world, including the United Nations⁵, recognizes the official Yemeni government as the legal authority in the country.



The STC has deep roots in Yemen's history. Yemen was previously divided into two countries, North Yemen and South Yemen⁴. The STC, supported by the UAE, is seeking to set up a government in control of South Yemen and separate from North Yemen to once again form two separate states.

Currently, the main conflict is between the Houthis and the two other actors, the STC and the official Yemeni government. The Houthis are also using force against civilians to cement their power over the population within their area of military control in the North. The sexual violence committed by the Houthis against civilians will be the main focus of analysis in this paper.

Since the beginning of the Yemeni Civil War in 2014 thousands of women have been held in Houthi prisons and detention centers without legal justification, and while being detained have experienced numerous forms of violence and violations of their human rights.

Enas Muhammed is a 22-year-old woman from an area of Yemen currently under Houthi control. The daughter of a local tribal leader, she was arrested by the Houthis under the pretext that she had engaged in prostitution and held in one of the group's many political prisons for several months. While detained, she was the victim of rape, beatings, starvation, and other heinous methods of torture, including receiving electric shocks. She was eventually released after the Houthis had accomplished their goal of extorting her father⁶.

Enas's story is devastating, but unfortunately, situa-

tions like it are not uncommon in the Houthi-controlled regions of Yemen. Statistics for the number of women and girls who have been killed or imprisoned by the Houthis are difficult to gather due to the secrecy of Houthi prisons, the routine imprisonment of journalists and activists, and the general instability of the region. However, according to the collective documentation of three Yemen-based human rights organizations, at least 1,181 women were detained by the Houthis in only the three years of the conflict between December 2017 and December 2020, and 293 of them were under the age of 18⁶. However, the actual number of detained women is likely much higher due to a lack of transparent reporting, and even the official number only includes detainees from three years out of the almost nine years of the conflict.

The implications of the Houthis' use of sexual violence against Yemeni women play a vital role in their strategy in the civil war, with the group even having a unit dedicated specifically to targeting women⁷. This opens up the question of why sexual violence against women is so important to the Houthis as a non-state armed group, compared to other similar actors who do not always use such tactics⁸, especially not as frequently as the Houthis do. This question of why a group might or might not choose to use sexual violence against women as a war strategy has become increasingly relevant in the academic literature.

This study brings to light a factor that heavily in-

fluences the Houthis' decision to use sexual violence against women: the fact that the group is operating within an honor-based society. Honor-based societies place extreme importance on the sexual purity and overall honor of females, which determine the reputation and public participation of the entire family⁹. This makes attacks against women's sexual purity extremely effective for armed groups operating within a society that follows such an honor culture, such as the Houthis in Yemen.

The principal finding of this study is that, based on an analysis of the Houthis in Yemen, non-state armed groups that are operating within an honor-based society will incorporate sexual violence against women as a part of their war strategy. Further, this study finds that the reason for this relationship is that in an honor-based society, sexual violence is especially devastating and impacts not just the victims but their families and communities as well, damaging both their economic and social viability.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Several academic articles in the realm of gender and conflict studies have focused on the motivations behind non-state groups that commit violence against women. Before considering the contributions of those studies, it is important to first consider the meanings of the terms sexual violence and CRSV within the current literature.

The definition of sexual violence varies significantly from article to article, but in general, the term includes rape, sexual assault, genital mutilation, sexual torture, sexual slavery, forced nudity, and sexual acts under coercion and can include all genders^{8;10}. However, in the context of this study, sexual violence against women is focused on.

CRSV similarly has no single agreed-upon definition and is a much more recently adopted term within gender and conflict studies. The definition accepted by most scholars is that CRSV includes all sexual violence committed by an armed actor during or immediately after a time of conflict¹¹. This includes sexual violence committed against both civilians and combatants.

