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Unveiling parenting in Yemen : a study on maternal parenting practices in slums in Yemen
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Yemen background
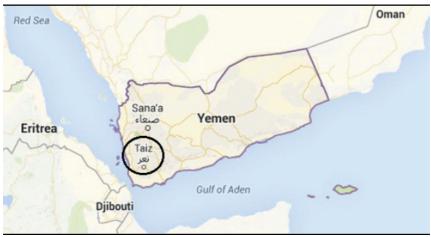
Yemen Background

Yemen is a country of crucial importance in the Middle East and yet general knowledge about it is highly limited (Al-Rasheed, & Vitalis, 2004). The Republic of Yemen is located at the southwest tip of the Arabian Peninsula. It is bordered with the Red Sea in the west, the Sultanate of Oman in the east, Saudi Arabia in the north, and the Arabian Sea in the South (Google maps, 2016). North of Yemen was ruled by the Zaidi sect, which remained until the 1962 revolution which resulted in the formation of the Republic of Yemen. South of Yemen was freed from the British colonization in 1967. The two countries united in May, 1990

Map of Yemen: Google maps

In January 2011, Yemen became part of what was called 'Arab Spring' where protesters were calling for the end of the 33-year rule by the president Ali Abdallah Saleh. In November 2011, Saleh signed an agreement brokered by the UN and the Gulf Co-operation Council where he formally transferred power to his deputy, who became Yemen's president for a transitional period of two years. The political transition failed as the new president struggled to deal with a variety of problems, including the continuing loyalty of many military officers to the former president, the controlling of some parts of the country in the north by the Houthi movement which is Yemen's Zaidi Shia Muslim minority that is believed to be backed up militarily by the regional Shia power in Iran, a separatist movement in the south, attacks by al-Qaeda as well as corruption, food insecurity and unemployment.

In January 2015, the Houthis and security forces loyal to the former president attempted to take control of the entire country, forcing the president to flee out of the country in March 2015. In response, Saudi Arabia and eight other mostly Sunni Arab states began an air campaign to restore Yemen's legitimate government. Since then, Yemen, which was already one of the Arab world's poorest countries has been shattered by a war between forces loyal to the internationally-recognized government of the president and those supporting the Houthi rebel movement.

Yemen is now facing the world's largest humanitarian crisis where 82% of its population needs humanitarian assistance and protection. Out of that percentage, 10 million need 'urgent assistance' which means they need aid to sustain their lives, at least three million people have fled their homes, and every 10 minutes a child under age 5 now dies of preventable causes (United Nations office for the coordination of humanitarian Affairs, 2017).

Economic Situation

Yemen's population is one of the fastest growing populations in the world, with a 3.5% population growth in 2006, compared to a 1.2 percent world average (United States Agency for International Development, 2008). In 2004, the population of the Republic of Yemen was 19.685.161 (National Information Center, 2013). However, according to the latest United Nations estimates, the population of Yemen had reached 26.83 million in 2015 (World Bank Group, 2019). Yemen ranks 178 out of 189 countries on the Human Development Index (United Nations Development Program, 2018) which is an index of life expectancy, education, and per capita income indicators. More than 50% of the population live in conditions of contemptible poverty, with poverty more prevalent in rural areas (United Nations Development Program, 2013). Since the start of the war in 2015, Yemen's economy had contracted by around 50% (World Bank Group, 2018), poverty rate has increased to an estimated 71 to 78% (World Bank, 2019) and in the absence of food assistance, 20 million people face food insecurity of which 8.4 million people are in the brink of famine (World Food Program, 2018; Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2019).

Informal Settlements

Informal settlements in Yemen are usually labeled as "ashwa'i" which would

also include slum areas (El Shorbagi 2007). "Ashwa'i" is a word that describes a non-residential area that is built mostly without a license and may lack the most basic needs of a decent life. "Ashwa'i" settlements often violate the construction laws and spread in the outskirts of cities conflicting with the natural trends of growth and development of those cities. According to El Shorbagi (2007), "Ashwa'i" settlements are quite heterogeneous; either in comparing key physical features among different informal areas or even inside an area.

