

1996

Gender and Status Inequalities in Yemen: Honour, Economics, and Politics

Sheila Carapico

University of Richmond, scarapic@richmond.eduFollow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/polisci-faculty-publications>Part of the [International and Area Studies Commons](#), and the [Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Carapico, Sheila. "Gender and Status Inequalities in Yemen: Honour, Economics, and Politics." In *Patriarchy and Development: Women's Positions at the End of the Twentieth Century*, edited by Valentine M. Moghadam, 80-98. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Political Science at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Political Science Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

Gender and Status Inequalities in Yemen: Honour, Economics, and Politics

Sheila Carapico

INTRODUCTION

Studies of women in Arab countries fit into two other wider inquiries. Within the anthropology of the Middle East, as Abu Lughod shows in her review, 'harem theory' is one of the three 'theoretical metonyms', the other two being segmentation theory and Islam. Because ethnographic debates on segmentation among tribes and orientalist studies of Islam are largely male dominated, and Western stereotypes of Arab women are so sexist, studies of women initially strove merely to show elements of power and individualism within the 'harem' and have only more recently moved on to analyse the ideologies of patriarchy and sexual modesty, the epistemological issues involved in 'knowing the Other', and the relationship between studies of women and studies of men (Abu-Lughod, 1990).

Arab women are also included under the broader rubric of women-in-development (WID), where general questions concern the impact of modernization on women's lives and the specific questions asked about the Middle East have often been whether Islamic or Arab culture is inimical to women's liberation. In this literature, as Moghadam shows, more recent research considers how male-dominated patriarchal structures in the public and private spheres of tribal societies and 'neo-patriarchal' states restrict female access to the public domain. She deals with the impact of wealth, status, power, and public policy on gender relations. It is also important in this context to examine changes in personal status, political rights, education and health, and employment (Moghadam, 1990, 1992).

The aim of this national case study, a synthetic summary of the work and evidence on women in a tribal, Muslim, Arabian, rapidly changing society, is to contribute to the intersection of the Middle Eastern and women-in-development literatures by situating women first within tribal and Islamic settings and then in the context of rapid changes in political and economic circumstances during the past thirty years. It therefore considers feminine roles in the different historical social strata before examining how new services brought by modernization, class formation associated with the penetration of capitalism, and political struggles between right and left all affect women's positions in modernizing Arab societies.

What I hope to show is that the relationship between modernization and women's status is not a straightforward one, even in an apparently patriarchal Arab context.

TRIBES, ÉLITES, AND SERVICE PEOPLE

A mountainous, semi-arid farming region on the south-west Arabian peninsula, historic Yemen was partitioned in the nineteenth century when the British colonized the area around and later east of the important natural harbour at Aden, while the north remained in the Ottoman sphere of influence until World War I and independent under a Zaydi imam afterwards. Within North Yemen, there are three major geo-cultural regions: the northern highlands, a semi-arid zone characterized by grain production and sheep and goat herding; the southern uplands, washed twice annually by Indian Ocean monsoons, greener and supporting a peasant population; and the Tihama, the Red Sea coastal plain, with tropical agriculture in the mountain-fed *wadis* and near-desert conditions in between. In the South, colonial capitalism and post-revolutionary socialism affected Aden city and the nearby Lahej agricultural region most directly, whereas the irrigated Wadi Hadramawt and the more tribal eastern mountains remained quite isolated. The northern highlands are predominantly Zaydi (Shi'a) whereas the rest of Yemen is mostly Shafa'i (Sunni).

The ethnographic literature, most of which (with the exception of Bujra) comes from the north in the late 1970s and early 1980s, describes a tripartite status hierarchy consisting of the tribes (*qaba'il*), the élite or religious aristocracy (*sa'ada*), and the 'deficient' or 'service' groups at the bottom of the social ladder. The three groups' status and roles were interdependent. While the tribespeople engaged in grain farming and/or herding, and the educated élite practised the legal, administrative, and educational professions, the lower-status groups performed personal and market services on a contractual or, more recently, a commercial basis. Like ascribed status categories in most cultures, membership in each group was based on descent or at least a myth of common ancestry, maintained through endogamous marriage patterns (Bujra, 1971; Caton, 1990; Dresch, 1977).

'Tribe' has two distinct connotations. In political histories, 'the tribes' are the great Hashid and Bakil confederations of the northern plateau, who maintained through a combination of honour and force a 'tribal peace' that protected unarmed people including religious élites, service people, and women. Tribalism in this sense embodies a set of folk codes of behaviour (*'urf* or *'ard*) and a form of political organization under the leadership of quasi-elected *shaykhs*. In the second connotation 'tribesman'

(*qabili*) or 'tribeswoman' (*qabiliyya*) means tribal, as distinct from non-tribal, status. Beyond Hashid and Bakil territory, 'tribes' are less of a political force, farmers are often called 'peasant' (*ra'iyya*) as opposed to *qabili*, tribal codes are relaxed, and the term *shaykh* connotes exploitation more than election. However, tribespeople are distinguished from both higher- and lower-status groups, as 'independent' cereal farmers and/or herders.

