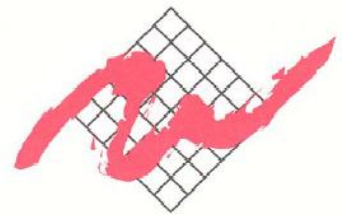


The Status of Women in the Middle East and North Africa (SWMENA) Project

Focus on Yemen | Opinions on Early Marriage and
Gender Quotas - Topic Brief

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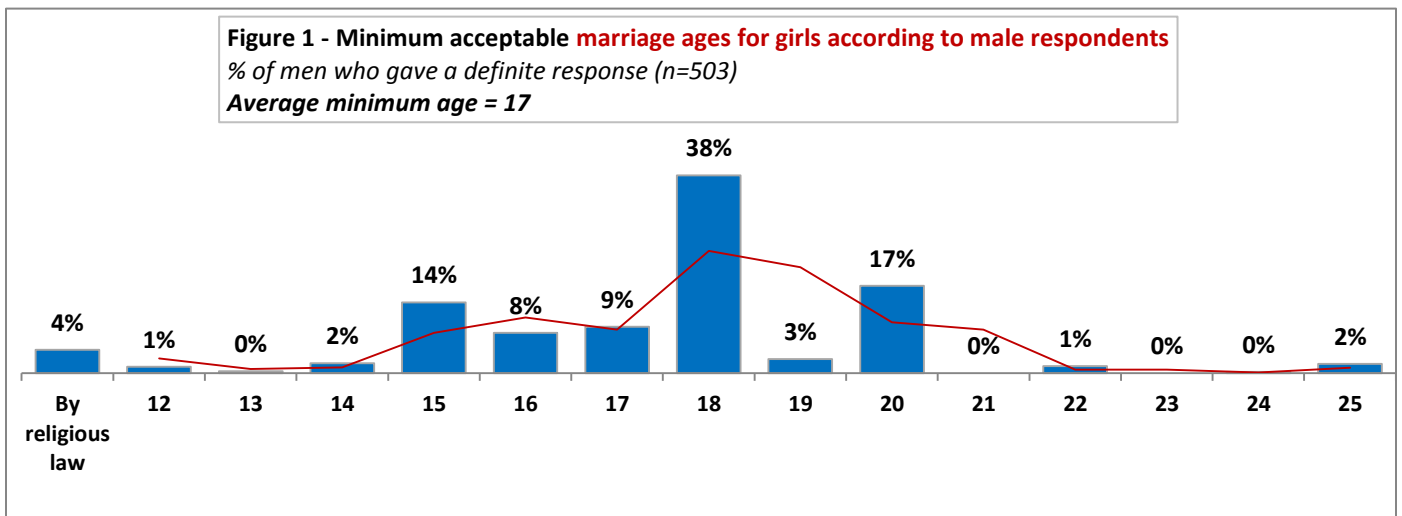
OPINIONS ON EARLY MARRIAGE AND GENDER QUOTAS

One of the principal objectives of the SWMENA survey was to examine the level of popular support for law reforms that have the potential to eliminate discrimination against women and enhance their participation in the social and political realms. The problem of early marriage and forced marriage remains a hotly debated issue in Yemen. Public debate over marriage rights was recently brought to the spotlight following the case of the 8-year old girl Nojoud who was married to a 32-year old against her will and went to the court alone in 2008 demanding a divorce. The issue led to the introduction of a draft law in parliament that would set a minimum marriage age at 17. The draft law was however postponed for further deliberation after strong opposition from Islamist factions. This topic brief elicits respondents' opinions about introducing a minimum marriage age for girls. It also explores opinions and attitudes towards gender quotas including knowledge of the concept of gender quotas and whether respondents are favorable or not to their introduction in elected bodies in Yemen.

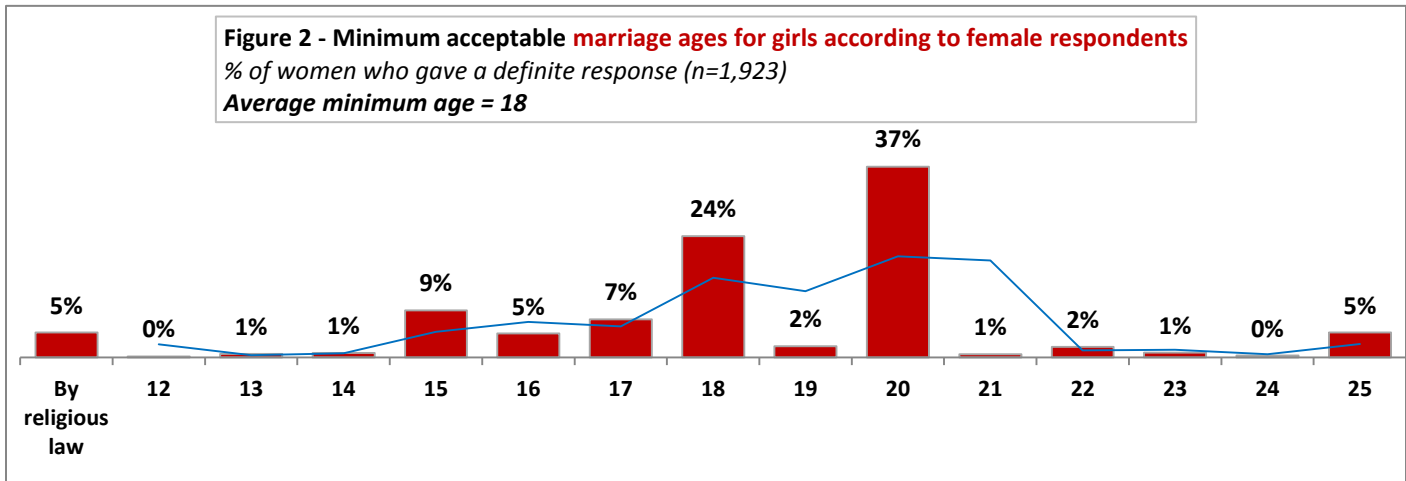
Opinions on Minimum Marriage Ages

Early marriage remains a widely spread phenomenon in Yemen and is believed to be one the main causes leading to high maternal mortality rates. Both girls and boys tend to marry young in Yemen, however, the implications of early marriage for women is understandably more serious due to the prevalence of teenage pregnancies which are most often coupled with short birth intervals, high fertility rates, and inadequate reproductive healthcare. Numerous women's NGOs are trying to push for the introduction of a minimum marriage age at 17. In the SWMENA survey, respondents were asked a series of questions about their opinions of the minimum acceptable marriage age for girls and boys and whether they supported a law that would set a minimum legal marriage age.

