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Living and dying with the state: The Netherlands according to Egyptians in Amsterdam

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(Un)settling divorces

In January 2018, after formally finishing fieldwork, I visited the American University in Cairo for a five week Erasmus+ staff exchange. One morning, I was enjoying a cup of tea before class when a man sat down next to me. “Welcome to Cairo,” he said, in Dutch, with a twinkle in his eyes. “Welcome to you too,” I replied, in Arabic, and we both chuckled. He took my hand, introduced himself as Ismaïl, and made an announcement: “*Ik was ook Nederlander*”, I was Dutch too, he said, searching my face for my reaction. “*Echt*”, really, I uttered, switching to Dutch too. “Oh yes”, he said, taking out his phone to show me a picture of his passport, which he apparently had ready for these kinds of occasions. “I see,” I said. “But why did you say you were Dutch”, I asked. “Well, I returned my passport to the queen and took my fuck off bonus”, he said, using the Dutch phrase *oprotpremie*, which generally refers to redundancy payments, but is sometimes used to talk about the few hundred euros a month that the Dutch government offers to dual citizens in return for revoking Dutch citizenship and leaving the country.

I knew about the Dutch remigration scheme, and I had read that some Egyptian-Dutch citizens had made use of it (van Meeteren et al., 2013: 144). However, I had never met anyone who did, or who even seemed to entertain the idea, for that matter. No, the people whom I met who acquired Dutch citizenship seemed to cherish it, if only for the privileges it held, such as access to international mobility, the Dutch social services, and the European labor market. So,

Ismail intrigued me. What had made him revoke his citizenship for what he referred to as a fuck off bonus? How had he fared since? I would not ask such intimate questions to someone I just met, and I did not have to, for Ismail was already telling his story.

In 2016, two years before our encounter in that teahouse, Ismail was about to reach his retirement age, after which he would no longer be eligible for the disability and unemployment benefits on which he had relied in the years prior. Instead, he would come to rely on the Dutch state pension (AOW) and whatever pension he had saved for himself. This would not have added up to much, Ismail declared, putting his thumb and index finger a centimeter apart to indicate how little it would have been, before quoting the numbers. The math was complicated, but Ismail still knew the numbers well. For starters, Ismail would only receive 34% of a full state pension, or 400,- euros a month. This was so because, per policy, people accrue the right to 2% of a full Dutch state pension each year they legally reside in the country during the fifty year period prior to reaching their legal retirement age. Ismail had resided in the Netherlands for nearly 30 years, but he only managed to legalize his stay after thirteen, and so he had only accrued the right to a Dutch state pension for 17 years. Ismail had been legally employed for twelve of those seventeen years, and during those years, had paid a pension premium, like most employees in the Netherlands do. This way, he had saved for an additional pension of about 200,- euros a month. However, his ex-wife was entitled to half of it, because they had been married for the entire duration of his employment, and she had not been employed during that time. All in all, Ismail had been looking at a life of scraping by on his own, so when he learned about the remigration scheme, he took the opportunity of an additional few hundred euros a month in exchange for his citizenship. He was happy he did, he said. His adult children were still benefitting from their Dutch citizenship, and he was living a comfortable life out of his late parents' apartment in Cairo.

As Ismail spoke, I had the curious sensation of listening to a future version of the divorcing and divorced men whom I had met in Amsterdam. As said, they never talked about taking what Ismail referred to as a 'fuck off bounty', but like Ismail, they had worked in physically demanding jobs until their bodies gave in, and while they had not reached their retirement age yet, they were already living a life of scraping by on their own. Had Ismail felt as abandoned by the Dutch state as they had, I wondered, and what had happened to his ex-wife? Would Hamza, Mahmoud, Bahaa, or any of the other divorced men I met end up making use of the remigration scheme too?

I had not planned to work with divorcing men and women, but a few months into my field-work, I noticed that the people who gravitated towards me were all divorcing or recently di-

vorced. Of course, this was no coincidence, but rather a reflection of how unsettling divorce was, and how desperate divorcing Egyptians were for someone to talk to outside of their immediate circles, and for someone who could help them make sense of and act upon the state institutions and actors that came to structure their life with an overpowering force. I made myself available for both, and as a result, saw unfold or otherwise gained intimate knowledge about over a dozen divorces. In this chapter, I describe these divorces in order to investigate welfare provisions as a sorting mechanism that reflects and reproduces hierarchical social citizenships, and as a set of conditions through which Egyptian-Dutch citizens made sense of their standing in the Netherlands, and under which they made their lives as Dutch citizens.

Nota bene, in this chapter I present the divorces of Egyptian Muslims in Amsterdam. I primarily worked with Egyptian Muslims and much less with Egyptian Copts anyway, but in this case, it is also because Coptic legal doctrines do not sanction divorce. Of course, this does not mean that Coptic couples did not separate, or even divorced under Dutch law, but my impression was that it happened much less, and it was definitely much less talked about, perhaps also due to the taboo on divorce.

3.1 SOCIAL CITIZENSHIPS

In his classic treatment of citizenship in the United Kingdom, Thomas Marshall (1950: 80) suggests that, following the institution of legal and political citizenship, the introduction of welfare services instituted social citizenship. This, social citizenship, may be defined as a relation between the state and citizens in which the state is responsible for upholding and promoting citizens' social rights, defined as "the whole range from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society."

T.H. Marshall's analysis of welfare services has long been complicated by Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial and critical-race scholarship (Williams, 2001). Marxist scholars have interpreted welfare as a system of social control designed to pacify the labor force and create consumer demand (e.g. Alber, 1988). Feminists have shown how welfare services have instituted the norm of the male breadwinner and the female childrearer and homemaker (Pateman, 1998; Orloff, 2009). Critical race and postcolonial scholars have pointed out that indigenous, enslaved, and illegalized people have been denied welfare services and thus social rights, while also showing how welfare works to further marginalize citizens, and racialized them as "non-white" or "with a migration background" (Gail, 1998; Bhambra and Holmwood, 2018; see Chapter

Two).

Together, these bodies of work show how welfare unequally distributes social rights, or produces and reproduces hierarchical social citizenships, to use the language of Marshall (1950). In my reading, they also reveal the actual mechanisms through which social citizenship becomes hierarchical. First, eligibility criteria group together people on the basis of (a combination of) certain characteristics, such as residency status, income, wealth, personal status, ability, and age, which become the grounds for unequal treatment, even if people are unequally treated in the name of equity. Second, welfare provisions define what a modicum of social security is for differently categorized people, and in doing so, shape the material conditions under which welfare recipients live their lives. Third, for welfare recipients and services users, the terms and conditions of provisions become the social responsibilities that complement social rights. In order to make sense of today's eligibility criteria, material provisions, and terms and conditions, I briefly sketch the historical making and remaking of Dutch welfare. I begin where I began to learn about welfare, which, in a telling fact of my privileged upbringing, was not in everyday life, but in high school.

