

**“Refugee, Woman, and Domestic Worker:  
The Multiple Tensions Faced by Somali Women in Yemen”**

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Introduction

Since the outbreak of the civil war in Somalia in 1991 a burgeoning flow of Somali refugees has spread all over the world. Ethiopia and Kenya are important countries of refuge for Somalis but also Yemen has received hundreds of thousands of Somali refugees. Yemen is the only country on the Arabian Peninsula that has signed the Refugee Convention 1951 and Somali refugees are accepted on a *prima facie* basis. Most Somalis come to Yemen by smugglers' boats and intend to travel on to the richer countries on the Arabian Peninsula or to Europe, the United States and Canada. Yet, the possibilities to move to other countries are limited and many of them are forced to stay in Yemen.

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 experienced the war directly, being raped or their relatives being killed in front of them, in other cases they suffered from poverty and the lack of income-generating possibilities. Many of them are young women in their early twenties, who travel alone overcoming various obstacles during their trip. Some marry on the way or soon after their arrival in the hope that being married will guarantee male protection, support, an income and an easier life, as living alone as a single woman is difficult in Yemen. But these marriages do not always last long and many women live alone with their children. Whereas Somali women socially depend on men, they are economically independent because 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 often have become the main providers for their families. For Somali men it is often difficult to accept their dependence on women, and the changed gender relations may result in tension, conflict and the break-up of marriages.

Gender relations always change as a result of migration and refuge, and the changes in gender relations among Somalis in the Diaspora have been noted by others (see for example Affie 2004, Boyle and Ali n.d., Chell-Robinson 2000, Farah 2000, Al-Sharmani 2006). The

case of Somalis in Yemen is particularly interesting in this respect because of the paradoxical situation in which Somali women are economically independent but socially dependent of men, because they are in need of male protection. In this paper I will describe and analyze this paradoxical situation and the multiple tensions Somali women face in Yemen, as refugees, as women, and as domestic workers. The paper is based on extensive anthropological fieldwork in two cities in Yemen between 2003 and 2007 and in particular on life story interviews with Somali domestic workers.

### Halima

Halima's story is one out of many stories I have heard in the past four years. She is a young Somali woman who came to Yemen in 2006. I met her in March 2007, when she was cleaning the house of a Yemeni friend of mine, and she told me her life story:

I am Somali. I am born in Mogadishu in 1986. My father was a doctor. I went to school but the civil war broke out when I was at school. I have two sisters and two brothers. One sister is living in Somalia and the other in Saudi Arabia. One brother is in Kismayo and the other in Mogadishu. My father died when I was eight years old. He was killed by thieves who thought that he was carrying money while there were only medicines in his plastic bag. My mother started to sell vegetables and fruits in order to provide for us. I stayed home until I married.

My mother married me off when I was 15 years old, to a man from the Habar Gidir clan. We had four children, three daughters and one son. When I was pregnant from my youngest son my husband was killed by a stray bullet. After his death my son was born. When my husband died I was very upset and I was continuously thinking: "Who is going to help me bringing up my children? Who will provide for us? Who is going to assist my children?" I decided to go to Yemen. I got the idea to go to Yemen because my sister already went to Yemen before and she travelled to Saudi Arabia, where she is living at the moment. I heard from others that you could only survive in Ethiopia and Kenya when you were financially supported by people who transferred money from abroad and that there is hardly any work. But in Yemen you can work and travel to other countries. This is what I heard from people who returned from Yemen. I decided to leave my children with my mother and go abroad. When I left, my oldest daughter was four years old, the second one was three, the third one was two and my youngest child, a boy, was one year old.

I first went by bus from Mogadishu to Galkayo. I travelled the same day with another bus to Bossaso<sup>1</sup>, together with three other women. We arrived the next morning. Because I did not have money to continue my trip, I started to work as a domestic for a woman who was selling qat.<sup>2</sup> She said that I could earn money for my trip and she promised to find smugglers who could take me to Yemen. I stayed one month and ten days in Bossaso but the woman never paid me. That is why I phoned my sister and she transferred 70 USD to me. I used 50 USD for

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<sup>1</sup> Bossaso is a port town at the Gulf of Aden from where boats go to Yemen.