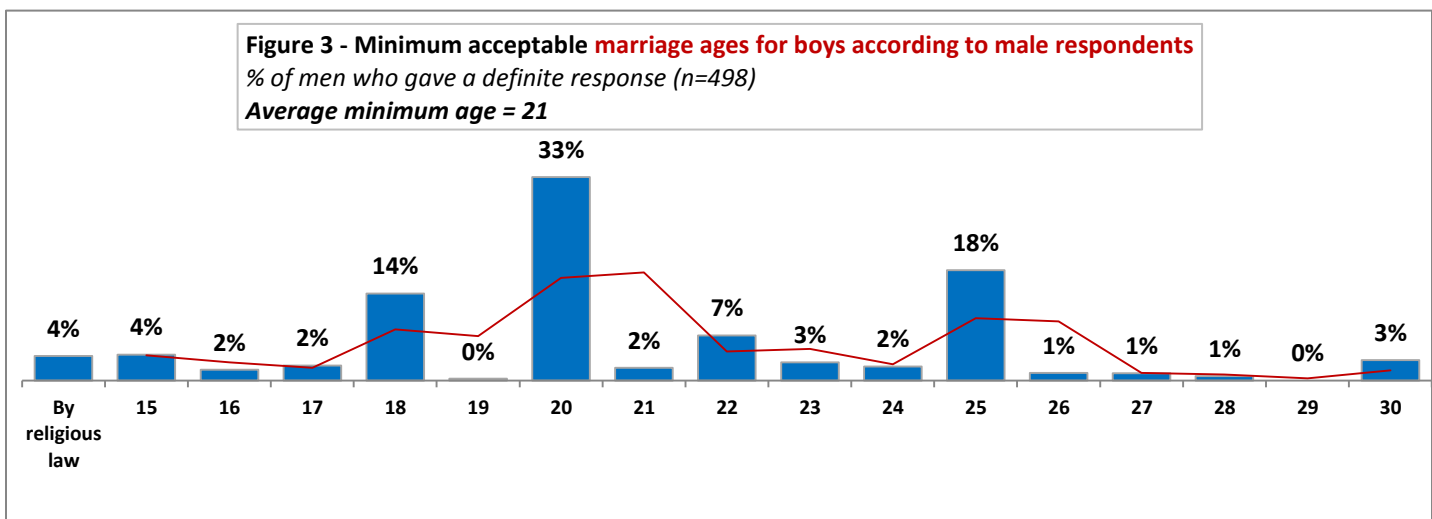
- Respondents were first asked what is in their opinion the minimum acceptable age for a girl to get married. Among male respondents, a 37% plurality mentioned age 18 as the minimum acceptable age for a girl to get married. According to survey responses, nearly seven in 10 Yemeni men believe that the minimum acceptable marriage age for girls should be at least 17 years or higher. This nevertheless leaves a relatively sizable share of men (30%) who believe that it is acceptable for a girl to get married at age 16 or younger. Four percent of surveyed men said that the minimum acceptable age for a girl to get married is according to religious law. This implies that these respondents believe a girl can get married as soon as she hits puberty. Overall, when averaging the ages given by male respondents and excluding those who said "according to religious law", the average minimum marriage age for girls as cited by men stands at 18 years old. If we assume that the average



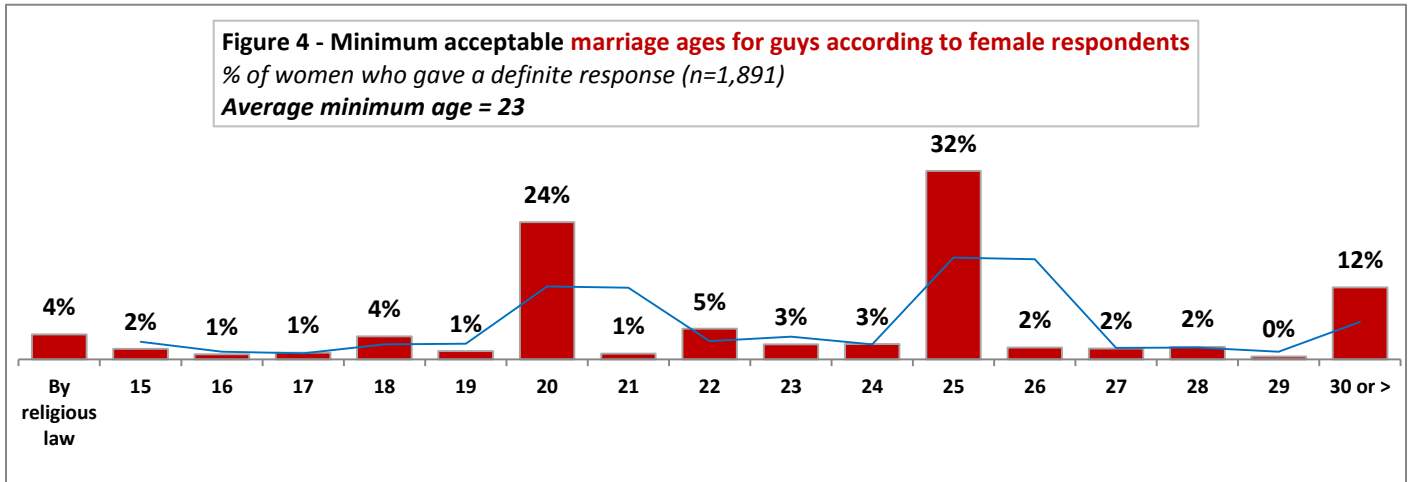
age for a girl to hit puberty is 11, then the average minimum age for girls to get married as cited by men would drop to 17 (Figure 1).



