

# Migrant Domestics and Religious Closeness in Yemen

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In pre-revolutionary Yemen it was relatively common to allocate domestic tasks to people of lower social status but only elite families in the cities had permanent servants. They were mostly coming from rural areas and stayed with the family till they married or died. In addition, slavery was legitimate in Yemen until the early 1960s, yet only families of high social status, and particularly those living in the coastal areas, made use of slaves. With the overthrow of the Imamate in 1962 and the development of a nation-state, slavery was abolished. The equality of all citizens was emphasized and laid down in the constitution. Since then economic class has gradually become more important than social background. One of the reasons for this monetarism of the economy was that larger numbers of Yemenis of different social backgrounds migrated to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States in the early 1970s, where the sudden increase of the oil prices resulted in a high demand for (unskilled) labour. This led to a growth of the Yemeni economy and enriched people regardless of their social status. A new middle class emerged of people actively involved in trading, business, and the professions. While the impover-

**Ethiopian women on their way to church in Sana'a, Yemen**



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**While the presence of Asian women working as domestics in the rich countries of the Arabian Peninsula is a well-known phenomenon, it is less known that also in Yemen a similar trend has occurred. The majority of these women come from Somalia and Ethiopia, but there are Asian women as well. Why are migrant women employed as domestics? And which role does religion play in their employment?**

Yemeni women migration to the city meant a decrease in workload as they lost their agricultural tasks and their work became restricted to domestic work and childcare. Yet, other women experienced an increase in workload. In many cases domestic tasks could no longer be divided between adult women living in the same household—with the younger ones doing the heavier tasks—but falling instead on the shoulders of one woman. In addition, because of the increased school enrolment of girls in urban areas, daughters were no longer automatically available for household chores. Moreover, in the past thirty years a growing number of urban women engaged in voluntary work or took up professional work in education, health care, administration, and other employment sectors. For these women combining their activities in and outside the home became a challenge for which employing domestic workers offered a solution. Employing domestic labour was and is only affordable for the middle and upper classes. Upper class families live in villas and multi-storey houses that require a lot of housework, and often have an active social life visiting relatives and friends and receiving guests at home. Because employing domestic workers facilitates a particular lifestyle, it has increasingly become a sign of social status. Employing migrant women as domestics is an even stronger sign of social status.

Despite the increased demand for paid domestic labour and the deterioration of the economy, few Yemeni women are employed as domestics. In addition to the historically low status of service professions, practices of gender segregation affect Yemeni women's willingness to work as domestics in the houses of unrelated men. But Yemeni families are also not in favour of employing Yemeni domestics. "Yemeni domestics are not clean" was one of the main reasons given in response to my query. This statement does not only refer to the fact that Yemeni women do not know how to clean, as they are often not acquainted with modern cleaning materials, but also to their social background. It refers to the old status hierarchy in which people carrying out service professions were of lower social background and were for this reason stigmatized as "dirty." In addition, in the old hierarchical system of social stratification status differentials between people were very clear and well-established. With the social and economic upheavals that have taken place in Yemen since the 1970s, such as the official abolishment of slavery and the enrichment of people of various social status groups, social boundaries between people of different social classes are less clear. The new middle classes are afraid of a blurring of class boundaries and therefore prefer not to employ Yemeni women. Instead, migrant women of different racial, religious, and national backgrounds are employed.<sup>1</sup>

## Distance and closeness

The worldwide employment of migrant women as domestic workers is not accidental. In many countries there is a shift from employing local domestic workers to migrant domestic workers. Increasing levels of education and consequent access to higher skilled jobs has made domestic labour an unattractive option for local women of lower social classes, and resulted in an increasing demand for migrant women as domestics. Moreover, the fact that these migrant women often lack citizenship rights and are therefore easier to manipulate is a key factor for their being in demand. As Anderson states: "Racist stereotypes intersect with issues of citizenship, and result in a racist hierarchy which uses skin colour, religion, and nationality to construct some women as being more suitable for domestic work than others."<sup>2</sup> Given that paid domestic labour takes place in the private sphere of the employer, which is the public sphere for the domestic, boundaries have then to be strictly drawn. Physical boundaries are thus used to underline inequality. In many cases domestic workers do not eat together with their employers and are not allowed to enter certain places in the house. When they live with their employers, domestics sleep in rooms in the basement, on the roof, or on the compound. By employing domestic workers who are different from themselves with respect to class, ethnicity, and nationality, employers emphasize those social boundaries. The threatening closeness that is an intrinsic element of paid domestic labour is then easier resolved. Domestic service "can only operate smoothly when servants and employers are considered different from each other."<sup>3</sup>

Accordingly, in Yemen there is a clear hierarchy between domestic workers, and this hierarchy coincides to some extent with the class position of the employer. Asian women, such as Filipinas, Indian, and Indonesian women, are employed by the upper classes for cleaning, cooking, child care, and elderly care. Ethiopian women are mainly employed by the upper middle and middle classes, to also do cleaning, cooking, and care-taking jobs. Both Asian and Ethiopian women often live with their employers. Somali women are the predominant group of domestic workers employed by middle class families. Somali women never cook but always do cleaning jobs and they rarely live with the families of their employers. Yemeni women occupy the bottom of the ladder. They are employed as cleaners and for particular tasks such as baking bread or cleaning water pipes.

