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# Conflict and Social Inequalities in Yemen: An Increase in Inequality of Access to Primary Education

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**To cite this article:**

Fares Al Ameri. Conflict and Social Inequalities in Yemen: An Increase in Inequality of Access to Primary Education. *International Journal of European Studies*. Vol. 7, No. 1, 2023, pp. 1-7. doi: 10.11648/j.ijes.20230701.11

**Received:** March 27, 2023; **Accepted:** April 25, 2023; **Published:** May 10, 2023

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**Abstract:** Children are the actors of the economic and social scene of tomorrow. They are, on the other hand, the section most exposed to danger in conflict environments. This article is intended to study the consequences of the armed conflict on social equality and in particular its impact on the right of access to education for Yemeni children. United Nations reports point to a high dropout rate among Yemeni children (UNESCO, 2021). It is thus a question of knowing the causes and demonstrating the direct impacts of the social conflict on the schooling of children in Yemeni society. To achieve this objective, we used a qualitative method, which consists of conducting interviews with 30 Yemeni families affected by the civil war. These families constitute our public, which includes 57 children between the age of (7-13 years). It is the legal age that corresponds to primary education. The results obtained from our survey showed a very fragile situation of childhood in Yemen. They also confirmed the figures and data quoted in the reports of the various UN organizations. So it is important, in order to protect the of children to access education, to call for an end to this conflict and rehabilitate the infrastructure of the education system; building, chairs, teachers, programs and textbooks, etc.

**Keywords:** Yemen Society, Social Conflict, Social Inequalities, Yemen Child, Unequal Access to Education, Child Labor, Poverty

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## 1. Introduction

The education of children is an important issue to guarantee the development of the future of our countries. Armed conflicts increase more and more unemployment and subsequently the poverty rate. Along with the growth of poverty in conflict settings, certain groups or restricted social classes become wealthier. These are mostly the winning party and its allies. Yemeni children are, according to UN reports, the social segment most seriously affected in this conflict.

It is obvious that the consequences of armed conflicts on Yemeni society are numerous. In our article, we content ourselves with studying the question of childhood and in particular access to basic schooling. It is a question of knowing the impact of the social conflict on the right of the children to the education, which consists in giving to the children the possibility of following a good education.

Thus, we first deal with the question of social and educational inequalities in order to then be able to understand their place in the Yemeni context. We will, in the second part,

expose the escalation of the conflict in Yemen and its impact on the lives of children in general and their education in particular. UN reports speak of 2 million Yemeni children who have dropped out or could not access school. In the third part of this article, we study this phenomenon in order to understand its causes. To achieve this objective, we will use a qualitative method, which consists of conducting interviews with 30 Yemeni families affected by the civil war. These families constitute our public, which includes 57 children between the age of (7-13 years). It is the legal age that corresponds to primary education. In a country where schooling for children is not compulsory, it is then up to the parents to take responsibility for the education of their children. It is for this reason that we specifically chose the family manager (one of the parents) as the audience. The interviews that we are going to carry out with the leaders of these families will take into account three points: the financial situation of the family, the work of the children and the schooling of the children.

The results of the interviews carried out will, first of all,

give an overall idea of the rate of children who do not or no longer go to school. They then shed light on the reasons for this deschooling, which has increased since the start of the armed conflict. These results will also serve to affirm or refute the data reported in the UN reports.

## 2. Social Inequalities

It is difficult to grasp a definition of social inequalities because it depends on the subject of the debate in question: income inequality, unequal access to education, etc. However, it seems important to give a definition to this concept before undertaking our analysis. The two French sociologists Bhir, Alain and Piferferkorn, Roland gave a complete definition to social inequalities. Social inequalities are, according to them, "*the result of an unequal distribution, in the mathematical sense, between the members of a society, of the resources of the latter due to the very structures of this society, by giving rise to a feeling of injustice within its members* [2]". Social inequality is thus perceived as a feeling of injustice due to a poor distribution of wealth or resources between members of society. This unfair distribution makes it possible to give advantages to one group of people at the expense of others. This is one of the indicators of the outbreak of social conflict. According to Durkheim, the problem of social inequality is explicitly linked to that of social conflict [3]. This relationship has been noted in the current conflict in Yemen. Social inequalities and poverty have given rise to protest movements that end in conflict. On the other hand, this conflict has further increased social inequalities and in particular, those related to the lives of children such as access to education, protection, etc. The results of our fieldwork show this clearly.

