

**The London School of Economics and Political Science**

**“Let Down the Curtains Around Us”  
Sex Work in Colonial Cairo, 1882-1952**

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## **Declaration**

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## **Abstract**

The shift from pre-modern to modern sex work meant the “professionalization” of transactional sex, its commodification and the attending social stigmatization of the essentialized category of prostitutes as “public women”. This dissertation explores the construction of social marginality of sex workers in colonial Cairo (1882-1952), in the context of major economical and social changes and the development of dramatically new concepts about the scope of intervention of the State on society. The quantitative and qualitative change in sex work which took place in Cairo since the end of the nineteenth century was made possible by a number of structural factors such as the integration of Egypt in the global market in a subaltern position, the restructuring of autonomous households’ economy, the augmented economic social vulnerability of female economic roles in the job market, migration and rapid urban growth. At the same time, the new social meaning of prostitution, a permanent symbolic threat to the physical and moral welfare of the rising Egyptian nation, was discursively constructed by dominant positions, both by local and colonial elites. Prostitutes were used as dense referent to express a wide range of dominant anxieties about the social order, the definition of normative notions of Egyptian citizenship and colonial racial hierarchies. Positing the inextricable link between material and discursive formations, this study analyzes the political economy of sex work and combines a wide range of sources – governmental reports, reformist societies’ papers, court cases, coeval press and semi-academic literature – to explore a space of subaltern and gendered agency which has been overlooked for long and endeavours to restore prostitution, generally considered as a marginal activity, to the history of the Egyptian nation.

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## **Acronyms**

AIF: Australian Imperial Forces

ANZACs: Australian and New Zealanders Army Corps

AMSH: Association for Moral and Social Hygiene

EFU: Egyptian Feminist Union

IAF: International Alliance for Women Suffrage

IBS: International Bureau for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children

LNA: Ladies' National Association

NVA: National Vigilance Association

## List of Contents

Declaration .....	2
Abstract .....	3
Acknowledgments .....	4
Acronyms .....	6
List of Contents .....	7
1 Introduction .....	10
1.1 The Scholarly Trajectory .....	13
1.2 Hegemony and Resistance in Post-modernist Thinking: Unpacking the Concept of Marginality .....	18
1.3 Studies on Prostitution: a Critical Assessment .....	27
1.4 Bio-politics, Prostitution and Nationalism .....	37
1.5 Scope and Structure of the Work .....	44
2 Pre-colonial Sex Work .....	49
2.1 Introduction .....	49
2.2 Ghawazi, ‘Awalim and Sex Workers .....	54
2.3 The French Expedition of 1798-1801: Beginnings of Supervision .....	59
2.4 Prostitution under Muhammad ‘Ali: The 1834 Ban .....	63
2.5 Conclusions .....	68
3 In a Changing City .....	70
3.1 Introduction .....	70
3.2 Urban Change, Gender and Labour in Colonial Cairo .....	72
3.3 Some Figures .....	82
3.4 The Geography of Sex Work .....	89
3.5 Racialized Representations and Social Profiles .....	95
3.6 Prostitution, Migration and the “White Slave Trade” .....	102
3.7 Conclusions .....	112
4 Sex Work, Structure and Agency .....	114
4.1 Introduction .....	114
4.2 The Organization of Sex Work .....	115
4.2.1 Licensed Prostitution .....	115
4.2.2 Disguised Prostitution in the Public Entertainment Sector .....	121

4.2.3 Clandestine Prostitution .....	129
4.4 Procurers.....	133
4.5 Sex Work and Female Agency.....	141
4.6 Conclusions .....	156
5 Regulation .....	160
5.1 Introduction .....	160
5.2 Regulation of Prostitution .....	160
5.3 Regulationist Legislative Framework until the 1905 Arête .....	166
5.4 The Medicalization of Prostitution.....	170
5.5 Shortcomings of the Regulationist System .....	175
5.6 Conclusions .....	179
6 Prostitution, Venereal Disease and Imperial Soldiers.....	183
6.1 Introduction .....	183
6.2 Imperial Troops and Venereal Disease .....	186
6.3 The 1916 Purification.....	189
6.4 The Debate about Prophylaxis .....	192
6.5 Imperial Troops and Brothels.....	194
6.6 Conclusions .....	197
7 Sex, Danger and the Nation in the Public Discourse .....	199
7.1 Introduction .....	199
7.2 Nationalism and the Rise of an Imagined Egyptian Nation in the Press.....	203
7.3 Gender and Danger in Cairo.....	209
7.4 “When Virtue Screams”: the “Fight against Prostitution” on the Egyptian Press .....	213
7.5 The Making of “National Villains”: Ibrahim al-Gharbi and the “Traders of Virtues” .....	222
7.6 Conclusions .....	227
8 Reformism in Practice: the Work of British Social Purity Movements in Egypt, 1920-1939.....	229
8.1 Introduction .....	229
8.2 “White Slavery”, Brief History of a Cultural Paranoia.....	231
8.3 Social Purity in Egypt: The Egyptian IBS Committee.....	234
8.4 The IBS Refuge in Cairo.....	241
8.5 The Work of the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene in Egypt.....	251



8.6 Egyptian Feminism and the Struggle against Prostitution .....	256
8.7 Conclusions .....	261
9 Abolitionism.....	263
9.1 Introduction .....	263
9.2 Vernacularizing Eugenics and Monitoring Male Sexuality: Law 25 of 1920 .....	264
9.3 Bringing Abolitionism In .....	266
9.4 The Second World War Regulationist Interregnum.....	270
9.5 Abolitionism.....	271
9.6 Conclusions .....	274
10 Conclusions .....	276
Glossary.....	286
Bibliography.....	288
I. Archival sources .....	288
II. Unpublished papers.....	288
III. Government publications.....	289
IV. Books and Articles .....	290
VI. Websites .....	306
VII. Newspapers .....	307

# 1

## Introduction

Coquettishly she placed her arm under his and gestured to those around them to clear the way. The woman with the tambourine started playing it, and the troupe along with many of the guests began to sing the wedding song: “Look this way, you handsome fellow”. The bridal couple proceeded with deliberated steps, strutting forward, animated by both the music and the wine. ... Their friends tried to outdo each other in offering their congratulations: “A happy marriage and many sons” “Healthy children who are good dancers and singers”. One of the men cautioned them. “Don’t put off until tomorrow what you can do today”. The troupe kept playing and the friends kept waving their hands until al-Sayyid Ahmad and the woman disappeared through the door leading to the interior of the house.<sup>1</sup>

This is how Naguib Mahfouz describes the beginning of the relationship between al-Sayyid Ahmad ‘Abd el Gawwad, the patriarch of the family whose story, spanning three generations and intertwining with the pivotal historical events of Egypt’s political trajectory in the interwar period, constitutes the core of his masterpiece, the “Cairo Trilogy”, and Zubaydah, a renowned singer he takes as his lover. ‘Abd el Gawwad and Zubaydah start their illicit relationship by mocking a *zaffah*, a wedding procession. This passage is significant, I think, in making clear how the traditional concept of patriarchy was based on a double morality, where romantic escapades with courtesans were the direct counterpart of conjugal relations. Romanticism and

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<sup>1</sup> Naguib Mahfouz, *The Cairo Trilogy* (London, New York, and Toronto: Everyman’s Library, 1990), pp. 112-3.

liberality with lovers was an integral part in the construction of Arab manhood and no contradiction was seen between the social respectability of ‘Abd el Gawwad and its adultery with performer Zubaydah. Prostitution, or in this case, relations of concubinage, were thus inscribed within the social order, as the type of transgression necessary in establishing the normative model of female decency and decorum typical of wives, whose stereotypical qualities are embodied in the book by pious and subservient Aminah. By dint of their very liminality, women trading sexual availability outside the wedlock as a way of earning a living, were thus more integrated in society than marginalized. In the historical time in which this part of the novel is set, that is, around 1919, ‘Abd el Gawwad gallantry is already somewhat of an anachronism. Not very far from Zubaydah’s quarters in the al-Ghuriyyah, other women are selling themselves without any fiction of artistry in the licensed brothels of the Azbakiyyah or the Wass‘ah. Again Mahfouz described what was going on there with exceptional realism in his book,

They fell in with the flow of men going their way and ran into another stream coming from the opposite direction, for the curving street was too narrow for its pedestrian traffic. The men swivelled their heads from right to left at prostitutes who stood or sat on either side. From faces veiled by brilliant make-up, eyes glanced around with a seductive look of welcome. At every instant a man would break ranks to approach one of the women. She would follow him inside, the alluring look in her eyes replaced by a serious, businesslike expression. Lamps mounted above the doors of the brothels and the coffee houses gave off a brilliant light in which accumulated the clouds of smoke rising from the incense burner and the water pipes. Voices were blended and intermingled in a tumultuous swirl around which eddied laughter, shouts, the squeaking of doors and windows, piano and accordion music, rollicking handclaps, a policeman’s bark, braying, grunts, coughs of hashish addicts and screams of drunkards, anonymous calls for help, raps of a stick, and singing by individuals and groups. Above all this, the sky, which seemed close to the roofs of the shabby

buildings, stared down at the Earth with unblinking eyes. Every beautiful woman there was available and would generously reveal her beauty and secrets in exchange for only ten piastres.<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on different sources – police registers, consular courts’ files, public security and public health reports, reformist and abolitionist societies’ papers, local press, tabloids, literary texts – this thesis traces the story of the transformation of the role of sex workers in Egypt during colonial times, from 1882 to 1952.<sup>3</sup> While taking into consideration both prostitution material structure and the public discourse about it, I look at the social construction of sex workers’ marginality, exploring the emergence of a distinct social *persona* for prostitutes. Such *persona* exemplified a new conception of hegemonic power, discursively produced through the creation of subject positions to be regulated and surveilled, and the enactment of a specific apparatus of discipline and control to contain socially “unconventional” groups. Together with the process of creation of social marginality, I am interested in exploring a specific type of bio-political project, that is the regulation of prostitution in Colonial Cairo and its trajectory to abolitionism, to see what it tells about the emergence of a national autonomous political community in Egypt. In other words this dissertation aims at exploring a space of subalterned and gendered agency which

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 912.

<sup>3</sup> Sources have been selected with the aim of balancing more State-centred accounts of prostitution with ones that, although stemming from dominant positions, can be read against the grain in a way that tentatively exposes how subalterns constructed their cases vis-à-vis instances of discipline and control, such as local police officials and the judiciary, and or the public discourse about sex work, both vernacular and high-brow. Primary research has been conducted in the National Archives, Kew, London, in the Women’s Library, London, in the Dar al-Kutub (National Library) and the Dar al-Watha’iq al-Qawmiyyah (National Archives) in Cairo, in the Archivi Nazionali di Stato (National Archives) and the ASMAE -Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (Historical Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) in Rome. For a very good discussion of archival sources on prostitution and associated methodological questions (sources’ positionality, destruction of records, lack of access and storage, privacy issues) see Timothy J. Gilfoyle, “Prostitutes in the Archives: Problems and Documenting the History of Sexuality” in *American Archivist*, 57, 1994, pp. 514-27.

has long been overlooked and endeavours to restore prostitution, generally considered as a marginal activity, to the history of the Egyptian nation.

I approached this work with a mixed set of questions in mind, reflecting my changing approach to history. Marxism and feminism initially influenced my interest in the exploration of the agency of gendered subalternity, framing sex work within broader dynamics of power and understanding it as labour, a survival strategy and possibly a site of resistance. Subaltern studies, in their latest postmodernist guise, postcolonial studies and their use of Foucauldian theory impacted my conception of the social construction of subordinated subject positions in colonial settings.

Therefore, I will address in this introduction the issue of my positioning within the scholarly conversation about marginality and the colonial history of prostitution, before exposing the structure of the present work.

### **1.1 The Scholarly Trajectory**

This work in the social history of the Middle East is influenced and builds upon a number of conceptual and theoretical approaches – history from below, gender studies, subaltern studies, postcolonial and post-modern theory – in a way that I will try to make clearer in the following.

For long time the history of the Middle East has been written as a peculiar version of “Noble Men” history, producing macrological political and economic narrations of change and transformation. The concept of history underlying this operation was monolithic, universalist, classist and racist: according to Joan W. Scott, the elites focus implied “that their experience embodied ‘man’ at his best, and

that their power was the deserved result of higher intellect, manners, morals and aesthetic taste”.<sup>4</sup> Elites were seen as the primal agent of progress and advancement.

With its critique of capitalism and its focus on the working classes, Marxist historiography brought in the need for narrating the histories of the popular strata of society. The way it set about this task was nonetheless vitiated by the same positivist objectivism and teleological stance it shared with liberal historiography. Influenced by French Marxism, British culturalist Marxism tried to mitigate the crude materialism of orthodox Marxian theory, devoting more attention to processes of class consciousness and identity formation. The main shortcoming of this approach was mainly represented by the fact that, although prioritizing culture and limiting the harsh determinism resulting from the dichotomy base-superstructure, its notion of “experience”, used as a device to restore the importance of human agency and shared collective responses, is still residually materialist. Implicitly maintaining a separation between the realm of culture and the realm of “experience”, that in the last instance was greatly shaped by productive relations, British cultural Marxism did not really go beyond the structuralism and positivism of previous approaches, although certainly taking culture very seriously. As Zachary Lockman, discussing the work of E. P. Thompson, one of the main exponents of British cultural materialism, has aptly pointed out,

in its prioritization of culture and insistence on the need to investigate the perceptions, attitudes and actions of actors in concrete historical situations, Thompson formulation is without question a great advance over the propensity of the structuralist and positivist approaches to deduce class from objective relations to the

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<sup>4</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, “History in Crisis: the Others’ Side of the Story” in *The American Historical Review*, 94, 3, 1989, p. 683.

means of production and then to deduce consciousness and behaviour, actual or putative. It does not fully resolve the problem, however, because it can still be read – whether or not it is Thompson’s intention, as depicting the sphere of “experience” as distinct or prior to “culture” itself. That is, it seems to be saying that certain objective circumstances produce in the consciousness of those on whom they impinge certain experiences, which are then “handled” or processed culturally to produce certain meanings. To the extent that this way of putting things does not insist that all experience is already cultural. ... We are still, epistemologically speaking, within the realm of empiricism, if at its outermost margins.<sup>5</sup>

The acknowledgment of the plurality of histories and point of views that actually complicate every imagined overarching representation of reality was a painful development, brought about by a new era of massive cross-disciplinary epistemological reappraisal and dramatic questioning of any kind of established truth, roughly beginning in the late Seventies. Influence of larger debates in critical theory, under the rubrics of post-structuralism, deconstructionism, gender, minority studies and post-colonial studies, generated a new trend of massive reassessment of theoretical approaches and historiographic practices.

If two major themes are to be posited as fundamental in this new theoretical revolution, those are the process of decentring, with the ensuing emergence of a plurality of “voices” or “views” for historical narration, and the fragmentation of the concept of homogenous, autonomous, rational subjectivity producing a predetermined agency at the core of positivist thinking. A whole lot of militant and resistant trends in scholarly enquire shared the label of post-modernist, in denouncing the power-laden, totalitarian and fundamentally violent nature of a

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<sup>5</sup> See Zachary Lockman, *Workers and Working Class in the Middle East* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 76.

historically consolidated scientific and epistemological tradition based on representation and reification by a powerful subject-knower of a silent and powerless object-known, whether a peasant, a worker, a slave, a woman, together with the call for the retrieving of a non-essentialized, non-teleological agency of subaltern groups and their resistance to hegemonic practices.

Among these trends, women's studies took upon themselves the burden of positing the centrality of the relationship between gender and power, understanding the construction of sexual difference and the subordination of women to men as a fundamental aspect of a male dominated epistemological system according to which reality, and women's submission within it, became unquestionable. In the context of Middle Eastern Studies, notwithstanding such a heightened interest in issues of subalternity, hegemony and resistance, women were largely ignored until the beginning of the '80s. This was certainly due to a flawed understanding of the role of Muslim women in the social and economic arena, the product of a die-hard Orientalist notion about the complete exclusion of women from the public sphere because of the alleged perennial and unchanging nature of Islamic doctrine. Such neglect of the contribution of women to the social and political history of the Middle East was a common trait of liberal and Marxist historiography. Actually such an analogy between elitist historiography and Marxist "history from below" can be explained also by the still preponderant importance attached by the latter to formal market economy and capitalist mode of production. In this sense, the informality of many women's social and productive activities makes them difficult to be appreciated. As historian Judith Tucker writes,



the history of women demands an immediate awareness of a multitude of forces, institutions and activities that elude analysis at the level of official, political institutions, mainstream intellectuals movements, or economic overviews; rather the world of informal networks, popular culture, and the basic forces of production and reproduction define the arena of women's activities and therefore women's studies. The social and economic life of men as well as women of the peasantry and the lower classes that constituted the vast majority of the pre-capitalist and, at least in the Third World, capitalist population, was shaped by those activities and institutions in which women played a major and distinct role: without understanding the forms and dimensions of women activities, we cannot grasp the contours of society as a whole.<sup>6</sup>

Labour history and women's studies largely constructed their respective objects of analysis, workers and females, in the same way, as an undifferentiated group. Stressing the clear-cut separation between hegemonic and subaltern political spheres, they enhanced the role of popular agency, while constituting it as a fundamentally progressive and revolutionary one. The call of post-structuralist scholarship for deconstructing the binary totalising autonomy of hegemonic and popular cultures claimed by previous approaches stressing coercion highlights the hybridity inherent processes of cultural creation, reception, consumption and reproduction. As John E. Toews puts it elaborating on Chartier,

the appropriating of imposed or distributive meanings, even in the most authoritarian and closed homogeneous culture, is not simply a passive assimilation but it is characterized by interpretive activity that involves resistance and evasion, as well as subtractive, supplemented and transformative revisions. Meaning are never simply inscribed in the mind or bodies of those to whom they are directed or on whom they are "imposed" but they are always re-inscribed in the art of reception.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Judith E. Tucker, *Women in Nineteenth Century Egypt*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> John E. Toews, "Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: the Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience" in *American Historical Review* 92, no.4, 1987, pp. 884-5.

## 1.2 Hegemony and Resistance in Post-modernist Thinking: Unpacking the Concept of Marginality

My research attempts at situating itself in the scholarly debate on the historiography of subaltern classes, positing the need for analysing areas of “marginal” and “subaltern” human activities from a global perspective, that is, not as separate fields, but as mutually dependent spaces of social agency, produced by the same meaning generative process. Marginality is a dense sociological term that needs to be carefully deconstructed with the aim of going beyond the traditional model of relationship between centre and periphery as homogenous, self-contained and autonomous entities.

Foundational Marxist “history from below” did not question such binary model. On the contrary, it largely relied on structuralist sociological theories looking at social marginality and deviancy as ontological categories more than cultural and transient human constructs.

It purported to rehabilitate the historical role of long-time forgotten popular classes, those people who did not normally enter the historical record, focusing on questions of class agency and consciousness.<sup>8</sup> A veritable revolution in a field of scholarly enquiry for long time characterized by extreme conservatism and almost impenetrable to theoretical re-assessment and interdisciplinary fertilization, history “from below” tried to “read” the subaltern consciousness against the grain, playing a pioneering role in retrieving a whole series of untapped popular sources, thus

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<sup>8</sup> I am referring here to fundamental classic works such as those by George Lefebvre, *La Grande Peur de 1789* (Paris, 1932), George Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (London, 1959) and *The Crowd in History: a Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848* (New York, 1964) Eric Hobsbawm, *Social Bandits and Primitive Rebels* (New York, 1959), E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship Between Classes in Victorian Society* (Oxford, 1971).

revolutionizing the method of historiography.<sup>9</sup> Clearly influenced by its broader political background, it called for the right of popular classes and a whole series of downtrodden and outcasts to be recognized as historical agents. Their agency was given a rationale and analysed in its social and economic context. More than not, agency “at the margins” was given a decidedly resistant, if not revolutionary, character.<sup>10</sup>

According to Timothy Mitchell,<sup>11</sup> studies on power and resistance continue to be informed by a dichotomous metaphor of persuasion and coercion. This is due to two main reasons: firstly, it has to do with an ordinary conception of personhood as something split into mind and body, rationality and materiality, culture and nature. In order to be exercised thoroughly, power needs to operate on both levels, mind and body. Such “humanistic assumption” extends to the analysis of political subjects so that the internal autonomy of consciousness is considered as a fundamental prerequisite for political agency. Secondly, also those works that bring neglected groups under scrutiny in search of their political agency, thus reversing the hierarchy of power, can’t do without this modern dualism. As Mitchell argues “nowhere is the dualism that opposes meaning to material reality examined as the very effect of strategy of power, in a manner that would bring to light the limits and complicities of thinking of domination in terms of an essential distinction between coercing and

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<sup>9</sup> On post-nationalist foundational histories see Gyan Prakash, “Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography” in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 32, 2, 1990: pp. 383-408.

<sup>10</sup> “Eclipsing former notions of authentic resistance, we have the concept of hegemony which transforms what once appeared as resistance and agency into the activation of incorporated subjects, who, through their own activity of self-formation, including ostensible ‘resistance’ work largely unwittingly to sustain the ruling order” in Chalcraft-Noorani (eds.), *Counterhegemony in the Colony and Postcolony* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Timothy Mitchell, “Everyday Metaphors of Power” in *Theory and Society*, 19, 5, 1990: pp. 554-77.

persuading”.<sup>12</sup> In fact, what is perceived as a natural order of things is the product of technologies of power and discipline peculiar to the emergence of Western modern political order. Disciplining strategies were predicated upon an understanding of personhood as an individual constituted by body and psyche, a modular conception of space to be partitioned and subdivided, so that it was possible to be recomposed into a meaningful picture. Separating, discriminating, framing, ordering, combining, arranging in functional structures the real world and human beings – all these operations resulted in a process of meaning generation. In other words, the discipline structure was so efficient as a materiality to generate the abstract yet powerful idea of an immanent coercive power. The separation between the functional structure and its materiality was the space for the generation of the meaning of this order, its metaphysic. The enframing operation produced two different realms, the physical, objective world and the transcendental order of truth. The world became semiotic, characterized by the distinction between objective reality (signifier) and the transcendental structure (signified). From rationalism to phenomenology, the foundational principle of reality is man’s intellect, which is capable to construct an interrelated discourse, a map of ideas to be transposed into objective reality.<sup>13</sup> As Michel Foucault has shown in his monumental study on Western epistemology,<sup>14</sup> the passage from Antiquity to Modernity in Europe was marked by a dramatic change in the form of knowledge, namely the shift from rules of resemblance, based on similarities and correlations, to those of representation, extending a system of

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<sup>12</sup> Mitchell, *Op. Cit.*, p. 546.

<sup>13</sup> See Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (London: Blackwell, 1996), p. 47.

<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1970).

semiotic relationships to the world. A pristine holistic conception was fragmented and divided, resulting in a system based on difference and identity. The history of power is in fact the tracing of the history of the power to impose a certain system of meaning on reality and make it dominant, by establishing it as an unquestionable truth. Homogenous subaltern “resistance” was conceptualized together with the belief in the existence of a similarly unified and contiguous “hegemonic power”. Traditional “history from below” failed to go deeper into the issue of the perpetual reconfiguration of power structures in the relationship between hegemonic and subaltern forces.

With its distinctive focus on the ongoing making and remaking of power structures and its rejection of fixed, essentializing theories of the Self, Subaltern Studies approach is more useful to my endeavour of describing social marginality not as an ontological truth but as an effect of power. In this sense, the first phase of the Subaltern Studies Collective, whose manifesto has been signed by Ranajit Guha in 1980, shared the same confident view in the possibility of retrieving a specific subaltern world-view and consciousness “from the condescension of posterity” to use E. P. Thompson’s expression.<sup>15</sup> Subaltern Studies School subsequently articulated a powerful critique of both liberal and Marxist foundationalist epistemologies.

Post-structuralist scholarship influenced by the seminal work by the French philosopher Michel Foucault showed how hegemony is not monolithic. On the contrary, an imagined order is constantly riddled with discrepancies and tensions,

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<sup>15</sup>For the Subaltern Studies’ Manifesto see Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South-Asian History and Society* (Deli-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982). For a comprehensive overview of the Subaltern Studies project and its theoretical trajectory from Gramscian Marxism to post-Marxism, see Vinayak Chaturvedi (ed.), *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* (London: Verso, 2000).

fissures where new possibilities crystallize for those who are subjected to power relations and find thus a space to articulate their own agency. While mounting criticism and re-assessment of some important conceptualizations have complicated the initial Subalternist agenda,<sup>16</sup> this will constitute my starting point for the exploration of the way in which subaltern agency and hegemony interact and mutually reinforce themselves.

Foucault's seminal work on disciplinary power being the necessary theoretical background, I will explore the theme of the social construction of marginality as an hegemonic way for exercising power by discursively constructing reality in terms of binary oppositions. The use of marginality, as a distinct sub-theme of "history from below" needs some clarification. In mainstream sociological and psychological literature, marginality is primarily defined in terms of deviancy from collectively established norms of behaviour, social stigmatization and social exclusion. Marginality is the condition of those who are socially stigmatized and condemned because they are not conforming to normative standards of sociability. These norms are being defined by the hegemony and enforced on subaltern subjects. Such operativity turns marginality into an effect of power. Marginality is generated by the displacement of the "non-conform" to the periphery by a power, that occupies a centre, which can be defined as such only after the "creation" of margins. Marginalization is thus a dynamic process in that marginality is produced discursively and it is the outcome of relations of power in which the hegemonic seems to occupy centre, and the subaltern is at the margins. Marginality is a cultural

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<sup>16</sup> See Rosalind O'Hanlon and Richard Washbrook, "After Orientalism: Culture, Criticism and Politics in the Third World" in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34, no. 1, 1992: pp. 168-84.

construction with indissoluble connections with centrality. What seems to be the product of the imposition of a repressive system of control on reality is endowed with powerful productive power. Hegemony reproduces itself also through the discursive proliferation of specific “abnormal” subjectivities whose containment and disciplinization legitimize the hegemonic order. In fact hegemony and resistance are logically coterminous and are determined in every specific context by their mutual position with reference to the source of power.

Foucault’s contribution to the scholarship on marginality came through his work about discourse as a method of socio-historical analysis and his interest for the specific “institutions by which authority and society classify and act upon the individual”.<sup>17</sup> Where Foucault talks about marginality as such, as in his 1970 lecture at the Kyoto Franco-Japanese Institute, he defines it mainly in terms of non-conformity to shared notions of social behaviour and exclusion from specific human activities such as production, reproduction, language and game.<sup>18</sup> The definition of marginality thus requires the enactment of boundaries between a central “Self” and a peripheral “Other”. Once established, boundaries require to be patrolled by specific

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<sup>17</sup> Eugene Rogan (ed.), *Outside In* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), p. 2. Classic point of references are Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: a History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1967); *The Birth of the Clinic: an Archaeology of Medical Perception* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1973); *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979); *The History of Sexuality* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> See Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, edited by James Faubion (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2000), pp. 335-42.

According to Foucault’s definition, clerics are marginal because they don’t participate in production and reproduction. Nuns, like prostitutes, share the same exclusion from reproduction. But prostitution served as a strategy for overcoming traditional women’s exclusion from paid labour by putting sex at work and divorcing sex from reproduction. Regulationism sought to control common women’s access to economic independence, trying to re-inscribe illicit sexualities “if not in the circuits of production, at least in those of profit”. See Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: the History of Sexuality*, translated by Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 4.

practices of control and supervision in order to discipline, contain and, possibly, correct deviant bodies and mentalities represented as a menace to the status quo.

While it is true that Foucault's theory focuses on the process of discursive construction of binary oppositions as a way of structuring and controlling reality, centrality and marginality could be understood as one of these many dyads. The emphasis on the dynamic process by which disciplinary apparatuses conjure up an idea of power and domination is clearly associated with spatial metaphors of centrality and marginality and their integration to constitute a system of social control by virtue of multiple points of supervisions and surveillance. This is architectonically transposed in the panopticon, the system of control designed by utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham in 1791.<sup>19</sup> The panopticon was constituted by two main parts: a central tower with a large window overlooking a circular peripheral building. This was divided into small cells, cutting across the width of the building and provided with two windows, one on the back and one on the front. The front window overlooked the central tower, the rear window allowed the light to penetrate the cell exposing the occupant to the gaze of the overseer placed in the central tower. Cells' occupants were confined within their rooms and there was no communication between adjacent cells. While cells' occupants were constantly visible to those occupying the central tower, because of some architectural devices the overseer could not be seen by the convicts. This generated a sense of "invisible omniscience" having a disciplining and normalizing effect on those subjected to it. Coercion was not obtained through invasive methods, but it derived his power from its being

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<sup>19</sup> See Jeremy Bentham, "Panopticon" in Miran Bozovic (ed.), *The Panopticon Writings* (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 29-95.



anonymous, depersonalized, ubiquitous and incessant. The panopticon synthesized two different conceptions of power and social control: a pristine one, based on exclusion operated by a top-down power, and a modern one based on isolation and correction operated by a flux of immanent pervasive power created through mechanisms of modular replication.

According to Foucault, marginalization rituals and disciplinary systems were predicated upon different political visions: while pre-modern lepers were simply marginalized and excluded by the human consortium, plague victims were carefully contained and supervised. In time, though, different patterns merged together,

it is a peculiarity of the nineteenth century that it applied to the space of exclusion of which the leper was the symbolic inhabitant (beggars, vagabonds, madmen and the disorderly formed the real population) the technique of power proper to disciplinary partitioning. Treat 'lepers' as 'plague victims', project the subtle segmentations of discipline onto the confused space of internment, combine it with the methods of analytical distribution proper to power, individualize the excluded, but use procedures to individualization to mark exclusion – this is what was operated regularly by disciplinary power from the beginning of the XIX century in the psychiatric asylum, the penitentiary, the reformatory, the approved school and, to some extent, the hospital. Generally speaking, all the authorities exercising individual control function according to a double mode; that of binary division and branding (mad/sane; dangerous/harmless; normal/abnormal); and that of coercive assignment, of differential distribution (who he is; where he must be; how he is to be characterized; how he is to be recognized; how a constant surveillance is to be exercised over him in an individual way, etc.). ... All the mechanisms of power which, even today, are disposed around the abnormal individual, to brand him and to alter him, are composed of those two forms from which they distantly derive.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, transl. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1999), pp. 199-200.

Historian Eugene Rogan pointed out that, notwithstanding the diversity of social groups falling within the rather loose definition of marginal, due to the fact that the notion of marginality as any social construct is not fixed but always changing through historical times and across cultures, “yet, there is more consensus than disagreement on those groups held to be on the margins of society in the modern period”.<sup>21</sup> Poor, convicts, fools and prostitutes, all stand out prominently in studies concerning that bustling *demi-monde* thought to be placed “at the margins” of “respectable” and “civilized” societies.<sup>22</sup> As Sumantra Banerjee aptly remarked, “unlike the peasants and the tribal population, the housewives and the working women, the artisans and the fledging industrial proletariat ... the changed status of all of whom in a colonial society has engaged the attention of some Marxist scholars and the new breed of ‘subaltern’ historians in their efforts to reconstruct history from below”,<sup>23</sup> prostitutes as a modern category of subaltern social actors against the backdrop of a rapidly changing social environment have received scant attention so far, at least to what pertains the field of Middle Eastern Studies. In this case, the feminist turn that brought about the writing of women’s studies focusing on the construction of gender and the sexualization of women as an integral part of the dominant male-based sex-gender system,<sup>24</sup> gained ground only from the ’80s

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<sup>21</sup> Rogan, *Op. Cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> Important studies of marginality in North African context are: Abdelhamid Larguèche, *Les Ombres de la Ville: Pauvres, Marginaux et Minoritaires à Tunis* (Tunis: Centre de Publication Universitaire, 2002); Dalenda et Abdelhamid Larguèche, *Marginales en Terre d’Islam* (Tunis, Cérés Productions, 1992); Fanny Colonna et Zakya Daoud (Eds.), *Etres Marginales aux Maghreb* (Paris: CNRS Editions), 1993; ‘Imad Hilal, *al-Baghaya fi Misr, Dirasah Tarikhiyyah Igtima’iyyah, 1834-1959* (al-Qahirah: Dar al-’Arabi, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> Sumanta Banerjee, *Dangerous Outcast: Prostitutes in Nineteenth Century Bengal* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998), p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> See Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex”, in Rayna R. Reiter (ed.), *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York-London: Monthly Review Press), pp.

onwards. While this was certainly due to the delay of historians of the Middle East in departing from a traditional historiographic mode, confining its focus to elite classes, formal politics and diplomacy, it is also true that commercial sex as a topic for serious scholarly enquiry has been left unattended for long time.<sup>25</sup>

### **1.3 Studies on Prostitution: a Critical Assessment**

Before the '80s, studies of prostitution had been mainly incorporated into broader narratives of crime, deviancy and abnormality. More recently, a revisionist trend on the historiography of prostitution reassessed the meaning of sex work in diverse historical and geographical settings in two main ways. The so called “linguistic turn” since the '80s propagated through the historical profession reshaping its theoretical horizons by shifting the focus of history-writing from economicistic and determinist explanations of sustained processes of long-term social change, to the in-depth micro-level analysis of cultural attitudes, beliefs and mentalities. As Geoff Eley pointed out “a new caution developing during the 1980s in relation to social analysis and the history of society led many to back away from the more grandiose ambitions of an early period and the confident materialism sustaining them”.<sup>26</sup> Concurrently,

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157-211. She defines the “sex-gender system” as the social “locus of the oppression of women, of sexual minorities and of certain aspects of human personality within individuals” constituted by the “set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied” (p. 159).

<sup>25</sup> For a very good literature review see Timothy J. Gilfoyle, “Prostitutes in History: from Parables of Pornography to Metaphors of Modernity” in *The American Historical Review*, 104, no.1, 1999: 117-41.

<sup>26</sup> Referring to structuralist foundationalist social and economic histories, using a fundamental category to explain huge processes of change and big structures, either shift in the control of the means of production and class conflict in Marxism, ecology and demography in the *Histoire Totale* of the *Annales* enterprise, or the quantitative investigation of American sociology-influenced cliometrics. See Lawrence Stone, “The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History” in *Past & Present* 85, no. 1, 1979: pp. 3-24.

greater interest developed in questions of subjectivity and all aspects of personal life, for which feminism certainly supplied the most far-reaching and sustained inspiration.

Some works dealt primarily with the deconstruction of the hegemonic discursive and symbolic formations on prostitutes' dangerousness for the civic order.<sup>27</sup> They served a fundamental role in making clear how prostitutes' social marginalization and demonization in the public discourse were historically and socially constructed. They focused on dominant narratives of prostitution, with the aim of contextualizing the formation of bourgeois understandings of gender and sexuality while highlighting their functions as catalyst for the exercise of power and control over society. These researches shed light on the complex relationship between prostitution, the State and development of a sense of national community, that is, how policies disciplining sex work reflected the broadening and changing scope of modern State intervention in society and how prostitutes, as a reified social category, were used as a metaphor to express bourgeois anxieties (rooted in re-oriented male fantasies and desires) and to formulate normative definitions of civic order and citizenship. Some important additions to the ever-growing corpus of enquiries devoted to commercial sex from the '80s onwards belong to this first group. Alain Corbain's *Women for Hire*<sup>28</sup> applied Foucauldian insights to the analysis of French regulationism and the deconstruction of dominant medical and moral discourses about prostitution. Combining post-structuralist understandings of

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<sup>27</sup> Main works in this vein are Donna J. Guy, *Prostitution, Family and the Nation in Argentina* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991); Laurie Bernstein, *Sonia's Daughters: Prostitutes and their Regulation in Imperial Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>28</sup> Alain Corbain, *Women for Hire: Prostitution and Sexuality in France after 1850*, transl. by Alan Sheridan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990, 1<sup>st</sup> French edition, 1978).

social control and discourse and the robust empirical French tradition of social history inspired by the *Annales* enterprise, Corbin described a vivid account of prostitution social organisation vis-à-vis State intervention. He outlined the development from sheer confident regulationism rooted in an Augustinian utilitarian concept of prostitution as necessary for maintaining the social body's efficiency and order, to a growing discontent with the system. According to Corbin, the decline of the brothel system in France was caused by change in sexual demand due to the extension of petty bourgeois practices to working-class people: "the brothel, 'the seminal sewer', to which men came to satisfy a physiological need, had lost much of its attraction. Meanwhile, the urge to seduce had considerably increased".<sup>29</sup> Working-class and lower middle-class men re-oriented their desires and rampant clandestine free-lance or disguised prostitution in public places and commercial entertainment venues flourished, in association with an emerging leisure culture and dramatically changed patterns of fruition of the newly planned urban space. Free circulation of "unmarked" sex workers, suggesting an idea of "sexual liberation", spreading of vice and debauchery with no apparent constraint all over the urban fabric, materialized in a series of discourses about prostitution as a venereal menace to race, class status, and the supremacy of the bourgeois order. Abolitionism was the last resort in preserving bourgeois civic order from social boundaries' dissolution.

A strong Foucauldian approach informed also Linda Mahood's *The Magdalenes* on prostitution and disciplinary power in nineteenth-century Scotland.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Corbin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 118.

<sup>30</sup> Linda Mahood, *The Magdalenes: Prostitution in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1999).

Mahood employed what she called a “problematization model”. She analyzed the emergence of the “prostitute” as a specific type of sexual behaviour in Scottish public discourse in the context of the “process of identification, classification and subsequent prosecution of peripheral sexualities”, whose ultimate goal was the preservation of the bourgeois social order. “Prostitutes”, among other marginals, were “socially constructed” and became scapegoats of modernity: stigmatization and regulation of working-class women sexuality and freedom of movement were part and parcel of a larger conservative hegemonic project.<sup>31</sup>

Other works paid attention to the material and structural elements defining prostitution. These studies centred on sex workers’ daily lives, survival strategies and politics. Marxist and feminist influences determined a sustained interest in the economic structural formations framing the trade and the extent of female agency, that is, whether and how sex work constituted for unskilled and economically vulnerable working-class women a viable option to improve their lives in urban contexts characterized by relentless growth, extension of market relations and increasing consumerism. Far from being understood as an evidence of social pathology, sex work was considered primarily as gendered labour and studied in the context of coeval job markets, working-class culture and restructured relations of production. The typical dichotomy traced by dominant narrations of prostitution, “dangerous” as opposed to “victimized” sex workers, was discarded by social historians who described the “banality” of prostitution, often a temporary occupation

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<sup>31</sup> L. Mahood, *Op.Cit.*, p. 9.

for women in economic distress, and the degree of autonomy they were able to articulate, working to their own end a fundamentally oppressive system.<sup>32</sup>

A radical materialist perspective on commercial sex was offered instead by Luise White in her study *Comforts of Home* on prostitution in colonial Nairobi.<sup>33</sup> Combining archival research and oral history, she endeavoured to restore prostitutes' full agency to history by focusing on sex workers earnings and economic roles within the broader urban economy. White explored the relationship between patterns of economic change, modes of production and Nairobi prostitution in its various forms. Treatment of prostitution as labour, of course, challenged plain representation of debased sexualized prostitutes, positing the centrality of their economic roles in Nairobi economy. White established a link between the dislocation of rural economies, both peasant and pastoral (in Kenya's case due to agricultural crises, famine and epidemics causing the starvation of cattle), and the flourishing of prostitution, a successful strategy available to women in order to accumulate resources either for the reconstitution of their families' shattered finances (acquiring cattle and arable land) or to invest in urban estate properties in Nairobi. Nairobi had

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<sup>32</sup> Main works in this vein are Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Frances Finnegan, *Poverty and Prostitution: a Study of Victorian Prostitution in York* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Mary Gibson, *Prostitution and the State in Italy, 1860-1915* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1999); Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

<sup>33</sup> Luise White, *Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). She formulated a very trenchant critique of some works on prostitution where, according to her, "the continued use of metaphors of pollution and passivity ... reveals how many of the categories of Acton and Parent-Duchatelet have been taken to heart, and how often even analytical studies of prostitution have identified with regulationists' and reformers' values". Taking what she sees as Francis Finnegan and others' internalization of Victorian tropes about "filth, degradation, depravity", White critiques them for having "naturalized prostitutes in the language of biological process, explaining how women's labour in an idiom of inevitability, corruption, and decay. In such scholarship, actions by and attitudes towards prostitution are not the result of specific historical and material circumstances, let alone specific interactions of reformers, casual labourers, and police, but biological and cultural absolutes", White, *Op. Cit.* , p. 7.

no industrial base and concentrated a large amount of temporary migrant male workforce, impoverished members of pastoral and agricultural families trying to recoup the losses suffered for ecological disasters towards the end of the nineteenth century through cooptation in the colonial capitalist sector. According to White, colonialism mobilized and exploited wage labour in Nairobi but did not reproduce it: “in the townships and the cities of the colonial world, wherever workers lived away from the actual workplace, maintenance and reproduction took place in illicit relationship between men and women and landlords and tenants”.<sup>34</sup> Prostitutes in Nairobi coming from the countryside were able to access “certain physical and social spaces available to them”, to take advantage of “certain position in the informal economy”, to work some characteristics and contradictions of colonialism, to accumulate independent money in order to subsidize their families back at the village or start their own new families in the city. “Prostitution was not evidence of social pathology, moral decay or male dominance” as Timothy Gilfoyle remarked, firstly combining with other forms of work, usually cultivation, gathering, petty trades and begging and becoming a full-fledge economic role in urban.<sup>35</sup> Most of the time, sex work was casual labour women, mothers and daughters, resorted to, with a desire for preserving their families’ structure. In this respect, White maintains, prostitution had to do with the restructuring and preservation of familial ties, not with their decomposition: “the daughters whose prostitution subsidized recently indebted cash-

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<sup>34</sup>White, *Op. Cit.*, p. 221.

<sup>35</sup>Gilfoyle, *Prostitutes*, p. 125. Prostitution’s merging with other types of petty trade is analysed by many authors in different contexts: see White, *Op. Cit.*, p. 40-1; Gail Hershatter, “The Hierarchy of Shanghai Prostitution, 1870-1949” in *Modern China* 15, no.4, 1989: pp. 463-98, especially pp. 491-8; Banerjee, *Op. Cit.*, p. 26-28; Corbin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 47; White, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 40-1; Joel Best, “Careers in Brothel Prostitution: St. Paul, 1865-1883” in *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 12, no.4, 1982: pp. 608-9.



crop producers or famine victims ... were living testimonies of a belief in families, that they should continue and prosper at any cost”.<sup>36</sup> Sex work supported transitional families while challenging bourgeois understandings of social discipline and control and attending neo-patriarchal order and showing the limits of colonial power.<sup>37</sup>

Treating prostitution as labour is one way to allow space for agency. It challenges plain representation of the debased sexualized prostitute complicating the picture and positing the many different socio-economic forms of prostitution and their politics. According to White, looking at prostitution in terms of labour allows to “write the history of prostitution without isolating women in the categories of deviancy and subculture”.<sup>38</sup> Analysis of prostitution as an internally diversified form of labour process and a capitalist social relation helps highlighting the complex and multidimensional relationship between domestic labour and wage labour and assigns prostitution a central meaning within sweeping changing social and economic patterns. White wondered how a literature that speaks only of women’s passivity and victimization instead of actions and earnings came into being, and succeeded in writing a social history of prostitution without “isolating women in the categories of deviancy and subculture”.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> White, *Op. Cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>37</sup> I make use of Micheal Johnson’s notion of “neopatriarchy” as an upper-middle class discourse to exercise social control by virtue of theories of women’s and children sexual behaviour, health and cleanliness, developing into an eugenic notion of class and class and racial superiority associated with modernization and the emergence of a liberal, that is inclusive, nationalism (as opposed to romantic and ethnic). See Michael Johnson, *All Honourable Men: the Social Origins of War in Lebanon* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001), pp. 220-1.

<sup>38</sup> White, *Op. Cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> White, *Op. Cit.*, p. 11.

Both these developments were superseded by what became known as the linguistic turn or “cultural turn”<sup>40</sup> or postmodernism. A radical fixation with issues of language and textuality,<sup>41</sup> though, soon led to the reproduction of the antagonism society/culture whose essentialism and, therefore, refusal had been a mainstay of the culturalist approach.

A new phase has been inaugurated since the 1990s, what Eley calls that of the “history of society” by a wealth of thought-provoking highly interdisciplinary historical studies trying to combine social and cultural approaches. In these works, the attempt at creatively synthesize the gains of social history with the insights of culturalist one presents more an opportunity than a limitation, opening up new questions about the emergence of ideas within precise historical contexts, not as a mere reflection of material and economic conditions, but as actively contributing to social change and transformation by making new materialities being expressible through language and images. In other words it is not the reconstruction of “empirical” or transparent historical facts and causal nexuses that is at stake, an exercise in “history as retrieval” to use Gail Hershatter’s expression,<sup>42</sup> but the

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<sup>40</sup> Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor: 2005), p. 156.

<sup>41</sup> Essential readings on the “linguistic turn” are: Victoria, Bonnell, Richard Biernacki, and Lynn Avery Hunt (eds.), *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Biersack, Aletta and Lynn Avery Hunt (eds.), *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Joyce Appleby, Lynn Avery Hunt, and Margaret Jacobson (eds.), *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: Norton, 1994); Sarah Mazah, “Stories in History: Cultural Narratives in Recent Works in European History” in *American Historical Association* 101, no. 5, 1996: pp. 1493-515; Peter Schöttler, “Historians and Discourse Analysis” in *History Workshop* 27, 1989: pp. 37-65; Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism or the Logic of Late Capitalism” in *New Left Review* 1, 146, 1994: pp. 53-93; David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: an Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (New York and Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 9-27.

<sup>42</sup> Gail Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth Century Shanghai* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), p. 4.

appreciation of the inextricable relationship between material and discursive practices in history writing.<sup>43</sup>

The development from “social history” to the “history of society”, that is, to a type of historical enquiry centred not so much on the recovery of “social facts” but on the investigation of processes of creation of cultural meanings in social action, is well represented in studies about prostitution by the theoretical and epistemological trajectory described by Judith Walkowitz’s work. Her *City of Dreadful Delight*<sup>44</sup> builds on the empirical findings of her previous work, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, shifting the focus on issues of discourse, representation and textuality. Making skilful uses of discursive methodology derived from cultural studies and literary criticism, it enhances the inextricable link between material social formations and the ways they were made sense of through competing urban narratives, both vernacular and hegemonic, thus positing the blurred difference between experience and “narration”. Walkowitz’s initial enquiry on commercial sex in Victorian England depicts a thick account of sex work’s social organization, with the aim of going beyond a number of received tropes reproduced and reified by mainstream narratives

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<sup>43</sup> I found this image used by Gail Hershatter to express the changing relationship between what is recorded, who was recording it and the historian’s own position very illuminating: “if we think of the process of history writing as an onion-peeling exercise, where the historian concentrates on stripping away layer after layer in search of some imagined essential core, she is apt to find herself with nothing left but compost and irritated eyes. On the other hand, if what interests her is the shape and the texture of the onion, the way it is constituted by layers and the spaces between them, the way it appears as a unified whole but breaks apart along initially invisible fault lines, the process by which investigating its interior actually alters the shape of the whole onion, the smell it produces under various circumstances, and the effects that the investigation produces in the person doing the peeling – well, then the onion approach to history can be very productive. Onions are, arguably, ‘out there’ waiting to be peeled, so perhaps the metaphor is not flawless. Yet, historians are, after all, examining something. And it could be said that onions are not prediscursive either; they need to be recognized as food in order for peeling to become a worthy activity”. Hershatter, *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>44</sup> Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delights: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992).

about commercial sex. She demonstrated well how prostitutes were more integrated within working-class popular culture than social outcasts, how sex work mainly constituted a coping strategy for a limited period of time, before exit from the trade and marriage, how prostitution was mostly an intra-class social relation of production, thus challenging one of the best known abolitionist argument about the systematic exploitation and “enslavement” of young and immature working-class girls by middle-class men. Subsequently, she took in consideration representations, “urban myths” of sexuality and gender/danger in Victorian London and the ways in which they reflected a number of spreading social fears. She argued that there was no overarching discourse in fact, but that “different social constituencies reached very different interpretations of the same events, with little consensus on their ultimate meaning”. Positing the organic link between experience and discourse, material and cultural, she suggests how images of “urban crime and sexual catastrophe not only haunted urban residents but clarified their conception of the city”.<sup>45</sup>

A mixed materialist and discursive approach was taken up also by a pivotal study on prostitution and modernity in twentieth century Shanghai, Gail Hershatzer’s *Dangerous Pleasures*.<sup>46</sup> Hershatzer wrote a history of sex work in semi-colonial Shanghai combining social history, post-structuralism, feminist theory and a distinctive subalternist twist. As she remarked, the complex interlocking of material and ideological practices and circumstances can’t but be acknowledged by a reflexive historian:

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<sup>45</sup> See Gilfoyle, *Prostitutes*, p. 127.

<sup>46</sup> Hershatzer, *Dangerous Pleasures*.

changes in migration patterns and economic opportunities might have increased the number of prostitutes and the alarm over them. But changes in elite notions about the link between women's status and national strength helped create the language through which a rise in prostitution acquired meaning ... and the elite shaped the institutions that emerged to classify, reform or regulate prostitution – all of which in turn began part of the material environment in which prostitutes lived.<sup>47</sup>

She studied the development of Shanghai's different forms of sex work within the context of sweeping changes transforming modern Shanghai's urban space and economy. She endeavoured to re-read elite sources on prostitution with the aim of showing how prostitutes subaltern positions are embedded in the "histories and contests for power" of those who had the power to narrate their stories. By reading against the grain dominant narrations, she attempts to map the complex relationship between historical facts, narration and interpretation.<sup>48</sup> Hershatter's debt towards the Subaltern Studies collective and their use of Foucauldian concepts on power and knowledge is clear in her stringent critique of objectivist historical writing, where she shows the inherent positionality of the sources used by historians and of the researcher's gaze itself, and by her emphasis on the concepts of "voice" and "agency".<sup>49</sup>

#### **1.4 Bio-politics, Prostitution and Nationalism**

In this study, I am looking at both the material organization of sex work and the significance of prostitution within larger processes of Egyptian political

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<sup>47</sup>Hershatter, *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>48</sup>Hershatter, *Op. Cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>49</sup> See also Antoinette Burton, "Archives Stories: Gender in the Making of Imperial and Colonial Histories" in Philippa Levine (ed.), *Gender and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 280-93 as a useful meditation on how archives, as complex "manufactured experience" of imperial history impact the researcher's imagination.

development. In particular I will make use of Michel Foucault's definition of bio-politics and I will try to show how the regulation of modern sex work in Cairo constituted a quite specific bio-political disciplinary project and to point out its implications for the study of bio-political systems in the colonial world and the relationship with nationalism.

Michel Foucault pointed out how, throughout the nineteenth century, the time-honoured conception of sovereign political right over life and death – that is, to take life and let live – was complemented by a new notion of power; the capacity of manipulating and controlling the biological processes affecting the population as a mass of individuals (i.e. reproduction, health), a new technology of power called “bio-politics”: in other words, preserving the life of population and not the right of putting subjects to death was to become an evidence of power. According to Foucault, who wrote about bio-political theory in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*<sup>50</sup> and elaborated it by introducing the ensuing notion of state racism,<sup>51</sup> a fundamental change took place in political philosophy, when the idea of the individual body as power's object of control to be rendered productive and efficient by virtue of exercise, drill, etc., was joined by the concept of the collective body of the people, the “national body”, and its biological phenomena. Disciplinary technologies of the body were thus complemented by regulatory ones, trying “to control the series of random events that can occur in a living mass, a technology

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<sup>50</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality 1: the Will to Knowledge*, translated by Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1998), pp. 140-1 and 143-4.

<sup>51</sup> Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, edited by Mauro Bertani e Alessandro Fontana, translated by David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), pp. 239-64.

which tries to predict the probability of those events (by modifying it, if necessary), or at least to compensate for their effects”.<sup>52</sup>

This resulted in the emergence of a whole corpus of knowledge concerning public health, demography, sexuality, the environment and urban planning; it created new normative discourses through which power was exerted over society with the aim of defending the whole of a people’s society essentialized characteristics, their race, from exogenous and, most importantly, endogenous dangers.

The field of sexuality came to be viewed as a key element of governance. “Correct” sexuality would preserve the well-being of a community of productive national citizens and would prevent social decay; placed at the intersection between the individual body and the collective one, sexuality entailed individual behaviours that, through procreation, had a dramatic impact on the whole of society. It is in light of this, that hyper-regulation of sexuality in the late nineteenth century was seen as a necessary step to contrast the spreading danger of racial degeneration. This was represented by the venereal threat, the widely shared notion that individual taints and maladies originated in perverted or debauched sexual practices were hereditary, transmittable across the social body and would eventually determine a nation’s annihilation. Foucault’s state-racism becomes relevant, when the language of contamination and pollution was widely accepted and peculiar social groups were defined as those responsible of corruption and degeneration of the whole social body.<sup>53</sup> In other words, the notion of state-racism is in fact premised on the idea that the “nation”, the people whose political community is represented by the State, is a

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249.

<sup>53</sup> Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, p. 254.

homogeneous, undifferentiated entity which must be defended from internal as well as external enemies. Such enmity is biologically defined: those who are considered as “racially” inferior, or deviant from the norm, must be “eliminated”, reformed into something socially acceptable.

The argument taken here is that the emergence of state-racism, as a device through which bio-power was inscribed in the workings of the modern State, has an enormous impact in the social construction of sex workers as “pathological threat”. It determined a shift from regulationism, which is the corpus of practices enforced on sex workers by State authorities in order to discipline rather than prohibiting their work, to abolitionism, for the sake of social purity and moral regeneration. This trajectory from regulationism to abolitionism was followed by all regulationist countries, including Egypt, where regulationism was introduced in 1882 and increasingly attacked until the promulgation of an abolitionist legislation in 1949.

Following Foucault’s theory, State regulation can be seen as a disciplinary technique of power based on the compartmentalization, supervision, control and segregation of female individual bodies. While schools, colleges and barracks constituted the first historical examples of disciplinary institutions,<sup>54</sup> the establishment of State-licensed brothels represented a meeting point of disciplinary and regulatory techniques of power. Sex workers were individually confined, scrutinized and medicalized with the aim of controlling the cumulative biological effects that affected the collective body of population; in this case, the threat posed to public health by the spread of venereal diseases resulting from promiscuous sex.

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<sup>54</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality I*, p. 140.



Confidence in positivist knowledge and determinist organicism were peculiar of the advent of regulationism on one hand. Abolitionism, on the other, came to be vociferously debated across the political body and throughout civil society at a time when the crisis of bourgeois regimes at the end of the nineteenth century caused a loss of confidence in the previously accepted disciplinary methods of control; it brought about a “defensive” radicalization of state-racism. In this context, the expansion of bourgeois values and practices across society created a new sense of disorientation and confusion: the widespread perception of the disintegration of the social order.

Excessive social mobility, which increases the risk of proletarian contagion; growing uniformity in dress, which makes it difficult to distinguish among the classes and stimulates a sense for luxury and coquetry among the poorer classes, political upheavals, the spread of a sense of transitoriness, which leads people to seek immediate pleasures<sup>55</sup>

are some of the social anxieties felt by end of the nineteenth century metropolitan bourgeoisie. As Alain Corbin has pointed out in reference to post-Commune France, “in the tradition of pessimism haunting bourgeois minds” social change suggested “that an irresistible flood has broken through the social dikes”.<sup>56</sup>

Late nineteenth century national regimes made use of state-racism to strengthen internal cohesion, by excluding and alienating some “marginal” social categories. Prostitution was “pathologized” and came to be regarded as a social malaise to be suppressed, not condoned, by authorities. According to abolitionists, while a comprehensive reform of morals was badly needed, state-regulated

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<sup>55</sup> Corbin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

prostitution also had to be abolished in order to contain the spread of vice and immorality and prevent the existing powerful networks of commercial sex entrepreneurs from carrying out their criminal activities. Prostitutes were considered a social gangrene, conducive to the degeneration of the whole social order, the spreading agents of venereal disease to be eliminated by virtue of a massive purification campaign. At the same time, a new discourse of moral rehabilitation was introduced and for the first time prostitutes came to be considered targets for moral regeneration. An analysis of State policies on prostitution and subsequently public discourses will investigate whether the shift from regulationist to abolitionist policies in Egypt signalled the emergence of a new bio-political regime and its enforcement on the Egyptian social body. It will also examine how it related with the development of local nationalist politics which sought to define their “national” community.<sup>57</sup>

Some observations are needed with reference to the implications of Foucauldian theory for the historical study of non-metropolitan settings. Foucault’s work seems to be concerned only with the study of metropolitan states and societies, thus foreclosing the appreciation of the imperial dimension of disciplining power. A number of scholars devoted their efforts to the study of “colonial governmentality” and the ways in which multiple discourses about hygiene, space, education, sexuality and intimacy have shaped colonial societies and power regimes.<sup>58</sup> They applied Foucauldian insights to specific ethnographic locales, often disclosing the numerous fissures and tensions complicating imperial hegemony. A historical reading of

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<sup>57</sup> See Stephen Legg, “The International and the Historical Within the Local: Targeting Prostitution in Colonial Delhi”, Unpublished Paper.

<sup>58</sup> See Anna Laura Stoler, *Race, Education and Desire* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 2.

Foucauldian genealogy of power discourses can help define important shifts and development in the incessant making of colonial selves, colonizers' and colonized alike. Discourse on the regulation of sexuality and prostitution can be read as a lens through which national identities were defined. In the colony, bio-political notions were used not only by colonizers to set civilizational standards, but also by national elites to engineer their imagined version of national community. A type of colonial discourse, that of the management of "dangerous sexualities", was used by indigenous nationalists as a discourse on the inclusion/exclusion from the emerging political community. This process was based on the vernacularization and translation of universalist concepts, such as that of nationalism and citizenship. While a critical analysis of the scholarship on nationalism is beyond the scope of the present study, it will suffice to say that it is in conversation with those studies on Middle Eastern nationalism which sought to adopt a non-reactive (Arab nationalism is a simple reaction to European encroachment), non-imitative (Arab intellectuals consciously tried to imitate European idealist thinkers) and non-diffusionist (the story of nationalism is the story of the diffusion of the idea of Nation from Europe to non-European contexts).<sup>59</sup> In particular this study looks at nationalism as a multiple and contested discourse rooted in specific socio-economic factors and seeks to establish the role that sex and gender played within the articulation of these discourses.

