



BRINGING FORTH THE VOICES OF MUHAMMASHEEN

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ACRONYMS

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data
CARE	Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere
CEDAW	Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CERD	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CSO	Civil society organization
CSO	Central Statistical Organization
DNA	Deoxyribonucleic acid
DHS	National Health and Demographic Survey
FGD	Focus group discussion
GBV	Gender-based violence
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GPC	General People's Congress
GPS	Global Positioning System
HFIAS	Household Food Insecurity Access Scale
HNO	Humanitarian Needs Overview
IDP	Internally displaced person
IFES	International Foundation for Electoral Systems
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMSEA	Integrated Model of Social and Economic Assistance and Empowerment
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MERIP	Middle East Research and Information Project
MOSAL	Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NDC	National Dialogue Conference
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
OAPEC	Organization Of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
PDRY	People's Democratic Republic of Yemen

ROY	Republic of Yemen
SFD	Social Fund for Development
SGBV	Sexual and gender-based violence
STC	Southern Transitional Council
SWF	Social Welfare Fund
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
VNA	Vulnerability and Needs Assessment
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
YAR	Yemen Arab Republic
YR	Yemeni Rials
YSP	Yemeni Socialist Party



I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Muhammasheen, meaning “the marginalized,” is an ascriptive term designating a group of Yemenis who were traditionally called *Al-Akhdam* (literally meaning “the servants”).^[1] Membership in this ethnic minority is hereditary, associated with certain types of occupations, and in traditional Yemeni social structures its members are considered ‘weak’ and lacking origins, therefore ostensibly under tribal protection. There are strong cultural prohibitions against marriage of Muhammasheen to other social groups and its members are traditionally not allowed to bear arms or to own property. Such individuals are perceived as being of African origin and are highly stigmatized within Yemeni society in ways that are caste-like. The term Muhammasheen, as an alternative to *Al-Akhdam*, came into common parlance in the early part of the new millennium in development and humanitarian circles and more broadly in Yemeni society.

Estimates of the number of Muhammasheen in Yemen vary radically, most commonly stated from 500,000 to 3.5 million, with significant concentrations in slums surrounding Yemen’s major cities. This study estimates there are between 500,000 to 800,000 Muhammasheen, approximately 1.6 to 2.6 percent of Yemen’s population. There are a variety of theories about the origins of the Muhammasheen. Ultimately, discussions on origins cloud the truth that Muhammasheen are Yemenis and Yemen is their homeland.

During the conflict, Muhammasheen children have faced similar issues as other children in Yemen, as well as additional challenges that emerge from their membership of an ostracized ethnic minority with high levels of poverty and at risk from sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Muhammasheen children encounter high levels of discrimination in schools from teachers and administrators, as well as bullying and harassment from their peers. Additionally, many Muhammasheen families need the income that children earn, primarily through begging, to survive. Despite such an environment, Muhammasheen families generally care deeply about education as it is seen as essential to build a better life. The incidence of SGBV against Muhammasheen is perceived to be increasing, including among children, often with impunity for the perpetrators due to a lack of social and state protection of this group.

Young men from the Muhammasheen community have been particularly hard hit by the conflict with shrinking income-earning and educational opportunities and diminishing hopes for marriage and a better future. One of the most significant challenges young Muhammasheen men face is recruitment to fight by parties to

1) This term will be used throughout this study, despite the fact that from within the Muhammasheen community there is not an agreed preferred term. See Annex A for a discussion of various terms.

the conflict. While families benefit in the short term from the money earned this comes with problems: lack of support for medical treatment if a young man is injured, and little or no compensation if he is not able to work again; no support for mental health issues or trauma suffered as a result of the horror of war; and if a young man is killed while fighting, his family loses his financial contribution with no support to his parents, widow or children. Further, when a man is away fighting his family is more vulnerable to abuse and violence. Muhammasheen men have expressed that they feel used by parties to the conflict who neglected them before the conflict and who they believe will abandon them when the war is over.

One of the most urgent needs of Muhammasheen identified in this research is shelter and housing. The conflict has dramatically deteriorated the situation for all residents of shantytowns, but due to their caste-like status and structural discrimination Muhammasheen residents have been disproportionately negatively impacted. Challenges include severe overcrowding and land ownership issues. The absence of basic services in slums was a major issue before the conflict and since 2015 has only increased in significance.

Poverty among Muhammasheen is intimately tied to structural discrimination and translates into a range of challenges including: educational challenges which limit income-earning potential; weak healthcare services contributing to indebtedness and poor health, impacting the ability to work; denial of humanitarian assistance despite Muhammasheen being among the most vulnerable in displacement; and abuse and trauma which have deep emotional and psychological impacts contributing to depression and constraining income earning.

The social isolation and stigmatization of Muhammasheen magnify vulnerabilities and deny them the support of their fellow Yemenis. Prior to the conflict, Muhammasheen had varying levels of integration into Yemeni society in different parts of the country. Generally, in Aden and Hudaydah, Muhammasheen were more accepted and faced less overt discrimination. However, with the conflict and humanitarian crisis, in some cases isolation has increased, although there are reports of communities of Muhammasheen and non-Muhammasheen coming together in displacement to support one another. In recent decades many Muhammasheen have become distant from tribal systems as a result of urbanization and seeking to escape strangling social stratification in rural areas through migration.

The emergence of Muhammasheen-led CSOs has contributed to the increased visibility of the community at both the national and international levels. Such organizations have sought to positively impact the situation of Muhammasheen through educational and health activities, documenting abuse and discrimination,

assessing needs and advocating with local authorities on specific issues. Yemeni civil society has been deeply impacted by the conflict and ensuing humanitarian crisis, and Muhammasheen-led CSOs face similar challenges as their peer organizations, although their marginalized status means their staff face amplified risks of harassment, detention and targeted abuse.

Muhammasheen political engagement has varied during different eras and locations. With the unification of Yemen in May 1990, the possibility of democratization, political parties and electoral politics emerged, but only a few Muhammasheen candidates have entered electoral politics. Apathy or cynicism about national politics is not uncommon among Muhammasheen, who have rarely benefited from the system and have been persecuted, made invisible or manipulated by political elites. Some younger Muhammasheen joined in Yemen's popular uprising starting in January 2011 seeking political change. However, despite this increased public profile, only one individual from the community, president of the National Union of the Marginalized Noaman al-Hudhaifi, participated in the National Dialogue Conference (NDC). Despite this limited representation, a number of the 1,800 NDC recommendations specifically addressed the situation of Muhammasheen. Following the NDC, the Constitutional Drafting Committee included one article in the new constitution on the situation of Muhammasheen (Article 62), pledging to promote their participation in political, economic and social life.

Women in Yemen face significant social, economic and political challenges. *Muhammashat* (plural feminine) are the most stigmatized group of Yemeni women, and also the most vulnerable to abuse. Their income-earning activities, commonly begging and street sweeping and vending, bring them into public spaces where there are few other Yemeni women. Additionally, their social isolation and lack of adequate housing expose them to risks and deny them the respect and protection accorded to women from other strata of society. Stereotypes about *Muhammashat* abound, accusing them of loose morals, lack of honor and lineage and weak religious observance; these stereotypes shape their interactions with other Yemeni men and women. Such prejudiced views have real life consequences for *Muhammashat* and put them at increased risk of harassment, abuse and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Perpetrators of violence against *Muhammashat* are rarely prosecuted.

Table 1 summarizes the findings of this study, and presents recommendations to improve the situation of Muhammasheen and address underlying inequalities and structural discrimination in Yemen.

Table 1: Summary of Findings and Recommendations

No.	Finding	Recommendation
1	Conflict-sensitive approaches are essential for all programming in Yemen. There is structural discrimination against Muhammasheen and resistance to support them from other local actors.	Integrate conflict-sensitive approaches in interventions targeting Muhammasheen to mitigate tensions and negative consequences. Include host communities, fellow IDPs and slum residents in activities and conduct conflict analysis for any project targeting Muhammasheen.
2	Gender-sensitive programming is weak in Yemen, particularly in humanitarian interventions. Protection concerns are often sidelined in urgent life-saving interventions and there is a lack of gender expertise among humanitarian personnel.	Mainstream gender analysis in all programming and implement programs focusing on the needs of vulnerable women and promoting equality. Utilize income-earning interventions to support gender-based violence survivors and those at high risk of early marriage, including young Muhammashat.
3	Many programs for Muhammasheen have a narrow geographic or sectoral focus, limiting impact.	Strengthen coordination among organizations targeting Muhammasheen and other vulnerable groups.
4	The isolation of Muhammasheen requires focused efforts to promote integration and social inclusion. There is limited information on best practices working with ostracized and stigmatized groups.	Compile lessons learned and research best practices from various interventions in Yemen as well as initiatives in other contexts to combat racism and caste-based discrimination against marginalized groups.
5	Civil society is key to building resilience at the community level and providing basic services. Muhammasheen-led CSOs face isolation and discrimination, as well as experiencing similar weaknesses as other local CSOs.	Invest in capacity building of local CSOs led by Muhammasheen and support them to build alliances with other Yemeni CSOs. Develop more flexible funding mechanisms to rapidly respond to evolving needs identified by Muhammasheen-led CSOs.
6	There is very limited documentation of human rights violations against Muhammasheen, undermining future efforts to hold parties to the conflict accountable for war crimes. There are few journalists, researchers and writers from within the Muhammasheen community.	Support the documentation of the impact of the conflict on Muhammasheen including building the capacity of human rights activists, journalists and researchers from within the community. Engage local and international organizations to mitigate retribution against the community for Muhammasheen-led activism.
7	Muhammasheen youth and women share similar challenges with their peers, but also struggle with unique issues and high levels of isolation and discrimination.	Conduct assessments with Muhammasheen youth and women to build solidarity and social cohesion. Use the arts to amplify voices and build skills in expressing needs, insights and aspirations.

No.	Finding	Recommendation
8	Education is key to social mobility and economic empowerment. There is a need to better understand why boys' enrollment and performance is lower than girls'.	Support vocational training opportunities and higher education scholarships for youth. Support schools to improve learning environments in areas with high numbers of Muhammasheen and engage parents to address bullying and corporal punishment.
9	The lack of government-issued national ID cards is a significant obstacle for Muhammasheen, particularly for Muhammashat, to access basic services and humanitarian aid.	Implement a campaign to provide national ID to all, with a particular focus on Muhammasheen and women, and facilitate the registration process making it more citizen-friendly and accessible to all.
10	While cash assistance targeting women is essential and must continue, such efforts are best combined with income-earning opportunities for Muhammasheen women, youth and men to contribute to longer term economic empowerment.	Support economic empowerment in renewable energy and sustainable interventions such as solar energy and recycling. Incentivize savings programs and creative entrepreneurial solutions for housing and shelter in slums. Promote financial inclusion of Muhammasheen youth in microfinance and entrepreneurship initiatives.
11	Housing and shelter, along with basic services (water, sanitation and cooking fuel) are high priorities. Land ownership issues contribute to insecurity and the destruction of Muhammasheen property by the state, local authorities and/or landowners.	Explore creative shelter and housing solutions in slums globally. Support government and local authorities to address needs, and empower Muhammasheen community leaders, including women and youth, to contribute to finding solutions.
12	Unaddressed social inequities and the systematic exclusion of Muhammasheen from decision-making has contributed to structural discrimination.	Foster social inclusion interventions, applying a gender lens. Institute a quota of Muhammasheen as beneficiaries and develop affirmative action for Muhammasheen and other vulnerable groups promoting a more inclusive society.
13	Access to and confidence in justice systems is very low among Muhammasheen. Police and prison systems perpetuate structural discrimination and abuse against juveniles, Muhammashat prisoners and their children incarcerated with them.	In more stable areas of the country, support the justice system to better deal with women and juveniles. Such efforts must be accompanied by reform of security and justice services, strengthening community-based efforts to address SGBV and the needs of children incarcerated with their mothers.



II. HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

2.1 Terminology

The *Muhammasheen*,^[2] meaning “the marginalized,” is an ascriptive term designating a group of Yemenis who were traditionally called *Al-Akhdam* (literally meaning “the servants”). Membership in this ethnic minority is hereditary, associated with certain types of occupations, and in traditional Yemeni social structures its members are considered ‘weak,’ lacking origins and, in tribal areas, under tribal protection. There are strong cultural prohibitions against marriage of Muhammasheen to other social groups and its members are traditionally not allowed to bear arms or own property. Muhammasheen are perceived as being of African origin and are highly stigmatized within Yemeni society in ways that are caste-like.^[3] While there are other groups in Yemeni society who share some elements of marginalization with Muhammasheen, social and state interactions with other groups are far less harsh and rigid.

The term *Al-Akhdam* is considered by many from within this group to ostracize, demean and denigrate, and over the years a variety of alternatives have been used. Salem Rubai Ali, chairman of the Presidential Council of the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) from 1969 to 1978, abolished the term and other traditional titles in the first decree of his chairmanship, making their use an offense punishable by imprisonment. This ban was accompanied by a range of social programs during his leadership which sought to eliminate inequalities among social groups, as well as build a political constituency for himself and the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP).^[4] Subsequently in the South the terms *Azboud*^[5] or *Ahjur*^[6] were more commonly used.^[7]

2) Plural; singular masculine, *Muhammash*; plural feminine, *Muhammashat*; and singular feminine, *Muhammasha*.

3) The eight pillars of caste used by Isabelle Wilkerson in her seminal book *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, Random House, 2020, include: divine will – the belief that social stratification is beyond human control, either divinely ordained or a natural law; heritability – the belief that social status is acquired at birth and immutable; endogamy – the prohibition of sex and marriage between castes; purity and pollution – the belief that the dominant caste is ‘pure’ and must be protected against pollution by the inferior castes; occupational hierarchy – the reservation of the more desirable occupations for the superior castes; dehumanization and stigma – the denial of individuality and human dignity of lower-caste individuals; terror and cruelty – as means of enforcement of the caste system and control of lower-castes; and inherent superiority and inferiority of castes – the belief that people of one caste are inherently superior to those of other castes.

4) Ashraf Girgrah, “‘Al-Akhdam’ Aden Marginalized Caste,” http://adencollege.info/Al_Akhdam_in_Aden_by_Ash_eng.pdf. Accessed September 11, 2020.

5) *Azboud* (plural of *Zuboud*) refers to people whose ancestors hailed from Zabid on the Tihamah coast.

6) *Ahjur* (plural of *Hujur*) refers to a historic community of dark-skinned wandering herders, originally from the southern lowlands of Wadi Hajar, who would seasonally work in agricultural harvesting.

7) Helen Lackner, P.D.R. *Yemen: Outpost of Socialist Development in Arabia*, London, Ithaca Press, 1985, p. 108.

The social category of Al-Akhdam is not racial alone, although the prejudice expressed about this group is often couched in terms of their black skin color. Many Yemenis have darker skin and are indistinguishable from Muhammasheen in physical appearance, yet they are from non-marginalized social groups including tribesmen, judges, mashayikh and descendants of the Prophet Mohammed.

The term Muhammasheen, as an alternative to Al-Akhdam, came into common parlance in the early part of the new millennium in development and humanitarian circles, and more broadly in Yemeni society, to assist discussions on the challenges and facing this group. Terminology related to Muhammasheen presents significant challenges, as in the struggle to claim their rights and address the stigma they face some activists have sought to expand the category to encompass other discriminated groups. Members of this group have various terms they use including: *Al-Ashad Fakran*, meaning the most impoverished; *Al-Akthar Du'afan*, the most vulnerable/weakest; *Al-Aqalu Hzan*, the least fortunate; or even the traditional term *Al-Akhdam*,^[8] the servants. Another term, which is now common in areas controlled by the armed Houthi movement, is *Ahfad Bilal* (the grandchildren, or descendants, of Bilal).^[9] In Hadramawt, Shabwa and Al-Mahra, sometimes Muhammasheen and other Yemeni ethnic groups of African descent are referred to collectively as *Al-'Abeed* (designating those who were formerly enslaved). Some younger activists from the community prefer to use the term *Fia' Samra* (brown category). For purposes of this study the term Muhammasheen is used focusing on this group of Yemenis, unless referencing other research, proverbs or the words of Muhammasheen themselves who may use the term Al-Akhdam.

In the absence of consensus among the community itself on the preferred term to refer to the group known traditionally as *Al-Akhdam*, in this report we use the term Muhammasheen, understanding its limitations and the concerns by some members of the community that it may collapse several marginalized classes under one term, resulting in diluting the historic and current grievances of *Al-Akhdam* who suffer from systematic caste-like structural discrimination.

(See Annex A for further information related to terminology.)

8) Some from the community prefer this term as a way to embrace their own traditions and transform stigma into pride.

9) Bilal ibn Rabah was a former enslaved man of African descent who was one of the most trusted companions of the Prophet Muhammad and the first individual who called Muslims to prayer.

Table 2: Traditional Social Hierarchy in Yemen's Northern Highlands^[10]

- *Sada* (singular, *sayyid*) – Families that trace their lineage to the Prophet Mohammed who adopted the honorific title of *sayyid*.^[11]
- *Qudha* (singular, *qadi*) – Religious judges and scholars, who were accorded a protected status by the surrounding tribes.
- *Mashayikh* (singular, *sheikh*) – Tribal leaders who were commonly elected by tribesmen, although their roles and rights varied in different parts of the country.
- *Qabail* (singular, *qabili*) – Tribesmen who bore arms and were responsible for maintaining the honor of their tribe, as well as working as small-scale farmers. *Qabail* are able to trace their lineage to the founders of their specific tribe. Traditionally, their identity was partially framed by the occupations they eschewed, such as those related to commerce and services provided in towns.
- *Mazayinah* (singular, *muzayyin*) – Also known as *Bani al-Khums*, or *Khaddam* (meaning servants, but distinct from Al-Akhdam), a category of 'weak' occupational groups under tribal protection, who were perceived to lack origins (*nuqqas* or *naqis al-Asl*), comprised of butchers, barbers, tanners, bath attendants, greengrocers, circumcisers, heralds and a number of other occupations who traditionally provided services to tribesmen and with whom it was unusual for 'higher' social categories to intermarry.
- *Al-Akhdam* (singular, *khadim*) – literally meaning the servants, the lowest level in the social hierarchy.

10) Tomas Gerholm, *Market, Mosque and Mufraj: Social Inequality in a Yemeni Town*, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Stockholm, 1977.

11) This category under different names can be found within both Zaidi and Shafei traditions (i.e., Shia and Sunni) in Yemen.

Table 2 provides a snapshot of Yemen's traditional social hierarchy in the country's northern highlands,^[12] with there being regional variations in the hierarchy's names and structures. A caveat in presenting such a hierarchy is that such descriptions are idealized and are relatively flexible, particularly in recent decades when such divisions have lost some of their meaning. For example, since the 1962 revolution, prominent political figures and businessmen have risen out of the *mazayinah* social class.^[13] *Al-Akhdam* are an exception to this caveat; their caste-like status is generally maintained through the present day across Yemen.

2.2 Demographics and Migration

Estimates of the size of Yemen's Muhammasheen community vary radically, most commonly cited from 500,000 to 3.5 million. The most recent census, in 2004, found 153,133 *Akhdam* in the country.^[14] However, the researcher Noaman al-Hakami was involved in conducting a rigorous parallel tabulation process following the census that counted 270,127 individuals in this caste-like category^[15] (approximately 1.38 percent of Yemen's population in 2004 of 19,540,000).^[16] For the purposes of this study the number of Muhammasheen are estimated to range from 427,000^[17] to 800,000,^[18] making up 1.4 to 2.6 percent of a total Yemeni

12) Various scholars have presented different versions of Yemeni social hierarchies, as terminology and categories vary between locations. For a comparison between a number of descriptions see: Tomas Gerholm, *Market, Mosque and Mufraj: Social Inequality in a Yemeni Town*, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Stockholm, 1977, p.105.; according to Kennedy (1987), "There has been some confusion in the descriptions of the traditional social system of Yemen. This is partially a reflection of regional variation, since each author tends to present the structure which he found as "the" Yemeni system [...]. In all accounts, however, there is agreement about the upper and lower levels of the stratification systems. This indicates that, although we may be dealing with regional differences, the upper and lower groups probably were generally similar throughout Yemen." John G. Kennedy, *The Flower of Paradise: The Institutionalized Use of the Drug Qat in North Yemen*, D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1987, p. 47.

13) John G. Kennedy, *The Flower of Paradise: The Institutionalized Use of the Drug Qat in North Yemen*, D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1987, p. 52.