Independent cereal and dairy production was not pure subsistence, for tribal households relied on others to provide the goods and services their 'honour' prevented them from undertaking, including growing vegetables, especially local onions and horse-radishes; and the activities of barbers, builders, cosmeticians, healers, criers, musicians, artisans, builders, traders, innkeepers, and, particularly, street-sweepers and bath-cleaners. Dishonoured by these tasks, tribal communities or families contracted with market people or ritual specialists, exchanging grain, butter, and meat for services. Service professionals, referred to collectively as *muzayyin*, as 'deficient' (*nuqqas*), or as 'market people' (*ahl al-suq*), traditionally entered contractual agreements to provide certain goods and services in exchange for grain and protection from a tribe, or subsistence from an élite community. Group-to-group contractual arrangements were preferred by both farmers and Muslim and Jewish service people for their reliability and dignity.

The élite non-tribal religious aristocracy consisted of the descendants of the Prophet, the *Sa'ada* and/or *Ashraf* (singular *sayyid* or *sharif*); and the judges (singular *qadi*) whose status came not from birth (for by blood they were tribesmen) but from education which, as in Europe, tended to be passed on within families. Honour attached to piety, scholarship, and mediation of disputes rather than, as among tribesmen, to acts of valour and violence (Caton, 1986). These two groups tended to concentrate in a dozen or more historic towns, where a combination of fees for legal services, rent-taking, religious endowment, and royal largess gave them a standard of living somewhat, but not dramatically, better than that of either rural tribesfolk or the service people in their midst. Under tribal practice, *sayyid* communities, like the market domain, were *hijrah* or 'protected' from warfare.

At the very bottom of the social hierarchy were the *Akhdam* (servants), employed in urban and market areas as street-sweepers and bath-cleaners for the municipalities or *awqaf*, where taxes or endowments paid their wages, or on large estates in the Tihama and some parts of the southern uplands as migrant harvest workers, a step below the permanent sharecroppers. Often seen lodged in temporary housing on the edge of towns, markets, and estates, the *Akhdam* are very nearly a distinct ethnic group, who evidently have African as well as Arab heritage, dress distinctively, and rarely interact socially with other Yemenis. Although when camped

they appeared to be propertyless, a careful study in 1977 of Luhayyah district in the near-desert northern Tihama showed that families abandoned their land in drought years to seek employment as migrant farm workers, urban sanitation workers, or unskilled labourers in Saudi Arabia (Steffen *et al.*, 1978).

The distinctions among these groups were status inequalities rather than class divisions because independent farmers and tradespeople owned their own means of production—land, livestock, and the tools of their trades—and engaged in contractual exchange with other groups. Moreover, it was not the religious élite but a distinct tribute-collecting class-in-the-making that expropriated wealth through a sharecropping system not corresponding directly to status (Tutwiler, 1987). Unlike inter-household sharecropping in the semi-arid zones, on some irrigated estates in the southern uplands, the Tihama, and the Hadramawt, sharecroppers paid up to three-quarters of their crop to landlord-*shaykhs* or urban masters. Among the largest landowners in the early twentieth century were the imam's family and some other prominent *sayyid* families, but also northern *shaykhs* who conquered verdant valleys and traders who took land as collateral against loans. Independent farmers then became sharecroppers and gradually lost their tribal identity along with their independence. Class and status overlapped most closely for the *Akhdam*; otherwise, the class relation between owners and sharecroppers should not be confused with the status distinctions in the ethnographic literature.

Nor did low status prevent some coffee merchants, importers, and businessmen who moved to British Aden from amassing economic and political fortunes (Messick, 1978). The imams also selected some bright sons of low-status families for higher education or military posts precisely because, unlike either tribal military leaders or other descendants of the prophet, they could presumably broker no claim to political power. Thus although the monarchy derived its ideology and legitimacy from the religious aristocracy, status did not coincide exactly with wealth and power. When the son of a blacksmith, in his capacity as captain of the palace guard, seized the reins of state in September 1962, the *sa'ada* lost influence, but merchants and officers were posed to come to the fore.

THE ROLES OF WOMEN

Gender, the second major source of inequality in Yemeni society, has been the subject of more journalistic and impressionistic writing than serious scholarship. The major published studies of Yemeni women remain Myntti's general overview and Dorsky's study of Amran, while the bulk of the analysis of extended fieldwork by Najwa Adra, Christine Ansell, Mary Herbert, Martha Mundy, and Delores Walters remains unpublished.

Evidence suggests a great deal of regional and situational variation, within which, ironically from a contemporary liberal feminist political perspective, the greatest honour is attached to feminine seclusion and the greatest shame to market activity. This section begins with the role of women farmers and sharecroppers, and then considers *sayyid*, service, and *Akhdam* women.

The predominant farm system consisted of three interdependent elements: the fields, the livestock, and the kitchen. The fields supplied cereal and tinder to the kitchen and fodder for the livestock, who, in turn, returned fertilizer and traction to the fields as well as milk and sometimes meat to the kitchen. This was a use-value-maximizing system with virtually no waste, since grasses and stalks were culled for feed and fuel, leftovers fattened livestock, and even droppings were used as fuel or to replenish the soil. The farm system produced a nutritious, high-fibre diet of grain, beans, dairy products like buttermilk and clarified butter, sometimes eggs or meat, and herbs and seasonal fruits. Water had to be collected daily, often from natural streams.

Within the tribal household, men performed the mainly seasonal tasks associated with the land and women did nearly everything else. Men maintained the terraces contouring the rugged highlands, or irrigation systems in the Tihama, rebuilding walls, ploughing, levelling fields, and turning the soil under after harvest, using drought stock. Women's responsibilities for dairy stock and the kitchen entailed a long list of daily chores, including cutting fodder and collecting fuel, feeding and milking, preparing a fire, grinding grain, making bread or porridge, collecting water, and, of course, serving meals and raising children (Dorsky, 1986; Myntti, 1979; Carapico and Tutwiler, 1981).

