

Eleven-Year-Old Divorcée to Human Rights Activist: A Yemeni Girl's Fight to End Child Marriage



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9 min read · May 11, 2021

At the age of eleven, Nada al-Ahdal was thrust into the international spotlight when she ran away from home to escape a forced marriage. Today, the eighteen-year-old continues to fight for girls in the Middle East.

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Nada al-Ahdal in a 2019 photoshoot.

By all standards, Nada al-Ahdal was a normal child from a normal family. She was born in early 2002 in Zabid, a hot, arid city adjacent to the Red Sea in Western Yemen. Nada's father worked as a blacksmith while her mother cared for her and her seven siblings. Nada was musically gifted and participated in a small girls' choir, occasionally performing for local media outlets. She dreamed of one day becoming a doctor or a teacher.

Like most children, Nada didn't fully grasp the concept of marriage — what it represented and what its consequences were — though child marriage was far from uncommon in her country. In fact, 2005 [data](#) from the International Center for Research on Women revealed nearly half of all Yemeni girls married by the age of eighteen. Yemen was (and is) the [poorest country](#) in the Middle East, and underage girls were often sold to suitors in exchange for a bride price when their parents fell upon hard times. Marriage, for nearly every girl, put an end to her education, her existence becoming entirely servile with no room for aspirations beyond the home. Nada was too preoccupied with music and school to consider if, when, and under what circumstances her own marriage would transpire.

Things started to change when Nada turned ten. She witnessed her fourteen-year-old aunt, Hashima, commit suicide to escape a physically and emotionally abusive marriage. Hashima's husband, a man nearly three decades her senior, would beat her with metal chains and berate her endlessly for her shortcomings as a wife and mother. Hashima doused herself in gasoline and lit herself on fire, burning to death and leaving behind an infant daughter.

In retrospect, Nada was stunned by how quickly and dramatically her aunt's life deteriorated after marriage. Hashima's husband didn't approve of her mingling unnecessarily with her siblings and cousins, preferring she stay indoors and tend to the home. Pulled out of school, Hashima grew increasingly isolated from her family and friends. In many ways, she felt like a caged animal. Life inside the cage was brutal, bounded by the violent whims of her husband; a life outside the cage would invite danger, uncertainty, and economic and physical insecurity. Divorce is rare in Yemen, and women who choose to end their marriages are vulnerable to lifelong harassment and stigmatization. Even if Hashima had managed to secure a divorce, with little education and a child to care for, securing a stable, well-paying job would prove no easy task. Suicide became Hashima's only conceivable escape.

Shortly after Hashima's death, Nada's parents announced the engagement of Nada's thirteen-year-old sister, Nadiah, to a twenty-eight-year-old expat. Nadiah pleaded with her parents to reconsider their decision, but her pleas fell on deaf ears, her parents convinced the marriage was in her best interest. Soon after the announcement, the family discovered Nadiah slumped across the floor of her room, her body covered in burns. Nadiah's attempt to burn herself to death, unlike her aunt's, was unsuccessful — still, she was, at least temporarily, too disfigured to present as a bride. Instead of calling the ceremony off, Nada's parents, who had already accepted a bridal payment, replaced Nadiah with Nada as the intended bride.

Nada recalls her father approaching her delicately, explaining the marriage was for her own good, trying to entice her with an ornate dress and promises of a grand celebration. Her father's words were a formality; in fact, Nada was already legally married, her father had signed the marriage certificate on her behalf. What remained was the religious ceremony, where she would lay eyes on her husband for the first time.

One week before the ceremony, Nada packed her belongings into a small backpack and phoned her uncle, Abdel Salam.

“My uncle is the most educated person in my family. He believed strongly that girls should have the right to complete their schooling, rather than be forced into marriage at an early age. I knew he would stand up for me,” says Nada.

Abdel Salam, at the time, was working outside the country and did not receive Nada's calls. Out of desperation, Nada called her uncle's close associate, Abdul Jabbar, who reluctantly agreed to pick her up and provide a place to stay until they could contact her uncle. Though Abdul Jabbar knew his actions could invite serious legal consequences, he, like Abdel Salam, firmly opposed the marriage of minors.

Within days, Nada's face was projected across local media, her parents filing a police complaint, fearing she had been kidnapped. Nada wanted to dispel all confusion surrounding her disappearance — with Abdul Jabbar's help, she recorded and uploaded a two-minute video to YouTube explaining she had not, in fact, been kidnapped, relaying her story and decrying the injustice of child marriage. She made an impassioned plea for change, explaining how underage marriage is used to deprive girls of an education, destroying their futures by stripping them of autonomy. In less than three days, the video accumulated over eight million views and was translated into over thirty languages. Activists and humanitarian organizations across the world rallied behind Nada, and Yemeni culture as a whole was suddenly thrust into the spotlight to be dissected by the media.

Due to the intense global scrutiny, the Yemeni Ministry of Interior coerced Nada's father into nullifying her marriage. Fearing Nada's parents would retaliate against their daughter and further paint the country in an unflattering light, the Ministry awarded full custody of the eleven-year-old divorcée to Abdel Salam.

Nada moved into her uncle's home in Sana'a, where she was allowed to continue her schooling. She was invited to share her story on media outlets across the Middle East. MBC 1, one of the Middle East's largest television networks, produced a [documentary](#) on

her journey. In France, the Michel Lafon Publishing House released a [biography](#) about Nada that examined the practice of child marriage across the world.

