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### Work culture and migrant women's welfare marginalization

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## WORK CULTURE AND MIGRANT WOMEN'S WELFARE MARGINALIZATION

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### ABSTRACT

*Central to this paper is the relationship between work and welfare marginalization of migrant women domestic workers. Based upon the findings of a recent (2005-2007) research study on Albanian and Ukrainian domestic workers' access to social insurance, medical and children's care (i.e. nurseries, kindergartens), the paper claims that welfare barriers are constituted around lack of resources, discriminations as well as conditions and values at work.*

*At the highest level of generality, paid domestic work is considered part of an economic activity that is increasingly difficult to relate with the official state policies and welfare provisions, because of its fluid and personalized work conditions. However, the typical processes, routes followed, and set of ideas developed by migrant women in domestic work in order e.g to maintain employability, necessitate the adoption of practices and values which sustain and enhance existing welfare barriers to the above mentioned services.*

*The first part of the paper explores the role of low status jobs in welfare ideas and practices. The second part refers to the case of Albanian cleaners and Ukrainian carers working in Greece, their work conditions and values, and how both contribute to welfare limits.*

### INTRODUCTION

This paper is concerned with migrant women domestic workers access to formal welfare institutions and services (i.e. social insurance, hospital care and nurseries). Access to different types of social benefits has for long been the central concern of both sociology and social policy contributions.

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Amongst the many different routes followed to explain how migrants experience inequalities in the field of welfare resources and distribution by formal agencies, the discussion of conditions, habits and culture at work deserves a closer attention. In relation to the low status service industry it is suggested that work, not only exposes workers to the risks of poverty, irregular jobs and menial tasks, and a series of practices not covered or protected by the host society and its welfare institutions, but it also readjusts patterns and prospects of life organization.

To examine therefore how domestic work shapes migrant women's opportunities, activities, and views on welfare is in itself an attractive enquiry and a *tour* into the more profound moral or emotional penetrations of economy on people. This has been prompted out of a general understanding that work is first and foremost, as Brown (1978) explained, an experience and a tool for communicating difference and social stratification. This is most vividly reflected in the views one holds about the social world and in expectations of social protection and mobility (Becker, 1964; Kassimati, 2004). But there is also a second more particular reason for pressing ahead with such an inquiry. Over the years, various research contributions on the life chances of immigrant workers in Greece have shown that work and employment conditions socially exclude people from welfare opportunities and rights. This social exclusion is not in itself a matter embedded only in the lack of resources or administrative restrictions, but also in the ways work shapes migrants' views about themselves and the host society.

Based on the findings of a recent research project (see Psimmenos and Skamnakis, 2008), this paper addresses substantive parameters involved in the welfare prospects and access of migrant women domestic workers into social insurance, health care and children's nurseries. By looking into the objective conditions and welfare attitudes of domestic workers from Albania and Ukraine living in Greece and employed as cleaners and live-in carers, it is hoped that it will become clearer how domestic work affects women's social protection life schemes.

#### WELFARE MARGINALIZATION OF IMMIGRANTS AND THE LOW STATUS SERVICES

For sociology and the history of migrant labour, welfare marginalization<sup>1</sup> begins with social order and how work mediates between the market,

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1. *Welfare marginalization*, as opposed to the use of the general term *marginalization*, is preferred here in order to indicate the differences that exist between various types of border

personal aspirations and the state or formal welfare institutions of society. Borderline living and a human condition out of society's *protective shields* have not always been understood as being the result of maladjustment, vice, unemployment or idleness. Instead, for migrant workers employed in precarious or low-status jobs, welfare marginalization is thought to be a process beginning with social stratification and ending with the formation of distinctive work norms and values about social relations and welfare strategies. One such example is the case of migrant women employed in the services sector.

In contrast to modernist views which have alleged the progressive emancipatory role of work,<sup>2</sup> the concentration of migrant women or women from racial or ethnic groups in low status services (e.g. homeworking, housekeeping, prostitution) has been understood as having more than just an income related impact on their lives.

The underlying theoretical assumption held here (i.e. of the Chicago School or the Marxist and Weberian tradition) is that workers in low status services are not only being exposed to various important social and economic inequalities and discriminations by the formal welfare mechanisms of social protection. Performing low service work also exposes women to a number of limits on perceptions and practices about the *self*, *welfare* and *group belongingness*.

The above proposition is central, for example, in duBois' (late nineteenth century) classic study *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899, rep. 1996), an issue which was further examined by the early Chicago School of Sociology and the voluminous case studies on the effects of job precariousness upon migrant workers. For duBois and Isabel Eaton, the work place is treated as a place for the formation of social exclusion or of racial and gendered identities as well as

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line living (e.g. income related, political participation, community segregation, etc.) and to stress the importance of migrant workers' relation to formal welfare agencies on their life organization paths.

2. What is debated here is the Modernist claim that almost by definition (an axiom) the impact of modern economy and society leads to individual empowerment and a break from gendered and community notions and boundaries of life. For a further critical understanding of this thesis, see Rai (2002) on the effects of modern wage economy on the gender and ethnic divisions of migrant women, Fredrickson (1997) on the relational aspects of feudal values and modern economic divisions which determine migrants' stratification, and Tilly's (1998) understanding that migrant women's concentration in low services is sustained through a moral and social legitimation of inequalities. See also Gjerde (1998), Schmitt and Moody (1994).

of appropriate ways of subordinate<sup>3</sup> living. Being employed as a cleaner, cook, maid or child minder has implications. One such implication is the workers' understanding of tasks divisions as being linked to cultural and moral traits. This linkage is reinforced through the use of "paternal" or "maternal" advices or *instructive* methods by employers, and through treating the job-place as a substitute for workers' family relations. Then again rights and benefits distributed according to personal *trust*, gender stereotypes and ethnic or cultural backgrounds (i.e. Eaton describes how employers used cultural stereotypes to legitimize task divisions) lower women workers' economic and social expectations, and produce a culture of deference and patronage.