In high school, I learned that, in the Netherlands, the Marshallian idea of social rights began to take hold in the second half of the nineteenth century, although I did not learn about it in those terms. This was right when 'natives' in the Dutch colonies were legally reduced to residents rather than citizens (see Chapter Two), but that was not something I learned about in high school. I specifically and most extensively learned about Van Houten's law (1874), which prohibited certain forms of child labor, and which continues to feature as a hallmark change in the historiography of Dutch welfare provision. I also learned about the 1901 workmen compensation and compulsory education acts, as well as various insurance schemes covering invalidity, old age, and sickness emerging at the time.

At university, I was invited to rethink Van Houten's law, as well as the various insurance schemes that came after. I learned that these initial protections were not based on the principles of social rights, as I had imagined, but rather on the principles of just wage, for only wage earning workers were eligible (van Oorschot, 2006: 58). As a result of the gendered divisions of labor, this meant that men were the main beneficiaries of social protections, while women in need continued to rely on (religious) charities (Knijn, 2008). I also learned that these provisions were accompanied by paternalistic efforts to modernize the working classes, and that efforts predominantly targeted women in their role as mothers and homemakers, thus making them responsible for the unpaid work of reproduction (De Regt, 1984). It was not until well into my PhD research that I realized that indigenous and indentured workers in the Dutch colonies

were probably excluded from these schemes, and instead targeted by the kind of paternalistic ‘civilizing’ policies that would later inform minority and integration policies (see Chapter Two).

In the 1930s, the emerging figure of the retired poor fueled existing debates about the inherent shortcomings of a wage based system of social security. In 1943, taking the opportunity of the Second World War, the Dutch government in exile in London set up a committee to lay the grounds for a new social security policy. In line with emerging norms in London at the time (see also Marshall, 1950), this committee concluded that “society, organized in the state, is liable for the social security and protection against want of all its members, on the condition, that citizens themselves do all that can be reasonably expected in order to acquire such security and protection” (van Rhijn Commission 1945, cited in van Oorschot 2006: 59).

In the decades that followed, building on this idea of social security and protection for all against want, subsequent Dutch governments developed an expansive web of tax-based welfare provisions in what Wim van Oorschot (2006: 60) calls a process of “collectivization and solidarization”. The so-called guest-workers were also eligible for these provisions, but the descendants of enslaved and indentured workers living in Dutch Surinam and the Dutch Caribbean, who were residents and not citizens of the Netherlands, were not. Moreover, while the introduction of care oriented welfare provisions created work opportunities for women in particular, this wave of nation-based social and economic welfare rights also instituted the heterosexual family, most notably the norm of the male breadwinner and female childrearer and homemaker (Knijn, 2008).

In the 1970s and 1980s, rising needs due to staggering unemployment, second wave feminism, and the idea that former guest-workers were staying in the Netherlands to benefit from welfare services converged to mainstream the idea that further expanding the welfare state was economically unsustainable and that welfare provisions created undesirable dependencies and were insensitive to people’s personal needs (van Oorschot, 2006: 60). In response to these debates, subsequent Dutch governments vowed to increase the gap between wages and benefits. This was meant to encourage people to work instead of relying on benefits, while making welfare provisions more efficient by introducing specific services for specific target groups. These latter included, among others, the labor market integration programs for unemployed and disabled people, women empowerment programs, and the so-called minorities policies discussed in Chapter Two.

In the 1990s, these ideas further dovetailed with a new belief in market solutions, spurring the privatization of welfare and especially healthcare services, giving rise to a wealth of corporate service providers competing for both funding and citizen-clients, and to intricate corporate-

government partnerships. In the meantime, in line with the more general move towards governing through community throughout Europe (Rose, 1996), governments began to promote what would become known as the *participatiesamenleving*, a big society in which people take care of each other before looking to the government for help. As part of this endeavor, governments began to transfer responsibility for welfare from the national to the municipal level through subsequent versions of the so-called *Wet Maatschappelijke Ondersteuning* (Social Support Act). Concretely, in 2007, responsibility for domestic care was transferred to municipalities, and in 2015, this was followed by the transfer of child and youth care, and care for people with a disability and long-term psychological problems. This was framed as a way to allow healthcare and welfare providers to develop locally specific programs and offer tailor made solutions, which was supposed to improve services, and make them more cost-efficient (Duyvendak and Tonkens, 2018).

The wide variety of policies, organizations, programs, and actors hinted at above tends to be lumped together under label “welfare state” (*verzorgingsstaat* in Dutch), both by sociologists and political scientists, and by politicians and social commentators more generally (e.g. Esping Andersen, 1990). Reflecting a more general reluctance to evoke the state, as well as an initial lack of interest in the global north, anthropologists have not engaged much in these discussions, either in the Netherlands or beyond. Instead, they have empirically studied how specific welfare programs and services are developed, put into practice by street-level bureaucrats, and subsequently experienced by recipients. In doing so, they have charted the process by which grand ideas get refracted into locally specific practices (e.g. Koch, 2018) as well as locally specific interpersonal entanglements and generally unruly effects that they bring about (e.g. Vollebergh, de Koning, Marchesi, 2021). Zooming out to bring the variety of practices into view, anthropologist Tess Lea (2020) conceptualizes welfare as an ecosystem of interrelated infrastructures and actors, that taken together, are beyond anyone’s direct control. In this chapter, I take inspiration from Tess Lea’s work to conceptualize welfare as the conditions within which marginalized citizens make their own histories. To do this, I briefly summarize the welfare ecosystem that the history sketched above has brought about.

The Dutch government remains committed to a modicum of welfare and social security for all citizens. To this end, the Dutch unemployment bureau (UWV) provides generic and more specific unemployment benefits, while the Tax Office provides more specific healthcare and rent benefits to people below a certain income. Meanwhile, as a result of the privatization of service provisions, the number of service providers has mushroomed, creating a web of organizations providing specialized services to very specific categories of people. Together, this creates

an image of excess, a wealth of provisions. However, in specific domains, such as benefits, social housing, and psychosocial care, efforts to curtail expenses and prevent undesirable dependencies have generally made provisions less accessible, less generous, and more difficult to use. First, welfare provisions have become less accessible due to more restrictive eligibility criteria and more elaborate application processes, most notably for unemployment and disability benefits (Hemmings and Prinz; 2020), and due to waiting lists, which have become notably long for social housing (Jonkman and Janssen-Jansen, 2018). Second, welfare provisions have become less generous, or, in other words the modicum of social security has been scaled down: benefits have not increased at the same rate as the cost of living has (Custers, 2023), while support services like legal aid have been reduced (e.g. Schnabl, 2022). Third, the terms and conditions of use have been made stricter, so that the balance between social rights and social responsibilities has shifted towards the side of social responsibilities (e.g. Simonse et al. [2022] on welfare benefits).

