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# The business of desire: “Russian” bars in Amman, Jordan

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**Abstract:** *This paper discusses the type of work migrant women from the former Eastern European countries perform in nightclubs in Amman, Jordan. The fieldwork for this qualitative study was conducted in 2010 and is based on in-depth interviews with 13 women. The topic is approached from the perspective of describing women’s choices and journeys to this work. It juxtaposes the sexualised nature of their work with their yearning for a “normal” family life, which they imagine, yet know, is impossible to achieve with the men they meet in their workplaces. Layered on top of these private desires among both women and their clients is the business strategy of the clubs, which operate in the lucrative but marginal space of selling exotic but respectable seduction. I draw on the literature about female migration to the Middle East in order to argue that hostesses in these bars perform affective labour akin to care work, within the neoliberal global economy that individualises risk.* DOI: 10.1080/09688080.2017.1378063

**Keywords:** female migration, emotional work, Middle East, women’s health, entertainment industry

## Introduction

It is 10pm on a weekday and I enter a bar in a busy swanky area of Amman, Jordan. I emerge through the metal detector into a dark space with loud dance music and thick cigarette smoke. I begin to see, perhaps, a dozen people, predominantly women, seated in small groups at various tables. As I take a few seconds to gather a sense of the place, I am met with looks of mild curiosity (and perhaps a slight disappointment?). The few men there keep their focus squarely on their female companions. The night is young – if I were seeking a party, I would feel in the wrong place. However, I have come as a researcher and was told to be here early, before the place gets busy. My Jordanian research assistant introduces me to the manager and I hope I am not asked to leave as I explain the nature of my interest in his female employees. I have been trying to contact women working in these bars for weeks, hoping to interview them in their spare time during the day, to no avail. To my delight and surprise, the manager allows me to stay and speak with two to three women, as long as we sit discreetly on the side, finish before the bar gets busy, and that I compensate the women for their time by buying them a cocktail (more on this later). After five consecutive nights visiting three different bars and interviewing a dozen women, I begin to understand why

none of them wanted to meet with me during daytime. The days are for sleeping.

There is a special niche for certain nightclubs in Amman, employing Eastern European women\* as hostesses. At first glance, one might easily assume that these are meeting places where sexual transactions are negotiated, arranged and begun. My original interest in these bars came from a public health perspective. I assumed sex work was taking place and wanted to understand the implications of the practices on the women’s health. However, the reality of the women’s work and workplaces was much more complicated and interesting. In light of this research re-adjustment, this study attempts to understand the nature of the commercial exchange occurring in these bars within broader sociological concepts of labour and migration, and women’s economic migration in particular. In order to do so, this paper is structured to describe the hostesses and their workplace (“Russian bars”), proceeds to examine the nature of services sold and purchased, and the types of customers who frequent the bars.

Focusing on the labour migration and agency of women from the former Soviet Union working in

\*The bar managers and the women themselves refer to the hostesses as “girls.” I retained this word in direct quotations but chose to use the word woman/women in my own narrative.

Amman's bars, this study inevitably touches on a large literature analysing transnational migration, trafficking and the victimisation of women. As such, there is a large discrepancy between the perceptions of women – the (suspected) sex workers – viewed as “predatory, guilty and a threat to the moral fabric of society”<sup>1</sup> and trafficked women, the innocent victims of exploitative criminal transnational groups. The space between these two perspectives<sup>2</sup> opens up a fascinating opportunity for social research into choices, desire and commercial enterprise in the specific context of the “pre-revolution” Middle East as the destination and the former Soviet Union as the origin of women's migration. In particular, I draw on the literature about female migration to argue that the women's work and work circumstances can be seen not only from the perspective of emotional labour, but further comprise elements of domestic work and its affective qualities.<sup>3</sup> I suggest the sexualised nature of the women's work is only one dimension of the life trajectories leading to their employment in Jordan, and reflects their position within the neoliberal global economic conditions underlying women's labour migration options and choices.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, countries within the bloc have initiated economic reforms characterised by privatisation and shrinking of the public sector, as well as political changes enabling freedom of movement.<sup>4</sup> These changes have resulted in a creation of wider socio-economic inequalities and high unemployment, in addition to a pervasive uncertainty about the benefits of citizenship.<sup>5</sup> However, whereas poverty and unemployment are valid overarching themes in labour migration globally, this study examines the motivation for migration of its target group in more detail, questioning assumptions that are framed by larger economic realities rather than in-depth investigations of migrant women's lives and choices.

