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Gender, migration and domestic work: Space and time in the discourse of albanian domestic workers in Athens

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GENDER, MIGRATION AND DOMESTIC WORK:
SPACE AND TIME IN THE DISCOURSE OF
ALBANIAN DOMESTIC WORKERS IN ATHENS

ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between gender and migration from the perspective of everyday life. It is based on a series of focus group discussions with Albanian women who work in the domestic sector. The analysis explores the gendered ways in which these women describe, discuss and evaluate their personal experiences of space and time. Although there is a great diversity in these experiences, their discourse is dominated by the fact that their everyday life has been overtaken by the space and time of domestic work. The paper argues that the impact of this overtaking is twofold: on the one hand, it accounts for the isolation that Albanian domestic workers often experience as migrants in a foreign country, but also for their unequal position as women within the Albanian family; on the other hand, however, it also leads to a questioning of gender stereotypes that prevail in both the country of origin and the host country, as the limits between paid and unpaid, private and public, male and female space and time are being challenged.

INTRODUCTION

During the past decades the relationship between gender and migration has become one of the salient issues in the interdisciplinary field of migration studies. This has resulted from two interrelated developments. On the one hand, migration experts began to acknowledge the increasing “feminization” of migrant movements (Castles and Miller, 1993). More specifically since the 1970s, studies of international migration have

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documented a quantitative rise in the number of women migrating, which was accompanied by the increasing but asymmetrical participation of migrant women in the global labour market (Wallerstein, 1991). Undoubtedly, however, these phenomena were not entirely new: the feminist debates of the 1970s contributed to the rising visibility of female migrants, which were previously hidden in official statistics and historical accounts of past migrations (Morokvasik, 1995). On the other hand, in the 1990s more and more studies began to challenge the gender-blindness of mainstream migration research and focused on gender as an analytical category in different disciplines (Donato et al., 2006). Through this focus it became apparent that in mainstream theory the subject who migrates was endowed with masculine characteristics, while women were only included in dominant analytical frameworks as “complementary”, following male trajectories and becoming part of official statistics and policies primarily within the context of family reunification (Phizacklea, 1998). As a result, women’s agency in migrant flows was strategically silenced and their subjectivity was conceived only in relation to decisions, practices and ideologies of men in their environment. Overall, although today women are often hidden in mainstream approaches and gender biases persist, there is increasing awareness amongst scholars of the global inequalities that affect women migrants disproportionately, but also of the possibilities of “escape” and emancipation emanating from the processes of migration.

This paper studies the relationship between gender and migration in the domestic space, a space which has undergone rapid changes due to the “globalization of domestic work” (Parrenas, 2001). Domestic work constitutes a privileged site for the study of the relationship between gender and migration not only because of the increasing numbers of female immigrant workers employed in the so-called “care professions” (cleaning, child care and elderly care) but also because of the contradictory nature of domestic work itself. In this context, a linguistic clarification is necessary: unlike the transitory and fragile qualities attached to such terms as “house” or dwelling, the Latin origin of the word domestic (“domus”) emphasizes symbolic practices of ownership, rulership and domination. It is also closer to “*oikiaki*”, which was the working term in Greek (Bridwell-Pheasant and Lawrence-Zuniga, 1999). The term “domestic” is, thus, well suited, to give meaning to the asymmetrical power relations of gender and migration that materialize in different households and families. Furthermore the usage of the term “work”, rather than help or care, conveys meaning to a productive activity, which involves payment. Work in the domestic space has not

always been and is still not always recognized as a form of labour. “The fact that women’s work is often either seen as an extension of women’s domestic roles, or that it is accomplished on domestic premises, points to the crucial question of the interrelationship between women’s position in the household and their position in the economic system”. In particular for migrants, whose conditions of work are often informal and precarious, the fact that at work they have to perform predominantly “female” roles (those of the caregiver and the housewife) “legitimizes considering them as subsidiary workers and the level of their wages as complementary only to those of men” (Morokvasik 1995: 103). The usage of the term “work” might appear as a simple linguistic detail, but for many activist migrant domestic workers it signifies a form of political recognition and gives migrant women the identity of a pro-active subject (Torevillas, 2006).