<sup>2</sup> Qat is a mildly stimulant drug, the leaves of which are chewed.

the boat trip to Yemen and 20 USD for my daily expenses. The trip by boat took two days. We were with 30 women and 110 men and there were also small children. Most of them came from Mogadishu. We did not get any food during those two days. We only had some biscuits and when we ate we immediately started to throw up because our stomach was so empty and could not tolerate the food. The crew beat the men fiercely, and they did not spare the women, they were also kicked and beaten. One time one of the crewmen fired a bullet to deter us.

When we arrived at the Yemeni coast, they brought us close to the beach and because they did not trust the situation they became scared and they took us back to the sea. At 4.00 am they dropped us near Bir Ali<sup>3</sup> and rushed back to the sea, leaving us helpless on the beach. We did not sleep that night because we were scared and we started to walk. Eventually we arrived at a place where we met UN officials, who gave us milk, water and biscuits and they took us to Mayfah.<sup>4</sup> There we received clothes and sandals. The next day we were taken to Al-Kharaz camp.<sup>5</sup> I stayed two nights there and then travelled on to Aden, where I also stayed two nights.

In Aden I met some Somali people in the street who helped me with a place to stay. In the beginning I thought that I was already in Sana'a. I had phone numbers of Somali friends who were living in Sana'a and that is why I wanted to go there. I called my friend in Sana'a and she arranged for someone to take me to Sana'a. We left early in the morning and arrived in Sana'a at 5.00 pm. I stayed with my friend and she arranged work for me. I worked one month for a Yemeni woman who had just delivered and who was in need for domestic work. She paid me 15.000 YR.<sup>6</sup> I transferred 10.000 YR to my mother and the rest I kept for myself. I had to clean the house, do the laundry and iron and after lunch I did the dishes. When I was finished I went home. It was a nice job. Even though I did not know Arabic, I understood what she meant. We used a sort of sign language. I worked for a month for her and after that I started to work for a Syrian family. I liked the family but unfortunately they went back to Syria. I asked other Somali women if they knew someone who needed a domestic worker and that is how I found the job I have at the moment. I clean the office and the house. I earn 20.000 YR per month and send most of it to my children.

When I arrived in Sana'a I married again. This man was a relative of a friend. He was married before but he did not have any children. He is a teacher and gives Koran classes to children. I left him three months after we got married because we were quarrelling all the time. In the beginning he 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. He spent his own income on qat and cigarettes. We quarrelled a lot and after three months he divorced me. I rented a room for myself. He is still calling me but I don't want to talk to him anymore. I was pregnant but I had a miscarriage. I am suffering from health problems since then.

My mother died when I was in Yemen. The day I heard that my mother died was a very sad day for me. She had a tumour in her leg and her leg was amputated. My brother is now taking care of my children. I regularly send money to him and phone to hear if everything is OK. I am working, I earn money and that is it. When I return from my work I stay home. Most of the time, I stay in bed and sleep. Only at prayertime I wake up. I don't go outside. I don't like to hear gossip or to get into problems with others. The only problem I have is that I miss my

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<sup>3</sup> Bir Ali is a small town on the Yemeni coast, between the cities of Aden and Mukalla.

<sup>4</sup> Mayfah is the transit centre close to Bir Ali where UN officials receive Somali refugees who arrived by boat.

<sup>5</sup> Al-Kharaz is the UN refugee camp near the city of Aden.

<sup>6</sup> 15.000 YR equals 75 USD.

children. As regards the future, I am trying to save money to travel to Egypt. I heard that Somali people are easily accepted as refugees in Egypt and have a chance to be resettled in a third country. That is what I want to do.

