

SECTION 2

*Africa and the Middle East*





## Prostitution in Cairo

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Prostitution, in Arabic *bigha'*, *da'arah*, and *'aharah*, is the providing of sexual services for payment. This definition makes prostitution in Islamic law a practice of adultery, *zina*, which includes any sexual intercourse between an unmarried couple except a master and his female slave, *jar'iyyah*. Very recently, sex work and illicit sexuality in Egypt have become new terrain for historical enquiry. Lack of historical sources has been a major challenge, of course. While reconstructing the history of ordinary people is always a difficult task, it is even more so as regards those who practised such a highly gendered and legally controversial activity as prostitution. Local historiographers of mediaeval and pre-modern Egypt's capital Cairo tended to overlook sex work as a social practice in the urban fabric. Some of them made references to the existence of prostitutes in passing in the chronicles and biographies of rulers and notables and in comments on the state system. European travellers in pre-modern Egypt gave accounts of nomadic and urban groups practicing prostitution in Egyptian towns. Given the lack of corroborating sources, however, it is quite difficult to differentiate between what is myth, fiction, and reality in these accounts. Yet, these sources are useful for exploring the European construction of sexuality in Egypt.

Some recent Egyptian studies have succeeded in bringing to light a great deal of obscure local sources from the nineteenth century and hence have provided ground-breaking ethnographies of areas which used to have licensed prostitution throughout the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Although this scholarship is valuable and bravely steps into a field that has previously been

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\* This article is the result of joint research and an ongoing dialogue between the authors about the social history of sex work, gender, sexuality, and society in Egypt. We would like to note that Hanan Hammad authored the introduction and the sections about prostitution during the periods of Mamluk and Ottoman rule and during abolitionism and postcolonial times. Francesca Biancani authored the section on colonial prostitution. The paragraph about prostitution under Muhammad Ali and the conclusion was jointly written by the two authors.

1 'Abd al-Wahab Bakr, *Mujtama' al-Qahirah al-sirri, 1900–1951* (Cairo, 2001); 'Abd al-Wahab Bakr, *al-Jarimah fi Misr fi al-nisf al-awwal min al-qarn al-'Ishshrin: ash-Shawari' al-khalfiyyah* (Cairo, 2005); 'Imad Hilal, *al-Baghaya fi Misr: Dirasah tarikhiyyah ijtimaiyyah 1834–1949* (Cairo, 2001).

overlooked in Egyptian historiography, it replicates a particularly static image of prostitution quarters that has been rendered in popular fiction and orientalist writings. Western scholarship has started to explore prostitution in Egypt through broad discussions of gender history, state-society relationships, and the role of power discourses in restructuring society, an approach that could be very promising.<sup>2</sup> Employing the same approach, this paper traces the history of prostitution in Cairo from Ottoman times until today. The focus is on the formal relationship between the state, society, and prostitution. It highlights the shifting trajectory ranging from fiscal control without strict regulation in pre-modern times, when Cairo was the capital of an Ottoman province enjoying virtual autonomy from the Empire's centre, to the state regulation of sex work during the British colonial period and the subsequent abolition and criminalization of sex work in the post-independence era.

This paper aims to give an overview that is as extensive as possible of the ways in which sex work was practised and how it changed over time from the 1600s until today. Far from considering prostitution to be the "oldest profession", this overview endeavours to set up the context for studying prostitution as a complex historically situated phenomenon. This study reveals how the management of gender and sexuality were closely connected with the story of the state and its capacity for penetrating, controlling, and disciplining society, and it tells us about the ways in which women, as well as men, adapted to sweeping social and economic changes.

### Prostitution under the Mamluks and Ottomans

Cairo entered the seventeenth century as the provincial capital of Egypt under the Ottoman Empire. Consistent with their tradition of governing newly conquered territories, the Ottomans preserved many institutions and administrative systems from the Mamluk period (1250–1517), and the Mamluks themselves were incorporated into the ruling elite. Thus, many Ottoman governors

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2 Liat Kozma, *Policing Egyptian Women: Sex, Law, and Medicine in Khedival Egypt* (Syracuse, 2012); B.W. Dunne, "Sexuality and the 'Civilizing Process' in Modern Egypt" (Unpublished Ph.D., Georgetown University, 1996); Francesca Biancani, "Let Down the Curtains around Us: Sex Work in Colonial Cairo, 1882–1949" (Unpublished Ph.D., London School of Economics, 2012); Khaled Fahmy, "Prostitution in Egypt in the Nineteenth Century", in Eugene Rogan (ed.), *Outside In: On the Margins of the Modern Middle East* (London, 2001), pp. 77–103; Judith E. Tucker, *Women in Nineteenth-century Egypt* (Cambridge, 1985).

continued the Mamluk tradition of tolerating prostitution as an urban service. Aside from the orthodox Islamic prohibition on sex outside marriage and between masters and slaves, prostitution in Cairo can be traced back to the Fatimid period (969–1171).<sup>3</sup> Sex workers in Cairo were more integrated than ostracized and were part of the larger labouring class. Dressed in the traditional *milayyah*, which is a wrapping cloth, and a *tarhah*, a loose head veil, sex workers were distinguished with red anklets on their legs.<sup>4</sup> They were visible in marketplaces and public festivities. They were also concentrated in particular areas known as *harat al-Khawaty* or *harat al-Zawani* (quarters of “fallen” or adulterous women).<sup>5</sup> These quarters were mostly hilly areas that were distant from the residential neighbourhoods or adjacent to entertainment centres around lakes. This location outside residential areas distinguished prostitutes from *al-ahrar*, which literally means “free people” but was used as a term in pre-modern times until the early twentieth century to refer to “respectable” people. This distance helped to ease social anxieties about public morality. Social protests against prostitution were usually stirred up when sex workers lived and openly practised their trade in regular neighbourhoods.

Brothels and taverns also mushroomed in entertainment areas around lakes such as the Azbakiyyah and al-Ratli lakes, where male and female slaves were employed in sex work.<sup>6</sup> Prostitutes in Ottoman Cairo were active during festivals, including the celebrations of saints, known as *mawalid*. This was a continuation of mediaeval practices in which some festivals became characterized by sexual overtones.<sup>7</sup> Prostitutes attended the celebrations of the annual increase of the waters of the Nile when they reached the point that the dam could be opened and flow into the Azbakiyyah Lake.<sup>8</sup> The prostitutes of the Azbakiyyah area openly conducted their trade and performed alluring dances. A street show called the Bee Dance became very popular under the Ottomans. In that show, which seems to have been a sort of strip dance, women pretended to have a bee in their clothing and started to take off their clothes one piece after another, keeping on only a light unveiling garment. Al-Azbakiyyah attracted

3 Taqi al-Din Ahmad ibn 'Ali al-Maqrizi, *al-Mawaiz wa al-'itibar bi dhikr al-khitat wa al-athar*, 2 vols, (Cairo, 1997), II, p. 357.

4 Ahmad 'Abd al-Raziq, *al-Mar'ah fi Misr al-mamlukiyyah* (Cairo, 1999), p. 39.

5 Jamal al-Din Abu al-Mahasin Yusuf bin Taghribirdi, *al-Nujum al-zahirah fi muluk Misr wa'l-Qahirah*, 2 vols, (Cairo, 1929), II, p. 389 and al-Maqrizi, *al-Mawaiz*, p. 658.

