10-2007

Migration To and Through Yemen: The Case of Migrant Domestic Workers

Marina de Regt

Migration To and Through Yemen: The Case of Migrant Domestic Workers

By
Marina de Regt

Paper Prepared for the

Migration and Refugee Movements in the Middle East and North Africa

The Forced Migration & Refugee Studies Program
The American University in Cairo, Egypt

October 23-25, 2007

Discussion Paper
Migration To and Through Yemen:
The Case of Migrant Domestic Workers

Marina de Regt, PhD
International Institute of Social History
Amsterdam, the Netherlands

I. Introduction

Regarding migration, Yemen is primarily known as a sending country. Large numbers of Yemenis have migrated abroad in different periods of Yemen's history, and labour migration was one of the main sources of income since the oil boom in the 1970s. Since 1990, however, Yemen has turned into a receiving country. Not only were hundreds of thousands of Yemeni migrants expelled from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States after Iraq's invasion in Kuwait in 1990, but the political changes that took place in the Horn of Africa, in particular in Ethiopia and Somalia, in the early 1990s led to the arrival of large numbers of migrants and refugees from that region. Exact numbers of migrants and refugees from the Horn of Africa residing in Yemen are unavailable, but estimations vary between tens and hundreds of thousands.

In this paper I will describe the current situation regarding migration and population movements to and through Yemen, with a special focus on migrant domestic workers. Whereas the employment of migrant domestic workers in the economically more developed countries on the Arabian Peninsula is well-known, the fact that Yemen employs these workers, mainly migrant women employed in domestic work, surprises many. Yemeni women are reluctant to do paid domestic labour, and migrant and refugee women, particularly from the Horn of Africa, meet the demand. I will first give a short overview of Yemen's overseas connections from the past to the present, as the country is often depicted as isolated and backward, statements that are based on little historic evidence. I will then describe the three main groups of women working as domestics in Yemen, namely Somali, Ethiopian and Asian women. In the last section I describe the practices of and the policies towards recruitment agencies, one of the main ways in which migrant women come to Yemen. The

paper is based on post-doctoral research among migrant and refugee domestic workers in Yemen carried out between 2003 and 2006.

II. A Short History of Yemen's Overseas Connections

Located on the south-western edge of the Arabian Peninsula, bordering the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, overseas connections through trade and migration have always played an important role in Yemen's history. In ancient times, Yemen occupied an important place in the incense trade between the Mediterranean and the Far East. Camel caravans brought spices, salt, textiles and other products from India, China and the east-coast of Africa to the Mediterranean, whereas incense and myrrh were traded from Yemen and Somalia. During the Roman Empire, Yemen was known as Arabia Felix because of its fertile lands; the Romans tried to occupy the country several times, but to no avail. The mountainous areas in North Yemen and the deserts in the East and South of Yemen have always been inaccessible for outsiders, fiercely defended by its inhabitants. In the first centuries of Christianity, Yemen was a number of times invaded by Ethiopians who tried to Christianize the population. With the arrival of Islam, Yemenis were among the first to become Muslim and were part of the troops that moved around the Middle East and North Africa to spread this new religion. They crossed the Red Sea and brought Islam to the coastal areas of East Africa, a reason why many Somalis claim to be of Arab descent. Yemen became part of the Caliphates of Damascus and Baghdad, but local rulers continued to stay in power. The same applies to the period when Yemen was part of the Ottoman Empire; the Ottomans controlled the cities but were unable to occupy the hinterland in the North-east of the country. In the seventeenth century, Yemen's seaports played an important role in the trade between Europe and Asia, which was mainly dominated by the Dutch and the British. Coffee was discovered in Yemen and became one of the main products in this trade.[1] Also in this case, local rulers were willing to be involved in trade relations with foreigners but they never allowed them to assume power.

