EUROPEAN URBAN
AND REGIONAL
STUDIES

FROM 'SETTLEMENT' TO 'INTEGRATION'
INFORMAL PRACTICES AND SOCIAL SERVICES FOR WOMEN MIGRANTS IN ATHENS

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Abstract

In recent European literature on migration, two main trends characterize the ways in which migrants are increasingly portrayed. The first tends to define migrants in terms of their belonging to 'communities' while, in the second trend, migrants and refugees epitomize ideas of diaspora and hybridity, as resistance to constructions of place-bound 'communities'. In the context of these trends, women migrants hold ambivalent positions as particular 'others'. In our article, we attempt to problematize the 'purity' of these approaches. Based on research with Albanian migrant women in Athens, we examine the ways in which they construct very local, but also transnational and imagined communities while they seek to settle and find ways of integrating in the new setting. Using material from focus groups and biographical interviews with women migrants, as well as with women employers, we discuss: (a) the importance of informal practices of support and assistance at the neighbourhood level; and (b) the role of social services (health and child care), as they affect migrant women's efforts to negotiate a place for themselves and their dependents, to forge a sense of belonging and redefine communities and gender relations.

KEY WORDS ★ Albanian migrant women ★ everyday life ★ gender ★ neighbourhoods ★ social services

Introduction

Over the past 15 years, Athens has become a destination for numerous groups of migrants from a variety of places, but mostly from the Balkans (in particular Albania) and from Eastern Europe. The presence of migrants is more visible in the central neighbourhoods of the city, which have been in many ways revitalized, although they were never 'abandoned' by locals. These developments have triggered research interest on what is a new condition for the country and the city, and there is by now an increasing volume of outputs and writing, from a variety of perspectives and disciplines (for a review, see Petronoti and Triandafyllidou, 2003). More recently, interesting contributions have been added which introduce gender perspectives and/or develop specifically feminist approaches. This research and writing aims to form part of – and contribute to – a European framework of debate on the 'new migration' and women's autonomous migration, where lines of argument and theoretical perspectives are already developed, based on prior and/or longer experiences of migration. This framework is at times useful in order to understand and interpret 'local' phenomena, while at other times it underplays the importance of forming analytical tools and theoretical formulations, which would correspond to 'local' experience(s).

Our article is an offspring of such theoretical and empirical enquiries and draws on two ongoing research projects, between which there is a loose collaboration on theoretical and methodological questions.[1] Here we trace the complex experiences of material and symbolic work involved in caring and making a home in an unhomely environment, of adhering to and challenging the terms of belonging to a 'community', of negotiating identities and

redefining place(s), both 'here' and 'there', of being active agents in the project of migration, rather than keepers and transmitters of ethnic identity and culture. We examine the ways in which migrant women in Athens construct local, transnational and imagined communities while they seek to settle and find ways of integration. Using material from focus groups and biographical interviews with women migrants, as well as with women employers, we focus on two instances in migrant women's trajectories:

- informal practices of what we call *settlement*, which include arrangements leading to a bearable everyday-ness and are exemplified by, among other things, efforts to find housing and a job, to familiarize themselves with the city and its neighbourhoods, to form support networks;
- more formal processes of what we call *integration*, which include contact with, and insertion in, local institutions, exemplified by access to child care and health services. In these instances, migrant women may or may not have a residence/work permit. We use both 'settlement' and 'integration' in the limited sense described above (and, to some extent, translating between languages), in the context of our perspective which tries to understand perceptions of belonging both 'here' and 'there', as they come out of women's narratives. It is beyond the scope of this article to go into a detailed discussion about the controversies of the term 'integration' in migration studies (see Glick Schiller et al.,1992).

Women migrants and the city

In European literature on migration, we can identify two main trends which characterize the ways in which migrants – and women migrants in particular – are increasingly portrayed in research findings. The first tends to define migrants in terms of belonging to 'communities' or ethnic groups, in the majority of cases perceived as homogeneous, bounded and sharing a rather static 'ethnic culture' (Salih, 2000). With respect to earlier research, which considered migrants as 'just workers', research agendas now include social and cultural transformations in urban neighbourhoods, resulting from the efforts of migrants to form a 'new'

everyday life in the place of destination. The emphasis on ethnic groups tends to underline the role of men as pioneers and play down women's dynamic contributions to the project of migration. Choice and moving are linked to men and masculinity, while women and femininity are associated with a sense of home and belonging; women are seen as guardians and transmitters of tradition and ethnic culture (for an interesting critique, see Marvakis et al., 2006; see also Anthias and Lazaridis, 2000).