### **Methodology**

This study was designed to gain an understanding of the lives and choices of women from the former Soviet Union who work in “Russian bars” in Amman. In order to obtain such narratives and be able to identify further topics of interest, the method of in-depth individual interviews was chosen. I approached a total of 16 women in 3 different nightclubs in Amman, 13 of whom provided

informed consent and participated in the research. The study was done June and July 2010 and interviews were conducted in the women's workplaces in quiet areas of the bars, where neither bar managers nor clients could overhear the conversation, and were recorded, transcribed and analysed by the author. The interviews were conducted in English, a language the respondents were comfortable communicating in, and lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. All information about the respondents was treated as confidential. Pseudonyms are used in this report to ensure anonymity. The study was approved by a local ad hoc ethics committee based at the University of Jordan.

### ***Amman's “Russian bars”***

Prior to delving into the analysis of the women's lives, it is helpful to understand the broad nature of the nightclubs where they work. In general, these bars look like other bars or nightclubs, operating from 8pm until around 3am. One or more security guards are stationed at the entrance and security cameras monitor all movements. The tables – depending on the hour of the evening – are occupied either by groups of attractive women sipping drinks, or by men, alone or in groups, with women at their side. Sitting or standing next to their customers, the women may be engaged in a discussion, joking, laughing, drinking, or sometimes hugging and dancing. Near the entrance or at the bar, with a good view of the establishment is a table for the manager or the owner, where the drinks served are meticulously recorded and bills prepared. Female clients or mixed couples are rare but not unseen in these clubs. The clubs have no external sign of the hostess services they provide and unaware tourists might visit for a drink. The women are dressed in party clothes, some in very short dresses or skirts, many of them have long blond hair. Most of them smoke. The tables are full of small plates with nibbles and ashtrays with lipstick-imprinted cigarette filters.

Women, also known as hostesses, are recruited from their home countries through agents or through referrals from women already working for the club. The manager and the potential female employee exchange emails and phone calls, where he explains the nature of the work and remuneration, and she submits her picture for consideration. Once the verbal agreement is made, the

manager coordinates the transportation, residence and work permits, and arranges an initial accommodation with the agent or the woman herself. Once the bar expedites her immigration documents (referred to as *iqama* or residence permit, in this case a special type of permit for the purpose of entertainment work), the woman is only allowed to work in the specific bar. The bar owner personally (not the business) carries the liability for the employee vis-à-vis the state's immigration compliance authorities. Transferring a woman's *iqama* to a new employer requires cooperation from both present and future bar owners and is rare, particularly in cases of disagreement between the woman and her sponsor. The bars require employees to pay all the costs incurred in obtaining the permit and deduct payments from their earnings over time.

The owners and managers of the three bars in which interviews took place were Arab men, two Jordanian and one Lebanese. Either the owner or the manager, or during busy weekend nights both, are present in the bar to oversee the work of the women, the billing for tables and the security of the staff. The bar's clients can invite one or more women to join their table. A woman can also approach a man to ask what he would like to drink or a man might be a regular client of a particular woman. Whereas the price of a drink for a customer depends on the type of beverage, all drinks, called cocktails, for the women have a fixed price. This is no matter whether the woman chooses to drink water, fruit juice or alcohol. In most regular clubs, an alcoholic drink costs approximately 5 Jordanian dinar (JD, 1 JD was approximately 1.4 USD at the time of the fieldwork), whereas in "Russian bars" the price of a cocktail is 10 JD (midrange bars) to 15 JD (upscale bars). This pays for her time and company. The women are instructed to take about 20–30 minutes to drink a cocktail with the customer. At the end of the evening, the number of cocktails each woman has consumed is added up to calculate the commission for the woman, which is, depending on the bar, around 5 JD per cocktail.

