

The pain of poverty for Yemeni children... and the rare pleasure of escape



By: Asma Al-Mohattwari

Though she couldn't have realized it at the time, at the age of four, Hanaj moved from Bani Mattar to the Old City of Sana'a to begin suffering from poverty. She was left with extremely difficult family circumstances. As her father was sick and her mother was left to take care of her children, the family's sole provider was her grandmother. She worked to provide them with food.

The grandma started working in neighboring houses, assisting women with cleaning, cooking and other household chores; in return, she received small amounts of money or food to give to her grandchildren. But when Hanaj's grandmother died, the children began suffering from hunger.

Her mother was forced to take her grandmother's place and went out to find work. But conditions were very harsh and what the mother was able to earn wasn't enough. So Hanaj at the age of five went out to work to help her mother with household expenses. Hanaj took care of her neighbor's children, and went on trips to the grocery store to buy things for other children or for the neighbors in order to receive some small sum from them.

Hanaj watched as children returned from school and quietly hid her grief deep in her heart. She saw the joy in their eyes when the other children came back from buying school uniforms and new school supplies. She was eager to go to school but couldn't imagine herself attending school one day. Her wish effectively vanished with each day of work.

One day, when she was nine years old, a woman asked her: "Why don't you go to school?"

Hanaj responded with sorrow in her eyes, "I don't have a school uniform." The woman decided to give her a uniform and encouraged her to go to school.

There was clear joy in her eyes when her mother told her to leave work and go to school. Although Hanaj didn't have money and supplies like the rest of schoolchildren, she was very happy at school and thanked God that she was able to attend.

Reflecting on those difficult days many years later, Hanaj said, “A lot of things weren’t available to us and our life was so difficult, more than you could imagine, but our love for education was great.”

After completing the sixth grade, the family moved to another location in Sana’a, and her new home was very far from the nearest school. Because transportation was too expensive, Hanaj stopped going to school. At the time, her brother Ahmed was studying in the mornings and working in the afternoon, cleaning cars to help his mother.

By chance, Ahmed met a woman named Nouria. She loved him very much and was very kind to him. One day Ahmad took her to his home and there Nouria found a family which struggled to find food and which refused to resort to the help of others.

After she learned more about the family’s difficult life and heard Hanaj’s story, Ms. Nouria Naji, Director of the Yemeni Education and Relief Organization, decided to support and take care of Hanaj and her family, making the family the first which the organization provided support to.

Nouria decided to solve the family’s poverty problem by supplying them with all their food, clothing, and other needs. She also met the children’s school-related needs, from buying school uniforms to covering necessary fees and expenses.

“Every year, she gave us new things.

Our life completely changed after Mama Nouria entered our lives.

She provided us with things we never even dreamed of,” Hanaj reflected with delight in her voice.

Not only that, but the organization provided them with teachers in all subjects after they finished school to strengthen their educations. The extra subjects included courses on computers, drawing, photography and handicrafts. Celebrations and trips were also organized for them at the end of each academic year, and healthcare was provided by the organization.

“We lived the most beautiful we didn’t reach it, these moments want to remember the very painful

After she finished high school, university: high school itself was receiving encouragement from the University, studied political the university.

In Nouria’s organization, there are success following a long struggle

Othman was another child who came to her barefoot and selling and he ended up studying and school. Othman now works at a commercial center.



moments in the center of our lives, and if would never have been lived. I do not and miserable past,” she said.

Hanaj wasn’t considering attending something big for Hanaj. But after Ms. Nouria, Hanaj joined Arwa science and graduated with honors from

a number of stories which represent to escape life’s obstacles.

joined the organization. Nouria said he water bottles in the street. Years later, persevering until he had completed high

Yemen Education and Relief Organization has adopted more than 500 children, some of whom went on to finish high school and are now working; still others have enrolled in various colleges under the auspices of the organization.

“I do not have kids, but I consider the 500 children my sons and daughters and I am very proud of them and their success,” said Nouria.

Although the stories of success are many, a huge number of children continue to work and miss out on school.

The Yemen Children's Parliament confirms that the number of working children in Yemen has reached about 600 thousand children. Most of them are engaged in arduous and dangerous tasks which are inappropriate to their ages, tasks such as carrying heavy rocks and working in workshops as helpers for blacksmiths, carpenters, and plumbers – or constantly around cars, at bus stops, or working as street vendors.

According to some government reports, most children working in the street are selling newspapers, bottles of water, household goods, cassettes, fruits and vegetables, or are cleaning cars.

Nouria considered poverty to be the main cause of the child labor phenomenon, which is the main cause behind families' not allowing their children to attend school. The families simply cannot cover the costs that come with school. Nouria said, "It's difficult for families to let their children go to school because they are often the only source of income for the family, so the organization provides families with food and clothing, etc. in order that their children will be allowed to go to school."

Children are exposed to many risks during their daily work, but the bitterness and harshness of life forces them to work in the street and deal with all the difficulties which they encounter, wishing only to find something to stave off their own and their families' hunger.

Hanan, 13, is a child who hasn't had the opportunity to attend school. She said that she lives with her mother, two sisters and three brothers. She is oldest child, and was forced to go out into the street after her father left, leaving the family to face the suffering that comes with poverty alone. Hanan has tried all manner of street work, including selling gum, tissues, cassettes, cleaning cars, and so on.

The Yemen Children's Parliament has called on the government to intensify efforts to reduce child labor, saying that current efforts continue to be below the level required.

Hanaj said, "The government should fix the poverty problem because it's the main cause behind children dropping out of school and going out to work. And ask all the parents not to prevent their children from receiving n education."

As she spoke these words, tears were visible in her eyes.