Former North Yemen was for centuries an Imamate, ruled by religious leaders. It is the period under the rule of Imam Yahiya (1904-1948) and under Imam Ahmed (1948-1962) to which people refer when they speak of Yemen as an isolated country. Both Imams intentionally

[1] Coffee was originally found in Yemen and owes its name to the Yemeni port town Mokha, an important port in the seventeenth century. (see C.G. Brouwer, Profile of a Yemeni Seaport as Sketched by Servants of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) 1614-1640)

isolated Yemen from the rest of the world, particularly from Western countries, in order to preserve their own position. Yemenis were discouraged from traveling abroad, education was limited to religious schools and contractual relationships with foreign agencies, whether governments or private enterprises, were avoided. Only a limited number of foreigners were allowed into the country and their movements were closely monitored. (Stookey 1978, 186) Despite the isolationalist policies of the last two Imams, a significant number of Yemenis went abroad to work or study. Many active and enterprising Yemenis, frustrated by the economic and political situation migrated to Aden, Saudi Arabia, East Africa, South-East Asia, Britain and the USA. In the 1970s some of these migrants returned to Yemen, sometimes forced by the socio-political developments in the countries of migration where nationalist movements were fighting for independence,[2] but also attracted by the political changes that had taken place at home.

With the establishment of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) in former South Yemen in 1967 and the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) in former North Yemen in 1970, labour migration increased. As a result of the 'oil boom,' there was a high demand for cheap and unskilled labour in the oil-producing countries of the Arabian Peninsula, and many Yemenis decided to try their luck there.[3] Within a short period of time the remittances sent home became an important source of income for the two new republics. In addition, both states started to receive foreign aid: the PDRY from socialist countries such as the USSR and Cuba, and the YAR from capitalist countries such as the USA and Western countries. Both countries became heavily dependent on external financial sources but followed different economic and political paths. The PDRY was better able to become self-sufficient and trained Yemeni professionals such as engineers, teachers, university faculty, and health staff, but in the YAR foreigners coming from a wide variety of countries filled the need for specialized skills. According to Dresch (2000, 133), there were around 50,000 foreigners working in former North Yemen at the end of the 1970s. The main roads were built by Chinese road workers, the majority of teachers were Egyptians and Sudanese, and hospital staff was Indian, Russian or coming from other Arab countries. Carapico (1998, 41) mentions that there were around 20,000 Arab expatriates working in former North Yemen in the mid-1980s, mostly

[2] In Ethiopia, Sudan, Djibouti, and Somalia, nationalist governments came to power and changed laws which had previously favoured foreigners, for example those concerning property rights. Foreign migrants, including many Yemenis, lost the favourable position they had held and some of them decided to return home.
[3] In 1970, there were 300,000 Yemenis working in the oil-producing states on the Arabian Peninsula (Dresch 2000, 119), and at the end of the decade the number of migrants had risen to 800,000 (ibid. 131).

Egyptians and Sudanese teachers who were often religious conservatives paid by Saudi Arabia to enforce its religious ideology. Instead of training local professionals and building up a national industry the economy of the YAR was completely dependent on foreign aid, foreign professionals and the import sector.

The vulnerability of the Yemeni economy became evident when the Gulf Crisis broke out, a few months after the unification of North and South Yemen in May 1990. Yemen was a member of the Security Council and against a military attack on Iraq because of its invasion of Kuwait. As a result, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States changed their residence policies for Yemeni migrants and around 800,000 Yemenis were expelled. 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 provide them with housing, employment, health care and education. The Gulf Crisis and the subsequent economic problems resulted in immediate tensions between the ruling parties of the former North and the former South. In 1994 a short civil war broke out. The socialists were defeated and disappeared from the political arena. The economic situation was disastrous after the civil war, due to costly war efforts but also because oil prices had decreased and Western donor agencies had withdrawn their aid. In addition, many foreigners working in Yemen had left during the war.

In order to improve the Yemeni economy the World Bank and IMF imposed a structural adjustment programme in 1995. Direct measures taken were the devaluation of the Yemeni Riyal, the removal of government subsidies on primary necessities such as flour and oil, and a freeze on government employment. In addition, a start was made with the Yemenization of the economy. Foreign teachers were replaced by Yemenis and the training and employment of Yemeni health care staff was encouraged. In principle, the immigration of certain categories of workers is restricted such as construction workers, administrative personnel, agricultural workers, and service providers. The reason behind this policy is that the unemployment rate of Yemenis is high[4] and migrants should not occupy jobs which Yemenis can undertake. Domestic workers are not specifically mentioned but officially the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour only approves requests for foreign domestic workers when it is clear that the demand cannot be met by Yemeni women. Only large families with many children, families

[4] The official unemployment rate in Yemen was 11.5 per cent in 1999, and 14.7 per cent in 2003 (based on projections of the General Directorate of Human Planning, Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation).

where the wife is employed and families with a sick or handicapped family member are allowed to employ foreign women as domestic workers. Yet, in reality many foreign domestic workers are working in Yemen, with or without the permission of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour. Although poverty rates in Yemen are increasing, and many Yemeni women are in need of an income, they are reluctant to do paid domestic labour because of its low social status and the fact that it affects practices of gender segregation. “I prefer begging over working as a domestic,” poor Yemeni women told me. The demand for paid domestic labour among the middle and upper classes in the cities is therefore met by foreign women, most of who are coming from Somalia and Ethiopia but there are also Asian women working as domestics. The Gulf Crisis and the political and economic developments in Yemen in early 1990s coincided with the arrival of large numbers of refugees from the Horn of Africa, particularly from Somalia, affecting the economic situation even more.