In sum, changing modes of welfare provision have widened the gap between what seems to be on offer and what is on offer, and between citizens and residents who turn to welfare in an attempt to improve the conditions of their lives, and those who already find themselves in more opportune conditions than those offered by welfare services. The process of separation and divorce brought this gap into full view, and thus became one of those processes through which my interlocutors learned about their standing as citizens in the Netherlands.

3.2 HOW (NOT) TO SEPARATE, THAT'S THE QUESTION

The separations and divorces that I came to know about were all initiated by women. In the upcoming sections, I explain why this was the case. I will switch between writing from the vantage point of divorcing women to writing from the vantage point of divorcing men, not to justify any of the things that the people with whom I worked did, but rather to explain where they were coming from. In this section, I will explain why it was so hard for couples to actually separate, even if they both wanted to, and briefly sketch what separation involved for both men and women, before zooming in on the more personal experiences, and the details of negotiating welfare provisions in the Netherlands. *Nota bene*, this explanation is technical, and probably confusing for those unfamiliar with the Dutch system. However, I deliberately chose to maintain some of the intricacies in order to show how 'unruly' the system indeed is (Lea, 2020).

The divorces that I saw unfold were generally long in the making, but even if they were not, actually separating was hard, both for men, and for women. I suppose this is the case for most

separating couples, but for couples relying on benefits and living in social housing, this was made extra difficult because at least one of them would have to find alternative sources of income and housing, which was not impossible, but came with tremendous (social) costs.

In the Netherlands, welfare benefits are person-based, but eligibility and amounts are based on the incomes of other adults in the household. This means that, in practice, live-in adult children and partners of people with a high enough income are not eligible for benefits, and multiple-adult households relying on benefits receive less per person than single-adult households relying on benefits.

The divorces that I saw unfold were generally between a husband and wife who at the time of their divorce relied on a combination of disability and unemployment benefits. This meant that they had to formally dissolve their household before being able to afford rent for a second apartment, because only after dissolving their household would they both be eligible for benefits. To formally dissolve their household, one of the parties would have to formally register at another address. The most straightforward way to do so would have been to rent another place, and register there. Per their low income, they were eligible for social housing, which they probably could have afforded for a month or two until the dissolution of their household was official. However, as long as their children had a place to stay, they were not eligible for priority on the social housing waiting lists, and so, social housing was out of the question. Renting on the private market was financially unfeasible, if only because landlords are allowed to implement a monthly income threshold of several times the rent, which effectively prevented the people with whom I worked from renting a place. One of the ways to circumvent this would have been to register at a friend's place. However, in practice, this was not an option, because if they would do so, they would formally become part of their friend's household, which would have an impact on their own and/or their friend's benefits.

As a result, for many of the men and women with whom I worked, the only way to formally dissolve their household was for one of the two parties to register at a homeless shelter. The person who would do so would have their benefits cut to a homelessness allowance of a few hundred euros a month, because they would no longer have to pay rent, as the reasoning goes, which of course meant that they could no longer pay rent either. The men and women with whom I worked knew all of this, so no one volunteered to do this.

In my experience, this stalemate only got resolved after women threatened to or actually involved the police. In the introduction, I already told the story of how Fatma forced her husband Mahmoud to leave the house by threatening to tell the police that he was planning to take her and her children to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. I also met women who threatened to tell

or actually went and told the police that their husband was abusive, which in some cases was true, but in others was not. However, regardless of the truth, in the heat of the moment, the police would have to take such threats seriously. Mahmoud and men like him knew this, and so they usually opted to leave the house before the police would force them, if only to stay on the police's good side for the process to come.

Technically, men could also involve the police on the basis of similar accusations, and I did hear rumors about a man who had managed to make his wife leave their home by telling the police that his wife was hitting the children, but I never met this man (as far as I know), so I cannot substantiate those rumors. The men whom I did talk to about this felt like involving the police was pointless. They assumed that the police would take their accusations less seriously, because they were made by a man and against a woman. And more importantly, they knew that in the ensuing process, their ex-wives to be would be appointed as the so-called resident parent, and in that capacity, would be granted the right to stay in their marital home, if only for the sake of the stability of the children, as I will explain in more detail.

If involving the police was effective, it was also risky, especially for women who were actually in an abusive relationship. As I will describe later, after threatening the police, Fatma lost not only her husband, but also the father of her children, as Mahmoud was literally struggling to survive, and in the meantime, struggled to be involved in his children's lives in the way that he wanted. If she had actually called the police, Fatma and her two children could have been taken to a safe house, in which case they would have been subjected to the safe house's rules and regulations. And in case her accusations had been substantiated, Fatma and her children would have been resettled, meaning she and her children would have had to start anew, in another unknown place. These were not risks that all women were willing to take, especially if they suspected that their children would end up holding it against them, and so women in abusive relationships were much less likely to involve the police than women like Fatma.

In the Netherlands, post separation co-parenting is the norm, but the children have to register at their primary residency (*hoofdverblijf*), so that one of the parents will become what in the United Kingdom system is called a resident parent. The divorcing mothers and fathers with whom I worked could not agree with their ex-partner on who would become the resident parent. They both claimed that they wanted to be with their children, and that their children needed them, but they also knew that as resident parents they would get to stay in their marital home, whereas their ex-partner to be would have to find alternative housing. Unable to agree, they would bring the case to court. In the cases that I followed, the judge granted primary residency, and thus the right to stay in the marital home, to the parent whom parenting professionals had

recognized as the parent who had been the primary caretaker up until that point. This was common practice, at least according to lawyers of the divorcing men and women with whom I worked, who told me that judges only divert from this if the primary caretaker is found to be unfit to parent, or if the second parent is deemed to be a threat to the children or their resident parent, in which case the children would be relocated to a new home at a location unknown to the second parent.

3.3 AN 'EGYPTIAN' DIVORCE CRISIS?

After noticing that the people who were gravitating to me were all divorcing or divorced, and when I saw how unsettling these divorces were, I began to bring the topic up in my conversations with people who positioned themselves as community leaders. One morning, I asked Faiza about it over a cup of coffee. "Oh, yes, it's more than 80 percent," she said matter-of-factly. For a moment, I had the impression she thought lightly of it. But then she told me that she herself had been through three divorces herself, and that it had been incredibly hard on her. Curiously, others also mentioned divorce rates of 80 percent, including Gamal and Bahaa, although no one was able to point me to a reliable source. I inquired at the Dutch Central Bureau for Statistics (CBS) which informed me that their indicators suggest Egyptians in the Netherlands are indeed more likely to divorce than average, but for various methodological reasons could not provide a specific rate.

I don't believe that 80 percent of the marriages end in divorce, but the fact that several people mentioned this number told me that divorce was considered commonplace. Divorce was a recurring topic of conversation at the different associations where I conducted fieldwork. At Etihad, I learned about men's perspectives, and at the other associations, I learned about women's perspectives, although they were not so different as I would have thought.