It is therefore important to point out the impact of conflicts and social inequalities on the lives of children. The United Nations Children's Fund report states that children are the most vulnerable and affected by the armed conflict in Yemen [16]. It details the problems suffered by children due to political and social instability of which unequal access to education is an important part.

### *Unequal Access to Education*

Social inequality is undoubtedly at the origin of educational inequality because the first increases the precariousness of families and increases the poverty rate. Since schooling is neither free nor compulsory, it is the responsibility of families to ensure the schooling of their children. As a result, poor families will, unlike rich families, find it difficult to finance their children's schooling. As educational inequalities are social inequalities transposed in school [5], rich children will receive a good education. As for poor children, they will find it difficult to access it. Thus, we can qualify the school environment as a micro-society insofar as it brings together all social classes.

This problematic is a topical issue in all societies. It is, however, dealt with at several levels. In developed countries, the problem is treated differently. It is no longer about access to education because it is, in these countries, compulsory and

free. Therefore, the problem is treated according to the chances and the school career. Bouden (1973) speaks of unequal educational opportunities. It is about the chance to choose the school orientation (long or short) which depends on the economic level of the family.

For underdeveloped or developing countries such as African countries and those of the Middle East and in particular Yemen, educational inequality is perceived in relation to the possibility of access to education. In the situation of the Yemeni child, the problem seems more complicated. It is not a question of a simple choice of school career but of the inability to access school education. The conflict and the absence of laws that make basic education compulsory and free have made access to school difficult for hundreds, even thousands of Yemeni children who live below the poverty line. Two million of all 10 million Yemeni children do not go to school due to economic difficulties or other factors that we will show in the next part of this article.

## 3. Overview of the Conflict in Yemen

Yemen is one of the so-called "Arab Spring" countries that rose up, in 2011, against the regimes in place such as Tunisia, Egypt, etc. These were the protest movements launched against inequalities and social injustice. For some countries, the Arab Spring movements have brought about change and evolution. For others, it opened the doors to civil war, as in the case of Yemen, Syria and Libya.

It should be noted that the protests of 2011 in Yemen overthrew the regime of President Saleh who remained 34 years (1978-2012) at the head of power. Vice President Hadi was then elected President of the Republic of Yemen on February 25, 2012 based on the signing of a power transition agreement concluded under the aegis of the Gulf countries.

The Houthite movement with the support of the ex-president succeeded in seizing the capital Sana'a on September 21, 2014 and placing President Hadi under house arrest. President Hadi was forced to publicly announce his resignation on January 22, 2015. He remained under house arrest until he managed to flee to Aden, his hometown, where he returned on his forced resignation.

The pursuit of President Hadi by the military troops of the coalition (Saleh and Houthite) officially triggered the social conflict which will then ravage the country's infrastructure. Thus, the country has become a battlefield between opponents and allies of the republican regime represented by President Hadi. Before the arrival of the Houthite troops in Aden, the latter once again succeeded in fleeing to Oman and then to Saudi Arabia where he demanded the intervention of the Arab Coalition which would bring together dozens of Arab countries. The Arab Coalition declares its military operation, under a request of President Hadi, against the rebellion in Yemen on March 25, 2015 with the aim of restoring power.

Airstrikes have since targeted Houthite military troops destroying infrastructure and the various forms of life in the country. Since 2015 the war in Yemen has continued in one

way or another, of which citizens and children in particular are the first victims. These 8 years of war have led to the deterioration of economic and social life in Yemen; it has worsened the humanitarian crisis and made the country one of the most dangerous for children on the planet [15].

The report speaks of: -2.3 million children who suffer from malnutrition, -2 million displaced children and -2 million children who do not have the possibility of going to school.

