Victims of Trafficking or Narratives of Post-Soviet

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Dans cet article, l'auteure puise dans ses récentes recherches ethnographiques auprès des femmes .émigrantes de l'après-Union soviétique qui travaillent à Istanboul, pour poser le problème du concept de « victime » qui prévaut dans le discours autour du trafic de ces femmes et dans le trafic « at large » . En misant sur les témoignages de ces femmes engagées dans différentes formes de travail, l'auteure s'éloigne du principe qui fait passer les émigrantes volontaires comme des victimes du trafic et préfère celui d'une considération plus proche de la vie de ces femmes et de leur interprétation de leurs nouvelles pratiques de travail.

In June of 2002 I was invited as a casual observer to attend a workshop entitled "Trafficking in Women" sponsored by the International Organization of Migration in Istanbul, Turkey. The workshop brought together a range of representatives of non-profits from Central and Eastern Europe to discuss efforts to curb trafficking in women. One presentation by a representative of La Strada, a transnational non-profit dedicated to eradicating trafficking in women, was characteristic of the two-day event. The speaker lamented the difficulty of warning hundreds of women travelling from Belarus and Ukraine to Germany, who were "not yet victims" of prostitution, about the dangers awaiting them. The speaker presented a computer game developed for use in Ukrainian schools; it featured "Monika," a cartoon figure, as a potential victim of trafficking. Students were supposed to make choices—whether to accept work abroad or finish school, whether to settle for a low-wage job or dream of economic prosperity abroad—and, depending on these choices, "Monika" was led to her doom or left safely, if poor, at home.

Severe economic restructuring in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union created a context in which sex work was one of the few means for young women to earn a living that would support basic needs.

These presentations, like the widespread discourses on trafficking (The Angel Coalition; CATW), did not problematize the category "victim" and I was left with many questions. For instance, how do women working in a range of spheres, not just sex work, but nonetheless under unfair and sometimes humiliating conditions, fit into this analysis? And how would anti-trafficking organizations make sense of women who are not trafficked but still migrant sex workers? I was especially struck by the idea of "victims" of trafficking and I wondered how much of this discourse was the result of a "whore/Madonna" dichotomization of women's migrant labour. Scholars like Jo Doezema and Luise White have convincingly argued that such a discourse is tied to reformers' moralistic stands on sex work. In this article I draw on my recent ethnographic research among post-Soviet migrant women employed in Istanbul in an effort to problemetize the idea of "victim" that is prevalent in the discourse on trafficking in post-Soviet women, and in trafficking more broadly.

Trafficking from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union

As a number of scholars have written of other contexts, sex work has been historically shaped by shifting political, economic and social transformations (Kempadoo and Doezema; Truong; White). Severe economic restructuring in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union beginning in the early 1990s created a context in which sex work was one of the few means for young women to earn a living that would support both basic household needs and growing consumer desires.[1] According to some sources, by the late 1990s two-thirds of the estimated 500,000 women annually trafficked for prostitution to 40-50 countries across the world came from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union (IOM cited in McDonald, Moore and Timoshkina; Hughes). Others point to less dramatic figures, but nonetheless at home and abroad in recent years women from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe have turned increasingly to sex work as a means of supporting themselves and sometimes their families (see, for example, Nazpary).

Some non-profits have dedicated significant resources to analyzing this new pattern of migration, but spe-

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cifically with a focus on forced prostitution and the victims of trafficking.[2] The dominant discourse rarely indicates that thousands of women migrate each year who are not trafficked, and instead suggests that all sex work in which women are engaged inherently leads to their victimization. For instance, in a passage typical of the burgeoning literature on trafficking in women from the Former Soviet Union, Donna Hughes, an established figure in the crusade against trafficking, writes:

> Whether through poverty, desperation, naivete, deception, or some combination of these factors, thousands upon thousands of Russian women are leaving their homes in search of livelihood abroad and ending up violently exploited, and sometimes enslaved, in the international sex industry. (59)

In fact, however, such statements do not clarify the situation; the social science research focused on the sphere of "trafficking" from the former Soviet Union is just beginning to emerge (Erokhina; Levchenko; Gulcur and Ilkkaracan). There are even fewer examples of research based on qualitative interviews with those migrant men and women from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe who are engaged in sex work (see McDonald *et al.*).

