Khul' divorce in Egypt: public debates, judicial practices, and everyday life
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8 On secret marriages and polygamy

8.1 Nura wants to marry again...polygamously and by way of ‘urfi

Nura called to tell me that she was very angry with me since I had not asked about her for a long time. I could tell that she was really upset since she was not even asking me how I was doing but almost immediately continued to complain about her knee which was hurting her again. “Besides that, there is also haga nafsiya, something psychological which I want you to tell about. Can you come to the post office tomorrow?” she asked me in a sad but compelling voice.

When I arrived at the post office the next morning I gave her a missed call where after she came to pick me up. She gave me the usual four kisses but then she threw her arms around me very strongly. She had never hugged me like that before. When we went inside the post office she was not laughing and smiling as much as she normally used to do and apparently she had not slept well because she had bags under her eyes. Nura made me a small breakfast which we ate together. When I asked her what was wrong she said that she was tired of having nothing to do. She wanted to work more instead of sitting at home the whole afternoon and evening. She showed me immigration papers to Australia saying that an Egyptian man, who migrated to Australia two years ago and who had gained Australian nationality, had advised her to fill out the forms. She asked me whether I was willing to help her with that.

A little later she asked me to accompany her on her way to the public oven where she wanted to buy bread for her and some colleagues. On our way, she started to talk about ‘Afaf saying that she had not heard from her again after that morning in court. Nura was of the opinion that Afaf had been angry with us for not having paid her the fifty pounds which she so badly needed. “Yet,” she said, “if I had the money, I would have given it to her.” “Wasn’t her brother supposed to pay?” I asked her. “No, he was her mediator, so he cannot pay.” “And what about her parents?” “She does not have parents. Well, at least she is not in contact with them. She is living alone with her children,” Nura said after which she suddenly asked me: “Do you really want to know why I am feeling depressed?”

Nura did not wait for my reply and started to tell me that: “You know that Mahmud has debts because of the minibus which we wanted to buy in instalments. Since he cannot pay back his debts his creditors are still after him. However, because he is in prison they cannot get him and now his creditors want to come to my house to get the money.” “How do you know that?” “My daughter

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226 Personal meeting, Nura (10 May 2004, Cairo).
told me that they were at their door and that my mother-in-law told them that she had not seen me in two years and that she did not know where I was living at the moment. However, if they come back again I am afraid that she will tell them where I live. So, in order to escape them I sleep in another house every night. One night I stay at my mother’s, another night at my sister’s and sometimes I even sleep at the house of Madame Jeanet (her Christian colleague). I even considered giving up my work in order to leave Cairo and live in my village again. Yet, if I do that it will be very difficult to see my children” Nura said sadly.

In the meantime we had arrived at the oven and I asked Nura: “What will they do if you cannot pay it back?” “They might put me in prison too.” “But why does his family not pay for this?” “His mother said that it was my problem.” When we walked back and while I was still thinking of this unfortunate development Nura told me that a married man with four children had proposed to her. He had promised her that he would write a flat in her name in one of the new satellite cities and that he would provide for her. She said that it was haram (forbidden) and that her sister had opposed the idea since it would only bring problems as he would marry and leave her again. “However, Muhammad, the lawyer, supports me and told me that I could give it a go. What do you think Nadia?” “How old is he?” I inquired. “He is 36 years old.” “And what does he do for a living?” “He works as a zabīt il-jaysh (officer in the army). He has a very good job.” “How did you get to know him?” “Through the neighbours, who are always answering the phone when you call my mother. They know this man. He used to live in our neighbourhood and we actually grew up together. From the time we were little he has been in love with me,” Nura said and for the first time that day I saw a smile on her face “So, why did he not marry you?” “He wanted to, but his family decided that it was better to marry a woman from the family. And so he did.” “So, she is his first wife?” “Yes.” “And you will become his second wife?” Nura smiled shyly as she nodded. “Yes. Look…the best solution, of course, is to find work but it has not been easy to find work,” she said. “Well,” I replied, “you should be careful. You should see the flat, and when you are going to sign the marriage contract you should register…” “There will be no marriage contract” Nura interrupted me. “We will marry by way of ’urfi. Do you know ’urfi?” she asked me. “Yes,” I said. “Well, that changes everything. Why does he want to marry you by way of ’urfi? Does he want to keep the marriage a secret from his first wife?” “Yes,” she told me. “He does not want his wife and children to know. He wants to keep it a secret for their sake. He promised to spend three days with her and four with me.” “And she will not get suspicious?” “No, he is an officer in the army, so his absence will not arouse a lot of suspicion.” “Well, I guess it is not bad when he is only around four days a week” I said while I looked at her with a smile “Yes, that will be very relaxing indeed,” Nura said and it was clear that she understood what I was
alluding to. “And will you take the children back?” “No, that is impossible. Their schools will be too far away.” “And your future neighbours, won’t they get suspicious when he is coming and going, leaving you alone in your new flat?” “No, they will know that he is an officer in the army and during his absence I can stay with my mother and sister. But, if I can get this flat, then Mahmud’s family and the creditors will no longer be able to find me” she told me with a sense of hope in her eyes.

In the mean time, we had arrived at the post office again and since it was past ten there was no more work that needed to be done and so we sat a little with two colleagues of Nura. One of them told us proudly that her daughter had started studying law. She started to smile as she said that she would divorce her husband through *khul’* as soon as her daughter had graduated from law school. Her daughter would then be the legal expert of the family and her with filing a case. I asked her smilingly whether she was talking seriously. “No,” she said a bit shocked, “of course not. I was only joking.” Thereafter Nura and her two colleagues started talking about a divorce case in Nura’s family which I assumed was the case which Nura had told her cousin about on the day that the latter drove us from the post office to Nura’s mother’s house (see also 7.1). Nura told her colleagues how the husband was the one who had kept the children. Her colleagues were clearly very surprised when they heard this but concluded that at least he was a good husband since he did not refrain from taking care of his children. “Mahmud would never do that,” Nura told them but I was under the impression that her colleagues did not want to talk about it as they only nodded and did not elaborate on her remark.

Zeinab, another colleague of Nura who had got engaged recently came to show me her *shabka* which consisted of two bracelets, a necklace, a ring and something else which she said she had left at home. She said that they planned to marry after one year or maybe even in December if everything worked out fine. I asked her where they hoped to live. “Maybe in al-Marg or in Medina-t-Nasr, if he can get a flat over there,” she said. When Zeinab left again Nura told me that Zeinab’s fiancée was a friend of her brother.

Then my mobile phone rang and after I had hung up I told Nura that a man who claimed to live in Saudi Arabia had been calling and harrassing me for the last couple of days. Nura had to laugh: “From Saudi Arabia, wow, can’t you get him for me?” Nura’s two colleagues had to laugh and told Nura that he wanted me and that he definitely would not be interested in Nura.

A few minutes before we intended to leave the building, the director and another man came to the table where we were sitting. Without introducing the other man the director whom I always found very friendly pointed at Nura: “This
is the woman who divorced by way of khul’. “The other man did not know how to react. Neither did Nura. You could hear a pin drop.

At noon we all left the building. I warned Nura to be very careful with the flat and to make sure that someone checked the papers concerning the ownership of the flat. She said that (her lawyer) Muhammad had already promised to check that and that he thought this marriage to be a good solution. She looked at me quite energetically saying that her brain was working like crazy.

A secret meeting at the Muqattam Hills
A few weeks later Nura told me that the man who wanted to marry her by way of ‘urfi was actually one of the sons of the neighbours who were living next to Nura’s mother and who always took care of her old and handicapped mother. Nura told me that she really feared that her mother and the neighbours would find out about their secret. “I cannot take the risk. If they get angry with me, they will stop taking care of my mother,” she said. Although she claimed that she had put the idea of marrying him out of her mind, it was clear to me that she still liked talking to him as she constantly asked me whether she could use my mobile phone to call him or to send him text messages. One day she even used my mobile phone to call him in the presence of her mother. To make her mother think that she was calling a female friend, she used the feminine form of you – inti- instead of the mascular inta. Apparently they had arranged to meet since it was only a few minutes later that her secret lover whose name was Rami, entered Nura’s mother’s little house making it look as if this meeting was a coincidental meeting between two neighbours.

On another occasion Nura told me that Rami had invited her for a visit to the Muqattam Hills. “Will you come with me this evening?” she asked me. Since I knew that the Muqattam Hills had a very bad reputation for secret lovers to meet, I told Nura that I would only join her on condition that my partner could come with me. Of course we never went there; that same day she called me to say that he had not called her again and that it was therefore very unlikely that we would go. Instead she asked me to come to the post office on Wednesday morning. “I want to make couscous for you,” she said as if she wanted to have a good reason for inviting me.

Visiting Nura at the post office again
In June 2004, I went to the post office and as usual I waited in front of the gate to be picked up by Nura. I was quite surprised when instead of Nura, Ahmad, the boy doing all kinds of errands in the post office, came to fetch me. When I met Nura inside she told me that Rami had not called her and that she had only accepted his invitation to go to the Muqattam Hills for my sake. She asked my permission to
call him on my mobile phone. “Rami says that we can go to the Muqattam Hills tonight. Would you like to go there tonight?” Nura asked me full of expectation. “No, I am sorry but I am not free tonight,” I told her as I was getting slightly irritated by the whole Muqattam Hills business.