The consensus is that there is no singular factor that explains whether a group will or will not use sexual violence, either against civilians or combatants. Instead, a multitude of factors influence the presence, prevalence, and types of CRSV that occur in each case⁸. However, some scholars, especially earlier on in the evolution of conflict studies, contended that whether or not a group will use sexual violence is determined primarily by its opportunity to and its ability to use it as a strategic weapon¹¹. This stance ignores the multitude of factors within every conflict that contribute to whether that opportunity and strategic ability are realized. This study seeks to move beyond the assumption that all armed

groups will use violence if they have the ability to and consider an aspect of the specific context that influences an armed group's motivation for the use of sexual violence.

It is generally recognized in the literature that the culture in which the conflict takes place impacts the characteristics (presence, prevalence, and types) of CRSV. Specifically, the cultural attitudes surrounding sexual violence that exist during peacetime don't simply disappear at the outbreak of conflict. They, instead, are intensified and carried out on a larger scale by the actors in the conflict^{12;8}. Depending on the specific cultural attitude towards sexual violence, its use during wartime will be received differently. If a culture has taboos against sexual violence, then it is less likely to be prevalent during conflict⁸. The literature is still exploring how the various cultural attitudes that support sexual violence impact its use during conflict. Several studies have examined specific case studies on culture and CRSV, and some trends have been extrapolated. These include issues of ethnicity¹³, patriarchy¹², and as a part of the intentional genocide of a specific population¹⁴.

Whether due to cultural or other factors, sexual violence has been weaponized for a variety of aims within the context of conflict, including intrastate conflict. As in the trends mentioned above, these include sexual violence as a weapon of ethnic cleansing, such as targeting women of a certain minority group for sexual violence¹⁴ and sexual violence as a reinforcement of the patriarchal structure of a society in order to prevent the full and equal participation of women in a conflict or resistance¹². This weaponization of sexual violence against women makes the study of the motivations behind it, and therefore the likelihood that an armed group will use it, incredibly relevant.

When considering the impacts of culture on the characteristics of CRSV, it is important to keep in mind whether the cultural values being discussed are held by either the leaders of the armed group, the combatants writ large, or both. This is true because combatant beliefs impact their actions and how closely they follow the orders of their leaders based on whether they align with their viewpoints¹⁵. So, if a large proportion of the combatants hold a given cultural value that is affected by sexual violence, then it is more likely to impact the use of sexual violence.

A largely unexplored cultural attitude that involves support for sexual violence is the presence of honor culture in society. The conclusion in the current literature is that in a culture where women are viewed both as in a separate sphere from men and as symbols of their honor, then armed groups acting within that culture are more likely to incorporate sexual violence into their strategy¹⁶. However, prominent gender and conflict studies scholar Wood criticizes this hypothesis as

unconfirmed because the current studies neglect to address whether the cultural belief of women as honor symbols is held by the combatants and the society they operate within and then weaponized or if the sexual violence is purely a strategy formulated by the leaders and then instructed to the combatants⁸. The beliefs of the citizens and local combatants and why they choose to carry out sexual violence and incorporate it into their methods is a critical aspect to consider when confirming the hypothesis that armed groups acting within an honor-based culture are more likely to utilize sexual violence as a part of their war strategy.

This study seeks to use a case study of Yemen, where the cultural view of women is largely influenced by beliefs about honor, to examine how honor culture affects the characteristics of CRSV in the Yemeni Civil War. It will include a qualitative examination of the local combatant beliefs of women within honor culture in order to confirm the hypothesis that combatants view women as honor symbols, and then analyze how this influences their use of sexual violence, along with the types of and prevalence of CRSV, rather than just focusing on the correlation between honor culture and the presence of sexual violence. This will add a new, culturally informed dimension to the broader literature on the use of sexual violence during conflict and, therefore, will assist in predicting whether CRSV will be prevalent in a given case and what the characteristics of that sexual violence might be.

3 METHODOLOGY

This article uses the case study of Yemen as its focus to analyze the impact of honor culture on the weaponization of sexual violence against women as a war strategy for non-state armed groups. Yemen was chosen for several reasons. First, it has an honor-based culture and an ongoing conflict in which a non-state armed group systematically uses violence against women. Second, it has one of the most deeply entrenched and conservative honor cultures in the world^{17;18;19}. As a mostly rural, underdeveloped, and politically unstable country, it has all of the factors that make a society more likely to prioritize honor culture values and norms above government laws^{17;18}. Because the dynamics of honor culture are present in everyday Yemeni actions, the impact of those dynamics on war is extremely evident, making Yemen an excellent focus for this article.