### Somali Refugees in Yemen

“Smuggling Across the Gulf of Aden from Somalia to Yemen on the Increase”, “At least 112 drown off Yemeni Coast”, “Somali Immigrants Face Death in the Red Sea” and “Clashes Between Yemeni Police and Somalis” are a random selection of some headlines of Yemeni newspapers in the past few years. Since the outbreak of the civil war in Somalia after the fall of President Siad Barre in 1991, the flow of Somali refugees to Yemen has been growing dramatically. At the moment there are more than 80,000 Somali refugees registered in Yemen, but the actual number of Somali refugees that have come to Yemen since 1991 is unknown because many of them are not registered or have moved on to other countries. 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. Somali refugees are accepted on a *prima facie* basis provided that they left Somalia after the outbreak of the 1991 civil war and that they originate from Mogadishu or the south of Somalia (Hughes 2002, 7). Most of them come to Yemen by smuggling boats and risk their lives with these trips. The boats are made of wood, do not have any sanitary facilities, and are overcrowded. The smugglers are not allowed to enter the Yemeni waters, let alone go ashore, with the result that passengers are sometimes forced to jump off the boat in deep water, a couple of miles off the coast, and drown. Halima survived the trip but speaks of beatings of men and women, and being left helpless on the beach.

Those who survive and arrive safely in Yemen are apprehended by the Yemeni police. In 1992 the Yemeni government formally requested UNHCR’s assistance with handling the influx of Somali refugees. A UNHCR Branch Office was established in Sana’a, followed by a Sub-Office in Aden (Hughes 2002, 6). In addition, a transit centre was set up at Mayfah, where many refugees arrive and where Somalis are separated from non-Somalis. Somalis are immediately accepted as refugees and referred to the refugee camp in Al-Kharaz whereas non-Somalis have to prove that they are indeed refugees. The treatment by Yemeni police officers can be harsh. Their belongings may be confiscated and there are stories of women who were harassed (ibid. 11). Habiba, one of the women I interviewed, only told me after the end of the interview what had happened to her when she arrived in Yemen. After she had lost her husband she decided to migrate with her three children and came by boat to Yemen in

2001. Upon arrival in Bir Ali, Yemeni policemen asked 2000 Yemeni Rial from every newly arrived refugee. When it turned out that Habiba only had 600 Yemeni Rial she was separated from her children and raped by three Yemeni policemen. Only the next day she was allowed to move on to a refugee camp. A strong stigma is attached to rape in Somalia, and it often leads to the rejection by husbands, family and community (Musse 2004, 79). Somali women therefore prefer not to talk about rape and conceal it from relatives. Yet, harassment and (sexual) abuse is common and explains why many Somali women travelling on their own to Yemen decide to marry on the way. In Somalia as well as in Yemen male protection is essential for women, and women who do not have male relatives that can function as their guardians (such as fathers, brothers, husbands and sons) run the risk of being harassed.

After having registered in Mayfah, Somali refugees are referred to the refugee camp of UNHCR in Al-Kharaz, where they can receive shelter, food and health care. Because the refugee camp is located 1,5 hour from Aden, in a plain desert with extremely high temperatures, and with only basic facilities and no opportunities to gain an income, most refugees prefer to go to the cities. Hughes (2002, 12) mentions that many refugees feel completely dependent in the refugee camp, while they want to take their destiny in their own hands and therefore leave the camp and travel further. In addition, UNHCR encourages local integration over camp settlement in order to maintain the camp for “vulnerable cases” that are unable to survive without international assistance (ibid.). At the moment there are approximately 10,000 people living in the camp, 9,000 of them being Somali (Hughes 2002, 12; Hill 2006).

Halima only stayed two days in the camp and then went to Aden and from there to Sana’a. Halima was lucky to know someone in Yemen but there are many refugees who do not have any contacts or money and cannot travel by bus. In the southern part of Yemen it has become quite common to see refugees walking long distances on endless roads, with hardly any luggage or clothing. Sawda, a young Somali woman of 17 years old who left her family because they were very poor and travelled to Yemen on her own, said:

“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.”