Analyses exploring the intersections between gender, ethnicity, race and class and analyzing asymmetrical power relations between migrant groups and host societies have shed light on the diversity of migrant groups in general, and women migrants in particular, emphasizing the importance of studying these intersections in the words of migrant women themselves (Anthias and Yuval Davies, 1993; Anthias, 2000). This article is based on a series of focus group discussions with Albanian women working in the largely unregulated domestic sector in Athens. Because this method is dialogical, it became possible to place emphasis on the diverse ways in which they understand and negotiate the relationship between gender and migration (Radway, 1991; Burgess, 1998, and Madriz, 2000). Migrant women’s voices were prioritized over those of other groups (such as Albanian men or Greek employers) because they have for long remained in the margins of public debate. The analysis of these discussions problematizes the ways in which Albanian domestic workers experience and produce their workplace, which also happens to be someone else’s home. Their narratives document how concrete strategies and tactics challenge the relationship between public and private space/time and transform Greek and Albanian households into contradictory and ambivalent sites, where gender, ethnicity, race and class are negotiated daily. These strategies and tactics usually involve daily tasks that we normally take for granted, such as washing, cleaning, dusting, decorating, and arranging objects, or sawing, cooking, shopping, feeding or playing with children. Furthermore, they tend to defy the limits of the material space of the “house” and the time of work (Kambouri, 2007).

THE PERSPECTIVE OF EVERYDAY LIFE

The discussion of gender and migration in domestic work is approached here from the perspective of everyday life. This perspective advances a critique of the authoritative status of scientific knowledge by shifting the emphasis from the interpretation of social interactions by a scientist holding the expertise in their own particular discipline to the production of knowledge in concrete everyday practices involving individual actors, social groups and material objects (Lefebvre, 1991). In that respect, it is important to address both conscious and unconscious practices that structure social relations, paying attention to the ways in which they contribute to the production of material space and time. This methodological shift is of particular importance for this study since it gives substance to the call for “giving voice” to marginalized groups, such as migrant women, whose active contribution to the production of the domestic space is silenced in mainstream discourse (Kofman et al., 2000). Furthermore, situating gender and migration in everyday life is in harmony with feminist methodologies since it treats migrant women as pro-active subjects. “It does not transform subjects into objects of study or make use of conceptual devices for eliminating the active presence of subjects. Its methods of thinking and its analytic procedures must preserve the presence of the active and experiencing subject” (Smith, 1987: 272).

From the perspective of everyday life, the space and time of domesticity are not taken for granted. As Lefebvre argues, we cannot assume that space and time are neutral and static objects encompassing social relations. We should try and understand them instead as dynamic and multiple relations of power *produced within* social practices. Abstract conceptions of space and time, conceived in isolation from the social relations that produce them, obscure our ability to realize our own critical contribution to the processes of production and to challenge the premises of everyday life (Lefebvre, 1991: 85). The space and time of domestic work do not constitute mere “products” of social relations, understood in terms of the means of production, consumption and circulation, but they presuppose and reinforce gendered institutions, such as citizenship, the family, marriage and the state. In order to establish a critique of forms of domination and exploitation taking place in those spaces, one first has to study how these spaces are constructed and sustained. The implications of this critique for the analysis of domestic space and time are twofold: on the one hand, space is conceived as dynamic and contingent and, on the other hand, spatiotemporal relations

are analyzed from different angles representing the different positions of actors, groups and institutions that participate in their production.