Turkey and Migrants

This article is part of a larger project on women labour migrants who began moving between the former Soviet Union and Turkey in the early 1990s. In this three-year ethnographic project (2002-2005) I consider sex workers and two other migrant populations—domestic workers and petty traders—in terms of how women from the former Soviet Union negotiate experiences as transnational labour migrants. The research draws primarily on participant observation and semi-structured interviews with women migrants. The research has also included interviews with representatives of a range of non-governmental organizations, including some addressing trafficking in women, and some providing social services to displaced persons or migrants. In this essay, I seek to draw attention to women's narratives in order to move the analysis away from identifying voluntary migrants vs. victims of trafficking, and instead more carefully consider women's lives and their interpretations of their new labour practices

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In the course of this research I have consulted with about 50 women from the former Soviet Union, specifically Moldova, Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. All interviews were done in Russian, which continues to be the lingua franca for people from the former Soviet Union. So far I have conducted formal interviews with ten petty traders, 15 domestic workers, and ten sex workers. Some women had also worked in one of the other two spheres or were hoping to shift into one of the other spheres in the future. Interviews focused on conditions of work, attitudes toward new forms of labour, women's aspirations, and relationships with family, friends, lovers, and colleagues.

While Turkey has been a primary destination for women from the former Soviet Union since the early 1990s, their options for employment have shifted significantly over the past decade. Opportunities for domestic work became relatively scarce in Turkey following the financial crisis of late 2000/early 2001 that resulted from the flight of foreign capital and a sudden devaluation of the Turkish lira. Interest rates and inflation skyrocketed and unemployment sharply increased. Making a living through the petty trade of small volumes of clothing, the primary product of Turkish textile production being resold throughout the former Soviet Union, also became difficult after 1998. In August 1998, the Russian Federation suffered its own currency crisis brought on by Russia's inability to pay the interest on its International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans; the series of import duties and tariffs initiated as part of a new economic plan in Russia made petty

trade of goods transported from Turkey and resold in Russia unprofitable for thousands of women who had been supporting themselves in this manner since the early 1990s (Wines). Sexwork, and specifically exotic dancing, is a sphere where women from the former Soviet Union readily continue to find employment. As the tourism industry expands in Turkey, venues for entertaining tourists also expand, and these include nightclubs, bars, escort services, and massage services.

While figures on labour migration into Turkey are not readily available, statistics on recent deportations give a sense of the scale. Deportations from the Istanbul area alone were reported by the Istanbul Police Directorate as totalling 47,000 foreign nationals over a three-year period, from 1999-2002. Those deported were found guilty of crimes ranging from carrying a fake passport to theft to smuggling narcotics; 8,000 people were found guilty of "working without a permit," 6,000 of "visa violations," and 5,500 of "prostitution for benefit." Of the 47,000 deported over the three year period, 13,000 were from the former Soviet Union, with 9,000 from Moldova and 4,000 from Ukraine ("Detention").[3]

Turkey has become a significant destination for many seeking a better life. For some, like Nigerians who have arrived in hundreds by stowing away on boats and airplanes, Turkey is known as a place where they can bide their time as they wait for U.N. refugee status. Turkey does not have legal provisions for non-European refugees to become permanent residents (Interview with Helen Bartett, Istanbul Interparish Migrants' Program, July 10, 2003; Içduygu). For others, like Iraqis and Afghanis, Turkey is an accessible country with well-established human smuggling routes into western Europe ("Detention").[4]

For some labour migrants from the former Soviet Union, Turkey is considered a good alternative to Western European countries like Italy which, by the late 1990s, were limiting work visas to those with some demonstrated knowledge of the language. In 2003, Italy was also requiring those applying for visas from Moldova to leave US$1200 in escrow to cover the potential cost of deportation (Interview with Oleg Zadvornii, tour agency director, Chisinau, Moldova, June 28, 2003). In 2001 and 2002, citizens of the former Soviet Union—such as Moldovans, Ukrainians, and Russians—could easily obtain a Turkish tourist visa of one month's duration upon arrival in Turkey.[5] Those who overstayed the visa were in danger of being deported, but this could often be avoided by paying a fine (Interviews with domestic workers in Laleli, Istanbul, 2001-2002).

Aside from pointing to the economic incentives, these women often spoke of other appeals of the work, such as their aspirations to "see the world," and especially their longing for glamour and romance.