The formation of job sub-cultures is further explained by the early Chicago School of Sociology. The emphasis was put on the *commodification* of servitude and the emergence of a subculture of casual work *mentality*.

In Thomas and Znaniecki's *Polish Peasant* (see Zaretsky, 1984), in Cressey (1932, see also Gelder, 2007: 37) or in Park, Burgess and Mackenzie (1925), welfare marginalization is seen as one's dislocation from community filiations, being out of place or as a social outcome of migration and of the anomic city environment. It is also seen as a form of adjusting to a particular set of values that distinguishes one's life paths from formal organizations and values. It is not a norm-less condition of human life. Instead, different norms prevail and provide not only a solution to survival but also a way to build on social networks which seem more close to the life experiences and social predicaments of workers in low status jobs.

In the *Polish Peasant*, for example, migrant workers are being confronted with a regular change of residence and work places, of work practices, and a morality reinforcing individualism and actions based on private interests. In the study, casual work and the city environment, opposite to what was hoped, *disorganize* existing networks and values on moral order and welfare solidarity. Destitution, deviance, the breakdown of family rules are only some of the examples offered. But the influence of the market and of the city is not only disorganizing but also re-organizing the morals and life organization of Polish migrants, in terms of people's welfare.

On this basis the casual job market is thought to expose workers to the prioritization of economic transactions and egotistic behaviours.<sup>4</sup> "Each

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3. For early theories of exclusion, see duBois (1920, rep. 1999) and Jordan (1996).

4. The spread however of Tayloristic principles of management organization, of mass production, and of unskilled work, to migrants and native population (1880-1920s) gave rise to new social consciousness amongst workers in America, which questioned Thomas and Znaniecki's original assumptions.

member follows his own course of action, has a different set of interests” and nothing induces one to substitute private economic interests for “reciprocal social responses” to welfare (Thomas and Znaniecki, in Zaretsky, 1984: 270-271).<sup>5</sup> This is thought to be an outcome *firstly* of hiring procedures such as the *calling on* system outside factories or job agencies, which amplified problems of irregular employment and personal contacts with employers. *Secondly*, apart from undermining income stability and security, such a hiring system was considered to have detrimental effects on workers’ expectations, usually reduced to the maintenance of day living. *Thirdly*, being in the lowest possible condition of employment, workers according to Thomas and Znaniecki developed the habit of accepting irregular jobs as a substitute for steady and assured types of employment, of thinking that day labour is a way to ensure personal independence, and of taking no pleasures in labour securities which might devoid them from the *liberties* casual jobs provide.

Moreover, this moral journey or “*milieu*” (Park’s notion) of migrant casual and low-status workers is also the theme of Cressey exploring further the notion of job *careers*. Having been looking at recreational and prostitution services offered by women, Cressey identifies at least three important mechanisms, through which occupational culture may alter one’s social and welfare perspective (see Gelder, 2007). According to Cressey these are: the rise of a commercial understanding of personal services, the development of an emotional understanding of commerciality, and the development of a work perception that is more linked to *emancipatory* or *cosmopolitan* views of life. The *first* relates to the organization of body functions and ways to manipulate clients, so as to increase the volume of customers and economic returns (opportunism) in the shortest possible time. The *second* refers to the *flavouring* of services with mini-breaks of romance, marriage, or sharing satisfaction as part of a sensual transaction between themselves and the clients. In this sense, a job is also treated as an escape route, in which, as Gelder (2007) suggests, “commercial imperatives” and “romantic impulses”, exploitation and affection sit uneasily alongside each other” (Gelder, 2007: 30-39). Finally, providing escort services was also seen as a “*gaze*” into various ethnicities and cultures and as an opportunity to meet different people from all over the world without having to travel.

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5. Social expectations however were not always limited according to job and ethnic categorizations. The role of welfare agencies (see Gans, 1995) through their policies, family and political affiliations with home countries, and even meeting or hiring places for casual labourers, provided some sense of “roots”, values and common means for communication. See Gutman (1987) and Sachar (1993).

After World War II, a number of issues (e.g. industrialization, division of labour, welfare state) shifted attention away from the study of specific occupations towards a more general understanding of how migrant workers, particularly women, relate to formal state institutions and production systems. In the place of occupational subcultures, marginalization was mainly identified with regimes of immigration control and employment related to industrial, consumer and welfare systems of organization.

Especially after Frazier's treatise on the *Negro Family in the United States* (1939), a number of USA scholars like Whyte (1943), Davis (1946), Miller (1958), Rodman (1959) and Gans (1962), concentrated their critique on the contribution of low status residential and occupational concentration of migrant labour force to the development of a *culture* of informal social organization (see Welshman, 2006: 92-93).

The claim was that segregation, lack of opportunities, institutional discriminations by labour organizations and welfare agencies bred a labour force that *suffered* from lack of motivations and was susceptible to an informal way of living. This informal way of living included not only economic aspects of life but also values about welfare *alternative* to formal institutions. This was also the main aspect of concern for European scholars discussing the effects of a dual labour market on the welfare of migrants. More importantly, during the 1970s, studies like those of Giddens (1973) or Rex and Moore (1967) showed that social and occupational segregation has had a detrimental effect on migrants' *trust* on the host society's formal institutions and on their social behavior towards politics and social protection practices.