III. 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 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.

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 (ibid. 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. 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 2,000 Yemeni Riyal from every newly arrived refugee. When it turned out that Habiba only had 600 Yemeni Riyal 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 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 and raped.

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. As 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. (Hill 2006)

The majority of Somali refugees move to the cities, particularly to Aden and Sana'a. They 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 and handing out and renewal of Identity Cards to Somalis, but does this 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. Those who do not have ID-cards are not entitled to subsidised services.

In addition, Somalis are often discriminated against and exploited as tenants and workers. 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). 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 Somali women are employed as domestic workers, cleaning the houses of Yemeni and expatriate families. They are employed on a part-time or full-time basis and rarely as live-in domestic workers. Somali women work mainly for middle class Yemeni families. They tend to earn less than Ethiopian women (around 50 US$ per month), which can be explained by their larger availability. Somali women often complain of strenuous workloads, of being insulted and called bad names, of not receiving salaries, and of discrimination. Women are often afraid they will be accused of theft as a ploy to fire them without paying their salaries, a strategy some Yemeni families use when they want to get rid of a domestic worker. Their contacts with their relatives back home are weak, and few of

them send money home. In some cases, women even receive money from relatives abroad. During instances of disputes with their employers, Somali women have no embassy to turn to and there are few organizations supporting their interests. UNHCR and the UNHCR financed Refugee Health and Community Project and Marie Stopes International Yemen (MSIY) are the only two venues that support refugee women (see Jaffer et al 2003).

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 with Somalia. In addition, whereas Yemen used to have an "open-door policy" (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. 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[5] and UNHCR's family reunion programme. Despite the stricter border controls, Somali men still cross the border with Saudi Arabia but women are more

[5] 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.

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. Yet, the flow of refugees to Yemen continues to increase, and consists not only of Somalis but more recently also of Ethiopians and Eritreans, who flee poverty and oppression at home.

Case Story: Afrah

Afrah is a young Somali woman who is 24 years old. She came to Yemen one and a half years ago. Her parents and younger brothers and sisters are living in Mogadishu. She decided to migrate to Saudi Arabia and traveled alone by bus to Bosasso, one of the ports on the Gulf of Aden. She came by boat to Yemen and arrived in Mukalla. From there she traveled on to Sana'a. The trip took her one and a half months. When she heard that it was very difficult to cross the border with Saudi Arabia she decided to stay in Yemen. She took up domestic work for a Yemeni family and married a Somali man. She soon got pregnant but her husband treated her badly and they divorced within a year. She is now living alone with her five month old daughter in a room in the area As-Safiah, where many refugees live. She earns less than 50 US$ per month for full-time domestic work. Her employers treat her well but the work is very hard. Her male employer often chews qat[6] and she has to clean the diwan[7] almost daily. Her salary is not enough to make ends meet, but a previous employer paid only half of what she makes now, so she does not complain. She has no contact with her parents anymore; they do not even know she has a child. Afrah is still planning to move on to Saudi Arabia but she wants to wait till her child is older.

IV. Ethiopians in Yemen

Ethiopia is one of the largest and most populated countries in sub-Saharan Africa with 65 million inhabitants most of whom are living in rural areas. The dramatic events that characterize Ethiopia's modern history, with tremendous social and political turmoil,

[6] Qat is a shrub of which the leaves have a mildly stimulant effect when chewed. A large part of the Yemeni adult population, in particular men, chews qat in the afternoon, alone or with others. Qat sessions are the most important pastime in Yemen.
[7] Arabic sitting room.

recurrent famines, economic crises, warfare and repression have had a large impact on people's migration movements. During the dictatorial regime of Mengistu, Ethiopian refugees were one of the largest numbers of African refugees in the world. (Bariagaber 1995, 213) Yet, the overthrow of Mengistu in 1991 has not brought more equality and less repression. A new system based on ethnic federalism was introduced, and the subsequent inequality between regions has had a very strong impact on people's livelihoods. In addition, the ongoing war with Eritrea has resulted in numerous divided families and deportees from Eritrea for who migration is one of the few ways to survive. Moreover, the violent crackdowns of demonstrations and the persecution of opposition members, human rights activists and journalists in November 2005 have led to a new flow of migrants and refugees, as has the recent war with Somalia and the famines in the eastern part of the country. Boats with Ethiopian refugees, in particular Oromo's and Afar, two ethnic groups that are confronted with repression and famine, arrive almost daily at the Yemeni coast.