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<sup>59</sup> Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1960); Silvia Haim, *Arab Nationalism, an Anthology*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962); Bernard Lewis, *The Middle East and the West* (New York: Harpercollins College Div, 1968); Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964).

### **1.5 Scope and Structure of the Work**

My work aims at deconstructing hegemonic representations of sex workers' dangerousness for the social order and shows to what extent both colonial and local bourgeois anxieties were inscribed in the bodies of prostitutes. Women not subscribing to middle-class notions of social respectability, I argue, were increasingly constructed, from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, as "dangerous" social beings, whose careful containment and supervision were considered vital by both colonizers and local elites for the imperial status quo and the Egyptian national community, respectively. I am interested in elucidating the link between facts, interpretations and historical narrations to see how different meanings were assigned to prostitution across the social body, an exercise in critiquing a pure empiricist "retrieval model" in historiography.

Non-economistic culturalist understanding of Marxism and feminism initially influenced my interest in exploring the agency of a gendered subaltern group, whose story has been largely left outside the historical record. To what pertains popular histories, this work seeks to complement our knowledge of yet another space of mediated historical agency "from below", that of sex workers in Cairo in the period under consideration. A first aim of this research, in other words, is contributing to that body of literature subscribing to the view that there is much to know outside the realm of historical grand narrations. More specifically, I am trying to complement that branch of prostitution studies which focuses on the agency of sex workers, on the base that hegemony is never monolithic and that the exploration of subaltern lives does irremediably substantiate a space of complex and fragmented micro-resistances.

A second aim of this research is that of addressing the question of the relationship between the construction of social marginality and disciplinary bio-political project by exploring a specific case study, that of the regulation of sex work in colonial Cairo. The analysis of Egyptian regulationism and abolitionism extend to the question of the circulation of cultural materials among the metropolis and the colony. Sex and gender will then be analysed as important facets in the modernist project of Egyptian nationalist elites.

Chapter 2 sets the context by analysing instances of pre-colonial sex work from the end of the eighteenth to the end of nineteenth century and looks at the antecedents of prostitution regulation. Chapter 3 deals with the emergence of modern prostitution in late nineteenth-century Cairo. Modern prostitution as opposed to earlier forms of sex work is understood as a quantitative and qualitative change and the extreme commodification of sex. Analysis of the expansion of prostitution covers certainly structural factors such as the impact on the integration of Egypt's economy in the global market on an unequal base, the uneven spread of capitalist development and the ensuing restructuring of household economies and family relations. Female economic roles outside the autonomous self-servicing expanded family were dramatically restructured. Poor wages and lack of occupational options, due to the scarce industrial base in the country, determined the recourse to prostitution of growing number of women. The expansion of prostitution was promoted by the unprecedented growth of Cairo and increasing demand due to the rising of a local middle class with greater purchasing power, massive imperial military presence, mass tourism and the emergence of new consumption patterns. These elements

constitute the background against which prostitution was assigned new critical social meaning by the dominant classes. Chapter 3 focuses on the reason why prostitution flourished after 1882 and establishes a relation between urban change, female economic vulnerability, migration and the increasing in prostitution evident from the beginning of British domination over Egypt.

Chapter 4 looks at the complex organization and hierarchy of Cairene sex work from 1882 onwards. The hierarchy of Cairene sex work is discussed in coeval sources of many kinds as a static two-tier trade where European prostitution, although deplorable and coerced, still compared favourably to native “Oriental” abjection and squalor. An alternative reading of primary sources, especially some personal micro-histories chosen as exemplification of some aspects of the trade, seems to challenge received stereotypes of racial superiority and narrations of female victimization and coercion. This chapter also deals with the question of sex worker’s agency and shows how women in the trade, although caught in a system of subordination, did resist and circumvented unwanted state intervention and pimps’ exploitation. I will then analyse the actual practices and the discursive strategies used to marginalize prostitutes and turn them into disciplined and docile objects of control. Chapter 5 traces colonial and local State authorities approaches to sex work. I argue that disciplinary power was firstly employed by colonial officials to stamp prostitutes, in the form of a specific system of discipline and control, made up by the brothel, the lock-hospital and the prison, coupled with a scientific discourse of medicalization. Disciplinary power was then complemented with a new emerging bio-political power focusing on the preservation and the optimization of the

population's health and productive forces. The emergence of mature bio-political concerns, resulting in Foucault's notion of state racism associated with the acceleration of Egyptian nationalism, brought to the shift from regulation to abolitionism. The precedent of abolitionist practices can be recognized in the purification campaign waged by colonial authority in Cairo during the First World War with the aim of safeguarding public orders and curtailing the rampant spread of venereal disease among Dominions and British troops garrisoned in town. The relationship between colonialism, in the form of foreign troops, prostitution and venereal contagion is the subject of chapter 6. Chapter 7 focuses on how prostitution was used by nationalist leaders of different orientations to formulate a trenchant critique of Western imperialism, while delineating the contours of their much sought-for autonomous national community on the local press. Local elites and rising middle-class *effendiyyah* expressed through prostitution their concerns for the establishment of a healthy Egyptian political community: sex work was seen as major danger in terms of social order and governmentality. A number of themes were woven together: the fear of social anarchy, the growing discomfort with increased female mobility and irruption in the public space, the spread of venereal contagion and its related bio-political risk, the degeneration of the national community due to rampant immorality and debauchery. In the context of Egyptian nation-making, prostitution as a discourse was a medium through which local notions of citizenship and cultural authenticity, mainly defined by religion, found expression. The public discourse on commercial sex, sexuality, gendered roles, marriage, the family and public health in formally newly independent Egypt were inseparable from attempts at

defining its modernity and political maturity and legitimize local nationalists' hegemonic role. To attain these goals, a typical discursive strategy consisted in the creation of figures of "national villains" as dense metaphorical referents of spreading social malaise: the cases of the "king of the underworld" Ibrahim al-Gharbi and traffickers in women and children are discussed. Chapter 8 talks about abolitionists' attempts to reform and reintegrate prostitutes in society, by converting them into disciplined and reliable servants. By focusing on foreign prostitutes and "fallen" women in Cairo, it explores the colonial dimension of Victorian social purity, by showing how these specific categories of gendered subaltern actors discursively played a very integral role in the preservation of besieged notions of colonizers' racial and civilizational superiority. Lastly, chapter 9 will analyze the switch from regulation to abolitionism. Since 1935, when a special governmental commission on abolition officially pronounced itself in favour of abolition, Egyptian political elites and middle-class commentators considered prostitution as intolerable. As opposed to conventional views which consider abolitionist regulation as a sign of libertarianism and emancipation, I will argue that Egyptian nationalists' abolitionism was part and parcel of a complex disciplinary project aimed at reinforcing their control over society.



## 2

# Pre-colonial Sex Work

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide a brief historical background of the emergence of “modern” regulated prostitution, focusing on the end of the eighteenth century to 1882, when State-licensed sex work was codified by colonial authorities. It will investigate how women transacting in sexual services as their exclusive – or more often as one of other low-income activities – were dealt with by local authorities. I argue that the colonial system of sex work regulation has some antecedents, the study of which, allows us to outline the emergence of a disciplinary project characterized by the increasing social marginalization of prostitutes. The fluid *continuum* of social integration versus the systematic exclusion of sex workers during the first half of the nineteenth century leading up to the colonial period reveals a great deal concerning the extent to which gender and sexuality were used as discourses of power and control over society by an increasingly authoritarian State. Following an introduction of occupational figures such as public entertainers, singers and dancers who were often associated with prostitution for their immodest public behaviour, particularly in pre-1882 literary sources, I will analyze what I consider to be important historical moments in the progressive creation of social subjectivity of prostitutes. Before the

institutionalization of State-licensed prostitution in 1882, the fundamental link between female sexuality, social disorder, prostitution and public health were progressively constructed and shaped by practices of surveillance and discipline targeting unattached and reputedly disorderly women. This began during the French Expedition of 1798-1801 and was later extended under Muhammad 'Ali and Isma'il's rule.

Both Judith Tucker and Khaled Fahmy are among the few scholars who tackle the study of Egyptian prostitution in the pre-colonial period.<sup>60</sup> They argue that the occupational status of women pre-1882 proves to be a rather elusive matter for historians to approach due to the very limited sources available to researchers. According to Tucker, the stigma attached to prostitutes "militated against official recognition of these women in the courts or elsewhere".<sup>61</sup> Whether the extent of social stigmatization, as opposed to the poor effectiveness of police surveillance, was a principal cause for the almost complete lack of police cases related to prostitution before the mid nineteenth century is debatable here, it is certainly true that historians have had to deal with a major gap in archival sources.<sup>62</sup> Tucker extensively

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<sup>60</sup> See Judith Tucker, *Women*, and Khaled Fahmy, "Prostitution in Nineteenth Century Egypt" in Eugene Rogan (ed.), *Op. Cit.*, pp. 77-104.

<sup>61</sup> Tucker, *Op. Cit.*, p. 150.

<sup>62</sup> Starting from the 1840s and following a series of khedivial reforms, the religious judicial system based on Islamic law, the *shari'ah*, was complemented by a secular one made of police stations and various levels of adjudication courts, the higher being the so called *Maglis al-Ahkam*. Far from replacing the religious system, the new one actually integrated it, as it constituted the codification of *ta'azir*, that is, the discretionary punishment ruled by a *qadi* for non-*hadd* crimes, those crimes whose punishments are not clearly stated in the Qur'an. For example, in honour crimes such as that of defloration (*hitk al 'ird*), perpetrators very rarely could be punished according with the *shari'ah*, as the private nature of sexual intercourse militated against the fundamental principle of evidence in the Coranic law, witnesses' testimonies (*shahadah*). These crimes, then, were dealt with in secular courts under the provisions of *ta'azir*. Cases of pimping, pilfering, gambling, killing and sexual abuse connected to the world of prostitution were generally dealt with in secular courts. Interestingly enough, those examined in existing scholarship are all post-1858. See Khaled Fahmy, *Op. Cit.*, p. 96; Liat Kozma, "Negotiating Virginity: Narratives of Defloration from late Nineteenth Century Egypt" in

investigated Cairo and provincial *shari'ah* court records to analyse the changing economic roles of women within and outside family production units, as well as women's access to property and shifting ideological formations about gendered division of labour. In her classic study *Women in Nineteenth Century Egypt*,<sup>63</sup> Tucker examined sex work as one of the various female economic activities through the lens of resistance to the oppressive power of the State.<sup>64</sup> Tucker saw prostitutes primarily as objects of expanding state intervention and coercion, because of their infringing widely shared codes of honour and female decency. Fahmy refined our knowledge on the topic in two important ways. On one side, he analyzed prostitution as a medium through which newly implemented Egyptian state policies expressed anxieties about rational management of the population in terms of public health, order and morality. On the other, he also shed light on the lives and circumstances of prostitutes themselves by focusing on the social space within which they operated, the brothel; this was carried out by reading police files as sources of social in addition to judicial history. In this way Fahmy succeeded in reading new areas of State-imposed control as sites of contestation where agency "from below" was shaped and continuously negotiated when ordinary people came in contact with the State disciplinary or normalizing power.<sup>65</sup> Here I wish to complement or extend

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*Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, 24, no.1, 2004: pp. 55-65; Mario M. Ruiz, "Virginity Violated: Sexual Assault and Respectability in Mid- to Late-Nineteenth-Century Egypt" in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 25, no. 1, 2005: pp. 214-27; Rudolph Peters, "The Infatuated Greek: Social and Legal Boundaries in Nineteenth Century Egypt" in *Égypte-Monde Arabe*, 34, 1998: pp. 53-66; Khaled Fahmy, "Law, Medicine and Society in Nineteenth-Century Egypt" in *Égypte-Monde Arabe*, 34, 1998: pp. 17-52; on the tensions between secular, *siyyasi*, and religious, *shari'i*, laws see also Khaled Fahmy, "The Police and the People in Nineteenth Century Egypt", *Die Welt des Islams*, 39, 3, 1999: pp. 340-77.

<sup>63</sup> Tucker, *Op. Cit.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 150-6.

<sup>65</sup> Fahmy, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 77-8.

Fahmy and Tucker's analysis, by updating our knowledge about the social profiles of sex workers in pre-colonial Egypt and their relationship with State authorities in order to sketch the prehistory of the process of increasing prostitutes' social marginalization, which was eventually codified by the colonial State in 1882. Before the British occupation, sex workers were often repressed or controlled by the State through taxation. This attempt was neither systematic nor effective. Given the dearth of information concerning pre-modern sex work in Egypt, it will be necessary to combine sparse and multifarious sources ranging from fiscal revenue registers to folk tales and travelogues to be able to sketch an albeit tentative portrait of the trade. For instance, the peculiar sensibility of modern eighteenth and nineteenth century European travellers and observers in Egypt, with their quest for the exotic and sensual Orient they were introduced to in their literary education, accounts for the abundance of descriptions of women dancers and prostitutes in Orientalist travelogues, the main source we have about prostitution in the pre-colonial period.<sup>66</sup> Invariably described as endowed with unrestrained sexual energy to the point of aberrant perversion and coarseness, dancers described by Denon, Flaubert, Lane and others, signalled the attempt of the West to capture the "essence" of the Orient, as

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<sup>66</sup> The most important examples in the genre are Vivant Denon, Edward Lane and Flaubert's work. Baron Vivant Denon (1747-1825) was a French writer, engraver, art historian, Egyptologist, and colonial administrator. He published his travel diaries under the title *Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt, during the Campaigns of General Bonaparte, translated from the French, to which is prefixed an Historical Account of the Invasion of Egypt by the French, by E.A. Kendal, Esq. Illustrated by Maps, Views, &c. &c.* (London: Darf Publisher, London, 1986, first published in 1802). Edward William Lane authored *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians, the Definitive 1860 Edition Introduced by Jason Thompson*. (Cairo-New York: AUC Press, 2006). Lane (1801-1876) is famous above all for being the first translator of the "One Thousand and One Night" into English. He travelled in Egypt in the 1820s and first published his account in 1836. In 1850 well-known French novelist Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) made a trip to Egypt with his friend, writer and photographer Maxim Du Camp. Flaubert's travel diary has been translated and published by Francis Steegmuller as Gustave Flaubert, *Flaubert in Egypt, a Sensibility on Tour* (London: Bodley Head 1972).

they unveiled and in some instances took physical possession of the bodies of those women who, promenading as “phantom-like” silhouettes in everyday life, were perceived as embodying the perennial imperviousness of the Orient to all-conquering Western eyes.<sup>67</sup> What is almost entirely missing from these narratives is the prostitutes’ sense of agency: in fact, whether these women are described as dangerous and sly or passive and subservient, the transactional and contractual dimensions of the relationship between the customer and the prostitute are always concealed. For instance, in his travelogue written at the time of the French Occupation of Egypt,<sup>68</sup> writer Vivant Denon talks about the uncontrollable licentiousness of his neighbour’s wife in Rosetta:

she was beautiful, of amiable manners, and she loved her husband; but she was not amiable enough to love him alone; his jealousy was the cause of continual noisy quarrels; on her submission, she constantly promised to renounce the object of his jealousy; but the next day there was new affliction; she would weep, and repent again; still, her husband had always some fresh cause for scolding.<sup>69</sup>

No explanations or hypothetical remarks are offered by Denon, though, for her behaviour other than a “typically Oriental” unrestrained sexual appetite. For example, no mention is made to the fact that a reason why many local women entertained multiple sexual liaisons with a number of French men as their “sugar daddies” could possibly allow them to ameliorate their economic position, also given the social stigmatization as native Moslem concubines of French occupants.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> See Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) for an analysis that brings together power, colonialism, gender and representation. See also Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978), pp. 188-90, on the link between Western epistemology, the “Orient” and sexuality.

<sup>68</sup> For more detailed information about this historical events, see next paragraph.

<sup>69</sup> See Denon, *Op. Cit.*, p. 75.

<sup>70</sup> The transactional nature of sexual relationships is clear here, for all the difficulties of disentangling categories of prostitution from transactional/non transactional sex. In this case Egyptian women, often

Again Gustave Flaubert gives no specific background information for the presence of the “Triestina”, a prostitute of Italian origins, in the Cairene “dilapidated” brothel room where he met her during his veritable Middle Eastern sex tour in 1850.<sup>71</sup> Kutchuk Hanem, the Syrian *‘alimah* Flaubert met in Esna, could well have been once one of the most renowned courtesans of her times, but we are not told anything about the circumstances that brought her to practice prostitution in a dull and languid provincial town: once again, voyeuristic descriptions of firm bronze breasts and intercourse are all we are left with.<sup>72</sup> Despite their racial and gendered bias, these sources are still useful nonetheless. Not only do they document the process of sexualisation of the “Orient” that was a fundamental aspect in the construction of colonial knowledge, but they can also be used to sketch, at least tentatively, the different forms sex work could take; for instance, from the exchange of long term sexual access in return for economic protection perhaps described best as concubinage, to the episodic provision of sexual services for cash (or even goods) we normally associate with the concept of prostitution, and how they changed over time.

## 2.2 Ghawazi, ‘Awalim and Sex Workers

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fleeing from their legal partners, had relationships with Frenchmen to attain greater consumption power than for subsistence. This observations on the widespread role of gift and sex are drawn from Mark Hunter, “The Materiality of Everyday Sex: Thinking Beyond ‘Prostitution’” in *African Studies*, 61, no. 1, 2002: pp. 99-120. I thank Dr. Sharad Chari for this reading suggestion.

<sup>71</sup> Flaubert, *Op. Cit.*, p. 39. See also also Auriant (pseudo), *Koutchouk-Hanem, l’almée de Flaubert*. Paris: Mercure de France, 1949, pp. 10-38.

<sup>72</sup> Flaubert, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 113-20.

Singing and dancing provided by female performers in non-clearly defined religious contexts<sup>73</sup> was generally associated with prostitution. According to literary and iconographic sources,<sup>74</sup> in particular by Western observers, female performers were divided into two main categories although the differentiation was to become increasingly blurred over time. The *'awalim* (plural of *'alimah*) were performers of high rank, considered as models of cultivation and refinement. Skilled in the arts of singing, dancing, poetry and literature, often hired for the education of upper-class girls, they performed only for women in wealthy harems or sang for mixed groups from behind the *mashrabiyyat*, typically Egyptian carved wood latticework windows overlooking the main salon of traditional houses. The *ghawazi* (plural of *ghaziyyah*), on the contrary, were mostly entertainers for the lower classes. They danced in the streets on special occasions and could be hired to perform in front of all-male audiences, generally in a group of four or five women accompanied by some musicians playing a *tar*, (a tambourine), a *darabukkah*, (a hand-drum), a *rabab*, (a

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<sup>73</sup> According to Michel Frishkopf, Islamic hymnody (*inshad dini*) “should take place in a suitably sacred context, neither within core Islamic ritual (where it is not sanctioned by Tradition), nor in irreligious contexts (where it could be misinterpreted, mocked, or acquire unsavory associations). Within these limits, *inshad* may be performed at explicitly religious occasions, or general social ones”, see Michael Frishkopf, “Inshad Dini and Aghani Diniyyah in Twentieth Century Egypt: a Review of Styles, Genres, and Available Recordings” in *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, Winter 2000. <http://fp.arizona.edu/mesassoc/Bulletin/34-2/34-2%20Frishkopf.htm> on line edition. Performance practices of female singers in religious contexts are nonetheless documented historically for the nineteenth century when women like al-Haggah al-Suwaysiyyah performed in public completely veiled and accompanied by family members. See Virginia Danielson, *A Voice Like Egypt: Umm Kulthum, Arab Song and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997), p. 23, 29 notes 13, 42.

<sup>74</sup> The pervasive presence of dancers in the Orientalist male imaginary is confirmed also by the numbers of contemporary iconographic sources representing *'awalim* and *ghawazi*. Among the first to draw Egyptian dancers were Louis François Cassas (1756-1827), French painter, architect, engraver and traveller, and Georg Wilhelm Bauremfend, member of a Danish royal expedition to Arabia and the Levant between 1761 and 1766. Among other European Orientalists who travelled in Egypt and were inspired by local dancers were Belgian Jean-François Portaels (1818-1895), Austrian Leopold Carl Müller (1834-1892), and Carl Rudolph Hüber (1839-1896). In 1842, a lithography by Edouard De Biefve depicting a famous Egyptian *'alimah* named Ansak caused a scandal at the Brussels Salon, as it was reputed too sensual.

sort of violin). These women were stamped out as a separate category by the attribution of cultural markers, such as their alleged gypsy origin and dialect. In the construction of their otherness, the apparent subversion of shared notions of social decorum also played an important role. According to British traveller Edward William Lane's description, many *ghawazi*, while being "public women", that is available for promiscuous sex for money, were in fact married and dominant over their subdued husbands:

the husband is subject to the wife: he performs for her the offices of a servant and a procurer; and generally, if she be a dancer, he is also her musician: but a few of the men earn their subsistence as blacksmiths or tinkers.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> See Edward William Lane, *Op Cit.*, p. 380. In his work, Lane devoted to the *ghawazi* an entire chapter entitled "Public Dancers": "The Ghawàzee being distinguished, in general, by a cast of countenance differing, though slightly, from the rest of Egyptians, we can hardly doubt that they are, as themselves assert, a distinct race. Their origin, however, is involved in much uncertainty. They call themselves 'Baramikeh' . . . and boast that they are descended from the famous family of that name who were the objects of the favour, and afterwards of the capricious tyranny, of Haroon Er-Rasheed", p. 379; "The Ghawàzee mostly keep themselves distinct from other classes, abstaining from marriages with any but persons of their own tribe; but sometimes a Ghàzeeyeh makes a vow of repentance, and marries a respectable Arab who is not generally considered as disgraced by such a connection. All of them are brought up for the venal profession; but not all as dancers; and most of them marry; though they never do this until they have commenced their career of venality", p. 380; "The ordinary language of the Ghawàzee is the same as the rest of the Egyptians; but they sometimes make use of a number of words peculiar to themselves, in order to render their speech unintelligible to strangers. They are, professedly, of the Muslim faith; and often some of them accompany the Egyptian caravan of pilgrims to Mekkeh. There are many of them in almost every large town in Egypt, inhabiting a distinct portion of the quarter allotted to public women in general. Their ordinary habitations are low huts, or temporary sheds, or tents; for they often move from one town to another: but some of them settle themselves in large houses; and many possess black female slaves (by whose prostitution they increase their property), and camels, asses, cows, etc., in which they trade. They attend the camps, and all the great religious and other festivals, of which they are, to many persons, the chief attractions. Numerous tents of Ghàzeeyehs are seen on those occasions. Some of these women add to their other allurements the art of singing, and equal the ordinary 'Awalim", p. 381; "there are some other dancing-girls and courtesans who call themselves Ghàwazee, but who do not really belong to that tribe", *ibid.* There are analogies with earlier John Lewis Burckhardt's, *Arabic Proverbs: or the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians Illustrated from Their Proverbial Sayings Current at Cairo* (London: Curzon Press, 1984), pp. 173-9. Burckhardt (1784-1817), a Swiss, travelled from the Euphrates valley and the Syrian Desert to the Sinai and, in Africa, up the Nile Valley, until Aswan and across the Red Sea to Arabia and the Hejaz from 1809 until his death in Cairo in October 1817. Also Bayle St John (1822-1859), British traveller and journalist, described the *ghawazi* in his *Village Life in Egypt* (1853). He talks of a community of dancers in the rural village of Kafr Mustanat where very young children, bought from their peasant family to be trained in dancing, are learning "the graceful arts and allurements peculiar to their strange community. See Bayle St.



Although in earlier periods, the *'awalim*, unlike the *ghawazi*, were not associated with the idea of commercial sex, later in time the two groups were to be increasingly identified and became synonym for a woman singing and dancing in cafés or cabarets as well as not refraining from engagement in paid sex.

Despite the contempt of society and orthodox religion for those who publicly displayed their bodies, performers were quite ubiquitous social figures. They danced and sang at popular religious festivities called *mawalid*<sup>76</sup> and communal ceremonies such as weddings, circumcisions and the like, where a “folk”, or *sha'bi*, repertoire was performed by women in front of mixed audiences. Female dancers and singers highlighted through their very presence the liminal quality of the passage rites so integral to the ongoing reproduction of collective identities and the complex interplay of decorum and indecency in folk culture.

Prostitutes as a professional urban group are detectable together with male and women dancers and singers from Mamluk times onwards. Singers, prostitutes and beggars were grouped as distinct trades in historical sources. They participated in guild processions, marching at the end of the parade, but it seems they were not fully integrated within the guild system. As in the case of other “ordinary” guilds, they functioned more as an instrument of State taxation, a case of administrative interventionism without a distinct philosophy of regulation: in other words, in Mamluk times and even later until 1882, prostitutes were taxed, so *de facto* recognized, but prostitution was not institutionalized with the segregation of licensed

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John. *Village Life in Egypt*, vol.1 (New York: Arno Press, 1973), p. 23. He also refers to the *ghawazi* as a sort of tribe or peripatetic guild of dancing girls. See St. John, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 24-8.

<sup>76</sup> *Mawalid* are saint's festivals among which particularly famous for the presence of dancers-prostitutes were those of Tantah and the *mawalid* of Sidi Ibrahim al Disuqi at Disuq, in the Delta.

sex workers in State-authorized brothels. At the same time, women workers in general and not only ostracized professional groups, experienced a great deal of exclusion and marginalization in the guild system: according to Judith Tucker “many of the more frequently cited women’s professions fell into the category of low-status occupations which were not organized into real guilds or guilds of valid pedigree”.<sup>77</sup> This space of exclusion from male-centred institutions might well turn into an alternative arena for the consolidation of a distinct women subaltern culture, organized around the neighbourhood informal networks of communication (the streets, the fountain, the small vegetable market populated by women peddlers). Prostitutes, although in an oscillating position, were part of this human and social landscape, more integrated than marginalized, as members of a larger labouring class. Their tax was levied at the level of the *muqata’ah* of the *khurdah*. This was similar to a tax on lowly occupations, applying among others to snake charmers, hashish sellers and mountebanks. Being grouped for fiscal purposes, they were supervised by the State but not closely regulated in the way they conducted their business. It seems however, that the authorities’ abusive methods in tax-farming were the norm, with female casual labourers constantly under the threat of being registered as prostitutes. The *hurdaḥ multezimi* (tax-farmer) had free hand in adding or erasing women’s names from the registers, often depending on whether a good bribe had been paid or not. In pre-colonial Mamluk and Ottoman times, prostitution was significant to the State, mainly due to the importance in revenue collection,

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<sup>77</sup> See Judith Tucker, *Op. Cit.*, p. 108. For a list of female working activities the classic reference is André Raymond, *Artisans et commerçants au Caire au XVIIIe siècle* (Damas: Institut français de Damas, 1973-74), vol. 2, p. 511.

while communal leaders decided how to enforce collective notions of propriety and decorum on transgressive individuals, without central State's intervention.<sup>78</sup>

### 2.3 The French Expedition of 1798-1801: Beginnings of Supervision

It was a French initiative that placed greater emphasis on the necessity of locating and disciplining sex workers. During the French Expedition of 1798-1801,<sup>79</sup> French authorities decided to ban prostitution and taverns from the main cities. More than considerations on morality and decency, French provisions against commercial sex and drinking showed a very pragmatic concern for public health and the army's well-being and efficiency.<sup>80</sup> Sex workers were banned to the countryside in order to prevent their association with soldiers garrisoned in towns. At the same time, the removal of prostitution and drinking dens was part and parcel of a major public health programme against the epidemic of plagues that regularly swept the country.<sup>81</sup>

From a later account written in 1802 by Carlos Bey, *nom de plume* of a British army

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<sup>78</sup> See chapter 4, notes 9 and 10.

<sup>79</sup> In 1789, Bonaparte sailed for Egypt with an army of 25,000, in order to establish his control over the Eastern Mediterranean, thus preventing British access to India. From the initial military victory against the Mamluks in the Battle of the Pyramids, Napoleon occupied the country until 1801, when it was defeated by the British expeditionary corps led by Sir Ralph Abercrombie in Alexandria. Despite the actual brevity of the military occupation, its repercussions were enormous in terms of cultural influences and the diffusion of technocratic practices of government in Egypt. For analysis considering all the cultural, political and social aspects of the French occupation see Juan Cole, *Napoleon's Egypt, Invading the Middle East* (Basingstoke-New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007) and Irene A. Bierman (ed.), *Napoleon in Egypt* (New York: Ithaca Press, 2003).

<sup>80</sup> Bonaparte's military authorities banned all known women (those women who were known to State authorities for practising prostitution, *al-nisa' al mashhurat*) from Cairo. See Khaled Fahmy, *Prostitution*, p. 78 and Tucker, *Op.Cit.*, p. 150.

<sup>81</sup> Outbreaks of plague swept Egypt 193 times from 1374 to 1894. A major epidemic of bubonic plague is documented for 1791 and was followed by the pandemic of 1798, when Napoleon's medical officials started the first scientific investigations on its aetiology. See Alan Mikhail, "The Nature of Plague in Late Eighteenth-Century Egypt" in *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 82, no. 2, 2008: pp. 249-75. For a discussion of plague outbreaks in nineteenth century Egypt, especially the epidemic of 1834-36 which may have caused the death of 200,000 people, and the quarantine enforced by Muhammad 'Ali to prevent contagion, see LaVerne Kuhnke, *Lives at Risk, Public Health in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1990).

officer witnessing the flight of the French from Egypt in 1802, we grasp that the unsanitary conditions were amongst the central concerns of European powers.<sup>82</sup> Both the French and the British tried to apply strict prophylactic measures against the plague. In 1802, letters had to be passed through vinegar and fumigated, bread could only be eaten cold and contacts among persons were severely curtailed. The city of Rosetta was divided into six districts for the purpose of domiciliary inspections of storerooms and cellars to be carried out on a daily basis by *Diwan*-appointed constables. Carlos Bey wrote that the French were particularly careful to ensure that contacts among persons were reduced to a minimum in order to prevent contagion moreover, while clear cases were quarantined.<sup>83</sup>

The impact of emergency sanitary laws effected women who were active in transactional sex and solicited their trade around taverns and liquor shops. Moving to provincial towns made avoiding taxation easier, but deprived them of the bulk of their customers, represented by French army officers. In cities under French occupation, women often exchanged sexual services for greater economic stability, although their inherent subalternity in the sex-gender system always made them vulnerable to abuse and violence; they often also became mistresses of French officials or lived with them as concubines.

The Egyptian women are extremely abandoned and whenever an opportunity offers, give full swing to their vicious inclinations. A vast number of them lived with the French soldiers and almost

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<sup>82</sup> *A Non-Military Journal: or Observations Made in Egypt, by an Officer upon the Staff of the British Army*, London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1803. Aldridge in *Cairo* (London: Macmillan, 1969) suggests the identification of Carlos Bey with Major General Sir Charles Holloway (1749-1827). According to him, the plague had ravaged Egypt for the sixth consecutive year in 1802, attacking 150.000 persons and resulting in 80.000 casualties, *A Non-military Journal*, p. 36.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60. These regulations clearly parallel measures taken in similar circumstances in France since the seventeenth century and before. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 195.

invariably destroyed by medicine before birth the creatures that would otherwise have seen the light, but would have been the children of Christians,

wrote Carlos Bey in his 1802 diary.<sup>84</sup> Despite his blatant chauvinism, the information he gives sheds light on the transactional nature of sex in a colonial context.<sup>85</sup>

The Egyptian historian al-Jabarti (1754-1825) wrote in 1798 that when the French came to Egypt “loose woman and prostitutes of low breeding became attached to the French and mixed with them because of their submission to women as well as their liberality toward them”.<sup>86</sup>

Although he links the loose behaviour of the native women to the corrupting example given by French women who had followed their husbands to Egypt, along with French males’ lust and submissiveness to female whims, al-Jabarti is very sharp in condemning the deeds of his folk-women. He argued that “women lost all sense of shame” and that “because of the advantages offered by the French, these women renounced all sense of shame and self-respect, all deference to public opinion. And they enticed females of their like, particularly young girls, bewitching their minds and exploiting the penchant to sin characteristic of human nature”. Implicit in al-Jabarti’s description is the danger that lack of control of women and their sexual power entailed for the social order. For instance, in a description of the parties and

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>85</sup> For a conceptual definition of women as being transacted in the male-dominated sex-gender system see Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic of Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex” in Rayna R. Reiter (ed.), *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), pp. 157-211.

<sup>86</sup> Cited in Louis Awad, *The Literature of Ideas in Egypt* (Atlanta, GE: Scholar Press, 1986), pp. 22-3. Shaykh al-Jabarti’s chronicles of the first seven months of the French Occupation from June to December 1798 have been edited and translated into English by Shmuel Moreh in *Napoleon in Egypt. Al Jabarti’s Chronicle of the French Occupation, 1798* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2003).

orgies that the French had on boats during the Wafa' al-Nil, the feast of the Nile's flood,

women came out in full ornament and mixed with the French and accompanied them on barges, dancing, singing, and drinking with them night and day in the light of *lanternas* and candles. ... The boatmen also jested licentiously and responded by singing their stupid and saucy songs while beating their oars, especially when their brains were addled by the fumes of hashish. Then they would yell, beat the rhythm, dance and play their flutes, showing their excitements by imitating the songs of the French and using many of their words. When black slave girls learned about the interest of the French in loose women, they hurried to them singly and in groups. They jumped over walls and escape to them through windows and informed them of the secrets of their masters and of their hidden treasures, concealed properties and so forth.<sup>87</sup>

Upon leaving for France, French port officials at Rosetta sold their native women to British soldiers for one dollar each. Carlos Bey commented that “in truth it was more a transfer than a real sale, so that these women could find shelter from Turkish vengeance, since laws were being passed calling for the execution of all native women that had intermingled with the foreigners”.<sup>88</sup> Al-Jabarti reports in his chronicles the cases of two Cairene women – Zaynab al-Bakriyyah and Hawwa' – who were killed for their affairs with French men. Zaynab al-Bakriyyah was taken from her mother's house in Gudariyyah and brought in front of the Ottoman authorities. After being interrogated and disowned by her father, the guards broke her

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24

<sup>88</sup> *A Non-Military Journal*, p. 33: “When the Cairo division of the French army was about to embark to France, the scene that passed upon the quay at Rosetta was in truth a very singular one. The two contending Christian power were employed in the traffic of women who were no more liable, in any justice, to be sold by the one than to be bought by the other; yet there was a regular sale on the part of the French to our army of the women of the country who had lived with them. Several of our soldiers bought very pretty ones for a dollar!! And it was ridiculous enough to see them parading through the streets with their dingy property under their arms. To the credit of both parties, it was in general a transfer rather than a sale of property, in order that the poor unfortunate wretches should have protection from the barbarity of the merciless Turks, who threatened and seemed determined to put to death every Arab woman who had been connected with a Christian”.

neck. A woman called Hawwa' had left her Egyptian husband to move with her French lover to the Citadel. After Cairo was taken by the Ottomans, her husband, a man called Isma'il Kashif al-Shami, found her and asked the Ottoman Wazir for permission to kill her. On being answered in the positive, "he strangled her on the very same day and also strangled his white slave woman, who was the mother of his child. Two other women of their ilk were also killed on that occasion".<sup>89</sup> Not all women were doomed to such a tragic fate. Many went back to their previous husbands or returned to their families and eventually married off.<sup>90</sup> While many men behaved as to re-establish the male-monopolised social code of honour and shame by punishing those women who had dared to challenge the patriarchal order and its hegemonic notions of gendered behaviour and decency, at the level of everyday life the reintegration of these women in the society was still possible.

#### **2.4 Prostitution under Muhammad 'Ali: The 1834 Ban**

Muhammad 'Ali's stance towards prostitution, at least until 1834, was one of increasing fiscal control without regulation. The substantial amount of money levied on socially stigmatized professions, such as actors, dancers, musicians, magicians, accounted for the dramatic expansion in state capacity of extracting and concentrating financial resources. Although not explicitly referred to, it is likely that prostitution was assimilated to these scorned but tolerated trades. In 1834 a decree was promulgated which banned all dancers and singers to Upper Egypt. The main reasons behind such provision have been extensively discussed in existing

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<sup>89</sup> Cited in Awad, *Op. Cit.*, p. 24.

<sup>90</sup> See *Non Military Journal*, p. 31.

literature.<sup>91</sup> Khaled Fahmy reconsiders the “public opinion argument”, which centred around the belief that the ban would have been a response to mounting public discontent towards spreading debauchery and immorality in the capital, voiced by an alliance of common people and religious authorities. At the core of such an abolitionist wave was a very deep distaste for Muhammad ‘Ali’s policies in general, especially for what was considered to be the most vulnerable point of his “modernist” agenda, that is, his perceived indulgence for Europeans, whether residents or travellers, and how they were allowed to amuse themselves in ways contrary to local morals.<sup>92</sup> Notwithstanding the impact that public outrage played on Muhammad ‘Ali’s reconsideration of authoritarian methods and general disregard for *ulama*, it seems more likely that the ban was ultimately brought about by Muhammad ‘Ali’s own concerns for the implementation of his modernizing reforms. In other words, the danger of prostitution was not in relation to morality, but to health and discipline in the key-institutions, like the army and the secular technical schools, that the future development of Egypt was considered to be based on. As a result, prostitution was not abolished altogether but banned and confined to provincial towns which were far from the main cities, schools and barracks. These actions confirmed a previous trend when prostitutes attempted to escape the rapacious taxation of central power. Before the enforcement of the ban, which dislocated prostitution along the course of the Nile in Upper Egypt, Tucker has argued that pre-modern Egyptian prostitution always

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<sup>91</sup> Karin Van Nieuwkerk, *A Trade Like Any Other* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), pp. 31-2.

<sup>92</sup> See Fahmy, *Prostitution*, p. 81. Hanan Kholoussy in her recent article “Monitoring and Medicalising Male Sexuality in Semi-Colonial Egypt” in *Gender & History*, 22, no. 3, 2010, p. 679 also accepts Fahmy’s view. Judith Tucker, *Op. Cit.*, p. 151, instead, advanced a different hypothesis. She argued that the ban originated in widespread protest led by religious authorities and triggered by the blatant abuses committed by the “State system” in the person of the current tax-farmer, the Copt Antun Tuma.



tended to be an informal peripatetic mixed urban-rural type of trade.<sup>93</sup> For instance, according to Tucker, during the Mamluk period, the cotton manufacturing centre of Mahallat-el-Kubra in the Delta was known as a site for prostitution. Denon and the anonymous author of *A Non-military Journal* described their encounters with the dancing girls of Matubis (or Matubas) in the province of Gharbiyyah.<sup>94</sup> Traveller Edward Lane also wrote of prostitutes plying their trade at Minuf in the mid of the nineteenth century.<sup>95</sup> Also around 1850 Gustave Flaubert wrote in his travelogue of the presence of numerous communities of destitute prostitutes and dancers in Aswan and Qena in Upper Egypt.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Tucker, *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> See Denon, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 77-8: "By way of pass-time for the evening, they sent to the shechs, requesting the presence of a party of almehs, a sort of dancing girls in Egypt, similar to the Bayaderas of Indistan. ... The almehs arrived, and did not appear to have any share of the political or religious scruples of the shechs. They denied, however, with a pleasing gracefulness, what the French thought the last of favours, such as that of discovering their eyes and lips, for all the rest was negligently free; and they soon seemed to forget concealment, clothed as they were in coloured gauzes, and ill-fastened girdles which, every now and then, they carelessly tightened, with a playfulness that had something in it agreeable and that reminded the French of their own countrywomen. They had brought two instruments, the one a bag-pipe, and the other a tambourine, made with an earthen pot, and which was beat with their hands. They were seven in number. Two began to dance, while the others sang, accompanying themselves with castanets, in the form of little cymbals, of the size of a crow piece: the motion by which these were rattled against each other, displayed the fingers and wrists of the almehs to great advantage. Their dance began voluptuously, and soon became lascivious. It was no longer anything but a gross and indecent expression of the ecstasy of the senses; and what rendered this picture still the more disgusting, was that at the moment in which they kept the least bounds, the two musicians, with the bestiality of the lowest women in the streets of Europe disturbed with a coarse laugh the scene of intoxication that terminated the dance. They drank brandy in large glasses, like lemonade; and though young, and pretty, they were for the most part, worn-out and faded". *Non Military Journal*, p. 98: "These girls have their headquarter at a town called Matubes (Spanish sounding name by the way) where they indulge their vicious inclinations. It is impossible to be more depraved than they are or, in general, more hideously ugly, fat, coarse and decidedly inelegant; their manner of dancing disgustingly indecent. Yet, they are not only admitted into society, but looked upon as almost as absolutely necessary at a marriage ceremony where they are admired in proportion as they are indelicate!!!".

<sup>95</sup> See Lane, *Op. Cit.*, p. 377

<sup>96</sup> See Flaubert, *Op. Cit.*, p. 110, referring to Qena: "at the bend of one of the streets, to the right as you leave the bazaar, we suddenly found ourselves in the quarter of the almehs (prostitutes). ... The women are sitting in their doorways on mats, or standing. Light-color robes, one over the other, hang loosely into the hot wind; blue robes around the bodies of the negresses. The colours are sky-blue, bright yellow, pink, red – all contrasting with the differently-coloured skins. Necklaces of gold piastres falling to their knees; on their heads, piastres threaded on silk and attached to the end of the

There were many effects of the 1834 ban on prostitution and female entertainment. Depriving those women of their sources of income resulted in a worsening of their economic conditions in general and blurred the distinction between skilled performers and common prostitutes. Clandestine prostitution, nonetheless, managed to survive underground, as witnessed by coeval sources.<sup>97</sup> Writing in 1850, Flaubert tells us that sex workers in Cairo were particularly careful in not attracting the authorities' attention, due to the ban on prostitution enforced fifteen years earlier: when he describes his sexual encounter with the Italian prostitute La Triestina,<sup>98</sup> he recalls that she "was violently afraid of the police, and begged us to make no noise".<sup>99</sup> He went on to comment that "Abbas Pasha is fond only of men, makes things difficult for women".<sup>100</sup> In fact men promptly filled the gap left by women dancers and singers. Women were replaced by *khawwal* and *gink* – the latter non-Egyptians, usually Turkish, Jewish or Armenian. At the time, the term *khawwal* was not derogatory and it was used to indicate male transvestites dancing in public venues and substituting dancing girls. They occupied a social niche and were perceived as fulfilling a respectable, morally sanctioned function during festivals and communal occasions:

one day behind the Hotel d'Orient we meet a wedding procession.  
The drummers (small drums) are on donkey-back, richly dressed  
children on horses; women in black veils (seen full-face, the veils

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hair – they tinkle. ... Tall girl with a soft voice, calling 'Cawadja! Cawadja!'. ... I give some of them a few piastres; a few put their arms around me and try to pull me inside". Other encounters with displaced prostitutes were with Safiyyah Zugairah of Esna (p. 116) and 'Azizah of Assuan (p. 121).

<sup>97</sup> See Flaubert, *Op. Cit.*, p. 39; He also refers to women selling their bodies in the Aqueduct area, ('*Ubur al-Mayyah*'), close to the military camp: "It is along the aqueduct that one generally finds the soldiers' prostitutes, who let themselves be taken for a few *paras*. During the shoot, Maxim disturbed a group of them and I treated our three donkey-drivers to Venus at a price of sixty *paras*".

<sup>98</sup> "Triestina" in Italian means "a woman from Trieste", a city in the north-east of Italy.

<sup>99</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Op. Cit.*, p. 40.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

are like the paper disks that circus riders jump through, only black) uttering the *zagarit*; a camel all covered with gold-piastres; two naked wrestlers, oiled and wearing leather shorts, but not wrestling, just striking poses; men duelling with wooden swords and shields; a male dancer – it was Hasan al-Belbeissi, in drag, his hair braided on each side, embroidered jacket, eyebrows painted black, very ugly, gold piastres hanging down his back; around his body, as a belt, a chain of large square amulets, he clicks castanets; splendid writhing of belly and hips; he makes his belly undulate like waves; grand final bow with his trousers ballooning.<sup>101</sup>

More importantly, the major consequence of the ban on prostitution and female entertainment was that of depriving self-employed women of much of their autonomy and control over their profession. State intervention invariably produced the marginalization of prostitutes and their subordination to the masculine figure of pimps and procurers in return for protection from State control and its coercive methods.

Around the 1860s, prostitutes and dancing girls were brought back to Cairo, maybe as the opportunity of taxing them acquired primacy over every other consideration. In 1866, Khedive Isma‘il introduced a new tax on public women, according to which the amount to be levied on every single female practitioner was to be decided upon by the tax-farmer. Lady Lucie Duff Gordon, an aristocratic Englishwoman travelling in Egypt at the time, recorded the grievances of a dancer:

I saw one of the poor dancing girls the other day ... and she told me how cruel the new tax on them is. It is left to the discretion of the official who farms it to make each woman pay according to her presumed gains, i.e. good looks, and thus the poor women are exposed to all the caprices and extortions of the police. This last new tax has excited more disgust than any.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Flaubert, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 38-9, see also p. 69 and pp. 83-4, where the author describes again the most famous male-dancer of the time, Hasan al-Belbeissi.

<sup>102</sup> Lucie Duff Gordon, *Letters from Egypt* (London: Virago Press, 1997), p. 322.

“We know the name of our ruler” said a fellah who had just heard of it, “he is *Mawas* Pasha”.<sup>103</sup> The use of the term *Mawas*, meaning “pimp”, by the peasant cited by Duff Gordon in her memoir clearly expresses the extent of ordinary Egyptians’ animosity towards their autocratic leader, rapacious taxation and State tolerance of prostitution.

## 2.5 Conclusions

Despite the paucity of sources on Egyptian prostitution for the pre-colonial period, this chapter has sketched the status of Egyptian women transacting sexual service up to the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Women prostituting themselves would recur to transactional sex often combining it with other activities, especially with entertainment such as dancing and singing. These performers, although ostracized for displaying their bodies and their voices, were nonetheless still part of society, and indeed in fact played an important role in communal celebrations.

The pre-colonial period was conspicuous for the absence of strict labelling policies; sex work was highly informal and not institutionalized. With the exception of some heightened measures of control and supervision introduced during the French Expedition for sanitary reasons related to the plague, the approach of authorities to prostitution was neither systematic nor consistent. Recent scholarship also discussed how the famous ban of sex workers to the South under Muhammad ‘Ali in 1834 was more of an attempt at preserving discipline and health within key technocratic institutions, such as the army and the new secular technical school, by

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<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

simply confining prostitutes to a secluded area rather than an attempt at disciplining their activities. As will be argued through the forthcoming chapters however, the process of state consolidation over the central apparatus of authority, resulted in increasing marginalization of women marketing their sexual services as a separate professional category endowed with a sexualized social *persona*, that of the prostitute. While the separation of prostitutes from the wider class of Egyptian working women was never completely achieved during the nineteenth century, the links between prostitution and the political economy of the labouring class at large were increasingly downplayed in State discourse at the time of modernist West-inspired reforms of sex workers legal status.<sup>104</sup> The relationship between new legislation on commercial sex, the development of the trade and the overall political, economic and infrastructural change originating from Khedive Isma‘il’s time (1863-1879) and deepening during British colonial period (1882-1952), will be investigated in the following chapters.

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<sup>104</sup> Chapter 4 will deal in detail with the Egyptian history of sex work regulationism, inspired by European examples of legally recognized, hence tolerated, prostitution in brothels, inaugurated in Egypt right after the British Occupation of 1882 with the general decree on medical inspections of prostitutes.

## 3

# In a Changing City

### 3.1 Introduction

After remarkable continuities in its development through Mamluk and Ottoman times, Cairo grew to become a global metropolis very rapidly from the 1860s onwards. While Khedive Isma‘il was the first to launch an ambitious programme of urban planning, rapid processes of economic and social change boosted by the British Occupation in 1882 radically transformed the city.<sup>105</sup>

In this new urban context, I argue, sex work, which has been briefly described in the first chapter in its pre-modern multifarious practices, restructured into a dramatically new phenomenon. In this chapter I am attempting to introduce an analysis of the emergence of modern sex work in Cairo by placing it in its historical context, stressing the link between commercial sex and larger processes such as urbanization, immigration and human trafficking. These structural factors constituted the broad canvas against which prostitution came to be seen by women of different backgrounds as a viable strategy to cope with increasing female economic vulnerability and a new social meaning was assigned to it by political elites. Modern prostitution as opposed to traditional commercial sex is here understood as characterized by both changes and continuities. While, as I will discuss in detail

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<sup>105</sup> André Raymond, *Cairo* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 318.

later, any quantification of the actual number of practitioners, hence the relative growth in the ratio of sex workers over the total number of female Cairo residents and its changes overtime, is very difficult, not to say impossible, to establish, due to the fragmentariness of data and the partiality of sources at our hand, qualitatively speaking the last quarter of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of a new conception of sex work. This entailed the construction of a specific sex worker's social *persona*, that of the prostitute, and increased attention, at least in theory, by local and colonial authorities, to the scrutiny and regularization of reputedly "disorderly and dangerous" women, to the effect of making sex work more "exposed", something of a highly visible feature of the urban space. State authorities, both colonial and local, showed a new interest in quantifying sex workers in the clear attempt of controlling them. At the same time, I argue, this process should not be understood as a mono-dimensional linear trajectory. Changes in sex work in the colonial period was a decidedly uneven and combined phenomena, where transactional sex restructured by articulating different and complex degrees of interaction with the market and the State, from more formal and institutionalized brothel prostitution to more informal and casual clandestine sex work. While it continued to be a choice women could make more or less deliberately trying to alleviate their harsh economic constraints, the structure of sex work and its social meaning deeply changed due to its increasing integration within the realm of market forces and State intervention.

### **3.2 Urban Change, Gender and Labour in Colonial Cairo**

The British occupied Egypt in response to a broadly based proto-nationalist movement rallied around the figure of Colonel Ahmad ‘Urabi in 1882. They reinstated an acquiescent ruler, rather young and dull Tawfiq (1879-1892), and set about to exert their direct rule over a country that had acquired the most strategic importance for the Empire by dint of its location astride the Suez Canal, the key sea-route to India. The occupation of Egypt developed into a fully fledged colonial enterprise lasting formally until the country’s unilateral independence of 1922, but which practically ended in 1954 when all British military bases were removed from the Egyptian soil. Until the First World War, Egypt’s agricultural sector continued to grow, sustained by the projects of rural infrastructure development promoted by the British. On the contrary, as Egypt was to be integrated in the global market as a supplier of raw materials to the British textile manufacturing industry and a purchaser of finished goods, the development of a local industrial sector was not equally encouraged. Relations of production and patterns of land ownership in rural areas changed as export-oriented plantation economy was fostered with the aim of maximizing the output for the global market. Peasants saw the pace of the processes of dispossession they had been subjected to since the middle of the nineteenth century to increase rapidly. Rural migration to urban centres was a major consequence, and one that greatly changed the face of Egypt’s main urban centre,



although it was a complex and gradual process. As urban historians showed,<sup>106</sup> all those trends that had already marked Cairo's development during Isma'il's times (1863-1879) – expansion of built-in areas, urban planning, increasing Western economic and cultural penetration – were reinforced on an unprecedented scale. During the speculative boom of 1897-1907 when, as Roger Owen showed, there was a considerable inflow of private foreign and local investment, Cairo came to be known as some sort of El Dorado.<sup>107</sup> The combined effects of increase in agriculture outputs and the confidence in the realization of high profits from any kind of business related to rural land or urban properties generated an investment upsurge who involved all types of companies, from mortgage and banking to transport. Colonial elites, a foreign comprador bourgeoisie, and rich locals populated the wealthy quarters, which seemed to combine European high society life with the exoticism of the Orient. Elizabeth Cooper, an American writer, thus described the exterior of the famous Shepherd's Hotel, a veritable institution of cosmopolitan Cairo, in 1914:

one does not pass at once to the Cairo of the Egyptians, but one lingers on the hotel terraces and studies the cosmopolitan life that is surging around him in this meeting place of East and West. During the season, that is from November until March, there is always a well-dressed crowd sitting around the little tables on the big verandahs of the hotels. One sees the French woman with her exaggerate styles, the American, looking as if she had just come from her Fifth Avenue milliner, the heavy but practical German frau with her heavier husband and uninteresting daughters, and finally the English woman with her blasé air and feather boa.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> My analysis here is based on two classical urban studies, Janet Abu Lughod, *Cairo: 1001 Years of the City Victorious* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 173-4 and Raymond's *Cairo, Op. Cit.*

<sup>107</sup> Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800-1914* (London & New York: Methuen & Co, 198), p. 235.

<sup>108</sup> Elizabeth Cooper, *The Women of Egypt* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1914), p. 32.

More than the concentration of wealth and occupational possibilities generated by foreign investment, rural demographic pressure drove peasants away from the land and accounted for Cairo's rampant population growth during the First World War and in its aftermath. Within ten years after the war, the city absorbed 200.000 newcomers. Whereas in 1917 about 35% of Cairo's population had been born outside the city (i.e. they were migrants, either from other areas of Egypt and from abroad), by 1927 this figure had risen to over 42%.<sup>109</sup> Increasing dispossession and overpopulation driving thousands of villagers to the city combined with the increase in life expectancy rate, due to the positive impact of sanitation on people's living conditions. According to urban historian André Raymond, Cairo's population increased from 374.000 in 1882 to 1.312.000 in 1937, that is by 250% through a time span of 45 years.<sup>110</sup> Surely much of the demographic influx was constituted by rural migrants in search for employment opportunities and better living standards.<sup>111</sup> They usually settled in the poorest neighbourhoods of the Medieval Islamic City as Gamaliyyah, Bab-al-Sha'riyyah, Darb al-Ahmar and in the northern commercial district of Bulaq, where they could rely on the existence of social networks of urbanized co-villagers offering some material and psychological support.<sup>112</sup> At the

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<sup>109</sup> Abu Lughod. *Op. Cit.*, p. 173.

<sup>110</sup> Raymond, *Op. Cit.*, p. 319.

<sup>111</sup> Marcel Clerget, *Le Caire: Etudes de géographie urbaine et d'histoire économique* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1934), p. 242. According to Janet Abu Lughod, in 1917 25% of Cairo's residents whose birthplace was known were coming from some other Egyptian areas, while 10% were born abroad, whereas in 1927 the percentage of Egyptian internal migrants was already 34% as opposed to 8% of residents born abroad. Abu Lughod, *Op.Cit.*, p. 174.

<sup>112</sup> Ehud Toledano, *State and Society in Mid-Nineteenth Century Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 196, describes the ways in which rural migrants adapted to Cairene urban environment in mid-nineteenth century with reference to a collection of 36 case files from the DAWAQ. Although social practices are no doubt changing over time, migrant adjustment to city life seems to show a remarkable degree of stability through times. For example, Janet Abu Lughod studies

same time, a significant proportion of newcomers were foreigner. Due to favourable investment conditions under the Capitulation Laws, European presence in the city increased constantly: aggregate data given by Raymond again show that the number of foreign residents in Cairo rose from 18.289 in 1882 to 76.173 in 1927.<sup>113</sup> While the British (11.221 individuals in 1927, tenfold their number before 1882) and the French (9.549 in 1927) constituted the foreign elites and were mainly middle class and professionals, the largest communities, that is the Greek (20.115 individuals in 1927)<sup>114</sup> and the Italian one (18.575 in the same year)<sup>115</sup>, were much more stratified. Besides these four main European communities, many other national groups were represented in Cairo: the 1927 census of Egypt enlists 23 nationalities,<sup>116</sup> not to mention the *shawwam* community originating from the *bilad al-sham*.<sup>117</sup> Moreover, 23.103 Jews lived in Cairo in 1927,<sup>118</sup> the majority being local subjects belonging to the Egyptian *diaspora* community established in ancient times and fully integrated within the local society yet preserving its cultural identity.

Steady population growth resulted in dramatic expansion of Cairo built-in area (from 1.000 hectares in 1882 to 16.330 hectares in 1937),<sup>119</sup> accompanied by blatant

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in the early '60s based on the localization and distribution of village benevolent societies showed how protective patterns of physical proximity, cooperation and mutual assistance among urbanized former co-villagers helped easing the difficulties of rural-urban transition. See Janet Abu Lughod, "Migrant Adjustment to City Life: the Egyptian Case" in *The American Journal of Sociology*, 67, no. 1, 1961: pp. 22-32.

<sup>113</sup> Raymond, *Op. Cit.*, p. 320.

<sup>114</sup> Clerget, *Op. Cit.*, p. 222.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> *Census of Egypt taken in 1927*, Cairo: Government Press, 1931, p. 216.

<sup>117</sup> *Shawwam* is the plural of *shami*, literally "Syrian", from *Sham* as the city of Damascus is also called. It referred more generally to migrants coming from the Levant, also called *bilad al-sham*, meaning Syria, Lebanon, Palestine. Ottoman subjects legally, the *shawwam* constituted a fairly homogenous community in terms of social status and religion. Mostly Christians, they were generally professionals and businessmen.

<sup>118</sup> Clerget, *Op. Cit.*, p. 222.

<sup>119</sup> Raymond, *Op. Cit.*, p. 322.

speculation in the real estate sector. The urban landscape changed with the introduction of municipal utilities such as gas lightning and water piping in the rising middle-class areas of Isma‘iliyyah, Faggalah and Tawfiqiyyah, in the Gezirah, Garden City and Qasr al Dubbarah along the Nile. Circulation within the city was made easier thanks to the paving of large tracts of the street system, to the effect that public cab-driving constituted by 1917 the single most common occupation in Cairo. After 1896, public cabs faced increasing competition from the development of large-scale transport infrastructure in the form of electric tramlines.<sup>120</sup> Between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, Cairo’s space became increasingly sanitized with the introduction of clinics and hospitals and, more importantly, of a drainage-sewage system. Under the close supervision of ‘Ali Mubarak, Minister of Schools and Public Works, in the second half of the nineteenth century, “a new structure was laid out between the northern and western wedges of the existing city and its gateway from Alexandria and Europe, the railway station, with plots made available to anyone who would construct a building with an European façade”.<sup>121</sup> This required the “removal of certain human agglomerations from the interiors” of the city, to quote a source of the time.<sup>122</sup> From the khedivial palace of ‘Abdin, Boulevard Muhammad ‘Ali was cut through the old city. It run diagonally for two kilometres and, as Janet Abu Lughod reported, “its path stood almost four hundred large houses, three hundred smaller ones, and a great numbers

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<sup>120</sup> See John T. Chalcraft, *The Striking Cabbies of Cairo and Other Stories: Crafts and Guilds in Egypt, 1860-1914* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press), pp. 134-5.

