

LONGING FOR EDUCATION: WOMEN FROM THE CITY

Chapter V of

"Pioneers or Pawns? Women Health Workers and the Politics of Development in Yemen"*

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5.1 Hawā

Hodeida, May 1997. I am preparing for the first interview of this study. Hawā, one of the *murshidāt* of the first group trained in 1985-1986, has agreed to talk with me about her training and employment. I have known Hawā since my very first days in Hodeida. She is head of the MCH section of one of the main health centres in Hodeida so we have worked closely together and I have often visited her at home. I had heard about the problems Hawā had in the first years of the project when her relatives did not allow her to work. But since I have known her, these problems have not reoccurred anymore and she seems to perform her work without obstacles. Once I asked her how her husband reacts to her activities, as she is a busy head of clinic, working mornings and afternoons and sometimes even in the evenings as a birth attendant, and she replied that as long as he gets his food on time he does not complain: "You should never neglect your husband. Continue to give him the attention he has always received, so that you don't give him a chance to complain." But in my view this is easier said than done.

I get into my car and drive from *Hay al-Tijārī* via Al-Hamdī Street, my favourite street with its small local shops and restaurants, passed the park to the end of Sana'a Street. Near the edge of Hodeida, where the road enters the flat Tihāma plain, I turn right and put my car into four-wheel drive to cross the sand in front of Hawā's house. One of Hawā's sons opens the door and Hajār and Hudā, Hawā's two youngest daughters, come running towards me and welcome me with kisses. Hand in hand we walk to the house at the end of the compound where Hawā is waiting for me. "Welcome, Marina, welcome", and she guides me to the guestroom, one of the two rooms of the house. The house is made of bare concrete blocks and has a kitchen and a bathroom. It occupies only a small part of the large compound where most of the daily activities take place. But today we stay inside: the interview is a special occasion and I am received as a guest. Hawā is known for her hospitality and her cookery, and will never skip an opportunity to invite people over. I wonder how she manages to be a head of clinic, mother of five children, wife, birth attendant and a good friend and sister. One thing I know is that she takes life seriously and that she is a good organizer, in her professional as well as in her personal life. In that way she very much resembles Thera, who has been a close friend of Hawā since her training in 1985. Both Thera and Hawā are key figures in the project, committed, practically oriented, hospitable, and always willing to help. And what's more, both Hawā and Thera love to talk about the project, and in particular about the first years when the project was still in its infancy, with no systematic plans and only a small number of *murshidāt*. They are proud of what has been achieved in the past ten years, and this is also the reason why Hawā agreed so wholeheartedly to be interviewed. Hawā likes sharing her ideas and

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experiences with others and my research interests her very much. She feels very committed to the project and finds it important that the experiences of the *murshidāt* are written down. After finishing our first cup of tea, we are ready to start. Hawā's daughters are sent outside, I turn on the tape recorder and begin by asking Hawā where and when she was born. Within a couple of minutes the interview has lost its formality and Hawā clearly takes pleasure in telling her story.

The focus in this part of the dissertation is on the backgrounds and social positions of the first group of *murshidāt* trained in 1985 and the ways in which they shifted boundaries by entering a new type of paid work for women. What were the family and educational backgrounds of the first *murshidāt*? What were the reasons that they decided to enter a new type of work? How were they recruited and how did this affect the selection? In what ways did the work of the first *murshidāt* challenge existing gender ideologies? And how did the first *murshidāt* negotiate their new positions?

Hawā introduced herself by saying that she was born in Hodeida in 1962, in the neighbourhood of Al-Mitrāq. "I have six sisters and three brothers. I am the only one of the girls who is working. The others are all married and do not work. My brothers are also married and they have good jobs. Two studied airplane engineering in Russia and one studied at the police academy. He is working in Taiz as a prosecuting attorney. With regard to the girls, in the past they did not let girls go to school a lot. The most important thing was that a girl knew how to read and write. I went to school before but I did not finish primary school, I left school after the fourth grade." Hawā told me that there was a girls' school in Hodeida at that time but that she first went to Quran school: "All the members of our family studied Quran first. With regard to the girls, not one of them studied as much as I did." I asked her why the others did not continue their studies, and she answered, "They studied Quran, and one also studied till the fourth grade. After that it was finished. Girls had to stay home. If she knew how to read and she knew the religious instructions (*umūr al-dīn*) it was enough. Then she would know how to read and how to pray and what *amr Allah* (God's command) is, more studying was not necessary." But did her brothers go to school? "Yes, they finished secondary school. And my father himself paid for their studies abroad. We could afford it. We had a house here and we had a house in Taiz. We were well-off." Hawā's parents came from a village near Al-Mahwīt, a governorate in highland Yemen, and were maternal cousins; the mothers of Hawā's father and mother were sisters. Her parents migrated to Hodeida in the years of the Imam when Hawā's father was a soldier in the army. After the revolution he opened a shop and later he became a contractor. With the money he earned he built a number of houses and was able to stop working and to live from the rent of the houses. Hawā continued, "I liked to study very much. I was one of the best at school. When my father decided to withdraw me from school the school director went to see him and advised him to let me continue my studies. But my father said that four years was enough." I asked her whether she was angry when her father withdrew her from school but Hawā only replied, "He said that it was enough." Hawā was about twelve years old when she stopped going to school.

