



Extended Holiday in Hurghada: Russian Migrant Women and ‘*Urfi* Marriage

by Joanne Walby

The trope of the trafficked Russian woman is in many ways a product of the Soviet Union’s disintegration, its ensuing economic paralysis and the rapid expulsion of willing and unwilling women migrants that followed.¹ A steady persistence of this trope in mainstream global trafficking and sex work discourses has come to inform popular fears and perceptions of Russian women seeking work abroad. Since the early 1990s, variations in these discourses have lent themselves to the production and proliferation of an imagined, archetypal Russian woman

¹ This essay is extracted from J. Walby, “Extended Holiday in Hurghada: Russian Women and ‘*Urfi* Marriage” (M.A. Thesis, Department of Gender and Women’s Studies, American University in Cairo, Egypt). (2010)

subject: a destitute, invasive and hyper-sexualized slave to need rather than a mobile and rational agent. The very suggestion that this archetypal subject should be in a position to negotiate economic preferences and priorities of her own or to act upon private desires for real estate ownership, more equitable and fulfilling marriage partnerships and more leisure time is inconceivable within the existing discursive and investigative literature on trafficked and *sexscape*²-bound migratory Russophone³ women from the former Soviet republics. Inasmuch as these essentialized discourses conflate a broad set of motivations for Russophone women's migration and engagement in sex work, they fail to move beyond a fixation with saving victims⁴ and into more nuanced investigations of the ways Russophone women seek out and obtain economic viability, negotiate social and institutional mobility and satisfy their preferences and desires beyond the borders of their homelands. This work hopes to push that discursive moment along into less superficial pauses with an analysis of how and why Russophone women travel to Egypt's Red Sea resort town, Hurghada, as tourists and, increasingly often, why and how they stay.⁵

Whereas human trafficking and sex work more generally in the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region remain contentious but urgent issues for investigation, this research suggests that the dominant discursive and policy frameworks for trafficking and sex work under-attend some critical, perhaps intentional, regulatory incentives and disincentives operating on both ends of the migration stream and, by rendering Russophone women migrants thematic subjects rather than social and economic individuals, provide inadequate investigative tools for getting to the heart of the why and how Russophone women relocate to and build lives in Hurghada with relative ease. In that sense, this work shifts away from mainstream frameworks and into the more localized complexities of Hurghada's social and economic landscape as a nexus of transnational and multicultural community formation, multinational tourism and real estate growth.

² Denise Brennan (2004) describes the tourist town of Sosua, Dominican Republic as a "sexscape," in which the destabilizing affects of global capital on less industrialized economies have limited women's work options to insecure and dangerous work in tourism and sex tourism (2004, 31).

³ "Russophone" rather than "Russian" is used here in order to reflect the diverse nationalities of the respondents interviewed and of migrants relocating along Egypt's Red Sea coast more generally. The work will use the two terms interchangeably for the sake of ease at times, but aims to call attention to a tendency in the literature to lump a broad spectrum of subjects haphazardly into a generic category as "Russians," "Russian sex workers" or "Russian migrants."

⁴ See Katherine P. Averginos, "From Vixen to Victim: The Sensationalization and Normalization of Prostitution in Post-Soviet Russia," *Vestnik: The Journal of Russian and Asian Studies* 5(1): 17-39. (2006)

⁵ The citizenship of the women interviewed for this research included 24 from Russian Federation, 1 from Ukraine, 1 from Tajikistan, 1 from Uzbekistan. The English word "Russophone" is used to convey their varied national and ethnic origins as well as to best conceal their identities.

Two important ways Russophone women have learned to navigate Hurghada's complex terrain and gain access to greater degrees of mobility are by engaging in Islamic customary *'urfi* marriages with Egyptian men and starting families with them.⁶ An *'urfi* marriage contract is considered religiously binding once a couple declares their intention to marry each other, but it is not treated as an "official" contract in the eyes of the Egyptian state unless it has been registered with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Cairo. Unofficial *'urfi* contracts, which are most common among migrants, is little more than a piece of paper signed off by both parties, or "a ticket for sex" as many respondents called it, which allows couples to get a hotel room or rent a flat together. Unofficial *'urfi* certificates can be obtained from a range of venues including, as one respondent noted, kiosks outside Egypt's Sharm El Sheikh airport, adding, "Now, how can anyone think that is a real marriage?" Once an *'urfi* marriage has been legalized⁷ and the couple applies to register their marriage with the Egyptian Ministry of Justice⁸, the foreign bride becomes eligible for a residence visa in Egypt which, unlike the tourist visa, can facilitate formal or more stable wage and work contracts. Children born to parents with an official *'urfi* contract, or one that has been registered with the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, become eligible for an Egyptian national identity card, patrilineal inheritance rights and entitlements to financial support from the father in case of divorce.

While this initial sketch of *'urfi* marriage contracts suggests that marriage may be a relatively easy way for Russophone tourists to remain in Egypt on extended holiday, a point to which this essay returns, this work ultimately argues that it is common for Russophone women to migrate to Hurghada for reasons beyond work and marriage, as many informants for this research cited a desire to "start over" after divorce, to "enjoy the sunshine" and to "find their fate" while experiencing a different pace of life in an exotic locale—some for themselves, some for their children from previous marriages and some for aging parents or close friends. In Hurghada, Russophone women are able to act upon certain rational "desires" for real estate, more flexible work opportunities and a higher standard of living due to the greater mobility afforded to them as "white" tourists in a largely "non-white" yet foreign capital-oriented tourist zone monitored by bribable state tourism police. Although possession of the resident visa may allow migrant women to be considered "local" in the administrative sense, their "whiteness"

⁶ Children with patrilineal Egyptian heritage can apply for citizenship in Egypt, particularly male children.

⁷ If an *'urfi* contract is not legalized in a lawyer's office with two witnesses present, it is considered an illegitimate "secret marriage," although many men believe that having an *'urfi* marriage (legalized or not) renders pre-marital sex "lawful" and hence absolved of "sin" under *Sbari'a* law (Abouissa 2009b).

⁸ Official and unofficial *'urfi* marriages also take place between Egyptian men and Egyptian women. This work will focus in on the practice of *'urfi* marriage as it relates to unions between Egyptian men and foreign, specifically Russophone women.

allows them to transcend normative protocol for local behavior and dress and thus to live more freely than most Egyptian women and men in other parts of Egypt. As they stroll along Hurghada's pedestrian malls, Russophone residents are mistaken for tourists and ignored by the police, enjoying a great deal of freedom when it comes to creating their own cultural practices and norms within the Red Sea tourist spaces. I argue that largely because of such structural and social advantages, all of my Russophone respondents had been able, while retaining their citizenship of origin⁹, to negotiate and seize upon various entry points into the local economy and social sphere as privileged locals and, in doing so, were able to collectively influence public space and establish distinct and lasting hybrid cultural practices and norms, not least of which is a dynamically mobile next-generation of dual-citizen, multilingual, multicultural and transnational children.