When Halima arrived in Sana’a she first lived with a female friend and only started to pay rent when she had found a job. Most Somalis share apartments and rooms in areas where many refugees live, such as the area of As-Safiah in Sana’a and Basateen in Aden. By sharing rooms and apartments they try to decrease the costs of the rent, with the result that houses and

rooms are overcrowded. The rooms are small, and often barely furnished, with only one or two uncovered mattresses, a bed and sometimes a wardrobe. Even though Somalis are accepted on a *prima facie* basis, their living conditions in Yemen are hard. They do not have citizenship rights and still need work permits to be able to get formal jobs. The Yemeni government is responsible for the registration, handing out and renewal of Identity Cards to Somalis but does that only once every other year, as a result of lack of resources. Many Somalis suffer from not having an Identity Card, which hampers their access to health care, education and employment. NGOs that offer assistance to refugees with financial support of UNHCR such as the Refugee Health and Community Center and Marie Stopes International Yemen are only allowed to help refugees with ID-cards (see Jaffer et al 2004). Those who do not have ID-cards are not entitled to subsidised services. Halima has no Identity Card yet and is therefore unable to go to the few health clinics that offer services free of charge to refugees, and has postponed a visit to the doctor because she does not have money.

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.<sup>7</sup> The brand new government of the just established Republic of Yemen lost one of its main sources of income, namely the remittances of Yemeni labour migrants, and was unable to cope with the sudden arrival of returnees and refugees and provide them with housing, employment, health care and education. As a result of the structural adjustment policies imposed by the IMF and the World Bank, Yemen's economic situation has further deteriorated and unemployment and poverty are rampant. Whereas Yemeni return migrants were blamed for the bad economic situation in the early 1990s, nowadays refugees from the Horn of Africa are Yemen's scapegoats. The increasing rates of unemployment, criminality, prostitution and AIDS, are linked to the presence of refugees who subsequently suffer from racism and discrimination (see also Hughes 2003, 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 down, is still not approved by the Parliament and therefore not implemented. Somali refugees are treated like any other foreigner and have little to no rights. Rather than improving the situation of Somali refugees, the Yemeni government tries to reduce the refugee flow through negotiation in the conflict in Somalia. In addition, whereas Yemen used to have an "open-door policy"

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<sup>7</sup> 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.

(Hughes 2002, 10) and it was relatively easy to enter and reside in Yemen illegally, nowadays stricter border controls are part of Yemen's contribution to the "war on terror", in which the government is heavily supported by the United States and a number of other Western countries. These border controls, at the border with Saudi Arabia as well as in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, are assumed to prevent the smuggling of weapons and the entry and activities of 'terrorists' but are also very efficient to keep refugees from entering Yemeni territories. Another result of Yemen's engagement in the "war on terror" is that government control of international money transfers are clamped on, and it has become more difficult for Somali refugees to receive money from relatives abroad (see COMSICCA 2005, 202).

The large majority of Somalis intend to leave Yemen and continue their journey to richer countries in the region, such as Saudi Arabia or the Gulf States, or even better, to the United States, Canada or Europe. Halima mentions Egypt as an option because she thinks it is easier to be resettled from Egypt, a perception that is shared by other refugees (see Al-Sharmani 2006, 57). In Yemen, resettlement options are indeed very limited. UNHCR Yemen only resettles "vulnerable cases", and in particular women with children without a male partner and women who were mentally, physically or sexually abused. Yet, the number of female headed households is so large that only very few of them can be resettled and most single women with children remain in Yemen. Other ways to leave are the Green Card Lottery of the United States<sup>8</sup> and UNHCR's family reunion programme but both ways do not guarantee success. Despite the stricter border controls, Somali men still cross the border with Saudi Arabia but women are more reluctant to make this heavy trip by foot through the desert or by boat via the Red Sea, with the risk of being caught and deported to Somalia.

In December 2005 hundreds of Somali refugees demonstrated for weeks in front of the head quarters of UNHCR in Sana'a, demanding better living conditions in Yemen or resettlement in a third country. As a result, UNHCR and the Yemeni government opened six permanent registration centers nationwide for the issuance and renewal of Identity Cards. A number of foreign donors announced that they would assist with improving the living and working conditions of Somalis. Local integration is given preference over resettlement, as many Western countries have decreased their resettlement quota as a result of more restricted immigration policies.

