



# MUWALLADEEN IN YEMEN: RACIALIZATION, STIGMATIZATION AND DISCRIMINATION IN TIMES OF WAR

By:  
Marina de Regt  
and Aisha Aljaedy

June 20, 2022

---

# MUWALLADEEN IN YEMEN: RACIALIZATION, STIGMATIZATION AND DISCRIMINATION IN TIMES OF WAR

By:

Marina de Regt  
and Aisha Aljaedy

---

June 20, 2022

COVER PHOTO: A general view of the Crater neighborhood of Aden,  
Yemen, on February 24, 2022 // Sana'a Center photo by Sam Tarling



The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies is an independent think-tank that seeks to foster change through knowledge production with a focus on Yemen and the surrounding region. The Center's publications and programs, offered in both Arabic and English, cover political, social, economic and security related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Methodology</b> .....	<b>10</b>
Selection of Research Participants .....	11
Research Methods.....	11
Security and Ethical Considerations.....	11
Data Analysis and Quality Control .....	12
Limitations of the Study.....	12
<b>Leaving Yemen and Coming Back</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>Self-identification and the Role of Parents</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<b>Racialization and Stigmatization</b> .....	<b>19</b>
<b>Gender Differences</b> .....	<b>27</b>
<b>The Impact of the War</b> .....	<b>30</b>
<b>Migration Aspirations</b> .....	<b>33</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>36</b>
<b>Recommendations</b> .....	<b>38</b>
<b>Annex 1: Key experts interviewed</b> .....	<b>39</b>

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, we would like to thank all the people who were willing to be interviewed and who shared their stories with us. We would not have been able to conduct this research without them. We are impressed by their experiences, which inspired us during the analysis and write-up, underlining the importance of the topic. We would also like to thank the research team (Marwan Hassan, Othman Mohammed Salem, Naseem Aref al-Murisi, Amal Nasser and Fatoum Saleh). It was wonderful to work with a team of dedicated researchers who were able to collect data under difficult circumstances and in a very short period of time. The regular Zoom meetings were always pleasant and insightful. Thanks to Marta Colburn for sharing her experience with the Muhamasheen study and her research tools. Thanks to Amal Nasser, Bilqis al-Lahbi, Khalid al-Dubai, Dalal Abdulrazzaq al-Hubaishi and Yasmeen Nasser for assisting us with finding respondents; and to Amal Nasser, Nadira Omarjee and Othman Mohammed for reading an earlier draft of this report. We also want to express our appreciation to the editors who gave invaluable feedback. Last but not least, we would like to thank Yasmeen al-Eryani and Ali al-Dailami, who facilitated this research, making sure we could do our work properly and guiding us in moments when we were seeking direction.

We dedicate this report to Ali al-Batati, who died during the writing up of this report. Ali was a close friend of Aisha, and very interested in and supportive of the research, being a Muwallad himself. Dear Ali, Rest in Peace.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The term Muwalladeen (m. sing. Muwallad; f. sing. Muwallada) refers to Yemenis whose families have historical links outside of Yemen, and who are in some cases of mixed origins (with a Yemeni father or grandfather and a non-Yemeni mother or grandmother). The term is often used in a derogatory way, and Muwalladeen have been the target of discriminatory practices for decades. They were, and still are, often denied citizenship rights, discriminated against in the labor market, socially stigmatized and sometimes lack access to education. Muwalladeen often deny their non-Yemeni roots in order to avoid stigmatization and exclusion. This is particularly so for those whose families have links with Africa; Muwalladeen of mixed Yemeni-African descent are more racialized than Muwalladeen of other backgrounds, such as those whose families have historical links with Asia or Europe.

This report examines the experiences and perceptions of stigmatization, discrimination and racialization of Muwalladeen of Yemeni-African descent, with particular attention to social, economic and security concerns in contemporary war-torn Yemen. The research comprises a desk study, interviews with key experts and 36 interviews with male and female Muwalladeen in Sana'a, Aden and Hadramawt. Additionally, two interviews were carried out with Muwalladeen based outside Yemen and a focus group was held with six male Yemenis of Somali descent in Amman, Jordan.

The study findings show that most Muwalladeen experience racialization and stigmatization at school and work, and in society more broadly. Yet, there are important differences between regions, with Muwalladeen in southern Yemen, particularly in Aden, being less stigmatized and discriminated against than those elsewhere, such as in Sana'a. Interestingly, many interviewees were of the opinion that the war has not exacerbated racialization and discrimination, arguing instead that all Yemenis have suffered from the war regardless of their (ethnic) background.

Yet, under the surface of this general statement, many interviewees shared experiences of discrimination, in the past and in the present. They often face obstacles obtaining legal documents because they must provide proof of their father's birthplace in order to obtain identity cards and passports. Some interviewees mentioned that Muwalladeen lose their jobs more easily than other Yemenis. With regard to gender, interviewees stated that male Muwalladeen face greater discrimination because they are more active in the public domain, yet women also spoke about the difficulties of having to take up paid work due to the deteriorating economic situation and shared their experiences of racism. Leaving Yemen was regarded as a way to improve one's life by both men and women.

Younger people were found to embrace their Muwallad status more easily than older people.

In order to improve the situation of Muwalladeen in Yemen, this research proposes the following key recommendations:

***For the International Community and Donor Organizations:***

- Ensure minority representatives are included in future peace negotiations so any prospective peace or reconciliation agreement contains provisions guaranteeing their rights.
- Exert pressure on the internationally recognized government and de facto authorities regarding the protection of minority rights, including people of mixed origin, on issues such as the right of movement, the right to official documents and the cessation of discrimination against them.
- Allocate a portion of financial grants to support local Yemeni organizations that work for social equality and on combating racism, and for further research into minorities in Yemen, especially in light of the fact that groups such as the Muwalladeen are generally not organized at the community level.

***For Civil Society Organizations:***

- Design programs that target the Muwalladeen and the local community in order to remove cultural and psychological barriers that prevent their full integration into society such as public awareness campaigns that address biases and prejudice against Muwalladeen in public sentiments.
- Design programs aimed at providing psychological support to men and women of mixed origins to mitigate the effects of stigma and discrimination, and urge men and women of mixed origins to form organizations that can cooperate with other NGOs in providing psychological and legal support.
- Design social media campaigns celebrating people of mixed origin as an integral part of Yemeni society, making clear the principle of “purity” is a misconception.

***For the Internationally Recognized Government and De Facto Authorities:***

- Enact laws criminalizing racism in all its forms, along with regulations to ensure effective compliance and monitoring in all areas, especially on matters of employment and the issuing of identity cards and marriage certifications.
- Assist minorities with legal transactions and paperwork, especially in light of the instability in the country.
- Include instruction about diversity and racism at all levels of education (primary, secondary and university); this should include the rich history of migration to and from Yemen and its impact on the Yemeni society and population.

## INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings of a qualitative study about so-called *Muwalladeen* of African descent in Yemen. *Muwallad* (m. sing.), *Muwallada* (f. sing.), and *Muwalladeen* (pl.) are terms used to describe Yemenis of mixed descent, and they sometimes also refer to Yemenis who were born and raised abroad. As a result of Yemeni emigration to Africa and Asia over centuries, a considerable group of Yemenis is of mixed descent,<sup>[1]</sup> though no exact figures are available. The terms *Muwallad* and *Muwalladeen* in Yemen are most commonly associated with Africa, and they are often used to refer to Yemenis with African ancestors in a derogatory manner. As a result, many people of mixed descent try to hide their background in order to avoid stigmatization and exclusion. This is particularly so for those of mixed Yemeni-African descent; *Muwalladeen* who have an Asian, European, American (grand)parent are often valued higher socially and are less discriminated against because of their lighter skin. *Muwalladeen* have been the target of discriminatory practices for decades because they are not considered “pure Yemenis”. This affects, among other things, their citizenship rights, access to education and the labor market, and social integration. Yet, the social position of *Muwalladeen* is not as straightforward, compared to, for instance, *Muhamasheen* (literally, the Marginalized)<sup>[2]</sup> and other groups in Yemeni society, as *Muwalladeen* do not constitute a group with as well-defined boundaries. The social status of *Muwalladeen* depends on factors including the country of migration of their forefathers, region of origin, social status, gender and age, who considers him or herself a *Muwallad*, and how people of mixed descent – as well as Yemenis who were born and brought up abroad and are not necessarily of mixed descent – are categorized by others.

*Muwalladeen* have played important roles in Yemeni society as writers and artists. One of the most famous Yemeni writers is Mohammed Abdulwali (1940-1973), who was of mixed Yemeni-Ethiopian descent and often brought up the cause of Yemeni migrants and their fate in his writings. His most well-known novella, *They Die Strangers* (Arabic: *Yamutun Ghuraba*), portrays Yemenis in Addis Ababa who build up lives abroad, marry local women (often as second wives) and

<sup>[1]</sup> See, Engseeng Ho, “Hadhramis Abroad in Hadhramaut: The Muwalladun,” in, *Hadrami Traders, Scholars, and Statesmen in the Indian Ocean, 1750s-1960s*, edited by U. Freitag and W.G. Clarence-Smith, (1997), pp. 131-46; Iain Walker, “Hadramis, Shimalis and Muwalladin: Negotiating Cosmopolitan Identities between the Swahili Coast and Southern Yemen,” *Journal of Eastern African Studies* vol. 2, no. 2 (2008), pp. 44–59; Marina de Regt, “Ethiopian Migration to Yemen: Past and Present,” *Chroniques Yémenites* 17 (2012): 1-13; Marina de Regt, “From Yemen to Eritrea and Back: A Twentieth Century Family History,” *North East African Studies* vol.17, no. 1 (2017), pp. 25-50; Connie Caroe Christiansen, “Gender and Social Remittances: Return Migrants to Yemen from Eastern Africa,” *Chroniques Yémenites*, vol. 17, (2012); Sophia Pandya “Yemenis and Muwalladin in Addis Ababa: Blood Purity and the Opportunities of Hybridity,” *Journal of Arabian Studies* vol. 4, no.1 (2014), pp. 96–114; Nathalie Peutz, “The Fault of Our Grandfathers: Yemen’s Third-Generation Migrants Seeking Refuge from Displacement,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* vol. 51 (2019), pp. 357-376.