In heading to Hurghada in July of 2009 to conduct ethnographic interviews¹⁰, I expected to find a dominating sex industry. Instead I discovered a complex network of relationships and operative modes through which Russophone migrants, only a few of whom I suspect were selling sex, constructed lives abroad. Of the 27 Russophone women I interviewed in Russian¹¹ in Hurghada, nine claimed to have met their husbands while vacationing in Hurghada, having been married on average five years. Ten respondents initially moved to Hurghada with local job offers, while eight moved in search of a different pace of life, finding work and romance along the way. Some respondents had chosen not to officially register their *'urfi* contracts, whereas others said they were open to the possibility. Just under a third of my informants (7 of 27) were married to non-Egyptian men, with whom they had moved to Hurghada in search of economic opportunities. Although none of my respondents openly self-identified as sex workers, many of my interviews pointed to a general awareness of private "working" flats where sex is being traded or sold, as if sex work lay just below the surface of Hurghada's social infrastructure.¹² As

⁹ I have heard anecdotal evidence of "many" Russian women who move to Egypt for marriage, convert to Islam and begin to wear the headscarf (*hijab*) and veil (*niqab*). Future research could examine whether these women also change their citizenship and how that affects their standing in Hurghada as "Russian women."

¹⁰ I returned to Hurghada for a week of follow up interviews in September 2009.

¹¹ All Russian to English and English to Russian translations and transliterations in this work have been performed by the author.

¹² While sex workers may be found in Hurghada's vast matrix of informal and formal hotels, clubs, businesses, social cliques, their status as "trafficked" women is unclear. n I asked my informants, including Russian women and Egyptian men, about the issue of "human trafficking" and potential links with Hurghada's sex industry, many were skeptical, citing the plethora of women on holiday as "giving it [sex] away for free". Even dancers from a travelling, mildly-erotic dance troupe reported that they were properly paid, provided with housing and their manager was sensitive to allegations of prostitution, so if their mobility was controlled, it seemed to more along the lines of a "house mother" preventing promiscuity, as I did observe the dancers socializing freely after a performance at a popular beach club.

I continued to find intermixing between Egyptians and Russophone migrants through the practice of *'urfi* marriage and Russophone women tourists, migrants and residents engaging in long- and short-term employment stints in Hurghada's tourism industry¹³, this research shifted further into an investigation of why and how these relationships and opportunities became not just possible but essential instruments for extended stay in Hurghada. Following such observations, I began to look more carefully at the sites in which Egyptian men and Russian women gained interaction with one another and questioned whether and to what degree these trends related to sex tourism itself.

Hurghada as *Sexscape*

In Egypt more broadly, the standard set of associations which often accompany Russian women are applied to the sizeable Russophone community now living in Hurghada, a tourist town some 395 km south of Cairo along Egypt's Red Sea coast, which has sprung up over the past 15 years of Egypt's aggressive state-led tourism development. Before I first visited Hurghada and grasped the size and situatedness of the local Russophone population there, I had become familiar with its profile as a transit hub for human trafficking circuits leading to Israel and Europe from the Newly Independent States (NIS) of the former Soviet Union.¹⁴ Under the influence of the trafficking and sex work literature, I perhaps naturally assumed Hurghada would serve as an ideal environment for observing sex work and even trafficking in Egypt. Still the degree to which Hurghada could be considered a *sexscape* remained unclear until slightly later in my research, when I began to uncover the more subtle complexities of its social, economic and regulatory environment.

Much of the literature on sex tourism in Southeast Asia and the Caribbean renders the female subject as non-mobile, exploited and desirous of mobility (Brennan 2006). In Hurghada, however, Egyptian men tend to be the stationary or less mobile subjects yet are often portrayed in online Russian and English language chat rooms as the exploitative parties, preying upon migrant and tourist women for economic gain or social conquest. Many online chat rooms provide lengthy discussions between Russophone women of "romances gone wrong" and "blacklists" of Egyptian playboys who use *'urfi* to engage in duplicitous casual affairs.¹⁵ The

¹³ This does not mean that "trafficked women" don't exist in Hurghada, only that this research supports the argument that recent arrests in the Russian-Israeli mafia and Israel's decision to not require visas for Russian nationals may have slowed the trafficking of women through Egypt.

¹⁴ According to estimates from Chemonics International and USAID in *Assessment on the Status of Trafficking Persons in Egypt: Changing Perceptions and Proposing Appropriate Interventions* (2007), 3000-5000 women annually were trafficked into Israel's sex industry between 2001 and 2005.

¹⁵ Such blacklists against Egyptian men exist in Egypt and Turkey and possibly for tourist towns elsewhere.

portrayal of Russophone tourists and migrants in Hurghada as victims of exploitation perpetuates an essentialist model of female sexuality as passive.¹⁶ Yet in Hurghada quite the opposite scenario is often observed, as Russophone tourists and migrants, who are often older than their Egyptian male partners, enjoy a higher level of economic and social mobility, suggesting that Hurghada is something more complex than a *sexscape* where foreign male tourists seek Russian sex workers. This research thus suggests that while sex may characterize certain aspects of Russophone migrants' efforts to turn holiday in Hurghada into extended stay, such as in the case where *'urfi* marriage, child bearing and, yes, occasionally sex work, the notion of Hurghada as *sexscape* is an easy out, as it oversimplifies some important modes of agency for Russophone migrants themselves, while downplaying the structural and social incentives which make their extended stay in Hurghada possible. In an effort to illustrate more fairly the ways by which Russophone women navigate the complexities of Hurghada and advance their own interests and desires, I provide the respondent narratives of three women, Ksenya, Katya and Larissa.

Ksenya¹⁷ [Ксения]

When I first caught site of my main informant, Ksenya, at Hurghada's bus station, I didn't recognize her from the online profile photo, which showed her with carrot red hair and an open, smiling face. As taxi drivers, travelers and shopkeepers bustled around me, a woman bearing resemblance to the Italian actress Isabella Rosselini strode toward me and directed the Egyptian man with her to help with my bags. Her eye and lip liner, I would later realize, were tattooed-on and her matching red patent handbag and sandals and red, orange and pink beaded necklace made her look perpetually 'put together,' reminding me of the summer outfits some women put together when heading for holiday in warmer climes. She greeted me with a smile and we hopped into the car. As her husband drove the three of us through town, she took several calls on her cell phone, discussing business with the caller and her husband behind the wheel, Ibrahim, who jointly owns a perfume shop with three other Egyptians.

