

DRIVEN WOMEN: RECONCEPTUALIZING THE TRAFFIC IN WOMEN IN THE MARGINS OF EUROPE THROUGH THE CASE OF GAGAUZ MOBILE DOMESTICS IN ISTANBUL

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In this paper, I suggest that undertaking ethnographic studies which are attentive to the subjective accounts of women migrants can help us to better assess and critique discourses regarding the traffic in women and to ask new questions about the agency and power of mobile female subjects. In the spring of 2001, I followed the lives of Moldovan women of the Gagauz ethnic group who travel illegally to work as domestics in middle class Istanbul homes.¹ Here I will sketch the political and economic situation that prompts this unusual migratory pattern and detail the experiences of one mobile Gagauz woman whom I came to know well. I contrast her case, and the agency and power she evidently holds, with the International Organization for Migration's discourse that frames trafficking and women in very certain terms: young single women as victims forcibly trafficked and sold into prostitution by criminal networks. Through her case, I point to the uncertainty of these terms, and some of the problems with this discourse for understanding trafficking and the situation of illegal migrants in the margins of Europe. This example and others like it, suggests the need for us to re-conceptualize conventional and scholarly ideas of migration, of female subjects, and of agents and victims in trafficking.

Political and Economic Context

Dubbed the poorest country in Europe by the European Union, Moldova is a leading example of the difficulty of political and economic transition in Eastern and Central Europe. The hardships postsocialist states have suffered have left their populations in poverty and women have often been the hardest hit by these market transformations (Koffman et al 2000; Gal and Kligman 2000; Funk and Mueller 1993). While part of the socialist agenda was to provide work for women, Yukseker-Yenal explains that "feminized" labor sectors such as communication, trade, and catering have been

disproportionately downsized in post-Soviet Russia (2002). Gal and Kligman support this claim for former socialist states more generally (2000). These scholars also point out that in many postsocialist states, pro-natalist policies have created an environment where women are encouraged to stay home. The survival of the household in the Soviet era traditionally relied upon women's "reproductive" activities in the gendered division of labor. Such activities involved women's strategies of networking and bartering to secure goods and services formerly scarce under socialism. Although now many of these goods are available, they are not less difficult to obtain and women continue to use their networks to get by. When women do work now, they are forced into informal, "flexible" work and small-scale trading sectors. Yukseker-Yenal argues that small-scale transnational trading, what she calls "shuttle trading," was a natural extension of women's entrepreneurial skills under socialism and of their roles in the gendered division of labor (2002:17-18; see also Bruno 1997). Such "flexible" transnational work involves not only small-scale trading, but migrant sex and domestic work -- all done through trafficking networks (Gal & Kligman 2000). The situation in postsocialist states coincides with a wider global restructuring, which has prompted migrant flows of low-wage service-laborers from poor, peripheral, nations to "global cities" (Parennas 2001). In the case of Moldovans, while many women may want to go to Western Europe, where wages are high, the increasingly strict immigration controls in the EU have made it next to impossible to gain entry (see Lutz and Koser 1998 and Koffman et al 2000). As a result, many find it easier to travel between and work illegally in places marginal to "Fortress Europe," such as the other former Soviet Union states and Turkey.

Known best as the provider of guest workers for Europe, particularly Germany, Turkey has become a recipient of migrants from the former Soviet Union, especially women, in the past ten years (Erder 1997). Laleli, a Russian neighborhood of Istanbul from the early part of the 20th century, is the first stop and central meeting place of FSU women. This neighborhood is a veritable human bazaar where Russian is the language of choice and dollars the common currency. In my visits here, I found what many scholars categorize as separate “types” of migrant women from former socialist states. The first set of FSU women to migrate to Turkey were the small-scale traders identified by Yukseker-Yenal, who, beginning in the 1990s, came to buy goods from predominantly male merchants in Istanbul and returned to sell them in Eastern Europe or Russia (2000). Limited to two suitcases in order to avoid taxation by states, this trade has been termed *bavul ticareti*, or the suitcase trade, in Turkey. As Yukseker-Yenal notes, many have established long-standing economic, but also intimate and sexual relationships with their male Turkish merchant counterparts (2002). The trust that was established between them helped to sustain this informal trade network and constituted an economic gain for Turkey worth billions of dollars a year. The second type of FSU migrants are sex workers commonly known as “Natashas.” The third category of migrant workers are domestics; in Turkish they are termed using their national affiliation as *Moldavyali*, Moldovans, or *Ukranyali* Ukrainians, and so forth.