A little later I was witness to Ahmad telling a group of female employees about one of his aunts who had divorced her husband by way of *khul’* and who had married again recently. Nura told me that this aunt married a man who was already married. “So, she became the second wife?” I asked Nura. “Exactly. This happens a lot,” Nura said. Ahmad interrupted saying: “Of course, divorced women often marry again, but they seldom marry a man who has never been married before. Men who marry for the first time want to marry a virgin,” he concluded. “Suppose you like a girl, but that she is a divorcee, would you marry her?” I asked Ahmad, knowing that he had never been married. “Certainly not. I want to marry a virgin. It would be very embarrassing for me to marry a woman who is not a virgin,” he said firmly.

After this short conversation with Ahmad, Nura wanted me to say hello to her sister who was working in another department of the post office. On our way Nura told me that the problems between her sister and her husband were getting worse. “Are they still living in the same flat?” I asked her. “Yes, where can she go to? She wants to get rid of him but she does not have anywhere to go to with three children and she is also afraid that she will lose custody of the children. Moreover, since I already divorced Mahmud by way of *khul’*, she feels she cannot divorce too. That would be too embarrassing. My parents only have two daughters. What will people say when both of them divorce by way of *khul’*? Sometimes my sister teases me and accuses me of having stolen a march on her,” Nura said half seriously half jokingly.

**Nura cuts off her hair**

When I visited Nura at the post office in September 2004 she told me that she had cut off her hair in a fit of despair. After work we took a bus to her mother’s house. When she unveiled in order to show me what she had done to her hair, I was shocked to see that she had not only cut it off but criss-cross as well. Nura who only donned a small veil and who was normally not bothered by showing her hair to both her male and female neighbours was now careful in keeping it covered as much as possible. “I want my children back,” she exclaimed. “My mother-in-law takes good care of them but of course she is not like a real mother who helps them with things such as doing home work” she sighed as she poured me a cup of tea.227

227 In 1911 an Egyptian magazine used the story of a young woman who was forced to marry an eighty year old man to illustrate that it was wrong to marry a young girl to an old man against her will. This
One year later: Nura insists on marrying polygamously

I left Cairo in October 2004 and during a one-month period of fieldwork in May 2005 I met Nura again. As always we decided to meet in front of the post office. Although we were both very happy to see each other again I also noticed that something was bothering Nura. When I asked her about it she told me that she was sick and tired of people talking behind her back about her status as a divorcee. “I thought a divorce would make me a free woman but the opposite is true. Even my colleagues are talking behind my back. I really think it is better to marry again. When you were in Holland, a few men have asked for my hand, but they were all widowers and I refused to marry them,” she said as she looked at me earnestly.

“Why? Didn’t you just tell me that you want to marry again?” I asked her in surprise. “Yes, but if I marry a widower I will have to take care of his children and the entire household. I do not want that. I want to keep my freedom. Look Nadia, I have three children whom I am not able to take care of and whom I had to leave in the house of my mother-in-law. Will I now take care of somebody else’s children? Of course I will not. And, do I want to become a housewife again? Mahmud [her ex-husband] forbade me to work, so I gave up my job at the post office, just before I completed three years of work which would have enabled me to become a muwazzafa (civil servant). Since he did not provide, I went back to work at the post office. However, now it is much more difficult to become a muwazzafa. Three years of work does no longer automatically turn you into a muwazzafa. At the moment I even work on a contract basis, which means that my salary is small; that I am uninsured; that I will not build up a pension; and that they can fire me whenever they wish. I will not give up another chance to become a muwazzafa by marrying a widower who wants me to become the new mother of his children. I would rather marry an already married man with children who is so busy with his first wife and family that he will only have time to spend a few days a week at my place. That is fine with me. After all the problems I experienced during my first marriage, I do not think I will be able to endure the presence of a man 24 hours a day. I need my freedom. By marrying a married man, I will have the respectable status of a married woman again. Moreover, I will be living in my own flat and he will pay part of the rent,” she ended her story.

“So, why didn’t you marry Rami? You like him and he is already married,” I asked her. “No, I can’t marry him because he is the son of the neighbours and by marrying him I risk disturbing the relationship with them and that is something which I cannot do because the neighbours are taking care of my mother,” she explained seriously. “No, I already have my eye on somebody else.” “Well, tell me who he is and how you met him?” I asked her impatiently. “He is twenty-year-old educated Cairene woman became distressed and also “cut off her hair in despair” (Baron 1991, 282).
working in one of the shops near the post office and that is how I met him. He is not handsome but he is already married, has children and a second job. He wants to marry me because his wife is no longer a real *zawga* (wife) to him and he said that he would arrange for a flat for me to live in and he also said that he would pay the rent and furnish part of the flat,” Nura concluded happily. “And what about his first wife, does she know that you want to marry her first husband?” “No, he wants to keep it a secret from her.” “But he is legally obliged to inform his first wife of his wish to marry again.” “No, we will not do that,” Nura simply said. “What do you mean, do you consider again marrying by way of *’urfi*?” “Maybe, I don’t know yet. We will see,” she said and it was clear that she did not want to talk any longer about it. Instead she urged me to go inside the post office.

**Nura is unhappy and considers divorcing again**

After I left Cairo in June 2005 I returned for a few weeks in September 2005. Nura and I immediately made an appointment to meet, in front of the post office of course. When I saw her again I could immediately see that she had lost a lot of weight, at least ten kilos. When I asked her about it she told me that she got married again in July [2004], to a man called Magdi, the same man she had told me about last time. It had been a small wedding which only her sister had attended, notwithstanding the fact that her sister had opposed this polygamous marriage. Nura had kept the second marriage a secret from her mother although she now knew that her daughter had married again. Like her sister, Nura’s mother had disapproved of the marriage as well.

Nura started to complain immediately: “We have been married for six weeks now, and during this period he has only visited me six times. He did not even give me a *dibla* (wedding ring). Even 200 pounds for the *dibla* were too much for him. I feel so embarrassed because my colleagues keep asking me about the wedding ring. So, now I have told them that he gave me a refrigerator instead. However, it is not true. He did not even bother to give me a fridge. Remember, in my mother’s house we did not have running water. Now I have a house with running water but without a fridge. Every day, I bring a few empty bottles and store them in the fridge of the post office in order to take home cool water. On top of it all, he refuses to pay the rent for the flat, which costs 200 pounds a month. I only earn a little bit more than 130 pounds a month. I had to borrow 200 pounds from my sister and 500 pounds from my work. Soon, I will join a *gam’iya* (association - here it refers to a saving association) in order to make ends meet. Sometimes when he comes to visit me he even asks me for money to buy cigarettes. His last visit was eight days ago. Can you believe it? I asked him to divorce me, but he refused, saying that he does not want to lose me since his wife is no longer a good *zawga* (wife) if you understand what I mean. What did I do? In
this situation a prostitute would at least earn money,” Nura complained bitterly. I wondered why Nura was so upset about the money. Was it because she wanted to have a place of her own which she could only afford with his help or was she afraid that the neighbours would suspect her of prostituting herself to a man whom she called her husband but who only came to visit her once a week? Or was it a combination of both? There was no time to ask her as we had entered the post office.

Inside the post office, I was greeted heartily by Nura’s colleagues and after Nura and I were left on our own again, Nura opened her wallet to show me the contraception pills which she was taking. “I absolutely do not want to have children by him,” she explained after which she continued saying that everybody had warned her that “these things often happen.” “I am even considering to resort to khul’ although I am very reluctant to do this again. I have already been divorced once. Moreover, if I divorce him I will have to give up the flat, sell the furniture and move in with my mother again,” she said. “I really hate the idea of having to spend the night at another house every few evenings. The only thing I had hoped for was to find a place of my own,” Nura finished her story. After Nura finished her work at 1230, we walked to the bus together. When we said goodbye she made a last remark: “When I see you in November, I might be divorced again.” I did not know how to reply and told her to take care of herself.

**Nura’s injured knee**

When I visited Cairo again in November 2005 Nura and I held on to our tradition of meeting at the post office. I no longer used to give Nura a missed call but entered the building by myself. When I entered the department where Nura was working, Zeinab was the first who came to welcome me back. I asked her if she had already married. She told me that she had not and that the wedding had been postponed to January. Since Zeinab looked as happy as in September I had the impression that everything was still all right.

“Habibti” (my dear one) a shrill voice sounded from inside the department. It was Nura who hurried to welcome me back. She looked happy and I was even under the impression that she had gained weight again. Nura confirmed but complained that due to her being overweighted her knee was hurting her again. When we had a private moment I asked her how she and Magdi were doing. “Oh, things are better now. Since my knee is hurting me I have to take injections twice a day and these injections are very expensive. For this reason I told Magdi that he had to pay for the rent of the flat or else I would be forced to leave the flat. So, he finally agreed to pay for the rent,” she said with a smile.

When we left the post office Nura let a few buses pass since she wanted me to greet the bus driver whom she knew and who always drove us to the City of
the Dead. When the bus arrived the driver gave us a free ride and we even
managed to find two empty seats next to each other. I told Nura that I was three
months pregnant. Nura looked happy although I was also under the impression
that she considered this to be about time too. “Will you call the baby Yasmina?”
she asked me with a smile referring to earlier meetings in which we had talked
about favourite baby names.

When the bus had to break for a speed bump Nura twisted her knee, the
one that was already hurting. When we got off the bus, she could hardly walk and
I had to support her. A male passer-by whom she obviously knew supported her
too but since Nura was very heavy and since he was very thin, he asked her to wait
so that he could mobilize other people to help her. Within a few minutes a group
of neighbours came to help her. Nura started to sob and told them what had
happened after which they reassured her that they would take her to the hospital.