The men I worked with felt that they had not married in the right way. Indeed, as they explained to me, because of the socio-economic situation in Egypt and because of illegalization in the Netherlands, by the time they were ready to get married, "all the good girls were gone." Moreover, when they went to Egypt after all those years, they tried to present the image of the successful immigrant, for example by wearing a suit and tie and carrying a big bag of gifts, or by engaging in consumer practices that indicate an upper-middle class lifestyle in Egypt (A. de Koning 2009), like shopping at Carrefour or in one of the malls emerging in Cairo's suburbs, treating people to lavish dinners, and vacationing in Sharm el Sheikh or Hurghada. In doing so, they performed the idea of Europe as a place where hard and smart work pays off (Chapter

One; Schielke, 2020), which according to the men I worked with, attracted the ‘wrong’ girls, i.e. the girls who are interested in glamorous lives but do not make good wives.

The divorcing and divorced women I talked to confirmed that even though they had known about the hardships of immigrant life, experiencing it firsthand had still been hard. However, they emphasized that it was made harder by their husbands, whom they said had turned out to be quite different in the Netherlands from the men that had wooed them in Egypt. “Men are scared,” one of the women I worked with said, “they want to keep us away from society, because they know that once we know the way things works, there is nothing that keeps us with them.”

The men I worked with admitted that they were scared, and did not always know how to be a good husband or father in the Netherlands (see also Chapter Four). At the same time, they also felt that women jumped to divorce too quickly, and too recklessly, and some of the women I worked with actually agreed. “They think it will be easy,” one woman told me. “They kick their husbands out, claim the kids and the house, and they think it will improve their lives. But it is not easy. It is hard work. And you will be all on your own. Sooner or later, you feel you need to get married again. I know, because that is what happened to me.” Later in this chapter, I tell the story of Farida, which will counter this narrative. The men and women not only blamed each other or the circumstances of their lives in the Netherlands, but also Dutch child and family services, which made it seem like separation and divorce would be easy, which men described as ‘feminist’, and which women ended up experiencing as controlling but not very helpful.

Sociologists and anthropologists working on divorce have long noted that divorcees tend to tell the same story over and over again, using the same phrases, figures of speech, and metaphors (e.g. Hopper, 1993; Simpson, 1998; Qureshi, 2017). In her analysis of the stories that she heard from Pakistani divorcees in the United Kingdom, Kaveri Qureshi (2017) proposes to read these stories as part and parcel of the process through which people disentangle themselves from their ex-partners and previous lives, and through which they establish new relations, to themselves, others, and the world they live in.

I also understood my interlocutors’ stories this way. As they talked about their own and other people’s divorces, my interlocutors reflected on the struggle of moving to and settling in the Netherlands and of raising a family on unfamiliar grounds and with limited means. In the process, they established themselves as a people who had learned the hard way how to be a better wife or husband, mother or father, citizen, and ultimately a better person. In the same vein, they established the Netherlands as a place where hard and smart work might pay off, but which, in addition to being morally corrupt, also favored women over men, to the detriment of both (see Chapter One). And they elaborated a history of Egyptian migration and immigration that is

rooted in lived experience rather than the terms of reference of integration policies (see Chapter Two).

This lived experience narrative of the Netherlands as feminist and service providers as controlling resonates with the ways in which marginalized and racialized people across Europe make sense of their experiences with state actors. Melanie Griffiths (2015) found that the experiences of applying for asylum in the UK taught applicants that in the UK “man is nothing”, Ester Gallo (2006) found that Malayali men in Rome narrated Italy as a place that is not good for men, and Insa Koch (2015) found that women in a council estate in London felt that the state had replaced the man. They also resonate with the discourse of men’s rights activism, or the idea that men are in crisis because women get favorable treatment, not only in family law, but also in the education system and labor market (Jordan, 2016).

My interlocutors’ narratives also resonated with the stigmatizing anti-immigration discourses that depict Arab and Muslim men like Mahmoud as oppressive (Pratt-Ewing 2008; Scheibelhofer, 2012), migrant women like Farida and even Fatma as needing saving (L. Abu-Lughod, 2002; 2013), and the Netherlands and Europe more generally as egalitarian or feminist (Dietze, 2010). In other words, while they may provide divorcing men with something to hold on to, they also contribute to an environment in which Fatma’s threat to call the police was so effective, in which Mahmoud was kept away from his children on account of an accusation that even the police later said was not credible, and in which being a father of a Dutch child is not enough to get a residency permit (see the story of Ali in Chapter One).

In the next section, I move beyond narrative by zooming in on the various episodes of the separation and divorce process. I begin by describing my conversations with Farida, whose husband was incredibly violent, and who was looking for a way out, but who felt like the way out offered by Dutch welfare was not a way forward. I tell her story to explain why some women like Farida chose not to separate, and to counter the pervasive idea of Arab women as docile victims.

3.4 BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE?

Farida first called me in February 2017. Speaking hurriedly, she described at length how stressful it was to live in a 60m² apartment with four children. After about half an hour, I finally asked her why she was calling me. Without skipping a beat, she asked me to call her social housing cooperation to inquire about the possibilities of moving to a larger house. I don’t have the language, she said, apologetically. I called but as I already knew, her housing cooperation did

not consider her family size a legitimate reason to move her up the waiting list. I sent her a text to let her know, and forgot about it.

I was re-introduced to Farida by Karima, one of the directors I was working closely with at the time, and who liked to give me tasks. Afterwards, when it was just the two of us, Karima told me to inform the Dutch embassy that Farida and her children were travelling to Egypt so they would support her if her husband tried to keep her there against her will. Karima was often forthright like that, and it always overwhelmed me. Unsure how to proceed, I clumsily told her I would give Farida a call.

Farida had been waiting for my call, she said, and before I could tell her about my conversation with Karima, she was already talking about her eighteen year old daughter who was applying for an internship in Spain so that she could leave the house, her sixteen year old son who would not leave his room, and her ten and twelve year olds who were already beginning to resemble their older siblings. It's my husband, she said, again and again. I did not say much, but when she said that something had to change, I asked her what she had in mind. She sighed, and said that she wanted to leave him, but needed to be sure that her children would choose to stay with her and that she could provide for them if they did. This meant that she had to travel to Egypt to gather her family's support and secure her assets, including her jewelry and an apartment that she formally owned but which she feared he could claim in case her divorce would not be recognized by Egyptian law. However, she feared that once in Egypt, her husband would take her and her children's passports, thus preventing them from returning to the Netherlands. This was why she wanted me to get in touch with the Dutch embassy.

I was not sure what to do. I worried that a message to the embassy like that would make it into some database from which it could emerge again to haunt Farida or her husband, whom I hadn't even met, let alone asked about his views on things. Still, I wanted to reassure Farida, so in the end, I sent an email describing the situation in general terms without identifying Farida. That same day, I received a short and crisp e-mail explaining that as soon as she set foot in Egypt, the Egyptian authorities would consider her an Egyptian citizen, meaning that the Dutch embassy could not put any claim on her. I was not sure whether this was true, legally speaking, but from the e-mail, it was very clear that Farida would have to do without the embassy's support, and I let her know as such.