Women's work was not 'housework'; it was the basis of production and subsistence, with high value added. Measured in terms of hours, it was way more than half the work, depending on the ratio of land to livestock. Within share-cropping and nearly landless families women's economic power was greater relative to males because the value of their livestock exceeded that of the land; on marginal and even medium-sized holdings, planting decisions were often predicated on the importance of sorghum and alfalfa as fodder. In the most destitute farm families that sharecropped even their livestock, women usually contracted independently. In all farm families women managed all the products (grain, milk) as well as most of the inputs (fodder, fuel, water), which required daily handling, while men were condemned to seasonal unemployment during fallow and growing seasons. Whereas entirely female households could survive, it was culturally inconceivable and physically untenable for men to live 'alone' until markets began to supply bread, milk, and water.

Most tribeswomen inherited a bit of land, about half as much (under Islamic laws) as their brothers, but all land in the household was managed

as a unit by the men (Mundy, 1979). The preferred marriage patterns kept both people and property within the extended family, or tribal fraction. The ideal household consisted of two or more adult males, one of whom could be off-farm, and three or four women. Polygamy occurred, but the extended household of male kin was preferred. When women married, they looked after their mothers and sisters-in-law, with whom they would spend their lives dividing day-to-day chores. A brideprice composed of gold, livestock, or other goods was paid to the bride and her father. If a man divorced his wife, he regained part of the brideprice but lost her labour, her land, her livestock, and the alliance of her male kin. It happened, but was not taken lightly. The other women in the household and the necessity of her labour minimized wife abuse.

Under tribal law, women were not at all equal to men. They did have tribal status and membership, but they were also treated as 'protected' people. Therefore, they would not bear arms, and should never be attacked; if they were harmed, the blood-money compensation might be as much as eleven times that of a man's. No tribeswoman should set foot in a marketplace, engage directly in trade, or betray her sexual honour. Tribeswomen were thus the object of a chauvinistic code of chivalry that denied direct participation in the military-political sphere or in the market.

Women from *shaykhly*, *qadi*, and administrative families exercised a certain power as intermediaries and as consummators of political alliances. Except under very dire circumstances when a distraught widow burst into a *shaykh's diwan*, women approached political leaders through their menfolk or the *shaykh's* womenfolk. Women in political families often married into potentially allied tribes, where they enjoyed membership in their fathers' as well as protection by their husband's tribe. Depending on her temperament, relationship with her family, and the specific circumstances, such a marriage could be an entrée into influential behind-the-scenes politics or into social and psychological exile.

Although the daughters and wives of tribal chiefs shared with *sayyid* women the potential for political marriages, there was a clear difference between the 'ladies' of the upper crust and tribeswomen. For the women of the religious aristocracy exemplified the seclusion and modesty of Muslim wives, mothers, and daughters. The privileged 'ladies' of the 'best families' were also the most 'protected' group in society: from work, from public view and interaction with strangers, and from violence. Daughters of *sayyid* families, who always married other *sa'ada*, veiled heavily after the fashion of Ottoman Turks who partly conquered Yemen in the seventeenth and again in the nineteenth century. In centres of administration and learning in the highlands, post-pubescent females lived a cloistered existence, venturing from their homes only to visit other women, cloaked from head to foot in yards of fabric, while in élite Tihama towns a labyrinth of passages allowed them to visit without entering the street. The veil symbolized not

just honour but freedom from the drudgery and physical exertion of the fields. Unlike rural tribeswomen familiar with all the men in their own communities, the ladies of the well-born and learned families refrained from contact with males beyond their immediate families, and were therefore far more likely to marry utter strangers. Their extreme modesty were marks of privilege, mimicked by women of *qadi* families that could afford it.

The veiled ladies enjoyed a further privilege open to no other women: schooling. Within *sayyid* and *qadi* families literate women trained their brightest daughters and nieces to read the Quran, practice calligraphy, or, sometimes, in herbology or other arts. For the apt pupils in the best urban families tutors might be brought. Such learning conferred tremendous prestige because it was so rare.

In other ways the women of all but the royal family shared certain things in common. Although *sayyid* families were more likely to have a public fountain, often endowed through a pious foundation (*waqf*), near their homes, they still had to haul water. Although they might take in poor relatives, orphans, or women of 'service' strata to lighten the load, unlike the ladies of Europe they did not rely on servants to prepare meals, keep house, or raise children. Their neighbours were frequently of different status. And like women throughout Yemen they tended cows and goats for milk and breeding, typically feeding them with alfalfa and other crops from nearby *waqf* gardens. And it must be noted that the men and women sharecroppers on the *waqf* gardens chequering *sayyid* communities were not infrequently themselves *sayyids* whose association with the pious foundation or a mosque conferred prestige on tasks otherwise performed by the untitled lower strata. Other *sayyidat* earned money, grain, or goods by reading or performing at feminine celebrations, healing, tutoring, and so forth.

Finally, the untitled *muzayyin* and *Akhdam* women were the least constrained and least privileged: having neither land nor status, they had only their labour to barter or sell and (as the others saw it) no particular honour to protect. Yet within their families low-status women wielded more economic power than their ladylike or even tribal sisters. Although a complete ethnography of the trades has not been done, apparently there are a number of trades where women and men each have special skills (pottery), some where they do similar tasks (straw weaving, sewing), some where each gender serves its own (barbering, cosmetics, entertaining), and some performed only by men (carpentry, metal work, fishing) whose wives tended livestock or vegetable gardens. For the wholly shameless it was even possible to enter the market, unveiled, to hawk wares, serve in a restaurant, or tend to traveller's needs at a hostel. Even these market women looked down on the *Akhdam* street sweepers.