Most Moldovans who work in Turkey are members of the Gagauz ethnic group, a Turkish speaking community in Southern Moldova. They are hired to clean, cook, and care for children, the handicapped, or the elderly. This undervalued “dirty work,” is no longer fulfilled by upwardly mobile Turkish women, the extended family, or the Turkish state. Moreover, such work is not taken up by men. Despite the fact that women are increasingly working outside the household in Turkey, the gendered division of labor within the home has remained unchanged. In Istanbul, local Turkish women who might fill these jobs traditionally have taken on other types of waged work. Those locals that continue to do domestic work prefer not to work as live-in labor, as they have their own households to attend to, often close by. This raises the demand for migrant domestics, who

seek live-in positions. The high demand for Moldovan women in particular relies upon their reputations as upright people and good caretakers, “cleaner,” “more literate”, and “more civilized” than their Turkish villager counterparts who usually fill such roles. This perception indexes a belief in the higher class and culture of a population perceived as more “European” than the Turkish one. Because they speak a Turkic language, Moldovans of the Gagauz ethnic group are considered more appropriate for these domestic jobs because, compared to other Eastern Europeans, they are better able to learn Turkish quickly.

The Uses and Abuses of Representations of Migrants and the Ambiguity of Agency: Maria’s Case

Maria, a pseudonym, is one Gagauz woman whom I got to know while I was in Istanbul last spring. Her narrative can give us a sense of some of the experiences of mobile women in the margins of Europe. Maria had come to work in Istanbul several months before I met her. Back in Moldova, she had a husband and two kids. Before the fall of the Soviet Union, she had worked part time as a bank accountant. When the economic situation in Moldova began to decline in the early 90s, her husband lost his job, and they had trouble making ends meet. In Soviet times, Maria explained, even if there were no jobs, at least schools, medicine, or tractors were free. But since Gorbachev, this had changed. Although they were one of the lucky families who had acquired some land and could thus always put food on the table, they had little means to make the cash they needed for things like health care and education. Maria and her family decided that she take an option increasingly available to Gagauz women: go to Turkey for six months to work as a domestic. Six months in Turkey has become a rite of passage in this community. After this time, state fines for crossing borders with an expired visa double. While Maria’s combined family income was about US\$10/month in Moldova, domestics in Turkey earn about US\$300/month. Such a wage compensates for traveling costs, which include trafficker fees, customs official bribes, and state fines. As is typical for most of these women, Maria used her kinship network to alert her sister, who was working in Istanbul, that she was coming.

A considerable network of women from Gagauzia has been established in Istanbul, many of whom have traveled back and forth to Turkey up to four or five times over the past five years. It was through this network in both Gagauzia and Istanbul, involving both Moldovan and Turkish traffickers and kinship networks, that Maria acquired her passport, bus and plane tickets, one-month tourist visa, and a temporary residence, and made it to her sister's side in Istanbul. She was lucky: many others are bribed, raped, and/or sent back at the border. A few weeks after she had announced her availability for work in Laleli, a friend notified her that she was returning to Moldova and offered to have Maria replace her in her current job. Maria was to work as a live-in domestic and caretaker for an elderly woman, a victim of a stroke, who lived with her son.

Despite similarities in language, Gagauz women are perceived in Turkey to be generically Christian and Russian. Thus marked, and seen as working class women, they are often conflated with so-called *Natashas* and susceptible to being held as morally suspect assertive sexual predators and willing sexual prey. Alternatively, as an integral part of a Turkish household, and as women essentially alone in a foreign country, they are also seen as requiring the protection of their employers. These stereotypes and reputations often work to their disadvantage. For instance, employers may use these ideas to justify disciplinary actions that have little to do with cleaning, cooking, or caring, such as requiring women to wear conservative clothing or preventing them from leaving the house for extended periods of time, even on their day off for fear they are "running around with men." It also makes them subject to unwanted aggressive sexual advances. Yet, at other times, these stereotypes may help the Gagauz to gain opportunities for money, employment, and/or friendly allies. The women with whom I spoke were well aware of how these perceptions both hurt and could potentially help them in their already vulnerable situation as illegal migrants and workers.