<sup>[2]</sup> For more on the status of *Muhamasheen* in Yemen, see: Martin Colburn, Fatima Saleh, Mohammed al-Harbi and Sumaya Saleem, “Bringing forth the voices of the *Muhamasheen*,” *The Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies*, July 13, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/14588>

establish families but always long to return home. In addition to being a writer, Abdulwali was a diplomat. In past decades, there have been Yemeni politicians of mixed descent, although they rarely spoke about their backgrounds, as doing so could have affected their social status. Other well-known Muwalladeen include Abdul Rahman Hussein, one of the directors of the film *Karama Has No Walls*;<sup>[3]</sup> Yemeni fashion model Intisar al-Hammadi, who has been detained by Houthi authorities since February 2021;<sup>[4]</sup> and Abdul Razzaq Gurnah, the 2021 winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature who is of Hadrami descent and was born in Zanzibar.

Although Yemeni emigration has been significant in terms of numbers over the centuries, leading to large Yemeni communities in Southeast Asia, East Africa and the Horn of Africa, Europe and the United States, relatively little scholarly work has been conducted on these long-term overseas connections and the impact on the composition of the Yemeni population. Most of the studies about Yemeni migration focus on those who moved to Asia, in particular from Hadramawt,<sup>[5]</sup> or to the United States and the United Kingdom.<sup>[6]</sup> Only recently has more academic attention been paid to Yemeni migration from the former North Yemen to East Africa and the Horn of Africa.<sup>[7]</sup> These studies sometimes shed light on various aspects of having a Muwalladeen status in Yemen and abroad; in doing so, they have filled important knowledge gaps.<sup>[8]</sup>

<sup>[3]</sup> *Karama Has No Walls* was the first Yemeni film to be nominated for an Academy Award, in the 2014 Documentary Short Film category.

<sup>[4]</sup> "Yemeni model jailed for indecency by rebel authorities," BBC, November 8, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-59205765>

<sup>[5]</sup> See, Linda Boxberger, *On the Edge of Empire: Hadhramawt, Emigration, and the Indian Ocean 1880s-1930s*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002); Engseong Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Leif Manger, *The Hadrami Diaspora: Community-building on the Indian Ocean Rim*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010).

<sup>[6]</sup> See, for example, Jonathan Friedlander, *Sojourners and Settlers: The Yemeni Immigrant Experience*, (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988); Fred Halliday, *Arabs in Exile: Yemeni Migrants in Urban Britain*, (New York and London: IB Tauris, 1992).

<sup>[7]</sup> See, Samson Bezabeh, *Subjects of Empire, Citizens of States: Yemenis in Djibouti and Ethiopia*, (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2016); Marina de Regt, "From Yemen to Eritrea and Back: A Twentieth Century Family History," *North East African Studies* vol. 17, no.1 (2017), pp. 25-50; Nathalie Peutz, "The Fault of Our Grandfathers": Yemen's Third-Generation Migrants Seeking Refuge from Displacement," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* vol. 51 (2019), pp. 357-376.

<sup>[8]</sup> See, Engseong Ho, "Hadhramis Abroad in Hadhramaut: The Muwalladun." In *Hadrami Traders, Scholars, and Statesmen in the Indian Ocean, 1750s-1960s*, edited by U. Freitag and W.G. Clarence-Smith, 131-46 (1997). Leiden: Brill; Iain Walker, *Hadramis, Shimalis and Muwalladin: Negotiating Cosmopolitan Identities between the Swahili Coast and Southern Yemen*, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* vol. 2, no. 2 (2008), pp. 44-59; Marina de Regt, "Ethiopian Migration to Yemen: Past and Present," *Chroniques Yémenites* 17 (2012), pp. 1-13; Marina de Regt, "From Yemen to Eritrea and Back: A Twentieth Century Family History," *North East African Studies* vol. 17, no.1 (2017): 25-50; Connie Caroe Christiansen, "Gender and Social Remittances: Return Migrants to Yemen from Eastern Africa," *Chroniques Yémenites*, vol. 17 (2012); Sophia Pandya "Yemenis and Muwalladin in Addis Ababa: Blood Purity and the Opportunities of Hybridity," *Journal of Arabian Studies* vol. 4, no. 1 (2014), pp. 96-114; Nathalie Peutz, "The Fault of Our Grandfathers: Yemen's Third-Generation Migrants Seeking Refuge from Displacement," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 51 (2019), pp. 357-376.



Since the start of the civil war in Yemen, labeling on the basis of one's family background has increased, which is mainly a result of the fact that the Houthis make their claim to power based on lineage to the family of the Prophet Mohammed.<sup>[9]</sup> Thus, lineage is a political issue that continues to define Yemeni society. While many Muwalladeen tried to integrate into Yemeni society prior to the war, now they sometimes choose to leave the country. Yemenis of African descent have, for example, fled to Djibouti<sup>[10]</sup> and Jordan.<sup>[11]</sup> Yet, in these host countries, they also often feel marginalized and discriminated against, as they may not be considered Yemenis by fellow Yemeni citizens or host communities. However, while discrimination against Muwalladeen continues, some of them are reclaiming their identities.<sup>[12]</sup>

---

<sup>[9]</sup> Yemen knows a system of social stratification based on descent and the work someone does. The five most important social classes are the sada, the quda, the qaba'il, the muzayyineen and the akhdam. See p. 19, 'Racialization and Stigmatization' for an elaboration of the Yemeni system of social stratification. See also, Sabria Al-Thawri, "Identity and War: The Power of Labeling," POMEPS, 2021, <https://pomeps.org/identity-and-war-the-power-of-labeling>.

<sup>[10]</sup> Nathalie Peutz, "The Fault of Our Grandfathers": Yemen's Third-Generation Migrants Seeking Refuge from Displacement", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* vol. 51 (2019), pp. 357-376; Alexander Lauret, "Du Réfugié Yéménite à l'Entrepreneur: Quand l'Exil de Guerre Devient Opportunité Économique à Djibouti", *Politique Africaine* vol. 159 (2020), pp. 145-168.

<sup>[11]</sup> Simon Verduijn and Solenn Al-Majali, "Somalis and Yemenis of Mixed Origin Stranded and Struggling in Jordan's Capital," *Mixed Migration Center*, July 23, 2020, <https://mixedmigration.org/articles/somalis-and-yemenis-of-mixed-origin-stranded-and-struggling-in-jordans-capital/>

<sup>[12]</sup> Aisha Aljaedy, "Neither Yemeni nor Foreign: Life as a Muwalladin of Hadramawt," *Yemen Peace Forum*, January 26, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/ypf/life-as-a-Muwalladin-of-hadramawt/>; Afrah Nasser, "The dilemma of Muwalladeen during wartime [AR]," *Raseef 22*, October 14, 2016, [www.raseef22.net/article/77187-مأزق-الوَالِد-في-زمن-الحرب](http://www.raseef22.net/article/77187-مأزق-الوَالِد-في-زمن-الحرب)

## METHODOLOGY

This study aims to address the absence of a comprehensive study on the position of Muwalladeen in contemporary Yemen, since the outbreak of the war. The main research question was: How has the war impacted the ways Muwalladeen perceive and experience their social, economic and security conditions in Yemen, and how do they navigate their identities in a context of increased stigmatization and marginalization? In view of the limited time available to collect and analyze the data, and the large group of Muwalladeen of different ethnic backgrounds (such as Asian, African and European), a decision was made to focus on Muwalladeen of African descent. Yemenis migrated to Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Sudan, and other countries in East Africa, and returned in large numbers<sup>[13]</sup> after the independence of these countries and the establishment of the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen). They constitute a large segment of the Yemeni population<sup>[14]</sup> but are often marginalized and discriminated against because of racist attitudes against people with a darker skin color and/or those of African descent.<sup>[15]</sup>

This qualitative study mainly consisted of in-depth interviews with Muwalladeen of Yemeni-African descent, which were carried out face-to-face or remotely via phone, Skype or Zoom. In view of the large number of Muwalladeen in Yemen – living in various parts of the country, of different ages and generations, and of different social classes – the study did not aim to get a representative sample. Rather, it was deemed more important to collect high-quality data which could offer insights into the experiences of Muwalladeen of different ages and genders.

The data was collected by a team of six Yemeni data collectors, four of whom have a Muwallad background themselves (all of them women). One of the six data collectors functioned as field coordinator responsible for liaising between data collectors, coordinating their activities, providing quality control, participating in data analysis, and co-authoring the report with the lead researcher. The lead researcher developed the data collection tools, including interview guidelines, and discussed them with the team, trained the data collectors in conducting qualitative research and semi-structured interviewing, monitored the data collection, trained the field coordinator in manual coding and data analysis, and co-authored the report. The fieldwork took place over a six-week period during August-October 2021.

In order to study a variety of experiences, interviewees included 18 men and 18

---

<sup>[13]</sup> No reliable statistics exist on numbers of returnees.

<sup>[14]</sup> It is impossible to determine the number of Muwalladeen in Yemen because there is no clear definition of who is a Muwallad. In addition, there are no statistics available of the number of Muwalladeen as they are never registered as such.

<sup>[15]</sup> We will discuss the intersection of skin color and lineage in the section on racialization and stigmatization.

women, ranging in age from 20 to 74 years old, and people living in three parts of the country, namely Sana'a (21), Aden (10) and Hadramawt (5). In addition, two interviews were done abroad: one with a Muwallad in Egypt and one with a Muwallada living in the Netherlands.

