

Triple Tensions: Somali Refugee Women in Yemen

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Introduction

Since the outbreak of the Somali civil war in 1991 a burgeoning flow of Somali refugees has spread all over the world. Ethiopia and Kenya have received the highest numbers of Somali refugees; however, Yemen has also received hundreds of thousands. Yemen is the only country on the Arabian Peninsula that has signed the Refugee Convention of 1951 and Somali refugees are accepted on a prima facie basis. Yet, the living and working conditions of Somali refugees in Yemen are far from ideal. Their social status in Yemeni society is low; they are often discriminated against and are blamed for the increasing unemployment rates, levels of crime, prostitution, presence of AIDS, and the loosening of moral values.

The number of Somali women that come to Yemen on their own, without male relatives but sometimes accompanied by children, is remarkably high. In some cases, they experience the war directly, through rape or witnessing their relatives' violent death. In other cases, they suffer from poverty and the lack of income-generating opportunities. Some marry on the way or soon after their arrival in Yemen in the hope that marriage will guarantee male protection, support, income, and an easier life. The alternative, living alone as a single woman in Yemen, is difficult. However, these marriages do not always last and thus, many women end up living alone with their children. Though Somali women are socially dependent on men in Yemen, they are economically independent. It is easier for women to find paid work in Yemen than for men. The large majority of Somali women are employed as domestic workers, cleaning the houses of Yemeni families, and they have often become the main providers for their families. Somali men find it difficult to accept their dependence on women. The changed gender relations result in tension, conflict, and the break-up of marriages.

1. See for example, Affie, 2004; Boyle and Ali, n.d.; Chell-Robinson, 2000; Farah, 2000; and Al-Sharmani, 2006.

2. The research was part of the research program titled Migrant Domestic Workers: Transnational Relations, Families and Identities at the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) and the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research (ASSR).

Gender relations always change as a result of migration and in refugee situations. In particular, the changes in gender relations among Somalis in the diaspora have been noted in several studies.¹ The case of Somalis in Yemen is particularly interesting in this respect because of a paradoxical gender relationship: Somali women are simultaneously economically independent and socially dependent on men, due to their need for male protection. In this paper, I will describe and analyze this paradoxical situation and the multiple tensions Somali women face in Yemen; in society at large, at home, and at work. The paper is based on extensive anthropological fieldwork in two cities in Yemen between 2003 and 2007 and on in-depth interviews with Somali domestic workers.²

Social Tensions

The following are examples of headlines that have appeared in Yemeni newspapers over the last few years: “Smuggling across the Gulf of Aden from Somalia to Yemen on the Increase”, “At least 112 drown off Yemeni Coast”, and “Somali Immigrants Face Death in the Red Sea”. Since the outbreak of the civil war in Somalia, the flow of Somali refugees to Yemen has increased dramatically. Currently, there are more than 90,000 Somali refugees registered in Yemen. The actual number of Somalis that have come to Yemen since 1991 is unknown because many of them are not registered or have moved to other countries. Most Somali refugees come to Yemen on smuggling boats, risking their life during the journey. The boats are made of wood, do not have sanitary facilities, and are overcrowded. “When the boat is too heavy and starts to sink, the smugglers start to throw people off the boat in order to stabilize it. People are shouting and screaming because they are still alive but know that they are going to die,” recalled a Somali woman who came to Yemen by boat. In addition, the smugglers are not allowed to enter the Yemeni waters, let alone go ashore. Thus, the passengers are sometimes forced to jump off the boat a few miles off the coast and swim to shore, at the risk of drowning in the process.

Those who survive and arrive safely in Yemen are apprehended by the Yemeni police. Somalis are immediately accepted as refugees and referred to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)-refugee camp in Al-Kharaz, near Aden. Non-Somalis have to prove that they are indeed refugees. In the interim they may be arrested and imprisoned. Despite the ready acceptance of Somali refugees, they sometimes experience harsh treatment. For example, their belongings may be confiscated. There are stories of women experiencing harassment. Habiba, a young Somali woman who came to Yemen because she lost her husband, is one such example. She was separated from her three children and raped by three Yemeni policemen because she could not pay the sum of money they requested from her. She was held by the policemen until the following day. A strong stigma is attached to rape in Somalia and so, prior to the interview, Habiba had not told anyone what had happened.