When her mother saw us approaching her house I expected her to be
worried about Nura. Instead, however, she looked rather annoyed saying: “Here
we go again.” Nevertheless, she still gave her daughter a hundred pounds which
she had hidden underneath her clothes. “This will cost us a lot of money,” she
complained. Nura did not react and instead told her mother in the presence of all
the neighbours that I was pregnant. This clearly diverted attention away from the
money issue as her mother started to smile meanwhile pushing me inside the
house so that I could tell her all about it. Nura and most of the neighbours, a few
males and many females entered the house too in order to wait for the taxi which
would take Nura to the hospital. When the taxi came and Nura and a few of the
female neighbours left the house to go to hospital, I was left alone with Nura’s
mother and a few older female neighbours who took the opportunity to ask me all
about my husband, pregnancy and family.

Although Nura was still not able to walk without the help of others, she
insisted on going back to her flat. Since I wanted to go home too we said goodbye
to her mother and the neighbours and left for the buses. Although it was only a
short walk to the buses it took us quite a long time to get there as I had to support
Nura who could still barely walk. When we finally got there Nura found an empty
chair to sit on. She wanted to call Magdi so that I could talk to him for a few
minutes and tell him that she had had an accident with her knee and that we had
to go to hospital. “And do not tell him where we are. I do not want him to know
that my mother lives her. I told him that she lives in the village,” she commanded
me meanwhile pushing her mobile phone into my hands. When I talked to Magdi I
told him what had happened and that Nura was going home. I asked him to take
care of her.

While we were waiting for a taxi - I had convinced Nura of taking a taxi
instead of a bus- Nura met a man from the neighbourhood. He apparently knew
that Nura had divorced recently and asked her how she was doing. She told him
that she had married again and what her husband was doing for a living. “OK, so
he is just a normal employee,” he concluded. Nura nodded but added that he was
a little bit better than Mahmud. “He is just as greedy as Mahmud but he does not
swear at me, nor does he hit me.” On the way to the buses she had told me that
this was very important to her.

Nura started telling me that her sister had also come to live in her apartment
building. “A few weeks ago she finally decided to take the big step and move out
of her husband’s flat.” “Did she divorce him?” I asked her in surprise. “No, she
cannot divorce him, because she is afraid that she will lose custody of her children.
The two girls are already quite old so she only has a right to keep the boy.” “And
what about you? Do you still plan to divorce Magdi?” I asked her. “No, since he
started paying for the rent of the flat I decided not to do that. Moreover, I divorced
a husband before, so unless there is no other way out, I will not consider divorcing
again. Can’t you come to meet him?” she asked me. I told her that I could not as I
was travelling soon. Finally a taxi arrived and Nura got in. In the evening I called
Nura to see if she had arrived home safely. She told me she had and that Magdi
had visited her to see how she was doing.

8.2 Khul’ women remarrying: confirming the stereotype?
During my first meeting with Nura in court, she had told me firmly that she did
not want to remarry. Her courtmate ‘Afaf had also stated that she had had enough
of marital life but that if she were to marry again, she would conclude an ‘urfi-
marriage (see 4.3). Later, when I often went to the post office to visit Nura, she
regularly repeated that she did not want to marry again. Although her colleagues
tried to find her a new husband, Nura wanted to find a well-paid job instead so
that she could take back her children. After Nura had made it very clear on these
occasions that she did not want to marry again and that she only wanted to have
her children back, I was quite surprised to see that her life had taken quite a
dramatic turn. Not only had Nura decided to marry again, she had also taken the
initiative to find a suitable husband whom she married in July 2005. By marrying
again and by actively pursuing a new husband, she unintentionally confirmed
what opponents to the law had always predicted and warned against, namely: that
women who resort to khul’ only want a divorce in order to marry another man.
Furthermore, so they had claimed, by exchanging one husband for another, khul’
women were destroying their families in the process. Nura who had left her
children behind when she divorced her husband would certainly fit the picture
which opponents had formed of khul’ women.

While a lot of attention was paid to women who wanted to divorce
through khul’ –the way they were dressed, their bad habits – hardly any attention
was paid to the men who were the so-called victims of these women. The only thing that became clear from opponents’ criticism was that the divorced husbands were divorced for frivolous reasons. The front page of a Dutch newspaper even carried the story of an Egyptian woman who had divorced her husband after he had refused to give up a childhood habit of spraying himself and the entire house with a perfume which she was allergic to (Metro 8 January 2007, 1).

The image of the men that *khul’* women wanted to marry was even less clear and the only thing that was clear was that these men were more handsome and/or richer than the husbands these *khul’* women wanted to divorce. Nevertheless, Nura’s case showed that the two men she wanted to marry were neither handsome nor rich. In fact Nura often complained that Magdi was not handsome at all and that he was not living up to his promise to pay part of the rent of the flat. On the contrary, when he visited her, he would ask Nura to give him money in order to buy cigarettes and it was Nura who spent her money on preparing him good meals. He had not even given her a *dibla* (wedding ring) on their wedding, a fact which she tried to hide from her colleagues by telling them that he had given her a refrigerator instead. Rather than being rich and handsome these two men were married, had children and at least Magdi had two jobs in order to scratch a living.

Why did these men want to marry Nura and why was Nura interested in marrying them? Both Rami and Magdi wanted to marry Nura because they no longer felt attracted to their wives but since they also wanted to maintain life with their first wife and children the second marriage with Nura had to be kept a secret from their families. For that reason, they both wanted to marry Nura in secret through an *’urfi* marriage, a controversial and informal type of marriage. In return they promised Nura to rent or write a flat in Nura’s name and to visit her regularly.

At the time of the introduction of the *khul’* law, not only the *khul’* article but also the article on *’urfi*-marriages had been subjected to fierce criticism since, according to local opinion, *’urfi*-marriages are illegal marriages which young people contract without the knowledge and permission of their parents. One newspaper article on polygamy in Egypt expressed another view and claimed that *’urfi*-marriages are often conducted by husbands who are already married and who want to marry a second wife in secret. Through an *’urfi*-marriage it is easy to get around the legal obligation of informing the first wife (al-Ahram Weekly 26 February-3 March 2004). Statistics show that twenty-five percent of the married

228 Rami wanted to marry Nura through *’urfi*. In the case of Magdi, Nura was reluctant to tell me whether she had concluded an official marriage or not.

229 See article 11bis of law 100/1985 (al-jarida al-rasmiya, issue 27, 4 July 1985, 1).
male population marry a second wife within three years of marriage (ibid).\textsuperscript{230} Again we see how women were accused of exactly the thing that men wanted, namely, to marry another woman.\textsuperscript{231}

With this being the case, two questions spring to mind. First, where opponents to the law had said that women would only want a \textit{khul’} divorce in order to marry another man they had refrained from predicting that most of these women would end up becoming a second wife. As Ahmad, the boy running all kinds of errands in the post office, had said, divorced women often marry again and in such cases they frequently become a second wife. With this being common practice in Egypt, and other Muslim countries as well,\textsuperscript{232} why did opponents to the law make it look like as if \textit{khul’} women were pursuing a tall, dark, handsome and rich man while in reality they must have known that most of these women would end up becoming a co-wife through a secret marriage?

Moreover, Nura did not remarry a rich man. To the contrary, she married a man who could hardly provide for her. What is even more significant is that at first she was not even looking for a husband to take care of her. She wanted to keep her freedom and she was not prepared to give up her financial independence by letting another opportunity go to become a \textit{muwazaffa} (civil servant). Hence, if Nura was not pursuing a tall, handsome man and if she wanted to keep her financial independence and her freedom of movement, why then did she marry again and why was she even prepared to give up the idea of taking back her children? Now one could argue that Rami’s offer provided her with an opportunity to escape the creditors of her ex-husband. Yet, after the issue of the creditors had disappeared into the background a few months later, Nura still wanted to marry again. She was sick and tired of people gossiping about her status as a divorcee and by marrying again she hoped to escape \textit{kalam al-nas} (gossip). She no longer wanted to be “outside the structure.”

\textsuperscript{230} I am aware of the fact that this number is quite high. For more on this issue, see 4.7.
\textsuperscript{231} In a Dutch newspaper it was argued that after the introduction of a new Personal Status Law in Morocco in 2003, many men decided not to marry the official way but to conclude a marriage in the mosque in order to circumvent the new marriage rules which give women more rights in case of divorce (NRC Handelsblad \textbf{4} March \textbf{2005}). The article does not raise the question as to why women would agree to enter a so-called mosque marriage which deprives them of their rights and whether women who agree to conclude a “mosque marriage” are first, second or third wives. In Egypt unofficially conducted marriages are often second or third marriages.
\textsuperscript{232} A good example forms the study of Jansen on women without men in an Algerian town, She shows how in case of remarriage, almost half of the widows and twenty percent of the divorcees became second wives (1987, 2). For the case of Syria, Carlisle remarks that court arbitrators warn women that insisting on a divorce will have the result that in case of remarriage they will be forced to marry older men or to accept to become a second wife (2007, 250).
8.3 Social pressure to (not) remarry

Without any prompting from my side, almost all women who divorced through *khulʿ* vehemently claimed that they did not want to marry again. This starkly contrasted Rahma’s circle of divorced female friends who had all divorced out-of-court through *ibraʿ* and who did not hide their eagerness to marry again. In my eyes, the reaction of women who divorced through *khulʿ* was fuelled by a fear to confirm the picture of *khulʿ* women which opponents had spread in the public debate. Nura, for example, had once told me that: “It is true that most women who file for a divorce by way of *khulʿ* have an eye on other men.” “But,” I asked her, “you have divorced your husband by way of *khulʿ* too, haven’t you?” “Yes, but I am one of the few, one of the five percent, who has good reasons.” Hence, women who divorced by way of *khulʿ* were under considerable pressure to not marry again. At the same time, however, most women remarried and the case of Nura shows that she was even pressured by colleagues to remarry! This had not become immediately clear to me as the post office in which Nura was working and which had come to occupy a central position in our meetings, exuded a friendly and informal atmosphere.