Polygamy rates seem to have been highest among the most and the least

privileged families. Among the political élites, men took second and third wives to cement political alliances and head households in more than one location. At the other end of the spectrum, peddlers, itinerant traders, caravaneers, and other travelling men found a wife in each of several destinations, leaving each to fend for herself much of the time, raising livestock, selling crafts or services, or ingratiating themselves to more affluent families. The latter—landless wives of shiftless men—enjoyed little honour or wealth, but (so) they enjoyed more freedom of physical mobility, economic independence, and personal access to *shaykhs* and judges than any other women.

The ways in which status distinctions were constituted, reflected, reinforced, or, more recently, modified in the course of daily interaction and crisis resolution have been a major theme in the ethnographies of Yemeni men. Social inequalities among men are enacted almost daily in the seating arrangements at a *qat* session, where the most prestigious seats are in the far corner of the *diwan* or *mafraj*, opposite the windows, and the least desirable places are near the door (Dresch, 1985). Forms of greeting and rhetorical style also mark the status of both the speaker and the person being addressed (Caton, 1986).

Within the female domain, the cues to status seem far more subtle, since social interactions coalesced around physical rather than status proximity. In traditional neighbourhoods and villages, a feminine social network revolved around water sources and afternoon social gatherings. At the water-hole or fountain, fights might break out in dry periods but no one could pull rank. In more urban neighbourhoods where market, élite, and tribal households often shared common spaces and facilities, women attending wedding and post-natal parties filled the *mafraj* two and three deep, on a first come, first served basis, quite oblivious to status ranking, and convention required either equal greetings to each individual or a single collective blessing. While everyone knew who could and could not marry whom, in women's gatherings only the visiting, special-occasion professionals, like ritual Quran readers, by definition *sayyidat*, and *muzzayina* entertainers, stood out. Even wealthy, powerful women married to *shaykhs*, governors, or princes took pains not to show off. Within the group, women ignored status distinctions, and felt it rude to speak of them. One's personal honour depended on personal traits like generosity, piety, wit, and motherhood.

THE IMPACT OF CHANGE ON STATUS

The Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) was a separate state from 1962, when the imamate fell, until 1990, when North and South Yemen unified. During that period, a political, economic, and social transformation unleashed by

the civil war (1962–70) destroyed not only the imamate but also the political basis of aristocratic preferences and privileges. The oil bonanza in the neighbouring Arab Gulf opened up wage and entrepreneurial opportunities for over a million Yemeni sojourners whose remittances, peaking at over a billion dollars a year, flooded a formerly ‘closed’ economy of fewer than ten million residents with hard currency and imported commodities. Within a generation class had substantially replaced status as the principal denominator of social inequality. In the late 1980s, deflation in the price of oil reduced the YAR’s foreign currency transfers, sending the economy into recession. In the meantime, however, Sana’a had negotiated a political agreement for unification with the heretofore Marxist post-colonial regime of the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), noted, among other things, for its progressive family and gender policies. Soon on the heels of unification came another major shock from the 1991 Gulf War, which precipitated an influx of returned migrants and sharply reduced international assistance. These rapid, major changes affected men and women differently, and among women the effects of rapid modernization and political developments depended on both prior status and subsequent class position.

In the North Yemeni bourgeois society, with its commercial economy and bureaucratic state, status inequalities continued to differentiate men but they lost their material and occupational underpinnings. With political upheavals and the advent of modern urban education old élites lost their monopoly over learning and their domination of the expanding apparatus of the state. Traders as a group and certain importers and money-changers in particular flourished, and were indeed able to transform new wealth into prestige and power. Sellers of certainly traditionally valuable and now widely available commodities like meat and *qat* now prospered while some artisan categories like potters and weavers lost most of their trade to cheap uniform imports. The latter joined the thousands of smallholders and some tenant sharecroppers in the growing exodus to the Gulf where some established small businesses but the majority worked for wages. Migrant remittances entered Yemen via money-changers who transmitted them to families for expenditure on consumption. This economic ‘demand’ pulled markets, roads, electricity, and pumped water into the countryside. Soon, the market for wage labour spread into the Yemeni towns and eventually the villages.

With the availability of imported white flour, tinned milk and food, and, more unevenly, gas, electricity, and piped water, the economic basis of household grain and livestock production on dry land began to collapse. Those who could dig or drill wells to irrigate their land for *qat* or commercial food crops did so, and the *qat* farmers made a small fortune (Weir, 1985). Others gradually concluded that the old grain and livestock regime was more trouble than it was worth, and the men moved further into the

wage economy. By the late 1980s, when the bonanza ended, most families were almost entirely dependent on the market.

Women's access to the fruits of North Yemeni modernization projects was uneven, for water, electricity, roads, education, and health-care services distribution was affected by factors ranging from technology and terrain to politics and foreign aid. The extension of these services affected, and reflected, urban-rural as well as class and gender differences. Overall, only a small, privileged proportion of women enjoyed enough access to education, health services, and transport to really transform their lives, to support and express themselves individually in the new public spheres of market and state.