Entertainers and the Context of Work

In the course of two months in 2002 I collected narratives among women working in the sphere of sex work—or "entertainment"—in the nightclubs of Taksim, a central tourist district of Istanbul. I refer here to the women as "entertainers" (see Tyner) since they were officially employed as exotic dancers and sometimes strippers; while they could engage in prostitution, this was not their primary means of making a living. I interviewed ten women. Since we lived in the same hotel, our discussions were not single events, but ongoing. Our interactions were sometimes casual—often while the women were preparing for work, applying makeup, fitting bras, or ironing costumes. In this article, I draw primarily on material from interviews with four entertainers—Kara, Daria, Nelli, and Veronica (all pseudonyms).

The entertainers I came to know did not speak of being coerced or deceived into taking on their work. Due to contacts with previous migrants they were mostly aware of the conditions they were to encounter upon arriving in Istanbul. Eight of the ten women I interviewed were on their second and third six-month contracts as entertainers in Turkey; one woman had also worked in Lebanon and Greece. While the petty traders and domestic workers were women in their late 30s, 40s and 50s, the entertainers were all in their late teens to early 30s. The youngest woman I encountered was 19 and the oldest was 31. None of them had worked as traders moving textiles between Istanbul and their hometowns, since they lacked the capital to initiate such a business, but several of them had worked in street markets back home selling Turkish textiles for a petty trader. The entertainers tended to disdain domestic work as "manual labour" that was viewed as far less glamorous than entertainment work.

Work in the entertainment sphere involved long, and odd hours, beginning around 7:00pm and sometimes extending until 5:00am. The monthly pay in 2002 was often ten times more than the US$20/month women could hope for back home; in Istanbul they were making over $500/month. After fees for accommodation, their take-home pay was about $250/month. When they had paid off the debts incurred to arrange the contracts—about $400 in 2001—they could count on this income. Based just on their pay checks, several

women I came to know sent home $1000 in remittances by the end of their six-month contracts. Those with additional sponsors or wealthy Turkish boyfriends were rumoured to be sending $5000 home in the same period. Aside from pointing to the economic incentives, these women often spoke of other appeals of the work, such as their aspirations to "see the world," the sense of independence they gained, and especially their longing for glamour and romance.[6]

These aspects of entertainers' experience of engaging in migrant labour are particularly absent from much of the literature on "trafficking." Sweeping assertions of exploitation as the central component in women's experience abroad negate important factors in women's experience of migration. More significantly, the abolitionist discourse around trafficking has tended to lump sex work into a single trajectory of discussion around victimization and degrees of it, with a highly moralizing tone implying that women need to be "protected" and/or risk being "trafficked" (Hughes). In focusing on glamour and aspirations for independence and romance as three significant aspects of women's narratives, women's desires shape their lives as migrants (see, for example, Kelsky).

Women's Voices: Glamour, Independence, and Romance

I was introduced to several entertainers by a woman from Moldova employed in cleaning the hotel where we all lived. The first young woman who spoke with me extensively was Kara. She invited me to take a seat on her bed, one of three in the room, as she painted her nails in preparation for the evening's work. She explained that she was on her first contract and had sought out this work in despair over her poor options and low pay back home in Ukraine. In her primary career as a telephone operator a month's work resulted in more than US$20/month. In the other spheres she had attempted, for instance in a local market where she would freeze standing outside in winter selling clothing brought by her boss from Turkey, she could only earn $1/day. In Istanbul she was making $18/day, $9 after paying for her hotel room. Kara was planning on renewing her contract; she was saving money to help send her 18-year-old brother to college.

Rochelle Rubinstein, "Dance," hand-dyed linocut print, 24" x 24," 1990.

Like several other entertainers, Kara had tried to arrange a marriage through an internet matchmaker service before seeking work abroad. Kara corresponded with three men for several months, and for a brief period she dreamed of marrying a man from "that place where a lot of automobiles are made," Detroit, Michigan. In the end translating the letters and updating her file with the marriage service were too expensive to keep up; besides, she explained, "It was a silly dream to think that someone

else would solve my problems."

In 2001, Kara turned to possibilities for working abroad, and visited every European consulate in Kiev to learn about temporary work visa requirements. Everywhere she checked they required fluency in English or a local language in order to issue a visa. Kara also looked into arranging work in Italy through a semi-official network of friends and acquaintances, but this would have cost a minimum of US$350, and she did not have the money. Turkey was the last resort, a place everyone knew you could arrange a six-month work visa as a "ballerina" without knowing Turkish or any other foreign languages.