For example, at first Nura invited me to meet her at the post office instead of at home. She wanted to show me where she was working and introduce me to her colleagues. I remember quite well my first visit to the post office. Not only was the copious meal of *mahshi* which we shared amid all kinds of letters and envelopes, and in the presence of a crying baby, illustrative of the informal sphere in the post office, but the same applied to the way Nura and her colleagues interacted with each other. I remember being surprised by the fact that all her colleagues, of whom all but one were female, as well as her (male) superior knew that Nura had filed for a divorce through *khulʿ*. Besides, at least some of them also knew that her husband was in prison and that he used to hit her. Nura spoke very openly about her divorce with her colleagues and apparently was not disturbed by the fact that the tone in the public debates which had surrounded the introduction and implementation of *khulʿ* had been very critical and sometimes even venomous towards women. Proponents to the law had even exclaimed that it would influence women to such an extent that they would be very reluctant to file for a divorce through *khulʿ*. All of this seemingly went unnoticed in the post office and it looked as if it was the most natural thing in the world that Nura was in the process of divorcing and, at a later stage, had divorced through *khulʿ*.

Yet, when her male superior explicitly pointed out to another man that Nura was the women who had divorced by way of *khulʿ* Nura had felt very uncomfortable (see 8.1). On another occasion when Ahmad told the other women in the post office that his aunt had not only divorced through *khulʿ* but that she had also left her children behind when she left the marital home, Nura felt a jolt of
recognition and it was as if she was relieved to have her colleagues hear the story
of a woman who was in a similar position. When one of Nura’s colleagues told me
that she wanted to help her to find a new (Dutch) husband, Nura became irritated
and tried to divert attention away by bringing up a new subject. I had never asked
Nura why this had irritated her but I assumed that it was either because her
colleague and I were discussing whether a future Dutch husband could be
Christian or because Nura did not want to marry again as that would curb her
chances of working abroad and providing for her children. Looking for a second
job (abroad) and wanting to become a provider for her children was a deviation
from what her colleagues expected her to do after divorce, namely: to marry again.

These incidents slowly made me realize that the friendly and informal post
office also exuded an atmosphere in which issues such as marriage, love and
children were recurrent topics of discussion and where one could feel the need to
live up to unwritten but authoritative and compelling codes of behavior. Apart
from offering emotional support colleagues and friends also exert a lot of pressure
to conform to certain societal standards. When we realise that Nura and her
colleagues were sharing the same space in the post office five hours a day for six
days a week, it should not come as a surprise that colleagues can play an important
role in a working woman’s life; as an important source of emotional support but
also by exerting a considerable amount of social pressure. As a result of this
pressure Nura decided to remarry and consequently dropped the idea of taking
back her children.

When I asked a friend of mine about the status of divorced women, this
divorced upper class woman said: “According to the majority of the people
divorced women are dangerous and for that reason they receive a different
treatment (see also Bibars 2001). For example, here at work I am never able to have
a meeting with a male colleague behind closed doors while this is not a problem
for my female colleagues who are married. Apart from that I also have to endure a
lot of remarks from my colleagues about the way I am dressed. They would never
make such remarks to a married female colleague. A female colleague of mine
used to tell me all the gossip which my colleagues were spreading about me. In the
beginning I wanted to know it all but now I have asked her not to tell me any
longer. It is too depressing. I recently tried to find a job in the Gulf where one of
my brothers is living. Unfortunately I did not succeed and had to return to Egypt. I
was really depressed in the plane on the way back to Egypt. Going back to a place
where there is constant pressure to marry again was not really something I was
looking forward to.”

In other cases I also witnessed that it was difficult to be a divorced woman
and that divorced women were under a lot of pressure to remarry. For example, a
teacher at one of Cairo’s most expensive and prestigious private universities
divorced her husband out-of-court through an *ibra’*-divorce. She told me: “In my case my family still hopes that I will return to my husband since it is hard to be a single woman in Egypt. Married women are afraid that you will run away with their husbands and as a result you are kept out a bit from everything. The family of my father, for example, no longer invites me that much. As a divorced woman you suddenly become an individual. You are no longer part of a family. Being unmarried at my age is abnormal. It means that you are out of the structure,” she concluded her story.

In the case of Algeria in the 1980s, Jansen remarks that women whose defining relation with a man is lacking, are also outside the accepted family structure (1987, 1). “Being out of the structure” was exactly what happened to Nura. She was divorced and the fact that she had a “good” excuse to not marry again (she wanted to work in order to provide for her children) was not reason enough to justify her single status. The post office which exuded a sphere of intimacy and which served as an environment of emotional attachment simultaneously provided an internally differentiated structure of power and authority in which colleagues and superiors served as surrogate family. As a matter of fact, in Nura’s case there was no pressure from the side of her family to remarry. Although one cannot take Nura’s mother and sister’s objection to her second marriage as a sign that they opposed her remarrying in general, it does signify that they did not want her to marry at all costs.

In the context of the post office and its employees serving as surrogate family, I found a study by Kondo on a Japanese workplace interesting. Kondo describes the workplace as *uchi* (inside) as opposed to *soto* (outside) and states that the distinction between inside and outside is crucial in determining one’s mode of behavior and one’s form of emotional expression (1990, 150). According to Kondo, “inside” and “outside” are not fixed, kinship-based entities. They depend on a large extent on the “other” against which they are set, and there can be room for individual play and choice” (ibid, 152).

I found the aspect of “inside” not being a fixed, kinship-based entity interesting as well as the concept of individual play and choice as it shows once again that the importance of the family should not be taken at face value while it also reminded me of what Willemse has described as “personal preference.” In the case of market women in Sudan who sell in the market on a daily basis and who share the same space in the market from morning

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Although it might seem far-fetched to include a study on Japan, it actually is not if we take into account that the Arab press at the turn of the twentieth century often invoked Japan as a model to emulate. Japan provided a modernity which was not Western, one in which women could be modernized without undermining social hierarchies and morality (Worringer, cited in Abu-Lughod 1998, 15). The Christian Egyptian socialist essayist Salama Musa (1887-1958) also wanted Egyptian society not to take the Western model of liberation of women as an example but to turn to China and other Asian nations instead (Memissi 1987, 13).
until the evening for six days a week, Willemse concludes that rather than kinship relations, personal preference is one of the most decisive aspects for maintaining relations on a daily basis (1998, 309-10). This is not to say that biological family members are not important. Their importance, however, should not be overestimated as personal preference also determines whom one wants to associate with, and whom one is likely to feel socially pressured by as a result of that.

8.4 Divorced women remarrying: whom should they marry?
When divorced women are under considerable pressure to remarry, the question arises as to whom they should marry? Ahmad, the boy performing all kinds of errands in the post office had claimed that divorced women do not marry men who have never been married before. According to him it would be humiliating for him to marry a woman who was not a virgin anymore. Others confirmed the importance of virginity. For example, Rania had divorced her husband among others because he was unable to consummate the marriage. When I asked her if a new husband would be bothered by her previous marriage she told me: “As soon as they find out that the marriage was not consummated (she had proof of that) they will no longer be bothered by the fact that I was married before.”

In another case my friend Rahma, a thirty-year old upper middle class woman who divorced her husband a few months after their wedding, was having difficulties trying to find another husband: “I recently wanted to marry a pilot who liked me but his family opposed our marriage saying that he should not marry a divorcee.” In this case not the husband but his family was opposing his plans to marry a divorcee. According to Rahma his family thought it too humiliating and stigmatizing for their never married son to marry a divorcee.234

One evening Rahma had introduced me to her circle of female friends of whom almost all were divorced. One of her friends was ten years Rahma’s senior and had been a widow for many years. During all these years she had never remarried. Rahma explained why this was the case: “At her age it is very difficult to find a new husband. Suitable partners are almost always married and if they are not, because they are divorced for example, they have children or problems from a former marriage.”

During a conversation with another upper middle class woman whom I met through a common friend, this middle-aged divorced mother with two children claimed that being a divorcee is more problematic for women from the upper classes. “Women from the lower classes can opt for a polygamous marriage but for women with my class background this is impossible,” she said after which I

234 See also Jansen (1987, 198) for the case of Algeria.
asked her whether she had ever considered marrying again. “No,” she replied, “I did not and do not want to marry again. After all, all potential husbands will be divorcees with children who will try to profit from my situation by moving into my house and subletting their apartments.”

From these different meetings with divorced women it became clear to me that while there is a lot of pressure to marry again, it is also not easy to find a suitable marriage partner since social rules dictate that divorced women cannot marry a man who has never been married before. Both (young) women from the lower and the upper classes would rather not marry a widower or a divorced man since they are afraid that in such cases husbands will either require them to take care of these husbands’ children; burden them with problems from a previous marriage; or take advantage of their situation by subletting their flats and move in with their new wives, for example. In a way this also applies to Nura’s situation since her husband Magdi was happy to make use of Nura’s flat every now and then, imposing the additional financial burden on her. This picture of husbands who profit from their wives’ residential independence contrasts sharply with urīdu khul’an in which khul’ women were portrayed as being after the flat and money of their husband. However, in muHāmī khul’ we see how the lawyer Badr is accused of living on the sweat of women, that is to say, of profiting from all the luxuries which the wealthy Rasha has to offer him (see 3.4).