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<sup>8</sup> Each year the government of the United States of America makes 50,000 visas available to people who come from countries with low rates of immigration to the USA.

## Tensions At Home: Changing Gender Relations in the Diaspora

As mentioned before, the large number of Somali female-headed households is not limited to Yemen only. Also in other countries where Somali refugees have settled the number of divorced and widowed women with children is remarkably high (see for example Gardner and Bushra 2004, Boyle and Ali n.d. and Al-Sharmani 2006). One of the most obvious reasons is that many women have lost their husbands in the war, because they were killed or forced to flee. In addition, women are sometimes the first to migrate with their children, leaving their husbands behind who plan to follow later. Yet, not all women leaving Somalia are married as the large number of single women that come to Yemen shows. But they often marry during the trip or quickly after arrival in Yemen. Many Somali women strategically make use of marriages in order to get male protection, requesting a divorce in case their marriages are unsatisfactory. In addition, men may leave their wives as a result of tension and conflict, or because they had better possibilities to move on to other countries.

Already before the outbreak of the civil war, gender relations had changed considerably in Somalia. Somali society is a patriarchal society where women have a lower social status than men, yet many changes have taken place in gender relations in the past century. In a concise overview of these changes, Kapteijns (1993) shows how the increased importance of clan identity in Somali society, already created during the colonial period but further developed during Siad Barre's regime, "has devalued women's social roles, deepened women's dependence on men, and degraded them in ways typical of other capitalist countries of the economic periphery" (ibid. 18). Since the clan is defined as a community of agnatically related men, women have become second-rank members who can only gain outsider status in the household of her husband (ibid. 3). Inequalities within the clan, such as those based on class, are ignored.

The Somali civil war has had major consequences for gender relations. One of the impacts of the war is that women are increasingly replacing men as breadwinners of the family (Gardner and Bushra 2004, 10). While women were also economically active before the war, they could use the money they earned according to their own wishes whereas men were responsible for the maintenance of the family. Nowadays men have become dependent on the income of women, who have created new economic niches for themselves (see for example Warsame 2004). This is not only the case in Somalia itself, but also in the diaspora (see for example Affie 2004, Boyle and Ali n.d., Chell-Robinson 2000, Al-Sharmani 2006). Somali women in the diaspora are actively involved in public activities, as they have taken up



paid work and community activities in order to expand their resources for livelihood. Al-Sharmani (2006) did research among Somali women in Cairo and concludes that they play vital roles in securing livelihoods and maximizing economic, social, and legal resources for their families. Somali women relocate with children or younger siblings to achieve legal security for the family abroad; they engage more in income-generating activities than men; they play an essential role in the education and socialization of children; and they become active in community work to sustain a Somali collective identity.

Yet, Al-Sharmani also points to the downside of the increased importance of women in the Somali diaspora. Although their decision-making power inside the family has increased as a result of the economic and social activities they have taken up, women are often frustrated by men's reluctance to take responsibility for their families and be actively involved in uniting and strengthening the community (ibid. 71). In addition, the maintenance of transnational households, in which women often live separate from their husbands, sometimes leads to strains on marriages and results in loneliness, resentment, and bitterness among spouses (ibid. 58). As mentioned before, other studies have pointed to the tensions that may arise because male relatives, and in particular husbands, have difficulties accepting women's economic independence. As a Somali domestic worker in Italy quoted by Farah (2000: 73) formulates it:

It appears as if there is a more overriding tension between men and women than between the clan-families that are at war at home. For although the clan divisions follow tensions of a trodden path, the tensions between men and women are newly manifest in salient ways, particularly now that their income-generating roles have been reversed, the women working, the men dependent on the women.