6 Al-Maqrizi, *al-Mawaiz*, p. 750.

7 Boaz Shoshan, *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 43.

8 Muhammad Sayyid Kilani, *Fi-Rubu'al-Azbakiyyah: Dirasah adabiyyah, tarikhiyyah wa ijtimaiyyah* (Cairo, 1985), p. 10.

many men who would spend their nights free from any moral bondage, causing “immoral chaos”.<sup>9</sup>

Al-Ratli Lake was another area where prostitution was practised openly around the year. It was part of the Ard at-Tabbalah area, which was so well known for illicit activities that men from all over the town visited it for sex and hashish.<sup>10</sup> Poets celebrated their pleasures in the area by drinking, consuming hashish, listening to music, and watching unveiled “moon-faces”. When the rulers demanded that all the owners of the buildings around the lake prohibit illicit sexual activities, its sex workers and entertainers moved to Azbakiyyah.<sup>11</sup> In the late eighteenth century, well-known Egyptian historian Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti (1754–1825) mentioned that religious scholars at al-Azhar patronized prostitutes.<sup>12</sup> Lower-class workers and peasants were able to afford inexpensive prostitutes among the Gypsy and Gi’idi tribes. The Azbakiyyah, particularly Wajh al-Birkah Street, became such a famous spot among Cairene pleasure seekers that one scholar noted that a literary genre called Wajh al-Birkah flourished among contemporary authors.<sup>13</sup> Some of that literature was so sensational that it spoke of the quality of male organs and encouraged the public to commit adultery.<sup>14</sup> An eighteenth-century poet named Muhammad Shabanah (d. 1795) mentioned a brothel owned by a certain Kuwaik in Azbakiyyah who secured boys and women for customers.<sup>15</sup> Without state intervention in Wajh al-Birkah, cafés were open late at night, dancers appeared almost naked, and prostitution and illicit activities that people did not allow in their residential neighbourhoods were carried out.<sup>16</sup>

Prostitution was associated with lower-class entertainers, e.g. male and female musicians and dancers. This would explain the use of the term *maghani*, literary male singers, for prostitutes in pre-modern times. Lower-class entertainers who performed for male and female audiences on streets and in cafés were called *ghawazi*. They were different from *‘awalim*, high-ranking performers for female audiences who only performed in wealthy harems or sang for mixed groups from behind the *mashrabiyyat*, carved wood windows

9 Cited in Kilani, *al-Azbakiyyah*, pp. 12–13.

10 Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Ibn Iyas, *Bada’i’al-zuhur fi waqai’al-duhur*, 6 vols (Istanbul, 1931), v, p. 11 and al-Maqrizi, *al-Mawaiz*, pp. 357, 750.

11 al-Kilani, *al-Azbakiyyah*, p. 12.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 36–49.

14 An example of that poetry is mentioned in al-Kilani, *al-Azbakiyyah*, pp. 47–48.

15 Mustafa As’ad ibn Ahmad al-Luqaymi, *al-Mudamah al-urjwaniyyah fi-al-maqamah al-ridvaniyyah*, unpublished manuscript cited in Kilani, *al-Azbakiyyah*, pp. 13–14.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

overlooking the salons of upper class houses.<sup>17</sup> According to British traveller Edward William Lane, who toured Egypt in 1825–28, many *ghawazi*, while being “public women”, meaning that they were available for promiscuous sex for money, were in fact married and dominant over their subdued husbands.<sup>18</sup> Singers, male and female dancers, prostitutes, and beggars were grouped into distinct trade groups and participated in guild processions, marching at the end of the parade, but it seems they were not fully integrated within the guild system. According to Ottoman traveller Evliya Çelebi, three pimps controlled most of the prostitutes in seventeenth-century Cairo and pimps operated in a system that was close to the guild. Known as *Sheikh al-Arsat* or the head of pimps, those three pimps kept records of all the prostitutes and supervised their work.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, prostitution was not institutionalized with the segregation of licensed sex workers in state-authorized brothels. At the same time, women workers in general experienced a great deal of exclusion and marginalization in the guild system.<sup>20</sup>

Pre-modern sex work was a highly informal sector. In Mamluk and Ottoman Cairo, the state subjected sex workers to taxation. Under the Mamluks, these taxes, known as *maghani* taxes, were substantial sources of revenue for the state.<sup>21</sup> A female tax collector known as the *Daminat al-Maghani* functioned as a tax farmer who bought from the state the right to collect taxes with a profit and kept records of the prostitutes. These taxes were taken in return for the state protection of prostitutes; hence it could be taken as state recognition of sex workers as a professional group.<sup>22</sup> In the seventeenth century, the state designated the position of *aminshikar*, and whoever was in charge of that position collected taxes from prostitutes. The position and the tax were annulled in 1643.<sup>23</sup> Subsequently, taxes were imposed again on prostitutes as part of what became known as *khurdah* taxes that were levied on people with lowly occupations such as snake charmers, hashish sellers, and mountebanks.

17 Karin Van Nieuwkerk, “Changing Images and Shifting Identities: Female Performers in Egypt”, in Ann Dils and Ann Cooper Albright (eds), *Moving History/Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader* (Middletown, CT, 2001), pp. 136–143.

18 Edward William Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians, the Definitive 1860 Edition Introduced by Jason Thompson* (Cairo, 2006), pp. 380.

19 Hilal, *al-Baghaya*, p. 115.

20 Judith E. Tucker, *Women in Nineteenth-century Egypt*, p. 108.

21 Ibn Taghrabardi, *al-Nujum al-Zahirah*, 1, p. 47.

22 ‘Abd al-Raziq, *al-Mar’ah fi Misr al-mamlukiyyah*, p. 40.

23 Hilal. *al-Baghaya*, p. 30.

Prostitution and taxation also intersected in the slave trade.<sup>24</sup> Caucasian and *farangi* (European) girls were brought to Cairo for sex work.<sup>25</sup> A particular tax called the *huquq al-qinat* was imposed on every male and female who provided sexual services in taverns.<sup>26</sup> There was also a similar tax on those slave-prostitutes known as *huquq al-Sudan*.<sup>27</sup> Court records of the Ottoman period reveal cases in which pimps bought women for their brothels.<sup>28</sup> A European traveller to Egypt mentioned that some *ghawazi* forced their African slaves to practise prostitution.<sup>29</sup> Slave merchants operated brothels in Cairo and in once case the head of their guild complained of a lack of state control over this illicit business.<sup>30</sup>

Taxes on prostitutes constituted an important source of revenue for the governor, the *wali*, and his Turkish policemen, the *aghas*. They functioned as tax farmers who bought from the state the right to collect taxes from prostitutes and retain a certain amount of profit. In the eighteenth century, Vasir Abdullah Pasha Alkibralli had to provide huge financial compensation.<sup>31</sup> In the rest of the Ottoman period, the police chief kept records of prostitutes for taxation purposes. The authorities were abusive in their tax-collecting practices and casual female labourers were constantly under threat of being registered as prostitutes. *Khurdah multezim* (the *khurdah* tax-collector) and state officials had a free hand in placing women's names on the registers and removing them, and this often depended on whether a good bribe had been paid or not.

Evliya Çelebi estimated that there were forty policemen who oversaw the brothels and made sure that every prostitute stayed at home overnight.<sup>32</sup> This heavy policing might have been related to public security issues in addition to fiscal ones. There were accounts of gangs that employed "fallen" women in their thieving operations. The women of a gang called the *al-baqar al-wahshi* (antelopes) walked around the Wajh al-Birkah to pick up wealthy-looking customers. If they succeeded in being invited to their victims' homes, they would

24 See 'Imad Hilal, *al-Raqiq fi Misr fi al-qarn al-tasi' 'ashar* (Cairo, 1999).

25 Al-Kilani, *al-Azbakiyyah*, p. 13.

26 Al-Maqrizi, *al-Kutat*, p. 144; Jalal al-Suyuti, *Husan al-Muhadarah*, II, p. 218.

27 Al-Bayumi Isma'il, *al-Nuzum al-maliyyah fi-Misr wa al-sham zaman salatin al-mamalik* (Cairo, 1998), p. 201.

28 Hilal, *al-Baghaya*, p. 115.

29 E.D. Lane, *Customs and Manners*, p. 328.

30 Hilal, *al-Raqiq*, p. 227.

31 Ahmad Shalabi 'Abd al-Ghani, *Awdah al-isharat fiman tawla Misr al-Qahirah min al-wuzara' wa al-bashawat* (Cairo, 1978), pp. 574–575.