In any case, when remarriage is difficult for divorced women but where staying alone is hardly an option too, women from the lower classes often end up becoming a second wife. For upper class women the idea of being a co-wife is very humiliating and therefore they would prefer to remain single.235 In a way, women from the lower classes are in a better position than women from the upper classes since the latter have few chances to remarry and, as a result, face a future in which they will be under constant pressure to marry again and in which family, friends and colleagues will perceive them as a threat to their marriage. In fact, a woman like Nura was not only able to free herself of societal pressure by marrying again, at the same time she was also able to give her own twist to whom she wanted to marry and under what conditions. Even after she realised that the khul’ divorce had not given her the freedom which she had expected, she was still not willing to give up the little freedom she had obtained and therefore did not want to marry a man who would expect her to become a housewife and the new mother of his children. For that reason she rejected all potential husbands who were not already

235 Sonbol argues the opposite as she claims that while the number of polygamy cases was on the decline among the middle and lower classes in the 1980s, it became fashionable among the upper class. According to Sonbol, the declaration of unconstitutionality of the 1979 PSL as a result of which polygamy no longer constituted a basis upon which a woman could automatically obtain a divorce was a reflection of that development (1996, 284).
married. By making it very clear that she only wanted to marry an already married
man with children, Nura was turning around the obedience-maintenance relation,
the cornerstone of the Egyptian Muslim marriage system.

8.5 Becoming a second wife by choice?

“I’ve often said that if polygamy didn’t exist, the modern American career woman would
have invented it. Because, despite its reputation, polygamy is the one lifestyle that offers an
independent woman a real chance to “have it all” (Elizabeth Joseph - an American journalist
and the sixth wife of a Mormon man, May 1997, www.patriarchywebsite.com, 6 February
2007).

At the beginning of the twentieth century Egyptian men and women from the
upper classes revolted against the institution of polygamy. Qasim Amin and
Muhammad ‘Abduh, for example, were famous opponents of polygamy, and the
Egyptian Feminist Union fought hard to abolish polygamy from the Personal
Status Law. Yet, where countries such as Turkey and Tunisia have abolished
polygamy, Egypt is among those countries where the legislature has “only” tried
to curtail husbands’ rights to polygamy. In Egypt the husband needs to notify his
first wife of the second marriage and needs to include in the marriage contract the
names and addresses of all wives. The wife also has the right to request a divorce
on the basis of polygamy. To this day, fighters of women’s rights try to abolish
polygamy and women’s NGOs such as the Egyptian Centre for Women’s Rights
claim that the Personal Status Laws are not compatible with the reality of Egyptian
society (http://www.ecwronline.org/english/researches/2004/changingworld.htm,
14 February 2007).

In fact, Bibars, leader of the women’s NGO The Association for the
Development and Enhancement of Women (ADEW), wrote in her research on
female-headed-households in Egypt that a small percentage of female-headed-
households is made up of women whose female headship is the result of a
polygamous marriage (2001, 49). Bibars suggests that it is men who have created
this situation (2001, 49, 54). But there are women, for instance Nura, who chose to
marry polygamously on their own initiative. It is true that social pressure played
an important part in her decision to marry again but it was Nura who took the
initiative to look for a new husband and decided who she wanted to marry. In
other words, to some extent Nura was the architect of her new marital situation.236

236 Although Chant in a study on female-headed-households pays attention to female agency and to the
fact that not all instances of female-headed-households have arisen out of an action on the part of the
husband, she simultaneously remarks that it is not easy to determine the relative power of individual
agency and to disentangle cause from effect (1997, 19).
The following story supports the finding that not all women who marry polygamously are forced to do so.

Iman was a university student from a middle class background. I had always thought of her as a rather exceptional and independent woman since she was not only studying but also working to help her divorced mother to make ends meet. During her student days she had sold computers, worked as a secretary, worked in a hotel, started a business in artificial flowers and textiles and, near the end of her college life, she had started a business in tourism. Being the enterprising woman she was, I remember being quite surprised when she told me that she was not only considering marrying a married man but also a man who was twenty-seven years her senior. Iman told me that she had met him in the hotel in which she was working and that she had already arranged for a wedding dress which was stored under the sofa. When she showed it to me she said that: “In the beginning I really wanted to marry him but now I am no longer sure whether I should. We have different ideas and a different sense of humour. When I laugh, he does not laugh and when he laughs, I do not laugh. Money is not important and our relationship should also be based on love.” Apart from that she was afraid that he was in his midlife crisis: “Men who become older want to go back to their youth and in such cases they often do stupid things. He is married to a Palestinian woman and together they have children who are of my age.” She showed me a photo of him and I remember being even more shocked as her husband-to-be looked even older than I had expected and when Iman asked my opinion I told her the first thing that was on my mind: “You will soon be a widow.” Iman did not take that as an insult and when she put the wedding dress back into its place under the sofa she again told me that love was the most important thing. “So, have you made up your mind?” I asked her. “Yes, I will call him to tell him that I want to cancel the wedding.” “Are you in a hurry to marry because you are already twenty-eight years old?” I asked her as I still could not think of another reason for her wish to marry this man and become a second wife. “No, when I meet a potential husband, I will consider marriage again but otherwise I am not in a hurry,” she said airily. “So why did you consider marrying him?” “I wanted to marry him because it would be a good opportunity to accompany him on his business trips and to travel.”

Comparing Nura and Iman, there is a difference in the sense that Nura was a divorced woman while Iman was a student who had never been married before. The reason for having included Iman’s story at this point is related to the fact that both Nura’s case and her case refine the widespread assumption prevalent among many scholars that women are forced into polygamous marriages as well as the dominant assumption within Egyptian society which dictates that women often do
not have an alternative but to marry a husband who is already married. This latter assumption is often explained and justified by claiming that there is a large surplus of women in Egyptian society (see also 4.3). Some people even claimed that sixty to seventy percent of the Egyptian population consists of females and for that reason polygamy is a good solution both in cases in which divorced women want to remarry and in cases in which young women cannot find a suitable partner.

**Women do not outnumber men in Egyptian society**

When I told a well-educated and professional divorced woman that I had found statistics showing that approximately fifty-two percent of the Egyptian population was male and approximately forty-eight percent female, she not only looked very surprised but happy too. “I have always been under the impression that the number of women is much higher than the number of men. I am so relieved to hear you say that this is not true. It will increase my chances of remarriage significantly. You know, I will write this on a poster and stick it on all the windows of my car. Everybody needs to know this,” she said with a furtive smile.

**Is the shadow of a man better than the shadow of a wall?**

Nura’s and Iman’s cases show that at least in some cases women deliberately opt for polygamy because it provides them freedom to travel and spatial independence. Of course, Nura could have opted to live alone but her case clearly shows that Nura realised that she was dependent on Magdi to visit her at least a few times a week. It was important to Nura that the neighbours knew that she was married and therefore she felt rather uncomfortable when he started to only visit her once a week. At a later phase in their marriage she would even stop complaining about the fact that he hardly contributed towards paying the rent of the flat but his occasional visits remained a great worry to her and the fact that she even compared her situation to that of a prostitute, saying that a prostitute in her situation would be better off, made it very clear that Nura could not live alone unless a husband was visiting her regularly. Naturally, Nura felt relieved when her sister decided to leave her husband and started renting an apartment for her and her three children next to Nura’s apartment. Her story and other stories show that in case women do not have family or cannot rely on them for offering housing, requesting a divorce is a big step with major social implications as Egyptian society.
does not easily accept women living alone (especially women living alone without children). In such situations I often heard women say that “the shadow of a man is better than the shadow of a wall,” thereby referring to an old and well-known Egyptian saying which promotes the idea that any marriage is better than being alone. Let us now look at the case of ‘Azza, whom I met early in the fieldwork, through a common friend of ours.

At the time of the fieldwork ‘Azza was eighteen years old and studying commerce at Ain Shams University. Together with her parents and five brothers and sisters, ‘Azza was living in a small house with only one very tiny little window in one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Cairo. ‘Azza’s father was treating her mother badly and although she wanted to get rid of him she did not want a divorce. When I asked ‘Azza why, she told me that after a divorce her mother would be thrown out of the house and since she had no family to return to it was better to endure “the shadow of a man than the shadow of a wall.”

Although the father’s pension was far from being enough to scratch a living (during the fieldwork one of his daughters died of diabetes because there was not enough money to pay for adequate medication and care), ‘Azza’s father nevertheless married a second wife in 2004. Although ‘Azza felt relieved that her father had left the home as his presence always caused a lot of tension, the financial situation of the family deteriorated rapidly after her father invested his small pension in his new wife, who, according to ‘Azza, was around the same age as his own children. Since they could no longer pay for the rent, ‘Azza’s mother had to leave the small apartment and go back to her family whom she had not seen in a long time and who lived in Lower Egypt. Her family, however, did not want her back, let alone accommodate her six children. As a result, ‘Azza stayed in Cairo with different friends and acquaintances. When they had enough of her presence in the house she would then move and stay with other friends for a few nights. When I asked ‘Azza why her mother did not consider divorcing her father, she told me that that would have been a possibility if her family had agreed to let them stay in Lower Egypt. Since there was no place for them, her mother did not dare to ask for a divorce fearing that she would lose the only thing that she still had: the respectable status of being a married woman. Even that, however, was taken from her as ‘Azza’s father divorced her a few months later.