Therefore, the everyday life of migrant domestic workers is not simply situated within the pre-determined abstract space and time of established Greek households, but it is an integral aspect of the production of the changing domestic space and time of these households. Production is, however, a complex word: it includes both the actual construction of a material house and the “production hidden in the process of its utilization” (De Certeau, 1984: xiii). Production in domestic spaces consists of the ways in which the actual objects of the house and the house itself were constructed, and how they are experienced and used on a daily basis not only by the owners, or the family but also by those who work inside the house, cleaning, taking care of the children and the elderly. Following De Certeau, this dynamic is understood as follows: first, through *strategies*, discursive practices that presuppose the existence of privileged places of power (the state, the house, the employer’s position, the institutions of knowledge) from where subjects can make utterances on gender and migration as an external object; and second, *tactics*, discursive practices that do not emanate from a privileged centre of power and as a result they cannot distinguish gender and migration as an external object, but are dispersed in different aspects of everyday life (De Certeau, 1984: xix). These “ways of operating” are structured as relations of power, whose asymmetries are constitutive of the actual space and time of domestic work. To take a concrete example, simple everyday operations such as the re-arrangement of decorative objects in a house may involve multiple strategies and tactics by family members and domestic workers. The actions of a house-owner and a domestic worker, however, do not carry equal weight. Despite the fact that the domestic worker is usually the one who actually *does* the work of re-arrangement, the house-owner is the one who, as a rule, decides upon the positioning of things and significant changes to be made. This division of tasks, which is determined by ownership and gender but also by cultural criteria and presuppositions about superior taste and style attached to host or sending cultures, imposes asymmetries in the processes of production of households. In this context, a domestic worker imposing her own style and taste by positioning objects in a new way may actually consciously or unconsciously attempt to re-appropriate the space in which she works and assert her own creativity on the domestic space against the authority of her “boss”. The emphasis placed on the pro-active involvement of domestic workers in the production of domestic spaces calls for a double conception of power that

includes both practices of gender domination and subjugation, and practices dispersed inside and outside the official institutions of power creating the conditions for the subversion of gender inequalities.

This point touches upon the critique of space and time advanced from a gender perspective. Time and space are conceived as antithetical concepts: time is commonly attributed “masculine” traits, like linearity, progress, or speed, which are in complete contrast to the “feminine” characteristics attached to space, like circularity, stability, or tradition. Mapping space and time from gender perspective involves questioning the gender bias of such categorizations and studying how space is inscribed into dynamic and contingent social relations and time is leaving its traces on space in a non linear manner (Massey, 2004). From this perspective the relationship between gender and migration does not begin and end within the host country, but involves (often imaginary) trajectories back and forth to the country of origin, a country that often only exists in the memories of the past. Furthermore, from a gender perspective, domestic work does not begin and end within the limited confines of the house, but extends beyond to include, also, other houses in the past and the present (including the domestic workers’ own “home”), but also other places outside work (places of entertainment, rest, transportation, enjoyment, relaxation and duty). In this context, the limits between “private” and “public” space and time are conceived as porous, providing a “necessary corrective to examining women in bifurcated categories, either sequestered in the private domain or marginalized in the public region” (Yeoh and Huang, 1998: 251). Overall the space and time of domestic work involves multiple interconnections between past and present, as well as between the local, the national and the global. The experiences of migrant domestic workers described below highlight the form and regularity of these interconnections that transform Greek households and families into places of re-negotiation of both gendered and national identities.

DOMESTIC WORK IN ALBANIA

In their recollections of the past, Albanian women tend to invest with great significance their role as housewives and their ability to master domestic tasks despite the fact that this form of labour remained unpaid. Because the house belonged to the husband’s family, married women had to “earn” their living there by taking care of the domestic work, which included providing for the children and the husband’s parents who lived with the couple. The

work overload was worsened by the absence of consumer goods, in particular chemical detergents and cleaning liquids (there was only soap, soda and petroleum). Bona remembers:

“My mom was cleaning in the morning and at midday and it was her only...Twice a day, she was cleaning the house. And she had to go to work. And when she came back she had to clean again”.

Migration to Greece signified a transition in the ways in which migrant women experience space in general and domestic space in particular. Space was no longer for them simply a familiar, static, comfortable and safe “place” (their own “homeland” and “home”), where they follow the same daily practices and itineraries, but it has also become a dynamic milieu, in which they can “venture forth into the unfamiliar and experiment with the elusive and the uncertain” (Fu Tuan Yi, 1977: 9). Such transitions are documented in the recollections of the first painful experiences of housing in Greece. Small ground-floor apartments (which “did not exist in Albania”) and furniture found in the garbage constituted a new temporary form of accommodation, where families, relatives and friends “stayed” for a while. Overcrowding, but also “sharing” alternate in the recollections of these temporary dwellings.