While international labour migration was restricted under the socialist regime of Mengistu, the government that came to power in 1991 made the right to free movement part of the constitution and everyone willing and able to go abroad is nowadays allowed to do so.[8] In the absence of suitable jobs at home, Ethiopians are increasingly looking for job opportunities abroad. Many of them have migrated to the economically developed countries on the Arabian Peninsula. Yemen, geographically closer but financially less attractive, has also experienced an increase of Ethiopian migrants and refugees since 1991. Historically, there have always been close relations between Ethiopia and Yemen. Intensive trade relations, at times invasions by one or the other, and migration flows between the two countries have been of major importance for both countries (see Carmichael 2005). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many Yemenis migrated to Ethiopia to escape the poor economic situation during the Imamate. They often married African women and brought their families back to Yemen after the establishment of the Yemen Arab Republic in 1970, and in particular after the nationalization of land and property during Mengistu in the second half of the 1970s. Yet, there still is a large Yemeni community in Ethiopia, and many Yemenis have relatives in Ethiopia.

[8] In June 2006, the Ethiopian government proudly announced that more than 13,000 Ethiopians migrated abroad via legal channels. (The Ethiopian Herald, June 21, 2006)

Ethiopian Navy officers, who had been serving under Mengistu, were among the first Ethiopians who settled in Yemen since 1991. After the overthrow of Mengistu they were forced to seek refuge, and accepted on a *prima facie* basis in Yemen. They were later sometimes followed by their wives. The second major group of Ethiopians in Yemen consists of Ethiopian women who migrated to take up paid work as domestics. They are mostly young, single women who come to Yemen via relatives or friends and via recruitment agencies. The third major group of Ethiopians in Yemen are migrants and refugees that come to Yemen smuggled by boat, escaping famine or persecution. They travel over land to the coast of the Red Sea or of the Gulf of Aden and pay smugglers in Eritrea, Djibouti or Somaliland to take them by boat to Yemen. Depending on the distance, the trip can take as long as three days and stories of people who drowned appear regularly in the Yemeni newspapers. The political developments in Ethiopia since November 2005, when the Ethiopian government forcibly removed the opposition, led to a growing number of migrants and refugees.

The increased presence of Ethiopians in Yemen is clearly visible in public space. There are Ethiopian restaurants; Ethiopian hair saloons; Ethiopian music shops and a number of Ethiopian organizations in the main cities. In Sana'a there is an Ethiopian community centre where people can go to have a meal, drink coffee, play billiards and watch television. There is a strong community sense among Ethiopians in Yemen, with people helping each other and celebrating weddings, births, and national and religious feasts. Newcomers are quickly integrated in the community, and helped with housing and work. Most Ethiopians share apartments, and sometimes rooms, to divide the costs.[9] While most Ethiopian women to some extent dress like Yemeni women, in black garments with headscarves, they are still relatively recognizable as Ethiopian because their headscarves are colored and they do not wear face veils.

Roughly estimated there are around 10,000 Ethiopian domestic workers in Yemen. Reliable figures are not available as many of them have not registered. Most women that work as domestic workers come to Yemen via employment agents or via relatives and friends. A smaller group of women come by boat entering the country illegally. The majority of the women are unmarried, especially those who come through an agent. Yemeni families often specifically ask for young and unmarried women because they think they are more malleable.

[9] See for similar housing arrangements in Lebanon Al-Zougbi (2003) and Beyene (2005).

Women who come to Yemen without the interference of an agent are predominantly young single women but they can also be married, divorced or widows. In some cases they have left their children with relatives in Ethiopia.