Yemeni "Ashwa'i" informal settlements harbor 61% of the population of Yemen (World Bank, 2014). Multidimensional deprivation characterizes those "Ashwa'i" settlements. This means that poverty is not only related to inadequate income but also to low education, inadequate livelihoods, large number of children per family, bad housing conditions, and poor health. This is based on the notion that households facing multiple deprivations are expected to be in worse conditions than is suggested by income poverty measures only (World Bank, 2015). What characterizes "Ashwa'i" settlements in Yemen in general is that they have a wide nature of cumulative deprivation, characterized by neglected living conditions, poor sanitation conditions which lead to risks to health and life in general, traffic accidents, air pollution, natural disasters, and exclusion from employment opportunities, political representation and legal and social protections (World Bank, 2006). Houses are built from whatever building materials are available. This can vary mainly from cement brick, wood or even sometimes fabric . Houses can therefore be very small and usually full of too many people according to the space available (World Bank, 2006). Those houses are characterized by poor conditions such as bare walls, rooms (even toilets) without doors, and poor or even absent sanitation systems (Madhok, 2016) which we observed exactly in our study during the observational visits. Just like dwellers of slums around the world, nearly all dwellers of the "Ashwa'i" settlements in Yemen are engaged in informal employment which is linked to lack of job protections, informal workers are often the first to lose their jobs during economic crisis (Rockefeller Foundation, 2013).

Family structure and size in the "Ashwa'i" settlements is not much different than that of Yemeni families in general where family size is large and usually structured hierarchically based on age and sex. This is in fact the case in the overall Arab family structure where the young are subordinate to the old and females to males (Barakat, 2003). Family size is on average larger among the poor than the non-poor. Among the

countries in the Middle East and North Africa's regions, Yemen's total fertility rate remains the highest at 6.2 in 2005 (Roudi-Fahimi, & Kent, 2007) and at 4.45 in 2019 (World Bank, 2019).

Women

Yemeni social structure preserves a distinctive split between the public and private spheres. Women are usually in charge of the house, and therefore less active in the public sphere. Decisions made outside the home belong to men otherwise a permission of the man of the house is needed. Women tend to live under the authority of a man (e.g. a father, a brother, a husband) during their entire lives (Al-Mutawakel, 2005). According to the Global Gender Gap Index which inspects the gap between men and women in four essential categories; economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment, Yemen was ranked 133 out of 169 countries (Bekhouche, Hausmann, Tyson & Zahidi, 2013).

As part of their culture and religion, women in Yemen cover their bodies from head to toe , heads with a scarf and their faces with a veil called Hijab when they are outside their homes and specifically when men are around This includes women putting the veil on also at home if there are men present other than men from the immediate family like a father, a brother or an uncle. In a veiled culture, photographing women is a taboo and having a video camera at home to film women is a great challenge. Yemeni people are often suspicious about what one would do with the photos and they impose many rules around taking women's pictures like taking prior permission from the women's male relatives such as fathers, brothers or husbands – otherwise it could create problems between tribes (Shaher, 2011).

Marriage, childbearing and child rearing in Yemen determines life for nearly all women resembling the situation of women in general in the Middle East and Northern African regions (Roudi-Fahimi & Kent 2007). The average age for females at marriage is below 17 years old. In addition, in a culture that has the ideology of male authority (Jurdi, & Saxena, 2003), strict gender roles are socially assigned for mothers and fathers. A father traditionally embraces authority and responsibility (Barakat, 2003), and makes most of the decisions since he is the family's provider. Thus, fathers spend most of their time outside home either at work, the market (Milanovic, 2008) or socializing with their guests while consuming qat, a leaf that has mild amphetamine (Meneley,

2007). This obviously leaves the task of raising children and parenting as the mother's main role (Yadav, 2010).

Parenting

"Heaven is under mothers' feet" is a statement in the Muslim world believed to be said by the prophet Muhammed about the rewards of childrearing hard work undertaken by mothers. Even though this statement is interpreted by many Muslims, particularly the Arab Muslim population as guidance of placing the responsibility of parenting mainly on the mother's shoulder, little is known so far on how that hard work is being carried out. Studies of parenting in the Arab world are limited and are almost non-existent in Yemen.

Broadly speaking, parenting styles were classified by Baumrind as authoritarian, permissive and authoritative (Baumrind, 1991). Notably, this classification was based on research among mainly American parents, and these parenting styles have been predominantly studied in Western contexts. Authoritarian parents tend to control the child, and obedience is a major ingredient in their parenting style whereas autonomy is not (Baumrind, 1966; Reitman, Rhode, Hupp, & Altobello, 2002). Permissive parents encourage their children's autonomy and allow them to make their own decisions. However, confrontation with their children is avoided as exercising authority is not of importance to parents which in return creates poor control of their children (Baumrind, 1991; Reitman et al., 2002). On the other hand, authoritative parents tend to have good nurturing skills and apply moderate parental control to allow their child become more autonomous (Baumrind, 1966,1991; Reitman et al., 2002). In this parenting style enforcing limits, reasoning, positive reinforcements, and discussions are very important ingredients of parenting. In her recent work, Baumrind (2012) argues that while permissive parents avoid asserting power, both authoritarian and authoritative parents are similar in terms of asserting power but are different in how that power is asserted. The kind of power authoritarian parents assert is described as coercive power which is arbitrary, peremptory and relies on threats and commands, while authoritative parents use confrontational power which is open to negotiations and reasoning and allows children to have choices.