<sup>121</sup> Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991), p. 65.

<sup>122</sup> Abbate-Bey, “Questions hygiéniques sur la ville du Caire” in *Bulletin de l’Institut égyptien*, 2<sup>nd</sup> series, 1, 1880, p. 69. Quoted in *ibid.* Dr. Onofrio Abbate-Bey (1825-1915), court physician, was at the time Vice-President of the Khedivial Society of Geography.

of mosques, mills, bakeries and bath houses”.<sup>123</sup> These were all destroyed, or cut in half so that, when the work was finished, the area looked as if it had been shelled, with houses in all stages of dilapidation, though still inhabited, exposing their views of domestic interiors with a somewhat grotesque effect. The demolition of unsanitary, narrow streets and old houses to make space for new ambitious European-style architectonic projects destined to rich apartment blocks for the emerging middle class and the affluent expats meant the relocation of low-class Egyptians to the margins of the modern city, its core being located in the area between Garden City, Qasr al Dubbarah, Tawfiqiyyah, Azbakiyyah and ‘Abdin. The Medieval City, that is the four districts of Gamaliyyah, Darb al-Ahmar, Muski and Bab-al-Sha‘riyyah, quickly overpopulated, while services and infrastructures crumbled. In the period between 1882 and 1927, the population of Gamaliyyah increased by 44.788 persons, while Darb al-Ahmar number of residents increased by 52.544 persons during the same amount of time. The newer popular commercial area of Bulaq accommodated in 1927 79.681 persons more than in 1882.<sup>124</sup> The booming areas were the northern districts though, Shubrah and Wa’ili, where, according to Raymond, “the share in Cairo’s total population had been growing with impressive regularity: 12,9 % in 1897, 21,5% in 1917, 34% in 1937”.<sup>125</sup> A brutal demographic problem was already evident in Cairo by the beginning of the 1930s. Population increase in these areas must certainly take into account the natural urban growth rate, the decline of the high rate of mortality and the increase in the birth rate, but it was

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<sup>123</sup> Janet Abu Lughod, *Op. Cit.*, p. 113.

<sup>124</sup> Clerget, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 242-4.

<sup>125</sup> Raymond, *Op. Cit.*, p. 337.

also connected with the arrival of new settlers from the countryside, especially to the Islamic City which offered the cheapest and, due to the incipient demographic pressure, divested, accommodations available in town. As showed by Ehud Toledano,<sup>126</sup> Cairo attracted migrants from several parts of Egypt starting from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards. In the 1850s newcomers came mostly from the Delta and Cairo's closest governorates as Gizah, Minufiyyah, Fayyum, Qalyubiyyah, whereas their provenience was much more diversified in later times.

From 1914 onwards, the annual increase of agricultural production was more and more markedly inferior to the annual increase of rural population, resulting in a powerful wave of rural-urban migrants. Men outnumbered females in the first place, but women quickly followed as the tendency of peasant families had always been that of preserving the unity of the parental group even at times when men abandoned the land because of corvées, army conscription or in search of new employment in the city.<sup>127</sup> Internal female migration, as opposed to foreign one, was not usually unattached, meaning that women did not move to the city without being attached to a husband to sustain them. Still, life in the city exposed men and women more directly to the vagaries of the market and especially to harsh competition for waged labour. Mostly unskilled and untrained as they were, women were extremely vulnerable in the job market and occupational options for them were scarce. In 1907 Cairo, 103.856 women were unemployed as opposed to 32.843 men, while the largest female occupational group was constituted by unpaid labourers (domestic workers in

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<sup>126</sup> Toledano, *Op. Cit.*, p. 197.

<sup>127</sup> Toledano, *Ibid.*, and Tucker, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 135-7.

their own households numbered 126.919).<sup>128</sup> In the absence of a significant industrial sector in Cairo, the only expansion for female employment was in the service sector, a poorly paid field of activity.<sup>129</sup> Women seemed to be in a very vulnerable position: either their prospects for earning were poor or they were not earning at all. Poor wages and lack of occupational options might have determined the recourse to prostitution of growing number of women, in a context where prostitution was promoted by the unprecedented growth of Cairo and increasing demand due to the rising of a local middle class with greater purchasing power, massive imperial military presence, mass tourism and the emergence of new consumption patterns. Especially where women were left without any form of support from a husband, as in the case of divorcées or widows, prostitution might have been the only way to earn a living and provide for the needs of children in the case of single-parent women.

Expansion of prostitution had much to do with the encroachment of global economy and State power on the lives of individual Egyptians, men and women, during the nineteenth century. During most of the century, Egypt remained an agrarian country. As said before, only after 1914 rural areas started to grow less than urban ones. As social historian Judith Tucker pointed out, though, in an effort to underline the importance of structural forces without writing off people's resistance

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<sup>128</sup> Of course numbers must be treated with caution as late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Egyptian censuses are far from being considered reliable. On some of the difficulties encountered in taking the 1917 census of Cairo, for example, see Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 111-2.

<sup>129</sup> See Tucker, *Op. Cit.*, p. 101: "Rapid urbanization in the second half of the century increased the demand for household maids and all matter of women who performed special services, such as seamstresses, hairdressers, tattooists... As the female role in production in the urban economy contracted, service activity multiplied: by the end of the nineteenth century, working women were concentrated in this world of casual services and informal networks". Domestic work, by the way, often included sex work to some extent, as in many cases masters expected their maids to be sexually available to them.

or agency, the history of nineteenth century Egyptian countryside was a complex one, where both internal and external factors combined to wrought momentous transformations upon the autonomy of Egyptian rural families. State-power interference in the existences of rural population actually started from the first and the second decades of nineteenth century, under Muhammad ‘Ali’s ambitious centralization programme: “the peasant family unit gradually lost control over the organization of its production and consumption as the central government interfered directly in peasant life through a system of agricultural monopolies, corvée labour, military impressment, and the confiscation of peasant land”.<sup>130</sup> When State-sponsored systems of monopolies faltered in the 1830s under the joint pressure of economic crisis and foreign expectations, the Wali restructured the way of controlling rural relations of production by granting large estates to various members of the Royal family. The total extension of *athar*, that is lands privately owned and exploited by their owner-peasants with all the rights connect it with it, notably decreased. Pressure on the semi-autonomous peasant family further intensified with the increasing commercialization of crops: after 1860, large and small landowners decidedly invested in cotton for the export. Again Tucker, basing her statements on a number of archival sources, showed how peasants, exposed to the up and downs of the global market, increasingly experienced dispossession due to the debts they were not able to repay: “the fall in the market price of cotton in the 1870s erased the margin of profit of small holders altogether and foreclosure often ensued”.<sup>131</sup> While the vast majority of rural Egyptians kept on working their families’ plots, they

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<sup>130</sup> Tucker, *Op. Cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>131</sup> Tucker, *Op. Cit.*, p. 34.



increasingly suffered the effects of swinging prices, debt, tax collectors and corvée labour. The British tried to boost the agricultural sector, a fundamental move in order to extinguish the country's foreign debt, and effectively ameliorated agricultural infrastructures. While they tried to confront the problem of peasants' insolvency by reforming taxation, corvée and military conscription systems, pressure on small holders did not diminish and the number of landless peasants grew. For many, the choice was between staying on the land as waged labourers or leaving the countryside in search of new employment opportunities in cities. Obviously women shared within such an experience of economic restructuring: if only, they had to face even greater difficulties in adapting to an urban job market leaving them very few occupational choices outside the casual and informal sector. In such a context, not only women deprived of the support of a husband, as divorcées and widows, might have resorted to the selling of sexual services to sustain themselves and those dependent on them, if any, but also women whose husbands, pauperized and on menial unstable jobs most of the time, were simply not able to effectively provide for the needs of their families. In this sense, prostitution might not be considered as just the labour of women with weak family ties, but, more accurately, as the labour of women coming from economically weak families. As historian Liat Kozma pointed out, women "resorted to prostitution because of personal misfortunes or because nationwide transformations had deprived them of their means of survival",<sup>132</sup> i.e. a husband or an economic activity contributing to the budget of the family.

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<sup>132</sup> Liat Kozma, "Women on the Margins and Legal Reform in Late Nineteenth Century Egypt" (Ph. D. diss, New York University, 2009), p. 198.

### 3.3 Some Figures

Being a regulationist country from 1882 to 1949, Egypt produced a distinct type of documents concerning prostitution. Authorities tried to monitor and discipline sex work by turning it into a quantifiable phenomenon as much as possible. Police and sanitary officials were instructed to collect specific information about sex workers, while brothel keepers were requested to keep registers with their employees' names, provenance and ages. Licensed sex workers held ID cards, on which results of weekly sanitary inspections had to be recorded. Unfortunately, none of these materials seem to be available to researchers at the moment. What historians can make profitable use of in order to attempt reconstructing the dimension of the phenomenon are aggregate data detectable in the censuses, available for the year 1917 and 1927, and, more significantly, Public Security and Public Health yearly reports from the Egyptian Ministry of Interior, of which we still have an unbroken series from 1921 until 1946. These same sources were also used and compiled in a number of coeval publications on prostitution by abolitionist societies or public health experts on venereal diseases.<sup>133</sup>

According to the 1917 census, prostitutes in Cairo were 1.395 (with the greater concentration in Bab-al-Sha'riyyah, Azbakiyyah and Sayyidah Zaynab), that is a number much smaller compared to other coeval estimates: for instance, writing in 1915, Guy Thornton, Chaplain of the Australian and New Zealanders Army Corps

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<sup>133</sup> See for example Duktur Fakhr Mikha'il Farag, *Taqrir 'an Intishar al-Bigha' wa al-Amrad al-Tanassuliyyah bi-l- Qutr al Masri wa ba'd al-Turuq al-Mumkin Ittiba'iha li-Muhariba*. (al-Qahirah: al-Matba'ah al-'Asriyyah, 1924); Muhammad Farid Gunaydi, *al-Bigha', Bahth 'ilmi 'amali* (al-Qahirah: Matba'at-al-Nasr, 1934); Muhammad Abu-l-'Uyun, *Mushkilah al-Bigha' al- Rasmi* (al-Qahirah: Matba'at-al-Hilal, 1933); Burtuqalis Bay, *al-Bigha' aw Kathir al-'ahara fi-l-Qutr al-Masri* (al-Qahirah, Matba'ah Hindiyyah), 1907.

garrisoned in Cairo during the First World War,<sup>134</sup> talked of at least 2.300 native plus 800 European women registered as prostitutes, “without considering clandestine prostitutes numbering in the thousands”.<sup>135</sup> It could be that a major purification campaign carried through under Martial Law in 1916<sup>136</sup> with the aim of keeping a closer eye on public order had significantly reduced numbers in the trade, but, lacking precise information on this specific episode, we might be on the safer side in limiting ourselves to say that, despite the enforcement of State-licensed prostitution in Cairo, numbers of women practicing the trade can only be estimated. Moreover it is commonly accepted that a decrease in licensed prostitution might not reflect but a significant increase in clandestine sex work, that is, not a decrease in the number of sex workers but simply their “going underground” instead of practicing as registered prostitutes.

In the 1927 census, the first to enlist prostitutes as a separate professional category, that is, separately from “unproductive” activities, such as begging and vagrancy, registered prostitutes were 749, 680 locals and 69 foreigners. Once again numbers must be treated with great caution. In 1926, two years after a crackdown on clandestine prostitutes and procurers in the native quarter, Cairo City Police reported the existence of 1.184 licensed women, 859 Egyptians and 325 Europeans. According to the report, 102 clandestine houses had been dealt with in 1926. Also in this case, we are not able to ascertain the coeval trend in clandestine sex work, which would give us a more exhaustive picture of the phenomenon. Not only did

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<sup>134</sup> See chapter 6.

<sup>135</sup> Guy Thornton, *With the Anzacs in Cairo: the Tale of a Big Fight* (London: H.R. Allenson, 1916), p. 59. As a prominent evangelist and puritan abolitionist, Thornton could have had reasons to exaggerate the numbers in order to create panic and alarmism.

<sup>136</sup> See chapter 6.

contemporary observers describe prostitution in Cairo as an unabated phenomenon, flourishing thanks to the relative post-bellum prosperity,<sup>137</sup> but, according to Russell Pasha, *hikimdar*, that is, Chief Officer of Cairo City Police, in 1931, for example, Cairo's public security did not benefit in fact from the enforcement of government regulation of prostitution as the bulk of commercial sex trade was underground and out of reach of public authorities. Russell Pasha stated that brothels catered for working-class customers and the "baser kind of tourists", while "99% of respectable middle-class Egyptian men consorted with clandestine prostitutes".<sup>138</sup> In fact, he maintained, the general standard of morality in the city was so low that "there was no need for any but working-class men to cohort with licensed prostitutes because there was an ample supply of other complaisant girls".<sup>139</sup> If we bear in mind that in 1927 census, almost 400.000 people in Cairo figured as unpaid workers, the vast majority of them women, it is utterly difficult to estimate how many of those women would engage in some form of transactional sex work in the clandestine sector. The data we have at hand, thus, document only the expansion or contraction of the licensed sector with the relative presence of local as opposed to foreign women employed as prostitutes, and the number of clandestine houses raided every year. They reflect the

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<sup>137</sup> Women's Library, 4/IBS/6/024 - International Bureau for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children, The Case for the Abolition of the Government Regulation of Prostitution, 1939.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> Women's Library, 4/IBS/6/025 - Personal communication of Russell Pasha to Mr. Sempkins, Secretary of the National Vigilance Association (hence NVA), 23<sup>rd</sup> of February 1931. Russell Pasha's judgment certainly sounds as profoundly classist and moralistic and his claim about the number of Cairene middle-class men patronizing clandestine prostitution is hyperbolic and doesn't have any statistical value. As a consequence, Russell Pasha was in favour of the closing down of the licensed quarter in the city centre, and the transfer of the brothel area to the outskirts of the city. The same point of view had been advocated in his Cairo City Police Report for 1926: "I would maintain a purely native licensed prostitution quarter on the outskirts to meet the demand of the native population until what time that education and civilization made it possible to do away with licensed prostitution altogether". Cairo City Police Report 1926 in Women's Library 4/IBS/5/2/40.

contours of the extent to which Public Security officials were able to scrutinize the trade, not what was really going on. Public Health Bureaus for the sanitary inspection of licensed prostitutes recorded the numbers of Egyptian licensed and unlicensed sex workers they interacted with for the years 1921-1927, while Cairo City Police yearly reports are used to reconstruct trends in the trade between 1928 and 1946. These data are collated and shown in the following table.<sup>140</sup>

Year	Number of unregistered women known to police	Number of licensed prostitutes
1921	906	1.210
1922	651	1.243
1923	840	1.070
1924	735	843
1925	884	718

<sup>140</sup> Data for the years 1921-1927 are taken from *Taqrir Sanawi 'an A'mal Taftish Sahhat- al-Qahirah li-sanawat 1922, 1925, 1927*, al-Matba'ah al-Amiriyyah bi-l-Qahirah. Data for the period 1928-1946 are taken from Wizarat-al-Dakhaliyyah Bulis Madinat al-Qahirah- *Taqrir Sanawi-al-'am 1930*, al-Matba'ah al-Amiriyyah bi-Bulaq, 1931; Wizarat-al-Dakhaliyyah - Bulis Madinat al-Qahirah- *Taqrir Sanawi al-'am 1933*, al-Matba'ah al-Amiriyyah bi-Bulaq, 1934; Wizarat-al-Dakhaliyyah Bulis Madinat al-Qahirah- *Taqrir Sanawi al-'am 1935*, al-Matba'ah al-Amiriyyah bi-Bulaq, 1936; Wizarat-al-Dakhaliyyah -Bulis Madinat al-Qahirah- *Taqrir Sanawi al-'am 1937*, al-Matba'ah al-Amiriyyah bi-Bulaq, 1938; Wizarat-al-Sahhah al- 'Umumiyyah – *Taqrir Sanawi 'an A'mal Taftish Sahhat- al-Qahirah li-'am 1936*, al-Matba'ah al-Amiriyyah bi-Bulaq, 1939; Wizarat-al-Sahhah al-'Umumiyyah-*Taqrir Sanawi 'an sanat-1937*, Tub' bi-Dar al-Tiba'ah al-Fayyada, al- Qahirah, 1939; Wizarat-al-Dakhaliyyah - Bulis Madinat al-Qahirah- *Taqrir Sanawi li-sanatay 1942-1943*, al-Matba'ah al-Amiriyyah bi-l-Qahirah, 1944; Wizarat-al-Dakhaliyyah - Bulis Madinat al-Qahirah- *Taqrir Sanawi li-sanat- 1944*, Tub' bi-l-Matba'ah al-Amiriyyah bi-Bulaq bi-l-Qahirah, 1944; Wizarat- al-Sahhah al- 'Umumiyyah- *Taqrir Sanawi li-sanat 1946*, Tub' bi-l-Matba'ah al-Amiriyyah bi-Bulaq bi-l-Qahirah; Wizarat-al-Sahhah al-'Umumiyyah- *al-Taqrir al-Sanawi al-'amm li-sanat 1943*, Tu' bi-l-Matba'ah al-Amiriyyah bi-Bulaq bi-l-Qahirah.

1926	-	745
1927	723	641
1928	-	620
1929	-	628
1930	-	653
1931	-	338
1932	2.497(Azbakiyyah area only)	726
1933	-	745
1934	2.278	848
1935	2.009	804
1936	2.899	821
1937	2.893	823
1938	-	699
1939	-	582
1940	2.124	606
1941	-	742
1942	2.624	758
1943	4.319	631
1944	2.909	571
1945	3.772	555
1946	1.219	462

Some observations can be drawn from the analysis of these data. As it is evident, since 1925 the number of sex workers raided in clandestine houses or caught in the streets while soliciting unlicensed has always been bigger than the number of registered women. So, while looking at licensed prostitution's data only, one could inadvertently think of a decline in sex work at first, data about clandestine prostitution revealed an entirely different situation, an upsurge in sex work, in the '30s and again during the Second World War, concentrated in the casual, informal, sector. More and more often women seemed not to opt for licensed sex work, as they did not wish to comply with the sanitary medical inspections they were compelled to and that could severely affect their ability of working and earning, if found diseased. This was especially true at times when sex work was sustained by increased demand and, hence, became a particularly interesting occupation: during the Second World War, for example, when thousands of soldiers stationed in Cairo, unlicensed prostitution detected were 4.319 compared to 631 licensed in 1943, and 3.772 unlicensed compared to 551 regulated in 1945.<sup>141</sup> These are certainly useful information to describe general trends but are far from giving us a clear understanding of the phenomenon. We should have more precise information about

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<sup>141</sup>Fictional materials can be fruitfully used to complement these quantitative data. Talking about the upsurge of clandestine sex work in Cairo, Naguib Mahfouz's classic novels, *Bidayah wa-l-Nihayah* (The Beginning and the End) and *Zuqaq al Midaqq* (Midaq Alley) come to mind. In the former, Nafisa is a girl from a lower middle class family whose economic situation is shattered when the father, a well respected civil servant, dies all of a sudden leaving his wife, daughter and three sons to provide for themselves. The book depicts Nafisah "falling" from middle class respectability to prostitution. She starts working as a seamstress among the general consternation of her family, is deflowered by a guy, a son of a grocer, who tricks her with a fake marriage proposal until she starts walking the streets. See Naguib Mahfouz, *The Beginning and the End* (London: Anchor, 1989). In *Midaq Alley*, instead, a *baladi* beauty, Hamidah, leaves her traditional neighborhood and becomes a clandestine prostitute servicing foreign soldiers, driven by her lust for luxury and material affluence. See Naguib Mahfouz, *Midaq Alley*, translated by Trevor Le Gassick (London: Heinemann, 1966).

the diffusion of clandestine prostitution in the city and its size in relation to regulated prostitution. While general agreement among experts existed on the fact that clandestine prostitution was several times the size of licensed sex work,<sup>142</sup> very different estimates were made. Doctor Fikhri Mikha'il for example expressed the most disquieting estimates, in saying that, according to his studies, the number of unlicensed prostitutes could be 35-40 times that of registered women: as we consider that in 1921 licensed prostitutes were 906, the number of unregistered sex workers would be around 35.000-40.0000.<sup>143</sup> Once it is established that data on licensed prostitution only are far from reflecting a balanced picture of the diffusion of sex work in the city, it must be said that exhaustive data on the real diffusion of clandestine sex work, and its proportion to licensed prostitution, are not retrievable as they are simply bound to remain what they were to State officials, that is, undisclosed.

These sources expressed well the anxiety of ruling elites about labelling and quantifying the presence of sex workers. While they are certainly interesting testimonies in these regards, they are far from allowing us to have a clearer picture of the quantitative dimension of the phenomenon, simply because the bulk of sex work in Cairo had always been and continued to be practiced as an informal activity, resisting any attempt at State regulation.

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<sup>142</sup> See N.W. Willis, *Anti-Christ in Egypt* (London: the Anglo-Eastern Publishing Co., 1914), p. 40: "To every licensed woman in Cairo or Alexandria there are at least ten, perhaps, twenty unlicensed, uncontrolled, women of every colour or nationality (except British and Americans), ... most of the women are French; next in numbers come Italians, and there are also Germans, Swiss, Greeks and Spanish". Louise Potter (see chapter 7), an abolitionist social worker active in Egypt in the '30s wrote in her tract *Egypt is awakening. Is it true?* wrote that "Cairo has, it is officially stated, about five times as many 'secret' as 'registered' women. This is true in different degrees of every regulated city. In practice therefore vice is not confined by the system of licensed prostitution", Women's Library, 4/IBS/6/033.

<sup>143</sup> Farag, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 40-1.



### **3.4 The Geography of Sex Work**

Also the spatial organization of sex work in Cairo was somewhat dual, circumscribed and highly visible on one side, decentred, multiple and absolutely undefined on the other.

The main red-light area in Cairo was in the city centre, not far from the Azbakiyyah quarter. Officially opened in 1872, the Azbakiyyah Garden was located on the original site of the Birkat-al-Azbakiyyah, the Azbakyyah Pond, a low land that in Mamluk times filled with water during the Nile's floods, while providing a green area and rallying point for festival and communal ceremonies such as the Mawlid al-Nabi during the rest of the year. The Azbakiyyah was abandoned until the third decade of the nineteenth century, when Muhammad 'Ali (1805-1849) decided to have the pond drained and planted as a garden with sycamore trees and acacias in 1837. The near-by cemetery was closed, for sanitary considerations and in order to render the area more agreeable to those foreign travellers, businessmen and diplomats who already resided and operated in the area. The first hotels, an enduring distinctive feature of the Azbakiyyah, were established around that time, notably the Orient Hotel and the famous Shepherd's, which was soon to become a veritable institution of cosmopolitan Cairo. From the 1840s onwards, an increasing number of traditional buildings were replaced by Western-style constructions. Cafés, taverns and dancing halls mushroomed, where a mix of Italian, Turkish, Greek, Arab and French songs were played and heavily made-up European women welcomed customers. A heterogeneous crowd of travellers and locals, street vendors of various

types, mountebanks, snake charmers, storytellers, etc., populated the esplanade. In the authorities' view, unrestrained sociability and mingling of disparate human types quickly turned the Azbakiyyah into a reservoir of criminality and a potential threat to social order and legality. Khedive Tawfiq decided to transform the Azbakiyyah into an ordered, well-designed park, the perfect background for dominant bourgeois sociability, a focal point of a city that was conceived as a centre of commercial, aesthetic and civilized life. Foreign capital was essential in bringing about the rejuvenation that turned the Azbakiyyah into an integral part of Cairo's overall urban planning scheme. The new Azbakiyyah's garden was created together with the new gaslit boulevards, the districts of Isma'ilyyah and Tawfiqiyyah and the monumental Opera. The octagonal park was surrounded by large streets and four ample squares: Opera, 'Ataba al Khadra', Khazindar and Qantarat-al-Dekkah were placed to the south, south-east, north-east and north-west respectively. The garden was fenced and late hours admissions were charged at one piastre per person. When the park inaugurated in 1872, the Azbakiyyah was a green oasis of exotic species such as baobabs, Bengal figs and other rare varieties, provided with a lake, a grotto and a pagoda. Open-air cafés and restaurants catered to different tastes, European and Oriental. Discipline and order were imposed to space and social practices thanks to technical advancement: the new Azbakiyyah, a site for refined and civilized middle-class leisure and amiable sociability, was made safe thorough the dissemination of gas. Street lamps in the shape of giant tulips holding translucent porcelain bulbs were scattered all through the park, along the lake and amid the trees. The outside of the park were flamboyant, "its pavements and its park railings as exhibitions of native

life ranks to the bazaars”:<sup>144</sup> the donkey boy, the pavement restaurateur, the peripatetic dealers of beads and scarabs, the postcard sellers, the rug-picker, the chestnut roaster, the whip-maker, the tarbush-maker, the fortune teller all populated the exteriors of the Azbakiyyah Garden, trying to make good deals with the foreign tourists on their strolls outside the hotel surrounding the park.

Cafés, taverns, restaurants and dancing halls provided travellers and middle-class locals with entertainments and leisure. Cairo’s main red-light district was placed at a stone’s throw from the Azbakiyyah, its big hotels, commercial and leisure activities, a major city’s thoroughfare, a tourist site as it was described by many, more or less appalled, coeval observers. Descriptions of the Azbakiyyah and its “red-blind” district are easy to locate in old travel books as the area was considered as a “spectacle” of the city, one of the spots the tourists “did” during their tours in Cairo.<sup>145</sup> Steeped in voyeurism and a certain kind of Orientalist aversion cum-fascination for that beastly and hyper-sexualized East the image of which they

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<sup>144</sup> Douglas Sladen, *Oriental Cairo, the City of the Arabian Nights* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1911), p. 55.

<sup>145</sup> N. W. Willis, *Op. Cit.*, p. 28: “tourists, young and old, go to Egypt to “do” the Pyramids, the Tombs, the Wells, the sacred places (and places that are sacred only to Satan’s pimps) but they scarcely ever leave the Pharaos without seeing the abomination of all humanity, Ibrahim Gharhi [Ibrahim al-Gharbi was the most powerful pimp in the Wass’ah, the segregated area for licensed prostitution, see chapters 2 and 6]. In the season, guides make nearly as much money from showing globe trotters the infamous Ibrahim Gharhi, as they do from showing the Pyramids and other Egyptian sights”. See also L. D. Potter’s pamphlet, *Egypt is awakening? Is it True?*, p. 2: “With regard to order, it is only too known that the vice-areas of Cairo are one of the ‘tourist shows’ of the world, a notoriety of which Egyptians are not proud”, Women’s Library, 4/IBS/6/033. See also this comment on the Wass’ah by Cicely McCall, Secretary of the International Bureau for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children, appearing in her report *The International Bureau for the Suppression of Traffic in Women and Children: Its Work in Egypt*, in 1930: “Egypt, and Cairo in particular, is notorious for its houses of ill fame and the practice of perversions. Even nowadays, tourists are sometimes taken round the segregated quarter by their obliging dragomans to see the sights. Yet few people realize the full horror of the segregated quarter and in particular the native quarter. In Cairo the quarter is close to a main thoroughfare in the centre of the town. Most of the streets are for pedestrians only, some are not more than two yards wide, and nowhere is there any water laid on in any of the houses. At night the streets is so densely crowded that a client coming out of one of the hovels onto the street can hardly push his way among the passer-bys” (pp. 11-2). Women’s Library, 4/IBS/6/033.

obsessively try to evoke, these travelogues, nonetheless, constitute interesting sources in the attempt of reconstructing the appearance of the area at the beginning of the twentieth century. Other fictional sources such as novels by Naguib Mahfouz who set scenes of several of his works in Cairo's red-light district<sup>146</sup> can contribute significantly, describing the red-light district as seen from the point of view of local, as opposed to colonial, eyes.

Cairo's brothel area was divided into two zones, the Wagh-al-Birkah, or Wish el Birkah in local parlance (meaning the "front of the lake") and Clot Bey Street and the Wass'ah, the area for regulated native prostitution.

The Wagh-al-Birkah was the area concentrating the most of foreign prostitutes endowed with a licence. The street was flanked with three-story high buildings in Mediterranean style with balconies stretching out onto the streets. Women would lean on the balconies wearing light dressing gowns, trying to catch the attention of those promenading the street.<sup>147</sup> Off Wagh-al-Birkah, Shari' Bab-al-Bahri was a blaze of electric lights. The street was full of music halls and café-chantants. Female

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<sup>146</sup> See Naguib Mahfouz, *The Cairo Trilogy*, p. 912; p. 1060 *et seq.*, where an encounter in a clandestine brothel is described. 'Attiyyah, the prostitute, is described as a "divorced woman with children. She masks gloomy melancholy with boisterous behaviour. These greedy nights carelessly swallow her femininity and her humanity. Her every breath blends together fair passion and loathing. It's the worst form of bondage. Thus, alcohol provides an escape from suffering as well as from thought", pp. 1194-7; Naguib Mahfouz, *The Beginning and the End*, p. 171: "Here, in the twisting darb [referring to Darb al Tiab], where the balconies of neighbouring houses were intimately close to each other, coquettish cheers mixed with debauched screams, the smell of perfume with the odour of liquor, and the blows of combatants with the vomit of drunkards, here Hassan felt quite at home. Added to all this, were singing, instrumental music and just plain frolic. In such an atmosphere he could live indefinitely without growing bored, eating, drinking, earning money, taking hashish, singing. He cast a look around him. He heard the footsteps of newcomers dispelling the silence, and his ears were struck by the prolonged laughter characteristics of courtesans. He watched her swaying buttocks and the glaring lascivious glances in their eyes"; pp. 183-5, describing the first encounter between Hassan, one of the main characters of the work, a shirker working as a bouncer in the Wass'ah, and San'ah, a prostitute working in a brothel in the Darb Tiab. He will become his pimp and she will become his mistress.

<sup>147</sup> Sladen, *Op. Cit.*, p. 60; Thornton, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 77-8.

entertainers, the vast majority of them European, sang and danced and a number of native dancers performed some sexy variant of Oriental dance for the intoxicated and uproarious crowds. To the north of the Wagh-al-Birkah, off Shari‘ Clot Bey, the indigenous quarter of prostitution was placed in the area usually known as the Wass‘ah, with an appendix in the Harat-al-Ruhi and the proletarian Sicilian ghetto of Little Sicily. Women in the Wass‘ah, Egyptians, Nubians and Sudanese, solicited in front of their “shops”, one-room shacks (*akhwakh*), or assembled in front of the bigger establishments.

Some of these houses were two or three stories high, and each storey contains its quota of women. The front or street flat generally has an open window near the doorway. In this great opening, without any glass or covering at all, in fact, quite open, like the big fish-shop windows in London, several women sit bedecked with the most gaudy garments that even the showy splendour of the East can produce. At the back of one great window, I noticed seven women “on show”. In centre sat a very tall negress, whose face was as black as the devil’s hoofs are reputed to be. She was splendidly proportioned, with regular and evenly cut features, and large expressive eyes. She was as I say, jet black, with an oily shine or polish on her face. She came from the Upper Sudan, stood six feet seven inches high, and was altogether a fine picture of Nature’s handiwork, even for the borders of Soudan and Abyssinia. She was a licensed woman, and had under her protection 6 girls, 2 of them came from Syria, two from the land of Goshen, and 2 from Greece, all licensed and registered.<sup>148</sup>

In his memoirs, Russell Pasha from Cairo City Police recalled that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, a stroll through the Wass‘ah

reminded one of a zoo, with its painted harlots sitting like beasts of prey behind the iron grilles of their ground-floor brothels, while a noisy crowd of low-class natives, interspersed with soldiers in uniform and sight-seeing tourists, made their way along the narrow lanes.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Willis, *Op. Cit.*, p. 28.

<sup>149</sup> Russell Pasha, *Egyptian Service: 1902-1946* (London: J. Murray, 1949), p. 178.

In time, various proposals were made to extend regulation to other areas of the city, in an attempt to circumscribe and bringing under State control increasing portions of clandestine sex work: in 1926 licensed brothels existed also in ‘Abbasiyyah and Sayyidah Zaynab, while in 1927 brothels were opened up in Bulaq, al Wa’ili and al Khalifah areas too. These actions did not prove to be successful, as regulation was again restricted to the original zoning (al-Azbakiyyah and Bab-al-Sha’riyyah) by 1928.<sup>150</sup>

Again, it has to be stated that the topography of Cairo’s sex work was in any way limited to the licensed area, on the contrary, much of the trade in sex took place outside the segregated areas, disguised under a cover of decorum in anonymous flats in “respectable” neighbourhoods. From 1926 to 1936, Cairo City Police detected and raided 2.654 clandestine brothels,<sup>151</sup> most probably a number far from the totality of illicit establishment present in the city. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of December 1923, an article was published on the major Egyptian daily, *al-Ahram*, concerning the diffusion of clandestine brothels (*buyut sirriyyah*, secret houses) in the city.<sup>152</sup> A reader had

<sup>150</sup> See Imad Hilal, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 81-2.

<sup>151</sup> See Wizarat-al-Dakhaliyyah, *Taqrir Bulis Madinat-al Qahirah li-sanat 1935*, (al-Qahirah, al-Matba’ah al-Amiriyyah bi- Bulaq, 1936), p. 102; Wizarat- al-Dakhaliyyah, *Taqrir Bulis Madinat al Qahirah li-sanat 1936* (al-Qahirah: al-Matba’ah al-Amiriyyah bi- Bulaq, 1937), p. 102; ‘Abd-al-Wahhab Bakr, *al Mugtama’ al-Qahira al Sirri* (al-Qahirah: Dar-al-‘Arabi, 2001), p. 160 on the ‘*awwamas*, boathouses moored on the Nile’s shore in the Gezira and Imbaba.

<sup>152</sup> “Ba’d Sitt ‘ashar Sa’ah” in *al-Ahram*, 17.12.1932. The reader’s list reads as follows: “Tawfiqiyyah, near ‘Ubur-al-Mayyah (Aqueduct): 2 clandestine houses; al-Mawardi: 2; Dar-al-‘Awalim: many; Harat-al-Tarabish and Shari’ ‘Abd-al-‘Aziz, ‘Abdin: 1; Dar-al-Muqattam al Qadim: 2; Shari’ ‘Abdin: 2; Shari’ Tilifun: many; Shari’-al-Qabbanah: 2; Hilmiyyah Gadidah: 5; Shari’-al- Dawawin: 1; Shari’ Khayrat: 2; Shari’-al-Sahhah: 4; Shari’-al-Baghghalah: 10; Shari’ Zayn-al-Abdin: 7; Shari’-al-Khudari: 1; al-Qubisi wa Shari’-al-‘Abbasi: many; al-‘Abbasiyyah: many; Misr Gadidah: 3; Ghamrah: 10; alleys behind Katbikhanah: 5; Bulaq: 5; Shari’-al-Khalig: 5; Kum Umm Salamah: 10; Darb-al-Gunaynah: 5; Bab-al-Bahr: 7; Awlad ‘Anan: 4; Shari’Umm al-Ghulam: 1; Harat-al-Zarabin: 1; Harat-al-Gabbaruni: 1; Suq-al-Zalat: 4; al-Faggalah: many; Shubrah: 4; Manshiyyat-al-Sadr: 2; al-Dimardash: many; ‘Izbat-al-Zaytun: 3; Rawdat-al-Farag: 2; al-Zahir: 3; al-Sabtiyyah: 5; Darb-al-Qit’ah: 7; Shari’ ‘Ashara-al-‘Abbasiyyah: 4; Clot Bey: many; Suq-al-Tha’ban: 1; Bab-al-Luq: 1; Bab-

drawn a map showing the location of the clandestine brothels he came to know about while strolling around Cairo. He has been able to localize 159 houses, showing how they were scattered across the whole urban fabric: apparently, very few areas of the city, if any, were completely devoid of these houses, places, he writes, “for the resident and the traveller, where sinners, men and women, lie together illicitly”. According to author of the letter, however, most of these houses, although clandestine, were in fact known to the neighbourhoods’ residents and to the police itself. As long as they were not disrupting the public order and no complain was raised by the people living nearby, public security officials were fine with turning a blind eye to clandestine sex work. The state of public morality was clearly in a seriously bad condition, the reader argued, if a robbery case could be solved in just sixteen hours, while the police did not bother to take any action to protect the “country’s virtues”.

### **3.5 Racialized Representations and Social Profiles**

As said, prostitutes did not normally record their lives and circumstances. Due to the fact that registration lists containing quantitative data on sex workers’ names, ages, previous occupations, family background, civil status, etc., are not retrievable in Cairo’s case,<sup>153</sup> biographical information concerning sex workers must be sought for differently, most notably by combining heterogeneous sources, such as governmental reports, judicial cases, police investigation files, benevolent societies papers, the

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al-Shari‘yyah: 12; Behind the Muhafazah: 3; Kubri- al-Qubbah: 2; Citadel: 7; Darb Riyyash: 2; Shari‘ Nubar: 1; Suq-al-Nasari: 2.”

<sup>153</sup> See for example the kind of close analysis done by Alain Corbain, *Op. Cit.*, whereby these data are available and can be worked out quantitatively.

press. Information about prostitutes' social profiles or first-hand testimonies by prostitutes must then be extrapolated from documents written by others. Although written in a heavily standardized bureaucratic language, courts cases and police minutes can be used fruitfully to attempt at locating within the interstices of a dominant normative discourse instances of prostitute's points of view and perceptions. While I was not able to locate police minutes and supreme court cases for the period after 1882 in the Egyptian Archives, I partly made up for this gap by locating a number of consular court cases related to pimping and other crimes where prostitutes figure as plaintiff, defendant or witnesses, from the Italian (many of the non-Egyptian prostitutes in Cairo were Italian subjects) and the British consulates. These cases concerned only offenders of foreign nationalities, as they were not subjected to Egyptian laws but to their national penal code. Nonetheless, in the proceedings also local subjects appear and what we see accounted for is a wide range of everyday interactions between subaltern local and foreign subjects who seem to share to a very large extent the same life-style and values, chiefly the very same concern for making ends meet.

Foreign sex workers appearing in these cases described a working environment they shared with native prostitutes. As they certainly articulated stories of exploitation and deprivation, they did not represent themselves simply as victims, but as working women strenuously trying to defend their role as breadwinner, whether for their families or for themselves. Taking this into consideration, we can mainly distinguish two main groups of sex workers in Cairo, locals, that is Egyptians, including Sudanese and Nubians, and foreign women, mostly Greek, Italian and



French, to whom sometimes Levantines were equated. Prostitution in Cairo was extensively described in coeval sources as a two-tier trade, where the hierarchical distinction between European sex workers and their native counterparts was spatial, juridical, due to the existence of a discriminating legislation based on the Capitulations, and cultural. Discourses on the hierarchy by puritan reformers and imperial authorities described European prostitution in Cairo as mostly coerced and deplorable, but still civilized if compared to native “Oriental” abjection and squalor. They maintained a fiction of imperial racial superiority while pointing to the necessity of converting and correcting low-class female sexuality and moral weakness in the context of metropolitan campaigns for moral purity and social regeneration. Many accounts routinely stressed this point: Russell Pasha, Head of the Cairo City Police, wrote in his service memories that the Wagh-al-Birkah, the area of European prostitution in the Azbakiyyah, was populated

with European women of all breeds and races *other than British* [emphasis mine], who were not allowed by their consular authority to practice this licensed trade in Egypt. Most of the women were of the third class category for whom Marseilles had no further use, and who would eventually be passed on to the Bombay or the Far-East markets, but *they were still Europeans* [emphasis mine] and not yet fallen so low as to live in the one-room shacks of the Was’a which had always been the quarter for purely native prostitution of the lower class.<sup>154</sup>

Douglas Sladen thus described the Wagh-al-Birkah in his 1910 travelogue:

every floor has its balcony and every balcony has its fantastically robed Juliet leaning over. As the street, in spite of its glare, is not well lighted, you cannot see how displeasing they are; you get a mere impression of light draperies trailing from lofty balconies

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<sup>154</sup> Russell Pasha, *Op. Cit.*, p. 180.

under lustrous night blue of Egypt, while from the rooms behind  
lamps with rose-coloured shades diffuse invitations.<sup>155</sup>

European observers were certainly more concerned with the existence of European women “selling themselves openly and unabashed to black, brown or white men for money”<sup>156</sup> than with the plight of Egyptian sex workers ordinarily described as feral creatures. Again Russell Pasha left a description of the Wass‘ah in which local prostitutes were clearly presented with bestial traits, while in Sladen’s words, Wass‘ah’s women, “most of them appalling ... positively flame with crimson paint and brass jewellery and have eyes flashing with every kind of mineral decoration and stimulant, and far too much flesh”.<sup>157</sup> As the Wass‘ah, the near-by Harat-al-Ruhi concentrated low-class brothels, while presenting a more diverse ethnic composition. Here Jewesses were to be found, together with Italians and Levantines. Prostitutes soliciting in the streets were described by travellers as rapacious, dangerous beings, as “wild-eyed, lithe creatures, human leopards”, “night birds seeking whom they may devour”.<sup>158</sup> Local women were not considered as morally degenerated, but devoid of any sense of morality. More than fallen women, a category to be introduced later together with the activities of foreign benevolent societies and native feminist associations, Egyptian prostitutes were exoticised and described, not without a mixture of repulsion and longing, with feral traits reflecting shared and widespread beliefs on the animal lasciviousness of uncivilized backward Oriental peoples. Foreign and native sex workers were both essentialized and

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<sup>155</sup> Sladen, *Op. Cit.*, p. 60. He remarked that these women “aspire to the better class”, they were either tenants of the flats or working in the best European managed brothels.

<sup>156</sup> Willis, *Op. Cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>157</sup> Sladen, *Op. Cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>158</sup> Sladen, *Ibid.*, p. 109.

represented by the colonial gaze, although in distinct ways. Generally speaking, women's agency and autonomy were downplayed to the advantage of passivity and victimization. European women were presented as victims of the "White Slave Trade", as mindless or retarded girls whose typically low-class lack of morality or sound moral judgment would ultimately account for their present situation. Local women were instead often portrayed by colonial authorities as voluntary sex workers, while local political elites and civil group society of different orientations would use paternalistic stereotypes of passivity and victimization in their own social commentaries. As I shall try to make clearer in this paragraph, nonetheless, ethnicity as the sole criterion for the distinction between local and foreign sex workers is not only scarcely useful but utterly misleading as it essentializes these groups within a civilizational hierarchy where Oriental women were beastly, autonomous and dangerous and Western woman were invariably coerced, fallen and disabled. While ethnicity has been certainly overemphasized to allow the reproduction of colonial civilizational hierarchies, adopting class as a criterion for discussing similarities and differences among these group would allow, I argue, a more nuanced analysis, debunking the colonialist dualism local/foreign and highlighting how Cairene sex workers, local and foreign alike, shared some significant common traits, while showing some important peculiarities as well. Similarities rested firstly in sex workers reasons for entering the trade, an extreme response to experiences of social and economic instability common to lower class women in general. Economic need, the erosion of support networks provided by the traditional extended family in the urban context and lack of occupational alternatives pushed many women into

prostitution. In most cases, entering prostitution was a last resort due to the lack of male support: it's a fact that many sex workers were either widowed or divorced. While, as Judith Tucker skilfully demonstrated in her investigation of nineteenth century *shari'ah* court cases,<sup>159</sup> practising prostitution, or simply the suspect of it, in many cases the very same fact of working outside the house, was a sure reason for losing a women's custodial rights over her children in a tribunal, there are cases in which prostitutes clearly have children dependent on them.<sup>160</sup> As it has been pointed out, it was not uncommon for sex workers to pass their trade over to their daughters.<sup>161</sup> As many prostitutes were unattached women, many other did have husbands not being able to support them: cases in which prostitution was practiced with the knowledge, consent or by instigation of a husband are also traceable.<sup>162</sup> Single women were also girls, who had been deserted or escaped parental control. In most cases they had been facilitated in entering prostitution by male figures, pimp-lovers or simply procurers, making up somehow for the protection afforded by

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<sup>159</sup> Tucker, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 58-9; p.155.

<sup>160</sup> On prostitutes with children dependent on them see for example, Women's Library, International League for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children, Report of Internal Cases for the month of December 1928, case 1.051: a 34-year-old Greek, a long-time morphine addict, lived with her two 12- and 7-year-old daughters in a brothel; Betty Kramp, German, worked as disguised prostitute and lived with her 6-year-old daughter.

<sup>161</sup> On prostitutes whose mothers had initiated them to the trade see for example, Woman's Library, International League for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children, Report of Cases for the Month of January 1927, Fanny Yacob's case: her mother had been a prostitute too, she entered the trade and got syphilis. She got married to a man, who was then sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labour. Left with two daughters to support, she resumed the trade.

<sup>162</sup> About women instigated by their fathers or husbands, or other relatives see Woman's Library, International League for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children, Report of Cases for the Month of January 1928, the case of Irene Capsis, a 14-year-old Greek, forced to prostitute herself, as her sister, by her father; case n. 104, of a 21-year-old British girl who had married an Egyptian who bluffed her into believing to be a prince. He then forced her to work as a prostitute; Women's Library, International League for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children, Report of Cases for the Month of March 1929, case no. 1067- Rumanian Jewess, 19 years old. She had been found in a brothel, where she was working for her "step-sister", the daughter of her father's lover. When the girl's mother died, the father asked the brothel keeper to employ her daughter in the brothel.

paternal figures.<sup>163</sup> As will be discussed more in detail later, this does not imply that many girls could have been lured into prostitution without their consent, but certainly many others were not oblivious of procurers' real business and tactics. Given also the pervasiveness of stories of abduction and sexual exploitation widely circulating, it seems highly improbable that girls did not have a clue of what they were going to find when they left their homes or even emigrated abroad following the promises of a male casual acquaintance.

Local women were often widows, divorcées or servant-thieves fleeing from their employees' houses to take refuge in a brothel. In some cases, work conditions could be so hard and unrewarding to make prostitution a much desirable occupational alternative. Servants in fact were considered almost as disguised sex workers, and it is no coincidence that agencies recruiting domestic workers frequently collaborated with procurers and bordello-keepers to place prospective brothels' inmates. Servants hired through employment agencies were often tacitly considered available to give sexual services to their masters as well.<sup>164</sup> Still, at the very end of the period considered in this study, 175 out of 600 sex workers interviewed by sociologist Muhammad Niyazi Hetata in 1949 had been previously active as servants. This group was smaller in size only than the one made by women

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<sup>163</sup> See Women's Library, International League for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children, Report of Cases for the Month of February 1929, case no. 1.059, Julia, 19, Syrian Jew. She had been escaped from her mother custody to live with lover-pimp on clandestine brothel, a '*awamah*', moored along the Nile.

<sup>164</sup> A quite emblematic case is that of a Czechoslovakian girl, Josephine Guttman, in 1927. She had been hired as a nanny by a well-to-do Egyptian Bey through a local employment agency. When she first met her employer she realized that a different kind of service was requested from her. She had to defend herself against him throwing a small dog at his head. Once back to the Refuge she was hosted at, she came to know that other girls went through the same experience. Women's Library, 4/IBS/6/044.

who did not have a profession before entering the trade (214 out of 600).<sup>165</sup> Once again these data confirm how prostitution responded to patterns of female economic and occupational vulnerability.

### **3.6 Prostitution, Migration and the “White Slave Trade”**

The majority of both local and foreign sex workers were not native to the city, but migrant. Local women were usually from the countryside, as the majority of Cairo dwellers, while foreign women travelled from a number of European countries, most notably from Southern Europe (Italy, Greece), France, Central and Eastern Europe. Foreign women migrated through the procurement of international networks of pimps, working in collaboration with local procurers who liaised with brothel-owners.

European prostitutes were known to local government and abolitionist and purity movement campaigners as victims of the so called “White Slave Trade”. This term referred to the massive smuggling of women from Europe to other parts of the world. According to a report issued by the Central Office for the Repression of the Traffic in Women and Children at the Italian Home Office in 1927,<sup>166</sup> the main routes along which women were smuggled started from Germany, Austria, Spain, France, Greece, Italy, Poland, Romania and Turkey heading to Southern America –

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<sup>165</sup> Muhammad Niyazi Hetata, cited in Imad Hilal, *Op. Cit.*, p. 66. Besides prostitutes who had been unemployed (214) and servants (175), other sex workers had been formerly active as: manual workers (58), cabaret artists (50), peripatetic sellers (29), nurses (19), milliners (18), peasants (13), actresses (12), shop assistants (8), merchants (2), other professions (2) for a total number of 600 interviewed women.

<sup>166</sup> ACS, 13.180.3- folder no. 2.

Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Panama and Uruguay – on one side, Egypt and Northern Africa on the other. According to the authors of the report,

the majority of women involved in the traffic are professional prostitutes, although minors. A significant number of trafficked women is made up by demimondaines, living at the fringes of professional prostitution, ... while a third category of women is represented by music-halls artists. A fourth group is made up by tricked girls, who marry adventurers who force them to practice the infamous trade abroad.<sup>167</sup>

Traffickers resorted to a number of ways to evade the control of authorities and deceive their victims: fake marriages, religious marriages with no legal effect, especially in the case of Jewish girls,<sup>168</sup> false promises of employment opportunities, especially as maids or artists, tampering of passports and birth certificates. Traffickers would know special spots to embark and disembark their “merchandise” without being impeded by major controls. For example, Italian prostitutes would normally travel to Marseilles to get the steamers leaving to Egypt and South America, to circumvent tougher checks in Italian ports.

The “White Slave Trade” became a prominent concern of bourgeois reformers all over Europe since the end of the nineteenth century. Popularized by a number of pamphlets and publications portraying the commerce in the lewdest and flashiest tones, a powerful propaganda was orchestrated by purity and abolitionist activists. Wretched women and tricked silly girls, in other words living examples of “weak” female and working-class morality and decency, were turned into dangerous symbol of political and social disorder. As Walkowitz puts it, Britain was overtaken by a

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<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> On this with specific reference to the Argentinian context see Donna J. Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family and Nation in Argentina* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), p. 8.

cultural paranoia in the late nineteenth century, “as its industrial pre-eminence was seriously challenged by the United States and other new national industries, its military positions and imperial holdings by Germany, and its domestic peace and class structure by the spread of labour unrest and the growth of socialism”.<sup>169</sup> At the domestic level, these concerns were finally addressed in the Criminal Law Amendment Acts of 1885. Supported by purity movements and a temporary alliance of abolitionist feminist groups, they raised the age of consent from thirteen to sixteen and extended police powers in intervening on working women and minors not sticking with bourgeois standard of sexual behaviour and decorum. The acts were in fact accompanied by a sustained effort at refashioning working-class culture and social and sexual habits by overt coercion and imposition of bourgeois values and standards. At the imperial level, the existence of a large number of European working-class women being extensively exchanged and trafficked- posed serious problems for the legitimization of the racial hierarchy the imperial ethos was based on. The very existence of these “white subalterns” was highly problematical for the supporters of the imperial enterprise, in that it clearly challenged dominant notions of colonial moral and racial superiority. This is why the international dimension of women’s trafficking and the struggle against procurement of European women was so prominent in the reformists’ agenda, especially from the last decade of nineteenth century. The British National Vigilance promoted the establishment of a International Bureau for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children (IBS) whose new transnational dimension was made possible by the formation of national

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<sup>169</sup> Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution*, 1982, p. 247.



subcommittees increasingly coordinating their activities with the recently formed League of Nations in the aftermath of the First World War. In 1904 the NVA pressed for the adoption of a Convention International pour la Suppression du Traite de Blanche. It was signed in Paris by sixteen states and subsequently ratified in 1910. According to it, signatory States would appoint a national Central Authority to coordinate all actions and policies aimed at fighting and eliminating traffic in women. In Egypt, one of the most problematic countries because of the presence of State-regulated brothel system directly depending on international procurers' supply, the IBS established three branches, in Alexandria, Port Said and Cairo. In spite of a number of organizational vicissitudes and lack of coordination resulting in the disbandment of a short-lived unified committee in 1929, the IBS branches operated until the Second World War and their archives certainly represent a mine of useful information to study the structure and nature of global sex traffic in Egypt from the beginning of the twentieth century to the end of the '30s.

Despite local authorities' attempts at concealing the dimension of the traffic,<sup>170</sup> Egypt had been known since the end of the nineteenth century as “a country of large demand for women and girls of all nationalities for prostitution”.<sup>171</sup>

In 1905, a report on the “White Slave Traffic” was presented by a Greek subject resident in Alexandria, Madame Tsykalas, at the International Conference of

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<sup>170</sup> See Women's Library, 4/IBS/5/2/040 - Licensed Houses: Abstract of the Reports of the Governments on the System of Licensed Houses Related to the Traffic in Women and Children”, Geneva, Feb 28<sup>th</sup>, 1929.

<sup>171</sup> The International Bureau for the Suppression of Traffic in Women and Children, *Its Work in Egypt*, Nile Mission Press, Cairo, 1902, p. 3.

the Union Internationale des Amis de Jeune Filles.<sup>172</sup> According to the report, Alexandria, in the preceding twenty years, had turned into the major international centre of European women trafficking, thanks to Egyptian economic and population growth, and more importantly to the existence of the Capitulation system and the structural weakness of the indigenous penal code in dealing with offences by foreigner traffickers.<sup>173</sup> Capitulations accorded foreign community a privileged fiscal and legal status, allowing foreigners to evade the native courts. As for cases involving offenders of several nationalities, it was occasionally possible for the Egyptian Parquet, the native court, to conduct the enquiry on its own, after being granted a permit by the Consulates at stake. The norm was in fact that the case was dismembered into as many trials as the nationalities of the offenders involved and they were tried by their consular authorities separately, in a way that was often “derisory”, according to Cairo City Police Chief Russell Pasha.<sup>174</sup> Native Egyptian

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<sup>172</sup> Women’s Library, 4/IBS/6/033 - Report on White Slave Traffic, 1905-06, by Mme Tsykalas from Alexandria. With an abstract of a report by Lord Cromer. The *Union Internationale des Amis de Jeune Filles* was among the purity associations active in Europe against the White Slave Trade at that time.

<sup>173</sup> An attempt at reforming the legal framework was made in 1928, when a proposal was drafted to extend the power of the mixed courts to deal with women’s traffickers. See Women’s Library, 4/IBS/6/022 - Mixed Courts, from a press clipping: “The Egyptian mixed courts have jurisdiction in civil matters but only in rare cases have they any jurisdiction in criminal matters. The most important type of offence in this connection is that connected with drugs. In a gang containing accused of various nationalities each accused has the right to be brought before his own consular court and in consequence of that not only are the decisions different but the punishments vary disproportionately, and it is in any case difficult to obtain convictions because witnesses have to be produced before court after court. The Egyptian government therefore proposed the extension of the powers of the mixed courts jurisdiction to deal with certain offences and a Committee sat to consider this proposal which, of course, requires the satisfaction of all the powers concerned. Mr Booth himself suggested the inclusion of offences against women and children in the schedule of offences which would be dealt by the New Mixed Courts jurisdiction. That might have gone through without opposition had it not been for the trouble over the Anglo-Egyptian treaty. The matter will come up again in the autumn and it remains to see whether any action will be possible”.

<sup>174</sup> Russell Pasha, *Op. Cit.*, p. 26. See also Laurence Grafftey-Smith, *Bright Levant*, (London: John Murray, 1970), p. 12: “In one notorious case in Cairo, two Italians, a Greek and a young Egyptian Jew called Jacoel were involved in a pocket-knife murder, unexpected when they broke in to steal. The Egyptian was the only one to be hanged. The others, after condemnation in their consular courts and

investigations were hindered by a number of caveats ultimately linked with the existence of a dual judicial system: “no entry into a foreign domicile could be made without the presence of a Consular representative, and in the case of Greeks no permission could be obtained for perquisition by night as this under the Greek constitution was illegal in Greece itself”.<sup>175</sup> Moreover, the efficiency of the security apparatus and its capacity of securing criminals to justice were also jeopardized by the lack of collaboration between the police and the judiciary. According to the Napoleonic Code adopted in Egypt, the police, under the aegis of the Ministry of Interior, while opening the enquiry on the crime scene, could only proceed with the authorization of the Parquet, dependent on the Ministry of Justice. In many instances, the police failed to secure offenders to justice because of the staggering relationship with the Parquet authorities. Criminals of every sort, women’s procurers, drug dealers and smugglers, especially if non-Egyptians, were thus free to ply their trades in a sort of legal vacuum.

Reliable quantitative data about the dimension of the “White Slave Trade” are not offered, but Mme Tsykalas, author of the 1905 report on women’s trafficking, estimates in 500 the number of foreigner girls – mainly Rumanian, Austrian, Russian, French, Italian and Greek – sold to brothel keepers in Egypt every year. Women’s traffic was a highly seasonal market, with the largest number of women being imported into the country during the tourist season, from December to the end of February. At that time, the demand for new girls to be employed in brothels,

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release on appeal to Athens and Ancona, were back in Cairo in less than three months, buying haberdashery from the Jacoel family shop”.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

dancing halls, cabarets and the like used to increase dramatically and procurers' profits skyrocketed. In Naples, a traffic ring was active, smuggling women from Italy to Athens, Salonica, Alexandria and Cairo.<sup>176</sup> Led by Maria Pica, a former artist known as "Marie d'Argent", the network was exposed when a tampered passport was found in the name of Annina Morghen, a demimondaine from Naples whom Pica had sent to Athens to work in a dancing hall. Morghen had her original passport seized by Pica to prevent her from leaving Greece. Originally hired on the agreed monthly salary of 50 liras, she would instead receive 90 drachmas, the equivalent of 12 liras, plus a percentage on every bottle of champagne sold to customers in the club. Investigations on Pica's activities revealed how she would have contacts with local impresarios in Egypt and Greece, countries it was relatively easy to get passports for by the Italian emigration authorities.