### **3.1. Armed Conflict and Social Injustice**

Civil and political conflicts increase the sense of injustice among members of society and reinforce the social inequalities, despair, and resentments that trap countries in the spiral of violence [14]. This violence leads to serious economic and humanitarian consequences: the destruction of infrastructure and property, the collapse of the health system and the forced displacement of citizens. They also increase the poverty rate as job opportunities are reduced.

Social conflicts, on the other hand, give rise to the enrichment of a group of people. They are often supporters of the winning party or traders (of war). In this way, social inequality, resentment and despair, which have certainly existed forever, increase further. The UNDP asserted in its report that the conflict in Yemen has destabilized markets and institutions, destroyed social and economic infrastructure, and strongly contributed to rising inequality [12]. This inequality has become remarkable in level of income, purchasing power, housing and above all access to education.

As a result, Yemen is now ranked as the second most unequal country in the world in terms of income (UNDP, 2019). It should be noted that these conflicts have generated an increase in the number of poor people, which the UN estimates at more than 17 million (UN, 2022) out of the total of 32 million Yemenis [18]. OXFAM, a UN organization, claims that 80% of Yemenis now live below the poverty line [11]. We can therefore see that the middle class, made up mostly of employees, has almost disappeared in favor of the poor class. This is because many employees have lost their jobs or no longer receive their salaries. These include public employees and the school sector in particular.

### **3.2. The Crisis and School System**

It is obvious that education brings benefits to individuals and to society. It is also important and essential in terms of the development of countries because it is considered the pillar on which the growth of society is based [1]. For this reason, countries have an interest in facilitating children's access to education and providing them with quality education. The contribution that children can make to society largely depends on the type of childhood they have had, the education they have received and the skills they have acquired [7]. It is therefore important to guarantee an educational and social environment that is favorable and accessible to all children.

International human rights conventions clearly recognize children's right to education. The UN adopted a series of

conventions that established this right such as the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which was adopted as international law in 1990 [13]. Countries must, according to Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, ensure that primary education is compulsory and free. However, some countries, such as Yemen, do not include this provision in their constitutions. The schooling of children in the latter remains optional and paid for until today.

However, the schooling of children in Yemen has improved relatively between 1999-2013 according to World Bank reports. The enrollment rate had risen from 71.3% to 97.5%. At the start of the 2012-2013 school year, the Ministry of National Education had more than 5 million students enrolled in nearly 17,000 schools. This growth figure has unfortunately fallen significantly since the start of the civil conflict in March 2015 [8]. The latest reports affirm the abandonment of school by 2 million students (UNICEF Yemen, 2021), which represents a drop-in schooling of around 33%. A figure that raises many questions about the seriousness of this war on the future generation.

It should be noted that the Yemeni school system has not been spared from this economic deterioration. It is also one of the first government organizations to have been directly affected by this humanitarian crisis. A large proportion of teachers, who no longer regularly receive their salaries as we have already reported, have been forced to adopt another profession (UNICEF, 2021) or work in private schools. According to the United Nations Children's Fund, 64% of teachers have not received regular salaries since 2016 [16].

As for school infrastructure, Yemen had, according to the Ministry of National Education, 17,000 public primary and secondary schools. They offered their services from the first class of primary to the baccalaureate, for a public aged between 7 and 19 years (Ministry of National Education, 2014). Some of these schools are no longer in service. The armed conflict has caused the destruction, damage or closure of a hundred. The UN notes, in its report published in 2021, that 2,507 public schools have been damaged, destroyed, occupied by armed groups or used as refuge for the displaced [16]. Some of the schools that are still open to students are found to be in poor condition and deemed, according to the UN, unsuitable for learning [10].

Faced with these conditions, private schools, which have also experienced remarkable growth, seem to be the only option for regular education. It is an expensive education whose registration fees are relatively high for an ordinary Yemeni citizen. Thus, disadvantaged children will not have the possibility of accessing it unlike those from well-to-do families. This highlights the inequality of opportunity in the face of schooling in conflict situations. The UN speaks in its report of 2 million children out of school, 500,000 of whom have lost the possibility of enrolling because of poverty or forced displacement due to the civil war [6].

