



# Tracing aspects of the Greek crisis in Athens: Putting women in the picture

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## Abstract

In the political fluidity of our times, the dismal economic situation in Greece is perhaps extreme but indicative of a deepening crisis in Europe, which is expanding, both geographically and socially. Contrary to the dominant rhetoric, austerity measures and pacts imposed on Greece, Portugal, Spain – and later Cyprus – do not seem to provide effective remedies. On the contrary, they seem to plunge entire areas and groups of people into a vicious cycle of rising unemployment, shrinking incomes and deep impoverishment. In the context of this rhetoric, an almost exclusive emphasis on the macro-economic aspects of the crisis, seems to “expel” from public debate the fact that there are effects of austerity policies that are unevenly distributed, inscribed as they are on existing inequalities: inequalities among places, between women and men, locals and migrants, big and small employers, secure and precarious workers and, most importantly, intersections of these. This paper engages with some of the less debated aspects of the crisis in Athens, with a focus on the complex and usually invisible ways in which it impacts on women. It draws upon research in a low-income neighbourhood of Athens and focuses on changes in women’s everyday lives, which have to do with job precarity and job loss, destruction of social services and the re-shaping of care, as well as practices of coping with/ resisting the crisis.

## Keywords

Care, Greek crisis, precarity, urban neighbourhoods, women

## Introduction

Much has been written about the multi-faceted crisis that has befallen Greece and the other countries of Southern Europe, with changing arguments and attitudes. Many writers across the political spectrum have contributed insightful analyses and lively debates – and continue to do so as the speed of developments turns arguments “obsolete” very fast.<sup>1</sup> Recurrent memoranda and more or less extreme austerity programmes, imposed on all four countries and later also on Cyprus, do not seem to provide effective remedies. On the contrary, they lead to deep recession and social crisis, while the

promised recovery is postponed to an unknown future. The programmes and measures seem to plunge the European south, and Greece in particular, into a vicious circle of rising unemployment and inflation, shrinking incomes and deep impoverishment. Analysts have recently been arguing that the

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measures adopted or imposed are not a means to achieve some goal, they are the goal itself. In the words of Krugman (2012: A27):

...austerity [...] is about using deficit panic as an excuse to dismantle social programs [...]. The big question here is whether the evident failure of austerity to produce an economic recovery will lead to a "Plan B". Maybe. But my guess is that even if such a plan is announced, it won't amount to much. For economic recovery was never the point; the drive for austerity was about using the crisis, not solving it. And it still is.

One of the targets of austerity programmes to overcome the crisis, in line with the neoliberal repertoire of deregulation and downsizing of the state, seems to be the social model that has developed in different and unequal ways in Southern Europe over the post-war decades. Although this model was never fully developed in Greece, the Greek economy is rather small and peripheral in the European Union (EU) and in this sense an easier site for neoliberal experimentation on a number of frontal attacks: to demolish whatever there is of a welfare state, to attack the public sector, to abolish workers' rights, pension systems, wages and salaries, to marginalise democratic institutions and even to challenge national sovereignty.<sup>2</sup> Although such attacks have place-specific manifestations and/or effects in cities and regions, they are part of the broader crisis in the eurozone and of the "inter-dependent economies within which we live" (Smith, 2013: 4). In addition, they tend to create within the eurozone a space of exemption where large numbers of people are becoming a low-cost precariat for new rounds of profitable investment.

In Greece, four years of implementing the bailout agreements with the Troika have led to a deepening and multi-faceted crisis, few aspects of which are part of the public debate that takes place in Greece as well as in the rest of the EU.<sup>3</sup> Most prominently missing from this debate is the fact that the effects of austerity measures are unevenly distributed, inscribed as they are on inequalities that preceded the current crisis (Hadjimichalis, 2011; Karamessini, 2012; 2013; Zavou et al., 2013): inequalities among places, between women and men, locals and migrants, big and small employers,

secure and precarious workers – and, most importantly, combinations of these.

