

Assassination of *Iftihan Al-Mashhari* and Its Implications for Women and the Rule of Law in Yemen



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Background

Amid the international community's preparations to commemorate the **25th Anniversary of the Adoption of the UNSCR 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security**, which established an international framework to protect women and ensure their active participation in peace processes and decision-making, recent developments in Yemen reveal a profound disconnect between international commitments and the reality on the ground. This gap was underscored by the assassination of *Iftihan Al-Mashhari*, Director of the Cleaning and Improvement Fund in the city of Taiz, who was killed on 18 September 2025 while performing her official duties.

According to verified testimonies and field sources, the incident occurred in broad daylight and was executed in a highly organized manner. Four armed men on motorcycles participated in the attack: one opened fire, discharging multiple rounds directly at the victim's head and face, while the others surrounded her vehicle to prevent any attempt at intervention or rescue. The precision and coordination of the operation indicate a high degree of planning, confirming that this was not an isolated act of violence but a deliberate, targeted assassination intended to convey symbolic messages that extend beyond the individual victim, striking at women in leadership positions and their participation in public life.

The repercussions of the assassination extend well beyond the personal loss of a dedicated public servant. It conveyed a broad message of intimidation to women engaged in both public affairs and the private sector. As a result, fear and anxiety have grown among women in Taiz and Marib, prompting many to reduce or even withdraw from public participation. Such developments risk causing significant setbacks to community empowerment and local development efforts.

Beyond its immediate impact, the assassination constitutes an unprecedented breach of Yemen's long-standing customs and traditions, which have historically prohibited the targeting of women, even in times of conflict. It signals the erosion of community-based protection mechanisms and heightens risks to social cohesion, with grave implications for both immediate stability and longer-term peace.

Against this backdrop, there is an urgent need for a comprehensive and coordinated response that brings together local and international efforts to safeguard women and strengthen the rule of law, consistent with the objectives pursued by the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda over the past twenty-five years.

Incident Overview

The assassination of Iftihan Al-Mashhari took place in the vicinity of the Kalaba, Al-Rawdah, and Asifra neighborhoods, areas classified as low-governance zones due to the limited presence of state institutions and the extensive influence of armed groups operating beyond state control. These conditions created an environment conducive to organized criminal activity, with little capacity for rapid intervention and no immediate accountability mechanisms in place. According to field testimonies, Al-Mashhari was near her workplace at the time of the attack, monitoring routine operations. The location had not been adequately secured, despite earlier warnings and formal requests for protective measures. The assassination was preceded by a series of direct threats against her, along with armed assaults on her office, which was later relocated to a less secure area, further increasing her exposure and vulnerability to targeted violence.

Local reports indicated that these threats were linked to individuals affiliated with certain military units, including the 170th Brigade, the 17th Brigade, and the 20th Brigade. Nevertheless, the measures taken by the authorities remained temporary and insufficient, often contingent on financial payments, practices widely regarded as inadequate and inconsistent with professional standards.

Al-Mashhari was also subjected to a series of coercive administrative measures, including the confiscation of her previous office through decisions considered unjustified, despite her having personally financed and equipped it.

At a later stage, additional offices under her authority were seized, and her current workplace was relocated to an insecure area under the control of armed groups, further heightening her vulnerability and facilitating her targeting. In parallel, her powers were curtailed and several responsibilities were withdrawn by dominant military factions, a step that deepened her professional and political isolation.

Despite these pressures, Al-Mashhari continued her work and managed to equip the city of Taiz with modern sanitation and waste management machinery. She also secured official approval to establish a waste recycling plant as a strategic initiative for the city. Local assessments suggest that these achievements may have intensified tensions with certain influential stakeholders who viewed her success as a threat to their interests.

Academic figures, human rights defenders, and women's organisations sought to intervene through mediation and support, but these efforts failed to provide effective protection or restore her rights. Al-Mashhari also submitted formal memoranda to the relevant authorities requesting protection; however, the response was limited to temporary deployments of security personnel, again contingent on financial payments, measures perceived locally as closer to coercion than to genuine protection.

Symbolic and Political Dimensions

The circumstances surrounding the killing carried profound symbolic significance that extended beyond the personal targeting of Al-Mashhari. The deliberate aim at her face was not solely an act intended to end her life, but a calculated message designed to instill fear among women, demonstrating that any attempt to assume public office or confront corruption would be met with extreme violence. This pattern of targeting marks a dangerous escalation, moving violence against women from verbal threats and administrative harassment to systematic killings. Such a transformation threatens the very presence of women in public life and undermines years of progress toward their political and economic empowerment.

This crime had ramifications that went beyond women in government institutions; it also affected the private sector, where some women now fear that their professional participation could render them future targets. This climate of fear jeopardizes the city's economic and social fabric, gradually pushing women to withdraw from leadership and management positions.