32 Hilal, *al-Baghaya*, p. 30.



get them intoxicated and rob them, and kill them as well at times.<sup>33</sup> Another gang was called the *al-Baqar al-Sarih* (roaming cows) and their women would go to drink with their customers at their homes. Once the man got drunk, they would rob the house and then flee.<sup>34</sup> Theft and murder involving prostitution was a two-way road. Prostitutes also fell victim to the abuses of their customers. In one incident in mediaeval Cairo, three men habitually invited prostitutes to their homes and then murdered them and stole their clothes. Ultimately they were executed and their corpses were carried through the streets together with cages containing the bones of their victims.<sup>35</sup>

In Mamluk and Ottoman times, the position of prostitutes and brothels was unstable. On the one hand, the brothel provided sources of revenue and was accommodated or de facto recognized by the state. Society tolerated it as long as it was marginalized outside the regular residential neighbourhoods where the *ahrar* lived. On the other hand, sex work was resented for both moral and practical reasons. It offended religious sensibilities and the collective notions of propriety and decorum. It sometimes caused problems for urban security, particularly when prostitution was associated with theft and public drunkenness as mentioned above. The authorities sporadically outlawed prostitution in Cairo for moral reasons. The last Mamluk Sultan, Qunsuh al-Ghuri (1501–1516), ordered the destruction of the prostitution shacks around the al-Ratli Lake.<sup>36</sup>

The Ottoman *vasir* Husayn Pasha (r. 1635–1637) was the first Ottoman ruler to shut down brothels. The story goes that he had a man hung on the spot when he saw him leaving one of the shacks around the Mujawarin Lake and ordered that all the brothels in Bab al-Luq be demolished.<sup>37</sup> The prostitutes fled and their shacks were removed. Shortly after, prostitution became relatively free again until Maqsud Pasha (r. 1642–1643) banned it along with public singing and dancing.<sup>38</sup> Up until the end of the century, the state tolerated prostitution for taxation purposes, and complaints about prostitution and their taxes were ignored. Yet, there is an account that the eighteenth-century *vazir* Isma'il Agha ordered severe physical punishment for a prostitute and her customer when he saw them close to the hilly area of al-Tibi Mosque.<sup>39</sup> In 1733 Isma'il Agha

33 al-Kilani, *al-Azbakiyyah*, p. 50.

34 *Ibid.*, pp. 50–51.

35 Shoshan, *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo*, p. 5.

36 al-Kilani, *al-Azbakiyyah*, p. 10.

37 Muhammad bin Abu al-Surur al-Bakri, *al-Rawdah al-ma'nusah fi-akhbar Misr al-mahrusah* (Cairo, 1996), p. 148.

38 al-Bakri, *al-Rawdah al-ma'nusah*, p. 158.

39 'Abd al-Ghani, *'Awdah al-Isharat*, p. 218.

ordered that all brothels and pubs had to be shut down. As a way of dealing with the resentment the policemen felt because they had lost their share of the taxes, he offered them the compensation of twelve cases of money from the provinces, so the police chief there had to live off the prostitutes' earnings.<sup>40</sup> It is believed that this was a single incident and the state's policy of tolerating prostitution continued for the sake of taxation until the French invasion.<sup>41</sup>

During their campaign in Egypt (1798–1801) the French authorities first imposed health and security regulations on prostitutes in an effort to protect their soldiers from infection. Al-Jabarti wrote in 1798 that when the French came to Egypt “loose women and prostitutes of low breeding became attached to the French and mixed with them.”<sup>42</sup> Initially, the French required that prostitutes register and undergo health inspections. They also issued orders stating that the soldiers could only visit registered prostitutes and they considered using registered pimps who would be responsible for the safety and protection of the soldiers. The regulations required that the doors of brothels be lit by lamps and open onto streets so that soldiers could easily get help if they experienced problems.<sup>43</sup> The costs of spending time with a prostitute were posted outside the brothels in both writing and symbols to minimize any disagreements or misunderstandings caused by language barriers. Eventually, the death toll brought about by venereal diseases among both the French troops and Egyptians alarmed the French about contact between their men and local prostitutes.

In the first two years of the occupation 2,419 French men died of venereal diseases.<sup>44</sup> Subsequently the French authorities had about 400 infected women drowned in the Nile and imprisoned many more.<sup>45</sup> Napoleon Bonaparte banned women who were known for practicing prostitution from being in Cairo.<sup>46</sup> This war on prostitutes was a short-lived bout of hysteria rather than a systematic policy, and hardly a dent was made in the sex trade.<sup>47</sup> Sex workers were sent to the countryside in order to prevent them from having relations with the soldiers garrisoned in towns, but they practised their trade openly away from police harassment in provincial towns such as Dusuq, al-Mahallah

40 *Ibid.*, pp. 574–575.

41 Hilal, *al-Baghaya*, p. 32.

42 Cited in Louis Awad, *The Literature of Ideas in Egypt* (Atlanta, 1986), pp. 22–23.

43 al-Kilani, *al-Azbakiyah*, pp. 56–57.

44 Juan Cole, *Napoleon's Egypt: Invading the Middle East* (New York, 2007), p. 235.

45 André Raymond, *Égyptiens et Français au Caire 1798–1801* (Cairo, 1998), p. 303.

46 Fahmy, “Prostitution in Egypt in the Nineteenth Century”, p. 78; Tucker, *Women in Nineteenth-century Egypt*, p. 150.

47 Cole, *Napoleon's Egypt*, p. 235.

al-Kubra, and Tanta in the middle of the Delta. Moving to provincial towns made it easier to avoid taxation, but it deprived them of the bulk of their customers, who were French army officers. In cities under French occupation, women often exchanged sexual services for greater economic stability, although their vulnerability 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.

### Sex Work in Muhammad 'Ali's Cairo

Under the reign of Muhammad 'Ali (r. 1805–48), sex workers enjoyed a strong presence in Cairo and were subject to taxation until Muhammad 'Ali banned the sex trade and ordered that the brothels be shut down in 1834. In 1836, he banished many sex workers to Upper Egypt. Historians cite different motivations behind this change in Muhammad 'Ali's treatment of prostitution.<sup>48</sup> Judith Tucker emphasises the influence of the Muslim 'ulama, while Khalid Fahmy argues that concerns over health and public order were behind the banishing of sex workers to areas outside Cairo.<sup>49</sup> Banishing sex workers to provincial towns that were far from the main cities, schools, and barracks deprived the women of their sources of income and worsened their economic condition in general. According to a contemporary witness, clandestine prostitution nonetheless managed to survive underground.<sup>50</sup> More importantly, the ban on prostitution and female entertainment deprived self-employed women of much of their autonomy and control over their profession. State intervention invariably led to the marginalization of prostitutes and to their subordination to pimps and procurers in return for protection from coercive state power. Around the 1860s, prostitutes and dancing girls came back to Cairo, maybe as the opportunity to tax them acquired primacy over every other consideration. In 1866, Khedive Isma'il introduced a new tax on public women which allowed tax-farmers to assess the amount levied. Lady Lucie Duff Gordon, an aristocratic Englishwoman travelling in Egypt at the time, reported the grievances of a dancer as tax farmers made each woman pay according to her presumed gains, i.e. her good looks, and the poor women were exposed to all the caprices

48 Karin Van Nieuwkerk, *A Trade like any Other* (Austin, 1995), pp. 31–32.

49 Tucker, *Women in Nineteenth-century Egypt*, pp. 151–152; Fahmy, "Prostitution in Egypt in the Nineteenth Century", pp. 77–103.