Neoliberal reforms and austerity programmes target urban areas disproportionately with the dismantling of public services and infrastructures and the shrinkage of public employment. It is in cities where the effects of such programmes are more intensely felt. "Cities are therefore where austerity bites. However, never equally", as Peck (2012: 629) argues, drawing from a wealth of US experiences. Women and men who live in cities rely, albeit unequally, on monetary income to meet basic needs such as food, shelter or fuel. Drastic cuts to and then the freezing of salaries, pensions and benefits, high unemployment, increases in both direct and indirect taxation, and the privatisation of basic services and infrastructures weigh heavily on low- and medium-income households (see also Jarvis et al., 2009). Privatisation of basic services and infrastructures in particular raises their cost and makes them inaccessible to increasing numbers of people who now start to turn to alternatives found in the spreading initiatives of solidarity.<sup>4</sup> Precarious low-income workers, low-rank public employees, self-employed and/or family firm owners, lone parents, people living on benefits, students, marginal groups, recent migrants and many more find themselves excluded from bearable urban livelihoods.

This paper has grown out of my interest in some less debated aspects of the Greek crisis, the individual and collective practices of resisting or simply coping with it on a day-to-day basis and the geographical scale/s at which such practices occur. In this context, the paper discusses some of the ways in which the crisis hits women. It approaches its subject matter from the perspective of everyday life in Sepolia, a low-income neighbourhood of the municipality of Athens, starting from the premise that, behind statistics and macro-economic calculations, different women and men live with unemployment, precarity, salary and pension cuts, poverty and deprivation or shrinking social rights in ways that are often determined by ordinary places – and at the same time shape those places. Cities are home to the complexity of urban life, places where diverse people lead different yet intersecting everyday lives and where dense networks of interaction and multiple encounters take place (Simonsen, 2008). From this perspective, cities

and urban neighbourhoods, and the Athenian neighbourhood in question, are seen as spatial formations where everyday practices to cope with crisis and austerity are devised and initiatives to resist it spring up with diverse targets, varying outcomes and actors among which women are often protagonists.

In the following section of the paper I present some background information on the neighbourhood and on the effects of austerity policies, focusing briefly on salary cuts and unemployment, care deficits and the ubiquitification of violence – which highlight the unequal, complex and usually invisible ways in which the crisis hits women (and places). The next section cites the stories of three women who live in the area and have experienced deep changes in their everyday lives, in order to reflect on how concrete experiences fit in/diverge from general patterns and common understandings of the crisis when the spaces of everyday life become test beds for service cutbacks, job loss and exposure to risks. The final section draws together some concluding points.

The passage from general data and theoretical conceptions of “the Greek crisis” to concrete place/s and to the experiences of particular embodied subjects – and back – is not an easy one. However, such crossings of scale help carry the argument forward in two directions. Firstly, they help one to understand the multiple determinations of an otherwise unqualified “one-size-fits-all” reference to an almost generic conception of crisis (see also Bernt and Rink, 2010). Secondly, they help shape an approach that consciously oscillates between levels of reference that are usually kept apart: on the one hand, discourse/s and explanations constituted by “big pictures” and global analyses and on the other hand urban space and the spatialities produced through the bodily presence and everyday practices of individuals and groups affected by a crisis that is also (or perhaps primarily) urban, as Harvey (2012) argues.

## **Sepolia, an ordinary neighbourhood in the crisis-ridden Athens**

### *The crisis in figures*

Greece is already in the fourth year of implementing the clauses of successive International Monetary

Fund (IMF)/EU bailout packages and austerity programmes aimed at reinstating the competitiveness of the Greek economy. During these years, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita has fallen cumulatively by 23.6%, dropping to 1964 levels after two decades of real convergence with the EU15 average. The purchasing power of wage earners plummeted by 37.2%, the volume of production fell by 23.5% and demand dropped to 1999 levels. Prices of everyday items, however, remain high, as a result of privatisation, VAT increases (from 9% and 13% to 23%) and the operation of monopoly chains in many areas of food retailing (Toussaint, 2012). The cost of labour per unit of production, a major disincentive for investment according to the neoliberal rhetoric, fell by 13.9% in three years (2010–2013), while productivity reduced by 6.5% (Institute of Labour of the General Confederation of Trade Unions (INE/GSEE), 2013).