A few days later, Farida called again. As I picked up, she was yelling in Arabic. "Stay away, stay away, stay away." Then, I heard a door slam. After, Farida started sobbing. After a minute or so, she began to explain what had happened. Apparently, her husband had been coming for her from the kitchen with a knife, but to her luck (her words), her son had unexpectedly entered

the room, after which her husband had left, slamming the door on his way out. I was utterly shocked and offered to help her and her children get out of the situation as quickly as possible. Crying again, she explained that she was not ready yet. Soon, soon, she said, before ending our call.

The next day, Karima called. She too had spoken to Farida, and was frantic. “This is it, we need to call for help,” she said. I agreed, but at the same time, Farida had made it very clear that she did not want to be separated from her husband or children yet, and given the circumstances, I did not know any organization that would respect that wish. Well, we cannot sit and watch him kill her, Karima said, again and again, as I was voicing my concerns. I agreed, and suggested to ask Farida for permission to call Veilig Thuis (Safe at Home), the main organization offering advice and support to victims of domestic abuse. “Just call them,” Karima said, but I did not. Instead, I called Farida, who swiftly rejected the idea. With Karima in the back of my mind, I asked Farida permission to call Safe at Home anonymously, to which she reluctantly agreed and which I then did.

After being on hold for about half an hour, a woman picked up the phone. She heard me out empathetically but when I was done, she said she was very sorry to tell me that Safe at Home could only act on the basis of a formal report, and that although they were reluctant to separate people from each other, they also had a duty to protect the people involved, so in case of violence, they sometimes had no choice. I asked her how a separation like that would work, to which she said that they would either work to remove the perpetrator from the home or, in case of more serious danger, provide shelter to the victim(s). I said I knew enough, and thanked her for her time. I called Farida, who was not surprised, and then Karima, who was frustrated. “These women are so scared to leave”, she said. I too felt frustrated, and scared, for I felt utterly incompetent for the situation I was in.

Another few days later, I was woken up by a phone call in the middle of the night. I looked at my screen, saw it was Farida, and picked up, but found myself speaking to a police officer. He first assured me Farida was fine, but then explained that they had come to the house after multiple calls from neighbors. At the house, they had found a man going at a bathroom door with a knife. After removing the man, they had found this woman in the bathroom, who had told them to call me in order to translate. As he spoke, I could hear Farida crying and talking, but I could not make out what she was saying. As the policeman finally put me on speaker, I said hi to Farida. She continued to cry and talk, but I was able to discern that she wanted the police to leave so that she and her husband could resolve things. I did not think the police would grant her wishes, but I told them nonetheless. The policeman said he understood, and ended

our call. I stayed up for another hour, hoping to hear from Farida, but she did not call back.

The next morning, Farida did check in with me. Apparently, the police had taken her husband to the office. For the first time since I had met her, she did not have much else to say. I asked her if there was anything I could do for her, but she just sighed, so I wished her luck, and asked her to check in with me afterwards. A few hours later, Karima informed me that Farida and her husband were reunited, but that he had found out about me and had forbidden her to speak to me. I was worried but also relieved that I was no longer responsible for a situation I did not know how to handle. Then, another few hours later, Karima told me to look out for Farida at the market near the neighborhood center where she organized her meetings the next morning.

The next morning, it was raining heavily. I found Farida waiting for me at the entrance of the market. She was wearing a lot of make-up, but not enough to cover her bruises. I had never seen her like that, and not knowing how to conduct myself, I stupidly asked her how she was. She did not answer, but told me that she and her husband had agreed that she would travel to Egypt. That way, they could spend some time apart before he and the children would join for the summer holidays. She said she worried about the children, but was relieved to get out of her situation in the Netherlands. She then took out a folder with photocopies of their passports. In case you need them, she said. I took the folder, wished her safe travels, and took off.

For months, I did not hear from her. I wanted to call her but I was afraid that if I did, I would bring her trouble. Then, one morning, I ran into her at another market. She was with a man who I assumed was her husband, but she nonetheless approached me, on her own. After exchanging some pleasantries, she told me they had made up in Egypt and were committed to making things work again. I did not know what to make of that, so I just told her that I hoped that things would work out. She thanked me for everything, and that was the last time I saw or heard from her. I don't know where she is today.

In the months and years that followed, I kept on wondering if I should have done something different, and whether there was something that I could still do. Later, while writing up, I wondered how to write about her and her husband. Farida was only one of several women whom I knew who were abused like that by their husbands, and I felt like not telling their story would be akin to making it seem as if it did not happen. At the same time, having read Lila Abu-Lughod's *Do Muslim Women Need Saving* (2013), I worried that Farida's story would be interpreted as having to do with Arab culture and/or Islamic theology, rather than family history, patriarchy, or racial capitalism. Then, after reading Kaveri Qureshi's (2016) heartbreaking ethnography of divorce among British Asians, I decided to do as she did, namely to tell a story of domestic

abuse, and subsequently analyze it in light of how it resonates with popular discourses about Arab and Muslim men and women, as I am doing here, before contrasting it to the experiences of divorcing men.

Farida's husband was abusive, and Farida was his victim. However, she was not docile. In fact, she knew very well what she wanted, but in her attempt to try and get it, she found out that the help she sought was not available. I never had the chance to ask Farida why she did not want the help that actually was offered. Our conversations were of another kind, and frankly, in the circumstances that we were in, asking questions for the purpose of research was not high on my priority list. Still, from what she said, and from what she did to create the right circumstances to leave her husband, I infer that she did not feel like the help that was on offer would significantly improve the conditions of her life, while she feared that they could make things significantly worse. If so, then her actual experiences with reaching out to the available services must have confirmed her views: her housing cooperation let her know that they would not have access to suitable housing, the Dutch embassy let her know that they would not support her, while Safe at Home and the police let her know that they would separate her from her husband even if she did not want that (yet). In other words, Farida felt like her needs were not met, and that the consequences that came with relying on existing social services were not worth it.

Later in this chapter, I will share the stories of Bassant and Amira, two women who did divorce their husbands, and whose experiences further get at the reasons why women like Farida might prefer the life they are living over the life they might live after divorce. Before doing so, I move on the experiences of men, who post-separation, felt pushed to the edge of existence. I do so by picking up the story of Mahmoud, who felt like his social rights were violated, and asked me to help him reclaim those rights.

