

THE WOMEN OF SHEBA

Stories of Resilience in Yemen

D. MATHIEU CASSENDO





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OXFAM
Canada



A comic strip on violence against women in Yemen

In 2018, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Nadia Murad and Denis Mukwege for their efforts in trying to put an end to the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war. This served as a reminder that, throughout history, women's bodies have been used and abused with impunity as loot or for revenge in times of war.

The Quebec Association of International Cooperation Organizations (AQOCI), whose feminist policy and commitment against militarism are at the heart of its vision, decided to focus on the crucial and sensitive topic that is violence against women in war and conflict during the Quebec edition of the 2019 International Development Week (IDW).

To illustrate this theme through the comic strip medium, AQOCI identified Yemen as an obvious choice. This forgotten war, the largest humanitarian crisis in the world today, is at the centre of complex geopolitical conflicts of which civilian populations bear the burden, as usual. Therefore, the goal was to document the violence experienced by Yemeni women and to emphasize their courage and determination, inviting D. Mathieu Cassendo, author and visual artist, to tell their stories. This approach sparked feelings of outrage at the situation but also of great esteem for the determination shown by these women. An approach that left no one indifferent.

AQOCI wishes to thank its member organizations which supported the production of this comic strip, the volunteers who donated their time, and particularly D. Mathieu Cassendo, who rose to this creative challenge with openness, flexibility and great talent.

We dedicate this comic strip to the women around the world who are facing the horrors of militarism. Women who are trying to protect their families and their own physical integrity while suffering the chaos caused by war.



DO YOU KNOW THE
QUEEN OF SHEBA?



SHE WAS ONE OF THE
MOST FAMOUS QUEENS
OF WESTERN ASIA, A
LEADER WHO VALUED THE
IDEAS OF HER ADVISERS.

