

# IMMIGRANT WOMEN IN GREECE. A BIOGRAPHICAL STUDY OF DOMESTIC WORKERS / CATHERINE VASSILIKOU

## Subject and methodology

In recent years – since the early 1990s – a significant number of immigrant women have entered Greece coming from the Balkans and the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe. Their presence cannot pass unnoticed; they are mostly domestic workers engaged in taking care of the elderly and children. These immigrant women constitute an important part of the economic and family life of many Greek men and women. Unlike domestic workers in the upper class of Greek society in past times, these newcomers are for the most part employed by the middle class. Although they are present everywhere, mainly in urban areas, their lives and destiny are not well known and social research has only begun to address them.<sup>1</sup> This is due in particular to the complexity of their position and probably also to how recently the phenomenon has begun to occur. Their status is characterized by a lack of social recognition, and it reflects a multi-faceted problem concerning immigration, gender and human rights. These immigrant women find themselves in a vulnerable position: they live alone, away from their families, working for strangers in strangers' houses, often under very hard conditions; they are illegal or semi-legal residents and are fulfilling the urgent and heavy responsibility of supporting the families they have left behind.

As for the number of the migrants, in the last census (2001), the Greek population was estimated at 10 964 000 inhabitants. Foreigners make up 762 191 people in the population (690 000 of them were not citizens of the then European Union). The male immigrant population from the Balkans and Eastern European countries are engaged mainly in the construction industry, agriculture, manufacturing and less often in tourism, while migrant women are employed in activities that are traditionally considered as feminine, like domestic services, tourism and the sex industry.<sup>2</sup> In Greece, like in other countries of Southern Europe, there is a high percentage of women's immigration, with a predominance of women from Albania, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Georgia, Romania, Russia and the Philippines. Immigrant women in Greece in the 1980's constituted a quarter of the foreign population, while today they represent approximately 45%. Albanian immigrants represent 65% of the foreign population and 43% of all foreign women. Bulgarians follow at 6.8% of the foreign population and 15% of all foreign women, and Romanians at 4.6% of the foreign population and 5.5% of all foreign women. Immigrant women from Ukraine, Georgia and Poland represent, respectively, 8%, 5% and 4% of the foreign female population in Greece (see Kavounidi 2002, Tzortzopoulou 2002).

Yet, according to a study by the Greek Institute of Migration Policy, the real number of foreigners who live and

work in Greece is not known owing to the existence of illegal and uncontrolled immigration and the absence of data or the non-comparison of data issued from different programs of registration of migrants. However, it is estimated that Greece actually has over 1 000 000 foreign residents (Baldwin-Edwards 2005).

My study concerns the immigrant women who have come to Greece since the early 1990's. Between 2003 and 2005 I interviewed ten immigrant women from countries such as Albania, Romania, Moldavia, Georgia, Bulgaria and Poland residing and working in Athens. The interviews and the analysis were based on the biographical-interpretative method proposed by Gabriele Rosenthal (see Rosenthal 2004, Idem 1993).

The interviewed women have chosen pseudonyms like: Mira, Victoria, Elli, etc. The language of the interviews was Greek (fairly well spoken by the majority of them). The main feature of this kind of approach is its open character. I opened the interviews with an open question: "I would like you to tell me about your childhood, your family, the relation with your parents, brothers and sisters, your adolescence, your school years, about your decision to continue or not your studies, your marriage and your children, your decision to leave your country and come to Greece, and also about your future expectations." During the interviews I didn't interrupt the narration nor did I ask questions, and I spoke only after the interviewees had completed their stories. The outcome of this research is a collection of the stories of these women's lives. First I analyzed one of these stories in a detailed manner according to the standards of the aforementioned method. The chosen story was studied in the following phases: a presentation of the objective biographical data, an analysis of those data through the formulation of a series of hypotheses on the woman's life story. These hypotheses were later confirmed and elaborated or not confirmed and abandoned. Finally, I proceeded, after the reconstruction of the chosen woman's life story, to a comparison of the ten stories.

The life stories present the following characteristics of the immigrant women in Greece: (a) the deterioration of the standard of living in their countries of origin; (b) the awareness of the vulnerability and precariousness of their actual living conditions; (c) the central role of the family as an identification pole; (d) an ambiguous position in relation to other identifications with the native country or to the actual social group; (e) the fact that all these adjustments take place under force: the forced separation from the family, the forced new working conditions, etc.

This article presents some of the issues that were dealt with in my research.

