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EXTENDED HOLIDAY IN HURGHADA:
RUSSIAN WOMEN AND 'URFI MARRIAGE AS AN 'ALTERNATIVE CIRCUIT OF
SURVIVAL'

A Thesis Submitted to

Gender and Women's Studies

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

by Joanne Walby
(Bachelor of Arts, University of Washington, Seattle)

(under the supervision of Dr. Martina Rieker

December 2009

Extended Holiday in Hurghada:
Russian women traversing 'alternative circuits of survival'

By Joanne Walby

"Hurghada: the Bride of the Red Sea"

- A street sign at the entrance to Hurghada on the road from Cairo.

"In the course of the global dislocation of women and sexualization of labor, a new geography is being mapped by the recruitment of women among minorities and slum communities, their transportation along trafficking routes and across borders, abroad and offshore for labor in global sex industry... This maps the alternative circuits of survival in the margins of pan capitalist reality".

- Ursula Biermann, 2002

"Ярки и плохие это более заметно чем незаметны и споконы."

(*"That which is bright and bad is more noticed than the quiet and pleasant"*)

-Zhenya, wife, mother and worker in Hurghada's informal work sector

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INTRODUCTION

“The effort to identify the enemy as singular in form is a reverse-discourse that uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of terms” (Judith Butler, 1990: 18)

Since the disintegration of the former Soviet Union, the “trope of the trafficked Russian¹ woman” has shaped the fears and perceptions of Russian women moving abroad for work. This discourse reifies fears of exploitation and victimhood but overlooks women’s ability to rationally consider the risks and benefits of international migration for economic and social reasons.

In Egypt, some negative stereotypes have been associated with the Russian population living in Hurghada, a tourist town a 395 km south of Cairo along the Red Sea coast that has sprung up in the past 15 years as Egypt developed its tourism industry. Before coming to Hurghada I didn’t have a sense of the size of the local Russian population but I had read that it was a transit point for women being trafficking into Israel’s sex industry.² Instead I found Russian women making use of their relative mobility and economic privilege as “white” tourists and then later as foreign residents in Egypt’s fastest-growing tourist town.³ One aim of this paper is to challenge the trope of the Russian trafficked women and explore the desires,

¹ The English word “Russian” refers to citizens from the Russian Federation (*Россияны*) as well as Russians (*русские*). In this report, I use “Russian” loosely to refer to all my Russophone informants from the republics of the former Soviet Union, in an attempt to disguise identities.

² According to estimates cited in a 2007 USAID Report on Trafficking into Israel, 3000-5000 women were trafficked into Israel’s sex industry annual between 2001 and 2005.

³ This does not mean that there aren’t “trafficked women” somewhere in Hurghada, but research I will present in future chapters seems to suggest that recent changes in visa requirements and the arrests in the Russian-Israeli mafia has slowed the trafficking of women through Egypt.

challenges and motivations behind this significant wave of immigration that is turning Egypt's Red Sea coast into a multi-cultural community and site of spectacular growth in the tourism and real estate markets.

This discourse about Russian women and human trafficking is often connected with the existence of a sex industry. In Hurghada, rather than a visible "sex industry", there exist a network of hotels and clubs where male and female tourists engage in long and short term relationships with each other and local men. Although these European female "sex tourists" were not the focus of my study, they came up in conversation quite often. One day when I would found myself chatting with a young male Egyptian in a perfume shop, I wondered, after he offered to rub lotion on my hands, if this is how "sex tourists" meet local men. If so, what makes the Russian women I interviewed who married local men via '*urfi*, or customary marriage,⁴ different than those female sex tourists who carry on relationships under the '*urfi* guise? Time, intentions and a willingness to relocate to Hurghada seem to be the key variables.

When I first caught site of my main informant, "Ksenya"⁵, at Hurghada's bus station, I didn't recognize her from her online profile photo which showed her with carrot red hair and an open, smiling face. As taxi drivers, travelers and shopkeepers bustled

⁴ '*Urfi* marriage, is customary Islamic marriage, and if unregistered with the state is considered a "secret marriage". Critics say in many cases it is simply a way to "legalize" premarital sex, but men in possession of an '*urfi* contract (it should be "legalized" in a lawyer's office and signed by two witnesses) can rent a flat or hotel room as a "married" couple. *Russia Today* August 19, 2009 "A ride to a Dream, part I and II", http://russiatoday.com/Top_News/2009-08-18/ride-dream-part-two.html/print.

⁵ All names are pseudonyms.

around me, a woman resembling the actress Isabella Rossellini strode towards me and directed the Egyptian man with her to help me with my luggage. I would later realize her tattooed-on eye and lip liner were what made her look perpetually “put together”, as did her red patent handbag, matching red patent sandals and red, orange and pink beaded necklace. She greeted me with a smile, like a long-lost friend and the three of us hopped into the car. As we made our way through town, she took several calls on her cell phone, discussing business with the caller and the driver, introduced as her husband, Ibrahim, who owned a local perfume shop.

Though separated in age by more than a decade, Ibrahim and Ksenya met while she was on holiday in Hurghada, taking a break from her high-income, high-stress job at an oil company in one of Russia’s largest cities. She said, “It was my first day in Hurghada and I walked into his shop. From that day on, he didn’t leave my side. When he proposed marriage after only a week, I said to my friend, ‘Let’s get out of here! This guy is crazy!’” But he explained that he was serious about marrying her and since she had developed feelings for him as well. Within three months she had relocated to Hurghada with her two adolescent children.

Ksenya told me how things were financially tight now, and she was now planning to open a school in the fall for Russian-speaking students, a mere two months away. I was doubtful it would materialize as she had yet to find a school house, nor did she have any students or teachers lined up. I didn’t yet realize that this former university literature teacher had also once been a black-market clothing trader in the last days of the USSR. Making such calculated risks was par for the course for someone who

travelled long distances alone, dodged authorities and risked jail in order to trade in contraband clothing in Moscow's public restrooms.

For many women who come to Hurghada, it is a calculated risk in the search for personal and economic independence and fulfillment, or as one woman said, "to find my fate". Many women said they wanted to "start over" after divorce, enjoy the sunshine or experience a different pace of life, for themselves and for some, their children. I believe the ability to act on these desires is tied directly to their mobility, garnered by citizenship and access to expendable cash. I wondered what economic and social forces were "pushing" or "pulling" women into moving abroad for work or marriage and how this differed from the story often told about trafficked women, where exploitation is highlighted rather the desires and hopes that propel them to migrate. In Hurghada, these immigrant Russian women are able to live more or less in a "country" of their own making. While some of them do suffer exploitation in their workplace in the form of unpaid labor, this is part of the neoliberal employment environment many workers in Egypt experience. The real story surrounds the fluid power dynamics given them by their race, gender, mobility, education and economic advantage, all factors many of them brought to their new lives and marriages in Hurghada. Also, the sheer numbers of Russians in Hurghada provides social networks and opportunities to accumulate social capital. As they stroll along the pedestrian malls, Russians residents are mistaken for tourists and therefore ignored by the police. They have a lot of freedom when it comes to creating their own cultural practices and norms in the public space, as long as they stay in Hurghada and the Red Sea tourism zone. As one Russian woman said, "Cairo is another country."

Katya

One evening I joined some of Ksenya's Russian friends at a popular, upscale chain restaurant that featured a women-only night, promoted in Russian as *Den Devushek* ("Ladies Day"). Until 1am, only women were allowed into the bar, where they offered two glasses of wine and a dessert bar, *gratis*. As the bartender explained, this "experiment" was meant to provide a women-only socializing scene, which was a popular option for women whose Egyptian husbands may not approve of them going to bars with other men around. As we clustered around on the bar's red velvet stools, I spotted a young woman wearing a blue sequined mini-dress with plunging neckline. Though the town abounds in tourists wearing revealing beachwear, her dress' sequins and short hemline caught my attention. Later, as my acquaintances and I strolled along the pedestrian mall that extends through the heart of Hurghada's hotel and shopping district, I spotted the woman in the sequin dress walking alone. I asked my Russian acquaintance about her and where she worked. "Oh yeah, that's Katya." Then she raised her eyebrows and said meaningfully, "She keeps herself, busy, you know?" ("на все руки от скуки", literally, "on all hands from boredom").

A few nights later, I was at a café with two women who had agreed to be interviewed when Katya joined us. After discussing mutual friends for a few minutes, I was introduced to Katya as an American doing sociological research interviews in Hurghada. Katya murmured, "Oh, yes, I've heard about you." The curiosity was mutual: I noticed her frequent glances around the cafe, her smudged, hot pink

mascara and the way she seemed to growl out her words. At first I mistook this for slurring and thought she might be drunk, but then I realized it was probably just her deep and nasally tone and her penchant for peppering her speech with slang that gave her a rough edge. I allowed the conversation to drift along for a while before asking Katya if she'd like to be interviewed about her experiences in Hurghada. She didn't look at me when she said, "sure" but the studied nonchalance of her answer belied an interest in talking to an outsider. I wondered what kind of story she would tell.

We agreed to meet a few days later at the same café in the shopping mall where Ksenya and her friends often met; as I waited for Katya to arrive, the waiter I recognize from previous visits asked me with a grin if I spoke Russian. When I said "yes" his next question is, "So, do you want to get married?" I have heard this question before from the occasional taxi driver in Cairo, but suddenly I realize it is not a marriage proposal per se, but a proposition for sex. I recall how the phrase "getting married" is often used by my Cairene friends to indicate not just an event, or a having a spouse, but the long awaited act of becoming an adult, symbolized by sexual intercourse. I'm still thinking back to all the other "proposals" I've received during my year and a half in Egypt when Katya hurries up. The waiter, obviously acquainted with Katya, gives her an overly-flirtatious greeting which bordered on lecherous. He asks me the time and after I tell him, he unnecessarily touches my wristwatch, an invasion of personal space unthinkable in Cairo. When we moved to a table inside, another waiter greets Katya and openly ogles her low-cut blouse, causing her to cover her cleavage demurely with her hand while shooting him a reproachful look. I never saw this level of familiarity between the waiters and other women I

interviewed at this same café and I wondered if Katya's attempt at propriety (covering her cleavage) was due to my presence.

After we ordered a couple drinks Katya eagerly launched into her story, explaining that her parents had divorced when she was young but she had one full brother and several half siblings: "I initially left home in Moscow because of tension with my mother who didn't like me coming home so late [from her job as a "go-go dancer" at a nightclub]...sometimes I would come home drunk." So she headed off to visit her brother who was working as a hotel animator⁶ in Sharm El Sheikh and decided to become a diving instructor. That apparently didn't pan out, but she did find work as a "children's animator", providing child care and activities for children on vacation at the hotel with their families. She told me how one little girl became so attached to her that the girl cried when it was time leave and gave Katya her favorite stuffed animal, the mascot for the upcoming Olympic Games in Sochi. After a year or so, Katya returned home to help her half-sister take care of a new baby. "It was a hard time because my half-sister's mother had disappeared and we didn't know where she was." She decided to return to Egypt, telling no one except her brother who was in hospital suffering alcohol poisoning which occurred after his girlfriend broke up with him. "I called him from the airport, saying I'd only be gone a month, but I've been here for 13 months now. Not long after I had returned to Egypt, they called me one day and said, 'We found her' [half-sister's mother] and I thought, 'Thank God!' but then they said she had frozen to death on a park bench. She had been drunk." When

⁶ Animators work in hotels organizing sporting activities and entertainment for hotel guests, and will be examined in more depth in chapter three.

I asked where she currently worked, she said she was currently unemployed and made reference to “having enemies” at certain hotels so she couldn’t get rehired there as an animator. But when I asked how she supports herself without a job, she shrugged the question off, saying, “My friends help me out.” I sensed she didn’t want to provide more details on how she got money, so I listened to her monologue about family troubles and a vast web of friendships maintained by social networking websites. Despite not having a formal job, she considers Hurghada her second home and friends coming from around the world to visit. She said, “For the time being, Hurghada is more or less enough for me.”

One aspect of Hurghada that makes it feel like a “second home” for many people is the existing Russian population. Local Russian real estate mogul⁷ says Hurghada’s population has tripled since 2004 and a popular website sets the local population is at 180,000⁸. Some estimates say Russians make up one-fifth of Hurghada’s population, ranging from 10,000 to 20,000, the latter if one includes those who have overstayed their visa⁹. As the website states, "A part of the population growth comes from women who have married local men and are now raising the new multicultural generation of the city."¹⁰ According to anecdotal evidence, as more grandchildren are born in Hurghada, their grandparents are spending more time in Hurghada, attracted by cheap real estate and a lower cost of living than is found in Russia, especially Moscow, one of the most expensive cities in the world.

⁷ Chairman of the Board of Directors of a major real estate investment company in Hurghada.

⁸ www.hurghada.com is run by a marketing and advertising company based in Hurghada.

⁹ Komsomolskaya Pravda, Sept 8-21, 2008 “Center for Social and Legal Defense helps Compatriots”, page 24.

¹⁰ www.hurghada.com

Hurghada even has a Russified name: “*Krasnomorsk*”¹¹, effectively appropriating it as part of the Russian Motherland (*Rodina*). Many Russians have moved to Hurghada, bought property, opened businesses and schools and even started an Egyptian edition of one of Russia’s preeminent newspapers, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*.¹² As I met more of Hurghada’s Russian population, including Russian tourists-cum-brides and women whose relative wealth and mobility allowed them to “start fresh” in a new place, I wanted to understand how they adapted to life in Egypt, recreate themselves in Hurghada’s “transnational public spaces”.

One evening I was sitting on a bench under a streetlight in the housing complex where I lived, finishing an interview with a neighbor. About 20 feet away sitting on a bench were two women in their late 20s, “Zhanna” and “Larissa”. One of them called over to me asking, “Are you the American doing interviews?” Eager to have two more interview subjects, I walked over and introduced myself to the two women, both with school-age daughters playing nearby. After arranging to meet Zhanna later at her real estate office (“We can talk at the office; business is pretty slow these days”), I turned to Larissa. She said she was from a small town south of Moscow, “You know, we’re famous for our hand-made lace and butter.” If it weren’t for her arched, inked-on eyebrows, her blond hair pulled into a bun and blue eyes would have reminded me of a painting of a Russian peasant woman I have, given to me by a

¹¹ “Red Sea town” in Russia. It follows a typical naming convention ala *Chernomorsk* (“Black Sea town”) and the common descriptive prefix in Soviet days, “*krasno-*”, (red).

¹² As of May 2010 a second newspaper has appeared: *Moskovskiya Komsomolets*, a leading paper in Moscow has begun publishing an Egyptian edition in Hurghada.

Russian friend who said, “That is a traditional Russian beauty: we all used to be blonde and blue-eyed before the Mongols came.” As we talked, Larissa’s eight-year old daughter with wavy dark-blond hair and her mother’s blue eyes, flitted about, occasionally asking her mother questions, sometimes in English, sometimes in Russian. Larissa bragged how her daughter was also fluent in Arabic and was “so popular down at the mosque. She always goes with her Dad and all the sheikhs just love her.”

“Larissa” first came to Egypt 10 years ago on vacation with her (female) boss. Her future husband worked at the hotel and invited her to go to the hotel’s disco. Over the next two weeks, their romance blossomed and they stayed in touch after she left. She later returned for a second visit and when he proposed, she accepted. They entered into an *‘urfi* contract, and her husband began the process of officially registering their marriage with the Egyptian Ministry of Justice, which can take up to six months. Eventually she received a residence visa and work permit. “After we got married, I stayed home for two months, but was bored so I asked my husband to help me find a job.” Subsequently, she worked for three years in a tourism company, and then moved to another firm where for four years she sold excursions on the street for a commission. Eventually, the price of tours offered by hotels fell and selling cheaper excursions on the street was no longer profitable, so the firm closed. “Now I work for a real estate company that specializes in beachfront property.” She spoke knowledgeably about the new multi-million dollar, luxury resort development project at Sahl Hasheesh, 20 km from Hurgada. Her eyes shown with anticipation when she mentioned the world-famous architect commissioned to design the town which will

feature 15 hotels, three golf courses (Hurghada has none) “and the longest promenade in the world!” When I asked if this trend in real estate development toward luxury resorts would lure people away from Hurghada she said, “Hurghada is where real people live, you know? And it is cheap enough for those middle-class Russians who want to go to vacation in ‘Africa’ ”. In essence, that sums up Hurghada’s attraction for Russian tourists: an affordable, yet exotic destination that has been Russified.

By the late 1990s, the Russian economy was recovering and Russian middle class tourists were travelling abroad for the first time, usually to Eastern Europe and then south to Egypt, drawn by the ease of obtaining a tourist visa, guaranteed sunshine and affordable vacation packages only five hours from Moscow. More and more housing developments sprung up in Hurghada to accommodate the influx of migrant workers from other parts of Egypt and foreign residents eager to buy tax-free real estate in Hurghada. As Hurghada’s infrastructure developed, relocating to Hurghada made sense for people fleeing Russia’s harsh climate, constant illness, allergies, economic uncertainty and the high cost of living in Moscow, as well as those simply just searching for "a change of scenery".

Russian influence in Hurghada’s tourist trade and beach culture has certainly helped Hurghada economically. One young Egyptian man who said he had worked in Hurghada and Sharm El Sheikh for four years claimed that many of the joint ventures in tourism were facilitated by marriages between an Egyptian man and Russian woman, the latter with connections to the Russian “mafia”. “The Russians need a local partner in Egypt, otherwise they will pay a lot in taxes”, he said. Though

unconfirmed in my research this sounds plausible as the Russian investors have a significant presence in Turkey's tourism industry, which is also a common destination for women from the former Soviet Union looking for work and marriage.¹³ But there is tension between the two nationalities as well. The real estate mogul mentioned above said he would never do business with Egyptians again. "I don't trust Egyptians in business and I don't help anyone who wants to do business with them because at first they just want a small piece..." [He holds up a business card by one corner] "But soon, they want it all." [his thumb moves to cover the greater part of the card]. "I prefer to work and hire Russians. We have the same mentality, same logic."

Perhaps it is inevitable that such tensions exist between the local population in a conservative, Muslim-majority country like Egypt and its sizeable foreign-born population. The scantily clad female tourists flocking to Hurghada's nightlife are cast as "immoral" and blamed for luring Egyptian men into the sins of alcohol consumption and pre-marital sex.¹⁴ In an Egyptian newspaper article about the rising costs of marriage, marriages between Egyptian men and foreign women are written off "because their sole objective is gratification and pleasure, or to be more precise, a fixation with pleasure" (quoted in Singerman, 1995: 80). The Egyptian men and women I spoke with informally about their opinions voiced almost universal negative

¹³ While I did not meet any couples overtly using a "marriage on-paper" to avoid paying taxes on tourism investments, it doesn't seem very far-fetched either, given the ease with which marriage contracts can be made and broken. But it raises a whole host of other issues related to property ownership by non-citizen wives of Egyptians, which could be the subject of future research.

¹⁴ The Rough Guide to Egypt (2007: 732) writes that Russians are regarded by many local Egyptians as "drunks and whores"; a perusal of chat room conversations show references to "Russian women" as immodest, alcohol-swilling, noisy, disrespectful and a temptation to Egyptian married men and therefore a threat to their Egyptian wives.

impressions of Russian tourists.¹⁵ When I would ask Egyptian men their general opinion of Russian women in Hurghada, one recounted with barely concealed disgust how a female hotel co-worker from Russia performed sexual favors for the manager, “to get what she wants”. A bartender in a popular nightclub almost sneered when he said, “I don't like the sound of their language ...'*otlichna* [*great/excellent*], *pozhaluista* [*please*] ...this not romantic, not normal. I don't even like their body language. When they wave their hand at me [a gesture that means, “I don't know”] it is like they are shooing you away...like I am a servant. Some girls are nice but when they get an Egyptian boyfriend they act differently. Who do they think they are? After Egypt they will return to Russia with nothing." This negative response is not surprising since I saw many instances of behavior by tourists (from many countries) that would not be acceptable in Cairo, such as public drinking and wearing swimsuits in public places.

Tension between tourists and local residents is a common phenomenon in tourist areas. The “Doxey’s Irridex (“Irritation Index”) is used by tourism studies theorists to describe the process of gradually deteriorating interactions between tourists and locals. The last point on the index is outright “antagonism” in which tourists and tourism become the scapegoats for all that is wrong with society. “[the tourists] are dehumanized...can be cheated ridiculed or even robbed.” (Burns and Holden, 120).¹⁶

¹⁵ Due to my limited competence in Arabic I could not do an Arabic language media survey to learn how Russian women are portrayed in the local Egyptian press.

¹⁶ One informant reported that a few years ago there were a lot of fights between local Russians and taxi drivers who wanted to charge tourist-prices for Russian residents or didn't give the correct change,

In Hurghada, as in other tourist areas where there is tension, migrant and tourist populations are blamed for social problems instead of reevaluating the state policies that facilitated the growth of Egypt's "Red Sea Riviera".

Regardless of whether Russian women in Hurghada were working in tourism or in the domestic sphere of a new family, I was interested in how their reproductive labor supports and shapes the local tourism economy. Chapter one sets up a varied theoretical framework that examines the political economic view of reproductive labor, transnational migration for work and marriage, as well as marriage structures in Egypt. In chapter two, I will explore how the collapse of the Soviet Union and the resulting dire economic straights made migration abroad an attractive option for many women. Also, I look into the origins of the stereotype of "sexually available" migrant women. I believe factors in Russia that triggered the "resexualization" of post-Soviet society along with women's movement into the informal work sectors has produced a stereotype that links many Russian women to prostitution and continues to plague Russian women in Egypt. This leads to the main question in chapter three which asks how Russian women answer Hurghada's economic demand for a racialized and gendered reproductive labor force within its tourism industry. Chapter four describes "sex tourism" in Hurghada and the various actors I found who variously buy, sell, exchange and negotiate sex. Chapter five explores the many ways in which 'urfi marriage contracts are used by men and women to legalize pre-marital sexual relationships and how they struggle to gain legitimacy for their marriages once they are officially registered with the Egyptian state.