Most studies on Somali family and gender relations in the diaspora take the married couple as point of departure. The situation in Yemen shows, however, that marriage may be the ideal but in practice women and men strategically make use of the possibilities to marry or to divorce in order to improve their situation. Halima came to Yemen in order to provide for her children, who she had left with her mother in Somalia, and married again in the hope to find support and protection. But her husband did not approve of her sending money to her children and their relationship deteriorated. Halima pushed for a divorce and now she lives by herself again. Another example is Adar, who came on her own by boat to Yemen in 1992, began to work as a domestic and married a Yemeni of Somali background, in the hope that marriage would make life easier for her. But her husband lost his job and started to treat her badly. Adar took up work as a domestic again, despite the fact that she now has two daughters. Her

husband disapproved of her work because of its low status but he did want her money to buy cigarettes and qat. Adar was only able to get a divorce by interference of people from her tribe.

The tensions between Somali men and women in Yemen are the result of the different ways in which they depend on each other. Somali women coming to Yemen on their own, as single, divorced or widowed women, feel a strong need to get married because marriage guarantees male protection. In Somalia as well as in Yemen women's social status depends to a large extent on their marital status. As Kapteijns states for Somalia: "Considered a temporary member of her father's household, a woman gains only outsider status in the household of her husband" (1993, 3). In Yemen, being married is also of crucial importance for women as it guarantees male protection and belonging to a family. Single women and divorced women have a low social status and 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 in case of problems. It is therefore understandable that single women marry soon after their arrival in Yemen. Adar, for example, married and divorced twice in Yemen and when I asked her whether she would marry again after two bad experiences she answered:

"I would not marry again if I get a chance 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 to get married. They are in need of a wife because being married is the most accepted social status in Somalia and Yemen, but also because they need women to do their housekeeping, prepare their food, satisfy their sexual needs, and bring in an income. Finding paid work in Yemen is easier for Somali women than for Somali men. Unemployment rates in Yemen are high and the only work that is available for Somali men are unskilled jobs, such as cleaning cars, street sweeping or construction work. Men find these jobs humiliating and women are more willing to accept low-status jobs than men (see Kibreab 1995, 11 and Gardner and El Bushra 2004, 105). The large majority of women are employed as domestic workers, cleaning the houses of Yemeni and expatriate families. With women having paid jobs, they have become interesting marriage partners for Somali men without work. Sometimes Somali men marry a second time abroad, already having a wife and children in Somalia. In other cases they may be divorced, like the second husband of Halima. Marriages are easily arranged among Somali refugees, and are not always based on a written contract.

Yet, the fact that women are earning an income and men have become dependent on them has resulted in tensions at home. Many men feel frustrated, angry and alienated and the increased use of qat and cigarettes is a way in which they deal with their frustrations. Chewing qat, a habit that is very common in Somalia but also practiced on a large scale in Yemen, is a favourite pastime of Somali men and many Somali women complain that their husbands do nothing else and want the money they earn to buy qat. In Somalia it was shameful for men to ask money from their wives but in the Diaspora it has become normal. Somali men also take out their frustrations on their wives and children, resulting in an extremely high rate of marital conflict and divorce (see also Affie 2004, 112). “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” (ibid.).

Both Halima and Adar decided to opt for a divorce, because their husbands were making life too difficult for them. The fact that they are economically independent is an important reason why they can decide they want to divorce. Yet, since they are married according to Islamic law, their husbands can divorce them easily but they themselves need to prove that he is not fulfilling their obligations, such as providing for his family. But few Somali women go to court to get a divorce. Halima’s husband only divorced her once<sup>9</sup> and is still interested in taking her back, whereas Adar’s husband only accepted a divorce after interference of people from her tribe. Men are more in need of wives than women are in need of men. Although life in Yemen is difficult for single Somali women, Halima and Adar prefer to cope with the difficulties of not having male protection over having a husband who requests their money and does not support his family.