### **Structures connected with the transfer and reception of immigrant women**

Neither the departure of the women from their home countries and their arrival in Greece nor the work offered to the immigrant women seem to depend on fortune. Without any mechanism to expose in detail the existence of large-scale illegal networks of trafficking women destined to become domestic workers (though the existence of such networks is more than likely), as in the case of research on the sex trade, it is nonetheless obvious from my interviews that structures connected with the transfer and reception of migrant women very much exist. The arrival and the work of these women constitute an important part of the informal sector not only of the Greek economy but also of the economy of the countries of the immigrant women and intermediary countries situated between their homeland and Greece.

The arrival of immigrant men and women took place in two waves: first, a great number came to Greece only with a tourist visa; second, after the Greek authorities applied stricter control mechanisms, crossing the borders became a very difficult and hazardous journey, but far too many immigrants were nonetheless willing to undertake this dangerous trip. On the basis of my research evidence, certain intermediary figures played a key role in the whole process, and whoever wanted to enter Greece illegally had to pay a significant sum of money in American dollars or German marks. Upon their arrival in Greece, the women approached certain employment agencies targeting immigrant workers, regardless of their residence status (legal or not).

The Greek state also, in turn, developed a series of immigrant networks. It became a complicated process to obtain work and a residence permit (and more difficult for those who don't speak Greek well). The administrative procedure is extremely time-consuming, and there is a standard need for a lawyer to be involved. Most of the required documents for residential and work permits cannot be issued unless the women and men involved are rather highly bribed.

### **Educational level and actual employment of immigrant women**

It is important to mention some statistical data concerning the educational level of immigrant women, which were collected from applications submitted for registration (the first step for obtaining the residence permit according to Greek law). Among the immigrant population, 2% are illiterate, 38% have primary education, 51% secondary, and 9% have a higher education. In a comparison of male and female immigrants, we can observe that 16% of women compared to 7% of men have studied at the graduate level, 57% and 49% of women and men, respectively, have secondary education, and, finally, 25% and 43% have primary education (Kavounidi 2002).

A study of the educational level of twenty more representative nationalities of immigrant women in Greece shows that women from former socialist countries tend to have

a higher level of education compared to their male counterparts. The most important difference between male and female immigrants relates to immigrants from the former USSR. Among women from Georgia, 39% have higher education (21% of men do). They are followed by women from Ukraine, Russia, Moldavia and Armenia. Like in the first stage of applying for a residence permit, persons that were in the final phase of registration had similar characteristics: women tended to have a higher educational level compared to men. Georgia comes first with a percentage of 44.1% (25.5% for men), followed by Ukraine, Russia, etc. (Kavounidi 2002: 79–80). According to the same report, the majority of foreign workers that apply for a residence permit do not have any opportunity to use their qualifications in the occupations they are employed in. Therefore, immigrants in Greece are employed in fields in which qualifications are not required (Kavounidi 2002: 980). According to another estimate, 45% of immigrants from former socialist countries who live in the capital of Greece have a secondary education and 77% have vocational training (Tzortzopoulou 2002: 49).

Among the women that I interviewed, not a single one of them had the same or a similar job as the job they had held in their native country. In their home countries, after the collapse of the regimes, all these women either lost their job or had to accept serious salary cuts. As a result, many were forced to hold more than one job, but none were optimistic about a happy outcome for the economic crisis that was affecting their countries and their families. Thus, a common factor in their decision to leave home and move to Greece was the deterioration of the economic situation after 1989. Progressively, their professional background could not adjust to the changes in the new economic reality of their country.

Veni relates how her work situation deteriorated: "(...) the last job I had, I was insurance agent – I studied economics at university – during communism that was a very good job. I made a lot of money at my job. But, after, who to insure and for what? We didn't have money to buy bread, who would want life insurance? For that reason, people stopped buying insurance because they saw that the money had no value. So, I came here, to Greece. It was difficult. I made my decision and said to myself, I will go."

Mira relates her experience: "Since childhood I had wanted to be a nursery nurse. This was my dream, which, fortunately, came true (...) I was happy, I liked my job very much (...) Everything was great; a peaceful and pleasant life. After, when the system in Bulgaria changed, in 1989, things began to worsen. There was no work. There weren't any jobs. Me, for example, I had three jobs. In the morning, I was at the nursery school, in the evening in my brother's store, and at night I washed dishes in a restaurant. But there still wasn't enough money."

Upon arriving in Greece, and even before, the Greek market had mainly one job to offer these women mainly (other than work in the sex industry): that of a domestic work-

er. Most of the women, regardless of their professional or educational background, in this way converged in a limited range of professional outlets, such as domestic services, assistance to the elderly, the sick or the handicapped, childcare, that is, occupations in the most private sphere of Greek society and "labor market", the family home. The migration of these women from their country of origin to Greece, while it offered them a significant improvement in income, resulted in lowering their professional and social status.

