

The Marriage Deal Between and a Former Russian

ELINA PENTTINEN

Cette histoire est issue de la recherche sur le terrain sur la prostitution et le trafic des femmes russes dans la Finlande du Nord. Cette narration en forme de fiction est construite à partir d'interviews avec un jeune Finnois-Saamen dans lesquelles il raconte son engagement dans la prostitution organisée dans sa région. L'auteure vise à montrer comment la mondialisation se vit localement.

This story stems from my field research on prostitution and trafficking in Russian women in northern Finland. This fictive narrative, constructed from interviews with a young Finnish-Saame man in which he told me about his involvement with organized prostitution in the region, aims to show how globalization concretizes at the local level and more specifically on gendered bodies.¹

I could start telling this story by explaining what happened last week, when the cops came and searched his house for drugs. Or when this guy, unfortunately, maybe arrogantly, gambled his fishing boat to the man from the South. These events are consequences of previous events. So, let's go further back in time a few months. Let's go back to early summer, to the time before the fishing season. These events take place in the beginning of June 2001, in Utsjoki, at the northern border, across the river from Norway, closer to the eastern border than to south of Finland.

He talks to his friends. "Since I am free this weekend and I have a new car. You know, to get to the southern border of Finland it is over 1000 km, but to the eastern-border it is only 150 km. Maybe I will go for a drive." This time he is thinking about meet-

ing his bride to be, a Russian woman from Murmansk, ten years older than him.

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This 150 km is not a distance at all in the North, it is just next door. This is a distance that a man would easily drive, if the destination would be worth it. And it has been for some years now. Women, booze, parties at camping sites that turned into brothels for the weekend, since early '90s over on Norwegian side in Laxness and Skiippagurra, as long as "the whore bus" arrived from Murmansk, Russia.² This was until November 2000.³

The Skiippagurra camping site, near Tana village, was located in a "normal" neighborhood of private homes. Similarly the camping site in Laxness was by the Tenoriver alongside with the strip of houses of local people. There was no separate red-light district, no separate street or city district where the trafficking took

place, where someone who wanted to find a prostitute could do so, and the rest could ignore it.

These days only an occasional minibus passes on Fridays by the Tenoriver, driving swiftly to the predetermined destinations of private homes. There seems to be peace and quiet now. Only those inside the network know when and where the bus travels.

The Meeting of a Finnish-Saame Man and a Russian woman

He says he is a professional fisherman. He says they met at Laxness. This means, that she was a prostitute at the time. Or, rather they met because she was in prostitution. He doesn't tell exactly what her position was in the business. Her ability to provide for him financially points to the direction of being more than just a prostitute. Anyway, for simplification I am going to call him the fisherman and she: how should we call her? Let's call her *a Russian woman*, for that is what women like her, coming from Murmansk and engaging in prostitution are called, implying that anyone identifiable as Russian and as woman, would be a prostitute. I could call her red meat, implying the other types of fish a tourist could catch here besides salmon. He calls her "this current one." He calls their connection "an international relationship," a factor that adds a special flavour to dating.

She promised to meet him this weekend in Utsjoki. This is how they and other "couples" like them meet, over the weekend from Friday to Sunday. Sometimes the woman would not even see the man who has

a Young Finnish-Saame Man Prostitute in Northern Finland

invited her to Finland. She would meet other men, yet the men who organize the travel and come and pick her up remain the same. What makes it possible for the woman to cross to the West is that her sexual labour is profitable for someone else.

Another opportunity that could be available for her is marriage. Many relationships have been formed in Skiippagurra and Laxness. Even then it is her gender that makes possible what is probably hoped to be a final escape, to cross the border once and for all.⁴

The young fisherman and the Russian woman have been involved for nine months by now, which for him is exceptional. This is the longest time for him to be in a relationship. Before they lasted at most half a year. This Russian woman must be special to him since she keeps his interests. What is her secret? Now the real test is coming; the fishing season is starting soon. This is the test that he is setting out for her. His relationships have never lasted over the summer because during the summer he is fishing every night. His previous local/Finnish girlfriends have never been able to accept that. His terms in a relationship are that he is always out, and that he will always be late. That is who he is, a professional fisherman.