Data published by the Hellenic Statistical Authority (EL.STAT) and other government sources about unemployment, service cuts and poverty are not available below the regional scale – which is in itself telling about the questions deemed important and the scale/s and detail at which it is thought appropriate to treat them. Salaries, on the other hand, are regulated at national level and have suffered significant cuts, carrying along a number of benefits (for unemployment, pregnancy, disease, overtime) and contributing to the reduction of pensions. Thus, minimum salaries fell from 751.5€ in 2009, to 586.1€ (before tax) in 2013 (and 510.9€ for people under 25 years of age). Women’s salaries are 78% of those of men and women are further discriminated against by the rise of the pension age and a new system of calculating pensions based on the earnings of the entire working life (INE/GSEE, 2013). Infringements are frequently reported in the press, while there is a significant proportion of employed women and men, local and migrant, who work without any kind of contract.

During the four years of austerity programmes, registered unemployment has reached 1,348,742 people – which, according to some calculations, means 752 people becoming unemployed every day since May 2010.<sup>5</sup> In 2009, women’s unemployment was 12% and men’s did not exceed 5.0%. By 2013, these figures have reached 31.0% and 24.7%, respectively.

However, the figures look more disastrous if one looks at the young age groups: among women under 25 years of age, unemployment went up from 36.6% in 2009 to 65.0% in 2013; the respective figures for men rose from 12.1% to 52% (EL.STAT, Labour Force Surveys, 2009, 2013).<sup>6</sup>

Skyrocketing unemployment, along with severe cuts in salaries and pensions, tax increases and a series of reforms in labour and pension rights have led to dramatic increases in poverty from 16% to 23% of the population and the so-called “new poor” (or “employed poor”) increased by 43% (for Italy, see Mingione, 2006). In the worsening conditions, the neo-Nazi party “Golden Dawn” has gained a strong representation in Parliament (7% of the vote and 21 deputies in the June 2012 elections)<sup>7</sup> and an even stronger presence in some deprived areas of Athens where it has systematically been claiming territoriality and control over space (Kavoulakos and Kandylis, 2010). The insecurities of income cuts and precarity are aggravated by everyday aggressions, violent attacks against migrants, gay men, female left-wing parliamentarians and local activists and other non-conforming individuals and groups.<sup>8</sup>

Violence and aggression in the streets and squares of the city is accompanied by an extremist discourse that overtly promotes racism in the name of “national purity” and homophobia and sexism in the name of aggressive masculinity and a “woman’s place” in the home (Avdela and Psarra, 2012). According to the discourse of Golden Dawn, corrupt politicians, criminal migrants, degenerate homosexuals and audacious women are held responsible for the crisis; women in particular should be stopped from taking men’s jobs in the formal and informal sector, reaching high posts in the employment structure, talking in public and claiming the right to their bodies instead of looking after the Greek family (for a radical discourse analysis, see Athanasiou, 2012). In a context where violence has become commonplace, violence against women, in both private and public space, is also on the increase – albeit hidden in a conspiracy of silence. Data is rare, but very telling.<sup>9</sup>

Until September 2013, successive right-wing governments – and certainly the current one – have shown tolerance towards these often criminal practices, hoping to attract votes from the dirty waters of

violence, nationalism and macho behaviours of the extreme right. For reasons beyond the scope of this paper, many deputies and party activists of Golden Dawn now face legal charges on a long list of criminal acts. The process has been triggered by the killing of a young musician and activist in Perama near Athens. Even in the lower tension environment of Sepolia, aggression against migrants is not uncommon and has contributed not only to generalised feelings of fear, but also to tacit acceptance of violence and sexist and homophobic discourse, which have deeply affected everyday patterns of coexistence.

### *The neighbourhood<sup>10</sup>*

Sepolia is a neighbourhood on the north-west of the city centre of Athens, west of the central railway station, with very good connections to every part of the metropolitan area, through surface and underground transport. Since the early 1990s, many migrants have found here affordable housing and easy access to jobs. For more than two decades, migrants and locals have been testing ways to live together/apart, through their everyday/ordinary practices and sometimes through commonly organised neighbourhood activities.