Kara brought out her photo album, filled with snapshots taken during her time in Turkey. Many images were of her and other dancers at the *kazino*, as she referred to the club where they performed nightly. She flipped through images of a day at the beach, dinner out with her Turkish boyfriend, and New Years' celebrations at the club. Here she paused and noted that her white, sequin-laden costume was wearing out after months of performances, and besides she had gained nearly ten pounds since she arrived in December, so she didn't really fit the costume as her mother had designed it to fit her. Kara laughed with self-deprecation, "*Tantsory*! (Dancers!) We're supposed to be dancers, but look at us trying to be glamorous!" She added, "But this work is okay; compared to the dreariness of home, it is like a vacation (*opusk*)."

On another occasion one of Kara's roommates commented on the shifting reception of Russian-speaking entertainers in Turkey. Veronica explained that it was a decent living now, but nothing like ten years ago, as she had heard from older entertainers. At 19, Veronica was on her second contract, having worked in 2001 in Izmir, a city to the south of Istanbul. Veronica lamented that ten years ago the "Russian" women were considered really exotic. "The Turkish men were *astonished* by Russian women and they were giving gifts of diamonds and gold. Now they give nothing much." It was not uncommon for such a discourse of glamorous possibilities to be invoked to explain what originally drew these women to seek out work as entertainers.

Romance also played a role in some of the women's work as entertainers, and was often highlighted as complicating returns home. All of the women I consulted with sought out at least one steady admirer, (*muzhateer*), who would occasionally take them to dinner, supply them with a cell phone, and hopefully pay their return ticket at the end of their club contract. These were not viewed as simple commercial exchanges, however; these relationships were often infused with emotional ties. Depending on the intensity of these ties, the entertainers clearly distinguished between an admirer (*muzheteer*), boyfriend (*blizkii drug*), and simply friend (*drug*). In their free time outside of working hours, women frequently met with men fitting in all these categories for meals, trips to the beach, or shopping. They cautioned one another, though, that it was not worth "falling in love" with these men who were unlikely to reciprocate.

In seeking romance for leisure as wellas to secure new forms of independence the entertainers frequently demonstrated a range of agency that did not easily fit with an image of "victim."

Kara's second roommate, Daria, was a little older than the others; at 31 she worried about age, but she also knew she had more experience which gave her confidence in her work. She was on her third contract in Turkey and was thinking of how to negotiate her fourth. Daria often spoke of her eight-year-old daughter back home in southern Ukraine. She was being taken care of by Daria's sister and would be attending a private school in the fall; Daria was trying to save to cover the fees. While her daughter's father was not living far away, he wanted little to do with his daughter, and he not only refused to help financially, but frequently called Daria on her cell phone in Istanbul asking her to send him money.

Daria explained that they had been together for eight years, and that her daughter had her father's last name which she regrets. She also said that he refuses to work, even though he could, because he says the pay is too low. One afternoon Daria commented, "I'm just so tired, I have worked eight years without a break" (*Ia tak ustala, 8 let rabotaiu bez pereriva*). She picked up some photographs she just had developed and changed the subject, pointing to an image of a young Turkish man embracing her on a beach. She said she was glad she has been able to find a boyfriend (*blizkii drug*), someone who genuinely cares for her, but she worried about the relationship if she couldn't arrange work in Istanbul at the end of her current club contract.

Resistance

In seeking romance for leisure as well as to secure new forms of independence the entertainers frequently demonstrated a range of agency that did not easily fit with an image of "victim." When managers would drop by their hotel rooms between shifts, the entertainers would even take on a position of superiority. They would gleefully invoke derogatory names they had created for the managers in Russian, such as *tarakan*. Tarakan, the Russian word for "cockroach," was the most disliked of the

five club managers who often tried to kiss the women. Speaking in Russian, which Tarakan did not understand, the women were fond of reminding each other in Tarakan's presence that he was illiterate and also probably impotent. The women I interviewed would frequently comment that most of the entertainers were far more educated than their employers. Some of the women had technical school training, one had studied law, and all of them had completed high school. In contrast, three of the five club managers were high school "drop-outs."

A segment from Nelli's life history further highlights the ways the entertainers were consciously resisting certain work conditions. Nelli, a cheerful 19-year-old woman with a distinctive piercing in her navel, began dancing right out of high school when her other options in Belarus seemed much less interesting and low-paying. She heard from a girlfriend about the possibility of dancing in clubs abroad, and quickly arranged a contract through an employment agency. Although her father was not happy with this, he did grudgingly agree to her taking up the job since as an unemployed factory worker, his sporadic income as handyman could not support the household.

