Employing Migrant Domestic Workers in Urban Yemen: A New Form of Social Distinction

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The employment of migrant domestic workers in the oil-producing countries of the Arabian Peninsula is well known, but few people know that migrant women also work as domestics in the least economically developed country in the Middle East, the Republic of Yemen. Yemen is primarily known as a sending country in migration with many Yemenis migrating to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States in the 1970s. Yet, since the early 1990s with the outbreak of civil war in Somalia and the downfall of Mengistu in Ethiopia, Yemen has also become a receiving country. The majority of Somali and Ethiopian women migrants are employed as domestic worker by urban families; they carry out cleaning tasks and sometimes also cook and take care of children and the elderly. On a much smaller scale Asian domestic workers are employed by wealthy families. Yemeni women are reluctant to take up paid domestic work.

The low status of service professions in Yemen's traditional system of social stratification is one of the reasons why poor Yemeni women are not interested in doing paid domestic labour. Only people of low social status backgrounds had manual and cleaning jobs in the past, which explains the strong stigma attached to this type of occupation today. In addition, practices of gender segregation affect Yemeni women's employment as domestic workers; Yemeni women do not want to work in the houses of unrelated men. Yemeni families also prefer to employ migrant women as domestic workers: they are available to live with the family; they accept the hierarchical relationship inherent to domestic labour; they do not have family responsibilities in Yemen, and they are not part of the local community. In this chapter I will argue that employing migrant workers has also become a new form of social distinction for urban families because their presence strengthens social status.

1 This chapter is largely based on an article that was published in Hawwa: Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World, 6 (2008), 125–128.
In order to substantiate this argument, I will analyse the employment of migrant domestic workers in the light of changes regarding gender, class and labour. I will first discuss Yemen's system of social stratification and the ways in which it is complemented by other hierarchical systems. I will then explain the reasons behind the increasing employment of migrant domestic workers, and describe the main categories of foreign women employed as domestics. I also explain why relatively few Yemeni women are employed as domestic workers. In the second part I discuss the public debate about the employment of migrant domestic workers which took place during my fieldwork, and in particular, focus on the different ways in which Yemeni women's domesticity was debated in the 2000s. Yet, whereas notions about gender, class and labour are changing, this does not necessarily mean that social inequalities disappear. Differences based on gender, class and race continue to be important identity markers structuring Yemeni society, although the forms in which these inequalities manifest themselves have altered.

The article is based on ten months of anthropological fieldwork in the cities of Sana'a and Hodeidah during the period 2003–2005. The main data collection methods were informal conversations and semi-structured interviews with domestic workers and employers, topical life stories of domestic workers and observations in employers’ households and in the homes of domestic workers. In addition, informal conversations with a wide range of people, from taxi drivers to storekeepers, and interviews with government officials, embassy personnel, journalists and representatives of non-governmental organizations were important sources of information.

Class and Social Distinction in Yemen

In the past, there was a close link between people's social status and the work they performed. In general, people of high social status worked in

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4 In total, ten months of fieldwork were carried out: eight months in the capital Sana'a and two months in the port town Hodeidah. I returned to Yemen for short visits in 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2013.

5 In total I interviewed sixty-three domestic workers of different nationalities (mainly Ethiopian, Somali, Filipinas, Indonesian and Yemeni women) and 10 female employers: five in Sana'a (from three upper class and two middle class families) and five in Hodeidah (from three upper class and two middle class families).

6 Most of the research was done in Arabic, but some interviews were done in English. The majority of the semi-structured interviews and life stories were recorded on tape and fully transcribed.