#### *Private School: A Facet of Educational Inequality*

It is obvious that, in countries that suffer from social conflict, equality regarding access to education becomes

more and more reduced because, in such circumstances, access to education becomes more and more complicated. due to displacement, poverty, job loss and destruction of public-school infrastructure.

The closure of public schools exposes poor children to dropping out of school as they are unable to afford private school fees. It should be noted that private schools are not designed to be accessible to all social classes. They are made for the wealthy and those with a good level of income. Thus, the closure of public schools whose tuition is acceptable for poor families makes the development of private schools. Children's education is no longer considered a priority for families in financial difficulty. It is for these families rather to ensure the necessary needs such as food, which sometimes involves child labor. According to our respondents 56% of parents do not consider the education of their children as a priority in its economic conditions. In its 2011 report, Education for All states that countries affected by armed conflict are among those furthest from the goal of education for all. This means that education in these countries is not accessible to everyone [14].

### 3.3. School and Child Labor

Poverty and social inequality have pushed some children, according to the UN, to drop out of school to work in an effort to help their families support themselves. UNICEF, states in its 2014 report, that child labor is a daily reality for 24% of Yemeni children aged 5 to 15 [17]. The conflict, triggered in 2015, must have certainly increased this figure. This is, according to recent United Nations reports, 64% (UNICEF, 2022).

For Putnick and Bornstein child labor is often divided into three major categories: work outside home, family work and excessive home hold chores [4]. Working outside the home or working for family economic reasons is often linked to dropping out of school. In this sense, they are forced to leave school to be able to work more and bring money back to the family. The majority of children from families in great financial need start the labor market at a very young age while leaving school. This is the case for most of the children in our audience.

Our survey shows that 62.5% of the children of the families surveyed work. 23.2% of them work either after school or during weekends or during school holidays. 39.3% of children work daily. This category is not going to or has left school. Their family situations forced them to work to support the family's financial budget.

Such a situation clearly shows us the consequences of the conflict and social inequalities insofar as children from wealthy families enroll in private schools and receive a good education while poor children cannot access education. The latter must, on the other hand, work instead of going to school.

## 4. Field Work and Analysis

In this part we will present the public on which we

conducted this survey and the methodology followed to carry it out. We will also do our data analysis which serves, through the results obtained, to highlight or refute the hypotheses reported in the various UN reports. It is also the case to show how civil conflicts have increased social inequality and consequently educational inequality in Yemeni society.

### 4.1. Audience

It is about 30 fathers of families in financial difficulty who have lost their jobs and their homes because of the war. They are, for the majority, displaced people who have fled the border regions of conflict to settle in the western region of the city of Ta'ez.

Since the schooling of children is not compulsory and the Government does not support their education, it is thus incumbent on the fathers of the families to ensure the task. It is for this reason that we have chosen this audience. It can answer our questions about the causes of children dropping out of school that the UN reports have often highlighted.

-8families come from the lower class known as "the akhdames"<sup>1</sup> whose fathers perform derisory trades according to Yemeni traditions and customs and reserved for this marginal class as garbage collectors or waste sorters. It's a job because it's poorly perceived.

-22families are from the middle class whose fathers worked as: (13) teachers, (1) macon, (5) workers and (2) farmers.

We counted in these 30 families, 57 children aged between 7 and 14 years. This is the legal age for access to primary education. This therefore makes an average of 2 children per family. Certain families certainly have other children whose age does not correspond to the objectives of our research.

### 4.2. Approach and Methodology Followed

We followed a qualitative approach which consists of interviews with the fathers or those responsible for these families. These are directive interviews composed of direct questions. Some questions are sometimes closed whose answer is supposed to be (yes or no). Others open where the interviewee has the freedom to express his point of view freely. We have chosen a very short question grid to avoid unnecessary details. We allowed 20 minutes of interview per family. The interviews consist of the following questions:

1. Did you work before the conflict? if so what jobs?
2. Did this job meet your family needs?
3. Do you have work at the moment?
4. Are you able to meet the needs of your family with your current income or the help you receive?
5. Do you have children between 7-12 years old?
6. Do they go to school? if not why?
7. What do you think of the children's schooling?
8. Do your children work?
9. Did they work before the conflict?
10. What do you think of child labor?