The geographic proximity is an important reason to come to Yemen but other reasons are the presence of relatives or friends and the negative stories women heard about other Arab countries (such as Lebanon and the Gulf States where human rights violations of Ethiopians are increasingly becoming public in the media). Some women joined their husbands in Yemen, and then decided to take up work as domestic workers. Those who come through an employment agent enter Yemen legally but the employers or the agents do not always arrange or renew their residence and work permits. In other cases, women returned to their home countries after having finished their contracts and came back on tourist visas to take up work as freelance workers. They sometimes neglect to apply for residence permits when their tourist visas expire because the costs are too high compared to what they earn.

Ethiopian women work mainly for middle class and upper class Yemeni households. The women who come as migrant workers often intend to go home after having earned enough money to set up a business or build a house in their home countries. In case they are able to save money, they send money to their families, via people who go to Ethiopia or via Western Union. But their salaries are low (between 50-150 US$ when they work for Yemeni families) and life in Yemen is expensive. They are often unable to save money for their return and many feel they are stuck. They don't want to return home empty-handed and prefer to stay or to move on to another country where they may earn more money. In case they succeed in returning home, they often decide to return to Yemen after a couple of months. Job opportunities in Ethiopia are very limited and they feel compelled to go back to Yemen. There is a clear pattern of change in employment status among Ethiopian domestic workers from working on a contract to freelance work, from live-in worker to live-out worker, from working for families to working as a cleaner in an office or embassy, and from working for Yemeni families to working for expatriate families. Expatriate families pay the highest salaries (between 200-400 US$).

The majority of Ethiopian domestic workers are Christian, mainly Ethiopian Orthodox, but the numbers of Pentecostal Protestants are increasing. Churches play an important role in the

lives of many women and those who have a day off on Fridays often go to church.[10] Freelance workers have freedom of movement and are better treated than contract workers. Contract workers often do not have a day off and have a strenuous workload. In addition, they do not hold their own passports, they do not always receive their salaries on time, and are sometimes mentally and physically abused by their employers or their agents. Stories circulate between Ethiopians about women who have tried to commit suicide because of the misery in which they live. A number of women have succeeded in leaving their workplace and are aided by other Ethiopians. The Ethiopian community in Yemen is strong, with people helping and visiting one another, which is visible through their participation in social gatherings, such as wedding celebrations and other parties organized among Ethiopians. The Ethiopian embassy is regularly confronted with the problems of Ethiopian domestic workers. In particular women who came to Yemen via illegal employment agencies approach the embassy for assistance. In order to regulate the migration and employment of Ethiopian women as domestic workers the Ethiopian Ministry of Labour introduced a new system in July 2004. Every request for an Ethiopian domestic worker has to go via the Ethiopian embassy in Sana'a.[11] The Ethiopian embassy monitors the implementation of the contract, such as the payment of the minimum salary (100 US$) and the right to a weekly day off and to annual leave. According to the embassy staff, the system works well. The embassy is, however, unable to monitor the activities of illegal employment agencies and continues to be confronted with women whose rights have been violated.

Case Story: Tsehay

Tsehay is 27 years old and came to Yemen six years ago. She was employed on a contract basis via an official employment agent and earned 50 US$ per month. Two weeks before the end of her contract she quit her job after a fight with her female employer. She had never left the house before and said that her employer treated her badly. She met some Ethiopian women who took her to their house. She soon found another job, as a live-out domestic worker for a Yemeni family earning 100 US$ per month. She is not the only domestic worker: an Indonesian woman is responsible for cooking and lives with the family. Until recently Tsehay did not have a residence permit and when she wanted to go home to visit her ailing father, she had to pay a large sum of money to cover the fine and the costs of a residence permit. She stayed for almost three months in Ethiopia and returned before her visa expired. Her father died a few months later. Tsehay quit her job because her shoulders and arms hurt

[10] Churches are accepted in Yemen as long as they are not actively visible in the public sphere.

[11] The agent or the Yemeni employer has to submit the necessary documents to the Ethiopian embassy. The embassy makes four copies of the documents and sends them to the woman worker in Ethiopia, or to the counterpart of the Yemeni agent in Ethiopia. The documents have to be approved by the Ministry of Labour in Addis Ababa. After approval the worker can travel to Yemen. The costs of her visa and ticket are paid by the employer. The worker is responsible for arranging a passport and a health test (TB and HIV/AIDS).

from all the ironing she had to do. She does not know what she is going to do. She wants to return to Ethiopia but knows that it will be very difficult to find employment to earn a basic living.