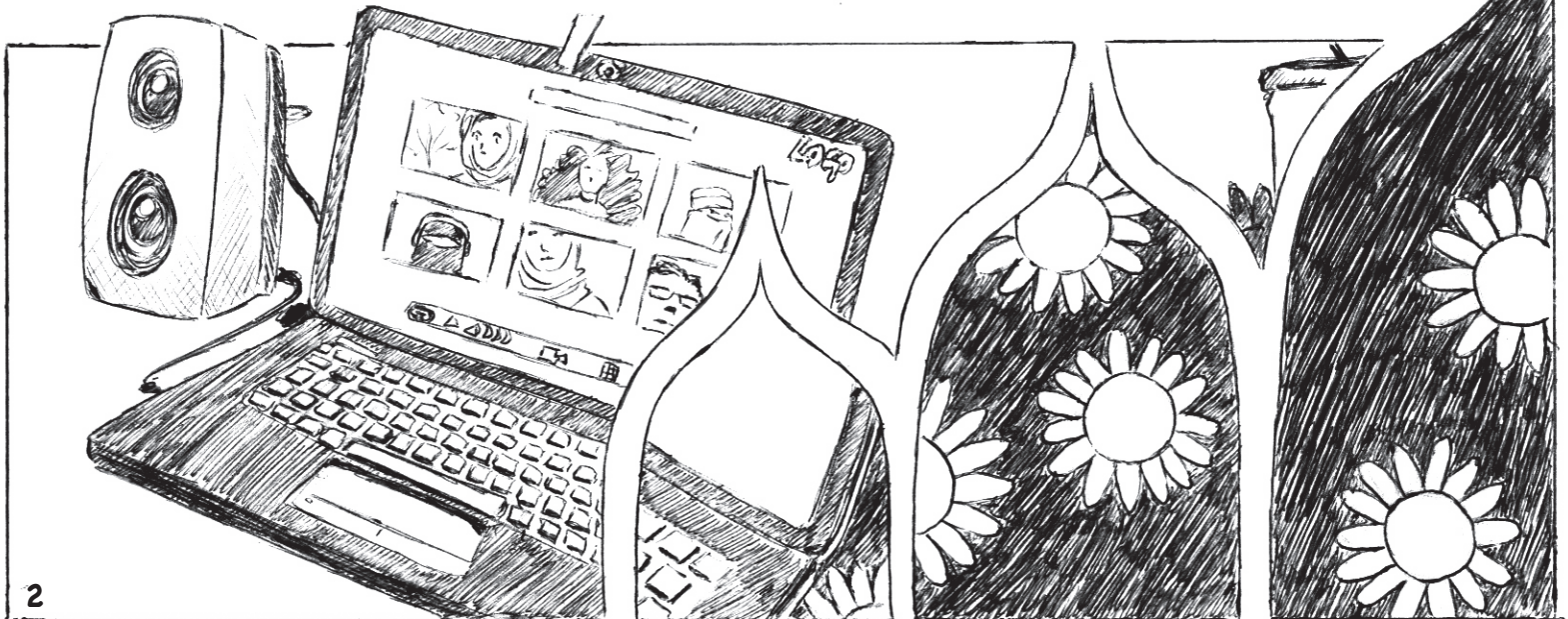
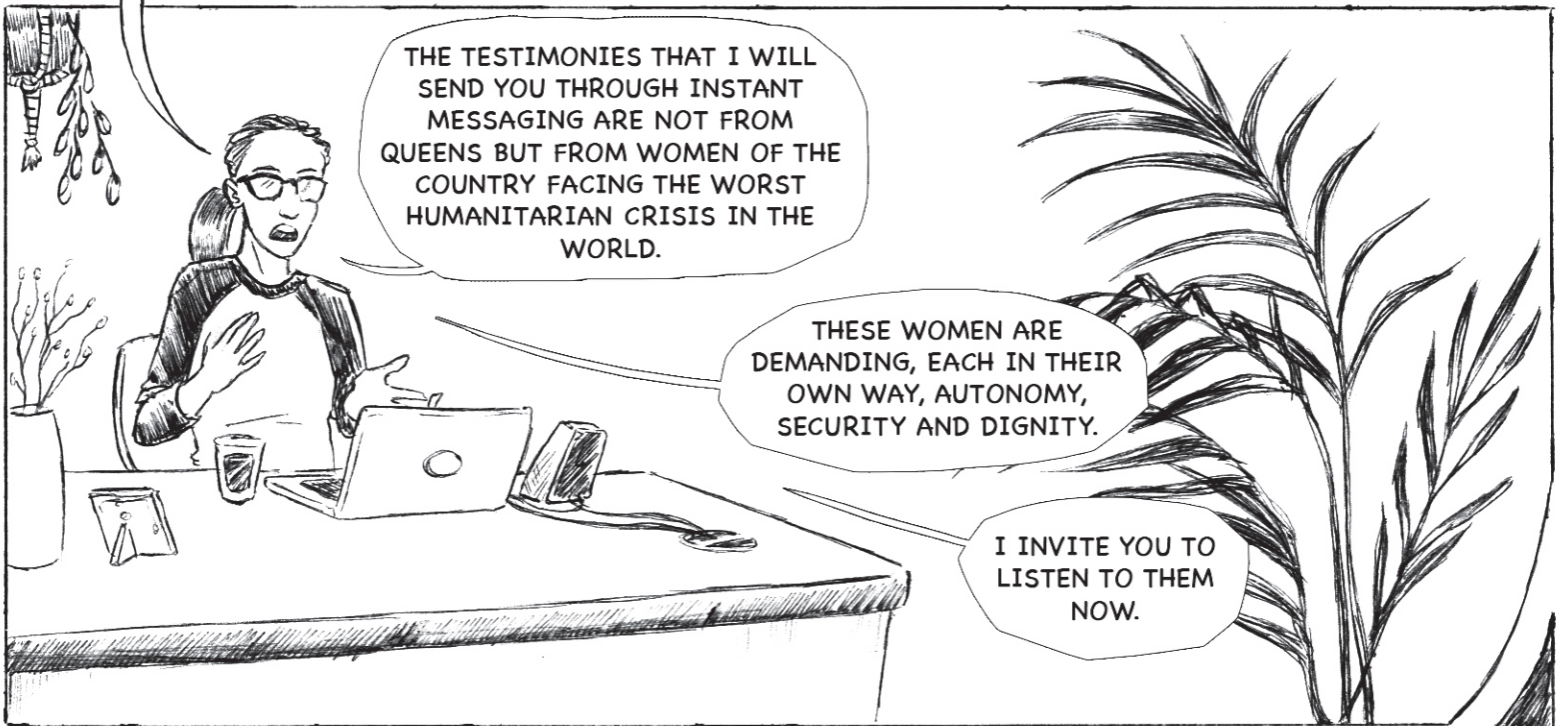
SEVERAL PEOPLE CLAIM THAT SHE
HAILS FROM THEIR COUNTRY, BUT HER
ORIGINS REMAIN UNCLEAR, EVEN FOR
HISTORIANS.