"You know, tourists can confuse LE 50 with 50 piastres". Now Hurghada's streets are flooded with taxis and the Russians know to negotiate fares in advance.

Methodology

When I first considered studying Egypt's Russian population, I thought it would make a convenient use of my undergraduate degree in Russian studies and my Russian language skills. Once I configured my computer for a Cyrillic keyboard, I was able to log onto several Russian-language websites that provide information for tourists and residents in Egypt on topics ranging from real estate purchases, finding vacation rentals, private schools, social event calendars and even a group that shares Egyptian food recipes. Several chat rooms offer information and discussion forums on relocating to areas along Egypt's Red Sea coast, marriage to an Egyptian man, obtaining visas, finding work and other issues. I was apprehensive about publicizing my research interests while searching for contacts in such an open forum, so I initially posted an ad offering English/Russian language exchange. I received a few helpful responses from Russians living in Hurghada who offered language lessons and help finding housing. After I arrived in Hurghada, I continued to peruse these chat rooms and post requests for interviews as my interests narrowed, but with limited success. For the most part, my postings garnered few responses and one request to interview "dancers" prompted some sarcastic remarks about the kind of research I was doing and that I was probably a man looking for women, or worse, the police looking to

entrap women. Stymied, I removed my posting and relied on personal contacts for all interviews.

Relying on personal contacts meant I wasn't at a loss for people to interview, but it did limit the informant pool to women from more or less similar education and economic backgrounds, although they came from all parts of Russia (and a few from Ukraine and some Central Asian Republics). So I made an effort to make contacts independent from my initial informant. I went to tourist settings (such as a Bedouin safari camp), talked to beach marketers, bartenders, waiters, dancers, and even struck up conversation with a hotel worker from Tbilisi while sharing a taxi.

I had not been to Russia since 2001 but I was curious how the presence of so many Russian women would influence an Egyptian town. Although Russian tourists have a bad reputation, named "Worst Tourists" in 2008 by an expedia.com poll¹⁷, I wondered how the strained relationship between a "tourist and a local" is affected when the tourists not only never leave, but marry into the local population and for the most part, bring their own values and social norms with them. And what does the future hold for the growing number of Russian-Egyptian children? Until last year, there was one school, "Russki Dom" in Hurghada, with approximately 90 students, but the growing population has prompted the opening of two more schools, one of which offers Russian language secondary education for students up to 18 years old.

¹⁷ They lost this designation to British tourists in 2009.

For this thesis, I reviewed Russian language newspapers, scholarly articles, and perused online chat rooms catering to Russian expatriate populations and tourists to Egypt. In the summer of 2009 over the course of one month I conducted 27 ethnographic interviews with women from the former Soviet Union¹⁸; most interviews ranged from one to three hours and a few became longer term informants. I made a follow-up trip to Hurghada in September 2009 for five days, conducting additional interviews with new informants. In addition to the core interviews of Russian women, I met with Russian men and women active in business and civil society, including directors of private schools (there is a Russian NGO and a quasi-governmental “Coordination Council” run by volunteers that meets annually in Cairo under the auspices of the Russian Embassy). I also interviewed less formally Egyptian men who live in Hurghada and work in souvenir shops, as beach marketers; some were also married to Russian women.

Although I was equipped with a digital recorder, I decided not to tape the interviews. As a U.S. citizen conducting research on a Russian community in Egypt, which has a vast police presence (both in uniform and plainclothes) I felt there were too many trust issues, especially since many of the informants were living on expired visas and sometimes our conversations took place in public areas within view of the tourism police. Even some Russians I became friends with would make jokes about me being a spy: one middle aged Russian man who remembers the Cold War well would often pre-empt a joke or story with, “Joanne, quick get your *dictaphone* (digital recorder)--

¹⁸ The citizenship of the women interviewed in this survey are: 23 Russian Federation, 2 Ukrainian, 1 Tajikistan, 1 Uzbek.

this is going to be good!” When another less-friendly acquaintance made an oblique reference to Americans collecting information for nefarious purposes I did my best to explain my research goals. But for the most part when I would explain before each interview that they didn’t have to answer any questions they didn’t want to and that I would be changing their names if I quoted them in my these, the vast majority would smile and say, “No problem. I have nothing to hide.”

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

“[Russian women] are not just passive victims of yet another bout of adverse economic and political condition...women are constructing their identities themselves whether they are resisters or accommodators, they will do so on their own terms.”

- Marta Bruno (1996: 55)

1. Hiring the Familiar: Beyond the Trafficking Debate in Tourism Sector Work

In Anna Agathangelou’s critical study of political economy and sex in Turkey and Cypress, she claims that international political economy theorists tend to ignore how surplus female labor is exploited around the world when capital owners search for ever cheaper labor to increase profit rates. Sex work and domestic and "care" work¹⁹ provide the surplus value of female labor that underwrites the economy. Often overlooked, Agathangelou argues that reproductive labor is key to constructing, maintaining and enhancing intimate relationships and emotional stability; in short a stable family life that aids in the daily reproduction of the labor force.

Since the 1980s, Egypt has sought to develop its tourism industry along the Red Sea coast with the result being a significant population influx of foreign and domestic workers to Hurghada. In this way, the state mediates racialized and gendered labor and capital through immigration policies, laws and controls on labor markets

¹⁹ Agathangelou (2004:3) describes “care” work as labor that enhances a person’s physical and emotional well-being, such as massage, physical or emotional therapy, home-care nursing as well as more intimate acts like sex work.

(Agathangelou, 2004: 3). In a capitalist global economy, the state aids the search for a cheap labor force by facilitating in-migration for women on tourist visas, but is not forthcoming in issuing work visas, thus ensuring that migrant labor remains in the vulnerable informal work sector.

The first Russian-speaking tourists arrived in Egypt in 1994 and by the late 1990s, tour operators and hotels were hiring Russians who had relocated to Hurghada, as well as recruiting Russians interested in moving to Egypt. This trend to hire Russians in Egypt's tourism industry (at Egyptian wages) echoes an observation made by Ursula Biemann (2002) in her video essay that geographically locates and tracks women's global migration into sex industries. She wrote that women are "trafficked" abroad to provide "the familiar" for expatriates living or working abroad, citing the Filipinas trafficked into Lagos, Nigeria for the Chinese businessmen, the Thais brought to France to serve French-born Chinese and Cambodian immigrants, or the Nicaraguans who provide sexual services for Mexican agricultural workers in California. In her study on female migration into the sex industry, Biemann writes that, "Trafficking hinges on the displacement of women, their costly transportation across topographies from one cultural arrangement to another, from one organization to another, from one abandoned economy to a place of greater accumulations. *It is the route that counts*" (emphasis added).

While the Russian women I spoke to were not "trafficked" to Hurghada, most of them worked in the informal sector without work visas and were paid in cash. As one

woman told me, “I can live on it [the salary], but not well, nor save any money.” By hiring Russian women, usually as “guest relations” front desk personnel, the hotels seek to provide the “familiar” for tourists who don’t share a common language with Egyptian hotel staff (most Russian tourists don’t speak much English or Arabic). But is “hiring the familiar” the really same as trafficking? Do the often-exploitative working conditions in present-day capitalism’s ever-expanding “informal” sphere mean one was “trafficked?” Conflating trafficking with exploitative working conditions is a restrictive discourse that seeks to discipline its female subjects by “naming” them as trafficked women. Thus “named” as victims, their unfettered and fluid movements can then be restricted through “protective” legislation and restrictive visa regimes that harness their reproductive labor in tourism’s informal sector.

The desire to name is part of what Wendy Brown calls the “logics of pain” (1993). Brown posits that the emergence of identity politics in the U.S., linked to race, gender and sexuality claims have been removed from the discourse of class politics of oppression, as part of a “process of renaturalization of capitalism” which began in the in 1970s. Instead it links itself to bourgeois ideas of justice: “upward mobility, relative protection against arbitrary violence and reward in proportion to effort” (Brown, 1993: 394). Brown writes that the liberal subject, at once desiring a state that grants equality but retains individualism, is “buffeted and controlled by global configurations of disciplinary and capitalist power of extraordinary portions”. But unable to access class solidarity, they are “helpless and constantly accountable to self [which] creates a subject “seething with *ressentiment*” (Brown, 1993: 402). Jo

Doezema explored how the “wounded attachments” of feminist anti-trafficking campaigns relied on Brown’s concept of the “injured body” of third world prostitutes, in order to forward feminist claims of women’s subjugation in much the same way Victorian feminists took up moralizing anti-prostitution campaigns on behalf of Indian prostitutes as justification for women’s suffrage in England.²⁰

Present day anti-trafficking advocates and prostitution abolitionists resurrect, or perhaps continue the White Slavery discourse that was popular in the U.S in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. First put forth by the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, “white slavery” fears were used to criticize a variety of social ills: police corruption, consumerism, industrialization, new working-class entertainment such as dance halls, urbanization, male violence, sexual double standards, women’s public roles, immigration, and even “lackadaisical parenting” (Donovan, 2006: 18). In the end though, the women themselves were often blamed for their downfall: their interest in consumerism, their participation in public life and even taking an interest in sex were blamed for their “downfall” (Donovan, 21). But it also sends the message that a poor woman is not allowed to desire consumer goods, participation in public life, travel, and even sex. The advantage of “blaming the women”, whether a hundred years ago or today, is that it allows one to ignore the economic inequality and lack of opportunity that leads people to take the risk of leaving home for work (Chapkis, 2003: 926). In the 1920s, the Soviet Union sought to eradicate the structural

²⁰ “Ouch!: Western Feminists' 'Wounded Attachment' to the 'Third World Prostitute'” *Feminist Review*, No. 67, Sex Work Reassessed (Spring, 2001), pp. 16-38.

inequality that Marxists say led to prostitution. Today, as neoliberal economic and labor regimes spread across the globe, the outcry against structural inequalities leading to prostitution is rarely heard in the power centers where these anti-trafficking laws and policies are drafted.

What interests me about the trafficking debate is how it has affected Russian women and their mobility. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and waves of migrant women arrived in points across the globe, women from the former Soviet republics quickly made it into the media eye when stories of human trafficking into sexual slavery were told and retold in the press. This resembles the “white slavery” discourse, again playing on fears of “mobile women” and leading to protective legislation and restrictive visa regimes which further limited their options. The human trafficking discourse in Russia also played on an oft-repeated literary motif of the Russian prostitute as a symbol of national humiliation (Borenstein, 2006). To add insult to injury, the “rescue narrative” is enacted by the USSR’s same Cold War opponents, the United States and European Union member states that fund most of the NGO and law enforcement-led efforts to combat human trafficking in Russia and other former Soviet republics. Anti-trafficking advocates took up their cause, displayed their “wounded attachment” by abhorring this “arbitrary violence” as an affront to the middleclass ideals. However, their rehabilitation programs rarely address economic considerations and real responses to structural poverty resulting

from Russia's move to the free market.²¹ Gradually, however, the rescue narrative became a story of frustration and confusion when the same "rescued" women are found to be "trafficked" again. This is what happens when the "trafficking victims" do not follow the script, but keep gambling on the hopes that this next trip abroad will provide them with a safe job, a real income and they won't get 'caught'.

1.2 "Flexibility" of Informal Work

In Russia in the mid-1990s, one could easily go a year riding public buses and trams without paying once. Riding without paying a fare is called "riding like rabbits" (*«ходить как зайцы»*), meaning, quietly, unnoticed. And in the unlikely event a ticket taker appears, one can buy a ticket for a Ruble with no consequences for not having a ticket in the first place. Similarly in Egypt, tourists can over-stay their visa, find work paid under the table, "riding like rabbits" for seemingly as long as they like, and only pay a nominal fine at the airport upon their departure.

One of my research questions was whether I would find migrant women from the former Soviet Union working in informal work conditions within Hurghada's tourism industry. Lourdes Beneria writes there has been a trend to "informalize women's work" during the deindustrialization process of the 1970s. This was accompanied by a desire to deregulate the labor market and demand that workers shoulder more of the

²¹Miramed Institute's "prevention" programs include information/media campaigns, operating rescue hotlines and law enforcement trainings. The author participated in Miramed's first "trafficking awareness and prevention campaign" in 1998. www.miramedinstitute.org

labor costs. As David Harvey asserted, “flexibility is the *modus operandi* of late capitalism” (2009: 262). What one person might consider “exploitation” another might call “flexibility”, and both are present in the margins of Hurghada’s tourism sector. “Lana” is a 28-year old lounge singer with a bleach-blonde pixie cut who left her Moscow office job at an international company when offered a singing contract in Hurghada. She recounted how she disliked singing every night during dinner in a hotel cafeteria. “Most of the people don’t listen to me or even acknowledge a song when I’m done. I’m like a CD player to them. But back in Moscow when I sang in restaurants, although I wasn’t paid by the restaurant and my earnings were unstable, I liked it better because I was paid by the customers who requested songs. Then I knew my singing was appreciated.” For Lana, she said she preferred the fluidity of informal work because she knew her art would be appreciated. When I asked how she navigates the instability in Hurghada’s entertainment industry, going from job to job, she dismissed my suggestion that not having stable work was a negative aspect to life in Hurghada. “Business here is *diki* (wild). Everyone has to watch out for themselves. But at the same time, life in Hurghada is a blank page: you can follow your own destiny.”

Most of the women I interviewed worked in the informal sector as hairdressers, house cleaners, villa caretakers, or entertainers, including bellydancers, gogo dancers at night clubs, a singer, disc jockey, or dancers performing in a traveling “ballet show” in clubs and hotels in Hurghada and beyond. The modest wages in Hurghada’s informal sector are perhaps similar to seasonal opportunities offered to European

backpackers as they pass through tourist areas in need of English-speaking personnel during the summer. There seems to be no shortage of young people in Russia willing to buy a plane ticket to the Red Sea and earn a meager salary, just for the chance to travel and experience a new country. No one I interviewed came to Hurghada to make money, as the wages in Egypt's tourism industry are often lower, or commensurate with wages they could earn in Russia. In fact, many of the women who came to Hurghada (for marriage or otherwise) left well-paying jobs in Russia and sometimes sold or rented their apartments in Russia in order to subsidize their living expenses. The vast majority rely on the plethora of informal work opportunities in Hurghada, all paid under the table.

1.3 Egypt's Informal Visa Regimes

Saskia Sassen-Koop (1981) asserts that state action determines migration patterns, not individual choice. In the case of Russian women in Hurghada, I will argue that the fall of the Soviet Union and the *lack* of state action, in terms of it no longer providing employment, childcare or a pension, have propelled many Russian women abroad in their search for economic and marital stability. In the human trafficking debate, these socio-economic conditions are described as “push” factors. I would suggest that Egypt's flexible visa regimes and work opportunities in its tourism development zones, along with all the other reasons women say they came to Hurghada, are ‘pull’ factors. Together, these conditions have resulted in the creation of a space where Russian women exercise of their agency/mobility and find themselves negotiating

what Aihwa Ong calls, “cultural logistics” through which certain actions such as relocating to, or marrying in, a foreign country become “thinkable, practicable, and desirable” (Aihwa Ong, 1999: 3).

Aihwa Ong has written extensively about how transnationalism creates, or is created by, mobile subjects, individuals whose relation to the nation-state is fluid and not territorially-fixed. She describes transnationality as “the horizontal and relational nature of contemporary economic, social and cultural processes that stretch across space” (ibid). Her writing on the Chinese diaspora has examined how persons with multiple passports represent “the split between the state-imposed identity and personal identity cause by political upheaval, migration and changing global markets (Ong, 2).

One route that enables women to traverse national boundaries and extended her stay in Hurghada is by entering into an *'urfi*, or customary marriage contract with an Egyptian man. With an *'urfi* contract the wife can apply for a six month residence visa, which gives her additional time to find work as some employers check that an employee has a visa when they start working but rarely check that it remains valid.²² Although “work not permitted” is stamped on the visa, this is ignored by employers who pay under the table. Still, many women, married or not, are living with expired visas, which is not a major concern for the women I interviewed, as long as they stay in Hurghada. Those who need to travel to Cairo could face fines or in some cases,

²² Though no one said they got married expressly for the visa, many said it facilitated the process of finding housing when they cohabited with a boyfriend, and the fact that it would assist them in obtaining a six-month visa.

deportation. However, as will be discussed in chapter 3, not having a valid visa can affect one's job prospects. In addition to officially marrying in order to get a residence visa, one may also obtain a residence visa by purchase property above \$50,000. Although many Russian-Egyptian couples may purchase a modest USD\$20,000 or 30,000 flat together, this does not entitle the wife to a residence visa. A woman may be a property owner, be married to an Egyptian and have borne children in Egypt, but if her husband has not officially registered the marriage and extended her visa, she could be deported.²³

But when it comes to marriage, the Egyptian state facilitates, regulates and controls relationships between Russian women and Egyptian men by first channeling their “legal relationship” through an *‘urfi*, or customary, marriage contract.

1.4 Regulating Marriage through *‘Urfi*.

There is much confusion and rumors around *‘urfi* marriage in Hurghada. *‘Urfi*, an Islamic form of customary marriage does not require registration with the state to be legal in Islamic law, yet unlegalized, “secret” *urfi* marriage is controversial and generally frowned upon in Egyptian families as it is perceived as a “legal” pretext for

²³ When I initially conducted this research in July 2009, many women noted that they were not concerned about overstaying their visas, saying, "The police never stop me because I'm a foreigner". However, when I returned two months later in September 2009, a few women expressed concern about going outside. There had been a highly publicized arrest in Cairo in late August 2009 of two Russian women for prostitution, and two or three women said they had heard that the police were spot-checking foreigners' visas on the *memsha*, the pedestrian thoroughfare in front of the Esplanade Mall. Tamara even reported she read in an online chat room that a Russian woman married to an Egyptian with whom she had a child, was deported because her visa was not valid.

premarital sex. Some Russian women report being told, by their fiancés, their local lawyers or Egyptian bureaucrats at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that there is an Egyptian law which prohibits Russian women on tourist visas from obtaining official, registered marriages, thus forcing them into *'urfi* marriages.²⁴ Some women I interviewed cited this as the reason they married via *'urfi*, while others said it was for the convenience, as it can be done same-day without necessitating a multiple trips to Cairo to visit the bride's embassy for documentation and then go the Foreign Ministry to register the marriage. Mulki Al Sharmani, Assistant Professor at American University in Cairo's Social Research Center, said there are no such provisions in the Personal Status Laws (which govern marriage), but she supposed it could be an informal policy aimed to reduce the number of impromptu marriages between Egyptian men and tourists in Hurghada. The result of this policy, even if it is informally applied, is that all the women I interviewed (except one, who married a Coptic Christian in a Church ceremony) initially entered into an *'urfi* marriage contract. As most of my interviewees were with women living in Hurghada, I didn't conduct research on how *'urfi* was used by short-term tourists looking for holiday romance as "a ticket for sex" as Katya called it. (See Mustafa Abdallah's *Beach Politics*, about the use of *'urfi* marriages between Egyptian and European women in the Sinai tourist village, Dahab 2007). One informant even report seeing photocopies

²⁴ Another informant from Estonia, who had known her husband 10 years when they both lived abroad, was told that because she was from the former Soviet Union (Estonia) they would have to marry via *'urfi* so the wife could get a residency visa, which they were told is a precondition for official marriage for women from the former Soviet Union (although ironically, she was told Russians were exempted from this). However, because of the husband's personal contacts in the government, they were able to forego *'urfi* marriage if the wife passed "a security check". Personal communication, October 28, 2009.

of *'urfi* contracts being sold at a kiosk near the Sharm El Sheikh airport. She added, “Now, how can anyone think that is a real marriage?”

In her topographic study of the global sex trade, Ursula Biemann writes, “the automatic channeling of migrant women into sex work...speaks of the place of sex in that national space where laws protect the flourishing sexual life of male citizens as a privilege and a source of power.” Biemann was referring to the fact that two-thirds of the 500,000 women from former Soviet Union migrating to Europe work in the entertainment industry (Biemann, 85). Although most of the Russian women I interviewed in Hurghada were neither poor, desperate, or being “channeled into sex work” per se, one could say Russian women are marginalized to a degree when they are “channeled” into *'urfi* marriage instead an officially registered marriage. For instance, if one’s Egyptian husband chooses not to convert the *'urfi* contract into an officially registered marriage, the wife won’t be able to have a valid long term visa and a chance to apply for a residential work permit, thus if she chooses to work it would have to be in the informal sector.

The widespread use of *'urfi* in Hurghada begs the question of how Russian women relate to marriage in Russia. Divorce rates in Russia are high, with two out of three ending in divorce, often within the first year (Nikandrov, 1995:54). I recall from my time in Russia²⁵ that it was not unusual for 25-year olds to be divorced; it was almost normal. One of my informants referred to her first marriage as “a student marriage”

²⁵ Ranging from 1994-2001.

(*studentcheski brak*), almost as a U.S. woman might say, “my college boyfriend”. In Soviet times, couples would marry "when they felt like it, but today, they have to calculate the cost of living." (Sonja Luehrmann, 2004). According to a Russian woman I interviewed, she likened the accessibility of Egypt's *'urfi* marriage to *grazhdanski brak*, which is a simple bureaucratic procedure. However, because of cultural norms in Russia that allow cohabitation, some couples do so without the formality of actually marrying. One woman I interviewed explained that the term *grazhdanski brak* is also used by Russian couples who are simply cohabitating without any marriage contract but consider it a committed relationship.