This type of argument 'converses' with approaches in urban studies, which emphasize the multicultural character of cities, as a result of new and old rounds of migration, both internal and external. In these approaches 'communities', ethnic or otherwise, are identified with particular places, urban neighbourhoods where 'ethnic cultures', as they are expressed in culinary habits, ethnic festivals, collective activities and practices etc. are played out in space (Chinatown/s, Little Tokyo/s, curry town/s etc.). In this line of argument, urban neighbourhoods, including those inhabited by migrants, are understood as invariably local and as bounded places which exist because of the intimacy of face-to-face communication.[2] When it comes to social services, women migrants are seen to face a double exclusion: on the one hand, as part of ethnic communities, who in any case face specific difficulties in gaining entitlement to social benefits (e.g. as a result of lack of work permit or social security payments); and on the other hand, as women subject to patriarchal gender relations within their own communities and families, in which men's jobs are given priority and social rights are derived from husbands and/or fathers. Women may then become even more vulnerable as we move from the model of 'universal' social protection to individualized arrangements.[3]

The second trend in migration studies comes in many ways as a critique of such notions of community, drawing from Anglophone cultural studies. Migrants (and other displaced subjects) are seen to epitomize notions of diaspora and hybridity, as a form of resistance to bounded communities. Spatial metaphors, like third space, displacement, borders etc. are used here to underline a different experience to that which is associated with established communities (Bhabha, 1990; Clifford, 1994; Gedalof, 2000). The diasporic subject is

portrayed as free from the coercions of ethnic and community boundaries and moving in a 'third space' which lies beyond dualist conceptions and permits a multiplicity of points of view (Bhabha, 1996). Here, again, the role of women is underplayed, albeit in a different way: the notion of a diasporic subject tends to efface questions of power and inequality (Anthias, 2001), as well as gradations of autonomy, involved also in the ways in which women (have to) negotiate old loyalties and new subjectivities, not only 'here' (in the place of destination), but also 'there' and on the way, especially when they are associated with dependants, mainly children.

This second trend is linked with a different turn in the discussion of space and place – one which emphasizes the immense spatial upheavals associated with globalization and the so-called time-space compression (Harvey, 1989). The transnational character of economic activities, technological innovations in the fields of communication, information and transport, according to many writers, seem to lead to loosening links between place and the formation of collectivities (see e.g. Urry, 2000). In this context, everyday life is also theorized in terms of mobility, speed and flows cutting across geographical scales, from the body to the global, without specific or long-standing links to (bounded) places. Here migrants seem to exemplify this dislocation and fragmentation of everyday life.

As is well documented by now, recent migration flows to Europe involve great numbers of women who migrate alone (without families/husbands) and retain loose links with their ethnic communities both 'here' and 'there'. Their access to social services is linked to their individual social and economic status, their cultural (or religious) perception of different types of social services, their links to their home country and their personal expectations (and wishes) regarding social integration. In this context, the restructuring trend in welfare provision towards flexibilization of social services may provide opportunities to improve their access to and use of social services.

Linking debates about migration to geographical debates about space/place and to changing processes of social service provision introduces new levels of complexity, which permit neither homogeneous and predetermined categories, nor uni-dimensional approaches to community, belonging, transgressing (borders) and negotiating (identities) (Anthias,

2000). In our analysis, based on our theoretical and empirical research, we attempt to problematize both trends as well as the dichotomous conceptions of community/diaspora or its spatial corollary of local/global. Starting from the premise that most urban citizens, including migrants, live lives characterized by locatedness, convergence and encounters (Lefebvre, 1968; Pahl, 1991), we discuss migrant women's settlement in the city in the light of changing socio-spatial configurations. Following Massey (1994), we see the places of their settlement, in our case urban neighbourhoods in Athens, not simply as material entities (as physical spaces), but most importantly as constellations of particular sets of social relations which interact at those particular locations. Such places are, in many ways, open and provisional, rather than bounded, fixed and static. They are open to contestation and to different readings by individuals and groups with different experiences (Keith and Pile, 1993). 'In one sense or another most places are "meeting places"; even their "original inhabitants" came from somewhere else' (Massey, 1994: 171).

This conception of place resonates with our preoccupations with migrant women in Athens. The idea of openness corresponds to a conceptualization of community and place which takes in the spanning of the globe by economic relations, the disorder and new hierarchies at regional and local scales, the living of lives in a series of nested and continuous spatial scales, from the body to the global (see also Inowlocki and Lutz, 2000). In this context, the lives of Albanian domestic helpers in Athens – as they come out of biographical interviews, fragments of which we present in the following sections of the article – do not easily correspond to either one of the models of migration paths (family reunification and independent worker migration) or to universal vs individualized models of service provision.

Two points about Albanian women are relevant here: (a) as a rule, they migrate together with their families and not for reasons of family reunification – which would place them in a relationship of dependency from the viewpoint of basic needs (such as accommodation) and access to social rights; (b) they find and negotiate their work and income individually, but the type of paid work does not necessarily mean that they gain independent worker status (and independent social rights), since often they work informally in the employer's home and

have difficulties in convincing their employers to make a formal employment declaration and pay social security contributions.[4] Moreover, both models tend to underestimate the dynamics of changing gender relations within migrant and local populations.[5] More specifically, the place of domestic helpers in the labour market influences gender roles in migrant families, as women become active agents in the social integration process. Paid domestic work by migrant women influences both gender roles within local families and the organization of social services, in particular the care sector: for example, demands for public care for children, for the elderly and for other dependants, or for a better balance of labour between local women and men, may be played down in the light of the availability of widely affordable migrant women's labour (see Orloff, 2002).