14) According to data from the 2004 census the geographic distribution of Muhammasheen was as follows: 35 percent in Hudaydah; 13 percent in Hajjah; 10 percent in Dhamar; 8 percent in Aden; 5 percent in Taiz and Sa'ada; 4 percent in Amanat al-Asimah; 3 percent in Shabwa and Ibb; 2 percent in Lahj, Al-Bayda, Hadramawt and Al-Dhalea; and 1 percent in Raymah, Sana'a governorate, Abyan, Marib, Amran and Al-Jawf, and a few hundred in Al-Mahwit and Al-Mahra. This means that approximately 81 percent lived in areas formerly in the YAR and 19 percent in PDRY areas. Republic of Yemen, "2004 Census," <http://yemen-cso.microdatahub.com/en/index.php/catalog/2>. Accessed November 4, 2020. Although the data cited by Hakami was not found in the census data published online.

15) Noaman Abdullah al-Hakami, *Akhdam Category in Yemen*, LAP Lambert Academic Publishing, 2017,

16) Ibid.

17) Calculated by multiplying Al-Hakami's adjusted numbers from the 2004 census, 270,127 x 3% annual population growth rate for Yemen.

18) The upward range estimate was confirmed by knowledgeable informants for the research and based on the following assumptions: higher fertility rates among Muhammasheen; rural clusters of

population of 30,500,000.^[19] However, if one is discussing the total population residing in slum areas in the country, including non-Muhammasheen, the number would be much higher, though it is still unlikely to reach the 3 million-3.5 million sometimes posited as the upward number in the top of the range of Muhammasheen (approximately 10 percent of the population).

The movement of labor within Yemen, Muhammasheen and non-Muhammasheen alike, generally from more rural areas to urban settlements, preceded the 1960s revolutions in the north and south of the country.^[20] At the time of the 1962 revolution in the North and the emergence of the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), there were few Muhammasheen found in Sana'a or other highland areas. Most Muhammasheen lived in rural areas in western and southern Yemen, with high concentrations in the Tihamah plateau in Al-Hudaydah governorate, particularly in and around the city of Zabid, and in coastal Hajjah governorate, as well as communities in Hadramawt and Aden.^[21] In the mid-1970s under the presidency of Ibrahim al-Hamdi (1974-1977), the YAR government began recruiting Muhammasheen to Sana'a, and other cities, to work as street sweepers and sanitation workers under the auspices of the Ministry of Municipalities.^[22]

Along with other Yemenis, members of the Muhammasheen community also found opportunities for work in Gulf countries in the 1970s and 1980s, many of them eventually bringing their wives and children with them.^[23] During this period it is estimated that 30 percent of adult Yemeni men benefited from work opportunities that had proliferated as a result of the 1973 Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) oil embargo^[24] and the subsequent

Muhammasheen who were overlooked in the 2004 census; additional returnees from GCC countries; and the expansion of the category of traditional *Akhdam* to include other populations who are marginalized and yet who reside in slums/shantytowns in Yemen.

- 19) "Humanitarian Update," UNOCHA, May 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-update-issue-5-may-2020>. Accessed November 23, 2020.
- 20) In the mid-1850s, the British began recruiting Muhammasheen from Zabid and environs to work in Aden as street sweepers, garbage collectors and removers of night soil, and in Tawahi, Ma'alla, Shaykh Uthman, Crater in Al-Khusaf valley settlements were established. Scott S. Reese, *Imperial Muslims: Islam, Community and Authority in the Indian Ocean, 1839–1937*, Edinburgh University Press, 2018. p. 112-114. The construction of the Abyan irrigation scheme in the late 1930s by the British created a significant agrarian labor opportunity for Yemenis from various parts of the country, including Muhammasheen.
- 21) Burja notes that in 1962-1963 in Hureidah, a town of 2,000 in Wadi 'Amd branching off the larger Wadi Hadramawt, 20.8 percent of the population were *Al-Akhdam*. Abdalla S. Burja, *The Politics of Stratification: A Study of Political Change in a South Arabian Town*. Oxford University Press. 1971. p. 14.
- 22) Afrah Al-Ahmadi and Sharon Beatty, "Participatory Socio-economic Needs Survey of the Sana'a Urban Settlement Dwellers with Special Reference to Women," Oxfam-Yemen, April 1997. p. 33.
- 23) In 1990 it was estimated that up to one-third of Yemenis working in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf were accompanied by their families. Thomas Stevenson, "Yemeni Workers Come Home: Reabsorbing One Million Migrants," MERIP, 181, March/April 1993, p. 16, <https://merip.org/1993/03/yemeni-workers-come-home/>. Accessed November 17, 2020.
- 24) The catalyst for the OPEC oil embargo was to target nations perceived as supporting Israel during the Yom Kippur War in 1973, resulting in a dramatic increase in the price of oil on the global market of 300

massive infrastructure boom it fueled in the Gulf. Yemeni migrant workers sent remittances home to their families^[25] and contributed to citizen-led investments in schools, water systems and housing throughout the country. This migration wave and the resulting remittances also contributed to changing social patterns in the country. However, as one study from the early 1960s in Hadramawt found, Muhammasheen were disadvantaged in labor migration, which was a significant channel for upward social mobility; wealthier, higher status groups had a long history of such movement, existing networks abroad and better education, and were able to engage in higher-paid work.^[26]

It is difficult to estimate the number of Muhammasheen who worked in the Gulf, but returnees in 1990 to Yemen included a significant proportion of individuals and families from marginalized groups.^[27] Saudi Arabia's expulsion of between 800,000 and 1 million Yemenis in the wake of the Gulf War followed on the heels of unification in May 1990. Many Muhammasheen had migrated to escape prejudice and social exclusion and chose not to return to their areas of origin where they had no land, but rather settled in shantytowns which arose close to all major cities.^[28] Combined with the loss of development assistance from Gulf countries, the United States and other donors,^[29] Yemen faced a series of economic challenges in the early 1990s and the newly formed government was unable to address citizens' basic needs. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimated that poverty levels soared from around 15 percent before 1990 to 35 percent.^[30] The eventual imposition of International Monetary Fund structural adjustments in the mid-1990s further contributed to the impoverishment of many Yemenis,^[31] including marginalized groups such as Muhammasheen.

In general, many returnees faced significant challenges in reintegration in their

percent.

25) At the peak of the remittance boom in the 1980s, it is estimated that annually \$2 billion was sent to the YAR from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. Mohammed Al-Maitami, "Efforts of Economic Programme and Structural Adjustment," presented at the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, University of Georgetown, Washington, October 1, 1998, <https://al-bab.com/efforts-economic-programme-and-structural-adjustment>. Accessed November 27, 2020.

26) Abdalla S. Burja, *The Politics of Stratification: A Study of Political Change in a South Arabian Town*. Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 192.

27) Thomas Stevenson, "Yemeni Workers Come Home: Reabsorbing One Million Migrants," MERIP, 181, March/April 1993.

28) Ibid.

29) Action taken in response to Yemen's perceived support of Saddam Hussein's August 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

30) Ibid.

31) Mohammed Al-Maitami, "Efforts of Economic Programme and Structural Adjustment," presented at the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, University of Georgetown, Washington, October 1, 1998, <https://al-bab.com/efforts-economic-programme-and-structural-adjustment>. Accessed November 27, 2020.

home country. Muhammasheen came home from the Gulf with few skills, as most had worked as manual laborers or in restaurants or groceries,^[32] and they encountered extremely limited job opportunities upon their return.^[33] Initially upon return some had assets, but these were often depleted quickly and life in these underserved settlements deteriorated. Further, they were faced with discrimination at home: “In Saudi Arabia, the returnees had seen and experienced discrimination, but this was the discrimination with which Saudis viewed the majority of Yemeni people. The discrimination which met them, they [Muhammasheen] say, after the initial rush of sympathy and solidarity on their arrival in Yemen, was different.”^[34]

2.3 Theories on the Origins of Muhammasheen^[35]

The earliest Western scholarly discussions of *Al-Akhdam* in 1850 proposed a connection to the Dalit, ‘untouchables’ found in South Asian Indian society.^[36] The British scholar Robert Bertram Serjeant (1916-1993) posited that Al-Akhdam could be the original inhabitants of South Arabia, or possibly descendants of Abyssinians in antiquity.^[37] A theory widely held in Yemen holds that Muhammasheen are descended from Abyssinian/Ethiopian soldiers who served in the army of Abraha Al-Ashram, the Christian viceroy of Aksum who ruled Yemen in the sixth century AD.^[38] The significance of this is that in Islamic tradition, “Abraha’s army is associated with the antagonists of the Quran’s Verse of the Elephant, which describes God destroying the army before it could attack Mecca.”^[39] In this theory,

32) Afrah Al-Ahmadi and Sharon Beatty, “Participatory Socio-economic Needs Survey of the Sana’a Urban Settlement Dwellers with Special Reference to Women,” Oxfam-Yemen, April 1997, p. 46.

33) During the years of high labor outmigration in the 1970s and 1980s there had been significant labor shortages in Yemen, particularly in the agriculture sector. However with the 1990 crisis this situation changed dramatically. “Skilled returnees displaced less skilled workers. The influx of returnees drove unemployment from around 4 to 25 percent, with 40 percent unemployment among former migrants.” Idem.

34) Republic of Yemen, UNICEF, World Bank and Radda Barnen, “Children and Women in Yemen, A Situation Analysis: To Be Seen and Heard: Children in Especially Difficult Circumstances,” Volume IV, Sana’a, 1998, p. 57.

35) The following paragraph owes much to input from Delores Walters, an African-American anthropologist who carried out her doctoral dissertation research among the Al-Akhdam in Yemen in the early 1980s.

36) Arnaud and Vassiere, “Les Akhdam de l’Yemen, Leur Origine Probable Leur Mœurs, Journal Asiatique, 4. Ser, V. 15, Paris, 1850, as recounted in Delores Walters, *Perceptions of Social Inequality in the Yemen Arab Republic*, Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, 1987, p. 86.

37) Delores Walters, *Perceptions of Social Inequality in the Yemen Arab Republic*, Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, 1987, p. 90.

38) Ibid, p. 222.

39) Elisa K. Burton, “Red Crescents: Race, Genetics, and Sickle Cell Disease in the Middle East,” *ISIS*, 110 (2), University of Chicago Press, 2019, p. 11, <https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/288399>. Accessed November 19, 2020.

Muhammasheen are the descendants of Abraha’s Ethiopian or Nilotic Sudanese soldiers who were enslaved and punished by having to carry out demeaning tasks following this expulsion. The perceived threat by Abraha may account for “the severity of reprisals and long-standing aversion towards defeated Ethiopians,” as the intensity and longevity of such repercussions do not apply with other foreign invaders and/or rulers in Yemen.^[40] There is some limited genetic information suggesting a connection to both African and South Asian Indian populations.^[41] The presence of Muhammasheen in Yemen may date from the sixth century AD, or possibly even earlier.

While interesting, such discussions do not help us understand the roots of the caste-like structural discrimination that Muhammasheen face. Ultimately, such discussions on origins may further racialize the community and single it out from fellow Yemenis whose origins and national belonging are not questioned, clouding the truth that Muhammasheen are Yemenis who have for centuries lived and contributed to their homeland.

(Annex B contains information on the various prejudiced social justifications for the exclusion of Muhammasheen).

Annex C highlights differences in the legal status of Muhammasheen in the YAR and PDRY as well as listing a number of international treaty obligations that Yemen is a party to of relevance to eliminating discrimination against Muhammasheen.

40) Delores Walters, *Perceptions of Social Inequality in the Yemen Arab Republic*, Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, 1987, p. 222.

41) Research by a Yemeni scholar from Sana’a University published in 2017 took blood samples from Yemeni tribesmen (838 individuals) and Muhammasheen (818 individuals) examining the distribution of ABO and Rh(D) blood groups. This research noted that the phenotypes in Muhammasheen were similar to those reported from areas in South India and south-east Asia. Ashraf M. Al-Nahari, “Genetic Variation of ABO and Rh(D) Blood Groups Polymorphism among Marginalized People and Tribesmen in Sana’a Capital of Yemen.” *Hebron University Research Journal (A)* Vol.(7). 2017, p. 1-41. <https://www.hebron.edu/docs/journal/A-Natural%20Sciences/v7/v7-1-14.pdf>. Accessed September 6, 2020.



III. Key Research Findings: The Impact of the Conflict on Muhammasheen

The following section focuses on the impact of the conflict on Muhammasheen at multiple levels – individual, household, community and national. The last sub-section contains information on specific challenges facing Muhammasheen women and girls. Some information from prior to the conflict is included where appropriate, but the primary temporal framework is from 2015 to the present relying on primary data collected for this study.

3.1. Methodology

The availability of reliable, current and relevant data in Yemen is a perennial problem. The situation is particularly complex since 2015, especially in parts of the country where there is active fighting. There are additional challenges when seeking to understand the needs, vulnerabilities and challenges facing a highly stigmatized and vulnerable community such as the Muhammasheen. Another caveat on data is that the highly politicized context of Yemen has had a deep impact on Muhammasheen. This means the research team for this study has had to proceed cautiously, recognizing such limitations and the need to rely on conflict-sensitive approaches in all its activities. To this end, names of key informants are kept anonymous, while general locations, gender descriptors and in some instances general affiliation with local NGOs were retained.

The research team conducted the following primary research:

- 39 interviews (20 male and 19 female interviewees, including seven interviews with individuals outside the country).
- Two gender-segregated focus group discussions with members of the Muhammasheen community, one with eight men in Aden and one with eight women in Abyan.
- Two mini-surveys administered to Muhammasheen, with 20 men on voter registration and national ID cards and with 20 women on work and income earning.

A key priority of this study has been to rely on the voices of Muhammasheen in all data collection efforts. Thus, some researchers selected are from within this community and the vast majority of research participants were Muhammasheen.

3.2. Individual Level of Analysis

This section explores a range of issues impacting Muhammasheen children and youth (see Annex D for a summary of recent UNICEF statistics on Muhammasheen children and Annex E for a summary of a 2017 survey on the topic of Muhammasheen). Some issues of relevance for women and girls will be covered in section 3.6 below.

Education

Challenges to accessing education for children in the Muhammasheen community are immense. Education is seen by many in the community as a key element to breaking the cycle of poverty, discrimination, abuse and isolation that Muhammasheen suffer from in Yemen. Misconceptions and stereotypes within the broader Yemeni community hold that Muhammasheen do not care about education, without fully understanding the challenges they face. As one interviewee from Aden noted, “Most Muhammasheen children drop out of school and beg. Even if meals are provided for them at schools, how can such poor families provide the rest of the needed supplies, such as uniforms and other things?”^[42] Despite such significant challenges, many Muhammasheen see education as a foundation for building a better future.

Prior to the war it was already challenging for Muhammasheen children to study due to a variety of factors including: discrimination and harsher corporal punishment from teachers than other students;^[43] harassment and bullying from their



“During my visit to a school, I was surprised that one of the children was crying, so I asked him ‘Why are you crying?’ He said, ‘An old man punched me because of a quarrel I had with his granddaughter.’ We contacted the school administration and the head of the neighborhood and the father of the girl whom the Muhammash boy had the dispute with apologized, restoring the honor of the Muhammash child.”

Muhammash interviewee, Taiz

42) Interview by research team with a human rights activist and the head of a local NGO (woman #1), November 23, 2020.

43) Corporal punishment in schools was prohibited in Yemen by the decree of the Ministry of Education in 2001. However, a number of studies have found that the incidence of corporal punishment is very high in the country. “In Yemen, physical punishment at school takes several forms such as beating, tying the feet, pinching and biting, pulling hair or ear, hitting on the head and forcing children to stand in the midday sun.” Charmaine Seitz, “Country Profile of Yemen: A Review of the Implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child,” Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, 2011, p. 17, <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/country-profile-yemen-review-implementation-un-convention-rights-child-2011?embed=1>. Accessed December 11, 2020.

fellow students; more difficulties to stay clean in light of challenges securing water, a situation which exacerbates student and teacher verbal abuse and harassment; and extreme levels of poverty creating pressure for Muhammasheen children to beg to contribute to household income. With the conflict the educational situation of all children in Yemen has deteriorated, however conflict-related factors have been exacerbated for Muhammasheen children due to the structural discrimination they face. Internal displacement impacts Muhammasheen children more dramatically because their families are often denied housing with other displaced people and they face additional obstacles in accessing services. Furthermore, although prior to the conflict Muhammasheen children sometimes worked, the economic hardships of the war have increasingly pushed children to contribute to household income. Such challenges have had an extremely negative impact on education among Muhammasheen children. In the words of interviewee in Aden, the war has “sadly reversed the situation for Muhammasheen; now there could be an educated parent and an illiterate son.”^[44]

Muhammasheen children face increasing levels of violence and bullying in schools by teachers, school administrators and their fellow students, according to interviewees for this research. A Muhammasheen activist said parents were increasingly reluctant to send their children to school because they were often mocked or humiliated, beaten, or worse, while teachers and school administrators idly watched.^[45] Interviewees observed that since the conflict began non-Muhammasheen children were interacting less with their Muhammasheen peers and were not defending them when they were abused. One mother shared, “I went to the school and met the principal and told him that beating children is internationally prohibited and that my son was beaten on his back with an electric cord by the school supervisor because they said he uttered bad words. When I asked my child why, he told me that one of the children had hurt him physically, so his bad words were in reaction. I discovered that the school had appointed another student as a ‘classroom head’ to assist the teacher and that this child had beaten my child and other students, thus spreading hatred and intolerance.”^[46]

A further issue related to education is that many Muhammasheen children do not possess birth certificates and their families have no national identification documents. This lack of civil documentation hinders the process of school registration for Muhammasheen children. Another issue of interest is the gender

44) Interview by research team with the head of a local NGO serving Muhammasheen (woman #2), November 22, 2020.

45) Interview by research team with a Muhammasheen human rights activist and head of a local NGO (man #1), October 22, 2020.

46) Interview by research team with the head of a local NGO serving Muhammasheen (woman #2), November 22, 2020.

imbalance in the education of girls among Muhammasheen, with girls' enrollment rates being higher than that of boys, the opposite of the norm in the broader population in Yemen.^[47] There are numerous factors that may contribute to this, including: that boys were needed to contribute to family income; boys' lower levels of interest in school; and negative treatment by children and teachers at school, a factor more commonly identified among boys.

The increasing cost of living due to the conflict has also contributed to declining school enrollment rates among Muhammasheen. Many public schools, particularly in Houthi-controlled areas, impose monthly fees on students despite the legal right to free education in Yemen.^[48] These fees vary depending on the area, but represent a prohibitive challenge for many Muhammasheen families, who often have more than one child and struggle to cover their basic needs for food and shelter. Families are often forced to send their children to work to contribute to household expenses through daily labor or begging. The additional cost of school supplies makes education increasingly unattainable for poor Muhammasheen families.

Despite significant barriers, some Muhammasheen students have been able to advance to university.^[49] However, in 2020 Muhammasheen were denied free seats designated for them at Sana'a University.^[50] The responsible university committee refused to meet with Muhammasheen students who came from a number of

“We as a group do not have a difference between a male and a female. Indeed, we have opportunities available to all, women and men. In many cases women are more commonly enrolled in education and they strive to work hard and excel to build a better future for themselves and their families.”

A community activist and lawyer, Sana'a

47) UNICEF data from 2020 showed a continuing gender gap in favor of girls; in Amanat al-Asimah and Sana'a governorate it was 7 percent (male, 81 percent and female 88 percent), although in Aden it was only 1 percent among residents (male, 64 percent and female, 65 percent) and rising to 9 percent among displaced households (male, 51 percent and female, 60 percent). This gap is the opposite of the national average in 2016 of 10.7 percent favoring boys (male, 89.4 percent and female 78.7 percent). “Data for the Sustainable Development Goals - Yemen,” UNESCO, <http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/ye>. Accessed February 12, 2020.

48) *General Law of Education* (No. 45) of 1992 states that education is a basic human right ensured by the State and provided to all Yemenis (Article 6) and that it is free (Article 8). UNESCO, “World Data on Education,” 7th Edition 2010-11, <http://www.ibe.unesco.org/sites/default/files/Yemen.pdf>. Accessed January 23, 2021.

49) Interview by research team with a community activist and lawyer (man #2), November 6, 2020.