This hierarchy raises additional questions about the role that religion plays in the preferences of employers for domestic workers of a particular background. Asian and Ethiopian women, who are predominantly Christian,<sup>4</sup> are higher valued than Somali and Yemeni women who are Muslim. Does this mean that being Muslim is a negative factor in paid domestic labour in Yemen, and if so, how can this be explained?

## Religious closeness

When I asked Yemeni employers if religion played a role in their preference for certain domestics, many of them stated that this was not the case: "It doesn't matter if she is Christian or Muslim or whatever, as long as she is God-fearing" was an answer I often received. A small number of employers expressed a preference for Muslim domestics: "I feel more at ease when I work together with a Muslim woman. I understand her and she understands me. I feel better that way." A third group of employers preferred Christian women as domestics: "Christian women are honest, you can trust them, but Muslim women are unreliable, they come and go when they want." Hana, an upper class woman in Hodeidah, told me that her mother used to employ a Muslim Ethiopian domestic worker. But the young woman never wanted to accept orders and was very stubborn. "She did not want to be called *shaghghala*" (houseworker) and at a certain moment, when we were talking about the washing machine that was not working (*shaghghal*), she started to shout and threatened to run away. She felt insulted because she thought that we were talking about her." Muslim women who are similar to their employers with regard to social and cultural background, educational level, and descent do not accept the hierarchical relationship with their employers, a reluctance which may be related to the emphasis placed on equality in Islam. "She should not think that she is better than me" often expressed Muslim domestic workers' sen-

timents. In response, they use different strategies to undermine this hierarchy, such as coming late to work, not showing up, and avoiding certain tasks. As a consequence they are stereotyped as "unreliable," "unclean," and "lazy." Somali women in particular are stigmatized in this way, which is also related to the fact that they are refugees and therefore seen as a threat and an intrusion.<sup>5</sup>

The intricate ways in which employers prefer domestics that are "religiously close but socially distant" manifests itself in the increasing employment of Indonesian women by upper class families. Indonesian women are attractive as domestic workers because they are not part of the local community and therefore do not challenge social boundaries, while being religiously close. "They have the same religion as Yemenis and that is why there is a demand for them," Fadl, a recruitment agent of mixed Yemeni-Indonesian background, told me. He is regularly approached by upper class families looking for Indonesian domestic workers.

As Muslim women of a different nationality and ethnicity but coming from a country with which Yemenis historically had close contacts,<sup>6</sup> Indonesian women are attractive domestic workers. Indonesian women are employed as live-in domestic workers and as cooks, nannies, and caretakers of the sick and the elderly. They have replaced Filipinas, who not only have become too expensive

because of the high inflation rates in Yemen but who are also seen as too assertive and too "open-minded," a complaint which points to a stronger emphasis on conservative (Muslim) values among certain families. In addition, Indonesian women have a weak legal position and do not claim citizenship status, which implies that they are easier to control.

Employers' preferences have therefore less to do with the religious background of the domestic worker as with the extent to which they can maintain distance and assert control and authority over their domestics. Employers who explicitly prefer non-Muslim domestic workers do so to create distance, yet employers who prefer Muslim domestics do not do so to reduce distance. Instead, they are compromising some of the features of distance for various reasons. The fact that Indonesian women are cheaper than Filipinas is, for example, for some employers, a reason to employ them, while other employers prefer Indonesian women because personal care of the elderly or of children is involved. Religious closeness becomes then more important. Protecting the reputation of the family may be another reason to employ Muslim domestics, and in doing so avoid discussions about possible "inappropriate" behaviour of male relatives or of domestics. Employers prefer to employ domestic workers who are socially, culturally, and religiously distant, but they might feel a need to compromise this preference and opt for an intricate balance of closeness and distance.

## Notes

1. This is part of the research programme "Migrant Domestic Workers: Transnational Relations, Families and Identities" at ISIM and the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research. See also Marina de Regt, "Preferences and Prejudices: Employers' Views on Domestic Workers in the Republic of Yemen," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (forthcoming 2007).
2. Bridget Anderson, *Doing the Dirty Work? The Global Politics of Domestic Labour* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2000).
3. Karen Hansen, *Distant Companions: Servants and Employers in Zambia, 1900-1985* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).
4. The majority of Filipinas in Yemen are Catholic, most Indian domestics are Hindu, and the majority of Ethiopian domestics are Ethiopian Orthodox. Almost all Indonesian women are Muslim.
5. Yemen is the only country on the Arabian Peninsula that has ratified the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. There are approximately 80,000 Somali refugees registered in Yemen but their actual number is much higher.
6. Yemeni merchants from the Hadramawt area travelled to the Indian archipelago in previous centuries.

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