It is already late and finally she arrives to the place where they promised to meet. It is on Norwegian side. They are meeting at a point where they met for the first time. That is some years ago. They have known each other for a long time. It is only last year that they became *romantically* involved, around the time when the operation of the brothels was

under threat of closing. Something had to be done.

She became his fiancée.

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The Marriage Contract

He sees the Russian minibus coming from afar. He steps out of his car already in waiting for her. Anyway, it is she who enables him to have the new car, both directly and indirectly. He couldn't have made that money from taking tourists fishing. Yet, I don't think that he thinks of his car as being enabled by her. His car is what he owns. His car is his. He has it now, because of who he is, in terms of sex and gender.

The Russian bus stops, she steps out. They smile at each other and go inside his car. There is anticipation in the air for both of them. They both think about whether this weekend will be a good one. They both anticipate how it is going to go albeit for different reasons.

What do they say to each other when they are alone in his car, driving to his home? What language do they speak to each other? They speak to each other in English, a language that neither of them knows very well.

How do they find the words? Does she tell about the drive from Murmansk? Does she tell him how her son is doing or how she has been since their last meeting? He would not be interested in hearing about these things. He would rather find out if she has been able to get a move on selling the apartment in Murmansk that she promised to do. Would they talk of business, about trafficking drugs and booze across Norwegian and Russian borders? Are they that open to each other?

What kind of things does she omit so that she can achieve her ends? What kind of things does he cease to ask, in order to keep his illusion of the naturally feminine and subordinate Russian woman, that he so thinks he has captured.

He holds out his hand to her and she puts an envelope of money in it. At this specific moment he does feel superior to her. He thinks she cannot but give it to him when he asks for it. He thinks he has made a real find because he captured a woman who had the most money to give. He thinks that the Russian women give their money away if a man asks for it and this being so he had to find himself the woman who had to most to offer.

"They can't hold on to it, you know. They just give it away. It is a misconception that Russian women are poor. They don't have money because they cannot handle it. I see them with this pile of cash in their

hands and if some man would ask for it, they just give it away.”⁵

To whom do they give the money? Do they give the money to the clients that became their friends under the circumstances of these weekend brothels? Has he probably only witnessed women giving part of their earnings to their traffickers and other middlemen, which would mean that the money they had in their hands did not really belong to them. They had earned it with their work and from the profit of booze and cigarettes they had sold, but the money really wasn't for them to keep.

He thinks she hands out the money to him because he is a real man. Because he is so charming that she cannot help herself, that he has mesmerized her. This is the impression he likes to give to his peers.

But who has captured whom? Can he be sure that it is he who caught her and not vice versa?⁶

She may think that he is a fool. But nevertheless she knows how to play her part and keep pretending that he is calling the shots. And in a way he is, but probably in a different way than he convinces himself. Now, is the crucial moment, since summer is coming and she wants to get a move on with their deal, she doesn't want anything to go wrong. And she may very well have more plans for him than he suspects. She still has her “business associates” on the Russian side, and it is not like she could or would want to break away from them. He might not realize that it could be the Russian woman who is taking advantage of him. She might think of other contracts that he couldn't refuse, once he is tied into this one.

He likes to think that he is making a wonderful deal, the best possible one. That is what he was after. He is young and has a mind for risks. He knew he could do this, so he needed to think for a while. Which one of them, which one of the girls from Laxness would he marry? He saw the women at Laxness as possibilities. For him, they were a selection, like loose candy in the candy store. He

wanted to choose the sweetest one. And in a twisted way he sees himself as a benefactor. He can explain his actions through a mindset of benevolence. It was because he felt for the women, for their economic hardship that he became involved, that he would recruit his pals and other local men, take them to Laxness for sex and booze.

Finally he asks her, when they are safely in his home, about her situation in Murmansk. Will she be able

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to proceed with the selling of the house? She is somewhat reluctant and slow in answering. She wants to keep him hanging, but at this time she cannot make definite promises.

“Things should go as planned” she says, waiting for him to reassure his own position in the contract. That he is ready to marry her, that she can move to Finland and bring her son with her.