50) Through the political activism of *Muhammasheen* a number of benefits have been won including: establishing government community centers in Sana'a and Aden with education, training and health care services and providing free services in two hospitals in Sana'a for poor families in general, but specifically targeting Muhammasheen; providing scholarships for Muhammasheen at the University of Taiz (150) and Sana'a University (30); allocating 1,500 posts in the armed forces between 2009 and 2010; and transferring home ownership in some areas in Sana'a, Taiz, Aden and Hudaydah to members of the community. “From Night to Darker Night Addressing Discrimination and Inequality in Yemen,” The Equal Rights Trust Country Report Series, 9 London, 2018, p. 87, https://www.equalrightstrust.org/ertdocumentbank/Yemen_EN_online%20version.pdf. Accessed September 14, 2020.

governorates to attend interviews and take the admissions exam. The National Union for Muhammasheen and the General Union of Municipal and Housing Workers issued a statement describing this incident as racist and calling on the relevant authorities to address the issue.^[51]

“I met someone who told me he wished to study at the university, but couldn’t get the opportunity. They told him, ‘You are a Muhammash person. Go back to your country and study there where you have your own universities and high schools.’”

Woman FGD Participant, Abyan

Child Labor

Prior to the crisis many Muhammasheen children worked on the streets to contribute to family income, but the war has exacerbated this issue and pushed even younger children to the streets, placing them in a hazardous environment and exposing them to the risk of physical and sexual exploitation. Muhammasheen children work as cobblers, collect empty boxes and bottles, wash cars and beg. According to a series of Vulnerability and Needs Assessments (VNA) conducted by UNICEF, in 2020 the rates of Muhammasheen children under 15 years of age working was 62 percent in Amanat Al-Asimah, 49 percent in Sana’a governorate^[52] and 10 percent in Aden,^[53] compared to 17 percent among the broader population of children in 2012 as the national comparator.^[54] This is an increase from a 2008 study conducted by the development-focused civil society group Soul, which found that among school-aged Muhammasheen children interviewed, 15.5 percent participated in the informal labor market, of whom around half were engaged in begging.^[55]

In recent years there has been a noticeable increase in the number of Muhammasheen children begging in the street throughout Yemen. This trend corresponds with the deteriorating economic conditions in the country, the interruption of civil servant salary payments since 2016 and large-scale population displacement during the conflict. In many cases Muhammasheen children have become the sole breadwinners of their families.^[56]

51) Yemen Post, “The Houthi Group Deprives Muhammasheen Students of Their Free Seats in Universities,” (Arabic) November 4, 2020, <http://yemenpost.news/archives/12257>. Accessed January 2, 2021.

52) UNICEF, “Vulnerability and Needs Assessment (VNA II) Amanat Al-Asimah and Sana’a Governorates,” IMSEA, April 2020.

53) UNICEF, “Vulnerability and Needs Assessment Aden Governorate,” IMSEA, May 2020.

54) UNICEF and Social Welfare Fund, “Muhamasheen Mapping Survey in Taiz,” in collaboration with Interaction for Development, October 2014.

55) SOUL for the Development of Women and Children, “Study of Educational Situation of Marginalized Groups,” December 2008, p. 7.

56) Interview by research team with a Muhammash journalist (man #3), November 15, 2020.

One of the stories shared with the research team is that of three girls who lost their mother in conflict-related shelling and their father to a fever. The loss of their parents put them in a very difficult position and the oldest sister, a 19-year-old, could not find work so all three girls were forced to beg. The sisters beg in the morning, and at night they study in a mosque; begging exposes them to harassment, verbal violence and insults.^[57]

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

Sexual violence against children in the Yemeni war has received little attention. Due to their living conditions, poverty, family fragmentation, and their heavy exposure to the streets as workers or beggars, Muhammasheen children are normally exposed to far higher levels of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) than their counterparts. The matter is further exacerbated by widely accepted practices such as child marriages.

In interviews for this research many Muhammasheen and activists shared horrifying stories about children from the community subjected to SGBV through child marriage and sexual harassment and rape by family members, work supervisors or others who took advantage of their vulnerabilities. Below are excerpts of some of the stories they shared:

- In 2017 in Abyan, the father of a 13-year-old Muhammasha (singular, feminine) from a poor family took her out of school and married her to a much older man. On the wedding night, the child was injured due to the husband's brutality. She was hospitalized and suffered from severe bleeding and trauma that almost killed her.^[58]
- In 2011 in Abyan, the father of a 14-year-old Muhammasha died and her mother asked her to start work. A local grocery store owner raped the girl and gave her money. When the girl became pregnant the man left the area; she fled to her village to an unknown fate.^[59]
- In 2019, in Abyan, a number of Muhammasheen children were brought for treatment for SGBV in Al-Razi Hospital in Khanfar district. A Muhammasheen-led organization investigated the matter and discovered that no charges were brought against the perpetrators.^[60]

57) Interview by research team with the head of a local NGO serving Muhammasheen (woman #2), November 22, 2020.

58) Interview by research team with a Muhammasha from Abyan (woman #3), October 10, 2020.

59) Ibid.

60) Interview by research team with a Muhammasha community activist (woman #4), November 17, 2020

- Muhammasheen children are often subjected to sexual harassment and abuse on the streets while working to earn income. Sometimes they are given money in exchange for sex. Recently in Aden, five Muhammasheen children were raped by young men from well-known families. The children were unable to speak and their families did not report the crimes in an effort to protect the children, believing there would be no justice.^[61]
- In 2018 in Aden, a 7-year-old Muhammasha was sexually abused by her cousin, who lived with her and her mother (her father had abandoned them). The cousin sexually abused the child, reputedly while on drugs. The young man was taken to the police, who pressured the mother to drop the case at the behest of her brothers. Given her precarious financial situation and the need for family support she eventually dropped the case against her nephew.^[62]
- In 2020, six boys from 11 to 16 years old raped a 7-year-old Muhammash (singular, masculine) boy in Dar Saad in Aden. They took him from his home saying they were going to play with him and went to a remote isolated area where they raped him. Fortunately, there was a man in the area collecting plastic who heard the child screaming and rescued him. The attackers were imprisoned. The psychological state of the Muhammash child deteriorated and his parents had to go with him to school; his family denied that their child had been raped to protect the child.^[63]
- In 2016 in Aden, a man sexually abused a mentally disabled Muhammash child. Following the incident, the boy suffered physically and emotionally with a very fragile psychological condition. His mother works as a maid and his father is unable to work due to illness. The rapist is not known because he was not a resident of the area.^[64]
- In Abyan, a farmer hired Muhammasheen children to work and sexually exploited them, including a 16-year old boy whom he raped and killed. The farmer later admitted the rape and murder to the boy's cousin, whom he also attempted to rape. The cousin escaped and the Security Belt Forces were informed of the murder. In 2020, security authorities interrogated the farmer, who confessed to the murder and other crimes over the past 25 years. Despite public protests and advocacy by local civil society organizations, including the Yemeni Women's Union, in December 2020, the perpetrator was convicted of murder, but not rape, the incident has caused significant dissatisfaction in the community.^[65]

61) Interview by research team with the head of a local NGO serving Muhammasheen (woman #2), November 22, 2020.

62) Interview by research team with a human rights activist and the head of a local NGO (woman #1), November 23, 2020.

63) Ibid.

64) Ibid.

65) Interview by research team with a Muhammasha community activist (woman #4), November 17, 2020. The incident was also reported in the local press: <https://aden24.net/news/70209>; <https://www.alwattan.net/news/134477>; "Exposing the killing of a young man and his burial by the owner of a farm working there," Al-Ayyam, September 28, 2020, <https://www.alayyam.info/news/8COMWLP8-3RT64B-C33D>. Accessed January 5, 2021.

Youth and Recruitment

Since the beginning of the war in 2015, all parties to the conflict have put significant efforts into recruiting Muhammasheen, although there is no precise data available. A key lure for Muhammasheen is that a soldier's pay provides some financial stability for their impoverished families.

Many Muhammasheen interviewed for this study expressed that they believe the *Ahfad Bilal*^[66] (Bilal's descendants) movement,^[67] allegedly aiming to integrate Muhammasheen into broader society, was in fact created to facilitate the mobilization of Muhammasheen to fight. According to a representative from the General Union of Muhammasheen, "Muhammasheen don't represent any political, religious or national party as they live on the margins of society," which he says has allowed many of them to be recruited to fight, and die, on frontlines, including battle fronts in Marib, Al-Jawf and Al-Bayda.^[68] The recruitment of Muhammasheen youth to fight for various parties to the conflict is also reportedly a significant issue in southern areas of the country.^[69]

"Young Muhammasheen these days turn to drugs and forming armed gangs. About a month ago there was a wedding in my neighborhood and one neighbor was disturbed by the noise. So he got his gun and fired at the wedding party, wounding four people. Among reckless youth the weapon has become the first speaker. Any simple dispute between you and your neighbor now may be resolved with weapons."

Male FGD participant in Aden

There is a lack of precise data on the number of children recruited to fight in general and the number of Muhammasheen in particular. In Sana'a, huge posters of children identified as "the martyrs of *Ahfad Bilal*" can be seen throughout the city, confirming the recruitment of children by Houthis.^[70] In areas nominally controlled by the internationally recognized Yemeni government, Muhammasheen children also have joined battle fronts, with the aim of obtaining a monthly salary averaging 1,000 Saudi riyals.^[71] According to a community activist in Lahj, some Muhammasheen children joined the ranks of Al-Qaeda in Lahj in 2016,^[72] which led them to embrace radical ideological ideas.

66) Bilal ibn Rabah was a former enslaved man of African descent who was one of the most trusted companions of the Prophet Mohammad and the first individual who called Muslims to prayer.

67) *Ahfad Bilal* was founded in 2014 in Taiz by Mohammed al-Qairai as a way to build connections between Muhammasheen and religious Salafis in Taiz. Since 2015, the Houthi movement has appropriated the term and sought to use it for political purposes, particularly in their recruitment efforts among Muhammasheen youth.

68) Interview by research team with a representative of the National Union of Muhammasheen (man #4), October 26, 2020.

69) Interview by research team with a Muhammasha community activist (woman #4), 17 November 2020.

70) Zakaria Ahmed, "Children Fighters ... Yemen's Warring Parties Exploit Young People on the Frontlines," Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, October 30, 2020, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/society/-حرب-اليمن-أطفال-مقاتلون-طرفا-حرب-اليمن> Accessed January 2, 2021.

71) Interview by research team with a representative from an NGO (woman #5), November 14, 2020.

72) Interview by research team with a community activist from the National Union of the Muhammasheen in Lahj (woman #6), November 19, 2020.

Interviewees for this research expressed a sense of being exploited by parties to the conflict because of their vulnerability due to poverty, illiteracy and limited livelihood options.^[73] This exploitation manifested itself in a society that rejects them as citizens but seeks their service in war. Other interviewees, while recognizing the exploitation, expressed that fighting was a better option than the “inferior” jobs usually available to Muhammasheen (i.e., street cleaning, garbage collecting and begging). Some Muhammasheen youth see military recruitment as a means of integration into broader society, in contrast to the traditional prohibition against Muhammasheen being armed and being perceived as “weak” by broader society.

Military recruitment and the conflict-driven rise in the proliferation of arms in Yemen has led to an increase in carrying weapons among Muhammasheen, which has corresponded with more violence and interpersonal conflicts, including killings, within the community.^[74] This is threatening stability in the Muhammasheen community and undermining trust among Muhammasheen themselves.

73) Including, among others, interviews by research team with a Yemeni expert and academic (woman #7), December 1, 2020; a Muhammasha woman from Abyan (woman #3), October 10, 2020; and a Muhammash human rights activist and the head of a local NGO (man #1), October 22, 2020.

74) Focus Group Discussion with men in Aden, facilitated by the research team, November 30, 2020.

3.3. Household Level of Analysis

This section explores a range of issues including challenges that Muhammasheen face in housing and shelter, household income and accessing assistance. See Annex F for a summary of information on Muhammasheen households from recent UNICEF Vulnerability and Needs Assessment studies.

Housing and Shelter

Housing was a significant challenge for Muhammasheen prior to the conflict, and contributed to their social isolation. Many Muhammasheen live in shanty towns known colloquially as the *Mahawi*, a derogatory term typically used to describe a dog shelter.^[75] Such settlements are often located on the outskirts of major cities or urban centers and may also house African refugees (primarily Somalis) and migrants as well as other extremely poor Yemenis, including people displaced by the conflict. Many structures are built of corrugated iron, with the poorest living in canvas tents or makeshift shelters made of cardboard, rags and scraps of wood and recycled materials. These shantytowns are usually densely packed and overcrowded and lack running water or sanitation facilities. The substandard living conditions in these slums render the residents more vulnerable to infectious diseases and epidemics. These settlements are also underserved in terms of municipal services, electricity or schools.

The rainy season varies in different parts of Yemen, but across the country monsoons and storms have a disproportionately negative impact on the flimsy homes in shantytowns.^[76] According to a community activist in Taiz, following flooding Muhammasheen families have been forced to spread their blankets on muddy floors and sleep, as they had no other choice.^[77] *Muhammasheen* families also seek warmth by burning the trash that often accumulates in shantytowns due to the lack of garbage collection

“A key problem is that the Muhammasheen community is not able to find safe housing, and that is why you see them in the street and in places isolated from the other community. Their homes are made of cardboard cartons and rags and they move from place to place searching for a living. There are also challenges during displacement, as organizations do not consider them displaced, as Muhammasheen have been displaced throughout their lives. So they are excluded from benefiting from humanitarian aid.”

Interview with Muhammash activist in Marib

75) Luca Nevola, “‘Black People, White Hearts’: Origin, Race, and Colour in Contemporary Yemen,” *Antropologia*, 2020, Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 95, <https://www.ledijournals.com/ojs/index.php/antropologia/article/view/1626/1526>. Accessed September 18, 2020.

76) For a litany of floods and cyclones that have hit Yemen over the past five years see: “Yemen,” Floodlist, <http://floodlist.com/tag/yemen>. Accessed February 12, 2021.

77) Interview by research team with a community activist in Taiz (woman #8), October 18, 2020.

services.^[78] A Muhammash activist described living conditions in shanty towns: “We live in four-by-six meter tents and we cook food by burning cartons, bags and clothing, burning whatever we find on the street to prepare our meals.”^[79]

Since 2015, many Muhammasheen families have been forced to flee their homes as they offered no protection from bullets, shelling or airstrikes. Others were forced to leave in search of income-earning opportunities, due to the severe impact of the war on their traditional economic activities. When some families attempted to return to their homes after displacement(s), many were denied access by landlords or landowners, or forced into yet further rounds of displacement by the new landlords or landowners.^[80] During displacement(s), many Muhammasheen families lost belongings.^[81]

Interviewees for this report said harassment or bad treatment by landowners or landlords was the biggest housing challenge facing Muhammasheen. While there is no formal legal prohibition against Muhammasheen owning land, a customary prohibition on Muhammasheen land ownership remains in place, bolstered by stigma and discrimination.^[82] Landowner harassment of Muhammasheen includes threats, constant interference, continual rent increases and expulsion, at times by violent means including arson and using bulldozers.^[83] A local Muhammash activist recounted an incident in Al-Ma’fer district in Taiz governorate, in which a landowner threatened a group of displaced Muhammasheen families with expulsion if they did not list her name with an international organization to receive food aid delivered to the families. Despite notifying the local authorities multiple times, the Muhammasheen were never allocated alternative land.^[84]

In another incident that highlights the violence inflicted on Muhammasheen, 35 Muhammasheen families in Abyan’s Lawdar district were forced in 2019 to abandon their homes of 30 years when a businessman showed up and claimed the land as his. The businessman wanted to build a leather factory on the land and violently evicted the Muhammasheen families; one child was

“The Muhammasheen are nothing in this country, and the war has affected them. Anyone can come and kill us, as if we were not human beings like the others. We are humiliated even in death.”

Woman participant in a FGD in Abyan

78) Robert F. Worth, “Languishing at the Bottom of Yemen’s Ladder,” The New York Times, February 27, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/27/world/middleeast/27yemen.html?ref=todayspaper>. Accessed September 10, 2020.

79) Interview by research team with a Muhammash activist (man #5), October 30, 2020.

80) Interview by research team with the head of a local NGO (man #6), October 7, 2020.

81) Interview by research team with a member of the National Union for the Development of the Poorest Groups in Taiz (man #7), October 17, 2020

82) However, under customary law (*Urf*), land ownership by Muhammasheen is still prevented.

83) “From Night to Darker Night Addressing Discrimination and Inequality in Yemen,” The Equal Rights Trust Country Report Series: 9 London, 2018, p. 206, https://www.equalrightstrust.org/ertdocumentbank/Yemen_EN_online%20version.pdf. Accessed September 14, 2020.

84) Interview by research team with a Muhammash human rights activist and the head of a local NGO (man #1), October 22, 2020.

injured and a woman suffered a gunshot wound. The collaboration of government security personnel with the businessman demonstrated how little protection Muhammasheen receive from law enforcement. The families were displaced to Zinjibar, Abyan’s capital, where they lived on the streets for 15 days before the governor of Abyan assigned land to them in another area.^[85]

In addition to overcrowding and the lack of durable shelter, Muhammasheen families also face significant challenges to access basic services such as clean drinking water, water for cleaning and personal hygiene, toilets, sewerage, garbage collection, electricity, safe fuel for cooking and adequate ventilation.

Since 2015, access to electricity in Houthi-controlled areas has been problematic for all, but due to poverty, few residents in shantytowns have access to alternatives (either privately operated networks or solar energy).^[86] In southern, nominally government-controlled areas, public electricity is variably available but Muhammasheen communities benefit little from it, despite the extreme heat in the summer in many areas, with there being reportedly no electricity in any of the Muhammasheen camps in Al-Dhalea.^[87]

As for water, shantytowns throughout the country generally lack adequate access to clean water, which is chiefly available through water tanks provided by relief organizations or local philanthropists.^[88]

Some Muhammasheen reported having to travel to remote locations to access water tanks,^[89] or having to queue for an hour or two for a 20-liter container of bad tasting water for domestic use (cleaning and personal hygiene).^[90] With regard to cooking fuel, displaced Muhammasheen families often rely on firewood and burning cardboard for cooking, with few depending on gas cylinders, as they are difficult to obtain (requiring a personal ID card to secure at the official price)^[91] and expensive, with the official price being approximately YR4,000 in Houthi-controlled areas (roughly US\$6.67 at the average exchange rate in northern areas in 2020).^[92]

“The jobs occupied by Muhammasheen are those of cleaners, porters, being a cobbler, or begging. When other Yemenis come to register as a street sweeper he becomes a supervisor, driver, or administrator in the government cleaning and improvement fund. He is made an official employee with benefits. But to take up a broom and sweep in the street, this is not possible!”

Interview with Muhammash activist from Dhamar

85) Interview by research team with a representative from an NGO (woman #5), November 14, 2020.

86) Interview by research team with a Muhammash human rights activist from Marib (man #8), October 30, 2020.

87) Interview by research team with the head of a local NGO (man #6), October 7, 2020.

88) Interview by research team with a Muhammash human rights activist and the head of a local NGO (man #1), October 22, 2020.

89) Interview by research team with a community activist and lawyer (man #2), November 6, 2020.

90) Interview by research team with a community activist in Taiz (woman #8), October 18, 2020.

91) In Houthi-controlled areas, ‘Aqil Al-Hara (a neighborhood chief) organizes the process of distributing gas cylinders at the official price, although they are difficult and much more expensive to obtain on the black market.

92) Interview by research team with a Muhammasha (woman #9), November 22, 2020.

Household Income

Since the 1970s in Yemen, Muhammasheen in urban areas have been employed in municipal street sweeping and garbage collection.^[93] These jobs, despite their meager and irregular salaries, ensured some level of financial stability. In Taiz and other rural areas, Muhammasheen worked mostly as daily manual labor in agriculture.^[94] Others relied on informal jobs such as in shoe repair, peddling at roundabouts or traffic lights, porters, car washers, street hawkers or as waiters in restaurants. Muhammasheen women worked as street sweepers, domestic workers and begging, a phenomenon which has become more widespread after the outbreak of the war. However, with the conflict, Muhammasheen incomes have plummeted similarly to other Yemenis.^[95] Unemployment levels have risen and salaries of municipal workers have been paid inconsistently although Muhammasheen, along with other civil servants, have often been forced to continue working.

A key consequence of the war was the recruitment of the Muhammasheen men, youth and even children by the parties to the conflict. In the short term this has alleviated some financial pressures, until such fighters are killed. Then, in many cases, families lost this income and few received compensation.^[96] It is important to note that the harsh economic conditions resulting from the war apply to all Yemen, but unfortunately the economic collapse affected Muhammasheen more severely, as the war has pushed non-Muhammasheen men to compete for professions traditionally carried out by Muhammasheen.^[97]

93) According to UNICEF VNA data in Amanat Al-Asimah and Sana'a governorates, 17 percent of households relied on salaried work, the vast majority in street sweeping and garbage collection, in Aden it was 21 percent, and in Taiz (in 2014), it was 10.4 percent.