The journey to Athens: between formal and informal

Following on from the discussion of the previous section, we present here fragments of the experiences of Albanian women migrants in Athens. These fragments testify to their efforts to survive in the new place of settlement, modifying the place itself and also their own identities, their perceptions of belonging, their ideas of 'here' and 'there'. The vast majority of Albanian women in Athens operate as domestic workers and, to a lesser degree, as carers, while Albanian men are employed in construction, usually in more precarious conditions and with frequent intervals of unemployment.[6] The latter is a source of crisis in the household, as husbands and partners find it difficult to adapt to what they consider a loss of power, and many women report instances of domestic violence.

> He was good, he was very good. In Greece, life has become much worse … I have a difficult life. I am beaten, I go to work. I am beaten, I go to work. No woman goes through all this. No woman. He wants us to go back. I don't want. (Natasa)

As we have already mentioned, we focus on two domains which loosely correspond to two aspects of their 'journey to Athens': on broadly informal practices of finding housing and a job, forming

support networks etc. (settlement); and on more formal processes of contact with and access to child care and health services (integration). The lines of division between formal and informal are neither clear-cut nor fixed over time. The terms are used here as a reference to the existence (or not) of state policies and services affecting the everyday lives of migrant (and local) women. Indeed, as our analysis indicates, 'formal' services are heavily mediated by informal practices, while 'informal' employment patterns are, to a greater or lesser extent, formalized as a result of the requirements of the various rounds of 'legalization processes'.[7] This rather vague and delicate distinction between formal regulations and informal practices in all aspects of economic and social life (in Greece as elsewhere in Southern Europe) leaves a considerable margin for individuals to develop survival strategies and manage processes of integration.

Finding a job and a house

> As soon as we arrived – we arrived let's say on Saturday or Sunday morning, I don't remember well – Monday morning my husband went to work and I did not know anything … I could not leave the house. I would not remember which bell to ring, downstairs or upstairs – the names were in Greek … I did not know a word to go out in the street and ask. Or, if I lost my way, who could help me? … I did not know where to go. (Loretta)

The experience of Loretta illustrates some of the most acute problems which Albanian women face when they first arrive in Athens, as a rule together with their men (husbands, fathers or brothers). Here we discuss ways of finding a place to stay and a job and processes of forming support networks, within and beyond the confines of community or ethnic group, all of which are crucial for 'settlement' in the new place (Athens).

It is quite common for migrant women to stay, for a shorter or longer period of time, with relatives, in conditions of overcrowding.

> When I came, we stayed together with my husband's younger brother. And money was all common, not just the house. After two years my husband's brother left. (Anita)

I stayed for a while in a hotel in Omonia[8] – and then we had a house here … We stayed with my cousin and my brother-in-law and a couple of friends. In the beginning, around 1992. (Arvena)

When Albanian women migrate independently from men, they face more intense problems looking for a house or flat and are prone to even higher exploitation by landlords. On the whole, they are more vulnerable and less able to use temporary arrangements or sleep rough. Therefore they depend on being put up, for some length of time, by relatives or friends who form part of support networks within their 'ethnic community'. These, however, work as networks of control from which some women opt to escape through the whole project of migration.

> My brother, he lives here all right. But I do not talk to him often … only sometimes I call him. Sometimes, when my mother thinks he has problems, she says to me 'Don't argue with him – you always argue over there.' And I call him, I don't go to his place, he may come to mine … but he does not approve of how I live [together with a Syrian man she is not married to]. (Athena)

The usual next step is the search for paid work, in order to contribute to the household income. Finding a job as domestic workers is the most common outlet – a way to earn an income even when their language skills are poor. Demand for such labour results from a number of developments, including a general rise of the standard of living and available incomes; but it is also generated by the fact that more local women have been entering paid employment in the past 20 years or so, only to find a vacuum in the domain of services such as caring for the young and the old. The large numbers of low paid-migrant women provided a widely affordable response to these problems. Sometimes it is local people who introduce migrant women to possible employers: landlords, janitors, less often neighbours – who broaden the local support networks of women migrants; in other cases they find 'houses' (to clean) through fellow migrants.

> Margarita is now my friend. She found the first houses for me … It is difficult for a foreigner who comes and does not speak the language. (Loretta)

Then the owner of our flat helped me find work, one day a week. And then slowly, very slowly, I started working every day. (Natasa)

Work may be irregular and unstable, on a weekly or longer-term basis. For example, they may not have work/income every day, employers may go on holiday for a month or two without paying the corresponding wages, some employers demand extreme flexibility (e.g. calling the women whenever they so wish and expecting them to be available). And it is not uncommon for them to pay themselves the social security contributions necessary to obtain or renew the residence/work permits.[9]

> Work is difficult, I don't know. This year … I have work two days a week, then one day. It is not regular … It is better to have one job. I dream of one job to go to every day, to know where to go. I am very sad when I don't go. (Nora)

When family income improves, efforts are made to improve housing conditions: to move to less crowded conditions, to find a better flat or house, to buy furniture and appliances. Some of these efforts are linked and/or legitimized by the presence and well-being of children.