Incidents of actual or perceived sexual violence against women committed by the Houthis were analyzed to consider how occurring within an honor-based society affected the Houthis choice to use that sexual violence as a part of their strategy, and its degree of effectiveness. Perceived incidents of violence were included due to the relevance of instances when the Houthis claimed to have enacted sexual violence

against a woman without actually having done it. The incidents came mainly from the United Nations Human Rights Council reports of violations of human rights in Yemen. Explanations of the several occurrences of violence were listed in the report in a direct, factual manner, with almost all of the citations within the report regarding the details of the violence listed as Confidential Sources on File. This makes the United Nations the nearest known source for most of this study's information regarding examples of sexual violence in Yemen committed by the Houthis. However, it is likely that those sources are derived at least in part from on-the-ground reporting from Yemen.

4 ANALYSIS

4.1 Honor Culture in Yemen

Before analyzing the impact of honor culture on instances of CRSV against women in the Houthi controlled areas of Yemen, it is important to consider the characteristics of those honor-based values in general and in Yemen in particular. Honor culture manifests and is practiced differently depending on the broader culture that it operates within and its specific historical development, but it has a few common characteristics across different societies. These include a patriarchal social structure, an emphasis on reputation, the belief in the importance of women's sexual purity (and the justification of violence or even homicide against women whose sexual purity is believed to have been violated, regardless of whether it actually was), and the connection of individual honor to family honor and often to tribal honor¹⁸. Each of these practices will be elaborated on in the context of how the case study of Yemen experiences them and how those practices manifest in the current Yemeni Civil War.

Yemen has a strong tribal identity²⁰, in which the honor of the families in a tribe determine the honor of that tribe. Within a family, the patriarch ensures the honor of every member, thus the collective family. The women in the family are regarded as property to trade through marriage, and in order for the trade to occur, their virginity and reputation as being sexually pure must be intact. These attributes of women as property based on their sexual purity make them symbols of honor, representing the reputation of the family and the reputation of their tribe⁹.

When a woman's sexual purity is believed to have been violated to the extent that her status as an honor symbol jeopardizes her family, the patriarch of her family is expected to enact violence upon her in order to preserve the family's honor¹⁸. That violence can take the form of genital mutilation, forced early marriage (often to the rapist in the case of rape), forced suicide, or murder, known in this context as an honor killing¹⁷.

These forms of gendered violence are intended to restore the honor of the family, and while almost always illegal, are often overlooked by the societies they occur in frequently⁹, including Yemen because honor culture is so ingrained, and because the punishments often occur in more private settings. In Yemen specifically, even if an honor killing is reported to the authorities (which is already incredibly unlikely due to the reasons mentioned above, the political instability, and lack of governance in the region) and criminal action is taken against the person who committed the murder, Yemen's legal system reduces the sentence if the murder was committed by a man against his female relative and in the name of honor²¹. This means that Yemen's honor culture is a social construct and is also legally cemented in the country's government and legal systems.

When family or tribe honor is considered to have been violated by the larger society (for example, before the honor punishment/crime against a sexually impure woman in the family is enacted, or if another violation of honor has occurred), then their access to participation in the public sphere is diminished⁹. Honor is needed for a group to be recognized in public life and to be able to engage in business and social life. Because of the serious repercussions caused by a violation of honor, families place significant pressure on women to maintain their reputation and sexual purity due to their role as honor symbols and how significantly they can damage the social standing and economic viability of the family.

It is difficult to get an accurate number of honor killings or honor crimes for a given time or region because they often go unreported due to their private nature and because communities tend to hide them from authorities. As a result, reported numbers are considered to be an underestimate. Given that, there are some statistics regarding the prevalence of honor crimes. In 1997, there were 400 honor killings (this does not include nonlethal honor crimes) in Yemen, making the country have one of the highest rates of honor crimes¹⁹. This makes Yemen an excellent case study for researching how the influence and presence of an honor culture results in the use of sexual violence as a war strategy.