The single most significant change for women came from piped water. In the two decades after the end of the civil war in 1970, the Yemen Arab Republic, with international assistance, delivered water to much of the population: 29 per cent of households, mostly in cities and towns, had piped water by 1981, and the proportion of households reached may well have doubled in the next decade with the completion of an additional 1,223 water projects (CPO, 1988: 65, 111). Women who now had water piped to the house or at least the neighbourhood were freed of one of the most time-consuming and strenuous of their traditional tasks, the carrying of water. This was a most welcome relief especially to rural highland women, many of whom spent hours walking several kilometres a day to provide their families with a couple of buckets full of water. However, it should also be noted that the water collection spot previously gave women a gathering place outside the home, and that going for water afforded a particular sort of physical mobility and, indeed, exercise, so that household or neighbourhood taps removed their main excuse for leaving the home even as it relieved them of an arduous task.

The second service gradually reaching most households was electricity, extended gradually from the cities, along the main roads, into the countryside, reaching 64 per cent of households by 1981 and nearly tripling in generating capacity by the end of the decade (CPO, 1988: 65, 112-13). Electric lights and televisions bought with migrants' remittances now lit most homes. This made a difference in the rhythm of daily life once tied to sunrise and sunset and in the nature of leisure time once filled only with social conversation. Women liberated from the task of hauling water, and in many cases from livestock rearing, now settled in the afternoon or evening in front of the TV to watch Yemeni, Arab, and Western programmes. Television mesmerized, reducing the incentive to attend women's parties, and to talk when one did visit. It introduced a partial, rarified glimpse of lifestyles and technologies never imagined a decade earlier, from Caireen middle class sitcoms to improbable scenarios with talking, flying, anthropomorphic animations or real men in space flight. This exposure raised certain expectations but also created confusion and even revulsion about

the world outside. Electrification also introduced basic appliances like washing machines, blenders, and refrigerators, whose utilization were less labour saving than housework modifying. There is little evidence of time saved fetching water or chopping vegetables being put towards 'economic' purposes (Myntti, 1979).

Female access to other services was more limited. Roads brought appliances, building materials, and consumer goods, but relatively few women travelled, and then only heavily veiled. Indeed the arrival of vehicular traffic brought strangers whose presence made most girls and women more reluctant to venture from home and more likely to veil. Although in medical emergencies women might ride to a clinic or hospital, few travelled by car to clinics or schools on a routine basis.

Although schools and clinics were built throughout North Yemen in the 1970s and 1980s, female access to education and medical care, especially beyond the main cities, was limited and spotty. Some aggregate statistics illustrate this point. By 1985, female literacy rates in the YAR were estimated at 3 per cent, compared with 27 per cent for males, and 25 per cent for females in South Yemen. Between 1986 and 1988, 40 per cent of primary school-aged girls were enrolled (compared with 141 per cent for boys, indicating large numbers of older male students). At the secondary level, the proportion of the female age group dropped to six per cent (Moghadam, 1992: table 13), reflecting parents' reluctance to send pubescent daughters to school, due to the acute shortage of women teachers, to fathers' refusal to have their daughters more educated than themselves, to mothers' desire to have them help at home, and to the widespread perception that advanced education for girls is 'wasted'. City girls were going to school at twice the rate of their country cousins. During 1986-7, girls constituted one-fifth of those in grades one to six, including 42 per cent in Sana'a and probably the other cities, but a commensurately lower proportion elsewhere. At the preparatory and secondary levels females were only 11 per cent of pupils, and 19-20 per cent in Sana'a city alone (CPO, 1987: 157-62). There was a comparable urban bias in female education in the PDRY, where two-thirds of Adeni girls but around one-third elsewhere attended primary school, and at the secondary level 43 per cent of teenage females in Aden were students, but in other governorates the figures mirrored the YAR's (Al-Noban, 1984: 121). The ratio of female to male enrollment in all of Yemen in the mid-1980s was 24 at the primary level, 22 at the secondary level, and 40 for higher education (Khalidi and Tucker, n.d., p. 5).

The rate of college entry of female graduates of YAR secondary schools being equal to men's, women represented 12 per cent of Yemeni student body at Sana'a University, and of various faculties as follows: medicine, 56 per cent; arts, 31 per cent; science, 24 per cent; education, 21 per cent; commerce and economics, 9 per cent; engineering, 7 per cent; law, 2 per

cent; agriculture, 2 per cent. At the Taiz faculty of education, 31 per cent of the Yemeni students were women (CPO, 1987: 177). Fourteen per cent of YAR graduate students, and a quarter of trainees at teachers' institutes were women (CPO, 1987: 169). In comparison, women were in the absolute numerical majority at Aden University of South Yemen, where they represented 72 per cent of students in the college of education and half of medical students (Lackner, 1985: 114).

Indicators of health care, like school attendance, put North Yemeni females behind women in almost all other Middle Eastern countries. In 1981-5 the contraceptive prevalence rate of 1 per cent was the lowest in the Middle East, and the fertility rate of 8.5 per cent was the highest. A World Fertility Survey in the early eighties reported that only a quarter of Yemeni women were aware of family planning methods, again far lower than elsewhere even within the Arab World, and less than 5 per cent were reportedly willing to use contraceptives, perhaps because child mortality under age one remained an alarming 162 per thousand, and 237 under the age of five (Moghadam, 1992, table 12). Acceptance of contraception (and/or the results of surveys) varied regionally, however, as a 1977 survey in Sana'a found that 21 per cent of women had used contraceptives and 37 said they might in the future, whereas the Family Planning Association reported that 13 per cent were using contraceptives and in another, rural, survey, Myntti found that 9 per cent of ever-married women practised family planning (Myntti, 1985: 50). In 1985, according to World Health Organization estimates, 12 per cent of births were attended by a recognised professional attendant, and maternal mortality could not even be estimated (World Bank, 1989: 226).