References to Sepolia in the 19th century underline its important agricultural production, which survived all the way through to the early 1970s, when intensive urbanisation took over. Since the beginning of the 20th century the area has grown as a working-class neighbourhood near the old industrial zone of Athens (Eleonas). A significant number of refugees from Asia Minor found a home in Sepolia in the 1920s (Aggelidis, 1992; also Leontidou, 1990). As an old resident remarks:

The whole area was inhabited by poor people, living on daily wages, internal migrants from all over Greece [...] Few people were better off...public servants or bank employees who lived in small single family houses.

(Charis, interviewed in 2006)

In the 1970s, the first apartment buildings started appearing, with a variety of size and quality of flats. The new round of construction brought into the area

many low-income employees in the commercial and manufacturing activities of the city centre, as well as low-rank civil servants, aspiring to affordable home ownership not far from their workplaces. Rising incomes in the following decades drove many of them to the suburbs, leaving many flats empty (Emmanuel, 2013). A diverse building stock and an equally diverse local population were in place when different waves of migrants started arriving in the 1990s, from the Balkans, mainly Albania, with smaller groups from Eastern Europe and the former USSR, from many African countries and recently from East Asia. The presence of migrants gradually became more consolidated and visible in shops, public spaces and uses of the neighbourhood. As Nikos, an old resident in the area, remarks:

Grocery stores have disappeared from the neighbourhood. Now we have mini-markets operated by foreigners. We have our Pakistani corner shop, our Chinese clothing outlet [...]. You see strange bodies around. You see richer and poorer people [...] Now we remember the neighbourhood, we do not see it any more.

(Nikos, interviewed in 2006)

The initial perplexity and silent enmity of locals and the fear and anxiety of migrants slowly turned into patterns of co-existence where contacts were selective and incidents of overt aggression were rare and contained (on this, see also Kalandides and Vaiou, 2012).

In the streets and the balconies you hear languages that you do not understand. Women sit on the side walks, like in the old days, they knit, they talk to people across the street. Their children play around, they talk to each other languages that we do not know.

(Nikos, interviewed in 2006)

Anja, a migrant woman from Ukraine observes:

Look, we all live here, we have to look after the place. You see, I went to the municipality and complained about the park. It is in a bad condition. And our children play there.

(Anja, interviewed in 2007)

As the crisis evolved, this condition of co-existence met with tensions, which are supported, if not initiated, by members and supporters of Golden Dawn who present themselves as “*the real* local residents”, even though they do not necessarily live in this neighbourhood.

As I have already mentioned, at the scale of the neighbourhood it is not possible to measure the effects of crisis and austerity, but it is possible to make inferences. The severe cuts and lack of disposable income are visible in the poor merchandise on sale in local shops, in the closed and white painted shop windows that intensify the impression of blight in the neighbourhood. Poverty is also visible, for example in the marked presence of people in soup kitchens offered by the church and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), in free exchange bazaars or in the re-appearance of credit accounts in local groceries. They are less visible in the increasing numbers of small children who go to school without having had a proper meal.<sup>11</sup> They are also less visible in the dismantling of public services, including full day care for children and the elderly and access to primary health services, which hits primarily women: local women as recipients of services for themselves and for other members of their households and as workers in those services, where 79% of women’s employment was concentrated in 2009. Cuts also hit migrant women as carers in their own homes/families and as workers in home care; for them loss of employment jeopardises not only their livelihoods but also their “lawful” presence in Greece and the livelihoods of their families elsewhere.

Service and income cuts and more recently heavy taxation have reduced disposable income in a neighbourhood where incomes were already low and have caused a major blow to consumption and on ways of getting by, also among better off residents. Material from recent interviews shows a clear deterioration of the conditions of living, such as overcrowding, worsening nutrition, poor access to health services and efforts to economise on every possible expense and utility bill. These developments have driven households to impoverishment and to the need for an unpaid “full-time housewife” in every household – in new and yet to-be-defined terms, with ever more time-consuming duties and hard manual labour.