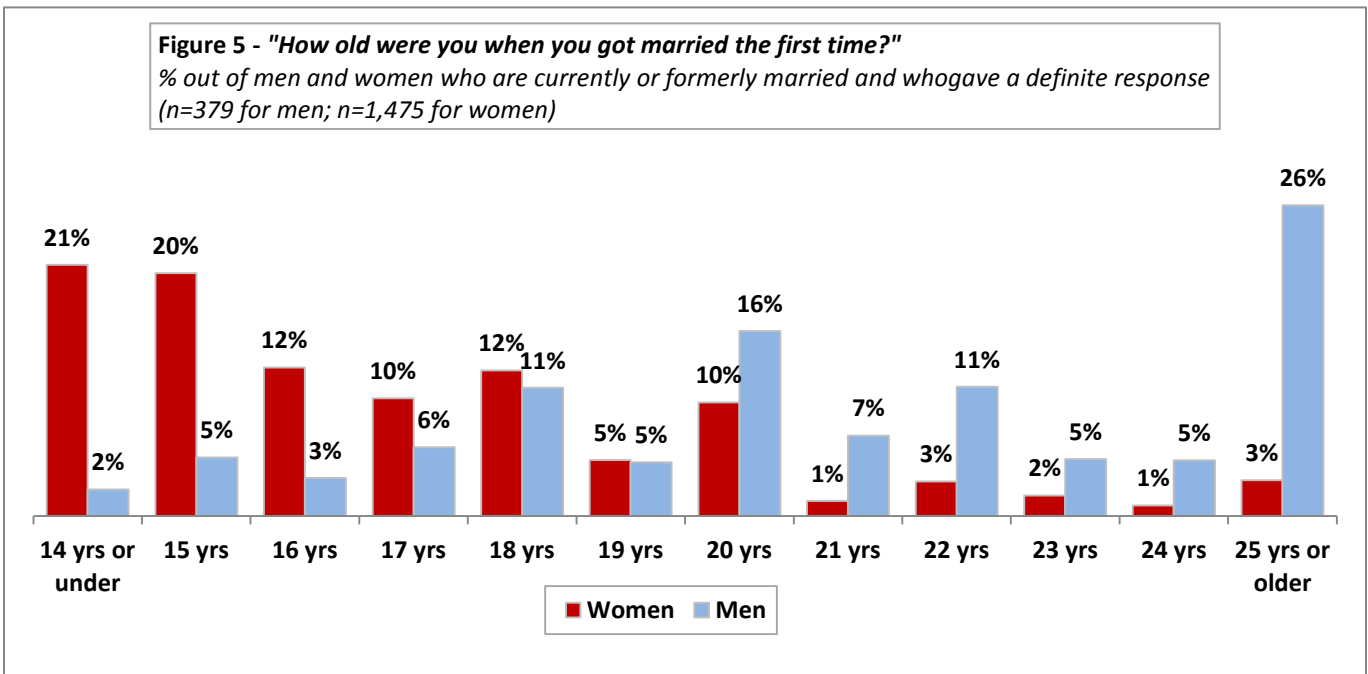
- For female respondents, a 37% plurality mentioned age 20 as the minimum acceptable age for a girl to get married. Nearly eight in 10 surveyed women believe that the minimum acceptable age for a girl to get married should be at least 17 years or older. This leaves 20% of women who would accept a marriage age for girls at 16 years or younger. Similar to men’s responses, 5% of female respondents said that the minimum acceptable age for a girl to get married is “according to religious law.” Overall, this shows that the average minimum age for a girl to get married is 19, as cited by female respondents, excluding those who said “according to religious law.” When including this group, the average minimum age drops to 18 (Figure 2).
- Survey respondents were also asked about what they thought is the minimum acceptable age for boys to get married. A sweeping majority of male respondents (90%) believe the minimum acceptable age should be at least 17 years or older. In fact, a plurality of male respondents (33%) cited age 20 as the minimum and another sizable share of 18% cited age 25. Four percent of male respondents said the minimum acceptable age for young men to get married is “according to religious law.” In total, the average minimum acceptable age for boys to get married according to male respondents is 21 (Figure 3). This does not change with the inclusion of those who said that it depends on religious law (i.e. when the boy reaches puberty assuming that the average puberty age



for boys is 12).

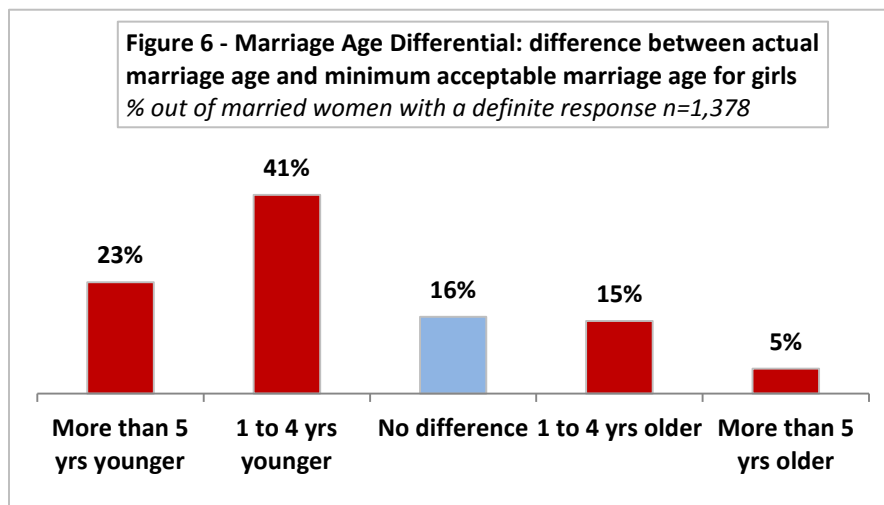


- According to female respondents, the average minimum acceptable age for a young man to get married stands at 23. It is interesting to note that for Yemeni women, the minimum acceptable age for marriage is only slightly higher than the minimum cited by men for both girls and boys (Figure 4).
- Survey respondents who have been married before were asked how old they were when they got married the first time. This helps get a snapshot view of existing marriage ages in Yemen. The survey shows that 54% of currently or formerly married Yemeni women have been married at the age of 16 years or younger. Ten percent were married at age 17, 12% at age 18 and 5% at age 19. Nearly 19% of women have been married at age 20 or