> We were on the third floor, but it was very cold and we said with my husband: we will pay a little more, but it will be better for the child, because there we were cold … winter and summer we were cold. (Nora)

> When I came here my husband did not have anything in the house. Look how it was [she shows a photo]. Empty. (Loretta)

In the early 1990s, finding a house or flat was not easy for Albanian migrants; instances of racist behaviour by landlords were commonly reported and can be identified in many ways in the interviews.

> Most people asked: 'Where do you come from? Albania? No … I don't rent the house.' We even went to real estate offices … we had paid money and they did not deliver. (Arvena)

Information about flats to let passes by word of mouth and often flats go from hand to hand, with relatives or friends introducing the newcomers to the landlord. After a decade or more, in some central neighbourhoods of Athens, Albanian households

buy flats in old apartment buildings, thereby contributing to the revitalization of the local housing market.

> My husband took a house next to my brother, because my brother knew this guy next door and told him 'Let's have my sister and her kids rent the house.'
>
>   'OK,' he said. (Arvena)
>
> The janitor had a flat. It was hers you know. And she wanted to rent this house. Some gentleman went away, and I asked her, because I knew her well. (Anita)

Most Albanian women migrate with, or soon after, their men and they play a key role in the process of family settlement. In conditions of uncertainty and poverty, they are responsible for making ends meet in their households and it is they, rather than men, who develop strategies of gradually appropriating urban space, using the city and the neighbourhood and identifying safe itineraries in city life. Family and compatriots are the main nucleus around which socializing is organized. But under the conditions of stress in the new environment and the difficult encounter with a different cultural setting, disruption of networks and breakdowns in belonging to such communities of compatriots and relatives are quite common (see Petronoti,1998; Castel, 2000). Such loss of links and support increases stress and a sense of dislocation, but at times they are compensated for by the formation of new networks, which include neighbours, both locals and migrants from other countries, as well as employers.

Starting a new life is difficult, but women are well aware of the impasses in their home town or village; in addition, the limited trips back to Albania show how much they may be distanced from a familiar place which is becoming unfamiliar and renew their will to 'succeed' in the new place, in Athens.

> Where can I go back to? I don't have a job there and I have to stay here. What can I do there? Everybody looks for a place [in the market] to buy and sell things. In the wintertime there is no electricity, it comes for few hours to every neighbourhood. Water too. (Amalia)

Insertion of migrants, and of Albanian women migrants in particular, in city life has been made possible through informal practices and

arrangements, which are structural components of urban development and characterize Athens (as well as other Greek cities) in many respects. The wide scope of the informal has contributed to urban problems for which Athens is notorious (high densities, lack of open spaces, illegal constructions and so on), but have left 'gaps' where mechanisms of social integration could and have developed for locals and where recent migrants have found ways to settle in the city, as the preceding discussion indicates. This is not meant to underestimate the negative aspects of such 'informal' mechanisms on a medium and longer-term basis (see, among others, Vaiou and Hadjimichalis, 2003 [1997]); nor is it meant to stick to a dichotomous conception since, as we have already underlined, at least for the labour market some kind of formalization is already necessary in order to acquire or renew a residence/work permit (e.g. employer's declaration, social security payments, tax clearance etc.).

Negotiating access to social services

Preschool child care and reproductive health, the two types of social services selected for the research, share, for both Greeks and Albanians, a strongly gendered character: they are closely associated with mothers', rather than fathers', roles and responsibilities. Kindergartens are 'female' spaces in the sense that both recipients and providers of the service are almost exclusively women. Reproductive health is likewise seen as a woman's concern (not a concern of the couple as a reproductive unit). Access to these services has been chosen as an indicator of changes in gender relations among migrant populations, as well as of the ways in which formal and informal activities are interconnected during their provision.

In Greece, public preschool care is provided by local authorities, which also determine the rules of access on the basis of demand and availability. In the early 1990s, when migrants started coming in large numbers, it was relatively easy for migrant children to obtain a place in the municipal kindergartens where these existed. Stricter rules were introduced following increases in demand, possibly also in response to the discomfort of some Greek parents, owing to the high proportion of migrant children in

nurseries and kindergartens. Nowadays more and more kindergartens accept only children of women who are formally employed – which means having formal proof of paying contributions to the state social security system (IKA).

Domestic workers usually work (informally) on a daily-wage basis. Employers are not motivated to pay their share of social security costs insofar as the work is performed in the 'private' space of the home and therefore not subject to any form of public labour inspection. Migrant women are similarly unmotivated to pay personal contributions if they have access to social security as dependants of their husbands. Thus, they find themselves in a vicious circle, in the sense that they cannot seek formal employment if they have no access to child care and cannot obtain access to public nurseries and kindergartens if they are not in formal employment. To move from an undeclared to a declared job, domestic workers have to negotiate with employers, who are thus required to formalize their employer status and contribute to social security costs. In order to facilitate this task and collect considerable amounts of money, IKA has accorded domestic work a special simplified status in the social security system as 'dependent employment with multiple employers and a daily wage'.