Not surprisingly the issue of welfare marginalization was further studied through an examination of the following: *first*, of the unequal treatment of migrant workers by the welfare agencies. *Secondly*, through an analysis of the way women relate with service labour markets, and *lastly*, through an analysis of auxiliary guest-workers class and status in society. It was, however, the sociological works of Phizacklea's (1983) *One Way Ticket*, of Castles and Kosack's (1973) *Immigrant workers and class structure in Western Europe*, and of Cohen's (1987) *The New Helots*, which showed how labour-market segmentation corresponds to a differential welfare service system, based alongside race, gender, and on immigration and employment status classification.

In all the above mentioned studies the emphasis is put on the growth of an undocumented and *socially invisible* labour force, which not only experiences forms of discrimination and social exclusion from various rights

and provisions, but also a life in the *shadows* of society's institutions. In Cohen's study, immigration policies in the U.S. and Europe and casual labour markets have contributed towards a particularly distinctive type of immigrant workforce. This is characterized by informal employment, lack of basic rights and welfare benefits (Cohen, 1987: 185), a life in hiding (to avoid arrest) from immigration authorities, and patronage from employers and hiring agencies. The theoretical understanding, however, is not limited to the various new barriers casual migrant labour is facing, but extends to the roles of immigration policies and of informal economy in the formulation of specific habits and ideas about life in the host society, amongst workers. The formation of a subculture of informal organization based upon: isolation from institutions of social protection, social fragmentation according to task divisions and employers, and a culture of informal work codes and practices is a characteristic of the new *invisible* labour force.

The issue of invisibility is also the immediate concern of Phizacklea's edited study on migration. Morokvasic's, Anthias' and Phizacklea's contributions in it focus on the role of immigration policies and of types of work and of employment in the formulation of a distinctive labour force. They suggested that this labour force is identified by the ways workers relate to the migration process, the welfare state, and the labour market. Challenging the liberal and modernist approaches to migration and the thesis of modern development,<sup>6</sup> they propose: *first*, that labour segmentation deepens gender divisions and maintain traditional values about women's work and welfare position in society; *secondly*, that the life patterns and welfare organization of women migrants employed in services is distinguished from other groups of casual migrant labour (including women from different backgrounds and types of employment); and *lastly*, that welfare practices and ideas depend to a large extent not only on rights and provisions by the state but also on social expectations, identities and the values generated at work. This is also proposed by Castles and Kosack's study (1973), in which, although they are less critical towards the *modernist thesis* on migrants social and cultural adaptation to modern economy, they nevertheless hold the view that the rise of a new low-service migrant labour force has bestowed upon women workers new gendered constraints on life prospects.

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6. These see both migration and work as mechanisms for women's empowerment and social emancipation away from the fetters of traditionalism and community controls over an individual's life. See Morokvasic (1983: 16-18, in Phizacklea) and Rai (2002: Chap. 2).



The contemporary growth of low service industry and migrants place in it has made research into the grim life prospects of women even more attractive. In Greece, in the 1990's, a number of case studies supported the idea that what mattered most for migrants' informal labour organization, apart from regimes of employment and immigration control, was also the type of work performed. Sociological studies focused on personal services, as a distinctive form of labour which generated particular living conditions and aspects of social identity (Lazaridis and Psimmenos, 2000; Karakatsanis, Swarts, 2003; Psimmenos, 1995). Anderson's and Phizacklea's comparative report (1997), for example, on the conditions and life prospects of migrant women domestic workers and a number of research studies that followed (for an overview see Psimmenos and Kassimati, 2006a), renewed interest on the issue of marginality of women and of the different types of inequalities they experience. What particularly led to a revival of interest was that domestic work not only undermined women's welfare opportunities and capabilities, but it also undermined family, community and citizenship rights and habituated workers to a customized type of servitude (see also Tastsoglou and Maratou-Alipranti, 2003). It was suggested in those studies that domestic workers in Greece were driven to isolation from social filiations and towards sexual and economic exploitation. More specifically, domestic work was thought to induce workers to depend on niches of undocumented labour, protected by individual employers or temporal work agencies, and to seek informal social protection offered by private clients, as an alternative to state welfare. The nature of work and of employment led women to work practices and a work "culture" which *customized* residence and living standards, according to the market fluctuations and the values and needs of individual clients' physical and social habits (see also Psimmenos and Kassimati, 2006b).

#### THE BACKGROUND OF DOMESTIC SERVICE

The analysis of migrant domestic workers' access to welfare presented here is part of a larger study (Psimmenos and Skamnakis, 2008) including the perspectives and actions of welfare officials towards women (see Skamnakis' article in this volume). Women were randomly selected from migrants' records completed through snowballing techniques, and to be eligible for the research study each woman had to have entered the country legally (i.e. in some cases this was not so), to have at least five years of residence in Greece and to be actively involved in personal services (i.e. cleaners and live-in domestics). Here, due to space constraints, the analysis is confined to the presentation of a

fraction of the barriers to welfare that women experience. From the initial study of forty-two Albanian (31 women) and Ukrainian (11 women) domestic workers life stories, it became clear that domestic services are *reserved* for migrant women who had already experienced particular types of inequalities and forms of social exclusion both in the home and host countries.

During the course of the interviews that were conducted, the majority of Albanian women claimed that at their place of origin they have *first* experienced social and political boundaries concerning prospects for themselves and for their spouse, and *secondly* that flexible non-standardized forms of employment increased their cash flows but decreased stability and securities in welfare benefits and employment. Having being left on their own (their husbands had migrated to Greece) more than half of the Albanian interviewees decided also to join their spouse using a family re-unification visa permit. But re-unification visas restricted both autonomous access to various welfare benefits (i.e. social insurance) and prohibited their employment in Greece.