**4.3. Analysis**

We will divide our analysis on the problematic trios that were taken up in the survey. These issues are:

- 1) Financial situation of families
- 2) Child labor
- 3) Children's schooling in primary school

**4.3.1. Financial Situation of Families Surveyed and Poverty Rate**

This part contains four questions that ask the audience about their sources of income. It is a question of making the comparison between the chances of these families before and after the civil war.

Q1- Did you work before the conflict? If so, what professions?

We asked this question to take stock of the economic situation of these families before the outbreak of the civil war. Thus, the data that we have collected show that all the fathers of families exercised trades before the outbreak of the war. This means that 100% of respondents had a job to support their families. But were their incomes sufficient to meet the financial requirements of their families: food, rent and school fees etc!

Q2- Did this job meet your family needs?

20of our interviewees claim to be able to meet their

necessary family needs with the income they earned from their work. The other 10 respondents say they often have problems coping with the low income they earn from their trades. So, we can say that 25% of our audience lived below the poverty line even before the civil war.

Q3- Do you have work at the moment?

According to the responses from our sample, only 8 people currently have trades. As for the others, they rely on the food and financial aid they receive from charitable associations. The rate of people in our sample who have lost their jobs or the chance of finding work is around 73.3%.

Q4- Are you able to support your family with your current income or the help you receive?

“It is difficult to meet all the necessary needs of the family in such an economic situation”. This is the response of 29 people, which constitutes the absolute majority of our audience. Thus, 96.6% of our respondents live, according to these data, below the poverty line.

We draw the following results from this analysis:

- 1) 75% of our sample lost, due to the civil conflict, their trades or in other words, the chance to find work. They therefore rely totally on charitable aid.
- 2) The rate of poverty or inability to provide the necessary needs for the family, increased from 25% to 96.6%, which makes a variable of 71%.

*Table 1. Poverty rate before and after the civil conflict.*

	Social Class	Father's jobs	N	Availability of work	Economic status		New profession	
					Satisfying	Fragile		
Before the conflict	Lower	Garbage men	8	8	4	4	100%	
		(Public) schoolteachers	13	13	11	2		
	Middle	Stonemason	1	1	1			
		Workers	5	5	1	4		
		Farmers	2	2	2			
Poverty rate				75%	25%			
After the start of the conflict	Lower	Garbage men	8	0		8	26.6%	
		(Public) schoolteachers	13	5	1	12		Schoolteachers (private)
	Middle	Stonemason	1	1		1		
		Workers	5	2		3		Itinerant cigarette vendor
		Farmers	2	1		2		Itinerant sandwich seller
Poverty rate				3.4%	96.6%			
Increasing rate in poverty						71%		

With this increase in poverty recorded since the beginning of the civil conflict and consequently the inability to provide the necessities of the family, the children are thus put in the labor market to help, according to the UN, their families. The next part of our survey will focus on this problem in order to find answers.

**4.3.2. Child Labor**

In this part, we are going to ask our audience about child labor. It's about whether their children are working and why. The purpose of the questions in this section is to relate child labor and school dropout as reported in various UN reports.

Q8- Do your children work?

According to the responses of our public, 35 children work. 10 of them help their parents during weekends and school

holidays and 3 after school. As for the other 22 children, they work permanently in the (Qat)<sup>2</sup>souk. The latter do not go, according to their families, to school. Thus, we can say that 62.5% of children work to help their families: 39.3% work every day, 17.9% during weekends and school holidays and 5.3% after school lessons.

Q9-Did they work before the conflict?

According to the answers collected, the majority of the children did not work because the situation of their families almost covered their needs. 81% of those questioned affirm that their children did not work before the outbreak of the war. 19% of the surveys affirm, on the other hand, that their children are still working even before the social conflict.

These figures show that conflict, rising social inequality and reduced options for finding work are behind the

UN-recorded increase in child labor.

10-What do you think of child labor?

80%of respondents believe that children should not work. Some resume that the difficult economic situation of the family forces them to work to help the family.

20%of respondents do not think child labor is a problem. They are for the majority of Akhdam families.