> They say to me. 'Make an employer's social security declaration!' But most ladies won't do this for me. One lady, who is very kind, thank heavens – I go to her twice a week – did it for me. She did it [the employer's declaration] as if I work for her every day. But the difficult thing about it afterwards was – I handed it to them and they took it – wherever I went to work, when school started, they say to me: 'We want all the telephones of the places you work,' and this is where the trouble starts! I say to the ladies: 'What's going to happen now, if I say that I work for you and you don't give me an employer's declaration?' With that lady – and she was a good lady I swear to you – I tell her all this and she says: 'OK. You must give them all the telephones.' (Suzanna)

In some (not uncommon) cases, migrant women succeed in gaining access, despite the lack of 'proper papers', through the intervention of women employers who happen to have contacts either with decisionmakers in the municipality (on a personal or political basis) or with the kindergarten staff.[10] The importance of informal relations is illustrated by Etleva, as follows:

For my elder daughter, when I went to ask at the pre-school, they said something like: 'You have to have insurance stamps. We don't take Greeks [without insurance stamps]. Are we going to take you?' And I went away. OK. And the following year I said: 'I'm going to have to send both my daughters,' because I couldn't get by, there was so much rent and other expenses. And to a lady I work for, I say all this: 'I'm in need,' I say. 'I can't sit around any more without work.' And she says: 'I'll help you. You go to the Town Hall, to Mrs. X, I don't know what her name is, she's … what is it, not the mayor … the deputy mayor! And you'll go there. She's a very, very good person. And you'll tell all this, and she'll help you.' And that's what I did. And I went and said all this, and I told them, 'I need to work, I've got three children. I've got a high rent to pay. Can you help me, I say, for my children to go there [to the nursery]?'

'Why don't they take them?' she says.

'Because I don't have IKA,' I say. 'I have all the other papers! Whatever they ask for.'

She asks me: 'Does your husband have IKA?'

I say, 'Yes. He works all the year and he's been here for 14 years!'

Straight away she rings up the teacher at the pre-school and says: 'The Albanian girl, Etleva, will come to you and you'll take her girls and you'll enrol them!'

I go there and they say 'Bring me your papers.' They don't say anything about IKA or other problems. (Etleva)

Child care for domestic workers is a prerequisite for access to the labour market, but is also a way to facilitate their integration into Greek society. With this in mind, they actively seek to maximize chances for their children by providing education in the Greek language and socialization with local children from an early age. A recent decision by the Ministry of Education, which was highly publicized and widely debated, has served to uphold these expectations. The decision was in relation to an Albanian schoolboy (Odysseas) who had got the best marks in his school and was therefore entitled to lead the school parade and raise the Greek flag on the national holiday.[11] The question of whether his ethnicity should be an impediment to this triggered a variety of racist reactions, but these were thwarted by the government's firmly negative response. Secular principles had prevailed over religious and national prejudice. The incident marked a

contribution to the empowerment of migrant women in their role as mothers and a sanction for related hopes of the social integration (and mobility) of their children (and themselves) by means of the Greek education system.

> If I was like Odysseas I would have raised it! And as for me, if a day comes when my daughter … and if they say … well, why shouldn't she raise it? You don't know what a pleasure it would be for me! Why shouldn't she raise it? I would be pleased! You don't know what a pleasure it would be for me! Why not? And would you like me to tell you something? I no longer want to go to Albania! I tell my husband this, to buy a house here. And if you want to say to me: you grew up there, I'll tell you that it seems to me, living here, that I grew up here. I don't seem to me to have grown up in Albania. (Suzanna)

All this may help to explain the reluctance of some migrant women interviewed to acknowledge discriminating attitudes against their children or themselves by kindergarten staff or by other children's parents. But wherever they do register awareness of such behaviour their response is to complain actively and seek restitution. 'Proper' behaviour by kindergarten staff is appreciated. They are indeed expected to prevent aggression against their children on the basis of ethnicity.

> A boy had his birthday and he invited all the children. There were just two Albanians that he didn't invite: Elias and a girl. And I went, because I felt very bad when Elias said to me: 'Mama, I am an Albanian. You see how Antonis didn't invite me?' I went and I talked to the teacher but she said:
>
> 'It's not my fault that they didn't bring an invitation for Elias and the girl.' I say that it was the teacher's fault. And today I don't forget how Elias said to me:
>
> 'Antonis didn't invite me and I felt bad… .' But what did the boy say to me? Afterwards, in February, he had his birthday. I didn't arrange anything. I couldn't. I sent sweets. But he said to me: 'Mama, if I have a party, should I invite Antonis?'
>
> 'How do you feel about it?' I said to him. 'What do you want to do?'
>
> 'I want to invite him. It doesn't matter that he didn't invite me.' You see, the boy understood. (Marietta)

The same attitudes underlie migrant women's requests for full support from the kindergarten system. Extra teaching help is explicitly demanded in cases where children face language problems or other learning difficulties which local children might also face. But extra support would be refused if its provision were seen as discriminatory or exclusive to migrant children.