A major point of departure for migrant women on their way to Egypt was Trieste. A peculiar phenomenon within the framework of female migration to Egypt, one which seems less connected to third parties' role, was in fact that of the Alexandrinke. In Alexandria, since the opening of the Suez Canal until the Second World War, so called Alexandrinke, female Slovenian rural migrants coming from the Goriška region at the Slovenian border with Italy, the Valley of Vipava and Istria, came in waves to the bustling Mediterranean city. They would be hired by wealthy European expatriate families as wet nurses – the most lucrative activity – nannies, maids, *dame de compagnie*, thanks to their education, quite higher if compared to other migrant groups. They normally travelled between Alexandria and back to the

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<sup>176</sup> ACS, 13.180.3- folder 30/3.

native village many times during the years, resuming their job as wet nurses after any pregnancy. In many families, two or three generations of women would migrate to Egypt at some point to support the household economy. They actively sustained their families' shuttered economies back at the village, especially in the critical juncture after the First World War, when many villages in the Vipava and adjacent valleys (as Prvačina, Gradišče, Dornberk, Bilje, Renče) were re-built anew thanks to the remittances from the Alexandrines in Egypt. As Italian journalist Paolo Rumiz wrote,

they followed the same route as the boats of today, loaded with desperate Africans. Some of them, before finding employment in the houses of rich French, Arabs, Armenians or Jewish, were caught up by ruthless exploiters. The situation was difficult for hunger-stricken n-eastern blondes too: "There is no beerhouse in Alexandria devoid of its girl from Gorizia,"<sup>177</sup> an anonymous wrote in the pages of a local journal in 1886 "there are furnished rooms with their Gorizianas, ill-famed hotels are mainly inhabited by Gorizianas, in sum there are very few scandalous facts happening in Alexandria where the abovementioned Goriziana does not play a central role".<sup>178</sup>

Among many stories of successful emancipation and social promotion still told by Alexandrines' descendants,<sup>179</sup> other might well have been gloomiest. At times, greedy procurers could be actually from the same family of migrant women, as we can see in the story that Maria Fiat, an 18-year-old girl from Gorizia.<sup>180</sup> She migrated to Alexandria in February 1927, on the agreement that her paternal aunt, Cristina

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<sup>177</sup> Gorizia is a town in north-eastern Italy, at the foot of the Alps and on the border with Slovenia. It is located at the confluence of the Isonzo and Vipava rivers.

<sup>178</sup> Paolo Rumiz, "L'antica rotta delle badanti italiane", in *La Repubblica*, 28.05.2005.

<sup>179</sup> Testimonies about Alexandrines' life stories are being collected by the Association for the Preservation of the Aleksandrines' Cultural Heritage (Društvo za ohranjanje kulturne dediščine aleksandrink) of Prvačina, Slovenia, whose website constitutes a good starting point for documentation about this migratory phenomenon: [www.aleksandrinke.si](http://www.aleksandrinke.si) (accessed on 11.11.2010)

<sup>180</sup> ACS, 13.180. 3- Folder n.4.

Zigon, long-time resident in Alexandria, had found her a job as a maid at her master, certain Nader Michele, wholesaler in onions and other vegetables. “After a few days,” Maria told the police,

without my knowledge and on agreement between my aunt and her master, I was sent to a nun-run institute, to learn the French language. I stayed there for 3 months. When I went back to my aunt master’s place I came to know that my next job would be working as a French teacher to her daughter, who was soon to come back with her mother from Syria. The days passed and mysteriously enough the masters’ wife and daughter were not back from Syria yet. Meanwhile, my aunt continuously tried to instigate me to go into the master’s room, making him company, being nice and compliant to him. When the master’s wife finally returned to Alexandria, my aunt and I had to leave the house. I found employment at a Turkish family, I was happy with the work, although my aunt collected the money. When my employers left to Cairo, and I wanted to follow them, she did not let me go. I was hired by another family instead, but I resigned after two days only, as both the master and his son expected me to sleep with them. Because of this, I was bitterly reproached by my aunt, who blamed me for not being able of doing anything with my life. ... One day, she brought me to a house where she introduced me to an old, heavily made up lady. She made me go into a heavily perfumed parlour, where 2 Arabs were waiting. When I understood what it was going on, I found a way to escape and I went back home.

Some time later, Cristina Zigon took up work as washerwoman for seamen and the crew of the navigation companies on service between Europe and Alexandria. Cristina often tried to profit from her niece, instigating her to be kind and docile with seamen and officials. “Because of my answering in the negative, endless quarrels broke out” Maria recalled. Eventually, Cristina Zigon introduced her niece to a certain Hadaia Basha, a man in his sixties, who asked Maria to become his *dame de compagnie*. Maria refused. She came to know later that her aunt had succeed in procuring him two young girls from Ranziano, a village close to Gorizia, in the

summer of 1926, when she was touring the area to recruit new girls to start into the trade in Alexandria. Maria was lucky enough to find a very considerate employer in Salomon Adler, the owner of a candy factory she had been working at since she had lost her job at Nader's. He gave her the money and passport to leave Alexandria and reunite with her family in Gorizia. Subsequently he made his formal proposal to marry Maria. "Before leaving back to Italy" Maria recalled "my aunt told me: 'And now go and die of hanger and you'll see, one day you will still need me. But next time, make sure you'll be more judicious and follow my advices!'"'. As Maria's personal narrative seems to show, working-class juvenile sex work could make up a very profitable merchandise, one which greedy parents or relatives would have no particular moral problem in exploiting to their own advantage. Nonetheless, I think it is important to point out how, despite the deployment of a number of tropes about girls' naivety and innocence, the way in which Maria represented herself was certainly far removed from being easy to be manipulated, on the contrary she showed a clear determination in resisting her aunt's attempts at weakening their will. Before the Second World War, 4.500 Slovenian migrants were counted in Alexandria, 7.000 in the whole Egypt. Some benevolent associations were established in Alexandria with the purpose of offering material and psychological support to the local Slovenian community: the Slavic Association "Sloga" funded in 1895 turned into the "Slovenska Palma ob Nilu" (The Slovenian Palm on the Nile). Under the auspices of this Society, the Refuge for Unemployed Girls "Franz Joseph" was operating. A bit later the member of the religious order of the Sorelle Scolastiche Francescane di Cristo Re (School Sisters of St. Francis of Christ the King) took on the task of

running the refuge, which extended to multiples branches in both Alexandria and Cairo, and secure the moral uplifting of the inmates:<sup>181</sup> with distinct hyperbolic tones, on the First Register of the Refuge, now kept in the Trieste Public Library, we read that “before the institution of the Refuge, hovels were swarming with these women, where, because of exploiters and poverty, they fell into an abject life, something which was highly detrimental to the good name of the Austro-Hungarian colony”. Certainly self-empowerment and greater autonomy were achieved by some Alexandrinke, while other had less successful stories. To break with the rhetoric of lament and fallenness, for many Alexandrinke Egypt did not represent a descent into a life of sin and debauchery, but an opportunity for hard work which, in many cases, was essential to the survival of women’s family back in the village.

### **3.7 Conclusions**

This chapter tried to show and briefly explain the reasons for Cairo’s prostitution expansion by placing it in its socio-historical context, characterized by expansion of State power and the economy over individual lives, migration, urban growth and restructuring of traditional social networks as the extended family. Increasing vulnerability of both local and foreign women in Egypt pushed them to look at prostitution as viable strategy to earn a living and support those dependent on them. State Regulation did try to marginalize these women into a clear-cut professional category, whose members’ social profiles I have tentatively described here, while the

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<sup>181</sup> The School Sisters of St. Francis of Christ the King congregation was founded in 1869 in Maribor (Slovenia), after separation from the School Sisters of St. Francis and its Motherhouse in Graz (Austria). It established itself as an autonomous religious order with the specific mission of instructing and educating young girls in the Maribor diocese. It quickly spread to other areas of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and, in early twentieth century, to the United States and Egypt.



majority of sex workers kept on playing on the porous ambiguous borders of social respectability engaging in on-off clandestine prostitution. I offered here some discussion of numbers generated by the State in the quite unsuccessful attempt to control sex workers by quantifying them, of the topography of Cairene sex work and the backgrounds of women who engaged in it. This brings us to the issues of how women decided to ply the trade or whether they were coerced, in which different ways and to what ends, to what extent they were strategic choices, in short to questions of women's agency I will be dealing with in more details in the following chapter.

## 4

# Sex Work, Structure and Agency

### 4.1 Introduction

How was sex work organized in Cairo? This chapter describes the structure of the trade by taking a look at the different types of sex work being carried out in the city. Prostitution will be analyzed in its multifarious varieties, with the aim of going beyond essentialist and homogenizing representations. In Cairo different forms of sex work were practiced by women coming from a variety of backgrounds in multiple areas often distinctive on the basis of race and ethnicity,<sup>182</sup> with different aims and degrees of autonomy. In order to describe the organization of Cairene sex work during from the end of the nineteenth century to the end of the 1940s, this chapter will distinguish three main types of commercial sex: namely enclosed regulated prostitution in brothels, “disguised” transactional sex in public entertainment venues, and on-off casual clandestine prostitution. It is important to clarify how these categories, while helping to define the diversity of prostitutes’ working arrangements, should not be considered as monolithic and self-contained. Borders within the different types of sex works were in fact porous, with women practicing different kinds of sex work during particular times in their lives. Emphasis

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<sup>182</sup> Usually migrant European women were to be found in the Wagh-al-Birkah while local women practiced in the Wass‘ah.

on the diversity of working arrangements helps the deconstruction of the essentialist stereotype of “prostitute” and stresses the notion of agency. This clearly emphasizes not only that no unified category of “prostitutes” existed, but also that women active in sex work were not simply subjected to psychological and physical violence, but attempted, at times successfully, to manoeuvre within the limits imposed by a fundamentally exploitative system. Moreover, many of these women fulfilled their goals, namely economic independence for themselves and their families. Being able to describe a fairly detailed account of the diverse circumstances of Cairene sex workers is essential to the endeavour of this thesis, that of retrieving at least a glimpse of the agency this group of subaltern social actors has been systematically deprived of, either by pseudo-sociological regulationist accounts<sup>183</sup> or moralizing abolitionist pamphlets on “fallenness”.

## **4.2 The Organization of Sex Work**

### ***4.2.1 Licensed Prostitution***

The licensed area in Cairo consisted of the Wagh-al-Birkah, home to mainly European prostitutes, with the adjoining area of Wass‘ah, where local women were to be found. Brothels situated in these areas were run in accordance with Egyptian laws. Licensed prostitution in Egypt at the beginning of the twentieth century was regulated by the arête of the 16<sup>th</sup> of November 1905 on *maisons de tolérance* (*buyut*

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<sup>183</sup> The main unparalleled example of those was constituted by Dr. Alex J.B. Parent-Duchatelet, *De la prostitution dans la ville de Paris* (Paris: J.B. Baillière, 1836). Other works belonging to the abolitionist tradition, share with Dr Parent-Duchatelet the same pathological essentialist approach, in terms of trying to describe the “ideal type” of prostitutes: William Acton, *Prostitution Considered in Its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects in London and Other Large Cities, and Garrison Towns*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: J. Churchill, 1870); Abraham Flexner, *Prostitution in Europe* (London: Richards, 1914).

*al-'ahirat*).<sup>184</sup> According to the decree, a *maison de tolérance*, or brothel, was a house where two or more women would cohabite or assemble for the purpose of prostitution.<sup>185</sup> As a simplified version of the continental regulation system, the decree stipulated that brothels could only be opened in specific areas (*quartier réservé*),<sup>186</sup> although segregation was never strictly enforced in Cairo and prostitutes normally failed to comply with legal provisions confining them to the brothel area and prohibiting any form of visibility.<sup>187</sup> Brothel keepers were to obtain licenses from the *mudiriyyah* (province) and provide the local police section with a list of the employed women, their names, ages and nationalities. The same legal provisions applied to brothel keepers of foreign origin, although the major exception was that they should notify their consuls of their decision to open a *maison de tolérance*. Women working in licensed brothels were registered prostitutes (*mumisat rasmiyyat*), they had to be at least 21 years of age and hold annual photo-cards. They were also required to report for weekly medical inspections at the police infirmary (a dedicated *Bureau de Mœurs* with medical equipment was introduced in Cairo in 1937, within the context of a major reform of public security measures)<sup>188</sup>. The women paid for their registration fees and were charged for all medical checkups. Infected women would be barred from prostituting themselves and confined in al-Hud al-Marsud Lock Hospital in Sayyidah Zaynab, until three negative tests would

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<sup>184</sup> Wizarat-al-Dakhaliyya, *Nidam al-Bulis wa al-Idarah- Lai'hah bi-sha'an buyut al-'ahirat*, 1936. The decree confirms a previous one by the same name, issued on the 15<sup>th</sup> of July 1896.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, article 1.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, article 2. The article stipulates that brothels had to be open in certain areas only, with no more than one entrance and no communication between them and either other buildings, shops nor public places.

<sup>187</sup> Women's Library, 4/IBS/6/040.

<sup>188</sup> Yunan Labib Rizq, "Safety First", *Al Ahram Weekly*, 6-12 December 2001, Issue no. 563, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2001/563/chrncls.htm>

be taken. Foreign registered women, if found diseased, would instead notify their consuls who would then prohibit them from practicing their trade until recovery. Given that no voluntary free clinic was available, nor was treatment in any venereal ward for European women enforced by law, foreign prostitutes were largely left free to keep working provided they went underground and were not caught prostituting themselves in the *quartier réservé* or soliciting in the streets.<sup>189</sup> According to the 1926 Cairo City Police Report, of the 1184 registered prostitutes working in Cairo, 859 were Egyptians and 325 foreigners.<sup>190</sup> Brothels (called *karakhanah*)<sup>191</sup> would usually lodge five or six *maqturat* (resident prostitutes). Given the high density of the red light district,<sup>192</sup> brothels would normally occupy small premises with a ground floor vestibule and a staircase leading to the first floor where bedrooms were located. A fairly detailed description of a brothel is available in a British consular record concerning a murder in a house of ill-fame.<sup>193</sup> This particular brothel was owned by an European prostitute, Santa Coppola, and was located in Shari‘ ‘Abd al-Khaliq, in the Wagh al-Birkah. Five girls plus the mistress worked there, four of whom were Italians plus a Greek woman. The brothel had three steps which led to the street and where some of the girls waited for customers while others sat in the hall. A five-

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<sup>189</sup> See Women’s Library, 4/IBS/6/040.

<sup>190</sup> Women’s Library, 4/IBS/5/2/040.

<sup>191</sup> The origin of this name is quite interesting. In the Levant the *karakhanah* identified the workshop and the brothel. According to Jens Hanssen, in Beirut the majority of prostitutes were unmarried village girls that had formerly worked as silk weavers (*banat al karakhanah*) in the outskirts of Beirut: “They were initially sent to earn money in the factories to sustain their families’ honour by subsidizing their agricultural revenue in adverse economic conditions. Yet, as the Maronite clergy and the patriarchal system considered female labour immoral in a factory where they would come into contact with men, these women suffered social stigmatization”. Jens Hanssen, “Public Morality and Marginality in Fin-de-Siècle Beirut”, in E. Rogan (ed.), *Op. Cit.*, p. 197.

<sup>192</sup> The Azbakiyyah had the second highest population density in Cairo after the nearby area of Bab-al-Sha‘riyyah with 36.323 inhabitants per sq. kilometre in 1926. See Abu Bakr ‘Abd-al-Wahhab, *Mujtama’ al-Qahira al-Sirri, 1900-1951* (al Qahirah: Maktabah Madbuli, 1987), p. 28

<sup>193</sup> See NA, FO/841/62.

metre-long corridor led to a bedroom and a staircase led to the first floor where a large sitting room overlooked the hall with two adjoining rooms. In the sitting room customers waited for the girls to receive them, spend time in conversation with their mistresses, drank spirits and gambled. Rooms were quite simple: “a bedstead, a table with marble top and some other things”. This description of the brothel closely resembles the setting of the sexual initiation of Kamal in Naguib Mahfouz’s novel

*Palace of Desire:*

he went inside trailed by her. She was singing: *Let down the curtain around us*. Finding the narrow staircase, he started climbing with a pounding heart. At the top was a hallway leading to a parlour. Her voice caught up with him, saying now, “Go right”, then “go left”, and finally “the door that’s partway open”. It was a small room decorated with wallpaper, containing a bed, a dressing table, a clothes rack, a wooden chair, a basin and a pitcher.<sup>194</sup>

Brothels in the poorer area of the Wass‘ah were certainly more destitute and shabbier. Prostitutes received clients in rooms directly overlooking the street. Referring to the turn of the twentieth century, British Cairo Police Chief Russell Pasha described the Wass‘ah as a place where sex workers were so miserable that they lived “in one-room shacks. ... Here in the Wass‘ah, Egyptian, Nubian and Sudanese women plied their one shilling trade in conditions of abject squalor, though under medical control”.<sup>195</sup>

According to a report of the International Bureau for the Suppression of Traffic in Women and Children of 1930, the native prostitution district brothels consisted of:

hovels opening to the street like shops, with a dirty pink cotton curtain across the opening and a bed of the same enticing color behind. While waiting for custom, the women sit in their doorways,

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<sup>194</sup> Naguib Mahfouz, *Op. Cit.*, p. 913.

<sup>195</sup> Russell Pasha, *Op. Cit.*, p. 178.

and if a policeman passes “they are just taking a breath of air”. In the doorways of some larger establishments sit other painted women, also just getting a breath of air. A prostitute knows nothing of the eight hour day. She works every day of the month and all day even though perhaps suffering from continual haemorrhage.<sup>196</sup>

Until 1916, the Wass‘ah district was overseen by Ibrahim al-Gharbi, a Nubian transvestite who controlled the women’s traffic both in Cairo and in the provinces. Known as a “King of the Underworld”, he was imprisoned by the British during a crackdown on free-lance prostitution in a 1916 purification campaign. He was confined in the Hilmiyyah internment camp for one year, before being sent to his village in the South. In 1923 he was arrested once again during a Cairo police maxi-operation which exposed a local sex traffic ring. One hundred and twenty Egyptian men and women were indicted for being members of an organization recruiting local girls between the ages of 12-14 from the Helwan area in order to turn them into prostitutes. Sixty girls were raided and kept in custody, but it was thought that hundreds of girls and boys were involved, being exploited as sex workers or sent to the provinces as virtual slaves to local landowners<sup>197</sup>. The news aroused a great deal of interest in the international press, with the British newspaper *Morning Post* reporting of the “revolting allegations” concerning the abduction of sixty Egyptian girls, kidnapped, sold or pawned by their parents<sup>198</sup>. Local judicial authorities, on the

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<sup>196</sup> Women’s Library, 4/IBS/6/024. The International Bureau for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children was established in 1899 and it constituted a network of national purity and vigilance associations who gathered to campaign against the international traffic of European women. Subsequently and especially after the First World War, the campaign was taken up by the League of Nations, with which the IBS strictly collaborated to formulate policies against international procurement.

<sup>197</sup> Women’s Library, 4/IBS/6/031.

<sup>198</sup> See *Morning Post*, “White Slave Traffic in Egypt- Revolting Allegations”, 24.10.1923; *Daily Express*, “White Slave Arrests, Egyptian Gang’s GHQ Raided”, 23.10.1923; *Daily Mail*, “White Slaves Raid, 100 Arrests in Cairo”, 24.10.23. It is remarkable that, despite the newspapers talked of “White Slave Traffic”, no European woman was in fact involved in the case. The term was probably

other side, hastened to reassess the nature of the case. In a letter to Miss Baker, Secretary and Director of the British National Vigilance Association,<sup>199</sup> a reformist society active against vice in Egypt, G.W. Hughes, the Chief Inspector of the Native Court of Appeal, the Parquet, claimed that, unlike the information circulated by the British press, the girls involved in the case had not been kidnapped or sold to brothel keepers by their parents. Instead, he commented that they were “volunteers”, as “practically the whole native prostitute world in Egypt is supplied by volunteers”. He went on to suggest that the vast majority of girls involved in the case had freely chosen prostitution “after having in most cases practiced as unlicensed prostitutes for years”, in order to support their families. In a number of cases, officers had been supposedly deceived by the girls regarding their age in order to obtain a permit.<sup>200</sup> This represents a significant example of the mild approach that local authorities adopted towards commercial sex. A direct witness, Sister Margaret Clare, a British religious activist running the IBS refuge in Cairo at the time, remarked that the sex trade was “encouraged and supported by the Egyptians in the highest positions”. According to her, al-Gharbi, the most important women’s trafficker in the country, was “looked upon as a little God by the Egyptians” and could rely on the support of political elites.<sup>201</sup> At the end of May 1924, the charges against al-Gharbi were defused and he was released on bail. According to a source, a bribe of 5000 Egyptian

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chosen for sheer sensationalistic reasons, at a time when imperial concerns of racial purity were used to support a domestic agenda of moral regeneration.

<sup>199</sup> The National Vigilance Association (NVA) was founded in Britain in 1885 to campaign in favour of the Criminal Law Amendment. As a purity association, it targeted prostitution, homosexuality, obscene publications and vice. For more information about the NVA and other British purity movements active in Egypt see chapter 8.

<sup>200</sup> Women’s Library, 4/IBS/6/031 - Letter of G.W. Hughes, Chief Inspector of Cairo’s Native Court of Appeal to Miss Baker, Director of the National Vigilance Association, 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 1924.

<sup>201</sup> Women’s Library, 4/IBS/6/031 - Note by Sister Margaret Clare to Miss Baker, 15.11.1924.



pounds was paid to Maqrushi Bey, Egyptian Head of the Parquet, to secure al-Gharbi's freedom who subsequently "returned home where he had a tremendous feast and was welcomed as a conquering hero"<sup>202</sup>. Years later al-Gharbi served a five-year imprisonment during which he died. Russell Pasha wrote in his memories that

his removal was not altogether a blessing for the brothel organization of the country. He had the reputation of being good to his women and fair, though severe, in his justice. Deprived of their king, the women had to find other protectors, without whom, however brutal they may be, a prostitute, all the world over, is lost and helpless.<sup>203</sup>

#### ***4.2.2 Disguised Prostitution in the Public Entertainment Sector***

New forms of prostitutions developed due to the increasing expansion of international tourism and business in the Azbakiyyah district, which, as we have seen in the previous chapter, had always been where entertainments and big hotels were concentrated in Cairo. In addition, the emergence of new patterns of middle-class nocturnal sociability, which was made possible by technological change including gaslighting and electrified public transportation, impacted the ways in which urban space was utilized. Rising levels of consumption sustained the spread of leisure spaces where it was possible for people of all social and economic backgrounds, to find some form of amusement suitable to their pockets. Imperial troops constituted a permanent source of demand, especially during the First and the Second World War when the presence of soldiers on Egyptian soil dramatically increased. Soldiers regularly patronized brothels and this resulted in a heated debate about the standards

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<sup>202</sup> Women's Library, 4/IBS/ 6/031 - Note by Sister Margaret Clare, 26.05.24

<sup>203</sup> Russell Pasha, *Op.Cit.*, p. 181.

of morality among troops, leading to the imposition of a harsh, albeit short-lived, measure of “social purification” in Cairo during the First World War.<sup>204</sup>

From the First World War onwards the general trend was the decline of big brothels. Instead, as it will be discussed, unregulated prostitution, whether disguised or clandestine, thrived. In the nightlife district of the Azbakiyyah, packed with café-chantants, music-halls, cabarets and brasseries, disguised prostitution was practiced by women employed as barmaids, waitresses and performers. Freed from police supervision on one hand and the protection of a pimp on the other, these women became the rank and file of “a new form of procuring that ... formed networks whose sheer size helps to explain the currency of the theme of the “White Slave Trade” during the early years of the twentieth century”.<sup>205</sup>

Performers were brought in by procurers and theatrical agents during the tourist season. A well-known French procuress of the 1920s was Madame Marcelle Langlois, owner of the Casino de Paris and a pension for women-artists. She was credited with having amassed such a considerable fortune that she was able to buy a castle in her native France. Every summer, she brought five or six artists, dancers and singers from France for the seasonal opening of her casino, to which all prominent Cairene personalities were invited. She was known for being the mistress of an important Bey in Zaytun and for introducing her complacent girls to other members of Cairo’s elite. When some girls, upon becoming mistresses of wealthy beys and pashas, relinquished their contracts with Madame Langlois, she charged their patrons high sums.

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<sup>204</sup> See chapter 5.

<sup>205</sup> Corbain, *Op. Cit.*, p. 168.

In 1925, the Passport and Permits Office attempted to restrain procurement by introducing stricter rules on the import of artists from abroad. A tax of 100 Egyptian pounds was levied on every performer and their repatriation was made mandatory on the expiration of their contracts. It seems however that the new regulations were far from being effective. It was also alleged that nothing could be done to the stiff foreigner procurement and sex industry as long as theatres and other entertainments managed by locals had to pay the exorbitant sum of 180 Egyptian pounds a year for a license. With the exception of a few internationally renowned companies, such as the French and Italian opera, it was argued that earning an “honest living” was impossible for a singer or a dancer in Egypt due to their meagre incomes. Performing meant disguised prostitution and “everyone knows this”<sup>206</sup>.

In nightclubs and bars, transactional sex was based on a fiction of seduction.<sup>207</sup> Girls were required to be gay and seductive while entertaining customers in bars and brasseries. Signalled by large signs advertising the sale of different types of alcohol, Azbakiyyah casinos and bars opened their doors at 11 p.m. to the throngs of locals, tourists and soldiers who frequently packed the establishments until the break of dawn. Scantly dressed and heavily made-up women quietly sat around casting eloquent glances at potential customers. After being approached by a customer, girls would then sit and join the patron for a drink at his table. In addition, they often

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<sup>206</sup> Women’s Library, 4/IBS/6/025 - Communication of the British Head of the Passport and Permit Office to Miss Saunders, IBS.

<sup>207</sup> Many information on the nightlife scene in Cairo until the Revolution can be derived from local publications devoted to arts and entertainment from the ’20s and the ’30s such as *Alf Sand*, *Dunia-al-Fann*, *al-Kawakib*, *Magallat-al-Funun*, *al-Malahi-al-Musawwarah*, *Ruz al-Yusuf*. These papers used to devote regular columns to the different programmes performed in the venues and commented extensively on the quality of the establishments and performers. It seems that the main entrepreneurs bribed journalists to obtain positive reviews. For the following description of Cairene commercial entertainment scene I am drawing on Van Nieuwkerk’s, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 43-9.

made him buy an indefinite number of drinks and packets of cigarettes for her and himself. At the end of the *fath*, as the approach was called, girls would have sex with the customer if requested to do so either in one of the rooms of the venue or in a nearby brothel; many bar-owners had special agreements with brothel keepers. Bargirls were in fact unlicensed prostitutes who freely plied their trade in agreement with the owner of the venue.<sup>208</sup> For soliciting on the premises the woman would have to pay a fee to the owner and in return, they would receive a percentage of the customer purchases in addition to cash received for sexual services. In can-cans and café-chantants women sold themselves under the cover of music and dance. Artist-prostitutes would first sing and dance on stage, displaying themselves before being invited to sit at some patron's table to drink. Their main aim was to encourage the patron to consume more and more and eventually the woman withdrew with them if requested.<sup>209</sup> The opening of bottles, either champagne, whisky or beer, according to the venue and customer's rank, would actually constitute the most of the girls' earnings. Due to the fact that the women had low fixed wages, they were forced to substitute their income by inducing their patrons to drink more and more with them. According to the press, in 1938, a café-chantant performer earned 16-20 Egyptian pounds a month, from singing and dancing, and 24-48 Egyptian pounds a month

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<sup>208</sup> In 1940, the Head of Police in the Azbakiyyah area found out 459 *garsunat* without a license. On being sent to a compulsory medical checkup, it was discovered that 97 of them were actually infected with venereal diseases. This demonstrates that these women were in fact engaging in sex work, besides working as barmaids. See Hilal, *Op. Cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>209</sup> In some venues, performers had to refrain from sitting with customers by contract, in order to discourage association with establishments that were just covers for prostitution. A very famous performer at the beginning of the twentieth century, Tawhidah, wanted to have stated in her contract that she wouldn't drink more than five glasses of cognac in one evening and that she couldn't be compelled to sit with customers.

from drinks.<sup>210</sup> A drink in a bar cost 15 piastres, of which 2 were for the alcohol, went to the girl and 8 to the venue's owner. Tabloid columns anecdotally commented on the process of *fath*. Occasionally girls were unable to perform on stage in the end, due to the enormous quantities of alcohol they had consumed, others preferred to sit and drink rather than going on stage.<sup>211</sup> *Fatihah* elaborated strategies to augment their own profits dramatically; for instance, two girls would both sit with a customer, one of them leaving at some point only to return a few moments later. It was customary that the gentlemen should order another drink for her.<sup>212</sup> The behaviour of an artist-prostitute was closely supervised by the venue-managers and carefully detailed in the contract agreement. Normally women would work until 2-5 a.m., paying for their own dresses and in some cases were requested to gamble with customers. The occupational status of artist prostitutes was extremely vulnerable since they could be fired by the manager without notice.

From the 1890s, when the entertainment industry in Cairo dramatically expanded, the bad effects of enormous alcohol consumption on nightclub dancers became a topic of serious and satirical commentary. In 1897, the plight of a Cairo *fatihah* was described as follows:

One black-eyed Arab, of ugly but amiable countenance, sat down beside the Doctor and myself after their performance, and we conversed to the extent of our powers. ... The Doctor said: "Well, my dear, how is your poor tummy now?". ... And she said: "Anglais-pint-bitter-bottled". Thus you see how truly expressive is our language even in the mouth of a Cairo dancing girl. She drank a pint of beer, then another half-pint; and no doubt her tremendous

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<sup>210</sup> Van Nieuwkerk, *Op. Cit.*, p. 198, note 8.

<sup>211</sup> In 1938, a competition between two Alexandrian *fatihat* ended up with the winner, Firdaws al-Shallabi drinking 35 glasses and her contender, Mimi, 25 glasses. *Ruz al-Yusuf*, 20.06.1938, cited by Van Nieuwkerk, *Op. Cit.*, p. 198, note 8.

<sup>212</sup> Van Nieuwkerk, *Op. Cit.*, p. 44.

exertions required exceptional quantities of liquid support. Then she sent the empty bottles on to the stage, and they were set on a little table besides her place there so that all men might see she had been entertained and put money into the pocket of the proprietor. She smoked cigarettes for some time, failed to make much conversation or understand ours, and bade farewell. My brother said that generally these girls die young, as their business is calculated to put a tremendous and unnatural strain upon their system.<sup>213</sup>

The existence of a social problem concerning cabaret women was extensively commented upon in the press and addressed by moral purity associations. In 1937, for example, the IBS discussed a proposal to establish a pension for cabaret girls to provide some form of social protection. Highlighting the firm exploitative grip that managers had on girls, IBS abolitionist activists concluded that for any action to be effective, “as the contracts of the girls often specified where they were to live, etc. it was absolutely essential to get the collaborations of the entrepreneurs”<sup>214</sup>.

Karin Van Nieuwkerk, author of an ethnography on present-day female entertainers in Egypt, argues that “prostitution was not necessarily part of the performers’ job, although several probably engaged in order not to lose wealthy customers”<sup>215</sup>. In addition, she reports interesting stories, taken from the coeval press, about romanticized anecdotes concerning virtuous singers who stubbornly resisted the advances of wealthy patrons, instead preferring their poor lovers.<sup>216</sup> Certainly not all women-performers resorted to prostitution. While this is particularly true for women performing in the traditional circuit (community singers and dancers hired for ceremonies such as *tasmiyyat*, weddings, *mawalid*, etc.), the

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<sup>213</sup> *Black and White*, 13.11.1897, cited in Sarah Graham Brown, *Images of Women: the Portrayal of Women in Photography in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 171.

<sup>214</sup> Women’s Library, 4/IBS/6/041.

<sup>215</sup> Van Nieuwkerk, *Op. Cit.*, p. 45.

<sup>216</sup> Van Nieuwkerk, *Ibid.*

situation for entertainers in the commercial variety circuit was more difficult. A small group of women-performers managed to attain personal fame, success and control over their work, in time often establishing themselves as powerful *salat* entrepreneurs.<sup>217</sup> Women such as Tawhidah, Na'imah al-Masriyyah, Badi'ah Masabni, Ratibah Ahmad, Bibah, and other famous public performers<sup>218</sup>, constitute interesting examples of how gifted and charismatic individuals could actually manage to work an exploitative system to their own advantage. While in many cases their early biographies remain obscure, and it is alleged that in some instances they were supported by powerful and wealthy protectors<sup>219</sup>, they were capable of carving their own space in show-business, amassing considerable wealth and projecting powerful social personae. Despite this, however, these women constituted an important exception to the ordinary dynamics of the public entertainment trade, that, while using women as sexualized objects of desire, exposed them to public stigmatization and disapproval. The fact that wages were very low meant that for the majority of *café-chantant* artists in Cairo engaging in sexual service to augment their monthly incomes was a reality.

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<sup>217</sup> *Salah* was the Arabic name for "music hall". According to Karin Van Nieuwkerk it did not carry a negative connotation, differently from *kabaré*, Van Nieuwkerk, *Op. Cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>218</sup> Tawhidah was of Syrian origins. She started performing in the Azbakiyyah around the turn of the century. She married a Greek who opened for her the "Alf Laylah wa Laylah", where she was the headliner for many years. After her husband's death, she managed the hall until she died in 1932. Na'imah al-Masriyyah came from a lower middle family. She started performing to support herself after she got divorced. She became one of the most acclaimed singers of the Theatre District and eventually opened her own establishment, the "Alhambra". Badi'ah Masabni was a Syrian migrant. She danced and sang in the Levant before moving to Cairo. She then became the star of al-Rihani's theatrical troupe. She married him in 1923 and divorced in 1926. Using the money she earned during her career and thanks to the financial help from wealthy patrons, she opened her own *Salah* in 1930. "Salat-Badi'a" became a landmark of Cairo's nightlife. After a wrong investment in the film industry, she entrusted the management of the establishment to Bibah, one of her leading performers. She moved back to Lebanon in order to escape Egyptian tax inspectors. Ratibah Ahmad was niece of Bamba Kashshar, one of the most famous 'awalim at the end of the nineteenth century. She managed to open her own dancing hall and was known for her usual rowdiness and drunkenness.

<sup>219</sup> Jacques Berque, *L'Égypte, Impérialisme et Révolution* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), pp. 363-4.

Even during the depression of the 1930s, nightlife in Cairo flourished despite the growing dissent of local conservative groups and foreign moralist associations. Concerns over vice and moral degradation were increasingly framed within anti-colonial feelings. Subordination to Western cultural influence and political encroachment were often considered to be at the core of ethical moral degradation. Moreover, the proliferation of vice and crime in the discourse articulated by Islamic political movements such as the Muslim Brethren, which was founded in 1928, played an ever-increasing role in Egyptian politics in the 1930s and the 1940s. It is within this context that a wave of purity laws, targeting nightclubs and entertainment emerged. In 1933, *fath* was prohibited to Egyptian performers while foreign dancers and singers continued plying their trade undisturbed; clubs and nightclubs were to be patrolled and monitored by local police. Since police officers were relatively easy targets for bribes, enforcement of restrictive regulations was quite uneven and periodical crackdowns were alternated with periods in which the *fath* was publicly practiced despite the purity regulations.<sup>220</sup>

During the Second World War, Cairene nightlife boomed and the sex market readily expanded mainly due to the massive soldier presence in the city. Artemis Cooper, author of a brilliant account of Cairo military and social history from 1939 to 1945, states that there were 80.000-100.000 British soldiers on Egyptian soil at the beginning of the War. In 1941 however, 140.000 men were stationed in Cairo. Allied troops were garrisoned in different camps around the city; South Africans stayed in Helwan, Indian pugrees camped in Mena and New Zealanders in Ma'adi. The British

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<sup>220</sup> See Van Nieuwkerk, *Op. Cit.*, p. 47.



were to be found at Heliopolis, Hilmiyyah and Al-Mazah. Their dwellings were a small squared tent with one window, ten men to a tent. Venturing into the city, the soldiers would get a tram and head to the nightlife district in order to spend the money they had amassed during their time spent in action in the desert: “bars and brothels cost money, but since there was nothing to buy in the desert and except the occasional egg from a nomad child, the men usually arrived in Cairo with a considerable amount of back-pay in their pockets”<sup>221</sup>. Popular venues as the Opera Casino run by Badi’a Masabni, the Kit Kat, the Bosphore Club of Bab-al-Hadid, were conveniently located next to the main tram station and the brothels district. In bars and dancing halls spirits, often adulterated, were sold to soldiers. Their drunkenness frequently caused brawls and fighting to the extent that many troop cabarets along Shari’ Imad al-Din erected barricades of protection in order to prevent drunk customers from getting on stage.<sup>222</sup>

#### ***4.2.3 Clandestine Prostitution***

As we have seen, licensed prostitution, although numerically significant, constituted but a small part of the Cairene sex trade. Reliable quantitative data about the diffusion of clandestine prostitution are extremely difficult to obtain, if not impossible. However, police-generated figures concerning mandatory regulations and the number of raided illicit brothels suggest that clandestine prostitutes greatly outnumbered licensed sex workers. The vast majority of Cairo sex workers did not

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<sup>221</sup> Artemis Cooper, *Cairo in the War, 1939-1945* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), p. 112.

<sup>222</sup> See Pennethorne Hughes, *While Shepherd’s Watched* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1949), pp. 51-2.

belong to the brothel system and plied their trade on a more flexible basis in clandestine *maisons de rendez-vous*.<sup>223</sup> This flourished due to the fact that private houses were not amenable to police officers unless they were summoned by the neighbours. A Cairo City Police memorandum on prostitution in 1926 highlighted the existence of many such houses, particularly when no public scandal or complaint was made.<sup>224</sup> The memorandum confirms that transactional sex was integrated rather than marginalized in the everyday lives of popular neighbourhoods, as long as it did not disturb the public peace.

The topography of Cairene clandestine prostitution was therefore hazy and elusive; unlicensed brothels were camouflaged in Cairo's urban fabric. First-class brothels, under the cover of bourgeois respectability, could be found in districts such as Rod-el-Farag or 'Abdin and often benefited from the patronage of influential members of the political and economic elite. The *'awamahs*, houseboats on the Nile, were known as places of debauchery where "gay" young girls would entertain upper-middle class and upper-class men.<sup>225</sup>

Women engaging in prostitution in early twentieth century Cairo did so out of necessity, in order to cope with situations of serious economic and social vulnerability. In doing this, some of them subjected themselves to State regulation and got licenses to ply their trade as professional prostitutes in brothels privately operated but approved by the State. In contrast, the vast majority of women marketed

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<sup>223</sup> I am using Corbin's term to define a private house whose tenants made available to third parties for commercial sexual encounters. Women were not inmates, but frequented the house for the purpose of prostitution. Clients could be either procured by the keeper or by the women themselves. See Alain Corbin, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 174-5.

<sup>224</sup> Women's Library, 4/IBS/ 5/2/040.

<sup>225</sup> For a description of a *'awamah*-brothel see Booth, M. "Unsafely at Home: Narratives of Sexual Coercion in 1920s Egypt" in *Gender and History*, 16, no.3, 2004: pp. 744-68.

their sexual services in the informal sector; they were clandestine sex workers in clandestine brothels. They successfully evaded State control by playing with the porousness of the boundaries of social respectability. Historian Liat Kozma has demonstrated how police records from around 1880 provide illuminating examples of this strategy:

women and places of ill repute could be easily mistaken for respectable ones, and vice versa. The 1880 Police Act, for example, warned policemen and shaykhs that prostitutes might pretend to be respectable women and rent an apartment in a good neighborhood under such false pretence.<sup>226</sup> Similarly, maidens that the police had found in a brothel sometimes claimed that they mistook it for a respectable place. In one case, for example, a prostitute who heard that her daughter was seen in one of the neighborhood's houses had to ask a man she saw nearby whether it was a respectable place, because she could not determine what it was by its appearance.<sup>227</sup>

Clandestine sex workers came from a variety of working-class backgrounds, most of the time they were women living on the margins of the peddler economy as seamstresses, washerwomen, dressmakers, servants, shop assistants. Despite the strain of economic hardship and impoverishment, these women retained family ties; many of them were married and practiced prostitution in order to supplement their meagre family income. According to Egyptian governmental sources, clandestine houses were:

frequented, either with or without their husband's consent, by married women whose incomes are insufficient for their luxurious tastes, by girls who are exploited by unprincipled parents, and by young women who have fallen victims to procurers and continue in their mode of life. Women connected with procurers also frequent

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<sup>226</sup> See article no. 8 of the *Dabtiyyah* Act. Filib Jallad, *Qamus al-Idarah wa-l-Qada'*. Alexandria: Al-Matba'ah al-Bukhariyah, 1892, pp. 216-7, quoted in Liat Kozma, "Prostitutes and Other Dishonourable Women", unpublished paper.

<sup>227</sup> DAWAQ, *Dabtiyyat-Iskandriya*, L/4/18/11, case no. 748, 27 Rabi' Awwal 1297 (8 March 1880), 71-72. See also DAWAQ, *Dabtiyyat Iskandariyyah*, L/4/18/11, case no. 727, 18 Rabi' Awwal 1297 (28 February 1880), 38-40.

these houses, and also women who have been previously registered but who, for some reason, have succeeded in eluding the supervision of the Bureau of Public Morals.<sup>228</sup>

Such descriptions apart from the gross misunderstanding of the women's motivations and the classist disdain for "dubious working-class moral standards", typically stresses the victimization of women while downplaying the importance of prostitution as a pragmatic survival strategy.

Prostitution in general and clandestine prostitution to an even greater extent, due to periodic authorities' crackdowns on official vice, flourished in the context of increasing economic instability in the 1930s and afterwards. Therefore, flourishing prostitution must be placed in the context of larger patterns of socio-economic crisis which were portrayed in public discourses as a growing threat to national civic order; it endangered the fundamental institution on which social reproduction reposed, marriage. Despite this, prostitution in modern Egypt presented women with a viable alternative to economic hardship and starvation. Surprisingly, the strongest prostitute autonomy was to be found at the extremities of the sex trade hierarchy. First-class elite prostitutes and casual prostitutes both eluded registration; they were not restricted in their freedom of movement as well as not subjected to medical examinations. This was in contrast to the women practicing in the middle ranks as disciplined sex workers in licensed brothels. Women practiced prostitution as a part-time activity within the precinct of the clandestine brothel, adjusting their labour-schedule to other occupations, domestic chores and child-rearing. From the minutes of a case concerning a raid in a clandestine brothel in Kafr el-Kafarow in 'Abdin, we

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<sup>228</sup> Women's Library, 4/IBS/ 5/2/040.

can derive some interesting information. The house was managed by Giuseppe Mifsud, a Maltese shoemaker married to a French woman, possibly a former prostitute. The brothel was run as a family-business by the couple with the help of two menservants in their three-storey house. The couple lived on the third floor with their two children, while the first and the second storey constituted the brothel. When the house was raided due to a complaint by the neighbours, six women were in occupancy. They were all Egyptian and came from nearby areas, such as Shari‘ Muhammad ‘Ali and the Darb al-Ahmar in the Dawudiyyah. Hanifah Mursi, one of the women, told the police that she had been working there for a month and that she would go to the house for the purpose of prostitution at night, while busy at home during the day; she would retain half of the money paid to her by the customer. Among the other women also present at the raided house was a mother who was unemployed and living on the income of half a house they owned. They claimed to have been lured by Mifsud with an excuse and subsequently kept against their will.<sup>229</sup>

#### **4.4 Procurers**

As we have seen, while the majority of sex workers practiced underground, regulated prostitution took place in State-licence brothels. In both sectors, the role played by procurers was fundamental in maintaining a regular supply of foreign women to both licensed and clandestine brothels. Foreign brothel keepers, profiting of the virtual immunity bestowed upon them by the Capitulations, relied on a vast network of

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<sup>229</sup>NA, FO 841/146 - Rex versus Giuseppe Mifsud for living on the earnings of prostitution.

international traffickers to provide them with new attractive girls, especially during the tourist season when they were most in demand. It seems that French procurers took the lion's share of business particularly in Cairo and Alexandria, since they controlled the main port of departure, Marseilles, and could count on the collaboration of stokers and chauffeurs working aboard the steamers to Egypt. Women travelled as stowaways on the Messageries Maritimes vessels and disembarked mainly at Alexandria where ships were moored along the quay; this made it easy for women to go ashore, disguised as seamen or wearing army uniforms.<sup>230</sup> Women were then sorted by local procurers, often through fake employment agencies, and directed to their destined workplaces. Other women reached Port Said on their way to Eastern destinations further afield. Older prostitutes that had been in the trade in Europe before being embarked to Egypt usually via Marseille or Naples would tend to be employed in local brothels ending their careers there. More marketable younger women would spend some time in Egypt before being transferred to India and the Far East. Some girls were inveigled by international traffickers and eventually forced into prostitution. Many Greek girls for instance were said to be lured on the promise of a job or a marriage match and welcomed upon their arrival by local intermediaries disguised as the groom's relatives.<sup>231</sup> After some days, women would be told to get ready for travelling to meet their future husband and eventually taken to their destined brothel. Many others were fully cognizant of their circumstances. In a 1927 Report of the League of Nations Special Committee of Experts on the Traffic of Women and Children, a

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<sup>230</sup> See Women's Library, 4/IBS/6/ 034.

<sup>231</sup> Women's Library, 4/IBS/6/033 - Report on Traffic in Women by MmeTsykalas, 1905.

statement made by a Greek prostitute was reported: "Greece is quite different from all other countries. She is actually overpopulated and they are glad to see us go. If a girl has a good reason of going, that it is all is necessary". Another prostitute named 91-G in the report, commenting on her two prostitute friends, who had left for Egypt on tampered passports because they were minors, put it quite clearly: "It is there one must go to make money. I should be going myself but it is too late in the season".<sup>232</sup>

According to the same report, the flourishing of women's trade in Cairo was the result of a combination of several factors: the existence of a licensed brothel system that constituted the natural counterpart of traffic; the prosperous situation of the country in 1926; the high rate of exchange; the steady expenditure on debauchery by middle-class locals and foreigners; the relative freedom enjoyed by traffickers and *souteneurs* because of the local judicial system.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> Women's Library, 4/IBS/6/033, section taken from the 1927 Report of the Special Committee of Experts on the Traffic of Women and Children.

<sup>233</sup> See Women's Library, 4/IBS/6/037: "As an example of the difficulties encountered by the Police in attempting to close unlicensed brothels, the following description may be quoted, as indicating the ponderous, and in general, ineffective procedure that must be followed: 1-Statements must be obtained from neighbourhoods; 2- The house must be kept under supervision usually for about 14 days, 3- A report is made to the Governorate with a request for "Notification to quit"; 4- Notice that the house is considered a brothel and that the female occupants must quit within 30 days is served by the Governorate to the offenders. If the latter are local subjects, the notification, signed by the Governor, is served directly; if they are foreign subjects, it is served through the offender's consulate. If the women are still there at the expiration of the notice, the lessee or owner of the building is prosecuted before the Contraventions Court, and the prostitutes can, then, carry on their trade until the case has been heard, the householder fined and the women ordered by Court to quit. If in spite of this, they refuse to leave, an ejectment order must be obtained from the Court, before they can forcibly be turned out. However, the astute prostitutes leave a few days before expiration of the 30 days' warning and start business elsewhere (it may be in another flat in the same landing) and the same procedure must be reported. In some cases, if the persons concerned are local subjects, the Police is able to avoid this lengthy and tiresome procedure, by obtaining from the Parquet an order to raid the premises on suspicion of drugs or that some women are minors. The owner of the house is then put in contravention and the women are brought to the Caracol, kept there during the night and sent to the Public Health Department doctor for medical inspection. This procedure generally frightens them sufficiently to cause them to go to another *qism* to carry out their businesses, and then there the all procedure must start all over again. If the persons suspected are foreign subjects, a raid cannot be carried out without the previous authority of their Consul who is free to grant or withhold his consent, or, while concurring in principle, to require evidence, a condition which sets in motion the same

An international procurer commented on a local pimp acting as intermediary between him and the brothels,

he brings each year from France at least 8 young girls. He sells them to the tenants. ... Sometimes he obtains as much 50 Egyptian pounds. The souteneurs also purchase them. In Egypt you can do whatever you like: this is why you find souteneurs from all parts of the world. They can change the ages of the women when they work in the houses for it is forbidden to register women under 21 years of age.<sup>234</sup>

In 1923 there were 312 registered prostitutes of European nationalities in Cairo; 98 Greeks, 75 Italians, 47 French and 12 of other nationalities. In 1924, of the 357 women registered in police records, French women figured as the largest group (127), followed by 107 Greeks, 56 Italians and 5 from other nationalities<sup>235</sup>. In 1925, a list of pimps operating in a red-light district of Cairo reported the existence of 16 men, of whom 14 were French, 1 Greek and 1 British, while it was stated that more than one hundred French pimps were in fact active between Alexandria and Cairo.<sup>236</sup> Miss Saunders, Warden of the IBS Refuge in Cairo at that time, explained that the large number of French nationals active in sex traffic was due to the quite favourable attitude of their consular authorities, and in particular, the General Consul Monsieur Labè towards them. She commented on the “boldness” and “effrontery” of the French pimps that loitered around Azbakiyyah with their dogs while the Egyptian

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ponderous procedure. Only rarely do the women, usually newcomers, consent to leave the house at the request of the Police; any attempt to deal with old offenders in this expeditious manner only gives rise to a complaint of interference with Europeans to the offenders' consulates and exposes the Police to the ridicule. The complaint then of the Police that their efforts are stultified by want of adequate legislation appears to be justified on this ground alone if no other. But to treat the manifestations of prostitution such as the keeping, without licence, of a disorderly house as contraventions only, with the low scale of penalties applicable, makes still more difficult the maintenance of order and decency in public places. On the other hand, the medical inspection of registered prostitutes, if efficient within its limits, is not and cannot be an adequate mean of coping with VD”.

<sup>234</sup> Women's Library, 4/IBS/6/038.

<sup>235</sup> Women's Library, 4/IBS/6/034 - Egypt. Messageries Maritimes. 1 folder. 1925-30.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*



police could nothing against them.<sup>237</sup> According to Miss Saunders, Labè had in various instances deliberately vetoed or delayed the deportation order of notorious traffickers. In the case of Madame Dora Norvalle, a famous procuress, the Consul was reportedly in close confidential terms with the accused as he regularly visited her clandestine house:

One of the experienced workers called to see him in the winter 1924-25 about the repatriation and more adequate treatment for venereal disease of a young French prostitute whose family in France had been enquiring for her and that was under the age of 20. At her request, the girl and the padrona of the brothel were summoned but when this Dora Norvalle (now deported) came in, the Consul shook hands warmly with both women ... shortly after this, the French Lady on the Committee of the Refuge of the League, who had drawn the attention of the Consul to the condition of the sick girl, was very indignant at the behaviour of the Consul to herself. Monsieur Labè, who was not sober, met her at the Opéra and came up to speak to her in front of her own daughter of 19 about 'his young friend, Rosalie V.', the prostitute referred to.<sup>238</sup>

In August 1925, Consul Labè was notified by the native Parquet that several French and non-French notorious pimps were to be arrested and that it was of necessity that the Parquet sent his kavasses in. Upon hearing the news, Monsieur

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<sup>237</sup> Women's Library, 4/IBS/6/034. Miss Saunders compiled a reported about French pimps operating in Cairo for the Cairo City Police. She enclosed some interesting social profiles: "Here are, under, a few names, or rather nick-names, of some of the best known pimps. These pimps frequent the Café Carillon and are to be found at midnight. They also frequent the Café Riche, and a small bar of Haret el Arbakhana, Ezbekiyeh. 1. Marious: exploits Marie Hoen, dite Mignon, his legal wife, and runs Pension Mignon, Rue Wagh el-Birka; George: fat, short, cleanshave; speaks French with an rrrrr accent. Exploits Georgette Lallier, dite Suzanne, who is running Pension Montmartre; Paul le Petit: exploits the woman named Raymond, Pension Montmartre; Joseph: short, thin, small black moustaches, black eyes, red face. Exploits the woman Juliette of 8, Rue el-Berka; Dominique Le Brun: exploits Mme Marcelle, of Pension Modèle in Rue Wagh el-Berka (travelling between Cairo and Alexandria); Louis l'Australien: exploits woman Gaby of Luxembourg; Louis l'Algerien ou Bouton: exploits his legal wife, Henriette Bouton Suzanne Germaine. She has lately run away from him with a native; Joseph: reforme de l'armée a cause de maladie mentale, exploits Odette, Rue Zaki, no. 7; Dominique Le Jacquot : who was expelled in 1924. His woman is Mado, who ran away lately with a native; Philippe: Exploits the women named Marie, who runs the pension "Chat Noir" of Rue Wagh el Birka. Note by Miss Saunders: of the 7 addresses mentioned, I believe only one is that of a clandestine house. The other pensions are in the segregated quarter near the Ezbekiyya".

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*

Labè asked who was the French subject that was to be arrested. This name was Antoine Desanti. He was a Corsican living with three women he exploited including his first cousin at 6 Shari‘ Galal. It is unknown whether the Consul General informed Desanti personally, but, according to Miss Saunder’s informant, Labè was the only one at the Consulate to know about Desanti’s name was on the list. The Corsican pimp swiftly left the country the night before the raid was carried through.<sup>239</sup> The IBS had previously sent a letter dated July 1925, giving details concerning a traffic case related to Desanti and asking the French Consul to arrest him. They requested a trial through the consular court instead of simply being deported since deported pimps often remained at large for a while before returning to Cairo undisturbed.

Life in the brothel was marked by high competition between the women’s overseer and her employer. In these establishments, women normally had to rely on pimp in order to be protected from greedy keepers and their relentless physical and economic exploitation, as well as from violent and rowdy customers. Getting a lover pimp meant more protection to women, but it often, time and again, added to their subordinate position as a new element of exploitation. The ongoing difficulties encountered by the Egyptian authorities in enforcing regulation and strict segregation, nevertheless, resulted in the ever-increasing expansion of forms of prostitution; women, although licensed, were endowed with a greater measure of physical mobility. A registered prostitute could also work as a self-employed professional, provided that she refrained from public soliciting as this was forbidden by law. This certainly gave her a greater measure of autonomy, but could also expose

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<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*

her to major dangers, especially the mistreatment and abuse of violent customers. While the brothel restricted prostitutes' independence on one hand, it also offered an institutionalized system of protection on the other. Indeed, a brothel keeper often resorted to a number of local bullies to enforce a security service, where men would intervene in cases of fights over payments and when brawls between drunkards erupted. Self-employed prostitutes were, as a result, practically forced to recur to some lover/pimp whose behaviour would normally be exploitative and abusive.

The social profiles of Cairo pimps were as diverse as the prostitutes. The vast majority were young working-class local and foreign men, who were unskilled casual labourers. To them, pimping presented the opportunity of securing a living without engaging in the pressures of the local labour market. Most of the men had been gravitating around the Azbakiyyah district for some time, temporarily working in bars and taverns where they had made acquaintances with the prostitutes plying their trade in the area.

Among the cases discovered during research, there were at least four pimps who had previously served in the British Army, two of whom had been members of the Cairo City Police under the command of Russell Pasha.<sup>240</sup> For instance, Gordon Anslie Ness, an ex-Lieutenant Lancashire Fusiliers, was appointed as a Constable in

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<sup>240</sup> Russell Pasha pointed out in various instances the need for a new scheme for police officers in order to discourage corruption and collusion in illicit activities. Although he was mainly referring to native policemen, it seems that his remarks can apply to British ones as well: "I fear however that the standard of pecuniary honesty which in the past has been high among the city police, is being undermined by the inadequacy of the pay. It is today quite impossible for a married policeman to exist on the pay he receives." He pressed for the introduction of a pension system, free housing in Governments cantonments (such as Shubrah, Old Cairo, Sayyidah Zaynab, al-Khalifah and 'Abbasiyyah according to the report) and free medical and educational facilities for police families, Russell Pasha, *Op. Cit.*, p. 161. In 1927 a major press campaign on *al-Ahram* addressed the issue of reform in law enforcement, public security and police corps' professional standards. See Yunan Labib Rizq, "Safety First", in *al-Ahram Weekly Online*, 6-12 December 2001, Issue no. 563.

the Cairo City Police, before being removed for bad conduct. In November 1921, he was charged of living from the proceeds of the prostitute Sophie Maltezaki as well as assaulting her and disturbing the public peace on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June 1921.<sup>241</sup> It appears that he was resident at 6 Shari‘ Galal Pasha, the same address where Antoine Desanti, the Corsican notorious pimp, lived. Sophie Maltezaki, a Greek, was an artiste-prostitute at Guindi’s Café-Concert in Shari‘ ‘Imad al-Din. She had lived with the accused for seven months and had known him for a year. Giving evidence, she stressed the fact that she was not a prostitute, and that prostituting herself was not in any way part of her job; she danced and sang. She denied that she gave Ness any money and argued that she had returned to her aunt’s house upon hearing that he was a married man. In June, Ness and Sophie met at a police station, where he asked her to return with him. Outside the station, he took her by force and dragged her towards a taxi, while drawing his revolver. A police officer, Giuliano Santo, subsequently stopped him.

Sophie’s occupation and relationship with Ness were described in very different terms by witnesses. Sophie was in fact a *fatihah*, a dancing hall girl who was paid for sitting with customers, drinking with them and occasionally going home with them.<sup>242</sup> As a disguised unlicensed prostitute, she wanted to conceal her real profession, despite the danger Ness constituted for her. According to Arthur Marks Broome, Head Constable of Cairo City Police, during the quarrel with Ness at the

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<sup>241</sup> NA, FO 841/205 - Rex versus Gordon Ainslie Ness for living wholly or in part on proceeds of prostitution.