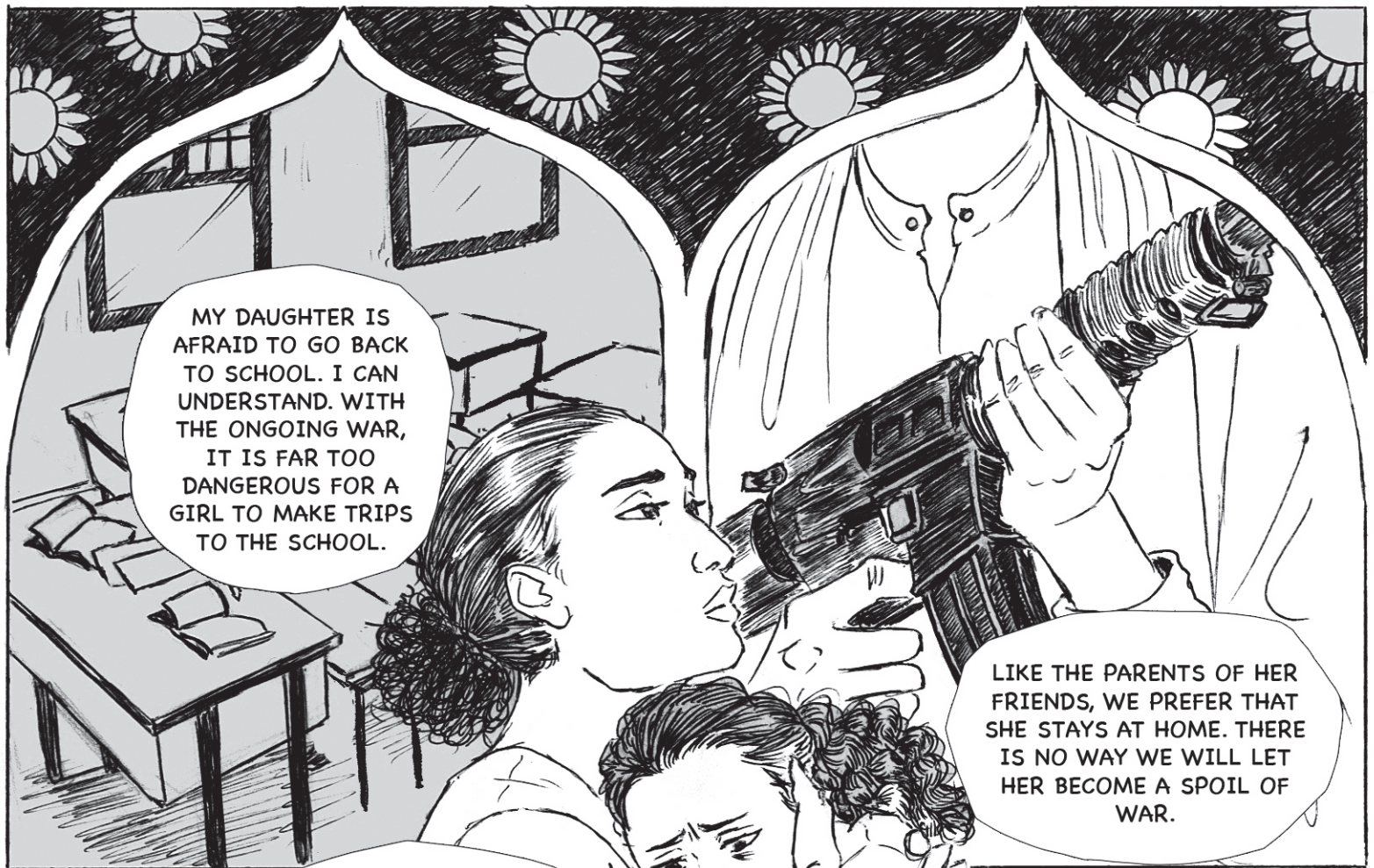
AFTER ALL, THE KINGDOM OF
SHEBA STRETCHED FROM
YEMEN TO THE NORTH OF
ETHIOPIA AND ERITREA.

THE TESTIMONIES THAT I WILL
SEND YOU THROUGH INSTANT
MESSAGING ARE NOT FROM
QUEENS BUT FROM WOMEN OF THE
COUNTRY FACING THE WORST
HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN THE
WORLD.

THESE WOMEN ARE
DEMANDING, EACH IN THEIR
OWN WAY, AUTONOMY,
SECURITY AND DIGNITY.