## Selection of Research Participants

A snowball method was used to approach possible interviewees, making use of the research team's networks. Since this report aims to present a qualitative perspective on the challenges facing people who openly identify as Muwallad in Yemen, interviewees were selected who were willing and able to share their personal stories. Qualitative interviewing requires trust between researcher and interviewee. While selecting interviewees via personal networks allowed for such trust, it limited the geographical reach to urban residents of Sana'a, Aden and Hadramawt because the data collectors were either located there or had connections in those areas.

## Research Methods

*The following research methods were used:*

- Desk research: academic studies, reports and literary sources on the (historical) background of Muwalladeen in Yemen.
- In-depth interviews: 36 interviews in Sana'a, Aden and Hadramawt, and two interviews abroad (one in Egypt and one in the Netherlands).
- Focus group discussion: one focus group discussion with six male Muwalladeen of Somali descent in Amman, Jordan.
- Expert interviews: four interviews with key experts/researchers who have worked on issues around race and ethnicity in Yemen (see Appendix 1).

## Security and Ethical Considerations

In view of the security situation in Yemen and challenges faced while conducting fieldwork, particular attention was paid to logistics and ethics. Interviewees were informed of the goal of the research and that interview data would be anonymized to protect their privacy; prior oral informed consent was obtained from all interviewees. In a number of cases, interviewees chose not to answer certain questions because they were afraid of repercussions. With regard to the security of the data collectors, it was decided that interviews could be carried out face-to-face or via phone, Zoom or Skype. Most of the interviews in Sana'a and Aden were done face-to-face (30 out of 31 interviews). The interviews with Muwalladeen in Hadramawt (5) were done via phone and Zoom.

## Data Analysis and Quality Control

Interviews were recorded and transcribed in Arabic. The field coordinator carried out quality control of these interviews. Interviews with key experts were recorded and transcribed in English. The focus group discussion was recorded and transcribed in Arabic and then translated to English. The transcripts of the in-depth interviews with Muwalladeen were manually coded and analyzed by the field coordinator, under supervision, and in close collaboration with the lead researcher.

## Limitations of the Study

While the initial plan was to interview people who identify as Muwalladeen in both urban and rural areas in northern and southern Yemen, this plan had to be adjusted due to challenges encountered during fieldwork. Changes to the data collection team and security challenges affected the fieldwork, particularly travel plans within Yemen. It was decided, for example, not to include Hudaydah in the study because the security situation was too unstable. In addition, a decision was made not to hold focus group discussions in Yemen because of the sensitivity of the topic, and as a result, the only focus group discussion that was held took place during a visit to Jordan by the lead researcher.

## LEAVING YEMEN AND COMING BACK

Migration is part and parcel of Yemen's history. Located on the southwestern edge of the Arabian Peninsula, bordering the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, Yemenis have always been mobile, moving to Africa and Asia. The Sabaean empire was said to stretch from Yemen across Ethiopia,<sup>[16]</sup> while the Aksum empire, spanning modern-day northern Ethiopia, Eritrea and parts of Sudan, controlled stretches of Yemen between the first and 10th centuries A.D. Many academic sources mention the fact that the first group of Islamic converts left in the time of Prophet Mohammed to escape persecution and were offered refuge by Emperor Negash in Aksum. This is seen as the first entrance of Islam into Africa.<sup>[17]</sup>

From the 13th century onward, Hadramis began to play an important role in the incense trade and migrated to the Indonesian Archipelago and East Africa. Hadramis from the highest social strata (the so-called *sada* families) migrated primarily for commercial or religious reasons, and their migration had an important impact on the development of religious networks, trade and politics in destination countries. They held and continue to hold positions of respect within the recipient societies.<sup>[18]</sup> In Africa, there are century-old Hadrami communities in Zanzibar, Addis Ababa and Khartoum, in addition to places in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

Emigration from Yemen increased after the British colonization of Aden beginning in 1839 and the French colonization of Djibouti in 1888. Firstly, these colonial enclaves created work opportunities and attracted many Yemenis from both southern and northern Yemen. What would become North Yemen was then part of the Ottoman Empire. During the Ottoman period, Zaidi imams ruled Yemen's interior for centuries, and kept the population isolated and underdeveloped. In particular, under Imam Yahya (1868-1948), oppression, famine and lack of economic opportunities to build a livelihood led many Yemenis, often young single men, to leave the country. While there was work available in the ports of Aden and Djibouti, many Yemenis were able to move to Europe and Asia, often hired as crewmen on ships. In this way, Yemenis migrated to British colonies in the Far East such as India and Singapore, to Britain itself, to French colonies

<sup>[16]</sup> Jean-Francois Breton, "Arabia Felix from the Time of the Queen of Sheba Eighth Century B.C. to First Century A.D.," (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000).

<sup>[17]</sup> Lidwien Kapteijns, "Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa," In *The History of Islam in Africa*, edited by Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L. Pouwels (2000), pp. 227-250; Hussein Ahmed, "The Historiography of Islam in Ethiopia," *Journal of Islamic Studies* vol. 3, no.1 (2000), pp. 15-146.

<sup>[18]</sup> See, Linda Boxberger, "On the Edge of Empire: Hadhramawt, Emigration, and the Indian Ocean 1880s-1930s," (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002); Engseng Ho, "The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean," (Berkeley: University of California Press (2006); Leif Manger, "The Hadrami Diaspora: Community-building on the Indian Ocean Rim," (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010).

such as Vietnam and Madagascar, and, to a lesser degree, to France.<sup>[19]</sup> When the railway between Djibouti and Addis Ababa was finalized in 1889, it became easier to move to Ethiopia; Yemeni migrants also traveled to modern-day Kenya, Uganda,<sup>[20]</sup> Tanzania, Sudan, Chad and the Central African Republic.<sup>[21]</sup>

In the early 1940s, another large wave of Hadrami migration occurred after Hadramawt suffered a catastrophic famine that killed nearly 35,000 people, a considerable percentage of the population. The combination of drought and global disruption of remittances pushed many Hadrami families to travel to East Africa and Asia.<sup>[22]</sup>

Many Yemeni emigrants started to return to Yemen in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. This was partly due to the fact that many of the countries they settled in had become independent, which led to an increase in nationalism. Foreigners lost favorable positions in commerce and in terms of land ownership because national governments changed laws in favor of the local population. Additionally, both North Yemen and South Yemen became independent states, in 1962 and 1967, respectively. In particular, during the 1970s the president of North Yemen, Ibrahim al-Hamdi, called upon the Yemeni diaspora to return home. Many Yemenis and their relatives had benefited from educational opportunities offered abroad, and Al-Hamdi wanted to make use of them to help develop the country. He promised returning migrants employment, free housing and a better future.<sup>[23]</sup> In various Yemeni cities, special neighborhoods were created for the returnees (*al-moghtaribeen*).<sup>[24]</sup> Yet, instead of being welcomed at home, many returnees and their children became second or even third-class citizens. While status differences were officially abolished in the Yemeni constitution and every Yemeni became a *muwatin* (citizen) regardless of their family background, Muwalladeen continued to suffer in various ways from their “minority” status, affecting their citizenship rights, social integration, marriages, positions in the labor market and socio-economic status and prospects.

---

<sup>[19]</sup> Marina de Regt, “Pioneers or Pawns? Women Health Workers and the Politics of Development in Yemen,” (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), pp. 197-199.

<sup>[20]</sup> Susan Beckerleg, “From Ocean to Lakes: Cultural Transformations of Yemenis in Kenya and Uganda,” *African and Asian Studies* 8: 288-308 (2009); Leif Manger, “The Hadrami Diaspora: Community-building on the Indian Ocean Rim,” (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010).

<sup>[21]</sup> Leif Manger, “The Hadrami Diaspora: Community-building on the Indian Ocean Rim,” (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010).

<sup>[22]</sup> Alawi Bin Sumait, “Hahramawt, Thousands of deaths from famine [AR],” *Al-Ayyam*, March 23, 2019, <https://www.alayyam.info/news/7QNZ6FDX-DSIZYG>

<sup>[23]</sup> Paul Dresch, “A History of Modern Yemen,” (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 130.

<sup>[24]</sup> Marina de Regt, “Pioneers or Pawns? Women Health Workers and the Politics of Development in Yemen,” (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), p. 199, footnote 25.

The following five sections present the findings of the study. The first section focuses on self-identification and the important role of parents, followed by a section on stigmatization and racialization, and a section on gender differences. The fourth section discusses the impact of the war, and the fifth section deals with migration aspirations. The report ends with a number of policy recommendations.

## SELF-IDENTIFICATION AND THE ROLE OF PARENTS

As mentioned in the introduction, the terms Muwallad and Muwalladeen have a negative connotation and are often used to stigmatize those who are of mixed descent or whose parents or grandparents were born or raised abroad. The terms can even be used as a curse, and people of mixed descent may hide their family history in order to avoid stigmatization and discrimination. Identities are formed in relation to others, and the value judgments of those outside one's own social group can be important for one's own interpretation of the categorization. This also points to the importance of the context in which particular terms are used. The attitudes of parents strongly contribute to how Muwalladeen identify themselves, a point made clear during interviews. This section focuses on the moment interviewees learned that they were considered Muwalladeen and what it meant for them.