## Lived experiences of crisis<sup>12</sup>

In order to approach the crisis at a different but very important scale, that of embodied subjects weaving together practices of coping/resisting in this ordinary place of everyday life, I draw from the stories of three women who live in Sepolia and have recently experienced deep changes in their everyday lives (see footnote 10). Using the stories of people does not imply some claim of authenticity or verification (Cragg, 2002). It rather introduces some transparency of interpretation and some “flesh and blood” in the diversity of urban experiences that constitute the neighbourhood under study.

### *Being made unemployed*

Mary [interviewed in June 2012] is a 48-year-old single woman who has been working for the past 16 years as a social worker in a municipal programme of home care for the elderly. Such programmes expanded and multiplied through Community Support Framework funds, but when fiscal controls and austerity measures intensified, they were severely reduced or even cancelled. Mary was one of the victims, at the end of 2011, and she has not been able to find a job since. Moreover, she was technically a self-employed person, with short-term renewable contracts and, in this sense, she cannot be made “unemployed” and is not eligible for unemployment benefits.

I have started looking for a job in other municipalities, in private homes for the elderly, in whatever. Then for just any job. In several places I am told that I am too old ... too old to be a waitress, not attractive enough to be a shop attendant. It's really depressing you know. Because I am also too young to qualify for a pension.

After a long period with no income and when her savings were depleted, she had to leave the flat she was renting. She moved in with her female partner for a few months, but things did not work. So, she went to live with her mother from where she had fled 25 years earlier. The mother lives in a privately owned flat and has a pension that could at least feed both of them. However, major crises erupt every time a bill arrives, especially if it is from the power

company, which includes property tax. In the winter of 2012, when her mother's pension suffered a 12% cut, Mary and her mother decided to have the telephone line disconnected and to keep the heating off, except for extremely cold evenings.

My cardphone is enough. Besides, who wants to contact us? Perhaps my sister – but she also calculates every euro and calls only at emergencies. We save at least 30 € a month [...] The heating? Ah, when it gets cold, we put several layers on, we cover ourselves with blankets. At some point I was worried about my mother but she made it OK.

It is no surprise that Mary's personal life is severely downgraded, she faces crises of depression and lack of self-esteem; she has not had another partner and feels that she lapses back into power relations with the mother, but she can see no immediate escape. “I cannot complain too much”, she says. “At least I have a roof over my head and I am not hungry. But then, how can I go on like this?” The thing she does complain about, however, is mounting violence in “her” neighbourhood. She has heard about “fights between local residents and migrants” and she reports an incident of people snatching her mother's bag on her way back from the local bank, as well as returning from a visit and finding their flat broken into. “There are many incidents like that in the neighbourhood. I do not any more feel safe to go out at night – even at day time...” She attributes her feelings of insecurity to migrants in general, although, at another point in the interview, she talks very positively about a migrant woman neighbour of theirs from Sierra Leone who is a source of constant assistance to her mother. Her positive feelings are further enhanced by her very recent participation in the social space of Sepolia-Kolonos-Akademia Platonos.<sup>13</sup>

### *Who cares?*

Christiana [interviewed March 2012], is a 56-year-old public servant, divorced and struggling to maintain her standard of living. She used to employ Athena, a migrant woman from Ukraine, as a live-in carer for her father who is a widower and lives on his own in the same apartment building. In 2004, employing a live-in carer seemed like an affordable

alternative that did not conflict with her ideas of appropriate care, as opposed to a home for the elderly (on this, see Bettio et al., 2006; also Mingione, 2009). This arrangement was common among a wide range of households with stable income and made room for Christiana to manage her time without feeling continuously preoccupied and guilty. She was able to shape a personal life of her own and participate in local initiatives. The arrangement relied on the one hand on the abundant availability of low-paid migrant women, one of whom is Athena, and on the other hand on the pension of her father which, albeit low, ensured the material conditions of this type of personalised care, with little contribution on the part of the family, in this case Christiana and her brother.

