

## The Greek Review of Social Research

Vol 124 (2007)

Special Issue 124, C: Gender and Migration: Aspects of social integration and social policy. Editors: Koula Kassimati, Loukia M. Mousourou, Ioannis Sakellis



### Employing immigrant women from Albania and Ukraine in domestic services in Greece.

*Ioannis Sakellis, Natalia Spyropoulou*

doi: [10.12681/grsr.115](https://doi.org/10.12681/grsr.115)

Copyright © 2007, Ioannis Sakellis, Natalia Spyropoulou



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

### To cite this article:

Sakellis, I., & Spyropoulou, N. (2007). Employing immigrant women from Albania and Ukraine in domestic services in Greece. *The Greek Review of Social Research*, 124, 71–93. <https://doi.org/10.12681/grsr.115>

*Ioannis Sakellis\*, Natalia Spyropoulou\*\**

---

EMPLOYING IMMIGRANT WOMEN  
FROM ALBANIA AND UKRAINE  
IN DOMESTIC SERVICES IN GREECE \*\*\*

---

ABSTRACT

*The mass influx of both male and female immigrants in Greece has been the core characteristic of Greece's economic growth for the last two decades. All available data lead us to the conclusion that immigration to Greece is motivated by economic factors: the pursuit of employment. In this article we shall attempt to place the work of immigrant women in the context of the hierarchical and exploitive relations that prevail in the labour market.*

*The article consists of three parts. The first part describes the hierarchical structure of the Greek labour market and outlines the upcoming developments and the emphasis placed on gender discrimination. In the second part, the basic findings of the empirical research are presented. The third part draws the main conclusions.*

INSTEAD OF PREFACE

*Elsa, 41 years old, was born in Albania and lived in a rural area. She graduated from the local high school and worked in the fields until 1997, when she came to Greece along with her husband and children. She now works in houses as a domestic help. She believes that life has become very difficult and more expensive over the last few years. Her husband works in the building construction sector but, because labour demand in the sector has diminished, he may work for one day and then be out of work for a month.*

---

\* Professor, Panteion University of Athens. Director of Institute of Social Policy of EKKE.

\*\* MSc. Social Policy, Research Collaborator at the National Centre for Social Research.

\*\*\* Many thanks to Professors K. Kassimati and L. Moussourou for their constructive remarks on this article, as well as for their critical contribution and scientific guidance in the performance of the relevant research.

*In the future, she may not know how things will turn out, but she can already tell that her children want to keep living in Greece.*

*Brigitta, 43 years old, was born in Albania and studied Biology and Chemistry in Tirana. She is married and a mother of two children. Brigitte worked as a high school teacher in her country and was very satisfied with her life there. They came to Greece for political reasons in 1995. For nine years, she was working for 56 hours a week as domestic help, while, during the first 3 years, she was working at the same time as a cook and also washing dishes at a restaurant. Since 2004, Brigitta and her husband have run a mini market of their own in the Athenian suburb of Vyronas. Today, she thinks that, despite the difficulties of the first few years, she was very well treated not only by her employers, but by the rest of the people as well; she thinks that she has been very lucky in this sense.*

*Dora, 36 years old, was born in a village of Northern Epirus (South Albania). She graduated from high school in Albania, dealing, at the same time, with agricultural works. She came to Greece, along with her husband and brother, in order to find a better life. She believes that the severity of the poverty and the deprivation that prevailed in Albania motivated her compatriots to flock to Greece. Today, Dora is divorced, living with her two children without receiving any alimony or other financial aid from her ex-husband. She is currently working at a factory located in Inophyta, in the morning, while in the afternoons and some weekends she cleans houses. Although she works for many hours, she is not interested in changing jobs since she manages to make ends meet and to form her timetable by herself.*

*Ludmilla, 57 years old, came from Ukraine to Greece for the first time in 1997. She returned to her homeland in 1999, but then came back to Greece again due to financial obligations. In Ukraine, she used to work as an accountant for a transport bureau. In Greece, she worked for two years as an in-house carer for an old man, but did not like it, and since her return to Greece again works as a domestic help. She works every day from 08:00 to 16:00 except Sundays. She is married and has two daughters and a grandson. All the members of her family live in Ukraine and she hopes that she will return to her country soon.*

*Oresta, 57 years old, came from Ukraine in 2000. She studied Geology at a Technical Lyceum, working at oil-drilling in her country until 1990, when the firm was shut down. She wanted to come to Greece in order to make money. When she first came here, she faced difficulties in dealing with the private employment agencies, but for the past few years she has been working steadily as a live-in carer of a sick elderly lady, with no days off.*

*Since she came to Greece, Oresta has not gone back to Ukraine again, although her husband, two children and four grandchildren live there.*

The above cases are characteristic examples of female immigrants working in the domestic services sector. Domestic work is often part of the function of the family and the house-keeping activity. In this case it is normally unpaid and, therefore, lies outside the labour market. Otherwise domestic work is offered against payment within the (formal or informal) labour market system. Whether paid or unpaid, domestic work is the clearest case of role distinction and segregation of work according to gender, a situation which in Greece continues to exist and be reproduced.