Instead of reassuring her, he too, leaves the back door open, and says, “You, know I cannot promise you eternity. I can't promise you that we will be together forever. I can promise you something for now. But, you know how I am, and you have to accept that. You know I will always be late, I'll be fishing every night during the summer. This is not a secret how I am. So, let's see how

things go past this summer. Let's see if we can make this work.

And, at that moment, for a slight second, he wasn't sure whether he actually wanted the relationship to work. It could have been easier to revert to his old ways, be independent, spend time in a local bar, or pick up girls from different towns; just have a blast, no responsibilities. But this Russian woman had her advantages compared to the Finnish girls. It seemed she really respected him as a man. He could get the kind of admiration and compliance from her that he could not get from Finnish girls who couldn't accept him for who he was, and who always complained when he was late. Finnish girls were demanding, they really didn't understand the nature of things. And the nature of things, for him, was that the man is always superior.

And now this Russian woman seemed different. She was ready to do what he said. It seemed like she was the one woman who did understand the natural order between man and a woman and truly think the same way. She came from a different culture than his, and he found it intriguing. After all, she was *a Russian woman*.

And not just any Russian woman, but the hottest one of them all. His friends would both congratulate and envy him for being able to tame her. This was a proof of his true manhood, for she was known for being able to serve the most men in the shortest time at Laxness. Now, he could have her all to himself. And among his peers this proves of his capabilities, as if sexual labour would have been about her insatiable needs and desire for multiple partners.

How, easily are his friends convinced? It didn't cross their mind that she is having sex with them because that is her job now, for the time being, because there are no alternatives? She needed to make the most money in the time available for her, one weekend, once a month.⁷ In the end it meant she had to work four times harder.

She has to keep her mind cool, she has to make sure that he keeps his end of the deal. It is crucial for her, and she has her reasons. And the reason is not that he is such a magnificent guy.

What he has going for him is his Finnish citizenship. This is his uttermost asset. This is the key he has: his citizenship and his gender. This combination is what makes him the pathway for her escape. She has to convince him that he will be rewarded for his agreement to marry her.

To make it clear, to bind him to the deal one more time, she says, "Just think, what you are getting out of this. I will pay you 10,000 U.S. dollars for every year we are together, and once I have sold the apartment in Murmansk, we can start building a new home right here, for you, me and my son. It sure will be better than this place, you'll see."

His silence is making her nervous, this was supposed to be a done deal. Why is he being so difficult about it? She has already given him parts of her money; that's how he got his new car, and they have done business together for a long time. They have had an agreement about this.

He knows he has the power in this situation and this is how he likes it. He can keep her wanting and begging. He knows the reason why the marriage contract is so important for her, and why he can ask for so much money. And then it dawns on him: It is not because he is such a great stud or a real man, that she is eager to marry him, but because she is doing it for her son. She wants to save her son from violence. She wants to save her son from military service. He understands the real threat that her son is in coming from Murmansk. It is easier in there for guys from St. Petersburg and Moscow. But for a young man from the North or another periphery in Russian terms, the military can be deadly. The Russian woman is ready to do everything in her powers to save her son from such fate. He is taking it to the extremes to benefit from it financially.

He says; "Let's see how things go

over the summer. I can't promise you eternity, I promise you something, just for now."

Open Ending

There was still something that the fisherman had to think about before really going through with the marriage deal. He had long considered the financial benefits which were significant to him at this point. After all, with the slowing down of the business there was less for him too to organize. Those few men who were still having their "girlfriends for the weekend" would have them delivered directly. The days when he used to drive his friends to the brothels were now over.

There was only one problem. He hadn't told the name of his bride to his father. This was not because he was ashamed of her past. He wanted the money she was able to give to him. She was the best deal ever. But this is where the problem was really.

He hadn't told his parents, especially his father, since he knew that his father would know the connections she had with illicit business in the region. His father would know the Russian woman and her past and would not be happy about his son's contract with her. But, although he had his doubts for a while, they did not last too long. If she had her connections then so did he. He would be faster, smarter. It was he who would always have the upper hand; the Russian woman and her son's fate was in his hands.