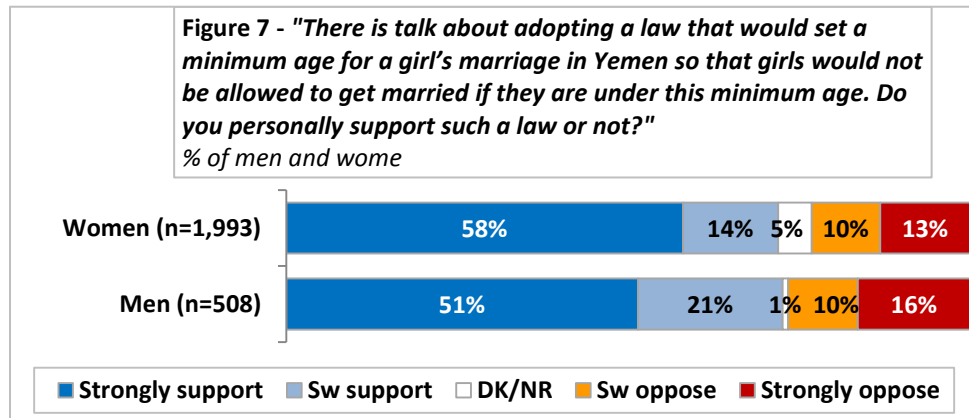
older. For men, the picture is quite different, with more than 67% reporting being married at age 20 or older.

- In fact, over a quarter of Yemeni men (26%) have been married at age 25 or older versus only 3% of women. Only one in 10 Yemeni men was married at age 16 or younger (Figure 5). According to survey findings, the average marriage age for surveyed women is 16.7 years old. For men, the average marriage age is 21.6 years old.
- Given the prevalence of early marriage in Yemen, we used survey findings to examine whether Yemeni women believe they got married too young (relative to what they believe is the minimum acceptable marriage age) or whether their opinions on minimum marriage ages correspond more or less with their own experiences. Consequently, we looked at married women and calculated a “marriage age differential”¹ by subtracting their actual marriage age (the age at which they got married the first time) from the age they gave as the minimum acceptable marriage age for girls. The data suggests that a relatively large proportion of women (64%) were actually married at an age younger than what is in their view the minimum acceptable marriage age for girls. In fact, 23% of married women were married at an age that is at least five years younger than what is in their view the minimum acceptable marriage age for girls. Nearly 16% of married women in our sample were married at the age that corresponds to what they believe is the minimum acceptable marriage age for girls and 20% of women have been married at an age older than what is in their view the minimum acceptable age for marriage. However, only 5% have been married at an age that is five years or older than the minimum acceptable marriage age for girls (Figure 6).



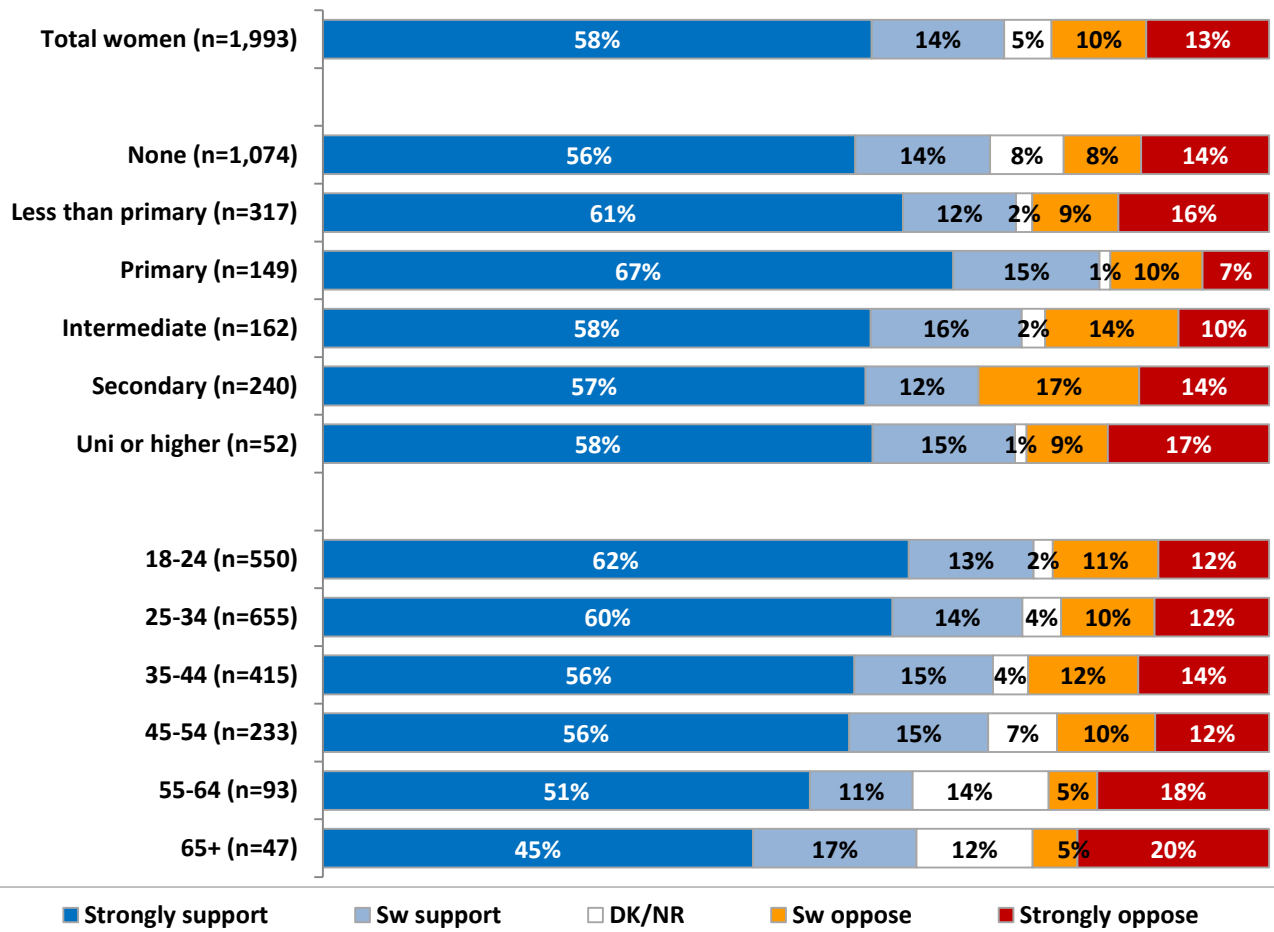
¹ The “marriage age differential” is defined here as being the woman’s actual marriage age on her first marriage minus the minimum acceptable marriage age for girls that she gave in answer to the following question: “What is the minimum acceptable age for a girl to get married?”