UNHCR has established a refugee camp near Aden where refugees can receive food, shelter, and health care. The camp is located in the desert, is subject to extremely high temperatures, and has only basic facilities. Accordingly, most Somali refugees prefer to travel to big cities in search of employment. UNHCR encourages refugees to integrate into the local community. The camp is reserved for “vulnerable cases”, unable to survive without international assistance (Hughes, 2002, p. 12). Currently, there are approximately 10,000 people living in the camp. The rest leave the camp and travel to the cities. In the southern part of Yemen, it has become common to see refugees walking long distances with little luggage or clothing. Sawda, a young Somali woman of 17 years, left her family because of poverty and travelled to Yemen on her own. She recounted her experience of leaving the refugee camp: “We spent seven days on our way to Sana’a. We didn’t have money for a taxi so we had to walk. We walked at night, we slept in villages, and the next day we continued walking.”

In the cities, most Somali refugees share apartments and rooms in an attempt to decrease the cost of rent, which results in overcrowding. The rooms are small and usually sparsely furnished with one or two mattresses, a bed, and sometimes a

wardrobe. Even though Somalis are accepted on a *prima facie* basis, their living conditions in Yemen are difficult. They do not have citizenship rights and need work permits to work in the formal sector. The Yemeni government is responsible for the registration, dispensation, and renewal of identity cards for Somalis. However, these services are only available once every two years due to the lack of governmental resources. Consequently, many Somalis do not have identity cards. This hampers their access to health care, education, and employment. NGOs who receive financial support from UNHCR to offer assistance to refugees, such as the Refugee Health and Community Center and Marie Stopes International Yemen, are only allowed to help refugees who hold identity cards. Those who do not have identity cards are not entitled to subsidised services.

In addition, Somalis are often discriminated against and exploited as tenants and workers. The outbreak of the civil war in Somalia coincided with the outbreak of the Gulf War in 1991 and the subsequent return of hundreds of thousands of Yemeni migrants from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States.³ The government of the newly established Republic of Yemen lost one of its main sources of income, namely the remittances of Yemeni labour migrants. The government was unable to cope with the sudden arrival of returnees and refugees, particularly in regards to basic service provision such as housing, employment, health care, and education. The structural adjustment policies imposed on Yemen by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank further weakened Yemen's economic situation. Currently, general unemployment and poverty are rampant. In the early 1990s returning Yemeni migrants were blamed for economic problems. Currently, refugees from the Horn of Africa are the scapegoats for Yemen's ills. Increasing rates of unemployment, criminality, prostitution, and AIDS are linked to the presence of refugees who, subsequently, suffer from racism and discrimination (see Hughes, 2003, p. 37).

The Yemeni government does little to support Somali refugees. The refugee law, in which the rights and duties of both refugees and the Yemeni government are laid out, has not been approved by the Parliament and is therefore not implemented. Somali refugees are treated like other foreigners and have few rights. Rather than improving the situation of Somali refugees in Yemen, the Yemeni government tries to reduce the refugee flow by assisting in negotiations in Somalia. In addition, whereas Yemen used to have an "open-door policy," in which entrance and illegal residence were relatively easy, the government has recently implemented strict border control regulations, as part of Yemen's contribution to the "war on terror" (Hughes, 2002, p. 10). Regulations at the border with Saudi Arabia, in the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden, are focused on the prevention of arms smuggling and the entry of "terrorists." However, they have also proven very efficient in preventing refugees from entering Yemeni territories. Against this backdrop of discrimination, the Somali refugee women who are able to enter Yemen are often faced with poor economic conditions and maltreatment in the work place.

3. The Yemeni government was against a military attack on Iraq after Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, with the result that approximately 800,000 Yemeni migrants were expelled from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States.

Tensions at Work

The large majority of Somali women in Yemen are employed as domestic workers. Despite the economic crisis in Yemen, upper and middle class families in the main cities increasingly hire domestic workers. Changing family relations as a result of migration,

urbanization, the increase of girls' education, and women's employment have impacted notions of domestic work which has, in turn, resulted in the increased demand for paid domestic labour. Yemeni women are reluctant to work as domestic labourers because this job has a low social status and because working as domestic labourers forces them into contact with men who are not their relatives. The majority of domestic workers come from Somalia and Ethiopia. In some cases, Asian women are also employed.

There is a clear hierarchy among domestic workers. Asian women, from the Philippines, India, and Indonesia, are employed by upper class families for cleaning, cooking, child care, and elderly care. Ethiopian women are mainly employed by the upper middle and middle classes. They usually are hired to clean, cook, and to do care-taking jobs. Usually, Asian and Ethiopian women live with their employers. Middle class families predominately hire Somali women to do their domestic work. Somali women are almost never hired to cook. They are usually hired for cleaning jobs. They rarely live with their employers' families because they have their own family responsibilities.