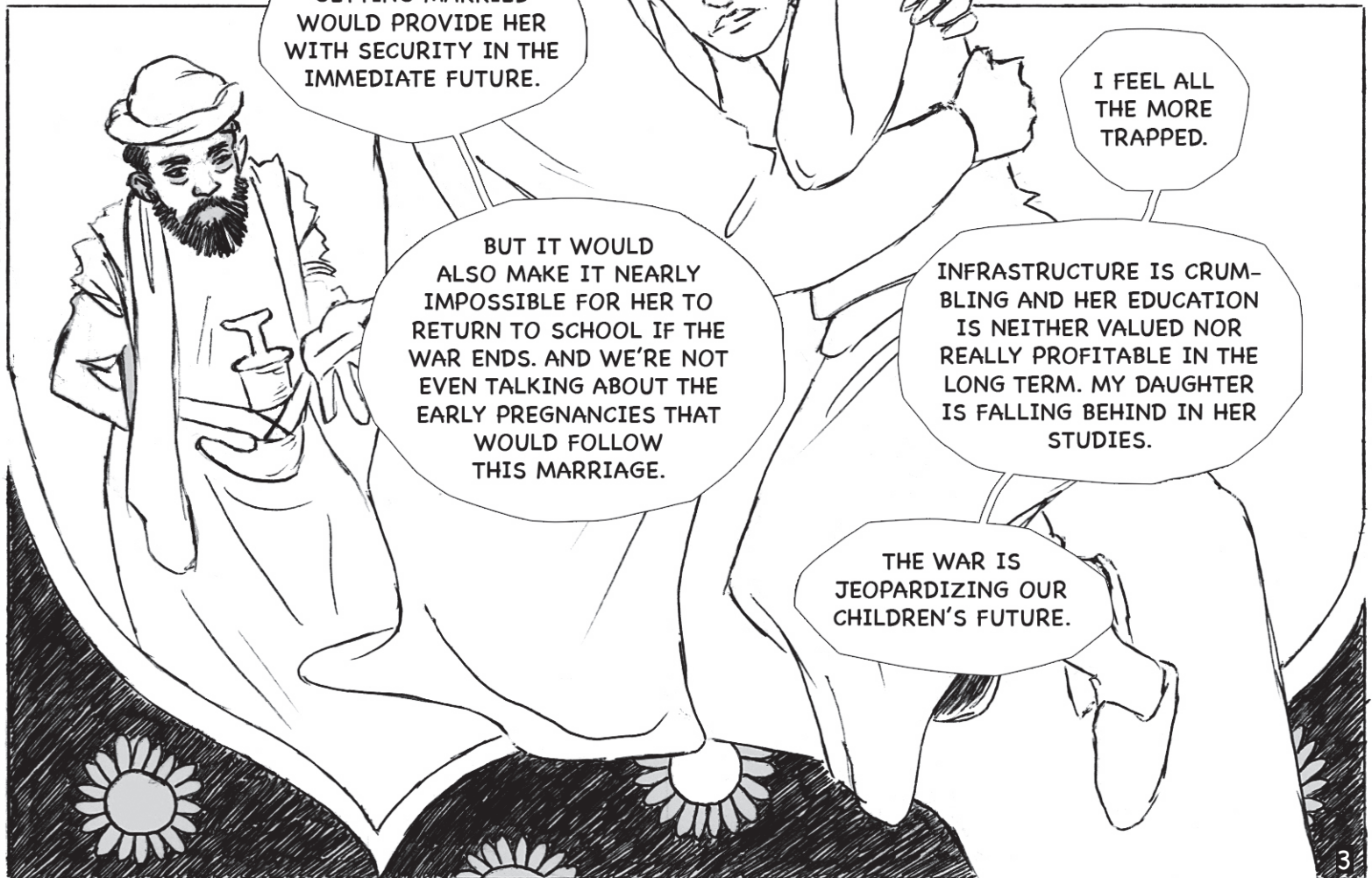
I INVITE YOU TO
LISTEN TO THEM
NOW.





MY DAUGHTER IS AFRAID TO GO BACK TO SCHOOL. I CAN UNDERSTAND. WITH THE ONGOING WAR, IT IS FAR TOO DANGEROUS FOR A GIRL TO MAKE TRIPS TO THE SCHOOL.

LIKE THE PARENTS OF HER FRIENDS, WE PREFER THAT SHE STAYS AT HOME. THERE IS NO WAY WE WILL LET HER BECOME A SPOIL OF WAR.



GETTING MARRIED WOULD PROVIDE HER WITH SECURITY IN THE IMMEDIATE FUTURE.

I FEEL ALL THE MORE TRAPPED.

BUT IT WOULD ALSO MAKE IT NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE FOR HER TO RETURN TO SCHOOL IF THE WAR ENDS. AND WE'RE NOT EVEN TALKING ABOUT THE EARLY PREGNANCIES THAT WOULD FOLLOW THIS MARRIAGE.

INFRASTRUCTURE IS CRUMBLING AND HER EDUCATION IS NEITHER VALUED NOR REALLY PROFITABLE IN THE LONG TERM. MY DAUGHTER IS FALLING BEHIND IN HER STUDIES.

THE WAR IS JEOPARDIZING OUR CHILDREN'S FUTURE.

I'VE EXPERIENCED ABUSE FOR AS LONG AS I CAN REMEMBER
AND MY ETHNIC COMMUNITY HAS BEEN MARGINALIZED FOR
CENTURIES. WE ARE THE AL-MUHAMASHEEN, BUT MANY
PEOPLE CALL US "AKHDAM", THE SERVANTS.

OUR SKIN IS DARKER AND WE ARE PUNISHED FOR IT.

THE
WOMEN FROM MY
COMMUNITY ARE
PARTICULARLY
TARGETED BY
AGGRESSORS.

I CAN'T COUNT THE NUMBER
OF TIMES THAT I WAS RAPED.
NOR THE NUMBER OF TIMES
WHERE I WAS BEATEN FOR
NO REASON AFTER HAVING
BEEN HUMILIATED.

THE LEADERS DON'T LOOK AT
US IN THE SAME WAY. THIS
DOESN'T MAKE US INVISIBLE
TO THE BOMBS THAT ARE
FALLING ON US.

IN
THE MORNING,
I GET UP AND I
TAKE MY BROOM
TO WORK.

STREET CLEANER
IS THE ONLY JOB
I CAN DO.

MY THREE CHILDREN ARE HUNGRY AND
I NO LONGER HAVE A HUSBAND TO
BRING BACK ENOUGH TO EAT.