In the two years since Nelli finished her English immersion high school in Belarus she had also worked in Lebanon and Greece. Her Greek contract was short-lived, since there she described the system as "more like prostitution." In Greece, she was required to sleep with clients on demand; she left after a month and returned home. In Lebanon, however, she liked the working conditions where she performed in a club for nearly eight months. Nelli explained that she could make better money in Lebanon than in Istanbul because she could, if she chose, go home with customers. Nelli was hoping to return to Lebanon as soon as she received a visa; she said it was particularly easy to renew one-month tourist visas for a number of months, so she could arrange work without having to pay fees to any employment agencies. She hoped to work this way for another ten years, or at least as long as it took her to save enough capital to open her own business in clothing design back home.

Conclusion

While there were clearly wide-ranging power relations at play between these Turkish "admirers," "friends," and "boyfriends" and the entertainers, as well as between Turkish law enforcers, club managers, and the entertainers, the entertainers I spoke to exercised a wide range of forms of agency. Furthermore, their lives as migrant sex workers were not simply about being underpaid, overworked, and victimized, but at least as much about their aspirations and their efforts to realize these. These lives do not easily fit the stereotypical portraits of trafficked victims desperate to escape their circumstances.

While women and men may, in some cases, be coerced into migrating, it is at least as important to pay attention to the poor working conditions in which migrants find themselves even when they have migrated legally. The trafficking literature focusing on "victims" leaves little room for considering the experience of migrants in their own words, including the ways in which women and men are leaving home and dreaming of prospects for a better future. The extensive labour migration of women from the former Soviet Union deserves scholarly attention in particular since it suggests something of the interaction between global restructuring, post-Soviet patterns of desire, and the sexual strategies employed by some migrant women.

A number of scholars have directly addressed the ways in which women migrants in contexts as varied as Rome, Hong Kong, and Hawaii are not merely suffering the plight of migration (see, for example, Constable; Parreñas; and Kelsky). Like the women migrants discussed in these works, in some cases post-Soviet women migrants are excited to be relatively independent, earning incomes which they can control. Sometimes they are happily seeking out their own aspirations separate from families, boyfriends and household responsibilities back in Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, or Moldova. We have much to gain from careful attention to the lives and interpretations of women migrants, and particularly post-Soviet sex workers, whose perspectives can challenge hegemonic frameworks of how agency functions and how women can operationalize sexual strategies transnationally. Instead of settling for simplistic, moralistic assertions of victimization in discussions of shifting flows of women's international migration, we can shift the analysis. Through women's narratives we can come closer to understanding the new forces of consumer desires and economic transformation that are significantly altering the lives of labour migrants and their families around the world.

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[1]As several scholars have pointed out, this is not the first time migrant women from Eastern Europe and Russia have engaged in sex work outside their home regions. With social and economic crises of the 1860s and 1880s, women migrated in large numbers in search of work, which was sometimes sex work, to locations as far away as Argentina and India (Guy; Levine).

[2]At least two films have recently been made dedicated to this issue. One documentary film entitled "Trafficking Cinderella" was made in Canada with funds from the Open Society Institute (dir. Mira Niaglova, 2001). A second feature film entitled "Lilya 4-Ever" was made in Sweden (dir.Lukas Moodysson, 2002; Memfis Folm AB/Nordisk Film and TV Fond).

[3]Those deported in the three year

period also included 12,000 from Romania and 5,500 deportees from Iraq. A large number of deportees were also from Spain, Armenia, England, Afghanistan and Mexico ("Istanbul Police Release Data on Deportations").

[4]Of the more than 200 people who were detained by police in a single week in June 2002 at Turkey's eastern border with Iraq, there were 142 Iraqis, 31 Iranians, and 29 Afghans ("Detention").

[5]There is a growing literature on tourism in Turkey, but sex work as a visible aspect of this is completely elided (Icoz *et al.*; Var *et al.*; Taumergen and Oval; and Gözmen).

[6]Similarly, based on oral histories gathered among sex workers in Kenya White argues that some sex workers who "... waited decorously and discretely in their rooms ... were in fact entirely out for themselves, eager to disinherit fathers and brothers and to establish themselves as independent heads of households" (20).

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