Interviewees shared that they only became aware of being considered Muwalladeen in relation to the way others treated them. A 27-year-old man who lived in Crater, Aden, said:

*“In our childhood and while playing with our peers in the neighborhood of Crater in the city of Aden, we began to hear this word (Muwalladeen) and other stigmatizing words. It was then that we learned that we are of mixed origin, and our parents explained to us what this meant. ... Our identity as Muwalladeen has had a great impact on our lives as we faced problems and difficulties that we still suffer from now. Even our parents at first urged us not to reveal our identity as Muwalladeen so that we wouldn't be harassed. But when everyone got to know us, they strengthened our sense of belonging and made us proud of our identity.”<sup>[25]</sup>*

In general, the interviewees can be divided into three categories. Interviewees in the first category define themselves as Muwalladeen and are proud of their mixed origins, such as the man from Aden quoted above. Their parents or grandparents did not hide the fact that they were of mixed descent or stopped hiding it at some point while their children were growing up. They spoke more than one language at home, prepared non-Yemeni dishes and valued their mixed origins. Yet, despite the positive attitude of their parents and grandparents, they still face stigmatization and discrimination, a topic examined in more detail in the next section.

The second category consists of those who present themselves as Muwalladeen depending on the context. They are aware of the negative connotations the term has in Yemen and selectively use it. For example, one of the interviewees said:

---

<sup>[25]</sup> 27-year-old man, face-to-face interview in Aden, September 19, 2021.



*“Being of mixed Yemeni-Somali origin, I call myself Muwallada. Though sometimes I avoid saying it in order to avoid any discrimination or difficulties I may face. I realized that I was of mixed origin when I was 12 years old, when the schoolteacher asked about our nationalities. I went to ask my father and mother about my origins, as I thought that I was of Somali origin only because I lived in an area where the majority of inhabitants were Somali and its environment was Somali. ... My father advised me not to say that I was Muwallada in order to prevent me from facing discrimination. My mother, on the contrary, used to say ‘you are Somali’. I followed their advice selectively, based on the situation I found myself in.”<sup>[26]</sup>*

This quote points to an interesting difference between the attitudes of the two parents, which can be explained by the fact that her father is of Yemeni descent and thus did not want his daughter to be stigmatized for being of mixed descent, while her mother was proud of her own Somali roots and probably did not want to give in to the discrimination and stigmatization she encountered in Yemen.

The third and last category comprises people who do not publicly acknowledge being Muwalladeen. This is particularly the case among Muwalladeen living in the northern part of the country, such as in Sana’a, where racialization and stigmatization seem to be more acute than in Aden and Hadramawt. One of the interviewees said the following:

*“I do not call myself Muwallada. I was born in Ethiopia. Muwallad refers to a person whose parents are of another nationality. In fact, I disagree with people in naming me Muwallada; I have a Yemeni mother and a Yemeni father.”<sup>[27]</sup>*

Confidence in claiming one’s identity depends on many factors, one of them being the ways in which parents approach the matter. Language is also an important identity marker. Many interviewees were brought up in bilingual, or even multilingual, families. Where and when a particular language is spoken often indicates whether a family is open or closed about their mixed origins. Thus, in families that are open about their mixed ancestry, African languages are freely spoken. One of the interviewees said:

*“Currently, we speak Arabic at home, but as a family, many of us speak several languages such as English, Swahili and Ugandan. Our customs are Yemeni, whether during our period living in Uganda or in Yemen, as we preserved them and were not affected by the customs of the African countries in which we lived for a while.”<sup>[28]</sup>*

---

<sup>[26]</sup> 21-year-old woman, face-to-face interview in Aden, September 29, 2021.

<sup>[27]</sup> 26-year-old woman, face-to-face interview in Sana’a, September 9, 2021.

<sup>[28]</sup> 46-year-old man, face-to-face interview in Aden, September 29, 2021.

Parents who are afraid their children will suffer discrimination and stigmatization because of their mixed parentage often speak Arabic at home and in doing so hope their children avoid stigmatization. Almost all respondents said that they speak Arabic outside the home and that the use of African languages (such as Somali, Swahili, Amharic and Tigrinya) is limited to their parents or others who are fluent in the language. One interviewee said:

*“My mother always speaks to us in Arabic, but when she gets upset she turns to Somali. We understand her and every word she says. Even though we can’t speak Somali.”<sup>[29]</sup>*

As illustrated above, some interviewees mentioned that they are not fluent in their mother’s native language but are able to follow conversations and use some terms. Another interviewee said:

*“I understand the Ethiopian language to some extent. When I am in the company of Ethiopians or Muwalladeen, I understand 50 percent of the topics they are talking about, but I can’t write Amharic. I know that sometimes, when my father and mother want to communicate privately, they speak in Amharic so that we don’t know what they are saying. It is a kind of secret code between them.”<sup>[30]</sup>*

In summary, Muwalladeen interviewed had different attitudes toward their identities, and these attitudes were strongly related to stereotyping, stigmatization and racialization. The next section goes deeper into these experiences and links it to racism and what racism means in Yemen.

---

<sup>[29]</sup> 26-year-old woman, face-to-face interview in Sana’a, September 10, 2021.

<sup>[30]</sup> 34-year-old man, face-to-face interview in Sana’a, October 4, 2021.

## RACIALIZATION AND STIGMATIZATION

Discrimination and stigmatization of Muwalladeen is mainly a result of Yemen's system of social stratification, in which ancestry and one's occupation are used to determine one's social status. Traditionally those who claim descent from the Prophet Mohammed (the so-called *sada*) were at the top of the social hierarchy, followed by judges (*quda*), tribesmen (*qaba'il*) and craftsmen (*mazayyinah*)<sup>[31]</sup>. *At the bottom were those considered to be descendents of former slaves (abid) and individuals who cannot trace their lineage (akhdam)*.<sup>[32]</sup> The terms *abid* and *akhdam* are derogatory, respectively meaning "slaves" and "servants", and therefore have been replaced by the term *Muhamasheen* (m. sing. *Muhamash*, f. sing. *Muhamasha*), which means "the marginalized".<sup>[33]</sup>

Various studies conducted about social stratification in Yemen in past decades show that these social categories are not applied evenly throughout Yemen. There are important regional differences, for example, in Hadramawt, where Abdullah Bujra did his study (1971); Lower Yemen and the Tihama, where Delores Walters did her research (1987); and the highlands where Luca Nevola carried out fieldwork (2020). Moreover, social stratification is not static. After the overthrow of the Imamate in northern Yemen in 1962 and southern Yemen's independence from Great Britain in 1967, the constitutions in both the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) guaranteed equality of all citizens regardless of their social status background. Internal and international migration (in particular to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States), the expansion of urban centers, and increased education and employment opportunities have also led to changes in Yemen's system of social stratification.

Notwithstanding these changes, traditional structures still affect the population. In addition to lineage and occupation, one of the most important markers of identification is skin color, and this is upon which much of the stigmatization and racialization of Muwalladeen is based. Gokh Amin Alshaif (2021) notes that a March 2014 Civil Status Authority decree forbade identity cards "for Muwalladeen born outside Yemen, *especially to those born in the Horn of Africa*, who do not have proof of Yemeni nationality." The decree is careful to clarify that non-Black

<sup>[31]</sup> *Mazayyinah*, which literally means "barbers", is a common all-encompassing term for this segment of society, which is known by various labels.

<sup>[32]</sup> See, Abdulla Bujra, "The Politics of Social Stratification: A Study of Political Change in a South Arabian Town," (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971); Delores Walters, "Perceptions of Social Inequality in the Yemen Arab Republic," PhD Dissertation, New York University (1987); Luca Nevola, "Black People, White Hearts: Origin, Race, and Colour in Contemporary Yemen," *Antropologica*, vol.7, no.1 (2020), pp. 93-115.

<sup>[33]</sup> See, Gokh Amin Alshaif, "Black and Yemeni: Myths, Genealogies, and Race," POMEPS, 2021, <https://pomeps.org/black-and-yemeni-myths-genealogies-and-race>; Sabria Al-Thawr, "Identity and War: The Power of Labeling," POMEPS, 2021, <https://pomeps.org/identity-and-war-the-power-of-labeling>; Luca Nevola, "Black People, White Hearts: Origin, Race, and Colour in Contemporary Yemen," *Antropologica*, vol.7, no.1 (2020), pp. 93-115; Connie Caroe Christiansen and Sabria Al-Thawr, "Muhamasheen Activism: Enacting Citizenship during Yemen's Transition," *Citizenship Studies*, vol.23, no.2 (2019), pp. 115-138; Huda Seif, "The Accursed Minority: The Ethno-Cultural Persecution of Al-Akhdam in the Republic of Yemen: A Documentary & Advocacy Project," *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2005), pp. 1554-4419.

Muwalladeen, specifically those “born in the Gulf countries, Europe and Asia,” are excluded from this policy. Yemenis with African heritage face continuing stigmatization and racialization, common to Black Arabs throughout the region who continue to be referred to as *abid* or “slaves”. Alshaif convincingly argues that:

*“The hierarchy within this fifth category (the category of Muhamasheen) reveals a gradation of Blackness and anti-Blackness in Yemen. It is a spectrum rather than a binary of race and racialization. Some Muhamasheen mobilize this gradation to claim belonging among other Black Yemeni communities. Indeed, African origin plays a role in constructing the “Blackness” of the Muhamasheen in comparison to other non-Muhamash Yemenis, who may not phenotypically differ. In this way, the presence of the marginalized and affectable Black subject provides a contrasting “other” on whose back the racialized Yemeni figure can claim some dignity.”<sup>[34]</sup>*

Muwalladeen are part of those “other non-Muhamash” Yemenis, who are also discriminated against and marginalized because of their skin color and African ancestry. For some Muwalladeen, this is also a reason to hide their mixed origins, yet this is only possible for those who do not stand out because of their skin color. This was apparent among many interviewees. A 34-year-old man in Sana’a told us:

*“The bullying I faced when I was young made me wonder: why do they call me khadim (a servant)? After high school, it did not affect me in any way. Now there is openness and development, but in the past, in the generations of my father and grandfather, there was a view of those of mixed origins as Abyssinian (habashi), and not Yemenis, who came to obtain Yemeni citizenship unjustly. When we explained to them that I am Yemeni and my grandfather migrated there (to Africa) and we came back to our country, they were not convinced.”<sup>[35]</sup>*

Researcher Luca Nevola argues that racism (*unsuriyya*) in Yemen originally referred to more than skin color and phenotype, and was mostly based on hierarchical categorizations of patrilineal lines of descent. Only those who could trace an honorary lineage (which means a lineage that proves that they are descendants of northern or southern Arabs) would be considered “pure Yemenis”.<sup>[36]</sup> Those who could not were seen as lacking in origins (*nuqqas al-asl*) and morally deficient. The notion of racism emerged in Yemen in the 1950s when it was used to oppose the rule of the Hashemites, who were in power but also genealogically defined as a minority. The term was not used to distinguish *nuqqas al-asl* on

<sup>[34]</sup> Gokh Amin Alshaif, “Black and Yemeni: Myths, Genealogies, and Race,” POMEPS, 2021, <https://pomeps.org/black-and-yemeni-myths-genealogies-and-race>

<sup>[35]</sup> 34-year-old man, face-to-face interview in Sana’a, October 4, 2021.