Four years later, when Hawā was sixteen, she married Ahmed, her maternal cousin (*ibn khāla*). Even though Ahmed was a relative of her mother, and her mother therefore may have influenced this decision, Hawā emphasized that it was her father's choice. "It was my father who chose." Ahmed had been working in Saudi Arabia since the early 1970s (1) and came home only briefly to get married. Hawā first lived with her parents but when her first child was born and she was pregnant with the second, she and Ahmed moved to a separate apartment in Hodeida. Ahmed continued to work in Saudi Arabia. "He used to go to Saudi Arabia where he



worked as a labourer for six months at a time, and then come back for some time. When he was away my sister Bilqīs stayed with me, and sometimes one of the neighbours, because I was alone and the children were still small. There was a lot of time in which I did not know what to do. I was just sitting at home. First I thought I wanted to learn how to sew or something like that. I had a neighbour next door to me and she knew how to sew. I sat and watched how she did it and I learned it from her. I borrowed money and I bought a sewing machine myself. I started to sew for my own family. I made trousers, clothes for the girls and for my sisters. They even gave me money when I sewed something.”

“After a while one of my older sisters said to me, ‘We have to study.’ She knew how to read Quran but she wanted to learn more. And I thought ‘Yes, why don’t I go back to school when I have time?’” I asked Hawā what she meant with having time. Didn’t she have two children? Was that not work? But she replied, “No, that was not much work because I finished everything in the house quickly. So together we registered for literacy classes (2) at the Yemeni Women’s Association.(3) In the beginning we did not attend classes but we prepared ourselves at home for the exams. We did the exams for the fourth and the fifth grades in that way. For the sixth grade we went to the Association and attended the whole course. Sometimes I took the children with me in the afternoon, or I left them at home. They fell asleep after lunch and I left them like that from four till six o’clock(4). When they did not want to sleep I took them with me.” And her husband, did he agree? Hawā answered, “When Ahmed phoned from Saudi Arabia I asked him if it was all right for me to go back to school again, and he said ‘Okay’. I could not have done it if he had been present!” I asked her if he would not have allowed her to go to school but Hawā emphasized that that was not the case; rather the work at home would have been more. “Because he was not present I could go to school and I obtained the diploma of the sixth grade.” And what did her family say about her schooling? “They didn’t say anything. Because I was married, if Ahmed agreed it was okay.”

After obtaining her primary school certificate, Hawā registered at the Teachers Institute (*ma’had al-mu’allimāt*)(5) in order to continue her studies and become a teacher. But at the time of her registration Abla(6) Nādīa, the director of the Teachers Institute, took her aside. “She said to me, ‘Look, what do you think, Hawā, would you like to attend a health education course?’ I said, ‘But I have just registered for five more years to become a teacher.’ You know what she said? She said, ‘You could first attend this course and benefit from it, then you will know a lot about health care. And then you come back and you can attend the teachers training as well.’ I thought about it and I agreed with it. I could benefit from the health education course, it was only for one year, and after that I could go back to school for another five years. Five years is a long time and after that there may not be a chance to study health education. And so I decided to attend the course. But before I decided to register for the course, I discussed it with Ahmed. He was at home at that time, and I told him about the health education course and he approved of it. But I also had to talk to my father because otherwise my family would find out later and my father would say ‘Oh, she didn’t tell us, she does everything on her own.’ You know what I told my family? I said, ‘I will only study but I will not work afterwards’ because they had to let me go. I said, ‘I will not work’, because I knew that they were going to say ‘no’. I convinced them by saying that I would learn about health care and if someone in the family was ill I could give her an injection, if someone had to give birth I could assist. At least someone would have some background knowledge (*khalfiyya*).’ And that is why they agreed. So that is how I came to study health education, and after I finished the course I started to work in the health centre.”

I asked Hawā if she had ever thought about working in health care before and she replied, “In health care, no. Before I hadn’t thought about health care. I had only thought about



the Teachers Institute because when I finished the sixth grade I thought, 'What will I do? I knew that my family would not allow me to work in health care. They don't want that. In the past, it was not good for a girl to work in health care.' Why was health care work not good? Hawā answered, "I will tell you why, because the girl would stay in the hospital, she had to sleep there while there were men who were going in and out. People would say that she sits together with male nurses and with the doctors. And the patients sometimes walk around, they can sit inside and outside the rooms." I asked Hawā what these ideas were based on and she said, "People see it happening. For example, if someone takes a sick person to the hospital this person will sleep at the hospital. My sister was hospitalized, and her husband would bring her supper(7) and he sometimes saw male and female nurses putting on a music tape and listening to it together. The people say 'If my daughter becomes a nurse, she will be like them.' That is why they had never liked it. Only very few people allowed it, only families that were not so strict (*mush mutashaddidīn*).