50 See Gustave Flaubert, *Flaubert in Egypt: A Sensibility on Tour* (London, 1992), p. 39.

and extortion of the police.<sup>51</sup> This taxation led some people in Egyptian society to refer to Isma'il as "Pimp Pasha."<sup>52</sup>

### Colonial Prostitution: Urban Change

Cairo grew very rapidly to become a global metropolis from the 1860s onwards. While Khedive Isma'il (r.1863–1879) 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>53</sup> The British deposed Isma'il and installed his son Tawfiq in 1879 and eventually occupied Egypt in response to a broad proto-nationalist movement which developed around the figure of Colonel Ahmad 'Urabi in 1882. The occupation of Egypt developed into a full-fledged colonial enterprise lasting formally until the country's unilateral independence in 1922 but which truly ended in 1952 with the Free Officers' Revolution. In this way, the British secured control over the Suez Canal, the key sea-route to India.

Egypt was integrated into the global market as a supplier of raw materials to the British textile manufacturing industry and a purchaser of finished goods. Relations of production and patterns of land ownership in rural areas changed as an export-oriented plantation economy was encouraged with the aim of maximizing output for the global market. Peasants watched as the pace of the processes of dispossession they had been subjected to since the middle of the nineteenth century rapidly increased. Rural migration to urban centres was a major consequence, and one that greatly changed the face of Egypt's main urban centre, Cairo, although it was a complex and gradual process.<sup>54</sup> 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. Meanwhile, "subsistence migrants" from southern Europe (Italy, Malta, Greece, and France in particular) crossed the Mediterranean to compete with local unskilled labourers. Due to favourable investment conditions under the Capitulations, the European presence in the city was constantly growing.<sup>55</sup> According to urban historian André Raymond, Cairo's population

51 Lucie Duff Gordon, *Letters from Egypt* (London, 1997), p. 322.

52 *Ibid.*

53 André Raymond, *Cairo* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 318.

54 Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800–1914* (London [etc.], 1981), p. 235.

55 Raymond, *Cairo*, p. 320. 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.

increased from 374,000 in 1882 to 1,312,000 in 1937, that is, by 250 per cent in forty-five years.<sup>56</sup> This steady population growth resulted in the dramatic expansion of Cairo's built-up area from 1,000 hectares in 1882 to 16,330 hectares in 1937.<sup>57</sup> The urban landscape changed with the introduction of municipal utilities such as gas lighting and piped water in the rising middle-class areas. Transportation in the city was made easier via the paving of large tracts of the street system and the development of large-scale transport infrastructure in the form of electric tramlines.<sup>58</sup> Between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, Cairo's spaces became increasingly sanitized with the introduction of clinics and hospitals and, more importantly, a drainage and sewage system. The four districts of the Mediaeval City quickly became overpopulated, and services and infrastructure started to crumble.<sup>59</sup>

In this new urban context, sex work was restructured and transformed into a dramatically new phenomenon. The expansion of prostitution had much to do with the encroachment of the global capitalist economy and colonial state power over the lives of individual Egyptians, men and women alike. New opportunities materialized in the bustling and booming metropolis with its financial and real estate speculation, internal and international migration, the advent of mass tourism, colonial warfare during World War I and World War II, and the emergence of a local middle class with greater purchasing power; all these fundamental factors accounted for the diffusion of prostitution as a response to the increased economic and social vulnerability of women within the capitalist wage labour market. Women faced great difficulties in adapting to the urban job market which left them very few occupational choices outside the casual and informal sector. In some cases, working conditions could be so strenuous and unrewarding that prostitution could be a more desirable occupational alternative. Most working women were active in domestic service and as servants, and they were often tacitly expected to give sexual services to their masters as well.<sup>60</sup> It is no coincidence that agencies recruiting domestic workers frequently collaborated with procurers and bordello-keepers to fill the ranks of brothels with inmates.

56 Raymond, *Cairo*, p. 319.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 322.

58 See John T. Chalcraft, *The Striking Cabbies of Cairo and Other Stories: Crafts and Guilds in Egypt, 1860–1914* (Albany, NY, 2004), pp. 134–135.

59 Marcel Clerget, *Le Caire, etude de géographie urbaine et d'histoire économique*, 2 vols, (Paris, 1934), I, pp. 242–244.

60 Women's Library, London [hereafter WL], 4/IBS/6/044, Cairo, Miscellaneous Correspondence, 1924–1930.

### The Legal Framework: Regulationism and the Colonial Order

Cairene prostitution changed qualitatively with the enforcement of new legislation aimed at the strict supervision and containment of women engaged in sold sex. Sex workers were given a definite social persona, that of the prostitute, according to which women were essentially identified with a certain type of anti-social behaviour: promiscuous sexual activity in exchange for money. In order to protect “decent” people from their “corrupting” influence, prostitutes had to be supervised and restricted to certain areas of the city where they could ply their trade in licensed houses and be under medical control. That is, in short, the philosophy of regulationism. 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 practitioners and other low-status and “morally suspect activities”, which included dancing and singing. 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 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 all that was biological. Moreover, the regulationist project was characterized by blatant class and gender biases, since its stance was directed at the control of working-class women.

On the 31 October 1882, the first law disciplining sex work was drafted in Egypt. The “general decree” of 1882 aimed to define carefully segregated and contained spaces for medicalized commercial sex. Regular medical check-ups were made compulsory for licensed prostitutes with the establishment of inspection rooms 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 activities after being dismissed from the lock hospital upon issuance of a medical certificate. 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>61</sup> the British authorities forced the Egyptian government to adopt 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 to consort with prostitutes and the difficulty of preventing them from doing so. Such a decision was predicated on a belief in the existence of a racial moral double standard, by which prostitution was considered to be endemic in the "backward" Orient and women were considered loose and debased.<sup>62</sup> Local women were not considered amenable to moral regeneration and were designated as professional prostitutes to be placed in clearly signalled brothels. 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, namely the sanitary emergency brought about by the spread of venereal diseases (syphilis, gonorrhoea, and cancrroid) and the disturbance of public order.

In accordance with this, in July of 1885 an ordinance was promulgated by the Minister of the Interior, 'Abd al-Qadir Hilmi Pasha, on the medical inspections of prostitutes.<sup>63</sup> It stipulated that the inspection bureaus of Cairo and Alexandria would be staffed by one or two doctors, a 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 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 that showed her name, age, address, personal characteristics, and the name of the brothel keeper for which she was working. The women had to undergo weekly sanitary inspections, the results of which were reported on her card. Inspections took place daily from 8 A.M. to 1 P.M. in summer and from 10 A.M. to 2 P.M. in winter; doctors were prohibited from carrying out sanitary check-ups at the women's domiciles. Those prostitutes who were unable to attend the weekly sanitary inspection because of an illness had to send a certificate from their medical doctors on the day designated for their medical check-up proving that their condition

61 Hilal, *al-Bighaya*, p. 165.

62 WL 3/AMSH/B/07/05, Reports of VD's amongst soldiers in Egypt (1916).

63 *al-Qarrarat wa al-mansurat al-sadirah sanat-1885*, (Cairo, 1886), pp. 153–157; *Dikrnat wa Lawa'ih Sahhiyyah* (Cairo, 1895), pp. 54–56.

prevented them from being present at the medical inspection. The same kind of provisions applied to female brothel keepers, with the exception of women older than fifty. The concern for clearly defining the marginal status of prostitutes is evident in Article 13; every prostitute who wished to leave the trade either through marriage or repentance had to produce two witnesses and apply to the Public Health Administration in order to have her name crossed off the registration list.<sup>64</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 check-ups were subjected to a fine of fifty piasters in the first instance, followed by a fine of 100 piastres or imprisonment for two to eight days in the second instance.<sup>65</sup>

A number of decrees reiterated and specified norms regarding the functioning of brothels as contained in the general decree of 1882 until the promulgation of a comprehensive Law on Brothels (*La'ihah Buyut-al-'ahirat*) dated 15 July 1896.<sup>66</sup> This law marked the real beginning of licensed prostitution in Egypt 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 fifteen days prior to the proposed opening date. The name, birth place, and nationality of all applicants, as well as 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. All applicants, both foreigners and locals, could apply for a permit provided they were not minors and had never been indicted for a crime. 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, and 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.