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 highly paid, high-stress job at an oil company in one of Russia's largest cities. "It was my first day in Hurghada and I walked into his shop," Ksenya told me, "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!'" Once Ibrahim had

¹⁶ See Kempadoo 2001 and O'Connell Davidson 1998 among others for further discussion of female sex tourism and passive gender performance.

¹⁷ All respondent names are pseudonyms.

explained that he was serious about marrying her and, in realizing she had developed feelings for him as well, Ksenya relocated to Hurghada with her two early-teen children three months later with a plan to stay long term. Ksenya alluded to the financial strains of a lagging tourist economy in 2008, but was continuing with her plans to open a school for Russophone students a few months following the interview. I hadn't yet learned at that early point that this former university teacher of literature had once been a black-market clothing trader in the last days of the USSR. Taking risks on a business venture was par for the course for someone who, as a teenager, had travelled long distances alone, dodged authorities, maneuvered successfully through informal networks and negotiated with tough characters to make ends meet. Before coming to Hurghada, Ksenya had been eyeing Bulgaria's Black Sea coast and places in Turkey, looking, she said, for a suitable climate for her son. In Hurghada, she found not just a dry climate suitable for her son's asthma, but also a marriage partner and economic opportunities in the burgeoning Russophone community.

Ksenya brought private assets into Egypt when she relocated to Hurghada and chartered the way for a network of Russian friends also interested in investing locally. Although Ksenya and her husband, Ibrahim, rent a flat together, quite contrary to local norms in which the husband will purchase a marriage flat, together they have invested in Cairo and Hurghada real estate and venture initiatives, including a yacht for tourist rentals and other long term business prospects like the school Ksenya had been planning to launch. Questions regarding decision-making and household finances were regarded as topics for negotiation between her and Ibrahim, and Ksenya, like other respondents, reported regular contributions to household expenses like rent and food, suggesting that such seemingly equitable and fluid marital finance arrangements were more or less the norm between mixed couples, rather than the customary local Islamic practice in which wives separate personal finances from household expenditures.

One evening I joined some of Ksenya's Russian friends at a popular, upscale chain restaurant featuring a women-only night, or "*Den Devushek* [Ladies Day]." Until 1 a.m., women were invited to enjoy two glasses of wine and help themselves to a dessert bar, *gratis*. The bartender told me this was an "experiment" meant to provide local women with a women-only social forum, as a measure to appease Egyptian husbands and social norms. As we clustered around the bar on red velvet stools, I spotted a young woman wearing a blue sequined mini-dress with plunging neckline. Although Hurghada abounds in revealing tourist beachwear, the sequins and short length of her dress 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 blue dress walking alone. I asked my acquaintance about her and where she worked. "Oh yeah, that's Katya." Then she raised her eyebrows

meaningfully and said, “She keeps herself busy, you know?”¹⁸

Katya [Катя]

A few nights later, I was interviewing two women, one an accountant from Moscow and the second a psychologist taking “a break from hectic Moscow life” when Katya joined us. After they discussed 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 shopping mall pavilion where we sat, her smudged, hot pink mascara and the way she growled out words, which I initially mistook for intoxication, then realized was probably just a deep and slang-peppered aesthetic, perhaps intended to convey a rough edge. As if on cue, two women in very different styles of dress approached our table, greeted Katya with a kiss on both cheeks and began discussing a male acquaintance; one was an Egyptian woman dressed provocatively in a jean miniskirt, leggings and black bustier, while the other, a Russian woman, wore a conservative flower print dress. After they left, 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 seemed to belie her interest and anticipation 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. After ordering a couple of drinks, Katya eagerly launched into the story of how her parents divorced when she was young and her one full brother and several half siblings. She identified herself as an “active” person and a graduate of an institute for physical education. Katya first came to Egypt to visit her brother who was working as an animator¹⁹ in the upscale Red Sea resort town of Sharm el Sheikh. Upon seeing the many foreign workers there, Katya decided she would move and become a diving instructor. When the diving instructor job failed to pan out, Katya found work as a children’s animator, providing child-care and activities for children on vacation at the hotel with their families. After a year or so, Katya returned home to Moscow to help her half-sister take care of a new baby, saying, “It was a hard time because my half-sister’s mother had disappeared and we didn’t know where she was. I decided to leave again because of tension with my mother who didn’t like me coming home so late [from her job as a ‘go-go dancer’ in a nightclub]...sometimes I would come home drunk.” She decided to return to Egypt, telling no one except her brother:

¹⁸ Literally, “on all hands, from boredom” or “*на все руки от скуки*.”

¹⁹ Hotel animators are hired to provide activities for guests, including games, exercise classes and childcare. They sometimes also perform musical shows before accompanying hotel guests to nightclubs.

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 I asked about work, Katya said she was currently unemployed and made reference to "having enemies" at certain hotels where she had worked as an animator and couldn't be rehired. When I asked how she supports herself without a job, she shrugged the question off, saying, "My friends help me out." Trying to steer the conversation back to Katya's living situation, she said only that she and her Egyptian male "roommate" managed to communicate in what little Arabic and English she knew. Although she claims their relationship is platonic, cohabitation between unmarried men and women is illegal in Egypt and is regularly policed throughout the country except, perhaps, inside tourist zones. Sensing she didn't want to provide more details on how she got money, I listened to her monologue about family troubles and a vast network of friendships fostered by Egypt's tourism zones and English and Russian language online chat rooms and social networking websites. Despite not having a formal job, Katya identified Hurghada as her second home and said that friends from around the world come to visit her often, noting, "For the time being, Hurghada is more or less enough for me."

Having seen that informal work was available in Egypt's Red Sea tourist towns, Katya eagerly left a troubled family life in Russia, which included a marriage and divorce at the age of eighteen. With annual trips back to Russia and occasional visits by family, Katya typifies the "back and forth" mobility of the transmigrants one finds in abundance in Hurghada today. When I asked about her future plans, she said, "Well, I could always get married and have kids here...or [I] may go to Turkey for work," while noting that Turkey was more strict about overstaying one's visa and that to do so could get one blacklisted from the country. Nonetheless, Katya inhabits an important middle space in Hurghada's social scene, somewhere between those in official *'urfi* marriages and formal employment on the one hand, and those even further outside Hurghada's loose formal structures, with the latter including women who exclusively sell sex. Despite her ubiquitous presence along the pedestrian mall and tenuous relations with other hotel animators, Katya is able to maintain her social contacts among the women who gather for "Ladies Night" and to negotiate her way to a better life through short-term employment stints and non-marital bonds.