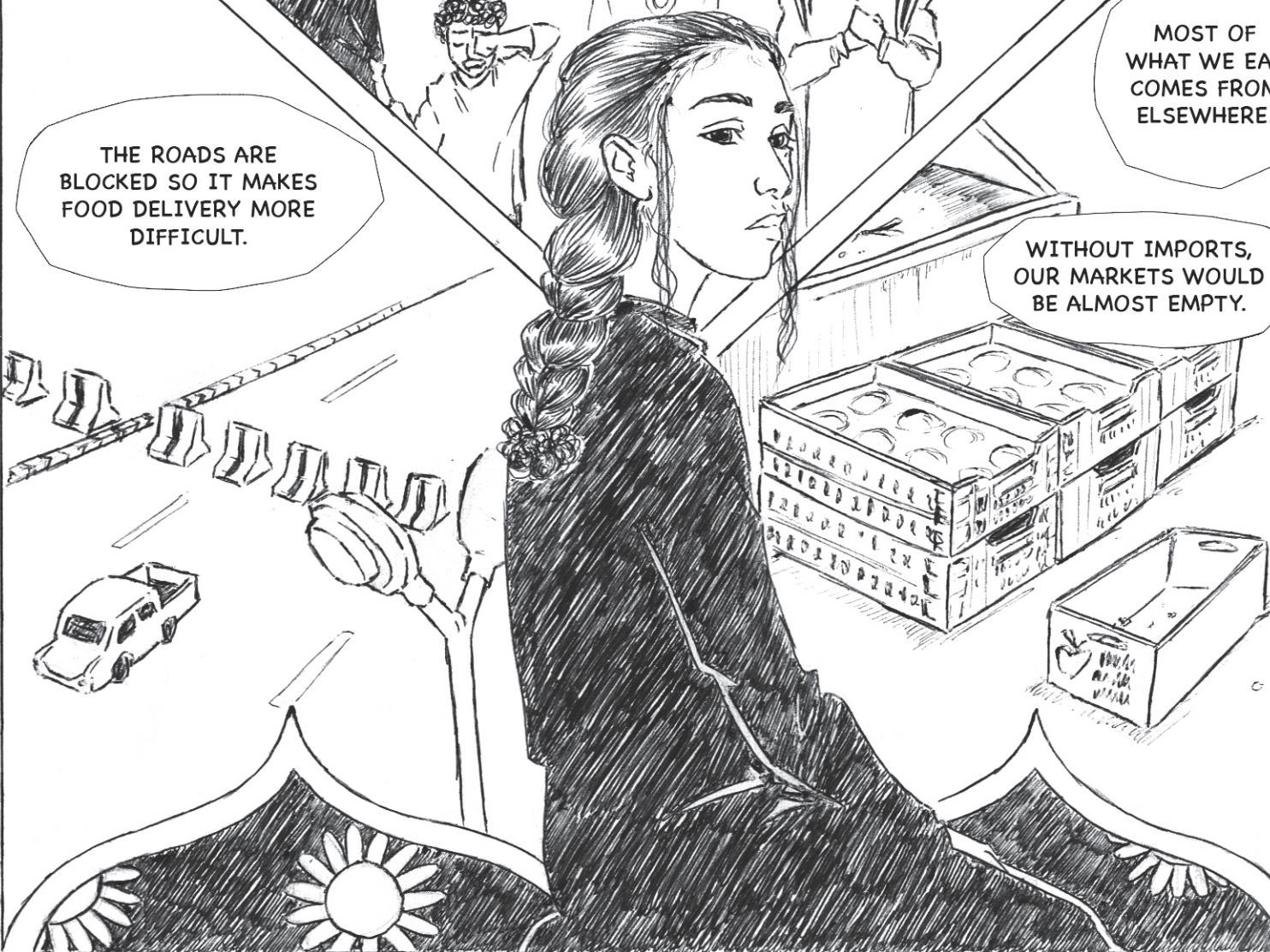
I BEG EVERY DAY,
ASKING PEOPLE TO SHARE A
FEW CRUMBS.




MOST OF
WHAT WE EAT
COMES FROM
ELSEWHERE.

THE ROADS ARE
BLOCKED SO IT MAKES
FOOD DELIVERY MORE
DIFFICULT.

WITHOUT IMPORTS,
OUR MARKETS WOULD
BE ALMOST EMPTY.





THE STREETS ARE LIKE TRAPS.
REGARDLESS OF OUR DESTINATION,
TAKING THE ROAD CAN MEAN BEING
HARASSED, BEATEN, KIDNAPPED,
RAPED AND EVEN KILLED.

TO BE ACCOMPANIED
SOMETIMES MAKES A
DIFFERENCE ... BUT WHO
WILL BRING THE CRIMI-
NALS TO JUSTICE WHILE
THE AUTHORITIES ARE
BUSY WITH THE WAR?
WHAT CAN STOP THEM
REALLY?

WITH THE WAR
GOING ON, EACH
JOURNEY GROW
RISKIER.

I MYSELF HAVE
BEEN THE VICTIM
OF AN EXPLOSION.

IT IS CHAOS.

"YOUNG PEOPLE WILL TRIUMPH.
A NEW YEMEN WILL BE BORN."