<sup>242</sup>*Ibid.* See testimony of Eric Leslie Desmond Lees, Head Constable of Cairo Secret Police: “I know Sophie. She works at the Café Guindi, she sits with client of the café and if she can come to terms with them, she will go home with them. I have seen Sophie leaving the café with one man and I have seen her go to bed with another man at Villa Napoli, 13 Sharia Qantarat al-Dekkah”.

Police station, Sophie lamented that there was no question of her moving back with him since she was unable to keep him any longer. As a “waitress” in Guindi she earned 10 Egyptian pounds a month plus 20% of drink orders, her responsibilities included retaining her son at school on this little amount. Eventually, Ness was found not guilty when he was tried before the supreme court in January 1922. He was subsequently repatriated under Martial Law.

John Charles Shalders was a sergeant in the Military Police; after his discharge from service became the pimp of Rosa Lieben, a Jewish Russian registered prostitute and keeper of a licensed brothel on Shari‘ Wagh-al-Birkah. According to a report to a jury by Ragheb Saad and Nico Gregorio, two members of the secret service who had been instructed to follow the accused, Shalders worked in a bar in Shari‘ Mahdi, the Union, a meeting place for British soldiers, until 12.30 p.m. Following this shift, he would go on to a brothel that was 150 yards away on a parallel street to supervise the business there. According to witnesses, Rosa would give Shalders 20 piastres per night in payment. Tried by the supreme court in January 1922 he was found not guilty but soon repatriated under Martial Law.<sup>243</sup>

#### **4.5 Sex Work and Female Agency**

In August 1925, the famous Corsican pimp and women’s trafficker Antoine Desanti, succeeded in making a daring escape out of the country thanks to his well placed political connections. The allegations against him were based on the testimony of Nelly Plummier, a 23-year-old dressmaker and former prostitute in a *maison de*

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<sup>243</sup>NA, FO 841/205 - Rex versus John Chas. {Charles?} Shalders for living on proceeds of prostitution.

*rendez-vous* in Marseilles, who had made Desanti's acquaintance in a dancing there. They had begun a relationship and Desanti suggested that they moved to Egypt where he would open a milliner's shop for her. She travelled as stowaway on the Messageries Maritimes steamer Lotus, protected by members of the crew. Upon her arrival in Alexandria, Desanti, who had travelled on the same boat, gave her a visitor permit and had her disembarked. Once ashore, he put her in a clandestine brothel run by an Italian; she protested and was brutally battered. Upon the arrival of the Lotus steamer from Beirut on its way back to Marseilles, Nelly got aboard in a desperate attempt to talk to the Captain and ask for his assistance. Immediately recognized by one of the ship-boys who had helped in her smuggling, it did not take long before she was seized by Desanti who took her to another clandestine pension in Rue Cleopatre. She was then transferred to Cairo, where she started working in a French clandestine brothel in Shari' Mahdi. She lived with three other women, Desanti's cousin, Eliana, and Desanti's mistress, Pepé. The women were exploited by him and all their earnings went to Desanti. Nelly finally met a young man and decided to move with him to a pension, but when Desanti found her, the young paramour disappeared and she was forced to return. Desanti claimed that he was ready to take her back, but only if she paid 100 Egyptian pounds to him as a refund for the expenses he had sustained for her. Alone and without money, she eventually found the courage to denounce him as her pimp.<sup>244</sup>

Despite the didactic tone and the moralistic vein in which abolitionist accounts on the "White Slave Trade" were written, some cases are reported that shed light not

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<sup>244</sup> Women's Library, 4/IBS/6/ 034.

only on the traffic structure and dynamics, but also on the ways in which women adapted to their circumstances. For instance, Augusta Pellissier was a 17-year-old French girl, who was brought over from Marseilles under the pretence of finding her a partnership in a café. The man who smuggled her over from Marseilles was called Adé, alias Amédée Desanti, brother of Antoine Desanti. She had met him in Marseille in July 1928 in a restaurant she used to lunch at. Her story is so vivid and detailed that it is worthy of being reported at length. Augusta Pellissier told the authorities:

My acquaintance with Adé grew closer and closer and he started making some proposals, like leaving to Egypt with him to open a ball-room there. Three weeks later, once I had decided to accept his offer, he asked me to go and live with him, at Rue de la Cathédrale 1, where we planned our journey. I went and live with him for fifteen days all in all, during which it did not occur to me there was anything seedy with him. This is how we travelled to Egypt. ... Adé embarked our luggage the day before the departure. On that day, at 7 a.m. he got on board on his own. One hour later, I went to the ship with a certain M. Michel, who lived with Adé and whose wife did some housework for him. I was given a small packet I was instructed to deliver to Jules Arency, a chauffeur on board, pretending I was his wife. When I got on the ship, I was taken to Arency's cabin: he was there with Adé and another boy. Adé made the gesture of keeping my mouth shut. Arency went out of the cabin and took a look around. One hour later they took us down to the storeroom. They put us in a chest and put weights on top of it. Some hours later, when we reached the open sea, the storekeeper came and picked us up and we moved to his cabin. We spent all the crossing in there, except for some walks at night and a couple of times when we had to be hidden because the cargo was being inspected. The first time, we were hidden in a cabin, on the side of the anchorage, almost buried alive by canvas bags. The second time, they put us at the bottom of the bridge, among planks and one ton iron rims. ... We reached Alexandria on the 28<sup>th</sup> of September on the Lotus. ... At 7 a.m. Adé set foot on land dressed as a chauffeur and came back with a friend of his to pay the storekeeper. He gave him 3.000 francs, then they drank champagne together to celebrate the arrival at Alexandria. And then a chauffeur called Joseph gave me an identity card. My picture was on it but

the stamped papers accompanying it were in the name of a certain Virginia (I don't remember the surname), Italian, housemaid. I disembarked around 7 or 8 at night. Three chauffeurs were waiting for me on the quay, a tattooed big man, Arency and Joseph. They told me to go through the custom on my own and that we would have rejoined after that, which I did. At the custom, I was not checked nor searched at all.

In Alexandria, Augusta was handed over to a woman who suggested how she could make money, as her "partner", since Adè did not yet have sufficient capital to buy a ballroom. The girl objected and when persuasion failed, was beaten. She was then made to go on the streets from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m., from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m., and again from 8 p.m. to 1 a.m. or later, and always with someone watching her. After a month in Alexandria, Augusta was visited by a woman, Jeanne Maury, alias Josephine Emilie Maury. She paid Amédée Desanti 7 Egyptian pounds on the spot and brought the girl to her clandestine brothel at 2 Sekkat-al-Manakh in Cairo. Augusta started prostituting herself there, travelling once a week to Alexandria to bring Amédée the money she earned. Her testimony is extremely vivid and reveals a considerable amount about her life in the brothel and of the strategies of trade. This included the *vol à l'entôlage*, or pilfering, which constituted a common way to augment the income of the business in low-class brothels:

Mme Maury instructed me to pick up only native types in "galabiyeh" or elder married-looking men because they don't make difficulties about the price and they are fine with paying 20 or 30 piastres. Once in my room, I must be paid in advance for the service and a tip. Making himself comfortable, the punter puts his clothes on a sofa in the room, which is abeam of an adjoining room. While the man is busy with me, Emile Maury is pilfering, lifting the wallet from behind a tent, that looks as if it sticks to the wall, but it is in fact loose. She takes some bills but she leaves some in place, so that the man doesn't realize he has been robbed if he opens his wallet. She puts the money she stole under the sofa, so that, if the man finds out the theft, I pretend I am finding the



money. If the man doesn't find out, Mme Maury gets the money, and every time I go to Alexandria I bring Adè his share. We use a code between us: for instance, if she doesn't find anything in the wallet, she makes me understand saying: "Renè needs you".<sup>245</sup>

There is certainly a big difference between Augusta's first-hand account of prostitution and the way in which female stories were popularized in the literature of "fallenness": women who had failed to conform to Victorian sexual and social norms and who were enthusiastically patronized by abolitionist associations. Despite their moralistic emphasis, abolitionist pamphlets did not fail to recognize the role of material causes in orienting women towards prostitution, especially the lack of occupational opportunities for women and the meagre wages they received for their work. On the contrary, earnings of prostitutes were favourable if compared to current wages. Depending on the area, prostitutes charged 10 piastres a head in the Wass'ah and double in the European Wagh-al-Birkah. A woman could earn from 80 piastres to 1, 50 Egyptian pounds ca. a day depending on the number of customers<sup>246</sup> Before the First World War, a native mason would earn 6-12 piastres per day, a native painter 14-15 piastres per day, a railway worker's family of 6 people living in 3 rooms would live on about 6 piastres per day.<sup>247</sup> While prostitution constituted a quite lucrative in terms of wages, many of the women normally had their earnings

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<sup>245</sup> Women's Library, 4/IBS/6/034 - Augusta Pellissier's testimony to police, 15.04.1929. On the *vol à l'entôlage* see in the same file also the testimony of André Guillet, a French minor, brought over by a certain Sachelli, who first seduced her and then forced her to go to Egypt threatening her with a revolver: "about 7 months ago, I asked Gros Loui to go to the house of Jeanne Maury, 2 Sikket al-Manakh where I met a young man called Tonnin, whom I found later to be the nephew of Jeanne Maury and I was trained by them the *vol à l'entôlage*, from the clients and then I was arrested with the others and detained in the ELU awaiting trial. I then was sentenced by the French Consular Court to one year's imprisonment with the first offender's benefit".

<sup>246</sup> Women's Library, 4/IBS/6/037. In a speech delivered on the 7<sup>th</sup> of June 1932 at the meeting of the first committee on prostitution, H.E. Mahmud Shahin Pasha, Ministry of Interior and Public Health, estimated that licensed prostitutes received between eight and sixteen customers per day. According to him, clandestine prostitutes received only two customers per day.

<sup>247</sup> Clerget, *Op. Cit.*, p. 156.

swindled by their *padronas* or *souteneurs*. Brothel inmates kept half of their earnings and paid the keeper for board plus various extras, usually charged at very high prices. In some cases, women would retain their earnings but paying a monthly rent for the room they used. Average rent was 30 piastres a day for lodging, while it was possible to rent a room in the Azbakiyyah for 10piastres a day.<sup>248</sup> Prostitutes also had to buy clothes, undergarments, shoes, and cosmetics in order to attract more clients and earn more, brothel keepers usually provided the women with these articles acting as an intermediary between women and dealers. Other expenses endured by prostitutes included medical fees and annual registration fees. In many instances they had children and relatives dependent on them and part of their earnings often went going to pimps and bullies. Many women soon became indebted to their *padronas* or found it very difficult to accumulate private money in order to reinvest in some trade or exit strategy. Only a small number of particularly successful prostitutes could hope to earn enough to be able to accumulate money to emancipate themselves and start other income-generating activities. In some cases, former sex workers turned to sex service management, brothel keepers. It was here that money and connections in the criminal underworld became essential for crossing over. When a woman could count on the right type of protection, nonetheless, she could earn well, depending on the type of clientele of the establishment she run.

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<sup>248</sup> NA, FO 841/205 - Testimony of a landlady, Katina Cephalas. The rent in brothels is taken from 4/IBS/6/025. It is possible to argue that in Cairo the segregation associated with regulationism was never adopted in full. Closer study arrangements between prostitutes and brothel keepers will probably support the view that Cairo's brothels were mostly closer to "open houses", a sort of lodging house inhabited by public women, that *maison fermée* of the continental type. This explains also the fact that many women, although formally prohibited to do so by the law, actually attracted clients in the streets, standing in front of the buildings or under the arches of the Wagh-al-Birka.

Prostitutes were thus in a weak and subordinate position, but this does not mean they did not try to resist or renegotiate the terms of their exploitation. Strategies of resistance were multiple and related to the different brokers who controlled their work, whether *padronas*, State officials (policemen or public health officers) or pimps. Women who chose to resist unwarranted State intervention kept themselves to the informal sector instead of obtaining government issued-licenses. When sex workers attempted to subvert the power relations they had with their exploiters, their pimps, they did not hesitate to make use of the law system, as plaintiff in courts. Among the consular minutes researched, there are cases which provide interesting insights in the relationship between prostitutes and their pimps. In these cases, women were self-conscious enough to sue their pimps and haul them before a court for their mistreatment.

In February 1914, an Italian registered prostitute, Francesca Collavita, sued the 21-years-old Maltese Giuseppe Vassallo, for living from her earnings gained from prostitution as well as repeatedly threatening her with a razor. The woman worked in the Fish Market under the name of Angiolina while she rented a “shop” available for customers. In addition, she lived with Giuseppe in a small room nearby in Darb-al-Nur where she paid for rent, food, washing and the man’s expenses. After she asked for assistance from the police and denounced him, Vassallo fled to Alexandria where he was caught. While leaving Cairo he had robbed her of a dress, a sheet and a pair

of cushions. Vassallo was found guilty and sentenced to twelve months' imprisonment with hard labour in Malta<sup>249</sup>.

In November 1917 Alexandra Calloubi, a French subject working as a prostitute in several houses in the Azbakiyyah, filed a police report against Pasquale Magri, a Maltese-British subject who was resident in Cairo, for living from the proceedings of her prostitution.<sup>250</sup> Pasquale was an unskilled labourer surviving on temporary jobs around the Azbakiyyah – he had worked as a waiter at the Semiramis and as a mechanic at the Azbakiyyah Skating Rink for 8 Egyptian pounds a month, but was unemployed for the majority of the time. Pasquale was known to the police, in 1911 he had served a sentence for owning a hashish den in the 'Abasiyyah area. Alexandra's testimony gives us a glimpse of the features of an ordinary life of a prostitute: a high degree of instability and violence. Alexandra had constantly moved between Cairo and Alexandria for the purpose of prostitution, promptly followed by Pasquale. Back in Cairo the couple had rented a room in Bab-al-Sha'riyyah, where Alexandra earned money prostituting herself with the professional name of Luisa Marianucci in the Luxembourg, a brothel managed by Grazia Pastore, an Italian, in Darb Ducal<sup>251</sup>. Alexandra went to the Luxembourg on a daily basis for the purpose of prostitution and was paid in tokens. She gave the tokens to Pasquale and he would return them to the *padrona* in exchange for cash (usually 2 or 3 tokens per day,

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<sup>249</sup>NA, FO 841/146 - Rex versus Giuseppe Vassallo for living wholly or in part on the proceedings of prostitution.

<sup>250</sup> NA, FO 841/164 - Rex versus Pasquale Magri for living wholly or in part on the proceedings of prostitution.

<sup>251</sup> Interestingly enough, I came across the name of Grazia Pastore, Alexandra's *padrona*, also in the Cairo Consular Courts' cases kept at the Historical and Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Italy. In ASMAE, Casi Penali Regio Tribunale Consolare Italiano del Cairo, 1932, folder 2, cases nos. 45-91 we read that in 1932 Grazia Pastore is a 43-year-old prostitute resident in Harat-al-Genaynah, off Clot Bey street and she appears in court accused of slandering a bread-seller in the Coptic Bazaar.

which was the equivalent to 4 dollars). He would then administer all her money, constantly urging her to work harder, occasionally striking her and threatening to leave her in a brothel if she didn't make more money. When she was hospitalized for postpartum complications, he abandoned her to go to Alexandria on his own.<sup>252</sup>

A similar case was that of Amalia Vescovo, an Italian subject who in 1919 filed a report against her pimp James Kelly, alias James Hughes, a 2-year-old Irishman and a deserter after the Battle of Gallipoli.<sup>253</sup> Amalia and James had lived together for four years in Alexandria (where she had worked in the notorious al-Ginaynah prostitution district) as well as in Cairo. During that period, James did not work and they lived from the proceeds of Amalia's prostitution. They lived together in the different brothels that she worked at in the Wagh-al-Birkah district as well as in private houses; on one occasion they were evicted from a furnished room in the Coptic Bazaar due to their relentless fighting and brawls. James regularly battered Amalia and on another occasion also threatened to burn the brothel she worked at if the keeper did not give him more money. Amalia attempted to escape from him five times while she was in Alexandria and Cairo. On her last attempted flee to Suez, she was caught by the police and brought back to Cairo where she denounced her pimp.

Unsurprisingly, relationships between pimps and prostitutes involved a great deal of physical and psychological violence. A typical case is that of Caterina Mikha'il, a 45-year-old Egyptian subject originally from Rhodes and Antonio

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<sup>252</sup> It is not possible to derive any information about the baby's father from the trial's minutes. The child was nursed by an old neighbour, Giovannina Valestra, Pasquale Magri managed to steal 15 Egyptian pounds from. It seems the baby was entrusted to the 'Abbasiyyah Orphanage at some point.

<sup>253</sup> NA,FO 841/186 - Rex Versus James Kelly Alias James Hughes for living wholly or in part on proceeds of prostitution.

Romeo, a Sicilian chauffeur.<sup>254</sup> On July 16<sup>th</sup> 1932, Antonio Romeo was accused at the police station of Bab-al-Sha‘riyyah of stabbing Caterina Mikha’il during a fight. He maintained that she had accidentally hurt herself while trying to assault him in a fit of jealousy. According to Romeo, on taking off his clothes while he was in bed with Caterina, she questioned him about his clean underwear and accused him of having met his second mistress before her. He replied that that he could do whatever pleased him, upon which she drew a razor and attempted to stab him, harming herself accidentally. In contrast, the story told by Caterina is different. According to her testimony, Romeo had stabbed her when she refused to give him money as she regularly did each evening. Caterina told him that she had not earned money but Romeo did not believe her and attacked her. She claimed that Romeo was unemployed and lived from the profits of her prostitution. He was Caterina’s pimp since they had met three months earlier upon her arrival in Cairo. On previous occasions he had called for her at one of the pensions where she had worked in the area of Shaykh Hammad and had struck her as she had stayed too long with her customers. As some witnesses stated, Romeo was a notorious pimp in Darb-al-Hatta and he was known for his ruthlessness; he had already attacked a woman he was exploiting by stabbing her legs and disfigured another one. Romeo was finally sentenced to eighteen months imprisonment in the Italian Judicial Lock in Rhodes. After being released, he went to Italy where he served in the army for sixteen months before addressing a formal request the Italian consular authorities to be allowed to re-enter Egypt. Disfigurement, either by using a razorblade or vitriol, seemed to be the

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<sup>254</sup> ASMAE, Casi Penali Regio Tribunale Consolare Italiano del Cairo, 1932, folder 2, cases nos. 41-95.

most common type of assault by pimps on their women. A typical case in this instance is that of Gino Biffi, which made the headlines on the Egyptian Gazette in 1913.<sup>255</sup> An Italian woman whose surname was Tedesco had been nearly done to death by an Italian named Gino Biffi in Tawfiqiyyah. A few months before he had been expelled from the country for attempting to force the same woman into prostitution. Once back in Cairo he attempted to persuade her again. Since she refused to prostitute herself so that he could live on her earnings, he disfigured her with a razor blade.

Another interesting case which sheds light on the transaction of sex between men and women in Cairo is that of 26-year-old Italian Antonino Rizzo, and a 23-year-old Greek national from Smyrna, Maritza Vladi.<sup>256</sup> Rizzo had migrated from Sicily in 1920 and had been working as a warehouseman at Giacomo Cohenca & Sons, Forniture Générale pour l'Électricité of Shari' Qasr-al-Nil until he met Vladi. They lived together for a few years before she decided to leave him and move to a place of her own. On February 28<sup>th</sup> 1926, while Vladi and her new flatmate Nazzarina Naser were returning home from the cinema, Rizzo ambushed the women at the house door, throwing vitriol in their faces and stabbing them with a knife. According to his testimony, Rizzo had known Vladi from a brothel. Having fallen in love with her, he claimed he had wanted to save her from the sordid life she had led. They moved in together and lived as a couple however he soon realized that "the leopard cannot change his spots". In a plea sent to the Italian Consul on April 17<sup>th</sup> 1926, he wrote:

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<sup>255</sup> "Attempted murder at Cairo", *The Egyptian Gazette*, 20.08.1913, p. 3.

<sup>256</sup> ASMAE, Casi Penali Regio Tribunale Consolare Italiano del Cairo, 1926, cases 1-65.

she kept on plying that vile trade when I was not around... I suffered! I wanted to forget, to get away and escape from her, but passion enslaved me. I cried as a baby, praying her to give up those dreams her mother had inculcated in her young head: you are young and beautiful, she would tell her, you could find a bey or a pasha to maintain you, instead of 'this Italian pederast, words I heard myself, without rebelling because I was too in love with her. But Maritza followed her advice and she evicted me from our house. She said we would remain friends, until her husband, as she was not legally divorced, would return to her. It was not true: she just wanted to keep me quiet, while she was opening her arms to his new lover, experience new embraces, satisfy her lust and destroy another man. Eventually I resigned myself, tried to forget by drinking, getting drunk to ease my pain: this was not a life, I felt doomed, I felt the dishonour I was bringing to my family. Maritza would keep on coming and see me from time to time: I was the object of her voluble pleasures, driven by the artificial dreams the injections of morphine and ether procured her.<sup>257</sup>

On the night of the incident, Rizzo claimed he had come to talk to her, although he was heavily intoxicated by alcohol. According to his testimony, Vladi drew a kitchen knife and stabbed him in the leg. At that point, Rizzo lost his temper and threw vitriol in the women's faces while also getting hold of a knife and stabbing them. The letter he wrote from the European Lock to his consul was a desperate attempt to invoke passion as an extenuating circumstance for the crime he had committed; he depicted himself as the innocent victim of a ruthless she-devil. However, too many elements did not corroborate his version. Interestingly Rizzo had resigned from his job precisely at the time he had met Maritza, a strange move for an individual beginning a happy marital life with a woman. Moreover, the fact he had a bottle of vitriol on his person on the night of the incident clearly did not corroborate any hypothesis of lack of intent in committing the crime.

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<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*



Perhaps more interesting than Rizzo's staged persona, the broken-hearted lover distraught by passion, is Maritza Vladi own version of events. The tone and the language used to explain the nature of her relationship with Rizzo is very different from the sentimentalism evoked in Rizzo's letter. In contrast, her own language is more akin to a pragmatic estimation of gain versus losses. Vladi confirmed she had met Rizzo at the Pension Di Milano, he used to frequent as a client. She accepted his courtship as he made her lots of promises:

he told me he was working at Cohenca's and that he earned 15 liras a month. He said he could have paid for any sort of luxury and that he would have married me. I trusted him and welcomed him in my house. Time passed and he did not do anything of what he had promised me.

They lived *more uxorio* for eighteen months during which she paid the rent and all other expenses. Maritza goes on telling her story:

Since living in that way was not convenient in any way to me, and I clearly realized he just wanted to have fun and exploit me, I drove him out. He protested and did not want to leave me. I explained to him that I had to pay the rent for the flat and many other expenses, and since he was not in a position to help me, as he was unemployed, I could not keep him living with me any longer. I moved to my new flat in 3 Sharia Daramanli Abdeen, where I rent out two rooms. I use the money I get from the rent to sustain myself.<sup>258</sup>

Coerced prostitution in clandestine brothels figured as a trope in coeval sources: local press and pamphlets of abolitionist movements were rife with sensationalist stories of naïve working-class girls seduced and ensnared by ruthless men and vicious procuresses. Once again reality was more complex and nuanced than allowed by bourgeois narratives of coercion. In May 1925, an 18-year-old

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<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*

Egyptian girl was found in a clandestine house by a young man who later contacted the American Mission and the IBS in Cairo in order to help her. According to the records, the girl was shopping when she met a woman who invited her for a coffee in her home. Once there, the girl was kept in the house against her will for the purpose of prostitution. The young man offered to take her home but she refused, replying that she was too scared from the reaction of her parents. Police authorities questioned on the case, pointed to the fact that the house was under control and that young girls were not in fact captives. Fabricated narratives of coercion often disguised a voluntary, albeit often temporary, entry into the world of prostitution for the purpose of accruing greater material wealth.<sup>259</sup> A 16-year-old Cairene girl of Greek origins was reported missing by her parents, a stonecutter and a housewife. The fourth of five children, she had been working as a buttonholer for one year at Bonne Marché before leaving her job for unknown reasons. According to the girl, she had been invited to the cinema by a Greek man she had recently met. When she realized it was very late and became afraid of returning home alone, the man proposed to host her at his house, a Greek pension which doubled as a brothel; the girl was found there one week later.<sup>260</sup>

Another interesting case sheds light on the resistant and subversive quality of clandestine prostitution. In 1914, the 21-year-old Maltese Alexandro Tanti, was judged in the supreme court for managing a house in Shari‘ al-Sahha, in the district of ‘Abdin. According to multiple witnesses, the house, which was leased to Tanti by its legal owner, ‘Abdul Latif Fahmi, was a clandestine brothel (*bayt-lil-’ahirat fi-*

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<sup>259</sup> Women’s Library, 4/IBS/6/044 - Report of the IBS Cairo Branch January 1928.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid*

*manzil*), attended by “respectable looking” men and women.<sup>261</sup> Alexander Tanti would stand at the door or walk in front of it, with the aim of recruiting women for his business. As Muhammad Shakib, ‘Abdin Ma’amur, stated, “some of the women used to enter the house, some just passed by. He also spoke to me, not recognizing me, and told me: ‘There are nice women upstairs!’”. No exterior sign qualified the house as a brothel where women sold themselves to men for one dollar, keeping half the sum and giving the rest to Tanti who denied that he was the manager. He claimed to have been tricked by Hanim Bint Rizq, who was his maid and whom he had met while he was sitting in a café along the road one night as she approached him wrapped in a black long robe, a *milayyah*. She had supposedly told him that she knew a way for him to make some easy money, explaining that she was trying to avoid some creditors and required someone to sign a new lease contract for her house so that her name could be struck off the papers. Tanti agreed and received one pound for drawing up the new contract in his name. It is hard to determine precisely what happened next: apparently, as soon as Tanti came to know that the woman was running a clandestine brothel in the flat, he attempted to evict her. Resisting his attempt, Rizq beat her and he subsequently sued her for assault. From the minutes of the hearing, it seems more likely that Tanti and the woman were actually co-managing the brothel with Tanti who had signed the leasing contract due to his privileged legal status under Capitulary provisions. Their judicial feud probably resulted from Tanti’s attempt to take advantage of the circumstances.<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> NA, FO 841/146.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.* By the same token, Tanti used to exploit his Capitulary protection at least in one case more. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 1914, Alexander Tanti, who was already in prison, was tried for permitting the use of a house he legally leased at 8, Harat-al-Fiddah, ‘Abdin District, as a hashish den. The premises

These cases are particularly enlightening because they are able to reveal the contours of some form subaltern agency challenging while appropriating and remaking hegemonic structure of power and control based on racial hierarchies. Local subaltern groups were not simply subjected to discriminatory legal provisions establishing a dual standard for native and foreigners. They actually appropriated and turned them into self-empowering tools through a strategic alliance with foreign subaltern groups. Natives would form mixed enterprises with foreign subalterns sheltered by the Capitulation system for mutual economic interests. The racial hegemonic discourse of the elites was thus challenged “from below”, by occasional class-based cooperation between native and “white” subalterns.

#### 4.6 Conclusions

The introduction of licensed prostitution in Cairo with its local and global dimensions marked a clear departure from previous types of sex work and was

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were occupied by a coffee-shop, run by a native, Hassan ‘Ali Guda. The man claimed that Alexander Tanti had been hired twice to oppose police executions for closing down the hashish den. He eventually took up the place’s lease and became the manager, while Guda remained as a keeper, employed by the Maltese for 24 piastres a day. Hussein Muhammad, Marshal of the Native Summary Court and Hassanayn Hassan, Shaykh al-Harah, went to close down Guda’s café, after it had been reported that hashish used to be smoked on the premises. Upon their arrival, they were stopped by Tanti, claiming to be the owner of the place and denying access to local authorities as granted by Capitulatory rights. The case was finally passed to the Parquet and Muhammad Shakib, at that time *Ma’amur* of the ‘Abdin Police, summoned the Maltese to give evidence before transferring the case to the British Consulate, see NA, FO 841/186. Another interesting consular case shows some kind of cooperation between foreign and local subjects in the illicit and sheds lights on the vital link between drug dealing and prostitution, see ASMAE, Corti Consolari del Cairo, folder 4, 141-195, 1932, Nikita Cumbaro, 141-195, 1932. Nikita Cumbaro, an Italian subject born in the Aegean island of Leros in today’s Greece, remained accused of drug peddling in the Azbakiyyah. Fifty-two grams of heroin were found in the bar he owned in Clot Bey. The police said that he was known for peddling drugs with the help of some prostitutes working in the area. He confuted the charge, stating that the drugs had been placed in his bar by a certain Husniah, a licensed prostitute who used to frequent his bar. She had her 120 Egyptian pound-worth jewellery stolen and accused Cumbaro of having a role in the theft. He rejected this allegation and she decided to take revenge by placing the drugs in Cumbaro’s shop window and summoned the police.

dramatically characterized by the larger colonial political order in the emergence of a discursive hierarchy of sexual workers based on race and ethnic affiliation. The emphasis I put on the actual diversity of working arrangements aimed at going beyond the essentialist representations of prostitution generally offered by hegemonic accounts. Such a focus on material conditions, strategies, aims, the actual agency of sex workers, is likely to provide us with a better understanding of commercial sex. It goes beyond the simple reproduction of the hierarchy of the trade, which itself is constructed by dominant positions pointing at European enclosed prostitution as the more advantaged form of sex work. The adoption of this approach helps deconstructing the un-nuanced “prostitute” stereotype and stresses the notion of agency, clearly showing that no unified category of sex workers existed in Cairo.<sup>263</sup> On the contrary, women actually plied the trade under dramatically different working conditions, with different aims and with varying degrees of autonomy. Moreover, coeval sources routinely described the Cairene sex trade as marked by racial hierarchy, juxtaposing European and native commercial sex. As this chapter has attempted to reveal, a close study of archival data challenges the colonial language of racial superiority, pointing out how native and foreign sex workers shared an experience of economic vulnerability due to a structural violence and feminization of poverty which prevented women from other feasible strategies of accumulation. Local women mostly resisted state supervision and practiced

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<sup>263</sup> According to Holly Wardlow, a shift from a moralizing to an economic approach is implicit in the use of “prostitute” as opposed to “sex worker”. The former term in fact emphasizes the concept of monetized sex as a kind of labour, as many different ones, and an income-generating activity instead of some sort of essentialized gendered identity. See Holly Wardlow, “Anger, Economy, and Female Agency: Problematizing ‘Prostitution’ and ‘Sex Work’ among the Huli of Papua New Guinea” in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 29, no.4, 2004: p. 1018.

clandestine prostitution as casual labourers integrating other economic activities, enjoying more autonomy, compared to foreign brothel residents. Without overemphasizing the autonomy of women in a trade that was ultimately dependent on a male-controlled sex-gender system, the analysis of this chapter stresses the fact that a different story nonetheless can be told. Sex work constituted for many women, both European and native, a strategy for coping with economic and social vulnerability and a way of fulfilling their goals. A question remains unaddressed however, what kind of meaning can or should be assigned to this type of agency; in other words, should these actions be interpreted as women consciously resisting patriarchal practices, an embryo of feminist consciousness?<sup>264</sup> This thesis adopts a non-reductionist understanding of agency breaking with the feminist liberal subjectivist teleological rhetoric of the dichotomy resistance/submission. As Saba Mahmood has aptly pointed out,

the meaning of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity. Viewed in this way, what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressive point of view, may actually be a form of agency – but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. In this sense, agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms<sup>265</sup>

or asymmetrical structures of power.

Prostitution was not a “liberating” activity, something it could only be in a context where sex work was free from third-party control and engaging in paid sex

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<sup>264</sup> This fundamental question has been extensively debated in feminist theory and gender studies. For an excellent overview see Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety, the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 11-24.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

with strangers was not culturally and socially stigmatized. Instead, it provided women, especially native and unregistered ones, with a viable alternative of earning a living for themselves and their families, although reproducing a male-dominated repressive sex-gender system. While moving into prostitution would certainly have been the result of disadvantaged social and economic circumstances particular to women, rather than an un-coerced and deliberate decision, a story of how women coped with these circumstances and recouped some of their own agency needs to be addressed.

## 5 Regulation

### 5.1 Introduction

In a study on prostitution in nineteenth century Egypt, social historian Khaled Fahmy defined the relationship between State authorities and prostitution as “troublesome and oscillating”, while highlighting the tenuous link between the State and civil society on one hand and commercial sex on the other.<sup>266</sup> While the formation and articulation of a public discourse on prostitution will constitute the subject of the next chapter, the main aim of this chapter is to begin outlining the trajectory and changing approach of Egyptian and colonial authorities to the flourishing Cairene commercial sex trade. Such a shifting approach, where it will be argued that regulationism was supplanted by outright abolitionism, is linked, to my view, with the development of changing conceptions of the role of the State and its degrees of intervention over the population lives.

### 5.2 Regulation of Prostitution

Following decades of administrative interventionism without strict regulations, an Egyptian version of a French-inspired regulation system was introduced by the British authorities in 1882. It was aimed at securing tax revenues from sex trade

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<sup>266</sup> See Fahmy, *Op. Cit.*, p. 77.



practitioners and other low-status and “morally suspect activities”, which included dancing and singing.<sup>267</sup> Until 1882, disciplining and policing of sex workers in Cairo was in fact mainly based on a concept of the “collective responsibility” of local communities.<sup>268</sup> Every Cairene neighbourhood decided how to enforce shared notions of public decency on “non conformist” individuals without the intervention of central authority. The response of authorities to complaints from locals was the expulsion of undesired prostitutes from “respectable neighbourhoods”<sup>269</sup>. This practice survived well into the colonial period, with many police investigations primarily based on petitions by inhabitants of local neighbourhoods. The advent of regulationism nonetheless, resulted in the introduction of dramatic qualitative change in the ways in which sex work was managed in modern Cairo.

Regulationism meant the institutionalization of prostitution by the establishment of State-licensed brothels in reserved urban areas, where registered sex workers would offer their services under close surveillance by the authorities. It also entailed the creation of a system of oversight, constituted by the brothel, where prostitutes worked under the supervision of brothel keepers and were subjected to weekly medical inspections, as well as the lock hospital, where the enclosed treatment of venereal sex workers took place. Regulationism was framed by an extensive medical discourse on social hygiene, which reflected the emerging political priority of creating a normative corpus of knowledge concerning the biological.

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<sup>267</sup> See chapter 1.

<sup>268</sup> See Ibrahim Halil Kalkan, “Prostitution in the Ottoman Empire”, paper presented at the Middle East Studies Association 41<sup>st</sup> Meeting, 17-20 November 2007, Montréal, Panel 003- Legal History, p. 6.

<sup>269</sup> This practices mirrored coeval ones in areas sharing Egypt’s legal culture such as the Ottoman Empire and its provinces. See Kalkan, *Op. Cit.*, p. 7 and Elyse Semerdjian, *Off the Straight Path: Illicit Sex, Law and Community in Ottoman Aleppo* (New York: Syracuse University Press), 2008.

Moreover the regulationist project was characterized by blatant class and gender bias, since its stance was directed at the control of working-class women. The regulationist system was also known as “French system”, as it was France which first adopted it before its expansion to other continental countries. In contrast, in England from 1864 a milder version of regulationism was put into place in garrison towns and seaports, following the passing of the Contagious Diseases Act, which had aimed to control the spread of venereal diseases. It was repealed in 1883, thanks to vocal opposition from a variegated abolitionist front. Despite this, regulationist legislation remained in place or was introduced throughout the Empire,<sup>270</sup> where racist notions of the inferiority of native populations and sexual primitivism coupled with the paramount importance of colonial security determined a sustained recourse to regulationist practices. As historical geographer Philip Howell has remarked “in such places, state intervention into sexual relations (commercial and otherwise) was of signal significance, and they offer a counterargument to the notion that British liberalism was largely responsible for the limited engagement with regulationist practice”<sup>271</sup>.

Regulated prostitutes were licensed and could ply their trade in State-authorized brothels. State-licensed prostitution was connected to the creation of an apparatus of control, supervision, discipline and repression of offenders. This materialized in some peculiar locales such the *maison de tolérance*, the French name for a brothel, the lock-hospital for the treatment of venereal diseases, the police

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<sup>270</sup> Philip Howell, “Race, Space and the Regulation of Prostitution in Colonial Hong Kong” in *Urban History*, 31, no.2, 2004: pp. 229-48.

<sup>271</sup> Philip Howell, “Historical Geographies of the Regulation of Prostitution in Britain and the British Empire”, <http://www.geog.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/prostitutionregulation/>

station and the prison. Based on the acceptance of the existence of a “double standard” for male and female sexualities and on the ensuing conception of prostitution as a “necessary evil”, the modern system of regulated prostitution aimed to define and control prostitutes as a clear-cut, separate category of marginal social actors. Prostitutes were, as a result, perceived as a peculiar category of women and their identity was defined in such a way that sex workers came to be considered not as “common women” practising transactional sex for diverse reasons, but as prostitutes tout-court.<sup>272</sup> Sex workers were scorned by State authorities and civil society for their trespassing of hegemonic notions of class and gendered behaviour; increasingly removed from the labouring class that they had originally they belonged to, these women were stigmatized as monstrous agents of moral corruption and pollution. The criminalization of prostitutes reposed not only on public health and public security concerns; the extension of Malthusian social ethic and the bourgeois concept of social productivity came to bear on this subaltern group. The association of prostitutes and vagrants in legal theory, a landmark of regulationist legislation, shed light on this aspect; prostitution came to be seen as an unproductive mean for gaining sustenance. In the regulationist view, prostitutes had to be carefully managed in order to be transformed from indolent disorderly elements into disciplined workers.

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<sup>272</sup> The construction of a specific social category for sex workers and their labelling as “prostitutes”, “public women” as opposed to “decent wives”, was obviously part of larger hegemonic project aimed at mapping and controlling societies by defining “marginal” or “deviant” subjectivities, whether prostitutes, criminals, lunatics, peasants, etc. Product of a “high-modernist” ideology truly confident in the possibility of mastering both society and nature, such process of societal normalization was, according to J.C. Scott, an attempt at creating social “legibility” and “simplification” with the ultimate goal of arranging “the population in ways that simplified the classic state functions of taxation, conscription, and the prevention of rebellion”. See James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Social Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 2.

On the 31<sup>st</sup> of October 1882 the first law disciplining sex work was drafted in Egypt. The *manshur 'amm* or “general decree” of 1882 aimed to define carefully segregated and contained spaces for medicalized commercial sex. Regular medical checkups were made compulsory for licensed prostitutes, with the establishment of two makatib al- tafitish in Cairo and Alexandria managed by the central Health Administration. Women’s names had to be listed in special registers, which recorded the results of their weekly examinations. If found diseased, women would be hospitalized for treatment; they could resume their activity after being dismissed from the lock hospital upon issuance of a medical certificate. In governorates where there was no proper sanitary bureau for sex workers, a declaration by police medical staff would be sufficient. Prostitutes had to obtain licenses as proof of their professional status and, more importantly, third parties were granted the right to legally run brothels by applying for a regular license.

The general decree was passed only fifteen days after the occupation of Egypt by the British army. According to Egyptian social historian ‘Imad Hilal<sup>273</sup>, British authorities forced the Egyptian government to adopt a legislation that would have been vehemently opposed back in Britain. Sex work was condoned as a professional activity recognized by the State as a means to protect the health of the troops, given their eagerness in consorting with prostitutes and the difficulty to prevent them from doing so. Such a decision was predicated on the belief in the existence of a racial moral double standard, where prostitution was considered to be endemic in the

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<sup>273</sup>Hilal, *Op. Cit.*, p. 165.

“backward” Orient and women were considered loose and debased.<sup>274</sup> Local women were not considered amenable to any moral regeneration and were designated as professional prostitutes to be placed in clearly signalled brothels. A more benevolent justification was given by the Australian author of sensationalistic novels and travelogues, N.W. Willis. According to Willis, regulationism was a pragmatic response to the deplorable state of public security in Cairo red-light district. In a conversation with a colonial official he was told that,

when first the British occupied Egypt and an English garrison was sent to Cairo, the Wazza bazaar was found to be a fearful death-trap of iniquity. The place was not only reeking with foul disease, but murder was in the air, and the Egyptian police were afraid to enter the Wazza bazaar in response to the cries of unfortunate women who were being done to death. It was then – in the dark days of Egypt – quite a common thing to discover the mangled body of one of the poor unhappy women in the roadway at Wazza bazaar as the beneficent sun cast its morning rays on this plague-spot. Then, no man or woman was safe in such dens. Many went into the dark, dirty lanes and came out no more; murder and robbery were as common as they are scarce now. Besides this, the place was a cesspool of foul disease; germs of the hidden plague ... claimed hundreds, perhaps thousands of native victims yearly. This state of things has been abolished, until today the place is safe for a European to walk through as Piccadilly Circus or Leicester Square.<sup>275</sup>

Although this was not an objective description of the efficiency of regulationism in Egypt, as clearly revealed by later discussions concerning

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<sup>274</sup> As an example, this typical formulation of racist contempt by one Lieutenant Olliver on duty on the H.M.S. “Calypso” of the Mediterranean Fleet during the First World War: “Perhaps people in England do not realize the effect that the immense inferiority of foreign women – compared to our own – has on men; more or less according to the meridian of longitude of the place so is the woman either a beast of burden, a chattel of her man, or more or less his equal. Tho’ one may respect ones’ equal, one has not the same feeling for the chattel of a man who is decidedly inferior to oneself and who does not respect herself. And the whisky or vodka inside one tends to take away the objection to her dago nationality or her yellow skins”. Women’s Library 3/AMSH/B/07/05

<sup>275</sup> Willis, *Op.Cit.*, pp. 35-6.

burgeoning criminality in Cairo by the same author<sup>276</sup>, it does highlight the extent to which issues of public order played a role in determining regulationist policies of prostitution in Egypt under the British occupation.

### 5.3 Regulationist Legislative Framework until the 1905 Arête

The general decree of 1882 constituted the first attempt by the Egyptian administration to organize and supervise sex work. It was subsequently followed by a number of legal texts specifying the aspects that were perceived to be the most detrimental in the trade; the sanitary emergency due to the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (syphilis, gonorrhoea and chancroid) and the disturbance of public order. In accordance with this, in July 1885, an ordinance was promulgated by the Minister of Interior ‘Abd al- Qadir Hilmi Pasha on the medical inspections of prostitutes.<sup>277</sup> It stipulated for the inspection bureaus of Cairo and Alexandria to be staffed by one or two doctors, one nurse, a secretary with knowledge of Arabic and French, a police officer and a suitable number of guards. According to article 3 of the decree, every prostitute (*imra’ah ‘hairah*) working in a place known for prostitution, was obliged to register her name with the local police in the bureau of medical inspection. She was given a card with a progressive number clearly showing her name, age, address, personal characteristics and the name of the brothel keeper she was working for. The women had to undergo weekly sanitary inspections, the results of which were reported on her unique card. Inspections took place daily from 8 a.m.

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<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 103-119.

<sup>277</sup> *al-Qarrarat wa al Manshurat al-Sadirah sanat-1885*, al-Matba’ah al-Amiriyyah bi-Bulaq, 1886, pp. 153-7; *Nidarah al-Dakhiliyyah, Idara ‘Umum al-Sahhah, Dikritat wa Lawa’ih Sahhiyyah* (al-Qahirah: al-Matba’ah al-Amiriyyah bi-Bulaq, 1895), pp. 54-6.

to 1 p.m. in summer and from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. in winter; doctors were prohibited from carrying out sanitary checkups at the women's domicile. Those prostitutes who were unable to attend the weekly sanitary inspection due to ordinary illness, would send a certificate from their medical doctors on the day designated for their medical checkup proving that their conditions prevented them from being present at the medical inspection. The same kind of provisions also applied to female brothel keepers, with the exception of women older than 50 years of age. The concern for clearly defining the marginal status of prostitutes is evident in article 13; every prostitute who wished to leave the trade, due to marriage or repentance (*tawbah*<sup>278</sup>), had to produce two witnesses and apply to the Public Health Administration in order to have her name crossed off from the registration list.<sup>279</sup> Pecuniary fines were used to enforce the law; all women who failed to attend medical examinations or did not produce their certificates at their regular weekly medical checkups, were subjected to a 50 piastres fine in the first instance, followed by a 100 piastres fine in the second or imprisonment for 2-8 days.<sup>280</sup>

The regulation concerning the issuance of brothel licenses was also laid down by the 1882 law. Article 16 stated that whoever desired, among either local or

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<sup>278</sup> The concept of repentance (*tawbah*) seems to be connected to that of *islah-i-nefs*, self-reform, self-discipline, appearing in a number of Ottoman legal cases from the nineteenth century. According to Elyse Semerdijan, this practice was established in court cases already in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when prostitutes could express formal regret for their past misdeeds and promise not to engage in prostitution anymore. The practice had a religious undertone, symbolizing a turn to the "straight path". A prostitute's repentance was registered in court and allowed her reintegration into society. See Semerdijan, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 202-4. The language of religion seemed to give way to that of redemptive productive work in the ideology of modern reformist institutions such the poorhouse and refuge. See chapter 8.

<sup>279</sup> The content of this article was further specified in a special Decree in November 1885.

<sup>280</sup> *La'ihah Maktab al-Kashf 'ala al-Niswah al-'Ahiyat*, article 14: "All prostitutes who are prevented from presenting themselves for the inspection, and those who will fail to produce their weekly inspection certification, will be subjected to a fine of 50 piastres in the first instance and 100 piastres in the second or imprisonment for 2 to 8 days.

foreign subjects, to establish a house for prostitution (*karakhanah*), would have to submit a specific application to the local administration in order to get a licence. After a grace period of three months any non-licensed brothel would be closed down by police authorities. The owners of brothels were required to notify the police and the Medical Inspection Bureau with the number of women employed, their names, ages, provenience, as well as supply information about all the women coming, going or temporarily residing in their establishments within 24 hours from the issuance of license. The brothel- owners also had to keep a ledger that was to be made available to the authorities upon request.<sup>281</sup>

A number of decrees reiterated and specified norms on the functioning of brothels as contained in the general decree of 1886 until the promulgation of a comprehensive Law on Brothels (*La'ihah Buyut-al-'ahirat*) dated 15<sup>th</sup> of July 1896.<sup>282</sup> This law marked the real beginning of licensed prostitution in Egypt (*bigha' rasmi*) and it constituted the basis of the 1905 Arête which, as the ultimate legal text on State-regulated sex work, disciplined the activities of licensed prostitutes who were resident in brothels until the abolition of prostitution in 1949. Article 1 of the 1896 law, defined a brothel as “the place where two or more women are living permanently or assembling temporarily for the purpose of prostitution”. According to article 5, in order to open a brothel it was necessary to present a written request to the Governorate or the Provincial Administration at least 15 days prior to the proposed opening date. The name, birth place and nationality of all applicants, as well as

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<sup>281</sup>*La'ihah Maktab al-Kashf 'ala al-Niswah al-'Ahirat*, article 18: “ All owners of houses of ill-fame ... must make a ledger with all details about employed women, available to police inspections”.

<sup>282</sup>*Nidarah al-Dakhiliyyah, al-Qawanin al-Idariyyah wa al-Gina'iyah, al-Guz' al-Rabi' al-Qawanin al-Khususiyya* (al-Qahirah: al-Matba'ah al-Amiriyyah bi-Bulaq), pp. 430-5.



information about the location of the establishment, the number of rooms and details about the legal owners of the premises was also to be included in the request. The actual license consisted of a certificate of inscription to a specific brothels' register. All applicants, both foreigners and locals, could apply for a permit provided they were not minors or legally interdicted. Those who had been convicted of a crime in the five years prior to application, as well as commercial sex entrepreneurs, whose establishments had been closed down by police authorities for not complying with existing laws, were forbidden from applying for a license.

A detailed list with the names of registered prostitutes and other people living and working in the house, such as servants, had to be supplied by the brothel keeper to the authorities. Prostitutes had to be at least 18 years old. Every prostitute was given a photo-card by the police which was to be renewed annually. Moreover, according to article 15, women had to submit to a weekly medical examination (*kashf tibbi*). The whole text was characterized by an emerging preoccupation with segregating areas devoted to sex work and their inhabitants from the rest of the population; article 2, for instance, established that brothels could be opened only in reserved areas of the city. There could be no more than one door opening onto the street and the brothel was to be completely detached from "other buildings, shops or public places", so as to avoid grievances from respectable people.

Women were required not to stand in the doorways or windows of brothels; ideally they were to be invisible. There was however a striking contrast between the strict segregation described in legal texts and the reality described in coeval

narrations.<sup>283</sup> Russell Pasha described sex workers in the Wass‘ah district as sitting in front of brothels, or behind iron grilles in ground-floor rooms. Women would solicit openly in the streets and invite their prospective customers to follow them inside the buildings lining the alleys.<sup>284</sup>

A series of specific apparatus of control and supervision were devised which, although largely ineffective, aimed to contain and neutralize prostitution and its dangerous social effects; these included the brothel, the medical inspection bureau or the lock hospital for the treatment of diseased women, and the police station or *qism*. It was these spaces in particular that the selling of sexual services was regulated or sanctioned and corrected, when laws were violated, through medicalization or repression.

#### **5.4 The Medicalization of Prostitution**

The Egyptian government claimed that one of the main reasons for the adoption of a regulationist legislation in the country was to protect public health; only the containment of the residents of brothels and the strict supervision of their medical conditions could prevent the spread of venereal diseases, conducive to the degeneration of social forces. With this aim in mind, the system of medical supervision was far from adequate and it was such ineffectiveness that constituted one of the main arguments of the abolitionist front in later years.

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<sup>283</sup> See Russell Pasha, *Op. Cit.*, p. 80; Women’s Library, 4/IBS/6/034.

<sup>284</sup> This image is in fact a typical of Orientalist iconography, clearly evoking women’s seclusion in the *harim* and their sexual enslavement, an instance of Muslim backwardness according to a dominant Western stereotype. It constitutes a recurrent pose for indigenous women studio portraits in early twentieth-century pornographic postcards. See Alloula, *Op. Cit.*, p. 24.

In 1924 a tract on the diffusion of venereal diseases (*amrad tanassuliyyah* or *zahrriyyah*) was published by Doctor Fakhri Mikha'il Farag, providing vital information on the medicalization and organization of prostitution in early twentieth century Cairo.<sup>285</sup> Farag described the three sanitary bureaus for prostitutes in Cairo; the Darb-al-Nubi for sex workers plying the trade in Bab-al-Sha'riyyah and the Azbakiyyah areas, as well as in 'Abbasiyyah and Sayyidah Zaynab where the lock hospital of al-Hud al-Marsud was located. He compared them to their counterparts in Berlin, in an attempt to reveal the serious limitations of sanitary policies in the Egyptian capital. For instance, in 1921, there were 1381 prostitutes listed in the registers of the Darb-al-Nubi bureau. During that year, 390 women were stricken off the list for various reasons, and as a result, the number of prostitutes that were regularly inspected in the bureau was 991. As the clinic was open four days a week and the total number of inspections that year was 29.208, it is possible to derive a daily inspection rate of 143 women.<sup>286</sup> Moreover, it is important to take into consideration, that bureaus were only open from 10 a.m. to 1 or 2 p.m. depending on the season, and that the medical staff also had to execute bureaucratic tasks in addition to carrying out medical inspections on women during opening hours. Thus, it is possible to conclude that every medical checkup would last for a few minutes instead of the 60 minutes necessary for a thorough internal and external examination for the correct diagnosis of venereal diseases. Bureau doctors themselves lamented that they were virtually unable to detect any infection; under these difficult

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<sup>285</sup>Farag, *Op. Cit.*, 1924.

<sup>286</sup> Farag, *Ibid.*, p. 46. In the 'Abbasiyyah bureau, 65 women were inspected daily on checkups day, while in Sayyidah Zaynab bureau the number of women checked on a single day was 55, p. 46.

circumstances, regulations concerning the frequency of medical checkups (once a week) were also evaded. Local women were checked 20 times a year, that is every 18 days, while foreign women submitted to medical examinations 30 times a year, or every 12 days. Women were exempted to present themselves to the medical inspection if they were able to send in a certificate signed by a private practitioner; the result of this was that there was a high level of forgery. Burtuqalis Bey, a gynaecologist specializing in venereal disease treatment in Cairo during the first decade of the 1900s, claimed that a medical inspection would take him at least 30 minutes, while in State-run bureaus a doctor would check tens of women in the same time span.<sup>287</sup> In addition, prostitutes resorted to a number of strategies in order to escape supervision and working undisturbed. Some women disinfected themselves immediately prior to the checkup or used special ointments to conceal the external manifestations of syphilis in the hope that they could deceive their doctors. Traditional barbers and midwives played an important role in these elusive practices, as they had some knowledge of traditional medicine as well. In 1934 a barber was arrested in Alexandria; he was known for being a specialist in camouflaging syphilis marks on the bodies of prostitutes. Over a period of time, a new practice was introduced; rich customers would require private doctors to test prostitutes immediately prior to consorting with them in order to be certain that the women were not infected. For a considerable sum of money, specialists would inspect the women and sign a certificate valid for 24 hours stating that the prostitute was free from infection. Of course such medical inspections had no diagnostic significance and,

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<sup>287</sup> Burtuqalis Bey, *al-Bigha' aw Khatar 'aharah fī-l- Qutr al-Misri*, targamah Dawwud Barakat (al-Qahirah: Matba'ah Hindiyyah 1907), p. 26.

Burtuqalis Bey says, women just reminded him of fresh fish, which also has to be consummated within one day after being bought.<sup>288</sup> During the First World War, there was an upsurge in venereal diseases due to the massive presence of imperial troops in Cairo. Despite mounting criticism concerning public opinion of regulationist practices, State authorities attempted to strengthen the medicalization system of prostitution by opening a lock hospital for the treatment of native prostitutes in Sayyidah Zaynab district who had venereal diseases.<sup>289</sup> The hospital, called al-Hud al-Marsud, occupied the site where the current Skin and Venereal Disease Hospital is situated today at 22 Shari‘Qadri. The hospital was staffed by three doctors only, and women were hosted in crowded common rooms with bar-fitted windows in an attempt to prevent the possible escape of inmates. Any sex worker found infected with venereal diseases, whether during a routine medical inspection or raided while soliciting the streets or prostituting herself in a clandestine brothel, was confined to the lock hospital for treatment. The hospital was equipped for the diagnosis and treatment of venereal diseases throughout its different stages and in accordance with medical practices. For instance, large quantities of mercury and potassium permanganate were used to suppress the infections. Coeval reports from Public Health authorities point out the constant increase in the number of patients. From 1925 to 1931 the number of women treated in the al Hud al-Marsud lock hospital rose from 2.830 to 5.783.<sup>290</sup> As stated by Muhammad Shahin, author of

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<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>289</sup> The al-Hud al-Marsud Lock Hospital officially opened in 1925. Of course, sex workers found diseased during medical checkups were hospitalized also before the opening of the Lock Hospital, only they were put in the venereal ward of Qasr al-‘Ayni general hospital.

<sup>290</sup> Muhammad Shahin, *Taqrir min-Mukafahat-al-Amrad al-Zahriyyah bi-l-Qutr al-Masri*, 1933, table 1. Muhammad Shahin was the representative of the Ministry of Interior for Health Affairs.

a governmental report on the system of venereal clinics established across the country from the mid-1920s<sup>291</sup>, the rise in number of treated people may have reflected a greater awareness by the general public concerning the necessity of curing infections promptly and in accordance with the correct sanitary practices. However, the high number of hospitalized people, who stopped treatment upon disappearance of external symptoms, without full recovery, does not corroborate Shahin's hypothesis.<sup>292</sup> In other words, the number of syphilitic patients was constantly on the rise; this revealed that regulationist policies did not curb the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, while medical techniques of control in infections were avoided and evaded by patients whenever possible. In addition, from Shahin's report, we learn that the average percentage of diseased women in al-Hud al-Marsud who interrupted the treatment beforehand was 44% between 1925 and 1932.<sup>293</sup> The reasons for this were manifold; not only did women perceive hospitalization as an unwanted form of confinement which restrained their freedom of movement, but it also severely affected their economic circumstances. Treatment was not free – in 1918 inmates paid 47 millims per day, 50 millims in 1919 and 78 millims in 1920<sup>294</sup> – and brothel keepers often advanced their hospital fees for their prostitutes, charging very high rates of interest in return. Data of the number of inmates in the lock hospital must also take into consideration the fact that a significant number of foreign practitioners were not subjected to sanitary control and thus left virtually free to prostitute themselves despite being diseased. Moreover, statistics or lack of, should

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<sup>291</sup> There were 16 venereal clinics in the whole country.

<sup>292</sup> Shahin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9

<sup>294</sup> Farag, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 60-1.

also take into consideration that the vast majority of sex worker in Cairo engaged in clandestine prostitution in an attempt to avoid control by State authorities. Sanitary officials believed that the treatment they provided in the clinic was a medical failure; they were perfectly aware that no full recovery was possible for the majority of women without costly therapies which took years. Secondary and tertiary syphilis for instances was to be treated with mercury and potassium permanganate tablets for three years in addition to the patient being kept under observation for two years and blood-tests to be taken at regular intervals. In many cases, women would be discharged from hospital after a few days or upon disappearance of the most evident exterior syphilitic symptoms.

### **5.5 Shortcomings of the Regulationist System**

In theory, the Egyptian system was informed by three basic principles: enclosure, constant supervision and hierarchical compartmentalization. However, none of these requirements were respected in Cairo. The *quartier réservé*, the area where brothels were to be concentrated, in fact only hosted a limited number of establishments, since prostitution in Cairo was largely scattered across the urban fabric. Various proposals were made to confine prostitutes to the outskirts of the city, but they never materialized.<sup>295</sup> The majority of licensed brothels were opened in the touristic and night life areas of Cairo, Azbakiyyah and the surrounding neighbourhoods, thus underlining how the expansion of prostitution was intertwined with rising middle and upper class purchasing power and global commerce. Moreover, in the *quartier*

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<sup>295</sup> Women's Library, 4/IBS/5/2/40.