Larissa [Лариса]

Larissa claimed to be from a small town south of Moscow, "famous for [its] hand-made lace and butter." If it weren't for her high-arched, inked-on eyebrows, Larissa would have reminded me

of a classical picture of a Russian peasant woman with her blue eyes and blond hair pulled back, much like a painting given to me by a friend who told me, “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 her 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 of her daughter’s fluency in Arabic and popularity at the mosque, where “She always goes with her dad and all the sheikhs just love her.”

Larissa first came to Egypt in 1999 for a vacation with her female boss. The man who she now calls her husband then worked at the hotel where she and her boss stayed and invited her one night to the hotel’s discotheque. Over the following two weeks, their romance blossomed and they stayed in touch after she left Hurghada. 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 to officially register their marriage with the Egyptian Ministry of Justice, which can take up to six months. Eventually she received a residence visa and work permit, saying, “After we got married, I stayed home for two months, but was bored so I asked my husband to help me find a job.”

Larissa worked for three years in a tourism company and then moved to another firm where she sold local excursion packages to tourists on the street for a commission. As the price of tour packages being offered by hotels fell and her work ceased to be profitable, the firm eventually closed. “Now I work for a real estate company that specializes in beachfront property,” Larissa said, speaking knowledgeably about a proposed multi-million dollar luxury resort development project, Sahl Hasheesh, to be located just 20 km from Hurghada. Her eyes shown with anticipation as she dropped the name of the resort’s world-famous architect and marveled over its proposed “fifteen hotels, three golf courses²⁰ and the longest promenade in the world!” When I asked if this trend toward luxury resorts would affect Hurghada’s tourist draw, she said, “This is where real people live, you know? And it is cheap enough to always attract middle-class Russians who want to go to exotic ‘Africa.’” Ultimately Larissa is an example of how Russophone women on holiday in Hurghada almost stumble upon marriage, family and career opportunities, rather than aggressively seeking it out. Moreover, although the extent of Larissa’s actual involvement in local real estate development is unclear, her informed sense of development projects and the luxury tourism industry along Egypt’s Red Sea clearly suggests her perceptiveness regarding upward socio-economic mobility in the local environment.

²⁰ Hurghada currently has no golf courses.

Transnational from Above and Below

One aspect of Hurghada that makes it feel, as Katya said, like a “second home” for many Russophone migrants is the existing Russophone population and the visibility of Russian language and culture. In conversation with a local Russian real estate mogul who has been in Hurghada for over 10 years, he said that Hurghada’s overall population had tripled since 2004. Estimates place the current population at 180,000 with Russophone residents numbering 10,000 and 20,000, the latter number including those who overstayed visas.²¹ As a local Hurghadan advertising company’s websites states, “. . .part of the population growth comes from women who have married local men and are now raising the new multicultural generation of the city.” Anecdotal evidence from this research further suggests that as more children and grandchildren are born in Hurghada, extended family members and family friends from Russophone countries spend greater amounts of time and money there, attracted by cheap real estate and a lower cost of living than that found in Russia’s urban centers.²²

Russian migrants have given Hurghada a Russified name, “*Krasnomorsk*”²³, effectively appropriating it as part of the Russian motherland, *Rodina* [родина], and highlighting all the more the extent to which migrants from the Russian Federation have established significant roots in Hurghada by purchasing property, opening businesses and schools and launching a local edition of one of Russia’s preeminent newspapers, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*.²⁴ As I met more of Hurghada’s Russophone 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, and recreated themselves in Hurghada’s transnational public spaces.

In her study of interactions between Dominican sex workers and European tourists in Sosua, Dominican Republic, Denise Brennan (2004) builds upon Smith and Guarnizo’s (1998) use of the concept “transnationalism from above,” which the authors initially used in reference to the national liberalization policies intended to further globalism which are enacted at the state level by state instruments, while “transnationalism from below” occurs at the micro level, facilitate not only the flow of peoples and currency but also various informal modes of exchange and trade, including the buying and selling of sex. One example of a policy initiative that enables

²¹ Population statistics have been gathered from www.hurghada.com and *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (Egypt Print Edition) (September 8-21, 2008).

²² This is especially true of Moscow, one of the most expensive cities in the world.

²³ This means “Red Sea town” in Russian and follows a typical naming convention, i.e. Chernomorsk [Black Sea town].

²⁴ A second Russian Language paper, *Moskovskie Komsomolets*, went into print in Hurghada in the fall of 2009.

transnationalism from above is Egypt's Law on Foreign Exchange 1994/230, which guarantees an unrestricted repatriation of profits and capital in addition to trademark and intellectual property rights for foreign firms and investors. A similar example is Law 1998/8, which initially granted a 20-year extension on tax exemptions for foreign investments in the tourism sector, after which profits were to be subject to a 40% tax.²⁵ Beyond policies that enable transnational movement of capital and finance, Brennan broadens the "transnationalisms from above" concept to include inflows of middle class tourists from affluent states which are "central to the accumulation of capital", or the global North, to the Dominican Republic, where they spend leisure time, purchase real estate, open businesses and have short term or temporary sexual exchanges and personal relationships with local women. Brennan describes this process by which poor and marginalized individuals cross borders for work and marriage as "transnationalism from below" (Brennan 2004, 43) and includes within it Dominican women who travel to tourist zones from other parts of the country to perform sex work and pursue lucrative personal relationships with foreign tourists and migrants.

Brennan draws upon an important distinction between foreign tourists and local sex workers in Dominican Republic as "mobile" and "non-mobile" subjects respectively, which I see as a useful construct for examining Hurghada's marriage market even despite the fact that many Russophone migrants do not come to Hurghada necessarily seeking sex or marriage. The tension between mobile Russophone women and non-mobile Egyptian men in many ways defines Hurghada's marriage market and, more generally, serves as an incentive for mixed couples to join forces in other respects, such as through joint investments and business ventures. Whereas Russophone female tourists who travel to and remain in Hurghada can be considered "mobile" in the sense of being able to relocate from their home countries while enduring the risks of not having a job, housing or a reliable community of personal networks and having to navigate a new climate of laws and norms, the Egyptian men they encounter and enter relationships with are comparatively "non-mobile," in the sense that they earn significantly lower wages, are prohibited from open travel by restrictive state policies toward lower class nationals and endure greater pressure from religious and state institutions to comply with local legal, social and cultural codes of conduct. Yet in another sense, partnerships with Egyptian men offer Russophone migrants a greater degree of mobility in the local environment, particularly by allowing them to stay and work more long term inside the country, and to gain access to real estate purchase and other forms of capital investment. All of these advantages which result from partnerships with Egyptian men are achieved through a manipulation of state policy, thus making Hurghada an

²⁵ In 2005, Egypt's Law 8 of 1998 was amended and the tax holiday was rescinded in favor of a 20% tax on profits.

interesting case study in which aspects of “transnationalism from above” and “transnationalism from below” overlap and reinforce.