As far as the health services are concerned, migrant women's first contact occurs when one of their relatives has health problems, including their children, whose health is the most common reason for visiting public health services. In the case of their own health, they tend to seek medical help only in cases of 'intolerable pain', which may include pain from work-induced conditions such as allergies or asthma caused by protracted use of chemical cleaning products, blood circulation problems in the legs due to long hours of standing, back pains and arthritis in the knees and hands. Women tend to underrate the health risks posed by their job and to postpone seeking medical help. It is only when symptoms become serious enough to threaten their capacity to work that they agree to consult a medical doctor.

> We've been working for so many years now that we've become a little tired, and it is a little tiring. Sometimes we say: 'I've got a pain here, I've got a pain there' [laughs], but … sometimes we just leave it and forget about what we have … We can't be bothered if it is just us. But I never leave it when it comes to the children … I am a little more careful, very careful, with the children. Don't let them get sick when they're young and develop something that when they grow up will … . (Naze)

Most Albanian women try to avoid preventive gynaecological examinations. Their attitude is that as long as there are no symptoms (no pain), they do not see any reason why they should have medical examinations – an attitude which does not apply to their children. Mothers assume responsibility for bringing children to paediatricians, carefully following vaccination plans and other types of preventive treatment. By contrast, preventive health care tends to be avoided in matters of reproductive health. It requires time (since public health services operate almost exclusively in the mornings) and therefore means absence from work and loss of a day's wages.

> As for our own health, I haven't gone [for pap tests]. No, it's not that I can't be bothered. I just can't bring myself to do it. I say, forget it – I'm going to work; forget it – I'm

going to work. I should have gone and if sometimes I have a back problem or some other pain, I will go. I shouldn't wait to get sick before I go. I should take them. (Miranda)

Occasionally going for tests is the result of encouragement by women employers, who quite frequently provide information about mammography, places where pap tests are conducted and so on. Sometimes examinations require the husband's time and availability as well, as the following example indicates.

> You know, I don't want to lose my day's wages. Because you have to go there to do a test. And it's not just like you go to someone there and do it. They send you to a lot of things [places]. And if I go to the hospital I have to take my husband with me. Because, I don't know, I don't understand at all. (Violetta)

In addition to the low priority Albanian women give to preventive health, structural characteristics of the Greek health system discourage, to say the least, preventive health examinations. Despite its more than 20 years of operation, the National Health System has not completely freed itself from what is called the *fakellaki* (little envelope), in other words bribery. The envelope comprises a direct cash transfer from patients to doctors and it is particularly prevalent in cases of surgical operations and childbirth. The practice is occasionally extended to other health staff. This still-persisting informal practice in effect undermines the equalizing function of the social security system and encourages what amounts to private health care. Patients of Albanian origin seem to have a greater propensity for such (Greek) practices than migrants from countries of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, where public health care was generalized. In Albania the quality of health care was directly dependent on private cash payments, a habit readily corresponding to the Greek health system.

The above-mentioned situation is widespread in cases of pregnancy and childbirth. Feelings of insecurity (some bring their husbands who speak better Greek etc.) – together with the extreme importance of giving birth to a healthy child – make pregnant women extremely vulnerable to exploitation by gynaecologists. Some gynaecologists may even deliberately frighten pregnant women for the purpose of creating demand for more (expensive and privately operated) prenatal examinations.

You get the bad behaviour with the doctor who sees you at the time you are about to give birth, or to go to have the operation. This is the moment they will find the way to get their money. Not going for an examination just like that and leaving. They won't get any money from that. Because the doctor himself knows that I am not going to give him any. If I go to give birth and they tell me all this: that things are not going too well for the baby, you get the idea. That will frighten me and I'll give him the money he wants. He will even ask me for it, not that I should give it to him myself. He will say, 'If you want me to take you over, to get started with you,' with an operation or some such thing, 'you will give me x amount.' I had this on my mind for ten days, and I went three times and the last time I went, there was somebody I knew from before, from last year when I had gone with a cousin, and he wanted us to give €700 to him and another person. And we gave it to them, and both of them took it. (Fabiola)

Aiming at alleviating the phenomenon of (informal) fees for hospitals and medical doctors, and at the same time extending the working hours of hospitals (and shortening queues), a system of evening medical consultancy was introduced in public hospitals some years ago. It involves an extra fee of €60 for medical consultation upon appointment, instead of free morning consultation. The price is slightly lower than the cost of a standard consultation at a private medical doctor. In the case of domestic workers, time is all-important since their social protection status does not provide for paid leave on health grounds. A morning visit to a hospital thus costs them a day's wages of approximately €40 – which is comparable to the cost of a visit to a private doctor (who would 'pay more attention') or of an evening visit to a public hospital.