The whole text was characterized by an emerging preoccupation with segregated areas set aside for sex work and keeping their inhabitants away from the rest of the population; Article 2, for instance, established that brothels could

64 The content of this article was further specified in a special decree in November of 1885.

65 *La'ihah maktab al-kashf 'ala al-niswah al-'ahirat*, article 14.

66 Nidarrah al-Dakhiliyya, *al-Qawanin al-idariyyah wa al-jina'iyyah, al-juz' al-rabi' al-qawanin al-khususiyah* (Cairo, 1896), pp. 430–435.



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 not allowed 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>67</sup> Russell Pasha described sex workers in the Wass’ah district as sitting in front of brothels and behind the iron bars of the windows of ground-floor rooms. Women would solicit openly in the streets and invite their prospective customers to follow them into buildings along the alleys. This image was in fact typical of orientalist iconography, evoking women’s sexual segregation in the *harim* and sexual enslavement, traits which were considered instances of Muslim backwardness according to western stereotypes. The idea of a hyper-sexualized *harim* space, for example, was a recurrent theme in early twentieth century pornographic studio portraits in which indigenous women, mostly sex workers, posed naked behind iron bars.<sup>68</sup> A specific apparatus of control and supervision was devised which, although largely ineffective, aimed to contain and neutralize prostitution and its dangerous social effects; these included the brothel, the medical inspection bureau, and the lock hospital for the treatment of diseased women, as well as the police station.

### The Geography of Sex Work

The spatial organization of sex work in Cairo was somewhat dualistic, circumscribed, and highly visible on the one hand, and 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 Azbakiyyah Pond. The octagonal park was surrounded by large streets and four large squares: Opera, ‘Ataba al Khadra’, Khazindar, and Qantarat-al-Dekkah. From the 1840s onwards, an increasing number of traditional buildings were replaced by western-style constructions. Cafés, taverns, and dancing halls mushroomed, and there 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

67 See Sir Thomas Russell Pasha, *Egyptian Service: 1902–1946* (London, 1949), p. 80; WL, 4/IBS/6/034, Egypt- Messageries Maritimes (1925–1930).

68 Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis, MS, 1997), p. 24.

types, mountebanks, snake charmers, storytellers, and others populated the esplanade. Cairo's main red-light district was located a stone's throw from the Azbakiyyah. The brothel area was divided into two zones. The Wajh-al-Birkah had the highest concentration of foreign prostitutes who were licenced. The street was flanked by three-storey Mediterranean-style buildings with balconies extending out over the streets. Women wearing light gowns would lean out over the balconies, trying to catch the attention of those promenading on the street.<sup>69</sup> The Wass'ah quarter was an area for regulated native prostitution where Egyptians, Nubians, and Sudanese solicited in front of their "shops" which were one-room shacks, and they also assembled in front of the larger establishments.<sup>70</sup> Cairo's sex zones, however, were not in any way limited to the licensed area. Much of the trade took place outside the segregated areas, disguised under a cover of decorum in anonymous flats in "respectable" neighbourhoods. From 1926 to 1936, the Cairo City Police found and raided 2,654 clandestine brothels,<sup>71</sup> and that number is most probably far from the totality of illicit establishments present in the city.

The vast majority of Cairo sex workers did not work in the brothel system and they plied their trade on a more flexible basis in clandestine *maisons de rendez-vous*.<sup>72</sup> A Cairo City Police memorandum on prostitution issued in 1926<sup>73</sup> 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 order. 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, and shop assistants. Despite the strain of economic hardship and impoverishment, these women retained their family ties; many of them were married and practised prostitution in order to supplement their meagre family incomes.

69 Douglas Sladen, *Oriental Cairo: The City of the Arabian Nights* (London, 1911), p. 60; Guy Thornton, *With the Anzacs in Cairo: The Tale of a Great Fight* (London, 1917?), pp. 77–78.

70 W.N. Willis, *The Anti-Christ in Egypt* (London, 1914), p. 28.

71 See Wizarat-al-Dakhaliyyah, *Taqrir bulis madinat-al qahirah li-sanat 1935* (Cairo, 1936), p. 102; Wizarat-al-Dakhaliyyah, *Taqrir bulis madinat al qahirah li-sanat 1936* (Cairo, 1937), p. 102; see Abu Bakr, *al Mugtama' al-Qahira*, p. 160, on the 'awwamas, bathhouses moored on the Nile's shore in the Gezira and Imbahah.

72 Corbain's term is used here to define a private house the tenants of which made it 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, *Women for Hire: Prostitution and Sexuality in France after 1850* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 174–175.

73 WL, 4/IBS/ 5/2/040, Miscellaneous-conferences, Egypt, proposed congress.

### Organization of the Trade

According to the 1926 Cairo City Police Report, of the 1,184 registered prostitutes working in Cairo, 859 were Egyptians and 325 were foreigners.<sup>74</sup> Brothels would usually house five or six resident prostitutes. Given the high density of the red-light district,<sup>75</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 was made in a British consular record concerning a murder in a house of ill-fame.<sup>76</sup> This particular brothel was owned by a European prostitute, Santa Coppola, and it was located in Shari' 'Abd al-Khaliq in the Wajh al-Birkah area. Five girls and the mistress worked there; four of the women were Italian and the other was a Greek woman. The brothel had three steps which led to the street and that is where some of the girls waited for customers while others sat in the hall. A five-meter-long corridor ended at a staircase which 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, spent time in conversation with their mistresses, drank alcohol, and gambled. The rooms were quite simple, consisting of "a bedstead, a table with marble top and some other things." Brothels in the poorer area of the Wass'ah were certainly more destitute and shabbier. Prostitutes received clients in rooms directly overlooking the street. British Cairo Police Chief Russell Pasha described the Wass'ah at the turn of the twentieth century 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>77</sup>

New forms of prostitution developed due to the increasing expansion of international tourism and business in the Azbakiyyah district, which, as we saw previously, had always been where entertainment venues and large hotels were concentrated. In addition, the emergence of new patterns of middle-class nocturnal sociability which were made possible by technological changes including gas lighting and electrified public transportation impacted the ways

74 *Ibid.*

75 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, *Mujtama' al-Qahirah*, p. 28.

76 See National Archives, Kew [hereafter NA], FO/841/62, Consular Police Reports, Cairo (29 August 1899). Report on a murder in a brothel.

77 Russell Pasha, *Egyptian Service*, p. 178.

in which urban space was utilized. Increasing levels of consumption drove the spread of leisure spaces where it was possible for people of all social and economic backgrounds to find forms of amusement suitable for their budgets. Imperial troops constituted a permanent source of demand, especially during World War I and World War II when the presence of soldiers on Egyptian soil dramatically increased. Soldiers regularly patronized brothels and this resulted in heated debates about the standards of morality among troops, leading to the imposition of a harsh, albeit short-lived, measure of “social purification” in Cairo during World War I. Up until 1916, the military authorities allowed troops to frequent the brothels. After World War I, however, their approach changed. In 1916, brothels with native sex workers were declared out of bounds for imperial troops, and in 1921 patronizing both native and European brothels was forbidden. The spread of venereal diseases among colonial troops brought about the emergence of prohibitionism. In practice though, toleration went unabated; while soldiers were formally barred from frequenting brothels, they were given anti-venereal prophylaxis and the addresses of establishments considered to be medically safe were posted in the barracks.