3.5 THE EDGE OF EXISTENCE

I first met Mahmoud when I began hanging out at Etihad in January 2017. As described in the introduction, at the time, I could sense that some people had doubts about my presence, but that was not because of Mahmoud, who was actually one of the few men who always took the time to welcome me. In March, Mahmoud suddenly stopped coming. After a few weeks, Gamal felt it necessary to assure us all that Mahmoud was still committed to Etihad, but had to focus on his family for a while. Afterwards, I told Gamal to send my regards, and to tell Mahmoud to call me whenever he felt like it. I did not hear from him for a few weeks, but in May, he called me. On the phone, he told me what I already knew, namely that he had moved

in with his friend Bahaa after Fatma had threatened to call the police. From there, things had gone from bad to worse, he said, and now he wanted my help. I was available, so I suggested to meet him for a cup of coffee the next day.

As I entered the café of his choice the next morning, it took me a second to recognize Mahmoud. He had lost weight and his hair had turned grey, but what struck me most was his face, which was no longer soft and kindhearted, but harsh. As I sat down, he almost immediately began to share his side of the story. Apparently, after he had left the house, his wife had gone and told the police that he was planning to take her and their children to the Islamic State. The police had consulted the people at the Child Care and Protection Council (*Raad voor de Kinderbescherming*), who had started an investigation. Mahmoud had fully cooperated, he assured me, but pending the results, Mahmoud could only see his children in the presence of his family's so-called Parent and Child Advisor, who had been assigned to them months earlier, and who had become a trusted professional.

After six weeks, the people at the Child Care and Protection Council had reported that there were no indications that Mahmoud was planning to take his children to the Islamic State, or that he was planning to go there himself for that matter. However, they had also found that both Fatma and Mahmoud were involving their two sons in their fights, putting the boys at risk of developing attachment disorders. According to Mahmoud, this was not true. He had respected Fatma's wishes and followed all the orders of the police and other organizations, and the only reason he had done so was to spare his children, so if they were at any risk, then Fatma was to blame, he said. I never spoke to her, but I am sure she disagreed.

On the basis of the report, the people at the council, together with the people of Safe at Home and the Parent and Child Advisor, had told Mahmoud and his (ex-)wife to ask someone who they both trusted to help them communicate, and to find a neutral ground where Mahmoud could meet his children once a week. Mahmoud had proposed to communicate via Gamal, but Fatma had refused, and in the end, Mahmoud had reluctantly agreed to communicate via Fatma's sister, and to meet his children at her house, because he did not want to prolong the period in which he did not see his children.

In theory, Mahmoud would thus see his sons once a week, but in practice, he rarely saw them. Sometimes, Fatma's sister, Fatma herself, or one of the boys cancelled under the pretext of other obligations. At other times, Mahmoud cancelled himself, because as a de-facto homeless man he had to prioritize surviving, or because he was in such a bad state that he did not want his children to see him. "Look at me," he said, as he told me this, clearly aware of his changed appearance. But even when he did see them, he felt a distance. Normally, he would help them

with their homework, take them to football practice, or to McDonald's. Now, he was supposed to sit with them in the living room of their aunt/his sister in law. What was he supposed to tell them, he asked, without expecting an answer. Not knowing what to do or say, he sometimes left early, he admitted. Instead, he went by their school, to just chat, or if he had the money, to bring a shawarma sandwich he knew they liked. This was not according to the agreement, but he could not help himself, he said.

One time, Fatma happened to be there. When she saw him she had started to curse him, and then she called the police. He challenged her, he said, because if she had a meeting at school, he had a right to know about it, and why else would she be there, he asked. That had been three weeks earlier, and after that, she had completely cut him out. Mahmoud had called all the professionals he had phone numbers of, but to no avail. He had also called Gamal almost every day, but having gotten tired of him, he had told him to call me, so he did. "I just don't know what to do", he said, again and again. "Please help me."

The first thing Mahmoud asked me to do was to help him apply for a so-called social housing 'urgency statement' (*urgentieverklaring*), which are issued by the municipality, and reduce waiting times for social housing from several years to several months. I was skeptical, but I nevertheless made a call to get him an appointment for a so-called 'urgency statement advice interview' [*urgentieverklaring adviesgesprek*]. These interviews were set up as a preliminary check on eligibility. The advice was not binding, but negative advice was meant to prevent pointless applications, and Mahmoud and others saw positive advice as a necessary but insufficient condition for actually being granted an urgency statement. I describe the advice interview in much more detail in Chapter Five in which I analyze how my interlocutors sought to motivate state-actors to treat them well or at least better. Here, it suffices to summarize the meeting.

After Mahmoud made his case, the advice officer swiftly announced that so-called non-resident parents do not have a right to urgency on the basis of parenthood, as their children already had a place to stay, namely with their so-called resident parent. She then asked him about his medical history, prompting Mahmoud to describe how his back and shoulder injuries required him to get adequate rest, which he would not get as long as he was homeless. The advice officer did not seem convinced, but after informally advising him not to apply, she promised Mahmoud to formally advise him to apply. On our way home, Mahmoud said he understood he did not stand a chance, but he would try anyway. What else can I do, he asked, rhetorically. But don't fathers have rights, he suddenly exclaimed, as he began to speed up his car.

After the advice interview, Mahmoud began to involve me in his effort to set up his own halal meat import business. Much later, I learned that Mahmoud was formally enrolled in an

obligatory reintegration trajectory organized by the Dutch unemployment bureau. Apparently, his so-called reintegration coach had thought highly of his plans, or at least the fact that he was making an effort at all. However, at the time, he did not speak about this. Instead, he spoke of his efforts to set up a business as geared towards leaving something behind for his two sons, so that even if they did not seem to think highly of him now, later in life, they would come to appreciate that everything he had ever done, he had done for them. He made me work hard. Each day, there were calls to be made, places to be looked at, and paperwork to be done. In the end, he accumulated more debt than when he began.

In the meantime, he was trying to become the resident parent or the parent with whom the children primarily reside. As explained above, as a result of the interaction of division of reproductive labor within (Egyptian) families in the Netherlands and the laws and policies that govern separation and divorce, it is common for mothers to become the resident parent, even if co-parenting is the norm, at least on paper. After Mahmoud was compelled to leave the house, Fatma also had become the resident parent, because until then, she had been the children's main caretaker. This had also allowed her to stay in the house, and to stay involved in her sons' lives in a way that Mahmoud could only dream of. After hearing those same rumors that I was hearing about an Egyptian father who had become the resident parent, he started to believe that even though it was a long shot, it was worth the effort, because apparently it was possible.

The first thing we did was to talk to his divorce lawyer. She swiftly announced that he would not have a chance, but after he pressed her, she explained that since his sons were both at least twelve years old, he had two options. The first option was to make the case that Fatma was a threat to his sons' development. The second option was to convince his sons to declare to the judge that they wanted to live with him. Neither were likely to succeed, she emphasized, but after he pressed her again, she said that if she would have to advise him, she would advise option two, as the first option could cause much more harm. However, afterwards, Mahmoud candidly explained that option two was not a possibility, as he barely saw his children. How can I convince them, he said, and so he began the project of casting Fatma as a threat to his children. I told Mahmoud I would not help him to do so, but he did keep me up to date on the various meetings he had with professionals, which seemed to have little effect. During the court case that eventually did take place, the judge annulled their marriage and ruled that Fatma would remain the resident parent.