The women usually work six nights a week. Some of the respondents claimed to receive a fixed daily salary (400–600 JD per month) in addition to commissions from cocktails. Others seemed to waver during interviews on that topic, implying they work for cocktail commissions only. On average, the women said they could make around 1000 JD

per month before any deductions for outstanding debts to the bar. However, their earnings fluctuate predictably (bars are closed during the month of Ramadan) and unpredictably (during this study business was still negatively affected by the global financial crisis of 2008).

### *Women's journeys to Amman*

The age of women I interviewed ranged from 23 to 39. Seven respondents were Ukrainian, three Russian and one each from Belarus, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The majority were single and never married, one was currently married and two were divorced. Two women were mothers. All the women were living in Jordan without their immediate families. Nadya, the married respondent, commented: "I told my husband everything about how I make this money. He understands but he is jealous, he cannot do anything because he understands we need this money." Two women chose not to explain the nature of their work to their families, whereas the rest said they had no problems doing so.

All respondents finished secondary education and seven had university degrees – in nursing, law, economics, international relations, accounting, engineering and restaurant management. Ten women worked in their country of origin at some point during their careers, but all were disillusioned by the low level of salaries and shortage of jobs appropriate to their education level. Three respondents did not work or were unable to find work in their home countries prior to seeking jobs abroad. For younger women, such as Natalya, the problem is their lack of work experience to complement their education:

*"I am young, I have a university diploma, but I don't have experience to find work easily in Russia. A lot of girls, sure, the first reason why they came to Jordan is that we don't have work, we don't have such easy money to live in Russia."*

Many of the respondents from Ukraine were from industrial or mining areas, where employment opportunities for men have dissipated, and women have often no choice but to migrate for work to support their families. The main reason to work abroad was lack of jobs, low salaries or stressful jobs in their home countries. A couple of women said they wanted to leave home, due to a family issue or an unsuccessful relationship.

The younger women also said they wanted to see the world and gain new experiences, echoing Maria's sentiment: "I am alone, free, I have no responsibilities." At the time of the interview, the most recently arrived respondent had been there for 6 weeks and the most seasoned had lived and worked in Jordan for 10 years, the average being 3 years. Prior to arriving in Jordan, seven women worked in other countries; the most common were Syria, Turkey, Japan, Korea, India and China. For six respondents, Jordan was their first employment abroad.

When asked about how long they planned to remain in their jobs, nine respondents would have liked to stop as soon as possible or work for maximum one year. Paula explained: "I wish I [could] go home and never come back. I feel tired; this is not good work for a woman." Two women were planning to continue for more than a year and two had not yet decided on their plans. The main reason to continue working in the bars in Jordan is the earnings and savings that the women need in order to start a new life, which included getting married, finishing their education or establishing a small business in their home country.

### *The work of a hostess*

When asked about how they describe their job, the women expressed themselves in terms of what they did as much as what they did not do. Their job as hostesses (some used the word waitress) was to provide friendly service, be polite, converse with clients (in English and perhaps in Russian, as some of the clients had received university education in the former Soviet Union), help them enjoy their time, drink and dance with them. However, they also recognised that they walked a thin line between directing the ways that addressed the client's "needs" while not promising more than necessary. Several women referred to this strategy as "playing the men" or "playing the game." The goal of a hostess is to receive as many cocktails as possible. The best strategy for this appears to be repeat business, which relies on a connection with client(s). Yet, whether one-time visitors or regular clients, Anna explained that men often misunderstand women's intentions or the nature of the bar, seeking sexual services:

*"We are serving tables, if he is interested, he can invite me to have a glass with him. If people are*

*not interested, I go, I don't ask nothing. I am waiting, if somebody asks and if I like that person I go to talk, if he likes me by himself and sometimes I ask, maybe you want to invite me for a glass, this is my work I have to take a glass. And people here they know the system, for sure. Some people are kind, some people are too mean, sometimes. Some could directly ask 'how much?' [for sex] There are many kinds of people. Most of them they open glasses [buy cocktails] but they like to talk about sex or touch and I am trying to, in a nice way, somehow not to be mean, we are playing because I need my glasses of course. Because if no glasses, I don't receive nothing. I try to get as many glasses as I can."*