In the case of Ukrainian women, problems of insecure employment led to the break of marriage bonds. The experience of short-term employment, low wages, and a decrease in welfare provisions led women to grave risks of poverty and child maintenance. Lacking family security and other fringe benefits due to non-standard work arrangements, they decided to migrate. They entered the country using a tourist visa with the help of temporary job agencies, which in some cases covered the costs of traveling and of visa or other expenses, involved in illegal transfer of workers from Ukraine to Greece (i.e. bribing customs officials). Their traveling documents prohibited them from any other form of residence and activity other than that of tourism. Access to any kind of social protection other than the one usually given in health emergency situations, and only after an agreement or consultation with the Ukrainian council, was also restricted.

The interviews suggest that both Albanian and Ukrainian women, apart from the above mentioned experiences, were led to domestic services mainly due to their ethnic origins, their family expectations, and the operations of the Greek informal labour market. Respondents from Albania claimed in their interviews that ethnicity and gender have a major role to play in the job opportunities and prospects for migrants. Racial boundaries on what kind of work women from Albania can do in Greece restrict hiring *choices* to cleaning services for individuals, families or firms. At best, according to the interviewees, women find jobs as auxiliary staff in restaurants, bars or in piece-rate production units in medium-sized family

owned enterprises. Overall, throughout the entire spectrum of job *opportunities* offered to Albanian women, there are some common characteristics. These are: low wage, low-status unskilled work, possibly uninsured, and temporal employment. In addition to the above, women have explained that due to their family being in Greece, their decision to join domestic service has also to do with the spouses' job, its work place and operational flexibility. It seems that Albanian women combine their job searching with their husbands' employment and develop a reciprocal understanding of what kind of tasks and jobs suit best the family unit and its unstable patterns of residence and economic activity in Greece.

On the other hand, Ukrainian women suggested in their interviews that domestic service, prostitution, and marriage are the only job opportunities given by the host society to undocumented women migrants from *Eastern* Europe. In most cases, due to their undocumented status in Greece, choices over job contents and types of employment were left to job agencies (legal or illegal), co-ethnic subcontractors, or individual employers. The market in Greece, in contrast to the case of Albanian women, shows preference for live-in domestics from Ukraine for two reasons mainly. These according to the interviewees correlate ethnicity with "high cultural traits, sexual stereotypes and with expected abilities and willingness (due to undocumented migration status) of women to accept and endure the duties and conditions of a live-in domestic worker". In addition, for the majority of Ukrainian women being without papers (i.e. work and residence permits) and on their own in the host country and having under-age dependent family members back at home to support, care was seen as probably the only form of suitable employment under the circumstances. A job as a live-in domestic worker was seen as something that '*suitet*' their plans to shorten the period of time staying in Greece, and avoid police detention.

#### BARRIERS TO WELFARE SERVICES: CONDITIONS AND VALUES

By focusing on types of welfare like those of social insurance, hospital and pre-school care, the original research covered a wide spectrum of migrant women's relation with formal agencies of social protection. The life stories of both Albanian and Ukrainian women in Greece shed light on both the conditions involved and the values implicated in their approaches to welfare. The two combined seem to adequately describe not only what the two groups face because of institutions when the issue of welfare is in question,

but also what the impact of work on the life organization and attitudes towards welfare institutions and services is.

In the initial phases of the research it was thought sufficient to focus on the objective conditions (i.e. social rights and work conditions) impeding women's access to welfare services. It was soon made clear, however, that welfare marginality is not a matter of services distribution and the actions taken by immigration authorities, welfare agencies and officials alone, but also an issue of how people are being "*pushed*" to think and act about welfare. As also Therborn (2006) suggests in his theoretical contribution about the *Inequalities of the World*, inequalities and states of people's welfare are produced, sustained and reproduced in a frame of social and moral interaction, and cannot be explained only in terms of resources and their official distribution to people (Therborn, 2006: 11). For welfare marginalization, the case of Albanian and Ukrainian women reveals that in addition to institutional barriers to services a frame is built due to immigration status and work, which also prohibits access to welfare and the use of services. More specifically, the analysis of interviews showed that women's attitudes, perceptions and actions towards *safety* or insecurity, *integration* and *allegiances* or solidarity, changed. This change came about through women's encounter with and adaptation to an informal economy, and their habituation to the contents, operations and the relationships developed at their work place. These three aspects of working life are thought to be central in a discussion of welfare and, in the analysis below, it will become even clearer that they also constitute important barriers to social insurance, health, and aspects concerning pre-school care.

Coming to terms, however, first of all with the welfare conditions migrant women experience in Greece, the list below summarizes some of those parameters thought by women as distantiating them from services. Different factors are thought by women domestic workers to minimize access to welfare services like social insurance, health and children's care, which can thus be sketched out here as:

- *Lack* of work and/or residence permits, or being unable to renew them.
- *Dependence* upon others for welfare and employment. For Albanian women, social responsibility for residence and insurance lied with the husband. For Ukrainian women, residence and work responsibility lied with the tourist operators (traffickers) and the employing families.
- *Inability* to apply for individual work and residence permits. In most cases, due to initial status and employment conditions the majority of women expressed difficulties to meet the existing legal procedures or requirements for their legalization process.