The severe cuts in pensions and salaries since 2010 have gradually made this model of care unviable. On top of the cuts, restructuring of the National Health System means that pensioners pay higher contributions for medical examinations and for medicines “of which the old man needs a lot”, Christiana says.

My father’s pension is not enough any more to pay Athena and support a separate household. My brother is on the verge of being made unemployed – can you imagine, at the age of 58? [...] And his wife had to close her little corner shop – she was not earning any money... Thank god their children had both gone to study in England and stayed there. Anyway, he cannot help. And my salary has gone down tremendously. I do not get any more overtime or extra salaries<sup>14</sup> – that is what I was giving for my father...

Her daughter Tina, a 26-year-old graduate from the department of sociology and currently unemployed, comes to the assistance of her mother and proposes to look after her grandfather, while her mother is at work.

But what about after work or at night? And what about Athena? I had to dismiss her after eight years – and I still worry about her. I have introduced her to other people, but everybody fears cuts and taxes – they try to cope on their own.

For Athena, losing this job means more than just becoming unemployed; it also means that she is at

risk of soon losing her work permit, the renewal of which depends on the payment of social security contributions, and then being unable to send money back to her family in Ukraine – which poses questions about seldom-mentioned interconnections and hidden effects of the Greek crisis across borders.

### *Precarious lives*

Etleva [interviewed September 2012] is a 24-year-old migrant woman from Albania. She came to Athens as a young bride six years ago, in the context of family unification, therefore with legal papers as a dependent of her husband. She now has a four-year-old daughter born in Athens. When she first arrived, her husband had a good job as a plumber and the plan was for her to be a housewife and mother. With the advent of the crisis, however, construction was one of the first sectors to collapse; since the beginning of 2011 the husband works only occasionally and informally, while his former employer owes him at least 3000€.

In this situation, Etleva is the only person employed in the young family. She works two days per week as a cleaner, and cleans a private home on Sundays and two offices once a fortnight each. The company she works for claims to take a high risk by employing her and pays her only 20€ for 8 hours per day, whereas from the other two jobs she takes 7€ per hour. She tries to make ends meet by economising on every possible expense, but to her distress she has to appeal regularly for the assistance of her mother-in-law, herself a low-paid cleaner in private homes.

I go to the open market around 3:00, when they start collecting their things to go. It is cheaper then – and some green-grocers give you things for free [...] I was told that some organization gives food not far from here – but I am ashamed to go.<sup>15</sup> If I need something urgently, the man at the corner shop gives me and allows me to pay later, when I get my money.

As her husband has been unemployed for two years now, he does not pay social security contributions and, therefore, he cannot renew his residence/work permit, nor those of Etleva and their daughter. As a result, Etleva cannot be formally employed and

is afraid to go out. “I take Zana [her little daughter] with me – they don’t stop you with the child, you know”, she says. Her anxiety for material survival for her and her family is mixed with the fear of moving around to go to work, to do the shopping, to take her daughter to and from school, to visit friends and family. She is afraid that she may experience aggression from fascist groups or be arrested/detained by the police (and perhaps even deported).

But where can we go? Mama lives near, we have friends around, we are used to the neighbourhood [...] And Zana, we cannot take her to the day care, they ask for our papers. But this good teacher [the principal] tells me “I will take the child”. And now Zana goes – she is happy there. She eats a good meal every day...

Most days Etleva’s husband stays at home and reluctantly collects Zana from school and looks after her until Etleva comes home. However, he does not engage in household tasks; the fact that Etleva has become the “breadwinner” destabilises both his and her idea of what men and women are supposed to do in the family.

Sometimes he is very angry. He does not beat me or the girl, I have friends who suffer this as well. But he shouts, he doesn’t like anything in the house. [...] He was such a sweet, docile man [...] It’s no good when the man stays at home and the woman goes out and works.

### **What do these stories tell us?**

The three women whose stories I have quoted, like many others, have seen their personal life projects overturned by the crisis, albeit in ways that differ significantly. They have to survive with lower or no income, curtailed services and increasing violence in the city. Care and its dismantling is an underlying thread that re-organises everyday lives and mobilises tensions at many levels, to do with gender relations among mother and daughter, local and migrant women, women and men, as well as with the ways in which they envisage their prospects on a day-to-day basis and in the immediate and longer-term future.