The health services that women trust most are those of the emergency wards in public hospitals (including gynaecological clinics) and the health centres in smaller towns. In cases such as these, where the relation of medical doctors to patients is more fortuitous and of briefer duration, there are fewer opportunities (in either space or time) for pecuniary requests or offers from either side. Contacts between medical practitioners and patients unfold in a public space and cooperation between different medical specialists is usually necessary. In emergencies the humane aspects of medical professionalism are more likely to emerge, and the social (and ethnic) background of the patients evidently plays a smaller role.

I trust them [public hospitals and gynaecologists] and I have no problem with them. I have more trust in those who don't make any demands [for *fakellaki*] of me than I do in those who do. I trust a doctor I go to at random, as when I gave birth, rather than giving money to somebody and making an issue of it. I don't believe in those I give money to. Because giving birth is something natural. Whether you give money or not, when the time comes, you give birth. You can't avoid it. (Fabiola)

I have chanced upon good ones and … when I went here at the Children's Hospital with the baby I happened to go to young girl [paediatrician]. She was a student. But she was a doctor. And when it was time to leave, because we have learned that when something is done for us we pay. And even if you didn't ask me for it, I would give the money with all my heart. I give €40 even if they don't take it. This girl was the first who didn't take it. She put it back in my pocket and I went to buy a cake. She says to me 'a cake is something I would like.' She was the first. She was so good that when the child was eight months old, I spent the whole night there. She saved the child. Because something went wrong when it was two months old and it had trouble breathing. (Zanetta)

Abortion and special examinations to find the reasons for infertility are aspects of reproductive health services which are rarely reported by migrant women.[12] When they need them they go to private clinics (as do most local women), a practice which involves significant cost. In relation to these 'modern' medical practices Albanian women seem to be more adaptable than men, who appear more reluctant to submit to examination into fertility problems.

Iaso [an expensive, private hospital], yes, there it was something else. I went there. OK, it was for something else that I went. I was four months pregnant and I couldn't keep the child. First of all they're grown–up now and I can't have another child. It would make my life too difficult and I went there and paid €450 for an abortion but I was satisfied and I say it was worth it. First of all it was very clean. I don't know. I've never in my life seen that kind of thing. (Fatbarda)

I only want one child in my life, because all my brothers and sisters, and there are seven of us, they all have children. What can we do about it now? That's life! I went to the doctor, I took the examinations. The doctor said 'Everything is OK. There's nothing wrong with you. Now your husband should come to take the examinations.'

He said, 'Aren't you ashamed of yourself?'

I say to him, 'Why should I be ashamed?' He should take the examinations too as a man. But I can't force him. (Maria)

Formal and informal practices in social service provision shape women's experiences in their effort to cope with paid work, improve their children's integration into Greek society and overcome reproductive health problems (see also Kassimati, 2003). Action for optimizing formal and informal practices on every occasion becomes a learning (and integrating) process for Albanian women who work actively on interpersonal relations with public servants and with people possibly able to 'mediate' in securing them access to services (usually their women employers). Social skills acquired in this context may become crucial for (or as the result of) their wish to 'come and stay' and negotiate, from a better position than in their home country, their gender roles in the family. Struggling between identities as mothers and as sole breadwinners, they assume responsibilities for their children's socialization and accommodate their reproductive health and rights.

From 'settlement' to 'integration': changing gender relations?

The experiences which we have collected in our own and other research underline the importance of considering both formal and informal processes determining conditions of settlement and integration. The relative importance of either side differs in time and according to the phase in a project of migration. However, the informal is crucial in Greece (and perhaps elsewhere in Southern Europe) as a set of mechanisms of social integration which are not exclusive to migrants – they affect locals as well and can be found at the basis of the constitution of urban experience and everyday life in the city. In this context, the experiences of migrant women in their efforts to support the material social and symbolic aspects of everyday life 'here' is part of the urban history of Athens and not a matter of ethnic group formation in the city.

Through complex formal and informal practices, and crossing the boundaries of such divisions, Albanian women migrants, as active agents, manage, often in contradictory ways, to make a home in an

unhomely environment for themselves and their families. In this process we can identify instances of adhering to the rules, habits and traditions of their own community/ethnic group. However, in the new place (in Athens), Albanian women (have to) go out to work and bring home an income, which, more often than not, is more regular than men's. This alone is a new source of power within their households and a basis from which to negotiate individual identities and gender relations. It is also a source of stress for men, especially during periods of unemployment or of work much below their own skills.

Gender relations and identities are also formed within the, often not fully conscious, employer–worker relation, in which behaviours and habits are constituted which may observe and adapt to (but also challenge) established ideas and practices. Recourse of local women to migrant women's labour has partially resolved the problems of performing the whole range of domestic and caring tasks; at the same time it has contributed to yet another twist in gender relations, which passes duties to a different group of women without involving men, and also to fading demands towards the state for the provision and quality of social services (Vaiou, 2003). Thus, the intersecting patterns of everyday life of Albanian and local women affect relations between women and women, women and men, local and migrant, as they reshape divisions of labour within (local and migrant) households, conditions of access to work and leisure, patterns of consumption, and ways of 'proper' housekeeping.