Feminists might argue that *'urfi* is another manifestation of the sexual contract in which the state provides prescribed outlets for male sexual desires through prostitution, forced marriage, etc. However, in Hurghada it is possible that the sexual contract applies to both men and women (if one suspends discussion of the stigma related to *'urfi* and particularly women's use of it in the rest of Egypt). While many criticize *'urfi* as simply providing a legal cover for men to have sexual relations with women outside of marriage, one should also acknowledge that it provides a legal cover for *women* to do the same. The proliferation of (un-legalized) *'urfi* in Hurghada suggests that long-term, official marriage may not be on the minds of many female tourists and foreign female residents. Some women I interviewed did not consider themselves to be “married” though they had entered into *'urfi* contracts with their current Egyptian partner. Lana, the singer who moved to Hurghada after a divorce, told me about her live-in boyfriend. “I think we [she and her Coptic

boyfriend] got an *'urfi* in the beginning, but I don't remember ...anyhow I told him I don't want to get married, but we just did it so we could get a flat together.”

Interestingly, her boyfriend is Coptic Christian so any *'urfi* contract he may have had was done solely for the sake of propriety, or perhaps to mollify their doorman²⁶, rather than having any legal pretences under Islamic law (this “legalization” protects the *'urfi* bride or groom from committing the sin of premarital sex).

In many studies of sex tourism, the female, non-mobile subject is the one being exploited yet simultaneously, desirous of “mobility” (Abdallah, 2007, Brennan, 2006). But in Hurghada, Egyptian men are the non-mobile subjects and rather than seen as victims of tourists' fantasies, they are often portrayed in internet chatrooms and websites as exploiting the tourists for economic gain or for sexual conquests. The discourse among Russian women on these websites contain lengthy discussions of “romances gone wrong”, and “black lists” of Egyptian men characterized by women as “playboys” for having entered into numerous *'urfi* contracts, either simultaneously or serially. Since these *'urfi* contracts are not registered anywhere, parties to these contracts can hold as many as they like, although it is only the man who is typically provided with a copy of the contract, which can today under Egyptian law be presented in court should either party seek to register the marriage or claim child support. A Ukrainian acquaintance in Cairo mentioned a female friend

²⁶ In Egypt, the doorman, or *bowab*, may enforce Egyptian law which prevents unmarried couples from living together or even visiting each other's flats, especially if one of them is Egyptian.

whom she described as a serial *'urfi* user: “I think she’s done it like seven or eight times,” she said, “You know, for the dowry.”

1.5 Migration for Marriage

Though the number of marriages between Russians and Egyptians are unknown, a recent article in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (Russia edition) claims that in the past ten years over 200,000 Russian women have migrated to Turkey for marriage.²⁷ Given that Hurghada’s population is approaching 180,000 with an estimated 10,000 to 20,000 Russians, the vast majority being women, I speculate that Russian women’s reproductive labor contributes to the operation of 5-10% of Hurghadan homes.

In order to understand how and why Russian women, and other European women for that matter, find work and marriage opportunities in Hurghada, one must consider how race and gender help “white” Russian women negotiate Hurghada’s job and marriage markets. In her study of sex and domestic care workers in Turkey and Cypress, Agathangelou argues that in these countries peripheral to Europe’s “core” economy, “white but not white” female workers from the former Soviet Union are desired for “their whiteness” by upper and middle classes “who can never be ‘white’ because race is also about class” (ibid: 5). She writes that these upper and middle classes outside Europe can never have the same economic and political power that

²⁷ "200,000 Russian women married to Turks" *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, September 8, 2008

their European counterparts do, thus, they “reconstitute themselves as bourgeois subjects”. However, O’Connell-Davidson questions this idea about desiring “whiteness” and points out that in the post colonial context, “white is desired not for color, but for economic opportunity.” (1998: 178).

Further, because of Turkey’s position in the world economy (and I would argue, Egypt’s), they must rely on “desire” industries, including tourism, to generate profits. In Hurghada although Russian women’s “whiteness” may make them “bodies of value”, I would argue that they are also attractive marriage partners because they do not demand a bride price (dower) or the detailed economic negotiations that are customary before marriage between two Egyptian families. That many Egyptian men have sought foreign brides is blamed on the rising cost of marriage in Egypt and the proximity of tourist populations that have been arriving in Egypt since the 1970s. In her book on Egyptian marriage practices, Diane Singerman cites an article in the newspaper, *Al-Sha’b*, which criticized “tourist marriages” between poor Egyptian girls and wealthy Saudis, as well as between Egyptian men and Europeans, saying these are marriages “are based on gratification and pleasure” which “Egyptian families have resorted to because of poverty.” Men who marry foreign brides without the prerequisite savings are looked down upon for not “struggling” to save money, thus showing their maturity and commitment to marriage (Singerman, 1996: 81).

In Nicole Constable’s book, Romance on a Global Stage: Pen Pals, Virtual Ethnography, and “Mail Order” Marriages, she investigated another form of

international marriage: “correspondence marriage”, the phenomenon of U.S. (or “Western”) men seeking marriage partners in China and the Philippines through internet introduction or dating sites. She found that these types of marriages differ from the stereotype of a “mail order bride” of the past not only in the use of technology, but in the expectations of both parties (Constable, 215). She writes that the use of the internet has “fueled a global imagination and created a time-space compression” that vastly increases the possibilities and interactions to meet men and women around the world. These internet relationships create a “transnationalism” that manifests a “multidirectional flow of desires, people ideas and objects...across, between and beyond national boundaries” (ibid: 216). “Mail order brides” have often been conflated with trafficking victims, little more than prostitutes “bought” by men, following an outdated 1970s feminists discourse which assumed universal gender inequality and is critical of marriage as exploitative of women, in favor of relationships in which men and women’s work in the public/private sphere was more equitable (ibid: 63). This idea has since been critiqued as a “white”, western, middle class idea that ignores how other women may describe “liberation”, and presumes that any marriages outside this “yardstick” was exploitative (ibid: 65).

In Russia, this interlinking of marriage and migration by Russian women was first noticed in the mid-1990s when marriage agencies proliferated with the internet, going from 105 sites in 1998 to 164 by 2002 (Constable, 2003:38). Soon these “introduction” websites and travel agencies were offering package tours for mostly

U.S. and European men to visit Russia in search of a bride. The internet dating industry came under scrutiny when it was suggested that they were acting as a front for human trafficking into prostitution or sex slavery (Constable and Luehrmann). However, painting internet dating and marriage websites with a broad brush as “trafficking fronts” unfairly portrays those who utilize them as having either criminal purposes or naïve. Again, the use of human trafficking discourse ends up creating a stereotype of a “global third world woman” whose ability to travel and marry the man of her choice is limited by restrictive visa regimes (Constable: 214-215).

In Constable’s study, issues of citizenship and adapting to the American culture are evident. One might suppose that women who migrate for marriage would adopt their husband’s citizenship, but in Hurghada, this seems to be rare. As Fatima Bazaeva, the head of the Russian House cultural and educational center said, “About 70% of the women here came for marriage, but they themselves ‘stay Russian’...unless they convert to Islam.” Ms. Bazaeva is herself a Russian Muslim from the Cherkassian region, so the idea that converting to “Islam” would make one “less Russian” is interesting, especially given the large Muslim population in Russia. Of the women I interviewed married to Muslim Egyptians, several had quit drinking alcohol and smoking, and observe the Ramadan fast, out of respect for their husband’s faith, but none of them donned the headscarf or were considering conversion to Islam. Ksenya says about her Muslim husband, “Oh, he’s always trying to drop hints, like saying, ‘Oh, look at that women in *higab*. Isn’t she pretty?’ [rolling her eyes and fingering her cross around her neck] But that’s not for me.”

The women (and men) Constable interviewed weren't simply seeking marriage as a "bridge" to a better economic life. Instead she found that love and economic necessities were interlinked, as one might say is the case in most marriages. However, one difference is that the women Constable interviewed were more ready to acknowledge that their choice of marriage partner is related to politics and "the global flow of capital". The men, on the other hand, often strongly objected to the idea that "economics" was a factor in their choice of marriage partner, insisting that their choice--and implicitly, in their bride's choice-- was based solely on love. Constable notes that most marriages have political, economic and emotional bases, but that "correspondence marriages" lay bare that which is usually not discussed in other marriages.

1.6 Mobile Mothers Breaking the Social Contract

As the 1990s progressed, more and more women from the former Soviet Union became "mobile" and went abroad for work, many returning home with the means to improve life for themselves and their families. The idea of leaving home became a more common and practical solution for high unemployment rates among women. Choosing migration also gives a woman the chance to travel and assert some level of control over her future. In Leyla Keough's study of migrant Moldovan women in Turkey, she found many women who worked there for only part of the year before returning to Moldova with their earnings, which they spend on their children's

education or improving their housing within their home village. Although their mobility has become a cause for national anxiety in Moldova, the women themselves justify their migration, whether temporary or permanent, as first and foremost materially beneficial for their children.

In Hurghada, many Russian women with children from previous marriages report hearing criticism and being called “a bad mother” because of their decision to remarry and move to Egypt. This “good mother trope” was popularized in Soviet Union where the “cult of motherhood” highlighted women’s suffering after two devastating world wars left tens of millions dead. For the most part it was Soviet single mothers who raised the next generation and rebuilt the Soviet economy (Kotovskaia and Shalygina: 129, in Pilkington,1996). When Ksenya described why she came to Hurghada and the struggles she faced in raising her children in Russia, she would often refer to her grandmother who served in the Soviet Army during World War II. “She fought alongside Grandpa, almost all the way to Berlin, but she was sent home when she got pregnant and then he was killed in Berlin.” Ksenya explained how although men were scarce and her grandmother already had one child, she was “so beautiful” that another man wanted to marry her. Ksenya said she doesn’t know exactly what happened to him but she suspects he abused her because she left him and swore never to marry again, and raised her daughter on her own.

Many states have no interest in “ordering this disorder of migration” because migrant workers send home remittances that help families back home survive where there are

so few employment opportunities (Keough: 23). However, only a few of the women I spoke to report sending money home to parents living on fixed incomes. In my conversation with Russian women with children in Hurghada, their children's health was mentioned immediately and frequently as a main reason for moving. When I asked Ksenya why she came to Hurghada, she started by telling me all the other places she had vacationed with her son (Turkey, Bulgaria), but that Hurghada was the best place for his asthma. Two other women, while soaking up some rays at the beach, also mentioned their children's health issues. While surely Hurghada's clean, dry air alleviates asthma symptoms, citing this reason quickly deflects and neutralizes any criticism one might hear about being "a bad mother". Many women seemed to be repeating conversations they have had with friends and family back home justifying their move. After returning from a two week trip to Russia, another woman lamented with a loud, almost pleading voice, "Everyone in Russia is sick! Absolutely everyone...our kids were sick all the time! Here at least we can have a life!"

Keough argues that Moldovan women's decisions to act on their mobility embody the neoliberal approach that creates new citizens who no longer look to the state for employment and security. As Marta Bruno argues (in Pilkington, ed., 1996), the social contract in the Soviet Union never really applied to women as subjects, so deciding to travel abroad for work and marriage is yet another pragmatic decision embarked on by women in the former Soviet Union to ensure their economic survival.

So while most Russian women retain their Russian citizenship, they seem to have a strained relationship with the Russian State. Despite the fact that Hurghada has a much larger Russian population than Alexandria, the former has no consular offices. Women complain that not only is it an arduous trip to visit the Russian Embassy in Cairo, but they are harassed by embassy staff who criticize and belittle them for marrying Egyptians. Also, many of the women married to Egyptian men have children from previous marriages with Russian men. These children attend Russian schools in Hurghada and many travel back and forth to Russia annually to visit relatives. These women still make claims on the state to validate their child's education through exams administered by the Russian Embassy's education attaché in Cairo. Passing these exams would ensure a smooth transition for the child when he or she will presumably go to Russia as an adult. The next chapter will explore this relationship between Russian women and the Soviet/Russian state with its long history, with many disappointments, "break-ups" and in the end, lowered expectations.

2. COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET EMPIRE AND EMERGENCE OF NEOLIBERAL REFORMS

“Between 1991-1993, in the midst of the upheaval, no one was having babies. Absolutely no one. When I had my daughter in 1994, I was the only person in the maternity ward. And both my kids had very few classmates growing up.”

-“Ksenya” who used to live in one of Russia’s largest cities.

In her 1989 article on Soviet Prostitution and “the woman question”, Elizabeth Waters speculated that Gorbachev’s social and economic reform policies of *glasnost*’ and *perestroika* (“openness” and “restructuring”, respectively) would inevitably result in unemployment and cause many women to leave the workforce because “women were seen as more expendable than men” (Waters: 17). The notion of a gendered public and private sphere split was gaining influence and even Gorbachev suggested in a speech that women might leave the workforce and take on more “womanly roles” such as child-rearing and homemaking (Gorbachev, cited in Waters: 16). At the time, Waters even suggested that the failed pro-natal policies of the 1970s might flourish in the 1990s as “home” and the domestic sphere would supposedly become a more attractive place to be, thanks to increased availability of consumer goods, new residential-based community projects and especially if a woman’s friends also return to the domestic sphere.

Previously, Soviet women had been full participants in the both the workplace and in the domestic sphere. Some theorists characterized women’s “double burden” as

“enslavement” and predicted that some women would welcome a return to full time domestic work if given the chance (Voronina, 2004: 46-47, cited in Ashwin, 2002: 117). Meanwhile Gorbachev’s economic and social reforms stressed the role of personal responsibility (*lichnost*) and greater individual initiative in reacting to economic changes. For those who thought *lichnost* would result in greater opportunity for women in the workplace, they underestimated the obstacles that women would face in the workplace (Waters 17). However, within two years after Waters’ article, the Soviet Union had collapsed and the generous social benefits that might have facilitated women’s presumed move to the domestic sphere were a thing of the past. Women and men were faced with the specter of unemployment and an unfamiliar political and economic reality. Instead of a guaranteed job, flat, car and annual vacation, suddenly men and women were being told that their prospects for economic success would depend on their individual initiative (*lichnost*) (Bruno, 41). This new emphasis of individuality is a hallmark of the neoliberal capitalist system and distinctly puts at a disadvantage those unable to adapt to the demands of *lichnost* and the free market, such as women and the old and very young. However, Bruno argues that certain Russian women’s adaptive skills served them in the transition to a market economy, especially when working for foreign companies who valued their ability to learn new skills and remain flexible. However, on the whole women faced widespread gender discrimination in hiring and sexual harassment in the workplace, which pushed many into the informal sector where they can exercise some amount of control.

2.1.1 Post-Perestroika: Women Shift to Private and Informal Sector Work

Unemployment in the Soviet Union did not officially exist, so the earliest estimates published by researchers in 1992 ranged from .08 - 6% (officially). According to a 1992 World Bank study, women made up over three-fourths of all unemployed in Russia. However, even this number cannot be trusted as men might have been more reluctant than women to officially register as “unemployed” and gain the stigma of being “unproductive” and “parasitic” (Bridger and Kay, 1996: 21). Also, thanks to costly “protective” labor laws that guarantee maternity leave and other women-specific benefits, female workers were considered “expensive and troublesome” employees and often the first to be put on administrative leave when payroll cuts were demanded (ibid).

Women are generally considered to have lost the most economically after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as they lost their jobs and a host of social benefits. But according to a comparative survey of employment statistics from years 1988 and 1993, women’s economic position relative to men did not worsen nor result in an employment gap, although the number of women on maternity leave inexplicably doubled by 1993 (Vanderlip, et al, 1998:135). This was relatively unexpected, as it was assumed women would lose in the transition to a capitalist free-market economy which saw massive cutbacks in state jobs. Women were able to maintain their participation levels in the workforce because although they lost state sector jobs,

many women had transitioned over to the fast-growing new private service sector. However, these new jobs in the private sector, such as sewing machinists, shop assistants, cleaners and secretaries offered lower salaries, fewer benefits and rarely made use of women's education and skills. The state attempted to respond to the needs of unemployed women by providing retraining courses that encouraged women to develop and market their "domestic" skills and start new enterprises in embroidery, tailoring, knitting, catering, bookkeeping and hairdressing. Some women expressed a reluctance to retrain, especially since there was no demonstrated economic viability for these professions and they knew there was a clear preference to hire men when a vacancy did appear. For instance, many women were retrained in a month-long bookkeeping course which produced a glut of ill-trained women looking for work in a field that usually requires three years of accounting training. As a result, many women used any newly-acquired skills to enter into a barter system with others in order to survive (Bridger and Kay, 22).

In the 1990s, many women started to rely on informal sector work, such as piecemeal sewing, repair work, street sales, domestic services and private tutoring. This reliance on the informal sector began in the late 1980s when participation in informal work was most risky. For instance, Ksenya, who moved to Hurghada after meeting her future husband in the perfume shop, told of how during the late-1980s, after her parents divorced, she turned to selling clothes on the black market to supplement her mother's meager salary as an engineer (which was the equivalent of \$50/month). Starting from age 16, she would travel alone on the three-day train to Moscow where

she would buy suitcases of imported clothing on the black market operating out of a public restroom. She would sometimes make \$200 in profit on each trip after selling the goods in her hometown.

Still, twenty years later, according to a 2002 survey²⁸, 78% of girls and women said their only source of income was from informal sector work. While being able to adapt to economic conditions bodes well for one's survival, it does not mean one will flourish economically. Also, workers in the informal sector lose the opportunity to gain skills in the formal sector. Plus, the longer they stay out of the formal sector, the less likely they are to return and thus they will lose out on earning a pension and other social benefits formal sector workers enjoy (Gorisov, 2002: 15).

2.1.2 Gendered Citizenship

Soviet women's economic history is shaped by the ways Soviet citizenship was gendered at different times in the nation's history. After the 1917 Russian Revolution, despite the rhetoric surrounding the Communist Party's idealistic vision of the "New Soviet Man" as a selfless, learned, healthy and enthusiastic proponent of Marxist-Leninism²⁹, women turned out to be the *de facto* subject of a new gender ideology, due to demographic imbalance after the wars." (Kotovskaya and Shalygina, 1996:129-130). After two world wars, there was almost no one left but women to rebuild the Soviet economy as well as the population, so women's participation in the

²⁸ 2002 Survey by the Russian State Statistical Committee, *GosKomStat*, cited in Gorisov, 2005: 13.

²⁹ Pipes, Richard. Communism: A History 2001 : 68 69.

public arena was rarely challenged. In these years, women made great strides towards equality in the workplace, relative to women in capitalist systems.

However, under Brezhnev in the 1970s, men were the citizen-subjects of a social contract in which their lack of productivity was overlooked as long as they were politically and socially *inactive*. Women's productivity at their state jobs was also overlooked, but any free time they did have was often spent on reproductive labor related to the domestic sphere: standing for hours in shopping queues or doing housework (Bruno: 42). Bruno writes that the old Soviet adage, "we pretend to work, they pretend to pay us" didn't apply to Soviet women and thus, when the transition to capitalism came, they were better able to adapt to new demanding economic conditions that required personal accountability (*lichnost'*) and "flexibility" in the labor force. As price liberalization and skyrocketing inflation rates of the early 1990s devoured household incomes, women compensated by doing more housework themselves, such as canning, cooking and laundry (Vanderlip, 133). In a survey of foreign employers in Russia, women were seen as "inherently" more efficient managers than men, although they were not allowed the same failings or mistakes often overlooked in male workers. For instance if a man arrived to work drunk or was involved in a bribery scheme, this was explained away as a vestige of the "old way of doing things" and not punished. However, if a similar act was committed by a female employee, it was interpreted as a personal deficiency (Bruno, 51).

So, with the end of the Cold War, the New Soviet Man, the male citizen-subject, lost his political and economic identity almost overnight. But since Russian women escaped this “Soviet” designation, they have had an easier time adapting to the post-Soviet world. I caught a glimpse of this gendered vision of ‘nationalism’ while speaking with a middle-aged Russian couple on vacation in Hurghada. The husband is a military veteran in his mid-40s who works for a Russian oil company. In the course of our two week acquaintance he often referred to his military service and lamented Russia’s fall from superpower status. One evening at dinner after a bottle of spirits had made one or two laps around the table, he declared to me, “I am not proud to be a Russian citizen; I was born in a different country [USSR].” But before long, his wife, a science teacher who looks forward to making more money after she retires by working as a private tutor, would silence her husband’s political talk by singing Russian folk songs, passed down for centuries, telling of women’s tribulations.

After the end of the Soviet Union, the vision of national masculinity was replaced by the “New Russian Man”, or sometimes, “The New Russians”. As for the “New Russian Woman” she was “feminine and in need of patriarchal protection in both the economic and romantic sphere” (Bruno, 45). This was decidedly at odds with the previous Soviet vision of women matching men stride-for-stride in the fields and

factories.³⁰ Nonetheless, in one area women were nearly equal to men: unemployment. By 2002, women made up 51% of the unemployed and men, 49%.

Although women's adaptive abilities stand them in good stead in the labor market, their economic downward mobility is undeniable when they make 65-70% of male wages. Russia's new, weak democratic institutions failed to transition Soviet citizenry into a new political system and "allowed society to be ruled by unwritten rules of common economic and bureaucratic practices rather than a clear-cut set of civic rights...and a constitution..." (Bruno: 42). While women dutifully shouldered these new responsibilities as the welfare state disintegrated, they were cast as second class citizens and "private caretakers of men" expected to "rein in their own identities to make space for the renaissance of the masculinity of men" (ibid: 43). Similarly, researcher Daina Stukuls remarks in her article on the rise of prostitution among Latvian women in the 1990s that the reaction to the "over-emancipation" of women during the Soviet era can be seen in the post-communist "normality, which carries within itself seeds of gender inequality, which are planted and nurtured in the soil of restored nationhood." (Stukuls, 1999: 549).