WHEN I HEARD A WOMAN
SCREAMING THESE WORDS IN
ADEN, AT THE PRESIDENTIAL
PALACE, I WAS FILLED WITH
HOPE. IT WAS WITH THE MEM-
BERS OF THE NATIONAL
DIALOGUE IN
2013-2014.

IN SANAA, WE WERE ASKING
FOR THE INCLUSION OF 30% OF
WOMEN WITHIN THE DIALOGUE
RATHER THAN THE 25% REPRESENTATION THAT WE ALREADY HAD
OUT OF THE 565 MEMBERS.



BEING
ACCOMPANIED BY A
CROWD OF ALLIES,
WOMEN AND MEN, MAKES
THE TASK MUCH LESS
BURDENSOME.

IT IS A COLOSSAL
OBJECTIVE THAT WE WANT TO
ACHIEVE: TO ENSURE THAT THE
CRIMINALS RESPONSIBLE FOR
LARGE-SCALE KILLINGS ARE
PUNISHED AND THAT POLITICAL
PRISONERS ARE RELEASED.



I ESCAPED ASSASSINATION
ATTEMPTS FROM PEOPLE
WHO WANT TO PREVENT ANY
DEMOCRATIC ACTION.

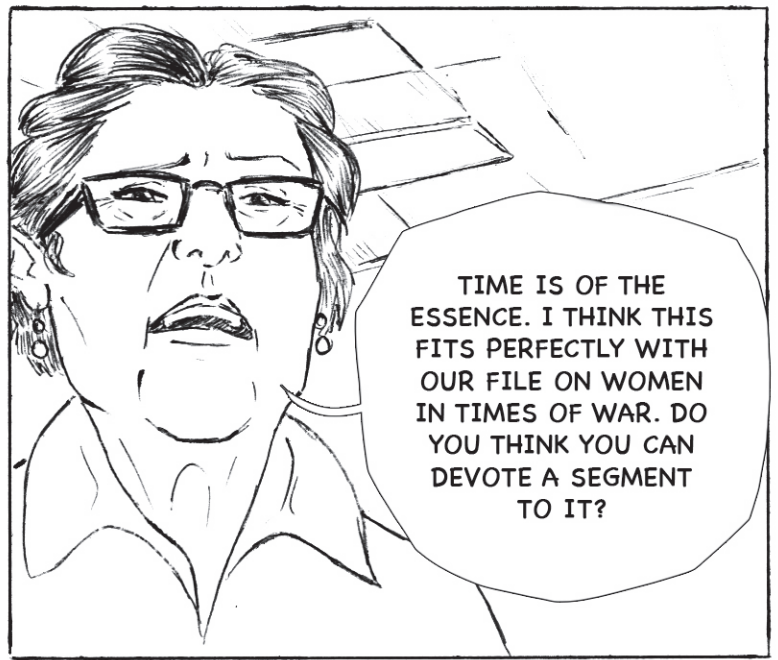
BUT I AM
NOT AFRAID.

WHEN
I SEE WOMEN
SUFFER, I AM OUT-
RAGED. WHEN I SEE
THEM FIGHT FOR
THEIR RIGHTS,
I AM PROUD.





IT IS POWERFUL.
AND THEY HAVE
GIVEN US THEIR
CONSENT TO SHARE
THEIR STORIES.



TIME IS OF THE
ESSENCE. I THINK THIS
FITS PERFECTLY WITH
OUR FILE ON WOMEN
IN TIMES OF WAR. DO
YOU THINK YOU CAN
DEVOTE A SEGMENT
TO IT?



WE MUST DEVOTE
ONE! THAT IS REAL
FREEDOM OF
EXPRESSION.



IT IS ALSO VERY
MUCH IN LINE WITH OUR
RESPONSIBILITIES AS
JOURNALISTS.

WE FOCUS A GREAT
DEAL ON THE ISSUE
OF FAMINE IN THIS
REGION, BUT WE
RARELY HEAR
ABOUT GENDERED
VIOLENCE.

WOMEN ARE VICTIMS OF
VIOLENCE BECAUSE THEY
ARE WOMEN. WE NEED TO
ADDRESS THAT.



FOR SOME, IT IS A
POWER STRUGGLE...
FOR OTHERS, IT IS A
STRUGGLE TO ASSERT
HUMAN RIGHTS...



LET'S HONOUR
THEM.

YEMEN,
A FEW DAYS EARLIER.

WHAT
HAPPENED?

THE
VIDEO ISN'T
PLAYING...

WE LOST ACCESS TO
THE INTERNET.

PITY,
I WOULD HAVE LIKED
TO TELL HER GOOD-
BYE. SHE IS NICE,
YOUR FRIEND.

AT LEAST THE
MESSAGE WENT
THROUGH. THE PEOPLE
WHO WILL SEE US IN
IT PROBABLY HAVE
MORE RESOURCES
THAN WE DO AT THIS
TIME.

PHEW ...
IT IS REALLY HARD
TO TALK ABOUT THE
NIGHTMARES THAT
WE'VE EXPERIENCED ...
BUT IT FEELS GOOD AT
THE SAME TIME...