From that time on, the number of large brothels declined. Instead, unregulated prostitution, both disguised and clandestine, thrived. In the nightlife district of Azbakiyyah, disguised prostitution was practised by women employed as barmaids, waitresses, and performers. Freed from police supervision on the one hand and the protection of pimps 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>78</sup>

Even during the economic 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 sentiment. Subordination to western cultural influences and political encroachment was often considered to be at the core of ethical moral degradation. Moreover, the proliferation of vice and crime in discourses 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 ‘40s. It is within this context that a wave of purity laws targeting nightclubs and entertainment emerged. Clubs and nightclubs were to be patrolled and monitored by the local police. Since police officers were relatively easy targets for bribes, however, the enforcement of restrictive regulations was quite uneven. During World War II, Cairene nightlife boomed

78 Corbain, *Women for Hire*, p. 168.

and the sex market readily expanded mainly due to the massive military presence in the city. Artemis Cooper, author of a brilliant account of Cairo's military and social history from 1939 to 1945, states that there were from 80,000 to 100,000 British soldiers on Egyptian soil at the beginning of the war. In 1941, however, 140,000 men were stationed in Cairo. Venturing into the city, the soldiers would get on a tram and head to the nightlife district in order to spend the money they had acquired during their time spent in action in the desert.<sup>79</sup>

### Life in the Brothel

Life in the brothel was marked by stiff competition between the women's overseer and her employers. In these establishments, women normally had to rely on a 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 for the women, but that often added to their subordinate position as an element of exploitation.

As for the social profiles of pimps, the vast majority were young working-class men, both locals and foreigners, and they were generally unskilled casual labourers. Most of the men had spent much time in the Azbakiyyah district temporarily working in bars and taverns where they made the acquaintance of the prostitutes as they plied their trade in the area. Among the cases discovered during the course of our 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. Others were part of loose networks of international recruiters and lived constantly on the run, crossing the Mediterranean to procure women for Cairene establishments and deliver them to their workplaces. Foreign brothel keepers always profited from the virtual immunity bestowed upon them by the Capitulations.

The earnings of prostitutes were favourable compared to current wages but they varied depending on the areas in which they worked. Prostitutes charged ten piastres per customer in the Wass'ah and double that in the European Wajh-al-Birkah. A woman could earn from eighty piastres to around one and a half Egyptian pounds a day depending on the number of clients they had.<sup>80</sup> While prostitution was quite lucrative in terms of wages, many of the women

79 Artemis Cooper, *Cairo in the War, 1939–1945* (London, 1989), p. 112.

80 WL, 4/IBS/6/037, Egypt. Worker sent by AAB and Association for Social and Moral Hygiene, 1928–32. By way of comparison, it will suffice to say that a local mason earned 6–12 piastres per day, while a rail worker's family of six lived in a three-room flat on a daily

had to share out their earning with their *padronas* or *souteneurs*. Brothel inmates kept half of their earnings and paid the keeper for board plus various extras, usually at very high prices. In some cases, women could retain their earnings but paid a monthly fee for the rooms they used. Other expenses included medical fees and annual registration fees. In many instances the prostitutes had children and relatives who were dependent on them and part of their earnings often went to pimps and bullies. Many women became indebted to their *padronas* or found it very difficult to save up money to reinvest in a trade or exit strategy.

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. 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 plaintiffs in courts. Among the consular minutes we researched there are cases which provide interesting insights into the relationship between prostitutes and their pimps, and these show how women were able to sue their exploiters and haul them before a court for mistreatment.<sup>81</sup>

### Abolitionism

In the 1920s, abolitionism became a prominent issue in public discourses and a number of civil society organizations actively campaigned for it. Nationalists, religious authorities, local feminists, British purity movement advocates, and colonial administrators all joined forces in supporting the cause of the abolition of licensed prostitution. While liberal-bourgeois groups such as the feminists led by Hudà Sha'arawi rejected licensed prostitution on the basis of universalist humanist discourses, religious leaders were concerned with moral regeneration of correct Muslim practices as a form of resistance to westernization and degeneration of the believers' community. Shaykh Mahmud

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income of 6 piastres. See Marcel Clerget, *Le Caire: Étude de géographie urbaine et d'histoire économique* (Paris, 1934), p. 156.

81 It is not possible to elaborate on this point here because of space constraints. Primary sources include NA, FO 841/146- Rex versus Giuseppe Vassallo for living wholly or in part on the proceedings of prostitution; NA, FO 841/164- Rex versus Pasquale Magri for wholly or in part living on the proceedings of prostitution; NA, FO 841/186- Rex Versus James Kelly alias James Hughes for living partially or in part of the proceeds of prostitution; Archivi di Stato del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Rome [hereafter ASMAE], Casi Penali Regio Tribunale Consolare Italiano del Cairo, 1932, folder 2, cases 41–95; ASMAE, Casi Penali Regio Tribunale Consolare Italiano, 1926, cases 1–65.

Abu-al-'Uyun, a prominent social reformist from al-Azhar, the Cairo-based centre for Islamic learning in the Muslim world and the most important of its kind, fulminated against the danger of public vice in the pages of *al-Ahram* while the state authorities decidedly put abolitionism on the political agenda and started to study proposals for the suppression of licensed prostitution.

After the First World War and increasingly after formal independence in 1922, the 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. Licensed prostitution involving native women increasingly came to be seen as intolerable in terms of race and, of course, its blatant incompatibility with Islamic laws. In April of 1926, a memorandum was published containing the views of the local authorities on licensed prostitution.<sup>82</sup> It reported that no justification could be found for the preservation of such legislation when countless studies had demonstrated that, due to a lack of adequate sanitary structures and juridical barriers, legalization of sex work had not succeeded in curbing venereal diseases. The authors recommended the repeal rather than the 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>83</sup> In 1932, a mixed Anglo-Egyptian commission was formed and charged with the task of investigating all the circumstances relevant to licensed prostitution in the country and its impact on public health and security; the aim of this was to establish once and for all whether the system was desirable or not. The commission worked for three years and the final report was published in 1935.<sup>84</sup>

In the report a draft law was proposed. It called for the arrest and detention of all third parties involved in the sexual exploitation of minors, both in legal brothels and clandestine houses, and punishment of up to fifteen years or a fine of 500 Egyptian pounds. Those aiding prostitution by knowingly renting out rooms or flats for debauchery and those earning their living by prostituting themselves would be subject to detention for up to two years and a fine of up to fifty Egyptian pounds. On 26 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 and it reasserted the conclusion reached by the previous one. The topic of the fate of sex workers was also tackled by the

82 "Ta'adil La'ihat- al -'ahirat", in *al-Ahram*, 13 April 1926, n.p.

83 *Ibid.*

84 Commission of Enquiry into the Problem of Licensed Prostitution, *Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Problem of Licensed Prostitution in Egypt* (Cairo, 1935).

commission; it recommended the opening of four refuges for “fallen women” in Cairo, Alexandria, Tanta, and Asyut, and they were to provide the women with marketable skills such as cooking and sewing. As a last measure to stop “social derangement”, abolitionism was eventually implemented in 1949 when Ibrahim ‘Abd-al-Hadi Basha, the Prime Minister and Commander in Chief, promulgated Military Decree 76 on the closure of brothels. Article 1 called for the closure of all bordellos in the country where more than one woman worked as a prostitute, and they were to be closed within two months of the decree’s issuance. As is evident from this article, prostitution per se constituted no criminal offence, while third-party exploitation was prosecuted by law, unlike the situation under regulationism. Two months after the issuance of the decree, anyone who was found to be managing houses of ill fame or living on the proceedings of women’s prostitution was to be subject to arrest and detention for one to three years, and two to four years if the *souteneur* was a relative of the exploited woman. Article 5 of the decree stated that if a woman suffering from a venereal disease was found to be practicing prostitution in a house of ill fame, she was to be arrested and detained for three to five years and fined 100 Egyptian pounds.

