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# RESEARCH ARTICLES

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## Economic Change and the Redistribution of Power Among Women in Yemen: A Focus on the Treatment of Domestic Workers

Molly Foye

### **Introduction**

Twenty-one year-old Somali migrant Deeqa earns a living as a domestic worker in Yemen. She shares, “at 15 I was married off to a man of the Habar Gidir clan. We had four children, three daughters and a son. When I was pregnant my husband was killed by a stray bullet and I became a widow. After my son was born, a period of mourning ended. When my husband died I was desperate. She cries as she asks, “Who is going to help me bring up my children? I decided to go to Yemen and now I work here in order to support myself and my children.” Migrant workers like, Deeqa, are often hidden in Yemeni society—they occupy domestic spheres without much interaction with other Yemenis. How has recent economic change in Yemen inform influenced the employment of low class, domestic workers?

A shared female identity does not promise solidarity among women in capitalist society. Exploring the prejudices held by Yemeni women over domestic workers exposes class related inequities among women. Recent economic change in Yemen showcases the crystallization of class while local gender identities morph in accordance to overarching capitalist demands. The presence of marginalized domestic workers in

upper-class Yemeni homes demonstrates the mutually informative relationship between class status and gender identity. Paralleling greater Yemeni hierarchical and patriarchal society, Yemeni women assert class privilege over low-income domestic workers. Of extreme relevance to better understanding gender and Islam, I argue that Yemeni women of distinguished class status possess and exercise control over the lives of migrant women, thus challenging perceived Yemeni gender roles that acknowledge men as dominant and women as submissive. Cemented by a preexisting drive to preserve familiar honor and fueled by recent economic change, upper-class Yemeni women problematize the “cultural closeness” of lower-class migrant, domestic workers through the formation of stereotypes.

### **Overview of Yemeni History**

A careful consideration of Yemeni political history will contextualize the development of stereotypes. The documentary “*Young and Invisible: Ethiopian and Domestic Workers in Yemen*” provides a concise and condensed history of Yemen. With a population of 20 million, the Republic of Yemen is the least economically developed country in the Middle East. Located on the southwestern corner of the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen poses few oil resources. Yemeni history teems with civil war and conflict. The modern day country, the Republic of Yemen, was formed in 1990 after the unification of the former states, North and South Yemen. A majority of Yemeni’s reside in rural areas where there is limited access to health care and educational resources. Many women in rural settings remain illiterate. Over the past 40 years, the population of the Republic of Yemen has rapidly increased, despite high infant mortality rates. Under the rule of Imams, religious leaders of Islam, former North Yemen remained isolated

from the outside world until the 1970s. The past 40 years have been accompanied by rapid changes: many roads and hospitals have been built while women have more access to education and employment. During this time many male Yemeni's immigrated to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States in search of jobs. Remittances earned abroad were sent home, stimulating local Yemeni economy leading to waves of urbanization. This led to the development of a new class system in Yemen and the solidification of an upper and middle class. To assert class status, it has become increasingly popular for Yemeni's to hire domestic workers (Nederveen and de Regt 2007).

Mohammed Baobaid (2006) addresses the influence of foreign nation's economic and political involvement in Yemen. He highlights the role of Western nations as catalysts of economic change in Yemen. Local civil war and political tension in Yemen were fueled by foreign occupation. Former South Yemen was divided into British protectorates between 1839 and 1967. In 1967, the People's Democratic Republic was established in South Yemen. Governed by an Imam until 1962, the former North Yemen was isolated from international interventions. Marxist South Yemen was supported by the communist parties of Eastern Europe—women in South Yemen benefited from educational opportunities that were not available in North Yemen (Baobaid 2006, 168). Both former North and South Yemen suffered from political change in the late twentieth century. The unraveling of the Soviet Union and the fall of communism depleted South Yemen of stable allies. Simultaneously, the Gulf War sparked economic troubles for North Yemen as Yemeni migrant workers were forced to return home as war in the region interrupted oil production (Baobaid 2006, 168). This disruption was highly problematic for North Yemen as oversea work opportunities stabilized the local

economy. Since the establishment of the Republic of Yemen, economic and political instability has plagued the nation. Baobaid summarizes:

Many families live in Yemen live in poverty, the cost of living has more than doubled:

Healthcare services are scarce and insufficient, maternal and infant death is among the highest in the world. Much of the population in Yemen lives in rural areas where access to schooling facilities has declined in the past years and illiteracy rates remain high. While larger urban areas fare better than rural ones, institutions and facilities are strained. Yemen ranks among the lowest thirty countries on the United Nation's human development index (UNDP 2001) (2006, 169).