Most women are also in touch with some regular clients outside of work. Some respondents specified that occasionally phoning regular clients or going with them for lunch is also part of their job, for the men to keep coming back to the bar:

*"If I like someone and I want to see him as a customer in the future, yes, I must keep a connection with him all the time. It's in my interest because he will come here and make money for me."*

When dealing with men unfamiliar with the system, the women's approach may be filled with false promises, as Yekaterina explains:

*"Sometimes I lie, for example when people want to go out after work. They ask: 'Can you come to my hotel?' I say 'Yes, of course I will come. Just open for me more glasses!' So I am lying and sometimes when I am not in the mood I say no, but most times I lie. And after 20 missed calls he understands the situation, because I don't go, I cannot go [to have] sex for money."*

While several respondents acknowledged that women who earn additional money from having sex with clients exist, all the women interviewed denied doing this themselves. Adriana explained that:

*"most of the girls don't sleep with men for money, but some girls are doing this. But nobody is shouting about this, but they are doing this for sure. Usually with old men, he is giving her money and she is sleeping with him."*

Some of the women consider being admired an advantage of the job and liken it to an addiction. At first it may not appear to be a job at all, as Natalya explained:

*“You can be here if you have no education and it’s funny when you just come here. You know, when I was here the first day I thought: Oh my God, I can drink, I can joke, I can talk without stopping and get paid for it?”*

Others resent the work, however, as Anna explained:

*“The way the customers treat the girls and the other way around is dirty. Everybody thinks we are all the same, but it’s not true. I came here to make money, but it doesn’t mean that I will give you my body. I just talk, there is nothing more, there is no action.”*

Adriana, the most seasoned worker, explained that she has come to terms with the work and can manage the ambiguous expectations of the clients: “I respect my job. If you respect your job, your job will respect you.”

### **What are the customers buying?**

The respondents tended to divide their customers into three groups: local Jordanian men, men from Gulf countries and men from Western countries, such as tourists or American soldiers on R&R/transitioning to or from Iraq. Some women explained that men from Gulf countries often did not like to spend money on cocktails for women, but ask women to go to their hotels, treating them like sex workers. Having to decline such direct offers, the commissions on such company can be very little. On the other hand, Western men, especially soldiers, by their nature of being transient guests were appreciated for being new, generous and sympathetic to the women’s situation. However, Jordanian men, mostly married and in their 40s and 50s, comprised the majority of the regular clients. Many of them had studied in the former Soviet Union and spoke Russian with the women. I focus here on the women’s narratives about the third, most important, type of client.

The women believed that there are two dimensions to the service these men were purchasing. Firstly, they felt that the men needed to get away, escape their lives, seeing the bars as a form of entertainment, a place to have a drink and unwind with beautiful exotic company. Some men might come for a particular girl and some come because they like the particular bar. The women saw themselves partly as counsellors,

talking with the men about their problems and family issues. Nadya opined that:

*“Most clients come regularly, they feel free in the bar, they can be as they like to be. In their real life, they cannot show themselves, between their work and their families, the relationships are tight and no mistakes are allowed.”*

Several of the respondents shared their insights about the private lives of their clients, especially regarding their marital and familial relationships, for example, Nina explained:

*“They marry here without any feelings, by tradition. And they believe that feelings will come and I don’t believe this. So almost all the men that come here are married. And they have a family, they have children, so they come here because they are not happy in the family, not happy. They come here, they get really drunk, too many girls at his table and he feels happy.”*

Secondly, the element of hope for a sexual encounter or relationship may be a motivating factor for many, if not most, clients. According to Adriana:

*“Somebody comes only to have fun. But I meet people like this, in my two years here I can count them on one hand. They come, they sit only, they talk, even sometimes he shows us what he bought for his wife [gestures taking lingerie out of a box]. He cares about his wife and he doesn’t want anything. He just comes to take a drink and talk about his family. Most of the work I have are my customers who[m] I know already for a long time. But still they want the same, he may be very polite and he is waiting for a chance when he can have something with me. And I have my chance to keep him as much as I can and at the last moment when he will say yes or no, I will say no.”*

Just as the women play with the men’s hopes to keep them coming back to the bar, the men seem to try to sweet-talk the women into having an intimate relationship, as Yekaterina explained: “local Jordanian men come here, see beautiful girls, of course they want to invite her for lunch, for dinner, step-by-step they want to try to have a [sexual] relationship.” Many respondents expressed that they are fed up with the men’s lies. When asked about their hopes and aspirations for the future, many of the single respondents expressed a strong wish to have a family and saw this behaviour as exploitative of these plans.