The complete criminalization of sex work was legally established in 1951 when Law 68, a regulation against debauchery, was passed. This law, which is still force today, calls for the prosecution of third parties as well as women working as prostitutes. Any woman found engaging in paid sex was and is subject to at least three months imprisonment and a fine of 250 to 300 Egyptian pounds. Egyptian lawmakers went further and supported the outright restriction of sexual freedom outside wedlock. Law 68 on Combating Prostitution, which was promulgated in 1951, decidedly criminalized sex workers and defined 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 with consensual extra-marital sexual activity.

### Postcolonial Prostitution: When Sex Workers Became Criminals

Sex workers in the 1950s were the first generation to work against the legal system and consequently were treated as criminals. After all of the licensed brothels were shut down in 1949, Law 68 criminalized sex work. This occurred on the eve of the Revolution of 1952 which resulted in the end of British Occupation, the abolishment of the monarchy, and the establishment of the republic. During the short-lived period of unification with Syria (1958–1961), Law 10 of 1961 extended the criminalization of prostitution to Syria. All activities



related to sex work such as facilitating sold sex, pimping, soliciting, recruiting sex workers, and managing or providing places for commercial sex became punishable crimes. Clients were the only party not to be criminalized and they were treated as witnesses.<sup>85</sup> In this process, scholars joined the state authorities in criminalizing sex work.

Interestingly, the label “registered prostitute” was kept in use but it did not refer to a licensed sex worker anymore. It now applied, and still does, to a woman who, having been arrested at least once for a commercial sex-related activity, is still considered to be suspicious and is subject to being arrested. Egyptian sociologists, anthropologists, criminologists, and legal scholars have studied prostitutes, pimps, and madams as criminals, social deviants, and psychopaths. Thus, most of the information available is based on surveys of prostitutes who have been arrested and/or imprisoned.<sup>86</sup> The major goal of scholars has been to make suggestions to policy makers about how to eliminate everything related to prostitution. Despite their different disciplines and approaches, most Egyptian scholars hold to the idea that sex work is a dangerous evil and threat to society that requires harsh legal treatment. At least one of those scholars went so far as to recommend curtailing female sexuality and denying women's right to fall in love and choose their partners.<sup>87</sup> Notably, scholarship on prostitution in postcolonial Egypt has been based on the narratives of prostitutes themselves while their voices were mostly absent in previous studies. Clients are always absent from research because they are never treated as partners in violations of the law. Thus, they are never arrested and the state does not keep records of them.

Sex work in postcolonial Cairo became structurally adjusted so that it could manoeuvre within the strict legal boundaries that came into existence. According to a study carried out in 1961, most sex workers (78.7 per cent) were under 30 years old. The largest age group was between 20 and 24 years old

85 For the laws and legal procedures concerning sex work since 1951, see As'ad, Ahmad Sabri, *Qanun al-uqubat al-misri mu'allaqan 'ala nususihi wa mudhayyalan biahkam mahkamat al-naqd* (Cairo, 1964); 'Izzat Muhammad Nimr, *Jara'im al-'ird fi qanun al-uqubat al-misri* (Cairo, 1984); Muhammad 'Izzat 'Ajwah, *Jara'im al-'ird wa ifsad al-akhlaq fi qanun mukafahat al-da'arah raqm 10 li-sanat 1961 wa-qanun al-'uqubat: Dirasah tahliliyyah muzawwadah bi-ahkam mahkamat al-Naqd wa-muqaranah fi bad tashriat al-duwal al-'arabiyyah* (Cairo, 1972).

86 A notable exception is an ethnographical study in which a scholar with the permission of the police pretended to be a client and surveyed sex workers and pimps in their work places. See 'Abd Allah 'Abd al-Ghani Ghanim, *al-Baghaya wa al-bagha': Dirasah susiyyu-anthrubulujyyah* (Alexandria, 1990).

87 Ghanim, *al-Baghaya wa-al-bagha'*, p. 317.

(33.8 per cent), followed by those who were between 15 and 19 years old (24 per cent). There were also prostitutes under 15 years old and over 45 years of age.<sup>88</sup> Madams, the women who facilitated the sale of sex through various activities such as recruiting sex workers and clients and arranging places for sexual encounters, were all ages. In addition to being sex workers themselves, younger madams exploited other women while the older ones (over 40) focused more on facilitating prostitution since their services were no longer in demand. Major differences can be identified in commercial sex since the mid-1970s. Most of the sex workers in the 1950s were illiterate and came from poor families, and for them selling sex was a way to make ends meet.<sup>89</sup> They lacked the skills to integrate into the formal job market. Half of them worked solely in prostitution while the other half could not generate enough income to support themselves and their dependants by working low-paying jobs such as street vending and domestic services. Only 3.5 per cent of their families were indifferent about their involvement in the sex trade, while the vast majority of women had to conceal it out of fear and a sense of shame. In contrast to stereotypes, very few of those sex workers drank alcohol and/or smoked hashish or used any other drugs. The few who did were merely trying to please their clients and only two women admitted that they enjoyed alcohol and hashish. Their clients were mostly Egyptian and a few were from other Arab states.

Throughout the 1950s, Azbakiyyah continued to be an important residential area for sex workers and 33 per cent of those who were arrested in association with prostitution lived there. None of them managed brothels or received clients at their homes in Azbakiyyah. Women could be accused of soliciting in the street, or according to the legal terms, “urging men to commit adultery, *wa fujur*, and committing shameful acts in public”, and they didn’t have to just be caught providing services or managing secret brothels. This was because sex workers took it upon themselves to find clients rather than waiting for them in their professional places and very few of them were willing to use their own homes. Most of the time their clients arranged the places where sexual encounters took place. Sex workers usually took the risk of going with a group of clients, mostly a group of friends who shared the cost. This meant that women had to work more, serve more men for less money, and agree to go with groups of strangers to unfamiliar places where they would not be able to get help if

88 Hassan al-Sa’ati, *al-Bigha’ fi al-Qahirah* (Cairo, 1961), p. 15.

89 The information on sex workers in the 1950s is based on a contemporary survey conducted by a team of the Egyptian National Center for Social and Criminal Research. See al-Markaz al-Qawmi lil-Buhuth al-Ijtimia’iyyah wa al-Jina’iyyah, *al-Bigha’ fi al-Qahirah: Mash ijtimai’i wa dirasah ikliniikiyyah* (Cairo, 1961).

they needed it. Prostitutes also provided sexual services in cars and boats. This is a reflection of the fact that prostitutes had to work beyond the boundaries of law but also reveals that they were free from pimps and mediators in the early phase of criminalization. Three quarters of the women worked autonomously, which was a short-lived radical departure from licensed prostitution. The few mediators involved in commercial sex in the 1950s were mostly men whose businesses set up prostitutes with clients and they were often hairdressers, waiters, and cab drivers. Although there were a few male pimps, women dominated pimping and they were mostly older retired prostitutes.<sup>90</sup>

The changes in the structure and dynamics of sex trade throughout the second half of twentieth century not only reflect the state's treatment of commercial sex but also the rapid course of socio-economic and political changes in Egypt and its Arab environment as a whole. After the Arab-Israeli war in 1973, wealth flooded into Arab oil-producing countries. Egypt emerged as an attractive hub for wealthy Arab tourists, particularly in the summer. Coincidentally, Egyptian society was going through socio-economic changes associated with reintegration in the open market and the global economy, which is known as the *Infitah*, the Open Door Policy. Many observed how these sudden changes widened the gap between the rich and the poor, unleashed consumerism, increased unemployment even among the educated, and undermined moral values; at the same time, observers noted the importance of wealth regardless of its source. These developments brought about changes in the structure of sex work. The sex trade witnessed a geographical shift from downtown Cairo to Pyramids Street and the Mohandiseen and Doqqi areas in Giza, which is the twin city of Cairo. These newly developed areas became home to international restaurants, nightclubs, discotheques, dance halls cabarets, and cafés. The modern appeal of these areas and their proximity to the pyramids made them a hub for tourists, particularly those from the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. A substantial number of residences are rented out fully furnished to those tourists who flood to the country during the summer and around New Year's Eve.