Immigrant women expressed to me a general feeling of professional insecurity. Illegal immigrant women especially find themselves in a particularly vulnerable position: without chances for any professional development, with very limited rights to negotiate salary or working hours, and with no legal help for professional problems.

Anna talks about her first job in Greece: "The first day, when I opened my eyes and saw where we were, I wanted to cry and leave. It was a house, not a real house... a place for animals. The boss, a policeman, said 'if you want to leave, I will take you directly to the police and they will send you back, to your country'. He knew that we had a tourist visa, only for fifteen days."

Mira lives in conditions of semi-reclusion, more subtle and hidden, but nonetheless harrowing and humiliating. She says: "What is the problem with us? With women from Bulgaria? We weren't born servants. You come here from Bulgaria and what do you find? You come into a house and you become a servant. You must do everything, everything. And, of course, you can never be alone. Even on Sundays I was with them. I always felt as if I was their 'girl'. I never felt myself."

Thus, the work and social status of immigrants contribute to the formation of labor areas in Greece which are outside control. The transfer of illegal migrants to Greece, regardless of the training they have in their country of origin, is aimed at covering mainly the economic and social needs of the local society (Bacas 2002, Lazaridis, Poyago-Theotoky 1999). In spite of the disparity between their educational background and their actual occupation, the main reason for leaving their homes and families to work in a foreign country appears to be their deep desire to contribute to the well-being of their families and to provide their children with the possibility of access to a higher education.

### **Two kinds of vulnerability for immigrant women: vulnerability of absolute risk and vulnerability of precariousness**

My research led me to distinguish two kinds of vulnerability among immigrant women. The distinction between two very concrete experiences, vulnerability of absolute risk and vulnerability of precariousness, is difficult to make when the first involves excessive dimensions, when absolute vulnerability pushes aside the vulnerability of the precariousness. The "non-distinction" between the two vulnerabilities leads to a confusion that concerns everyday reality, or

in other words the everyday misery, of immigrant woman. More precisely, in conditions of extreme vulnerability, and when the life of a person is in danger within a space of hours or even minutes, the vulnerability of the precariousness or "social vulnerability" is not of importance. The situations of absolute risk, mainly when an immigrant illegally crosses borders, because of their dramatic nature, have come to characterize the vulnerability of immigrant men and women, at least with regard to public opinion and the mass media.

Nevertheless, there exists another kind of vulnerability caused by the precarious conditions of the lives of migrants. This vulnerability is present in ordinary, everyday immigration. The experiences recorded in my interviews clearly reveal this second vulnerability, which marks the day-to-day life of the women: isolation, depression, solitude, fatigue or weariness, separation from their loved ones, work without social esteem – these are some of the characteristics of this vulnerability. Migrant women take on all the risks of hazardous emigration in order to end up as domestic workers, often in conditions of semi-reclusion. By perceiving the vulnerability and precariousness of immigrant women in this light, we would be able to better comprehend the social exclusion they experience.

### **The rejection of the identity of immigrant women: the paradox**

One of the topics that arose relates to the way in which these women seemed to accept and reject simultaneously their identity as immigrants (Kats 1982). Their very first concern is their family, and most of the women I interviewed avoided being identified with other immigrant women. I detected an ambiguous attitude that was characterized by a tendency among the women to distance themselves from the group to which they "legitimately" belong and a difficulty in accepting their new identity as domestic workers.

Elli, an Albanian woman, talking about everyday racism, says: "I often see on the bus Greek women who say 'Do you have an Albanian in your house? Aren't you scared?' So, I hear this, but I don't say a word." However, the same woman talks with almost the same contempt for immigrant women from other countries than Albania: "We don't want to know Russians or Bulgarians. We, we work. They have a different character than us. We came here with our family and to work for a better life. I don't like them, everyone with their character. I don't like the life they live, the majority come alone, without family and they don't work to buy a house, as we do in Albania (...) Ukrainians, let it be ... They want to seduce Greek men and profit off their retirement pension. Many such pensions end up in Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria ... We, the Albanian women, we don't do those things, we work all the time, like animals."

The lower image of the immigrant domestic worker – "servant" in contrast to the more comfortable – both psychologically and socially – image of the head of a family helps us to better comprehend their situation. The absence



of esteem or simply the contempt that stigmatizes certain people increases the fear of these women of being part of a high-risk group like the "immigrant women-domestic workers group". For that reason, the primary role played by the family in these women's psyche carries far more weight than the perception of their migrant identity. However, I must say that ultimately they are not choosing between two roles, that of female worker or that of householder, but between two ambiguities: workers without recognition, householders without family.