- Respondents were next asked specifically about whether they supported the adoption of “a law that would set a minimum age for a girl’s marriage in Yemen so that girls would not be allowed to get married if they are under this minimum age.” Survey findings are rather positive since large majorities of both men and women say that they support the adoption of a minimum marriage age law in Yemen. Indeed, a full 73% of men report strongly (51%) or somewhat (21%) supporting such a law and 72% of women strongly (58%) or somewhat (14%) supporting it. Meanwhile, 27% of men and 23% of women oppose a minimum marriage age law and 5% of women don’t know or refuse to answer (Figure 7). While these results are encouraging for groups in Yemen pushing for the adoption of this law, it is somewhat perplexing to see that the share of women supporting the law is not higher but rather similar to the share of men for a proposed reform that is expected to improve women’s marriage rights.

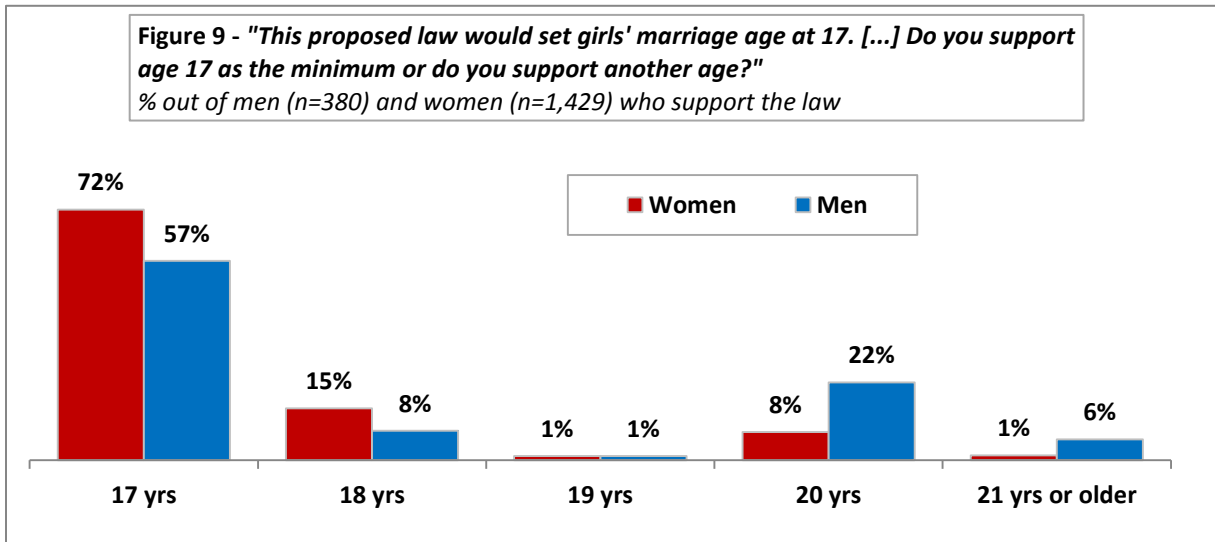


- It is also noteworthy that support for the law among women does not systematically increase with educational attainment. In fact, women with a primary education or lower show slightly higher support for the law (72%) than women with a secondary education or higher (70%).
- When looking at support levels for the law by women’s age groups, we observe that younger women under 34 tend to be more supportive of the law than older women yet there is a majority support for all age groups. A full 75% of women 18-34 support the adoption of a minimum marriage age law compared with a lower 71% of women 35-54 and an even lower 63% of women 55 or older (Figure 8). It must be noted that the share of respondents who say they don’t know or refuse to answer is much higher among women 55 or older.

Figure 8 - Support for the adoption of a minimum marriage age law
 % out of total women and women by education and age



- Respondents who said they supported the adoption of a minimum marriage age law were asked if they supported the current law proposal that sets the minimum at 17 years old or if they supported a different minimum age. Majorities of both men and women support the minimum age to be set at 17 years old, however, more men (72%) than women (57%) are in favor of age 17 as the minimum marriage age while more women (38%) than men (25%) would like the minimum legal marriage age to be set at an age older than 17. In fact, 22% of women would like the minimum marriage age to be set at 20 years old and 6% would like it set at age 21 or older. Meanwhile, 15% of men would like the minimum marriage age to be set at age 18 and 11% would like it to be set at age 19 or older (Figure 9).



- Respondents who said they were very or somewhat opposed to the adoption of a minimum marriage age law in Yemen were asked to explain the reasons why they are against it. The top reasons given by female respondents were different from those voiced by men. For women, the first reason why they oppose the law is due to their belief that marriage is a matter of chance/luck (35%), followed by the need to respect traditions and conventions (11%), the belief that reaching puberty for girls is sufficient for her to get married (10%), and the belief that if the husband is financially capable and can support his wife, then it doesn't matter what age the girl is (10%). For men, the top reason for opposing a minimum marriage age law is because it is against Sharia' and against religion (27%), followed by religious reasons (15%), the belief that it is sufficient for the girl to reach puberty to get married (13%), and the belief that early marriage protects youth from deviation (Figure 10).