In those weeks and months, I saw Mahmoud's pain deepen. Sometimes, he showed his pain to me, most notably the time when his mother called from Egypt to ask about her grandsons, not knowing that her own son was not in touch with them. After ending the call, Mahmoud tried

to tell me he had not yet told his mother because he was overtaken by emotions. At other times, he did not speak to me or anyone for days, until he was ready to face the world again. At yet other times, he was frustrated, especially after the many fruitless meetings with the professionals whom he felt were deciding his fate without even listening to him. One time, after yet another one of these meetings, Mahmoud started to talk about that day many years ago when he became a Dutch citizen. He remembered it well, he said. After years of having been illegalized, and another few years of having been a 'dependent spouse' it had felt like a new start, he said. "After that, I never did anything wrong. I worked, paid my taxes, and respected the Dutch law. And now look at me. They are just leaving me on the street. They are taking my children away. How can they do that?"

It was in these moments that I began to think of separation and its aftermath as a "traumatic" experience for men like Mahmoud, in the sense that Rebecca Lester (2013: 753) writes about it, namely, as those experiences that "distorted, stretched, and tore" the bonds that tethered these men to life. Indeed, losing access to the spaces they once inhabited, losing their partners, losing touch with their children, while struggling to survive not only hurt, but also ate away their identity, and made them question the nature of the Netherlands. How can they do that, Mahmoud and other men with whom I worked used to ask, making it clear that they felt like their rights were being violated, while also suggesting that what was happening did not fit with what they thought the Netherlands was or should be.

As the Netherlands no longer made sense and no longer seemed right, Mahmoud, and the other divorcing men with whom I worked with, presented themselves as good husbands and fathers telling everyone about all they had done to provide for their wives and children, and by narrating everything they did in terms of getting back in touch with their children again. Telling these stories appeared to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it allowed these men to maintain a sense of self in a moment in which they did not feel valued by anyone else. However, on the other hand, it made them feel incredibly wronged, and, perhaps even more unsettling, made them feel like they may have been wrong about the Netherlands. Perhaps, it had not been a better launching pad for their future, as they once hoped it was going to be, and perhaps not even their children were benefiting from it (see also Chapter Four). These were scary thoughts to have, especially as there was no way back, and so, after disengaging for a few days, men like Mahmoud would re-emerge, to ask me to pick up the struggle of getting their lives back on track.

After months like this, Mahmoud suddenly announced that he was getting married to a widowed Egyptian mother of one, with whom he could move in. In general, getting their lives

back on track was a struggle without a clear path, or even goal, but for many of the men with whom I worked, it involved getting married again at one point or another, both as a goal, and as a means towards other goals, such as finding a place to stay, or becoming a father again. In the next section, I describe how getting remarried was eventually also an attractive option for many of the women with whom I worked.

3.6 GETTING TIED UP IN A WEB OF WELFARE

If the divorcing men with whom I worked felt left behind by the Dutch state, the divorcing women felt like they were slowly getting tied up in a web of welfare services that spun around them and especially around their children. In Chapter Four and Five, I will describe in much more detail how mothers dealt with the state actors involved in their children's lives. Here, I tell the story of Bassant to describe how the experience of getting tied up in a web of welfare made them rethink their position in the Netherlands, just as men were rethinking their position in the Netherlands as they felt let down. I begin the story of Bassant from the vantage point of her ex-husband Hamza, because I only got to know her through him.

I met Hamza after one of the directors of the Egyptian association asked me to help him find his wife and two year old son whom he had not seen or heard from since the police had intervened in one of their domestic quarrels three months earlier. I told Hamza that I could not or at least would not do much to help him find Bassant as long as I did not know whether she wanted to be found. He nevertheless kept on inviting me for drinks or dinner. Sometimes, he asked me to call what appeared to be the general number of a random social help organization, but at other times, he just wanted to talk about what had happened.

Then, after a few weeks of hanging out, Hamza called me to tell me that some woman had called him to tell him that Bassant and their infant son Momo were in a nearby town. As I called the woman back on his behalf, we found out that they were actually in a women's shelter. This did not make sense to Hamza, who swore that he had never laid hands on her. If anything, she had pushed him a few times, he said. Ask her why, he said, again and again, as the woman on the other end of the line was already explaining herself. Apparently, Bassant had initially told the police that Hamza kept her locked in her room. She had then retracted her accusations, but had insisted that she could not go back to Hamza. At this point, the people at the shelter should have informed Hamza, but for some reason, had failed to do so, as this woman discovered after taking over Bassant and Momo's case. Hamza was enraged, and after seeing Momo a week later, he felt like things could only get worse.

In the weeks that followed, Hamza and I went to the shelter once a week, until one day, we found that they were not there anymore, but had been relocated to another shelter. Apparently, some observers at the shelter where they had initially stayed had been worried about young Momo, and now a spot had opened up in a more specialized shelter. Hamza was happy for Momo to receive the help he apparently needed, but was extremely frustrated with the fact that he had not even been notified of the decision. Is this how it is going to be now, he asked, again and again, as we made our way back to Amsterdam.

After moving to the new shelter, two year old Momo was sent to a daycare with special needs and subjected to a few preliminary tests. On the basis of the outcomes, he was then sent to a child and youth psychiatry clinic in Amsterdam, where he spent several afternoons to be tested on ADHD and autism. Hamza and I went to a meeting at one of these institutions at least once a week, and, in addition, each Friday, we went to pick up Momo for his weekend stay over.

It took a while for me and Bassant to warm up to each other. I think she felt like I was on Hamza's side, and given how heavily involved I was with Hamza, I guess I did not have much to say to her. The first few times, I asked her if she consented to me being there, in Arabic. She confirmed, in English, but other than that, would not acknowledge me. Then, after we first saw her at the new shelter, she thanked me for helping Hamza, in English, a language that Hamza did not speak. After that, we began to exchange pleasantries, but our conversations only expanded after she and Hamza were invited to come and describe Momo's so-called family system at the child and youth psychiatry clinic.

Hamza often spoke about his and Bassant's history, about everything he had done to provide for her and Momo, and how wronged he had felt by her. However, this was the first and only time Bassant opened up in my presence like that. She spoke about growing up with an abusive Egyptian father and an emotionally absent Egyptian mother in Milan, about how she left them to study in Cairo, not because she liked Cairo, but because it was a culturally acceptable way to get away from them. In Cairo, she met Hamza, and their life had been perfect, especially when she got pregnant. But then, as an expecting mother, she felt like she had to return to Europe, for the sake of her unborn child, who she wanted to have all the opportunities in the world. In Milan, things had been like they had always been, and so she had sent Hamza onwards to Amsterdam. She followed a few months later, together with Momo. In Amsterdam, the three of them had been living in a 10m² room in a house they shared with two older Algerian men. She had been so scared of them, she said, and how could she and Hamza have maintained peace under such circumstances? She wished Momo had not gone through all of that, but now that he had, all she wanted was provide stability for Momo, so she hoped she could move somewhere

permanent soon.