Impact on Women and Community Response

The killing of Iftihan Al-Mashhari entrenched a profound sense of insecurity among women in Taiz, rendering participation in public life or economic activity fraught with serious risks to their safety. It conveyed a clear and deliberate message of intimidation, signaling that holding public office or confronting corruption could be met with the most extreme forms of violence. Consequently, many women have become reluctant to engage in community and political activities. This development undermines efforts to strengthen women's participation in decision-making and peacebuilding, directly contradicting the commitments enshrined in the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda.

In the aftermath, the city witnessed peaceful demonstrations, including marches and sit-ins organized by women's groups, human rights defenders, and sanitation workers to demand justice and underscore the gravity of the act. These mobilizations, however, were conducted in a climate of considerable insecurity, as participants faced direct threats in the absence of any official protective measures.

Local organisations subsequently appealed to the international community for urgent intervention to ensure a transparent and independent investigation. They cautioned that continued impunity would risk further escalation, erode public trust in institutions, and leave women exposed to persistent threats without effective protection.

Institutional Gaps and Failures

The incident revealed a series of structural shortcomings that facilitated the crime:

- **Absence of preventive measures**, despite documented warnings.
- Lack of coordination among security, military, and judicial entities, which allowed perpetrators to act with impunity.
- **Persistence of accountability gaps** in previous, similar cases, with no deterrent action taken.
- **Weak coordination among security, military, and judicial bodies**, together with the overlap of political, military, and judicial interests, obstructed both investigative and protective efforts.

These systemic failures have reinforced local perceptions that the state is unable to protect its citizens, particularly women, and have emboldened armed groups operating outside the law to escalate acts of violence.

Key Local and International Demands

- **Opening a transparent and independent investigation** into all those involved in the crime, both the direct perpetrators and those behind them, to fully establish the facts and ensure accountability without exception.
- **Holding implicated military and security personnel to account under national law and international human rights standards**, in order to end the prevailing culture of impunity and restore public confidence in the justice system.
- **Establishing sustainable and effective protection mechanisms for women in both public and private roles**, including proactive protection plans, early-warning systems, and preventive measures at local and national levels, rather than relying on temporary or symbolic responses.
- **Restructuring local security and military institutions in Taiz on professional and transparent foundations**, to ensure accountability, limit the influence of armed groups operating outside state authority, and build institutions capable of asserting state control and safeguarding citizens.

- **Lifting the siege imposed on Taiz** and urgently reopening roads and crossings, while demanding that the Houthis end their control over the city's entrances. The continued siege has aggravated the humanitarian crisis, restricted the movement of civilians and goods, and obstructed the delivery of aid and basic services. It has also created a security vacuum inside the city, which rival armed groups have exploited to expand their influence, engage in extortion, and impose control over the population under the pretext of defending Taiz from Houthi attacks. As a result, civilians, particularly women, have been subjected to repeated and diverse violations, heightening their vulnerability and undermining their resilience.
- **Sustaining international pressure to ensure that the case of Al-Mashhari is neither shelved nor marginalized**, with consistent follow-up through periodic reporting and its inclusion in United Nations mechanisms and briefings on Yemen, thereby guaranteeing continued oversight and accountability.

Proposed Solutions and Role of Women

The situation has underlined the urgent need to rebuild state institutions and establish a transparent legal system grounded in official documentation and clear mechanisms of accountability. Local and international activists have warned that, if left unaddressed, these conditions could fuel instability beyond Taiz, with wider repercussions for regional security.

Women members of the Consultation and Reconciliation Commission (CRC) of Yemen's Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) play a central role in representing the concerns of Yemeni women and exerting pressure on political and military actors to reduce corruption and instability. This role is considered a cornerstone for encouraging the various parties to adopt genuine reforms and improve the security and service situation in the Taiz.

Local and international condemnation statements are also important tools for supporting victims and protecting women, and for ensuring that the international community remains closely monitoring these violations.

Recommended Actions for the International Community

- ① Provide technical and legal support to local authorities to strengthen their capacity for documentation, investigation, and evidence preservation.
- ② Establish an emergency protection program for women under threat, including a hotline, evacuation plans, and psychosocial as well as social support.
- ③ Allocate financial resources to support local initiatives that focus on protecting women and assisting the families of victims.
- ④ Include the case of Iftihan Al-Mashhari's assassination as a specific agenda item in UNSC briefings on Yemen, in order to guarantee continued international oversight.

The assassination of **Iftihan Al-Mashhari** marks a crucial moment in the escalation of violence against women in Yemen. It demonstrates the gravity of the challenges linked to protecting women leaders and strengthening the rule of law. This incident has reaffirmed the urgent need for coordinated national and international action to secure accountability and prevent the recurrence of such crimes, not only to safeguard the rights of women in Yemen, but also to preserve social stability and maintain prospects for peace.

Failure to achieve justice in this case would resonate far beyond Taiz, setting a grave precedent that exposes women to greater risks and severely constrains their participation in public life nationwide.