94) Interview by research team with a Muhammash human rights activist and the head of a local NGO (man #1), October 22, 2020.

95) Interview by research team with a Muhammash human rights activist from Marib (man #8), October 30, 2020.

96) One interviewee noted that if a male family member had died fighting, his family might receive an occasional food basket. Interview by research team with a community activist and lawyer (man #2), November 6, 2020.

97) Interview by research team with a Muhammash human rights activist and the head of a local NGO (man #1), October 22, 2020.

Accessing Assistance

Part of the Muhammasheen community benefited from the humanitarian aid provided by international and local organizations, especially from food aid, but many Muhammasheen activists and locals interviewed for this report complained that beneficiary selection processes overseen by Yemeni authorities excluded Muhammasheen.^[98] The head of a local NGO and a human rights activist said the situation was relatively better in government-controlled areas, where the distribution of humanitarian aid did not differentiate between displaced Muhammasheen and those with fixed domicile.^[99] According to UNICEF, the percentage of Muhammasheen on the Social Welfare Fund (SWF) cash assistance program is low.^[100]

For many Muhammasheen, the lack of personal identification documents is a key obstacle in accessing aid.^[101] This is partly attributed to the perception that acquiring personal identification documents is costly.^[102] In addition, the process is very bureaucratic and Muhammasheen suffer from prejudice on the part of civil registry staff. One interviewee noted, “When a Muhammasha goes to a government office seeking help or food aid, she does not receive any attention, but rather she feels humiliated and insulted by the workers there. She doesn’t even enter the office and is stopped by the secretary, and the door is closed in her face and this makes her feel inferior. Why are we treated in this abusive way?”^[103]

“There are some Muhammasheen who do not receive food baskets, because organizations assessing needs said that only one basket was allowed per house, even when more than one household shared a shelter. This was a great problem for us as sometimes such co-habitation was temporary and when families moved out on their own, they were not able to receive food assistance.”

Interview with a Muhammash civil society activist from Amanat Al-Asimah

98) Interview by research team with the head of a local NGO (man #6), October 7, 2020.

99) Ibid.

100) According to UNICEF, the percentage in 2014 was highest in Taiz at 25.7 percent, in Aden in 2020 it was 9 percent, in 2020 in Amanat Al-Asimah it was 6 percent and in Sana’a governorate it was 4 percent (an increase from the 2018 UNICEF VNA in Sana’a where only 2 percent of Muhammasheen surveyed benefited from SWF cash). Since the SWF program is designed to benefit the most vulnerable Yemenis, the percentage of Muhammasheen should be much higher, a situation that UNICEF is seeking to address. UNICEF, “Integrated Model of Social and Economic Assistance and Empowerment (IMSEA),” March 2020, p. 11, <https://www.unicef.org/yemen/media/3861/file/IMSEA%20Booklet%20-%20English%20.pdf>. Accessed November 30, 2020.

101) Interview by research team with a Muhammash human rights activist and the head of a local NGO (man #1), October 22, 2020.

102) Ibid.

103) Interview by research team with a Muhammasha woman from Abyan (woman #3), October 10, 2020.

In the absence of national ID, international organizations rely on a verification process which involves the district director, sheikh or head of the neighborhood known as an *'Aqil Al-Hara*.^[104] According to interviewees, this reliance on the *'Aqil* inherently excludes Muhammasheen even when the aid is publicly earmarked for them, due to the prejudice and systemic discrimination against Muhammasheen. The difficult circumstances facing so many Yemenis have created intense competition over who gets included on beneficiary lists. This process is very divisive and sometimes turns the local community against Muhammasheen, as other Yemenis view them as less worthy of receiving aid.^[105]

104) An influential government appointee whose primary function is to keep the peace in a neighborhood and liaise with the police if crimes occur, as well as coordinate marriages, births and deaths with the appropriate government authorities.

105) Interview by research team with a Muhammash human rights activist and the head of a local NGO (man #1), October 22, 2020.

3.4. Community Level of Analysis

This section explores community-level issues including poverty among Muhammasheen, conflict-related violence, community resilience, discrimination, exclusion and lack of social protection.

Conflict Related Violence

While few Yemenis have been immune to the consequences of the war, the impact of the conflict on Muhammasheen has been magnified due to their precarious social and economic situation. Muhammasheen have been victims of both airstrikes by the Saudi-led coalition and shelling by the Houthis; their homes have been destroyed or damaged. Although precise numbers of Muhammasheen IDPs are not available, anecdotal evidence suggests that thousands have been forced to flee due to conflict-related violence and fear for their lives.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that, as of 2019, 3.6 million Yemenis had been internally displaced.^[106] Muhammasheen face additional difficulties in displacement; unlike many other displaced Yemenis who stay with family, it is challenging for Muhammasheen to share housing with relatives,^[107] whose shantytown homes often are already overcrowded.^[108] Muhammasheen have also suffered in displacement from a lack of local acceptance; according to numerous interviewees, landowners and landlords often expelled or threatened to expel Muhammasheen from IDP sites.^[109] A member of the National Union for the Development of the Poorest Groups in Taiz said the Union's research on the needs of displaced Muhammasheen in Taiz identified many issues, including: lack of community acceptance of displaced Muhammasheen; poor coexistence between Muhammasheen and non-Muhammasheen community members; high levels of harassment and SGBV of girls and women; and unsafe housing. The union found these challenges were due to prejudice and caste-like treatment of Muhammasheen by the broader community and the lack of protection provided by the state.^[110]

106) "2021 Planning Figures," UNHCR, December 29, 2020, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/pdfsummaries/GA2021-Yemen-eng.pdf>. Accessed January 1, 2021.

107) Interview by research team with the head of a local NGO (man #6), October 7, 2020.

108) According to UNICEF VNA studies the percentage of households that are overcrowded (more than 3 persons per room) is 62 percent in Amanat Al-Asimah, 52 percent in Aden, 79.1 percent in Taiz and 50 percent in Sana'a governorate, versus 38.8 percent as the national comparator.

109) Including the following interviews by the research team: the head of a local NGO (man #6), October 7, 2020; the head of a local organization and a member of the National Union of Muhammasheen (woman #10), October 31, 2020; and a representative from an NGO (woman #5), November 14, 2020.

110) Interview by research team with a member of the National Union for the Development of the Poorest Groups in Taiz (man #7), October 17, 2020.

The lack of acceptance of Muhammasheen likely relates to a range of stereotypes and discrimination dominant in broader society (see Annex B for commonly encountered sources of discrimination). However, there have been situations where the ordeal of displacement has brought Muhammasheen and their fellow displaced Yemenis closer together.^[111]

In addition to displacement, Muhammasheen are affected by the conflict in a myriad of ways including rising family tension, divorce and separation, early marriage, increased cost of living, rising illiteracy levels and loss of personal identification documents^[112] and belongings due to displacement. Additionally, along with other Yemenis, their access to health, education, electricity, water and sanitation services has deteriorated; the impact of this has been magnified for the most vulnerable members of society due to structural discrimination and racism.^[113] Furthermore, as with many other Yemenis, Muhammasheen have suffered from the death and injury of family members from conflict-related violence, airstrikes, shelling, sniper attacks and mines.^[114]

“As a result of the conflict Muhammasheen have become closer to their non-Muhammasheen neighbors, because they are equal in displacement, and there was no longer a difference between them. Differences in privileges felt by the other community have disappeared. As for the competition for jobs, the Mummasheen have no jobs other than cleanliness, and there is no competition for this.”

Muhammash activist from Marib

111) Interview by research team with a Muhammash human rights activist from Marib (man #8), October 30, 2020.

112) Ibid.

113) Men’s Focus Group Discussion in Aden, November 30, 2020.

114) Multiple such incidents were shared, including: the decapitation of a Muhammasha woman, Zahra Saleh, by a shell in Al-Daba’a in Taiz in 2016; the killing of a Muhammasha woman, Fatima, by a sniper in Al-Bararah in Taiz in 2016; the shooting of a Muhammasha woman in Zaid Al-Mushki in Taiz in 2017 by a stray bullet which paralyzed her, for which she received no compensation. Interview by research team with the head of a local organization and a member of the National Union of Muhammasheen (woman #10), October 31, 2020.

Civil Society and Community Resilience

The National Union of the Muhammasheen, established in 2007, was the first union to represent Muhammasheen. It originally encompassed 33 organizations from various parts of the country under its umbrella^[115] and by 2019 had expanded to 80. The union was represented in the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) through its president, Noaman al-Hudhaifi, who was an NDC delegate. Al-Hudhaifi's participation impacted the NDC outcomes as well as the constitution drafting process that followed (see section 3.5 below). However, the role of the National Union of the Muhammasheen has diminished during the conflict, partially due to the changed role of the General People's Congress (GPC) (the political party of the former President of Yemen Ali Abdullah Salah,) in the post-conflict era and the halting of government financial support to local CSOs, including the Union.^[116] While the Union remains an important institution, other civil society organizations (CSO) led by Muhammasheen have continued to be established and grow, seeking to address needs in the community.

“Among Muhammasheen-led associations one of the challenges is that once established they do not last for long due to a lack of knowledge in participating in volunteer work and that they are not in fixed locations. Therefore, we struggle to face these challenges and support Muhammasheen to claim some rights.”

Interview with the head of a local NGO from Aden

Muhammasheen-led CSOs suffer from similar challenges as other CSOs in the broader community, but also must navigate additional complexities as a result of emerging from and seeking to serve an ostracized community. This includes capacity issues. In this research Muhammasheen activists complained that a lack of administrative skills within the community limited their ability to address needs in targeted areas.^[117] Additionally, it was noted that individuals and organizations not led by Muhammasheen often intervened in projects, resulting in less funding available to address the needs of highly vulnerable Muhammasheen.^[118] As a result, Muhammasheen community members have begun to lose confidence in civil society due to unfulfilled promises to provide assistance.^[119]

115) Noaman Abdullah Al-Hakami, *Akhdam Category in Yemen*, LAP Lambert Academic Publishing, 2017, p. 101.

116) Interview by research team with a Muhammasheen human rights activist and the head of a local NGO (man #1), October 22, 2020.

117) Interview by research team with a Muhammasheen from Hudaydah living in Sana'a (man #9), November 1, 2020.

118) Interview by research team with a representative of the National Union of Muhammasheen (man #4), October 26, 2020.

119) Interview by research team with the head of a local NGO (man #10), December 6, 2020.

Discrimination, Exclusion and Lack of Social Protection

As well as causing emotional suffering, social isolation detracts from both individual and community level resilience, as excluded individuals lack support from social networks. The social exclusion of Muhammasheen is exacerbated by the absence of social protection in broader Yemeni society that has sustained many Yemenis during the conflict and accompanying humanitarian crisis. (See Annex B for additional Yemeni proverbs illustrating the depth of discrimination and caste-like status that Muhammasheen face.)

Yemeni Proverbs on Muhammasheen

A person's behavior is determined by his origin.

Walk with a *Khadim* but don't sit down to a meal with him: eat with a Jew but don't walk with him.

Be a friend to an *Akhdam*, but never eat with him.

For many Muhammasheen, their caste-like status has left them few avenues to escape oppressive systemic discrimination. Migration had been one channel but, as the returnees from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf in 1990 found, this can lead to the loss of social support networks and increased isolation. While education had provided a path of social upward mobility for some, particularly in the south, since the unification of Yemen in 1990 such social gains did not spread to other parts of the country. Although outward signs of discrimination may have dissipated and there is more limited use of overtly racist language, the situation has not fundamentally changed. With the escalation of the conflict in 2015, any improvements that Muhammasheen had seen over the decades seem to have evaporated as the war, economic catastrophe, displacement, starvation and poverty tipped the scales in the direction of increased prejudice and discrimination.^[120]

Muhammasheen have reported that, since the onset of the war, attempts to integrate them into broader Yemeni society have been limited to recruiting them to fight for various parties to the conflict, while at the same time they have been deprived of their basic rights to education, work and healthcare.^[121] Some Muhammasheen see *Ahfad Bilal*,^[122] in such a light, as it hints at a non-Yemeni identity for Muhammasheen and claims to integrate them into Yemeni society through sacrificing themselves for a cause.^[123]

120) Interview by research team with a Muhammash human rights activist and the head of a local NGO (man #1), October 22, 2020.

121) Interview by research team with a community activist and lawyer (man #2), November 6, 2020.

122) Meaning the descendants of Bilal (the first individual who called Muslims to prayer), a movement popularized by the Houthi movement.

123) Interview by research team with a community activist and lawyer (man #2), November 6, 2020. Interview by research team with a representative of the National Union of Muhammasheen (man #4), October 26, 2020.

A December 2020 political cartoon by Rashad al-Samei presents two panels under the title of *Ahfad Bilal*, one from Sana'a of a dark-skinned person with a scarf tied over his mouth and the other from Taiz with the image of a dead dark-skinned child wrapped in white shroud, with the words "Houthi massacre in Al-Mufatsh neighborhood in Taiz."^[124] As an eminent visual social commentator, cartoonist, multimedia artist and journalist from Taiz, Al-Samei's graphic illustrates sentiments shared by many that the *Ahfad Bilal* phenomenon cannot be separated from issues of racism and human rights abuses.

The following stories shared by interviewees for this research illustrate the deeply embedded prejudice that Muhammasheen face in many aspects of life:

"A Muhammash remains Muhammash in the eyes of society from birth to death."

Interview with a community activist in Taiz

- In 2012, government jobs were offered in Abyan governorate as part of Yemeni government efforts after the expulsion of Ansar Al-Sharia fighters, including jobs for educated Muhammasheen.^[125] However, due to discrimination, some tribesmen took the jobs intended for Muhammasheen. The displacement and suffering during that period exacerbated the lack of economic opportunities and many from the community were forced to turn to begging.^[126]
- In 2019, a merchant in Aden had money stolen from his car in the market and security personnel gathered all the Muhammasheen women who were in the market and sent them to prison. The women pleaded their innocence but they remained in prison for a month until video evidence surfaced that the thief was a man, not a woman.^[127]
- People seeking manual laborers often are directed to Muhammasheen settlements and told, "Go there and you will find *Akhdam* who will work for low wages."^[128]
- Muhammasheen women are often ignored or humiliated when approaching government offices for help or food aid. Sometimes they are prevented from entering such facilities by secretaries.^[129]

124) Rashad al-Samei, Twitter post, Image, December 3, 2020, <https://twitter.com/RashadAlsamei/status/1334530592071962624?s=20>

125) In May 2011, Ansar Al-Sharia militants took over Zinjibar, the capital city in Abyan. They were pushed out of the city in June 2012 by Yemeni government forces backed by local tribes. Ahmed Dawood, "Concerns over AQAP role in Abyan – Yemen," Relief Web, July 2012, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/concerns-over-aqap-role-abyan>. Accessed January 28, 2021.

126) Interview by research team with Muhammasha community activist in Abyan (woman #11), November 17, 2020.

127) Interview by research team with the head of an NGO and a prominent member of the Muhammash Women Network (woman #12), November 5, 2020.

128) Interview by research team with a Muhammasha community activist in Abyan (woman #11), November 17, 2020.

129) Interview by research team with a Muhammasha woman from Abyan (woman #3), October 10, 2020

- A participant in a focus group discussion in Abyan said that during a recent hospital stay, she was rejected by other patients who refused to share food with her and treated her with contempt.^[130]
- In 2019, in Al-Basateen area in Aden,^[131] dozens of Muhammasheen IDPs originally from the north were beaten, tortured and expelled by the police due to alleged collusion with Houthi and Islah party forces.^[132]

Destruction of the Social Fabric

Increased poverty has played a major role in damaging social cohesion among Muhammasheen. According to numerous interviewees for this research, difficult economic conditions as a result of the conflict have contributed to a perceived increase in suicide rates, incidence of crime and bullying, and the use and trafficking of drugs and other contraband. These issues have had a devastating impact on the Muhammasheen community by undermining trust and traditions of mutual assistance.

A Muhammasha woman from Abyan related that in 2019 a poor Muhammasha man set himself on fire because he had no work and he and his family of 10 children had not eaten in three days. He died as a result and his family became even more vulnerable and were forced to beg for food.^[133]

During the conflict the phenomenon of carrying weapons in the Muhammasheen community has increased and contributed to a rising level of violence within the community. According to a lecturer at Sana'a University and specialist in gender, development and humanitarian action, this phenomenon has been fueled by the recruitment of large numbers of Muhammasheen by parties to the conflict, the proliferation of arms, weak rule of law, lack of security and the spread of drug abuse.^[134] While Muhammasheen have sought to distance themselves from the sectarian polarization of the conflict, that has not always been possible.

130) Women's Focus Group Discussion, Zinjibar, Abyan, December 3, 2020.

131) In August 2019 anti-northern sentiment rose in the South, with IDPs, traders and workers from the North in Aden, Lahj and Abyan targeted in violent attacks. ACAPS, Yemen Analysis Hub, "YEMEN Aden: Collapse of ceasefire," August 16, 2019, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20190816_acaps_yah_anticipatory_briefing_note_collapse_of_ceasefire_in_aden.pdf. Accessed February 20, 2021. According to interviews for this research, Muhammasheen were also impacted by such developments.

132) Interview by research team with a community activist in Taiz (woman #8), October 18, 2020. Such events followed the death of Abo Al-Yamama Al-Yafei, a high level commander in the Security Belt forces, أبرز قتلى هجوم الحوثيين على معسكر بعدن أبو اليمامة... (alaraby.co.uk) and amid a campaign to expel northerners from Aden by Security Belt forces (https://marebpress.net/news_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=153967).

133) Interview by research team with a Muhammasha woman from Abyan (woman #3), October 10, 2020

134) Interview by research team with a Yemeni expert and academic (woman #7), December 1, 2020.

3.5. National Level of Analysis

This section looks at national-level narratives and issues influencing the broader environment for the Muhammasheen community in Yemen including national ID cards, voting and political representation, Muhammasheen political activism in the Arab Spring and NDC era, access to justice, land ownership and sharecropping.

National ID Cards

The lack of personal identification cards represents a significant barrier for the Muhammasheen community in efforts to obtain education, healthcare and basic services, as well as to perform routine transactions.^[135] This includes government-issued national or family ID cards and passports, as well as registrations of births,^[136] deaths and marriages. One interviewee for this research spoke about the lack of awareness among Muhammasheen on the importance of personal ID as a primary reason.^[137] Additionally, negligence or indifference was mentioned as a challenge in securing birth and marriage certificates, which are a main requirement for the issuance of national ID documents.^[138]

“When Muhammasheen marry they do not register the marriage with the government, because it costs more than 20,000 Yemeni rials. When children are born it is at home and so very few have birth certificates, which them makes it difficult to enroll children in school.”

Interview with the head of an NGO and prominent member of the Muhammasheen Women Network, Aden

The most significant obstacle preventing Muhammasheen from pursuing national ID documentation, as cited by many interviewees, is the cost associated with the process, amounting on average to YR6,000 (roughly US\$8 at the average national exchange rate at the beginning of March 2021).^[139] The issuance of passports costs around YR10,000 (US\$11.30 at the exchange rate in government-controlled areas, beginning of March 2021) and is only an option in government-controlled areas. In addition, in order to be placed on a waiting list for a passport, Muhammasheen may resort to seeking the help of a commissioner who might charge thousands of Yemeni rials to speed up the process.

135) All Yemenis have the right to such documentation according to the Nationality Law (No. 6) of 1990.

136) Yemen has low levels of birth registration. According to UNICEF it is generally much lower among Muhammasheen; 28 percent in Amanat Al-Asimah, 8.8 percent in Taiz and 13 percent in Sana’a governorate, though in Aden it is 92 percent, compared to the national average of 36.9 percent (2013). UNICEF VNA studies 2014 in Taiz, 2020 in Amanat Al-Asimah, Sana’a governorate and Aden.

137) Interview by research team with a member of the National Union for the Development of the Poorest Groups in Taiz (man #7), October 17, 2020

138) Interview by research team with a Muhammasheen human rights activist from Marib (man #8), October 30, 2020.

139) Interview by research team with a human rights activist (man #11), November 9, 2020.