“In our houses we had absolutely nothing. Everything was missing. We did not have money when we first arrived. OK other people would offer us something nice, but in the street we bought only staff for a penny, until we reached a point today where we can actually buy new things”.

The absence of a “homeland” or a “home” experienced during the first years is often remembered as a form of psychological disillusionment. Anna recalls that they had to take her to the hospital when she first arrived in Greece because she got physically ill due to psychological reasons. She remembers that the doctor told her “you must concentrate and you must tell yourself that you are here to work for a while...And then you can go back to your home...That is how you should think about it”. Gradually disillusionment is transformed into an energetic preoccupation with working: work acquires meaning in terms of earning money to buy one’s own space, but also time to make one’s own “home” in the new country. Contrary to the doctor’s advice, however, it is not the temporary character of their stay in Greece, but the repetition of familiar practices attached to the homeland that provide an escape from the psychological impasse and the

sense of dislocation that many migrant women experienced at first. Domestic work came to be inextricably connected with a “deep though subconscious” attachment to the homeland, which “may come simply with familiarity and ease, with the assurance of nurture and security, with the memory of sounds and smells of communal activities and homely pleasures accumulated over time” (Fu-Tuan, 1977: 159).

THE OVERTAKING OF EVERYDAY LIFE BY DOMESTIC WORK

The familiar repetition of domestic tasks establishes an interconnection with the home country and the past that permeates the discourse of Albanian migrant women. The continuous references to the overtaking of “their” every day life by domestic space and time manifests this connection. Whether it is cleaning, looking after children or the elderly, work for them usually involves many households dispersed in different areas of Athens. Esme, who is a widow with two under-aged children, told the group that she is working from 6.30 a.m. to 10.00 p.m. and only rests for 30 minutes at home in between jobs. As a friend of hers jokingly noticed, she has “cleaned the whole of Athens”. Her work load is worsened by the fact that she has to use public transport, in which, as she explained, she “consumes” at least two to three hours per day. “There is no time for anything else. I suffer a lot...Let’s say that my life is empty”. Rita wakes up at 6.00-6.30, cleans houses, offices and does dish-washing in a restaurant until midnight.

“How can anyone be happy? Wake up in the morning, clean a house inside out. Wake up the next morning, you will take another house, and another house, and another house. Everyday: a whole life. It is not possible. How can you then find the patience to take care of your own home?”

In the process of escaping the constraints of life in an unfamiliar space, women enter a cycle in which they repeat the same tasks in different Greek households in order to increase their income. Furthermore, in their time outside work, Albanian women tend to clean and take care of their own houses. Working in other people’s houses and saving other people’s time means primarily being able to produce a new “home” in Greece, both metaphorically and literally. In their everyday lives the limits between the “private” domestic word and the “public” word for work are difficult to discern since there are continuities and interconnections between the two domains.

DOMESTIC SPACE/TIME IN WORK

Since the 1980s domestic work in Greece has undergone rapid changes by becoming at large an exclusive labour “enclave” reserved almost exclusively for foreign women (Kassimati, 2003: 165). In many cases cleaning, or taking care of children and old persons became the only possible avenue for Albanian women to enter the Greek labour market, at least during the first years of their stay. Demand for cheap and flexible labour has risen as a result of Greek women’s increased participation in the labour market, the demise of public welfare provisions (Kofman et al., 2000) but also the demise of family support networks and the reproduction of specific consumerist life styles (Anderson, 2000). This rise has been met with and reinforced by the absence of state policies dealing with questions of gender, migration and domestic work. In Greece with the exception of the interstate agreements signed with the Philippines in the 1980s for the “import” of “domestic helpers”, Greek migration policies have failed to address one of the most important areas of female migrant activity strategically reinforcing the precariousness of conditions experienced by domestic workers therein (Kambouri, 2007).