One profound difficulty with first-generation access to either education or medical care, despite the fact that access was theoretically free and universal, was the acute shortage of female teachers, nurses, and doctors. Indeed, during the 1970s and 1980s most teaching and health practitioner positions were filled by Egyptian, Sudanese, or Palestinian professionals, predominantly male. Only 13 per cent of primary teachers, 5 per cent of preparatory teachers, and 4 per cent of secondary teachers in 1981-2 were Yemeni (CPO, 1983: 220). By 1986, half of all physicians, one-third of qualified nurses, one-quarter of midwives, but 98 per cent of assistant nurses were Yemeni (CPO, 1987: 230-9). The likelihood of exposure to a foreign man exacerbated cultural inhibitions against Yemeni women's secondary school attendance and, particularly, physician care, thereby restricting access to schools and clinics to a predominantly urban, educated, wealthy segment of female society.

During this process, women were becoming housewives, professionals, workers, or farmers. First the housewives. Freed of the back-breaking daily drudgery of hauling water and firewood, hundreds of thousands of women discovered leisure for the first time. During the 1970s, as their

husbands' and sons' jobs or businesses afforded more and more purchases, women gradually abandoned field chores and then, a bit more reluctantly, cows and goats. These changes afforded them a kind of pampered luxury unimagined by their mothers, and an opportunity to imitate the *sayyid* ladies of a bygone era by veiling and going into seclusion. With urbanization, as more families moved to larger cities, villages became towns, and streets became filled with strangers, everybody but the *Akhdam* and the Western-educated adopted the formerly aristocratic full black *sharshif*. Yet women exchanged symbolic prestige and freedom from hard physical labour for a considerable loss of economic autonomy. As men's earnings from the cash economy replaced an interdependent production unit, women's work became tedious housework with marginalized economic value: cooking, cleaning, laundry. Their only productive activity is now child-bearing. Since they are now dependent on their husbands' disposition as never before, those in nuclear households in new suburban neighbourhoods removed from old feminine networks, particularly, are subject to unprecedented physical and emotional abuse.

Some combination of education, personal drive, family wealth, and parental support has propelled about two thousand female members of the Yemeni bourgeoisie into careers in broadcasting, education, medicine, public service, and other fields. Not more than a handful run their own businesses. College educated in Sana'a, Aden, or abroad, they dress stylishly but modestly. Although of course there may be conflicts within marriages, their families are prepared to cope with the potential breach of 'honour' associated with open professionalism: wealthy merchants, *muzayyin* officers, educated *sayyid* and *qadi* families, and modernizing republican *shaykhs*. And they earn prestige on their own in the public sphere. Even so, career women must juggle multiple family and professional responsibilities (El Duais, 1991).

The new female urban wage earners, numbering perhaps in the tens of thousands, include civil servants, unskilled industrial workers, and maids, probably in that order. Clerks and secretaries are literate and thus privileged relative to manual workers. Urban factory and household workers, among them Vietnamese- and African-Yemenis ('half-breeds') as well as some *muzayyin*, tribal, and even *sayyid* women, divorced, widowed, or married working mothers or unmarried daughters, typically aspire to be housewives. Often working women must keep their daughters out of school to help out at home or with piece work. They are at the bottom of every pay scale, and suffer from loss of prestige, but cannot afford not to work. Their veils are not a mark of luxury but a way of retaining anonymity and dignity on public transportation and among strange men in offices, factories, and shops.

Other women though not formally employed earn a living in the informal sector, displaying their own bread, eggs, baskets, or needlework in the

market, or selling clothing and other items at women's parties. Certain weekly markets including Suq at-Talh near the Saudi border, Suq Bayt al-Faqih and others in the Tihama, and Taiz markets frequented by Jabal Sabr women are notable for their women traders, but these are the exception rather than the rule. Elsewhere food, retail, and craft operations are managed by couples or families, or, more exceptionally, by women through their children and younger brothers. Male service workers, servants, petty traders, and sharecroppers also engage their wives and daughters for tasks that can be done in relative privacy.

In the farm sector, women remain active mainly within the use-oriented system of cereal and dairy production, for virtually all market and cash cropping activities, including *qat*, are designated as men's work. Although women and girls are sometimes hired as day-labour to harvest cotton, tomatoes, or other annual crops, at a wage about two-thirds of that of unskilled men, and although there is evidence that a growing proportion of sharecropping is done by females, and some fresh kitchen products like butter, eggs, and yoghurt had excellent market value, the introduction of mechanical irrigation, tractors, chemical fertilizers, and production-for-the-market put more and more capital and responsibility in the hands of men. In other words, on functioning integrated farms feeding cattle, goats, sheep, and chickens from the fields women play a role at least as vital as before massive male migration. But increasingly commercial-scale egg, meat, and dairy production and mono-cropping farm enterprises owned by male merchants and politicians replace domestic production.

There are now very clear class differences between a small number of families with property or rents that guarantee a high level of consumption and hired help from drivers, door-keepers, and maids, and larger, increasing numbers of households whose earnings fluctuate seasonally, monthly, or even daily to the point of uncertainty about basics like food and housing. Depending on life-cycle, personal, and family circumstances, bourgeois women, with access to all services and rights, may be professionals or housewives, and those without guaranteed income and probably illiterate may be poor housewives or working women. Unlike in the old days, in urban areas the two groups do not socialize, for their lifestyles are too different.