Through their own practices, Gagauz women resist these reputations, but they also seek to manipulate them, and thus often accommodate and confirm the constructions of migrant women workers -- and Russian woman -- as sexually promiscuous or as vulnerable women in need of protection. Through these

practices conventional ideas of women, workers, and migrants, are reproduced, even if opportunities and power for these women are gained in certain contexts. I witnessed this dynamic in Laleli, where Gagauz women gather on their days off to socialize, drink, eat and reminisce, with each other and with the local men they meet. After bargaining with street merchants for clothing, housewares, or toys, they send packages home to their families. A flirtation may help to lower the cost of a sweater for her husband, or secure a letter home, or make a local ally to rely on in the frequent police raids. They try to make some extra cash on their day off by selling goods or services, or, at least, they try not to spend their own money. Maria secured the latter by finding a local boyfriend who paid for food, drink and goods, and compensated her if she was subject to extortion by the police. Such relationships were not just a material exchange however. From what I could gather, many women developed sincere affectionate relationships with local men. This indicates how conflated these material exchanges become with affective ones. I should note also that I noticed this conflation of the material and affective in the relationship between women employers and their domestic workers within the household. The Gagauz domestics acted as intimate companions to their charges, hard-working wage-earners, good wives and mothers, but also at times as merchants, and at times they had sex with men in exchange for affection, favors, or money. Some of these women may participate in more than one type of work, others may not. Some consider all of these things work, others don't. At this boundless bazaar, then, as well as in Istanbul homes, and in Gagauz villages, I found various intimate exchanges, legal and illegal, economic and affective.

While clearly these women suffer because of their status as illegal migrant workers, they also hold a certain amount of power and agency in their households both in Istanbul and in Moldova. For instance, Maria's movements and actions were placed under excruciating scrutiny by her employers. Yet, as a caretaker of an invalid, Maria's mobility in the house, and her potential mobility outside it provided her with some power over her employer. In addition, her ability to move from job to job if she found one that paid more was a constant source of anxiety for her employers. Also, acting as the "woman of the house" placed her at times in a position to trump the authority of her female employers in

the home. Becoming a migrant worker also transformed Maria's status in terms of her life in Moldova. While she missed her family dearly, Maria experienced a great deal of independence in Istanbul that she had never held in Moldova. For instance, she had some expendable income and was able to date without the social control of her community. And she could establish friendships with men unlike those available at home. Maria was well aware that her mobility and cash-earnings gained her some leverage and status in her own household in Moldova. Her husband called to say "come home," but also to say "send money" – and she laughed, proudly asserting that he couldn't have it both ways. As I witnessed when I went to visit her family in Moldova, Maria's home life there was relatively stable, but other women with whom I spoke indicated that they had fled abusive husbands. They explained that the family structure has changed in their villages. With many women gone, they claimed, men had turned into alcoholics, and children were left in orphanages. Actually, some Gagauz men leave too, finding work in construction in Russia or other places. As a result, if not entirely dispersed from their homes in Moldova, families are often never home at the same time. Frequently the woman's absence is blamed for these conditions, even though her decision to leave is motivated by the desire to provide a better life for her family. Whatever power and agency these women gain, then, often backfires. It is their very assertiveness as mobile "Russian" wage-earning women that makes them suspect as good mothers and wives at home in Moldova and as good domestic laborers and companions among their employers in Istanbul.

There are several striking features about Maria's narrative that illuminate why such movements are different from migrations and trafficking traditionally conceived. Women like Maria do not want to move to Turkey permanently. Rather, they seek to remain easily mobile between Turkey and their homes. The fact that they are women migrants traveling alone contradicts prevailing conceptions of migratory patterns, which often assume men first travel to work and later bring their families to settle in the host country. Furthermore, from what I witnessed, many of these women do not easily fit local and academic categorizations of separate types of former Soviet female migrants as merchants or prostitutes or domestics. Most importantly here, however, Maria's story clearly

disrupts International Organization for Migration representations of trafficked women from Moldova, which presents them as young victims of an illegal network of criminal traffickers who intend to use them as sex slaves.

IOM Discourse on the Traffic in Women

The IOM, tied to the United Nations, and one of the primary non-governmental organizations dealing with trafficking in women, began a campaign in Moldova one year ago. The IOM argues that the primary goal of trafficking is for sexual exploitation. IOM material on Moldova does not even recognize that some women really do go abroad to work as domestics. They assume that the traffickers are tricking them into thinking that domestic work exists, and that instead they will be sold into prostitution. One IOM report states sarcastically in a side note: "Judging by the number of women gone abroad to work, it looks like the whole of Europe is full of disabled and old people who cannot wait for Moldovan girls to come and take care of them..." (2002:13). Using interviews with the 200 women repatriated from sex work abroad, the report constructs transnational criminal and victim profiles and goes on to characterize the mainstream of migration as unregulated and overwhelmingly negative for women. While this may be true for the cases they detail, Maria's narrative indicates that there are other stories to be told. The IOM represents trafficking as a clearly illegal activity, whereas I found that state laws subtly supported the traffic. It posits the traffic as spontaneous, while I found it informal, but fairly systematic. Most importantly, it argues that those involved are clearly either criminals or victims, while I found these judgments hard to make. By putting this traffic in these terms, IOM discourse forecloses other ways of conceiving of these movements and these women on the move.