The transformation of domestic space into a work place experienced by Albanian migrants is determined by the predominance of informal agreements and precarious arrangements (Anderson and O’Connell Davidson, 2003) Most Albanian women agreed, neither the obligations nor payment are clearly set out from the beginning. In most cases, they have entered domestic work without prior knowledge as to what they should expect with regards to raises, social security, and duration of employment. Raises are usually decided by the employers themselves and offered “as a gift” to the employees, but so are cuts based on employers’ judgement of the quality of work and the time spent on domestic tasks. On the contrary, responsibility for social insurance lies entirely with the domestic workers themselves, whose access to the processes of legalization depends primarily on their ability and willingness to “buy” the social insurance stamps necessary for the acquisition of the residence permit. For this reason, most of the relevant literature has emphasized the fertile conditions for the exploitation and even the “hyper-exploitation” of migrant women within Greek households (Karakatsanis and Swarts, 2003). Working illegally, however, also offers migrant women a chance to increase their income. As a result, many domestic workers find themselves in a situation where they enter temporarily the legalization procedures, only to become illegal again when they can no longer afford it. Linda for example decided to stop buying the social

insurance stamps in order to save money for a large house in Albania. Her decision points out to the broader tactics that Albanian domestic workers employ in order to enhance their position in the labour market, as well as to increase their income and social status in Greek society.

Overworking is often described by Albanian domestic workers as a direct outcome of their employers' unreasonable demands. Employers often ask their "helpers" to perform hard and even impossible tasks, such as keeping walls spotlessly clean, moving heavy furniture, refrigerators and cookers to scrub the floor underneath, washing cupboards, stairs, cars, carpets, balconies and patios every week. The rising needs of the employers related to consumerist standards of cleanliness and order impose for domestic workers the unlimited extension of the space and time of work (Anderson, 2000). In order to complete those tasks, however, many domestic workers are often forced to stay longer at work without extra payment. In particular, taking care of children involves an infinite extension of responsibilities (doing the washing up, washing and ironing clothes, cleaning them and tidying up their rooms, or preparing their meals) to be undertaken while the children rest or play. Offering care diminishes the ability to control one's own time in a rational linear manner, since the needs and demands of others are the object of what is offered (Davies, 2001). The extension of the logic of care into paid domestic tasks signals the inability to control one's own time and space at work too.

At the same time, however, overworking might be described as a work ethic. Often it is the employees themselves that overload their work time with tasks either because they want to finish faster and be able to move to another house to get extra payment for the day, or because they themselves desire their work to be as close as possible to Albanian standards of cleanliness and order. In this context, their ability to "take care" of the house in a professional manner acquires special significance and is often described as "Albanian perfectionism". In the narratives of Albanian migrants, the production of Athenian domestic spaces is not simply the outcome of repetitive tasks, but it also involves moments of creativity and enjoyment. Practices such as getting rid of stains, washing dirty spots, re-arranging decorative objects according to one's own taste, opening up the windows to let the clean air enter the building, washing thoroughly parts of the house that are normally hidden, seem to offer enjoyment and satisfaction. Furthermore, acquiring the skills to perform difficult domestic tasks through the knowledge and use of domestic appliances and chemical detergents often gives them a sense of mastering the house much better than their Greek

owners. In this context, the inability of Greek women to take care of the household becomes the object of ironic comments and scorn manifesting Albanian women's superiority.

Linda: Girls, I want to tell you a story. There is this girl. Whenever I go to her house she is gone and she always leaves a piece of paper that big (she shows an A4 sheet). And she writes down all the tasks that need to be done. But she doesn't have a clue. I call her. I tell her that I cannot make it even if I was working for a week. Not even half of what she is asking me to do. She says 'O.K. Lindy, I don't have a clue about domestic staff' She is nice...But the next time I go there I find the same paper again.

Different voices: Yes, yes, they don't have a clue, they don't have a clue.

Esmé: They ask you to do impossible jobs, like washing and ironing clothes the same day. When will they dry?