Since the late 1970s, Arab tourists, backed by their financial wealth, have represented an important segment of the sex market and pimps have regained their importance in a complex network structure. The importance of pimps and mediators since the mid-1970s cannot be overestimated. In that illegal trade, male and female pimps provide prostitutes with protection, expertise, and guaranteed work throughout the year. About 70 per cent of pimps are

90 See al-Markaz al-Qawmi lil-Buhuth al-Ijtimia'iyyah wa al-Jina'iyyah, *al-Bigha' fi al-Qahirah: Mash Ijtimia'i Ikliniyyah*, pp. 58–60; al-Sa'ati, *Al-Bigha' fi al-Qahirah*, pp. 82–83.

women and are currently or former sex workers.<sup>91</sup> By connecting sex workers with clients and arranging places for them to operate, they save sex workers from soliciting in the streets and consequently protect them from the police and clients. Some sex workers get daily wages from their pimps regardless of how many customers they serve. Although this system guarantees a regular income, it is not favoured by women as pimps can exploit them to serve a high number of clients for a fixed wage. Thus, only unexperienced prostitutes agree to work with that system.<sup>92</sup> Although many prostitutes resent the exploitation of pimps who take up to 50 per cent of the income, they prefer to work with pimps and even do their best to protect their pimps if they are arrested.<sup>93</sup> This is because pimps are usually committed to paying legal fees for lawyers and supporting the women when they get arrested and they also take care of their dependants while the women are in prison. Pimps pay visits and/or ask other sex workers to visit their imprisoned colleagues, which gives them much moral support, particularly if they do not have a family or their family has abandoned them.

Prostitution networks geared toward the tourism market are not restricted to providing sex; they also offer a wide variety of services including picking up tourists at the airport. A sex worker who has also pimped other women narrated the nature of her tasks and daily route: "I pick them up from the airport, show them furnished apartments to rent, arrange a domestic servant, do shopping, bring other prostitutes and let them choose [one], I take them to night clubs, dance with them, and then go to their apartment to sleep with them while I'm totally drunk."<sup>94</sup> She stated that she makes a lot of money through fees, gifts, tips, and commissions, and also by being involved in the apartment rental process and the prices of commodities and services. On the other hand, women who have the dual task of pimping and providing sex have to be generous in paying other sex workers and domestic servants well so they can secure their loyalty and facilitate the work. They also spend a great deal of their income on rental cars, fancy clothing, and lavish residences with phone lines, a luxury that was rare in Cairo until the last decade of the twentieth century.

Male and female pimps are very receptive to particular demands such as providing young girls and virgins for high prices. When a pimp fails to recruit a

91 Wazarat al-Dakhiliyyah, *Bayan ihṣā'i bi-majhudat qism mukafahat jara'im al-adab* (Cairo, 1990).

92 Ghanim, *al-Baghaya wa-al-bagha'*, p. 181.

93 *Ibid.*, p. 183.

94 Muhammad 'Arif, *Tariq al-inhiraf: bahth maydani 'an ihtiraf al-Bigha'* (Cairo, 1986), pp. 120–121.

virgin, an experienced sex worker will undergo minor surgery to get a fake hymen and is thus able to meet the demand. When tourists patronize young girls, the clients sign a civil marriage contract known as '*urfi* marriage, which is legal but does not have to be registered in the state records.<sup>95</sup> The interaction between male Arab tourists and female Egyptian sex workers has triggered focal polemics and stereotyping on both sides in the last few decades. Some Egyptian films have dealt with the theme of Arab men only seeking sexual pleasure and dragging destitute Egyptian women into prostitution or prostitution-like marriages.<sup>96</sup> One sex worker who often dealt with tourists said she was deeply offended and angered when a tourist-client suggested that all Egyptian women were like her.<sup>97</sup> She said she slapped him and terminated her two-week service agreement after only one week because he insulted her country, Egypt. This narrative is notable in that it both implies that this particular sex worker has a low view of herself and also that sex work is perceived negatively in Egypt and the Arab World.

Another structural change associated with developments in Egypt and the Arab region after the boom of oil wealth and *Infatih* has been an increase in trafficking networks. The police arrested three people involved in a case of the smuggling of a woman in 1984. That number jumped to twenty-six people involved in three cases in 1988, not to mention those whose activities went unnoticed or to whom the authorities turned a blind eye. These networks bring foreign women to work as prostitutes in Egypt and export Egyptian women to the prostitution market in other countries such as Lebanon and the states of the Arab Gulf. Very often women are granted real or fake employment contracts as domestic servants. Networks incorporate those who have access to fake visas, passports, and other documents, since most such women were blacklisted and unable to leave the country.<sup>98</sup> Unsurprisingly, 15 per cent of those who were arrested in 1990 were students in middle and high school and even university students.<sup>99</sup> One of the dramatic aspects of the illegal but flourishing sex business in Cairo is that it has been used to generate politically-motivated sensational media coverage.<sup>100</sup> By exploiting public interest, the former ruling

95 Ghanim, *Baghaya wa-al-bagha'*, p. 276.

96 Among many examples, Egyptian films such as *Ayam al-Ghadab* (*Days of Anger*) by Munir Radi, (1989) and *Lahm Rakhis* (*Cheap Meat*) by Iynas al-Dighidi (1995) are good representatives of this kind of polemic.

97 'Arif, *Tariq al-Inhiraf*, p. 114.

98 Ghanim, *Baghaya wa-al-bagha'*, pp. 293–300.

99 *Ibid.*, p. 106.

100 For examples of press coverage of issues concerning sex work, see app. 1 in Ghanim, *Baghaya wa-al-bagha'*, pp. 321–328.

regime frequently waged arrest campaigns against celebrities in association with sex work networks.<sup>101</sup> These cases captured the public attention for weeks and were skilfully used by the Mubarak government to steer public opinion away from its failing economic policies and political repression. The ways that the Egyptian regime has employed sex work to conceal its shortcomings is a matter which certainly deserves further investigation.

### Conclusion

This paper has tried to provide a rather extensive overview of sex work in the city of Cairo from roughly 1600 to the present day. By drawing upon a diverse array of sources including mediaeval chronicles, police files, court cases, abolitionist societies' papers, the press, travelogues, socio-criminal reports, and ethnographies, we have tried to give a detailed account of the ways in which sex work was carried out and how it changed in the rapidly transforming urban environment in precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial times. In particular we focused on the early modern and modern state regulations of commercial sex and the political economy of prostitution, taking into consideration the characteristics of the sex trade and how working conditions changed at particular junctures of time.

The process of the consolidation of state authority and colonial control resulted in the increasing marginalization of women marketing their sexual services as a separate professional category endowed with a sexualized social persona, that of the prostitute. By shunning a legalistic and social approach that separates prostitutes from the broader class of Egyptians, we tried to highlight the links between prostitution and the political economy of the labouring class since the nineteenth century. In this introductory overview, we focused on the relationship between prostitution and society, not just prostitutes' sub-culture. Far from being the "oldest trade" as is often maintained in traditional, essentializing understandings of this phenomenon, prostitution underwent a shifting trajectory from regulation to abolitionism in colonial Egypt, and criminalization in the postcolonial state has been closely intertwined with the articulations of an indigenous nationalist discourse and the process of nation-building in Egypt.

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101 The most sensational case was that of cinema stars Hanan Turk and Wafa' Amir. For more on the sensational coverage of prostitution and sexual matters in the Egyptian press, see Muhammad al-Baz, *Sahafat al-itharah: al-siyasah wa al-din wa al-jins fi al-suhuf al-misriyya* (Cairo, 2010).