These seeds of inequality didn't take long to sprout in the new private sector.

Although the private sector generally offered higher salaries, one of the risks was that women were often subject to sexual harassment and sexual demands from male

³⁰ Interestingly, Ksenya told me, "You know, women never drove cars in the Soviet days. Of course, they operated cranes and heavy machinery, but I never remember any women ever driving cars. It is odd to think of this now..." *Interview with "Ksenya" July 14, 2009.*

bosses in order to keep their jobs. This was especially true of younger women just joining the workforce in the early days of the post-Soviet era. As the state abdicated its role in regulating the workplace, women often fell prey to these “unwritten rules” and practices that propagated gender discrimination in the workplace. It became commonplace for job seekers to wade through gender discriminatory job announcements that specified female applicants be under a certain age, not married, nor have any children. Many of these job ads requesting young, female applicants were for poorly paid office jobs with no room for advancement: a woman’s presence at the reception desk was to serve as office decoration and to sexually service male employees as a condition of their employment (Bridger and Kay: 28). This practice became so widespread that some job announcements would indicate when “no sexual services required”. Although sexual harassment was not a subject of my ethnographic research, in conversation, one informant described how in the early 1990s, she was thrilled to be offered a job “with a lot of responsibility” at 10 times her previous salary. During the first week of work, the boss told her to attend a “business meeting” at the local bathhouse, or *banya* (where business meetings are often held over food and drink and concluded with a session in the sauna). She arrived and waited in the ante-room where she expected the business portion of the evening to take place. When her boss arrived, already drunk, he asked why she was still dressed. He told her that if she didn’t strip down and join them in the sauna she needn’t come into work the next day. “So I went back to my old job”.

Where did this expectation come from? How did Russian women go from being full participants in the Soviet economy and workplace to being sexual objects for male workers? The next section will explore the process of “resexualization” that occurred in the waning days of the Soviet Union.

2.1.3 Changing Soviet Mores: Prostitution as a Career Choice

Feminist analysis calls “the body” a multi-dimensional and complex object of political struggle...a ‘cultural battleground’ on which a wide array of issues are fought on (NACLA, 2001 cited Nagar 268), and this includes sexuality, desire and the commodification of female bodies in the years after *perestroika* and *glasnost*. In the USSR, prostitution, along with many other “social ills” such as drug abuse and crime did not officially exist as they were said to be a result of social inequality which had supposedly been eradicated in the Soviet Union. However, in the spirit of *glasnost* a series of newspaper articles exposed the luxurious lifestyles of “international *devushkas* (girls)” who sold sex for foreign currency and material goods. The tone of these articles was mainly critical, describing them as “work shirkers” and “parasites”, nomenclature that in Stalin’s era would have seen one shipped off to a labor camp. In the early days of the Soviet Union, prostitution was attributed to structural inequalities that would disappear as Communism was “achieved”. However, when prostitution makes its “official” reappearance in the 1980s, these so-called “foreign currency girls” or *interdevs*, themselves were blamed for “immoral behavior” when they had sexual relations with foreign clients in exchange for goods and foreign

currency (Waters: 7). Quickly shifting ideologies, the government abdicated its stance that prostitution was a “structural” problem; now if a woman sold sex, it was yet again, a personal, moral failing related to her *lichnost*. By 1987, prostitution became an administrative offense and the debate to criminalize prostitution in Russia has been on-going ever since.

As *glasnost*’ opened up social discussion about prostitution and other previously unacknowledged “hidden” social problems, the media began to cover in sensational detail the luxurious lives of “foreign currency” prostitutes. In the last days of the Soviet Union, women without other means to achieve material wealth and prestige were drawn to the seemingly rebellious lifestyle of sex work, as it provided access to fashionable dress and luxury goods and allowed them to flaunt their femininity and sexuality in a way that had been taboo for so long. But more importantly, the amount of money one could make was almost unthinkable. A former shop assistant earning 100 Rubles per month could work as a “foreign currency prostitute” and save almost 20,000 Rubles in five months (Waters: 7).

To this day, one film is blamed for luring women and girls into prostitution by presenting it in a positive light. In the 1989 blockbuster Soviet film, *Interdev*, the main character Tanya, is a sex worker who falls in love with a John and moves to Sweden with her foreign husband. At one point, when her mother discovers her profession and objects to it, Tanya counters, “But how many of us do *not* sell ourselves?” Though *Interdev*’s heroine dies in a car accident on her way back to

Russia, it is clear that her choice of work granted her the means to “better” herself and take control of her future. Taking up sex work was portrayed not only as a profitable option but a form of resistance to the inadequacies of the Soviet system. Voicing a similar theme, in the 1990 film, *To Die for Love*, a character asks, “You can’t live at 100 Rubles a month. Either you become a prostitute or a thief.” (cited in Attwood, 1993: 73). Ksenya mentioned this film and explained what an impact this film had on her the first time she saw it: “That kind of girl, you know, she was better [morally] than anyone else around her... that is why it was so sad when she died.” Although the heroine was a prostitute, shunned by society, Ksenya said she showed her “true morality” in her struggle to survive. In another conversation, Ksenya had mentioned how her black market trading days ending when she was arrested, spent two days in jail and was kicked out of her university. But, knowing that she had later held a teaching position at her university I asked how she was “rehabilitated”. She smiled slyly and said, “Well, I happen to run into the Dean in town as he was having lunch with a... *friend*, who was also a university student [with whom he was having an affair]. The next day he called me to his office and I was reinstated. We actually became friends after that.”

A 1999 article in the magazine *KinoPark*, scholars, police and sex workers were interviewed, they all named (and blamed) *Interdev* as having had a major influence on a generation of Russian women and girls saying it “lures them from the path of righteousness” (quoted in Borenstein: 181). This seems to support the post-Soviet criticism of prostitution as a “choice” rather than a response to structural poverty and

diminishing job opportunities that cause women to turn to “illegal” income generating strategies, for economic survival (Rainnie, 2002: 9). This is problematic because nearly twice as many women under 20 years old work in the informal economy compared to men. The Russian government’s 2002 GosKomStat survey shows a narrowing of opportunity for women entering the formal job market. For girls up to 20 years old, 39% work in the informal economy, while for men, it is only 26% (cited in Ashwin, 118).

Throughout Russian literary history the “Russian prostitute has routinely been deployed in the symbolic battle for the Russian soul” (Borenstein: 174). Though it was “not fit” for art or literature during the Soviet era, the economic collapse of the nation and the subsequent selling off of its state assets and natural resources has revived this metaphor. One might say it was even inadequate to describe the unprecedented commodification of women’s (and some men’s) bodies that took place in the 1990s as Russians went abroad as prostitutes, brides, adopted children and organs (Borenstein, 188). The migration of millions of women abroad for work and marriage was characterized by some as the final humiliation after losing the Cold War. However, this “humiliation” is felt by masculine subjects, to whom women are commodified as “national resources”, rather than citizens who relying on their *lichnost* to make the bold choice to migrate for work and marriage. Historically, male migrants have been praised for selflessly supporting their families, while female migrants are criticized and are framed as a cause for anxiety.

This metaphor of state as “selling its resources” to outsiders or compromising its values came to mind quite often in Hurghada. Tourists would often justify their actions, behavior or dress by saying, “we paid to come here [on vacation],” as if their position as tourist-consumer (or in the prostitution metaphor, a john) enables them to do as they like in Egypt. Once while I was visiting a desert safari camp with a group of Russian tourists, a Russian tourist complained loudly about the “backwardness” of the Egyptians. The tour guide, Anastasia, a 26 year old who had been living in Hurghada for three years, gave an impromptu lecture about the importance of respecting other cultures, even if one doesn’t understand their customs. She said, “You know when tourists [like the group she was addressing] wear shorts and tank tops here in Egypt, they are ignoring local customs and it doesn’t matter if they ‘paid to be there’. You know, in some poor places in Thailand, or wherever, people defecate in the streets. How would you feel if they came to Russia and did that in Red Square?” I think she got her point across.

2.1.4 Spatial and Economic Mobility through Marriage

When I was an undergraduate student in Moscow I lived with a single mother, Vera Vladimirovna, who worked at a university, and her college-age son. One day as we sat around the kitchen table, drinking tea and admiring Vera’s second child, a prize-winning black toy poodle named “Beria”, she asked me in her droll, husky voice, “So. What do you think my chances are? Should I put my picture on those internet

marriage agency websites?” Although I knew her to be a bit cynical and her question was tinged with sarcasm, I had a feeling she was actually considering it, perhaps as a way to escape a life in which she hadn’t had a vacation from work for over three years as she struggled to make ends meet on a salary being devoured by inflation. When I imagine what her two-bedroom flat near a metro line would fetch in Moscow’s real estate market today, retiring in Hurghada seems like an excellent idea.

Contrary to the idea that women in correspondence marriages are simply looking for any economically-viable husband, Constable writes that many men and women looking for international relationships take an active interest in other cultures and readily refer to books on history, culture and language. Many of the women in Hurghada would begin their stories to me by expressing their life-long interest in Egypt, or at least a burning desire to see the pyramids. One woman explained how at eight years old, she announced to her family that she wanted to learn Arabic. She said, “I have no idea why I thought this, but I did. And now, here I am married to an Egyptian.” She also explained how she had always loved the name “Adel”, after reading it for the first time years ago in a classic English novel, and how amazed she was to learn that her handsome Egyptian tour guide was also named Adel. She grinned and said, “It was my fate to live to Egypt.” I recalled how Hany, the café worker, had once told me that if a person understands the concept of *nasip*, or “fate”, they understand Egypt.

When I lived in Russia in the mid-1990s and saw how fervently some women desired marriage and the opportunity to travel abroad, one couldn't help but develop a general disdain for "western" men who would use their economic advantage and foreign passport to attract a "traditional" Russia bride. American and European men who complain that women in their countries are "too emancipated" and "don't believe in the differences between men and women anymore", are seeking marriage partners in Russian women who, since the fall of the Soviet Union, have gained a reputation for being "traditional". On many marriage agency websites, Russian women's photographs are shot from above, giving the "impression of vulnerable creatures waiting to be rescued from their hard life." (Luehrmann: 862). Although matchmaking agencies are frequently cited in the human trafficking literature as fronts for human trafficking operations, some critics have called "an unwarranted leap" (Constable, 214-215). In Sonja Luehrmann's study of an internet matchmaking agency in provincial Russia, one of the points she makes is that while surely such abuses have and do occur, none of the authors who mentioned match-making agencies as fronts for human trafficking operations reported meeting any women who personally gave such histories.³¹ Instead, these agencies act as mediators of racialized and gendered reproductive labor on an international scale. They also play a role in the construction of gender and the "new imaginaries of the nation in provincial Russia." (Luehrmann: 865). It turns out that contrary to popular belief women don't

³¹ I must have heard such stories, too, because I nearly panicked when I heard that a Russian friend of mine was considering marrying an Australian man she met on the internet. I was very worried that she was on the verge of being trafficked into a nefarious underworld. I wondered how I would ever be able to afford a plane ticket to Australia to "rescue" her at some point. There I was, imagining my own role in the "rescue narrative", whereby I would use my own capital accumulated as a result of my own economic position but not questioning the structural inequalities that made it possible.

just join these sites in an all-out effort to “go abroad”. Instead Luehrmann’s findings indicate that they use the websites to widen their search for potential marriage partners and some see these international relationships as a form of social security or a safety net: the man has access to cash and can be called upon in case of a financial emergency (ibid).³²

Marriage-seeking men have also been warned of scam-artists: women or men posing as women who make connections on the internet and then request money. In response to these deceptions, there are websites that publish these “women’s” names and photographs (even if the cyber-space scam artists are men hiding behind a woman’s photograph in an effort to get cash from unwitting suitors) and men seeking brides have become more skeptical about the sincerity of their potential brides (ibid). So, while the men’s higher economic position and mobility helps him find a bride, he suddenly becomes conscious that woman may have economic motivations as well. Many women in Luehrmann’s study have children from a first marriage and still live with their parents. For many of them, she says, they see marriage, whether with a local man or a foreigner, as the only way to pool resources and create an independent life (ibid).

So while matchmaking agencies are often portrayed as deceptive mediators, like many things in life, the results depend on the intentions of the people involved.

³² Luehrmann does cite the 2001 book by Lynn Vissa, *Wedded Strangers*, which describes Russian /American marriages that started through a match-making agency. Not surprisingly, like most marriages, they are characterized by conflict, negotiation, dashed expectation and even love.

Luehrmann's study demonstrates how, for women in Mari El Republic, joining a matchmaking agency is not just about finding a rich foreign husband, but finding a "suitable" marriage partner and moving up the socio-economic ladder, whether in Russia or abroad. Especially for a woman with few economic prospects, economic independence is a powerful lure and one that would lead many a rational person to take the risk of going abroad into uncertainty.

2.2.1 Sex Trafficking Debate and Mobile Russian Women

There is an oft-cited 1993 survey in which Russian high school girls cite prostitution at the top of their list of desirable occupations (Nikandrov, 1995: 54). Given the scarcity of consumer goods, rising unemployment and the normalization of the lives of sex workers in Russia and abroad, this should come as no surprise. In the mid-1990s as the tentacles of organized crime in Russia spread, one of its primary profit-making enterprises was prostitution in Russia and abroad. The "human trafficking debate" started out as a black and white: the women were either naïve victims or calculating entrepreneurs. This debate has since developed shades of gray, as acknowledgement of economic structural inequalities often make the issue of "choice" moot for those in prostitution/sex work.

The trafficking/prostitution debate between abolitionists and regulationists has seen an increase in scholarship examining sex work as it relates to labor, migration, sex

tourism, individual agency versus structural inequality and other issues.³³ Regardless of whether one considers “sex work” as a legitimate form of labor or considers prostitution the worst form of gendered violence, over the past decade the prostitution/sex work debate has expanded our understanding of the ways in which women, men and children sell their bodies, and body parts, in order to survive.³⁴ By conflating prostitution and trafficking, all reproductive labor is stigmatized. Women working in domestic work, care work for elderly and infirm, or sex work, are left in the margins outside labor law protections (Agustin, 2003: 388 and ILO Report, 2004: 79). The “trafficking” label also ignores the agency of the migrant and it also undervalues their reproductive work although Russia laments the loss of “their women”. When one sees the proliferation of Russian women pushing baby strollers around the streets of Hurghada, it is evident that their reproductive labor is being put to use in Egypt.

In 1998 I was working for an NGO on a UNIFEM-funded grant to conduct the first “education and awareness” anti-trafficking program in Russia. I travelled around Western Russia meeting with a variety of people including school groups and women’s NGOs and screened the film, *Bought and Sold*, produced by the Global Survival Network. The aim of this project was to warn young girls and women about the dangers of human trafficking while accepting job offers abroad that were “too good to be true”. However, at one school the social workers asked to screen the film

³³ For more on the trafficking/prostitution debate, see Barry, Jeffreys, Doezema, Kempadoo, among others.

³⁴ See Scheper-Hughes, Commodifying Bodies.

before showing it to the students. After they watched the film's undercover footage of women working in bars and dance clubs as well as discussions between the filmmakers and pimps about the trafficking process, one social worker exclaimed, "Thank God we didn't show this to the girls! They would ask where they could sign up!" I remember my smile turning into a puzzled look as I tried to understand her statement, as it did not fit into the paradigm in which I was working: "trafficked" women were naïve victims, universally deceived and in need of rescue. It never occurred to me that for someone who had probably never left her village, this video of women in mini-skirts, high-heels and sipping drinks surrounded by men paying to be in their company might be appealing, despite the warnings of violence.

In the mid-1990 many lawmakers, scholars and social activists in the United States framed the issue of human trafficking as an international security issue related to the spread of organized crime from the former Soviet Union. The U.S. Congress duly passed the 2003 Trafficking Victims Protection Act and encouraged other countries to adopt similar measures. The moral panic that led to the passage of this bill³⁵, accompanied by numerous TV news programs portraying women as trafficked into "sex slavery", made this a topic most Americans are aware of. This obsessive focus on trafficking into prostitution/sex work, as opposed to the more common labor trafficking, has also revived, or at least put center stage, the acrimonious debate

³⁵ Though unspoken, one got the sense that when members of the US Congress jumped on board the anti-trafficking bandwagon, holding hearings (many of which I attended) and issuing statements, the political message was that even though Russia was no longer able to provide for or protect "its women", the United States would benevolently make it their concern. Far from providing unconditional support, the US Victims Protection Act requires a woman to testify in court before receiving a "T" visa.

between abolitionists and regulationists, that culminated in the new definition of Human Trafficking enshrined in the UN Protocol Against Trafficking in Persons. In addition, the U.S. State Department's annual Trafficking in Persons Country Reports rate nations' efforts to combat human trafficking within and across their borders, and hint that economic aid would be conditional based on a country staying out of the lowest third-tier ranking.³⁶

So, as the prostitution/trafficking debate raged about their heads in the mid 1990s, women from the former Soviet Union became associated with the global sex trade; trafficking maps show them migrating in every direction, east to Asia, southwest to the Middle East and Africa, west to Europe.³⁷ But there is also a burgeoning domestic sex industry in Moscow, most likely a training ground or stepping stone to selling sex internationally (Aral, et al). In the global search for surplus female labor to commodify and exploit, the stereotype of the Russian prostitute, often referred to as "Natashas", arose. This association with the sex trade has become so pervasive that young women from the former Soviet Union find it nearly impossible to travel abroad, as they are routinely denied visas and have faced mass deportations (Aharanot, 1999, cited in Brennan). Indeed, when I decided to do an anthropological study of the Russians in Hurghada, my first thought was to study Russian women involved in Hurghada's sex trade as it was reportedly a main transit hub into Israel's flourishing sex industry.

³⁶ The website declares, "The annual Trafficking in Persons Report serves as the primary diplomatic tool through which the U.S. Government encourages partnership and increased determination in the fight against forced labor, sexual exploitation and modern-day slavery." www.stage.gov/g/tip

³⁷ www.mapsofworld.com/thematic-maps/illicit-trafficking-map.html

2.2.1 Hurghada as Human Trafficking Transit Hub

Denise Brennan describes the tourist town Sosua in the Dominican Republic as a “sexscape” where the destabilizing effects of global capital on less industrialized economies have limited women’s work options to insecure and dangerous work in tourism and sex tourism (Brennan, 31). In Hurghada, this designation also applies: vast numbers of Russian (and other foreign) tourists flock to its nightlife, for the free-flowing alcohol and “foam” parties that last until the morning hours; even those “local” foreign residents who don’t partake in such activities, live and dress by their own cultural standards, often unaware, or simply disregarding, Egyptian cultural norms of modesty in dress. In addition, a 2007 USAID report called Hurghada a main transit hub for women from the former Soviet Union being trafficked into Israel’s sex industry.³⁸ Having heard this, I was surprised that none of my informants, most of whom had arrived in Hurghada during in the past three years, had heard about this. According to interviews done in 2003 by the Migrant Workers Hotline of 106 women who had been trafficked into Israel, 72% said they arrived by plane in Egypt before traveling overland to Israel; of those, half arrived at Hurghada’s international airport which has daily flights to Moscow. However, there have been some changes in the past two years that suggest that Egypt may no longer be the preferred route for human traffickers into Israel.

³⁸ 2007 USAID Assessment report on trafficking in Egypt, 2009 U.S. State Department TIP Egypt Report, citing Hotline for Migrant Worker’s report, “Women as Commodities”.

In Biemann's essay on the geographies of women's migration into the global sex trade, she explains that these "trafficking routes" are not always run by big organizations, but by family and friends who facilitate a women's migration. She describes Asian and former Soviet women trafficked into Europe's sex industry, using her video lens to "dislocate and recontextualize the marketability of women and objectification of female sexuality". But she later includes women "imported" to the Philippines to work in agriculture or marriage to men in rural areas who have trouble attracting a bride. Subtly, she conflates women's migration with trafficking, where women are "imported" rather than collecting theirs and all their family's resources to find economic opportunities. "In this topography of the global sex trade, the female bodies get sensed and identified, evaluated and re-routed according to their assigned function... They are the embodiment of the abstract financial flows that feed the global economy." This emphasis on "trafficking" to describe migration has long been criticized as paternalistic and a reflection of Brown's "wounded attachment" to third world prostitutes and Biemann's assigns "sex workers", agricultural workers and "brides" to the same migration flows.

Using the U.S. State Department's Trafficking in Persons (TIP) "tiered" system of ranking, Egypt is a "tier 2" country. Egypt was downgraded to the tier 2 "watch list" in 2006 for making little effort to combat human trafficking, which in Egypt frequently takes the form of internal trafficking of children into labor or of young girls "sold" by their families into marriage abroad. If one compares the opening

paragraph of the TIP Report on Egypt in years 2008 and 2009, the reference to Egypt being a transit country for women from the former Soviet Union into Israel has been moved from the first sentence of the paragraph in the report, to the last. In the 2009 TIP report the internal trafficking of children in Egypt is now highlighted first.