For Somali women in Yemen domestic work is one of the few possibilities for paid work. It is also the reason for their economic independence. However, many Somali women have difficulty accepting their employment because it is seen as low-status work, it forces them into a hierarchical relationship with Yemeni women, and it puts them in daily contact with men who are not part of their family. Somali women have sometimes stated that, before the civil war in Somalia, they, themselves, had domestic workers at home and thus find it humiliating to do this type of work. In addition, Somali women are both culturally and religiously similar to their Yemeni employers: they are Muslim, they learn Arabic quickly, and share many cultural and religious values with the Yemenis. However, employment as domestic workers forces them to accept a subordinate position vis-a-vis Yemeni families. As domestic workers they are dependent on their employers who give them orders, can refuse to pay their salaries, and who may even accuse them of theft and send them to jail. Their dependence and vulnerability is even greater because they are refugees in a society that does not give them full citizenship rights. In addition, domestic work takes place in the private sphere and is therefore not covered by labour laws in Yemen. Domestic workers lack protection in cases of conflict between the employer and the employee. For example, one interviewee told me that she first worked for a large Yemeni family where the workload was very heavy, her salary was low, and she was not treated well. When she complained about her salary, the family threatened to employ an Ethiopian woman instead: "Praise the Lord, how the Yemenis treat us! They were always shouting: *Ya Somaliya! Ya khadima!*⁴ Come here, do this and do that. It was really bad. But I accepted it and did what they wanted."

Because Somali domestic workers have little power to negotiate the terms of their employment, they use different tactics and strategies to undermine the hierarchical relationship with their Yemeni employers. Coming late to work, not coming to work for a couple of days, or refusing to do certain tasks are ways in which they try to challenge this inequality. As a result, Yemeni employers call them "unreliable," saying that "they come and go when they want" and "they work for a short period and then they quit again". This so-called "unreliability" is also a result of the fact that Somali women have their own family responsibilities in Yemen. As mentioned before, many

4. *Khadima* literally means 'female servant' but it is also an explicit reference to the *akhdaam*, the lowest social status group in Yemen who are black and cannot trace their ancestry.

of them have children and are therefore not available for full-time work, particularly those who are single mothers. They cannot live with their employer's family. There is a chance that they will have to stay home to take care of a sick child or to help a relative. In addition, their "unreliability" is related to the fact that they are seen as "sexually promiscuous". Yemeni women are often concerned that their husbands will have extramarital sexual relations with the Somali women who work in their houses.

Domestic work is in the private sphere of the house and thus brings labourers into close contact with the members of the family, notably with men. Female employers often prefer to employ domestic workers who are not attractive in order to diminish the possibility that their husbands might become sexually interested in them. In general, Somali women are not seen as physically attractive by Yemenis because their physical appearance does not conform to Yemeni notions of beauty. In addition, the fact that they are Muslim and cover their bodies is seen as a sign of modesty, less likely to arouse men's sexual desire. Some Yemeni women, therefore, prefer to employ Somali women rather than Ethiopian women, who are regarded as beautiful. However, Somali women have the reputation of being "sexually promiscuous" and Yemenis often say that "Somalis will do anything for money."

Somali women stress that they are Muslim and therefore strictly respect notions of gender segregation and avoid contact with men who are not part of their family. However, they claim that Ethiopian women have sexual relationships with the male members of the families they work for. This, they believe, results from the fact that they are Christian,⁵ wear tight clothes, make-up, and do not cover their hair. In attempt to protect themselves in the work place where they are regularly confronted with the gaze and advances of men, Somali women emphasize their own modesty and strict code of sexual behaviour, blaming Ethiopian women for sexually promiscuous behaviour. For example, Fawzia, one of the Somali women interviewed, said: "Yemenis think that domestic workers aren't human. They treat us like servants and think that we never get tired. They make us work for long hours without food or anything. And the men are bad. They try to touch us and they look at us."

Somali domestic workers are vulnerable because they live and work in a society where the protection of women depends, to a large extent, on the presence of male guardians and because they work in the private sphere where abuse and exploitation can take place without legal repercussion. In order to get the protection of a male figure, women prefer to be married. However, their marriages often do not last.

Tensions at Home

The Somali civil war has had major consequences on gender relations in the public and private spheres, both inside and outside Somalia. One of the main impacts of the war is that women are increasingly replacing men as the breadwinners of the family.⁶ Somali women in the diaspora are actively involved in public activities, both paid and community-based activities. Mulki Al-Sharmani, who did research among Somali women in Cairo, concludes that Somali women play a vital role in securing livelihoods and maximizing economic, social, and legal resources for their families. Although their decision-making power inside the family has increased as a result of their economic and

5. The majority of Ethiopian women working in Yemen are Ethiopian Orthodox Christians.

6. See for example Chell-Robinson, 2000; Gardner and El-Bushra, 2004; Affie, 2004; Al-Sharmani, 2006.

social activities, women are often frustrated by men's reluctance to take responsibility for their families and to actively engage in the community (Al-Sharmani, 2006).