4.2 Sexual Violence Committed by the Houthis and the Influence of Honor Culture

The Houthis are well known within the international community for their routine violations of human rights and use of excessive violence, including sexual violence. Houthi forces regularly engage the local civilian populations, especially protestors and human rights activists, and are targeted for kidnapping, violence, coercion, or arrest²¹. In addition to civilians, the Houthis target and label women as enemies and thus subject women to violence. However, the group often uses a specific branch of their military force to enact violence against women,

especially in public areas, like at protests and demonstrations. The entirely female military branch is known as the Zainabiyats. They routinely use severe methods of force against women, including beating, harassing, facilitating rape, kidnapping, and other forms of violence^{7,6}. The group also has roles in guarding female prisoners of the Houthis and ensuring their compliance. Thus, when referring to violence against women, it is likely that the Houthi Zainabiyat were the perpetrators.

Notably, almost all Houthi combatants are from Yemen. Their core goals revolve around the belief that the Houthi tribes are the rightful rulers of their region of Yemen and, as is increasingly becoming the case, the entirety of the country³. Most members are either part of the original Houthi family, Houthi tribes, or other nearby tribes and clans they have created alliances with. Because of their unique makeup, the Houthis hold deeply rooted Yemeni values; thus, they are well aware of the cultural beliefs they are operating within, including the importance placed on values like honor, reputation, family, community, and women's sexual purity, and how their actions and strategies will culturally impact their Yemeni enemies through violations of honor.

These strategies include detaining women to taint their honor, using socially condemned honor violations as excuses to imprison female activists, and targeting specific women for CRSV in order to induce shame and ostracization by their male family members.

4.2.1 Post Detainment and Honor

An analysis of the Houthis' imprisonment of women, along with how and why they release those women from detainment, reveals that honor culture influences the Houthis to arrest more women in order to damage their reputation of honor, which inflicts significant damage to their families and communities.

A major tactic the Houthis use to control the civilian population and allegedly combat enemy infiltration includes detaining protestors and transferring them to prisons, police stations, or other areas for interrogation; this often results in the use of sexual violence, torture, and threats²¹. When women are detained in this manner, the Houthis use Yemen's honor culture to their advantage. The phenomenon is explained by an example of a 2018 protest that resulted in the Houthis detaining female protestors.

On October 6, 2018, a protest at the University of Sana'a, which is under Houthi control, included both male and female protestors and was responded to by a large force of both male Houthi soldiers and female Houthi Zainabiyat soldiers. The soldiers deployed the use of verbal threats and physical violence before forcing between 30 and 50 female protestors to a separate location for interrogation. In this specific case, the authorities released the protestors-turned-prisoners after their interrogation on the condition that they would

cease participation in future protests and be collected by their adult male authority figure²¹. These conditions align with Yemeni society, which legally guarantees that men have guardianship over women²¹. There is evidence that sexual violence occurred against some of the detainees on that day⁶. Given how common the Houthis' use of sexual violence against prisoners is, local civilians likely speculated that it was employed.

The Houthis' requirement for a male relative to pick up their female relative should be especially noted. Requiring the male relative to pick up their female relative, whom they have authority over, ensures that the man is informed of the woman's political actions and knows she was detained and possibly had sexual violence enacted against her. In addition, because the male relative visited the detainment area, his reputation, along with the family and community's reputation, is called into question.

Regardless of whether a woman actually engaged in a sexual act and if it was consensual or not, her family's honor is also called into question; as a result, the family's ability to engage in the public sphere and remain economically stable is at risk⁹. So, by involving a female detainee's male relative, the Houthis are using Yemen's honor culture to punish not just female protesters but their entire families and even communities. This makes sexual violence against women, and even just the threat of it, a viable control strategy for the Houthis or any armed group acting within an honor culture-based society.

A female detainee's actions exemplify the effectiveness of the Houthis' control strategy. Her husband was her male authority figure, so he was expected to pick her up from where she was detained. However, the woman would not contact him to get her because she knew that if he came, his reputation would suffer²¹. The dynamics of Yemen's honor culture clearly play out in this case, with the woman recognizing the threat to her family due to her tarnished reputation from the Houthis' detainment.