Others, perhaps the more seasoned hostesses such as Svetlana, explained that it is naïve to be waiting for a “prince” in the bar: “The man who really loves his wife and is happy in his family will not come here. The people that come here need something, of course.”

### ***Competitive advantage: staying in business***

The business of “Russian bars” works on the hopes of clients; the women offer good company and may keep the men hoping for more, but the bar and the women make money on the client’s continued business (paying for his drinks and women’s cocktails). If a client were able to buy sex with a woman or develop a relationship with her, he might stop coming to the bar, and this is not in the joint business interest of the bar owner or the hostess. In fact, the skills of women working in bars are expressed in view of their ability to keep their male clients returning to the bar. As one manager said while introducing one of the hostesses to me: “This is Adriana, she can play with a man for years!” Thus, the bar profits and women’s earnings rely on a simple strategy of not having sex with clients.

This is not to say that clients do not sometimes misunderstand or wilfully misconstrue the nature of the service provided by the women. However, a reputation for being a place where it is possible to “find a woman” can result in the bar being closed by the authorities. This results in a tight self-regulation of the bar operation and of the women’s behaviour and engagement with clients within and outside of working hours. Women are not allowed to leave the bar with clients and must arrive at and depart from their workplace in a taxi arranged by the bar. This ostentatious “performance” of a clean business takes place twice a day in front of each bar. It exemplifies the thin line between legality and marginality that the bar managers must walk on to stay in business, while the women enact the seduction roles to attract and retain their clientele. Meeting clients during free time for shopping or lunch, with the purpose of keeping them coming to the bar might be allowed by some managers, but other intimate relationships are either expressly prohibited or heavily discouraged.

### ***Discussion***

Several broad social and economic dimensions intersect in this research: work and relationships, migration and agency, and youth/attractiveness within overarching gendered global economic constraints.

#### **Sexualised work**

Harcourt and Donovan reviewed the different types of sex work, only including work that is physically sexual.<sup>6</sup> They excluded a broad service area of sexualised work, such as erotic dance clubs, massage parlours or hostesses in bars, where the flirtation is the key type of labour being provided, whether or not services of sexual nature follow. I propose that the respondents in this study provide a multidimensional service encompassing companionship, entertainment and counselling, all of which are performed with elements of flirtation and sexual innuendo. As Egan noted among US strip club dancers, the performance for regular clients is much more exhausting,<sup>7</sup> but seems like a sensible long-term business strategy. The respondents’ work is not sex work, but it is heavily sexualised.

An increasing body of literature about transactional sex, mainly from sub-Saharan Africa, elucidates the informal relationships where favours, money or goods may be exchanged between a “boyfriend” and “girlfriend,” but this relationship remains in the intimate sphere and has not been characterised as sex or sexualised work per se. Hunter has aptly described the economic dimension of such relationships as being linked to either subsistence or consumption, depending on the relationship. Yet, even in this context “women typically see multiple boyfriends as a means to gaining control over their lives, rather than acts of desperation.”<sup>8</sup> It is perhaps not easy to establish where the women’s job ends and their personal life begins if transactional relationships develop. Living on unpredictable commission-based incomes and facing the expectations of financial support from their families at home, the statement “here, life without the help of a man is difficult” was a common sentiment among the women. It uncannily mirrors the famous Arabic saying that a [life in the] shadow of a man is preferable to the shadow of a wall.

Further, I argue that the respondents’ work goes beyond emotional labour in which, for instance,

flight attendants or receptionists might engage.<sup>9</sup> Within the clients' patriarchal society, the respondents performed to the expectations of a sophisticated "white" woman, in which their education was an advantage. I propose that their jobs carry an element of domestic or care work – in that it is corporeal, emotional and feminised, but additionally that it encompasses elements of affect in transmitting social hierarchies and power structures.<sup>10</sup> A migrant domestic worker's placement and supervision in Jordan would be usually within the control sphere of a female head of household. Regular clients are outsourcing elements of eroticism, romance and friendship, perhaps lacking in their private lives, to the hostesses but their families might be completely unaware of the hostess's existence and labour.