V. Asian Domestic Workers in Yemen

Besides Ethiopian and Somali women, Asian women are also working as domestics in Yemen. Their numbers are, however, much smaller. The two main groups of Asian domestic workers are Filipinas and Indonesians but there are also Indian and Sri Lankan women. With regard to the Filipino community in Yemen, estimations are that there are around 600 Filipinos, half of whom live in Sana'a. From those living in Sana'a the majority are women, who are working in offices or as domestic workers. Filipino men work mainly in factories outside the capital. A number of Filipinos are employed as nurses. Filipinas also come to Yemen via relatives or friends or through recruitment agencies. They mainly work as live-in domestics and are employed as cleaners, cooks and nannies. A number of Filipinas work as full-time domestics for ambassadors or expatriates. They earn between 200 US$ and 500 US$ per month and are considered the top of the hierarchy of domestic workers.[12] Before the outbreak of the civil war in 1994, there were more Filipinas working as domestics but many of them left and did not return. The main reason is that the increasing inflation rate has affected the purchasing power of upper middle class families, and subsequently it has become more expensive to employ Filipinas.

Most Filipinas working as domestics are married, have attained higher education and speak English. Their husbands and children often remain in the Philippines, they return regularly home for holidays but in most cases come back to Yemen to work. The Filipino community is close-knit, although there is no Filipino embassy in Yemen. There are two community organizations that arrange activities and parties and many Filipinos collectively visit the Catholic Church on Fridays or Sundays. However, women that are live-in workers with Yemeni families have less time or no time at all for such activities and are often more isolated. In the past, there were more problems with domestic workers whose rights were violated, but currently the main problems concern Filipinos who do not have residence

[12] "Filipino women are the quintessential service workers of globalization." Parreñas (2001, 1) Filipinas were among the first to migrate abroad to take up paid domestic labour, and are nowadays employed in more than 130 countries. (ibid.) They have the longest history in paid domestic labour; they are the highest educated and the most professional domestic workers.

permits and who are unable to return home because they have been undocumented for a considerable period of time. Filipinos are represented by the consulate in Jeddah and the embassy in Riyadh. In case of serious problems, representatives of the consulate or the embassy come to Yemen.

Case Story: Evelyn

Evelyn is 53 years old and has been working in Yemen for more than ten years. She married when she was 18 years old and has three children. Evelyn decided to migrate because the salary of her husband, who is a carpenter, was not enough to pay for her children's education. Her sister and sister-in-law were working in Yemen and arranged work for her. She came to Yemen in 1992 and first worked for three years for a merchant family in Taiz. The family treated her well but the work was very hard, even though the family also employed two Somali domestic workers. She worked around 16 hours per day and earned 200 US$ per month. She used to send her entire salary to her family at home. After three years she returned to the Philippines for a couple of months. When she came back to Yemen she found work with an influential family in Sana'a, and stayed with them for seven years. This family also treated her well but the work was even harder than before because the family always had guests. She also accompanied the family abroad and had to take care of the children. They grew so attached to her that the family did not want to accept her resignation. It took a long time before she could leave. She is now working as a live-out domestic worker for an expatriate family. In the meantime she arranged for her husband and one of her daughters to come to Yemen. Her husband is working as a carpenter in Yemen and her daughter has an administrative job.

In the past few years the number of Indonesian domestic workers in Yemen has rapidly increased. Reliable statistics are lacking because Indonesian women often come to Yemen on tourist visas via illegal recruitment agencies, and are not registered at the labour offices. The bad economic situation in Indonesia makes Indonesian women willing to go abroad and most of them prefer to work in a Muslim country (see Robinson 2000). Brokers in Indonesia convince women in rural areas that it is easier to get visas for Yemen than to apply through the official channels for visas for Saudi Arabia or the Gulf States. In this way Indonesian women end up in Yemen, a country to which they rarely intend to migrate.[13] Though some of them have previously worked in one of the oil-rich countries, for others Yemen is their first overseas experience. Indonesian women mainly work as cleaners, cooks and nannies for upper class families, and earn around 100 US$ per month. Indonesian domestic workers have often only received a number of years of primary education, and in most cases do not speak English.

[13] There is no bilateral agreement that regulates labour migration between Indonesia and Yemen and the Indonesian government does not support migration to Yemen because it is not seen as a desirable destination due to the relatively low wages.