These constellations of social relations, which involve women and men, local and migrant, are part of the constitution of place (in our case, the urban neighbourhoods of Athens) they are inscribed in and form part of urban history. These places are not local and bounded, they are constructed out of movement, communication, social relations which always stretch beyond the local, as the experiences of Albanian women indicate, in their efforts to bridge 'here' and 'there' in their everyday life (see also Massey, 2005). The dynamics of place, which are part of such multi-scalar relations, are depicted by the changing mosaic of local facilities and services, the intensive uses of public spaces, the multiple traces of new and old residents. Such dynamics affect social relations in fundamental ways and contribute to (re)shape everyday lives, uses and meanings of time and space, as well as individual and collective identities.

As our analysis indicates, migrant women cannot be identified either with communities sharing some kind of ethnic culture, or with the chosen mobility of affluent diasporas. In the power geometry between utopian cosmopolitanism and ordinary life, these women struggle within the limitations of their multiple determinations (of class, gender, ethnicity, age etc.) to settle (and perhaps integrate) for longer or shorter periods of time in 'other' places, to shape a life closer to their (changing) expectations and to negotiate, more or less consciously, transformed subjectivities. From this perspective, we believe that it is important to work towards more complex approaches and explanations which link formal and informal processes and practices and bridge gender, migration and space.

Notes

[1] The first project, of Panteion University, looks at *Gender and Migration, Aspects of Social Integration and Social Policy,* focusing on Albanian and Ukrainian women migrants. Material for this article is drawn from 31 interviews with Albanian women domestic helpers, 10 with women (local) kindergarten staff and 6 focus groups with migrant women in Greater Athens conducted form March to September 2005. The second project, of the National Technical University of Athens, looks at the *Intersecting Patterns of Everyday Life and Socio-spatial Transformations in the City. Migrant and Local Women in the Neighbourhoods of Athens,* focusing on Albanian and Bulgarian women domestic helpers and carers in two central neighbourhoods of Athens. Material for this article is drawn from 24 interviews with Albanian women domestic helpers and 8 interviews with local women who employ them, conducted in Athens in 2006. Both projects are cofunded by the European Social Fund (75%) and National Resources (25%).

[2] These approaches reflect the tradition of the Chicago School and understandings of community and/in urban life in terms of face-to-face contact and kinship networks. See, among many: Wirth (1938); Gans (1962); Fischer (1982). For a review see: Simonsen (1997); Vaiou and Lykogianni (2006); see also Allen (1999); Amin and Thrift (2002).

[3] Critical social analysis has largely documented how this move, instead of reducing inequalities, reproduces social divisions not only along the lines of class, but also along the lines of gender and ethnicity (for further analysis, see Williams (1989); Lewis (1998).

⁴ In Greece, social security contributions, formally, have to be paid by both employers and workers. However, employers of migrant women often refuse to pay their share or even to declare that they employ them. Hence migrant women have to pay out of their own wages, not only in order to have access to social services, but also because proof of social security payments is required in order to get a residence/work permit. Otherwise, they have to declare themselves as dependants of their husbands, if they happen to have social security coverage – which increases their dependence.

⁵ In the article we use the term 'local' (population, women, men) to refer to Greek citizens and/or residents of Athens who employ migrant women domestic helpers and carers.

⁶ The women of our research come from small towns in Albania. They were brought up in families with many children (as was expected by the socialist regime) and, like their mothers, had prior experience of paid work in Albania. Albanians are the majority of migrants in Greece (57% of all migrants, who, according to the 2001 population census, comprise 1m or 10% of total population). Ethnic discriminatory attitudes against Albanians are quite pronounced among locals and abound in the media, although some improvement can be observed since the beginning of the 1990s.

⁷ 'Legalisation processes' (which is a literal translation from Greek) stands as a reference to the changing legislation of the Greek state concerning the conditions and terms under which migrants who have entered the country without proper visas or have stayed on after their visas have expired can obtain residence/work permits. The first such round of 'legalization' took place in 1997 (Law 1975/1991), and the last in 2005 (Law 3386/2005).

⁸ Omonia is a very central square of Athens and, since the 19th century, an entry point for (internal) migrants to the city. Cheap hotels around Omonia are mentioned also by Psimmenos (1995) as a first step of settling in the city. In different ways, the same topic has been taken up by novelists and filmmakers since the early 1990s.

⁹ Some researchers also identify cases of somatic and psychological abuse (Phizacklea, 1983; Lazaridis and Psimmenos, 2000); and there is certainly a hierarchy of preference among employers in which Albanian women are lower than, for example, Filippina live-ins. The latter are considered a status symbol for richer households, while the former are employed by lower-income ones.

¹⁰ Alternative solutions could have been for female relatives or friends who do not have a paid job, and are therefore available, to take care of children for a low fee.

¹¹ School parades at the two national holidays is a long-standing practice in Greece and holding the flag is an important manifestation of national pride.

¹² Abortion has been legal in Greece since 1986 (Law 1609/1986). However, most abortions take place in private

hospitals and clinics, usually for reasons to do with tax evasion by doctors and women's wish to maintain their anonymity.

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