Bassant's story left a strong impression on me, but after the meeting, we all had to hurry to different meetings, so I did not have the opportunity to acknowledge what she had said. However, a few days later, we all met up for Momo's third birthday at an indoor play park. As Hamza and Momo were happily jumping around in an air castle, Bassant came to sit next to me, and asked me how the cake was. I said it was delicious, and took the opportunity to tell her how moved I was by her story. She thanked me, and told me that this was actually the first time she had talked like that. I do not want to be ungrateful, she said, but I just cannot bear staying in the shelter anymore. It's too crowded, too noisy, too much of everything, she said. I said I understood, and told her that the people at this center for child and youth psychiatry had indicated Momo needed a quieter place. I just need a break, she said.

In the summer, without telling anyone, Bassant took Momo to her parents in Milan for two weeks. For a day, no one knew where she was. As she returned, Bassant continued to speak to me, telling me she had no one else to speak to. She said she knew that she had been violating the shelter's regulations as well as the Dutch anti-kidnapping laws, which stipulate that both parents have to consent to international travel. However, she had reached a point where she did not trust herself not to become violent with Momo without a break from the shelter. She knew that Hamza would not understand, and she could understand that, but she just could not do it anymore, she said, and so she had just left. The trip had been tough. Visiting Milan always was, but she still felt recuperated, she said.

For Bassant, leaving behind Hamza and the 10m² room in which they had lived had been an effort to take control over her life, but several months later, she felt like she was being held captive by her son, and the web of professionals involved in his life. This was a common experience among divorcing women. Amira, a divorced mother of three who already figured in the Introduction and will re-appear in Chapters Four and Five, once told me that before she got her divorce, she expected the Dutch state to be her husband, but discovered that "they come, one by one, listen to you, tell you they have a solution, but in the end, it's all just talk, talk, talk, and no action."

So, if men felt like their social rights were violated and their ex-wives social rights were met, women did not agree. Instead, they felt like their social rights were not met either, or, at the very least, that their social rights came with such a heavy bureaucratic burden and invasion of privacy that in the end, remarrying appeared easier. However, like men, most women ultimately felt like the only way out of their 'marriage' to the state was to remarry a man. Bassant long said she was not going to look for a husband, but as she kept on being dragged back into her role as

a mother, she began to look for a husband, not so that she could be a wife, but so that she could sometimes get time away from being a mother. Amira did the same, although she was much less optimistic than Bassant that this would indeed be the case.

3.7 CONCLUSION: SECOND-RATE CITIZENSHIP

In this chapter, I narrated my interlocutors' experiences with separation and divorce in order to shed light on welfare provisions as a set of conditions under which marginalized (Egyptian) citizens of the Netherlands live their life.

I began by analyzing welfare provisions as sorting mechanisms that (re)produce inequalities, by instituting eligibility criteria such as citizenship and residency status, income, wealth, personal status, ability, and age to group people together, by defining what a modicum of social security is, and by defining the social responsibilities that accompany social rights through terms and conditions of use. Second, I described separation and divorce processes that repositioned Egyptian-Dutch residents and citizens, in terms of social provisions they were eligible for and could access, and thus in terms of the social rights they enjoyed and the social duties they had to fulfill. Finally, I zoomed in on the stories of Farida, Mahmoud and Fatma, and Bassant and Hamza to describe how divorcing men and women made sense of this repositioning as they underwent it, and to show how this repositioning shaped the way in which they related not only to themselves and each other, but also to the Netherlands. I described how men's experience of being pushed out of their house and away from their children made them feel like the Dutch state was feminist, as several of my interlocutors put it. Meanwhile, the experience of getting tied up in welfare made women feel like the Dutch state was much more of a husband than they had wanted it to be, as Amira put it.

So, despite these opposing experiences, both divorcing men and women reached the conclusion that, in the Netherlands, you have to actively claim your rights. Depending on their situation, they acted upon this insight by engaging welfare providers, by trying to prevent themselves from getting tied up in welfare, or untangling themselves from it. Still, in the end, it was not so much a matter of claiming rights, but of making the best of life under conditions that appeared difficult to change. As a result of their particular positions, for both men and women, this often meant getting remarried. And for Ismaïl, with whom I opened this chapter, it meant accepting what he referred to as a 'fuck off bonus', accepting payment for repatriating away from the country to which he had emigrated.

The welfare provisions that I highlighted by describing the process of separation and divorce

are provisions that are available to citizens and legal residents only, meaning that people like Mostafa, Saïed, and Anastasia would not have been eligible. As such, they are part and parcel of the Dutch borderscape that I described in much more detail in Chapter One. As such, they purport to not differentiate between so-called native and naturalized citizens. Nevertheless, they did, both formally and informally. As a dual Dutch and Egyptian citizen, Farida would not enjoy the same degree of protection when in Egypt as non-Egyptian Dutch citizens would. Fatma's threats were so threatening because of Mahmoud's Arab and Muslim identity. Bassant was probably able to travel to Italy because she and her son were travelling on an Italian passport rather than a Dutch one.

Still, these are only a few examples of the ways in which dual citizenship and migration background may formally and informally shape the social rights citizens and residents enjoy, as the story of Ismaïl already illustrated. The people I worked with were not necessarily distinctly aware of these differences, but some were, and others found out only when they were relevant, or will find out, once they reach the retirement age. Bahaa for example, knew that as long as he held dual citizenship, his Dutch citizenship could expire, for example if he lived outside the European Union for ten consecutive years, or get revoked, for example if he would be convicted of committing fraud in his naturalization process, or if they became members of a terrorist organization. These were not immediate concerns to anyone I worked with, but it was one reason why I did not ask them any details of how they acquired citizenship. The people I worked with, including Farida, were generally aware that in Egypt, under Egyptian jurisdiction, they would be considered Egyptians, which meant that they would not be able to rely on the support of the Dutch state when in (legal) trouble. For women like Farida and for the more politically active people I worked with like Gamal and Bahaa, this was one of the reasons to not visit Egypt anymore.

This goes to show that, in the Netherlands, as elsewhere, citizenship is hierarchical, in the sense that different categories of citizens still hold different sets of rights, and conditional. In addition, in everyday life, those citizens who already hold fewer rights are also more likely to be denied the rights that they actually have, which was more of an active concern for the people I worked with. Indeed, in their everyday life, the people I worked with were more worried about how the general anti-immigrant, anti-Arab, and anti-Muslim sentiments, as well as systemic racism in the Dutch labor market and the education and judiciary systems was impacting them and their children, which is a topic to which I turn in the next chapter.