This situation was not the only one of its kind. Between December 2017 and December 2020, the Houthis detained at least 292 female activists and 246 female humanitarian workers, but these numbers are likely significant understatements and include documented detainments for only three of the war's nine years⁶. The Houthis practice of imprisoning female protesters and activists is routine⁷. Because the male relative is negatively impacted, she is highly discouraged from future participation in political action due to the danger imprisonment presents as a woman in an honor-based society. This makes Yemen's honor culture and its view on sexual violence a key factor in the Houthis' strategy of controlling civilian women by imprisoning women and tarnishing their reputation or sexual purity. Such a strategy would not be as effective if employed in a

society that does not value the outward perception of sexual purity and its vitality to family honor and social standing. This supports the supposition that the perceptions of sexual violence within honor culture have influenced the Houthis' strategy to include more violence against women due to its unique effectiveness within an honor-based society.

4.2.2 Honor as a Justification for Imprisonment

The pattern of Houthi arrests of female activists and their choice to falsely charge them frequently with crimes like prostitution (which are highly stigmatized in honor-based societies) demonstrates that honor culture makes women uniquely vulnerable to armed groups because the culture provides a strategy for the group to illegally hold women who go against them with little to no local pushback.

Houthi violence against people associated with human rights organizations or activism often includes imprisonment and torture, where the detainee is held illegally without any legitimate criminal charges. Detainees have included both men and women, sometimes along with their family members. When women are detained for their political actions or associations, the Houthis often cite charges of prostitution to give the imprisonment a legal basis²¹. However, by charging female prisoners with heavily stigmatized crimes like prostitution, they call her honor into question. Despite the fabricated charges, in Yemen's honor culture, even the perception of having a tainted honor is dangerous for her family¹⁸. Due to the potential backlash to the family of a woman whose sexual purity, and therefore honor, is ruined, the Houthis' charge of prostitution makes it almost impossible for the family or community to come to her assistance in trying to have her released. If they did so, they would violate the societal norm that a woman whose honor is tainted should be punished in order to redeem her family so that they can maintain their social standing.

The Houthis' use of prostitution charges against women, in particular, is an often-used tactic for them. In fact, in 2019 alone, at least 400 women were arrested by the Houthis on charges of prostitution⁶. This number was released by the Houthis as an accomplishment for the group. Like other statistics of violence in Yemen, these numbers are an underestimation of reality. In this case, the numbers only include arrests from one of the nine years of the conflict. Additionally, most of those women who were charged with prostitution were identified by local Yemeni human rights organizations as political activists who took action against the Houthis.

In a non-honor-based society, charges of prostitution against illegally imprisoned women would not hold much weight and could potentially be overturned. But in an honor-based society, prostitution is a very serious crime and is highly unlikely to be disputed by citi-

zens or the detainee's family. Even activists in Yemen face the danger of being imprisoned if they dispute the charges^{7,21}. Illegally holding political prisoners, especially women, is such a viable and frequently used strategy as it offers a way for the Houthis to effectively discourage women from initially getting involved in activism due to the potential damage that would be caused to their families if they were arrested. This reduces the amount of public opposition that the group receives.

4.2.3 Targeting Specific Women to Shame Men

The Houthis' choice to enact sexual violence against specifically chosen women, who had no previous political involvement, demonstrates a specific strategy used to hurt men whom they view as their enemies. This is because by sexually violating the honor of a woman, the Houthis use characteristics of the honor-based society to reinforce shame on the male guardian.

In Yemen and many other countries that consider women to be symbols of family honor, women will always have a male guardian or authority figure in their lives. Whether their father, husband, or brother, this guardian has legal control over the woman and can restrict her ability to travel or leave the house at all, and can potentially enact honor crimes against her if he deems it necessary²¹. As a woman's guardian, a man views it as his duty to protect her from harm. This often manifests as male guardians heavily regulating what women and girls are permitted to do, including where they can go and who they can talk to, in order to prevent her honor from being violated. If her honor is violated by another man (either by an attack against her or of her own volition), then her guardian is considered to have shamefully failed to protect and properly regulate her. Thus it is not only the woman but the guardian and the rest of his family whose honor is diminished²¹. With his diminished honor inherently comes public shame and a reduced ability to engage in his community's business dealings.