Figure 10- Reasons for opposing a minimum marriage age law
 % out of respondents who oppose the law

	Women (n=470)	Men (n=124)	
1) Marriage is a matter of chance/luck	35%	4%	(6)
2) Traditions and conventions	11%	3%	(7)
3) What is most important is reaching puberty	10%	13%	(3)
4) If financially capable, why not	10%	2%	(8)
5) It is against Sharia', against religion	7%	27%	(1)
6) I am ok with both sides, I don't mind	6%	1%	(10)
7) Early marriage protects young people from deviation	5%	11%	(4)
8) Society will not accept this law now	4%	5%	(5)
9) Fear of increasing spinsterhood	2%	2%	(9)
10) Religious reasons	2%	15%	(2)

Shows ranks according to citations by men

Opinions on Gender Quotas

The SWMENA survey also aimed to assess the level of awareness and support for the introduction of gender quotas in elected bodies in Yemen. Currently, the level of female representation in the Yemeni parliament is extremely low, standing at a tiny 0.3% of seats (1 woman out of a total of 301 seats). Female representation on local government councils is similarly limited with women occupying less than 1% of seats. Since the introduction of gender quotas would potentially promote women's participation in political decision-making, SWMENA survey respondents were asked a series of questions about their knowledge of the concept of gender quotas and whether they would support such a system in Yemen.

- Survey results indicate that few Yemenis seem to have heard of the notion of gender quotas. And awareness is much lower among women than among men. Indeed, when respondents were asked if they had heard about "the notion of reserving a share for women in parliament and in elected bodies so that women have a specific percentage of seats," a sweeping majority of women (80%) said no they had not heard about it versus 20% who said yes (Figure 11).
- Twice as many men (40%) as women said "yes" they heard about the notion of gender quotas, yet this leaves a 60% majority of Yemeni men who have not heard about gender quotas (Figure 12). The higher level of awareness of gender quotas among men could be explained by the wider access that men have to political debates and the media than women do.
- When breaking down the data on knowledge of gender quotas by different demographic characteristics of women, we find that women with higher educational attainment have higher-than-average awareness of gender quotas: nearly four in 10 women who have a secondary education or higher have heard about the concept of gender quotas. However, even for women who have university education or higher, the share of women who have heard of gender quotas is less than a majority (only 40%).

Figure 11 - "Have you ever heard about the notion of reserving a share for women in parliament and elected bodies so that women have a specific percentage of seats?"

% of women (n=1,993)

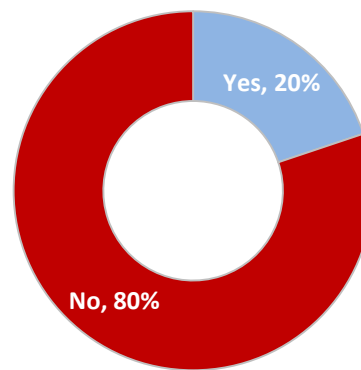
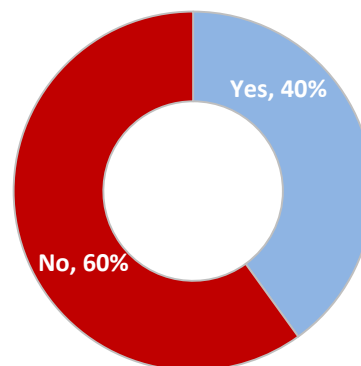
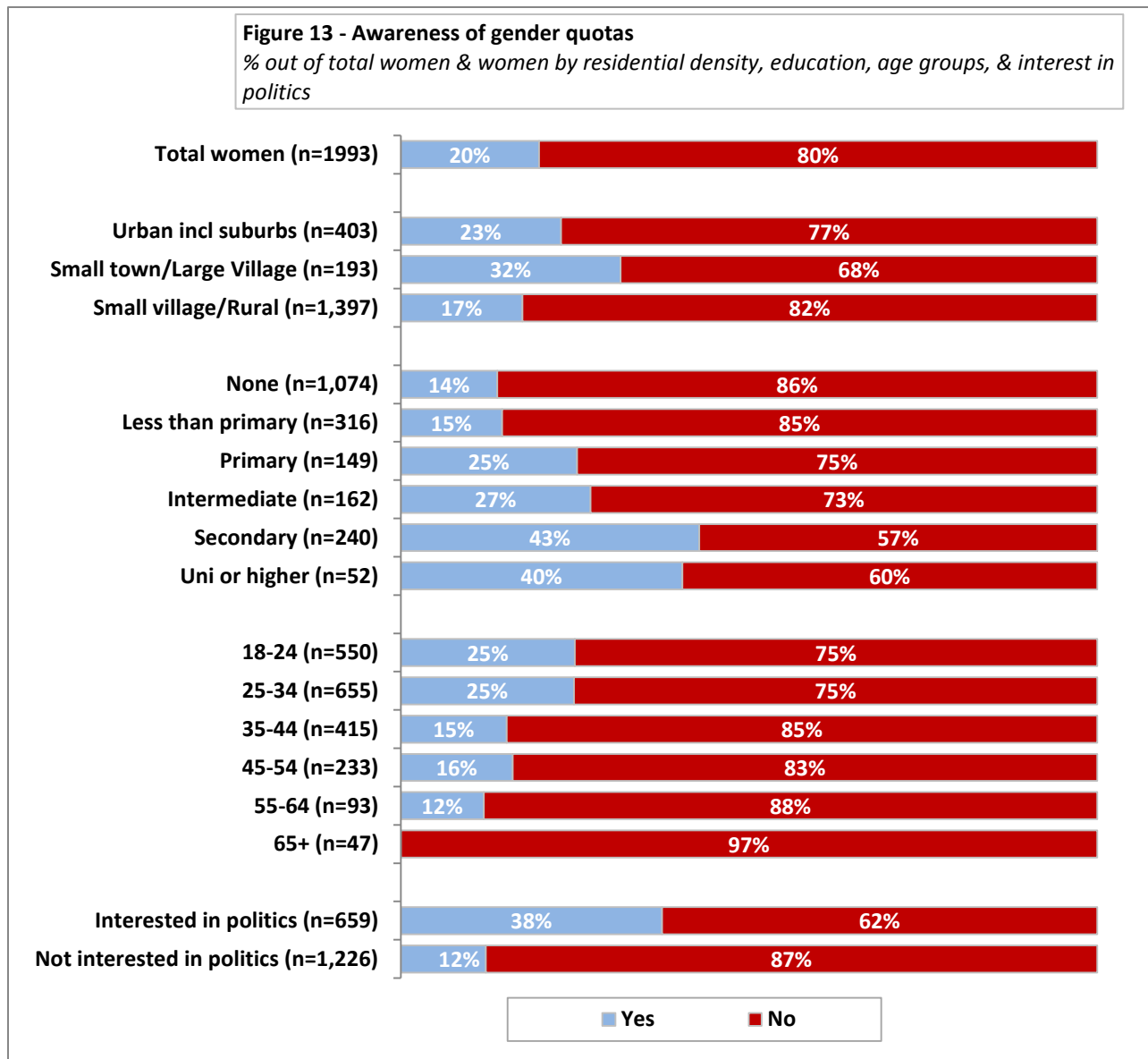