*réserve* vice was meant to have been confined to the brothels with the hoped effect of removing all provocation from the public thoroughfares and ensuring the safety of “decent citizens”. In reality, a number of historical descriptions reveal that sex work was far from removed from the gaze eyes of passersby. The physical proximity of vice to “decent honourable families” and young generations was highlighted in newspaper columns by those who opposed the regulation of prostitution; this reveals how prostitution was nothing but carefully circumscribed or segregated in Cairo<sup>296</sup>.

According to a coeval description,

so familiar is the sight of brazen women, lost of all womanly feelings, lost to all shame and often perverted by a sexual lunacy into sexual monomaniacs; so common and so familiar is their presence, hanging from their windows almost in the nude, smoking, cursing, screeching like fiends or laughing like mocking devils; so accustomed have the inhabitants, young and old, become to all the signs of their business that they now pass, as a matter of fact, as something necessary for the use of man.<sup>297</sup>

Florence Wakefield, a British social worker from the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene, wrote in a report on the British Army and prostitution regulation in Egypt:

children live in and frequent the segregated areas. I saw three little boys sitting down for the night against the wall of one of the narrow, crowded streets. Throngs of men, many of them at student age and appearance, saunter through the streets, when the women sit at their doors in scanty garments calling to each other and the passerbys. Some of them disappeared as we approached, some stood up respectfully and greeted the police officer as a trusted friend – as indeed he was. ... The area impressed me as a sort of moral swamp, spreading contamination over the whole town.<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> An instance of this is an article entitled “al-’Afaḥ yantahib”, “Howling Chastity”, published on *al-Aḥram*, 08.12.1923. Contemporary media coverage of the debate about regulated prostitution is analysed in chapter 7.

<sup>297</sup> Willis, *Op. Cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>298</sup> Women’s Library, 3AMSH/B/07/23.



Concerning what segregation actually involved, the view of Arthur Upson, a missionary from the Nile Mission Press, is also revealing:

when I began my purity efforts two years ago, there was not only public solicitation in the public streets, but the 'manual signs' of coitus were publicly demonstrated from both balconies and doorways, while the statistics per VD cases were not only alarming, but disgraceful. ... I do not believe people realize how many former upright lads were ruined in the EEF [Egyptian Expeditionary Forces, mine]<sup>299</sup> and how hard was for them to keep straight. London was nothing to it.<sup>300</sup>

Prostitutes were not carefully disciplined and supervised, despite the existence of specific regulations aimed at enhancing the enclosure system. Brothels may have satisfied regulations which required only one access door and fenced windows, but prostitutes would shout for customers from the balconies or thresholds and solicit on the streets.

Due to a specific clause in existing regulations, doctors were forbidden from making house calls, and as a result medical checkups did not take place at the brothels. The effects of this were that Cairene prostitutes enjoyed liberty of movement to a degree unknown to sex workers subjected to the same regulation system in other countries. There was certainly a hierarchy within the brothel, but nothing comparable to the French system; the Madame was often a prostitute herself, and the presence of men, whether husbands, pimps or paramours was unexceptional. In the case of clandestine establishments in particular, brothels were often akin to family businesses, with the owner's family and servants living on one storey of the building and sex workers and customers using the rest of the house. This implies that

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<sup>299</sup> The EEF, Egyptian Expeditionary Force was the name of the HQ created in March 1916 to command the growing imperial British Forces in Egypt. It was originally under the command of Sir Archibald Murray first, and then Sir Edmund Allenby.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*

there is a greater overlap between sex work and family, rather more than the separate category of sex theorized by regulationism. In the French system the brothel keeper was considered to be an agent of Central government: the very antithesis of procuress and pimps, immoral, harmful men, ill-defined creators of debauchery, who as a result represented a terrible threat, especially as they eluded supervision of the authorities and did their best to impede the surveillance that the police exercised over the prostitutional *milieu*.<sup>301</sup> In contrast, in Cairo the alliance between brothel keepers, local pimps and bullies was considered essential to resist the control of authorities. Indeed in some cases, police officers were known for creating secret dealings with brothel keepers and prostitutes.<sup>302</sup>

Prostitutes caught while soliciting on the streets, or those who failed to turn up at medical checkups, were taken to the local police section, *qism*, to be sentenced and eventually transferred to the relevant *niyyabah*, the prison of the Public Prosecutor Office. Unlike French prisons, Egyptian penitentiaries did not contain a separate section for prostitutes. Segregation was not enforced due to the infrastructural major unsuitability: in the *niyyabah* of Bulaq the isolation cell was designed to contain no more than 15 people, however, it accommodated 40. In the penitentiary of Misr Qadimah isolation cells contained no lavatories. In the ‘Abdin *niyyabah* there were no windows while in al-Khalifah the isolation cell had a shattered roof.<sup>303</sup> The efficiency of the regulation system in Egypt was jeopardized above all by the very existence of unequal colonial power relations as those at work in the Capitulation

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<sup>301</sup>Corbin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>302</sup>Rizq, *Op. Cit.*

<sup>303</sup>*Al-Taqrir al-Sanawi li-Bulis Madinat-al-Qahirah ‘an-Sanat- 1933*, p. 6.

legal system. The Dual System<sup>304</sup> and the privileges granted to foreign communities by the Capitulations severely curtailed the capacity of both local and British police to enforce the law effectively.

## 5.6 Conclusions

As Cairo became a cosmopolitan global capital-city caught between the contradictions of an emerging nationalist political culture and the reality of colonial domination, Cairene traditional sex work was marked by the emergence of prostitutes as a social category along with new forms of control and segregation of sex trade in brothels. It diversified with the emergence of a new market of local bourgeoisie and foreign travellers, businessmen and soldiers, which was mainly catered for by European women operating in commercial and amusement venues. Native prostitutes on the other hand, provided sexual services for the expanding local urban proletariat and rural migrants. Expansion of clandestine transactional sex, both in the form of unlicensed prostitution in clandestine brothels and disguised prostitution in commercial venues, while revealing the inefficacy of regulation and segregation attempts, shaped State approaches to prostitution and its shift towards abolitionism. As this chapter argued, Egyptian regulationist policies reflected the expansion of bio-political concerns from the Metropolis to the Colony. British authorities enforced regulation of prostitution in Egypt as in other occupied

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<sup>304</sup> From 1875 to 1947, the Egyptian judicial system was a dual one, meaning that besides Egyptian national courts for local subjects, foreign consular courts existed where foreigners were judged according to the laws of their respective countries. The summary way in which law was exacted in consular courts explains why foreign citizens in Egypt were virtually free of engaging in whatever sort of illicit activity. For a good overview, see Mark Hoyle, *Mixed Courts of Egypt* (London: Graham and Trotman, 199).

countries, as a measure which would have been deemed unacceptable at home. Pragmatic considerations concerning environmental conditions, sustained growth of urbanization, increasing numbers of uprooted urban poor, flourishing of capitalism in Cairo, were fundamental, but other elements were at stake; the inherent racism of the colonial enterprise, based on engrained notions of Orientalism (in short the belief in essential racial traits making perverted sub-human “Orientals” not amenable to any kind of moral edification) and racial hierarchy made this possible. Regulationism, rooted as it is in disciplinary power and Malthusianism, was an aspect of the bio-political project, marking a stage followed by radicalization which brought about the discourse of state-racism. As the following chapters will reveal, abolitionism was in fact campaigned for by local nationalist elites and civil society groups, who were competing for political hegemony in post-independence Egypt. Abolitionism was among the instruments through which nationalist political elites, particularly after 1922, sought to articulate their hegemonic normative vision of an Egyptian political community.

Regardless of the fact that regulationism was used by the British as a colonial disciplinary and oppressive project or it was appropriated by local elites to define the national community by excluding its “others”, extension of a bio-political order in Egypt was a highly problematic and controversial enterprise. Imported techniques of discipline and regulation were negatively affected by both colonial (the presence of unruly troops and the existence of a mixed judicial system) and local elements. Indeed, indigenous elites were unable to create efficient policies and provide active resistance against those social actors who were targeted by regulationism. Due to

their integration in the social fabric of society, local prostitutes tended to evade the brothel as a site for practicing their labour. Foreign women, in contrast, were often professionals purposely trafficked into the country by a large international network of pimps. These women were employed in state-licensed brothels but could easily circumvent the apparatus of medical inspection. In other words, regulationism was ineffective as local prostitutes tended to evade institutionalized sex work, while mainly foreign residents of brothels were de facto untouched by sanitary regulations. Aiming at controlling and reducing the spread of venereal diseases, regulationism in fact only affected native prostitutes in licensed brothels. If European prostitutes were found diseased following medical inspection, they were not detained in the lock hospital but rather were expected to report to their consuls. Of course this rarely occurred.

Even as a failed policy, the bio-political regime for the regulation of prostitution illuminates some interesting implications for the study of the interaction between the Metropolis and the Colony. The study of the attempt to regulate prostitution as a biological project allows us to complicate traditional centre-periphery models, particularly in illustrating processes of cultural communication within the Empire. In similarity to Deana Heath's observations in relation to the regulation of obscene publications in Britain, India and Australia, although the regulatory project "was initially exported from the metropole to colonies, it assumed new life in the process, becoming appropriated, distorted, and resisted in ways that not only served colonial interests but that were antithetical to, and undermined, the

interests of the metropolis”<sup>305</sup>, thus contributing significantly to the decentring of imperial histories. On one hand, subaltern actors resisted the introduction of the biopolitical, either evading or carving new spaces of agency with the interstices of domination and control, thus “indigenizing” and “vernacularizing” these normative systems. Local dis-order thus became instrumental to the colonial power as it stood to legitimize the European civilizing mission. On the other hand, failing to take resolute measures to implement regulation in Egypt, on the basis of the principle of local self-government, the emerging nationalist middle class, the *effendiyyah* class, champions of Egyptian modernism, co-opted discourses of social hygiene as important elements in the definition of a vernacular modernist identity. Britain came to be perceived not only as “anti-modern”, but as constraining the very same production of the modern Egyptian citizen. After having explored the impact of imperial warfare on sex work trade in Cairo, as well as imperial concepts of racial prestige and superiority which paved the way to the discourse of abolitionism, the next focus will be the emergence of abolitionism in public discourse. How was the discourse concerning prostitution and its dangers for civic order used by local nationalists as a powerful medium for articulating their normative definition of “Egyptian-ness”?

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<sup>305</sup> See Deana Heath, *Purifying Empire: Obscenity and Politics of Moral Regulation in Britain, India and Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 7.

## 6

# **Prostitution, Venereal Disease and Imperial Soldiers**

### **6.1 Introduction**

The following chapter will investigate the relationship between imperial warfare and sex work in Cairo. It will be argued that the First World War played rather an important role in shaping both colonial and local perceptions concerning the desirability of regulated prostitution in the Egyptian capital. While the unruly behaviour of imperial soldiers in towns posed a direct threat to both the efficacy of military operations and the prestige of the Empire, Cairenes highly resented the presence of foreign troops in town and the disruptive effect it had on local morals and public order.

The outbreak of the First World War created the conditions for the imposition of a far more direct form of colonial rule in Egypt. The vital importance of the Suez Canal as a communication line granting access to the Indian subcontinent, had the result of turning Egypt into a huge imperial barrack. British, Indians, Australians and New Zealanders were deployed to the Canal zone in order to protect it from possible Ottoman attacks from Palestine. By January 1915, 84.000 imperial troops were stationed in the country, 70.000 of whom were based in the Canal area. Aside from

the Canal, the other major military garrison was Cairo. As Mario M. Ruiz has noted, British and Australian soldiers “within a few weeks from their arrival ... flooded the city and immediately began to frequent its bars and nightclubs. The influx of such a number of troops predictably fed a burgeoning trade in the sale of alcohol, narcotics and prostitution.”<sup>306</sup> In 1915 and 1916, serious riots took place in the Wass‘ah district, signalling the mounting tension existing between local population and imperial troops. In April 1915, what later became known as the “Battle of the Wassa”, took place in the red-light district of Cairo. Troops from Australia and New Zealand looted a brothel in the area in response to rumours circulating concerning the infection of some comrades by prostitutes working in the area. Once they were told that some ANZACs<sup>307</sup> had been assailed and stabbed in a house of ill-fame nearby, highly intoxicated Australian soldiers set fire to mattresses, throwing women and their pimps out of windows, along with the furnishing of the brothels. The situation was exacerbated by the arrival of the military police who shot warning signals in the air; the Australians responded by throwing stones and bottles. In the Azbakiyyah, some shops were ransacked and a Greek tavern was burnt down. Eventually the Lancashire Territorial Corps intervened and succeeded in bringing an end to the riot. Some photographs which are kept in the Australian War Memorial, shows the Wass‘ah after the battle, ravaged and depredated.<sup>308</sup> Moreover, a second riot

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<sup>306</sup> See Mario M. Ruiz, “Manly Spectacles and Imperial Soldiers in Wartime Egypt, 1914-1919” in *Middle Eastern Studies*, 43, no. 3, 2009, p. 357.

<sup>307</sup> The acronym ANZACs stands for Australian and New Zealanders Army Corps. It was part of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force during the First World War formed in Cairo in 1915. They gave their contribution to the Gallipoli battle, before being dismantled as a consequence of the Allied evacuation of Gallipoli in 1916.

<sup>308</sup> AWM, C00183



followed at the end of July. According to Suzanne Brugger's analysis of the event<sup>309</sup>, the Wass'ah riots constituted the epilogue of a protracted period of hostility between the ANZACs, frequenting the red-light districts, and the local population of prostitutes, pimps and petty thieves. As Suzanne Brugger has pointed out,

internal order in the brothel quarter had been maintained fairly successfully before the War by the local association of "bullies" but their resources had been severely overtaxed by the influx of troops into Cairo at the start of hostilities ... They were not always able to ensure that customers were protected from petty thieves within the brothels and they could not exclude elements with too little regard for the ethics of the oldest profession.<sup>310</sup>

The ANZACs, on the other hand, were known for their rowdiness, and aggressive fights were frequent between Australian customers, brothel keepers, pimps and sex workers, particularly as they refused to pay on leaving brothels. It is likely that rumours seemed to have played a vital role in the Wass'ah riots. From mid-December a number of stories had been circulating in the Hilmiyyah camp, concerning ANZACs who had been attacked or killed in the quarter of ill-fame. Although these rumours were denied by the press, they may have played an important role in exacerbate the ANZACs'behaviour.<sup>311</sup> The presence of imperial troops in Cairo during the First World War had a dramatic impact not only on public security but on public health as well. As the remainder of the chapter will discuss, during the War, contagion from venereal diseases seemed to be out of control. imperial warfare thus can be argued to have played a major role not only in the making of the relationship of colonizers and colonized but also as a testing ground

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<sup>309</sup> Suzanne Brugger, *Australians and the Egyptians* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press), p. 146.

<sup>310</sup> Brugger, *Op. Cit.* On the Wass'ah riots see also Kevin Fewster, "The Wazza Riots, 1915" in *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, 4,1984: pp.47-53.

<sup>311</sup> Other rumours concerned Egyptian bar owners defiling the beer sold to the ANZACs by urinating in it. See Ruiz, *Op.Cit.*, p. 551.

for British conception of moral and civilizational superiority. It also had a lasting impact in bringing about abolitionist policies to be enforced at a later stage by Egyptian authorities.

## 6.2 Imperial Troops and Venereal Disease

The spread of venereal diseases amongst imperial troops who were garrisoned in town, reached unprecedented proportions. According to Australian historian Alistair Thomson, by February 1916 almost 6.000 men from the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) were treated for venereal diseases in Cairo. In addition, over 1.000 diseased soldiers were sent back home.<sup>312</sup> British army officer Lieutenant-Colonel Elgood stated that “in April 1916, in one formation of the Army, admission from venereal disease into hospital had risen to the annual ratio of 25%, and the average annual rate throughout the whole expeditionary force during that month was 12% approximately”. These statistics moreover do not reveal the soldiers who were able to conceal their infection.<sup>313</sup>

Military authorities were obviously concerned with how to guarantee men's efficiency by preserving them from venereal diseases and physical decay. Top-brass anxieties centred on homosexuality among troops and the danger of miscegenation proceeding from sexual relationships with local women, primarily through

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<sup>312</sup> Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 31. The most famous historian of the Australian war, C.E. W. Bean, talked about the impact of VDs among the ANZACs in his diary, see Kevin Fewster (ed.), *Gallipoli Correspondent: the Frontline Diary of C.E.W. Bean* (Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1983), pp. 38-9.

<sup>313</sup> Lieut.-Colonel Percy Elgood, *Egypt and the Army* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924), p. 258. Before the First World War the percentage of venereal soldiers was nonetheless very high: the rate of admissions to hospital for VDs in Egypt was 110, 8 per 1.000 men, compared to 55, 5 in India and 56, 4 at home. See Mark Harrison, “The British Army and the Problem of Venereal Disease in France and Egypt during the 1<sup>st</sup> World War” in *Medical History*: 39, no.2, 1995:p. 150.

prostitution. Before 1916, when the rank and file were permitted to frequent brothels, soldiers were only allowed to consort with European prostitutes. In contrast, local brothels were out of bounds; native women were considered to be ridden with disease and prone to criminality on an unprecedented scale. Martial law which had been introduced by Sir General John Maxwell in November 1914, just prior to the declaration of war against the Ottoman Empire, changed the privileged status of European sex workers. They also now had to register and undergo medical examinations, although they attended a separate lock hospital in Shubrah where they were checked by European doctors.

A shift in attitudes of military authorities towards the morality of the rank and file had determined in time a less condoning opinion on the desirability of diffusion of venereal disease among the military and prostitution. Since the mid nineteenth century, soldiers had been considered by their senior officers a target for moral regeneration, something they would have not been deemed before. From the 1860s onwards, military manuals spread the notion of a masculine “muscular Christianity” made of sexual restraint, fitness and chivalry:

as opposition to the CD Acts mounted [in the UK], more emphasis was placed on morality and uplifting recreation for soldiers. Army camps were provided with skittle alleys, workshops, libraries and gymnasia, and the soldiers’ entitlement to alcohol was reduced. At the same time, a more tolerant attitude towards the marriage of soldiers was emerging, for it was hoped that marriage would discourage casual sexual liaisons.<sup>314</sup>

The strategy for combating the spread of syphilis and other sexually transmitted pathologies among troops coupled prophylaxis with discourse on

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<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

countenance, chastity and physical exercise to release and neutralize the dangerous effects of sexual drive: two different approaches, evangelical-abolitionist and regulationist-disciplinarian coexisted.

Religious indoctrination came to play a relevant role in Cairo also. Guy Thornton, Chaplain-Captain of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force in Cairo, discussed in his book *With the ANZACs in Cairo, the Tale of a Great Fight* (1916) the attempt by military authorities and religious men to contain the spread of vice and immorality among the troops. Thornton, as any other evangelical leader, believed that England, as a civilizing power, had the duty of inculcate morality and “correct” the “lustful” Orientals so as “to make an end of the existing flaunting, bare-faced immorality” while simultaneously trying to defend imperial troops from degradation and corruption.<sup>315</sup> A cultural programme was organized in the Hilmiyyah Camp for the troops in an attempt to keep them away from the “terrible temptations of Cairo”<sup>316</sup>: a weekly concert, lectures on Egyptian history and archaeology, Islam, messes for moral edification, “all the things they needed for writing home was sold in the Camp so that they didn’t need to go to the city centre and be exposed to temptations”.<sup>317</sup> Attempting to keep soldiers who had just returned from the front from frequenting the red-light district proved to be an arduous task however, even for Thornton, the champion of religious zeal. He started to follow the intoxicated soldiers inside the brothels, preaching them to repent and refrain from the evil deeds they were about to commit. Describing an episode when a young soldier was being

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<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.* p. 24.

enticed by a big Berber pimp to enter a house of ill-fame, Thornton explains how he got into the inner room of the brothel in order to prevent the New Zealander from consorting with a prostitute: “the women, of whom there were two in the room, broke out into voluble entreaties, but a sharp word and threatening gesture would quickly reduce them to frightened silence”.<sup>318</sup>

He frequently came into contact with touts and madams, with whom he clashed while trying to disrupt their business. In one instance, he preached to a hundred New Zealanders queuing in front of a brothel:

as soon as my work began to tell, the women came down from the rooms about and ... cursed me ... in so many tongues, in many languages of the Levant, in French, in Arabic, in Italian, Greek and broken English ... at last, enraged by the fact that not a single man was entering their house, their madam (the woman who hold the place), as they generally did on similar occasions, tried to stir up a riot.<sup>319</sup>

### **6.3 The 1916 Purification**

As we have seen, public security and the spread of venereal diseases appeared to be out of control during the War. Vice and immorality were perceived to be rampant by local and imperial authorities alike, while many British residents and locals were vehemently opposed to State-regulated prostitution. In 1916 a joint military-civilian commission known as the Purification Committee was set up with the aim of assessing the efficacy of existing sanitary policies to curtail the diffusion of venereal diseases among troops. The committee was chaired by Lieutenant-Colonel E.A. Altham and was composed of important military and religious personalities and

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<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 86-7.

medical experts.<sup>320</sup> They concluded that the existing system of medical checkups was not a guarantee against the spread of venereal diseases and, as far as the impact of licensed prostitution was concerned, they pointed out that regulationism was detrimental to the containment of sexually transmitted pathologies; it created a deceptive feeling of security in customers while augmenting their exposition to contagion.<sup>321</sup> Since regulated prostitution did not constitute a deterrent on sexually transmitted diseases spread and sanitary measures were easily being circumvented by sex workers, the correct strategy, according to the commission, was an emphasis on moral regeneration. This would be attained through the adoption of strict prohibitionist policies. Cairo's purification policy consisted of the intensification of moral reform and religious indoctrination among troops and the repression of any form of vice. Under martial law, it was stipulated that all women suspected of being diseased with venereal diseases should be examined and confined to the lock hospital if found infected; knowingly transmitting syphilis by consorting with men was also made an offence. Many prostitutes tried to escape from supervision by "pretending that they are artistes and frequenting the music-halls".<sup>322</sup> As a result, Harvey Pasha

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<sup>320</sup> The committee included the Bishop of Jerusalem in exile, Rennie MacInnes, Major-General W.A. Watson, Lt.-Colonel T.W. Gibbard, Colonel Harvey Pasha, head of Cairo City Police at the time, Dr. H.P. Keating, and Dr Ferguson Lees.

<sup>321</sup> Women's Library, 4/IBS/6/033. As Dr Ferguson Lees stated, "the influence of the sense of security, suggested by an official control of prostitution, by increasing exposure to infection plays an important part. This sense of security being based on an erroneous estimate of the limitations of state control has an undoubted effect in increasing venereal prevalence by removing or lessening the deterrent influence of fear without a commensurate lessening of the risks of exposures, for no system of medical examination held with sufficient frequency and thoroughness to confer a guarantee of safety is practicable. Moreover the stricter the attempted control, the greater the temptation to clandestine prostitution with its attendant evils, and the effect of state control of prostitution in diminishing the prevalence of venereal disease has been equally a failure in every country in which it has been tried, whether it has been applied with a severity amounting to an actual persecution of the unfortunate class concerned or has been put in force under less rigorous powers of control".

<sup>322</sup> "Purification of Cairo- The Question of the Artistes" in *The Egyptian Gazette*, 16.06.1916.

Commander in Chief of the Cairo Police, ordered that only certified artistes could drink with the audience according to the *fath* custom but, as the press prophesied, “no doubt some way of evading this rule will be discovered, and all these women will soon obtain apparently genuine contracts to the effect that they are artistes”.<sup>323</sup>

Associated forms of “vice” conducive to sexual promiscuity were also outlawed. In June 1916 *Miralai* Harvey Pasha, banned belly dancing (*danse du ventre*) from any coffee house, music-hall as well as other public places as he “came to the conclusion that the dance is suggestive and immoral in its tendencies, and therefore should not be permitted in the capital of a city which is now a British Protectorate”.<sup>324</sup> Another moralizing measure taken by military authorities was the arrest and detention of transvestites, “the corrupt male of Cairo, ... the males of lewd character, who abandon the characteristics of manhood and assume the appearances of females in dress and toilette”.<sup>325</sup> As the selling of spirits was considered to play an important role in the flourishing of vice, its trade was prohibited in the Azbakiyyah between 5 p.m. and 8 a.m.<sup>326</sup> Morally suspect professionals such as actresses and artists were also barred from frequenting public cafés in the theatre district<sup>327</sup>.

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<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>324</sup> “Purification of Cairo - Harvey Pasha and the ‘Danse du Ventre’” in *The Egyptian Gazette*, 02.06.1916.

<sup>325</sup> “Corrupt Males of Cairo” in *The Egyptian Gazette*, 10.06.1916.

<sup>326</sup> Thornton quoted in his book a reportage from the *Egyptian Gazette* according to which 37% of the alcohol sold in Cairo was adulterated: “one thing is certain, banish the liquor and before 6 months 9/10 of the women would have to seek an honest means of procuring a livelihood”. Thornton, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 65-6.

<sup>327</sup> “Actresses and Cairo Cafés” in *The Egyptian Gazette*, 15.06.1916: “Britannia and Kursaal artistes assembled at Metro Café, while those of the Aziz Id troupe went to the Café de Ramses in Faggalah. Where actresses now spend their leisure time we don’t know”.

## 6.4 The Debate about Prophylaxis

While moral edification was emphasised and appeals to sexual abstinence reiterated among the troops, very pragmatic considerations about the ongoing consorting of soldiers with sex workers and the major threat posed by sexual transmitted diseases to military efficiency called for medical prophylaxis more than stigmatization of soldiers, an approach I called regulationist-disciplinarian. Military authorities believed that as moral edification and the elimination of deviant behaviours of the troops was not a goal in short sight, some form of medical prophylaxis ought to be enforced. The Purification Commission, which comprised of a number of enthusiastic abolitionists from the religious and military establishment, as well as several medical officers inclined to prevention policies, was mild in its statements about prophylaxis. For instance, the Bishop of Jerusalem, Major General Watson and Colonel T.W. Gibbard, dissented from the resolution of the majority which had agreed that while compulsory prophylaxis should be considered unacceptable on the moral grounds, prophylactics should be sold to soldiers if requested. In particular, the clash between moralist and sanitarian attitudes revolved around the issue of prophylactic packets to be distributed to men taking military leave.<sup>328</sup> The kit

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<sup>328</sup> New Zealander activist Ettie A. Rout (1877-1936) distinguished herself as one of the most enthusiastic supporter of VD prophylaxis and methods of early treatment in Egypt during the First World War. "A curious brew of libertarian and disciplinarian", she actively campaigned for the distribution of prophylactic kits among the troops in Egypt first, then in London and eventually in Paris, where she was famous for waiting troops arriving from the front at the Gare du Nord and distributing to soldiers business cards advertising the services of certain brothels run according with carefully supervised sanitary measures. Founder of the New Zealand Volunteer Sisterhood, in 1916 she opened in Egypt the Tel-al-Kabir Soldiers' Club and a canteen in al-Qantara to provide troops with better food and recreation. Highly despised by the religious establishment for her anti-moralistic stance, her concern for sanitation and hygiene was rooted in eugenics and racism. In her view, prophylaxis was required to defend the purity of Australian breed. As Philippa Levine pointed out, in her writings she contrasted time and again the "vigour of young Australia with Britain as old, decrepit, and potentially dangerous", see Philippa Levine, *Prostitution, Race and Politics, Policing Venereal*



consisted of calomel ointment against syphilis and permanganate potassium tablets for gonorrhoea. Dominion military authorities began distributing prophylactic kits to their men from 1916. This provision encountered strong opposition from metropolitan social purity movements; the British Association for Social and Moral Hygiene (hence AMSH) sent a missive to the War Office which demanded that public opinion be informed whether this practice had also been covertly adopted among British troops.<sup>329</sup> Opponents maintained that in no way should troops be encouraged to explicitly use prophylaxis as this would be tantamount to condoning vice. In practice however, military authorities made the kits available to soldiers while lecturing about the virtues of chastity. This same controversial approach surrounded the establishment of lavage rooms, clinics for post-coital disinfection. Opened in Egypt from 1916, lavage rooms offered soldiers confidential treatment when they returned to the barracks after leave. Methods used to eradicate possible venereal infections included penile irrigations and prostate massage. The treatments in the lavage rooms were not compulsory and understandably unpopular with troops. Indeed, soldiers, despite restrictive regulations, kept frequenting brothels without adopting any prophylactic measure nor recurring to post-coital prevention.

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*Disease in the British Empire* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), p. 153. See also Jane Tolerton, *Ettie: a Life of Ettie Rout* (Auckland: Penguin, 1992). One of Rout's most famous work, *Safe Marriage: a Return to Sanity* (London: Heinemann, 1922) was precisely focusing about the adoption of prophylactic measures against venereal disease to defend the matrimonial couple, hence the reproductive potential of society, from the degeneration coming from illicit intercourse.

<sup>329</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 148.

## 6.5 Imperial Troops and Brothels

The fact that imperial soldiers were among the main patrons of licensed and unlicensed brothels in Cairo is well documented by a host of historical sources. In 1921, A.T. Upson, Publishing Superintendent of the Nile Mission Press, a British missionary publishing company active in Cairo since 1905, published an alarmist article about the moral degradation of imperial troops in Cairo. Since 1918 the Nile Mission Press had been agitating against in-bound brothels, that is, brothels that could be used by imperial troops, and had welcomed the decision of the colonial authorities to close 20 brothels in the Wass'ah. However, as Mr. Upson hastened to remark, the ordinance failed to curb the link between British soldiers and prostitution as "some of these brothels were small and there was nothing like the traffic there that there was in the Azbakiyyah district of Cairo. These five or six streets contained a number of European women but an overwhelming majority of native ones".<sup>330</sup> Soldiers notoriously consorted with European or Levantine prostitutes more than Egyptians. Upson denounced the fact that military authorities were taking no effective measures to protect the youth of the Nation against the obiquitous sins of Cairo. To highlight the point, he recalled the exemplary story of a British soldier that he had rescued in the red-light district:

last Saturday night, while distributing some tracts in a street called 'Atfat-Shalaby (Out of Bounds) I came across a poor depraved-looking specimen of a British soldier, too drunk to stand. A chum was ineffectively trying to get him out. Now, this is a notoriously bad street for ... it is inhabited by notorious criminals and vagabonds, who are in league with, if not organically linked to, with the painted women who occupy the houses. I urged one friend to get out, as he was liable to be apprehended by the military police

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<sup>330</sup> Women's Library, 3AMSH/B/07/05.

at any time and, if he escaped their notice, the women would get him inside, and drug him, after which they would rob him of everything he possessed, and, if nothing worst happened, he might wake up next morning upon a dunghill. He expostulated and tried to get away from me, but as it was quite hopeless to walk along, his chum and I propped him up under the arm-pits and propelled him forward. Even then we had two spills going down the steps. ... This is merely one incident of an evening's work. I know not his name but, wonder what, his mother would say thanks to me for having rescued him, for, after all, he is somebody's boy.<sup>331</sup>

In 1921, all brothels were designated out of bounds for imperial troops. Contagion of venereal diseases was also experimentally made into a military offence, and was liable to martial court. This regulation was however only enforced for 6 months. This ambiguous approach – officially prohibiting the troops to frequent brothels while in fact tolerating it – remained dominant through the years. In the 1930s a new polemic was initiated by the AMSH however<sup>332</sup>. In 1934 Miss Florence Wakefield, an activist of the AMSH in Cairo, submitted to the association's Central Bureau in London an extensive report about the link between British troops and regulationism in the city. According to her,

segregated districts in Egypt ... are not completely out of bounds, for the military authorities allow the men to visit some of the houses for immoral purposes. These houses are specified in orders in the barracks. In Cairo they are ns. 8, 9, 23, 27, 33 in Sharia Birkat, and men are severely dealt with as they visit any others as the ones selected are considered to be better class houses with less risk of contagion. One of the selected houses contains far more women than the others and there are certain rooms in some of the houses that the men are not supposed to enter.<sup>333</sup>

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<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>332</sup> For extensive information about the abolitionist campaigns of the AMSH in Egypt see chapter 8.

<sup>333</sup> Women's Library, 3AMSH/B/07/05.

Upon asking Col. Barnes, the officer responsible for organization in the Army, about the reason why anti-regulationist measures had been successful in India and had failed in Cairo, she was told that:

women in Egypt were so much more attractive than women in India, and also more in evidence (he was referring to the Levantine women, *mine*) whereas in India they do not appear in the streets during the day and have to sought for indoor even in the evening. ... So the temptation for British soldiers is even greater. ... For these reasons the military authorities in Egypt feel that they cannot expect the soldiers to exercise continual self-control and that “the men must be allowed to blow off steam sometimes”. Therefore permission is given through a “verbal quibble” (to quote the Chaplain’s words) to visit certain houses in one of the segregated districts. I asked the colonel how the men knew which houses to go to. After a moment’s reflection, he said he did not know. I obtained the information later from a young British Police Officer who had been in the Army in Egypt until 1929 and whose duties still take him occasionally to the barracks.<sup>334</sup>

Following the publication of this report, the matter was immediately brought to the attention of the War Office. It was hoped by Miss Wakefield amongst others, that once and for all a severance, in the association between regulationism and the British Army in Egypt would take place as it was “a slur on the British reputation”.<sup>335</sup> In April 1934, Mrs Neilans, the General Secretary of the ASMH, wrote a letter to the War Office informing them of to the situation in Cairo with regards to British troops and their use of brothels:

you are aware that in the principal cities of Egypt certain areas are brothel areas. It appears from Miss Wakefield’s report that the addresses of certain brothels in Cairo, Nos. 8, 9, 23, 27 and 33 of Sharia Birka are posted up in the soldiers’ quarters, that the men understand that these houses are safe, or safer than other brothels, from a health point of view and, moreover, believe as a result of the

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<sup>334</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.* In the report Miss Wakefield aired also another reason of concern: “we may incur the disgrace of being forcibly deprived of the use of the system [of regulationism] by a progressive movement on the part of the Egyptian Govt”.

practice and attitude of the military authorities that they will not incur any reprimand or punishment if they frequent the above-mentioned houses, whereas they will incur penalties if they enter other brothels. ... We do not allege that the men in the British Army in Egypt are officially encouraged to frequent brothels, or rather we do not suggest there is any intention to encourage or recommend such frequenting, but, on Miss Wakefield's report to us and on other information we have received, there seems little doubt that certain brothels are indicated to the men as being available and permitted for their use with the knowledge and concurrence of the military authorities. We, therefore, bring these facts to your notice and ask if the action, described above, now being taken in Egypt, has the sanction of the responsible Dept. of the War Office, and of HM's Government.<sup>336</sup>

The reply from the War Office confirmed that the practice described in Mrs Neilans's letter was absolutely contrary to the policy of the British Army Headquarters in Egypt and that of the War Office. Troops were specifically warned by a notice issued in 1925 and regularly re-published, that no brothels were under the control of military authorities and that soldiers frequenting houses of ill fame were liable to contract venereal diseases. As an informer of AMSH from the King George Soldier's Home in Abbasiyyah, later remarked, the War Office response was one of evasion: "If the War Office did not encourage the whole business, ... how did special dressing rooms [the lavage room] ever come to be opened in every British Barracks?"<sup>337</sup>

## 6.6 Conclusions

Because of Egypt's strategic importance within the system of communication of the Empire, thousands of British, Dominion and Indian Troops were deployed in the

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<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.* By special dressing room is meant venereal wards for the treatment of diseased soldiers.

country during the First World War. Beside the Canal Zone, Cairo saw the greatest concentration of soldiers. Despite the imposition of Martial law since the beginning of the conflict, war time Cairo saw increasing lawlessness and disorders. The influx of imperial troops was connected to the burgeoning consumption of alcohol, drugs and the flourishing of prostitution. Riots erupting in the Wass'ah area, where Australian troops destroyed and set fire to a number of buildings, exacerbated the hostility of the locals against colonial soldiers and the occupation regime. The unruly behaviour of the troops not only posed serious threats to the very image of colonial racial superiority in terms of values of self-discipline and moderation, but also undermined their offensive potential. Military authorities attempted to contain the spread of venereal disease among the troops by using a mixed discursive strategy. What prevailed in fact was a mixture of moralistic repression, championed by the abolitionist evangelic leaders aiming at uplifting soldiers by strengthening their ethic qualities through spiritual and physical exercises, regulationism and prophylaxis cautiously supported by the military establishments and medical experts.

## 7

# Sex, Danger and the Nation in the Public Discourse

### 7.1 Introduction

How was the public discourse on prostitution linked with processes of nation-making in post First World War Cairo? What do the ways in which sex workers were represented and constructed in the public eye tell us about society and the political order at large? As shown extensively by Donna J. Guy's work on sex, danger and the family in early twentieth century Argentina,<sup>338</sup> the relationship between prostitution, national and family politics is substantial. This was, I argue, all the more so, in a colonial context like the Egyptian one, when, particularly in the severe social and political crisis leading to the outbreak of 1919 revolution and its aftermath, local nationalists struggling for Egyptian independence and sovereignty felt the urge to legitimize their project and define "their" modern national identity vis-à-vis colonial presence and foreign encroachment by formulating normative definitions of appropriate citizenship and moral behaviour.

Of course, Egyptian nationalism has been extensively studied from a number of different perspectives. The signal importance of the so-called "liberal experiment", "parliamentary" era, "monarchical" period, the time span from 1919 to 1952, a

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<sup>338</sup> Donna J. Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires, Prostitution, Family and Nation in Argentina* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1991).

poorly studied phase of Egyptian history, has been recently assessed.<sup>339</sup> As Salmoni and Johnson pointed out, the “cultural vibrancy, societal dynamism, and intellectual political legacy”<sup>340</sup> of these times made new vigorous enquiry mandatory, clearly showing the importance of this period for later developments in Egyptian political, social and economic history. In these years the political triangulation between the British, the monarch and nationalist political parties of different orientations, although resulting in a high level of political instability, still ensured that the fundamental principles of constitutionalism and parliamentarianism were maintained. Steady, if limited, development of an indigenous class of industrial entrepreneurs, expansion and increased complexity of State bureaucratic apparatus resulted in greater social mobility with the emergence of a urban working class and a newly educated stratum of middle-class or lower-middle class white collars and intellectuals – the *effendiyyah* – who struggled to forge their own concept of “Egyptian-ness” in terms of coexistence of modernity and tradition. I am not trying here to analyze the complex and manifold facets of a historical time characterized by profound and momentous transformations, if not by giving a very general account of the basic events leading to the coming of age of an indigenous nationalist discourse. What is important to point out is how post-First World War Egypt saw the emergence of multiple imagined discursive versions of a homogenous national community which the expanding printed press spread among the reading public. Deniz Kandiyoti aptly described the ways in which gendered identities became

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<sup>339</sup> See Arthur Goldschmidt, Amy J. Johnson and Barak. A. Salmoni (eds.), *Re-Envisioning Egypt, 1919-1952* (Cairo, New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2005).

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.



powerful markers of identity and expressed visions of indigenous societies and nations in postcolonial or decolonizing countries. As other types of subjectivities, woman status in society “became part of an ideological terrain where broader notions of cultural authenticity and integrated are debated and where women’s appropriated place and conduct may be made to serve as boundary markers”.<sup>341</sup> This chapter in fact attempts at integrating gender within the history of the emerging Egyptian Nation by providing a close reading of some discursive tropes about gender and social danger in general, sex and prostitution in particular, from the press. By mapping out the tropes of the public discourse on prostitution on the Egyptian nationalist press of the ’20s, this chapter tries to expand our knowledge on how femininities and masculinities were debated in a modernizing country under imperial control and crucially contributed to the definition of normative definitions of correct and virtuous gendered citizenship. Women were often constructed in paradoxical terms: victims of backward practices according to modernist liberal and feminist views, distorted Muslim practice in the eyes of religious leaders, or heinous perpetrators of horrendous crimes and dangerous beings. The diagnosis of a widely-perceived malaise afflicting the Egyptian nation, a veritable social crisis, was articulated by reiterated appeals to the regeneration of corrupted morals and Oriental authenticity. Spread of vice associated with the “irruption” of women in the public space, decadence of the marital institution, increasing criminality were perceived as the blatant features of social decadence. Regulated prostitution was unanimously

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<sup>341</sup>Deniz Kandiyoti, “Women, Islam and the State: a Comparative Approach”, in *Comparing Muslim Societies: Knowledge and the State in a World Civilization*, edited by J. R. Cole (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 246.

condemned by a number of civil society groups who widely debated the topic on the local press, but came to be assigned different meanings by different social actors. Muslim activists, on one side, saw licensed prostitution as a symptom of Western-imported degeneration and actively campaigned for the restoration of a largely imagined archetypal virtuous Islamic society based on religiously sanctioned gender roles. On the other side, liberal reformers, reproducing metropolitan bourgeois notions of feminine decorum and domesticity, dismissed regulationism in favour of outright abolitionist policies with the aim of ensuring social control and order by protecting the fundamental social unit, the family, from the threat of extramarital sex. Reformers regularly decried licensed prostitution as a national shame, an indicator of cultural backwardness and weakness. The sexualisation of the Nation, that is the process by which a gendered female character was attributed to the emerging idea of national community, was evident in a number of recurrent discursive motives: the victimized female body of the prostitute – often a minor or a girl – was seen as the metaphor of the very subaltern status of the colonized nation, who was abused and transacted by or sold herself to foreign powers. On the other side, wanton and rowdy sex workers, often foreigners, incarnated the corruption of local mores and morals caused by excessive westernization. Some renowned underworld figures such as sisters Raya and Sakinah and Ibrahim al-Gharbi, a transvestite and notorious “trader of virtue”, made into national “villains” by the reiteration of some discursive tropes in the press, not only embodied social uneasiness but were functional in defining normative canons of moral behaviours working by difference.

## 7.2 Nationalism and the Rise of an Imagined Egyptian Nation in the Press

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Egypt was in the midst of a severe economic and social crisis. The British occupied the country in 1882, crushing the first nationalist movement led by Ahmad ‘Urabi and imposing their rule over the country. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, Egypt had been increasingly drawn into the global market system as a producer of raw materials - cotton for the Lancashire textile industries - and an importer of manufactured goods. Although recent scholarship has shown how local rural economies were not simply shuttered by capitalist penetration, surviving and restructuring at the margins, political and economic change in the form of growth of State power and commercialization of agriculture did severely affect the rural household economy which loosed much of its cohesiveness. Peasants’ autonomy and control over the organization of production and consumption was severely curtailed as the central government intervened directly by imposing agricultural monopolies, corvée labour, military conscription and land confiscation.<sup>342</sup> After British occupation, large rural development infrastructural projects were launched to increase the country’s agricultural output.<sup>343</sup> While resulting in environmental damage, large scale irrigation works effectively extended cropped areas but exposed Egypt to the ups and downs of the world cotton market, as it became especially evident with the depression of the 1930s.<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> On rural crisis and its effects on family households’ economy see Judith Tucker, “Decline of the Family Economy in Mid-Nineteenth Century Egypt” in *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 1, no.3, 1979: pp. 245-71.

<sup>343</sup> In 1891 the Delta Dam was repaired, in 1902 the Aswan Dam was built, and subsequently raised in 1907-12 and 1929-1933.

<sup>344</sup> These projects had serious environmental and technological drawbacks such as poor drainage, soil depletion and cotton pests. See Joel Beinin, ‘Society and Economy, 1923-1952’ in M.W. Daly (ed.),

Colonial administration's emphasis on rural sanitation and health tried to impact positively peasants' lives, but the persistence of oppressive power relations in the countryside caused the process of rural dislocation to go unabated. Despite the dramatic expansion of cultivated areas occurred, by 1914 rural population grew faster than cropped areas and, due to increasing demographic pressure in rural areas, growing numbers of landless peasants migrated to urban centres, Cairo especially, in search for wage labour. From 1914 onwards in fact, agricultural production decreased: pre-war rural growth was around 1,6% with an average rural income of 30 Egyptian pounds per capita per annum while from 1914 to 1947 it did not exceed 0,4% per annum, that is, less than the rate of population growth. Agricultural income declined accordingly: in 1947 it was 26 Egyptian pounds per head per annum. As André Raymond remarked, "economic pressure in the countryside, which had lessened before 1914, became much stronger; and this movement to towns chiefly affected Cairo, where migration accounted for more than half the increase in population: in 1927, out of little more than 1.000.000 Cairenes, only 644.000 had been born in Cairo".<sup>345</sup>

The outbreak of First World War worsened the situation: Egyptians on fixed salary saw their purchasing power significantly eroded by galloping inflation while peasants were vexed by corvées and requisition of food stuff and animals of burdens. In 1919, after the deportation of Sa'ad Zaghlul, leader of the nationalist Wafd, violence and revolt swept the country. Daily demonstrations and protests broke out in

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*The Cambridge History of Egypt, Volume 2, Modern Egypt from 1517 to the end of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 321.

<sup>345</sup> Statistics and quotation are taken from André Raymond, "Le Caire" in Groupe de Recherches et d'Etudes sur le Proche-Orient, *L'Egypte d'aujourd'hui: Permanence et changements, 1805-1976*. Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1977), pp. 214-41.

the cities and the countryside alike, protesting colonial British presence and foreign control. The 1919 Revolution is generally considered as marking the coming-of-age of the Egyptian nationalist movement which had slowly formed out of the deep resentment and grievances triggered by collective traumatic events as the Dinshawai Incident in 1906.<sup>346</sup> On the 8<sup>th</sup> of March 1919, Zaghlul was jailed and deported to Malta on the following day. Student demonstrations escalated into full-fledged general strikes by government employees, professionals, and workers. Five hundred upper-class women led by Safiyyah Zaghlul, wife of the deported leader Sa'ad Zaghlul, and Huda Sha'arawi, wife of one of the founding members of the Wafd, the main nationalist party, later to be elected President of the EFU, the Egyptian Feminist Union (1923), staged a big demonstration on the 16<sup>th</sup> of March 1919 that officially signalled the start of self-proclaimed feminist activism in Egypt. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 1919 the largest demonstration took place, where thousands of Cairenes made their way from al-Azhar to 'Abdin Palace, despite British prohibitions and road blocks.

After the 1919 Revolution, British strategy of control in the country changed. In May 1919, Lord Milner was given the task of studying a disengagement plan, granting Egypt "self-governing" institutions while preserving British interests on the ground. The Milner Mission entered Egypt in December in 1919 and was vocally opposed by the nationalist forces who asked for the immediate abolition of the

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<sup>346</sup> On the 13<sup>th</sup> of June 1906, 5 soldiers of the occupying British Army went shooting pigeons in the village of Dinshawai. As the soldiers shot pigeons the inhabitants of the village were rearing to be sold and after the accidental shooting of the wife of the local imam, a brawl broke up between the villagers and British. Two officers managed to escape, one of whom died shortly of heatstroke. The incident was harshly punished by the occupying power. All men in the village were arrested and three men were sentenced to death in retaliation for the loss of the British soldier who had died nearby the village.

protectorate. After a round of secret talks between Milner and Zaghlul in London, the British government eventually agreed in February 1921 to the abolition of the protectorate as a first step toward the negotiation of a comprehensive peace treaty with Egypt. Unilateral formal independence was eventually granted by the colonial power in February 1922, although four key issues – security of imperial communications in Egypt, defence of the country from external aggressions, safeguard of foreign interests and minorities' rights in the country and the status of Sudan – remained to be negotiated at a later stage, ensuring the continuation of British rule over the area. The political scenario, nonetheless, changed into a triangulation between the monarchy, which increasingly sustained the conservative religious monarchists of the Ittihad Party, a newly formed constitutional government ruled by the Wafd (whose power was severely limited by the Monarch himself and by fierce opposition from the Liberal Constitutionalist's Party) and the British Authority, sustained by the occupation army. The 1920s, characterized by the introduction of constitutionalism and pluralism in Egyptian political practices, are often deemed to signal “the apogee of political consensus upon liberal nationalism before the emergence of Islamism and Arab Nationalism in the '30s and the '40s”.<sup>347</sup> In fact, far from establishing shared ideological consensus on the emerging national political community, the aftermath of 1919 Revolution saw intense debate and the ensuing inability to reach an agreement on a shared political identity among political forces. Class, gender, secularism, religion, democracy and authoritarianism were

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<sup>347</sup> James Whidden, “The Generation of 1919”, in Goldschmidt, Johnson, Salmoni (eds.), *Re-Envisioning Egypt 1919-1952* (Cairo-New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2005, 19-46), p. 20.

extensively debated across the political body and from such contestations a number of competing self-asserting discourses on “Egyptian-ness” took form. Liberal Constitutionalists and more radical Wafdists shared in fact a westernizing, evolutionary discourse of social change. Strongly identifying with modern Western culture, they were both concerned with progress and advancement. They both theorized that Egyptian society had to evolve and attain modernity, only they divided along strategic issues: according to the former British assistance and cooperation were necessary to create political social and economic development, while Wafdists thought full independence and sovereignty to be prerequisites for modernization. On the other side, Wafdist and Liberal Constitutionalists adopted a similar stance on cultural questions such as the role of women in society: they both campaigned for the improvement of women status in words, but were much milder in practice, careful as they were not to subvert the patriarchal foundations of society.

Islam, at last, was brought into formal party politics by the Ittihad Party, a monarchist religious group supported by the ruling dynasty. Outside the political mainstream, the Muslim Brotherhood was created in 1928 with the aim of re-Islamizing Egyptian society from below and restore the Islamic ethos of social justice to the Egyptian community. While initially concentrating its efforts on educational and charitable work, the Brotherhood soon became a chief anti-hegemonic anti-colonial political force.

In this context, the Egyptian press played a fundamental role in articulating the concept of that national imagined community so aptly described by Benedict

Anderson<sup>348</sup>. In Egypt, a crucial contribution came from the Levant, from which lots of “pioneers”(ruwwad as they are referred to in Arabic literature history) of journalism came around the sixth decade of the nineteenth century. New secular education, more opportunities of travels and cultural exchange with the West, the enriching influence of Levantine publicists, all these factors contributed to the emergence of a new educated intelligentsia, a new public of readers interested in innovative ideas and concepts expressed through books, periodicals and newspapers, sharing a common national identity.<sup>349</sup> Reform of the educational system and expansion of the printed press were crucial in the creation of a new reading public sensitive towards national issues. Once a public of receptive and educated readers appeared towards the end of the nineteenth century, private press, through the efforts of journalists and publicists coming from the rising middle urban classes, became the first outlet for criticism of the social and political situation of the country and for articulation of Egyptian identity through the characterization of local socio-types in fiction and vignettes. Private press became the public arena for the debate about national identity, modernization and tradition.

As Shaun T. Lopez has rightly pointed out in his work on crime press coverage (*akhbar al-hawadith*) and Raya and Sakinah case in 1920<sup>350</sup>, expansion and changes

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<sup>348</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spreading of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

<sup>349</sup> For more information about the rise and development of the Egyptian press, see Ami Ayalon, *The Press in the Arab Middle East: a History* (New York Oxford University Press), 1995.

<sup>350</sup> Raya Bint ‘Ali Hamam and Sakinah Bint ‘Ali Hamam had migrated from the Sa’id, to Kafr al-Zayyat in the Delta and Alexandria with their husbands in search of fortune. They had been active as prostitutes before, and in Alexandria they decided to open a drinking den cum brothel in the Laban area. In 1920 they killed, with the help of their husbands, 17 women, some of them prostitutes, some others occasional acquaintances they enticed to the brothel, suffocated, robbed of any valuable they carried, and buried in the basement. They were arrested, tried and executed in 1921. See Shaun T. Lopez, “Madams, Murders and the Media: Akhbar al Hawadith and the Emergence of a Mass Culture



of Egyptian press after 1918 resulted in the development of modern mass culture in Egypt. Although only literate groups, elites and *effendiyyah* (middle class) Egyptians,<sup>351</sup> constituted the reading public of the press,

crime coverage transformed local matters involving Egyptian from all classes, religions, and genders into matters of public and national concerns. Individual tales of immoral lives made public by this new mass medium thus became shared experiences among those who consumed the press. Commentators and politicians thus often referenced the lives of Raya and Sakinah, and their victims as they constructed their versions of what Egyptian identity should be, and thus played an important part in the formation of elite discourses about Egyptian identity and gender.<sup>352</sup>

Moreover, it is important to note how for the first time, characters, locales and situations belonging to the lived experience of the lower class were incorporated and played a vital role in the making of Egyptian collective imagination.

### 7.3 Gender and Danger in Cairo

Gender in fact was situated at the centre of competing discourses about citizenship and national identity.<sup>353</sup> Treatment of the “woman’s question”, (*Qadiyyat-al-*

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in 1920s Egypt” in Goldschmidt, Johnson, Salmoni (eds.) *Op. Cit.*, pp. 371-98. See also Salah ‘Isà, *Rigal Raya wa Sakinah, sirah siyyasiyyah wa igtima’iyyah* (al-Qahirah: Dar al-Ahmadi li-l-Nashr, 2002) and Yunan Labib Rizq, “The Women Killers” in *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, 17-23 June 1999, no. 343, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/1999/434/chrncls.htm>

<sup>351</sup> On the *effendiyyah* as a social category of middle class educated men, its relationship with nationalism and modernism see Lucie Ryzova, *L’Effendiyyah ou la modernité contestée* (Le Caire: CEDEJ, Collection 15/20, 2004).

<sup>352</sup> Lopez, *Op. Cit.*, p. 372.

<sup>353</sup> Fundamental works on gender, modernity, nationalism and citizenship in Egypt are: Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender and Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) and *The Women’s Awakening in Egypt: Culture, Society, and the Press* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Marilyn Booth, *May Her Likes Be Multiplied: Biography and Gender Politics in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Selma Botman, *Engendering Citizenship in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Lisa Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation: the Family Politics of Modernizing, Colonizing and Liberating Egypt, 1805-1923* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Hanan Kholoussy, *For Better, For Worse: the Marriage Crisis that Made Modern Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010);

*Mar'ah*), that is, the debate about the status of women in society and the characteristics women should have to contribute to the construction of modern, independent Egypt, became prominent in public discourse and marked a cleavage between secular bourgeois elites and religious ones. Employing an evolutionary approach influenced by social Darwinism, secular nationalists considered cultural formations such as segregation and veiling as symbols of Oriental backwardness to be actively fought against to promote modernity and progress. Egyptian feminists accepted this formulation, while using an universalist discourse of individual political rights to legitimize their specific struggle for women's emancipation male bourgeois nationalists did not subscribe to, thus revealing the patriarchal foundations and exclusionary practices at the core of modern liberalism. On the other side, Muslim activists saw traditional and religiously sanctioned gendered practices as the corner stone of a harmonic and ordered society, to be preserved in order to affirm Islamic and Oriental cultural authenticity in the face of westernization. Despite differences in the ways in which gendered roles were constructed, it is important to note how gender and gendered-related bio-political discourses such as sex and the family, constituted a formidable medium for expressing ideas about the rising Egyptian civic and political community. Correct social development was seen as based on hierarchical sex and gender relations: as Selma Botman wrote, "liberalism's advocates successfully posited the ideological dichotomy between the private/personal and the public/political whereby a hierarchy of power assigned a

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Leila Ahmad, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Omnia El-Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory: Subjects of Knowledge in Colonial and Postcolonial Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); Mona Russell, *Creating the New Egyptian Woman: Consumerism, Education, and National Identity, 1863-1922* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004).

subordinate place to women based on their natural role as child-bearers”<sup>354</sup>. The maintenance of carefully patrolled and hierarchically constructed gendered spaces was linked with notions of family honour and shame based on women’s modesty and propriety. If the Egyptian nation came to be imagined as a family, Egyptian women, although politically marginalized and discriminated, came to be the very repositories of the national honour.<sup>355</sup> An important dimension of the widely perceived Egyptian social crisis in the ’20s, in fact, was expressed by associating the idea of sex, gender and danger. One of the main features of the moral crisis was, according to coeval commentators, the increased presence of women, especially working-class females, in the public space, often in association with the idea of cosmopolitanism:

in many foreign cities it would be impossible to shop in the public market-place, but Cairo is so large and has such a mixed population that you find yourself only one of many, lost in the stream of cosmopolitanism. English women of the poorer class are there, French, Armenian, Sudanese, Jewish and Turkish, but no native women except those who are selling produce of some kind.<sup>356</sup>

Egyptian society was believed to be in the throes of a major moral crisis since, due to the influence of Western ideas and practices, strict boundaries to impede male-female contacts had not been preserved. Under the pressure of economic need, women had entered the labour market and, unencumbered from family supervision, they had been let loose, free to wander around the city and unleash their sexual appetites for greed or lust, and easy prey to evil procurers. Abolitionists blamed the Egyptian government not only for being incapable of taking steps towards the abolition of licensed prostitution, but also for failing to articulate effective policies in

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<sup>354</sup> Botman, *Op. Cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>355</sup> See Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman*, especially chapter 2 “Constructing Egyptian Honour”.

<sup>356</sup> Cooper, *Op. Cit.*, p. 109. Elite women were still less visible than their working class counterparts because of the *harim* tradition.

support of disadvantaged and economically vulnerable social categories such working-class women: “the Government should act as first point of reference for those women who are likely to fall (*suqut*), unemployed women, vagrants, and force them to find respectable occupations, whether their husbands were unable to support them”.<sup>357</sup>

Flourishing prostitution in Cairo came to be described on the press as the ultimate menace to the very survival of the Egyptian Nation and constituted the backdrop against which the idea of a homogeneous virtuous Egyptian national community was constructed. It could well be argued that the idea of pristine strict gender segregation or stigmatization of sex workers in Egyptian popular neighbourhood life was highly fictional and did not reflect everyday social practices on the ground,<sup>358</sup> but for the purpose of my analysis here, I deliberately decided to focus on the process by which the very reiteration of a number of discursive tropes on sex work and its dangers for the collective social body was transformed into an ontological truth and the pathologization of prostitution was used as a strategy to enforce a disciplinary project over society.