DO YOU
WANT A FEW
DATES?

IT IS BEING IN THIS ROOM
THAT I FIND REASSURING.
BEHIND REAL WALLS... IT HAD
BEEN AWHILE.

THANK YOUR
BROTHER FOR
FINDING THIS
PLACE,
SULTANA.

OH,
IT IS ONLY
NATURAL.

ONE THING I LEARNED
IN RECENT YEARS IS
THAT SHARING IS
REALLY POWERFUL.

FOR ONE THING, IT
MAKES US FEEL LESS
LONELY. WE WOULD
NOT HAVE MET
OTHERWISE.

LET US TAKE
ADVANTAGE OF
THE SECURITY
THAT THIS ROOM
PROVIDES US.

BEFORE WE
RETURN TO OUR
DAILY LIFE,
LET'S KEEP
GORGING ON
THE DATES LIKE
QUEENS!

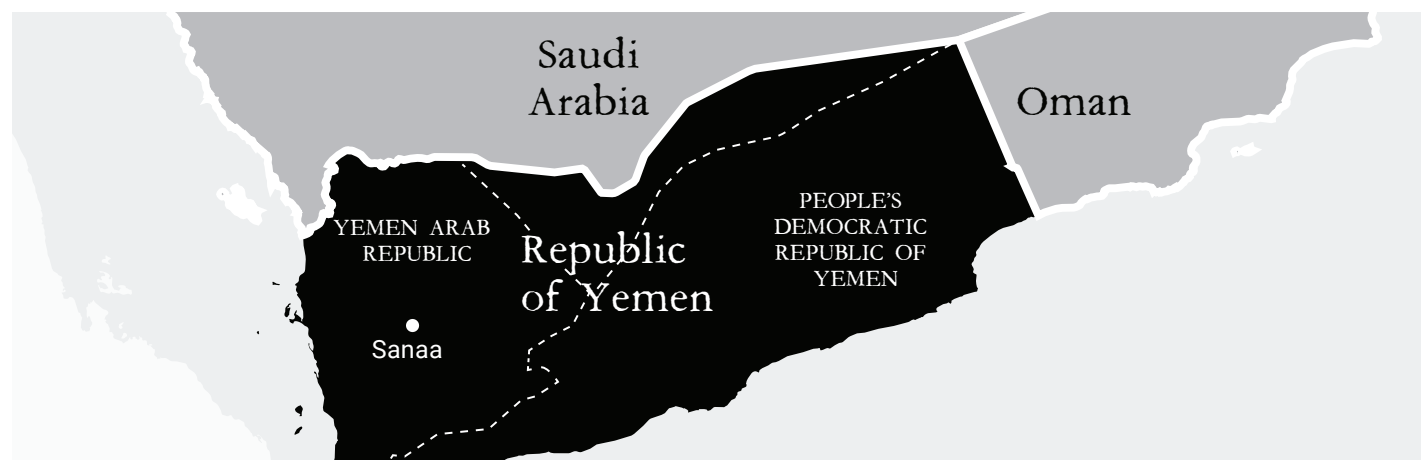
Yemen: The World's Worst Humanitarian Crisis Today

Humanitarian Crisis

The conflict which has been raging in Yemen for more than four years has greatly exacerbated the dire situation that the population was already facing. In the ranking of countries based on the Human Development Index (HDI), Yemen has fallen from the 154th to the 191st position, out of 203 countries, between 2015 and 2018.

Today:

- 22.2 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance or protection
- 16 million do not have access to drinking water and sanitation
- 17.8 million are experiencing food insecurity and famine is threatening 70% of the population
- 16.4 million lack access to adequate health care
- More than a million suspected cases of cholera have been identified by the Red Cross since 2017 (the largest epidemic of cholera ever recorded)
- More than 10,000 people, mainly civilians, have been killed by raids



Source : Le Monde

A Few Keys to Understand the Crisis in Yemen

Historically, the territory of Yemen has been very coveted due to its favourable geographic location at the cross-roads of strategic and trade routes in the region. The Romans referred to it as "Happy Arabia" while Voltaire once described it as "the most enjoyable country on Earth".

Today's Yemen was born in 1990 from the fusion of two independent States: the Yemen Arab Republic (North) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South).

The Yemeni population is Muslim and composed of between 60 and 75% of Sunnis (mainly in the South), and 30% of Zaydi Shiites (mainly in the North). The country has a population of approximately 34 million.

Violence against women in Yemen has increased by 63% since 2015, with 10,000 cases identified in 2016 alone.



Religious Affiliations—One of many Keys to Understanding the Conflict at the Regional Level

The conflict in Yemen is complex and cannot be explained solely as a confrontation between Sunnis and Shiites. The religious affiliations of the various actors does, however, help us understand some of the conflict dynamics. Indeed, the rift between the two main branches of Islam (Sunnism and Shiism) divides the Muslim world, and the two main powers of the region—Iran and Saudi Arabia—have exploited this rift for political gains.