Intense pressure is put on men who are the guardians of Yemeni women to prevent these women from being sexually violated. Because of this, when the Houthis need to shame or damage the social standing of a man, targeting one of his female relatives for sexual violence is a viable method to inflict significant harm on him. This makes Yemeni women incredibly vulnerable to CRSV due to the aspects of honor culture that connect their sexual purity to the livelihood of their male relatives. In this way, women merely become objects of a war strategy. They also become ways for the armed group to target specific men whom they view as enemies.

The story of Enas Muhammed in the introduction of this article is an excellent example of this phenomenon. Enas is the daughter of a Sheik (a local tribal leader) liv-

ing in a Houthi-controlled area that resisted the group. Enas had never been involved in politics or actions against the Houthis. In order to target her father, the group kidnapped and then illegally imprisoned, tortured, and raped her⁶. The Houthis employed this strategy because the honor culture they were operating within made it an effective option. Enas's father's honor, and therefore social standing, was connected to her sexual purity because they live in an honor-based society, so targeting her for sexual violence did a significant amount of damage to him. Because his daughter, who is under his guardianship and represents his honor, had her honor tainted by another man, he likely endured shame and ostracization within his community, especially considering that he is a local leader.

Enas' situation demonstrates the effectiveness of the Houthis' strategy of using sexual violence against women to shame and target their male family members, particularly their guardians. Her case is not the only example of the Houthis intentionally targeting a woman for sexual violence to harm her male guardian. Multiple women have been kidnapped and made victims of rape, imprisonment, and torture so that the Houthis could inflict damage on their male relatives²¹. This makes women incredibly vulnerable to violence in the region, even if they are never involved in politics or other aspects of the conflict, such as defying the Houthis.

This strategy would not be nearly as effective in a non-honor-based society and might not even be employed. It also might not be recognized by the combatants as an effective strategy if these combatants did not hold honor-based values. But the Houthis do, which furthers the conclusion that honor culture makes CRSV against women more likely.

The larger goal of the Houthis as a non-state armed group is to gain control of Yemen. As a result, a central part of their strategy must be to reduce opposition to their rule. Employing CRSV accomplishes this by threatening imprisonment to deter opposition from women, actually imprisoning female opposition members under the guise of honor crimes, and targeting specific women for violence in order to damage the reputation of their male relatives who oppose the Houthis.

5 CONCLUSION

When armed groups are acting within an honor-based society, it is highly likely that they will incorporate systematic sexual violence against women as a part of their war strategy. This article has demonstrated this relationship using information from the existing literature on CRSV and armed group motivations, along with a case study of the non-state armed group, the Houthis, acting within Northern Yemen as a part of the Yemeni Civil War. The case study of Yemen demonstrated that within the context of the country's deeply entrenched honor

culture, where the sexual purity of females determines their family's social standing¹⁹, the armed group acting within the honor-based society used this knowledge to target women for sexual violence to inflict damage on her guardian, family, and community. Ultimately, when combatants have honor-based values and operate within an honor culture, it makes sexual violence against women more likely to occur during times of conflict. This conclusion is drawn through the analysis of three examples of the impacts of honor culture on the Houthis' war strategy and systematic use of sexual violence. First, the Houthis detained activist women and then directly involved their male family members in order to shame their families and prevent future political action by the women. Second, the Houthis used highly stigmatized charges, such as prostitution, in order to imprison women for significant lengths of time and prevent their communities or families from coming to their aid. Finally, the Houthis targeted the female family members of their male enemies to inflict harm on them by reducing their access to public and economic participation by diminishing their family's honor.

Understanding that honor culture influences a non-state armed group's decision to incorporate sexual violence against women as a part of their war strategy has several implications for future action. It could help academics, policymakers, non-governmental and inter-governmental organizations, other countries, and other actors in international politics predict if high levels of CRSV will be a concern in potential future global conflicts. This could be done by gaining an on-the-ground understanding of the presence of honor culture in an area experiencing conflicts involving a non-state armed group. If both of those factors are present, then groups can prepare for the high likelihood that any non-state armed groups involved will use sexual violence as a part of their strategy.