The vulnerability and precariousness of the existence of immigrant women can be condensed into a kind of paradox:

1. Immigrant women, by coming to Greece, respond to a desire to secure a proper living for their family and to the demand of the Greek labor market, appealing to them as employees-specialists in the private sphere (domestic help, care services); the fact is that the educational level of a great number of them is much higher than what is demanded for their actual occupation.

2. As professionals in the private sphere, and in order to be fully integrated in the Greek labor market, immigrant women have to renounce to their own private domain (their home and family).

3. The effects of this paradox have, as I saw in my field study, a serious impact on these women's sense of personal and social identity.

#### **Social security as a mechanism of double insecurity: Greek and immigrant women**

The nature of the female domestic worker is also determined by her position in relation to the law. The official status of a foreign domestic employee, legal or not, plays an important role in her social disposition, her self-image, the feeling of being vulnerable, and her position in relation to the authorities and her employers, her sociability, the networks that she can join, etc. Her position in relation to the law is part of a very uncomfortable identity. The problem of illegal immigration is only one aspect of this legal relationship; social welfare is another one. In many European countries, domestic workers, local or foreign, are not registered in the social security system (see Destremau, Lautier 2002: 255).

In Greece, registration in the social security system is even more complicated for an immigrant woman or man because it constitutes the necessary precondition for residence and work permits, which allow them to legalize their status in the country. In practical terms this means that according to law the employers are required to pay the major part of the social security contributions for their domestic workers. Most of the time, the employing families fulfill this obligation with difficulty or they simply renounce this obligation.

I observed that for these women the importance of registration in the social security system is an indirect pole of identification, and all of them want to have social protection as working persons, even if that means accepting the

title of domestic worker, which officially confirms the socially lower character of their job.

Concerning social welfare Tania remarks: "We are going to stay here till the kids finish school. We will stay here as long as we have our papers and can work. If things turn bad and become very difficult, we won't be able to live here, then maybe we will leave. But as long as we have our papers, it's okay."

Victoria speaks on behalf of women who find themselves in a similar situation; she says: "(...) the job we are doing here is very, very hard, and we don't have papers. The papers they give us are only for six months. Is it possible to live in a country and have papers only for six months? For those of us who work as domestic workers in different houses, they don't give us money for social security. We can do nothing with the money we earn. It is very difficult to pay the rent, for water, electricity, food, and also for social security. I don't know. Greek employers don't pay our social security."

The general issue of registration in the social security system has at least two aspects to it: on the one hand, the immigrant women face "non-insurable" situations, and on the other, the conditions under which the demand for their work is created are developed in the "dim-lit" areas of the social welfare state. The absence, more or less, of a strong welfare state and the rudimentary character of social services, due in large part to Greece's economic difficulties and social particularities, leaves Greek social security in the difficult position of not being able to take care of elderly people (the proportion of the population over 65 years of age equals 17.3% of the total population<sup>3</sup>) or children. The result of this failure is an increasing demand for help at home. Many Greek women demand the assistance of foreign female domestic workers to take on responsibilities that are traditionally related to the private and more precisely to the feminine sphere. The difference between the public and the private sphere regarding the integration of men and women in the labor market probably constitutes an important factor of inequality for immigrant women.

The status of women in Greek society and the composition of Greek families have changed during the past thirty years (see Papadopoulos 1998). After 1970 the socio-economic role of Greek women began to evolve. Although these transformations did not weaken the sense of duty of the women toward their family members (parents, children, sick relatives, etc.), the new conditions diversified the patterns of practical, everyday support. Domestic obligations and tasks continue to lie on the shoulders of Greek women, even though nowadays things can be arranged in a different way. Greek women bear a double duty: to work outside the family, and still to take care of the main responsibilities of housekeeping. Many of them, in their effort to cope with this double demand on them, require external help; they have now the ability to pay for domestic and care services and instead of "sacrificing themselves" they sacrifice their money.