Other bureaucratic requirements of the Civil Registry Authority to apply for an ID card include proof of residence within a district, a challenge for many Muhammasheen who live in shantytowns or IDP camps where there are no street addresses. Additionally, the process requires the intervention of neighborhood representatives, known as *'Aqil Al-Hara*, which can be challenging for Muhammasheen who often face systematic discrimination from such officials, or of an employer, which is complicated as many Muhammasheen work in the informal sector.^[140] In some shantytowns, this issue has been addressed by appointing local representatives from the Muhammasheen community, although the Muhammasheh *'Aqil al-Hara* is usually paid less than his non-Muhammasheh counterpart. In such cases it was reported that Muhammasheen community members often preferred to approach the non-Muhammasheh *'Aqil Al-Hara*, who was perceived to be better able to use the system to address grievances or needs. With the majority of Muhammasheen lacking birth certificates or school records, for many the task becomes too cumbersome and costly to pursue.^[141]

For some Muhammasheen, discrimination within broader Yemeni society is a barrier to citizenship. A Muhammasha activist from Abyan recounted that in 2012, a group of around 300 former fighters, including 17 Muhammasheen, who had fought for government military forces expelling Ansar Al-Sharia from Abyan's Zinjibar district, were offered national ID cards by the GPC so they could receive food baskets from an NGO. When the NGO attempted to process the ID cards in coordination with the authorities, there was strong resistance by community leaders against issuing ID cards to the Muhammasheen fighters. This incident illustrates a clear systematic bias against Muhammasheen to secure a basic citizenship right, even when they have fought for their country.^[142]

The lack of ID cards impedes access to cash assistance, food baskets and coupons provided by local and international organizations.^[143] Some organizations, such as UNICEF, Oxfam and the Yemeni Women's Union, have facilitated the issuance of birth certificates and ID cards for Muhammasheen to facilitate their access to aid.^[144]

140) "Handbook of procedures in the Civil Status Authority," [Sana'a] Ministry of Interior, May 15, 2017, <https://imoyemen.com/news/5604>. Accessed January 15, 2021.

141) Interview by research team with a Muhammasha human rights activist from Marib (man #8), October 30, 2020.

142) Interview by research team with Muhammasha community activist in Abyan (woman #11), November 17, 2020.

143) Interview by research team with a Muhammasha (woman #13), November 5, 2020.

144) Interview by research team with a community activist in Taiz (woman #8), October 18, 2020.

Voting and Political Representation

Since Unification in 1990, multi-party electoral politics have been a regular expression of citizenship in Yemen,^[145] with the political participation of Muhammasheen often linked to such election cycles. The GPC party encouraged Muhammasheen to register as voters and cast their ballots in presidential, local council and parliamentary elections in exchange for small sums of money or basic commodities like a bag of rice.^[146]

The GPC formed field committees in electoral districts across the country to mobilize Muhammasheen to register as voters and to transport them on election day to voting centers.^[147] The field committees were often led by prominent local figures such as tribal sheikhs or other community leaders.^[148] In some areas, such as the 34th constituency in the Al-Shamayatayn district in Taiz governorate, GPC candidates are believed to have won due to high levels of voter turnout among Muhammasheen.^[149] Reflecting this support, the GPC nominated a number of Muhammasheen for local councils with some being elected.^[150] For example, Noaman al-Hudhaifi was nominated by both the GPC and Islah political parties, and eventually elected, in Sala (district 34) in Taiz^[151] and Sa'ad Al-Jamal, vice president of the National Union of the Muhammasheen was nominated by the GPC in 2000 (district 18) in Amanat Al-Asimah.^[152] According to a member of the National Union for the Development of the Poorest Groups in Taiz, the Islah party, the leading opposition party following unification, also made substantial efforts to attract Muhammasheen.^[153] Also, Yemeni Salafists preceded the Houthis in associating the Muhammasheen with "Bilal"^[154] through their activities in Taiz in 2015.

145) This included the following nation-wide elections: Presidential elections in 1999, 2006 and 2012; parliamentary election in 1993, 1997 and 2003; constitutional referenda in 1991 and 2001; local and governorate council elections in 2006; and governor elections in 2008.

146) Interview by research team with a Yemeni gender expert and academic (woman #7), December 1, 2020.

147) Among the general population it has been found that having a voter registration card is three times more likely than holding a national ID card, partially due to the ease of voter registration as compared to that of securing a national ID card. Civil Registration Centre For Development, "Towards Universal Birth Registration in Yemen: Situation Analysis and Recommendations for Government and UNICEF," The Hague, May 2013, p. 5. <https://www.crc4d.com/downloads/2013-05-towards-universal-birth-registration-in-yemen.pdf>. Accessed November 15, 2020.

148) Lutf Al-Sarari, "Muhammasheen in Yemen Alienation at the Lowest Margin," Assafir, October 3, 2019. <https://bit.ly/36bmN4Z>. Accessed January 25, 2021.

149) Interview by research team with a Yemeni gender expert and academic (woman #7), December 1, 2020.

150) It is estimated that eight Muhammasheen were elected to local councils on the GPC ticket including one in Sana'a, two in Taiz, five in Aden and one in Lahj.

151) It is estimated that Muhammasheen comprised 98 percent of voters in the district, thus facilitating Noaman Al-Hudhaifi's election. Connie Christiansen and Sabria Al-Thawr, "Muhamesheen Activism: Enacting Citizenship During Yemen's Transition," *Journal of Citizenship Studies*, Vol 23, Issue 2, 2019, p. 12.

152) Interview by research team with a representative of the National Union of Muhammasheen (man #4), October 26, 2020.

153) Interview by research team with a member of the National Union for the Development of the Poorest Groups in Taiz (man #7), October 17, 2020.

154) Bilal ibn Rabah was a former enslaved man of African descent who was one of the most trusted companions of the Prophet Muhammad and the first individual who called Muslims to prayer.

While the impact of Muhammasheen on political parties has been minimal, according to one interviewee the Yemeni Socialist Party was more inclusive of Muhammasheen concerns than other political parties.^[155] However, Mohammed al-Qairai, a Muhammash activist who had risen in the ranks of the YSP, resigned in 2008 due to frustration and the prejudice he encountered at the highest echelons of the party.^[156]

In contrast to limited political representation, as discussed above Muhammasheen have been heavily mobilized to fight by various parties to the conflict, including the Houthis, the Yemeni government and the Southern Transitional Council. This has led to growing rifts and friction within the Muhammasheen community; new political polarization and divisions have found their way into daily interactions of Muhammasheen. This sectarianism is also reflected in divisions in broader Yemeni society, which are likely to mar post-war Yemeni society.^[157]

The Houthis have targeted Muhammasheen for recruitment to fight through the *Ahfad Bilal* movement claiming they are integrating Muhammasheen into society. This integration is managed at the governorate level directly under Houthi local authorities who are also engaged in social and charitable activities. Many Muhammasheen interviewed for this study shared the belief that even the name *Ahfad Bilal* is a racist term that denies Muhammasheen their national identity.^[158]

A New Era of Muhammasheen Political Activism: The Arab Spring and NDC

Some younger Muhammasheen joined with other Yemeni youth, women and activists in Yemen's popular uprising, which began in January 2011. In March 2011, Nabil al-Maqtari, a Muhammash and the head of the Yemeni Organization Against Racial Discrimination, went to Change Square in Sana'a, the center of the demonstrations, to deliver a speech on behalf of Muhammasheen. He said: "Institutionalized by the government and normalized by the people, we are Arabs, Muslims and Yemeni citizens, just like you. So why are we made to feel inferior? Why are we treated like slaves? I came to this square because I wanted to feel equal. Instead, I find discrimination in every corner. This is racism in its

155) Interview by research team with a member of the National Union for the Development of the Poorest Groups in Taiz (man #7), October 17, 2020

156) Connie Christiansen and Sabria Al-Thawr, "Muhammasheen Activism: Enacting Citizenship During Yemen's Transition," *Journal of Citizenship Studies*, Vol 23, Issue 2, 2019, p. 13.

157) Interview by research team with the head of a local NGO (man #6), October 7, 2020.

158) Interviews by the research team with a community activist and lawyer (man #2), November 6, 2020; a Muhammasha (woman #14), November 22, 2020; and a representative of the National Union of Muhammasheen (man #4), October 26, 2020.

worst form.”^[159] This moment marked a new milestone for Muhammasheen, in bringing their plight to the forefront of the movements seeking political and social transformation.

Leading up to the National Dialogue Conference (March 2013-January 2014), Muhammasheen ramped up their political activism, including convening a conference of Muhammasheen leaders and organizing labor strikes of municipality workers and numerous popular demonstrations. Yet despite this increased public profile, among the 565 delegates selected to participate in the NDC only one was from the Muhammasheen community, President of the National Union of the Marginalized Noaman al-Hudhaifi. Nonetheless, the grievances of Muhammasheen were discussed, sometimes for the first time in public fora. Among the 1,800 NDC recommendations, a number specifically addressed the situation of Muhammasheen. The NDC outcomes proposed allocating a quota of up to 10 percent for Muhammasheen in public sector positions, and gave Muhammasheen the right to pursue leadership positions in elected bodies, councils and the legislature.^[160] The NDC outcomes also urged state authorities to take all necessary legal measures to achieve and guarantee Muhammasheen participation in public, civil and political life and equal access to decision-making positions.^[161]

Following the NDC, the Constitutional Drafting Committee included one article in the new constitution on Muhammasheen (Article 62): “The State shall undertake legislative and executive actions to raise the status of vulnerable and marginalized groups and promote their active participation in political, economic and social life. The State shall endeavor to integrate marginalized groups into society.”^[162] However, despite the progressive NDC outcomes and draft constitutional provisions, the eruption of the conflict shattered the hopes of Muhammasheen to obtain equal citizenship. Many Muhammasheen interviewed looked back with sorrow and regret on the hope prevalent during the transitional period and how things have since deteriorated.^[163] Among some Muhammasheen, the failure of the NDC to change their treatment by the state or their fellow citizens is blamed on political parties who lacked commitment to engage them in a constructive way in line with agreed outcomes.^[164]

159) Connie Christiansen and Sabria Al-Thawr, “Muhammasheen Activism: Enacting Citizenship During Yemen’s Transition,” *Journal of Citizenship Studies*, Vol 23, Issue 2, 2019, p. 7.

160) “NDC Outcomes,” p. 195. http://ndc.ye/ndc_document.pdf. Accessed January 10, 2021.

161) Republic of Yemen, “National Dialogue Conference Outcomes Document,” p, 158, <https://www.peaceagreements.org/yemen-timeline>. Accessed November 1, 2020.

162) “Yemen’s Draft Constitution of 2015,” *Constitute Project*, January 15, 2015, p. 13, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Yemen_2015D.pdf?lang=en. Accessed November 27, 2020.

163) Interview by research team with human rights activist (man #11), November 9, 2020; and a member of the National Union for the Development of the Poorest Groups in Taiz (man #7), October 17, 2020.

164) Interview by research team with a community activist and lawyer (man #2), November 6, 2020,

One interviewee noted that Muhammasheen were often manipulated by political leadership and then made to suffer the consequences. This was once again the case in the wake of the August 2019 conflict between the Yemeni government and the Southern Transitional Council (STC). In areas controlled by the STC, Muhammasheen men, who had fought on the side of the government, had their homes raided by Security Belt forces affiliated with the STC and several were imprisoned and labeled as criminals and bandits.^[165]

Nevertheless, there are glimmers of hope with some well-educated Muhammasheen establishing organizations in their communities.^[166] Such activism includes encouraging children's education, teaching income-generating skills to women, raising awareness on the need for ID documents and helping protect Muhammasheen (plural feminine) who are subjected to violence or abuse. While there are still a limited number of Muhammasheen journalists, there are many more than prior to the Arab Spring and NDC era and there is a website for Muhammasheen news.^[167] However, a gap remains as many abuses and challenges faced by the community are never covered in the media.

Access to Justice, Land Ownership and Sharecropping

Generally, Muhammasheen suffer from the absence of justice and mechanisms to seek redress, in both the formal and informal (*'Urf*) legal systems. In cases where crimes have been committed against Muhammasheen, if the perpetrators are arrested or charged they are easily released and the charges dropped. Such injustices are due to the interventions by or connections to influential people, bribery or as a result of systemic discrimination against Muhammasheen within the judicial and police systems.^[168] In crimes where the judicial system is traditionally strict, such as premeditated murder, the judicial system is lenient if the victim is from the Muhammasheen community, and pressures the Muhammasheen to accept *diya*.^[169] If such a deal is refused, the Muhammasheen victim's family are often persecuted and possibly expelled from the area, or their home is demolished without any protection, legal or otherwise.^[170]

165) Interview by research team with the head of a local NGO (man #12), November 11, 2020.

166) Interview by research team with the head of a local organization and a member of the National Union of Muhammasheen (woman #10), October 31, 2020.

167) See: <https://mohammashen-yem.info/category/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%87%D9%85%D8%B4%D9%8A%D9%86/>.

168) Interview by research team with a Muhammasheen human rights activist and the head of a local NGO (man #1), October 22, 2020.

169) Indemnity money paid to the victim, or their heirs, by the party that caused bodily injury, an Islamic legal practice observed in many countries as a form of social insurance.

170) Interview by research team with a Muhammasheen activist (man #5), October 30, 2020.

There are strong traditional barriers to the ownership of land for Muhammasheen in much of the country, with a few exceptions.^[171] While currently Yemeni law doesn't explicitly prohibit Muhammasheen, or any group, from owning land, landowners often refuse to sell land to Muhammasheen because of prejudice and negative stereotypes. In one incident in Jabal Habashi in Taiz in 2012, more than 40 Muhammasheen families were evicted from their legally owned land because the neighboring landowners campaigned against them and attacked them. Although these Muhammasheen sought redress by organizing rallies and through complaints to the governor, the authorities refrained from questioning or arresting the perpetrators.^[172]

As noted above, there is a strong historic prohibition in most of the country regarding Muhammasheen land ownership, including agricultural land, which has deep consequences in a traditionally agrarian society. This discriminatory practice has meant that poverty levels are high among Muhammasheen who were often forced to move between areas seeking agricultural or other types of work.^[173] In some cases Muhammasheen have been able to obtain a part of the agricultural output through sharecropping arrangements that assigns them one-quarter to one-half of the harvest.^[174] While sharecropping arrangements in Yemen are generally regulated,^[175] when illiterate Muhammasheen farmers are sharecroppers they are more likely to do so informally, and thus more subject to discrimination by the land owner.

The meaning of 'landless' in Yemen has deep implications as it is a factor contributing to poverty and exacerbates vulnerabilities, with a peripatetic lifestyle denying Muhammasheen and other landless rural poor protection by elites and tribes, constraining inheritance and thus limiting the assets that are passed down through the generations. Additionally, such circumstances also mean there is less capital available for migration, which is a key mechanism promoting social mobility. This challenge also contributes to separating families as men seek itinerant agricultural labor opportunities, contributing to the vulnerability of women and children from males who could intervene in cases of SGBV.

171) According to Burja, in Wadi Hureidah, branching off Wadi Hadramawt, until 1858 with the establishment of the Qua'ity State, *Akhdam* were not allowed to own land or even share-crop farm land. By the early 1960s when Burja conducted his research *Akhdam* owned the least amount of land per household of all social groups. Abdalla S. Burja, *The Politics of Stratification: A Study of Political Change in a South Arabian Town*. Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 62-69.

172) Ibid.

173) Huda Seif, "Alternative Report to the joint 15th and 16th Periodic Report of the State Party Yemen to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), United Nations Human Rights Commission," *Alternative World: Partnership for Equitable Development and Social Justice in Association with International Dalit Solidarity Network*, July 2006, p. 5, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CERD/Shared%20Documents/YEM/INT_CERD_NGO_YEM_69_10354_E.pdf. Accessed November 19, 2020.

174) Interview by research team with human rights activist (man #11), November 9, 2020.

175) Depending on the location, the type of crop and type of land, percentages for the landowner vary. William J. Donaldson, *Sharecropping in the Yemen: A Study in Islamic Theory, Custom and Pragmatism*, Brill, 2000, p. 142-163.

3.6. Public and Private Spaces for Muhammasheen Women

This section explores issues faced by women from the Muhammasheen community including working and contributing to household income, displacement, risks of SGBV, changing family relations and marriage.

Women in Yemen face significant social, economic and political challenges. Experiences of women and gender dynamics are diverse, shaped by status, education, work experiences and family context, and emerging from varied cultural, tribal and legal traditions. The current political and humanitarian crisis has had a profound impact on the situation of women and the context of gender in the country. This section will not cover gender dynamics and issues impacting women's lives, but rather it will share a number of salient issues of specific relevance to Muhammasheen that arose in interviews for this study.^[176]

Overview

Women and girls from the Muhammasheen community face challenges that differ from other Yemeni women, influenced by a number of factors including where they live, their education, economic circumstances and family situation, and their personalities. Muhammasheen face harsh systematic discrimination and prejudice when seeking work opportunities and securing basic services. At the same time, in broader Yemeni society they traditionally also face fewer movement restrictions, gender segregation constraints and veiling and modest clothing requirements.^[177] As one scholar writing about *Akhdam* women in Aden noted, “The *Khadima* woman is *hurra* (free) some people proclaimed to me.”^[178]

176) For a more detailed discussion of the situation of women in Yemen and gender dynamics see the following resources by the author of this study: Marta Colburn, “The Life Phases of a Yemeni Woman,” The Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, March 10, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/13340>. Accessed March 17, 2021; Marta Colburn, “USAID/Yemen Gender Analysis,” Banyan Global, 2020; and Marta Colburn, *A Situation Analysis of Gender and Development in Yemen*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and Oxfam, Amman Jordan, 2002.

177) Maxine Molyneux, *State policies and the position of women workers in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, 1967 – 77*, International Labour Office, Geneva, 1982, p. 3; and Sheila Carapico, “Gender and Status Inequalities in Yemen: Honour, Economics, and Politics,” In *Patriarchy and Development: Women's Positions at the End of the Twentieth Century*, edited by Valentine M. Moghadam, p. 86, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996, <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1170&context=polisci-faculty-publications>, Accessed September 9, 2020; and Anne Meneley, *Tournaments of Value: Sociability and Hierarchy in a Yemeni Town*, 1996, University of Toronto Press, p. 93.

178) Susanne Dahlgren, *Contesting Realities: The Public Sphere and Morality in Southern Yemen*, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2010, p. 285.

As the most stigmatized group of women in Yemen, Muhammashat are also the most vulnerable to abuse. Their income-earning activities, such as street sweeping, begging and selling goods, bring them into public spaces where there are few other Yemeni women. Additionally, their social isolation and lack of adequate housing expose them to risks and deny them the respect and protection accorded to women from other strata of society. Stereotypes about Muhammashat abound, accusing them of loose morals, lacking honor and lineage and having weak religious observance. Such prejudices shape how other Yemeni men and women interact with them, putting them at increased risk of harassment, abuse and SGBV.

The conflict has had a negative impact on the lives of many women in Yemen, and especially for a vulnerable minority such as Muhammashat. Like other Yemeni women many have had to flee their homes due to conflict, their children have nightmares from the violence they have witnessed, their male relatives have had to leave to fight to earn a living and they have struggled to continue to feed their families. Additionally, they have had to stand in endless lines for water and humanitarian assistance. Within this community of women, those who are elderly, disabled or incarcerated have additional layers of discrimination and vulnerability to overcome. Muhammashat survivors of SGBV struggle with health complications, social stigma and psychological challenges. Activities which are particularly challenging for women and which increase the risk of harassment and SGBV include street sweeping at night; passing checkpoints; begging; and incarceration, or being brought in for questioning.^[179]

Muhammashat Working

During the conflict, Muhammasheen women have increasingly become the main breadwinners for their families,^[180] despite facing many challenges when going out to work. Prior to the war, some Muhammashat worked as street sweepers, some were trained by charitable associations and had acquired professions such as sewing, spinning wool, making incense and other handicrafts, and some were employed as domestic workers.^[181] The employment of Muhammashat in domestic work has declined during the war due to diminishing household finances and

179) International Dalit Solidarity Network and the All Youth Network for Society Development, “UPR Yemen 2014 The Human Rights Situation of *Al-Akhdam* in Yemen,” Joint NGO Submission Related to Yemen for the 17th Universal Period Review Session Scheduled for January 2014, June 2013, p. 182, http://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/user_folder/pdf/New_files/Yemen/UPR_joint_submission_IDSNAYN_June_2013FINAL.pdf. Accessed November 19, 2020.

180) Interview by research team with a Muhammash human rights activist and the head of a local NGO (man #1), October 22, 2020.