<sup>[36]</sup> See, Gabriela Vom Bruck, “Being Worthy of Protection: The Dialectics of Gender Attributes in Yemen,” *Social Anthropology*, vol. 4, no. 2 (1996), pp. 145-162

the basis of skin color or phenotypical traits. According to Nevola, racism is still understood this way. In the past few decades, and in particular during the Arab Spring and the National Dialogue Conference that followed it, akhdam activists started “using skin color as a medium to construct an encompassing group identity and to claim social and political inclusion.”<sup>[37]</sup> In doing so, the akhdam have successfully redefined their community as a discriminated ethnic group of black people. In her work on the Muhamasheen, Gokh Amin Alshaif endorses this view:

*“The Muhamasheen, and the multitude of Black Yemeni experience, demonstrate racialization as a spectrum rather than a binary. The construction of “Arab” and “Black” happens at the dynamic intersections of imagined genealogies and skin color. The Muhamasheen’s social history and their condition as permanent outsiders in a country they have resided in for centuries reveal both the durability and instability of racial and national categories.”<sup>[38]</sup>*

The experiences of Muwalladeen are indicative of this spectrum; their experiences vary based on the genealogy of their patrilineal line of descent (whether their father or grandfather was coming from a sada family or a qabili family, for example), the region of origin (in northern Yemen people of mixed descent are more stigmatized than in southern Yemen), and their skin color (which can range from fairly light to very dark). A 53-year-old man in Aden, for example, said that he had personally never experienced any discrimination:

*“I have lived my life and have not faced any stigma or discrimination, although some Yemenis look at those from mixed origins with contempt and superiority, but this depends on the person’s culture and morals. While some treat the mixed origins with respect, you may find some non-mixed origins people stigmatizing some of those of mixed origins and telling them that they are not from the country, or that you are Muwalladeen, or that you are Somali or other.”<sup>[39]</sup>*

Yet, our research suggested there were potentially regional differences in how Muwalladeen experienced racialization. A 40-year-old man in Sana’a said:

*“Treating us badly had a negative impact on us. I mean, there was a difference in treatment in Hudaydah. We were living perfectly. No one called you Muwallad or anything else. But here in Sana’a, there is a clear distinction.”<sup>[40]</sup>*

Another interviewee in Sana’a, a young man whose grandparents and parents were all Muwalladeen with Somali origins, added:

<sup>[37]</sup> Luca Nevola, “Black People, White Hearts: Origin, Race, and Colour in Contemporary Yemen.” *Antropologica*, vol.7, no.1 (2020), pp. 93-115.

<sup>[38]</sup> Gokh Amin Alshaif, “Black and Yemeni: Myths, Genealogies, and Race,” *POMEPS*, 2021, <https://pomeps.org/black-and-yemeni-myths-genealogies-and-race>

<sup>[39]</sup> 53-year-old man, face-to-face interview in Aden, October 2, 2021.

<sup>[40]</sup> 40-year-old man, face-to-face interview in Sana’a, September 14, 2021.

*“The term Muwallad is used in Yemen for people of African descent. They just name them Muwallad. But to be honest, I have never been called a Muwallad. It is straight-up, ‘you are an Ethiopian or Somali’: they would never say, ‘you are Muwallad’. They would never accept that, I have a drop of blood that is Yemeni. It is odd being called straight-up Ethiopian or Somali.”<sup>[41]</sup>*

The term *habashi* (meaning Abyssinian, and nowadays used for Ethiopians, pl. *ahbush*) is a very common abusive term for people who have dark skin. Somali and *suud* (black) are often used as abusive terms as well, which shows that skin color is very important in the racialization of Muwalladeen (as well as other Yemenis who have darker skin but who are not necessarily Muwalladeen or Muhamasheen). One man also mentioned that the word *warya* (informal Somali for “man”) is used as an abusive term in Sana’a. Another informant shared the following story:

*“When I was little, my aunt used to say to me: ‘If your friends at school asked you [about your family history] what would you say?’ I told her that I would tell them that I am a Muwallada, and she would tease me and say ‘a water generator or an electricity generator?’ (The word muwallada has a meaning in Arabic similar to generator.) I asked her what to say instead. She told me that I should say that I am Yemeni. When I went to school, my friends used to wonder how I could be Yemeni because I am brown! Sometimes I am embarrassed, and I say that I am Yemeni, and sometimes I say that I am Somali.”<sup>[42]</sup>*

This experience is in line with those of Aisha Aljaedy, a co-author of this report, who grew up in Hadramawt. She only found out that she is considered a Muwallada when she mentioned to a friend that her father was born in Kenya.<sup>[43]</sup> When she told her mother about the conversation, she was advised not to share her father’s birthplace as people may think that they are *abid*. This example underscores that genealogy is important in the racialization of Muwalladeen, and that it is not only about skin color. Aljaedy’s father was born in Kenya, but his parents and his wife are Yemeni, yet some still considered him and his children Muwalladeen. This also shows that Muwalladeen do not necessarily have to be of mixed descent; those who were born and brought up abroad may also be categorized as Muwalladeen.

Marriages were mentioned as one of the ways in which Muwalladeen are discriminated against because they are excluded from marrying so-called “pure” Yemenis. Marriage formation in Yemen is still strongly based on the system of social stratification, and most people do not marry outside their social status groups. This applies in particular to men. One of the interviewees told us about her brother’s experience:

<sup>[41]</sup> 25-year-old man in Sana’a, interview via Zoom, October 14, 2021.

<sup>[42]</sup> 26-year-old, face-to-face interview in Sana’a, September 9, 2021.

<sup>[43]</sup> Aisha Aljaedy, “Neither Yemeni nor Foreign: Life as a Muwalladin of Hadramawt,” Yemen Peace Forum, January 26, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/yppf/life-as-a-Muwalladin-of-hadramawt/>

*“We did not know that there was discrimination against this group (Muwalladeen) except when we tried to propose marriage to a girl for my brother, and we were rejected because of our mother is African. Some youth with mixed backgrounds face difficulties when it comes to marriage.”<sup>[44]</sup>*

Another interviewee said that he met a young woman through Facebook. They fell in love and he traveled from Aden to Taiz to propose. However, her father refused when he became aware of the interviewee’s mixed Yemeni-Somali origin. He returned heartbroken because his relationship ended despite their many attempts to persuade the young woman’s father.<sup>[45]</sup> This story is a good example of the custom according to which Muwalladat may marry non-Muwalladeen men, while male Muwalladeen are unable to marry women who are not of mixed origins. As a result, most Muwalladeen marry with other Muwalladeen.

The level and type of discrimination Muwalladeen face can be influenced by social markers such as one’s level of education, social status of the father’s family (whether he is from an elite family, a tribal family or from a lower social status group), and the economic status of the family. Some well-known business families have African roots. A young man from Hadramawt told us that the fact that his father comes from a well-respected tribe has helped him a lot in life, as he had been able to continue his education and was now even studying abroad; yet, he remained afraid that he would not be accepted when proposing marriage because of his dark skin color.<sup>[46]</sup>

Other interviewees referred to difficulties they encountered dealing with legal issues, such as obtaining an identity card or a passport. In order to obtain an identity card or a passport, one needs a document that proves one’s father was born in Yemen, and that is often difficult for Muwalladeen. One of the interviewees recounted the following:

*“I will tell you what happened to me after I returned from Kenya to Yemen, and my attempt to obtain an ID card. I went to the Personal Status Department to get an ID, but I was asked for documents to prove the identity of my father. However, my father never lived in Yemen as my grandfather had migrated in 1918. The solution was for me to return to my village in order to obtain a confirmation proving where my family originally came from, in addition to a court ruling, and then to return to complete the procedures for obtaining the card. But in my opinion, these procedures are legal and should be done. As for the discrimination that Muwalladeen face ... I think it is common and happens all over the world.”<sup>[47]</sup>*

---

<sup>[44]</sup> 32-year-old woman, face-to-face interview in Aden, September 20, 2021.

<sup>[45]</sup> 27-year-old man, face-to-face interview in Aden, September 19, 2021.

<sup>[46]</sup> 21-year-old man from Hadramawt, face-to-face interview in Cairo, September 2, 2021.

<sup>[47]</sup> 60-year-old man, face-to-face interview in Aden, September 26, 2021.