The Indonesian embassy is increasingly confronted with Indonesian women who come to Yemen to work as domestic workers. Because there is no bilateral agreement that regulates labour migration, most women enter Yemen on tourist visas. The Indonesian embassy does not know how many Indonesian women work in Yemen as domestic workers. They only come to the embassy in case of problems. Recently, a shelter has been built at the premises of the embassy for women who leave their job after conflicts with their employer. Religion is one of the reasons why Yemeni families employ Indonesian domestic workers but another reason is the fact that it has become more difficult to employ Ethiopian women as domestics due to stricter emigration policies of the Ethiopian government.

Case Story: Ella

Ella is 23 years old and unmarried. Her parents are small farmers who live in a rural area in Java. Ella migrated abroad four years ago. She first went to Kuwait, where she worked for a family with three children. She was responsible for housekeeping and cooking. The family treated her well and she returned to Indonesia after two and a half years. She stayed home for three months and was approached by an intermediary who convinced her to go to Yemen. She is now working as a live-in domestic worker for a rich family with houses in Mukalla and Sana'a. Her male employer is married to two wives and each wife has an Indonesian domestic worker. She is lucky because her female employer only has a son, while her colleague has to take care of a family of six children. They help each other and share a room. But she prefers Kuwait to Yemen. Yemen is poor and underdeveloped, and when her contract ends she does not want to return. She is considering going to another country.

VI. Migration via Recruitment Agencies

One of the main ways in which migrant domestic workers come to Yemen is via recruitment agencies. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour issues licenses for employment agencies.[14] Until January 2006, there was one officially recognized private employment agent that brought women to Yemen as domestic workers. He used to have a counterpart in Addis Ababa who recruited women in Ethiopia. The office of his counterpart was closed in 2005 because recruitment fees were asked from the women, which is not allowed according to the Ethiopian law. In addition, in the second half of January 2006 the employment agent in Yemen was arrested and imprisoned because of raping a young Ethiopian woman who had recently come to Yemen via his office. The agent was arrested once the Ethiopian embassy

[14] The following criteria have to be fulfilled before an employment agency obtains a license: to have one million Yemeni Riyal (5,719 US$) in the bank, which should be proven by a bank statement, to be registered at the Yemeni Chamber of Commerce, to have an official office (proven by a rent contract) and to hand over a copy of the Identity Card of the owner(s) of the agency and to submit their personal data.

learned of the incident. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were informed and a court case has been opened against the agent. He will presumably lose his license, which would result in the absence of any officially recognized employment agencies operating in Yemen who recruit foreign women to work within the country.

A number of employment agencies work without a license from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour. The requirement of having one million Yemeni Riyals (5,719 US$) in the bank, as a guarantee in case of conflict or financial problems, is the most important obstacle for obtaining a license. However, there are also agencies that prefer not to be officially registered because this will increase the level of government scrutiny over their activities. Some agencies violate the rights of women migrants by deceiving them, withholding their passports, restricting their freedom of movement, delaying the payment of salaries with the excuse that the workers have to pay off their debts ("debt bondage"). The fact that the employer or the agent withholds their passports makes the women completely dependent. Cases of abuse are sometimes reported to the embassies, the police and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour but rarely published in the media. There is only one organization that defends the rights of domestic workers in cases of abuse. The organization is called UNIDOM, United for the Improvement of Domestic Work, and is established with financial support of UNIFEM. Yet, the organization is still in its infancy, and lacks the resources and facilities to solve domestic workers' problems on a large scale. Particularly Ethiopian and Indonesian women are victims of illegal recruitment and employment agents.

Women come in contact with brokers or agents in their country of origin who convince them that they will find them a well-paid job in Yemen. Most of the women know that they are going to work as domestic workers but they are often not informed about the way in which they will be employed, their tasks and workload and the salaries they are going to earn. In some cases the brokers or agents lie about the salary or neglect to tell them the value of the Yemeni Riyal. In addition, women who come via illegal employment agents have to pay recruitment fees, which on average can be between 200-400 US$. Women borrow money from relatives, friends at home or from the agent; the latter resulting in a long period of time passing by before they actually receive their salaries. The bureaucratic procedures that are involved in legal migration take so much time that many women prefer to make use of traffickers, even though it costs them much more money. Women who want to migrate legally

only have to pay the costs of a passport and medical tests, while those who migrate via traffickers have to pay large fees. Yet the demand to migrate is so substantial that many women prefer paying large sums of money to a slow but legal migration process.