In their distinctive literature review on parenting in the Arab world, Dwairy et al. (2006) state that parenting styles differ across Arab countries, with parenting styles in

traditional countries such as Yemen and Saudi Arabia tending to be more authoritarian than parenting styles in modern countries such as Lebanon and Jordan. This is in line with the results of several studies on parenting in Yemen which showed the extensive use of aggressive punishment. One study carried out in rural and urban locations, estimated that approximately 80% of the mothers in rural areas and 59% of urban mothers reported the use of corporal punishment to discipline their children (Alyahri, & Goodman, 2008). In a similar study, results show that 89% of Yemeni caregivers reported that their children had experienced psychological aggression (Lansford & Deater-Deckard 2012). Another study by Al-Thabhani it was found that 88% of urban and rural children reported that their parents' main style of discipline when they make mistakes was punishment (Al-Thabhani, 2004). Based on the above limited literature on parenting in Yemen, research suggests that corporal punishment, including harsh corporal punishment, is common in Yemen.

Research Location

Several attempts of accessing "Ashwa'i" settlements in different Yemeni governorates were carried out, of which some did not work due to the nature of the study's set up and methods. The study measures included video-observation tasks, questionnaires, and a test-based task. Initially, the "Ashwa'i" settlements in Sanaa, the capital city of Yemen, were targeted and a local non-government organization (NGO) whose work was based there was contacted. After discussing the study aims and methods, an based there was not hopeful it would be a successful mission. Then a decision was made to conduct the study in Taiz governorate, located in the South West of the Republic of Yemen, for many reasons. First of all Taiz was politically more stable than some of the other governorates at the time of the data collection and second Taiz was known for it being Yemen's capital of culture and education in 2013 (Alhadath Alarabi, 2019), which might provide a less culturally conservative context towards filming women comparing to some of the other more conservative governorates like Sanaá, Mareb or Aljob governorates. Moreover, Taiz governorate was considered the most densely populated governorate in Yemen; 12% (2.4 million) of Yemen's population lives in this governorate (National Information Center, Yemen, 2013). Taiz had 23 districts of which three were selected for the study's data collection; Ta'iziyah, Salh and Mawiyah. As of 2004, Ta'iziyah District had a population of 198,169 inhabitants, Salh District had a population

of 149,394 people and Mawiyah District had a population of 129,765 inhabitants (National Information Center, Yemen, 2013). Being one of the fastest countries in terms of population growth where its youth who are under 15 years old constitute nearly 50% of its population (International labor office, 2014), Taiz governorate provided a distinctive context to study how Yemen's youngest generation is being raised.

Based on all the reasons, the first author contacted her local network in Taiz governorate, which included employees of national and international NGOs that worked in child development. The goal was to locate a local partner that was already working in slums in Taiz and ideally also had professional experience in conducting data collection and research. A local NGO in Taiz, aiming to achieve social justice through its projects that could create equal employment opportunities, reduce unemployment and improve living conditions for the poor, was selected. . The NGO's projects included creating opportunities for poor families in slum areas to have more income through vocational training of different skills like carpeting, painting, plastering, etc. Other projects focused on involving poor women in creating their own businesses by targeting skills they have like cooking, sewing, hairstyling or by training them on those skills to empower them and to increase their income. The NGO was well known for its professional research work in slum areas in Taiz and two other Yemeni cities. The NGO was also already a local partner for different international organizations such as United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO). The NGO was contacted and its head has accepted the challenge of filming women in the "Ashwa'i"s that her NGO worked in. The NGO head visited families to explore their reaction to the study's video observation methods and from 100% families she visited, 40% agreed to be filmed. Based on that encouraging result, training of the NGO head and her assistant was initiated. This was done by extensive contact through video and phone calls. The questionnaires and video observation tasks were discussed in depth. Afterwards, the language of the questionnaires was modified according to the Taizi dialect and then back-translated. To ensure the observation tasks were to be performed well, the first author also as an example filmed a child-mother interaction of one of the study's observational tasks (don't touch task) with a Syrian refugee family who was living in a camp in Leiden. The observation task was discussed thoroughly with the NGO staff and afterwards, the pilot study was launched. Five families were visited, interviewed and filmed. Challenges from those visits were discussed, and based on feedback from the

NGO's head the language of the questionnaires was adapted further to suit the background and educational level of the participants who mostly were illiterate. Based on the successful pilot study, data collection was launched and conducted in Taiz governorate, which provided parenting research with unique data on a topic that is less researched in that part of the world and even less in poor contexts like of the "Ashwa'i" settlements in Yemen.

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