181) Interview by research team with a Muhammasha woman from Abyan (woman #3), October 10, 2020.

because some employers have grown suspicious that Muhammasheen women working in their homes may be serving as informants for various political parties.^[182] It was relatively common for Muhammashat to beg, as this is seen as employment within the community. The war has pushed many women who were not working or who worked in other jobs to the street to beg, and this has become the main profession for most Muhammashat women according to those interviewed for this research.^[183] They noted that in some families, two or three women from the same family beg, because with the Yemeni rial being worth roughly a quarter of its value in government-held areas in January 2021 relative to before the conflict, the cost of living has increased dramatically.^[184] Some Muhammasheen said that even since the war, families sometimes send their daughters and sisters to Saudi Arabia to beg, and many Muhammasheen women and girls worked as beggars at the Saudi borders.^[185]

The double vulnerability of marginalized women is most evident in the street where they face verbal and physical harassment and violence for being women in a patriarchal society, marginalized in a prejudiced society, and poor so being forced to beg. Women beggars are exposed to a range of risks and dangers of abuse due to their constant presence in the street, and Muhammasheen activists interviewed for this research asserted that there had been a war-time increase in the rates of assault and SGBV.^[186] Muhammashat employed as street sweepers work primarily at night putting them at risk of SGBV.^[187] A journalist said women paid the highest price in the Muhammasheen community.^[188] Muhammashat who support their families suffer because they are forced to go out to work or beg in the street, in addition to the dilemma of leaving their children at home without care.^[189]

182) Ibid.

183) Interviews by research team with the following: a Muhammash human rights activist and the head of a local NGO (man #1), October 22, 2020; a human rights activist (man #11), November 9, 2020; the head of a local NGO (man #12), November 11, 2020; and the head of a local organization and a member of the National Union of Muhammasheen (woman #10), October 31, 2020.

184) Interview by research team with a community activist and lawyer (man #2), November 6, 2020.

185) Interview by research team with the head of a local organization and a member of the National Union of Muhammasheen (woman #10), October 31, 2020.

186) Interview by research team with a Muhammash human rights activist and the head of a local NGO (man #1), October 22, 2020.

187) This is despite the Yemeni labor law which forbids the employment of women at night, except during the month of Ramadan (Article 46). Republic of Yemen, "Labor Code, Act No. 5 1995," <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/WEBTEXT/44043/65001/E95YEM01.htm#a42>. Accessed November 27, 2020.

188) Interview by research team with a journalist (man #13), November 15, 2020.

189) Interview by research team with Muhammasha community activist in Abyan (woman #11), November 17, 2020.

Displacement and Conflict

Displacement and conflict affect women in particular because of the impact on social roles, as burdens shift from men to women due to separation or the death of the husband as a result of war. Conflict, weak rule of law, fragmented governance, injustice and insecurity make women, and Muhammashat in particular, vulnerable to an increased risk of SGBV. In addition, in some cases they have become targets of deliberate attacks by the various parties to the conflict. Muhammashat women also face new demands as a result of the changing environment to provide for themselves and their children.

Muhammasheen families were subject to discrimination in the camps managed by the Houthi-affiliated Displaced Persons Administration; the camps designated for Muhammasheen families were much worse than those for the non-Muhammasheen, and they lacked basic services, according to a representative from the Yemeni Women’s Union.^[190]

The following incident, which took place in 2020, highlights the complex reality of displacement for Muhammashat, who face a higher risk of sexual assault and less access to justice. The head of an NGO and a prominent member of the Muhammasheen Women Network recounted: “There was a checkpoint at the roundabout in Aden. Soldiers were on duty at night and attacked IDP women from Hudaydah, raping two of them. So we went to the military authorities in the morning when we heard this news with human rights activists and lawyers. However, they had changed the personnel at the checkpoint. The file for the case has disappeared.”^[191]

Muhammashat also struggle to be included in beneficiary lists of humanitarian organizations; they face bureaucratic delays from organizations and very few Muhammashat have national ID cards.^[192] Even when an organization registers Muhammashat and transfers the cash to money changers, often she cannot collect the money without an ID card.^[193]

190) Interview by research team with a project director with the Women Union (woman #15), October 18, 2020.

191) Interview by research team with the head of an NGO and prominent member of the Muhammasheen Women Network (woman #12), November 5, 2020.

192) Interview by research team with a human rights activist (man #11), November 9, 2020.

193) Interview by research team with a Muhammash human rights activist from Marib (man #8), October 30, 2020.

Risk of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

Women are active breadwinners in Muhammasheen families, and through their work they are exposed to violence, harassment and abuse, especially since much of their work is on the street.^[194] Muhammashat women who work as cleaners may be subjected to sexual abuse by their supervisors;^[195] Those who protest or speak out may face further harassment and threats of expulsion.^[196] The daughters of working Muhammashat are also vulnerable to harassment.^[197] Muhammashat women also suffer from domestic and sexual violence from men in the family or from their intimate partners.^[198] Muhammasheen girls and women who experience SGBV have limited options for recourse due to discrimination among security personnel and in the judicial system.^[199]

Below are some of the stories of violence experienced by Muhammashat shared in interviews conducted for this research:

- In 2020, in Al-Shamaytayn district in Taiz governorate, a Muhammasha woman was raped at gunpoint by three armed men.^[200]
- In 2019 in Dhamar, a woman aged 19 or 20 years old disappeared after getting married. Her body was found after one month, and she was pregnant. Her husband was accused of killing her and is still in hiding.^[201]
- In Aden in 2020, a Muhammasha woman who worked as a cleaner in a school was sexually harassed by a teacher, who was her supervisor.^[202]
- In 2019 in Aden, a Muhammash man shot his younger sister and a man she hoped to marry because he disapproved of the proposed marriage. The sister was killed and her fiancé was permanently disabled. The brother, who worked as a military recruiter in Mokha, fled to Hudaydah governorate with his wife and children.^[203]
- In 2006 in Al-Hawban in Taiz governorate, a Muhammash man shot dead his Muhammasha wife because she refused to return to their home after a disagreement. He killed her at her family's home, where she had been staying.^[204]

194) Interview by research team with a Muhammash (man #14), November 15, 2020.

195) Interview by research team with the head of a local NGO (man #12), November 11, 2020.

196) Interview by research team with a Muhammasha woman from Abyan (woman #3), October 10, 2020

197) Interview by research team with a community activist in Taiz (woman #8), October 18, 2020.

198) Interview by research team with a Muhammasha from Marib (woman #16), November 26, 2020.

199) Interview by research team with a human rights activist and the head of a local NGO (woman #1), November 23, 2020.

200) Interview by research team with the head of a local organization and a member of the National Union of Muhammasheen (woman #10), October 31, 2020.

201) Interview by research team with a Muhammasha (woman #13), November 5, 2020.

202) Interview by research team with a human rights activist and the head of a local NGO (woman #1), November 23, 2020.

203) Ibid.

204) Interview by research team with a community activist in Taiz (woman #8), October 18, 2020.

Muhammashat in the Private Sphere

Changing Family Relations

During the conflict, family tension and divorce rates have risen in the Muhammasheen community, in part as a result of displacement and increased poverty.^[205] The dire economic situation has forced Muhammasheen women and children to take on more financial responsibility, with income-earning opportunities for men increasingly limited, as many jobs in factories and farms as well as migration opportunities have been lost due to the conflict.^[206]

As a Muhammasha activist describes: “There is a change in relations within the Muhammasheen families, rising voices, tension and quarrels, all due to poor social conditions. Husbands are not able to meet the needs of their families. This causes tension in the family especially when traditional roles are undermined and wives are unable to get what they need. In the past, Muhammasheen families were in relative stability. In the afternoon, husbands and wives would sit together and relax as a family, the father would go out in the morning to work and bring home food. Now he goes out to search unsuccessfully all day for income leading to frustration and anger. This causes tension within Muhammasheen families.”^[207] Conflict in Muhammasheen families is also exacerbated by political divisions, particularly in the south where some families are split between supporters of the government or the STC.^[208]

The conflict has had significant psychological effects in the home and in some cases led to mental health issues due to increased household tension and the death or injury of family members. Unfortunately, there are limited resources and organizations in the country supporting mental health issues, so Muhammasheen facing such challenges rarely receive psychiatric treatment.^[209] Additionally, interviewees noted increasing vulnerability to drug abuse.^[210]

“As for the marriage of girls to men older than them, a man comes with money and when this older man comes and will pay more, the father forces her to marry him, while the father doesn’t accept to marry her to the young man who loves the girl and she loves him back. The high cost of dowries is a very big disaster for the morals of society in general, as well as the Muhammasheen, and it is contrary to religious morals and no one talks about it.”

Interview with a Muhammasha activist from Dhamar

205) Interview by research team with the head of a local NGO (man #6), October 7, 2020.

206) Ibid.

207) Interview by research team with a representative from an NGO (woman #5), November 14, 2020.

208) Interview by research team with a human rights activist and the head of a local NGO (woman #1), November 23, 2020.

209) Interview by research team with a Muhammasha (woman #13), November 5, 2020.

210) Interview by research team with a member of the National Union for the Development of the Poorest Groups in Taiz (man #7), October 17, 2020.

Marriage

The interaction of the Muhammasheen community with the non-Muhammasheen community within IDP camps has led to some mixed marriages between the communities.^[211] However, in some cases, such marriages are short-lived, undertaken by non-Muhammash tribal men purely for pleasure, leaving Muhammashat women abandoned to suffer the psychological effects.^[212]

Moreover, according to numerous interviewees, the incidence of child marriage has increased, with fathers agreeing to their daughters' marriages to older men^[213] in order to benefit from the *mahr*.^[214] In the south, some Muhammasheen fathers marry their young daughters to merchants or men from Oman or the United Arab Emirates. When such girls or young women travel outside the country, they become isolated and vulnerable and can more easily be sexually exploited.^[215]

One interviewee for this research recounted that in 2017, a 15-year-old Muhammasha girl from Abyan was married and quickly became pregnant; she died during childbirth due to obstructed labor.^[216]

During the course of this research, reports of prostitution among Muhammashat were encountered, though it is difficult to assess the veracity of such information; such accusations have often plagued Muhammashat.^[217] While the economic challenges facing women may have pushed some Muhammashat into prostitution, it is difficult to sort through such a sensitive issue, partially due to the negative stereotypes in a society which harshly judges a caste-like minority it does not understand and considers immoral.

In conclusion to this section, it is important to note that Muhammashat are a force of incredible resilience and fortitude, supporting their families during difficult times including the current conflict and humanitarian crisis. Undoubtedly, they

211) Ibid.

212) Interview by research team with a community activist in Taiz (woman #8), October 18, 2020.

213) Interview by research team with a project director with the Women Union (woman #15), October 18, 2020.

214) Various (incorrectly) translated as dowry, bridal payment or bride-wealth, it is the groom's obligation to the bride in the form of money or possessions at the time of the marriage contract which becomes the property of the bride, either immediately or in the case of divorce.

215) Interview by research team with the head of a local NGO serving Muhammasheen (woman #2), November 22, 2020.

216) Interview by research team with a Muhammasha woman from Abyan (woman #3), October 10, 2020.

217) One scholar notes that during the British era in Aden there were common accusations that *Akhdam* women constituted many of the prostitutes in the Colony. In examining the records of the British this proved not to be the case. Although there were some *Akhdam* women so engaged, it was a small minority who were from this community. Prostitution was legal in Aden Colony until 1945, but even after that date little was done to stop the practice. Susanne Dahlgren, *Contesting Realities: The Public Sphere and Morality in Southern Yemen*, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2010, p. 275.

will continue doing so, although as with all of Yemeni society, the resilience of individuals and families is being stretched. Participants in this research reiterated their hope that a political solution will be achieved soon so they can begin to rebuild their lives and help heal the trauma of the war. Muhammashat should be supported to play a leadership role in such efforts.



IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Muhammasheen are a caste-like ethnic minority that has been ostracized and stigmatized for centuries in Yemen. The circumstances of marginalized groups such as the Muhammasheen have been exacerbated by the conflict, and they have faced rising levels of poverty, violence, abuse and SGBV. The conflict has increased vulnerabilities within the Muhammasheen community, particularly for women, children, the disabled and elderly.

The following recommendations are designed to address some salient challenges faced by Muhammasheen, in an effort to improve their situation and address underlying inequalities and structural discrimination in Yemen. They target donors, international organizations (UN agencies and international NGOs), local CSOs and government/local authorities.

Table 3. Findings and Recommendations

1	<p>Finding: Conflict-sensitive approaches for humanitarian assistance, development interventions and peace-building efforts are essential for all programming in the complex context in Yemen. Existing structural discrimination against Muhammasheen is insidious, and efforts to address their needs are met with strong resistance from local communities, local authorities and the government and even within international and local organizations.</p> <p>Recommendation: When targeting Muhammasheen, seek to integrate conflict-sensitive approaches to mitigate tension and resentment against them and avoid contributing to worsening their situation. Where possible program interventions should seek to include host communities, fellow IDPs or residents of slums or camp settings to mitigate resistance and negative consequences. Additionally, conducting thorough conflict analysis can improve project design.</p>
2	<p>Finding: There is an absence of gender-sensitive programming in Yemen, particularly within humanitarian assistance interventions. Protection concerns are often sidelined in urgent life-saving interventions and through a lack of gender expertise among humanitarian personnel. Local authorities discourage the use of a gender lens and the space to implement such programming is narrowing.</p> <p>Recommendation: Strive to mainstream gender analysis and gender best practices into all programming, including humanitarian assistance. Additionally, implement some programming exclusively targeting women’s needs and addressing gender inequalities, with a particular focus on women in vulnerable groups. Utilize income-earning interventions in programming to address the needs of GBV survivors and those at high risk of early marriage, including young Muhammashat.</p>

3	<p>Finding: Many efforts supported by the international community to empower and address the needs of Muhammasheen have focused on a specific geographic area and/or sector. This limits the impact of such interventions; those focused on one sector, such as housing/shelter, ignore other issues such as access to water which are critical to improving the overall living situation in slums.</p> <p>Recommendation: Seek to strengthen coordination efforts among various organizations targeting Muhammasheen and underserved slum areas and highly vulnerable people within this group including women, youth, the elderly, disabled and survivors of SGBV. Build on the efforts of UNICEF,^[218] utilizing a case management model to address a wide range of needs which contribute to poverty and marginalization. Integrate rights-based, conflict- and gender-sensitive approaches in such interventions to promote equity.</p>
4	<p>Finding: The isolation of the Muhammasheen community in Yemen will require significant efforts to address. There is a dearth of information in Yemen on the approaches to promote integration and social inclusion of Muhammasheen that have been tried in the country, as well as integration of marginalized groups in other conflict-affected and low income countries.</p> <p>Recommendation: It is suggested to compile lessons learned from various interventions to improve integration of Muhammasheen into broader Yemeni society over the past decades, in order to better shape future initiatives. Lessons learned and best practices of social inclusion efforts with highly marginalized or pariah groups in other countries should also be studied to inform efforts in Yemen to address the social isolation of Muhammasheen. This could include efforts to combat racism and caste-based discrimination among groups such as the Dalits in India and the Jarar/Bantu in Somalia.</p>

218) UNICEF's work with Muhammasheen has been shaped by its engagement with the Social Welfare Fund under the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor and includes a number of Vulnerability and Needs Assessments (VNAs) in Amanat Al-Asimah, Sana'a governorate, Taiz and Aden as part of the Integrated Model of Social and Economic Assistance and Empowerment (IMSEA) initiative. See: "Vulnerability and Needs Assessment Aden Governorate, Integrated Model of Social and Economic Assistance and Empowerment," May 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/yemen/reports/integrated-model-social-and-economic-assistance-and-empowerment-imsea-1>; "Vulnerability and Needs Assessment (VNA II) Amanat Al-Asimah and Sana'a Governorates," IMSEA, April 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/yemen/reports/vulnerability-and-needs-assessment-yemen>; and UNICEF and Social Welfare Fund, "Muhamasheen Mapping Survey in Taiz," in collaboration with Interaction for Development, October 2014.

5	<p>Finding: Civil society is a key actor in efforts to build resilience at the community level and provide basic services. Muhammasheen-led CSOs struggle under the burden of isolation and discrimination, as well as being hampered by similar weaknesses experienced by other Yemeni CSOs.</p> <p>Recommendation: Invest in capacity building of Yemeni CSOs led by Muhammasheen and support them to build alliances with other Yemeni CSOs, with a particular focus on youth- and women-led and human rights organizations to mitigate isolation and vulnerability. Support efforts to map and assess capacities among Muhammasheen-led CSOs to amplify the impact of such organizations and improve organizational effectiveness and efficiency. Develop more flexible funding mechanisms to rapidly respond to evolving needs identified by Muhammasheen-led CSOs.</p>
6	<p>Finding: There is very limited documentation of human rights violations against Muhammasheen. Such a lacuna makes it more difficult to advocate for assistance or to potentially contribute to efforts to hold parties to the conflict accountable for war crimes. Additionally, there are few journalists, researchers and writers from within the Muhammasheen community to bring issues to attention in broader Yemeni society as well as internationally.</p> <p>Recommendation: Support efforts to document the impact of the conflict on Muhammasheen and to chronicle human rights violations against this stigmatized and highly vulnerable community. This should include building the capacity of activists from within the community, as well as researchers and journalists. Engage local and international organizations to mitigate the negative impact of Muhammasheen-led activism.</p>
7	<p>Finding: Yemeni youth and women face various forms of exclusion and vulnerabilities. While needs among Muhammasheen youth and women share some similarities, they also struggle with some unique challenges, as well as isolation and discrimination from broader Yemeni society.</p> <p>Recommendation: Support efforts to conduct assessments with Muhammasheen youth and women to identify their needs as well as areas of commonality with their peers to build solidarity and social cohesion. Efforts to work with Muhammasheen youth should include utilizing the arts to amplify their voices and build skills in expressing needs, insights and aspirations.</p>

8	<p>Finding: Education is a key path to social mobility and economic empowerment and is an area of high need in the Muhammasheen community. The gender gap in education in the Muhammasheen community needs to be addressed to better understand why boys' enrollment and performance is lower than that of girls.</p> <p>Recommendation: Seek to change the social narrative about attitudes toward education, emphasizing that education can translate into better jobs for the younger generation, including boys. Link such efforts to vocational training opportunities specifically targeting adolescents and young men. Support schools to improve the learning environment for all children, targeting schools with high numbers of Muhammasheen students to address bullying and corporal punishment. Reduce household expenses for education by providing schools in poor neighborhoods with uniforms, school bags and feeding programs. Engage parents of Muhammasheen students in Mothers and Fathers Councils to seek to improve the learning environment and promote social inclusion. Provide consistent scholarships in higher education for young men and women from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds.</p>
9	<p>Finding: The lack of government-issued national ID cards is a significant issue for Muhammasheen, particularly for Muhammashat, to access basic services, humanitarian assistance and to manifest their citizenship.</p> <p>Recommendation: Implement a nationwide campaign to provide national ID to poor, vulnerable and marginalized Yemenis, with a particular focus on Muhammasheen and women. Such efforts should also seek to ease the registration process with government and local authorities, making it more citizen-friendly and accessible to all.</p>
10	<p>Finding: While cash assistance targeting women is essential and must continue, such efforts are best combined with income-earning opportunities for Muhammasheen women, youth and men seeking to contribute to longer term economic empowerment.</p> <p>Recommendation: Seek to develop economic empowerment efforts with Muhammasheen focusing on renewable energy and sustainable interventions such as those promoting solar energy or recycling solid waste in creative ways. Support economic inclusion efforts which incentivize savings programs and creative entrepreneurial solutions and which focus on improving housing and shelter in urban slums. Promote financial inclusion of Muhammasheen young men and women in microfinance and entrepreneurship initiatives.</p>

11	<p>Finding: Housing and shelter needs, along with basic services (water, sanitation and cooking fuel), are high priorities among all those living in slums. Throughout the country land ownership issues contribute to insecurity among Muhammasheen and the destruction of their property by the state, local authorities and/or landowners.</p> <p>Recommendation: Explore creative shelter and housing best practices and lessons learned in slums globally to address this high priority area. Support the efforts of the government and local authorities to address such needs, and empower Muhammasheen community leaders, including women and youth, to contribute to finding solutions. Consider launching competitions among youth to develop innovative solutions to housing and shelter problems.</p>
12	<p>Finding: The systematic exclusion of Muhammasheen from decision-making positions at the community, regional and national levels has contributed to the continuing structural discrimination against this ethnic minority. Such issues will not be eliminated unless a broad sector of society recognizes such exclusion as problematic and is supportive of addressing inequalities and injustices.</p> <p>Recommendation: Support interventions that have a strong focus on social inclusion utilizing a gender lens in a variety of sectors including education and health (where Muhammasheen face considerable prejudice from healthcare workers). Institute a quota of Muhammasheen as beneficiaries of interventions and integrate affirmative action for Muhammasheen community members and other vulnerable groups in society. All Yemenis will benefit from a more equitable society.</p>
13	<p>Finding: Access to and confidence in security and justice systems in Yemen is very low, even prior to the conflict, presenting Muhammasheen with significant barriers. Institutions such as the police and prison systems perpetuate structural discrimination and abuse against Muhammasheen, particularly against juveniles and women. Children of Muhammasheen prisoners are incarcerated with their mothers with no educational or other programming to address their needs.</p> <p>Recommendation: When possible in areas of the country that are more stable, reactivate programming that UNICEF and others were implementing before the conflict. This should include establishing units to deal with women and juveniles in detention that have well-trained female staff and include separate cells, bathrooms and clinics, as well as literacy and vocational training facilities. Such efforts must be linked to reform of security and justice services, as well as strengthening community-based efforts to address SGBV. Support facilities to address the needs of children incarcerated with their mothers including educational, recreational and healthcare interventions.</p>

ANNEX A: FURTHER TERMINOLOGY

Table 4 presents a summary of various ascriptive terms of Yemenis who share some characteristics of social exclusion and/or discrimination with the Muhammasheen.