- *Inability* (for those who successfully managed to apply for visas) to sustain their legal status due to financial reasons and due to a change in personal circumstances.
- *Work conditions* in the informal economy provided the necessary grounds for uninsured work, unstable and non-standardized employment, which impeded access to welfare benefits.
- *Work relations* with employers produced dependencies, patronage and values that sustain or produce informal strategies to welfare.

Present immigration policies and work conditions seem according to women's stories to ferment their social exclusion from welfare benefits. Specific to the above, domestic workers explained in their interviews that efforts made to operate within the system of state welfare were not encouraged by authorities, due to bureaucratic inertia, prejudice and lack of sensitivity by officials to the particular circumstances of life experienced by domestic workers in Greece. The above structures are salient enough to distantiate women from welfare benefits.

In relation to social insurance, for example, both Albanian and Ukrainian women expressed the view that the journey towards an uninsured condition of life in Greece begins with the existing immigration policies followed. Interviews strongly indicate that the undocumented or family re-unification status they acquire in the host country excludes them by definition from all sort of welfare services, especially those like social insurance. Without a work permit and social insurance, women are being pushed to informal economy for survival and for supporting their family dependents. Whereas for Albanians this economy usually includes jobs in domestic cleaning or auxiliary services in catering businesses, for Ukrainians the only market prospect is either in private or public care as live-in domestic workers and/or as assistant nurses in private homes or hospitals.

Once in the informal economy, the next problem women seem to experience relates to the work conditions and how steadily their chances to acquire both a residence and work permit are reduced because the majority of jobs they perform are uninsured. Thus women cannot successfully apply for work permits. There seems to be a condition which recycles social exclusion and limits further women's chances for inclusion into the welfare system. What this means is that, both Albanian and Ukrainian women domestic workers, once having entered the unofficial or informal labour market, not only suffer from exploitation and working conditions not

protected by state or labour codes, but they are also unable to claim any benefits (see also Vasilikou, 2007). A similar situation existed also in relation to health and pre-school care services. Due to policies on undocumented migrants and on social insurance, domestic workers from both countries had difficulties with public hospitals authorities and in particular with any sort of medical treatment which did not qualify as an emergency. This included visits to obstetrician, annual health check-ups, and the covering of child-birth costs by public hospitals.

In the case of public nurseries or kindergartens, they were also denied access due to lack of work and residence permits. Women claimed in their interviews their children were denied access because they could not prove that they were employed by one singular employer. As it is known, the job market amongst cleaners, especially those working in private homes is usually operating through what we identified in the initial study as a *multi-share* type of employment. For officials working in various welfare agencies the inability of clients to clarify their job-employment status (i.e. whether they are self-employed or employed by an individual or enterprise) and provide reference letters from employers, is usually enough to determine access to services. Except from the above, due to the complicated flexible work arrangements, women also experienced difficulties convincing officials that they were in real need for a public nursery and that the place of residence, income and hours of work, qualified them for such a welfare provision. In addition, racial or ethnic prejudices against i.e. Albanian women which were thought by officials not to follow the rules of the institution (e.g. providing health certificates of the child's vaccination record when asked, pick up their children in time and generally follow instructions) have also been highlighted by women as additional barriers against their children's access to pre-school care facilities.

The initial phase however, of welfare marginality pushes women to invest on practical steps thought important in order to acquire legal papers and access into welfare services. These strategies were identified in the interviews as being that of: *self-insurance* (i.e. buying themselves social insurance stamps and paying taxes), of holding *parallel employment* in two different but similar types of economic activity (i.e. working as a cleaner for an agency and for private households), of *buying* in the black market their *visa permits*, of getting *married* to a Greek, trading moral securities and affections for *status securities*, and of investing more on how to *operate* more successfully in the informal economy and increase their powers and returns over their economic environment.

However, the importance of the above mentioned steps or strategies is also present when women face issues such as medical care and access of their children into nurseries or kindergartens. Discussing institutional barriers (i.e. due to their legal status and informal employment) and how to counteract exclusion, domestic workers suggest that in the case of medical services they often resorted to *non-governmental organizations* or philanthropic institutions for help (i.e. the church, the PIKPA,<sup>7</sup> community associations), personal *bribery* of officials and medical staff, or using *personal contacts* (i.e. employers) to combat health inequalities. Similar strategies have also been followed for children's entry into nursing or kindergarten public facilities. For women being employed as live-in domestics there is also the *choice* of paying private boarding schools for their children so as to continue with their job tasks or alternatively ask employers to permit children's residence in the job-place.

These alternative responses to welfare by women in the study exemplify the effects institutional barriers have upon migrants. Welfare ideas and actions are both a process of structural conditions and how Albanian and Ukrainian women comprehend and confront these conditions. When referring to the above strategies adopted to combat welfare exclusion and marginality it becomes clear that subjects are not passively enduring discriminations. Seeking alternative routes to welfare or means of how to *force* themselves into the system of welfare provisions is certainly an example of agency here. But as it will become further clear below, these active responses are not necessarily out of line with the institutional barriers to welfare. In fact one could argue they are part of a larger process which sustains informal methods, individual responses and ethnic and gender divisions and views on welfare. This larger process develops out of women's everyday practices at work and the habits and values that are enmeshed in those practices.