Figure 12 - "Have you ever heard about the notion of reserving a share for women in parliament and elected bodies so that women have a specific percentage of seats?"

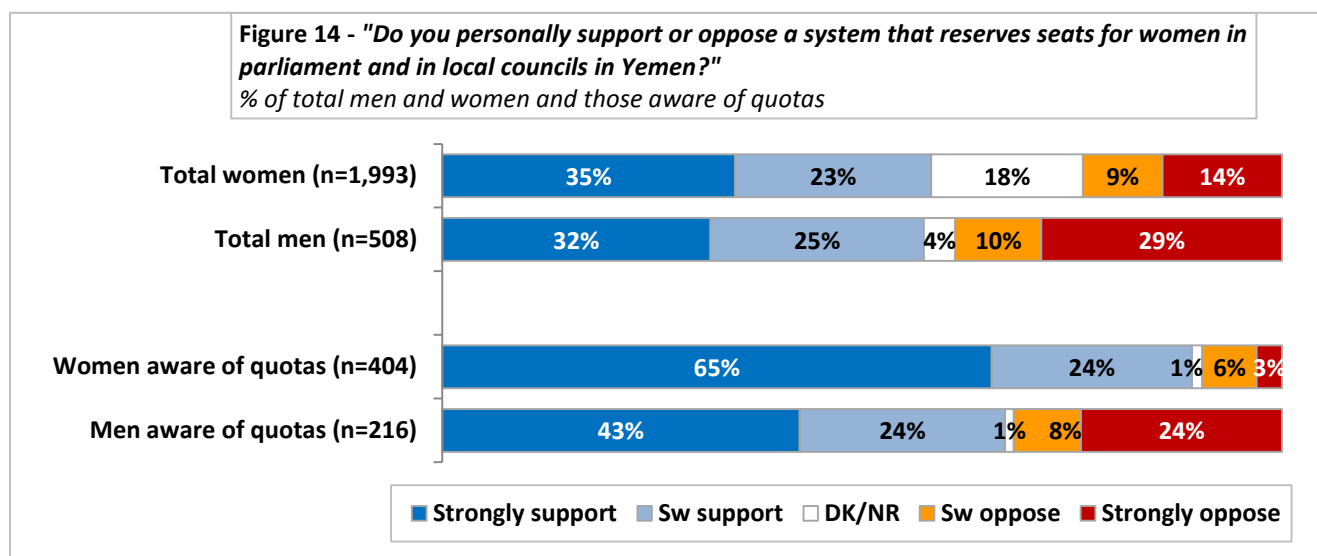
% of men (n=508)



- Younger women ages 18-34 are slightly more knowledgeable of gender quotas than women in older age groups, however, only a quarter of these young women have heard of the notion of gender quotas while the remaining 75% have not heard of it.
- When breaking down these findings by urban and rural locations, we find that women who live in small towns or large villages show higher levels of awareness of the notion of gender quotas (32%) than women who live in urban areas (23%) or in small villages (17%). The higher awareness in small towns/ large villages could be because political mobilization is easier in these areas than it is in urban areas or purely rural areas.
- Women who are very or somewhat interested in matters of politics and government are about three times more likely to have heard of the notion of gender quotas than women who are not too interested or not at all interested in matters of politics and government (38% vs. 12% respectively) (Figure 13).