Table 4: Lexicon of Marginalization^[219]

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Azboud</i> (plural of <i>Zuboud</i>) – referring to someone whose ancestors hailed from Zabid on the Tihamah coast. Used synonymously with <i>Akhdam</i> in highland areas of the north, but in southern areas describes landless agricultural laborers who worked on another’s land or in sharecropping arrangements.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Ahbash</i> (singular, <i>habash</i>) – term used for those who are assumed to have Ethiopian lineage.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Ahjur</i> (singular <i>hujur</i>) – historic community of black-skinned wandering camel and cattle herders originally from the southern lowlands of Wadi Hajar who would work seasonally in agricultural harvesting. It was said that tribesmen would eat with <i>Ahjur</i> but not intermarry.^[220] Landless cultivators who provide significant agricultural labor through sharecropping and are similar in status to ex-slaves.^[221]
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>’Abeed</i> (singular, <i>’Abed</i>^[222]) – Slaves. Slavery was legally and widely practiced in both northern and southern regions of Yemen. In 1962, Yemen became one of the last countries in the world to abolish the enslavement of its people.^[223] Under the British in Aden the institution was ostensibly eliminated.^[224]

219) This list is by no means comprehensive and was compiled to illustrate the diversity and complexity of occupation, social hierarchy, history and lineage categories in Yemen, many of which are marginalized and stigmatized. See Najwa Adra, “Social Exclusion Analysis – Yemen,” Prepared for DFID and the World Bank January 2006, p. 20, <http://www.najwaadra.net/yemense.pdf>, Accessed September 9, 2020.

220) Shelomo Dov Goitein, “Portrait of a Yemenite Weavers’ Village,” *Jewish Social Studies*, Jan, 1955, Vol. 17, p. 10-11.

221) Huda Seif, “Alternative Report to the joint 15th and 16th Periodic Report of the State Party Yemen to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), United Nations Human Rights Commission,” *Alternative World :Partnership for Equitable Development and Social Justice in Association with International Dalit Solidarity Network* July 2006, p. 8, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CERD/Shared%20Documents/YEM/INT_CERD_NGO_YEM_69_10354_E.pdf. Accessed November 19, 2020.

222) For a thoughtful history of slavery on the Arabian Peninsula, including Yemen, see: Benjamin Reilly, “Slavery, Agriculture, and Malaria in the Arabian Peninsula,” Ohio University Press, 2015, <https://library.oopen.org/bitstream/id/e0f5f38a-51ed-4b9b-81e6-975b579ee9f9/1004765.pdf>. Accessed December 5, 2020.

223) *Ibid.*

224) While in Aden, the 1833 Abolition of Slavery Act supposedly ended the institution, “in 1924 Britain admitted that slavery was still practised in Sierra Leone, northern Nigeria, Gambia, Aden, Burma and

- *Al-Jabarti* – a group of Africans brought by the British to south Yemen as a type of indentured servants to remove night soil. They were also associated with black magic, but distinguished from *Akhdam* and considered lower on the social hierarchy.^[225]
- *Bedu* – traditionally engaged in a nomadic lifestyle herding sheep and goats and raising camels and sometimes horses. Broader Yemeni society holds numerous prejudices against this group, particularly as their women are not seen to conform to common understandings of modesty in female behavior.^[226]
- *Du'afa* (singular, *da'if*) – meaning weak, who in the Yemeni tribal hierarchy are in need of protection due to their unarmed status, including women, Jews, or those considered 'lacking origins' (*nuqqas* or *naqis al-Asl*), as well as *muhhajjar* (*Sada* and religious scholars) who are also considered 'weak' and protected but not stigmatized.
- *Fellaheen* (singular, *fellah*) – landless agricultural laborers in the south.^[227]
- *Hirthan* (singular, *Harrath*) – meaning 'plowmen,'^[228] an occupational group found in Hadramawt who work as farmers, said to be the descendants of the original residents of Hureidah. Considered part of the *Masakin* people they lack a genealogical framework and are seen as without tribal roots.^[229]
- *Lahuj* - similar to Ahjur, Lahuj are migrant agricultural laborers, originally from Lahj, of African descent who come to an area during harvest season to provide manual labor.^[230]
- *Masakin* (singular *Maskin*) – meaning the poor, pathetic ones, or humble ones, a term used in various parts of the country to refer to those who are considered 'weak.' In Hadramawt this includes *Hirthan*, *Akhdam* and *Subyan*^[231] and in other areas *Bani Al-Khumus* (see Table 2 above).

Hong Kong." Joseph Hanlon, "Response: The 1833 Abolition of Slavery Act Didn't End the Vile Trade," *The Guardian*, January 24, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/jan/25/comment.comment>. Accessed November 27, 2020.

225) Scott S. Reese, *Imperial Muslims: Islam, Community and Authority in the Indian Ocean, 1839–1937*, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, p. 109.

226) Marta Colburn, "The Life Phases of a Yemeni Woman," *The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies*, March 10, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/13340>.

227) Alexandre Corriveau-Bourque, "Repairing Fractured Landscapes; Challenges and opportunities for resolving disputes over land, housing, water and other natural resources in Yemen," Norwegian Refugee Council, April 2019, p. 9, <https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/repairing-fractures-landscapes/repairing-fractured-landscapes---challenges-and-opportunities-for-resolving-disputes-over-land-housing-water-and-other-natural-resources-in-yemen.pdf>. Accessed November 20, 2020.

228) Robert W. Stookey, *South Yemen: A Marxist Republic in Arabia*, Westview Press, 1982, p. 8.

229) Abdalla S. Burja, *The Politics of Stratification: A Study of Political Change in a South Arabian Town*. Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 39.

230) Delores Walters, *Perceptions of Social Inequality in the Yemen Arab Republic*, Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, 1987.

231) *Ibid.* p. 14.

- *Ma'n* – nomadic group similar to gypsies found in the Eastern Aden protectorate during the British era who engaged in dancing and singing and would occasionally come into Aden city where they were forbidden by the British to enter.^[232]
- *Muwalladeen* (singular, *Muwallad*) – a derogatory term categorizing Yemenis of mixed ancestry, with the African and Indian mixture being the most negatively viewed in broader society.
- *Qarawana* – a derogatory term from Shabwa that refers to a settled class of individuals who work in low-status occupations.
- *Subyan* (singular, *Sabiy*) – meaning 'houseboy' or servant. An occupational group found in southern parts of Yemen who perform 'ceremonial services' to tribesmen and other higher status groups, or engage in menial tasks (e.g. carrying water, transporting sand or stone by donkeys), with a status lower than *Akhdam* in Hureidah, Hadramawt.^[233]
- *Suqi* – a derogatory term describing someone who works in the market and has been tainted through commerce or service. This includes *nuqqas* groups such as *Mazayinah*, *'Abeed*, Jews and *Akhdam*. Another version of this is *Ahl Al-Suq*, meaning people of the market.^[234]

A companion to the table above that provides non-derogatory alternatives for some terms referenced in this section is, "Social Media and Conflict in Yemen: A Lexicon of Hate Speech Terms," by Jacqueline Lacroix.^[235]

Yemen has rich oral traditions that include poetry, stories, songs and thousands of proverbs.^[236] Such proverbs provide a window into Yemeni culture. It is therefore not surprising that there are numerous negative proverbs related to Muhammasheen (i.e. Al-Akhdam). When these are shared, sometimes it is to justify a prejudice, and sometimes it is to seek to deconstruct such cultural norms in order to promote change. However, it is difficult to identify any proverbs that present Muhammasheen in a positive light. Table 5 contains illustrative Yemeni proverbs that provide insight into traditional social stratification and illustrate the prejudices that Muhammasheen face throughout their lives.^[237]

232) R. B. Serjeant, "The Ma'n 'Gypsies' of the West Aden Protectorate," *Anthropos*, 1961, Bd. 56, H. 5/6, p. 737-749.

233) Abdalla S. Burja, *The Politics of Stratification: A Study of Political Change in a South Arabian Town*. Oxford University Press. 1971, p. 43-44.

234) Tomas Gerholm, *Market, Mosque and Mufraj: Social Inequality in a Yemeni Town*. Department of Social Anthropology, University of Stockholm, 1977, p. 130-132.

235) Jacqueline Lacroix, "Social Media and Conflict in Yemen: A Lexicon of Hate Speech Terms," Development Transformations, Peace Track Initiative, July 2019, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54257189e4b0ac0d5fca1566/t/5d1ce382cef4150001f62b8b/156217434>. Accessed December 5, 2020.

236) Qadi Ismail Al-Akwa's *Al-Amthal Al-Yemeni* (Yemeni Proverbs) two volume collection contains 6,217 examples on a wide range of topics relating to all aspects of life.

237) In addition to folk traditions such as proverbs, in Yemen there are also a number of recent novels that address issues related to the Muhammasheen including: *The Land of Happy Conspiracies* (2018) by Wajdi Al-Ahdal; two novels by 'Ammar Batawil, *Salimin* (2014) and *Ekron 94* (2017); *A War under the Skin* (2010) by Ahmad Zayn; and Ali Al-Muqri's *Black Taste, Black Smell* (2008).

Table 5: Yemeni Proverbs on Muhammasheen^[238]

Transliteration	English	Arabic
<i>'Tidha laeiq kulub tabaquk fanazifhu, lkn 'iidha massah khadim faksirh.</i>	Clean your plate if it is touched by a dog, but break it if it's touched by a Khadim.	إذا لعق كلب طبقك فنظفه، لكن إذا مسه خادم فأكسره
<i>La tatafaraj lijamal al-akhdam, waldhunub fi haqahum aleizam.</i>	Don't look at the beauty of the <i>Akhdam</i> , sins are in their bones.	لا تتفرج لجمال الأخدام، والذنوب في حقهم العظام
<i>Ma juaadah min khadem.</i>	Goodness is not in the nature of servants.	ما جواده من خادم
<i>Khaw lak khadim.</i>	Do not consider a <i>Khadim</i> as a brother (as the slave is ungrateful).	خاو لك خادم
<i>Yahkumuh asluh.</i>	A person's behavior is determined by his origin. ^[239]	يحكمه أصله
<i>Sayir alkhadim wala tuakiluh, w akil alyahudi wala tusayiruh.</i>	Walk with a <i>Khadim</i> but don't sit down to a meal with him: eat with a Jew but don't walk with him.	سايير الخادم ولا تأكله، و أكل اليهودي ولا تساييره
<i>Yawm al-khadim eidah.</i>	<i>Khadim's</i> day is his <i>'Eid</i> (i.e. they aren't able to save money).	يوم الخادم عيده
<i>Min sayir al-khadim bat nadim.</i>	Whoever accompanied the <i>Khadim</i> , regretted it.	من سايير الخادم، بات نادم

238) Compiled from various sources.

239) Could also refer to *Mazayinah*.

ANNEX B: RATIONALIZING THE EXCLUSION OF MUHAMMASHEEN

In researching Muhammasheen in Yemen one encounters many explanations on the sources of discrimination they face in their own society. This section shares some common beliefs about this ethnic minority, with the caveat that such information is presented in order to better understand the depth of prejudice and the dynamics of domination. Neither the authors, nor Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, ascribe to such beliefs. While not comprehensive, this annex explores some salient justifications encountered in Yemen for discrimination against Muhammasheen.

One attitude encountered among Yemenis toward Muhammasheen is that they lack origin, i.e. *nuqqas* or *naqis al-Asl* (lacking, or deficient in, origin). This status has significance as origins, and the tracing of lineage, are considered very important to many Yemenis. According to one scholar, traditional social classes in Yemen are based on the ability to trace “an honorable lineage which others acknowledge.”^[240] The tribal categorization of Muhammasheen as ‘weak’ is related to their unarmed status, as traditionally they were forbidden from carrying arms,^[241] and thus are accorded a protected, albeit stigmatized, status along with women, Jews and *Mazayinah*.^[242] If a tribesman injures or kills a protected individual (also including *sada* and judges and women), the *diya*, or blood money,^[243] is multiple times the amount paid for a *qabili*, depending on the circumstances of the incident. Migration to cities or abroad allows for greater anonymity. However, this has also disrupted social protection networks, contributing to the vulnerability of Muhammasheen to SGBV and abuse. This has very direct consequences for Muhammasheen women and children who are particularly vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence, and even more so when their men are away working or fighting.

240) Delores Walters, “Women, Healthcare, and Social Reform in Yemen,” in *Feminism and Antiracism: International Struggles for Justice*, edited by France Winddance Twine and Kathleen M. Blee, New York University Press, 2001, p. 76.

241) “The *Akhdam* are a numerically small group in Sana’a mostly employed as street cleaners. They may neither acquire houses nor purchase land. Entry into other occupations is forbidden them. In contrast to members of other classes they are not allowed to carry arms.” R.B. Serjeant and Ronald Lewcock (Editors), *Sana: An Arabian Islamic City*, World of Islam Festival Trust, 1983, p. 255.

242) There are other groups accorded protected status, but who are not stigmatized but rather privileged by this traditional designation, such as *sada* and religious scholars.

243) Indemnity money paid to the victim, or their heirs, by the party that caused bodily injury, an Islamic legal practice observed in many countries as a form of social insurance.

A further aspect of the derogatory attitudes toward *Muhammasheen* is the claim that due to their “dirty” occupations, they are unclean to be around, reflected in the prejudice of not eating with a Muhammash. Such occupations traditionally included street sweeping, garbage collecting and removing night soil from homes and public toilets.^[244] Although prior to the 1962 revolution in the North, there were limited numbers of Muhammasheen in the highland areas and such ‘unclean’ tasks were performed by ‘*Abeed*, Jews or other categories of marginalized groups.^[245] Other occupations seen negatively in broader Yemeni society that Muhammasheen engaged in were performing music,^[246] dancing, therapeutic phlebotomy,^[247] and in some places contributing to Sufi traditions such as *Zar*.^[248]

“If there is a family that is not Muhammasheen and lives in the garbage, and its clothes are not clean and dirty, no one will accept them. I see that color is not the problem, but personal hygiene. I have friends who are Muhammasheen and we coexist, because they live a normal life.”

Manastigo online survey response

A further source of social stigma that Muhammasheen suffer from is the perspective that they lack cleanliness. As a result of poverty and discrimination, the housing situation for Muhammasheen is deplorable and houses generally lack clean water for drinking as well as showers, toilet facilities and electricity. This is a major challenge for Muhammasheen families whose lack of ready access to sanitary facilities puts them at greater risk for cholera, malaria, skin diseases, etc. Even the term *mahwa* to describe the slums where many Muhammasheen live is derogatory, typically used to describe a dog shelter.^[249] It is even asserted

244) A key component in the mosque-hammam-garden cycle found in the Old City of Sana’a is where the excrement from the public toilets is collected by Muhammasheen, burned and the ashes spread on the *miqshama* (plural, *maqashem*, green garden spaces found throughout the Old City to grow fresh food and fodder for animals). Ronald Lewcock, *The Old Walled City of Sana*, UNESCO, 1986, p. 72.

245) With the departure of the majority of the Yemenite Jewish community in Operation Magic Carpet in 1945-1946, gaps were left in a number of occupations which Jews typically performed in highland Yemen. This included the forced collection of animal and human excrement for burning in the bathhouses. Mark Wagner, *Jews and Islamic Law in Early 20th-Century Yemen*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2015, p. 39-40. By 1990 with the installation of a sewage system in the Old City of Sana’a, the collecting of dried excrement from long-drop toilets in homes and public toilets was no longer needed.

246) According to a British scholar, drumming is the domain of *Akhdam* in the music tradition of the Tihamah. Anderson Bakewell, “Music on the Tihamah,” *Studies on the Tihamah: The Report of the Tihamah Expedition 1982 and Related Papers*, Edited by Francine Stone, Longman, p. 104-108.

247) Bloodletting, a folk medicine activity traditionally practiced in many parts of Yemen and the Hadramawt was conducted by *Akhdam*. Mikhail Rodionov, “Field Data on Folk Medicine from the Hadramawt,” *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, 1996, Vol. 26, Papers from the 29th Seminar for Arabian Studies held in Cambridge, 20-22 July, 1995, p. 126.

248) Scott S. Reese, *Imperial Muslims: Islam, Community and Authority in the Indian Ocean, 1839–1937*, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, p. 112-119.

249) Luca Nevola, “Black People, White Hearts”: Origin, Race, and Colour in Contemporary Yemen,” *Antropologia*, 2020, Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 95, <https://www.ledijournals.com/ojs/index.php/antropologia/article/view/1626/1526>, Accessed September 18, 2020.

that burying someone from the Muhammasheen community can be problematic as some Yemenis feel their lack of cleanliness will pollute others even in death.^[250]

Many Muhammasheen and other Yemenis with darker skin share that they feel the discrimination they encounter is due to the color of their skin. Such perceptions are reflected in the additional layers of stigma that *Muhammasheen* face in contrast to others in the same *nuqqas* category such as *Mazayinah*, who do not have dark skin and are considered to be white by other Yemenis. As Luca Nevola, an Italian anthropologist,^[251] observes, “unlike many *akhdam*, these professional castes rarely suffer economic marginality and spatial segregation, since they have access to education and property.”^[252]

Another source of discrimination against Muhammasheen is the perception among some Yemenis that they are not good Muslims, as they incorporate non-Islamic practices into their religious traditions.^[253] The narrative on origins and the alleged connection of Muhammasheen to a Christian Ethiopian invasion in the sixth century AD also provides fodder for this justification of discrimination. Some Yemenis assert that their engagement in impious activities (music, dancing, *Zar*, etc.) or impure (dirty) occupations taints their spiritual life. Further, negative stereotypes include that “they are believed to be licentious in the way they let their women interact with men and to behave immorally, both ignoring Islamic religion and indulging in illicit acts like stealing and drinking.”^[254] Huda Seif, an anthropologist and human rights activist, notes, “the exclusion of this minority is religiously legitimized as a social castigation of fallen Muslim who could not uphold the moral codes of Islam and tribal Arab identity.”^[255]

“It is backwardness to brag about lineages and forget the words of the Prophet Mohammed when he said that all believers are brothers.”

Manastigo online survey response

250) Tom Finn, “In Revolt, Yemeni ‘Untouchables’ Hope for Path Out of Misery,” Reuters, March 7, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-yemen-akhdam/in-revolt-yemeni-untouchables-hope-for-path-out-of-misery-idUSLNE82602Q20120307>, Accessed October 23, 2020.

251) Nevola’s Ph.D. dissertation examines the role of genealogical constructs in essentializing professional caste groups in the Yemeni highlands.

252) Luca Nevola, “On Colour and Origin: The Case of the *Akhdam* in Yemen,” Open Democracy, February 13, 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/on-colour-and-origin-case-of-akhdam-in-yemen/>. Accessed September 18, 2020.

253) Afrah Al-Ahmadi and Sharon Beatty, “Participatory Socio-economic Needs Survey of the Sana’a Urban Settlement Dwellers with Special Reference to Women,” Oxfam-Yemen, April 1997. p. 54.

254) Luca Nevola, “Black People, White Hearts”: Origin, Race, and Colour in Contemporary Yemen,” *Antropologia*, 2020, Vol. 7, No. 1. <https://www.ledijournals.com/ojs/index.php/antropologia/article/view/1626/1526>. Accessed September 18, 2020.

255) Huda Seif, “Alternative Report to the Joint 15th and 16th Periodic Report of the State Party Yemen to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), United Nations Human Rights Commission,” *Alternative World :Partnership for Equitable Development and Social Justice in Association with International Dalit Solidarity Network* July 2006, p. 10, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CERD/Shared%20Documents/YEM/INT_CERD_NGO_YEM_69_10354_E.pdf. Accessed November 19, 2020.