One way the Egyptian state attracts both wealth from migrants’ home countries and migrants themselves is by offering residence visas for anyone purchasing real estate over US\$50,000, a high but not unmanageable base sum if resources are pooled between families. Some of my respondents noted, for example, that they and their Egyptian partners had pooled resources to purchase modest flats valued around US\$20,000 - 30,000, which, as one respondent pointed out, was not a significant enough investment to become eligible for the residence visa, requiring her to continually renew her tourist visa or risk being deported along with her son.²⁶

The ease of *urfi* marriage in Egypt, on the other hand, is an example of a policy incentive which indirectly facilitates “transnationalism from below,” as Russophone migrants may turn to marriage with Egyptian partners as a way to secure alternative venues for obtaining residency, a more comfortable life style and work opportunity. Although *urfi* marriage certificates are not automatically recognized by the state and must go through a legalization process before benefits such as residency can be secured, *urfi* certificates can secure immediate benefits such as cohabitation and occasionally work contracts. As one Russian woman I spoke to in Cairo observed, her seven year *urfi* marriage meant her husband would pay for housing and provide her with a support letter she would need to renew her visa annually and to keep her well-paying job. For other respondents, *urfi* marriage led to the birth of intercultural children with dual citizenship, which can offer the additional benefit of greater security and administrative status for themselves vis-à-vis the Egyptian state.

Flexible and Informal “Pulls”: Citizenship, Marital Status and Visa

In *Flexible Citizenship* (1999), Aihwa Ong suggests that political borders lessen in significance as individuals become eligible for more than one citizenship, noting that even as these obstacles to physical mobility become less rigorous, states continue to react to the “manipulation” of state policies by citizens and non-citizens alike, often showing discriminatory preferences for parties and individuals who enable foreign currency inflows. In other words, states do not necessarily prioritize their own citizens, particularly citizens with few capital assets or those with mismatched

²⁶ When I initially conducted this research in July 2009, most respondents were unconcerned about overstaying their visas, saying things like, “The police never stop me because I’m a foreigner.” When I returned two months later in September 2009, however, a few women expressed concern about leaving the house, as there had been a highly publicized arrest of two Russian women for prostitution in Cairo, and two or three women said they had heard that the police were spot-checking foreigners’ visas on the *memsha* [pedestrian thoroughfare in front of the Esplanade Mall in Hurgada]. One respondent claimed to have read in an online chat room that a Russian woman married to an Egyptian and with a child born in Egypt, was deported because her visa was not valid.

skill sets in highly demand driven sectors like tourism. Many respondents for this work did not feel their native citizenship helped them in any significant way as they built lives in Hurghada and, in fact, the obstacles to obtaining citizenship in Egypt served to keep Russophone migrants in a state of limbo with regard to personal status and entitlements. One respondent who had moved to Hurghada for marriage said that she “wouldn’t bother going to the [Russian] Embassy” in case of an accident, doubting that they “would lift a finger to help [her].”²⁷ Another respondent explained how she asked the Russian consul at a public meeting, asking how they could legalize their marriage in the Russian Federation. “He dismissed my question, saying our marriages ‘aren’t real.’ He [the consul] didn’t even answer my question and was rude!”²⁸

Except for passport processing services provided by the *Russki Dom* [Russian House], a privately owned and operated but quasi-governmental organization that runs a school and a visa processing operation, consular services including document authentication, licensing and legalization require applicants to travel seven hours to the Russian Embassy in Cairo—hence informal ‘*urfi*’ certificates remain the norm in Hurghada, as many respondents considered the time and expense of a several day trip to Cairo to be unworthy of the benefits they would gain by registering their ‘*urfi*’ marriages. Zhanna, for one, recalled how an embassy staffer tried to talk her out of marrying an Egyptian, saying, “You’re sure you really want to get married? Then God be with you [because it’s a difficult process].” After four years of marriage, Zhanna had yet to officially register her ‘*urfi*’ contract and, at the time of our interview, had been informally denied formal recognition of her marriage by the embassy on the grounds that her six-month residence visa had long expired. Zhanna claimed that the embassy had required a letter from her estranged parents to “prove she isn’t married,” which she claimed no other Russian woman she knew had been asked to provide, saying, “It’s just something new the embassy thought up to prevent Russian-Egyptian marriages.” Either unable or unwilling to get the parental letter, Zhanna’s ‘*urfi*’ marriage registration is stalled indefinitely, but she didn’t seem concerned, saying “In four years, no one has ever checked my papers so living without a valid visa is no problem.”

Zhanna’s narrative illustrates Aihwa Ong’s (1999) argument that citizenship matters less as mobility increases, particularly in the sense that her Russian citizenship and lack of Egyptian citizenship neither facilitated an official recognition of her new marital status in Russia, nor prevented her from feeling confident in her ability to remain in Egypt without a current visa, find

²⁷ Personal interview with Ludmilla (July 2009).

²⁸ Personal interview with Tamara (September 2009). Not even one year later, *Moskovskie Komsomlets* published an interview with the new Russian Ambassador to Egypt (May 22, 2010) where he answered questions from readers about Egyptian citizenship for children born of Russian mothers and Egyptian fathers. In a follow up interview in May 2010, one of my respondents reported that the Russian Embassy had begun allowing the Egyptian husbands of Russian citizens to get a Russian visa without the standard third party invitation.

employment and carry on with married life very much unphased by her status on such seemingly critical matters. Zhanna's narrative also illustrates Ong's argument in the sense that both the Russian and Egyptian states seem to react to her manipulations of policy in very particular and self-interested ways. Whereas on the one hand the Russian state appears to obstruct the official recognition of Zhanna's marriage to an Egyptian²⁹, the Egyptian state keeps Zhanna and other migrants like her in a state of status limbo by complicating the process for obtaining a residence visa, while also turning a blind eye to migrants with expired visas so long as they facilitate growth in the local economy. Given such obstacles, it is not surprising that many women maneuver in spite of and sometimes even prefer to keep their *'urfi* marriage contracts informal to sidestep bureaucratic headaches or, more seriously, to avoid potential custody issues in case of divorce. Tamara, a physician with a toddler fathered by her Egyptian husband, 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?"