Among Somali refugees in Yemen, similar changes have occurred. As mentioned before, finding paid work is easier for Somali women than it is for Somali men. Unemployment rates are high in Yemen. The only employment that is available for Somali men is unskilled jobs, such as cleaning cars, street sweeping, and unskilled construction work. Many men find these jobs humiliating. Women are more willing to accept low-status jobs than men.⁷ Though Somali women do not like to work as domestic labourers, they accept it because they do not have an alternative to provide for their families.

In Somalia, as well as in Yemen, women's social status depends, to a large extent, on their marital status. Kapteijns's (1993) analysis of Somali society includes the following: "Considered a temporary member of her father's household, a woman gains only outsider status in the household of her husband" (p. 3). In Yemen, being married is also of crucial importance to women because it guarantees male protection and belonging to a family. Single women and divorced women have a low social status and they run the risk of being harassed when they live on their own or have no male guardian. For refugee women in Yemen, male protection is even more important because they often do not have male relatives who can protect them.

Many single, divorced, and widowed Somali women marry soon after their arrival in Yemen. Khadija married and divorced twice in Yemen. When asked whether she would marry again after two bad experiences, she answered: "I would not marry again if I had the opportunity to go to the US or Europe but if I stay in Yemen I may marry again. Life is too hard for a woman living on her own in Yemen."

Somali men have other reasons for getting married. Women with paid jobs have become interesting marriage partners for unemployed Somali men. Even when they have a wife and children in Somalia, Somali men may marry a second time abroad. Marriages are easily arranged among Somali refugees and are not always based on a written contract. However, the fact that women are earning money and that men are economically dependent on them results in tensions at home. Though men need women's income, accepting it makes many men feel frustrated, angry, and alienated. Increasing their use of *qat* and cigarettes is a way in which they deal with their frustrations. Chewing *qat*,⁸ a very common habit in Somalia which is also practiced on a large scale in Yemen, is a favourite pastime of Somali men. Many Somali women complain that their husbands do nothing else and constantly want the money they earn to buy *qat*. In Somalia it is shameful for men to ask their wives for money but in the diaspora it has become normal. Somali men also take out their frustrations on their wives and children, which results in an extremely high rate of marital conflict and divorce: "Because of the breakdown of the traditional support systems available in Somalia, abusive relationships between parents and children, as well as among married couples, are increasing in the Somali community" (Affie, 2004, p. 112).

7. See Kibreab, 1995; and Gardner & El Bushra, 2004.

8. *Qat* is a mildly stimulant drug, the leaves of which are chewed.

Halima's husband was killed in Somalia. She migrated to Yemen to provide for her four children, whom she left at home with her mother. She married six months after arriving in Yemen but the marriage ended within a short period. "In the beginning my husband

was very nice to me but he changed suddenly and started to ask for the money I earn. He did not want me to send money to my children. We quarrelled a lot and after three months he divorced me," she told me. Another interviewee, Adar, also requested a divorce because her husband wanted her salary. However, she only succeeded in getting a divorce after people from her tribe interfered. Because Halima and Adar were both economically independent, they could opt for a divorce without fear of losing their financial resources. Although life in Yemen is difficult for single Somali women, Halima and Adar preferred to cope with the difficulties of not having male protection to having a husband who takes their money and does not provide for his family.

Conclusion

In this article I have analyzed the multiple tensions Somali domestic workers in Yemen are confronted with. The case of Yemen is interesting because it is a conservative society in which women, to a large extent, are dependent on male relatives who provide for them and give them social protection. In general, married women with children have the highest social status in Yemen because they do not have to do paid work. In Somalia the cultural importance of the male breadwinner grew during the colonial and post-colonial period. However, the outbreak of the civil war in 1991 has led to changes in gender relations and to an increase of women's economic participation. Both in Somalia itself and in the Somali diaspora, women have replaced men as breadwinners in the family. In addition, the number of female-headed households has grown considerably for a wide variety of reasons.

Somali refugees in Yemen are confronted with discrimination and have limited opportunities to improve their living conditions. Somali men have difficulties finding paid work because unemployment rates are high. For Somali women, it is easier to find paid work because there is a demand for domestic labour among Yemeni families in the big cities. Yet, Somali women working as domestic labourers are perpetually seeking ways to decrease their vulnerability in Yemeni society. They are vulnerable as refugees, as women, and as domestic workers. Marriage is a way to diminish their vulnerability because it guarantees male protection in a society where living alone as a woman is difficult. In addition, they hope that their husbands will provide for them. Somali men are interested in marrying Somali women because of their income. This, however, does not mean that marriage is the best solution for both parties. Actually, marriages are a source of tension and conflict because of the different ways in which men and women depend on each other.

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