The case of ‘Azza’s mother is illustrative of many cases I came across and to which the saying “the shadow of a man is better than the shadow of a wall” could be applied. This group of women forms one end of a continuum that runs between two extreme poles and where at the other end of the continuum we find women who do not want to endure a bad marriage and who rather opt for a divorce or a separation even if that means living alone. This, as we have seen, applies to some upper class women who do not want to become a co-wife. In other
cases, women like Iman who were already in their late twenties rejected potential marriage partners and claimed not to be worried that they would become too old for the marriage market. Such women also did not think that any marriage is better than living alone.

A newspaper article on Egyptian proverbs pays attention to this difference between women: “...traditionally it has been argued that dhill ragil wala dhill heta (The shadow of a man is better than the shadow of a wall) to promote the idea than any marriage is better than being single...But changing socio-cultural realities lead many women to retort that al-wihda khayrun min galis al-sou’ (Better alone than in bad company)” (al-Ahram Weekly 4-10 January 2001). Another Egyptian newspaper article, carrying the title “A woman alone,” presents the story of four young, educated, professional and financially independent women who not only insisted on establishing an independent household after their divorce but who also claimed to be happily divorced. Although the author writes that “[Happily] was the most astounding adjective I’d ever heard to describe what is, in our society, the most dreaded of states...” and although being happily divorced runs counter to “the established idea that divorced women are miserable and weak without a man,” she nevertheless concludes in her article that the trauma of divorce is not always “a prelude to living with the stigma of being a divorcee” (al-Ahram Weekly 11-17 July 2002).

It is difficult to assess whether the stories of these four women represent a growing trend among women across all classes to rather live alone or whether deliberately “living alone” should be viewed as an exception merely reserved to a class of professional and financially independent women, as Arabi suggests for the case of Saudi Arabia (2001b).

Whatever the case, we should be careful in using the expression “living alone” as the case of Nura shows that while she was on her own, she was also married. Hence, instead of saying “Better alone than in bad company” there are situations where it would be better to say “The shadow of a man is better than the shadow of a wall...but not the shadow of any man.” In Nura’s case this meant that she would not accept to marry a widower or a divorced man. Nura only accepted to marry an already married man. She decided to opt for a polygamous marriage since such a marriage would give her the freedom she needed. Polygamous marriages, however, are typically conducted outside the official marriage system. For example, Rami wanted to conclude a polygamous marriage on condition that it would be concluded through ‘urfi since he wanted to keep the second marriage a secret from his first wife and children while it was not clear whether the polygamous marriage to Magdi was an official marriage or not. Nura had always avoided answering my question as to whether she was married by way of ‘urfi.
Yet, if we take into account the attributes of unofficial marriages there are several reasons to believe that she had concluded an unofficial marriage.

**8.6 Unofficial marriages in Egypt**

While quite a number of scholars have written on official marriage and marriage preparations in Egypt,\(^{237}\) it is not easy to find information on unofficial marriages in Egypt or in the Muslim world for that matter.\(^{238}\) In a way this is strange because unofficial marriages, the so-called ‘urfi marriages have frequently aroused heated public debates in Egypt. They even led the legislature to recognize divorces from informal marriages (cf. Fawzy 2004, 42-3) and they also formed the subject of a controversial film in 2002. At the time of the introduction of law no. 1 of the year 2000, not only the *khul* article, but also the article on ‘urfi marriages led to much controversy as it was often claimed that it would legalize marriages which young people had concluded secretly, without the knowledge of their parents.\(^{239}\) Being considered the only legitimate alternative to premarital sex, ‘urfi was treated as disguised prostitution. It was even claimed that a large percentage of Egyptian university students, ranging from 17.2 percent to 67-70 percent was involved in ‘urfi-marriages (Abaza 2001, 20). ‘Urfi-marriages were also criticized since they wave nearly all of the husband’s responsibilities towards his wife. In cases where the husband divorces the wife, she and her children are not entitled to alimony.

In an Egyptian newspaper article some Egyptian scholars stress the need to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate or secret ‘urfi marriages. According to them, legitimate ‘urfi marriages are not officially documented but fulfill the conditions of legitimate matrimony as stipulated by the *shari’a*: consent of both partners to the marriage; signing of the contract by two male witnesses; payment of the bride’s wedding gift; and the public announcement of the

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\(^{237}\) See for example Singerman (1995) and Hoodfar (1997).

\(^{238}\) Exceptions are Hasso (in press) and Yilmaz (2003). In a study on Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Hasso pays attention to the rise of non-traditional marriages such as ‘urfi and misyar. Hasso calls these marriages ‘Recent challenges to “Traditional” Marriage’ since the “traditional” marriage is becoming too expensive, especially among the middle class. In a study on the interaction between official secular state law and unofficial Islamic law in Turkey, Yilmaz argues that approximately fifteen percent of the marriages are conducted religiously only, carrying no legal weight in Turkish’ secular legal system. Nevertheless, it is rather simple to turn an unofficial marriage into an official marriage. What is more, since children born out of such unofficial marriages are illegitimate in a legal sense, “The response to the great increase in illegitimacy as defined in the law has seen the passing of a series of enactments to make legitimization extremely simple” (2003, 34).

\(^{239}\) Article 17 of law no. 1/2000, second section states: “…In case of negation/ denial, the actions arising from marriage contracts shall not be accepted in respect of the facts subsequent to August 1, 1931 – unless the marriage is established by virtue of an official document. However, actions for forced divorce, or for rescission exclusively shall be accepted to each case, if the marriage is established by any written evidence” (underlining is mine).
marriage, at least to family and neighbours (al-Ahram Weekly 18-24 February 1999). The public announcement of the marriage is where the shoe pinches as many marriages which are now performed in secrecy, often even without the knowledge of the parents, are called *‘urfi* marriages. According to the Egyptian scholars and experts in the newspaper article mentioned above, these types of *‘urfi* marriages do not conform to the officially documented marriages nor the stipulations of the *shari’a* and are therefore simply illegitimate or secret (*‘urfi*) marriages (ibid). In Turkey so-called *gizli* (hidden) marriages (which, in my eyes are the Turkish equivalent of the secret *‘urfi* marriages in Egypt) are also seen by some Islamic scholars as a legitimized flirt, especially since there is no announcement of the marriage to the public. By contrast, religious marriages which are made public, are often seen by Islamic scholars and the general public as valid marriages although they are not recognized by the secular legal system of the Turkish state (Yilmaz 2003, 39).

Other scholars in the Egyptian newspaper article also condemn the fact that people who marry through *‘urfi*, often do not have the intention of raising a family. For example, the former president of the Maglis al-Dawla (the State Council, an administrative court) believes that “In most cases, […] youths resort to such a marriage to fulfil a sexual desire, but not to form a family – which should be the main target of marriage.” The husband,” he adds, “resorts to this type of marriage because he cannot fulfil the financial obligations of traditional matrimony. According to Shari’a, however, the man should be financially capable of getting married…” (Middle East Times 7 April 2000). Saleh, professor of Sociology at the American University in Cairo adds that *‘urfi*-marriages often occur between well-to-do women and poor men who cannot afford to get married (Middle East Times 7 April 2000). This raises the question as to which types of people resort to *‘urfi* marriages. Are these merely youngsters who are looking for a minimal Islamic standard for premarital sex or do other social categories also make use of *‘urfi*?

In an article on perceptions of *‘urfi* marriage in the Egyptian press, Abaza argues that in the debate on *‘urfi* marriages, there was a moral condemnation of especially young people and women’s loose sexual norms. In the same way as the press associated “*khul*’ women” with westernized women wearing high-heeled shoes and tight clothes, lustful, mostly European-looking, ‘loose’ women were associated with stories about *‘urfi* marriages (2001). For the case of Turkey, Yilmaz argues that young people, usually university students, increasingly contract (religious) marriages in secret, without informing their parents (the so-called *gizli*

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240 Soad Ibrahim, a professor of jurisprudence at Al Azhar University also claims that unofficial marriages often do not aim at fulfilling the religious aim of marriage: forming “a settled family surrounded by care and love” (Middle East Times 7 April 2000).
(hidden) marriages to which I referred above). In this way they avoid the stigma of pre-marital intercourse, although the real intention might not be to conclude an official marriage in the future. Apart from the fact that religious marriages are not recognized by the state, often parents also do not recognize these secret marriages (2003, 39).

During my fieldwork, I found out that the practice of ‘urfi marriages in Egypt was not confined to the social category of youngsters (see also Hasso (in press)). For example, ‘urfi was and is still used by women who want to remarry but who do not want to lose the state pension of the deceased husband or their father (see also Abaza 2001). I was told several times that divorced women who want to remarry but who are afraid that they will lose custody of their children sometimes remarry through ‘urfi. In other cases well-to-do women who have become too old for marriage marry men who are too poor to marry and who are often many years younger. Finally, ‘urfi marriages are also conducted by men who desire to marry a second wife but who also want to maintain life with their first family.

Such was Nura’s fate. Her first potential new husband, Rami, wanted to take her as a second wife but only on condition that the marriage would be concluded by way of ‘urfi. He did not want to run the risk that his first wife would find out about his marriage with Nura. In the case of Nura’s second marriage candidate and the one whom she eventually got married to, it was not clear whether their marriage was an officially documented marriage, a “legitimate ‘urfi-marriage” or an “illegitimate (secret) ‘urfi marriage.” Nura had always avoided answering this question but there were some things that made me believe that she had conducted an illegitimate ‘urfi marriage.