This interviewee was of the opinion that being asked for these documents was legal, and he even expressed understanding for discrimination against Muwalladeen. Other interviewees did not share this view, and saw efforts to deny citizenship to those who were born and brought up in Yemen, and to those who came from abroad but had lived for decades in Yemen, as clear examples of racism and discrimination. As a 26-year-old woman in Sana'a noted: "My mother lived in Yemen for 40 years, and they did not agree to give her nationality."<sup>[48]</sup>

Some people also said that they had been asked to show their IDs at checkpoints while other passengers had not, and they attributed this to being racially profiled as Muwalladeen. A 46-year-old man from Aden shared the following experience:

*"I was stopped at a security checkpoint on the road despite having a Yemeni identity card. But the passengers who were with me on the same bus showed a positive attitude. They supported me and convinced the security officers to let me continue my journey."*<sup>[49]</sup>

Difficulties in obtaining passports and identity cards in Yemen, and being stopped at checkpoints, are not limited to Muwalladeen. Many Yemenis who are not of mixed descent have such experiences. The war has severely hampered the mobility of Yemenis, both within Yemen and across borders. The number of checkpoints has increased and travelers are checked multiple times on their journey. Obtaining a passport is, generally speaking, difficult, and only possible in Aden, where the internationally recognized government maintains offices.

Legal hurdles are compounded by the closure of embassies in Yemen, hampering the renewal of passports for African passport holders. This makes it difficult for Muwalladeen to travel abroad, and in doing so, escape the war in Yemen. Mobility inside the country also is linked to having personal documents. After Houthi authorities assumed power in northern Yemen, security risks increased for Muwalladeen without legal documents or who were unable to renew them because they could not prove to the Houthi-run agencies that they were Yemeni.

In addition to legal issues, many Muwalladeen said that securing employment is difficult, and interviewees recounted many instances of discrimination at work, both in northern and southern Yemen. For example, the 46-year-old man in Aden said:

*"I could not get a job because I was of a mixed origin. I applied to companies and factories, but I did not get accepted. They look at us (Muwalladeen) as if we are not citizens of this country, as if we are foreigners."*<sup>[50]</sup>

---

<sup>[48]</sup> 26-year-old woman, face-to-face interview in Sana'a, September 9, 2021.

<sup>[49]</sup> 46-year-old man, face-to-face interview in Aden, September 18, 2021.

<sup>[50]</sup> 46-year-old man, face-to-face interview in Aden, September 18, 2021.



These negative experiences have been linked to the social class and educational background of the interviewees. As mentioned earlier, in the 1970 constitution, status differentials were officially abolished. Yet, those of mixed descent continued to suffer from discrimination at a legal level. In the 1980s and 1990s, Muwalladeen often had a higher educational level than the local Yemeni population, as they had been educated abroad. They often spoke English in addition to Arabic, and attitudes toward women's employment were more positive among Muwalladeen than among the non-Muwallad population.<sup>[51]</sup> Many Muwalladat were pioneers, taking up paid work in teaching, nursing and administration, and in doing so opened the way for other women. In a 2012 article, Connie Christiansen mentions that Muwalladeen were overrepresented in jobs in international organizations, in part because it was (and is) difficult for Muwalladeen to secure government employment because of the challenges in obtaining an identity card.<sup>[52]</sup>

Some interviewees, such as the 34-year-old Sana'a man quoted earlier who spoke of openness and progress compared to his parents' and grandparents' eras, perceived the general situation as having eased over time. A 52-year-old woman in Sana'a specified the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990 as a turning point, recounting:

*"They looked at you with an inferior look, because of the difference in dialect or color, and talked to you as if you were not one of them. But thank God, after the unity, there is no longer the same discrimination that existed before. Currently, they are a little bit humble, it is better than before."*<sup>[53]</sup>

An interviewee originally from Hadramawt took an opposite view:

*"The war greatly affected the situation of Muwalladeen, but in fact, their suffering may have begun with the unification of North and South Yemen. There are no longer laws protecting them, and with the arrival of many 'whiter' Yemenis from the north, this has become the standard for skin color in the country, and they (Muwalladeen) are suffering more because of their color."*<sup>[54]</sup>

Now that the Houthis are ruling most of what was previously considered North Yemen, genealogy has become much more important than it had been since the overthrow of the imamate in the 1960s.<sup>[55]</sup> This element will be considered more thoroughly below, in 'The Impact of the War'. The extent, however to which Muwalladeen were and still are stigmatized and racialized depends on a variety of factors, such as where they live, the social status background of their father's family and their skin color. Interviewees reported facing discrimination at school, in the labor market, in marriage formation and in obtaining legal documents. In the next section, gender differences among muwalladeen are discussed.

<sup>[51]</sup> Marina de Regt, "Pioneers or Pawns? Women Health Workers and the Politics of Development in Yemen," (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007); Connie Caroe Christiansen, "Gender and Social Remittances: Return Migrants to Yemen from Eastern Africa," *Chroniques Yémenites*, vol. 17, (2012)

<sup>[52]</sup> Connie Caroe Christiansen, "Gender and Social Remittances: Return Migrants to Yemen from Eastern Africa," *Chroniques Yémenites*, vol. 17, (2012)

<sup>[53]</sup> 52-year-old woman, face-to-face interview in Sana'a, September 7, 2021.

<sup>[54]</sup> 21-year-old man from Hadramawt, face-to-face interview in Cairo, September 2, 2021.

<sup>[55]</sup> See, Sabria Al-Thawr, "Identity and War: The Power of Labeling," POMEPS, 2021, <https://pomeps.org/identity-and-war-the-power-of-labeling>

## GENDER DIFFERENCES

Yemen is a patriarchal society and gender differences are part and parcel of the country's social, economic and political make-up. How does gender affect the experiences of male and female Muwalladeen? Interestingly, both men and women interviewed were of the opinion that men, by virtue of their experiences and their interactions with people outside the home, are more affected by discrimination and stigmatization than women. In addition, many respondents, again both men and women, noted that respecting women is part of Yemeni culture and that this is a possible explanation for why Muwalladeen women are less often directly subjected to stigmatization or discrimination. One of the interviewees, a young woman, said:

*“We are in Yemen and the people here respect women a lot, except for the word warya. ... But if you were a man, they would not respect you. I think that men mix with people and have a lot of experiences, unlike women.”<sup>[56]</sup>*

This statement, however, includes a contradiction that should not be neglected. While the interviewee claims that women are respected in Yemen, she also points out that women are sometimes called derogatory terms such as warya, a term that is considered an insult when used in the wrong context.<sup>[57]</sup> As another interviewee, a 33-year-old man in Sana'a, noted, Muwalladeen women also have been stereotyped as more sexually available than non-Muwalladeen women.<sup>[58]</sup> There were also interviewees who perceived similar amounts of discrimination among male and female Muwalladeen. As one man said:

*“It is not different for Muwalladeen, whether they are men or women, as they will be looked upon with contempt and inferiority.”*

Stark contrasts were apparent between the relatively open-minded ideas of the families that interviewees grew up in and what they considered the “closed” social norms and values of mainstream Yemeni society, which imposes more restrictions on women than on men. A 20-year-old woman from Hadramawt said:

*“As a family who has experienced migration, we are more open to differences than others and more receptive to those who are different from us. There is an atmosphere of freedom and flexibility at home where my family and my sisters support me in all our choices, and this is rare in Yemen.”<sup>[59]</sup>*

<sup>[56]</sup> 26-year-old woman, face-to-face interview in Sana'a, September 9, 2021.

<sup>[57]</sup> The term “warya” is used in Somali to call the attention of a familiar person, but it becomes an insult when used to call a stranger. In Somali, women are not called warya but naaya. The fact that the term warya is used in Yemen to refer to women of mixed descent is insulting.

<sup>[58]</sup> 33-year-old man, face-to-face interview in Sana'a, October 7, 2021.

<sup>[59]</sup> 20-year-old woman from Hadramawt, interview via Skype, October 7, 2021.

As a result of her family's attitude, this young woman had been able to undertake higher education and work. She noted the fact that this was quite exceptional in Seyoun, where gender relations remain conservative and few women have paid employment outside the house.

Other female interviewees expressed that the war had negative consequences for them as women because their male relatives, brothers, sons and/or husbands had lost their jobs and they had to find paid work themselves, which was difficult. They feel discriminated against because they do not have access to well-paid and high-status jobs, and, driven by the need to work, most often find employment as domestic workers or providing assistance on occasions such as weddings and funerals for a small wage. They experience their visibility in the public sphere as negative.

The general response that women encountered less discrimination than men because women are less visible in the public sphere could also be analyzed in view of the dominant gender ideology in Yemen in which women are supposed to be less active and visible in the public sphere. Yet, this ideology is often not in accordance with daily realities. Interviewees may not have wanted to draw attention to the fact that Muwalladat are sometimes active in the public sphere in order to protect the social status of women of mixed origins.

Women over 40 years of age seemed more aware of racist attitudes toward them, which can be explained by the fact that they had taken up more income-generating activities since the start of the war and thus have been more active in the public sphere. Their answers about the impact of the war centered on losing their husbands and having to work for a living. Younger interviewees tended to answer that the position of Muwalladeen is generally good, suggesting they may not have encountered much racism and discrimination. Women from lower social-economic groups face much more discrimination as a result of the intersection of race, poverty and poor-quality education.

The three male interviewees from Hadramawt denied that they were subject to discrimination. Interviewers perceived a certain pride in these answers, which could be attributed to the fact that discrimination is associated with people of lower status, such as the muzayyineen or Muhamasheen. Yet, later on in interviews, the men shared experiences of discrimination, and in doing so, showed that even though their families were of elite backgrounds, their relationship with Africa affects their social status.

In conclusion, male and female interviewees were of the opinion that there are few differences based on gender in the treatment of Muwalladeen. Interestingly, the majority of the interviewees held the opinion that male Muwalladeen are confronted with more stigmatization and discrimination because they are more active in public spaces. Moreover, women who were forced to take up paid work because of the war also felt discrimination.