Egyptian law³⁰, conversely, allows a foreign wife to obtain Egyptian citizenship after being married to an Egyptian man and living in Egypt for five years³¹, with less realized conditions on that policy being that the marriage must be officially recognized and the wife must be living legally in Egypt for five years. Not one of my respondents held Egyptian citizenship, suggesting that despite such seeming opportunities for "transnationalism from above," more hidden and less formal obstacles exist which prevent migrants, even those who hold enduring marriages with Egyptian men, from obtaining Egyptian citizenship and the benefits it entails. A few of the women I interviewed had children with Egyptian citizenship, having been born in Egypt, however, yet none saw a lack of citizenship as influential for either work or marriage.³² Without significant social or legal constraint, *'urfi* marriage allows foreign women the same freedom to leave marriages as easily as Muslim Egyptian men might pronounce divorce.³³ *'Urfi* marriage is often criticized on grounds that it denies women their rights to financial protections from the husband, but as non-Muslims most Russophone migrants are simply ineligible for Islamic

²⁹ See Walby 2010 for further analysis of Russia's 'naming and shaming' of Russian women who marry abroad.

³⁰ *B Pomosh': Russiskomu sootchestveniky v Egipte* [Information and Legal Directory for Russians Expatriates in Egypt]. Print Publication of the Russian Embassy in Cairo, Egypt. (2009)

³¹ Some respondents even had the impression that the Russian Federation does not allow dual citizenship, but this is not the case.

³² Most women purposefully birthed their children in Russia in order for them to obtain automatic Russian citizenship.

³³ In Egyptian law and Islamic custom, men can legally divorce their wives by pronouncing the words "I divorce you" three times, whereas women must apply to civil courts to obtain a divorce.

entitlements, making informality a kind of safeguard on the mobility of the woman and her children should the marriage end in divorce and the woman want to return to her country of origin.

The disregard my informants broadly showed for issues like job security and expired visas illustrates Saskia Sassen's (1981) important critique that state action, by way of visa and labor policies rather than the choices of individuals, determines migration patterns. Russians choose Egypt as a holiday destination, in part due to the ease of obtaining entry visas at the airport, and in part due to its overall affordability and potential for longer work stay opportunities. The state's lax enforcement of labor and visa regulations in the tourism sector, moreover, allows many tourists to become labor migrants when they find work in Hurghada³⁴, and eventually to secure certain benefits and desirable accommodations unavailable in their home countries. Aihwa Ong (1999) argues that mobile subjects strategically situate themselves through citizenship in various countries in order to enhance their livelihood opportunities, thus manipulating state policies and structures to better obtain their desires and adapt to circumstances. Whereas in the case of Russophone women in Hurghada the likelihood of obtaining actual citizenship appears to be slim, the flexibility of labor and visa policies in Egypt do allow migrants to become situated enough to perform cost-benefit analyses between countries in terms of the desirability of employment, marriage and various social safety nets at a relatively minor cost to the migrants' assets and backward social mobility.

Whereas the human trafficking literature generally identifies these desires for better socioeconomic conditions as "push" factors drawing migrants abroad, this research sees Egypt's flexible visa regimes, informal employment networks, low state interference in regulating foreigners with tourism police, affordable real estate, and externalities such as lower cost of living and more satisfying marital arrangements which emphasize spousal support, shared resources and family life as a set of important "pull" factors at work in drawing migrants to Hurghada. Together these push and pull factors transform Hurghada into a space where agency is largely determined by the degree to which personal and regulatory flexibility and capital resources can be mobilized in the negotiation of what Aihwa Ong (1999) calls the "cultural logistics" through which actions such as relocation or marriage in a foreign country, become "thinkable, practicable, and desirable" (1999, 3).

³⁴ Russians numbered highest among the 12.8 million tourists coming to Egypt in 2010.

The Work | Marriage Nexus

Once a couple officially register their *'urfi* marriage contract, the wife can apply for a six-month residence visa, which gives her additional time to find formal or informal work. It is common for formal sector employers in Hurghada to check for a valid visa at the time of employment, but rarely to check that it remains valid once employment is secured. Although “work not permitted” is stamped across both tourist and residence visas, informal employers often ignore this and offer cash payment for services rendered. Thus many respondents have continued to live in Hurghada with expired visas since there is little consequence where stable jobs do not necessarily require proof of “legal” residence status. In the course of this research, however, I sensed that my informants were “fixed” in Hurghada in a number of other ways indirectly resulting from personal status insecurity, as few would venture into Cairo or other parts of Egypt for fear of being fined or deported.

In Anna Agathangelou's (2004) critical study of political economy and sex in Turkey and Cypress, she claims that the driving role of various forms of female labor within global capitalist processes is ignored in the international political economy literature. Sex work, domestic work and “care” work³⁵, all typically performed by female labor and virtually unrecognized in both theory and policy, contribute significantly to the surplus value underwriting many of the economies to which Russophone and other migrant women gravitate in search of opportunity. Agathangelou argues that women's reproductive labor³⁶ in particular enables, enhances and preserves intimate relationships and emotional stability in societies at large while reproducing the labor force itself. This is particularly relevant in the case of Russophone women in Hurghada in the sense that family formation and marital bonds are primary (although not always initial) modes through which women gain social leverage and legitimacy, both in the marriage and within Hurghada's broader Egyptian and Russophone communities.

Lourdes Beneria (2001) draws a correlation between the “informaliz[ation of] women's work” and deindustrialization processes in the global North beginning since the 1970s, which she identifies as joint forces in fostering the slow rise of global leisure industries. The deindustrialization trend, she argues, has been accompanied by a desire to deregulate global and national labor markets as a way to shift employment costs away from employers and onto laborers. This widespread deregulation of employment procedures, worker conditions and pay has produced a labor culture of short-term jobs without benefits, informal pay agreements and a

³⁵ Agathangelou (2004) describes “care” work as labor that enhances a person's physical and emotional well-being, such as massage, physical therapy, and home-care nursing as well as more intimate acts, like sex work (2004, 3).