First of all, Magdi had not paid Nura a dibla (wedding ring). This had embarrassed Nura to such an extent that she had lied to her colleagues by telling them that he had given her a refrigerator instead. In view of this, it is unlikely that Magdi had paid Nura a substantial dower (for the issue of the declining importance of the dower, see also chapter 4), and although he sometimes paid for the rent of Nura’s flat, he did not share in furniture expenses, neither was he prepared to pay for the household expenditure. In fact, the marriage of Magdi and Nura is a good example of women’s increasing contribution to the costs of marriage (see also chapter 4). Secondly, since Magdi wanted to keep the marriage a secret from his first wife and children, he insisted on marrying in secret. Nura, however, did not want to keep the marriage a secret. To the contrary, her marriage to Magdi served to stop the gossip at work. Besides, Nura needed the status of being a married woman in order to be able to rent a flat and live alone for a part of

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241 In 4.7 and 8.2 I already pointed out that twenty-five percent of the newly married men marry a second wife within three years of marriage and that these second marriages are often concluded through ‘urfi.
the week. For these two reasons, announcing the marriage was of great importance to Nura.

At the same time, however, Nura’s mother only learnt of the marriage after it had been concluded. More importantly, Nura did not want Magdi’s wife to find out about her. She was afraid that this would make Magdi’s wife want to divorce him and that was the last thing Nura wanted. Hence, Nura wanted to make her marriage public to her colleagues but at the same time it had to be kept a secret from her mother and Magdi’s wife.

Third, both Nura and Magdi did not marry with the purpose of forming a family. To the contrary, Magdi had only married Nura since his first wife was no longer a zawga (wife). According to Nura, sexual pleasure was his main reason for wanting to conduct a second marriage. Nura too took great care to prevent pregnancy which she had tried to make clear by showing me the contraception pills she kept in her wallet. Moreover, Magdi who already had two jobs in order to make ends meet before he married Nura, did not provide for Nura, nor did Nura marry him for the sole purpose of being maintained by a husband again. Although Nura needed Magdi to help her in paying for the rent of the flat, she did not want to become financially dependent on him and for that reason she did not consider giving up her job at the post office. All this deviates from the principles of official marriage. In fact, to a large extent Nura’s marital situation resembled that of the so-called controversial misyar marriage.

8.7 Is the shadow, even the ambulant shadow, of a man better than the shadow of a wall?

Misyar marriages are very controversial. In a misyar marriage husband and wife agree contractually not to live together and agree to the husband not bearing any financial responsibility to his wife. The couple also agrees that he visits her every now and then but that the marriage remains on a visitor’s basis (cf. Arabi 2001b; Welchman 2007, 102-5). Generally, the woman also accepts a condition that the marriage is not made public (Welchman 2007, 103). Local opinion often claims that this type of marriage was brought to Egypt by Egyptian men working as migrant workers in Saudi Arabia. Resembling the so-called zawag al-frind to a great extent (see also chapter 4), it is interesting that the Mecca-based Islamic Jurisprudence Assembly legitimized on 12 April 2006 both the misyar marriage and the zawag al-frind marriage (Welchman 2007, 103). The legitimization of the misyar marriage led an inhabitant of Saudi Arabia to post on Sabbah’s Blog a response by the title: “Prostitution is now official and religiously condoned in Arab land.” He states the

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242 According to Haeri, temporary marriages in Shi’a Iran (mut’a marriages) are mainly conducted for reasons of sexual pleasure as well (1989).

243 I have taken this expression from Arabi (2001b, 159).
following: “Okay, don’t you think that prostitution is better than this marriage? At least she sets the price and gets paid for giving what the man was looking for, which is sex. But in Misyar, the woman get laid…without getting paid. So the formula is “Laid but not Paid.” And in case in this marriage she is paid a little, then that is nothing but prostitution….Anyway, I once called for prostitution to be regularized in the Arab/Islamic world. I don’t remember anyone agreed with me…Now, I’m happy to see that my dream is coming true. Yes, it is not called prostitution in this part of the world, we call it Misyar…”

(http://sabbah.biz/mt/archives/2006/04/27/, 6 February 2007). This person wondered what couples benefit from a misyar marriage. According to him the husband enjoys sex without any liability towards the unpaid woman. As for the woman “The woman and her family seems to enjoy nothing but the woman’s sexual instinct seems to be fulfilled…” (ibid). In addition to this, opponents to misyar also condemn the secrecy of the marriage as misyar marriages are typically conducted by married men244 and they argue that the marriage should be made public (cf. al-aHrār 24 August 1998).245

On the other hand, proponents of misyar argue that misyar is practiced by “some professional women [in Saudi Arabia] especially those in good financial standing…who would like to maintain their hard gained independence and empowerment, at the price of giving up some of the privileges attached to conventional marriage” (Arabi 2001b, 161). Yet, the Saudi Arabian ambulant women Arabi is talking about do not live alone but remain living with their parents and other family members and for that reason Arabi argues that it is questionable whether women’s freedom and independence is secured through the conclusion of a misyar marriage (ibid, 159-60). In fact, in Egypt, women often view marriage as a way to escape parental supervision and to attain freedom and independence. Therefore, I would like to pause at this point and look in more detail as to how Egyptian husbands and wives in misyar-marriages are benefiting. Do husbands only want to indulge in cheap sexual pleasure and do women only wish to marry through misyar in order to avoid spinsterhood and to attain the respectable status of a married woman, as many opponents to misyar claim, or are other factors such as looking for an innate need for intimacy at play? In this light, it is interesting to have a closer look at polygamous marriages in general as misyar marriages are often conducted by already married men.

244 In the famous interview on al-jazīra (al-Jazeera) in which Yusuf al-Qaradawi stated that he supported the misyar marriage (although he would not encourage people to practice it), he also mentioned that misyar is typically a marriage to a second or third wife (al-jazira, 3 May 1998). See also Arabi (2001b, 154).

245 For more information on misyar marriages and how they are criticized, see Welchman (2007, 104).
With regard to polygamous marriages, Haugaard Bach observes how in an Upper Egyptian village near Aswan “The second wife is usually the choice of the husband, a love marriage, whereas the first spouse is chosen by the parents” (2003, 60). In a more generalized way, these findings are supported by a newspaper article on polygamy in Egypt in which the motives of husbands to marry a second wife can be succinctly summarized by the statement of one of them: “I married a second wife in order to have the opportunity to enjoy the love, emotions and feelings I never had with my first wife” (al-Ahram Weekly 26 February-3 March 2004). In the case of Magdi, it is more difficult to reason why he wanted to marry a second wife as I never met him and do not know what finding a real zawga (wife) implied to him. According to Nura, Magdi’s marriage to Nura was motivated by a wish to find a real zawga again without giving up life with his first wife and children. Magdi would visit Nura a few times a week in her flat and leave again. In return Magdi had promised her to pay (part of) the rent of the flat a thing which he hardly ever did. What were the benefits for Nura? Magdi was using her flat, her furniture and she even complained that she herself had to pay his cigarettes and the food she cooked him. This led her to exclaim that prostitution was better than this marriage since a prostitute would be paid for giving Magdi what he wanted while she was not. While this may be true, Nura had also deliberately opted for such a marriage. We have seen how she gave in to the pressure to marry again but that she refused to enter a marriage which would make her financially dependent on a husband again by giving up her job and by becoming housewife and mother of his children. For this reason she rather married an already married husband with children who simply would not be able to be with her all the time and who also would not be interested in raising a new family. And indeed, Nura and Magdi took great care to prevent pregnancy and Nura was happy to be married while at the same time relieved that she and her husband were seeing each other on a visitor’s basis. In other words, Nura simply was not prepared to give up her freedom by entering a situation in which her husband would provide for her and in which she had to remain obedient to him in return. Hence, Nura’s case seems to resemble those of her Saudi Arabian counterparts to a great extent. Yet, there was one big difference: where women in Saudi Arabia stay at their parents’ house, Nura saw marriage as an opportunity to leave her mother’s house and start living on her own by renting a flat far away from her mother’s home. To her this type of (misyar) marriage really constituted an opportunity to safeguard her independence.

In this light I found some interesting articles on the Internet in which women themselves all view polygamy and misyar marriages from a positive perspective. One article deals with part time marriages (passers-by marriages) being the rave in Egypt. Assuming that part time and passer-by marriage
translates as *misyar* marriages, the article tells us about a 46 year old woman who formed a passers-by marriage to become the second wife of a married man. The story of this woman resembles that of Nura to a great extent. First of all, she became the second wife of a married man for reasons that were also related to the fact that it is not easy to be a single woman in Egypt: “The concierge, the grocer and the neighbours show more respect towards me now than when I was single.” This woman sees her husband three or four times a week: “It suits me fine. I have to travel a lot because of my work, and not having a husband at home means I’m not tied down and can move when the job calls.” In the article it is argued that this kind of convenience is appealing to more and more Egyptians, of both sexes (The Straits Times 12 October 1998).

In another Internet article by the title “Egyptian wife promotes polygamy” a forty-two year old female journalist claims that her work keeps her so busy that she feels that her husband needs a second wife. Although her husband refused, she has started a campaign in favour of polygamy and even helped to form an association, Al-Tayseer, which promotes the idea of polygamy (Deseret News 4 September 2005). These Egyptian women have the support of religious authorities such as the late Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Ibn Baaz, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Nasr Farid Wasil, and Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi in the sense that Yusuf al-Qaradawi, for example, justified *misyar* marriages by arguing that women desire such marriages. “If a woman is rich and a professional, she does not need financial support. It is a way for rich women to separate sexuality from obligations” (al-jazīra 3 May 1998; Abaza 2001, 20). He also argued on al-jazīra (al-Jazeera) that a *misyar* marriage is typically a marriage to a second or a third wife. In fact, so he claimed, “I do not know of a first woman who married by way of misyar” (al-jazīra 3 May 1998). To a certain extent Nawal al-Saadawi, a controversial Egyptian feminist, agrees when she says that women married through *’urfi* are financially independent and free woman. According to her, women in these *’urfi* marriages “are free from the subservient obligations of the ordinary marriage provided by the anti-women law” (Middle East Times 18 February 2000).