#### DEMORALIZATION AND WELFARE VALUES

Undoubtedly, access to welfare for domestic workers (i.e. both out-door cleaners and live-in domestics) is primarily denied either due to immigration status, employment conditions and/or ethnic and gender prejudices. This understanding, however, is not limited to the objective conditions of

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7. Patriotic Institution for the State welfare of children.

existence of Albanian and Ukrainian women in Greece. There is an interplay between structural factors and individuals' comprehensiveness of these factors and actions. Otherwise, as one immigrant woman from Albania explains, life in Greece would be impossible and living conditions unbearable. Migrant women, as she suggested in her interview, have to *learn* how to survive in those existing conditions of illegality, without social protection and doing the dirty jobs that others do not want to do. Tefta from Albania explains:

*"... we have to survive in life. What we can do, we cannot choose (we have to learn to do the best) this is that we are doing. At the beginning we leave behind (initial plans), a person gets into chaos, she does not know what happens what will follow... After a while you come to terms (with realities)... you do your job as part of survival but you also feel (this job) as your own home... This is what I think always, where I work with my soul, not in order to fill my day, I work so that I would feel better and the people I work for..."*. (Tefta, 44)

For migrant women from Ukraine this chaotic initial situation is even more disturbing. As a live-in domestic worker explains:

*"... it is extremely difficult, you come here (as a domestic worker) and you do not know where to go: I am here, the children and the husband there..."*. (Nantia, 37)

Another Ukrainian worker explains the meanings of domestic services for herself as follows:

*"... (work is like a prison) Since it is a closed-indoors employment, and you cannot open the doors, you cannot go anywhere, phone home... I was not feeling well, feeling like a human. This is of course servitude, servant, I was feeling like this..."*. (Elvira, 50+)

Separated from the family (i.e. in the case of Ukrainian women), close friends and existing or familiar skills and trades (i.e. in the case of Albanian women) or even familiar environments, and working as a cleaner or servant, is not a social situation that leaves the emotional core of workers untouched. The initial *chaotic* condition women face leads to various but interlinked types of *demoralization*. Demoralization here could be interpreted as a form of decay of previous individual life organization. Personal ideas and habits seem to be in a constant battle between what women used to be accustomed to and expected from life, and the new settings and values generated from



domestic work in Greece. What interviews however suggest is that between the above two situations of life, women domestic workers recreate their past, bring forward its richness, its multiplicity, its distinctiveness and individual character. To comprehend the present conditions and to situate their selves in it, domestic workers venture towards an explanation of personality, and of personal ambitions in life.

Narrating this demoralization, Ukrainian women reflected on their past in order to situate themselves in the present social environment. A reference to life in Ukraine, to the “alcoholic husband”, to special skills and educational qualifications, or to the *home* and the personal and affectionate relations, is a usual basis for building a place or location, a background important in unstable life conditions. But it is also important for locating a person’s rules and norms, especially in social environments which question, through ethnic and gender prejudices, the moral vitality of Ukrainian women. Ntina (43) from Ukraine explains an aspect of the above moral vitality as follows:

*“...for us (Ukrainian women) there is no life without work, it is important for a person to work... (When I was unemployed due to language problems in Greece) I was crying everyday from sadness, because I did not know Greek, (thinking) to commit suicide... when you are not working, this is not life, life is not “passing”,... I cannot, I work even summer time even if employers leave, I have the keys and work alone at homes, what could I do?”*

The workplace and the provision of personal services as a live-in domestic worker, is a process of *demoralization* which is also expressed and narrated by women through a reference to the lived micro-experiences shared with other workers or employers at the work place. Details offered on the way tasks are being performed, the emotions involved, and the “miniature politics” of controlling housekeeping or care activities show workers’ anxiety to provide information of how important the personality of the worker is and how personal services are being connected with social skills. An example is offered by Olga (45) from Ukraine, when referring to the work habits various ethnicities have towards domestic duties:

*“...I want to say about the Philippine women... the rich have Philippino domestic workers. A friend of mine told me that when they teach them in their country how to look after kids, how to offer services... they are lazy... They always hold an iron at hand pretending to be busy... (I left the home) I am not only a servant but also a human being. I don’t want to do her job...”*

When the issue however of personal aspirations came forward, demoralization was described in thick terms amongst Albanian workers, through a reference to the differences between initial plans and the present situation. A reference to the difference between *the past and the present*, of how the *present self is out of touch* with what a woman used to be back in Albania is a reflection of demoralization. One migrant worker described this, explaining *that looking herself at the mirror she could no longer recognize herself. Her reflection was unknown*, reminding that somehow life conditions in Greece have *stolen* personal desires, individual actions and ambitions.

*"... I have changed. In my age (29 years old) I don't think how I will live here. To drink a coffee, to dress myself with something nice, and to enjoy myself. Even if I don't go, which I haven't, it doesn't matter, it doesn't impress me". (Pania)*

Comprehending therefore the life of a domestic worker, one needs to look not only at the general economic, family or migration status conditions, but also at the hidden injuries done on self-esteem. Domestic work here is linked not with the particular tasks involved or the type of employment but with the effects on *body aesthetics*, *gender relations* and on *character*.

#### REACTION TO INSTITUTIONAL WELFARE BARRIERS

Women do not passively accept their present situation. As the majority of domestic workers claimed, their jobs teach them how to control dispositions and keep them at safe distance. In the study four important aspects of the above were identified. These are: the theme of work as an activity keeping one's mind busy, as an activity through which one learns to be self-employed, as a *sanctuary* from social conditions and the market, and as a form of *opportunity* for gendered filiations and securities.<sup>8</sup> Work or the work place is conceived as a trajectory of *body* and *mind* release from the existing social tensions and limitations women are being exposed to.