- Sunni Islam
- Shiite Islam
- Judaism



2011 - Yemen's Arab Spring

In 2011, in the wake of the Arab Spring, the Yemeni population organized several rallies aimed at putting an end to the three decades of President Saleh's reign (Zaydi Shiite of Northern Yemen). That year, journalist Tawakkol Karman, one of the key figures of this "Yemeni Spring", became the first Arab woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. This uprising finally led to the negotiated departure of President Saleh and the election of a new president, President Hadi (Sunni from southern Yemen), in February 2012.

2014 - The Surge of the Houthis

Houthi fighters (Zaydi Shiites from northern Yemen) who had felt marginalized since the departure of President Saleh launched a devastating attack in July 2014. They conquered the capital, Sanaa, in January 2015, helped by army units which had remained loyal to former President Saleh. After this initial success, they moved to the west, to the east, toward the centre and then to the south. This forced President Hadi, who had taken refuge in the southern city of Aden since 2015, into exile in Saudi Arabia. Some claim the Houthis are supported by Iran (the most powerful Shiite country in the region, even if it they are not of the same branch as the Houthis).

2015 - Military Operation against the Houthis conducted by Saudi Arabia

In March 2015, in response to a call by President Hadi, Saudi Arabia launched a military operation to halt the progress of the Houthis. A coalition of nine predominantly Sunni countries, led by Saudi Arabia, included the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar, Morocco, Egypt, Kuwait and Sudan. Saudi Arabia's strategic objectives in this conflict were to restore the power of President Hadi, fight the influence of Iran in the region, and legitimize the new leaders of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in particular the Prince Mohammed Ben Salman ("MBS"), who had recently been appointed as Defense Minister by his father Salman. The United States, the United Kingdom and France also offered technical support (reconnaissance satellites, aerial photographs, assistance from military advisers, in-flight refuelling, etc.) to the coalition led by Saudi Arabia.



Evolution of the Conflict in 2017 and 2018

In August 2017, the alliance between the Houthis and President Saleh's followers broke down following the openness shown by the former president toward Saudi Arabia. Saleh was killed by the Houthis in December 2017.

In June 2018, the coalition led by Saudi Arabia stepped up its military operations, including by air, conducting attacks to Hodeida, Yemen's main port [through which transit a large portion of the supply and humanitarian assistance needed by the country]. In the same period, President Hadi returned from exile and relocated in Aden.

In December 2018, a ceasefire agreement (Stockholm agreement) in Hodeida was negotiated, but the fighting continued. The talks between the warring sides in Yemen were expected to resume toward the end of January 2019 in an attempt to define a negotiation framework to reach a comprehensive settlement



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Violence Against Women in Conflict and War

In situations of conflict and war, women and girls are exposed to heightened risk of physical and sexual violence. Those responsible for the violence, however, remain largely unpunished.

The types of violence against women in conflict situations

In addition to the violence linked to the armed conflict itself, women are frequently victims of sexual violence that can take many forms, including rape, sexual slavery, sexual torture, mutilation, forced pregnancy, abortion, prostitution, forced marriage, sterilization and human trafficking.

Why is there an increase of violence against women in conflict situations?

There are many reasons that can explain the increased vulnerability of women and girls in conflict situations. Here are a few:

- Sexual violence is often used as a strategy of war and is intended to humiliate, terrorize or force the target population to flee.
- War promotes the most deviant behaviours and sexual exploitation is used to “reward” the deserving fighter.
- Due to the conflicts, women and girls are often forced to leave their community to reach the camps of internally displaced persons and refugees, where the risks of sexual violence are further increased.

What are the consequences of violence against women in conflict situations?

Firstly, there are the physical impacts (including serious physical injury, forced pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases and even death). In the case of sexually transmitted diseases, for example, a 2004 study showed that 80% of the Rwandan women who were raped during the genocide had been diagnosed HIV-positive or suffering from AIDS.

The consequences of conflict-related sexual violence also impact future generations, in particular through stigmatization, poverty, poor health and unwanted pregnancies. The victims and their children born of rape, for example, are often rejected by their family and their community.

Why is it that impunity reigns for perpetrators of violence against women in conflict situations?

The fear of retaliation and cultural pressures deter the vast majority of victims of conflict-related sexual violence to lodge complaints. The weakening of institutions in times of conflict, and the dysfunctions of the judicial systems in war-torn countries, are such that very few aggressors are actually brought to justice. For example, not a single member of Daesh nor of Boko Haram has, to this day, been brought to justice for acts of sexual violence.

PHOTO : QUÉBEC SOLIDAIRE



Dimani Mathieu Cassendo

Author and visual artist

Dimani's career began with the creation of comic strips about their daily life. These web comics led to their first physical publication, *La Petite Suceuse*, in 2016. A year later, they published an Annual Comic Strip on Racism. In their work, they give great importance to respecting human beings' identities. Their artwork can be seen in several journals (*À Babord!* #67, the *Ligue des Droits et Libertés*, among others), zines, colouring books and on the walls of the *Librairie Racines* bookstore in Montreal.