Because of these negative ideas about women's work in health care Hawā had to hide her job from her family. "My brother was studying in Russia(8), and when he came back and heard about it he said, 'What are you doing? Are you working as a *sihiyya* (a health worker)?" I lied to him and said, 'No, I don't work.' After that when my brother came to visit he would say to me, 'Are you working?' And I would answer, 'No, I don't work.' I would stay home from work for as long as he was in Hodeida and only when he had left I would go to work again." But while her brother was against her work, Hawā's husband approved of it. "He knows me, and trusts me" was Hawā's explanation. "But problems arose when there were training courses in other places or a trip somewhere, then I was not allowed to go. Ahmed is a humble man but if someone talks to him then... Like for example one time, I told him that we would go to a training course in Dhamār. He agreed and so I went. But when I came back there had been problems with my family. In my absence my family had approached my husband saying, 'How can you let her go alone to Dhamār? Are you not a man?' And my husband had answered, 'But she wanted to go.' To which my family replied, 'If you agree that she can go then you have to accompany her. You can rent a house in Dhamār and join her. You cannot let her go alone!' After that Ahmed did not allow me to work in the afternoons anymore. He said, "*Khalās*, that's it, you will not work in the afternoons anymore. Your family does not allow it. They are angry and they are saying 'If you can't earn a living for her, then let her come to us and we will take care of her.' So for a long time I did not work in the afternoons."

Hawā emphasized that, especially during the first years of her employment, the money she earned was not the main reason for her to work. "The most important thing was that I worked, or that I studied, that I obtained a certificate. I wasn't thinking about money before. And then when I obtained a salary, it was great." I asked Hawā what she did with the money and she said, "Nothing, I spent it on the household together with the money Ahmed sent from Saudi Arabia. I bought gold, a ring. We had a savings club (*hakba*), me and the other girls, we used to put part of our salaries in this saving club and every month one of us could buy something expensive for herself." After a number of years Ahmed returned to Yemen permanently(9). He found employment as an office worker in the army but due to problems with his eyesight he had to leave his job. He became a self-employed worker, writing letters for illiterate people in front of government buildings.(10) In the following years Hawā's income became gradually more important to maintain the household. Hawā explained, "Look, in the beginning it was different, we did not have to pay rent because the apartment we were living in was my sister's property. I could use my salary to buy gold or something else, or when I visited people, for example when I visited someone who had given birth.(11) But at a certain moment we were obliged to pay rent and that is why we moved to this piece of land,



which we already owned. Now I try to save money to build the house. We use the money Ahmed earns for daily expenditures and I use my income to construct our house.”

Hawā had worked a couple of years as a *murshida* when the project staff proposed that two *murshidāt* of the first group would become heads of two health centres in town while the others would be upgraded to midwife. “I said that I would like to become a midwife, because I knew that if I chose to become a head of clinic Ahmed would not approve of it. I also discussed it with him and he said, ‘I don’t want you to be head of clinic, a head of clinic has to receive men, she has to go to the Health Office, she has to talk to men. People want to meet the head of clinic, they want papers from her. I don’t want that. It is better if you study midwifery, then you will always be with women.’ I agreed and informed the project team. The idea was that I would study midwifery at the Health Manpower Institute in Hodeida. But there they said that I could only attend the three-year course in midwifery. I was not allowed to skip the first year even though I had already attended a one-year course in health education.” In addition, the *murshidāt* who wanted to study midwifery needed an intermediate school certificate, implying another three years of basic education. But Hawā didn’t give in and obtained her intermediate certificate, finishing all exams for three grades in one year. Yet it did not help. The negotiations between the Health Manpower Institute and the project did not lead to a satisfying solution and only in 1995 did Hawā get the chance to attend a three-year midwifery course in the city of Taiz, three hours away from Hodeida by car. But Ahmed did not agree; he found Taiz too far away and he did not want his wife to spend three years away from home.

In the meantime Hawā had accepted the offer to become head of the mother and child health section of one of the main health centres in Hodeida. What did Ahmed think about that? “I spoke to him, I said, ‘Look, you said that all the heads of clinics receive men but the other heads of clinics, like Munā and Rihām, they don’t receive any men.’ And that is true. They don’t go to other places; they are always in the health centre. All the work is in the centre and the project team brings them everything. I knew that. I said ‘You excluded me from the responsibility. I didn’t study midwifery and I didn’t become head of clinic although I was better than the others. I said, ‘Come and have a look at the centre.’ I let him sit in the office, and I said ‘Look, they are all young women.’ I introduced all the *murshidāt* to him in the office, instead of allowing him to go around the centre. And after that I explained to him, ‘We have a curative section in the health centre as well, it is not like the centre before where only preventive mother and child care services were offered. In the curative section a doctor is working and there is a laboratory. But the curative and the preventive sections of the centre are separate from each other. The doctor is responsible for the curative section and I am responsible for the preventive section.’” In this way Hawā tried to convince Ahmed that the work she is doing is respectable because women and men are segregated in the health centre, even though there were male staff as well.