The focus in this paper is on tensions in gender relations but the particular situation of Somali women working as domestics in Yemen also may lead to generational tensions. Some women, such as Halima, leave their children in Somalia and come alone to Yemen. They have left their children with their mothers or with other relatives and regularly send money home. Their absence may lead to an increasing alienation between parents and children. In most cases, however, women brought their children with them to Yemen, or only had children after arrival in Yemen. These women have to find solutions for childcare during the time they are at work. Sometimes husbands take care of the children but in many cases women leave their children alone at home during the day, locking the door behind them. “I closed the kitchen

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<sup>9</sup> According to Islamic law a man can divorce his wife three times by saying “I divorce you”. Only after the third time the divorce is definite.

door and put food in the room for my children and left them in the room”, Faiza told me. There are even stories going around of women who give their children medication so that they sleep till they come home from work. Older children who are not going to school may take care of their younger siblings. The fact that children spend a large part of the day on their own, also gives rise to tensions and conflicts.

### Tensions At Work: The Particularities of Domestic Labour

Halima soon found work after arriving in Sana’a and started to work as a domestic. More than 80 per cent of the Somali women in Yemen are employed as domestic workers. Although the economic situation in Yemen is not good, upper and middle class families in the main cities increasingly make use of domestics. Changing family relations as a result of migration and urbanization, the increase of girls’ education and women’s employment and changing notions of domestic work are among the factors that explain the increased demand for paid domestic labour. Yemeni women of poor families are reluctant to work as domestics, because of its low status and the fact that it involves contact with unrelated men. Therefore, and for a number of other reasons (see de Regt forthcoming), mainly migrant women are employed. The majority comes from Somalia and Ethiopia but also Asian women are employed.

There is a clear hierarchy between domestic workers. 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, and 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 for middle class families. Somali women never cook but always do cleaning jobs and they rarely live with the families of their employers because they have their own family responsibilities. 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.

Domestic work is a particular type of employment because the private sphere of the employer is the public sphere of the domestic. The relationship between domestics and their employers is therefore in essence unequal, and boundaries have to be strictly drawn. Physical boundaries are used to underline inequality. Domestic workers, for example, do not eat together with their employers and are not allowed to enter certain places in the house. By employing domestic workers who are different from themselves with respect to class, ethnicity and nationality, employers emphasize social boundaries. The closeness that is an

intrinsic element of paid domestic labour is then easier resolved. As Hansen (1989, 7) states: domestic service “can only operate smoothly when servants and employers are considered different from each other.”

For Somali women in Yemen domestic work is one of the few possibilities to paid work, and it is the reason for their economic independence. Yet, many Somali women have difficulties accepting their work as domestics because it is low status work, it puts them in a hierarchical relationship with Yemeni women, and it involves contacts with unrelated men. Domestic work has a low status worldwide, and Somali women sometimes told me that they were having themselves domestics at home in Somalia before the civil war and that they found it very humiliating to do this type of work. In addition, Somali women are both culturally and religiously close to their Yemeni employers. They are Muslim; they quickly learn Arabic and share many cultural and religious values with Yemenis. But working as domestics for Yemeni families puts them in a subordinate position. As domestic workers they are dependent on their employers, who give them orders, who may 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 therefore is not part of the labour law in Yemen and domestic workers lack any kind of protection in case of conflict. Adar told me that she first worked for a big 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*<sup>10</sup>, 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 too late to work, not showing up for a couple of days or refusing to do certain tasks, are ways in which they try to downplay 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 of them have children and are

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<sup>10</sup> *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.

therefore not full-time available for domestic labour, in particular in case they are single mothers. They cannot work as live-in domestics and even when they work as live-out domestics there is a chance that they have to stay home to take care of a sick child or help a relative. In addition, their “unreliability” is related to the fact that they are seen as “sexual promiscuous” and might form a threat for the husbands of Yemeni women. Because domestics work in the private sphere of the house they are in close contact with the members of the family, and also with men. Female employers often prefer to employ domestics who are not attractive in order to diminish the possibility that their husbands might become interested in their domestics. In general, Somali women in Yemen are not seen as physically attractive 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 further diminishing the threat they can pose to Yemeni women. Some Yemeni women therefore prefer to employ Somali women to Ethiopian women, who are regarded as beautiful. However, because Somali women easily marry and divorce they have the reputation of being “sexual promiscuous”. Moreover, Yemenis often say that “Somalis do anything for money” and that Somali women are “whores” who easily have sex with men.