## THE IMPACT OF THE WAR

This section examines how the war has impacted Muwalladeen. As mentioned previously, Yemeni society historically had a strong system of social stratification based on genealogy and the work someone did. During the current conflict, the Houthis' claim to power in northern Yemen is partly based on genealogy, and the renewed emphasis on family background has had an impact on Yemeni society. Thus, it would reason that Muwalladeen would experience additional discrimination as a result. Interestingly, the dominant viewpoint among interviewees was that the suffering of Muwalladeen as a result of the war is the same as that of other Yemenis. The war was seen as an equalizing force. As one interviewee said:

*“The same challenges faced by Muwalladeen or others, which are how to secure their daily food and survive as well as job opportunities, are no longer like before. Everyone suffers, whether Muwalladeen or Yemeni. I think the issue of Muwalladeen disappeared after the start of the war, because people want to live and have bigger concerns, and these are small matters in comparison.”<sup>[60]</sup>*

This view was not shared by everyone. A 25-year-old man in Sana'a was of the opinion that the war was deepening social rifts and dividing society into social classes based on family background:

*“I would not say it [the war] impacted the people [Muwalladeen], but it brought more racism, more racism among Yemenis themselves. So now with the Houthis being a social group that thinks that they are superior to anyone and everyone — they are white, they descend from the Prophet Mohammed, you know — all those terms discriminate and segregate people. Like, we are this and that; if you fit these categories or these criteria, you are good. If not, you are not good. So the conflict brought more racism, not only toward black people but also toward everyone.”<sup>[61]</sup>*

One area in which discrimination was reportedly felt more during the war was in hiring practices. A 40-year-old man in Sana'a said:

*“Originally, we were persecuted for everything from the day we were born brown in color and Muwalladeen, and this is considered a war against us by means of sustenance, food, living, working, etc. All the prices went up, to the one who was renting a house for 50,000 [Yemeni rials], they ask him now for 100,000 rent, or to leave the house. Where does he go? To the street? This war affected everyone, whether [non-Muwalladeen] Yemenis or Muwalladeen, but the [non-Muwalladeen] Yemenis' condition is somehow better because they have lands or a house, but you can rarely find Muwalladeen living in a good condition; some of them work for daily payment and others don't work at all. Before, everything was easy, but after the war, the situation turned and everything was difficult.”<sup>[62]</sup>*

<sup>[60]</sup> 32-year-old woman, face-to-face interview in Sana'a, September 28, 2021.

<sup>[61]</sup> 25-year-old man, face-to-face interview in Sana'a, September 27, 2021.

<sup>[62]</sup> 40-year-old man, face-to-face interview in Sana'a, September 14, 2021.

While some interviewees were of the opinion that Muwalladeen suffer more from the war because they are already at the bottom of the social ladder in Yemen, others mentioned that Muwalladeen are discriminated against because they are expected to have money, which may be attributed to the assumption that they have relatives abroad offering financial support. For example, a 23-year-old woman in Sana'a said:

*“ID cards were obstructed in order to take money as a bribe to complete the transaction. This was during the war, because we had applied for ID cards, but we felt that they were blocking us because we were Muwalladeen. I feel that people have this idea about Muwalladeen – that they are rich, so they take double the amount from them.”<sup>[63]</sup>*

With regard to gender, men and women have been affected in different ways by the war, regardless of whether they are Muwalladeen. Men traditionally are considered to be breadwinners in Yemen, but the war has led some to lose their jobs. Other examples of discrimination include difficulties in arranging marriages and the break up of families.<sup>[64]</sup> One interviewee spoke of the common struggle, but noted a specific additional concern:

*“The challenges that Muwalladeen face are the same as those that non-Muwalladeen face, except for a few things. For example, when some Muwalladeen young men propose to girls, the families of these girls get scared about the identity of those who are of mixed Yemeni-African origin. They fear that they are among the Africans who entered the country unofficially during the war.”<sup>[65]</sup>*

The war has also forced some Yemenis to migrate from one part of the country to the other, and has prompted cross-border migration, which has resulted in new challenges and tensions concerning gender. One interviewee shared that her family was forced to flee Sana'a because their house was close to areas that were bombed. They returned to Hadramawt, from where her family originates, but they faced many challenges trying to reintegrate into local society as they lacked a social network. She said:

*“I was in high school and faced terrible racism because I was the only girl who didn't cover her face, and I was harassed in the street.”<sup>[66]</sup>*

---

<sup>[63]</sup> 23-year-old woman, face-to-face interview in Sana'a, October 7, 2021.

<sup>[64]</sup> Fawziah Al-Ammar, Hannah Patchett & Shams Shamsan, A Gendered Crisis: Understanding the Experiences of Yemen's War," Sana'a Center For Strategic Studies, December 15, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications8480/>

<sup>[65]</sup> 31-year-old woman, face-to-face interview in Aden, September 20, 2021.

<sup>[66]</sup> 20-year-old woman from Hadramawt, phone interview, October 7, 2021.

Her experiences stand in stark contrast with the views of three male Muwalladeen from Hadramawt who denied having experienced any form of discrimination and racism. The fact that they were men and were having relatively established social and economic positions and social networks might be a reason for this difference. Yet, interestingly, further on in the interviews they all shared experiences with being treated differently as well. One of them said:

*“If I wasn’t a Muwallad and fluent in three languages, I wouldn’t have had all the opportunities I’ve had in my life. Although I did not receive a higher education, a Kenyan high school diploma was considered an important thing in Yemen, and my experience in working in ministries and embassies made people call me a doctor. I don’t like it, but it shows great appreciation and respect. Not only education, but the diverse experiences and backgrounds that coexist together in the diaspora have formed my personality, which can succeed anywhere.”<sup>[67]</sup>*

He continued:

*“I present myself as a Hadrami born in the diaspora, and if this is the appropriate definition of the term “Muwallad,” then I have no problem with it. But what bothers me is that it is used as an insult to a person. Personally, I do not consider it an insult because there is nothing wrong or forbidden in a person being Muwallad. Neither I nor my family hide this fact; we are proud of it despite the fact that there is strong racism in Hadramawt toward us. ... I personally have not been affected by it, perhaps because of my position, but there are those in society who are subjected to it harshly, both men and women.”<sup>[68]</sup>*

In conclusion, whereas interviewees emphasized the fact that the war has affected Yemenis regardless of their ethnic background, the research indicated particular challenges for Muwalladeen in terms of legal issues and, racism, in particular in the northern part of Yemen.

---

<sup>[67]</sup> 75-year-old man, interview via Zoom, 2 October 2021.

<sup>[68]</sup> 75-year-old man, interview via Zoom, 2 October 2021.

## MIGRATION ASPIRATIONS

While many Muwalladeen tried to integrate into Yemeni society prior to the war, now those of mixed descent sometimes choose to leave the country. As mentioned in the introduction, Yemenis of African descent fled to Djibouti, Jordan, and other destinations.<sup>[69]</sup> In her article on Yemeni refugees in Djibouti, Nathalie Peutz mentions that a considerable portion of the people she interviewed in Markazi camp were of mixed descent and already had historical relations with the Horn of Africa. Some of her interviewees said they did not feel they belong in Yemen because they were considered “outsiders” and not pure Yemenis.<sup>[70]</sup>

*“What this population seeks — many of them educated and urban, but many also the so-called hybrid descendants (Muwallad/een) of both “Arab” and “African” parents — is refuge from generations of cross-sea migration. In the view of those born to Yemeni fathers and Eritrean, Ethiopian or Somali mothers, neither Yemen nor the countries in the Horn of Africa had ever fully integrated them. This experience of socioeconomic marginalization—not the war, itself—is why many had traveled to Djibouti to become UNHCR-recognized refugees: refugees who, through the promise of third-country resettlement and access to meaningful citizenship, hoped to escape their (often involuntary) migration pasts.”<sup>[71]</sup>*

The above-mentioned study prompted us to ask interviewees questions about migration, such as whether they knew people who had migrated, whether they had migration aspirations themselves, and whether their Muwallad status was a reason for them to consider migration? Many of the interviewees knew Muwalladeen who had emigrated. A 59-year-old man in Aden said:

*“Many Muwalladeen left the country because of the war and deteriorating living conditions, and they moved to different places to which they belong. Some of them have succeeded, and others have faced trouble and discrimination, especially those who immigrated to Somalia, where they are treated with racism and seen as Arabs and Yemenis.”<sup>[72]</sup>*

Overall, most interviewees said that Yemen is not a suitable place to live and build a good future for themselves or their families because of war, marginalization or both. Despite this, a number of respondents stated that they do not want to leave Yemen, either because they have already settled with their children and families,

<sup>[69]</sup> See, for example: Samaher al-Hadheri and Morgann Barbara Pernot, “The Evolution of Yemeni Migration to Djibouti,” The Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, April 13, 2022, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/17445>; Solemn al-Majali, “A Precarious Refuge: Yemeni Asylum Seekers in Jordan,” The Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, February 14, 2022, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/16557>

<sup>[70]</sup> Nathalie Peutz, “The Fault of Our Grandfathers: Yemen’s Third-Generation Migrants Seeking Refuge from Displacement,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* vol. 51 (2019)

<sup>[71]</sup> Nathalie Peutz, “The Fault of Our Grandfathers: Yemen’s Third-Generation Migrants Seeking Refuge from Displacement,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* vol. 51 (2019), p. 364

<sup>[72]</sup> 59-year-old man, face-to-face interview in Aden, September 18, 2021.

because of their emotional attachment to the country, or because they are simply not interested in integrating into new societies. A 67-year-old woman in Aden said:

*“As for myself, I neither aspire nor think about emigrating, and this is what I advise my children and grandchildren to do as well. And in the end, Muwalladeen are part of the society. When the conditions of the society as a whole improve, their conditions will improve.”<sup>[73]</sup>*