Natalia (45) from Ukraine claims that after some years in Greece domestic service was seen as more than a job offering a solution to economic survival. The job instead was thought important especially when

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8. Similar findings are also present in Romero's (1992) and Parrenas (2001) research studies on migrant women domestic work culture.

one feels “isolated and psychologically down”. Domestic service is reflected in Natalia’s interview as a tool with which one *helps herself* and helps *her power, her will... (to learn) to depend on her backs, on her hands, on her mind*. This understanding of work and the moral dimensions that accompany domestic work is thought to have a great significance for women’s emotional and social survival in Greece. It is probably the best starting point towards an understanding of how women relate to the issue of social insurance. What was made clear repeatedly throughout the research was that the work is important not just because it allows some autonomy from *close supervision*, as is the case with industrial jobs, or because it is better paid than other types of service work (e.g. in cleaning firms or subcontracting agencies), but mainly because it is considered to be a source of *safety*.

In the case of the Ukrainian workers, this safety is mostly linked to the ability of undocumented migrants to *hide* from authorities and use the place of work as a kind of *sanctuary place*. In the interviews with women who worked as live-in domestic workers the use of the above metaphor to describe work varied and it did not always imply a safety net from police or immigration authorities. Apart from offering higher pay, to work as a live-in domestic, was also considered as a way to escape from the emotional and social problems troubling the mind. For some women being with a family and having personal relations with people who “depend on you for all sorts of personal attention” is a sanctuary from the challenges other Ukrainian women have to put up with (i.e. prostitution, arranged marriages by bureaus in exchange for visas). It is also a sanctuary from the *social messes* that unemployment and living with violent or alcoholic husbands create. Then again the issue of work as a sanctuary place has also been used by different Ukrainian women as a reminder of safety from the market. Within the confines of personal relationships between employees and employers, and the limited spaces of home, one is made to feel a kind of security against competition and exploitation by Greeks and co-ethnic women migrants. One is made to feel as if they are on their own, to “exploit” personal and moral avenues on how best to secure employment and to ensure *trust* by the employing family. Finally, for Ukrainian women, to be a live-in domestic worker means that one has the *chance* to learn new social skills and become acquainted with different people from various places which *one day may prove important* for the worker and her family.

Similarly to the above, in the case of Albanian women employed as day to day cleaners, the work place is seen not so much as reflecting safety in the physical or social sense, but more a kind of *gendered net*. Through talking,

gathering and exchanging views one could develop a kind of *companionship* or friendship between women. The sharing of *ideas, skills* and trading *secrets*—on life, men, home decoration and all sorts of related issues— with employers provides a leisurely understanding of work.

At the most basic level women domestic workers see their jobs and their employment relations as part of their emotional cores, offering both opportunities to meet other people and to become acquainted with employers. Fatime, an Albanian worker, explains:

*"...I like Greece. I am saying, I am a cleaner, OK, I work, I feel proud that I am working. When I go (now) to a house in order to work, I don't see the madam as an employer, I see her as a friend. I have become friends with all (employers). When I first came here (in Greece) I felt bad, how to do (this job), how would the madam be..."*

In terms of safety, the majority of respondents claimed that in the "trade" of domestic services one learns the techniques of economic and emotional *survival*. In the case of Albanian workers, this is envisaged through the development of a *clientele* and by ensuring a routine and stability in tasks, duties and employment. This *survival* is also achieved through a deeper understanding of the work place as a basis to recover and develop further personal affiliations and a sense of lost *pride*. Social protection and social insurance, although not unimportant, Albanian women explain, one learns to seek them not in the state or welfare agencies but in employers and the members of the employing family in general. An investment on *trust* and *filiations* with employers is appraised as a more important step taken for the safety of a migrant in Greece.

*"...(work as a domestic) is to come to know people, to leave home, to see something different... (to help) my financial position..."*  
(Klontiana, 25)

Another Albanian cleaner explains:

*"... we live here alone... to them (employers) we can talk about our problems, for my anxieties, or worries, to drink a cup of coffee... You go to a home and you feel it your own".* (Natalia)

The above perceptions have an even more serious role to play for Ukrainian domestic workers. The employing families, after years of service are thought to be their only point of family reference, social identity and protective network in the host country. Both groups of domestic workers, to

a large extent, seem to share the view that domestic services have changed their approaches to work and employment and their understandings of welfare services such as social insurance. Instead of worrying about informality, they take active steps to ensure that they enhance their views and life organization with the norms and rules of the informal economy. One way to do this is to perceive state social insurance as an important mechanism for *dealing with immigration authorities*. On the other hand, the *real social insurance* from which people draw their benefits and security is probably linked by domestic workers more with clients than state agencies.

For women in the cleaning business the emphasis on *real* social insurance is visualized through practical ways, ensuring both a continuation of employment in the informal market and the development of a stable clientele. The pursuit, however, of those conditions necessitates an investment on social skills, which are thought by Albanian women to enhance securities in the job market. In the study, social skills linked to the *real insurance* centered mostly around: *work organization*, *mutual* understandings and solidarity, between a cleaner and an employer. In contrast to other types of services or cleaning jobs, being in *charge* and/or developing a daily routine of work tasks, is thought important for the employment capacity of a domestic worker. Depending usually on more than one employers to secure an adequate income and to minimize the risks from unemployment the women workers make an effort to control the hours spent, the methods of cleaning used for a specific employer, something which is only achieved if the worker co-decides tasks, how to perform duties and also if there is a frequent repetition of duties. Coming to the issue of *mutuality*, as it was also mentioned earlier, a good job is thought by cleaners to be a job which provides a basis to *build* friendships and solidarities between the two parties involved. Gift exchanges, financial assistance at times of difficulty, long term job prospects with the same employer and even the possibility of property inheritance are thought to contribute towards *real insurance*. These can only become a possibility through harnessing workers' own personalities, ways of behaving, or by responding to demands and learning to express feelings, in order to meet employers' standards of living, emotional and social expectations.