Yemeni's in urban settings do not face the same challenges as those who live in rural areas. In a material sense, "have's" of the city and the "have not's" of the country represent the segregation of Yemen. A stark division between middle and upper class in cities and rurally residing Yemenis highlights the presence of preexisting tribal hierarchies as influenced by capitalist class structures (de Regt 2009).

Tribal and familial loyalties promote the segregation of gendered spaces (Baobaid 2006). According to Baobaid, these traits suggest the presence of a strong "traditional" structure, which supports modern Yemeni society. Prerevolutionary Yemen exercised a strict class system that hierarchically ranked members of Yemeni society (de Regt 2009). This structure sought to maintain lineage and endogamous marriage patterns. Carpacio (1998) argues that "tribal law" explains the class ranked society in Yemen. There are five distinct social classes. The highest social status group (the *sada*) claimed power on the basis of direct descent from Prophet Mohammed, while the lowest social groups could not trace their ancestry. The families of judges (*quada*) followed the *sada*. The majority of the population consisted of tribesmen (*qaba'il*), who lived in rural villages and small

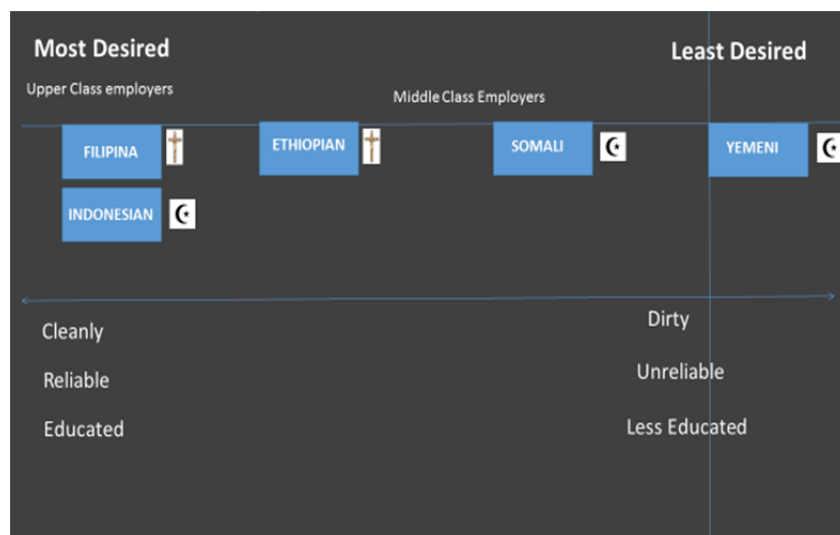
towns who earned a living through agriculture and trading. Families that did not have tribal ancestry but could still trace their ancestors provided services for the higher social classes on an occasional basis. At the bottom of the social ladder one found the “*abid* and the *akhdaam* (literally slaves), two distinct ethnic groups with African as well as Arab heritage who are recognizable by their dark skin” (de Regt, 2009). Interdependence between social factors and a community’s mode of subsistence emphasize the interwoven layers of society. Described in Yemen’s prerevolutionary hierarchal system, power is attributed to the religiously and racially pure, while dark skinned, mixed people compose the least desirable status. An individual’s participation in the local economy is dictated by social factors. Contemporary lower-class Yemeni women and migrant workers participate within a system supported by traditional scaffolding.

### **Preservation of Honor through Stereotyping**

Marina de Regt’s ethnographic work highlights the stereotypes used by upper and middle class Yemeni women to racialize domestic workers in Yemen. The author’s argument delineates the stereotypes that rank migrant worker while securing the honor and rigidness of Yemeni class systems. Class status is maintained through a selective hiring process based on stereotypes. Employers seek to establish cultural distance from their migrant workers in order to protect the family’s honor. An “‘ideology of honor and shame,’ which ascribes to ...[women] the function of being the symbolic markers of moral and cultural purity” (Rhode, 2006, 186). With intentions to preserve honor, and secure class status, stereotypes not only stigmatize but demobilize domestic workers. I argue that this act of social condemnation parallels the patriarchal values of Yemeni

society, perpetrating acts of violence against women. Class privilege fuels internalized violence committed by women toward women with intentions of preserving honor.