Among interviewees that aspired to emigrate, many confirmed that their Muwalladeen status was a factor in the consideration. A smaller number of those who wanted to emigrate did not cite their background. For example, a 40-year-old woman in Sana’a said:

*“Yes, sure [to emigration], due to the difficult living conditions. My status as a Muwallada is not a reason, but the situation the country is going through is [a reason].”<sup>[74]</sup>*

Another interviewee from Hadramawt mentioned that he knew many Muwalladeen who had left Yemen and who used their historical relations with countries in Africa as a first step to reach Europe. He said:

*“I know many who emigrated because of the war, and some of them went to seek asylum in Kenya and Djibouti in order to be resettled in Europe. In my opinion, this is a good step, as their lives are much better now than their lives in Yemen.”<sup>[75]</sup>*

During a focus group discussion in Amman, Jordan, with six Muwalladeen, aged 30 to 60, one of the issues discussed was whether their Muwallad background was a reason they left Yemen. Most of them confirmed that it was. They said that their families were used to migration and that they were therefore doing the same as their forefathers. Yet, most of the participants also mentioned that they remained outsiders, wherever they moved. Some of them traveled from Yemen to Somalia, after the war dramatically escalated in 2015, on ships that were sent by the Somali government in order to help Muwalladeen leave the country. They noted that they were called Yemenis in Somalia and Somalis in Yemen. This shows that migration does not necessarily address feelings of “non-belonging”. This comports with Peutz’s conclusion that those who left Yemen for Djibouti in the hope of finding a better life abroad encountered other forms of exclusion, and sometimes returned to Yemen, particularly as life in a refugee camp was restrictive.<sup>[76]</sup> Solenn Al-Majali, who studies refugees of Yemeni and Somali

<sup>[73]</sup> 67-year-old woman, face-to-face interview in Aden, September 22, 2021.

<sup>[74]</sup> 40-year-old woman, face-to-face interview in Sana’a, September 13, 2021.

<sup>[75]</sup> 75-year-old man from Hadramawt, Zoom-interview, October 2, 2021.

<sup>[76]</sup> See, Nathalie Peutz, “The Fault of Our Grandfathers: Yemen’s Third-Generation Migrants Seeking Refuge from Displacement,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* vol. 51 (2019)



origin in Jordan, said that both groups are discriminated against in Jordanian society but that Muwalladeen could play with their two identities as African and Arab. In interactions with Jordanians, they can present themselves as Yemenis, which facilitates their contacts with the host society, while this is more difficult for Somali refugees. Al-Majali also explained that most of the Muwalladeen in Amman arrived from Aden, are of mixed Yemeni-Somali background, and left during the war, in particular when Al-Qaeda was very strong in the south of Yemen. They were targeted as foreigners and suffered from discrimination at that time. Some of them first migrated to Somalia, where they still had relatives, and later traveled to Jordan, in many cases after first having returned to Yemen. Others migrated to Jordan directly from Yemen.<sup>[77]</sup>

In conclusion, the research indicates that migration aspirations are abundant among Muwalladeen but their status as Muwallad is not necessarily seen as the primary reason. Just like many other Yemenis who are not considered Muwalladeen, research participants suffer from the degraded social, economic and security situation in Yemen and some would therefore prefer to leave the country and build up a new life outside of Yemen, preferably in Europe or the United States. Yet, even those who migrate to the countries of one of their “forefathers”<sup>[78]</sup> often continued to feel they did not belong.

---

<sup>[77]</sup> Researcher’s face-to-face interview with Solenn Al-Majali, Amman, Jordan, October 1, 2021.

<sup>[78]</sup> Instead of forefathers it would be better to use “foremothers” but this is not commonly used.

## CONCLUSION

This study is the first qualitative research carried out about people who identify as Muwalladeen in Yemen during the war, focusing on those who have historical linkages with Africa. The study did not aim to give a representative overview of the experiences of Muwalladeen in Yemen, as this was impossible in view of the large variety of people who could be considered Muwalladeen and in view of the limitations to carrying out fieldwork in Yemen. It is therefore also difficult to draw general conclusions based on the interviews. The interviews showed a wide variety of experiences ranging from positive evaluations of being a Muwallad to clear discrimination, stigmatization and racism. Differences in how the research participants experience their mixed origins can be attributed to the attitudes of their parents, their reception at school and in the labor market, their gender, class and regional background and, last but not least, their skin color.

Those who were brought up in families in which familial links with Africa were positively valued and not hidden but instead celebrated had much more positive self-identifications than those who only found out that they were considered Muwalladeen via contact with others. The latter often were confronted with stigmatization and discrimination at school when other children or teachers questioned their family background. In particular, those with darker skin tones were victims of racism, labeled non-Yemenis and called names. Whereas the general perception is that racism is more prevalent in northern Yemen, Muwalladeen in Aden and Hadramawt also shared experiences of discrimination and stigmatization, particularly during their childhood and teenage years.

Regardless of whether they had been brought up with positive or negative attitudes toward their Muwallad backgrounds, many interviewees shared that they experienced discrimination and racism at school and in the labor market, noting difficulties finding jobs because of their family background. Most of the interviewees in the study came from lower socioeconomic classes, but some, and in particular those from Hadramawt, were better off. The latter emphasized that their Muwallad background had been positive because they had had access to higher education, learned several languages and were able to work in companies or other professions. However, they did confirm that the term Muwallad in general had a negative connotation and was often used as a term of abuse.

One of the most important domains in which Muwalladeen reportedly experienced discrimination was in legal issues. Their access to citizenship was sometimes severely hampered by the fact that they had to show a birth certificate for their father or themselves (in the case of people born abroad). As a result, obtaining an ID card or passport was difficult, and this could affect many other parts of life, such as aspirations for migration abroad. Another important domain in which

discrimination was reportedly common was marriages. Muwalladeen are in many cases not able to marry non-Muwalladeen, and this applies particularly to male Muwalladeen.

With regard to gender, the general view was that male Muwalladeen encountered more racism because they were more active in the public domain. Yet, female Muwalladeen (Muwalladat) also shared experiences of discrimination, in particular when working outside of the house.

The opinion of most research participants was that the war has had negative consequences for the Yemeni population in general, and not specifically for Muwalladeen. Many Yemenis are struggling to make a living and are confronted with security issues while Yemeni society has become more polarized, with social divisions more pronounced and people increasingly tending to categorize others on the basis of their familial background.

Migration is seen as a way out for many Muwalladeen. Yet, the possibilities to migrate abroad are limited and depend on access to passports and social networks. Muwalladeen on the one hand may benefit from the fact that they have family ties abroad, but on the other hand, they often face more difficulties obtaining a passport. Those who have managed to migrate have found themselves viewed as outsiders in their countries of migration, which sometimes has become a reason to return to Yemen.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations aim to disrupt racialization, stigmatization and discriminatory practices toward people of mixed ancestry in Yemen and improve the situation for Muwalladeen in the country.

### **For the International Community and Donor Organizations:**

- Ensure minority representatives are included in future peace negotiations so any prospective peace or reconciliation agreement contains provisions guaranteeing their rights.
- Exert pressure on the internationally recognized government and de facto authorities regarding the protection of minority rights, including people of mixed origin, on issues such as the right of movement, the right to official documents and the cessation of discrimination against them.
- Allocate a portion of financial grants to support local Yemeni organizations that work for social equality and on combating racism, and for further research into minorities in Yemen, especially in light of the fact that groups such as the Muwalladeen are generally not organized at the community level.

### **For Civil Society Organizations:**

- Design programs that target the Muwalladeen and the local community in order to remove cultural and psychological barriers that prevent their full integration into society such as public awareness campaigns that address biases and prejudice against Muwalladeen in public sentiments.
- Design programs aimed at providing psychological support to men and women of mixed origins to mitigate the effects of stigma and discrimination, and urge men and women of mixed origins to form organizations that can cooperate with other NGOs in providing psychological and legal support.
- Design social media campaigns celebrating people of mixed origin as an integral part of Yemeni society, making clear the principle of “purity” is a misconception.

### **For the Internationally Recognized Government and De Facto Authorities:**

- Enact laws criminalizing racism in all its forms, along with regulations to ensure effective compliance and monitoring in all areas, especially on matters of employment and the issuing of identity cards and marriage certifications.
- Assist minorities with legal transactions and paperwork, especially in light of the instability in the country.
- Include instruction about diversity and racism at all levels of education (primary, secondary and university); this should include the rich history

of migration to and from Yemen and its impact on the Yemeni society and population.



## ANNEX 1: KEY EXPERTS INTERVIEWED

### **Solenn al-Majali**

Researcher and PhD Candidate in Anthropology  
Telemme, Aix-Marseille Université  
Ifpo Amman, Jordan

### **Sabria al-Thawr**

Lecturer and researcher  
Gender Development Research and Studies Center  
Sana'a University, Yemen

### **Dr. Connie Christiansen**

Programma Manager  
KVINFO Center for Gender Equality and Diversity  
Copenhagen, Denmark

### **Dr. Nathalie Peutz**

Associated Professor of Arab Crossroads Studies and Anthropology  
New York University, Abu Dhabi  
United Arab Emirates



**Marina de Regt** is Associate Professor at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands. She has more than 30 years of experience working in and about Yemen. Her main research interests include gender, labor and migration between Yemen and the Horn of Africa. **She has also carried out research in Morocco, Ethiopia and Jordan**, and published extensively in academic and non-academic journals and on websites.

**Aisha Aljaedy** is a social entrepreneur and human rights activist. She studied law at Hadramawt University and studies political science at the American University in Cairo. She is also a writer who has published multiple articles in regional and international publications.

This report is part of a series of publications, produced by the Sana'a Center and funded by the Government of the Kingdom of Sweden, examining minority communities in Yemen.





[WWW.SANAACENTER.ORG](http://WWW.SANAACENTER.ORG)