### "Informed" migration choices

Secondly, this study aimed to understand its research participants as women who make choices to migrate and accept employment opportunities, in opposition to discourses promoting a view of a woman as "a destitute, invasive and hyper-sexualized slave in need rather than a mobile and rational agent".<sup>11</sup> A study of migrant sex workers in Turkey highlighted that women migrated for economic as well as social reasons, wanting to maintain their standard of living and take advantage of new opportunities and adventures. Exploring women's choices, the concepts of trafficking and victimisation<sup>4</sup> not only obscure individual women's accounts and decisions, but also preclude a discussion of employment types that do not involve sex work.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, such "moral panic about 'trafficking'"<sup>13</sup> neglects to examine the choices women make as well as changes that the women's migration instigates, for the woman herself, her home society, and her recipient country.<sup>12</sup>

This research also speaks to a growing body of literature on female transnational migration in the Middle East within the broader outlines of the global neoliberal economic order. Within walking distance from the "Russian bars" are less expensive "Moroccan bars" employing women from various North African countries. In a country where premarital sexual relations are uncommon and not socially sanctioned, the local market provides several legal options for sexualised encounters (and undoubtedly, many illegal ones for sex work as well). Women in "Russian bars" are but

one type of service (white, exotic, educated, English-speaking) on offer. The literature from the Middle East region speaks against homogenising the experiences of female migrants, even of the same nationality, in describing their life trajectories.<sup>14</sup> In this study, I interviewed and described migrant women from different eastern European and former Soviet Union contexts, cultures and identities, who have a multitude of life trajectories and motivations.<sup>15</sup> There are several other elements of the social phenomenon of female migration for employment in Amman's "Russian bars" that I was not able to explore in detail in this fieldwork: among them, the perspectives of the male clients and the women's longer-term journeys (including reintegration into their home society) would have further enriched this study.

The women's agency can also be examined through a comparison with their regular clients. The hostesses migrate to Jordan, taking advantage of their attractiveness and youth, and a relative lack of social obligations in their country of origin. Women interviewed for this study migrated to Jordan voluntarily and had an accurate idea of the type of work that is expected of them in the bars. The respondents were young, highly educated and mostly single women who showed a high degree of agency and control over their life, work and migration decisions. The clients, on the other hand, may be interested in a sexual encounter or relationship, but seem bound by expectations of their traditional family and masculinity roles. The freedom the men have to seek this type of entertainment and sexualised consumption are also strictly limited by their disposable income. It is the hostesses who are looking for romantic partners and imagine that such a connection, or at least a transactional relationship, may be possible. As in other contexts, women are not disempowered agents, but very aware of their attractiveness and sexuality as a resource with which to get ahead in life.<sup>16</sup> The women in this study felt that it is in fact the men who are "trapped" within the expectations and roles of their society, unable and unwilling to rebel, almost childlike. The women made an economic decision to migrate for work, which is exhausting but temporarily acceptable, if not entirely respectable. This work, which they yearn to leave in order to return to their "normal" life, however, provides financial support for them and their families.

## Female work and body within a global migration perspective

The third and final intersection touches on the biopolitical nature of the respondents' work. Despite the "informed" (if not empowered) choices on migration among this study's respondents, the global nature of the hostessing industry shows the brutal realities of the system that provided the best paid jobs to the youngest and most attractive women in Korea and Japan, and in Lebanon or Turkey to those willing to engage in sex work. Jordan thus emerges as a third-rate destination for women who are either "older" (past their mid-20s) or unwilling to engage in sex work; with a much lower earning potential. Similar to other countries in the Middle East, Jordan's immigration rules pertaining to the acquisition of an *iqama* carry consequences for the women's employment and earnings. As Parvis Mahdavi clearly showed in her ethnography of migrant workers in Dubai, exploitation is possible and rife in many diverse jobs.<sup>17</sup> For example, Sri Lankan domestic workers in Lebanon are described as being in contract slavery.<sup>18</sup> Within this study, the women are formally tethered to a bar owner sponsoring their residence permit, meaning that leaving an employer and seeking work elsewhere within Jordan can be lengthy and requires agreement and goodwill of both employers. The women perceived this inability to leave a potentially problematic employer as deeply disempowering.