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<sup>357</sup>Shaykh Mahmud Abu-al-'Uyyun, “al-Marahid al-'Umumiyyah” (“Public Toilets”), *al-Ahram*, 15.12.1923, n.p. As many sources confirm, shortage of occupational outlets and low wages made the economic status of women very vulnerable, especially when they were the only breadwinner in their households

<sup>358</sup> To reconstruct patterns of social interaction among popular classes, sources such as literature and folklore can be useful. Naguib Mahfouz's trilogy characters Zubaydah and Zannubah, for instance, show us how loose women were more integrated than marginalized in the neighbourhood life. Social stigma was more a hegemonic construction than a lived social reality for many sex workers, who, in fact, left the trade upon marriage without this resulting in their husbands' stigmatization. On the “imagined” quality of a virtuous and homogenous national community created by hegemonic groups see also Hanan Hammad, “Between Egyptian ‘National Purity’ and ‘Local Flexibility’: Prostitution in al-Mahallah al-Kubra in the First Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century” in *Journal of Social History*, 44, no.2, 2011: pp. 251-83.

#### 7.4 “When Virtue Screams”: the “Fight against Prostitution” on the Egyptian Press<sup>359</sup>

Press campaigns against public prostitution started to be waged as early as 1893, by the pen of ‘Abdallah Nadim (the so-called “orator of the ‘Urabi revolution”. In accusing the West to bring corruption to Egypt and corrupting Islamic morals, he was the first champion of Islamo-nationalism to campaign for the abolition licensed prostitution. In his *Magallat-al-Ustadh*, al-Nadim often touches upon the state of morals in the country, especially in a series of articles for the edification of girls entitled “*Madrasat-al-Banat*” (Girls’ School) (1845-1896) where a number of female characters happen to voice the grievances for the spreading of vice in society and the corruption of their husbands’ morals<sup>360</sup>. The association between nationalism and abolitionism was thus inaugurated. The prominent nationalist leader Muhammad Farid (1868-1919)<sup>361</sup> also was a fervant abolitionist. In his memoirs he wrote that the reason why vice and fornication had invaded the country had to do with its state of colonial subordination which had enabled foreign Consuls to become the “guardians of immorality” in Egypt, thanks to the Capitulations.<sup>362</sup>

A number of positions were articulated by the press regarding the debate on regulationism. For instance, while *al-Siyyasah* and *Ruz-al-Yusuf* were decidedly in favour of regulationism, *al-Ahram* constituted the vanguard of abolitionism. This was due to the figure of the journalist Dawud Barakat, editor in chief of the

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<sup>359</sup> Shaykh Mahmud Abu-al-‘Uyyun, “al- ‘afaf yantahib “ (“Chastity screams”), *al-Ahram*, 08.12.1923, n.p.

<sup>360</sup> ‘Abdallah Nadim, *al- I’dad al Kamilah li-Magallat al-Ustadh* (al-Qahirah: al- Hay’ah al Misriyyah al-‘Ammah li-l-Kitab), pp. 395-99 and pp. 132-40 cited in al-Hilal, *Op. Cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>361</sup> Muhammad Farid, a nationalist leader, writer and lawyer, was the main supporter of Mustafa Kamil, the founder of the Egyptian Nationalist Party. After his death in 1908, he took the lead of the party until his own death 1918.

<sup>362</sup> Hammad, *Op. Cit.*, p. 772.

newspaper. Since 1907, when he translated doctor Burtuqalis Bey's epidemiologic study on venereal disease on Egypt<sup>363</sup>, he became known for his fervent abolitionism. In November 1923, a press campaign against State licensed prostitution was inaugurated on the pages of the main Egyptian daily, *al-Ahram*. It was preceded by a letter signed by a female Shubrah resident, Fawqiyyah Kamil, on November 19<sup>th</sup> 1923<sup>364</sup>. In her letter, Mrs Kamil talked about the news she had found in the newspaper of a New York businessman who had been fined 5.000 dollars for kissing a girl against her will. The reader asked how could this possibly happen in America, when in Egypt the current state of affairs was such that no one, especially among intellectuals (*qadat-al-afkar*) was raising his voice against the thriving traffic in sex and vice. Fawqiyyah Kamil called upon Fikri Abazah<sup>365</sup>, to invite their co-nationals to sobriety and moderation. Only, in 1923, long before nationalist liberal elites eventually put abolitionism on their agenda, Mrs Kamil's complaints were fated to be heard not by liberal intellectuals, but by an al-Azhar shaykh, Mahmud Abu-al-'Uyyun (1882-1951). Born in Asyut province in 1882 from a distinguished *sharif* family, he graduated from al-Azhar in 1908. He stood out for his ardent nationalist and anti-colonial sermons during the 1919 Revolution. Accused of being a member of the so-called "Black Hand Society", a secret association founded with the purpose of threatening and killing Egyptians who would not take part in the General Strike, in May 1919 he was imprisoned in a German-Turkish prisoner camp in Rafah for three

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<sup>363</sup> See chapter 5.

<sup>364</sup> Shaykh Mahmud Abu-al-'Uyyun, "Min Agil Qublah" ("Because of a Kiss"), *al-Ahram*, 19.11.1923, n.p.

<sup>365</sup> Fikri Abaza (1837-1979), journalist and politician. Member of the Nationalist Party, Hizb Watani. He seated in the Administrative Committee in 1921 and was MP in 1926. As a journalist, He worked for several major periodicals, among which *al-Ahram* and *al-Musawwar*.

months. After being released, he resumed his activism against the Milner Mission and therefore was imprisoned again. In February 1920, he was released for medical reasons. Back in Cairo he got eye surgery and remained under arrest until November 1920 when he was made to sign a statement according to which he would refrain from playing any active role in nationalist propaganda. After the 1922 Treaty, he decided to abstain from party politics to devote himself to social reforms and moral purity campaigns. The first and most prominent one is his crusade against State-licensed prostitution, soon followed by campaigns against alcohol consumption and undressing on Egyptian public beaches when he was in charge of the al-Azhar institute in Alexandria in 1938.<sup>366</sup> He subsequently moved back to Cairo where he was appointed as secretary at al-Azhar, the post he retained until he passed away in 1951. Shaykh Mahmud Abu-al-‘Uyyun was the veritable torchbearer of abolitionism and social purity, who choose journalism as a medium to sensitize public opinion on the need for Egypt’s moral purification in two main *al- Ahram* series, “Slaughterhouses of Virtues” in 1923 and “Licensed Prostitution” in 1926. This second series came out after the creation of a Special Commission of Inquiry on Licensed Prostitution and Traffic of Women and Children set up by the Ministry of Interior in response to the League of Nations anti-abolitionist pressures.

On 20<sup>th</sup> November 1923, Shaykh Mahmud Abu-al-‘Uyyun published the first instalment of the series *Madhabih al-A’rad* (“Slaughterhouses of Virtues”) on *al-Ahram*, with the title of “Ala Mar’ah min al-Hukumah wa Misma”, “In the face and

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<sup>366</sup> Eventually the government passed a law about the establishment of sex-segregated beaches for women. See Walter Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 75-86.

the ears of the Government”, where he painted a black picture of Egyptian morals: “In Egypt -He wrote- the market of vice (*suq al fugur*) thrives under the eyes and the ears of the government, ... and virtues are sacrificed to greed and lust (*shahawat and atma*) without restraint and control (*raqabah*). Clandestine organizations of white slave traders organize themselves under the nose of the government”.<sup>367</sup> Shaykh Abu-al-‘Uyyun blamed Egyptian political elites for their acquiescence and went as far as repeatedly denouncing the collusion between traffickers, brothel keepers and the police.<sup>368</sup> Reproducing deep-rooted biological metaphors, he equalled prostitution to a lethal disease, conducive to the Death of the Nation (*mawt al-Ummah*), because of the corruption of morals (*fasad al-akhlaq*), dilapidation of wealth (*diya’ al-amwal*) and National honour (*diya’ al-sharf*), and the degeneration of the race due to the spread of venereal disease. The annihilation of the community was primarily imputed to the venereal peril, but in fact prostitution was considered to be anti-social not only because of public health considerations, but because of its impact on the institution in charge of social reproduction par excellence: marriage.

After independence, nationalist elites seized upon marriage and “nationalized” it, formulating normative definitions of correct matrimonial conducts and family models, in order to create “adult, permanent, preferably monogamous families, that, in turn, would serve as the foundation for a modern nation free of social illness”.<sup>369</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> Shaykh Mahmud Abu-al-‘Uyyun, “ ‘Ala Mar’ah min al-Hukumah wa Misma’ ” (“Under the Eyes and the Ears of the Government”), *al-Ahram*, 20.11.1923, n.p.

<sup>368</sup> See Yunan Labib Rizq, “Back Roads”, in *al-Ahram Weekly Online*, 7-13 June 2001, Issue no. 537, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2001/537/chrncls.htm>

<sup>369</sup> Hanan Kholoussy, “The Nationalization of Marriage in Monarchical Egypt” in *Re-envisioning Egypt, Op. Cit*, pp. 317-50.



As Hanan Kholoussy rightly pointed out, “marriage figured at the centre of the processes through which the modern, nationalist experience was learned and practiced in modern Egypt”<sup>370</sup> even before independence. Kholoussy extensively analyzed the articulation of a vibrant debate on the “marriage crisis”, an expression to indicate the perceived spread of bachelorhood or increase in the number of marriages with female minors<sup>371</sup> many observers deemed conducive to the collapse of social order in pre-1919 Egyptian press, to show how it served as an arena for shaping the competing versions of that allegedly homogenous “Egyptian identity” which found its iconic celebration in the 1919 Revolution. Since 1890s women’s press depicted men as “fleeing from marriage”, while in 1913 a “letter to the Editor” penned by Muhammad al-Bardisi appeared in *al-Ahram* with the title “Young Men and their Aversion to Marriage”.<sup>372</sup> In the letter, al-Bardisi expressed his concern for the dreadful state the matrimonial institution, “the fundamental cornerstone in the development of a civilization”, was in. He blamed economic stagnation for this<sup>373</sup>,

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<sup>370</sup> Hanan Kholoussy, “Talking About a Revolution: Gender and the Politics of Marriage in Early Twentieth Century Egypt” accessed on line at [http://www.grconsortium.org/pdf/V.1-2PDF/v12\\_kholoussy.pdf](http://www.grconsortium.org/pdf/V.1-2PDF/v12_kholoussy.pdf)

<sup>371</sup> Marriage of minors, polygamy and divorce were all extensively debated issues. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, a number of laws and proposals were formulated in order to reform the Islamic personal law in relation with marriage and divorce (*talaq*). As an evidence of the important place of marriage in the nationalist agenda, major pieces of legislation were passed in 1920, 1923, 1929, 1931, but they were preceded by a proposal for the reform of marital law already in 1914. In March 1914 in fact deputy member Zakariyyah Bey Namiq submitted a bill on marital issues, among which a proposal to set the legal female age for marriage at 16 (*tahdid sinn-al-zawag*). This triggered a heated debate on the press, opposing modernist reformers to conservative Muslim authorities who were against any change to religiously sanctioned practices. For some instances of press articles on the legal marriage age controversy see the series of articles on *al-Ahram* “Tahdid Sinn-al-Zawag” on 11.12.1923/17.12.1923/ 19.12.1923/22.12.1923/ 26.12.1923/ 27.12.1923/ 28.12.1923.

<sup>372</sup> Muhammad al-Bardisi, “A‘rad al-Shaban ‘an al-Zawag.”, Letter to the Editor. *al-Ahram*, 15.12.1913: 1

<sup>373</sup> “Most young men earn no more than 5 pounds a month, and it takes an extremely long time for them to set aside from this paltry sum sufficient funds for a dowry and the costs of a wedding, let alone the expenses necessary for the upbringing of their children” al-Bardisi, *Op. Cit.*

but also greedy parents asking for exorbitant dowries and uncultivated, uneducated women incapable of exciting enduring love and affection to men. A more radically nationalist view was articulated by another reader, Ibrahim Ahmad Fathi, who saw marriage crisis to be strictly linked with foreign economic power and competition, although Egyptian men were certainly to blame for their lack of initiative: “if Egyptians applied themselves seriously and intensively, they could ... establish their presence in commerce and accumulate vast wealth. The young men of today spend their time in coffee shops and in places of entertainment, ... having squandered whatever money they had with them, whereas if they economized, they could have saved great sums from the money they spent on coffee, water-pipes, drink, and games”<sup>374</sup> and, of course, prostitution.

While secular nationalists saw prostitution as a waste of economic and reproductive capacities, the cultural question was central to Islamists’ view of sex work. Prostitution as *zina*, extramarital sex, was first and foremost *haram*, contrary to the Islamic Law and the traditions of the Oriental Muslim Community (*ummah sharqiyyah muslimah*). On the 12<sup>th</sup> of December 1923, in the eighth instalment of his “Slaughterhouse of Virtues” entitled “*Fada’ih la hadd laha*”, “Endless Shame”, Abu-al-‘Uyyun reported a letter received by a certain Ghazal bi-Misr reader lamenting the dangers of prostitution by using some typically religious arguments:

I know of many boys who don’t think of getting married ... to the effect that many girls end up without a husband. And I am sure it won’t escape His Gracefulness’ notice that this state of affairs is bad for both parties (*firqatayn*, i.e. boys and girls) and it is

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<sup>374</sup>Ibrahim Ahmad Fathi. “A‘rad al-Shaban ‘an al-Zawag”, Letter to the Editor, *al-Ahram*, 19.12.1913, n.p.

conducive to the spread of prostitution, vice among the sexes (*fasiq gins*) and the unprecedented incidence of venereal diseases.<sup>375</sup>

The reader asked how the Egyptian government, as a Muslim government, could tolerate prostitution, while the British themselves were not condoning sex work in their own homeland. Ghazal bi-Misr, urged the national community to face the situation in all its abject squalor and not to behave as those men, infected with syphilis, who tried to conceal it out of shame, ignorance and stupidity.

The weakening of social cohesion and the “marriage crisis” were seen as by-products of prostitution, State regulation and lack of control over public morality. While, according to State officials, regulation served as a means for controlling the trade and safeguard public order and health, in the readers’ view regulation did not achieve its objectives, as clandestine sex work flourished undisturbed and the spread of venereal diseases was far from being under check: on the contrary, “every day we witness endless shameful acts taking place everywhere, even in coaches, cabs and boathouses berthed on the Nile”. The letter ended with a desperate cry, “Egypt, poor Egypt, how can you bear these wounds, wounds in your soul, wounds in your virtue, in your wealth”.<sup>376</sup>

Themes of diffuse vice, both overt and undercover, spreading like an epidemic across the social fabric and contamination were recurrent. The central problem was deemed that of contact between “marginals” such as prostitutes, criminals, homosexuals, and conformist, “respectable” citizens, families and young generations. In particular, commentators felt the urge to protect the latter from vice and

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<sup>375</sup> Mahmud Abu-al-‘Uyyun, “Fada’ih La Hadd Laha”, *al Ahram*, 12.12.1923, n.p.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*

debauchery, as the future of the Nation was considered to depend on young generations' moral and physical sound constitution. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of November 1913, Shaykh Mahmud quoted in his column a letter from a certain '*shaykh haram*'<sup>377</sup>, who pointed out the physical proximity between State licensed vice in the Azbakiyyah area and religious school pupils. Some days later, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of December, the topic was touched upon again with extreme alarmism in an article called "Chastity screams!" where Shaykh Mahmud-al-'Uyyun decried the fact that decent, honest people (*al-ahrrar*, literally free people, as individual freedom is seen as the first prerogative of citizenship) had to mingle with those who traded in vice (*tigarah al-a'rad*). A very problematic point was Shari' Clot Bey and its adjoining alleys, where most of licensed brothels were situated. Here, according to Shaykh Abu-al-'Uyyun, houses of ill fame and drinking dens were placed at a stones' throw from the Coptic schools (*madaris-al-aqbat*), the Franciscan convent and its school (*dayr wa madrasah-al-rahban*<sup>378</sup>). To protest against the situation, al-'Uyyun recalled, some

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<sup>377</sup> Mahmud Abu-al-'Uyyun, "Kitab Min Shaykh Haram", *al Ahram*, 28.11.1923, n.p.

<sup>378</sup> In fact it seems that the relationship between the Coptic Patriarchate and the Underworld was much more complex. Ten years earlier, a major scandal broke out when the *Egyptian Gazette* (02.12.1913) published an article in which, in the context of a wider campaign against the financial mismanagement of Coptic *awqaf*, collusions between Coptic religious authorities and brothel keepers were disclosed: "A far more important point, in our opinion, is the use to which the Patriarchate allows many of the houses belonging to the wakfs to be put. ... The wakfs' property lies in Clot Bey, in the notorious Darb el-Tiab, in the Wazza Bazaar and in that other plague-spot of Cairo, the Kantaret-el-Dikka. The majority of these houses are houses of ill-fame, the Darb el-Tiab, indeed, being the official quarter for the public women of Cairo. A seemly spectacle, is it not, that of charities which derive their revenue, and of a Christian Church which receives support from the immoral earnings of fallen women? Financially, no doubt, these houses are an immense asset to the Coptic Church – they seem to furnish the one example in which the wakfs have been administered with a keen eye on business, but spiritually and morally they represent an overwhelming loss – loss of dignity, loss of reputation, loss almost of spiritual life". The situation did not fail to alarm some among the most prominent figures of the abolitionist front in Cairo: in 1916, the Honorary Secretary of the Association of Social and Moral Hygiene, Mrs Helen Wilson, wrote a letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury to inform him that in the course of enquiries conducted from the Association's social workers in Cairo had resulted that 'two of the regulated brothels in the principal part of Cairo belonged to the Patriarch of the Coptic Church: "we understand these were burned to the ground by some of the Australian troops in the riot [it is

Clot Bey residents had addressed a petition to the Azbakiyyah qism, the local police station: they had decided to “stand up as a sole man and we called upon the Azbakiyyah Police and the *hakimdar* of Cairo City Police. We complained about this most serious situation to His Excellency Vice Minister of the Interior in the month of September last, and we made an official complaint to His Excellency the Minister of Interior’. A photograph of the original document had been sent to Shaykh Abu-al-‘Uyyun from one of the petitioners, “owners, merchants, residents, religious and school authorities”, in the name of “respectable and decent people, and on behalf of the students, God’s angels on Earth”.<sup>379</sup>

State Officials were eventually forced to address the problem and take action: while the Minister of Communication stated that public health, wealth and young generations had to be effectively protected and safeguarded by the government as they were the foundations of State’s power, the Minister of Public Works declared that the insalubrious houses nearby the Patriarchate would be soon demolished, “to make space for a wide thoroughfare where decent people and family can live, instead of those wretched creatures (*hasharat*, literally “insects” referring to prostitutes and

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referring to the Wass‘ah battle, *mine*], and that the owner was made known owing to a claim for compensation being made, which was ultimately agreed to by the British Officials. In view of the many benefits which I understand the Coptic Church has received from the English Church, my committee feels that this report should be brought to your Grace’s notice and they feel assured that any effective action which may be possible will be taken by you in the matter’. Women’s Library, 3AMSH/B/07/05. See also Willis, *Op.Cit.*, p. 19: “These shameless women scandalize the old and taint the mind of the young, by parading their profession openly in habitations, every brick of which belongs to a Church professing Christianity as instituted by Christ!!! I refer to the Coptic Church, whose bishop, however, denies all knowledge of the character of tenants who occupy the Church properties as immoral houses, filling them with abandoned women”.

<sup>379</sup>Mahmud Abu-al-‘Uyyun, “Chastity Screams”, *al-Ahram*, 08.12.1923, n.p.

pimps). At the same time, al- Khalig street will be widened by 40 metres, in order to purify it from the filth it is notorious for, and to restore it to its original dignity”<sup>380</sup>.

### **7.5 The Making of “National Villains”: Ibrahim al-Gharbi and the “Traders of Virtues”**

In his work on the 1920 Alexandria murders, Shaun T. Lopez aptly described how media sensations as the Rayya and Sakinah’s case contributed to the making of an imagined national ‘virtuous’ community of Egyptians subscribing to a certain moral code:

In the wake of the Alexandria murders a unitary vision of a morally virtuous Egypt that existed before the arrival of the corrupting influence of Europe and the West, assumed a moral central place in the nationalist narrative. Concerned about European cultural influence in Egypt, the newspaper commentaries ... imagined a pre-colonial era in which all members of the nation followed the same moral compass. ... In the aftermath of the Raya and Sakinah’s murders these imaginings were more specifically based on the notion of Egypt, as first and foremost, a society of like-minded Muslims.<sup>381</sup>

Religious piety and morality served as criteria for determining normative discourses of citizenship, largely constructed by difference, that is, by the creation, together with moral standards, of stereotypes of blatant immorality, iconic embodiments of widespread social unrest. A group of criminals rose to the status of “villains”, as norms were established by emphasis on their transgression. As shown by Lopez, sisters Raya and Sakinah, the ex-prostitutes and brothel keepers who robbed and killed 17 women whose bodies were found buried under their houses in the al-Laban neighbourhood in Alexandria, exemplified the dangers of increased

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<sup>380</sup> Ara’ al-Wuzarat, *al- Ahram*, 26.08.1926, n.p.

<sup>381</sup> Lopez, *Op.Cit.*, p. 381.

female mobility and disrespect of gendered roles. Daily reports from their trial attracted people attention's considerably, while a vast number of vignettes on the illustrated press enabled also illiterate Egyptians to follow the development of the case, which resounded nationally in an unprecedented way. Raya and Sakinah were certainly the most famous, but not the only phenomena of this kind. The well-known Ibrahim al-Gharbi, for example, constituted another emblematic case, as another media sensation was carefully crafted around the "Qadiyyat-al-Raqiq-al-Abiyad", the "White Slavery Case". Ibrahim al-Gharbi had long been known to the general public as the "King of the Underworld": born in the Aswan area, son of a slave merchant, he came to Cairo in 1890 and opened a brothel in Bulaq, in Shari' al-Mayyah. In 1896 he rented a brothel in the Wass'ah and a *baladi* coffe shop. In 1912, just before the crackdown on prostitution under the martial law of 1916, al-Gharbi managed 15 houses of ill-fame in the Azbakiyyah where 150 women were employed. As Russell Pasha wrote in his memories, in 1916 Ibrahim al-Gharbi was arrested together with other transvestites and confined to the Hilmiyyah camp. He bribed the *Ma'amur* of Cairo police, the Greek George Filippidis and Mahmud Muhammad, *Musa'id hikimdar* of Cairo, Muhammad Shakib, *Ma'amur Shurtat* 'Abdin, and Ahmad Kamil, *Ma'amur Shurtat* Masr al-Qadimah in order to be released. According to Alifah Bint 'Abdallah, a sex worker employed by Ibrahim al-Gharbi, He paid 300 Egyptian pounds to Filippidis, but the *hikimdar* of Cairo police did not agree on al-Gharbi's release and Filippidis was forced to give the money back, after retaining 20 Egyptian pounds for the interest he took in the matter.<sup>382</sup>

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<sup>382</sup> On the 27<sup>th</sup> of November 1917, Filippidis was sentenced by the Court of First Instance of Cairo

While gender, in fact the demonization of non-conform femininity and its perceived threat for the social order as a whole, was essential in the construction of Raya and Sakinah's public image, in Ibrahim al-Gharbi's case was precisely his transexuality, its gender liminality, together with his infamous career in vice and debauchery, to make him outrageous. Ibrahim al-Gharbi's appearance and attitude were described with remarkable uniformity in coeval narratives and journalistic accounts, often in hyperbolic terms. The "devil-man", as he was dubbed, "one of most abominable sight of Egypt", according to a coeval observer, was to be found seated in front of one of his many houses in the Wass'ah,

dressed as a woman, painted and glazed as though he were a black statue. This fellow has a shining skin, large black eyes and even features. Across his forehead, running past his temples and hooked at the back of his head, was a large solid gold band studded with precious stones. His arms were naked to the shoulder but for the gold bracelets which adorned them. On one arm, I counted fourteen differently shaped bejewelled arm-clasps or bracelets. The other arm was covered with a gaudy network of gold spangles and beads, and around his neck he wore a collar of welded gold, gold, it was said, which had come as presents from his admirers in Abyssinia. On his fingers were several valuable rings, his ankles were protected by gold clasps, and his body was enveloped in a light gauzy material covered with gold and silver spangles which glittered in the light. Thus arrayed the fellow had the appearance of some pagan demi-god or devil.<sup>383</sup>

Al-Gharbi's description indulged on the almost supernatural awe he inspired to his debauched court and the bad effect that his example could have, especially on youths:

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Governorate for corruption for taking bribes from subordinates, prisoners and politicians from 1913 to 1916 for a total amount of 784 Egyptian pounds. On the 30<sup>th</sup> of November 1917, Cairo criminal court sentenced him to five years imprisonment with forced labour. His wife Asma', who also played an active role in the affair, was sentenced to one year imprisonment.

<sup>383</sup> Willis, *Op. Cit.*, p. 32.



This Ibrahim Gharhi, (for al-Gharbi, the name is misspelled in the original text, *mine*) is a public menace. It is rumoured that he is very rich, and has great influence in carrying out the Devil's work in the Wazza Bazaar. All the women fear him, the men like him, and the boys go to him for money and advice, for he is very ready with his stout purse to help those who wish to travel the road to hell. The ostentation with which he displays his wealth stands as an advertisement of the material benefits derived from the trade of the most awful immorality the world knows.<sup>384</sup>

In 1923, Ibrahim al-Gharbi was involved in a famous judicial case which, starting from the 4<sup>th</sup> of December 1923, was covered by daily updates on Egyptian newspapers and reverberated on the foreign press as well.<sup>385</sup> Known as the “White Slavery Case”, although no foreign prostitutes were actually involved,<sup>386</sup> the trial reflected the considerable amount of social hysteria about the dangers young girls were exposed to because of lewd and ruthless “traders of virtues”. On the 16<sup>th</sup> of September 1923, a 14-year-old girl by the name of Ihsan Hassan Mustafà went to Sayyidah Zaynab police station and denounced that in the preceding month of February she had been raped by a certain Muhammad Higazi. According to her testimony, she had been approached by a woman called Fatimah Muhammad al-Fayyumiyyah close to Sayyidah Zaynab mausoleum: the girl would have accepted Fatima's invite home “to meet her son” and would have been kept against her will and plied with drug for three days, before being deflowered by the man, with the help of Fatimah Muhammad al-Fayyumiyyah and her daughter Nafidah Farag, whom she discovered to work as prostitutes in Zayn ‘Abdin area. Devoid of her virtue, the young girl could then have been exploited as a prostitute in a brothel. Further investigations

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<sup>384</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>385</sup>“Qadiyat-al-Raqiq al-Abyad”, *al-Ahram*, 04.12.1923, n.p.

<sup>386</sup> See chapter 4.

in the al-Hud al-Marsud lock hospital, in the Zaynhum area and in the Wass‘ah, disclosed a veritable ring of prostitution behind which the inquirers detected the presence of the notorious Ibrahim al-Gharbi. Press coverage emphasized al-Gharbi’s sexuality as an evidence of his abnormal devilish nature: he was forced to wear male garments in prison and detailed information were given about the examination he was subjected to by the *niyyabah* to verify his masculinity and see whether he was chargeable of sexual assault (which he was not, as he resulted impotent, *ghayr kamil al-ragulah*). Asked about his cross-dressing, he defiantly stated that he would dress as a woman as a ‘hobby’.

The “White Slavery” trial opened officially on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of December 1923. Muhammad Higazi, a cabdriver, was accused of raping young Fatimah Hussayn Hassan, known as Ihsan Hassan Mustafà, with the help of Nafidah Farag and her mother Fatimah Muhammad al-Fayyumiyyah. Nafidah Farag was also accused of helping in the rape (*hatk ‘ird*, that is, raping) of young Zaynab ‘Abd-al-Khaliq, by pinioning her on the ground so that they could commit immoral acts with her (*bi-an masakat bi-ha riglayha ala al-Ard kay yatamakkanuna min al fasiq biha*). Fatimah al-Shabiniyyah, a brothel keeper, and Hashim Ahmad were accused of forcing into prostitution a young girl named Fahimah ‘Uthman. Fatimah had arranged the marriage between Fahimah and his associate Hashim, who then forced her wife to prostitute herself in Fatimah’s brothel. Zabidah Ahmad ‘Awf, Zaynab ‘Ali and Hanim Muhammad al-Jazzarah were charged of exploiting young ‘Aliah Bint Mursi. Ibrahim al-Gharbi was indicted and eventually condemned for corruption of morals

and instigating to prostitution 7 minor girls.<sup>387</sup> As Judge Hughes, Chief Inspector of the Native Parquet noted in a report sent to a British moral purity association active in Cairo, only in the case of two girls had violence been used. According to Hughes, there was enough evidence to claim that most of the girls involved in the case had been volunteers, although minors, to the effect that the case could not be considered related to the traffic in women and children internationally known as “White Slave Trade”<sup>388</sup> which implied the abduction and exploitation of foreign innocent women and girls. Not only the case featured only local girls, but they mostly become to be voluntarily active in commercial sex.

## **7.6 Conclusions**

In early twentieth century, and especially after the 1919 Revolution and the unilateral declaration of Independence of 1922, Egyptian nationalist forces increasingly found in the rapidly expanding local printing industry a formidable arena for the articulation of an imagined national Egyptian communitarian identity. Among others, moral standards were often used to discuss the state of national affairs and, among other themes, flourishing prostitution, both regulated and clandestine, was depicted an instance of West-imported social pathology that Nationalists had to address with the outmost determination to preserve or restore the honour of the Egyptian Muslim community. Using typical biological metaphors, sex work was seen as a lethal disease spreading across the social body and draining it of all his strengths, by affecting its morals, financial resources and, more dangerously yet, its capacity to

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<sup>387</sup> *Al-Ahram*, 27.12.1923.

<sup>388</sup> Women’s Library, 4/IBS/6/031.

reproduce itself, because of venereal contagion. The State was called upon to enforce the outmost control and supervision, to ensure a clear cut separation, between respectable, decent citizens and those considered to live at the margins of society. Some media sensations were carefully crafted in order to promote normative models of moral and sexual behaviours, by evoking a number of iconic “national villains”. While the serial-killers and brothel keepers Raya and Sakinah of Alexandria exemplified the threat represented by working-class female mobility for the social order, Ibrahim al-Gharbi, a notorious transvestite and manager of a number of brothels in the red-light district of Cairo, was stigmatized for his sexuality. Another major mass hysteria was revolving around the so-called “White Slave Trade” and the “traffickers of virtues”.

## 8

# Reformism in Practice: the Work of British Social Purity Movements in Egypt, 1920-1939

### 8.1 Introduction

As we have seen, the international dimension of sex work, that is, the traffic with its massive numbers of migrant women entering Egypt to work as prostitutes or simply stopping over to further destinations and well-organized powerful networks of procurers and pimps sheltered by the Capitulatory system and buttressed by regulationism, made up a significant part of the prostitution sector in Egypt. The presence of European women selling themselves in Egyptian brothels, as elsewhere in the Empire, forced colonial authorities to face the thorny question of the presence of “white subalterns” challenging, by dint of their very existence, hegemonic racial and civilizational hierarchies. As Fischer Tinè points out,

poor whites or “low Europeans”, as they were called in contemporary administrative discourse, generally represented a serious menace to the legitimacy of colonial rule. ... According to ethnic or “civilisational” criteria, the groups in question were part of the ruling race and yet they figured among the “depressed and downtrodden” in terms of class and hence of economic and political power.<sup>389</sup>

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<sup>389</sup> Harald Fischer-Tinë, “‘White women degrading themselves to the lowest depths’: European Networks of Prostitution and Colonial Anxieties in British India and Ceylon ca. 1880-1914” in *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 40, no. 3, 2003: pp. 164-5.

This was all the more true for sex workers, as sex and gender constituted powerful facets of the bio-political power which became a distinctive feature of late Victorian Empire and gender specific bourgeois roles and notions of decorum were adopted as standard of civilization and racial superiority. While professional sex workers were considered as socially dangerous and disruptive in the metropolitan context as well, as they were seen to challenge concepts of female domesticity and economic dependency, in the colony their existence was even more problematic, as constantly called into question notions of race purity and superiority the imperial enterprise increasingly came to repose on towards the end of the nineteenth century. The embarrassment felt by imperial authorities reformers for the presence of such liminal characters, unaccompanied women roaming the world in search of a living, was but the imperial dimension of the veritable social hysteria which originated around the so-called “White Slave Trade”, the symptom of a more profound social and political crisis.<sup>390</sup> After a brief analysis of the emergence of metropolitan obsession around the so-called “White Slave Trade”, this chapter will explore the colonial dimension of social purity, to show how a specific category of subaltern social actors, foreign prostitutes and “fallen” women in Cairo, came to play a very important role in the preservation of besieged category of colonizers’ racial and civilizational superiority, through the creation of a specific apparatus of coercion, control and, possibly, regeneration managed by British purist and feminist movements in Cairo from the beginning of the twentieth century until the Second World War.

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<sup>390</sup> See Mary Ann Irwin, “White Slavery as a Metaphor: Anatomy of a Moral Panic” in *Ex Post Facto: The History Journal*, V, 1996, on line edition <http://userwww.sfsu.edu/~epf/1996/wslavery.html>: “the tensions created by economic depression, political upheaval, social reorganization, and demographic imbalance found voice in the seemingly endless debate over private morality, and set the stage for the evolution of the white slavery metaphor and the panic its rhetoric fuelled”.

## 8.2 “White Slavery”, Brief History of a Cultural Paranoia

In late 1879, revelations about the traffic of young British girls to Belgian brothels were published on the *Pall Mall Gazette* by Alfred Dyer, a journalist and prominent puritan activist, with the effect of galvanizing a heterogeneous purity front made up by Christian fanatic moral reformers and libertarian feminist. The idea of “White Slavery” was not new in fact: popularized by Victor Hugo in the third decade of the nineteenth century, it used the powerful symbolism of slavery to evoke the plight of professional prostitutes in brothels under regulationist regimes across Europe. In England, the passing of the Contagious Diseases Act in 1864, which stipulated for the compulsory identification and registration of sex workers in specific military depots in the southern part of the country and Ireland, introduced de facto regulation and was fiercely opposed by a repeal front, prominent among whose organizations was the Ladies’ National Association (hence LNA) guided by Josephine Butler (1828-1906). The powerful recombination of the reformist idioms moulded during the repealers’ battle until their final success in 1886, was at the core of the new “White Slavery” sensation spreading in the 1880s. In 1885, W. T. Stead, a *Pall Mall Gazette* editorialist and one leading figure of the purity movement, succeeded in instigating public outrage by orchestrating the famous “Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon” case.<sup>391</sup> Rebecca Jarrett, a 36-year-old regenerated prostitute, was hired by to procure a minor virgin so that Stead could demonstrate that a 13-year-old girl in

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<sup>391</sup> W.T. Stead, *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon*, edited and with annotation and an introductory essay by Antony E. Simpson (Lambertville, NJ: The True Bill Press, 2007). The series was published originally in the *Pall Mall Gazette* between the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> of July 1885.

London could be easily bought and started off on a career in vice. Young Eliza Armstrong was purchased by Jarrett from her mother for 5 pounds on the arrangement of going into service and then brought to a low boarding house where Stead pretended to be a customer willing to take advantage of her, before revealing his real identity. Starting on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 1885, a series of articles were published, centring on stories of children lured into prostitution. As Edward J. Bristow puts it, the series

was a prurient hash which centred on the disguised Eliza Armstrong story. Some of the horrifying descriptions of child rape in fashionable brothels may well have reflected a shocking reality; but the accounts of international and local white slavery were exaggerated<sup>392</sup>

and the police, accused of being acquiescent to the moral carnage, easily confuted most of the charges. Nonetheless, the staged scoop was exactly what was needed to inflame the public opinion. The “Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon” effectively compelled the government to pass specific restrictive legislations such as the Criminal Law Amendment Act raising to sixteen the age of consent and fuelled a number of national and international civil society groups lobbying for moral regeneration and correction of vice. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of August 1885, a large rally at Hyde Park marked the apex of the purity campaign and the founding of the Nation Vigilance Association (hence NVA), which were to become the main agent for moral reform campaign in the years to come, targeting prostitution, homosexuality, obscene publications and vice. W.T. Stead is credited for having conceived of the Association and laid down its basic principles, but the first secretary was William Alexander

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<sup>392</sup> Edward J. Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance, Purity Movements in Britain since 1700* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1977), pp. 109-10.



Coote, a compositor on the *Standard*, imbued with fervent religious zeal and puritanism. As Judith Walkowitz described it, “the social purity movement, emerging in the late ’70s and gaining momentum after the ‘Maiden Tribute’ reflected the new spirit of liberalism and liberal reform: more coercive, more interventionist”.<sup>393</sup> Initially, repealers of different orientations collaborated and joined the NVA organizing committee, but the profound divergences between the libertarian, constitutionalist, pro-individual rights inspirations of groups such the feminist LNA and the coercive, repressive and religionist outlook of the NVA became clear, to the effect that the feminist and constitutionalist goals of the repeal movement from where the NVA derived its impetus were totally neglected in the newly developed version of priggish reform.

The NVA aspired to a transnational operative dimension, its goal being an international crusade against the global organized exploitation of women and children. National committees were firstly established in a number of countries, with volunteers willing to gather information and working toward the suppression of the racket and promotion of abolitionist policies in their respective countries. A main instrument for the consolidation of the association was the organization of a series of international conferences, stressing the need for intergovernmental cooperation. The first conference was held in London in 1899 when the International Bureau for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children (hence IBS) was officially set up under the aegis of the British National Vigilance Association.<sup>394</sup> The main goal of the

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<sup>393</sup> Judith Walkowitz, *Op. Cit.*, p. 251.

<sup>394</sup> Bristow, *Op. Cit.*, p. 177: “In 1899 an International Bureau was established in London to coordinate the movement and work for a diplomatic convention. It was the NVA executive in another

IBS was the incorporation of the subject of traffic of women and children in the international legal corpus something which in turn, required local governments to adopt marked abolitionist measures. Despite growing tensions between regulationist and abolitionist national committees, a first international convention was signed in 1910, according to which significant measures should be undertaken by the signatory states to adjust domestic laws, if necessary, to punish the procuring of girl under the age of 20, even if the victims gave consent, and the procuring of any women by force or fraud. These acts would be criminal even if committed across national borders and would be extraditable. After the First World War, the lead of the battle against the international traffic in women and children was taken up by the League of Nations.

### **8.3 Social Purity in Egypt: The Egyptian IBS Committee**

A number of British purity movements, charity associations and religious groups were active in Cairo at the turn of the twentieth century, the most prominent among which were the Egyptian branch of the International Bureau for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children led by the NVA. The Egyptian committee of the IBS was made up by three sections, Alexandria, Cairo and Port Said. The first one was set up in Alexandria in 1904, when Coote, Secretary of the British NVA, founded the Alexandria Committee for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women in collaboration with Baron Jacques de Menasce, a prominent member of the local Jewish community. Government authorities granted annual subsidies to the IBS Committee, which was formed by member of the foreign and minority communities

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guise, with delegates co-opted from the national committees. The British National Committee was composed of two delegates from each of twenty social purity, religious and women's associations."

but no Egyptians. Donations were nonetheless vital. The differences in approaches and methods existing between the NVA and feminist inspired groups active in the country, resulted, as we shall see, in growing tensions in time. Feminist groups, such as the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene (hence AMSH, new denomination of the Ladies' National Association after 1915), being concerned with the existence of a double standard of morality granting men freedom of agency while degrading and repressing women, were for more radical change and social criticism and had clear abolitionist goals. Purity groups instead were primarily concerned with the enforcement of more rigorous standard of morality and decency, through repression and coercion if necessary. To what pertained regulationism in a colonial setting, purity activists from the NVA thought that abolitionism should be brought about very gradually, as Egypt was not advanced enough to apply successful abolitionist politics, thus eclipsing the inherent contradiction between their anti-racket agenda and the existence of a regulationist system ordinarily supplied by the international traffic.

Purity movements played a vital role in buttressing the colonial enterprise. As Margot Badran rightly observed, hindered as they were by the Capitulation, British authorities “welcomed cooperation with private anti-white slavery organizations”<sup>395</sup> and were much more benevolent toward them than abolitionist feminist groups calling for legal deregulation of prostitution. The hard abolitionist front was made up by international and local feminists and evangelical groups – such as the American United Presbyterian Mission, the Scotch Mission, the Church Missionary Society, the

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<sup>395</sup> Badran, *Op. Cit.*, p. 200.

British and Foreign Bible Society and the American Bible Society. Missionary groups in particular were active on the ground and devoted their efforts not only to the evangelization of Muslims and Copts, but also to the moral edification and uplifting of imperial troops stationed in Cairo by organizing musical evenings, lectures, Gospel addresses and by distributing religious tracts.<sup>396</sup>

Such contradictions are well illustrated by the polemic ignited by the arrival in Cairo of Miss Higson, an activist from the NVA with Butlerian leanings, invited to lecture about abolitionism in the country.<sup>397</sup> Mr Sempkin, at that time General Secretary of the British NVA, was alarmed. According to him, a too aggressively abolitionist stance could well have led to rapid disintegration of all the work done in Egypt. If the closing down of regulated brothels in the country was certainly the desired aim in the end, such objective had to be pursued gradually and with caution.<sup>398</sup> In other words, while every effort had to be undertaken to fight the

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<sup>396</sup> See *Blessed Be Egypt*, XV, no. 61, 1915, p. 9. *Blessed Be Egypt* was the bi-monthly publication of the Nile Mission Press from 1905. The Nile Mission Press was an independent mission with the object of publishing tracts, books and magazines spreading the Gospel Message. A.T. P. Upson the First Publishing Superintendent, strictly collaborated with the activists of the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene in campaigns of army's moralization.

<sup>397</sup> Women's Library, 4/IBS/6/024 - Letter of Miss McCall to Mr F. Sempkin, 10 March 1930. The reaction of local press to the lectures was totally negative: "the 'Egyptian Gazette' published a leader on Miss Higson and the International Bureau saying that while they agreed with our efforts to suppress traffic in women they thought there was considerable doubt as to the desirability of introducing abolition (advocated by Higson and by a petition to the government drawn up by the Central Government last week) and they deprecated her appeal for an equal moral standard in a Moslem Country. Judge McBarnet thereupon wrote a stinger, and the next day Judge Booth also signed a letter drawn up by Miss Higson and myself. This called forth another leader, the gist of which is that it is not an unmarried woman's job to talk about chastity and that she is the object of ridicule in the eyes of Moslem and that to insist upon doing so only takes away from the good work done by the International Bureau". Judge Booth was the President of the IBS Cairo Committee. Judge McBarnett was a member of the Mixed Court of Appeal, and President of the IBS Alexandria Committee.

<sup>398</sup> Women's Library, 4/IBS/6/025 - Mr Sempkin, NVA, to Judge McBarnett, Villa Rowlett, Bulkeley, Cairo, 29<sup>th</sup> of May, 1930. Letter of Mr Sepkin, NVA, to Judge Booth, Cairo, 28<sup>th</sup> of November 1930, where he says that it would be better to focus on stopping the traffic than on abolitionism: "You cannot go to people who are by training and early influence regulationists and expect them to do any good by the simple process of telling them that they are nasty minded people and that they must agree with you".

international traffic and the influx of European sex workers in the country, Egyptian sex work had to be regulated by the State for sanitary and public order considerations, provided that all brothels should be made out of bond for British and imperial troops, so that to ensure complete lack segregation and lack of contact between the military and prostitutes. This view clearly reposed on the racist assumption that prostitution, sexual looseness and vice were natural traits of heathen uncivilized native society. As Philippa Levine points out, “shame was allegedly absent in colonial cultures, normalizing prostitution in “degraded’ society”. This notion was essential to the way in which British colonial authorities commented on native sex work, seen as an evidence of the natural inferiority of colonized people, legitimizing regulationist legislation which would not be condoned in the domestic context”.<sup>399</sup>

In 1925, the IBS branches of Alexandria, Cairo and Port Said were organized into a joint national committee with the aim of strengthening the association’s propaganda efforts, enhance the staff and facilitate communication with local authorities and the public at large. In 1928, Miss Cecily McCall was hired as Organizing Secretary for the IBS Egyptian Federation. Later to become famous as the first female psychiatric social worker in Britain and author of a number of tracts on social work with female convicts based on her experience in the Holloway prison of London, McCall was a graduate of St Hughes’ College, Oxford, with secretarial training. She had spent eighteenth months in Poland as English tutor and lady companion of the wife and children of a Polish prince and had spent some time in

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<sup>399</sup> See Philippa Levine, ““A Multitude of Unchaste Women’: Prostitution in the British Empire” in *Journal of Women’s History*, 15, no.4, 2004: pp. 159-63.

India, being “therefore used to those climates and to the difficulties of a non-European population”.<sup>400</sup> After lengthy discussions about her salary and the training she wanted to take at the Josephine Butler Memorial House of Liverpool, which Mr Sempkins, then Secretary of the British NVA, decidedly opposed because of the “excessive feminism” of the institution, she eventually left for Egypt on the 19 of January 1928, reaching Alexandria towards the end of the month. McCall took on her tasks with the outmost enthusiasm and dedication, doing her best to reorganize the activities of the Egyptian committee. Miss McCall’s secretariat signalled the period of most fervent activism in Cairo and in the whole country. She toured the philanthropic organizations specialized in rescue work with street woman to gather more information about their activities in Alexandria, Port Said and Isma‘iliyyah, visited the Cairo Lock Hospital, the venereal wards where registered prostitutes were examined weekly and the female penitentiary to spread information about the IBS among sex workers, collaborated with British law enforcement authorities, worked on the project for the appointment of women police officer in duty in the Alexandria port and reorganized the refuge the IBS run in Cairo, called Bayt ‘Arabi. She also made frequent visits to the red-light district of Cairo leaving rich reports about the prostitution milieu:

I took up work in the night in order to get a better knowledge of the places where these wretched creatures are taken. ... There are also some men working as acrobats who make ten- or twelve-year-old children going around begging in bars. I stopped one in front of the Eden Palace Hotel thirty minutes past midnight and I told her that, had she been found in a public place again, she would be arrested. In the same street, I came across a nine-year-old child who gave me her servant licence (roska, Arabic *rukhsah*), but she was in the

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<sup>400</sup> Women’s Library, 4/IBS/6/023 - From Miss McCall’s application letter, 16.10.1927.

street bawling out to passer-byes. ... One night we made all the girls of the Manchester Bar, who were out in the streets calling out at customers, going inside. Next to the bar, there's a public brothel, in front of which four women were seated. We asked them to go inside, and they did so, except the brothel keeper's sister, who refused and would shamelessly grab the passer-byes by their arms. I called an agent and the woman was taken to the Police Station where she spent the night and paid a 50 piastres fine. We visited the brothel-district as well, but all the women seemed to be of age. ... Visiting Giza and Gezira, on the shores of the Nile, I saw that the task is hard, as difficulties are plenty. In front of the Semiramis, small boats have to be carefully watched over, as it often happens that isolated couples haul offshore and many of these girls are very very young.<sup>401</sup>

Growing tensions within the Egyptian IBS, in particular the conservatism of the Alexandrian committee, its regulationist stance and overt hostility towards young and energetic Miss McCall, eventually led her to resign at the end of 1930. As she explained in words imbricated with frustration, racism and contempt:

and so I have come to the conclusion they better get someone else out whose enthusiasm is not in the battered condition as mine is in, and if they keep on getting out new secretaries every two years or so, they may be able to keep the thing going. More than two years turn you either into a passive cynic or a lunatic. The practical work is bad enough in a country like this where you are dealing largely with the dregs of the Levant- girls who should have been drowned at birth and men whose mothers should have been drowned no to speak of their father.<sup>402</sup>

After Miss McCall's resignation, Mr Sempkin made a trip to Egypt in order to ascertain the moribund situation of the Egyptian committee, take stock of the advancement of pro-abolitionist propaganda in the country and see for the reorganization of preventive and rescue work. Despite McCall's efforts, the situation in Alexandria was highly problematic. A newly founded Ladies' Committee had

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<sup>401</sup> Women's Library, 4/IBS/6/044.

<sup>402</sup> Women's Library, 4/IBS/6/025 - Miss Cicely McCall to Mr Sempkin, Oct 8<sup>th</sup> 1930.

opened a refuge with no clear operative strategy nor organization. As to the Cairo Refuge, the place struck Mr Sempkins for being utterly mismanaged. As Mr Sempkins explained, the main reason for the success of the refuge in previous years had been the thorough support of *Bimbashi* Major Tegg, a Cairo police officer who had provided many of the prostitute inmates:

his methods are perhaps unorthodox but are decidedly helpful. Since the squabbles started in the Committee in Cairo, the Police have ceased to interest themselves greatly in the Refuge, and without the assistance of the police only an exceptional worker would ever get girls as inmates. Major Tegg, out of sheer kindness, had put in a number of more or less respectably married women with their children pending their deportation to England, but when I was there the Refuge was not doing what it was designed to.<sup>403</sup>

The Cairo IBS Refuge was reorganized in May 1935 and reopened at 36, Shari‘ Madbuli, ‘Abdin. It contained 18 beds in charge of a matron. The purpose of the institution was twofold: preventing needy girls to fall into bad ways and rescuing those who had been forced into a life of vice. Girls were taught domestic work such as cooking and sewing, and a job was found for them whenever possible. As shown by the IBS Report of 1937<sup>404</sup>, during that year, 109 women had been helped by the Refuge, the majority of them local Jews with no definite nationality, Egyptian and foreign subjects: British, Austrian, Swiss, Armenian, Greek, French, Italian, Syrian, Russian, Yugoslavian, and Czechoslovakian. Boarders were almost with no exception unmarried mothers who were brought with their children to the refuge by the police for safety. They would normally stay until some kind of income-generating activity could be found for them to provide for themselves and their

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<sup>403</sup> Women’s Library, 4/IBS/6/025.

<sup>404</sup> Women’s Library, 4/IBS/6/041.



babies and they were given medical assistance if necessary. With regard to the fight against licensed and clandestine sex work and despite the initial optimism, the management of the hostel did not improve in any significant way. Sex workers kept avoiding voluntary entry in the refuge with the purpose of reformation. With the advent of the Second World War, the whole abolitionist campaign came to a halt in the country. As Miss Devonshire, outside worker of the IBS Cairo refuge at the time, wrote in a confidential letter to Mr Sempkin, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March 1939:

The Government can think of nothing but Defence and it is quite possible that the Grant may be cut down this year. Bribery and corruption are rapidly getting worse and the new Bureau Des Moeurs leads the way in this respect. So what can be the use of passing resolutions or discussing methods of dealing with these ghastly problems? The women here are little better than animals and will certainly not avail themselves of free V.D. clinics even if these are provided. Our present Committee is so disinterested that no meeting was held before the Annual Meeting!! Only immediately after it, Matron and I asked for six weeks what precautions the Committee wished us to take for the safety of the girls in the Hostels and were told that we should probably close down altogether, and that in any case the girls would have to be evacuated!! We were not told what place we should take them!!<sup>405</sup>

#### **8.4 The IBS Refuge in Cairo**

Despite the huge organizational problems, the IBS Refuge was nonetheless the sole institution of its kind in Cairo from 1920 to 1939. It collaborated with foreign consulates, religious authorities and other philanthropic and charitable associations, which signalled cases they were aware of for internment in ther. The refuge was presided over an organizing committee made up by prominent members of the British expatriate community only. They relied mainly on subscriptions and

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<sup>405</sup> *Ibid.*

donations by privates. The centre was staffed by an organizing secretary and external worker, who did the administrative job, fund-raising, liaising with local Egyptian and British authorities, monitoring the situation on the ground, and a matron, who worked inside the house and supervised the girls through their daily chores.

From 1920 to 1929, the refuge was situated in an old house called Bait ‘Arabi. Following the creation of the joint committee in 1929, it was transferred to ‘Atfat-Fayruz 3 in an old Turkish house, opening into a the *salamlik*, with airy rooms with painted ceilings and a shuttered veranda, the former *harim*, on the first floor. It could accommodate twenty or thirty girls. Who were the girls and woman accommodated in the refuge? The Cairo IBS Refuge Reports I am referring to in this section give a glimpse not only of the sociological profiles of the hostel inmates, but also on the daily regimes, on the relation between moral reform and material realities of the refuge and the impact of moral discipline over inmates who in some cases conformed to the ideology of moral regeneration, in other cases did not and claimed their right to alternative autonomous choices.

As said, collaboration with local law enforcement authorities was essential to recruit inmates for the refuge. The outside worker attended medical inspections rooms where professional prostitutes were periodically screened, so that the girls knew that they could be helped in case they wished to change their life and apply voluntarily for entry in the refuge. Thanks to an agreement with Cairo police, a licensed prostitute could voluntarily enter the Refuge and stay there for a probation period of three months. If she “repented” at the end of this period and proved to be

ready to lead a decent life, her name would be struck off the registration list.<sup>406</sup> An interesting case was that of a Greek woman of 32 years, who migrated from Greece at the service of a family. After a while she found herself alone and with no means of subsistence and started working as licensed prostitute. She plied the trade for twelve years, during which she gave birth to 4 children, of which only one, now aged five, survived. Due to the life she led, she got seriously ill and she had to undergo a number of operations. Upon being discharged from the hospital she heard of the refuge and applied for admission: “She seems to be very determined to change her life and she makes a very good example for the other inmates”.<sup>407</sup>

The mission of the hostel was rescue and reform. Reintegration of inmates into society in the guise of decent and morally uplifted industrious women was sought, as the first aim of the institution was restore “fallen women” to conform femininity. Prostitutes were considered by purity activists as idle and indolent:

Three months, of course can't change a prostitute which has led an idle, sordid life of abjection into a hardworking independent woman. They lack self-reliance and self-respect, apart very often from complete lack of training or education. But three months is the minimum time limit in such cases, but as a rule they stay longer, sometimes leaving to go back to their relations, sometimes getting married, and sometimes taking posts as servants, dress-makers or shop girls. We keep in touch with them as far as possible, and, in spite of the disheartening and inevitable failures,

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<sup>406</sup> Women's Library, IBS Report of Cases December 1928. No. 1050 - French, 36 years old. This woman turned to us willing to leave the public houses and entering the Refuge. The Police has been informed and agreed on the woman staying with us for a period of 3 months. After that period, if her conduct is satisfying, we'll find her a job. Women's Library, IBS Report of Cases January 1929. No. 1056 - Italian, 40 years. She has been working as prostitute and brothel keeper for the past 9 years. She is willing to find a job. She will stay in the refuge for 3 months. After that, if her conduct is satisfying, her name will be struck out the registration lists. Women's Library, IBS Report of Cases February 1929. No. 1063 - Rumanian Jew, 31 years old prostitute in the past 4 years. Now she desires to work and leave the Ezbekiyya. With the police authorization she can leave the segregated area and go to Helouan for three weeks with her sister. Once back, she will enter the Refuge.

<sup>407</sup> Women's Library, IBS - Report of Cases February 1928, case no. 1017.

we have had enough success to prove it is well worth the constant effect and patience involved.<sup>408</sup>

Attracting professional prostitutes proved no easy task, though, as the vast majority of them had no interest in middle-class authoritarian moral reform. The majority of inmates were thus not professional sex workers though, but women in distress,

unmarried mothers who stay a few nights or a few weeks until better accommodation can be found for the baby and work for the mother; and we have destitute women whom, owing to their character of for some other reason, no other charitable institution will take in and who, but for us, would die in the gutter. Some can pay a few piastres, but the great majority are housed and fed free, and employment found for them as soon as they are fit.<sup>409</sup>

Some were widows with no source of income such as Mrs Foley, a Maltese whose husband died in the collapse of their house in Bulaq and was left with two children, with no job and very poor health<sup>410</sup>, or Mrs Philippine Borrell, a 50-year-old Greek, widow of an Englishman and a refugee from Smyrna, disabled, who lived with her sister on the very poor allowance paid by the Ottoman bank, former employer of her husband.<sup>411</sup> Other cases were constituted by girls coming from disrupted families. Miss Walker was a British girl of 15, whose mother divorced from her father. After her father left for the Sinai, she run away and did not want to live with her legitimate mother anymore.<sup>412</sup> There was an Irish-Egyptian girl of 14, whose parents divorced when she was 7. At the age of 9, her father wanted to have her married. The mother then arranged for her to flee to England, where she spent 18

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<sup>408</sup> Women's Library, 4/IBS/6/024 - "Vigilance Record", March-April 1929, Egyptian National Committee.

<sup>409</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>410</sup> Women's Library, IBS Monthly Report April 1924, case no. 748.

<sup>411</sup> Women's Library, IBS Monthly Report April 1924, case no. 750.

<sup>412</sup> Women's Library, IBS Monthly Report April 1924, case no. 747.

months in a convent. Back to Cairo, she was shunted from one place to another until she escaped from her mother's custody and took refuge at her father's Syrian mistress. Eventually she was found in the Bezenzan convent, before being taken to the IBS hostel. After medical examination, it turned out that the father had abused her. The father had been found and arrested in Alexandria.<sup>413</sup> Many inmates were abandoned women with children: Mary Williams was a Greek milliner married to an Englishman. She had been abandoned with a 5-year-old child in very bad financial conditions.<sup>414</sup> Deborah Perlmann was a 28-year-old Palestinian Jew married to an Alexandrian Cook dragoman. She had already been at the Refuge, when she was hosted with the child she had from a previous relationship. In 1925 she was taken in again as her husband, a dope addicted, sold all her belongings to raise money. She left with their 18-month-old child – who was later to be entrusted to a family – and asked the Refuge for help. The refuge staff tried to find her a job as health-care worker, as she had some experience in the sector.<sup>415</sup> In some cases, the Refuge staff also provided tricked women with legal advice. An exemplary case was that of Rifka Friedmann and her little daughter Bertha: “extremely ugly and very sickly”, Rifka, married Friedmann with a dowry of 300 pounds. Her husband went through the money and left her. She followed him with the baby to Cairo where he threatened to leave her again. The woman turned to the IBS refuge for help and Mrs Altman, then matron in charge, signalled the case to the Rabbinate, which, in turn, advised the Permit Office and Cairo police not to issue the man a passport.<sup>416</sup> Where possible,

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<sup>413</sup> Women's Library, IBS Monthly Report February 1929, case no. 1061.