The study came to similar findings when the life-stories of Ukrainian women were examined. A preference for *real* social insurance was also thought to relate to practical and emotional or social skills. However, in addition to Albanian cleaners, Ukrainian women invested more on: language and skills of communication, on gaining respect from the employer (e.g.

through a presentation of the workers' educational and social background) and on gaining body *trust* for the performance of routine but intimate caring tasks. These different understandings of welfare became even more central when the issue of medical care and children's access to nurseries was examined.

The dominant perspectives and strategies of domestic workers medical care show that health in general was experienced differently by most people. As was also the case with the issue of social insurance, health and medical care were seen in relation to a general frame of *change* of community, work and family relations and their impact upon workers' social and emotional cores. For women both from Ukraine and Albania, changes in their lives and working conditions ruined their personal concerns about health, matters and attitudes towards health care.

Pania (29) from Albania summarizes the above human condition saying that for a cleaner the immediate issue of concern is: "what tomorrow will bring". She adds:

*"Now it is night, I don't know what will happen tomorrow... I have been closed in myself, I was not (always) like that. I have changed. My personal character has changed a lot..."*

A similar feeling is expressed by a live-in domestic worker from Ukraine. Larissa explains in her interview that she *sees no future* in Greece:

*"I am temporary here, so I see here nothing, I don't see, I don't see my future, this is a great difference (with when I was back home)"*.

For the majority of the informants, health and caring about oneself is first and foremost an emotional condition which domestic workers seem to have lost mostly due to their unstable and insecure status and employment conditions. Day to day survival and being more and more preoccupied with job tasks is a *remedy* for one's perception of health. From women's life stories one comes closer to an understanding that a perception of health is built less around the economy and more, like social insurance, around women's character transformation. This in turn leads them to build a frame of health around *work routines*, personal relations with employers and an understanding that *mind* counts more than *body* conditions. Safety from illness and health securities are built around a collection of views on work ethic and the social meaning of domestic work for women. *Keeping busy, adding a health value on personal relations* and using employers for medical protection, is a significant answer to problems encountered with women's

access to public hospitals. But there is also an additional view of health care. Especially for live-in domestic workers, health starts at the work place and the ways in which one becomes related to employers. Mind and body problems are thought to arise when one is not in control of *situations* at the work place, or not following personal hygiene and diet, or not letting *social stigma of servitude go away*. In relation to the latter, a Ukrainian community representative argued that most problems of stigma arise due to the fact that women usually find it difficult to come to terms with services which even back at home were considered low status and were not easily accepted. Her personal way to deal with social stigma was to build a frame for explaining domestic service to her friends, as an *aspect of housekeeping*, which women back home do and it is usually unpaid.

Similar concerns were also prevalent amongst women when asked about problems experienced with children nurseries and/or kindergartens. Despite domestic workers (those that had children in the country) worrying about the future of their children, long term investment in their future was not obvious, because of their *vulnerability* in the Greek labour market and society. In line with this, domestic workers: first, seem to spend more time negotiating how to match work or job duties with children's care, during the day, and second, how to ensure that children become equipped with necessary skills required by fluid social and economic environments. In both cases, employers and philanthropic institutions were mobilized to provide: *reference letters*, *guidance* or *parental advising*, language *instructions*, and a temporary home when women were at work. Expectations, however, run short of any grand scenarios of possible future occupational or even residential prospects for mobility. In the study, the majority of women with children in Greece think about children's care in terms of time availability. *Calculating time* spent with children due to work commitments or not having time were the two most important aspects in the interviews. Women also thought about the problems they face with educational demands from children and the problems they face with their own *self* perceptions and future of the family. A woman explained that when she returns at nights: *I see my children but I don't know Greek in order to help them as I want*. Then again women argued that it is a hopeless situation, since they see that their residence in Greece is probably temporary. The most therefore one can do is see that *children grow and develop* till *the time comes to decide* what the family will do, where will it go and whether returning back home will be the most probable option taken. Thinking of options about future prospects what strikes most is how women think about their own options and future endeavours. Loudmila from Ukraine summarises her life in Greece as follows:

*“...I have quite a lot of experience. How to serve others. Now I can be turned into a good nurse for the sick... Once I was writing poetry. I am fed up from this foreign language, foreign pleasures, foreign nerves. I am fed up, I have nothing of my own but only my own clothes. I have nothing...”.* (Loudmila, 45)

## CONCLUSION

The analysis above offered a view on the importance of work, its habits and ideas upon women domestic workers' welfare chances and relations with formal state provisions. Undoubtedly there are many more routes and views on the subject which without any hesitation can also shed light to the social world of migrant women's employment in low status services. However, what the analysis has specifically illustrated is that barriers to welfare institutions and services depend at large on the micro-environment of work, and the relations and values which emerge. Albanian and Ukrainian migrant women are coming to a stage of reconciliation with existing inequalities and stereotypes or prejudices which limit access to welfare services, through the development of work perceptions and attitudes which do not contribute to the elimination of structural barriers to welfare. Instead, informal working methods, employer patronage, and a personalized view on social insurance, medical care and children's prospects in Greece, seem to be prevalent and sustain inequalities. At most, women's welfare views and practices seem to reinforce a further separation of their life organization from either community or state protection networks. By tracing the elements or parameters which lead to the above, the analysis has shown that what is important in welfare issues is to ask both types of questions: *what subjects confront in terms of welfare in the host country*, and *how they have come to view welfare because of this confrontation*.

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