I asked Hawā whether her father and her brother were still against her work and she explained, “Look, it was not my father who was making problems, it was someone else in my family. The husband of my sister has a high position and he said, ‘How can she work like that?’ Even my sister would sometimes say to me that it was not good and not necessary for me to work. And they influenced my father. Eventually I said to him, ‘Look, father, you are right that I can get money from you when I am in need of it but I cannot continuously ask for money. And you know that Ahmed is not like you and like my brothers, you are different because you are well off. The whole family is well off. But Ahmed’s circumstances are difficult and he has had bad luck. *Mā shā Allah*(12), when my brothers were still small, Ahmed was already in the army. And now my brothers all have high positions: one is in the general military staff, the other is an engineer, one is a finance officer and Ahmed is still as he



was before. Should I stay home and ask for money all the time? I am married and I have children, there is no need to make my life more difficult. I can divide my time between my family and my work, and nobody has to interfere in that.” And then my father said, ‘Okay, I won’t interfere anymore and you can do everything you want to do and whatever you think is right.’ That happened about two years ago. Since then there haven’t been any more problems.”

Although Ahmed sometimes complains that Hawā is working too much, she continues to succeed in keeping him happy. “I sometimes stay at home on Thursday afternoons and then we spend time together.” And he knows that the family can’t do without her salary, which is being used to finish the construction of the house. Moreover, all the children are at school and school expenditure is high. Hakma, Hawā’s eldest daughter, has almost finished secondary school and wants to study medicine. Hawā said, “I really hope that my daughters will be able to study, and that they do not have to face the same problems I had. With regard to marriage, we will try to find the right person for Hakma, someone she likes. We have already engaged her to her cousin, according to our family customs, but she won’t get married quickly. If she decides that she doesn’t like the man we’ll put an end to the engagement.”

At the time of the interview in 1997, Hawā had joined an upgrading course for *murshidāt* to become community midwives. After completing this course she was appointed head of MCH services in Al-Tahrīr, the oldest health centre in the city. In 1998, Ahmed stopped working completely as he had nearly turned blind. From that moment on Hawā became the sole provider. She receives a government salary for her work as head of MCH services in the health centre in the mornings and she earns an additional income in the afternoons, working at the registration counter of the same clinic.(13) When I visited Hawā and her family in April 2002, Ahmed had become completely blind and Hawā was still working as head of MCH services in Al-Tahrīr. They had another daughter in September 2000. Hawā told me that her relatives had accepted her professional life and even expressed their appreciation of the fact that she is employed and provides for her husband and children. Without her salary the family would have been lost. The engagement of her eldest daughter ended after one and a half years. Hakma did not get along with her cousin, who was not interested in studying or working, while she herself is a dedicated student. Hakma is now enrolled at the Faculty of Nursing in Hodeida, but would have preferred to go to Sana’a to pursue studies at the Faculty of Medicine and become a doctor. Yet Ahmed did not allow his daughter to study in Sana’a, even though the family has relatives there who could take care of her. He did not want Hakma to leave her parental home before she was married. Boundaries have shifted but gender ideologies have not changed completely.

5.2 “I just wanted to learn”

5.2.1 Families, fathers and the access to education

Hawā was born in Hodeida but originally came from a tribal family (*qabā’il*) from the area of Al-Mahwīt, in the highlands west of Sana’a.(14) Her stories about schooling, her marriage and the way her family reacted to her work as a *murshida* are examples of *qabā’il* notions concerning gender and labour. Tribeswomen (*qabā’iliyyāt*) living in rural areas are responsible for a major part of the agricultural and livestock work in addition to their domestic tasks such as cleaning, cooking and washing, and childcare. In the past (and still often today), they were denied any participation in public affairs because their modesty represented the honour of the tribe and therefore had to be protected. Women from the upper classes (the *sāda* and *qudā*)



were sometimes educated at home, but tribeswomen had no access to education. The heavy workload of women in rural areas and the lack of separate girls schools and female teachers affected women's access to education. In addition, gender ideologies in which girls' education was not deemed necessary as a girl was supposed to marry and move out of the parental house, affected the education of tribeswomen. Although the ideology of the male breadwinner was also part of elite notions of gender and labour, education was an important status marker for the elite and contributed to the prestige of families (Vom Bruck 1988: 398). Elite families were also the first to send their daughters to public schools at the end of the civil war in the sixties. As mentioned in chapter 3, access to education for all Yemenis, both men and women, was propagated as one of the main ways to development. According to Vom Bruck (ibid.), elite values such as learning and knowledge have nowadays gained general validity in Yemeni society, yet although school enrolment of girls has increased considerably since 1970, a large number of girls do still do not have access to education.(15)