Overworking in the domestic sphere is, therefore, doubly conditioned by the employers' requirements, which are intertwined with notions of care and consumerism that often impose impossible standards of cleanliness and propriety, but also by the values that migrant women themselves attach to their own work, such as professionalism, efficiency, speed, strength, and endurance. These conditions challenge the common sense separation between private and public and their respective anchorage to standards of femininity and masculinity. The overtaking of the time and space of everyday life by domestic work is not simply a question of being forced to work overtime in female only enclaves, but it also often includes the desire to be more efficient and creative at work, to acquire higher income and improve their living conditions. Through such tactics Albanian domestic workers claim for themselves a circumscribed "place" in the precarious spaces of domesticity, which aims to transcend, albeit temporarily, their subordinate position in Greek society. At the same time, though they challenge predominant assumptions about the feminine qualities of this place, since for them it becomes a public arena, where their identity is negotiated daily. The Greek household nowadays is a "place" produced in relation not only to "the Greek way of life", but also to Albanian standards of femininity, which materialize in concrete forms in different parts of the house. Intertwined with these strategies are tactics dispersed outside the place and time of work that constitute Albanian domestic workers' everyday life.

DOMESTIC SPACE/TIME OUTSIDE WORK

The time and effort that Albanian migrants spend on cleaning, arranging objects, decorating, as well as consuming products for their own houses complements and even exceeds the time spent in other people's houses. Bona explains:

“When I go to their houses in the morning, it is once a week, isn't it? It is only once. While we will not “do it” just once. Once a week we will do the general cleaning, the cupboards etc., but we will do everything else every day: the hover, dusting, scrubbing the floor. Every day. We will not wait for a week. We are used to that. That is how we always did it in Albania”.

Paid and unpaid labour involve the same activities, extending the time and space of domestic work indefinitely. Their “own” houses and the houses that they clean are somehow interconnected. Gestanda notes: “No, no, no...I cannot go to work if I haven't cleaned my own house first”. Vana adds: “it is psychological. It is a psychological relief when we ‘do’ our own house. If I feel uncomfortable in my own house, I cannot sit down”. Her identity as an Albanian and as a woman depends on her ability to perform domestic tasks. “Doing the house” involves primarily keeping it spotlessly clean (and not so much cooking or taking care of the children which seem to be the main priorities for Greek women).

This practice transforms the unfamiliar Greek urban landscape into a new “home” produced through the repetition of the same rituals of cleaning that they followed in Albania. Rita argues: “Our houses shine. They are not simply clean. They shine”. Cleanliness is what ties Albanian women to the “homeland” of the past and establishes a connection with present day Albania. Bruna explains in a hyperbolic fashion:

“Here amongst the Greeks we are cleaners, but there, in Albania, in my own home, it is different: those who are clean here are below the average there. My mother is paid 100 per month because she is an accountant still and she has changed three sofas since I've been here. Three sofas. And the curtains (she changes them) every year”.

Achieving the Albanian standards of femininity attached to cleanliness is almost impossible when living in Greece. In turn, returning home is often a difficult experience because the maintenance of national identity is intertwined with practices of domesticity that exceed their income and social status in Greece. Decorating one's own house, however, is attached to

“Albanian good taste”. Nikoleta and Konstantina read decoration magazines and pay attention to the quality of fabrics and materials and make sure to buy expensive and exclusive products for their own houses. Renata exclaims: “We are people with unbelievable taste. This is not to flatter ourselves. But it is true that *we are European*. We might have lagged behind because of the system, but we have amazing taste, especially women, but also educated men”. The house reflects essentialist qualities of femininity and Albanian national identity. The relationship with their own house mediates the relationship to the country of origin, but also with the host country.

GENDER, DOMESTIC WORK AND THE BLURRING OF BOUNDARIES BETWEEN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC IN THE SPACES OF DOMESTIC WORK

In the narratives of Albanian migrant women, domestic work tends to be in excess leaving no time for leisure. When asked to discuss their life outside domestic work, most Albanian women, who took part in the focus group discussions, remained silent. Some told the group how much they enjoy participating in the activities of Albanian cultural associations. One woman explained how much she likes taking care of her nails, and another one how she enjoys painting and dancing. Many women agree that “leisure” for them is associated with their children: taking them to the park, to the cinema, to a fast food restaurant or to the playground. The silence, however, was overwhelming indicating that one of the main implications of the strategies of overworking is the lack of “free” time. As Lefebvre argued, “leisure” constitutes (or at least appears to be) a sharp break in the rhythms of everyday life associated with liberation, pleasure, relaxation and escapism (Lefebvre, 1991). From this perspective, “leisure” is a “pure artificiality” - the “non everyday in the everyday”- which stands in a dialectic relation to work - the domain of the everyday per se. By performing the same domestic tasks at home and at work, Albanian migrant women’s tactics defy this dialectic. The performance of domestic tasks imposes a regularity and homogeneity in the rhythms of every day life, which reinforces the continuities between work and leisure, and the interconnections between private and public domains.