From least desirable to most valuable, lower class Yemeni, Somali, Ethiopian, Filipina and Indonesian women are ranked by upper-class Yemeni women. I created Figure 1 (see below) to visualize this hierarchy, displaying Asian women as the most preferred domestic workers while local lower-class Yemeni women noted as the least desirable. Employers associate a woman's cleanliness and reliability with her ethnicity. Cleanliness, in the eyes of Yemeni hirer, encodes other aspects of the worker's identities such as their race, linguistic background and class status.<sup>1</sup> Linguistic closeness poses as a threat to hirers who seek to employ a domestic worker who will not dishonor the family by gossiping.



<sup>1</sup> Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* deconstructs the culturally relative concepts of cleanliness and purity. Intended for an academic audience, the anthropological text, through various chapters, highlights the cross-cultural presence of taboo practices, focusing on those that are considered unclean and impure. The author provides examples from various cultures in order to demonstrate a fundamental concept: the shared notion that deems something dirty or taboo is based on a culture's collective perception and symbolic association with a practice or object. A careful analysis of Douglas' piece prompts a focus on domestic workers (in)ability to use modern cleaning products and how this influences her relationship with her employer. Incorporation of Douglas' ideas compliment Marina De Regt's ethnographic piece and serve as a foundation for understanding upper class Yemeni women's particular preference toward hiring specific domestic workers.

Another principal factor considered by employers depends on the worker's citizenship status. Refugees, typically Somali, and local, low-class Yemeni women are seen as less desirable. Not only are these women considered culturally and linguistically similar, they are more mobile than Asian domestic workers. These women typically have families of their own nearby and are considered less reliable as they may need to tend to a sick child or elderly family member. Some Somali women especially pose a threat of unreliability as they may relocate due to their status as refugees. Stereotypes develop around Somali and low class Yemeni women labeling them unreliable, unclean and uneducated. These women typically secure work in middle class Yemeni families who hire help to assert their class status. Middle class families are reluctant to hire low class Yemeni women, as they are fearful the boundaries of the society's hierarchal class status will blur if rural women are allowed in the home. Migrant workers without familial ties in Yemen are preferred over Somali refugees or local Yemenis, as they are considered more reliable. Ethiopian, Indonesian and Filipina workers often migrate to Yemen and consider themselves as skilled, educated, contributors to local families. Asian migrants are able to use modern cleaning products and technology without instruction and some speak English. Such status hierarchies are deep rooted in local Yemeni history: the presence of a preexisting social tribal hierarchy in Yemen suggests that segregation and preservation of socio-economic class is key factor of Yemeni culture (de Regt 2009).

### **Questions of Gender Identity and Power**

Social status and economic status, like gender identities, are mutually informative. Baobaid claims that in patriarchal societies, such as Yemen, violence against women



signals male power and that “[t]he structure of male privilege and patriarchy ...has been manipulated and reinforced by those men in power to influence the social and institutional character of Yemen such that women are treated as lesser individuals than men (2006, 176). Violence among genders too demonstrates the connection between power and violence in the context of patriarchy. I argue that upper-class Yemeni women vis-à-vis domestic workers replicate the same behaviors, whereby the latter treated as lesser beings; as dominators of the domestic sphere, striving to maintain familial honor, these upper-class women are socially violent toward domestic workers. The act of stereotyping domestic workers not only serves as an effective manner to preserve a family’s honor, but these labels further solidify socio-economic class status. Stigma associated with the cleanliness and reliability of a worker, combined with her assumed race, ethnic, religious and linguistic identifies prescribe her role in overarching Yemeni society. Since women’s behavior is culturally connected to and signals her family’s honor, it becomes culturally acceptable by the society and expected from the males in her family to exercise control over her behavior and use violence to sanction violations of the family’s honor. Baobaid argues that family honor and male domination within a home is informed but also extends to “workings of society and the justice system” (2006, 176). As a result, the domestic abuse is “embedded in a larger culture of violence that defines the social fabric of Yemen” and creates and reinforces existing power inequalities (Baobaid 2006, 178).

The presence of stereotypes alludes to the installation of violent acts committed by women toward women, challenging perceived gender roles in Yemeni society. Class status awards upper-class Yemeni women the power to socially maim domestic workers.