Hawā's family had moved to Hodeida in the 1950s, where her father first joined the army but later set up his own business. Her family story is an example of upward mobility, and of the increasing importance of economic class over social status after the revolution of 1962 (Carapico 1996: 88). The overthrow of the Imamate brought an end to the power basis and privileges of the aristocracy. Social status was no longer a guarantee of economic success but was increasingly being replaced by the right educational certificates, the right political connections and money (Carapico and Myntti 1991: 25). The result was that people with *qabā'il* and lower social backgrounds could gain economic status while people from *sāda* and *qudā* families sometimes lost economic power. Hawā's father became a rich merchant owning shops and houses in Sana'a, Taiz and Hodeida, and he was even able to send his sons abroad to study. His daughters were allowed to attend Quran school, and some of them also went for a couple of years to primary school but after that they had to stay at home. Whereas upper classes women in the cities increasingly went to school and sometimes took up paid work in the educational and administrative sector, the mobility of tribeswomen diminished in urban areas.(16) With migration to the city, tribeswomen lost their agricultural tasks and their responsibilities became restricted to domestic work and childcare (cf. Lackner 1996: 86).

Yet, migration to the city could also have positive effects for tribeswomen as some of them benefited from the increased educational opportunities after the revolution. Hawā was born in 1962, the year of the revolution, and her longing for education can be attributed to the revolutionary slogans about the importance of education. She attended Quran school and four years of primary school, after which her father withdrew her from school. Hawā explained that four years of primary education was deemed sufficient for girls, as they were then able to read and understand the religious instructions (*umūr al-dīn*). Access to written texts, in particular religious texts, still meant an increase of status: being able to read and recite the Quran was an important of being a good Muslim. Because women were seen as the primary transmitters of cultural and religious values, women's education was therefore to some extent allowed. With the increased schooling of children in urban areas, mothers had obtained the new task of assisting children with their homework.(17)

Hawā attended four years of primary school but there were other women in the first training course for *murshidāt* who were not allowed to go to school at all. Munā was also born in 1962, and told me that her brothers went to school but the girls did not. "My father did not want us to go to school" is the only answer I received when I asked her why she did not go to school. Her sisters accepted her father's decision but Munā secretly went to school in the mornings when her father was away at work. She told me proudly that she was able to finish primary school without her father knowing. Rihām's father had worked in Ethiopia and



returned to Yemen at the end of the 1960s.(18) The family first settled in Al-Baidha, her father's parental town, where Rihām was born in 1969. Six years later they moved to Hodeida where her father took up work as a factory labourer, while her mother started to sell small foodstuffs to make ends meet. Rihām has two brothers and a sister. Both brothers finished secondary school; the oldest one became a mechanic while the younger one finished university. But her sister only finished three years primary school, and Rihām herself six years. "In our family girls normally go to school till the sixth grade and then they stay at home."

But in the first group of *murshidāt* there were also women whose fathers were not against schooling and who did have the chance to continue their education. Two of them were Hawā's nieces, daughters of one of her older sisters, and therefore sharing the same family background. Hanān and Marīam are ten years younger than Hawā, born in the early seventies, and both went to school in Hodeida. The fact that they were born after the revolution may be one of the main reasons for their easier access to education: girls' education, in particular in urban areas, was more common at the end of the 1970s, due to the promotional activities of the government. Moreover, the mother of Hanān and Marīam, Hawā's sister, was a fervent adherent of women's education and attended literacy classes at the Yemeni Women's Association. Their father was also in favour of their schooling; he himself had not had the chance to go to school and regretted it. The two sisters both attended three years of primary education in a regular school and then decided to continue their education at the Yemeni Women's Association because it was closer to their house.(19) Two other participants in the first training course for *murshidāt* were the sisters Najwa and Nadhīra, from an Adeni family who came to Hodeida at the end of the sixties. Their father had studied law and was a high official in one of the ministries in the newly established socialist state; their mother was illiterate. Their father was soon forced to leave South Yemen and settled in Hodeida where he opened a printing office. A product of the socialist revolution, he had sent his children to school in Aden and continued to do so in Hodeida. Najwa's father had outspoken ideas about the future occupations of his children and he encouraged Najwa to become a doctor. Despite his encouragement Najwa and Nadhīra both studied till the third class of intermediate school and then left school of their own free will. When I asked her why she quitted school, Najwa answered that she didn't like school anymore, an answer I obtained in many cases when trying to find out why young women left school of their own accord. In the eyes of these young women, a number of years intermediate school was enough. They were not interested in continuing their education. Some of them stayed home, while others attended vocational training in nursing, midwifery, sewing, hairdressing and the like. Najwa registered at the Health Manpower Institute and attended a nursing course for a couple of months but then switched to the *murshidāt* training course.