Consumption habits manifest these continuities and interconnections. The pleasure and even the obsession associated with “doing one’s own house”, making it cleaner and tidier than the houses of Greek women, leaves room only for tactics of consumption dedicated to the house. The repetition

of these practices navigates Albanian women through the uncertainties of migrant every day life. Domesticity rather than leisure is constituted as the place of pleasure and escapism. Chrysoula describes her relationship to her own house as follows:

“When I buy something I prefer to buy it for the house, for the kitchen, not for myself. I am a young woman. I could buy something to wear. No. It is mainly for the kitchen and the house in general....Everything is brand new in my house and it is expensive too...I might save money from other things, but when I buy something for the house it must be forever”.

One might say that the absence of leisure accounts for the “passionate attachment” that Albanian migrant women develop with the object of their subjugation, that is with domestic work (Butler, 1997: 2-10). This object permeates every aspect of their every day life determining the ways in which Albanian migrant women experience the Greek social space (Kambouri, 2008).

Furthermore, the pleasure attached to domesticity is gendered. As a rule Albanian men do not participate in domestic work. Gestanda says: “He does not even put his plate in the sink. Amongst the Albanians, women have to do everything”. As Bona explains Albanian men expected all the housework to be done by women: “When my father got up and went to work, it was OK. He wanted his shirts ironed, two or three of them to hang in the cupboard, and otherwise he got angry with my sister and my mother”. She feels that she can only continue this tradition, even though her husband is unemployed. But being a good housewife also gives her pleasure.

“I spoiled him. And I still spoil him. It is in my nature because I do not trust anyone when it comes to domestic work and I want to do everything myself”.

For Albanian women, taking —often unwillingly— the entire responsibility for all housework from their husbands, teaching their daughters to be studious with housework, but also simply taking pleasure out of caring for one’s own house, decorating, and consuming new household products, spending a significant amount of personal time and money in order to keep the place spotlessly clean and tidy are tactics that acquire new meaning in the new country, since they preserve the attachment to the Albania of their past.

For the same reason, Albanian men find it hard to help their wives in domestic work despite the fact that migration has weakened traditional family

ties (since grandmothers, female neighbours, cousins and aunts are no longer there to assist). Bona remembers that when she was pregnant, her “spoiled” husband had to take the carpet to the balcony to take the dust off. She laughs and recounts that he was always looking around to see if the neighbours were staring at him because he was too embarrassed. Some women say that Albanian men look after the children in order to enable their wives to clean the house. There are no descriptions, however, of men cleaning or cooking, tasks that only women do. As in Bona’s case, asymmetric gender relations persist even when women are the primary income providers because of the feminine qualities attached to domestic work.

Performing continuously domestic tasks prevents Albanian women’s access to public spaces and contributes to their lack of social relations with Greeks. “We have no time to become friendly with Greek women. We are always working”, Rita says. Linda explains that although they are often invited to Greek weddings and baptisms, they cannot afford to stay up late either because they are too tired or because their husbands put pressure on them to return early. Albanian men’s strategies of control take advantage of and reinforce (consciously or unconsciously) women’s attachment to domesticity. Bruna says that during the eight years that she has been in Greece, only twice has she gone out for coffee. Lily’s husband would only let her go if she took the children too. The spaces of “leisure” seem to threaten Albanian migrant men’s identity since it is there that Albanian women may perform roles other than the domestic ones they are accustomed to.

Charikleia: If I talk to him about entertainment, if I tell him that we should go out for dinner, with the children, he always says: “where did you learn all these things?”

Bona: My husband says: “It is our fault that we brought you here and they opened your eyes”.