Shared female identity does not protect domestic workers from racialization and discrimination. An exploration of gender and class calls for a focus on power. How does gender and class status inform the distribution of power in Yemen? What aspects of Yemeni cultural ascribe power?

Power is multifaceted—different realms of identity grant power in a complex way. Culturally relative understandings of age, race, class, gender, and sex, for example, grant certain power and privilege. Though hierarchical, the many elements and contexts of human identity should be considered as a web instead of as a linear tract. Considering gender identity, how do women possess power in Yemen? Can women possess power in a patriarchal society? Do marginalized migrant workers possess power? Baobaid's ethnographic research exposes the skeleton of patriarchal, Yemeni society:

[D]omestic abuse is not an isolated practice of violence that women suffer, but must be understood as embedded in larger culture of violence that defines the social fabric of Yemen. It is very important that a political link is made between the existence and tolerance of violence in the home and the existence of governing patriarchal culture that subordinates women and dismisses their rights. This produces a reality for women in Yemen where abuse and oppression are deeply entrenched in the daily and overall social and cultural structure of the country (2006, 178).

Considering the underlying patriarchal traits of Yemeni society, what is Baobaid suggesting with this statement? This tender issue is ethically difficult to tackle. However by reducing women's identity to their gendered status in Yemeni society, Baobaid fails to acknowledge other realms of identity like class, age, religious belief, etc. which may grant women other powers within wider society. I challenge myself as I wonder about the notion of male dominated society, as women possess power across the spectrum of identity. With a focus on urban spaces, I argue that women with ascribed class status and migrant, domestic workers should not be considered powerless. Over the 20<sup>th</sup> century,

economic change in Yemen has led to the solidification of a capitalist class system. I argue that this redistribution of power has grants both wealthy Yemeni and domestic workers certain privileges. Luce Irigaray's (1993) beliefs concerning the liberation of women may mend aspects of Baobaid's one-dimensional argument. She proposes that the idea of gender equality is problematic as it compares women to a societal standard instead of allowing her to exist as her own, respected and valued category.

I argue that despite their marginalized status, domestic worker's presence in Yemeni society awards these women a certain sense of power. Certainly it cannot be dismissed that women in Yemen are physically beaten, tormented and discriminated against. These women are subjected to forms of violence as they are considered threats to other members of Yemeni society. Domestics who speak Arabic and practice Islam are considered less desirable as they may gossip about the family—their practice of Islam may threaten an upper-class family's reputation. Acknowledging the similarities and cultural closeness of Somali and Yemeni women, in particular, what does the act of oppressing an individual suggest about the preservation and redistribution of power? In the article "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) addresses how cross-cultural analysis is often clouded by a subconscious, ethnocentric drive to compare one culture to the standards of another. A more detailed collection of ethnographic materials may help to displace the Western savior complex with an accurate, complex understanding of female's identities in the Middle East and North Africa.

## Conclusion: Consider the Context

Aside from reference to ethnographic research, local artists share valuable insight regarding the complexities of human identities. The series of photographs taken by Yemeni photographer Boushra

Almutawakel titled *Hijab Series:*

*What if...* challenges the audience's expectation of the gender dynamic in

Yemen. Veils and symbolic garb, do not define women as oppressed

beings—women with ascribed class

status exercise their power onto

domestics and lower class members of society. Essential for anthropological research,

the realms of human identities must be pluralized. Rigid binaries and labels must be

replaced in order to comprehend variation expressed by human beings. Pluralizing

gender identities, and considering the local context and interpretation of religious beliefs

will highlight the underlying structures of patriarchal society. Our own stereotypes of

Yemen and life in the Middle East have developed from a heightened sense of

ethnocentrism. Images found on Western media sites generalize Yemeni people in

accordance to a rigid gender binary. In images of public spaces, men are highlighted as

violent while women's identities are marked solely by their garb: men are portrayed

rioting, women are veiled. These images are one-dimensional and lack contextual

background. It is necessary to abandon these stereotypes to create a more accurate

representation of the complexities of identity in Yemen. Class status, especially, removes



Figure 2: *Hijab Series: What If...* taken by Boushra Almutawakel

upper-class Yemeni women from this *oppressed* role as their elevated societal status grants them much local power. Marginalized migrant workers also possess a certain power—their interpretation and practice of Islam, linguistic backgrounds, and nationalities can be considered threatening—stereotypes are formed as a preventative measure to withhold power and social advancement of these women.

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