This group of *murshidāt* show the variety of opinions in Yemen on women's education. Family background (in particular social status and economic class), household composition, women's position in the household, age and generation, historical context, and personal preferences all determine women's access to education. It is particularly important to look at family and household strategies with regard to women's education and employment. In patrilineal systems, parents of lower class families often support their (eldest) sons to continue schooling while the education of girls is seen as less important. The rationale behind this in many cases is that daughters will leave their parental families when they marry while sons are supposed to financially support their parental family after they get married. Sons therefore need better jobs, which requires education (cf. Salaff 1981). According to Ibrahim (1985: 260), "individuals employ strategies for maximizing their interests within the family context, and families in turn adopt collective strategies for confronting larger society" (ibid. 260). She



therefore makes a plea for a more comprehensive analysis of family strategies in relation to women's education (and employment), and look at what she calls 'adaptive family strategies'. I am interested in the view of the young women who attended the first training course for *murshidāt*. What did they think about education and employment? Which aspirations, hopes and expectations did they cherish about their future lives? And which strategies did they employ to realize their ambitions?

5.2.2 Education as the road to self-development

Although Hawā liked going to school and was even one of the best pupils in her class, she accepted her father's decision and left primary school after four years. Only after she married, and had two children, did she start to think about studying again. She said that she was bored at home and wanted to fill her spare time. She first learned sewing and then her sister, the one who was a fervent adherent of women's education, encouraged her to obtain her primary school certificate at the Yemeni Women's Association. Hawā presented it as if she had not thought of it herself, but her desire to learn is a recurring theme in her life story. Other participants in the first course for *murshidāt* shared this desire, like Munā who secretly went to school when her father was not at home.

"I just wanted to learn" was an expression I often heard during the interviews with the first *murshidāt*. It was also given as the main motivation for attending the *murshidāt* training course. The emphasis on the importance of education can be explained in several ways. First of all, as mentioned before, the government in North Yemen promoted education as a gateway to development. Education would free Yemen from inequality, status differentials, poverty, and underdevelopment. Although the government made no great effort to develop girls' education, the revolutionary discourse about education as the gateway to development impressed many Yemeni women. In particular girls and women in urban areas became interested in education, but also women in rural areas increasingly saw the need for schooling, if not for themselves then for their daughters (cf. Dorsky and Stevenson 1995: 316). In a survey carried out in 1978, many girls and young women of school age expressed their educational aspirations, hopes and expectations for their futures (ibid: 318). While they all expected to marry, they also expressed the wish to continue their education and have jobs as teachers or nurses.(20) Yet, when the same women were visited again in 1992, most of them had left school, married young, and had several children (ibid. 322). They had not been able to fulfil their desire to study and many regretted the choices they had made or their families had made for them.

The ambitions and experiences of the first group of *murshidāt* are interesting in this respect. These young women also came from families in which education and paid work for women was in general negatively valued. Yet, they all wanted to learn and some even had the ambition to become a teacher or a nurse. After completing primary school they had all planned to continue their education. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the government established various types of vocational training centres to train professional cadres. Technical institutes, teacher training colleges and health institutes offered training courses to people with at least a primary school certificate. Four of the first *murshidāt* had registered at the Teachers Institute, which was the only school offering intermediate education to girls. Two of the *murshidāt* were too late for registration at the Institute and had to wait a year till they could register again. Two others were sitting idle at home while they wanted to work in health care and one had registered at the Health Manpower Institute. Some of the women wanted to become teachers but others considered the Teachers Institute to be a next step in continuing their education.



Hanān and Bilqīs, for example, wanted to become doctors and finishing the Teachers Institute would qualify them to attend university education. Teaching and medicine were one of the very few respectable possibilities open to women who wanted to obtain a profession. In addition, the ambitions to become teachers, nurses or even doctors, must be understood in a context where there were limited examples of female employment outside the home. “Many young schoolgirls of the late seventies had vaguely formed high educational goals but no realistic idea of what would be involved to pursue them seriously” (Dorsky and Stevenson 1995: 317).

The majority of the *murshidāt* (seven out of nine) did not want to study or work because they needed an income but because they wanted to develop themselves. Almost all the women who attended the first course for *murshidāt* had taken the initiative to start or continue primary education and had fulfilled their desire for schooling, sometimes after a period of staying home. Except for the two Adeni sisters, they had all decided to attend literacy classes at the Yemeni Women’s Association in Hodeida, and in doing so succeeded in gaining a primary school certificate. The fact that they took the initiative to join these classes shows their determination, and this determination is very important in explaining why they were also willing to join the *murshidāt* training course. In a way a pre-selection had already taken place before they joined the *murshidāt* course, a pre-selection of women who used their ‘agentive power’, as Comaroff and Comaroff (1993: 28) call it, to improve their situation. While other women who might have had the same desire for schooling may have failed in their attempts to attend school, this group of young women had been able to pick up schooling again. And even though most of them did not have the intention to enter paid work, their participation in literacy classes happened to be a crucial step in the development of their professional lives.