Somali women stress that they are Muslims and therefore strictly respect notions of gender segregation and avoid contacts with unrelated men. They blame Ethiopian women for having sexual relationships with male members of the families they work for, and explain this by reference to the fact that they are Christian<sup>11</sup> and wear tight clothes, make up and do not cover their hair. Blaming Ethiopian women and emphasizing their own modesty are strategies to diminish the gender tension at work, where they are regularly confronted with the gaze and advances of unrelated men. Fawzia said:

“Yemenis think that domestic workers aren’t human. They think about us like servants and that we never get tired. They make you work for long hours without food or anything. And the men are bad. They try to touch you and they look at you.”

During my research I did not hear many stories of Somali women who were raped but women might not want to talk about rape because it is highly stigmatized and may lead to rejection by the family and the community. In addition to sexual harassment, Somali women are regularly accused of theft, which is a common strategy of Yemeni employers to get rid of their domestic workers without paying their salaries. I often heard about Somali women who were

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<sup>11</sup> The majority of Ethiopian women working in Yemen are Ethiopian Orthodox.

accused of theft, and sometimes even imprisoned for months without being put on trial. Intisar, a young woman in her twenties, told me the following:

“When I was in Somalia I used to think a lot about coming to Yemen and working here. When I came to Yemen, I didn’t know anybody and I didn’t speak Arabic. Then I found work. I worked for seven months and then I ran away because the work was very hard. Then I started to work for a woman who treated me badly. She used to call me “servant”. I had an argument with her once and she called the police. They arrested me and kept me in jail for 11 months. They accused me of stealing a bag of gold but then they found out that I was innocent so the people I worked for said that I was illegal, that is why they made me stay in jail so long. Otherwise they would have deported me. They said that if I was guilty they will send me back to Somalia but I was innocent. A journalist helped me to get out of jail.”

As mentioned before, Somali women in Yemen 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 as domestic workers they are even more in need of (male) protection because they work in the private sphere, where abuse and exploitation can take place without repercussions.

### Conclusion

In this paper 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 have to provide for them and give them social protection. Married women with children have the highest social status in Yemen because they do not have to do paid work. Also in Somalia the ideology of the male breadwinner became more important during the colonial and post-colonial period. Yet, the outbreak of the civil war in 1991 has led to changing gender relations and the increase of women’s economic participation. Both in Somalia itself and in the Somali Diaspora women have replaced men as breadwinners of the family. In addition, the number of female-headed households has grown considerably for a wide variety of reasons. The married couple that shares a household may still be the ideal but is in practice no longer the most common way of living among Somalis.

Somali refugees who come to Yemen are also in most cases individual men and women who have left their marriage partners at home or who lost them as a result of the war. In addition, a remarkable number of single women travel on their own to Yemen. During their trip and upon arrival in Yemen these individual men and women marry soon because being

married has certain advantages. Women marry because they need male protection as living alone as a woman is difficult in Yemen. In addition, they hope that their husbands will provide for them. However, Somali men have difficulties finding paid work in Yemen because unemployment rates are high and even the possibilities to do unskilled labour are limited. For Somali women it is easier to find paid work because there is demand for domestic labour among Yemeni families in the big cities. Somali men are interested in marrying Somali women because they bring in an income. Yet, this does not mean that marriage is the solution for both parties; in contrast, marriages are a source of tension and conflict because of the different ways in which men and women depend on each other. Both parties strategically make use of marriages without seeing it as a life-long relationship, and divorce or separate when the relationship is not satisfactory. Somali women working as domestics continuously have to make choices in order to decrease their vulnerability in Yemeni society. They are vulnerable as refugees, as women and as domestic workers. Marrying is a way to diminish their vulnerability but because of the tensions and conflicts that may arise from marriages they sometimes prefer to live alone, despite the difficulties they then have to face.

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