Care is an everyday concern, for my respondents as for millions of women, at times of affluence as

well as at times of poverty. Improvisations and detailed adaptations in the everyday routines and practices increase not only anxiety and insecurity, but also the burden of what care and housework mean under conditions of salary cuts, unemployment and precarity. Examples from the three stories include shopping late in the open market, disconnecting the telephone, buying food on short-term credit from local stores rather than super markets, sharing care among women, etc. In this process personal choices are given up in view of pressing survival needs in a web of relations that Narotzky (2013) calls “*economías cotidianas*” (everyday economies).

The management of everyday economies becomes more complicated and difficult for women, since men seldom share the necessary labour (with the possible exception of some of the younger and more educated among them). The uncertainties that the crisis creates seem to lead to more conservative behaviour and deepening gender divisions of labour; however, they may also open room for empowerment and the negotiation of gender identities. The masculinities promoted in the popular media are distanced from caring images and contribute to a hardening of gender hierarchies and to an increasing acceptance and “normalisation” of downgrading women. They are also actively adopted and promoted by the Golden Dawn, whose sexist, racist and homophobic discourse and aggressive macho behaviours find fertile ground to penetrate in the crisis-ridden society. At the same time, practices of living together and more egalitarian arrangements are gradually being built into the common spaces of various initiatives that try to implement the slogan “nobody alone in the crisis”.

Along with the devastating experience of unemployment and poverty, the women discussed in the above stories face fear and insecurity in different ways in the spaces of their everyday lives. Certain parts of Sepolia where they live are “claimed” by Golden Dawn, propagating the expulsion of migrants from the area and holding them responsible for the (effects of the) crisis. Its hate discourse and aggressive practices find fertile ground among people personally and collectively disenchanted with the “state of emergency” that austerity policies constitute. In

this context, real or imagined threats settle in and affect everyday practices and ways of being in the neighbourhood, now shaped by insecurity and fear.

In this complex and changing environment, the effects of the crisis on gender hierarchies are not clear cut and deserve deeper and longer-term analysis. Living with multiplicity and mutual engagement and with a plethora of possible trajectories and life choices – constituting “a progressive sense of place” as Massey (1994, 2005) has so forcefully argued for many years – becomes more than a theoretical conception. It is a major stake, a process of familiarisation with difference/s and otherness, which includes controversies; it requires investment of time and labour, both material and emotional, abundantly contributed by women, including the ones whose stories are quoted in this paper. The small and repetitive acts of care, usually invisible in the (economic) analyses of the crisis, may start as practices of coping with the hardships inflicted by austerity policies. However, individual practices often move beyond the boundaries of private space and family arrangements and link with collective initiatives, local or otherwise (Vaiou and Kalandides, 2013). People like Maria move out of isolation and desperation into newfound ways of not only coping but also of resisting the crisis – and perhaps prospectively of “doing politics”.

In this sense, the stories of ordinary women (and men) that I invoke in my work are not an idiosyncratic particularity that can be easily ignored when we deal with understandings of the crisis. They are obviously caught up in power relations and institutional policy frameworks deployed at urban, national and European/international scales (Smith, 2013). However, this choice of (geographical) scale, linked in multiple ways to many other scales, reveals areas of knowledge that would otherwise remain in the dark. The change of focus (like in photography) does not mean amplification or diminution of the subject itself; it means a change of view about it. Stories that connect concrete bodies with global processes enrich our understandings with more complex and more flexible variables and, in this sense, they inform the “big pictures” (and not only the reverse). Such a theoretical and methodological approach is important, I believe, also politically at the present

conjuncture, because it provides a vantage point from which to break through the dominant discourse/s and collectively build (on) alternative narratives and ways out of the crisis.