The fact that the first *murshidāt* often emphasized that they “only wanted to learn”, or that they wanted to develop themselves (“*ashtī atawwar nafsi*”) is an example of the (Yemeni) notion that being educated is equal to being developed. In addition, it should be regarded as a strategy(21) to attend school without challenging the dominant gender division of labour. By stressing that their only goal was to receive education they intended to make clear that they did not have other plans beyond being educated, such as taking up paid labour, and that their schooling was acceptable because it did not challenge the ideologies of the male provider and of gender segregation. I will come back to this strategy later. In a way the first *murshidāt* can be compared to Yemeni upper class women who enter paid employment for personal fulfilment or with social ideals in mind. Yet, whereas upper class women are encouraged to gain an education and sometimes to enter paid employment, most of the first *murshidāt* had to overcome many obstacles before their schooling and work was accepted.

Room for manoeuvre

Hawā’s story is a strong example of the ways in which some of the *murshidāt* gradually shifted dominant gender boundaries in order to fulfil their desires and ambitions. They did not challenge these boundaries in a direct way but they cleverly created and made use of the available room for manoeuvre, accepting gender prescriptions to a certain extent but stretching them whenever possible. As a young girl, Hawā accepted being taken out of school although she liked school very much. She married the son of her mother’s sister. Ahmed was not rich and he was not highly educated. He was a migrant worker spending most of his time in Saudi Arabia. For Yemeni women living in rural areas male labour migration often had negative consequences, in particular because of their increased workload (cf. Adra 1983; Myntti 1984). But for women in urban areas male labour migration could work out positively, as Hawā’s



story shows. Hawā clearly benefited from the fact that Ahmed was abroad by taking several initiatives to shape her own life. She made use of the available space for manoeuvre to take up sewing, attend literacy classes and later she even entered paid work. Hawā is convinced that she would not have been able to continue her schooling if Ahmed had been at home; not because he would not have allowed her to go back to school but because she would have had more household responsibilities.

As mentioned before, Hawā's statement that she "just wanted to learn" can be regarded as a strategy: in theory she endorsed the dominant gender ideology of the male breadwinner, emphasizing that she was only interested in studying and not in obtaining paid work, but in practice she took advantage of her participation in the training course for *murshidāt* to enter paid employment. Hawā's statement in the introduction of this chapter is another example of the tactics she employed to gradually shift the boundaries of the dominant gender ideology. "You should never neglect your husband. Continue to give him the attention he has always received, so that you don't give him a chance to complain", she told me. As long as she was able to perform her tasks as spouse and mother, her husband would accept her work and not complain. Many other *murshidāt* repeated this statement to me, showing the efforts they had to make to reconcile their paid work with their domestic tasks.

The fact that (male) relatives did not complain as long as the *murshidāt* performed their domestic tasks is also related to another important Yemeni notion. The *murshidāt* were able to create room for manoeuvre by making use of the notion that what people are not directly confronted with is acceptable, even though they may know what is going on. Hawā, and the other *murshidāt*, made strategic use of this notion, as I will illustrate with a number of examples. First of all, Hawā's husband was abroad when she restarted her education. She asked his permission and he agreed by phone but he did not see what it meant in practice. Munā also made use of this notion: she attended primary school in the mornings when her father, who was fiercely against his daughters' schooling, was not at home. As long as he did not see that she was going to school, there were no problems and even her mother and her sisters quietly accepted what she was doing. Hawā's answer to her brother's question whether she was working in health care is a third example. She denied that she was working as a *murshida* but as soon as he left she continued her work. Her brother was not living in Hodeida and as long as he did not see that she was working there were no problems, although he may have known about it.

Some of Hawā's actions can be seen as consciously applied strategies, with a clear goal in mind from the outset, but other initiatives she took can better be regarded as part of a slow but steady process of which she herself could not know the final outcome. Hawā's own ambitions and aspirations also shifted gradually, with the gradual steps she took to shift the boundaries of the dominant gender ideology. After marrying and having two children, she started to think about possible ways to fill her free time. When she had learned sewing she decided to go to school again and when she finished primary school she intended to continue studying at the Teachers Institute. Filling her free time was no longer her main motivation; she now had the intention of working as a teacher. Yet, in her search for a possible future profession she conformed to the dominant ideology on women's paid work, as endorsed by her family, and asserted that she did not attend the *murshidāt* training course with the aim of working in health care. Health care work was not seen as respectable in her family, and Hawā shared this opinion. Therefore teaching was the only option left. But although she joined the *murshidāt* training course without the intention of becoming an employed *murshida*, she started to like the work so much that she again created room for manoeuvre and gradually shifted the boundaries of what was culturally acceptable. Although her family was opposed to



education and paid employment for women, in particular in health care, Hawā ended up managing one of the largest health centres in the city where male staff were also working. Hawā's story shows her ability to shift the terms of what was seen as respectable for women of her background, and in doing so she created new ways of living for herself and for others. Moreover, the fact that the *murshidāt* profession was a new and unknown type of work in Yemen enabled the women to negotiate the boundaries of what was culturally acceptable, a topic I will elaborate on in the next chapter.