This logic could also be applied to present conflicts that have both non-state actors and an honor culture, such as Syria in the Syrian Civil War^{9;19}, Sudan in its current insurgency²², or Palestine in the Israel-Gaza War^{17;18}. Applying this article's results to other societies could further confirm its claims because honor culture manifests many similarities across broader cultures⁹. However, some differences occur, including the different levels of importance placed on women's honor and the ramifications for violations of honor¹⁹. Those differences in other potential case studies could help confirm that this article's conclusion is relevant to Yemen but to honor-based societies in general.

Future research could also examine post-civil war Yemen to determine if the entrenchment of honor culture in Yemeni society was increased or decreased by the Houthis' co-optation as part of their methods of CRSV.

The prevalence of honor cultures in underdeveloped

and politically unstable areas makes studying the impact of honor culture on conflict and CRSV incredibly relevant to the academic literature on conflict studies, as well as for policymakers and other actors^{17;18}.

6 LIMITATIONS

6.1 Research Limitations

Several factors prevent the conclusions of this study from being accepted with complete certainty. These include both limitations to the research process and personal limitations and biases. Beginning with research limitations, the choice of Yemen as the basis of this study introduced some challenges. Yemen was selected in part because it is currently undergoing the Yemeni Civil War, but because it is an active war zone, reporting from the area is spotty and unreliable. This made finding and using local sources difficult. Trusting international sources was also not entirely feasible. Academic articles and United Nations reports were used for the majority of the study's information.

Another factor that makes finding local sources difficult is the Houthis' censoring of media in their areas of control. Journalists who go against the group are often imprisoned or killed²¹, and the average citizen in Yemen only has access to Houthi-sponsored news stations, newspapers, or websites²³. Victims of the Houthis various forms of violence, especially sexual violence, rarely come forward due to the fear of backlash from the group or damage to their honor and reputation²¹. This means that many of the victims' stories are unavailable, so the statistics are likely understatements of the actual number of victims and instances of violence.

The choice to use a case study as the method of analysis also means that the conclusions of this paper can only be applied with certainty to Yemen. However, as explained in the above methodology section, Yemen as a case study has implications that can apply to any honor-based society currently experiencing a conflict. By using other case studies or quantitative rather than qualitative methods, further research can confirm the conclusions and its relevant application. Within potential future studies of honor culture or other case studies of CRSV, another complication arises, which is that there is no single, universally agreed-upon definition of what constitutes sexual violence or CRSV. This means that each contributor to the study of the relationship between honor culture and CRSV will have their own definition of CRSV and could reach a different conclusion depending on the types of violence included in their specific definition. However, this study used broad definitions of the debated terms sexual violence and CRSV. These definitions include types of violence such as rape, sexual assault, genital mutilation, sexual torture, sexual slavery, forced nudity, and sexual acts

under coercion, which are commonly recognized as sexual violence within the current literature.

6.2 Personal Limitations

I could not travel to Yemen to conduct interviews as a part of this study due to safety concerns and financial barriers. A lack of conducted interviews, similar to the lack of local sources, introduces a potential bias towards Western reporting. However, conducting interviews with victims of sexual violence can be harmful and ineffective and introduce other issues to a study²⁴. Therefore, the lack of direct statements by victims of sexual violence is viewed as a major barrier to the analysis and conclusions of this study. In addition, several accounts of victims were reported by relevant agencies such as the United Nations and local Yemeni human rights organizations, so their perspectives were still used for the analysis and played a vital role in it. One important example of this was the account included about the imprisonment and consequent abuses committed by the Houthis against a young Yemeni woman named Enas Muhammed. The information on the incident and the victim's account was from a report on violence against women in Yemen that was written and published as a collaborative work by three human rights organizations founded and operating in Yemen⁶. The published English version was used for research, an exception to the aforementioned issue of being limited to United Nation accounts.

7 EDITOR'S NOTES

This article was peer-reviewed.

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