³⁶ Agathangelou (2004) defines reproductive labor as the “international sexual division of labor in which women's social and economic contributions are exploited, commodified and sold for cheap wages” (2004, 3).

general atmosphere of labor expendability, as laborers become increasingly easy to replace with incoming migrants willing to work harder for lower wages and fewer benefits. David Harvey (2009) calls attention to the increasingly fluid deployment of capital and human resources one finds in Hurghada, noting that, “flexibility is the *modus operandi* of late capitalism” (2009, 262).

And indeed it is in Hurghada, as most of my respondents had worked informally at some point as hairdressers, house cleaners, villa caretakers, or entertainers, which included belly dancers, go-go dancers at clubs, singers, disc jockeys, or traveling “ballet show” performers who worked the club and hotel circuit in Hurghada and beyond. *Urfi* marriage emerges as a relatively easy way to bridge the security gaps created by temporary, informal work opportunities in tourism for migrants who desire to remain in Hurghada, and facilitates an atmosphere where flexibility and informality intersect and overlap. Hence just as capital and labor have become flexible and mobile in Hurghada, Russian women have adapted to that tenor by developing their own “cultural logistics” (Ong 1999, 3) in response to new opportunities. Lana, for example, is a 28-year old lounge singer with a bleach-blond pixie cut who left her Moscow office job at an international company for a singing contract in Hurghada after her Russian husband divorced her. Lana claimed to prefer the fluidity of informal work, finding a better trade-off in knowing her art is appreciated. When asked how she navigates the instability of Hurghada’s entertainment industry, often moving from job to job, Lana dismissed my suggestion that job insecurity was somehow a negative aspect to life in Hurghada, saying, “Business here is *diki* [wild]. Everyone has to watch out for herself. But at the same time, life in Hurghada is a blank page; you can follow your own destiny.”

Just as none of my informants claimed to have come to Hurghada solely to make money, none of them can be said, based on the entirety of their narratives, to have relocated solely for marriage either. Wages in Egypt’s tourism industry are known to be lower or commensurate at best with wages offered in Russia and, as some respondents noted, many migrants who come to Hurghada for marriage, travel, and a higher quality of life part with well-paying jobs and sell or sublet expensive apartments in their home countries to subsidize the move. Similarly, as one young Egyptian man who is experienced in Hurghada and the upscale Red Sea resorts of Sharm el Sheikh pointed out, many joint ventures in Egyptian tourism have been facilitated by marriages between Egyptian men and Russophone women, as “the Russians need a local partner in Egypt, otherwise they will pay a lot in taxes.” In essence, none of the motivations most commonly cited by my respondents for moving to Hurghada can be said to operate in isolation but rather as a series of trade-offs and intersections in which opportunities are gained, traded and lost in the hope of something more desirable.

'Urfi: Convenience or Stepping Stone?

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 (Abouissa 2009a).

Although no official statistics exist on the number of 'urfi marriages currently found in Egypt, the 'urfi practice has become commonplace in Hurghada and to a lesser extent in other tourist zones, despite the social stigma attached to it in other parts of Egypt (Akinfiyeva 2005). While many criticize 'urfi as simply providing legal cover for men seeking to have sexual relations with women outside of a more traditionally Egyptian, primary and socially recognizable marriage, it became quite clear during the course of this research that 'urfi provides a legal cover for migrant women to do the very same. The proliferation of unofficial 'urfi unions in Hurghada suggests that more traditional Egyptian marriages may not be of interest to many tourists and foreign residents. For women who decide to extend their stay in Hurgahda, the informal 'urfi marriage can facilitate housing, social networks and work opportunities with little cost or commitment on their part.

The majority of my respondents considered 'urfi to be a positive arrangement which allowed them to cohabit immediately and permanently with their husbands. Of the women I interviewed in Hurghada, only Lana claimed to have entered an 'urfi marriage with her Egyptian boyfriend so they could cohabit. "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." Because Lana's boyfriend is a Coptic Christian rather than Muslim, she has little if any legal entitlement to money or property upon the dissolution of the marriage, but the 'urfi marriage certificate may be enough to mollify the doorman.³⁷ Russophone women, because they are unbound by Egyptian social customs and the familial networks created through marriage, can leave 'urfi marriages as easily as they would leave a boyfriend. One woman I interviewed, for example, said that when she and her husband got into an argument she tore up the 'urfi contract, forcing them to get another once they had reconciled.

³⁷ It is commonplace in Egypt to have a doorman, or *bonnab*, who monitors the foyer of an apartment building or private home, providing "security" and keeping track of people's movements. A mixed gender couple would typically show their marriage papers to the landlord and *bonnab* when they move in together.

Another respondent explained 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]: just tear up the paper!" The impermanence of *'urfi* is particularly desirable for Russophone women with children, as in Tamara's case where her son is registered on her Russian passport and can be flown back to Russia on immediate notice without being required to obtain her husband's permission before leaving Egypt with their son.

In Larissa's case, another respondent who met her husband while on holiday in Hurghada, the process of officially registering the *'urfi* contract was initiated immediately after it had been signed. Many respondents reported being told by partners and lawyers that *'urfi* contracts could not be legalized if the bride held only a tourist visa in Egypt and reflected on being forced to obtain a letter of support from the husband in order to obtain the residence visa, after which the marriage could be made official. Once Larissa's marriage had finally been legalized, however, she received a one-year visa, followed by a renewable five-year visa with work permission. Larissa's story is in many ways typical of how Russophone women enter into *'urfi* arrangements as a segue into more formal marriage and a more permanent stay. Mulki Al Sharmani, Assistant Professor at the American University in Cairo's Social Research Center, claims that nothing in Egypt's Personal Status Laws³⁸ per se requires foreign, particularly non-Muslim, women to obtain an *'urfi* contract before the marriage itself can be legalized with the state, noting, however, that an informal regime of denying marriage legalization to mixed couples without a prior *'urfi* contract may be promoted in order to limit mixed marriages and the extension of legal status to foreign women in Hurghada yet without taking such measures to the level of policy.³⁹ Perhaps because of this informal policy, all but one of my respondents claimed to have entered into unofficial *'urfi* marriage contracts before having the marriage legalized.

One indicator of legitimacy in mixed *'urfi* marriages which respondents noted often either directly or indirectly is whether or not the bride has met her Egyptian in-laws. Ksenya, for one, reported that she and her husband regularly visit his family in Cairo when there are family gatherings or when they travel to Cairo on business. Another informant, Anastasia, who entered into an *'urfi* contract with her coworker at a hotel, said she never met her husband's family during two years of marriage, even though his family lived in Hurghada.⁴⁰ Because marriage is legally and socially complex, particularly in the case of *'urfi* which leaves status and perception up for a wide variety of interpretations, some of my respondents understood *'urfi* marriage as a

³⁸ Personal Status laws in Egypt inform familial relations, including marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance.