Undertaking studies that are attentive to the subjective accounts of migrant women can lead us to ask new questions about the agency and power of mobile female subjects. In this case, while some women may be tricked into migrating and forced into work not of their choosing, Maria and others decided to work abroad and negotiated the kind of work they did as strategies to secure the survival of their households. To assure traveling arrangements and jobs, they themselves sought out illegal traffickers as people worthy of their trust and

able to provide security against the legal representatives of states such as the police and customs officials. The traffic in women thus involves not only the "duped young girls" represented by the IOM, but women who are knowledgeable about trafficking to varying degrees, mothers and wives, some old, some young, who use intimate networks of kinship, friendship, and even lovers to travel to work as domestics. In addition to their work as domestics, they may indeed, as the IOM claims, prostitute themselves, as part of a number of strategies to get by, including buying and selling goods. Yet, it seems important to note that this situation is not unfamiliar to many destitute women. Even those women who choose to stay home in Moldova may be forced to marry for money, clean, cook and care for free in their own households, to have sex with men (some their husbands) in order to provide for their children, or prostitute themselves to bosses to get ahead in their public life. If having an intimate male companion looking out for their interests helps to secure a business trade relation or a safe route home to their kids and husband, if it helps them to save money to send home, or just generally helps them feel safe in a hostile environment, should it be considered prostitution? Is it sex slavery? Or, is it just being a woman? In particular, is it one of the conditions of existence of being a poor woman in a poor country? What I am proposing here is that the IOM concentrates on trafficking in women at the expense of focusing on the poverty and conditions of life for women in Moldova, when they are actually inextricably linked. This situation is similar then to Hemment's point that the framing of violence against women promoted by international NGOs and adopted by women's organizations in Russia "not only screens out local constructions of events, but it deflects attention from issues of social justice" (2003:2). In fact, from what I witnessed, trafficking serves these women who are trying to their conditions: with considerable effort and a lot of luck, the Gagauz women's plans to make money and return relatively safely, works. Their mobility and cash-earnings may even promote their status in their own households and in those in which they work. Certainly, the family structure in Moldova has changed significantly as a result of these movements, but this is not necessarily negative where many situations were abusive to women.

In conclusion, we might better conceive of these women not only as victims, but as

agents in traffic. They are driven by the political-economic situation in their countries which forces them to travel and work illegally to get by, but also driven and assertive mobile workers trying to better their family's lives as well as their own. This is not to deny that the victim profiles detailed by the IOM are embodied in many real individual cases. It is only to suggest that people like Maria who are illegal migrant workers in Turkey do not fit neatly into these profiles. In fact, their situation demonstrates the difficulty with categorizing them as simply passive victims, trafficked by criminals and the trouble with presenting trafficking as entirely detrimental to their lives. This indicates that the focus of the IOM on criminalizing networks of traffickers and informing women of the dangers of working abroad may be largely ineffective in stopping trafficking and even negligent in bettering the lives of these women. If we understand women as agents, attempts to alleviate the exploitation they suffer might begin by asking them what they need. For instance, information about passports, and traveling more generally, maps and cell phones can help to empower them and thus were very much in demand by the women I met. What may also better serve these women are campaigns to legalize this migration and work and efforts to ameliorate conditions within Moldova. This new framework copes with what the IOM ignores: the bigger picture that unless the economic and political situation in places like Moldova improves significantly and the situation of women with it, women will continue to use illegal traffic and work as a means to support themselves and their families.

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Ayşe Oncu of the University of Bosphorus for the conception of "mobile" women I employ here. Most of all, I am grateful to "Maria" and the other Gagauz, Moldovan, Ukrainian, and Turkish individuals who shared their stories and their lives with me. A more extensive analysis of my research on this topic will be published in *Focaal*, *European Journal of Anthropology* 2004 forthcoming.

Endnotes

1. This research was funded by the University of Massachusetts European Field Studies Program for pre-Dissertation Research. I would like to thank the Director of that Program, Dr. Jacqueline Urla, and Dr. Julie Hemment for their intellectual guidance and support throughout the various stages of this project. The transnational research upon which this paper is based would not have been possible without the assistance of Dr. Hulya Demirdirek.. I am indebted to Dr.