In this way, the vulnerability and precariousness of immigrant women seem to be tightly related to the absence of social policy for Greek women and the Greek family. Greek women that work are often constrained to finance their entry into the labor market by paying the major part of the social security contributions of their immigrant assistants. Consequently, Greek families that relegate their children and elderly to the care of domestic workers suffer a double expense: on the one hand, they pay their own contributions as employees, and on the other hand, by seeking help from other persons, mainly immigrant women, they also have to insure them. This situation is indicative of the weaknesses and deficiencies in the structures of the welfare state and constitutes an important characteristic of the "risk society" in Greece.<sup>4</sup>

We could say that Greek women improve their situation with the help or "to the detriment" of the immigrant women they employ. At the same time, this pattern of work reproduces traditional family arrangements, since women still remain responsible for the domestic area, even if many of them now work outside the household. Immigrant women, for their part, also assume a double duty: first, to support the families they left behind in their home countries, and second, to ensure the proper functioning of the private sphere of Greek families. Consequently, they seem to bear responsibility for the "survival" of the family both in their country of origin and in the country to which they have moved. On the other hand, "affectionate" relations with their employers<sup>5</sup> often help offset the absence of social welfare, while maintaining the dependence and lack of public recognition of their status.

## Conclusion

As social actors with responsibility for the family they leave behind, women migrate to unknown and faraway places in response to what they feel is their most urgent need: to secure and improve the family standard of living. They often sacrifice their current lives for a better future situation and the "provisional" stay they were planning soon takes on the dimensions of a more permanent state, yet always under the weight of precariousness. A double vulnerability characterizes the precarious conditions of immigrant women's lives as domestic workers. This situation is also a consequence of the vulnerability of conditions in the Greek family and social sphere. In the life stories of my interviewees, the notion of social welfare occupies a prominent position. This "practical" issue introduces us to one of the major difficulties in the study of immigrant women. It concerns the dialectic of the inside and the outside. The external approach to these women's existences demands a human rights perspective, while the internal one reflects a need for sensitivity to the semi-obscure reality of domestic services.

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**2** According to G. Lazos, there are very powerful networks of prostitution and many cities and large villages in the former socialist Eastern countries live off this trade. The price for each woman ranges from 500 to 1000 dollars, and their estimated number in Greece is 17 000. Some of them start out working as domestic workers but the majority is driven directly into prostitution; see Kyriakatiki Kathimerini, 29 June 2003, p. 32.

**3** See Eurostat: <http://europa.eu.int/comm/eurostat>.

**4** On risk society, see, for example, Culpitt, I. 1999. *Social Policy and Risk*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications; Dourlens, C., Galland, J. P., Theys, J., Vidal-Naquet, P. A. 1991. *Conquête de la sécurité, gestion des risques*. Paris: L'Harmattan, Logiques sociales; Ewald, F. 2000. „Le risque dans la société contemporaine.“ *Agir, La crise du politique*, No. 3: 41–54; Duclos, D. 1996. „Puissance et faiblesse du concept de risque.“ *L'année sociologique*, 46/2: 309–337.

**5** On the social characteristics of an indigenous population and the expression of sympathy for immigrants, see Candace, C. 1987. „Sympathy Biography and Sympathy Margin.“ *American Journal of Sociology*, 93/2: 290–321. According to the author, the acquisition of sympathy demands a strategy from the person who is taking advantage of it.

## Poznámky

**1** See, for example, Anderson, B., Phizacklea, A. 1997. *Migrant Domestic Workers: a European Perspective*, research paper: University of Leicester and Equal Opportunities Unit, DGV; Fakiolas, R., Maratou-Alipranti, L. 2000. „Foreign Female Immigrants in Greece.“ *Papers 60*: 101–117; Karakatsanis, N. M., Swarts, J. 2003. „Migrant Women, Domestic Work and the Sex Trade in Greece – A Snapshot of Migrant Policy in the Making.“ Pp. 239–270 in Tastsoglou, E., Maratou-Alipranti, L. (eds.). *Gender and International Migration: Focus on Greece, The Greek Review of Social Research*, A/110. Athens: EKKE; Kassimati, K. 2003. „Immigration féminine d’Albanie et de Pologne. Emplois et différences.“ Pp. 587–617 in *Droits de l’homme. Crime - Politique Criminelle, Etudes en hommage à Alice-Yotopoulos-Marangopoulos*, Vol. A. Athens, Brussels: Nomiki Bibliothiki, Bruylant; Lazaridis, G. 2000. „Filipino and Albanian Women Migrant Workers in Greece: Multiple Layers of Oppression.“ Pp. 49–79 in Anthias, Fl., Lazaridis, G. (eds.). *Gender and Migration in Southern Europe. Women on the Move*. Oxford, New York: Berg,

Catherine Vassilikou (Ph.D. in the social sciences – sociology from the University of Paris 1-Panthéon-Sorbonne) is a social scientist and an associate researcher in the Bureau of International Institutions of the Academy of Athens. Her fields of interest are immigration, vulnerability, human rights, sociology of health.