Nada was invited to France for the launch of the biography. Upon arriving with her uncle at the Aden Airport for their flight to Paris, however, the pair was kidnapped by armed Al Qaeda forces. At the time, Yemen was in the early stages of its ongoing civil war and tensions were climbing across the country. Forced into a military vehicle at gunpoint, Nada and Abdel Salam were driven to a small compound housing Al Qaeda captives. For three days, they were blindfolded and interrogated about the motives behind their campaign against child marriage.

“They wanted to know if I was being backed by an NGO or a foreign government. They accused me of being a puppet for the West,” says Nada.

Long stretches of silence between interrogations were occasionally shattered by gunshots and screams from a captive, somewhere in the compound, pleading for his life as he was tortured or killed. The pair were held captive for over two weeks until ISIS militants stormed Aden and assassinated the governor, forcing Al Qaeda to flee. Miraculously, Nada, Abdel Salam, and the remaining captives were released.

Though Nada had endured an avalanche of threats from Yemeni extremists since first appearing in the media, it was her kidnapping, along with the growing civil unrest across Yemen, that pushed her to accept an offer of asylum from Saudi Arabia. King Salman invited Nada to Riyadh, where she would be housed at a humanitarian aid and relief center for the next year. There, she established The Nada Foundation, dedicated to increasing awareness about gender-based violence and child marriage and promoting opportunities for girls’ education. Nada eventually moved to the United Kingdom upon being granted refugee status, where she continued to work on the foundation while studying full-time.

Since its inception, The Nada Foundation has launched several programs to protect and expand upon the rights of children in Yemen. The [Our Dreams Thrive](#) initiative hires Yemeni teachers to provide English language instruction to over 10,000 girls in internally displaced persons camps across the country. Nada’s [Safe Havens](#) project aids girls who have been forced into marriage or have suffered domestic abuse. Since 2017, the Foundation has negotiated the dissolution of hundreds of underage marriages and awarded over sixty scholarships for continued and higher education. Through the profits of her biography as well as donations and grants, Nada’s foundation also sponsors a shelter for Yemeni girls who have fled forced marriages and domestic violence. In 2019, Nada’s efforts earned her a [nomination](#) for the [International Children’s Peace Prize](#).



Nada visiting students at a Yemeni school.

Nada's work has given hundreds of girls a second chance to create a life of their choosing; still, there are millions of Yemeni women whose dreams are left to wilt in an environment that fails to acknowledge their full humanity.

The ongoing civil war in Yemen, along with the pandemic, has severely destabilized the economy and resulted in the destruction of key infrastructure. Too many Yemeni families are focused on survival, casting progress aside for another day. As a result, the condition of women in the country has deteriorated: according to the [International Rescue Committee](#), nearly forty percent of girls are not receiving an education, and the rate of forced and early marriage among girls has tripled since the start of conflict. For years, Nada has lobbied for legislation explicitly criminalizing the marriage of children in Yemen. Still, Yemen has no such law in place.

Nada isn't disheartened. She believes the path to ending child marriage lies not in legislative chambers, but in the hearts and minds of people. Her interactions with hundreds of Yemeni parents through her foundation over the years have changed her perspective on the perpetrators of child marriage, including her own parents.

Nada realized in many ways, her parents were victims of a cultural practice they did not create, but were compelled to practice and uphold. Nada's own mother married at thirteen, and her grandmother at nine. To Nada's parents, as well as many other well-intentioned Yemeni parents, child marriage was just *marriage*, arranged for the good of their daughter in a country where few options existed to secure a woman's future.

If people understand the consequences of premature marriage, says Nada, they will protect and educate their daughters, and child marriage rates will naturally decline. Only widespread awareness will enable parents to view their daughters as individuals to be invested in, capable of securing their own economic futures, rather than burdens to be offloaded on to a husband. "It is, in fact, education that will secure a girl's future — not marriage (as a minor), which will destroy it."

For Nada, childhood was too brief, her innocence stolen as she was forced to contend with circumstances far too inappropriate for her age. Her story and work are a reminder that while progress is on its way, it too often drags its feet.

Nada's achievements, however, prove hope is not futile. She tells the story of Shayma, a beneficiary of the Nada Foundation. A victim of domestic abuse, Shayma was a seven-year-old girl who had suffered multiple bone fractures at the hands of her father. Having already been pulled out of school, Shayma's prospects weren't bright — had the Nada Foundation not intervened, she would have likely fallen victim to child marriage. With the help of a Yemeni prosecutor and human rights activist, the Nada Foundation successfully fought to transfer custody of the girl to her grandmother, who agreed to care for and protect Shayma against retaliation. For the past three years, the Nada Foundation

has funded Shayma's education. She has gone on to consistently achieve first rank across all subjects at her school.

Nada, who is studying international law in university, plans to dedicate her life to providing a voice for the millions of girls across the world who live in fear of using their own. Until every child can exercise the full rights granted to her on the basis of her humanity, says Nada, there's plenty of work to be done.

"We must never become hopeless. There is always hope. I wouldn't be fighting so hard if there wasn't," says Nada.

You can learn more about Nada's story by visiting her [website](#) and connecting with her on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#).

Learn more about the humanitarian crisis in Yemen [here](#).