

# Empowering Women in Yemen's Countryside: Securing Ibb

by [Abdullah Ali \(/experts/abdullah-ali\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Abdullah Ali \(/experts/abdullah-ali\)](#)

Abdullah Ali is a Yemeni journalist and correspondent focused on humanitarian affairs. He has a BA in Mass Communications.



## Brief Analysis

The four most vital governorates in Yemen, in terms of agriculture and population density, are Sana'a, Ibb, [Taiz \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/taiz-is-key-to-peace-in-yemen-a-chance-to-save-three-million-people\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/taiz-is-key-to-peace-in-yemen-a-chance-to-save-three-million-people), and Hodeidah. Ibb in particular is known as “[the fertile province \(https://www.navantigroup.com/news-1/2018/7/12/in-yemens-ibb-governorate-economic-and-physical-security-are-out-of-reach-for-most\)](https://www.navantigroup.com/news-1/2018/7/12/in-yemens-ibb-governorate-economic-and-physical-security-are-out-of-reach-for-most)” or “Ibb the Green” because of its unusual amounts of rainfall and soil properties, and it serves as a major agricultural hub and a food-source for people in surrounding areas. Despite these flourishing conditions, the wider conflict and influx of internally displaced persons (IDPs  [\(https://www.unicef.org/yemen/stories/nutrition-support-displaced-families-ibb\)](https://www.unicef.org/yemen/stories/nutrition-support-displaced-families-ibb)) have significantly strained Ibb's resources and deepened the dire humanitarian situation in [rural areas \(https://www.navantigroup.com/news-1/2018/7/12/in-yemens-ibb-governorate-economic-and-physical-security-are-out-of-reach-for-most\)](https://www.navantigroup.com/news-1/2018/7/12/in-yemens-ibb-governorate-economic-and-physical-security-are-out-of-reach-for-most).

While awareness of the general conflict in Yemen has increased, there has been minimal international attention and resources devoted to securing Ibb, though its wellbeing should be of great concern to the broader community. Ibb not only holds strategic significance—it has the potential to address Yemen's major food security issues and could easily benefit from rural development. In particular, the rural women of Ibb have been tasked with backbreaking labor to replace the region's crumbling or inaccessible infrastructure. International efforts aimed at supporting these women could alter the socio-economic landscape of rural Ibb and, given Ibb's potential, may create a ripple effect of positive developments throughout the rest of the country.

Closely intertwined with Ibb's agricultural challenges are its current majority workforce—[Yemeni women \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/have-we-forgotten-the-women-of-yemen\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/have-we-forgotten-the-women-of-yemen). Yemeni women in rural areas already faced myriad challenges before the war due to a lack of basic human rights—including the lack of a right to work, access to education, and freedom of opinion.

However, with the shift in demographics caused by the war, Yemen's rural communities have come to depend heavily on women for agricultural work. Over the past five years, rural women in the Ibb countryside have maintained fields under harsh wartime conditions that have gravely affected the infrastructure and education of these rural communities. While the nature of traditional farming and limited agricultural production does not require high levels of training, the emigration of male labor has forced women to take on more and more

responsibilities. Now, these rural areas have become dependent on women for sustenance even as they continue to look after housework, raise children and manage the responsibilities of other demanding tasks such as manually fetching water and gathering firewood.

The agricultural sector's (<https://fews.net/pt/east-africa/yemen/food-security-outlook/june-2019>) resurgence is driven in part by these women and in part by the decline in the value of the local currency. [The weakening of the local currency has led to an astronomical rise in prices of basic goods and services \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/ahead-of-ramadan-yemens-economy-is-increasingly-dire\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/ahead-of-ramadan-yemens-economy-is-increasingly-dire)—intensifying the suffering of populations in rural areas. For example, the price of basic food commodities and minimum food baskets remain the [highest in Ibb \(https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000104941/download/\)](https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000104941/download/)—along with [Al Jawf and Soqatra \(https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000104941/download/\)](https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000104941/download/)—in all of Yemen. The cost of a minimum food basket in Ibb—composed of wheat flour, oil, beans, and salt—has doubled since the start of the war, with the most recent estimate putting the cost of a basket in Ibb at around [5 \(http://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000104941/download/\) .522 Yemeni Rials \(https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000104941/download/\) \(http://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000104941/download/\)](https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000104941/download/) (Approximately 22 US Dollars).

