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MOBILITY, MIGRATION, AND DOMESTIC SERVANTS IN
MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY EGYPT¹



On 4 January 1864, the Cairo police detained a domestic servant named ‘Abida who had escaped from her employer, an eminent pasha’s household. When the police found her, they interrogated her. In her testimony, ‘Abida claimed she had gone to the residence of Muhammad Abu al-‘Ala to look after his mother and his sister, ‘Adila. Yet when she arrived at his home, she did not see his mother and instead met ‘Adila and Abu al-‘Ala. They gave her water to drink, whereupon she fainted. At this point in her testimony, ‘Abida stated that when she later returned to the house, Abu al-‘Ala “did it [sexual intercourse] to her” twice, after frightening her and with his sister’s knowledge. When questioned, Abu al-‘Ala confessed. ‘Adila, who was also questioned, claimed she was not involved and that ‘Abida had engaged in consensual intercourse. She further added that ‘Abida had escaped from the pasha’s household because she was afraid.

Upon receiving this case, Majlis Masr, the administrative council with authority over the police, sentenced ‘Abida to six months in the *iplikhane* (the textile spinning mill that functioned as the women’s prison), minus time served. The council also assigned Muhammad Abu al-‘Ala to menial labor for six months, minus time served. Following protocol, Majlis Masr forwarded the case to the higher-ranking Majlis al-Ahkam (Council of Judicial Ordinances), which upheld the lower council’s decision with modifications.² Why did Majlis al-Ahkam uphold the punishments of ‘Abida and Abu al-‘Ala? Did she actively pursue an intimate relationship with him under the guise of looking after his mother and his sister? What did she fear in the pasha’s household, and why did she run away from it?

This essay contextualizes the experiences of a mobile domestic servant by exploring the concerns over short-distance movements and urban space leveraged by the Cairene police and authorities. I adopt a mobility-based perspective of the lives of the domestic servants employed in the capital, specifically the individuals working in elite Ottoman-Egyptian households.³ Due to the limited number of sources that reference the movements of female workers, ‘Abida’s case

provides a route to address some of the research gaps regarding mobility, which I view through the double lens of small and short movements.⁴ She was part of a large group of working-class servants, many from rural migratory origins, employed in a critical sector of the workforce that comprised the primary livelihood for girls and women from disadvantaged backgrounds.⁵ 'Abida was not unusual; in the late Ottoman world, desperate and impoverished parents "unable to support their children, sent their daughters to serve as servants in wealthy households so that they would be brought up and supported while carrying out their duties."⁶ I therefore make use of one archival record that can help us reframe historical questions related to the circulation of female bodies in urban space and the surveillance of the social fabric as it was inscribed in that same space.

At the outset, the above case illustrates the intertwining of notions of mobility, age, and youth in the adjudication of sexual offenses. While 'Abida's age is unstated and her family background is unclear—her father, a water carrier, is mentioned in passing and her mother is never discussed—the ensuing police investigation indicates she was post-pubescent and mature enough to flee from her workplace. This was significant because, as Liat Kozma has argued,

policemen and council members treated cases involving younger boys and girls differently than those involving older girls and women. . . . Unlike adult women, children did not have to prove that they had not consented, and councils often reasoned that children were incapable of false complaint in sexual matters.⁷

At the same time, cases from this period underscore how the justice system did not regard older female servants as autonomous subjects capable of making their own decisions, especially when it involved allegations of consensual intercourse.⁸

Regardless of age, accusations of flight from an elite household received serious attention from police stations and judicial councils. Small and short movements mattered to officials, and raised questions about where the city's inhabitants spent their time, as seen in rape cases from the shari'a courts that document women's practice of going outside at all hours.⁹ Similar cases from police and conciliar registers verify that nonconsensual intercourse happened in the homes where domestic servants toiled. Ottoman officials understood that working as a servant meant few urban spaces were immune from assailants and that sexual abuse occurred in an employer's household. 'Adila's contention that 'Abida fled from a distinguished pasha's household, for

instance, is suggestive of the bodily and sexual violence that 'Abida experienced at the hands of Abu al-'Ala and the male members of the pasha's household. Since prosecution hinged on forensic and eyewitness accounts, officials conducted thorough investigations and encouraged families to participate in the process. Determining who witnessed illegal acts and where crimes happened thus bolstered the ability of the justice system to track and punish offenders.