This study's findings also resonate with female migration as a political process<sup>19</sup> – in a home economy plagued by male and female unemployment and underemployment, women are seen as the "better" migrants in terms of their work ethic and reliability of remittances.<sup>20</sup> The weak power of the women as economic agents in Jordan is obvious when one contrasts their high education levels and investment in migration to their relatively low average earnings and pay structure based on commissions, where they bore the brunt of the risk related to seasonal and secular declines in bar custom. They earned just enough to satisfy demands from their home society in a borderline respectable job, servicing male needs for companionship parallel/additional to family lives. While the women entered it knowingly, their position within a stream of the neoliberal global economy in which their income was based on their gender, race, youth and (un)willingness to

engage in sex work was not negotiable. They spoke extensively, often unprompted, about the negative mental health consequences of feeling stalled in their life progression as they were not able to pursue relationships leading toward marriage and children while being financially secure.

## Conclusion

This paper draws on qualitative fieldwork with female hostesses working in Amman's "Russian bars" in 2010 to explore the nature of the work performed and the motivations behind and consequences of the women's migration. The findings brought to the fore the importance of the sexualised and marginal nature of the women's work and regulation of their relationships with clients to the bars' business strategy, as well as its negative effects on the women's esteem and sense of self-determination. I also highlighted that despite their relatively privileged position in terms of education, the women exercised their choices within a narrow range of local (origin and recipient) and global gendered economic hierarchies.

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## Résumé

Cet article traite du genre de travail que les femmes migrantes des anciens pays d'Europe de l'Est effectuent dans les boîtes de nuit à Amman, en Jordanie. Le travail de terrain pour cette étude qualitative a été réalisé en 2010 et repose sur des entretiens approfondis avec 13 femmes. Le sujet est abordé dans la perspective de décrire les choix et les voyages des femmes à ce travail. Cela juxtapose la nature sexuelle de leur travail avec leur envie d'une vie familiale «normale», qu'elles imaginent, tout en sachant qu'elle est impossible à réaliser avec les hommes qu'elles rencontrent dans leurs lieux de travail. Aux désirs privés chez les femmes et leurs clients, s'ajoute la stratégie commerciale des clubs, qui opèrent

## موجز المقال

يتناول هذا المقال نوع العمل الذي تقوم به المهاجرات القادمات من بلدان أوروبا الشرقية السابقة في الملاهي الليلية في عمان، الأردن. أجري العمل الميداني لهذه الدراسة النوعية في العام 2010، وهو يستند إلى مقابلات معمقة مع 13 امرأة. وناقش هذا الموضوع من منظور وصف اختيارات النساء وكيفية وصولهن إلى هذا العمل. وهو يدمج الطبيعة الجنسية لعملهن مع رغبتهم في الحياة العائلية "العادية"، التي يتصورنها، مع علمهم أنه من المستحيل تحقيق هذه الرغبة مع الرجال الذين يجتمعون بهم في أماكن عملهم. وتأتي على رأس تلك الرغبات الخاصة بالنساء وعملاتهن، الاستراتيجية التجارية للنوادي الليلية، التي تعمل في قطاع مربح ولكن هامشي يهدف إلى بيع الإغواء الأجنبي والمحترم في الوقت عينه. وأعتمد في مقالي على الوثائق المتعلقة بهجرة النساء إلى الشرق الأوسط لتبيان أن المضيفات في هذه الحانات يؤدين عملاً عاطفياً مشابهاً لأعمال الرعاية، في ظل الاقتصاد النيوليبرالي العالمي الذي يصنف الخطر بطابع خاص.

dans l'espace lucratif mais marginal de la vente de séduction exotique mais respectable. Je me fonde sur la documentation concernant les migrations féminines au Moyen-Orient afin de faire valoir que les hôtesse de ces bars exercent un travail affectif semblable au travail de soins, dans l'économie mondiale néolibérale qui individualise le risque.