ANNEX C: LEGAL CONTEXT

Legal Status of Muhammasheen before Unification

The socialist era of the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) provided Muhammasheen with opportunities in education, employment and government service and contributed to some changes in status. Members of the community benefited from university scholarships to study outside Yemen particularly in military sciences and engineering in the former Soviet Union, Iraq and other destinations.^[256] There were a number of high-level officers of modest background in the various branches of the PDRY military, including from the Muhammasheen community.^[257]

The prohibition on the use of status titles meant that Muhammasheen may have faced less verbal abuse, however many significant challenges remained and despite integration efforts there was very limited intermarriage between Muhammasheen and other groups. While there was less overt talk about status, such issues were expressed in other ways. Susanne Dahlgren, a social anthropologist, has noted: “A plethora of common sense rationalizations arose for not socializing with particular people in place of comments on their status. Arguments that had to do with hygiene and purity, convenience, decency, and personal qualities were common.”^[258]

The PDRY *Agrarian Reform Law* (No.27) of 1970 saw the redistribution of land, including to members of the Muhammasheen community.^[259] However, this legislation was reversed by presidential decree in 1991 with the newly established Republic of Yemen.^[260] An estimated 24,000 PDRY-era farmers were mandated to return land to former owners with compensation,^[261] a situation that has created

256) Interviewees for this research noted that many Muhammasheen who had studied outside Yemen during the PDRY era, gaining skills and expertise, are today often found sweeping streets or collecting garbage, rather than contributing meaningfully to their society, due to the discrimination they face as members of this community.

257) Susanne Dahlgren, *Contesting Realities: The Public Sphere and Morality in Southern Yemen*, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2010, p. 272.

258) Ibid. p. 74-75.

259) Marta Colburn, *A Situation Analysis of Gender and Development in Yemen*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and Oxfam, Amman Jordan, 2002, p. 122.

260) World Bank (2009), “Land Tenure for Social and Economic Inclusion in Yemen: Issues and Opportunities,” Report No. 54923-YE Republic of Yemen, December 1, 2009, p. 49, <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/901231468347330974/pdf/549230ESW0P102010land0tenure109June.pdf>. Accessed September 9, 2020.

261) Sharif Ismail, “Unification In Yemen: Dynamics of Political Integration, 1978-2000,” Thesis MPhil in Modern Middle Eastern Studies Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Oxford, p. 51, <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~metheses/Ismail%20Thesis.pdf>. Accessed November 28, 2020.

significant issues in rural communities, although its impact on Muhammasheen farmers is not widely documented.^[262]

Events of 1990 (unification and the mass return of Yemeni migrants from Gulf countries) were a watershed point for many Muhammasheen, with a number of changes impacting the community including: efforts to build democratic institutions which meant that key political elites sought out support from the Muhammasheen to garner electoral votes; labor activism which saw a number of strikes among garbage workers and street sweepers;^[263] returnees saw a dramatic deterioration in their situation with deepening poverty and the growth of urban slums; growing tension with other minorities and refugees residing in slums with the increased competition for scarce jobs and affordable housing; and the increased social isolation of Muhammasheen as their ties to their rural origins were ruptured.

The YAR 1970 Constitution served as the foundation for Yemen's 1991 Constitution. Article 24 enshrines the protection of all Yemenis and declares that, "The state shall guarantee equal opportunities for all citizens in the fields of political, economic, social and cultural activities and shall enact the necessary laws for the realization thereof."^[264] Articles 41-61 guarantee the rights of all citizens to legal defense, freedom of movement, access to social security and healthcare services and to form associations. While there are no laws that discriminate directly against Muhammasheen, it is clear that the legal system and many officials in the justice sector discriminate against this community, failing to protect their rights and often participating in egregious abuses of Yemenis from this community.

Yemen's International Obligations Relevant to Eliminating Discrimination Against Muhammasheen

Yemen is signatory to a number of international treaties of relevance to Muhammasheen. Although currently Yemen is politically fragmented with the civil war, it bodes all parties to the conflict to adhere to such international, and of course national, legal obligations. The following are a few of the international commitments relating to this study:

262) For further details see Helen Lackner, "Land Tenure, Social Structure and the State in the Southern Governorates in the mid-1990s," in *Yemen into the Twenty First Century: Continuity and Change*, Edited by Kamil Mahdi, Anna Wuerth and Helen Lackner, Ithaca Press, 2007.

263) Atiaf Z. Alwazir, "Garbage Collectors and the Struggle for Workers' Rights in Yemen," *Jadaliyya*, June 12, 2012, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/26114/Garbage-Collectors-and-the-Struggle-for-Workers%60-Rights-in-Yemen>. Accessed November 27, 2020.

264) Republic of Yemen, "Yemen's Constitution of 1991 with Amendments Through 2001," *Constitute Project*, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Yemen_2001.pdf. Accessed November 28, 2020.

- *Convention on the Rights of the Child, Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict* (2000), acceded to by Yemen on March 2, 2007;
- *ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour* (1999, No. 182), ratified by Yemen on June 15, 2000;
- *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC – 1990^[265]), ratified May 1, 1991, via the Yemen Arab Republic (signature February 13 1990);^[266]
- *Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment* (1987), acceded to by Yemen on November 5, 1992.
- *Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW^[267] – 1979), acceded to May 30, 1984, via People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen;
- *ILO Convention on Minimum Age for Admission to Employment* (1973, No. 138), ratified by Yemen on June 15, 2000;
- *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* (CERD – 1969), acceded to by the PDRY on October 18, 1972 and by the YAR on April 6, 1989;
- *Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages* (1964), acceded to on February 9, 1987, via the PDRY;
- *Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation of Prostitution of Others* (1951), acceded to on April 6, 1989, via the YAR.

The *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* (CERD) is among the most significant of these international treaties for the Muhammasheen. In 2006, the Alternative World/Partnership for Equitable Development and Social Justice in Association with International Dalit Solidarity Network supported the submission of the “Alternative Report to the joint 15th and 16th Periodic Report of the State Party Yemen to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD).” The first paragraph of this document noted, “This report concerns the specific issue of ethnic/descent-based discrimination and ensuing human rights abuses perpetuated against Yemen’s most marginalized ethnic minority pejoratively labeled ‘*Al-Akhdam*.’” A further report by the International Dalit Solidarity Network in 2014 maintained, “UN conclusions and recommendations on the ‘*Al-Akhdam*’ in Yemen UN treaty bodies have on various occasions expressed grave concern about the persistence of descent-based discrimination against the ‘*Al-Akhdam*’ community in Yemen. UN bodies have recommended the Government of Yemen to, among other

265) Yemen’s accession was with no reservations, and in 2007 acceded to the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict and in 2004 to the Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, with no reservations to either treaty.

266) For a thorough review of Yemen’s national legal context with regards to children’s rights compiled by Child’s Rights International Network see: “Yemen: National Laws,” Child Rights International Network, <https://archive.crin.org/en/library/publications/yemen-national-laws.html>. Accessed February 12, 2020.

267) Yemen’s accession was with reservation to Article 29, paragraph 1, relating to the settlement of disputes which may arise concerning the application or interpretation of the Convention.

things, take measures to combat de facto discrimination against the ‘Al-Akhdam’ in accordance with the CERD General Recommendation 29 on descent, and to adopt a national action plan to address the issue.”^[268]

A 2020 report by the Yemeni NGOs CEDAW Coalition noted: “The marginalized women (*Akhdam*) suffer from doubled violence and exclusion in all social, economic, political, and cultural fields resulting from their marginalizing class, and absence of serious and successful policies and programs to contribute to social incorporation of this social group.”^[269] The Yemeni government is not following through on such recommendations to address discrimination against Muhammasheen men, women, girls and boys.

The legal context of Yemenis provides for the protection of rights and freedoms for all its citizens. Such legal protections are further enshrined through Yemen’s accession to a wide range of international treaties and conventions designed to protect individual rights, including that of minorities. However, there is no doubt that the rights of Muhammasheen have, in general, been disregarded and ignored, further exacerbating an already dire situation.

268) International Dalit Solidarity Network, “Briefing note on caste-based discrimination in Yemen IDSN Briefing Note · 2014: The situation of the ‘Al-Akhdam’ in Yemen,” 2014, p. 3 <https://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Yemen-Briefing-Note.pdf>. Accessed November 20, 2020.

269) Sisters’ Arab Forum, “Shadow Report of the Yemeni NGOs CEDAW Coalition: The Implementation of CEDAW in Yemen,” October 4, 2020, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e21d2d4aa9bc02b2a6fdb06/t/5f87267f89e5f722dcca54b8/1602692738643/Yemen+CEDAW+Shadow+Report+4+October+2020.pdf>. Accessed October 4, 2020.

ANNEX D: SUMMARY OF DATA ON MUHAMMASHEEN CHILDREN

Table 6 contains quantitative data from the UNICEF Vulnerability and Needs Assessment (VNA) and mapping exercises conducted in Aden (2020),^[270] Amanat Al-Asimah (2020),^[271] Sana’a governorate (2020)^[272] and Taiz governorate (2014).^[273] The final column presents comparable data from the national level from various sources where available.^[274]

Table 6: Summary of Key Indicators for Muhammasheen Children

Indicator	Amanat Al-Asimah 2020	Aden 2020	Taiz 2014	Sana’a 2020	National 2012 ^[275]
% Illiteracy, age 15 and older (Taiz, above 10 years)	62	49	80.2	74	40.3
% Boys, net enrolled in primary school, age 6-14 (Taiz, age 6-17)	38	48	40.2	35	74
% Girls, net enrolled in primary school, age 6-14	46	51	37	25	63
% Boys, never attended school, age 6-14	52	40	11	55	N/A
% Girls, never attended school, age 6-14	47	39	11.3	67	N/A

270) 26 slums were assessed. “Vulnerability and Needs Assessment Aden Governorate, Integrated Model of Social and Economic Assistance and Empowerment,” May 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/yemen/reports/integrated-model-social-and-economic-assistance-and-empowerment-imsea-1>.

271) 16 slums were assessed. “Vulnerability and Needs Assessment (VNA II) Amanat Al-Asimah and Sana’a Governorates,” IMSEA, April 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/yemen/media/5141/file/UNICEF%200142.pdf>

272) 23 slums were assessed. UNICEF and Social Welfare Fund, “Muhamasheen Mapping Survey in Taiz,” in collaboration with Interaction for Development, October 2014.

273) All Muhammasheen households in three urban districts in Taiz city were covered (Al-Mudhafer, Salah and Al-Qahera), as well as six rural districts (Al-Makha’a, Mawza, Al-Waziyah, Maqbanah, Mawyah and Samea).

274) Data in this column is from the UNICEF and Social Welfare Fund, “Muhamasheen Mapping Survey in Taiz,” in collaboration with Interaction for Development, October 2014.

275) Unless otherwise noted, data in this column is from the UNICEF and Social Welfare Fund, “Muhamasheen Mapping Survey in Taiz,” in collaboration with Interaction for Development, October 2014. Data for this column is from: “National Social Protection Monitoring Survey: Baseline Analytical Report Annex,” June 2014. <https://sites.google.com/site/yemennutritioncluster/documents/assessment-report/-nspms-national-social-protection-monitoring-survey>.

Indicator	Amanat Al-Asimah 2020	Aden 2020	Taiz 2014	Sana'a 2020	National 2012 ^[275]
% Birth registration, age 0-5 ^[276]	28	92	8.8	13	33 ^[277]
% Child marriage among girls, age 15-18 (Taiz and national, age 15-19; Aden, age 10-18 years)	27	6	17.9	X ^[278]	17.1 ^[279]
% Orphan prevalence (at least one dead parent), child under 18 years	11	8	7.2	X	4.9
% Child labor, under 15 years of age (in Taiz, age 6-14 years, national age 5-17)	62	10	1.6	49	21 ^[280]
% Boys, child labor	76	15	2.5	49	16.5 ^[281]
% Girls, child labor	49	4	0.5	50	17.6 ^[282]

276) Cost was the most common reason cited for the lack of birth registration in Amanat Al-Asimah (54 percent), in Sana'a governorate (67 percent) and in Aden (40 percent).

277) Civil Registration Centre For Development—CRC4D, “Towards Universal Birth Registration in Yemen: Situation Analysis and Recommendations for Government and UNICEF,” The Hague, May 2013, p. 10. <https://www.crc4d.com/downloads/2013-05-towards-universal-birth-registration-in-yemen.pdf>. Accessed December 9, 2020.

278) “X” indicates that data from Amanat Al-Asimah and Sana'a governorate were combined for this indicator.

279) Yemen Ministry of Public Health and Population and Central Statistical Organization, “National Health and Demographic Survey,” 2013, p. 37, <https://dhsprogram.com/publications/publication-fr296-dhs-final-reports.cfm>. Accessed November 30, 2020.

280) International Labour Organization, “Working Children in the Republic of Yemen: The Results of the 2010 National Child Labour Survey,” 2012, p. ix, https://www.ilo.org/ipec/Informationresources/WCMS_205232/lang--en/index.htm. Accessed December 9, 2020.

281) Ibid.

282) Ibid.

ANNEX E: SUMMARY OF MANASATI30 SURVEY

In November 2017, Manasati30, a Yemeni civil society organization, conducted an online survey on the topic of Muhammasheen in Yemen. Some 1,071 people between the ages of 20 and 35 years responded, from all governorates of Yemen. The survey examined attitudes to Muhammasheen, including issues such as the right to study, work and vote and perceptions of the reasons for discrimination against the community.

Of those polled, 79 percent said the term *Khadim*, meaning servant and traditionally used to describe Muhammasheen, was racist, while 16 percent felt it was not. The reasons for these answers differed: some respondents said the word emerged from customs and traditions that considered those with black skin to be inferior people with whom one could not coexist or marry. Others felt it was an issue of caste in Yemeni society, which classified people into a hierarchy. Still others responded that the current laws and customs contributed to injustices against Muhammasheen, treating them as second-class citizens or as non-Yemenis. Some blamed Muhammasheen for the discrimination they experienced, and some expressed that discrimination was due to the “different lifestyle” of Muhammasheen or a perceived lack of personal hygiene.

Asked if they considered Muhammasheen to be Yemeni citizens, three-quarters of respondents (76 percent) said they did, while 6 percent said they did not. Some respondents said Muhammasheen should be educated about citizenship rights, and that this must be done through concerted state efforts to prepare the community for their integration into society as Yemeni citizens. Others felt that Muhammasheen should be rehabilitated through inclusion in the education system, the dismantling of slums and integration into broader society, and that they must be acculturated into the way of life of other Yemenis. Suggestions included encouraging Muhammasheen to establish their own trade unions, as well as educating the broader Yemeni community to respect Muhammasheen and reject racism toward them. Meanwhile, some respondents said the Muhammasheen did not want to integrate into broader Yemeni society because they were accustomed to their own isolated way of life.

Asked what they perceived as the reasons for discrimination against Muhammasheen, respondents were given multiple options and asked to select all they felt applied. More than half (55 percent) said discrimination was caused by the lifestyle of Muhammasheen, while 54 percent blamed wrong social norms, and 52 percent felt it was due to government neglect. Around one-third

of respondents (30 percent) felt discrimination was a result of the burden of historical discrimination, while one-fifth said it was due to unfair laws.

Respondents were asked how they would respond if a Muhammash proposed to their sister; 37 percent said they would deal with the matter in the same way as any other proposal, while 34 percent said they would hesitate, and 29 percent said they would refuse immediately. Notably, 39 percent of male respondents said they would treat the proposal normally compared with 30 percent of female respondents. However, 30.4 percent of male respondents said they would immediately refuse such a proposal, compared with 27.8 percent of women. Regional differences were also observed: 35.9 percent of respondents in southern governorates said they would immediately refuse the proposal, compared with 27.2 percent in northern governorates. Some respondents noted that even if they personally did not object to such a marriage, social norms and customs might be an obstacle, risking social isolation.

More than one-third of respondents (37 percent) said that Muhammasheen did not wish to mix with other Yemenis; 63 percent disagreed. However, most respondents (82 percent) were in favor of integrating Muhammasheen into residential neighborhoods, with 18 percent rejecting this.

Concerning inclusion of Muhammasheen, 74 percent of survey respondents felt that Muhammasheen should not be integrated in schools with non-Muhammasheen. More than two-thirds (67 percent) said Muhammasheen should work in lower-status professions such as cleaning. Interestingly, 59 percent of respondents said Muhammasheen should not have the right to join the military. Some 40 percent of those surveyed said Muhammasheen should not have the right to be elected for public office. Some survey respondents said Muhammasheen should improve their education and be obliged to change their lifestyle before being allowed to stand as electoral candidates.

ANNEX F: SUMMARY OF KEY HOUSEHOLD DATA

Table 7 contains quantitative data from the UNICEF Vulnerability and Needs Assessment (VNA) and mapping exercises conducted in Aden (2020),^[283] Amanat Al-Asimah (2020),^[284] Sana'a governorate (2020)^[285] and Taiz governorate (2014).^[286] The final column presents comparable data from the national level when available.^[287]

Table 7: Summary of Key Indicators for Muhammasheen Households

Indicator	Amanat Al-Asimah 2020	Aden 2020	Taiz 2014	Sana'a 2020 ^[288]	National 2012 ^[289]
Households participating in survey	379	6978	9,152	477	N/A
Individuals	2,064	27,280	51,406	2,468	N/A
Mean household size	5.2	5	5.6	5.1	7
% Internally Displaced Persons	34	10	N/A	15	N/A
% Adverse housing possession ^[290]	18	N/A	75.2 ^[291]	62	53.8 ^[292]
% Crowding, with more than 3 persons per room	62	52	79.1	50	38.8
% Use safe source of lighting (Access to electricity in Taiz & national)	71	73	62.7	54	73.1
% Use unsafe, or no, cooking fuel ^[293]	51	26	74.5	94	34.9

283) 26 slums were assessed.

284) 16 slums were assessed.

285) 23 slums were assessed.

286) All Muhammasheen households in three urban districts in Taiz city were covered (Al-Mudhafer, Salah and Al-Qahera), as well as six rural districts (Al-Makha'a, Mawza, Al-Waziyah, Maqbanah, Mawyah and Samea).

287) Unless otherwise noted, data in this column is from the UNICEF and Social Welfare Fund, "Muhamasheen Mapping Survey in Taiz," in collaboration with Interaction for Development, October 2014.

288) "X" indicates that data from Amanat Al-Asimah and Sana'a governorate were combined for this indicator.

289) Unless otherwise noted, data in this column is from the UNICEF and Social Welfare Fund, "Muhamasheen Mapping Survey in Taiz," in collaboration with Interaction for Development, October 2014. Data for this column is from: "National Social Protection Monitoring Survey: Baseline Analytical Report Annex," June 2014. <https://sites.google.com/site/yemennutritioncluster/documents/assessment-report/-nspms-national-social-protection-monitoring-survey>.

290) Meaning people living in tents, makeshift housing or on land owned by others.

291) Home has no durable flooring, i.e. concrete, tile, stone or marble.

292) Home has no durable flooring, i.e. concrete, tile, stone or marble.

293) Firewood, animal dung, hay/cardboard or coal.

Indicator	Amanat Al-Asimah 2020	Aden 2020	Taiz 2014	Sana'a 2020 ^[288]	National 2012 ^[289]
% Use non-improved water source ^[294]	88	64	48.7 ^[295]	X	40.6
% Rely on public taps outdoors for drinking water	67	14	10	58	N/A
% Rely on bottled water/jerry can for drinking	22	16	28.5	0	11.5
% Access to public/private water network in home	7	40	9.2	X	87.3 ^[296]
% Access to latrine facilities (improved and/or unimproved)	79	97	42.4	35	76.2 ^[297]
% Secure food from begging	49	11	16.2	X	N/A
% No paid work in the past 30 days, excluding begging (Taiz, has unsuccessfully looked for work)	54	65	83.3	X	N/A
% Literacy, of household head	29	51	76.9	X	41.4
% Asset ownership, TV	27	79	39.1	7	63.2
% Asset ownership, phone	81	79	31.8	60	68.6
% Asset ownership, car	1	2	0.6	X	12.4
% Households with at least one member on Social Welfare Fund	6	9	25.7	4	35.4 ^[298]
% Household primary food source: begging, charity and/or relatives	37	12	52.8	100	N/A

294) Includes unprotected well, stream, pond, dam, water trucking, jerry can treated water, and communal water tank, as well as unprotected or any protected water that takes longer than 30 minutes round trip to access.

295) As the Taiz mapping was conducted in 2014 the only available comparable data (somewhat) is for those who use dam/stream/well as the main source of drinking water.

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