And then, to boost his ego, he does go and tell his father of the marriage deal. His father is appalled, anyone else but not her! The father knew when to be concerned. His son was prone to take too many risks. One can take advantage of the opportunities that Tenoriver brings for trafficking of vodka. But, one has to be sensible, discreet and wise enough to know when to draw the line.

So, it is left for the father to do. Soon, it is the father who calls the cops, much to his son's surprise. He

was not able to impress his father with his catch this time. The cops came over and searched the house for drugs that the father suspected that the Russian woman would be trafficking with the help of his son. She would no longer be allowed to cross the border to Finland.

The fisherman did not stay long grieving the lost love and was not threatened by the cops. He really didn't care. There was nothing they could catch him with. Soon after, he engaged for the fun of it in a card game with high stakes. There he put what he valued the most on the line, his fishing boat, and in turn lost it to a man from the South, a tourist he had underestimated. He had to sell his car and return the money to the Russian woman.

Since then he found a girlfriend from a city down south, and was quite busy with his new adventure. The Russian woman was last heard in Latvia seeking new possibilities to cross the border to the West.

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¹The meetings with the Finnish-Saame man took place 1st of June and 24th November 2001. The field data was collected for my Ph.D. Dissertation "Globalization, Bio-power and Trafficking in Women from Russia to Finland," for the Department of International Relations at University of Tampere, Finland. In my dissertation, I investigate the gendered subjectivities globalization produces by looking at the operation of global sex industry within global flows of people, money, images and information. This research is funded by the Academy of Finland and is conducted at the Tampere Peace and Conflict Research Institute. My fieldwork was done during 1999-2001.

²The trafficking route takes place from Murmansk across Norwegian border to towns such as Tanabru and the

border region between Norway and Finland where Norwegian, Norwegian-Saame, Finnish, Finnish-Saame and also tourist men would go. At the busiest time there were two buses that fit 80 women, and also 300-400 litres of vodka and Russian champagne. Another trafficking route in the north of Finland takes place from Murmansk through Ivalo to further north and across the Norwegian border as well as south to Kemiriver region close to Rovaniemi in Finland.

³Then the proprietors were jailed and charged for procuring Russian prostitutes. The charges were dropped due to lack of evidence in 2003.

⁴In this case the woman has to stay three years in a relationship before she can obtain a residence permit. This is the same both in Finland and Norway. After that she can, in theory, leave and try and make her own life with her children. In many cases those three years are long and difficult for the women, not the least of which can be attributed to abusive spouses but also from the open resentment of the local communities.

⁵This is a direct quote of his words during the interview on June 1st 2001.

⁶A comment on the situation by a friend.

⁷She can only apply for one visa at time, meaning in practice that she can only cross the borders once a month, since it takes three weeks to process each application.

Errata

In the previous issue on "Women and Peace-Building" (Vol. 22.2), an error was pointed out in the article by Ruth Ojiambo Ochieng, "The Scars on Women's Minds and Bodies: Women's Roles in Post-Conflict Reconstruction in Uganda." The following sentence which appears on page 26 should read: "... the weapons that have destroyed Arica and its people are *not* being manufactured in Africa."

MARIA PASSARELLI

Wife Hunting?

sitting on his fine tail,
smiling,
he reads:

all Christian nations
represented
our process quality controlled
smooth
in finding girls craved

242 letters arrive
a harvest of young and fresh
delicate bodies
at just such an angle

girls who lead uncomplicated
lives
humble and devoted
worth every dollar

it doesn't take long to find
the most eye-appealing
and there is such gratitude
because he sends her a simple
card
that she is now making lists of
the meals
she is going to cook for him

he writes:
what you say about western
women is true
they are condemned to
freedom
not defined to a workable size

he adds:
it's a miracle
i prayed to find the right
wife
a Christian loyal wife
who won't betray me
because divorce is not an
option
for either of us

i have a heart
full of loving-kindness
to share with
my princess
after three failed marriages

on the other side
at the immigration
interview
she thinks
perhaps afterwards one
can choose
not simply accept
not knowing that for her,
simple curiosity is
dangerous enough
this last thought
interrupted by...

"What is the child's
name?"

Maria Passarelli is a first generation immigrant living in Bolton, Ontario.