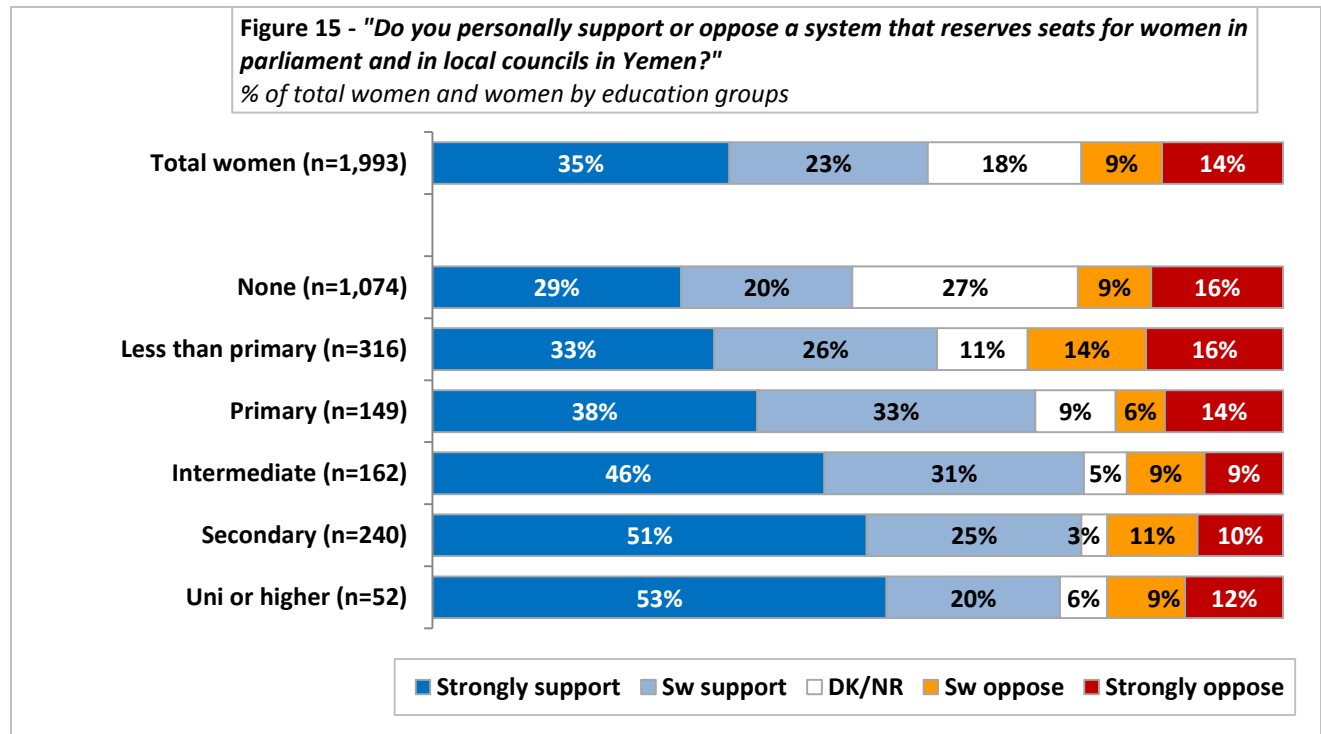


- Survey findings thus indicate that there is very little knowledge of the notion of gender quotas in Yemen. This knowledge deficit may potentially pose an obstacle to women’s NGOs and activists who are trying to push for the introduction of quotas in elected bodies in Yemen.
- Next, to gauge attitudes towards the introduction of gender quotas in Yemen, respondents were asked if they personally support or oppose “a system that would reserve seats for women in parliament and in local councils in Yemen.” Overall, majorities of both men (57%) and women (58%) said they strongly or somewhat support gender quotas in Yemen. Meanwhile, 39% of men said they strongly or somewhat oppose gender quotas versus 24% of women. It must be noted that nearly one in five women did not know or refused to answer the question.
- When excluding those who have not heard of the notion of gender quotas and comparing men and women’s responses again, we observe a wide gender discrepancy in the levels of support for gender quotas. Among women who are aware of gender quotas, a sweeping 89% majority say they strongly (65%) or somewhat (24%) support a system of quotas in Yemen. This is higher by 22 percentage points than the share of men aware of quotas who strongly (43%) or somewhat (24%) support the quota system. More than three times as many men (32%) as women (9%) oppose the system of gender quotas in Yemen (Figure 14).



- Overall, survey findings suggest that there is no significant opposition to gender quotas on behalf of either men or women. It is also noteworthy that opinions of quotas are much more favorable when women have knowledge of the notion of quotas: support for quotas goes from 58% for women as a whole to 89% for women with knowledge of quotas. This shows that increasing awareness of gender quotas can go a long way in rallying Yemeni women around this cause. Among men, support for gender quotas also increases as knowledge levels increase: the level of support grows from 57% for men as a whole to 67% for men aware of quotas, but the difference is not as notable as the one seen for female respondents.
- The data also shows that as women’s educational attainment increases, the intensity of support for gender quotas increases as well. Indeed, a 51% majority of women with a secondary education or higher say they

strongly support gender quotas. This compares to just 32% of women with an intermediate education or lower who say they strongly support gender quotas (Figure 15).



- Respondents who said they supported a system of gender quotas were asked why they do. Responses are based on those respondents who had heard of the notion of gender quotas. Among women, the top reason for supporting gender quotas is the belief that women should have the same rights as men: this garnered 33% of responses. Nearly a quarter of women (24%) said it is because women are better at representing women’s needs. Another 19% said it is because women should have a role in political life. Other reasons include the belief that women are just as qualified or as educated as men (9%), that women would focus on new policy concerns (9%), and that women are half the population and should therefore be represented (8%) (Figure 16).

Reason	% of cases
Because women should have the same rights as men/ I see no difference between men and women	33%
Because women are better at representing women’s needs/demands	24%
Because women should have a role in political life	19%
Because women are just as qualified/educated as men	9%
Because women in elected office would focus on new policy concerns/ issues (poverty, health, education, children, etc...)	9%
Because elected bodies should represent major social groups in society/ women are half the population and should be represented	8%

Among men, the top three reasons for supporting quotas are the belief that women should have a role in political life (29%), that women should have the same rights as men (20%), and that women are half the population and should therefore be represented (14%). The reason that women are better at representing women’s needs came in fourth place with only 9% of men mentioning it whereas it was the second most cited reason among women. It is noteworthy that 9% men support quotas because they think women are less corrupt than men (Figure 17).

Figure 17 - Top six reasons for supporting quotas among men (% out of men who are aware of quotas and support them)	% of cases
Because women should have a role in political life	29%
Because women should have the same rights as men/ I see no difference between men and women	20%
Because elected bodies should represent major social groups in society/ women are half the population and should be represented	14%
Because women are better at representing women’s needs/demands	9%
Because women are less corrupt than men	9%
Because women are just as qualified/educated as men	9%

Of those women who oppose gender quotas, the top reasons for opposing them are that a woman’s place is at home (38%), that women have no place in politics (30%), and that women are less qualified, less educated than men (12%).

Figure 18 - Top six reasons for opposing quotas among women (% out of women who are aware of quotas and oppose them)	% of cases
Because a woman’s place is at home	38%
Because women have no place in politics	30%
Because women are less qualified/ less educated than men	12%
Because women do not want to hold office anyway	6%
Religious reasons	4%
Because women should not be elected just because they are women	3%

The top three reasons men mention for opposing gender quotas are similar to those cited by women (Figure 19).

Figure 19 - Top six reasons for opposing quotas among men (% out of men who are aware of quotas and oppose them)	% of cases
Because a woman’s place is at home	41%
Because women have no place in politics	25%
Because women are less qualified/ less educated than men	12%
Religious reasons	6%
Because they are unfair, against the principle of equal opportunity	6%
Women are incapable	5%