Ensuring that their wives perform repetitive domestic tasks does not serve as a means of “enclosing” them into the house, but of preserving their “Albanian” identities. Men seem to spend most of their time off work within domestic spaces too. Marina says: “He stays at home and watches television. All our relatives come to visit us. Only in weddings and baptisms we have fun”. The regular visits of Albanian friends and family at home often impose an additional burden on women’s domestic responsibilities.

From the perspective of Albanian women, Greek households are gendered in ways very similar to their own: men are usually implied as a

subtext and only rarely make their appearance as passing or absent figures making themselves visible through clothes and personal items scattered around the house. This gendered absence is rarely questioned. On the contrary their relations with their female employers are constantly put into question. Although direct confrontations or fights are strangely absent from their narratives, disagreements are usually expressed as insinuations or silent tensions “between women”. Employers often adopt antithetical roles, at once controlling and caring for their “domestic helpers” (Petronoti, 2003). As Diana explains,

“They always do something in order to prevent you from having the courage to say ‘I want’. ‘You are so good. You are the best Albanian woman. etc., etc., etc. And then you cannot say a word”.

In this context, opportunities to share leisure time with employers and break the chain of repetitive domestic tasks may often be treated with mistrust. Drinking coffee before the start of work might appear as a positive gesture on the part of the employers, which gives the chance to their domestic “helpers” to rest and relax and take their minds off work. And yet such habits do not usually alter asymmetries in the work relation, but reinforce them. As Kleida explains:

“Yes, it is fine. ‘Kleida drinks coffee too’, but afterwards all the work needs to be done. It is better when she is not at home because I can finish early. They have invited me to weddings and baptisms too. But being tired is being tired”.

The fact that “Kleida drinks coffee too” may impose a heavier burden and impede her ability to negotiate her professional role in the house. Being treated as a friend or as part of the family by sharing moments of leisure with Greek employers’ forces upon Albanian women a subordinate identity.

CONCLUSION

Insisting on the identity of the domestic worker who works constantly and has no time for leisure breaks enables Albanian domestic workers to shed off their labelling as “one of us”. Negotiating their professional role in the house, but also their position in Greek society is realized through an excess of work rather than through direct confrontation with their employers. The ample demand for domestic labour and their ability to work in different houses allows them to leave those employers who mistreat them and

“choose the best ones”. Unlike their employers, Albanian domestic workers are aware of the differences between Greek women and exploit them in order to increase their income. Finishing early to “do” as many houses as possible is a tactic that enables them not only to earn more money, but also to deny their subordinate position and ensure that they will continue to work even if one of their employers mistreats them. These tactics contradict the commonplace argument that migrant women are doubly disadvantaged in the labour market because of gender and ethnic segregation. Although domestic work is undoubtedly related to downwards mobility, illegal status and social distress (Raijman, Schammah and Kemp, 2003), it might also transform the «private» space of Greek households from a female-dominated closed confine into a place of social acceptance and upwards mobility vis-à-vis the Greek society.

In the repetitive and excessive performance of domestic tasks at home and at work, typically “feminine” tasks are transformed into “public” questions. “Being a good housewife” no longer implies feminine inferiority and victimhood, but it might also come to signify a more dynamic professional identity that distances migrant women from the inferior role assigned to them in racist accounts. These contradictions are inherent in the relationship between gender and migration. Even for women, like Kaiti who used to be a professional engineer in Albania, it is offensive to challenge her ability to “care professionally” and share or even exceed her employers’ good taste. This challenge arises from the in-between character of a domestic space that is neither simply private (feminine, protected, ordered), nor simply public (paid, skilled, professionalized, hard). Renata’s following statement shows this blurring of boundaries.

“OK I am not saying that there are no Greeks who work hard. I say ‘He is very strong. He works like an Albanian woman’”.

In migrant domestic work, endurance, professionalism, strength, or speed become qualities that enable Albanian women to claim a superior, pro-active and dynamic identity against their employers’ compassionate understanding and care. The presence of migrant domestic workers may have failed to challenge the gendered hierarchies within Greek families, since women simply delegate their own “burden” to other women, who are treated as inferior. Instead migrant women themselves gradually come to challenge the gendered and ethnic hierarchies that prevail in Greek families by appropriating the spaces of domestic work and transforming their meaning.

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