Water and fuel are also commodities increasingly replaced by women labor. Since the price of [20 liters of fuel has reached 8,500 Yemeni Rials \(https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-update-covering-18-27-september-2018-issue-28-enar\)](https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-update-covering-18-27-september-2018-issue-28-enar) (33 USD), women have been forced to travel long distances in search of firewood because most citizens are unable to afford gas, especially given salary cuts and high unemployment.

Central water systems (<https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/8363>) have also been shut down as a result of the broader conflict and the fuel crisis has in turn limited the availability of water by cutting the number of trucked water to thousands of individuals. [The price of a water \(https://www.unicef.org/yemen/stories/access-clean-water-helps-children-go-back-school\)](https://www.unicef.org/yemen/stories/access-clean-water-helps-children-go-back-school) meter has reached 15,000 Yemeni Rials (approximately 30 US Dollars) and women and girls living in the Ibb countryside now must go in search of clean and safe drinking water. Today, women must venture out before sunrise in search of drinking water, despite the bitter temperatures of the mountainous regions.

The alternative to this perilous journey—which disabled citizens and others trapped in the Ibb countryside by surrounding violence cannot make—is to use contaminated rainwater, which is linked to cholera and other diseases. In 2019, the Amanat Al Asimah, Sana'a, Ibb, Dhamar, Hajjah and Amran governorates are the most affected governorates by the cholera outbreak. The efforts of international and community charitable organizations have failed to stem this issue, which has only increased the number of those affected by the outbreak.

Aside from these challenging responsibilities, women in the Ibb countryside have little in the hope of their future prospects due to a lack of higher educational opportunities (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/How-Yemens-Deteriorating-Education-Sector-May-Prolong-the-Conflict>). Yemen's public universities are remote from these rural areas. Despite girls' high grades on the Thanaweya Amma—the university entrance exam taken at the end of secondary school—the low income rates and high transportation costs precludes these potential students from enrolling in university.

Each of these issues is a challenge in and of themselves. What rural women in the Ibb Governorate need now is relief from their daily suffering. [Pooled efforts are required to tackle the longstanding economic, political, and social hardships \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/yemen-can-aid-alleviate-human-suffering\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/yemen-can-aid-alleviate-human-suffering) faced by women in rural communities.

The main reason for the suffering of women in rural areas, especially in the countryside of Ibb, is the continuation of

the devastating war. Ultimately, ending this war would alleviate the suffering of people living in these areas. Other solutions include strengthening the agricultural sector by providing fuel, digging wells and building dams to preserve safe rainwater, and opening additional public universities in rural areas.

Currently, combating the discrimination faced by women in rural areas of Yemen does not appear to be a priority for the international community—and a lack of media coverage of this issue is contributing to this oversight. Though the media occasionally highlights Yemeni women, it fails to acknowledge the significant role of rural women in the Ibb countryside in maintaining life there, despite the tremendous hardships and expectations now placed on these women.

Strengthening women's ability to contribute to building back vital industries—agricultural, education, water supply—has the potential to alter the stereotype of women and integrate them into public life. In this vein, international leaders must work to ease the blockade imposed on Yemen in 2015, encourage parties to return to the negotiating table and impose strict penalties against those who obstruct a national dialogue—[learning from the National Dialogue Conference's and the Gulf Initiative's failures](#)

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/drawing-on-past-lessons-for-lasting-peace-in-yemen>

. This in will ultimately help ensure that food, aid, and fuel rations effectively reach its intended recipients. ❖

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