Thus, we can conclude that the majority of parents are against child labor and that only their difficult economic situation obliges them to tolerate it.

The majority of the underclass do not see a problem in child labor. They constitute 19% of the total public.

The armed conflict is at the root of the increase in the number of working children in Yemeni society.

It is therefore likely that child labor may impact their school commitments. This can increase school dropout

because of the harsh working conditions children may experience.

### 4.3.3. Schooling of Children: More and More School Dropouts

This part of the fieldwork aims to focus on the reasons for the gradual abandonment of school by Yemeni children that the reports of the United Nations Organizations have pointed out on several occasions.

Q5-Do you have children between 7-12 years old?

All our respondents said they had children between 7-12 years old. We counted 57 children for the 30 families interviewed. This makes the rate of 1.9 children per family. We note that some families have more than two children in this age range. The following table shows the partition of children between families.

Table 2. The number of children per family.

Families	Number of children	Child rate per family	Percentage
11	11	1	36.66%
8	24	3	26.68%
11	22	2	36.66%
30	57		100%

26.68%of families surveyed have 3 children of primary school age. Admittedly, in such economic conditions, this high rate of children can constitute a major problem for families in terms of school fees for their children.

Q6-Do your children go to school? If not why?

22 children of all 57 at primary school age do not go to school. Despite their legal school ages, 14 children have never been to school. 8 children recently abandoned him. Thus 38.6% of children are not in school.

Table 3. Out-of-school children.

Father's job	Garbage men	Teachers	Stonemason	Worker	Farmer	Total	Percentage
children who go to school	6	17	1	8	3	35	61.4%
Children who do not go to school	18	0	1	2	1	22	38.6%

These children do not go to school because their family situations do not allow it: economic deficit, child labor and displacement. We can, according to our interrogations, note that the abandonment of the school on the part of the children of families questioned is due to the following points:

- 1) Moving
- 2) The financial deficit of the family
- 3) Lack of job opportunities
- 4) Parental unemployment
- 5) Educational inequality
- 6) Child labor
- 7) Poverty

Q7-What do you think of your children's schooling?

It is clear that the education of children for these families is no longer a priority. This is to help provide basic family necessities such as food and housing. 56% of our respondents say that their children's schooling is no longer counted among their priority options.

Summary of fieldwork results

The majority of our audience have lost their jobs. This is 96.6% families in financial difficulty against 25% recorded in the period preceding the war. This increases the poverty rate. Financial hardship forces some poor families to put their

children to work to help provide the necessary needs. 62.5% of the children in our audience work, 39.2% of whom are not enrolled in school. The abandonment of school by this category is related to the financial deficit, the forced displacement and the work of the children of these families.

Finally, the results that we obtained from this field work carried out on a sample of Yemeni society agree with the data reported by the UN reports. It is therefore important to take this phenomenon seriously and to take the necessary measures to put an end to it.

## 5. Conclusion

Despite the importance of basic education, a large proportion of Yemeni children do not go to school. Many elements are at the origin of this drama. We cite the civil war and consequently the forced displacement of families, the loss of jobs, the destruction of infrastructure and the shutdown of public services. Children, as a vulnerable segment, are the social category most affected by this conflict. Some have lost their right of access to school. Others have been forced to leave school to work and support their families. The statistics obtained from our analysis show that

39.2% of children are not enrolled in school. We point out that the figures obtained from the analysis of our sample agree perfectly with the data released by the UN. Thus, it is important to take all the necessary measures to put an end to social conflict and educational inequality, which are the main factors in the dropout of these children.

## 6. Recommendation

Based on the results of our survey, we recommend taking this issue seriously. It consists in calling for an immediate end to this conflict and rebuilding the school system, which has suffered greatly from this conflict. It is also important to solve the problems of Yemeni children relating to schooling, school injustice, child labor and school drop-out as soon as possible.

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1 It is the lower and marginal class of Yemeni society since it does not belong to a Yemeni tribe. They are from Africa. They have black skin and exercise derisory trades according to Yemeni culture such as garbage collectors, street sweepers, etc.  
 2- It is a euphoric plant from the Celastraceae family that Yemenis consume on a daily basis.