As in many countries, organized criminal groups are running these trafficking operations between Egypt and Israel and make use of the Bedouin tribes that are experienced in smuggling goods and people across the Israeli-Egypt border (Gleis, 2007). In January 2003, the Egyptian Government detained several Egyptian nationals who were working in the tourism sector and accused them of “threatening the national security of Egypt” and smuggling foreigners to Israel (IOM Global Survey, 273). The Egyptian government has paid increased attention to these smuggling routes since a series of July 2005 bombings were linked to explosives smuggled in by Sinai Bedouins (Maged, 2008). In 2007, response to this criticism of inaction, Egypt created a National Coordinating Committee to Combat Human Trafficking headed by First Lady Suzanne Mubarak who also spearheads the “End Trafficking Now” campaign which seems to focus mostly on outflows of Egyptians trafficked abroad (Mattar, 2007). In terms of legal responses, in 2008 article 7 of the Child Protection Law No. 126 was amended to criminalize trafficking in children and a law against human trafficking has been proposed (2009 TIP Report, 126). As there has been little if any fieldwork in Egypt on human trafficking, in September 2009 Egypt’s Coordinating Committee to Combat Human Trafficking partnered with the

National Center for Sociological and Criminological Research and United National Development Program to do a comprehensive study of trafficking in Egypt.

In an interview with Rita Khaikin, the anti-trafficking coordinator at Isha L'Isha, a shelter for trafficked women in Haifa, Israel, she said one positive development in recent years has been the creation of a Russian-speaking anti-trafficking police squad within the Israeli Ministry of the Interior. She said this squad has been much more cooperative with NGOs who provide services for the estimated 3000- 5000 women who are trafficked into Israel's sex industry every year. In March 2009, this squad received accolades from the Israeli government for its role in "Operation Octopus", a two year investigation into an international human trafficking network headed by a Colonel in the Russian Intelligence Services accused of trafficking women from the former Soviet Union into Israel and other countries between 1999 and 2007.³⁹ Two months later, the Israeli-Russian mafia was "decapitated" when mafia boss Alek Schneiderman was arrested and charged with extortion and blackmail. Khaikin said she believes these arrests have had an impact on the number of women trafficked into prostitution in Israel: she said the shelter normally receives 100-200 women each year, but in 2009 has received zero. However, rather than signifying a drop in "real" numbers of trafficked women, she believes the traffickers have shifted operations to Turkish Cyprus. She supposes that the trafficking is still ongoing but traffickers were looking for "less expensive and more dependable routes".⁴⁰ Despite Israel's new anti-trafficking law, the creation of the Russian-speaking squad and these high level arrests, the Ministry of Interior is still being criticized in the press for "not doing

³⁹ "Other side of Evil" May 2, 2009 www.Israelinfo.ru

⁴⁰ Personal communication August 16, 2009.

enough”.⁴¹ Or perhaps the Ministry is doing its best to downplay the problem so as it improve Israel’s position in the State Department’s TIP tier system.

Also, since an agreement was reached between Israel and the Russian Federation in September 2008, Russian citizens no longer need a visa to visit Israel, so perhaps this has negated the need to traffic women with Russian-passports over the porous Egypt-Israeli border. However, according to Hotline for Migrant Workers report, “Women as Commodities”, only 14% of the women interviewed were from Russia, and 48% and 28% were from Moldova and Ukraine, respectively. During my interviews in Hurghada, I found that many women found jobs through employment agencies, but all of them paid for their own plane tickets and none were beholden to their jobs or feared deportation. The only women who had their housing provided for them were the hotel animators who lived at the hotels, but several of them told of being free to change jobs so although they were under contract, none reported having their wages held or any instances of debt bondage⁴². Also, before coming to Hurghada I had read in some chat rooms that hotel’s front desk “guest relations” positions, especially in Sharm El Sheikh, were often a cover for prostitution, but in half a dozen hotels in which I spoke to Russian guest relations personnel, this was not evident. A more comprehensive study of Hurghada’s hotels is needed to determine if and how they are used as part of the local *sexscape*. More research on the activities of

⁴¹ Weiler-Polak, Dana "As Israeli Human Trafficking Rises, Immigration Police Remains Ineffective." *Ha'aretz*, Oct 21, 2009.

⁴² Although a form of debt bondage seems to be common in Egypt’s labor market when Egyptian workers salaries are docked for petty offenses, such as not wearing correct uniform or being 5 minutes late for work. One woman said, “The boss used to think up infractions so that they don’t have to pay full salaries to employees every month.”

smuggling/trafficking groups in Egypt, as well as a review of testimonies given by trafficked women in Israeli courts might shed more light on how recently the Egypt-Israel route was used or if it is still operational.

3. HURGHADA: TRANSNATIONAL WORK AND SEXSCAPE

“Globalization is a dialectical phenomenon simultaneously circumscribed by agency and structure, mutually constitutive of each other.”
-(Hank Overbeek, 2002: 75).

Being on holiday is out of the ordinary: “we live on the perimeter of ourselves... these marginal periods become important in our lives” (Ryan and Hall: 8). For many thousands of women from the former Soviet Union, these “marginal” periods of their lives have become turning points. Their holiday to Egypt’s Red Sea extended their time “on the margins” where they found opportunities for work, marriage and travel. In short, a life in Hurghada has turned them into transnational citizens, going back and forth between Egypt and Russia. Their mobility is key to understanding what types of work opportunities Russian women find and their decision to settle, at least “for the time being”, in Hurghada.

3.1 Development of the Red Sea Coast Tourism Industry

Globally, tourism ranks third behind the oil and car industries on the list of the highest revenue-generating global export categories (Burns and Holden: 2). Since the 1980s, Egypt has invested heavily in the tourism industry and provided lucrative incentives for multinational tourism companies, such as deferred taxes for 10 years and the unrestricted repatriation of profits (Richter, 2008: 939). Last year, two

million tourists came to the Red Sea⁴³. Revenue from tourism dollars, currently at 20% of all revenue, has enabled Egypt to overcome its previous balance of payments problems.⁴⁴ But the existence of a tourism industry serves another purpose: it affirms a nation's legitimacy and faith in its internal security (Burns and Holden, 2006: 93) which is crucial in Egypt as its main tourist sites have also been targeted by terrorist attacks. Egypt's ubiquitous tourism police are positioned to maintain this security, drawing thousands of foreign residents to Egypt's tourist attractions and its real estate market.

Egypt assumed control of the Sinai Peninsula from Israel in 1981. This area, along with the Red Sea Coast was designated as a tourism development zone in 1982 (Richter, 940). Tourism dollars, sometimes referred to as "Manna from heaven", are expected to produce jobs and large profits in foreign currencies with little political cost to the government.⁴⁵ Although Egypt has been investing in tourism since the mid-1980s, it began the large-scale privatization of its tourism industry as a condition of receiving an IMF Structural Adjustment loan in May 1991. This privatization process went hand-in-hand with de-regulation that allowed foreign firms to manage hotels and led to the increased transportation access achieved through the

⁴³ www.hurghada.com

⁴⁴ In 1982-3, tourism revenue was USD \$304 million; by 2004-5 it had reached USD \$6.429 Billion (Richter, 952).

⁴⁵ The social and environmental "threats", or costs, of a tourism industry is another area that feminist and environmental researchers have revealed. For instance, Gulf Arab tourists, who made up 24% of overall visitors to Egypt, are most welcome in Egypt because they tend to blend in more than Western tourists, however, they have been blamed for creating a demand for prostitution, a "social cost" generally ignored, and some would say, *facilitated* by the state (Gray, 105).

construction of Hurghada's international airport.⁴⁶ Central to this process of neoliberal reform was the 1994 Law on Foreign Exchange which guaranteed unrestricted repatriation of profits and capital and protection of brand names through intellectual property rights. This was followed four years later by a 20 year extension on tax exempt status for foreign investors in tourism (ibid: 948). The privatization process was completed in three stages between 1992 and 1995, with the sale of land, hotels and accommodation infrastructure and cruise ships going to transnational tourism companies (TNTCs) (Gray, 1998: 99).⁴⁷

Egypt's two largest towns in the Red Sea tourism development area are Sharm El Sheikh, the glitzy resort town on the Sinai Peninsula home to dozens of 5-star hotels and resorts that often host high profile international conferences; meanwhile Hurghada is favored by more budget-conscious tourists attracted by the "all inclusive" hotel room and meal packages. The main difference between these towns may not be apparent to many visitors at first, but Sharm El Sheikh is in many ways a "closed city". Much of its Egyptian population lives within the walled Il Nour District, and property purchases in Sharm El Sheikh are restricted to 99 year leases.

⁴⁶ In 1989 Law 230 allowed foreign ownership in certain economic sectors, including tourism, and granted ten-year tax breaks for investors to develop tourism in desert areas. In 1991, Law 91 established the Tourism Development Authority which was tasked with planning tourism development along the recently designated tourism development zones, especially along the Red Sea Coast. Law 91 mandated the building of roads and airports to service these areas, and also opened up the land to ownership by foreign investors (Richter, 947). Land was sold well below market value at \$1/square meter to private investors. When these areas were declared "tourism development areas" the price per square meter shot up 10,000%. As investors were able to use land titles as collateral for loans, this price increase afforded them liquidity overnight with which to build (Richter, 955).

⁴⁷ Part of the Washington Consensus rationale for economic liberalization is that it will encourage non-state actors to participate in economic as well as political spheres. However, according to Kielner (1998) economic liberalization resulted in a tightening up of state control in Egypt's political sphere.

On the other hand, Hurghada is home to a sizeable population of Egyptians and foreign residents; together they mix freely, marry, purchase property and are now raising a generation of multi-lingual, multi-cultural children. My interest in is how Russian-speaking women from the former Soviet Union have shaped Hurghada's "transnational spaces", in the workplace, at leisure, and at home.

Researchers in tourism studies note one concern of tourism development is the "demonstration" effect whereby the local population "observe[s] mass consumption of indolence", (Burns and Holden, 123) and is affected by it, for better or worse. I can't tell if this is a paternalistic idea with a kernel of truth or if it ignores the flows of cultural influence and exchange that already exist. However, there are differences between Cairo and Hurghada's social norms related to drinking and physical touching between the genders; obviously Hurghada's social culture has certainly been affected by the fact that nearly a fifth of its population is from abroad. Many Egyptians I spoke with said that living in Hurghada has exposed them to a variety of cultural practices and norms, having both positive and negative effects.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ In Cairo, not only is gender mixing curtailed within the lower and middle class, but I've never physically touched or been touched by any of my male co-workers (not even a handshake). But in Hurghada a new Egyptian male acquaintance, who works in a perfume shop and is married to a Russian woman, offered to "massage my third eye" above the bridge of my nose when I complained of a headache. I was surprised as much by his mention of the highest Indian chakra known as the "third eye" in Indian medicine, as well as his intention to touch my face, not to mention the fact that this exchange occurred in Russian.

3.2 Costs of Tourism Development without Planning

The major international actor promoting tourism development is the World Tourism Organization, whose advice has been called “self-serving and misleading” as their sole aim is to increase tourism rather than sustainable development or job creation (Burns and Holden: 90). However, the revenue that tourism brings is rarely shared with the local population because profits flow out of the country to TNTCs and non-local landowners (Eraqi, Abd-Alla and Lotief, 2006: 5).

Another criticism of Egypt’s reliance on tourism is that the Egyptian government has no long-term tourism development plan, except to continuously attract more and more tourists. Researchers at Cairo University conclude that, “Unfortunately, much of the development [in Hurghada] has occurred without the benefit of strict planning/zoning control and as a result, an abundance of hotels have emerged with little or no regard for aesthetics or the environment” (Eraqi, et al: 11). If Egypt does not mitigate and account for the social and environmental costs of rapid development it could exhaust itself (Gray, 108). Attracting too many tourists may cause what is known as “cycle tourism”, in which tourist-use damages an area and it is no longer an attractive destination. In the case of Hurghada, there is anxiety about the destruction of the coral reefs and some travel guides and tourism review websites lament how Hurghada has become overgrown. In a report on the growth of Hurgada’s Tourism industry, Cairo University researcher, Muhammed I. Eraqi wrote, “If you're not into diving or discos, it's hard to find much to like about Hurghada – though you have to admire its

commercial gusto; many of the townsfolk come from Luxor's West Bank, where tourism has been a way of life for generations.” (Eraqi, et al:10). Hany, a café worker I met on my first visit to Hurghada, told how the numbers of tourists to Hurghada have plummeted in the past two years as the global economic recession has taken hold. The café owner calls the airport daily to find out how many tourists are arriving, but Hany says, “There is no one now. It’s terrible.” Indeed the several times I visited the café, located north of downtown far from new housing developments and the bulk of the hotels, there were few other customers.

The process of privatization shifted control to foreign real estate and tourism development companies with no ties to the state (Kienel, 1998: 235). By relying on foreign investment to create jobs there is little incentive to strictly enforce labor laws, especially in the tourism sector. What results is a growing informal work sector, hiring Egyptians and foreigners without work visas into a local economy that relies 95% on tourism (Eraqi, et al:10). Egypt’s lax labor regulatory structure allows informality to serve profit accumulation of the tourism industry with potential negative implications for workers, who are at once commodified and “emancipated” by work in informal sector. So, workers have to tolerate what Lana, the lounge singer, called an atmosphere of “wild business”, living job to job, not receiving overtime pay, having their paychecks docked for tardiness or for not adhering to a dress code, and according to some workers, not being paid for several months when a business hits hard times.

3.3. Skin Color and Police Intervention: Regulating a Racialized and Gendered Labor Force

While many countries look to tourism to provide jobs, these tourism-related employment structures tend to challenge and distort traditional work patterns as it requires a migrant labor pool of both domestic and foreign workers who live away from their home towns (Burns and Holden, 1995: 100). By the mid-1990s, Hurghada had a local population of 50,000⁴⁹ which has tripled in recent years as Egyptians came for jobs in tourism and foreign residents purchased real estate and relocated to Hurghada. Thousands of mostly young men from Luxor work in Hurghada's commercial districts as well as in the burgeoning construction industry. Many of these workers live within the buildings they build by day, their shadows visible from the street by the light of a naked hanging light bulb. One Egyptian man I spoke with observed, "The darker-skinned Egyptians work in construction and lighter-skinned Egyptians, usually from Cairo or Alexandria work in hotels as they speak English and are used to foreigners." Perhaps one reason for their existence "on the margins" in informal housing is that Egyptian workers must obtain a renewable six-month work permit in order to legally work in Hurghada. For poorly-paid construction workers without a work permit, renting a flat may be cost prohibitive.

Racial and class preference is evident when Egypt's tourism police spot check individuals riding public transportation, scrutinizing the Egyptians' residence cards,

⁴⁹ Lonely Planet, Egypt 2008.

while ignoring lighter-skinned foreigners on the same microbus who may have expired visas. These same foreigners pay a minimal LE 50 fine (equivalent of \$10) at the airport upon their departure for overstaying their visa with rarely any further repercussions.

As for what attracts Russian women to Hurghada, they often said when they first looked into taking a holiday they wanted to visit European countries, such as Bulgaria or Turkey (and some did). But when they were looking into relocating abroad, they found Egypt's low cost of living, lax visa regime and the existence of a growing expatriate community very attractive. Plus, Egypt's apparent lack of interest in deporting Hurghada's foreign residents who overstay their visas means that Hurghada is a friendly place where Russian women find opportunities for work and marriage. Many Russian women I interviewed in July 2009 were not concerned with the police checking to see if they had a valid visa, citing the Egyptian government's lax attitude towards "white" tourists who overstay their visa. Katya, the former animator, explained that she stayed in Hurghada although she was "in between jobs", and that she was considering a job offer in Turkey as an animator: "The only problem with Turkey is if you overstay your visa you get blacklisted from the country for the period of time you overstayed your visa. Here in Hurghada if you have white skin the police don't bother you". However these conditions seem to be fluid; as one Russian woman remarked, "The police rotate through Hurghada every three months, so they do some checking [of documents] at first, you know, just to show they are doing something." In September 2009, after two Russian female tourists in Cairo were charged (and

acquitted) of prostitution, some Russian women reported that the police in Hurghada have started to check documents at the Esplanade Mall where many Russians and other foreign residents spend their free time. Tamara is a physician who moved to Hurghada for marriage three years ago and I would frequently see her around the housing complex pushing her eight-month old son in a stroller. She said she's been hesitant to go to the Esplanade mall ever since she read about a Russian woman who was deported. "Even though I'm married officially, my visa is expired but I haven't taken the trouble to renew it. That woman was married and had a kid, but they still deported her. So, it makes me nervous."

3.4 Mobile and Non-mobile Subjects

Egypt's internal travel controls limit movement of Egyptians into the Red Sea Tourism Development Zone and discourage tourists who have overstayed their visas from freely traveling outside of it. Each bus going to and from Hurghada is usually stopped by the police and the passengers' documents checked for validity, thus the women who moved to Hurghada for work and whose visas have expired are less likely to travel outside of Hurghada. Only a few of the women I interviewed had been to Cairo, though most have been in Egypt for over a year. On one of my return trips to Cairo, I was asked by a Russian acquaintance to accompany her on the bus to Cairo so she could renew her passport. Even though she had been in Egypt four

years she had never been to Cairo and was fearful, not just of encountering the police, but the metropolis of Cairo itself.⁵⁰

In Hurghada a person's mobility is an important factor in determining opportunities; men who marry foreign women, or enter into relationship with them have a chance to become mobile.⁵¹ One nightclub worker, Ahmed, told me about his Dutch "wife" (though they were never officially married) who lives in Holland with their two children. Although they are no longer in a relationship, his "wife" invited him to move to Holland and be near the kids, but he said "I prefer Hurghada", but says he maintains frequent communication with the children on Skype.

In her study of the interactions of Dominican sex workers and European tourists in Sosua, Dominican Republic, Brennan expands Smith and Guarnizo's (1998) use of the term "transnationalisms from above" which originally referenced the strategies of political leaders on the international level to enact policies of "globalization".

Brennan broadens this concept to include the movement of middle class tourists from states "central to the accumulation of capital" in her understanding of "transnational from above". Meanwhile, local impoverished people who cross borders in their quest for livelihoods as well as in their personal and familial interactions take part in "transnationalism from below" (Brennan: 43). In Aihwa Ong's book, Flexible Citizenship, she questions whether political borders are becoming less significant as

⁵⁰ Every time I took the bus between Cairo and Hurghada, it was stopped by the police who boarded the bus and checked everyone's documents—except for this last trip.

⁵¹ See Mustafa Abdalla's 2007 study on Egyptian men marrying foreigners in Dahab and how this affects their mobility.

citizens' mobility increases or whether the state is reacting differently to "manipulations" by citizens and non-citizens alike. I found some similarities between Brennan's description of the middle-class (mostly) male tourists to Sosua and some of the Russian women who relocated to Hurghada: they start out on holiday, meet and marry local Egyptian residents and purchase real estate using capital accumulated in Russia. However, in Hurghada, the women are the mobile tourist-subjects with the expendable income to take a vacation and assume the financial risk associated with moving to a foreign country, even before they found work.

In Brennan's analysis, the key feature that determines whether one is transnationalizing "from above" or "below" is mobility. Brennan's distinction between "mobile" and "non-mobile" subjects is visible in Hurghada's marriage market. While tourists to Hurghada are clearly "mobile", the Egyptian men they encounter are usually "non-mobile", as a result of the low wages they receive in Hurghada's tourism industry and its peripheral jobs in souvenir shops and restaurants. Perhaps deflecting the economic realities, more than one Egyptian man working in tourism told me when I asked if they had any desire to travel, "Why should I go anywhere? Everyone comes here."⁵² Also, of the 12 Russian women I interviewed who were married to Egyptians, only one of them had taken her husband to Russia to visit, and none of them had plans to travel or live in Russia, though a couple women said it was a possibility.

⁵²Though Egyptian men's experiences working in tourism are not directly related to my study, they are corollary. It was not unusual to find waiters or shop workers who claim to speak five languages, including Russian and English.

Although the women I interviewed in Hurghada only hold Russian passports, according to Egyptian law, foreign wives may obtain Egyptian citizenship after marrying an Egyptian man and living in Egypt for five years. A few of these women have children who are Egyptian citizens, having been born in Egypt.⁵³ Most of them did not express any interest in obtaining Egyptian citizenship⁵⁴, not seeing any benefit since neither their work nor marriage depended on having Egyptians citizenship. In this sense Russian women's mobility gives them a privileged position in Hurghada's transnational spaces of work and marriage; their foreign citizenship gives them flexibility to act on their mobility in both their work or marriage relationship which will be explored more in chapter five. Without social or legal constraints many foreign women in *'urfi* marriages seem to have the same freedom to leave marriages as easily as Egyptian men might pronounce divorce. This ability to enter into, or leave *'urfi* marriages as easily as men do is a manifestation of "transnationalism from above", where mobile subjects act on their desires regardless of their husbands' wishes.

⁵³Most women purposely gave birth to their children in Russia in order to get automatic Russian citizenship for their children.

⁵⁴Some women were even under the erroneous impression that the Russian Federation does not allow dual citizenship.

3.5 Hotel Animators: A Foot in the Door to Tourism Work

For women who came to Hurghada seeking work, many found it in a hotel's guest relations positions, or as animators, entertainers or dancers⁵⁵ (nightclub dancers, bellydancers or performers in "ballet shows".) These positions are visible and interactive with tourists, and other researchers have described this positioning of female workers as being due to their physical presence being "pleasing to the customer as an object of desire" (Chant, cited in Rainnie 1997: 145-47).

The younger women I met in their low to mid-20s, said they were motivated to come to Egypt by a desire to travel somewhere warm and "exotic" where they might find work as part of an animation team with a six month contract. As hotel "animators", both male and female workers play a key role in the entertainment aspect of Hurghada's tourism industry (animators are also found in Sharm El Sheikh and Turkey). Although some tourists might find hotel animators superfluous to their vacation experience⁵⁶, animators work 12-18 hour days, providing exercise classes, sport opportunities, child care (with "children's animators") and evening

⁵⁵ There is some overlap with these two groups: a woman may have initially worked as an animator or as a gogo dancer in clubs or in tourism, before marrying. However, she is unlikely to work in animation or as a dancer after marriage to an Egyptian man, perhaps because of the nature of the work requires extensive socializing with tourists.