Although there is much less field evidence, it would seem that some of the same processes had occurred in South Yemen almost a generation earlier, when services in and around Aden created a lifestyle very different from distant Wadi Hadramawt and Mahrah mountain, and the entrepôt economy created class differences sharp enough to spark a revolution. Although politically repressive in some other ways, the Aden regime purported to treat men and women equally. The PDRY not only recognized women as full citizens in the constitution, but also made an effort to equalize access to education, employment, and the professions (Molyneux, 1985). Although this theoretical goal was never achieved, female participation in

government and the professions compared favourably not only to other Arab states but to many Western systems as well. Like many socialist policies of the PDRY, however, the impact of progressive gender policies was felt mainly by the 42 per cent of the population living in Aden. As in the North, poor rural women fell behind just by staying where they were.

Politics was relevant to North Yemeni women's participation in modern services and employment in a complex way. YAR law was relatively liberal in terms of post-natal and family-leave-with-pay policies, women's suffrage, and property rights. Women's suffrage was theoretical because elections were in any case rare and female participation as either voters or candidates was low; but within the Arabian peninsula, Yemeni women had more political rights than most. Although seclusion was preferred in practice, women were not prohibited by law from participating in public life as in neighbouring countries.

Yet family and gender policies were very much at issue. Feminine modesty, education, and rights were politicized partly by the YAR's relationship with its two immediate neighbours, Saudi Arabia and the People's Republic, with drastically opposed gender policies. These positions were represented politically by the opposition Islamic and National 'fronts', respectively, since parties were outlawed. During the period between the early 1970s and the late 1980s, when Saudi influence was at its zenith and cold-war tensions flared between the YAR and the PDRY, the two neighbours offered very conflicting models for gender roles. While the YAR rejected some reactionary Saudi restrictions on the rights, appearance, and activities of women, the Kingdom's wealth gave it tremendous influence in policy areas including education. Bankrolling salaries for non-Yemeni Arab teachers, Riyadh recruited religious conservatives who supported its preference for gender segregation and women's seclusion. Religious partisans established a large base among faculty and students at Sana'a University where, in several ugly incidents, bare-headed Arab or Yemeni women were humiliated or even pelted with stones. The Islamic front also had a following of genuinely pious men and women attracted by their religious message, were capable of making temporary regional alliances with Hashid and Bakil, and could sometimes count on the support of Aden *émigrés* and anti-communist merchants.

By contrast, the progressive gender policies of South Yemen were admired by opponents of royalist influences in the YAR, by some Shafa'i communities with familial, tribal, and political ties to Aden and the Hadramawt, by whole southern uplands and Tihama districts full of sharecroppers wanting social and particularly land reform, and by some secular lawyers, journalists, professors, and students. Here the political conundrum was particularly complex, for the radical, unificationist National Democratic Front, which won popular backing in a number of southern uplands districts around Ibb and Taiz, was defeated militarily in the early 1980s,

and seemingly discredited politically by the terrible, destructive intra-party blood-bath in Aden in January 1986. During 1986 some ten thousand of the PDRY's intellectual, political, and economic élite moved to the North. In Taiz and Sana'a, the Adeni women, wearing the *abayya*, a loose cloak which, though acceptably Islamic was none the less considerably less restrictive than the Northern *sharshif*, were socially visible, shopping in urban markets, applying for jobs, visiting with their husbands' friends. While some conservatives murmured that their behaviour was disgraceful, a lot of people found an increasingly acceptable model of the modern Muslim woman.

The historical confluence of Yemeni unity and the Gulf War transformed the political landscape within which gender relations were constructed. Unity heralded new political liberty for Yemenis, northern and southern, men and women—the new constitution defined citizenship in gender-neutral terms and guaranteed freedom of the press, of assembly, of expression, of political organization and participation, from arbitrary arrest, and from 'discrimination . . . due to sex, colour, racial origin, language, occupation, social status, or religious beliefs' (Article 27, p. 9). Yet within months of this historic juncture in Yemeni history came the Gulf War, in which the new republic, trying to remain neutral, was perceived as tilting towards Iraq, and was consequently punished by Saudi Arabia with a cancellation of its substantial foreign assistance budget and expulsion of three quarters of a million Yemenis living in the Kingdom.

The gender effects of these events were far-reaching. First, the aid cut-off meant that foreign educators, health practitioners, and other professionals working in the North would no longer be paid in hard currency. They left in droves, opening up thousands of positions to be filled by Adeni teachers, nurses, and clerks, including many more women than had ever been employed in North Yemen. As part of the anti-Saudi sentiment in the immediate aftermath of the expulsions, at least a few women were thrust to the political forefront, for instance addressing crowds of tens of thousands who gathered in public squares to protest the war. Gender and family statements were also at issue in the constitutional referendum of May 1991, when a coalition of Hashid and Islamic leaders unsuccessfully called for a boycott of the constitutional referendum unless *Sharia* were made the sole basis of law.