Although it is difficult to establish the precise meaning of al-Saadawi’s words, I assume that when speaking of “the subservient obligations of ordinary marriage” she is referring to the fact that Egyptian women must obey their husbands in return for the financial support these husbands provide. If that is the case, then both al-Qaradawi and al-Saadawi are of the opinion that financially independent women are no longer obliged to pledge obedience to their husbands. In other words, when *’urfi* marriages are not based on the maintenance-obedience relation all sorts of questions concerning men and women’s proper gender roles are raised.
For the case of Saudi Arabia, Arabi argues that since one of the features of the *misyar* marriage is the agreement between husband and wife that the former is under no obligation to provide for his wife and children, this “seems to tinker with one of the crucial pillars that underlie the structure of authority in the Muslim family...: the role of the husband both as family leader and provider of maintenance (2001b, 156). Strangely enough, “The fatwa [of the late Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Ibn Baaz] is silent on the basic traditional structure of maintenance or *nafaqa*, of which the provision of marital domicile and sustenance by the husband was the corner stone” (although the issue of non-provision of marital domicile by the husband was explicitly addressed by the questioner) (Arabi 2001b, 165). According to Arabi the introduction of a new structure of marriage did not change the authority of the husband on a symbolic level although in practice ambulant marriages have changed the dictum that in return for their husbands’ maintenance wives must pledge obedience to them as the loyalty of the wife to her natal family has been strengthened (2001b, 167).

What I found interesting with regard to the case of Egypt is that the authority of the husband is not replaced by that of the wife’s family, at least not in the case of Nura. To the contrary, her case shows that *misyar* (resembling) marriages in Egypt enable the wife to leave the parental home and to start living on her own. Nura, however, was still largely dependent on Magdi to pay for the rent of the flat. In other cases where the wife has a good job; is not dependent on the husband for housing; and does not need to share a household with her husband, let alone with her family-in-law, this undoubtedly leads to the establishment of different marital relationships. For how can husbands in such cases demand that their wives remain obedient to them while their wives have their own domiciles and sources of income? Additionally, in such cases women are more likely to be able to keep their children.

From earlier chapters it has become clear that the maintenance-obedience relation is often merely a theoretical construction which has lost at least some of its practical relevance in Egypt of the new millennium. Nevertheless, it has also become clear that many in Egyptian society have found it difficult to accept this reality - something which became evident after the introduction and implementation of the *khul’* law led many to accuse women of neglecting their marital duties while in actuality these accusations merely reflected a negation of a living reality whereby men increasingly fail to fulfil their marital duties. For example, where women were accused of appropriating a husband’s investments in the marriage by divorcing through *khul’*, in actuality women increasingly contributed financially to marriage preparations, a contribution which they were

246 The same seems to apply to the newspaper articles that presented the stories of women who “happily” started to live alone.
often not allowed to keep in case of a divorce through *khul'* (see chapter 4). Where it was often said that women only wanted to divorce through *khul'* because their eye was on another man, in reality many women divorced through *khul'* because marital life was somehow made impossible or because the husband married a second wife. In the same vein, young people and women’s loose sexual morals were seen as the reason behind what is believed to be the rapidly increasing number of *’urfi* marriages and while the Egyptian public put on a par *’urfi* marriages such as misyar with prostitution, the case of Nura shows that where Magdi seemingly looked for sexual pleasure, Nura saw polygamy (second marriages are typically conducted by way of *’urfi*) as a way to obtain the respectable status of a married woman again while at the same time maintaining her financial independence and freedom. In these cases too, men hardly pay out a dower, let alone provide for housing.

One last remark, in section 5.5 we have seen how the arbitrator Hisham was of the opinion that most women in prison were prostitutes who loved to destroy a happy marriage.\(^{247}\) In Nura’s case, however, we have seen how she entered a marriage liaison which was put on a par with prostitution but that she only did so in order to be able to marry a man with a wife and children and that she was very careful to make sure that his first wife would not find out and possibly break up the marriage since a broken marriage was the last thing she wanted. It would curtail her freedom, both financially and emotionally. For this reason it was important for her to conclude a secret marriage.

8.8 Conclusion

By remarrying and by actively pursuing a new husband even at the detriment of her children, Nura fitted the picture which opponents to the law had spread of women who wanted to divorce through *khul’*. While a lot of attention was paid in the public debate to these women’s bad habits and the way they were dressed, hardly any attention was paid to the men who were the so-called victims of these women. The only thing that became clear from opponents’ criticism was that these men were handsome and rich. Nura, however, married an already married man with children, who could barely scratch a living and whom she did not find handsome at all. Instead of Nura pursuing a rich and handsome man, it was her husband who, according to Nura, was secretly looking for a real *zawga* (wife). Although it would go too far to conclude that all men who marry a second wife do so for reasons of sexual pleasure, it remains significant that statistics claim that 25

\[^{247}\] In this regard it is interesting that sometimes both married and unmarried Egyptian men who are in need of money prostitute themselves to Russian women who come to the Red Sea for a two or three weeks’ holiday. Since Egyptian law forbids Egyptians to share a hotel room with someone they are not married to, these men and their Russian “brides” conduct *’urfi* marriages. See also Abdalla (2007).
percent of the married men marry a second wife within three years of marriage. Hence, it seems that men fit the profile of *khul'* women better than *khul'* women themselves. Because they are looking for sexual intimacy, but also since at least some of them want to marry a rich woman, that is to say, a woman whom they do not need to provide for. So, the question arises why Nura decided to marry again while she had always claimed that she wanted to remain independent, if only to be able to provide for her children. Why would she agree to marry a man about whom she knew beforehand that he would not or hardly provide for her?

There were several reasons, the main reason being the pressure from her social environment. However, since divorce carries a stigma, it is not easy for divorced women to remarry. That is to say, to marry a man who has never been married before since “virgin” men seldom marry a woman who is no longer a virgin. In such cases the alternative is either to marry a widower, a divorced husband or an already married man. The general perception in society is that divorced women often become a second wife. This perception is in accordance with my fieldwork experiences that show that divorced women often do not want to take care of children or problems from a former marriage nor do they always want to give up their job in order to become a housewife and live under a husband’s obedience again. As a result, lower class women prefer to be the second wife rather than the new wife of a widower or divorced man, while upper class women often decide not to remarry at all.

The story of Nura, and other women’s stories, as well as some statistics, seem to indicate that second marriages are typically conducted unofficially and secretly through *'urfi*. With regard to *'urfi* marriages it is important to distinguish between informal marriages which are concluded in secrecy and those that are not. In Egypt, *'urfi* marriages have typically come to be associated with young people who marry secretly, without the permission and knowledge of their parents and other family members, and who use *'urfi* in order to provide a minimal Islamic standard for sexual intercourse outside wedlock. One form of *'urfi* marriage in which secrecy plays an important role is the so-called *misyar* marriage. Often equated with prostitution *misyar* marriages are controversial as husband and wife agree that the husband will not provide, a religious obligation which underlies the very structure of Islamic marriage. This, however, did not prevent the late Mufti of Saudi Arabia, the Mufti of Egypt and Yusuf al-Qaradawi to religiously condone *misyar* marriages, Yusuf al-Qaradawi even claiming that through *misyar* women are able to keep their freedom and financial independence.

Keeping her freedom and financial independence were the main reasons to marry by way of polygamy. Although she seemed reluctant to admit whether her marriage was an official marriage, a “legitimate *'urfi* marriage” or an “illegitimate *'urfi* marriage” through *misyar*, in the end it does not really matter whether Nura
married officially or unofficially, overtly or secretly. The mere fact that she married a husband without the intention to establish a household and to raise a family and without wanting to become financially dependent on him, is an indication that the basis upon which traditional Egyptian marriage relied, has changed. When husbands no longer provide for their wives, the latter no longer have an obligation to remain obedient to their husbands in return. In theory, at least. In practice, however, the issue of non-sustenance by the husband was not paid much attention to in the public debate on \textit{khul’}, notwithstanding the fact that in May 2000 a legal clause was introduced which proclaimed that men who fail to provide for their wives are liable to a 30-days-term of imprisonment (see 2.5). The late Multi of Saudi Arabia who condoned \textit{misyar} marriages, also remained silent on this issue. Instead of paying attention to husbands’ unwillingness or incapability to provide maintenance and housing, critics fixed their attention to the issue of women’s (dis)obedience. In this chapter it became clear that this pre-occupation with women’s (dis)obedience resulted in women who divorced through \textit{khul’} being exposed to conflicting messages. One the one hand, they were accused of having divorced to marry another man, while on the other hand these women felt under considerable societal pressure to remarry.

Women in Egypt deal differently with bad marriages. Some women claim that “the shadow of a man is better than the shadow of a wall.” Others say that “being alone is better than bad company,” and other women claim that “the shadow of a man is better than the shadow of a wall, but not the shadow of any man.” Through secret \textit{‘urfi} marriages, be it through \textit{misyar} or not, this latter group of women tries to get the best of both worlds: having the respectable status of a married woman while at the same time experiencing some freedom and financial independence. Hence, this group of women not only accepts to marry secretly because the husband wants to keep the second marriage a secret from his first wife and family. They too do not want to risk that the first wife finds out and asks for a divorce since that would jeopardize their freedom and independence. In some situations, making the marriage public is desired while in others it is not. Hence, we could better speak of “partially secret marriages.”