⁵⁶ In Reem Nafie's August 21-27, 2003 *Al-Ahram* article, "Tough Frolics", one disgruntled tourist said, "If I'm here on vacation, I would like to have some peace and quiet, not to be disturbed every morning by a bunch of hyper people," said Mona Hamdy, a housewife on vacation with her husband and kids.

entertainment shows for hotel guests⁵⁷. Then the animators are often required to accompany hotel guests to nightclubs, sometimes until the early morning hours. Many nightclubs and bars have agreements with various animation employment agencies and the hotels where the animators work in order to attract customers. The animators are tasked with selling nightclub tickets to hotel guests, for which the animators receive a LE 15-20 (USD \$3) commission per ticket. Their long working hours and the variety of tasks animators perform, recall Nancy Hartsock's words about the "feminization of labor force" that pushes women "into low wage, dead-end jobs, but also the feminization of anyone who holds such jobs as powerless, invisible, super-exploited." (Hartsock, 2001 cited in Nagar, 263). Thus, animators' labor as marketeers, guides in hotels and escorts to nightclubs facilitate the "tourist experience" and are the backbone of Hurghada's tourism industry.

Katya, the 22-year old former animator told me, "Some people think being an animator is a fun job because we're always supposed to have a smile on our face, but it can be really exhausting." I asked if the animator could return home to rest after delivering the "guests" to the nightclub and she said, "No we have to stay until the guests are ready to go home." One bartender even attributed his nightclub's failure to pay its workers (including a dancer interviewed for this study) for two months wages on the lack of a contract with an animation firm. Since there were no animators informally marketing the club and selling entrance tickets, there were few "guests" to provide the club with revenue. This demonstrates what a vital role the animators play

⁵⁷ I went to a performance of The Rocky Horror Picture show at an upscale resort and was told that this show, with its transvestite lead character, had been running for seven years.

in Hurghada's hotel and entertainment industries. Although many animators are paid approximately one dollar an hour⁵⁸, animation work is an attractive option for a young person as it provides housing and is relatively easy work to secure because of high turnover.

Anastasia, the desert safari tour guide, earned a degree in tourism from her university in the Urals, before coming to Hurghada on vacation alone when she was 19 and met the animation team in her hotel. After her two week vacation, she returned home but became depressed for eight months and decided to return to Egypt as an animator.

She was offered a six-month contract with USD \$300/month salary plus room and board, and a return plane ticket to Russia. She learned English on the job and made a lot of friends from among the other animators. After her initial animation contract she returned for a second six month contract and then decided to marry her Egyptian boyfriend who was also an animator (also a Coptic man who uses the Islamic '*urfi* marriage). He told her that if they married he might be able to avoid military service. "But it didn't work, so he has been gone for two years serving in the military." When we met for coffee a couple months after our initial interview, Anastasia said that since her husband returned from the military service a few weeks before, their relationship had "cooled" and that they would probably break-up. After a while, she confessed that a man at her job was courting her, "the right way" and was willing to wait to propose "real" marriage until after she finalized her split from her '*urfi* husband.

⁵⁸ If they work for \$400/month and work 10 hours day/6 days per week (conservative estimate based on information from informants).

For Ksenya, the divorced mother of two, her decision to move to Hurghada is framed as concern for her child's health: only in Hurghada's dry climate did his asthma symptoms go away. Later, she would tell the story of how her husband Ibrahim "swept off her feet" by promising to provide what her Russian husband never did: to shoulder the responsibility as the family breadwinner, thus giving her a chance to take time off from work. "Back home, I worked so much I never saw my kids; they were raised by a nanny. Here I get to see them all the time." Ksenya brought some capital with her to Hurghada to finance this new lifestyle, where she says, "I always feel like I'm on vacation". She and her husband and a handful of other investors jointly own a block of apartments under construction as well as a yacht they rent out for excursions, which they recently sold in order to invest in a new school for Russian children that Ksenya is planning. Although she "took time off work" when she moved to Hurghada, she's remained active in buying and selling real estate and recently she has been busy readying the three-story villa they leased for the school, as well as recruiting teachers, students, designing curricula, ordering supplies, and tending to a myriad of other details. In addition to this, there are political waters to navigate, as this new school will compete for students (and teachers, as it turns out) with the other Russian school Hurghada. Further, it must gain accreditation with the Education Attaché at the Russian Embassy. Ksenya says this is not a simple task because the principle of the other is close with the Education Attaché and has initiated a smear campaign against the school, even threatening to expose those teachers with invalid visas to the authorities if they take jobs at the new school.⁵⁹ However, since the new

⁵⁹ The new school has since gained accreditation and has attracted over 60 students, nearly as many as

school will provide high school courses, too, it could be a catalyst for luring even more Russian families to Hurghada. While Ksenya gave me a tour of the school building, I met a Russian carpenter who moved to Hurghada with his entire family for the low cost of living. He said without the prospect of this new school for his teenagers, their move to Hurghada wouldn't have been possible.

Olga, who moved from Siberia to Hurghada along with her husband and two children said, "We came to escape the cold. We're sick of getting sick! Everyone all the time is sick... I'm a hairdresser so I don't need to learn the language, my hands speak for me" ("Her hands are like gold." her husband interjected). Olga and her husband, both bleached-blondes with tight pixie haircuts, had checked out seaside towns along the Sea of Azov, looking for a more southern locale to relocate to, but were turned off by the local Communist government still in power. She said, "It was like they are still living in 1987. It was like being in a foreign country. Here [in Egypt] we have no financial crisis—Egypt is a cash economy. Why turn on the TV and watch all that bad news from Russia? Plus", she added, "we live the Arab lifestyle, and the kids can play safely on the street." I look out the window of their third story flat amidst dozens of nearly empty buildings up and down their street and wondered, "Who do the kids play with?" Almost as if on cue, a taxi pulls up to the neighboring building and a two European-looking women climb out with their baby strollers and toddlers in tow.

the rival school had the year it started.

Elena is a divorced 30 year-old former accountant from Moscow who has been in Hurghada for five years. We met at “ladies night” and she agreed to be interviewed. She was somewhat reserved and spoke in short, clipped sentences, seeming to choose what information to share. “Before, I was living in Dubai with my Syrian husband and our son; we met in Moscow. When we first moved to Dubai, we shared a flat with some people but there weren’t enough keys so we just left the door unlocked. Can you imagine? I was in shock! That would *never* happen in Moscow. There, it is so scary even to walk down the street at night.” But after a while she was dissatisfied with her husband’s edict that she stay home. “Back in Russia, at the office, I was the boss. But in Dubai, I was hardly allowed to go outside and when I did, I couldn’t look at anyone.” They fought so much, she decided to leave him. She first found Hurghada on the internet while she was searching for work opportunities in Europe, but saw an advertisement for affordable real estate in Hurghada. “At first I didn’t think the prices could be true. They were advertising flats for sale for \$10,000!” She purchased a flat for \$30,000 in Hurghada but because Egypt only gives residence visas to foreigners who pay at least \$50,000 for their property, she lives without a valid visa and is occasionally worried about being deported, along with her seven year old child. “If we ever need to go to the police or to the hospital, we might have problems.” When she first arrived, she had enough money from renting her Moscow flat that she took a year off. Then, her brother, who had taken a job as an animator in Hurghada, suggested she give it a try and now she works as an animation team manager. “I wish I had known about this kind of work when I was younger.” When I

asked her about her future plans, she said, “Well, most of the people I know say they are here permanently, but my child will have to go to high school in Russia in a few years, so I have to think about that.” Since this conversation, I learned that Elena took a job as an administrator at the new Russian school where he son attends school.

This section has dealt with women who decided to make Hurghada home; Ksenya, Elena, Olga and Anastasia all relied on their mobility, accumulated capital and Hurghada’s low cost of living to finance a change in lifestyle where they can live “permanently on vacation”, away from Russia’s high crime rates, illness and harsh winters. But the vast majority of tourists that come to Hurghada are purely “pleasure seekers”, who want to temporarily partake in the sun worship and nightlife, but return to their lives in Europe and Russia. When I began my research I assumed Hurghada’s pleasure-seekers would be wealthy Arab men from within Egypt or Gulf States driven by an interest in “sex tourism”. While this may be the case in Sharm El Sheikh’s upscale resorts, Hurghada’s more family-friendly atmosphere and affordable real estate market has attracted marriage-minded women and men whose relationships are the catalyst for their foreign investment in tourism, as well as for raising new families. Though my I found little evidence of organized business structures around formal prostitution in Hurghada, I did find evidence of “independent operators”, as will be discussed in the next chapter. However, when it comes to large scale “sex tourism” in Hurghada, the pleasure-seekers are usually European women interacting with local Egyptian men.

4 SEX TOURISM IN HURGHADA

“In Hurghada, people speak a new language, Hurgadinsk (no-Хургадинскии). Habibi-chik⁶⁰, is what a woman calls her Egyptian sweetheart. He calls her his habib-ka.” - Ksenya.

Studies of sex tourism first appeared in the 1980s but were hampered by widespread “disdain of the prostitute” and the fact that its illegal nature made it difficult to study. Spurred on by concerns and funding aimed to combat the spread of HIV/AIDS, feminist and political economic analysis has finally turned to the sites and practices of prostitution. This public health concern echoes early 20th century worries about “hygiene” that sought to regulate and control prostitution. Until somewhat recently sex tourism focused on “local” women selling sex to male tourists, but it has since expanded to include tourists of any gender who buy, sell, exchange and negotiate sex with “local” men, women and children in a variety of formal and informal relationships.⁶¹ (Kempadoo, 2001, O’Connell Davidson, 1998, Ryan and Hall, 2001, Jeffreys, 2009, among others).

In the context of Egypt in general, most sex tourism takes place in Cairo, where there is an influx of Arabs from the Gulf States who come for Cairo’s relatively cool summer temperatures; many of them engage in prostitution, either by hiring “maids”

⁶⁰ *Habibi* is a term of endearment in Arabic, meaning “beloved” or “dear”.

⁶¹ Since many people in tourist towns are drawn from other parts of the country or even region, “local” means living locally, even temporarily. In Hurghada, many foreigners and Egyptians from other towns consider themselves “local”.

who provide sexual services, or they enter into temporary *zawag-al-urfi* marriage contracts for the summer, a practice that has gained criticism at the international level.⁶² The International Sex Guide for Egypt lists 75 pages of postings from (presumably) men offering tips on places to buy sex throughout Egypt. When one person asked where they can “find Russian women”, another person responded, “It is hard to find Russian women in Cairo unless they are on vacation from the Red Sea circuit”. “Independent Escorts”, an escort service firm in Cairo, actively recruits women with this pitch on its website: *“We seek remarkable pretty young girls with faultless deportment and cultivated character, who are in job training, study or professional life and have a distinctive sense for the nice things in life. Do you feel that this description fits you, and would you like to apply? Then please read the following criterias [sic] very carefully and decide whether you are a good match for us.”*⁶³

4.1 Sex Work in Touristic Economies

A recent International Labor Organization study of brothels in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines found that sex work accounts for 2%-14% of their national gross domestic product (Altman, 111) which reflects Sassen’s findings that governmental development strategies rely on the sex industry as a source of revenue (Sassen, 2002: 101). Others have asserted that tourist towns look the other way when it comes to eradicating sex work/prostitution not only because prostitution attracts certain

⁶² See U.S. State Department Trafficking in Persons Annual report, 2009 and El Gawhari, 1995.

⁶³ www.independentescorts.com

tourists, but because many local households cannot survive on the low wages typically found in the tourism industry and often rely on income from illicit sex work (Jeffreys, 2006:130 and Sassen, 2002: 101).

Prostitution has been industrialized, globalized and integrated into national economies, starting with the remittances from sex workers living abroad, to the taxi drivers who act as mediators between clients and sex workers and even through the business of alcohol distribution closely linked with prostitution (Jeffreys, 30). At tourism destinations, prostitution takes various forms, both formal and informal, in brothels, bars, massage parlors, working flats, escort agencies, call girls, private brothels.” (O’Connell Davidson, 76).

Feminist scholar and prostitution abolitionist, Sheila Jeffreys argues against the use of the term “sex tourism” saying it is a euphemism that normalizes this practice of economic exploitation of women by men and turns it into “entertainment”. She prefers the term “prostitution tourism” which she says is “outsourcing women’s insubordination”. She notes that 70% of women in the Netherlands’ “window prostitution” are foreign women and although the Netherlands has legalized prostitution it still has a sizeable underground, unregulated sex trade.⁶⁴ When I started my research, I generally subscribed to this view and tried to find signs of women trafficked into prostitution/sex work in Hurghada. In Cairo, I would ask my Egyptian friends and colleagues about their general impressions of Russian women in

⁶⁴ Of the estimated 10,000 prostitutes working in Netherlands, only 2,000 are “legal” (Jeffreys, 2009 130).

Hurghada. They indicated that they thought most Russian women were immoral women for engaging in pre-marital sex, which made them little more than prostitutes or simply “fallen women”. Despite Hurghada’s negative reputation in Egypt as a haven for “Russian prostitutes”, I spotted only a few women who I guessed were sex workers, based on their dress: extra high-heels, very short dresses and generous amounts of make-up, but the longer I was in Hurghada, I realized they could easily have been tourists who brought their favorite clubwear for a special night on the town while on vacation. Although initially my research interest was in female (Russian) sex workers servicing male tourists, my research turned up only a few references to this kind of “formal” prostitution involving Egyptian and foreign women selling sex out of their private flats, massage parlors and cafes. Marina, who worked as a beach marketer selling massages, noted that the massage parlor is not actually affiliated with the hotel but that the space is simply rented out to a third party; further she “the masseuse is sometimes someone from housekeeping who receives LE 1000 (\$220/month) to give massages which had been sold for \$60 each. She said, “There were constant problems with European women who would request a male masseuse and then would make arrangements for a private meeting later.” I asked if this was an issue for female masseuses as well and she said, “Probably, but not as much as with the male masseuses. They [female masseuses] all wear headscarfs...not that that matters, of course.”

Many people I interviewed doubted the existence of a “sex industry” per se in Hurghada because there is a plethora of women on holiday “giving it [sex] away for

free". Also it could be that the more "flashy" Sharm El Sheikh attracts wealthier international male clientele travelling on business, while families on budgets and European women go to Hurghada for beaches and nightlife. One young upper class male Cairene I interviewed was eager to explain what he knew about "the scene" in Sharm El Sheikh where he had spent a couple of years while on military duty. He said he met many Russian women there, mostly on vacation or temporary residents who had found work as belly dancers or nightclub dancers. He said, "Sharm is known for its high end prostitutes; there is an escort service [International Escorts] you can book online and have a Russian woman flown in from Dubai and you meet in a five-star hotel room for LE 2600/hr. [he said, "I didn't do this myself, but I saw the website."]

But if you are on a budget, you can always ask a taxi driver and he might drop you off in the Il Nour district where the local Egyptian prostitutes live." He initially told me of visiting his friend's villa in Sharm, who had several Russian women living with him, often to be found lounging around the pool. At first, I wondered whether these women had been "trafficked" into Sharm and given free room and board in exchange for providing sexual services at the villa. While they may or may not have provided sexual services, he said their stay there was not "organized" and there was no money changing hands. His friend had simply met these Russian tourists, invited them to stay at the villa and they did until they decided to go home to Russia, or until the host suggested they be on their way.

Dancers

Instead of confirming my initial thesis that Hurghada's sex industry was fueled by "the trafficked Russian woman", I found women working as dancers, entertainers, animators and in other parts of the tourism industry. Anastasia, who had often gone to nightclubs when she worked as an animator, said she thought some of the nightclub dancers were "probably" involved in prostitution, and that "they are mostly from Ukraine, so they are giving us Russians a bad name!" When I asked if she had heard of any women being trafficked in or through Hurghada she said she was familiar with "human trafficking" in which women "are more or less kidnapped and forced to work as prostitutes, but that happens in Turkey, not here, as far as I know." While some of these activities may contribute to Hurghada's reputation as a *sexscape*, they are not what I would consider part of a "sex industry" in which a woman's sexual labor generates profits for a third party. Elena, the accountant who used to live in Dubai, remarked, "Hurghada is not like Dubai, where everyone knows the café's where the prostitutes hang out. Here it is not visible."

On my second visit to Hurghada, I sought out nightclub dancers to better understand where they fit into Hurghada's *sexscape*. I visited a nightclub known for its 2am "ballet shows" with Russian dancers. This nightclub was a prime example of what Jeffreys called "sexualized" public spaces; in some places, strip clubs are where many businessmen (and women) close business deals while women's bodies are "for sale" in the background (2009, 86). Above its dance floor it had dual screens on either side

of the DJ booth with looped footage of gyrating silhouettes of female dancers seemingly wearing little or no clothing. On the door to the women's restroom was painted a female figure seen from the back wearing a neon red g-string and thigh-high stockings that glowed in the black lights. Though no one was expressly "for sale" as far as I could tell, this hyper-sexualized "symbol" of woman on the restroom door set the tone for the nightclub as a sexualized public space.

I took in the ballet show at the nightclub, where I met Ahmed, the waiter with the Dutch wife and kids in Holland. He introduced me to some regulars, an Egyptian-Russian couple who had front row seats next to the dance floor and invited me to share their fruit platter and a bottle of whiskey. After the show, I asked Ahmed if I could meet some of the dancers, thinking he would point me in the right direction, since he had just opened up to me about his marriage. But he quickly passed me off to the dancers' manager, a Russian woman in her fifties whom I had first spotted manning the door collecting tickets and watching who entered the club. I repeated my request to interview the dancers and without another word, she led me directly outside to a patio seating area where four men were talking and smoking hookah pipes. The owner stood up and after hearing my request, drew me away from the seated men and politely and efficiently declined saying, "The dancers don't do any interviews." Then he seemed to get a bit nervous and rambled saying, "They are here on six month work contract, so it is all legal...they all have paper work." I was surprised at this swift handling of a request for "contact" with the dancers. I wondered if I had been another sort of person, male perhaps, if my request would

have been handled differently. Realizing he wouldn't budge, I thanked him and returned inside, but as I was leaving I spotted one of the dancers outside the entrance, chatting with a Russian man, so I introduced myself and she readily agreed to meet me later for an interview.

She phoned me the next day to invite me to an afternoon performance at a beach club. After the show, I found her sporting a thong-bikini (similar to the one the dancers wore during the show, usually accompanied by a chiffon cape that provided intermittent coverage of their buttocks) and flirting with a crowd of Egyptian men. After my experience with the dance manager and the club owners, I had started to wonder if the dancers were even free to move about town or if the rumors were true that they were instructed to "sit and socialize with" certain customers after the show, but I did not see any of the dancers return. Maria also worked as a nightclub dancer in a large town on Russia's westernmost borders and was recruited by another dancer to join this travelling dance troupe for six months. She considered it a good chance to see another country and "have fun." When I asked Maria if her movements were restricted in any way, she started to complain about the dance troupe manager, who closely supervises the dancers in an attempt to maintain a "good reputation" in the industry. She added with a grin, "But you know, there are a lot of us so they can't keep track of us all the time."

The next day I met with Natalya, a 22 year old gogo dancer in a popular nightclub whose number I got from the bartender. As we sat in a hotel café, I was immediately

charmed by her crooked-tooth grin and bubbly, open countenance. She said although she had studied “tourism” back home in Siberia, she chose to work as a dancer in nightclubs. “I’m not someone who can sit at a desk”, she explained, laughing. Before moving to Hurghada, she previously worked as an animator in Sharm El Sheikh, but was fired one day [“I don’t know why, they just called me in after two months and said they were cancelling my contract.”] Her agent at the employment agency found her another job as a dancer in Hurghada. Natalya said that she never sold sex, although “some girls do that”. She said she sends \$100 home each month to her mother who is on a fixed income when she can, but since the club was having financial troubles they hadn’t paid her wages for two months. Now, she dances in clubs and hotels on an *ad hoc* basis. “You know, Egyptian men just like to watch women dance. I really enjoy dancing, so it’s great. The bouncers make sure guys don’t bother me and I get LE 100 for four hours of dancing and when I finish around 2 or 3am, I can still go out with my friends.”

“Working Flats” and Exchanging Sex for Gold

My initial interest in Hurghada’s sex industry was to determine whether hotel prostitution was part of Hurghada’s *sexscape*. But the women (and men) I interviewed who worked in hotels did not attest to any organized hotel prostitution (I would have been surprised if they had as they were not “close” informants). However, many of the Russian women I interviewed (and a few Egyptian men) mentioned “the two [Russian] sisters” who surreptitiously sell sex in their flat while

they maintain a tour guide business “as a front”. Two Egyptian men, one married to an informant, confirmed this and also said that there was “a madam” overseeing several women selling sex out of an apartment in their residential area.⁶⁵ However, by the time I got the “two sisters” phone number from another contact on my last day in Hurghada, I had second thoughts about pursuing sex workers in “working flats” as part of my fieldwork research, as I had become more interested in the prevalence of *‘urfi* marriages. Also, I didn’t want to embarrass the sisters by tipping them off to the fact that their “front” was fairly transparent to everyone. Plus, their operation, I was told, catered to local Egyptian men rather than tourists.⁶⁶

Other informants reported hearing of male and female tourists who exchanged sex for gold in the dozens of gold and jewelry shops in Hurghada. One jeweler who had been in business for 22 years told me as we sipped tea in his shop, "Many women come to Egypt and exchange sex for a discount or free gold. Once a lady came in asking for some pieces [of gold]. She was 26 years old and a ‘real lady’, you know?⁶⁷ [...] She must have had \$12,000 worth of gold around her neck from other jewelers whom she said gave her the gold in exchange for sex." He told her he wasn’t interested as he had numerous lady friends (“Why should I pay?” he asked.) He remarked that there were several foreign women who sell sex, “Russian and German mostly." Another similar story I heard second-hand related to a (presumably) tourist

⁶⁵ I asked him a few times if he could supply contact information for this “madam” but he was not forthcoming and I didn’t press the issue.