<sup>414</sup> Women's Library, IBS Monthly Report May 1925, case no. 838.

<sup>415</sup> Women's Library, IBS Monthly Report May 1925, case no. 189.

<sup>416</sup> Women's Library, IBS Monthly Report June 1925, case no. 842-3.

foreign women, who were clearly the majority given the fact that only Capitulary citizens could be dealt with under the existing Capitulary legislation, were repatriated. Typical was the case, among many others, of an English girl of 21 who had been forced into prostitution by her Egyptian husband. He had deceived her by telling her to be a wealthy aristocrat but, once they arrived in Cairo, things turned out to be much different. She was forced to prostitute herself, battered and threatened. One day she went to the hospital to be medicated and met a policeman, she recurred to in search for help. He brought her to the *Caracol* and hence she was transferred to the Refuge, where steps were taken for her repatriation.<sup>417</sup>

A specific action was preventing the entering of young girls into prostitution. Specific cases were thus monitored by the Refuge social workers in collaboration with police authorities. Rose and Ida Artiniou, two Armenian cousins aged 20 and 16 respectively, waitresses in the Devonshire Bar, were given hospitality in Bayt ‘Arabi, and helped in finding a job outside the nightclubs of the Azbakiyyah.<sup>418</sup> Elene Cassarou, waitress in a bar, supported her crippled father. The Refuge staff tried to get some help for the father, so that the girl could move to Bayt ‘Arabi and being trained into some kind of income-generating activity.<sup>419</sup> An 11-year-old British girl had been reported singing and dancing for the troops in various bars of the Azbakiyyah. Investigations revealed that the child was daughter of an Englishman, who had left his family, and a Russian Jew. Her mother was terminally ill and the children were entrusted to her maternal aunt, a shady figure said to be owner of a

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<sup>417</sup> Women’s Library, IBS Monthly Report January 1928, case no. 104.

<sup>418</sup> Women’s Library, IBS Monthly Report April 1924, case no. 743-44.

<sup>419</sup> Women’s Library, IBS Monthly Report April 1924, case no. 746.

brothel in Salonika. The consulate eventually took steps to remove the child from her aunt's custody. When the girl was finally taken by the police and brought to the refuge, it was found that her passport has been tampered by her relative in order to transfer her to Greece.<sup>420</sup> Julia was a 19-year-old Syrian Jew who had left with her *souteneur*, an Egyptian, who kept her in one of his two *dahabiyyahs* on the Nile. The man was wanted by the police, for being the owner of *dahabiyyahs* and a clandestine brothel in town and for living on the prostitution of a number of girls, included minors. Julia's mother, an artist, sought the help of the refuge to find her daughter. She was found by the police together with the man and put in the Refuge awaiting for the trial to take place. As X-ray examination conducted by the police demonstrated that she was not a minor, as argued by her mother, she was released and free to go away with her pimp.<sup>421</sup> Another 19-year-old Romanian Jew was found in a house of ill-fame managed by a woman who claimed to be her half-sister. The girl asked to be helped and was brought to the refuge but her "sister" was determined to get her back as there was no consular ordinance.<sup>422</sup>

An Italian woman, and a mother of two, had asked to be taken into the refuge together with her daughters of 21 e 18 respectively. She was married to an unemployed cabdriver, who beat her and the girls. One daughter had already left the family to go into prostitution, while the other was about to do so.<sup>423</sup> The woman asked the refuge to host her and her daughters until they would be able to find a decent occupation.

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<sup>420</sup> Women's Library, IBS Rapport Des Cas Fevrier 1928, no number.

<sup>421</sup> Women's Library, IBS Report of Cases February 1929, case no. 1059.

<sup>422</sup> Women's Library, IBS Report of Cases March 1929, case no. 1067.

<sup>423</sup> Women's Library, IBS Report of Cases February 1929, no number.

Some women were signalled to the institution by the police, to whom they were known for some offence, not only sexual, as in the case of Helen Frankfurter, a 24-year-old Swiss. Married to a local, she carried on with other men and threw vitriol at her husband's face. She was in prison when she was taken to the Refuge's staff attention.<sup>424</sup> Another typical case was that of Dawlet Ahmed Yusuf, a 10-year-old Egyptian child from Alexandria living with a male cousin in Bab-al-Shar'iyyah. Placed in service, she had been accused of stealing and sent by the *Caracol* to the juvenile court in 'Abdin. The Parquet had declassified her case but disposed for her admission in an orphanage. Refused by a couple of institutions, she had entered the IBS Refuge, where she had stayed 20 days before escaping one night with the house key, several garments and 140 Egyptian pounds in money.<sup>425</sup>

In the refuge, the daily routine was relentless and purposefully designed to keep girls ever-busy. The institution was completely dependent on the inmates' work: they cleaned, washed, cooked and did needlework. Inmates were given classes by voluntary outside teachers in handicrafts, physical exercise, dancing, writing and French, the language of the Refuge together with colloquial Arabic. This schedule applied to younger inmates only, who, unlike older women, were never allowed out alone, and therefore need to have no spare time. Immorality was equalled to laziness. Hard work was thought to be uplifting and purifying. In other words, women could expiate their previous misdeeds by turning into efficient workers. Immorality was seen as a function of sin, not poverty as implied in these statements by Cecily

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<sup>424</sup> Women's Library, IBS Monthly Report April 1924, case no. 751.

<sup>425</sup> Women's Library, IBS Report of Work, June 1925, case no. 846.



McCall, Organizing Secretary from 1928 to 1930, which nicely reveal the punitive disposition lying behind the rhetoric of female solidarity:

first, about Margaret Nassoughli. I don't think there is anything at present that you can do in the matter, thanks very much. We have no funds to send her to England. It is a very curious case because the girl persists in wanting to go back to her father, sometimes saying so openly, sometimes objecting to every other plan. I think myself there is a young man somewhere in the offing too. Your idea of marrying her off strikes me as flippant in the extreme, and callous of the welfare of your sex! The girl is barely 16, very lazy, and unwilling, untrained, and apparently incapable of doing needlework, housework, cooking or looking after children. She has no other gifts, or more accurately, no gifts. Her one desire is to spend money on clothes, whose money does not interest her.<sup>426</sup>

Life of resident women was carefully organized and cadenced, the underlying principle being that of domesticating and civilizing idle women and transforming them into submissive and obedient servants. Once inmates proved to have thoroughly interiorized the discipline and being regenerated, they were reintegrated into society: they were given an occupation (milliner, shop assistant, embroiderer, cook, maid) and in some case a marriage was arranged. The hostel developed a system of strategies of moral regulation that ranged from incarceration to training and education. Emphasis was placed on the concept of “gentility”, defined as those qualities connoting a refined and appropriate middle-class femininity. Classes of French and dance were not finalized in turning boarders into “ladies”, something that was completely at odds with the institution’s purposes, but socializing them in the values associated with being a lady, in order to make them disciplined and reliable servants. A class-specific definition of working-class femininity was thus engineered

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<sup>426</sup>Women’s Library, 4/IBS/6/024 - From a letter of Miss McCall to Mr Sempkin, NVA, May 17<sup>th</sup> 1929.

in the Refuge, based on hard work and deference to middle-class authority. Philanthropy was far from being an innocuous project, on the contrary it was inherently authoritarian and conservative, as it reinforced and reproduced a social hierarchy based on the subordination of working women. The desire to “save” and protect working-class women betrayed a deeper will of controlling them, by correcting what were perceived as subversive sexual and vocational behaviours.

Coercion was thus an integral part of the strategy of moral regulation put in place in the hostel. Active cooperation from the inmates to conform to the disciplinary standards requested was certainly hoped but confinement was enforced on rebellious girls where necessary. Extreme cases were sent back to their families. Marie Cohen, a Jew, had been taken into refuge after 5 weeks in the lock hospital. She was found a job, but she left it after 5 days. She was forced to go back to Alexandria after the matron had to guard her for a whole night in a locked room and was formally prohibited by the police to go back to Cairo.<sup>427</sup> Overt rebellion was not unusual as inmates did not necessarily agree with the project of human regeneration they were subjected to. Two Armenian girls aged 16 and 17 from Smyrna, for example, had been brought from the red-light district to the hostel, one of them 2 month-pregnant. They stayed in the hostel one night, and the intervention of the police was necessary to prevent their escape. They slept dressed up and tried to leave the hostel at night by climbing the walls. It was necessary to lock them up and guard them until the arrival of a police officer succeeded in calming them down. They were

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<sup>427</sup> Women’s Library, IBS Report of Cases May 1925, case no. 73.

then transferred to a pension owned by a Syrian but kept under strict control.<sup>428</sup> A 25-year-old Palestinian Jew married to an Egyptian was brought in by the police but did not want to stay. She threatened to kill herself and was left free to go back to her husband and pimp.<sup>429</sup> Sometimes, the epilogue was more dramatic, though. In January 1928, a Refuge inmate, 14-year-old Greek Irene Capsis, committed suicide throwing herself out of the window. According to the matron, she could not live with the moral stigma of her own and her sisters' lives – they were all prostitutes – and was so weak and spiritless she could not see any way out. The matron's lapidary comment following the case was that "they were very sorry for her. The only consolation was that the post-mortem examination had ascertained that her internal organs were almost completely destroyed by the kind of life that her father had forced her to lead" and so she would not have survived long any way.<sup>430</sup>

### **8.5 The Work of the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene in Egypt**

Another important movement working in Egypt with prostitutes was the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene (AMSH) which exemplified the radical feminist stance.

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<sup>428</sup> Women's Library, IBS Report of Cases March 1929, cases no. 1065 and 1066.

<sup>429</sup> Women's Library, IBS Report of Cases February 1928, case no. 1020.

<sup>430</sup> Women's Library, IBS Report of Cases January 1928, case no. 967. In the same report is cited also a case no. 996, a resident in the hostel in September 1927 who "has been a good worker so far but she always has to be kept under strict control. She takes advantage of whatever circumstance to approach the men living nearby the refuge and after her friend Irene's death she threatens to follow her example. She also went up to the terrace, threatening to turn her plan into action. We don't believe she really wanted to do so, but in order to avoid further tragedy we decided to entrust the case to the Greek Consulate, with the hope that they will be able to find a place for her at the Bonne Pasteur. Meanwhile, our Consul informed us that she has been entrusted to a Greek family. We hope for the best".

The ASMH was created in 1915, as a result of the merger of the Ladies' National Association founded by Josephine Butler and the Internationalist Abolitionist Federation. It was a gender equality pressure group whose objectives were promoting in the public opinion, in the legislative corpus and in social practice a high standard of morality and sexual responsibility in woman and man, bringing to halt State regulation of prostitution, punishing third-party profiteering and proposing health and public order legislation with the aim of combating any form of discrimination within society. The ultimate goals of the Association were the promotion of administrative, sanitary, educational reforms bringing about the highest individual and collective morality. The AMSH was based on social justice, equality of all classes before the law and a single moral standard for men and women. Feminists were obviously against state regulation of prostitution, which saw as a blatant violation of women's rights, as disadvantaged women were turned into social outcasts whose bodies were accessible to male control and harassment, whether by clients, magistrates, police or medical officers. Differently from purity movements, feminists established a relationship between poverty and prostitution, more than sin and morality, was seen as a function of economics. The kind of rhetoric they used to talk about the women prostitutes they wanted to rescue and rehabilitate shifted in complex and subtle ways. As Walkowitz aptly described, their reference to motherhood to qualify the relationship between middle-class mature respectable social workers and prostitutes "was a political device: aimed at subverting and superseding patriarchal authority, it gave mothers, and not fathers, the right to control sexual access to their daughters". In this way it was "sanctioned an authority

relationship between older middle-class woman and young working woman that, although caring and protective, was also hierarchical and custodial”.<sup>431</sup> In other cases, an image of sisterhood was used, and prostitutes were seen as “sisters”, albeit “fallen”, whose rights and agency had to be respected. Nonetheless, feminism was informed by a fundamental belief in its civilizational mission, and when “fallen women” were not cooperative and opposed rescue and reform, feminism did not hesitate to show its authoritarian face.

In 1931 Miss Louise Dorothy Potter was sent by the ASMH to Egypt with the task of carrying on quiet educational work toward the abolition of licensed prostitution. In fact the action of Miss Potter was far from “quiet” as she constituted the most radical and daring abolitionist social worker in the country. She published a small booklet entitled *Egypt awakening! Is it true?* Its front page showed a picture of the famous statue by Mahmud Mukhtar entitled “Egypt’s Awakening” and representing an Egyptian *fallahah*, peasant woman, standing on top of a Sphinx, a plastic rendition of the formulation of Egyptian national identity given by local modernist nationalist elites. The leaflet tackled the topic of Egyptian prostitution and called for its abolition, as a much needed measure to safeguard civic order and public health and, more broadly, as an integral part of the Egyptian process of modernization and civilization: “it is opposed to the trend of modern civilization, i.e. the same moral standard for men and women, which is the aim of every civilized society”.<sup>432</sup> Potter summarized the arguments in favour of regulationism, that is, the public order one – concentrated vice is more easy to control – and the sanitary one –

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<sup>431</sup> Walkowitz, *Op. Cit.*, p. 117.

<sup>432</sup> Potter, *Egypt’s awakening? Is it true?* p. 5.

spread of venereal diseases can be checked where prostitutes are registered and subjected to medical examinations – showing how they were confuted by sheer evidence in Egypt. She stated that, on the contrary, regulationism was harmful in the extreme as it stood “in the way of the provisions of efficient centres for the treatment of venereal disease”, gave legal sanction to corruption. Vice, she added, encouraged debauchery among the population and supported the international traffic in women and children<sup>433</sup>. In the face of these facts, Potter suggested the education of public opinion on matters of sex and morality, propaganda on venereal disease, the creation of a network of up-to-date clinics for the free and confidential treatment of both sexes, and a strong legislation against third-party profiteering and exploitation of others’ immorality.<sup>434</sup>

These proposals were put into practice by the experimental project of abolition of licensed prostitution that the AMSH carried through under the supervision of Miss Potter in 1932 in Damanhur.<sup>435</sup> There were 55 registered women in town, all Egyptians and the majority coming from the Alexandria area. They worked in 18 licensed brothels, 2 or 3 of the better type, the rest very squalid, but, according to local police, there were probably twice or 3 times as many secret houses. Abolition was not expected to eliminate prostitution altogether, of course, but to pave the way for correct educational, social and legal measures, encouraging a better standard of morality for men and women. The closing down of town brothels, thus, was accompanied by educational efforts and the expansion of existing facilities for the

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<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>434</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>435</sup> Women’s Library, 4/IBS/6/038.

treatment of venereal diseases. Propaganda efforts included the issuing of posters and pamphlets on the dangers of syphilis which were disseminated in all hospitals, clinics, chemists, shops, outside walls and police stations, and lectures. The educational effort, was argued, produced an increase of the number of people who voluntarily went to the clinics to seek treatment against sexually transmitted diseases. Nonetheless, a fundamental question to be addressed was obviously that of the rehabilitation of former sex workers as one of the key element of the abolitionist doctrine was the marginalization and victimization of these specific class of women which was gender and class based. According to Louise Potter in fact, the economic motif lied at the bottom of prostitution:

a large proportion of the women in the houses in Damanhur had, according to their own accounts, their own or relatives' children depending on them or old parents. ... Some were obviously too lazy to work, but many others would, I believe, have taken work in the first place, if they could have found any sufficiently well paid. Women are therefore driven into prostitution to keep themselves and their families. It is almost impossible to find work for women when one wants to help them. A few years of the life of prostitution usually render such a woman flabby and unfit for work, though earlier she might have been saved.<sup>436</sup>

After the closing down of the houses, a large number of prostitutes transferred to brothels in other towns or entered the clandestine sector that is, remained in the trade. This was in part due to the fact that the abolitionist project was local only, but it also reflects the reluctance of women to abandon the trade for lack of occupational alternatives:

of the seven or eight women who remained in Damanhur, three married, two or three are selling in the street, having given money to start by the municipality, two were put in hospital for sometime

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<sup>436</sup> *Ibid.*

as being unfit, but did not stay, and one has not responded to help given.<sup>437</sup>

The women were offered a refuge but the majority decided not to avail themselves of it. This led Potter to address specifically the issue of a comprehensive scheme for former sex workers. Although she stated that prostitutes could not be forced to accept any help, she devised a very strict rehabilitative programme where women had to be all interviewed and classified before being divided into three categories: young, fit and attractive women could have been put in a refuge, taught some work and eventually re-married. Other young girls should be in training houses or given industrial training: “Government departments might send in their washing, or giving order for making articles. Some could go out and earn as workers or servants”.<sup>438</sup> Older women should have been put in a refuge to end their days there. Although sociological analysis of vulnerable female economic roles was an integral part of feminist elaboration on the problem of prostitution and feminist activists genuinely felt for the women they wanted to “save”, they had difficulties in acknowledging the full rationality and agency of those women who did not want to conform: the custodial approach was thus prevailing.

## **8.6 Egyptian Feminism and the Struggle against Prostitution**

This last section will deal with the complex and increasingly antagonistic relationship existing between imperial reformers and local feminists. Egyptian gender activists, organized in the Egyptian Feminist Union founded by Huda

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<sup>437</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>438</sup> *Ibid.*



Sha‘rawi in 1923 took up their fight against state-licensed prostitution, which was both feminist and nationalist, in the 1920s. In 1923 an EFU delegation attended the International Alliance for Women’s Suffrage (hence IAW) in Rome, where abolition of state-licensed prostitution and contrast of the international sex trade were high on the agenda. The core contradiction Egyptian feminists found them caught in was in fact being fighting for gendered equity between men and women in society, while being clearly relegated to a marginalized and subaltern position by an international feminist movement that was part and parcel of the colonial project. This explains why Egyptian feminist increasingly worked first toward the creation of a variegated abolitionist front rooted in local Egyptian civil society – for example by networking with al-Azhar religious authorities who were deemed important to mobilize public opinion – and secondly for a broader nationalist campaign to end up Capitulations. As Badran explains,

Egyptian feminists abhorred Capitulations, not only for “protecting” foreign prostitution but also as an odious infringement upon Egyptian sovereignty sustaining inequalities between citizens and Westerners.<sup>439</sup>

It was not possible, it was argued, to combat the double moral and sexual standard and class inequalities, while the Egyptian people was subjected to a discriminating corpus of law, favouring women’s exploitation and every kind of shady business. Huda Sha‘rawi first denounced the role Capitulations played in regulated vice and international women’s traffic in a 1924 IBS conference in Graz, Austria, where she asked Capitulary powers to abdicate to their powers and allow local authorities to close down establishments run by foreign nationals. Egyptian

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<sup>439</sup> Badran, *Op. Cit.* p. 199.

feminists were isolated not only in the IBS conferences, though, but also in the IAW forum, where no other feminist delegation came from a country where extraterritorial laws were in place. Activist Saizah Nabarawi asked the IAW congress in Paris in 1926 to take a resolution requiring Capitulatory powers to give Egyptian authorities legal competence over their nationals to facilitate prosecution of foreign traffickers and brothel keepers. The resolution remained dead letter. Egyptian feminists found cooperation in Cairo City Police Chief Russell Pasha, who furnished them with fresh data about thriving foreign sex work. He was opposed to Capitulations from a strictly technocratic public order-wise point of view. He did not get so far as openly lobbying in favour of Capitulations' repeal though, as this would mean anyway a diminishing of British influence in the country. In 1929, during the IAW Berlin Conference, thanks to vigorous pleading by Sha'rawi, Nabarawi and Mary Kahil, the assembly passed a resolution stating that Capitulatory power should smooth the way for the Egyptian government to control morality and public health, thus implicitly recognizing the interference of Capitulation. In 1930, Miss Higson, a member of the British NVA with a pronounced Butlerian outlook, toured the country to campaign in favour of abolitionism. She met with government officials, doctors, social workers, feminists, etc., and came to the conclusion that "the time has come when a definite step should be taken by the people of Egypt to convince the government that they demand the abolition of the State regulation of vice, by the closing of all licensed houses and the removal of the registration and medical examination of prostitutes". She eventually made a number of recommendations to the International Bureau for the Suppression of Traffic in Women and Children Central Committee, amongst

which the drafting of a bill to abolish all licensed houses and the registration and sanitary inspections of prostitution, the reform of the Criminal Code to include severe punishment of third party of either sex exploiting the immorality of others, protection of minors of both sexes, a general law protecting passers-by in streets from aggressive soliciting and punishment of sodomy. Miss Higson hoped also for the organization of a major educational work along three main lines: “education in simple social hygiene and an equal moral standard for men and women, education in social responsibility and the need for effective free treatment of venereal diseases combined with lectures on the same, education in the need for remedial work, to raise funds for the work of the Refuges, etc.”.<sup>440</sup>

The response from feminists was twofold: while Sha‘rawi signed Miss Higson’s petitions, Nabarawi took the chance to stress how, once again, the basic problem of Capitulation had not been addressed, thus condemning any effort to combat regulated prostitution in the country to be meaningless. A turning point was constituted by the IWA Conference of 1935 in Istanbul, whose theme was dialogue and cooperation between East and West, that is, in many cases, between colonized and imperial countries. In acknowledgment of the fact that international feminism had so far been very much a Western discourse, international committees were ready to sign a declaration that, for the first time, clearly individuated in Capitulatory legislation a limitation to national sovereignty, a permanent mark of inequality and call for their outright abolition. Margot Badran explains, nonetheless, how such position was once again the product of Western ethnocentrism: “it was around the

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<sup>440</sup> Women’s Library, 4/IBS/6/024 - Miss Higson’s Address to the Central Committee of Egypt February 25<sup>th</sup>, 1930.

issue of a wife's nationality<sup>441</sup>”, in fact, “ and not the issue of prostitution that after years of Egyptian persistence and IAW resistance, the international feminist body finally took a resolution against the Capitulations”.<sup>442</sup> In other words, it is important to note how the repeal of Capitulation reposed on the acknowledgment of a typical bourgeois issue, as that of nationality, and not on the protection of civic rights of subaltern working-class woman engaged in prostitution. In 1937 Capitulations were eventually abolished with a “transition period” of twelve years, until the 14<sup>th</sup> of October 1949. Egyptian feminists were now confident that the national government, free from foreign influence, would hasten to abolish prostitution. Their hopes were soon frustrated though. Egyptian authorities temporized and political and police authorities were unwilling to take active measures to combat prostitution. Egyptian feminists became then particularly prone towards collaboration with pro-abolitionist British activists. When the idea of the organization of an IBS congress in Egypt at the beginning of the 1940s, was launched in order to advance the cause of abolitionism in the country, Egyptian feminists were very much eager to give their support, as shown by the contacts between Huda Sha'rawi, Saizah Nabarawi and Muniah Sabet and Lady Nunburnholme of the British National Vigilance Association at the IAW conference of Copenhagen in 1939.<sup>443</sup> The proposal did not come forward due to the increasing disarray of the Egyptian IBS Committee, and the deterioration of the general political situation due to the beginning of the Second World War. It is true, though, that the existence of class and gendered prejudice and

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<sup>441</sup> Women marrying a foreigner had to give up their citizenship and take her husbands' ones. Feminists claimed that women had the right to choose and this was prejudicial to their individual rights.

<sup>442</sup> Badran, *Op. Cit.*, p. 203.

<sup>443</sup> Women's Library, 4/IBS/6/041 - Letter of Lady M. Nunburnholme to Mr Sempkins, July 20<sup>th</sup> 1939.

inequalities and the resilience of sexist and patriarchal mentality and sexual double standard, proved to be the real cause for the persisting of licensed regulation, even more than colonialism and neo-colonialism. Brothels were eventually closed down in 1949 by military decree, but only in 1953 State-regulated prostitution was outlawed as part of the comprehensive Nasserist reform to break with the liberal ancien régime.

## **8.7 Conclusions**

This chapter tried to shed light on the ways in which a specific group of marginal social actors in early twentieth century Cairo, European prostitutes and destitute working-class women, were managed and contained by imperial social purity and feminists groups. Starting as a metropolitan cultural paranoia in the 1870s, the notion of “White Slavery” came to play an important role in the power economy of the Empire. European prostitutes plying their trade in the colony represented the fear of the possible erosion of the “natural” colonizer-colonized divide and imperial racial superiority. Metropolitan purity movements and feminists active in the colony became vital allies of the colonial administration in trying to reinforce imperial bourgeois categories of morality and decorum by the articulation of a whole discourse and practice of “fallen women’s” social and ethic regeneration. As local feminist activists ventured to denounce in the course of their ambivalent relationship with the international feminist movement, the attempt at “moralizing” the Empire was not critical of the imperial power-balance: on the contrary both the puritan discourse and the more radical libertarian feminist one tried to revive and implement

the “civilizing mission” at the core of the imperial enterprise.

## 9

# Abolitionism

### 9.1 Introduction

During the 1920s, abolitionism became a prominent issue in the public discourse and was actively campaigned for by a number of civil society organizations. Nationalists, religious authorities, local feminists, British purity movements' advocates and colonial administrators, all joined their forces in supporting the cause of abolition of licensed prostitution. While liberal-bourgeois groups as the feminists led by Hudà Sha'arawi rejected licensed prostitution on the base of universalist human rights discourse, religious leaders were concerned with moral regeneration of correct Muslim practices as a resistance to westernization and degeneration of the Believers' community. Shaykh Mahmud Abu-al-'Uyyun fulminated against the danger of public vice from the pages of *al-Ahram* while State authorities decidedly put abolitionism on the political agenda and started to study proposals for the suppression of licensed prostitution. Interestingly enough, late Egyptian historian Yunan Labib Rizq pointed out that

in the 40 year period that extended from the British occupation – when, for the first time in Egypt, prostitution was codified and, therefore, legalised – to the Declaration of 28 February 1922 that recognised Egypt's national independence, prostitution never came under attack by proponents of the nationalist movement ... prostitution tended to be viewed as one of those bitter facts of life that only occasionally surfaced in the context of discussions of the

social ills that befell Egypt under the British occupation.<sup>444</sup>

After the First World War and increasingly after the formal Independence in 1922, realms of sexuality and morality were tackled by nationalists as discursive areas to be conquered, in order to define archetypical notions of Egyptian community and family. This chapter briefly traces the shift from regulationism and abolitionism, showing how the abolitionist discourse, gaining momentum in between the 1920s and in the 1930s and eventually prevailing in the 1940s in the context of the radicalization of anti-British sentiments in the country, was surely part and parcel of the cosmopolitan discourse of eugenics<sup>445</sup>, but also acquired a distinct anti-conservative and anti-colonialist twist in the Egyptian context.

## 9.2 Vernacularizing Eugenics and Monitoring Male Sexuality: Law 25 of 1920

While the supervision and monitoring of sexuality was inspired by a clear set of metropolitan bourgeois values and was part of the contemporary international eugenics movement which brought about the medicalization of sex and reproduction within the wedlock, Hanan Kholoussy has convincingly pointed out how Egyptians not only imitated various eugenic models but also “departed from the global

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<sup>444</sup>Yunan Labib Riz, “Backroads” in *al-Ahram Weekly Online*, 7-13 June 2001, no. 537, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2001/537/chrncls.htm>

<sup>445</sup>I use the term “eugenic” in the broad sense of discourse on the production of a healthy and prosperous human race, the optimization of the species (*tahsin al-nasl* in Arabic) which entailed primarily the development of scientific theories about birth-control (*tahdid al nasl*) and reproduction, sanitation, hygiene and puericulture. In its negative form, eugenics has to do with the prevention of mentally or physically “inferior”, in short tainted individuals from reproducing themselves and propagate their defects. According to Omni el Shaky “Mendel an genetics had not made serious inroads into discussions of population and although there were those who insisted on sterilization, at least in those cases where the genetic basis for disease transmission had been proven beyond a doubt, few argued on the Mendel an grounds”. See Omni el-Shari, *The Great Social Laboratory: Subjects of Knowledge in Colonial and Postcolonial Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 274-5.



movement by localising various eugenic examples and drawing inspirations from medieval Islamic religious texts rather than Western scientific treatises to fit their own unique socio-political and medico-legal context”.<sup>446</sup> A first successful attempt was the reform of Islamic personal status laws on marriage, the paramount institution on which the engineering of a “healthy” and productive national community was based. Article 9 of Law 25 of 1920 stipulated husbands’ “disease” as a legitimate ground for female-initiated divorce. This was done by departing from the dominant Hanafi legal interpretation and adopting the more morally liberal Maliki and Shafi’i codes. Interestingly enough the very “modern” eugenic concern of defending the offspring of the Nation from the danger of sexually transmitted venereal diseases was couched almost *verbatim* in the language of Medieval Islamic jurisprudence, as Ibn Rushd ‘s *Bidayat al-Mujtahid wa Nihayat-al-Muqtasid* (The Distinguished Jurist’s Primer) constituted the basis for the legal text. Notwithstanding the fact that this law was not extensively implemented as the dominant attitude of the legal establishment was conservative and not inclined to grant women easier access to judicial divorce, it has been rightly pointed out how, in the mind of the legislators, a mixed committee of lay bureaucrats and religious authorities, it did constitute not only an example of medicalization of male sexuality but, even more interestingly, a vernacularization of the contemporary metropolitan eugenics debate. As the protection of decent Egyptian families and young generations from the moral and physical degeneration brought

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<sup>446</sup> Kholoussy, *Monitoring*, p. 677. See also Omnia el-Shakri, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 273-4. A similar case was Shaykh ‘Abd al-Magid Selim’s *fatwa* regarding birth control promulgated in 1937. An eugenic concern as that of birth planning, or more precisely the need for child spacing as a measure against the inability of an individual of providing economically for his children, was addressed by extrapolating by analogy from classical jurisprudence, precisely al Ghazali’s work.

about by venereal peril became an imperative, legal prostitution, thus regulationism, came to be under attack also.

### 9.3 Bringing Abolitionism In

Egyptian licensed prostitution, targeting exclusively native women, came to be seen as increasingly intolerable for its racist connotations and, of course, its blatant incompatibility with Islamic laws. In April 1926, the Laws section (*qism al law'aih*) published a memorandum containing the views of local authorities on licensed prostitution.<sup>447</sup> It reported that no justification was to be found for the preservation of such legislation, when countless studies and researches had demonstrated that, due to lack of adequate sanitary structures and juridical barriers, legalisation of sex work had not succeeded in the past to curb venereal diseases. The section recommended the repeal instead of a modification of the existing law on prostitutes: “the Egyptian government should follow in the steps of those Nations who led the struggle against licensed prostitution and in defence of public health”.<sup>448</sup> In 1932 a mixed Anglo-Egyptian commission was formed with the precise task of investigating all the circumstances relevant to licensed prostitution in the country and its impact on public health and security, in order to establish once and for all whether the system was desirable or not. The commission worked for three years and the final report was out

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<sup>447</sup> “Ta’adil La’ihat- al -’ahirat” in *al-Ahram*, 13.04.1926, n.p. A previous report had been issued also by Russell Pasha, Chief of Cairo City Police, to the attention of the Ministry of Interior on the harmful effects of licensed prostitutions and the impossibility to guarantee public security under the existing conditions, due to the capitulatory privileges protecting foreigner entrepreneurs of commercial sex and sex workers.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*

in 1935.<sup>449</sup> In the text, a very precise definition of abolitionism is to be found.

#### Abolitionists

agree as to the mischief due to prostitution, as to the impossibility of extirpating it, as to the difficulty of repressing it, as to the un wisdom of allowing to flourishing it rampant. They insist, however, that regulation fails to achieve its purpose; worse still, as they argue, the moment prostitution is accepted, provided it submits to certain rules, the state is placed in the position of authorizing, legalizing or privilege the practice of vice.<sup>450</sup>

The correct stance that the State should adopt, hence, was considered to be abolitionism, that is, not abolition of transactional sex in itself, something impossible to be achieved if not by moral reform, but abolition of any legislation condoning the existence of brothels and the trade plied by their inmates. A number of internal and international factors doomed the system of regulation in place in Egypt to be unsuccessful and called for a ready repel of such legislation: the scarcity of financial resources to ameliorate the system of sanitary checks and prophylactic measures and the peculiarities of the Egyptian legal system, the inadequateness of sanctions against clandestine brothels and the existence of a dual, indigenous and foreign, legislation. The procedure for closing down illegal houses of ill-fame is a good demonstration of this.<sup>451</sup> If the police suspected a house to be a clandestine brothel, a statement had to be obtained by the neighbours first. The house had to be kept under observation for two weeks and a report had to be sent to the Governorate with a request of “notification to quit”. Once this was issued and delivered to the occupants of the clandestine brothel, women had 30 days to leave the premises. If they failed to do so,

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<sup>449</sup> *Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Problem of Licensed Prostitution in Egypt*, (Cairo: Government Press, 1935). Among members were Mohammed Shahin Pasha, Consular Judge W. M. Graham and Colonel Elgood.

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>451</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

the owner of the building was prosecuted in front of the contravention court while the prostitutes were left to keep on working until the verdict was delivered. If the brothel keeper was fined and prostitutes refused to leave the house, an ejection order had to be obtained from the Governorate in order to proceed further. Usually women would wait until the expiration of the 30<sup>th</sup> day to leave the house and go working somewhere else. As long as local subjects were involved, the procedure was somewhat quicker, although chaotic. If defendants were foreigners, the authorization to proceed was to be obtained by the relevant consular authorities and this caused huge delays. The undesirability of regulation in Egypt is studied and analysed in the report under three main aspects: the sanitary problem, i.e. the spreading of venereal disease, the traffic in women and children, and the disturbance of public security. Sanitary checks were found to be absolutely unsatisfactory. The main goal to be attained in this case was succeeding in making medical treatment of syphilitics capillary. To this effect, it was stated, venereal clinics have to be free and confidential. Compulsory medical inspection of prostitutes, an essential part of the regulationist system, should be therefore abandoned. As trafficking in woman and children was concerned, the existence of regulated brothels with its steady demand of manpower was seen as the natural cause of the trade in human beings. Abolition was therefore advisable to eradicate the traffic by targeting the mechanism of supply and demand. On the public security side, it was stated that while increased severity of punishment should be enforced for third parties exploiting prostitutes and entry of traffickers and sex workers in the country should be avoided at any cost, mere repression of prostitution was not conducive to any result, if not increasing soliciting

in the street under the public eye: “the ideal policy therefore would appear to be gradual and discreet suppression of prostitution, without taking such drastic action in the suppression of ‘clandestine’ houses, as would necessarily drive immorality into other channels, which might prove to be in some respect more dangerous to society, especially in its home life”.<sup>452</sup>

A draft law was proposed. It stipulated for the arrest and detention of all third parties involved in debauchery for no more than 15 years or a fine of 500 Egyptian pounds either in brothels or clandestine houses. Those who aided prostitution by knowingly renting out rooms or flats used for debauchery and those who earned their living by prostituting themselves were liable to detention up to 2 years and a fine up to 50 Egyptian pounds.

On the 26<sup>th</sup> of March 1938 the Ministry of Health issued a decree, forbidding the licensing of new prostitutes and the opening of new brothels. One year later, a new commission of enquiry was appointed under the auspices of the Ministry of Health, to reassert the conclusion reached by the previous one. The topic of the fate of sex workers was also tackled by the commission: the opening of four refuges for “fallen women” in Cairo, Alexandria, Tanta and Asyut was decided on, to train them in marketable skills such as cooking and sewing.

Regulationism was progressively restricted, without the implementation of any significant policy aimed at preparing the ground for the correct application of abolitionism.

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<sup>452</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 38.

#### 9.4 The Second World War Regulationist Interregnum

The Second World War, though, brought pragmatic regulationism back with the aim of curtailing the spread of sexually transmitted disease. War-time expansion of commercial sex was proved by rampant increase in VD rates among troops. Despite the emphasis military authorities placed on continence, they thought better to establish 7 VD centres, specialized in the treatment of venereal patients. According to military sources, in 1941-42, of the 127.000 Allied troops stationed in Cairo, 954 were hospitalized in a venereal ward.<sup>453</sup> An interest link was made by military medical officials between the unprecedented spread of VD disease in Cairo and the arrival to Cairo of the 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured from Cyrenaica. Despite the predominance of abolitionism in the public discourse, regulationism was brought back in during the War to cope with increased demand by “sex-starved” troopers: some brothels were officially declared “in bounds” and amenable to soldiers.<sup>454</sup> While most of the Birkah remained formally off-limits to foreign troops, robust demand for sexual services was quickly met by generous supply, as many Cairene women turned to sex work and entertainment to cope with economic anxieties: the cost of living, since the beginning of the World, had risen by 45 % and, while the British Army in Cairo was spending about 4.500.000 pounds a month, prices had been pushed up by foreign presence, basic foodstuff such as beans, oil and flour, increasing of 94 % since

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<sup>453</sup> Cooper, *Op. Cit.*, p. 115.

<sup>454</sup> *Ibid.* Cooper thus describes the Wagh-al-Birkah during the Second World War: “the prostitutes sat fanning themselves on the hundreds of little balconies that overlooked the long narrow street, and called down to the man below; while, at ground level, there were little booths, screened by a single curtain. One of these bore the legend ‘Esperanto spoken here’. The booths spilled into alleyways running off the Berka, with peep-shows and pornographic cabaret”.

1939.<sup>455</sup> Female rural migrants and domestic servants joined cabaret-artists and bar-hostesses during war-time. A contemporary observer, Pennethorne Hughes, accurately described these girls, 15.000 according to the figure he reported, who

sat at the bars, or at tables with the customers, having drinks and cigarettes bought for them at specially high prices and, in most cases, reporting back at intervals to the proprietor or their own particular protector, one of the thick-necked, scar-faced full-lipped pimps who scowled from seats at the back. How far the money girls made was supposed to be, and was, augmented by prostitution no doubt varied.<sup>456</sup>

He referred to them as a veritable “sociological problem”, since in his view bar hostesses were likely to be doomed to a slow descent in permanent prostitution and to become social outcasts.<sup>457</sup> Outside Cairo, in the provinces though, abolitionist policies were applied also during the Second World War: the military decree 384 of 1943, in fact, gave municipalities and provinces the right to close down brothels under their jurisdiction.

## **9.5 Abolitionism**

At a time of social and political unrest, marked by the ascendancy of the Moslem Brethren and rampant dissent with Western influence and imperial presence on the Egyptian ground, hopes of sound political development, social justice and full self-determination that had inspired the 1919 revolution were fading. The Wafd inability to offer a credible alternative to Egyptian political fragmentation, the increasing frustration of educated young generations for whom business and governmental job

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<sup>455</sup> Figures in Cooper, *Op. Cit.*, p. 136 and p. 162.

<sup>456</sup> Hughes, *Op. Cit.*, p. 53.

<sup>457</sup> Hughes, *Op. Cit.*, p. 54.

opportunities dramatically contracted compared to preceding *effendiyyah* generations, prolonged economic challenges brought by the Great Depression, followed by the Second World War, the lack of political credibility of King Faruq and the poor performance in the First Arab War against Israel, all these were aspects of the social unrest sweeping Egypt in the late 1940s. As Lisa Pollard has argued,<sup>458</sup> images of domesticity, marriage, gender and relation between sexes were used as a microcosm expressing the state of the Nation in its various circumstances. So, just as in 1919 cartoons from the urban, middle-class press represented the National Home, “Bayt al-Umma” as “a site of promise, in which monogamous husbands and their educated (house)wives presaged the nation’s potential”, the 1940s press was dominated by images of houses as sites of “treachery and deceit, where men were suckers and women lost their virtues”.<sup>459</sup> Houses were in disarray and men were victimized by wanton, greedy, dangerous femininities. As Pollard demonstrates, cartoons were populated by lousy wives, fiancées and prostitutes (*ghaniyyat*, sing. *ghaniyah*). The main points the social commentary delivered by these cartoons expressed were that men had been “feminized” by women who placed way too much importance on material consumptions, thus escaping from monogamous marriages. Paid sex with prostitutes could not make up for the loss of harmony within the conjugal relationship, as it would fail to produce a sound, healthy and legitimate new generation.<sup>460</sup>

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<sup>458</sup> Lisa Pollard, “From Husbands and Housewives to Suckers and Whores: Marital-Political Anxieties in the ‘House of Egypt’, 1919-1948 in *Gender and History*, 21, no.3, 2009: pp. 647-69.

<sup>459</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 647.

<sup>460</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 663-4.



As a last expedient to stop social derangement, abolitionism was eventually implemented in 1949, when Ibrahim ‘Abd-al-Hadi Basha, Prime Minister and Commander in Chief, promulgated the special military decree 76 of 1949 on the closure of brothels. It called for the closure of all bordellos where more than one woman worked as prostitute in the whole country, within two months from the decree’s issuance (art.1). As it is evident from this article, prostitution *per se* constituted no criminal offence, while third-party exploitation came to be prosecuted by law, unlike what happened under regulationism. All those found to manage houses of ill fame or living on the proceedings of women’s prostitution after two months were liable to arrest and detention for 1-3 years (2-4 years if the *souteneur* was a relative of the exploited woman). If a woman suffering from VD was found to practice prostitution in a house of ill fame, she incurred arrest and detention for 3-5 years and a fine of 100 Egyptian pounds. (art. 5).

The criminalization of sex work *per se*, that is independently from third-party exploitation, was legally established only in 1951, when the law 68 of 1951 against debauchery was passed. This law, which is still enforced today, stipulated for the prosecution of third parties and women prostitutes as well. Any woman found to engage in paid sex was liable to at least 3 months imprisonment and a fine of 250-300 Egyptian pounds. Egyptian lawmakers went further and stood in favour of outright restriction of sexual freedom outside the wedlock. Law 68 of 1951 on Combating Prostitution decidedly criminalized sex workers, in defining prostitution as “the practice of vice with others with no distinction”. The transactional or monetary nature of sex work was not recognized, thus equating prostitution to

extramarital consensual sexual activity. Sex workers became the real target of repression and were seen as criminals not as victims. As Long remarked “lawmakers may have wished to make it easier for vice squad officers to arrest prostitutes even without witnessing money being exchanged. However the desire to make a sweeping moral statement was also clearly evident”.<sup>461</sup>

## 9.6 Conclusions

The final repeal of regulated prostitution in Cairo and in the whole Egyptian country at the end of the 1940s was in many ways not due to public health considerations or eugenics solely, although they certainly featured as fundamental themes of the abolitionist campaign in the public discourse from the 1920s onwards. It was mostly a political move, in response to the decisive turn to radicalisation of Egyptian politics preceding the collapse of the *ancien régime* and the eventual success of July Revolution in 1952. The Egyptian state ultimately banned prostitution partly in the attempt to appease a burgeoning nationalist religiously conservative wave following the disgraceful defeat in the First Arab-Israeli War and the assassination of Prime Minister al-Nuqrashi in 1948 supposedly by initiative of the Muslim Brethren. The Egyptian government tried to stem the tide of anti-imperialist demonstrations at the end of the 1940s by eventually suppressing a business, prostitution, that was considered to be a blatant feature of colonial oppression, both because of the imperial troops’ patronage of brothel and the privilege legal status of European sex

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<sup>461</sup> Scott Long, Human Rights Watch Report, *In a Time of Torture: the Assault on Justice in Egypt’s Crackdown on Homosexual Conduct* (New York: Human Right Watch, 2004), pp. 133-4. <http://www.hrw.org/en/node/12167/section/1>

workers.<sup>462</sup> Law 68 of 1951 was subsequently was amended with minor changes well into the Revolutionary Period as Law 10 of 1961 on Combating Prostitution, when it was extended to Syria, recently united to Egypt in the United Arab Republic, to fit within the program of postcolonial moral regeneration championed by the Nasserist regime.

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<sup>462</sup> See Kholoussy, *Monitoring*, p. 682.

## 10

# Conclusions

This research endeavoured to offer a treatment as detailed as possible of the social history of sex work in colonial Cairo, roughly from 1882 to 1952. It purported to deepen our knowledge of a space of “marginal” agency, that of prostitutes, whose importance, because of epistemological constraints typical of orthodox Marxist social history in Middle Eastern Studies, has been overlooked for long time. More recent historiographic trends, influenced by postmodernism, on the contrary, has given the opportunity of thinking about marginality in more subtle and dynamic, as well as more problematic ways, than those previously imposed by more conventional “history from below”. Not only marginality has been understood as a shifting construct, but the definition of marginal subjectivities has come to be seen as vital for the making and remaking of hegemonic power through disciplinary projects of various types.

This thesis subscribes to the view, dominant in socio-historical studies on sex work since the 1980s, that prostitution is far from being a salacious topic or a marginal area of academic enquiry. On the contrary, I have tried to argue that the social construction of prostitutes’ subjectivities and their management by the political power by dint of marginalizing or repressive practices (regulationism and

abolitionism) has important implications for the study of larger political and social processes. More specifically, this work wants to highlight the link between the management of sex workers by colonial officials and local nationalists and the making of Egypt as a colonial and, subsequently, independent State.

The “invention” of prostitutes as a specific sociological category of women identified with their peculiar type of sexuality, that is, promiscuous exchange of sex for money, can be understood as a distinct disciplinary project among the various ones that Michel Foucault has associated with the emergence of notions and techniques of modern governmentality.

Firstly, I have tried to describe the shift from pre-modern to modern sex work in Egypt. While pre-modern sex work was a highly informal sector, conspicuous for the very limited extent to which labelling or supervision practices were applied to sex workers by the central government, prostitution in colonial times fell under the scrutiny of British and Egyptian authorities. After the occupation of Egypt in 1882, sex work restructured into a dramatically new phenomenon. Here my description of the modern labour market for prostitution in Cairo has focused on the push and pull factors – urbanization, proletarianization and pauperization, gender segregation in the “regular” job market, migration, both internal and international – which, in the context of a modernizing booming cosmopolitan space such as Cairo under the British protectorate, were vital in bringing about the emergence of modern prostitution in the city. This was characterized by the professionalization and commercialization of sex work, through the mechanism of State-licensed regulation. Far from being a “marginal” phenomenon, prostitution, both in its public and

clandestine forms, with the latter remaining numerically dominant even after the introduction of sex work regulation, became a feature of Cairo's public space, as described by coeval narratives. Then I devoted my attention to the actual organization of the trade, dealing with issues of sex work structure and prostitutes' agency. In order to deconstruct the dominant essentialized representation of prostitutes, chiefly the *mantra* of victimization versus criminality, I have looked at prostitution as a form of labour, the most available form of labour to unskilled female workers. I tried to show how sex work in Cairo was done by women coming from different backgrounds, with different working arrangements, ranging from prostitution in State-licensed brothels, clandestine houses or disguised sex work in bars and night clubs, and for different aims, whether survival for themselves and their relatives, attraction to easy earnings and desire for greater material consumption. Earning a living was certainly difficult to all sorts of working-class women in colonial Cairo: prostitution was a choice among the few available to unskilled female labourers and migrants, and one which, in some cases, could pay better than other service activities. Also in the case of foreign girls trafficked into the country, coercion was not in any way the norm, in contrast to what it is maintained by much cautionary literature from the time for girls travelling alone. Prostitution was a free choice more than a forced one, but this does not mean that sex-workers were not exploited by their madams and pimps. A number of micro-histories I have analysed in my thesis stand as a demonstration of the fact that in spite of their heavily subordinated position, women could make independent, if limited, choices, though: switching from registration to working underground, as the majority of sex

workers in Cairo actually did, for instance, or using the judicial system to sue their lover-pimps in order to administer autonomously the money they earned through their work. In any case, a story which does not tell only about women's victimization or "fallennes" can be written, one which shifts the focus of analysis on the contours of some form of prostitutes' agency. Working as prostitutes did not mean only reproducing female subordination and a system of gendered and class exploitation: as a form of labour ready available to women, it also gave them the chance to earn independently or to sustain economically those dependent on them.

Secondly, I have looked into the relationship between society and prostitution. I started from the premise that the regulation of prostitution in Egypt constituted a specific colonial bio-political disciplinary project. Sex workers in Egypt, as in other colonial contexts, were "colonial subjects" not only because their regulation came about as an aspect of colonial governmentality aimed at disciplining and supervising colonized people, deemed as racially and culturally inferior. Sex workers were "colonized" in a more epistemological sense, as their very same subjectivity was the product of asymmetric relations of power: in other words, they were produced and "normalized" by social hegemonic forces and the discourse they produced about prostitution. Therefore I have studied the process of the making of marginalization of sex workers by describing the actual system of regulation set up by colonial and local authorities by establishing specific locales for the containment and supervision of sex workers (the brothel, the medical inspection room, the lock hospital and the prison) and the discourses articulated about prostitution by a number of social actors as nationalist elites, British authorities and social reformers and Egyptian feminists.

This second part of the thesis has focused on the trajectory from regulationism to abolitionism and the response given by public opinion to prostitution in Cairo. Regulationism amounted to a failed policy which did not bring about any of the expected results. This situation was exacerbated by the events of the First World War and the impact of warfare on Cairenes' lives. The presence of thousands of imperial soldiers garrisoned in town caused an upsurge in the availability of sexual services. Wartime public disorders and cultural crisis were fundamental in reorienting local authorities' views about the desirability of licensed prostitution and bringing about abolitionist policies with a clear local nationalist and anti-colonial twist. In the abolitionist discourse, which prevailed from the 1920s until the final repeal of licensed prostitution in 1949, sex work was no longer to be compartmentalized or marginalized but simply erased from society. Sex workers became targets for programs of regeneration and social rehabilitation in order to be reintegrated into the social order.

This study has explored the extension of a metropolitan discourse such as that of bio-politics from the centre to the periphery of the Empire and the ways in which the path from regulationism to abolitionism was intertwined with the Egyptian nation-building process.

The shift from regulationism to abolitionism was not unique to Egypt in fact, but it did not simply reproduce what happened in other regulationist countries. Far from being a simple imitation of exogenous patterns, it can be understood as a reconfiguration of a metropolitan discourse Egyptian nationalists deflected to legitimize their own nationalist project. Marginalization of sex workers, as other



subaltern subjectivities, was part and parcel of the process of Egyptian modernization. This study is based on the assumption that modernity, and governmentality practices associated with it, was not simply transplanted in the Colony. The history of the management of sex work in Egypt is relevant to comparative colonial and post-colonial studies as it illuminates a specific trait of the Egyptian nation-state building project. As Omnia el-Shakri states: “although it can be argued that the theoretical literature on subaltern studies canonized the experience of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century British India as the paradigmatic example of colonialism, it is important to ask ourselves what other historical trajectories can tell us about the development of modern forms of statecraft, political governance and knowledge production under the pressures of European global hegemony”.<sup>463</sup> Here I have sought to extend the knowledge of the complex relationship between the Metropolis and the Periphery of the Empire and its attending processes of cultural communication by exploring the ways in which a metropolitan discourse of social reform as abolitionism and the social construction of prostitutes’ “otherness” became a facet of Egyptian nationalist political project.

The dynamics of intra-class domination, integration and exclusion certainly affected the structuring of relations of power in the Empire, but in turn they were redefined in the colonies where daily exchanges and cohabitations with “otherness” played a fundamental role in shaping dominant selves. Colonies in fact were not only sites of coercion and exploitation but veritable “laboratories of modernity” where the bourgeois foundations of colonial regimes appear simultaneously strong and

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<sup>463</sup>el-Shakri, *Op. Cit.*, p. 2.

contested and the self-celebratory rhetoric of European civilizational efforts less unassailable than often maintained. The construction of race and sex as discourses of societal regulation expressed in the colonies their productive power to the fullest. This view is a dramatic reappraisal of received understandings of cultural genealogies seeing the Colony primarily as the passive receiver of universalist discourses proceeding from the Metropolis to the Periphery. On the contrary, racial, gendered and sexual hierarchies made such an integral part of the colonial and metropolitan order of thought not because of their ontological fixity but because they continuously needed to be remade and reinforced, embodied and practiced. Nowhere more than in the Colony, the realm of “difference”, this happened in everyday social practices. As we have seen race, class and gender interacted in complex ways in the definition of sex workers’ subjectivities in Cairo. Both colonial and local middle-class reformers saw working-class female sexualities as something to be controlled, regulated and eventually reformed into submissive and subordinated domesticity. Race formed an important facet of the discourse on prostitution. While British authorities were reluctant to approach the problem of European migrant sex work on Egyptian soil in order to maintain the fiction of racial and civilizational superiority on which the colonial enterprise was based, race played an important role both in the way in which local sex workers and foreign prostitutes were represented by colonial authorities and Egyptian nationalists respectively. Once again, prostitutes were not “marginal” to the working of the colonial state and expanding local state power as they constituted a dense discursive referent in the articulation both of imperial identity and the imagining of an autonomous virtuous Egyptian national community.

Nationalists actually reproduced metropolitan practices of social control and adapted them to their own nationalist project. One of these techniques was the labelling and the representation in the public discourse of marginal groups considered to be inimical to the development of a modern and prosperous independent Egyptian state. On the part of Egyptian nationalists, representation became a power strategy. As Gasper describes referring to another powerless social group, the peasantry, “the process of representation was designed to restrict the idea of the nation to the vision crafted by the proto-nationalist middle classes and thereby to secure their places as the dominant social group”.<sup>464</sup> As pointed out by Samah Selim, who focused on village representation in Egyptian modernist literature, nationalist *literati* crafted and disseminated through public discourse the “myth of a unified identity through suppression or ‘sanitation’ of dissonant cultures and voices – women, minorities, social outcasts and the poor”.<sup>465</sup> The operation by which the Egyptian community was imagined as a homogeneous and unified was not a sort of strategic essentialism: to use Joseph Massad’s formulation “nationalists mistook their nationalism for an absolute essence”<sup>466</sup> reproducing the patterns of colonial epistemology. Although it was epistemologically equivalent to colonialism, local nationalism became a powerful anti-hegemonic discourse. Such apprehension makes for a dramatically different way of understanding the binary opposition of categories such as colonizer

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<sup>464</sup> See Michael E. Gasper, *The Power of Representation: Public, Peasants and Islam in Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 6.

<sup>465</sup> See Samah Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt, 1880-1985* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 59.

<sup>466</sup> See Joseph Massad, *Colonial Effects: the Making of National Identity in Jordan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 277. On the definition of strategic essentialism, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography” in *Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 205.

and colonized, universalist and particular, global and local. The hybridity of modernity, a phenomenon which has not been universal and unified but locally inflected and multiple,<sup>467</sup> needs to be investigated further historically and this is, I believe, the very modest contribution my thesis can make to the advancement of knowledge in the field. Indigenous abolitionism certainly reproduced all the tropes of the metropolitan abolitionist discourse. It was based on the positivist belief in the possibility of engineering a fit nation of Egyptian citizens by combating venereal disease. But Egyptian abolitionism was also a reconfiguration of the metropolitan discourse from which it derived though, as it constituted a response to Western cultural and political domination. Prostitution came to be seen as intolerable, not only because it conflicted with modern understanding of civilization and progress but also because it stood against locally specific understandings of morality rooted in Islam. The reason why sex work was so pervasive in Cairo was not to be attributed, in the nationalist discourse, to the inherent bestiality and irrationality of Oriental people, as the colonizers maintained, but was a blatant instance of the corrupting influence of the immoral West on Oriental and Islamic morals. Indigenous social reformers thus surely accepted and internalized the ideological premises on which abolitionism was based but they re-articulated and added a distinct anti-colonial tone. The extent of corruption of local morals was an instance of the pernicious influence of the West and its threat to local cultural authenticity: the preservation, or better, the restoration of Oriental and Islamic correct practices and values made an integral part of abolitionism, adding a culturalist and religious nuance even secular-oriented

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<sup>467</sup> On this the classical reference is Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

middle-class *effendiyyah*, influenced as they were by the ideas of Islamic modernism, subscribed to.<sup>468</sup>

The indigenous nationalist elites based their modernist project on the ideas of uniqueness and educability of the national community, whose autonomy and freedom from colonial tutelage they tried to restore. Egyptian abolitionism thus constituted a specific type of modernist project whereby combating the social dangers of commercial sex and purifying Egyptian society from vice was seen as a precondition for obtaining political autonomy. As I have tried to demonstrate in this work the transition from regulation to abolitionism, a theme which became increasingly conspicuous in the Egyptian public discourse with the coming of age of Egyptian nationalism after the 1919 Revolution and the Independence of 1922, well exemplifies the way in which gender and class were used to mould local concepts of political community and citizenship, evoking the need to rule over dissident and antisocial embodied “otherness”. The history of the management of Egyptian sex work thus is re-inscribed within the narration of the making of the Egyptian Nation and vernacular modernity.

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<sup>468</sup> Gasper, *Op. Cit.*, p. 220.

## Glossary

‘ahirah: prostitute.

‘alimah, ‘awalima (pl.): “learned woman”, a female trained in poetry and singing, performing for all-female audiences.

‘awamah: houseboat moored along the Nile.

Bimbashi: rank of Major in the Egyptian army.

Capitulations: commercial treaties originally established in the sixteenth century and granting nationals of Western Countries on Ottoman soil favourable tariffs and extraterritorial judicial rights.

Caracol: police station.

fath: practice of sitting and drinking with customers.

fatihah, fatihat (pl.): a girl performing fath in a club or a bar.

garsunah, garsunat (pl.): waitress.

ghaziyyah, ghawazi (pl.): dancers from the lowly classes performing at folk festivals.

gink: Turkish word for transvestite.

harim: in a traditional Arab house, is the part of the it reserved to women.

hikimdar: Ottoman title, Governor-General.

kavass: Ottoman title for an armed police officer, also used as a courier.

karakhanah: brothel.

khawwal: Arabic for transvestite, a performer in drags.

Ma’amur: chief.

Miralai: Turkish title, a colonel.

maqturah, maqturat (pl.): licensed prostitute resident in a brothel.

padrona: brothel-keeper, from the Italian “padrona” meaning “mistress”.

Parquet: native judicial court.

qism: police section.

salamlik: men's apartment and greetings area in a traditional Arab house.

salah, salat (pl.): ballroom, from the Italian "sala da ballo".

shaykh al-Harah: among the most distinguished residents in the neighborhood, acts as an overseer.

souteneur: French for "pimp".

zaffah: wedding procession.

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