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### Notes

1. See, amongst others, Lapavistas et al. (2010), Varoufakis (2011), Douzinas (2013) and Tsakalotos and Laskos (2013).
2. The harsh austerity measures demanded by the IMF, the European Central Bank (ECB) and the European Community (EC; the so-called Troika) met the unquestioned approval and support of Greek banks and successive governments. Toussaint (2012) argues that those measures will not allow Greece or any other affected country to improve their situation and characterises them as “a criminal act”.
3. For an alternative reading and interpretation, see Papadopoulou and Sakellariadis (2012); also Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (2011)
4. There is a growing interest, but up to now little systematic research, on a wealth of solidarity initiatives springing up in every neighbourhood of Athens (and other cities). Based on the premise that people actively and collectively participate and do not just receive assistance to resist/cope with the crisis, these initiatives include collective action for immediate day-to-day survival (such as soup kitchens, social groceries, communal cooking, exchange networks...); however, they also include social medical wards and pharmacies, as well as actions based on broader political claims and practices of living together (e.g. social spaces, local assemblies, advice and support centres, occupied public spaces, or “no intermediaries” initiatives) and attempts of making a living collectively (employment collectives). For a preliminary mapping and analysis, see Vaiou and Kalandides (2013)
5. Of those unemployed, 63% are long-term unemployed (36% for over 2 years) and, following the new measures, they receive no unemployment benefits after 12 months.
6. EL.STAT publishes only aggregate data by region, according to which the rate of unemployment in Greater Athens is 28.2% in the second semester of 2013 ([www.statistics.gr](http://www.statistics.gr)).

7. For a discussion of the rise of the extreme right in Greece and particularly Golden Dawn, see Psarras (2011).
8. Material has been drawn from the internet postings of the party itself ([www.cryshavgh.com](http://www.cryshavgh.com)), which has a special page on women.
9. Results from the SOS helpline of the General Secretariat of Equality, as well as more scant data from other sources, show a considerable increase of bashing, beating, serious injury (sometimes killing), sexual abuse, rape, and also economic and verbal violence against women.
10. The material used here is drawn from a broader research project (2005–2007) that included research in this and other central neighbourhoods of Athens. The project included elaborations and mappings of unpublished demographic and socio-economic census data on migrants and locals; detailed field work surveys (land use, housing market, commercial activity, types and uses of local services, etc.); biographical interviews (2–5 hours each) with 20 women migrants working as domestic helpers and carers for elderly people, approached through migrant support networks; in-depth interviews (1–2 hours each) with eight of their employers, approached through the migrant women who worked for them; interviews with 14 key informants (migrants' collectivities, old residents in the two neighbourhoods, volunteer teachers of Greek language for migrants, real estate agents); extensive systematic observation in public spaces and local shops and services (Vaiou et al., 2007). In 2012, I started a small and on-going project on the "gendered experiences of crisis", in the context of which I re-visit the place and re-interview respondents to the previous project, in an attempt to trace the effects of the crisis in migrant and local women's everyday lives.
11. According to a recent survey of 6300 pupils in public schools in Athens, which was reported in several newspapers, 23% of children live under the poverty line and 14% live in families that cannot provide adequate food or pay their regular bills. See, for example, newspapers *Efimerida ton Syntakton* 20/11/2012, *Avgi* 25/12/2011, 12/12/2012, 25/12/2012, 31/1/2013, *Kyriakatiki Eleftherotypia* 16/10/2011.
12. Some of the material in this section has been used in Vaiou (2012) "Les aspects genrés de la crise à Athènes", a paper presented in the Interdisciplinary Workshop *Gender and the Spatial Turn*, Université Paris Diderot, 16–17 November.
13. A number of local initiatives in the broader area of Sepolia, including a social space (of meeting, discussing and organising), a soup kitchen ("mazi na ta fame" – "let's eat together"), support teaching for migrant and local school children and a cooperative for low price foodstuffs ("without intermediaries"). As in other neighbourhoods, the slogan is "nobody alone in the crisis" (see [www.solidarity4all.gr](http://www.solidarity4all.gr)).
14. All employed people used to earn one extra salary at Christmas, half a salary at Easter and half a salary over summer, all of which were severely cut after 2010.
15. She refers to the local solidarity initiative (see footnote 12).

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