How judicial councils prosecuted crimes that occurred in and between residences remains among the key features of the case. No doubt out of her own fear, 'Adila cooperated with police investigators both to exonerate herself and sidestep uncomfortable questions about the conditions in her home that abetted unlawful intercourse.¹⁰ As for Abu al-'Ala, councils and the police assumed that offenders like him might attack the servants of wealthy pashas in their own homes. Keeping in mind the authority that powerful pashas held over their households, it was difficult to convict them of sexual crimes. A cumulative reading of cases from this period instead attests to the authorities consistently prosecuting pedestrian men for unlawful intercourse. Nineteenth-century legislation dismissed the possibility of consensual premarital intercourse and envisioned a landscape of victims and predators. Penalties such as incarceration, which worked as a more secure means of monitoring small and short movements, ensured that culprits received sentences commensurate with their violation of state laws. A different conception of mobility motivated the litigation of such cases, one where magistrates and administrators punished unaccompanied servants and their alleged assailants.

In short, the imperative to prosecute cases in the mid-nineteenth century stemmed from the ability of city dwellers to cross spatial boundaries and their apparent ease of movement. On the one hand, officials rejected the prospect of servants roaming Cairo's streets or men having unlawful intercourse with them. On the other hand, the justice system implicitly discerned that these activities were commonplace and attempted to regulate them within prevailing hierarchies of youth, gender, class, and mobility. For lawmakers, the freedom of 'Abida and Muhammad Abu al-'Ala to commit crimes pointed to the need for greater oversight. When assessing the explicit dangers that itinerant servants posed, officials opted to control their movements through laws intended to imprison them, without inviting speculation about the reasons behind the fear they felt toward a pasha's household. Yet 'Abida's wanderings bore a paradoxical tension: she ran away out of concern for a potential sexual assault in the pasha's household, only to find herself engaging in intercourse in another home, perhaps without her consent. As a result, we are left to wonder

how many other servants found themselves in similar situations. Were they able to transcend the confines of their workplaces and the expectations tied to their age and gender? How much distance did they need to cover? What limits did they encounter in their peregrinations, and which residences offered security rather than peril?

NOTES

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² Majlis al-Ahkam, Reg. S 7/10/18, case no. 556, 24 Ramadan 1280/2 March 1864, 181–82, Egyptian National Archives, Cairo.

³ On elite Ottoman-Egyptian households, see Shirley Johnston and Sherif Sonbol, *Egyptian Palaces and Villas: Pashas, Khedives, and Kings* (New York: Abrams, 2006); Nihal Tamraz, *Nineteenth-Century Cairene Houses and Palaces* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1998).

⁴ For definitions of mobility and migration utilizing a global framework, see Ettore Recchi and Mirna Safi, “Introduction: Human Mobility as Hallmark of Our Age,” in *Handbook of Human Mobility and Migration*, eds. Ettore Recchi and Mirna Safi (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024), xii–xxvi.

⁵ On the inequitable conditions of domestic servitude in Egypt, see Heidi Morrison, *Childhood and Colonial Modernity in Egypt* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 11–13; Judith E. Tucker, *Women in Nineteenth Century Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 92–93.

⁶ Nazan Maksudyan, *Orphans and Destitute Children in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 57. On the one-way migration of young and provincial maidservants to Istanbul, see Yahya Araz, “Rural Girls as Domestic Servants in Late Ottoman Istanbul,” in *Children and Childhood in the Ottoman Empire: From the 15th to the 20th Century*, eds. Gülay Yılmaz and Fruma Zachs (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 196–219.

⁷ Liat Kozma, *Policing Egyptian Women: Sex, Law, and Medicine in Khedival Egypt* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 115.

⁸ Nineteenth-century lawmakers never fixed a legal age of consent, which meant the language used to describe intercourse and litigants remained contentious. See Liat Kozma, “Girls, Labor, and Sex in Precolonial Egypt, 1850–1882,” in *Girlhood: A Global History*, eds. Jennifer Helgreen and Colleen A. Vasconcellos (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 351–53.

⁹ Amira El Azhary Sonbol, “Law and Gender Violence in Ottoman and Modern Egypt,” in *Women, the Family, and Divorce Laws in Islamic History*, ed.

Amira El Azhary Sonbol (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 286.

¹⁰ For a detailed exploration of how litigants negotiated cases of unlawful intercourse, see Mario M. Ruiz, "Virginity Violated: Sexual Assault and Respectability in Mid-to-Late Nineteenth-Century Egypt," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25, no. 1 (2005): 221–25.