- (1) In chapter 9, I elaborate on the migration of Yemenis to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States.
- (2) Literacy classes are organized for men and women over fifteen years old, in both rural and urban centres. People who did not have the chance to attend basic education can obtain a primary school certificate via literacy classes. The curriculum is similar to the primary school curriculum, yet two primary school grades are taught in one year and teaching hours are only two hours per day. The result is that a primary school certificate can be obtained in three years instead of in six.
- (3) The Yemeni Women's Association is North Yemen's main women's organization. It was officially established in 1965. The YWA mainly organizes literacy classes, sewing classes, handicraft classes and typing classes for urban women. After unification in 1990 the Northern Yemeni Women's Association and the Southern General Union of Yemeni Women amalgamated into the Yemeni Women's Organization (Badran 1998: 505).
- (4) Mothers in Yemen commonly leave their children at home, in the company of their father, a relative or even without someone to take care of them.
- (5) The Teachers Institute prepared students with a primary school certificate in five years to become a teacher.
- (6) *Abla* is originally a Turkish word for older sister. In Yemen (as well as in some other Arab countries) it is used as a term of respect for women, in particular for female teachers.
- (7) In both public and private hospitals in Yemen family members have to provide food for their hospitalised relatives.
- (8) Studying in the USSR and Eastern European countries was common for people from North and South Yemen alike.
- (9) With the decrease in oil prices in the second half of the 1980s, a number of Yemeni migrants working in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States returned home (cf. Carapico and Myntti 1991: 25; ESCWA 1993: 110-111).
- (10) Due to the high illiteracy rates in Yemen, literate people (men) offer their services to illiterate people, in particular in front of government offices where letters or forms have to be handed in.
- (11) It is a Yemeni custom to give money to the mother of a newborn baby. For a detailed description of the special visits paid to mothers and their newborn babies see Dorsky (1986: 158-164).
- (12) *Mā shā Allah* literally means 'what God wants/intends' and is used to express surprise.
- (13) Since 1995, a number of government health centres in Hodeida offer curative and laboratory services in the afternoons, financed by well-known merchants who are also Members of Parliament.
- (14) For a detailed description of the life of *qabīlī* women in a village in the governorate of Al-Mahwīt see Destremau (1990).



(15) Between 1970 and 1994, the total number of children enrolled in primary school grew 11 fold, from less than 250,000 in 1970 to almost 2,75 million in 1994 (in view of the rapid population growth of 3,7 per cent per year this is 55 per cent of the children aged 6-15 years old). Yet, female enrolment has grown much more slowly than male enrolment. Only around 37 per cent of girls aged 6-15 are enrolled in school. Enrolment in rural areas lags far behind enrolment in urban areas. According to the 1994 census, only 14 per cent of six year-old girls in rural areas were enrolled in school (UNICEF 1998, vol. III: 3).

(16) Although to a more limited extent, this process bears similarities to the process Al-Mughni (2001: 62) describes for women in Kuwait. After the oil-boom, the gap between upper class women and lower class women in Kuwait increased. Upper class women benefited largely from educational and employment opportunities while lower class women lost their traditional sources of income and were gradually drawn into their homes. Lower class men no longer needed to rely on women's work as they had found rewarding employment in the oil industry and related service sectors.

(17) In a study about the impact of literacy classes for women in Hodeida the main reasons why adult women wanted to become literate were: to be able to read the Quran and know how to pray, to be able to read books, letters, or anything else, and to assist children with their homework. Quran study and Islamic education are also part of literacy classes in Yemen, and most liked by women attending the classes (De Regt et al. 1996)

(18) In chapter 8, I elaborate on the migration of Yemenis to Africa, and on their return in the 1960s and 1970s.

(19) The fact that there was no school close to their house is an indication of the limited number of schools available at the end of the seventies, in particular for girls. In 1977, there were 4 primary schools in Hodeida and one secondary school. In 1985, the total number of schools had increased to 15.

(20) The fact these young women showed an interest in becoming nurses is remarkable in view of the negative status of nursing in Yemen. While teaching has a relatively high status, as it involves a certain level of education and guarantees gender segregation, nursing has a low status because of the implied contacts with bodies and bodily fluids as well as the contacts with unrelated men as patients and colleagues (see chapter 3). Yet, both teaching and nursing are professions that are compatible with conventional attitudes regarding women's work as they are seen as an extension of women's work at home. In addition, the interest of women to become nurses also shows that women do not automatically adopt negative views regarding respectable work but adhere to their own interests.

(21) Following Altorki (1986: 149), I define a strategy as a rational calculation of behaviour an individual adopts in order to advance his or her interests.

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