On 27 July 2005, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour published an announcement in the government newspaper Al-Thawra in which it listed the names of the 15 officially recognized private employment agencies and asked them to renew their licenses. However, as mentioned before, only one of these employment agencies actively recruited foreign women for work in Yemen. All the other employment agencies focus on recruiting Yemeni citizens for work abroad (in particular in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States). At the moment there is no officially recognized employment agency in Yemen that places foreign workers in the country. But the number of migrant domestic workers that enters Yemen increases every day (see De Regt 2006).

In contrast with other countries on the Arabian Peninsula, there is hardly any public debate about the increased presence of migrant domestic workers. Yemeni employers discuss the difficulties they have finding “good domestics” but emphasize that they treat their domestics well. In addition, attempts to discuss the vulnerable position of migrant domestic workers have not yet realized because the issue is not seen as a priority by state officials and employers. The increasing flow of refugees from the Horn of Africa is regarded as a big challenge, but the (illegal) migration and employment of women for domestic work is not recognized as a problem. The Yemeni state does very little against illegal recruitment agents and traffickers, mainly because political and financial interests are involved. The Working Women Department of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, which is technically and financially supported by the International Labour, has included migrant domestic workers in its future work plans but has to walk a thin line to create political will for the issue.

References

Al-Zougbi, 2003, "The Street of Slaves". *Al-Raida* XX, pp. 101-102.

Bariagaber, Assefaw, 1995, "Linking Political Violence and Refugee Situations in the Horn of Africa: An Empirical Approach." *International Migration* 33 (2): 209-234.

Beyene, Joyet, 2005, Women, Migration and Housing: A Case Study of Three Households of Ethiopian and Eritrean Female Migrant Workers in Beirut and Naba'a. Masters Thesis American University of Beirut.

Carapico, Sheila, 1998, *Civil Society in Yemen: The Political Economy of Activism in Modern Arabia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Carmichael, Tim, "The Diaspora in Yemen." In *Routes of Passage: Rethinking the African Diaspora*, edited by Ruth Simms Hamilton. Michigan: Michigan State University Press (forthcoming).

COMSICCA, 2005, "Fleeing One War, Finding Another: Support for Somali Refugees in Yemen", *Community Development Journal* 40, nr. 2, pp. 201-204.

Dresch, Paul, 2000, *A History of Modern Yemen*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gardner, Judith and Judy El Bushra, 2004, *Somalia: The Untold Story – The War through the Eyes of Somali Women*. London: Pluto Press.

Hughes, Nesya, 2002, *Report on the Situation of Refugees in Yemen: Findings of a one-month Exploratory Study*. Forced Migration and Refugee Studies Programme. Cairo: American University of Cairo.

Hughes, Nesya H.B., 2003, "Yemen and Refugees: Progressive Attitudes - Policy Void". *Forced Migration Review* 16, pp.36-38.

Hill, Ginny, 2006, "Somali Refugees Languish in Yemen". BBC News.

Jaffer, Fowzia H., Samantha Guy and Jane Niewczasinski, 2003, "Reproductive Health Care for Somali Refugees in Yemen". *Forced Migration Review* 19, pp. 33-34.

Kebede, Emebet, 2001, *Ethiopia: An Assessment of the International Labour Migration Situation: The Case of Female Migrants*. GENPROM Working Paper no.3, Series on Women and Migration. Geneva: International Labour Organization.

Kibreab, Gaim, 1995, "Eritrean Women Refugees in Khartoum, Sudan, 1970-1990." *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 8 (1), pp. 1-25.

Musse, Fowzia, 2004, "War Crimes Against Women and Girls". In Judith Gardner and Judy El Bushra (eds.), *Somalia: The Untold Story – The War through the Eyes of Somali Women*. London: Pluto Press, pp. 69-96.

de Regt, Marina, 2006, *Mapping Study on Women Domestic Workers in Yemen*. Beirut: International Labour Organization.

de Regt, Marina, 2006, “Ethiopian Women Increasingly Trafficked to Yemen”, *Forced Migration Review* 25, pp. 37-38.

Robinson, Kathryn, 2000, “Gender, Islam and Nationality: Indonesian Domestic Servants in the Middle East.” In *Home and Hegemony: Domestic Service and Identity Politics in South and Southeast Asia*, eds. Kathleen A. Adams and Sara Dickey, 249-292. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Stookey, Robert W., 1978, *Yemen: The Politics of the Yemen Arab Republic*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.

UNHCR, 2007, *Country Operations Plan Yemen*.