⁶⁶ For similar reasons, plus potential language barriers, I didn’t pursue a lead about local Egyptian women who sell sex by sitting outside a particular café on the airport road waving at men driving by.

⁶⁷ One wonders how her exact age came up in conversation.

couple who were bargaining for a large quantity of gold with a jeweler. Near the end of the negotiations, the “husband” offers to let the shop keeper sleep with his “wife” in exchange for a 50% discount on the gold. This story may sound apocryphal, but it relates how in Hurghada (or while on vacation?) everything is up for negotiation. These sorts of stories ensure that Hurghada’s reputation as an uninhibited *sexscape*, is alive and well, and remains a lure for pleasure-seekers looking to escape their inhibitions and spend time “on the margins of the lives.”

4.2 Female Sex Tourists

According to the comments and observations of the Russian women and some Egyptian men I interviewed, Hurghada’s sex tourism landscape fits into O’Connell Davidson’s definition of “sex tourism” as a “broad term used to describe activities of individuals who, whether or not they set out with this intention, use their economic power to attain powers of sexual command over local women, men and/or children while travelling for leisure purposes (1998 :75).

Not long after I arrived, one young Egyptian man declared to me that, “Hurghada is built on sex!” He was referring to the thousands of economically advantaged, mobile female tourists who flock to Hurghada’s beaches and nightclubs and enter into long and short-term relationships with local Egyptian men who often benefit economically from these relationships. Though my research was not focused on female sex tourists, when I would raise the issue of “sex tourism” many Russian women had a lot

to say about their perceptions of female tourists who enter into relationship with Egyptian men. Ironically, at least to an outside viewer, most of the women I interviewed might have been perceived as a “sex tourist”, if one includes holiday romances between tourists and economically disadvantaged local men in their understanding of sex tourism. However, not all Egyptian men are equally economically disadvantaged, nor are all Russian women economically advantaged, or using their wealth “to attain sexual command” over others. The assumed binaries of mobile/non-mobile, local/foreign and economically advantaged/disadvantaged are misleading and blurry. As with any personal relationship, the intentions, expectations and desires vis-a-vis commitment of the parties involved are key.

Female tourists who venture out of their hotels onto the streets of Hurghada may quickly find themselves lured by shopkeepers’ calls into souvenir shops selling scarves, Pharaonic statues, jewelry, perfumes and the like. Many of Hurghada’s shop workers have learned at least the basic greetings and numbers in many European languages and soon a female tourist may find herself the object of “the flirtation ceremony”. Lana, the lounge singer who has been in Hurghada for three years explained, “In Hurghada a woman can take part in the "flirtation ceremony" which is related to the customer service that men in shops and on the street provide. Even when you walk down the street men offer sex, murmuring the word 'sex'. Obviously some women are saying "yes" otherwise they wouldn’t keep saying it! ... Egyptian men are very generous with compliments and ‘over-pay’ attention to a woman even when they know her boundaries and expect nothing in return. [this last remark came

after I mentioned my experience with this “flirtation ceremony”. I believe she meant to differentiate herself from other women who believe the compliments and the men who give them, “expecting something in return”.] Back in Europe or Russia, "they could walk down the street and no one notices them anymore. When they come here, they can wear a pretty summer dress and [people] pay attention to them, even other women. It is very important for women as they get older to be seen as sexy".

4.3 Prostitution, Sex work and Sex Tourism

Sheila Jeffreys, a feminist theorist in the abolitionist camp, calls prostitution a “harmful cultural practice” against women. She writes that its reconstruction as “legitimate work” is a result of neoliberalism’s merging of sexual freedom and free market ideology, a process that in her words, commercializes women’s subordination (2009, 110). Jeffreys differentiates between “prostitution tourism” and “sex tourism” which can be practiced by tourists looking for non-commercial sexual encounters with fellow tourists or local persons. However, in my view this overlooks the economic inequalities that lead men, who probably wouldn’t consider themselves prostitutes, to enter into exhausting flirtation ceremonies, and offer hours of companionship and romance hoping for gifts or some kind of economic windfall.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ “Women usually require more real displays of desire before sleeping together (male prostitutes prefer male sex tourists who don’t require so much courtship and pay in cash). They complain of feigning delight at a woman’s generosity and expend a lot of energy in order to cover the commercial nature of the transaction (O’Connell Davidson, 181). Informal sex tourism, usually practiced by female tourists, knowingly or not, is where gifts instead of cash are given, allowing for self-deception and lets the mobile subject think there is romantic intimacy.

Still, Jeffreys disagrees with those who say that prostitution is not fundamentally a gendered practice, in reference to the “beach boys” in the Caribbean who have sex with tourists for gifts and cash (Kempadoo, 2001). She says although both male and female sex tourists use their economic and racial privilege to find sexualized bodies that they can control, she claims that female sex tourists do not have a “prostitution script”, or “common knowledge of prostitution” that would alert them that there might be some economic expectations attached to their budding romance. She cites the lack of street or brothel-based male prostitution as evidence that female sex tourists are engaged in a fundamentally different exchange than “prostitution”. She also cites a study by Joan Phillips in which a local man boasts about how his tourist-girlfriend services him sexually, saying this is “proof “that masculine-dominant power dynamics are in play in relationships between local men and female tourists. I find this argument unconvincing; expecting to find parallel street prostitution or brothels for female sex tourists would ignore the different ways men and women are socialized when it comes to romance and sex. Not having ever seen a brothel full of men, I find it hard to believe a European female sex tourist would find it appealing, so the lack of one does not constitute proof that female sex tourists do not exploit a man’s economic need in other ways. Further, one man’s boasting of his sexual exploits does not qualify in my view, as “proof” of a relationship’s power dynamics, especially since such “boasting” might simply be an example of Judith Butler’s idea of masculinity being “a performance”, especially by a man who feels the need to prove his. Further, while there is no “prostitution script” per se, I would argue that

some version of the “gigalo script” is well-known, and at least in Hurghada, a frequent subject of gossip:

While Anastasia was working as a beach marketer, one day everyone on the beach was talking about how a 60 year female tourist had made “a scene” in the hotel lobby when the 22-year old man with whom she had had a relationship broke up with her. Anastasia cringed at the memory of overhearing him bragging about breaking this older woman’s heart. ”It was really unpleasant.”

This retelling of a “failed romance” story with the Egyptian man bragging about breaking the woman’s heart may confuse the issue of “power dynamics” when it highlights the woman’s humiliation, yet it overlooks the economic inequalities linked to their relative mobility inherent in the relationship. Describing female tourists as being exploited by local men maintains the essentialist model of female sexuality as being passive, rather than active participants in the “erotizing, sexualizing fantasies and exploitations that consolidate and redefine their cultural identities” (Kempadoo, 2001: 57). As mentioned earlier, when women accept the “flirtation ceremony” performed by local men, complete with, “being called, ‘beautiful’ they are merely acting out the traditional gender roles (O’Connell Davidson: 189). If women recognized their superior economic and mobile status, this would undermine the necessary fiction that the relationship is not related to economic realities. Both male and female sex tourists succeed in deluding themselves into believing that romance, not economics, is driving the relationship. Especially female sex tourists are eager to

point to their “whiteness” that makes them an object of desire, not their superior economic position.⁶⁹

Another image of the European female sex tourist is that of an aggressive woman who uses her relative economic power and position to attain sex, even if using coercion. When Anastasia worked as a hotel animator she was told by a male co-worker about a female tourist who accosted him in the lobby, grabbed his crotch and say, “Let’s go to my room.” A similar story of coercion was told to me by “Mario” (“My mother was Italian” was the second thing he told me) a beach marketer originally from Cairo. He struck up a conversation with me hoping to sell me a snorkeling trip, switching easily from Russian to English when he learned I was American. He said he was 22 years old and a student at a university in Cairo in the faculty of foreign languages. When we later met for tea, he told when he used to work as an animator in a hotel he was once pushed into a broom closet by a female tourist who said she would accuse him of rape if he didn’t have sex with her; plus he said she offered him \$200. (He did and he said she paid him.)⁷⁰ I got the impression that this story was meant to convey to me that women were so eager to sleep with him that they would offer to pay, not that he had engaged in “prostitution”. But then again, the “rape” accusation clarifies that he was “forced into it.” I met with Mario a

⁶⁹ O’Connell Davidson also describes how notions of honor and shame and “being left on the shelf” are part of the motivations of sex tourists. Sex tourists “divorce the ‘honor’ given in past colonial areas to their individual selves” and “envision oneself as detached from structure and valuation that render them powerless at home and powerful in ‘third world.’” (183).

⁷⁰ Mario would also describe Egyptian men as being “hot-blooded” compared to European men who “need 20 minutes to warm up; here we are always ready”. In doing so he repeats the colonial era discourse about locals and the colonial invaders, as either “hot or cold”, or put another way, “emotional or rational”. I have heard this description of “hot” and “cold” also comparing Egyptian and European women, both times by men perhaps seeking to justify or provide an explanatory framework for having sexual relationship with someone from another culture.

few times, deflecting his compliments and come-ons⁷¹ with questions about his work experience (DJ, animator, beach marketer) and his impressions of female tourists, so the conversation would often returned to his sexual exploits with female tourists. In turn, he spoke with pride, kindness, disdain and incredulity about the many European women that he said have chased after him, and as if to illustrate his point, during our chat his phone beeped twice with text messages from women in Europe wishing him “good night and pleasant dreams”. When we met up again a week later, I was struck by how hoarse his voice was from selling scuba tours all day in English, Arabic, Russian, German, Dutch and Polish, and I felt guilty about picking through his stories for useful data about informal work and international romances. I also understood that, at least at first, I was just like another other tourist coming to Hurghada “wanting something”, whether it be romance, “fun” or in my case, information, and Mario would try to provide it, perhaps expecting some sort of financial (or sexual) pay-out in the end. I tried to make it clear that I wasn’t interested in romance, just his opinions and experiences. Hoping to set our acquaintance on platonic grounds said, “I will be like your sister, ok?” He readily agreed, but again, he seemed eager to please. He once invited me to join him for dinner with a group of Polish tourists whom he had accompanied on a gold-buying expedition. He had received a sizeable commission so he was treating the group to dinner at a modest Egyptian cafe. Mario seemed to have struck up a romance with the 17 year old girl in the group, who was

⁷¹ Not wanting him to interpret our meetings as “dates” I would keep notes on a small note pad as he spoke and tried to pay for my tea when the bill came. Normally, when I met with an informant in a café, I would insist on treating and most women would let me, but when interviewing a man, I realized that my insistence could easily be interpreted as the female tourist paying the way of her local boyfriend.

on holiday with her family and seemed enamored with him. When I later told him to be careful about breaking her heart, he said the girl was “sweet” and although he said her father had offered to bring him to Poland to marry his daughter and help him find a job, he was ambivalent. “My heart is dead, Joanne.” He later explained that he learned Polish from his Polish wife with whom he had had an ‘*urfi*’ marriage in Hurghada for 18 months. “She came here on holiday and stayed several months. She went back to Poland but decided to return and we got married so we could live together. But then she got sick, so she went back to Poland for treatment. We stayed in touch by chatting online. What I didn’t know until later is that she died of cancer and her sister pretended to be her when we chatted online. I guess they didn’t want to tell me. But I found out when the sister came to Hurghada and told me.”

I purposefully did not keep notes on this part of the conversation, but mention it now as an illustration of the exhausting emotional toll Mario’s economic activities as guide, fixer and tour arranger takes, especially when business and personal relationships overlap and Mario ends up “romancing” his female clients. But as he was telling me this story, I couldn’t help but be skeptical and wonder, “Would he make up such a tragic story? To what end?” Though a friendly person, Mario was braggadocios, over-confident and prone to what I suspect was embellishment, as when he said a Mercedes-Benz executive offered to pay him 45 million Euro to marry her, but that he refused, “because he was looking for love.”⁷² I expressed my sympathies about his wife and then said, “So, I guess you’re probably older than 22

⁷² Similarly, an informant mentioned his participation in Hughada’s own “Fight Club”, forgetting the first rule of Flight Club: “You don’t talk about Fight Club.”

years old, right?” He confessed to being 28, saying, “You know I don’t trust people anymore; I’ve met a lot of bad people.” I wondered to myself how pretending to be 22 years old would help him in his interactions with tourists, but didn’t want to ask. Perhaps, he sought to keep himself “youthful”, or to ward off unwanted questions about why he wasn’t married yet.

While the type of “holiday romances” that Mario engages in are commonplace and accepted as part of the scene in Hurghada, by comparison, Egyptian men who enter into relationships with foreign women in the Sinai town of Dahab, are routinely harassed and arrested by police, as most of the travelers to Dahab are low-income travelers and do not purchase the “all inclusive” tourism packages more common at the larger resort towns (Behbehanian, 2000:34). As the author writes, “The moral and sexual policing of Dahab ultimately serves to protect the interests of powerful multinational sectors of Egypt's tourism industry that continue to profit from exclusionary developments, such as those in Sharm al-Sheikh. In the guise of protecting national values, the state directs tourism revenue away from small businesses and independent operators, and directs the benefits of a burgeoning tourism industry away from ordinary Egyptians (ibid). However, by saying that non-mobile men are powerless compared to mobile women and the policing power of the state, ignores the complex power dynamics with foreign tourists who may have mobility, but it is the Egyptian man who directs a relationship into the customary *‘urfi* marriage. While a woman might take it to be a “real” civil marriage, the man may perceive it as a short term arrangement for fun and convenience. Also, Egyptian men

are familiar with the local cultural norms and customs in Egypt and specifically in Hurghada, while most Russian women don't speak the local language or understand, at first, how Hurghada's norms are perceived negatively in the rest of Egypt, at least at first.

5. 'Urfi marriage: Stepping stone or maintaining mobility?

“An Urfi marriage document can be bought for \$36. According to Al-Darby most of the local boys, acting with dirty intentions, would bring their foreign wives-to-be (25-55 years) and two witness friends (or strangers paid \$10 each) to witness the ceremony. Three signatures from the lawyer and witnesses, then the couple’s names filled in the blanks, a few handshakes – and the marriage is done, followed by an overnight honeymoon at the spouse’s room. The police will not trouble the couple.”

- “A ride to a Dream, part I and II”, *Russia Today* August 19, 2009

Although no official statistics exist on the number of ‘urfi marriages in Egypt, they have become commonplace in Hurghada, despite the social stigma attached to it in other parts of Egypt. It is common to hear Russian women who marry Egyptian men described as naïve tourists taken advantage of by local men promising marriage but only offer non-legalized, unregistered ‘urfi “contracts”.⁷³ There is also endless fear-mongering stoked by the Russian media, and women themselves in online chat rooms share stories of “deception” and vent their anger by posting names and pictures of ex-boyfriends/husbands on websites that host “blacklists” of men accused of “deceiving” women.⁷⁴ I hypothesize that in Hurghada some women themselves take advantage of ‘urfi marriages to facilitate their indefinitely-extended stay in Hurghada.

⁷³ Some of these may be merely xeroxed copies of ‘urfi contracts; one informant said she saw them being sold near the airport for LE 15. She asked, “How could anyone possibly believe that is a valid marriage?”

⁷⁴These blacklists exist for Egypt and Turkey and surely other tourist towns. I have heard a blacklist of Russian women exists now, too.

Surely, there are many women who enter into '*urfi* contracts, never to be legalized, nor registered officially, and perhaps they prefer to have it this way.

Ksenya met her future husband, Ibrahim, on day two of her vacation and he spent every day with her, showing her Hurghada. "I thought he was crazy when he proposed marriage after only a few days; I said to my friend who was with me on the trip, 'Let's get out of here!' but then he explained that that is how they do it here." She told him about her two adolescent children; he said he wouldn't be able to support them all financially, so Ksenya agreed to contribute financially to the housekeeping and three months later she moved to Hurghada and they married.

Despite the confusion about marriage requirements (which other women describe as ever-changing and "nightmarish"), this story is a typical example of how Russian women enter into '*urfi* marriage contracts. When I spoke Ksenya about the perceived stigma attached to '*urfi* marriage she suggested I speak with a neighbor, Tamara, who had some views on the matter. "She is always telling us that our marriages aren't 'real' because we started with an '*urfi* contract". I pointed out that Tamara, as we both knew, also had an '*urfi* marriage and that both women now had officially-registered marriages. Ksenya, answered, "Well, that's what she says...she's always going on about it." Most women I spoke with told me how they realized after they had been in Egypt for a while that most Egyptian marriages do not begin with an '*urfi* contract. They seemed to be somewhat uncomfortable with the idea that their marriages were not conducted according to

their husband's cultural norms: there had been no dowry negotiation, he provided no flat (though he usually pays rent now) and in most cases, no gold was gifted to the bride. Zhanna, who came to Hurghada for a job in tourism and met her husband who was a coworker said, "If I had to do it all over again, I would get the gold! She later said, "The lengthy marriage negotiation process discourages men from divorce because getting married is so expensive, plus he is responsible to the wife's male relatives. In Russia, we think of marriage differently: it is just two individuals deciding to live together. In Egypt, men don't really care if women contribute financially to marriage; that is not expected. They just want their clothes washed and hot meals." Incidentally, when we had that interview Zhanna's husband had lost his job in tourism so she was the sole breadwinner in the family.

Of course, many of the women I interviewed had been living in Hurghada with their spouses for on average 3-5 years, some longer, and they had successfully navigated the bureaucratic process to convert their *'urfi* marriage into an officially registered one. However, judging from the postings on various online forums about relationships, one could have easily written a study on the vast number of *'urfi* marriages that didn't last.

5.1 *Urfi*, de jure and de facto

Since Egypt's Personal Status Laws were amended in 2000, '*urfi* marriage has been legally recognized in Egypt and women in '*urfi* marriages gained the right to divorce if they can present a copy of the '*urfi* contract in court. Before this, '*urfi* was legal in *shari'a* law if the following conditions were met: the contract is drawn up by a cleric, two (male) witnesses are present and the dowry was paid⁷⁵. What is significant here is that an '*urfi* marriage is still legal in the eyes of Sunni Islamic law even if the marriage is not officially registered with the State. However, this unregistered marriage is frowned upon in Egypt and seen as a cover for premarital sex,⁷⁶ as presenting '*urfi* marriage papers allow couples to get a hotel room or rent a private flat. However, it seems '*urfi* contracts are not universally required for a couple who wants to rent a flat, as some of my informants said no one asked them for an '*urfi* contract when they rented a flat. They suggested it depends on the neighborhood location and if there is a doorman (*bowab*).

These '*urfi* contracts are an expression of how "existing inequalities" are reproduced in transnational spaces, even as "they are sites of new economic, cultural and sexual possibility" (Brennan 45). Egyptian law grants different rights to men and women in marriage, but '*urfi* does not; in a sense, both are equal, neither have financial obligations after divorce. In marriages between two Egyptians, only the husband has the right to divorce (the wife can appeal to a judge for divorce but she must prove

⁷⁵ www.Islamonline.com/marriage

⁷⁶ *Zawag al-'urfi* is a secret (that is, without witnesses) and temporary marriage contract in Egypt that give prostitution a legal context, and usually ends at the end of the summer.

cause, but the husband can divorce his wife by declaration.) Also, in an *'urfi* marriage, usually only the husband has a copy of the marriage contract. Without the husband's cooperation it may be difficult for an Egyptian woman to obtain a divorce, without which she cannot legally marry again. However, for foreign women in *'urfi* marriages, they see it as a "piece of paper" that can be discarded or simply forgotten when the relationship ends. One woman I interviewed said that when she and her husband got into an argument she tore up the *'urfi* contract, so they had to get another one when they reconciled. Tamara added that since only the husband keeps a copy of the *'urfi* marriage certificate, it isn't so complicated to get out of the marriage [for a foreign woman, perhaps]: "just tear up the paper!" Tamara equated *'urfi* marriage with Russia's 'civil marriage' which many people get when they decide to live together in Russia. "Even some people who never got an official "civil marriage" say they have a "civil marriage" (*grazhdanski brak*).

Tamara and her husband officially registered their *'urfi* marriage in Egypt, but never registered it in Russia because of the "paperwork hassles" and she heard the Russian embassy was not especially helpful to women seeking to legalize their marriage documents. Although her marriage is registered in Egypt and she says she has "all rights as Egyptian wife: I can go to hospital, get Egyptian prices on museum tickets", her marriage is not registered in Russia. She asked, "Why should I register my marriage in Russia? There are no benefits for me since my husband would still need to apply for a visa to visit Russia. If I got divorced, why would I want to go through the complicated process of an international divorce?" Their son, who was born in

Russia and has dual citizenship, is considered “illegitimate” there, but that doesn’t seem to bother Tamara. With her son’s dual citizenship, she would have no trouble taking him past passport control as he is on her passport.

5.2 Marginalized Marriage Structure or *de facto* Equality in Marriage?

Biemann asserts that migrant women seeking marriage are channeled into subordinate positions such as sex work, and I would argue that in Hurghada, into “unofficial” marriages. This prevalence of unregistered ‘*urfi* marriages attests to the existence of “laws that protect the flourishing life of the male citizen as a privilege and a source of power.” (Biemann: 80). While the existence of the ambiguous ‘*urfi* process services the sexual needs of “pre-marriage” Egyptian men, the existence of an informal policy mandating ‘*urfi* for brides from the former Soviet Union may *assign* women to a stigmatized marriage procedure, but at the same time, they remain outside the Islamic “protections”, “rights” and “duties” of a wife in an official marriage. One prominent website on Hurghada warns women away from ‘*urfi* marriage, calling it a “f*ck paper that leaves her with no rights or protection.” The website goes on to say that “it is no secret that many marriages in Hurghada go on the rocks as soon as there is no money to be had from the lucky bride” and suggests women wanting to marry Egyptian men should become “full-fledged members of Islam and have a proper Moslem wedding.”⁷⁷

⁷⁷ www.hurghada-information.com “The F*ck Paper, or ‘*urfi* Marriage”.

