

Young and invisible: African domestic workers in Yemen

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Filmmaker Arda Nederveen and anthropologist Marina de Regt have made a short documentary about Ethiopian and Somalian women who work as domestic workers in Yemen. Many families in economically developed countries make use of migrant women as domestic workers and cleaners.

But even in a relatively poor country such as Yemen, migrants and refugee women do paid domestic work. The majority of these come from the Horn of Africa. Why do these young women come to Yemen and what are their living and working conditions? Instead of portraying the women as victims, the film gives them a face and lets them show their resilience.

Yemen is the poorest country in the Middle East, yet despite this attracts large numbers of refugees and migrants, mainly from Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea. Dutch researcher Marina de Regt studied the backgrounds and motives of Yemeni employers and migrant domestic workers, the interactions between both parties, and the influence of outsourcing domestic household work on the families and society.

The research yielded various results. The domestic workers come from countries that are even poorer than Yemen and migrate to improve their own position and that of their families. Yemeni women do not want to do paid housework as it has a very low status. Yemeni employers emphasise that the treatment of domestic workers in Yemen is better than in other Arabic countries, but discrimination and racism are clearly

prevalent.

De Regt's research is particularly relevant for the developmental problems in Yemen, the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. There are scarcely any national and international organisations that defend the rights of domestic workers. They often work in isolated circumstances, have poor conditions of employment, make long working hours and are sometimes the victims of abuse and exploitation and have no possibilities to defend their rights.

One of the indirect outcomes of the research was the start of a UNIFEM-funded project to improve the working conditions of domestic workers. The documentary will be used to promote awareness about the living and working conditions of domestic workers in Yemen, but also further afield.

Source: Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research

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