³⁹ Personal Communication (August 15, 2009).

⁴⁰ While married, he had been conscripted in the Egyptian army. They "divorced" after his release, realizing they had grown apart.

stepping stone to official marriage with a life partner, while others understood it as an administrative document needed to facilitate one-night stands, cohabitation, work opportunities or other rather pragmatic ends. Ultimately this research concludes a wide variety of motivations for and approaches to *'urfi* marriage between Egyptian men and Russophone women in Hurghada, yet one consistent end result is an intimate intermingling of cultural norms regarding work, marriage, family and spatial movement which produces a new and seemingly boundless experience of transnationalism which pervades every single aspect of life in Hurghada and extends to some degree beyond the immediate parameters of its vicinity.

Mixed Marriage and the Pursuit of Desire

Viktoriya met her husband, a hotel worker, while on holiday in Hurghada and described their long distance courtship following her return to Russia, saying, “My husband and I talked all the time because I had a free international phone line at my work. We talked about religion, kids and our traditions. 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 [since] I would have [had] to dress differently.”⁴¹ Considering her new Egyptian suitor to be a suitable and “open-minded” marriage partner, Viktoriya decided to leave her life in Moscow, move to Hurghada and become immersed in the Egyptian culture by learning the language and starting a small business that caters to other Russian émigrés. Viktoriya successfully navigates Hurghada’s social and economic arena, as Aihwa Ong (1999) put it, of what is “thinkable, practicable and desirable,” in part, by consenting to marriage as a way to “bridge the common divide between practice and structure” (1999, 3)—or, in other words, between what is desirable and what is immediately achievable in the local environment. In considering what Russophone migrants perceive as “thinkable, practicable and desirable” in Hurghada, the role of race cannot be overstated as a factor which allows “white” Russophone women to navigate Hurghada’s job and marriage markets with relative privilege.

In her study of women sex and domestic care workers in Turkey and Cypress, Agathangelou (2004) asserts that “white but not white” female workers from the Russophone countries are desirable to upper and middle class denizens of states on the periphery of Europe “who can never be ‘white’ because race is also about class” (2004, 5)—in other words, Russophone women are desirable in that despite the privilege of racial whiteness, they often lack the class distinction of monetary might and thus of penetrable social influence. Thus as Julie

⁴¹ Although Viktoriya is a belly-dance instructor in Hurghada, she does not perform in public as per her husband’s wishes.

O'Connell-Davidson (1998) notes, "white [becomes desirable] not for color, but for economic opportunity" (1998, 178).

This research attempts to further O'Connell Davidson's angle on Agathangelou's work in the sense that while Russophone women's "whiteness" may render them "bodies of value" in Hurghada's work and marriage markets, high flexibility and a low demand for security further increase their value as marriage partners, employees and investors in the local environment, as they thus contribute to the economy not simply the high value of race but also the most highly sought skill in a capitalist *modus operandi* (2009, 262). In this way the "whiteness" of Russophone migrants becomes desirable not just for its ability to gender race, but also in its ability to gender class in being equated with a more upwardly and outwardly mobile package of social and market-oriented willingness and preferences.

Conclusion

The gathering wave of Russophone migrant women who arrive in Hurghada as tourists and, through various strategies involving informal work and *'urfi* marriage, transform that holiday into extended stay, seems to many a steady trend with no signs of slowing. Important questions remain, however, as to how this population and its next generation of mixed children with complex cultural, linguistic and political identities will further integrate and perpetuate both in the setting of Hurghada itself and within a broader spectrum of fluctuating immigration, emigration, work, marriage and citizenship policies. As long as the Egyptian state continues to facilitate migration streams through incentivized pull factors such as lax visa, informal labor, flexible marriage requirements and outward oriented investment schemes, Hurghada will continue to see a mixing of cultures and is bound to yield unpredictable issues for the state to deal with directly or indirectly. The Egyptian state continues to uphold a legal framework on marriage, sex and gender relations which, it has been suggested here, to some degree channels Russophone brides into unofficial *'urfi* marriages in order to limit mixed marriages, men's legal responsibilities to foreign partners and by extension, entitlements to Russophone women migrants living in Hurghada. Such demands for "fluidity" and flexibility suits some migrants well, but many are forced to invent new routes out of the margins of Hurghada's social and economic scene and into the kind of satisfying lifestyle which motivated many to relocate in the first place. As this work has tried to illustrate, *'urfi* is used by Russophone tourists and residents in a variety of ways, but ultimately for many it becomes an important structural pull factor which can help migrants to bridge the gaps presented by informal and sometimes unstable work, an unpredictable regulatory environment with regard to visa, and a social environment which demands certain protocol for cohabitation and asset sharing.

Whereas the motivations for and impact upon Egyptian men entering into *'urfi* marriage contracts with Russophone migrants is far outside the scope of this work, its significance cannot be understated in terms of making the transnational state of Hurghada today a reality. While global transport routes and the push and pull factors touched upon in this work can also be said to influence perceptions of migration and willingness to marry abroad, this work has tried to highlight the significance of microdynamics in the local sphere which motivate and obstruct everyday decision making among migrants and Egyptian residents. Hurghada is but a five-hour flight from Moscow, or the same distance as Irkutsk, Siberia's capital, and regular, affordable flights and flexible citizenship demands allow most women to take annual trips back to Russia, or to host friends and family when they come for holiday in Hurghada. Moreover, as greater numbers of children are born to these mixed marriages, grandparents increasingly purchase flats in Hurghada, as I recall seeing brochures for housing developments that cater to retirees.

Over the past decade, the relative economic standing of Russian and Russophone women has improved, as new skill sets and experiences have grown out of living, working, marrying and investing abroad. This work hopes to see the current shifts in mainstream discourses surrounding women migrants from the former Soviet Union and sex work pushed even further, beyond Russophone migrants as passive victims and tourists behaving badly and into a view as driving agents of globalism and cosmopolitanism who, like Ksenya, take calculated risks, traverse borders and create transnational spaces that change what is "thinkable, practicable and desirable" (Ong 1999, 3). Despite tendencies in the literature to marginalize and dismiss Russophone women as hypersexualized and dangerously mobile subjects, their role as influential social and economic entrepreneurs, mothers and economic stakeholders render them a force to be taken seriously. As one woman put it over a cup of coffee in her villa, "You know what they say about us Russians in Hurghada? 'We took the city without firing a shot.'"

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