At times, I sensed even those women whose *'urfi* marriages had been officially registered still felt the stigma attached to it. In a 2004 study of perceptions of *'urfi* marriage among AUC students, the majority of students said they would not enter into *'urfi* marriage contracts; and 60% attached a stigma to *'urfi*. (See Akinfiyeva, 2004.) Ksenya's *'urfi* marriage was officially registered with the courts three years ago, in what she called "a humiliating process." She described how indignant she felt when her husband translated the court order officially recognized their marriage: "Basically, I was the 'plaintiff' who was petitioning the court, "demanding" that my husband recognize that I was his wife! I was mortified! But that's how the system is set up." Today, she visits her in-laws several times a year in Cairo, yet she and other women seemed to struggle with this lack of acceptance by friends and family in Russia.

Egyptian men's views of *'urfi* marriage is the beyond the scope of my research, but from informal conversations I have had with Egyptian men, it mainly is used to legalize pre-marital sexual contacts, either in short or long term relationships. When I discussed how a woman can know if her *'urfi* marriage is "real" or not, I was told, "Well, it really all depends on the man's intentions to complete the registration paperwork."

Despite this stigma, *'urfi* use has varied over time in Egyptian society and there have been newspaper articles decrying the perceived popularity of *'urfi* among

university students who for a variety of reasons are not able to marry.⁷⁸ Before marriage registration with the Egyptian state became common in the 1950s, *'urfi* marriages were often practiced by soldiers' widows who wanted to remarry without registering the second marriage, thus enabling her to still collect her first husband's pension. But today, many Russian women (and Egyptian men) in Hurghada use *'urfi* to facilitate cohabitation and the receipt of a residence visa; this informal use of *'urfi* undermines and blurs the lines between official and unofficial marriage in Egypt. In fact, it usually took a somewhat detailed conversation with each informant to determine what kind of marriage she had: un-legalized (no witnesses); legalized, but not registered; or a full-fledged officially registered marriage.

Anya is a 40 year old nurse who has been married for seven years in an *'urfi* contract. She resisted "making it official" because she no longer trusts her Egyptian husband who has been physically abusive with her. When she originally found her current job as a nurse, she still had a valid work permit from another hospital, but that has since expired and she knows her current employer will not provide a work permit. She remains married to her Egyptian husband because she needs his letter of support in order to renew her residence visa annually, which gives her own piece of mind while she is working in Egypt. The mind boggles to try to weigh these opposing considerations: staying in an abusive relationship so she can have a valid residence visa so she can stay in Egypt with her relatively well-paying job. She didn't say so, but one can imagine that if she left her husband he could get her deported when her

⁷⁸Shehata, Jumana. "Marriages of convenience?" Daily Star Egypt, March 15, 2007.

visa expires. Her life seems like a house of cards, perched precariously on that *'urfi* contract. When I asked Anya about the negative stereotypes of Russian women married via *'urfi*, she challenged it, saying, “Yes, we may sleep with a man when we love him, but what does it mean if an Egyptian woman will only marry and sleep with a man when he pays the right dowry? Who is the prostitute here? I sleep with a man for love, not money.” She echoes what Borenstein theorized about the trope of the Russian prostitute as symbol of the nation who is “sold”, but redeems herself by choosing to “marry for love”. As another woman in Hurghada told me, “Germans come for Hurghada for money; Russians come for love.”

Without any of the baggage of *'urfi* marriage is Vera. A 28 year old from Ukraine who met her future husband online while searching for a job in Egypt. "It wasn't love at first sight, but then I saw what a serious person he was and he became someone I really relied on. Later I knew I was in love because I felt peaceful inside." Since her husband is Coptic Christian they had an Orthodox Church wedding, as is custom. "I'm the only woman I know who had a white wedding dress! ... All my other girlfriends simply did marriage paperwork, without the dress, without the gold. I got it all. Some Egyptian men meet a Russian girl and say, 'I love you, let's get a flat'; some guys just want to sleep with a woman, but some do want marriage later.” She paused, perhaps realizing that I had spoken with many of her acquaintances who are in *'urfi* marriages. “Some marriage are ‘real’ I guess, but some are just *'urfi*, *yanni*, for convenience.”

5.3 Mixed Marriages Create Their Own Transnational Spaces

In Egypt, the process towards an “official” marriage usually starts with negotiations between the two Egyptian families and requires significant economic resources on the part of the groom. However, Russian women married to Egyptian men reported that negotiations did take place before they agreed to marry: they discussed whether or not the wife would work, and who would contribute what to the household. Viktoriya, who met her husband while on vacation, met me at a café, wearing a tailored, T-length shirt dress and described how her husband courted her, after they met on holiday: “My [then-future] husband and I talked all the time because I had a free international phone line at my work. We talked about religion, kids, tradition. I'm very lucky because he's had exposure to tourists so he's open-minded.... We decided to pool our money and buy a flat because I didn't want to move in with him and his parents; I would have to dress differently.” Although Viktoriya is a bellydance instructor in Hurghada, she does not perform in public as per her husband's wishes, “To do so would not be appropriate here.”

Previously in the U.S., the idea of migration for marriage meant leaving behind one life for a new one, in which a person is very nearly cut off from their former life. Aihwa Ong studied how the transnational practices and imaginings of nomadic subjects and social conditions allowed them to enjoy “flexible citizenship”. This new arena of what is possible, “thinkable, practicable and desirable”, is expanded to “bridge the common divide between practice and structure” (Ong, Flexible

Citizenship, 3). Global transportation routes are changing perceptions of migration versus immigration, as the back and forth migration flows of people, goods and communication that keep personal and business relationships active (Constable, 2003). Only a five hour flight from Moscow, it is closer than the capital of Siberia, Irkutsk and most women take annual trips to Russia or have host visits by friends and family members. As more and more children are born to these mixed marriages, many grandparents are moving to Hurghada, and a new housing development outside of Hurghada aims to attract retirees.

Many women with children from previous marriages send their children to Russia for the summer months, usually to visit their grandparents. In Ong's book, Flexible Citizenship, she refers to children who are dropped off at boarding schools abroad as "parachute kids" as their parents accompany them across the ocean while they themselves travel on business. Similarly, one informant invited her retired former neighbor and nanny to accompany her child on the flight back to Egypt after the summer. The neighbor stayed in Hurghada for a few months providing child care and domestic help while the mother was occupied with a new business venture. This retired neighbor from Russia is now considering buying property and staying in Hurghada indefinitely.

To varying degrees, women adapt to their husbands' cultures, just as their husbands have adapted to living in a tourist town and their wives' cultural practice. I observed Ksenya's unique dress code; she would wear sleeveless dresses (rarely seen in Egypt)

but always ones that fell below the knee. At the beach her bathing suit consisted of black lycra leggings covering the knee and a turquoise cap-sleeved tunic with ruffles going just over her hips. She said her husband insisted she dress modestly and she said she didn't mind. However, she struggled to adhere to a curfew at midnight.

During my first week in Hurghada, Ksenya and I had been socializing at the mall. As it was approaching midnight I saw her glance at her watch, so I urged her to call her husband and let him know we were on our way, but she shrugged it off. Later that night at home, Ibrahim was frowning and I understood later they had some words.

“He never used to care what time I came home when we lived in the other apartment; it is just now that we live across from the coffeehouse where men are at tables late into the night, watching all comings and goings; it's just because the neighbors are watching that he wants me home by midnight.” So it wasn't necessary his preference that she have a curfew, but because there are witnesses to their breaking of the social norms.

Despite how unusual I felt it was for me, as a non-relative, to be living in an “Egyptian-headed” household, Ksenya's husband Ibrahim seemed to be accepting, if slightly suspicious at first. He saw how wife enjoyed having someone she could take around town introducing me to people, saying, “Oh, you have to interview so-and-so...” He even said, as I prepared to go, “I don't know what Ksenya will do without you.” I was impressed with how he compromised on traditional social norms by inviting a complete stranger into the home in order to make his wife happy. Zhanna said she and her husband have frequent disagreements based on their cultural

differences. “He says to me, ‘Well an Egyptian wife would do this and that’. And I say, [laughing] ‘Well, you didn’t marry an Egyptian wife, did you?’”

5.4 Finding “Suitable Husbands”

Most women living in Hurghada are there for other reasons than earning money in better employment opportunities (afterall, a third of the women I interviewed left jobs with salaries much higher than those found in Egypt’s tourism industry), yet they express no allegiance to Russia when it comes to having children with Egyptian citizenship. The fear associated with mobile women is real when a country like Russia, with a falling birthrate, is losing hundreds of thousands of women to marriage abroad. The *Komsomolskaya Pravda* article described the 200,000 Russian women who have emigrated to Turkey for marriage and economic opportunity in the past 15 years. The article described a meshing of cultures that is similar to what is happening in Hurghada, where Russian women are part of the social and economic fabric of Antalya, yet face criticism in the Russian press and on online discussion forums for “abandoning the motherland”.⁷⁹

In Russia, women who marry foreigners were labeled traitors, gold diggers and “bad mothers”. Ksenya, the divorced woman who brought her children to Egypt when she

⁷⁹ "200,000 Russian women married to Turks" *Komsomolskaya Pravda* September 8, 2008 retrieved from <http://www.topix.com/forum/world/turkey/TLROBG5QSUO3RJST> and “Turkish-Russian marriages make new ‘melez’ Generation” Gülden Aydın *Hürriyet Daily News* retrieved from <http://russianwomen.wordpress.com/2008/07/12/a-new-generation-of-russian-women-in-turkey/#more-511>

remarried, said her family and friends generally disapproved of her decision to move with her children. Similarly, another woman said her mother complained that Egypt was “no place to raise a child” and even tried unsuccessfully to get custody of her granddaughter in the courts. Ksenya vented to me one day, “They said I was a bad mother for marrying an Egyptian man and taking my kids to Egypt, but they never complained or criticized my ex-husband for all those years he was unemployed and drunk. Really, who is the bad parent?”

Seemingly in response to these twin crises of falling birthrates and women’s migration abroad, the new national holiday on July 9 was announced, “Day of Love, Family and Fidelity”, and the Russian language newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* in Egypt ran a series of articles promoting the benefits of family. Also, the Russian government has reinstated their pro-natal policies, offering cash incentives for births. But as Zhanna said, “What is \$10,000 for a second child when a tiny apartment in the furthest suburbs of Moscow costs \$250,000? Here in Hurghada I can get a nice place for \$20,000 and pay no real estate tax.”

Many women referred to the ubiquitous talk shows in Russia that would often feature women who married in Egypt and came back with “horror” stories about deception or oppression. “You can tell when one of those shows has been on because I get many panicked calls from friends and family saying, ‘Are you alright?!’” This national discussion of “mobile women” was also fueled by romance novels, one in particular was popular: How to Marry an Egyptian Man which depict one woman’s story of her

troubled marriage to an Egyptian. Ludmilla, a former teacher who married her tour guide, said, “Oh it was so exaggerated. So ridiculous! It shows the worse side of things.” Only a few of the women I interviewed mentioned trips to Russia with their Egyptian husbands. One woman brought her husband to her hometown and described her horror when her ex-husband showed up at the train station and asked, “So this is the chimp?” She said, “Thank God my husband didn’t understand that much Russian yet; he would have killed him, I’m sure.”

Recently, the local Russian newspaper in Egypt published a two-part series on mixed Russian-Egyptian marriages. The article states, “*Every year in Egypt appears more mixed marriages. On this topic...many are worried...[In fact] One could say that family life in a strange country is not always successful. One could say the opposite, especially if one judges from the articles and programs...[portraying] it as a complete catastrophe, where a husband is a tyrant or a loafer wanting to live on the dime of his [woman].*”⁸⁰ Accompanying the article is a family photo showing the Russian wife in *higab* with husband and toddler.⁸¹ Even after a more or less glowing article depicting married life to a man “who spends a lot of time with his family” the wife says, he is not a “typical” Egyptian man and that she doesn’t recommend marriage so far from one’s family, advising those considering marriage to “Think about it 85 times!...there are too many [unhappy] examples.”

⁸⁰ *Komsomolskaya Pravda in Egypt* “How to be a happy wife of Egyptian”, 22 June – 5 July 2009, page 14. (My translation.)

⁸¹ Though there are surely a handful of Russian women who married men in Hurghada and converted to Islam, in my month there, I maybe saw two such women, in headscarf on the street.

Other critics were concerned that women going abroad for marriage was a "value judgment" against Russian men (Luehrmann: 857). However, in Luehrmann's 2004 study of marriage agencies in Russia's Mari El Republic, many women claimed to not want to migrate, per se, but were seeking a marriage partner, citing a poor pool of local marriage partners given the high rate of male unemployment in the Mari El Republic. In a 2002 study on gender differences in employment strategies in Russia, 72% of women said that men should take the primary role as breadwinner (79% of men agreed). Although the numbers of men failing these financial obligations is relatively low, as only 15% of households rely on a sole female breadwinner.⁸² Still, women's anxiety on this issue is high and women frequently said that women have a greater sense of responsibility for the survival of the household than men do. So, while many women used the marriage agency as one of many means to find a husband, many also ended up marrying local Russian men, showing that marriage, not migration was the ultimate goal.

In the case of Russian women marrying Egyptians, I found that women explained their move to Egypt not in terms of moving up on the economic ladder, but because they found a suitable marriage partner. One woman said, "If you wait for a Russian man to propose, you could wait a long time." I also heard similar disparaging comments about Russian men from Russian women, often divorced, or having left unsatisfying relationships in which the husband/boyfriend was unemployed for a long time. Another time, Ksenya compared her new Egyptian husband favorably; "My old

⁸² According to the INTAS Gender Differences in employment strategy during economic transition in Russia" (grant no INTAS-97:202880).

husband didn't work: I did everything; he was like a third child. Here [Egypt] *I don't have to do anything for my husband*; he is very responsible." Though she spends hours cooking, cleaning and ironing and staying up late to greet him and serve his dinner when he arrives home, I believe she meant that she doesn't have to work outside the home as her Egyptian husband is gainfully employed and actively working in their real estate investment properties. Also, in the study mentioned above, 80% of Russian women expressed a desire to work even if they did not need the money. For younger women, the reason for this was so they could "meet people", while older women said it was important for them to remain active in society (Ashwin, 129).

As for Russian male reactions to mixed marriages, Ksenya said, "Just the other day, a Russian man I work with asked me how my marriage was going and he said in a sort of sarcastic way, 'Is your Arabic fairytale almost over?' He's just jealous." Another time, she remarked, "Russian men think that women are stupid and just after sex; but what they don't realize is that Russian women and Egyptian men have common interests: marriage and family. Russian men only really care about drinking with their friends ... Egypt men think they are the best lovers because so many Russian women come here. But, you know, they don't have a lot of experience." Another local man married to a Russian woman (himself born of an Egyptian father and European mother) questioned the wisdom of such mixed marriages between Russians and Egyptians: "They are so different: it is like humans and *cylons* [reference to TV show *Battlestar Gallactica*'s antagonists who are robots at war with the human race].

I asked his wife if she thought he was referring to men or women as the “cylons”. She laughed and said, “probably the women.” So many, not all, women married to Egyptian men in Hurghada seem to have found the ideal work/life balance that Russian women expressed a preference for in the 2002 survey: they want a breadwinning husband and the choice to work as much or as little as they like while assuming primary responsibility for the home. Almost every woman I interviewed told me with a touch of pride, “My husband says I don’t have to work unless I want to.” Then they would add, “And if I do, he said he would help me find a job”.

5.5. Bureaucratic Obstacles

Except for the passport processing services provided by the *Russki Dom* (Russian House) in Hurghada, there are no consular facilities in Hurghada that handle document authentication and legalization needed to marry officially in Egypt. Applicants must travel seven hours to the Russian Embassy in Cairo, and wait in line outside for several hours. Many women said the time and expense of a several day trip Cairo is a major obstacle to registering their *urfi* marriages. Zhanna recalled how one embassy staffer tried to talk her out of marrying an Egyptian, but finally said, “You’re sure you really want to get married? Then God be with you [because it’s a difficult process.]” Larissa’s husband began the process of registering their marriage, which meant Larissa had to go to the Russian Embassy and get paperwork proving she was not already married. She said the embassy staff made disparaging comments about “stupid girls who marry Egyptian men”. After their marriage was

officially registered with the Egyptian state, Larissa received a one year visa, followed by a renewable five year visa that allows her to work.

After four years, Zhanna has yet to officially register her *'urfi* marriage because the six-month residence visa has long since expired and without a residence visa, she is told she cannot get an official marriage. She regaled me with a long, convoluted story about the reasons her marriage wasn't official: the embassy was requiring a letter from her parents (from whom she is estranged) in order to "prove she isn't married". She said no other Russian woman she knew had to provide this letter: "it's just something new the embassy thought up to prevent Russian-Egyptian marriages".⁸³ Unable or unwilling to get this parental letter, Zhanna's *'urfi* marriage registration is stalled. But she didn't seem concerned, "In four years, no one has ever checked my papers so living without a valid visa is no problem."

Although bureaucratic hurdles or outright intransigence are major obstacles to getting marriages registered, some women may see an advantage to maintaining an unregistered marriage. Zhanna mentioned how many women who get pregnant and are married to Egyptian husbands make a point to have the baby in Russia, not only for the superior medical care, but also because it grants the child automatic Russian citizenship, "so the mom can leave [secretly] without getting her husband's

⁸³ This ambivalence towards the Russian state is evident when one Russian woman exclaimed, "If I had an accident, I wouldn't bother going to the Embassy. I don't think they would lift a finger to help me." (Ludmilla, August 2009). Another woman attended a public meeting convened in Hurghada by the Russian Consul in Egypt. When she asked what documents are needed to register *'urfi* marriage in the Russian Federation, the Russian Consul reportedly said, 'Those marriages aren't real marriages.' He didn't even answer my question and was rude!" (Interview with Tamara, September 2009)

permission.” This observation seems to contradict her previous-stated lack of urgency about the need to register the marriage, “We want to have a kid, so we should really do it [register the *urfi* marriage]”.

CONCLUSION

In the leafy neighborhood of Dokki in Cairo, the Russian Cultural Center’s reading room is usually quiet except for the sound of the TV tuned to Russian news channel coming from the lounge area. Alla has been presiding over the reading room for more than ten years. She’s been married to an Egyptian for 15 years. “We used to be called, “the iron brides” because we came from behind the iron curtain, but we were only a few then, compared to the numbers today.” The migrant wave of Russian women seems more like a tidal wave, but the question remains how this population, and more importantly their children, will become a part of their host country, Egypt. As long as Egypt continues to encourage the transfer of these foreign populations and their capital into tourism zones, the price of this growth will be a continued mixing of cultures and unpredictable future claims on the state.

During the past decade, Russian women’s economic standing has improved and they gained new skills and experiences living, working and marrying abroad. The discourse about migrant women from the former Soviet Union has evolved beyond descriptions of passive victims and tourists behaving badly, into that of active agents who, like Ksenya, take calculated risks, traverse borders and create transnational spaces that change what is “thinkable, practicable and desirable”.

The Egyptian State created a legal structure that holds up their end of the sexual contract with Egyptian men in tourist areas which seems intended to keep foreign *'urfi* brides outside of official marriage and men's legal responsibilities therein. For at least some of the women, this "fluidity" suits them, but many of these women are finding routes out of the margins into the mainstream. But how *'urfi* is used by Hurghadans, whether as a legalizing cover for pre-marital sex, or as the first step on the road to official marriage, all depends on the intentions of both parties: as long as Hurghada attracts "pleasure-seekers" there will be local residents to provide holiday romance, whether as a guise for economic gain or in good faith. Despite these attempts to marginalize Russian women, their role as reproducers of the next generation of Egyptian children and entrepreneurs ensure that they won't be going away anytime soon. One woman over a cup of coffee in her villa, said, "You know what they say about us Russians in Hurghada? 'We took the city without firing a shot.'"

APPENDIX A

Age	Occupation	Married officially to Egyptian	Unregistered 'urfi marriage	Formal work	Informal Work	Higher /Vocational Education
43	Nurse	X		X		X
40	Hotel Manager	X		X		X
42	Hairdresser				X	X
40	Businesswoman	X		X		X
45	School Administrator	X		X		X
42	Villa caretaker/entrepreneur				X	X
22	Unemployed animator/dancer		X		X	X
35	Dance instructor	X		X		X
40	Media publisher			X		X
32	Real estate agent	X		X		
30	Unemployed, worked in tourism	X		X		X
28	Bellydancer				X	X
26	Real Estate		X	X		X
34	Cosmotologist				X	X
23	Tour guide		X	X		X
29	Animation manager			X		X
24	Tour guide			X		X
30	Unemployed Pediatrician mother	X				X

45	Dance/Yoga instructor	X		X		
28	Singer		X		X	X
34	Yoga instructor, Artisan				X	X
35	Teacher	X		X		X
40	Entrepreneur	X		X		X
35	housewife					X
28	Retired					X
19	Dancer				X	
21	Dancer				X	X

APPENDIX B

Websites with Discussion forums about life in Egypt

www.dezy-house.ru *	English
www.kuntzkamera.com *	Russian and English
www.club.maghreb.ru	Russian
www.egyptsearch.com	English
www.egypt-best.ru	Russian

*feature "blacklists" of Egyptian men

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