Yet the post-war economic crisis also created widespread unemployment and inflation as the nascent republic struggled to cope with resettlement and soaring budgetary deficits even as it forged a brand new political order. With domestic politics on the verge of chaos and Saudi money now funding rightist, tribal-separatist, and religious factions at unprecedented levels, politics became increasingly polarized. Appeals to family and religious values resonate among returned migrants and other disenfranchised groups. In this context, the role of women, laden with cultural, religious, economic,

and political implications, is of tremendous ideological and symbolic importance, and has become a front-line political issue.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have tried to demonstrate that one cannot easily generalize about the role of Yemeni women, either by bemoaning oppression or by apologizing for 'chivalry'. Traditional roles varied according to family status, and women's status in the home and in society is nowadays affected by class. One irony that emerges from studying gender relations in Yemen is that the relative autonomy, participation, and self-reliance valued by Western feminists attaches to economic necessity and low prestige in the South Arabian context, where (non-professional) working women tend to envy housewives. Conversely, greater leisure for housewives is accompanied by a reduced economic role and eroding sense of feminine solidarity. Only at a high level of comfort and education do women begin to consider 'careers'. The larger point I have tried to make is that while cultural artefacts like the veil loom large in the eyes of foreigners, within a cultural setting economic and material conditions on the one hand and national and international political circumstances on the other mould gender relations in ways that have direct impact on women's lives. *Sayyid*, tribal, and partisan interpretations of 'family values' exist and are emphasized politically in time of economic or political crisis. I would argue that it is not Islamic, Arab, or tribal culture *per se* but rather their relationship to the political economy within which they operate that restricts or liberates women. In the same way that Pearson, in this volume, argues that industrialization does not have a uniform impact on women, likewise, I maintain that 'modernization' does not have a unilinear, universal, or automatic impact on gender relations. Women's roles and rights depend rather on more specific features of status, class, and the politics and economics of development.

REFERENCES

- ABU LUGHOD, LILA (1990), 'Anthropology's Orient: The Boundaries of Theory on the Arab World', in Hisham Sharabi (ed.), *Theory, Politics, and the Arab World: Critical Responses* (New York: Routledge).
- AL-NOBAN, SAEED ABDUL KHAIR (1984), 'Education for Nation-Building: The Experience of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen', in B. R. Pridham (ed.), *Contemporary Yemen: Politics and Historical Background* (London: Croom Helm).
- BUJRA, ABDALLA S. (1971), *The Politics of Stratification: A Study of Political Change in a South Arabian Town* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

- CARAPICO, SHEILA and TUTWILER, RICHARD (1981), *Yemeni Agriculture and Economic Change: Case Studies of Two Highland Regions*, Development Series Number 1 (Milwaukee: American Institute for Yemeni Studies).
- CATON, STEVEN C. (1986), 'Salam Tahiya: Greetings from the Highlands of Yemen', *American Ethnologist*, 13/2: 290-308.
- (1990), 'Anthropological Theories of Tribe and State Formation in the Middle East: Ideology and the Semiotics of Power', in P. Khoury and J. Kostiner (eds.), *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- Central Planning Organization (CPO) (1983), *Statistical Year Book 1982* (Sana'a: Prime Minister's Office).
- (1988), *Statistical Year Book 1987* (Sana'a: Prime Minister's Office).
- DORSKY, SUSAN (1986), *Women of 'Amran: A Middle Eastern Ethnographic Study* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press).
- DRESCH, PAUL (1977), 'Imams and Tribes: The Writing and Acting of History in Upper Yemen', in P. Khoury and J. Kostiner (eds.), *Tribes and State Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- EL DUAIS, NAGAT N. (1991), 'Yemeni Women in Public Life', *Yemen Times*, 10 April, p. 9.
- GERHOLM, TOMAS (1977), *Market, Mosque, and Mufraj* (Stockholm: University of Stockholm).
- KHALIDI, RAMLA and TUCKER, JUDITH (n.d.), *Women's Rights in the Arab World* (Washington, DC: Special Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) publication).
- LACKNER, HELEN (1985), *P.D.R. Yemen: Outpost of Socialist Development in Arabia* (London: Ithaca Press).
- MESSICK, BRINKLEY (1978), 'Transactions in Ibb: Society and Economy in a Yemeni Highlands Town', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ.
- MOGHADAM, VALENTINE M. (1992), *Development and Patriarchy: The Middle East and North Africa in Economic and Demographic Transition*, WIDER Working Paper No. 99 (Helsinki: UNU/WIDER).
- (1993), *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers).
- MOLYNEUX, MAXINE (1985), 'Legal Reform and Socialist Revolution in Democratic Yemen: Women and the Family', *International Journal of the Sociology of Law*, 13: 147-72.
- MUNDY, MARTHA (1979), 'Women's Inheritance of Land in Highland Yemen', *Arabian Studies*, 5: 161-87.
- MYNTTI, CYNTHIA (1979), *Women and Development in Yemen Arab Republic* (Eschborn: GTZ).
- (1985), 'Women, Work, Population, and Development in the Yemen Arab Republic', in J. Abu Nasr, N. Khoury, and H. Azzam (eds.), *Women, Employment, and Development in the Arab World* (The Hague: Mouton/ILO).
- STEFFEN, H., et al. (1978), *Yemen Arab Republic Final Report of the Airphoto Interpretations Project of the Swiss Technical Co-operation Service*, Berne (Zürich: April, for the CPO, San'a, II).
- TUTWILER, RICHARD (1987), 'Tribe, Tribute, and Trade: Social Class Formation

in Highland Yemen', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, State University of New York at Binghamton, New York.

WEIR, SHELAGH (1985), *Qat in Yemen; Consumption of Social Change* (London: British Museum Publications).

World Bank (1989), *World Development Report 1989* (Washington: Oxford University Press).

Yemen Times (1991), 'Yemeni Career Women Carry a Double Burden: at Home and at Work', Interview with Amat Al-Aleem Sousuwah, Assistant Deputy Minister of Information, 10 April, p. 12.