### 1. THE ENVIRONMENT IN THE LABOUR MARKET

Women's low activity rate is one of the main characteristics of the Greek labour market. This rate, although it shows a steady improvement over the last few years, it is still close to 55% of the (respective) working age population, which is below the average rate (62.5%) of the 25-member state European Union. It is true that the specific rate stands at very low levels both in Italy and in Spain, while it is as high as 68% in Portugal, where, however, there are very high levels of part-time employment.

It is interesting to note at this point that, even in terms of the prime working age group of 25-54, this rate amounts approximately to 68% (94.6% in men) and is considerably below the respective rate of the 25-member state European Union (about 76%) [European Commission, 2004].

In addition, evidence shows that Greek women who do not actively participate in the labour market (over 850,000, 25-64 years old) do not wish to enter employment. In fact, a very low proportion of women (about 4%) who neither work nor seek employment state that "*I would like to work*" while the vast majority (about 96%) state that "*I don't want to work for personal or family reasons*" (NSSG, Labour Force Survey, 2006).<sup>1</sup>

From the above evidence, we can conclude that domestic work constitutes the main activity of a very large number of Greek women who belong to the prime working age group and follows stereotypical role segregation.

---

1. Many thanks to Dimitris Dodis for the elaboration and analysis of the data referred to in this chapter.

Should one attempt to classify unpaid domestic services in the complex grid of social and economic relationships prevailing in the labour market, one will confirm that women's transition from the unpaid domestic services towards paid employment becomes exceedingly difficult since it requires a change in attitudes, social standards and stereotypes, as well as significant state interventions regarding the improvement of job attractiveness and work-life balance.

The labour market in advanced countries is mainly characterised, firstly, by a rigid hierarchy concerning both supply and demand and, secondly, by the fact that the quality of the work follows closely the pattern of the dual character of the economy (Edwards et al., 1975; Doeringer & Piore, 1971, pp. 1-5; Tilly C. & Tilly C., 1998, ch.1; Sakellis, 2000, ch. 3 ). There are jobs belonging to the official and advanced economy sectors that correspond to decent salaries, good working conditions and prospects of economic and social advancement. However, there is also the unstructured and often unofficial sector, where poor quality jobs prevail with low pay and lack of prospects. Nevertheless, as far as the demand side is concerned, the entrance into the structured sector is greatly determined by the level and the quality of education.

Potential workers have, in consequence, to face a clearly segmented market in the sense that workers of equal productivity power are treated in a different way. Social prejudices, attitudes, concepts and stereotypes lead to choices that do not follow any production or economic rationale.

In Greece, where the informal sector holds a considerable share of the economic activity, the issue of different treatment is constantly taking even more significant and multilateral social dimensions. Uninsured workers, their inability to claim essential working rights, high risks of accidents and the lack of both health and safety measures at work, are some of the features characterising a considerable number of jobs. The provision of domestic services is one such job. In Greece this is a typical job for a woman and, especially, for an *immigrant woman*.

Indeed, as it is shown by the detailed processing of the data from the Population Census of 2001 (EKKE,<sup>2</sup> 2005), 41,532 persons, 38,815 of whom were women (93.5%), were recorded to be employed in the sector of "Private Households Employing Personnel" in Attica. Only 6,457 of them were Greek, the lion's share taken by Albanian women (14,794), followed by

---

2. Greek National Centre for Social Research.

Bulgarian and Ukrainian women (3,664 and 3,105 respectively). It is worth noting that the vast majority of the female immigrants classified in this sector (over 65%) are located in Attica, followed by the largest geographic region of Central Macedonia, where (merely) 17% of the female immigrants are located.

Therefore, it appears that female immigrants' participation in the Greek labour market, mainly in domestic services, is sizable. These jobs have all the qualitative characteristics of the secondary sector of the labour market. This will be illustrated through the presentation of the results of the survey and will be discussed later in this article.

## 2. THE EMPIRICAL SURVEY

The findings presented in this section are based on primary data from the thematic axis Employment of the project "PYTHAGORAS I - Gender and Migrant Populations: aspects of social integration and social policy". The methodology used, included field work using both structured questionnaires and in-depth interviews<sup>3</sup> and aimed at investigating the particular working conditions of female immigrants employed in the domestic services and personal care sector, as well as their views regarding their position in the Greek labour market.

The survey, conducted in the greater area of Athens, focused on the professions of domestic help, house cleaning and personal care of children and elderly people. The first phase of the survey consisted of answering a questionnaire. In total, 300 individual questionnaires were completed: 190 by Albanian and 110 by Ukrainian female immigrants. In the second phase, interviews were carried out with women who participated in the first phase. The main characteristics of our sample are displayed in the Table below.

---

3. We ought to point out that pinpointing and approaching the qualitative characteristics of female immigrants' work was the target of the project. The survey included Albanian and Ukrainian female immigrants, who are the most representative nationalities of the female immigrants living in Greece, as it results from the population census. Choosing the female immigrants who took part in the context of the survey was performed with the use of the methodology approaching the "snowball" rules. It is true that, in the way the choice was performed, the alignment with the rules of random sampling will not be ensured. Nevertheless, completion of the detailed questionnaire, in combination with the interviews, reveals the qualitative parameters of this specific type of work.

**Table 1**  
*The main characteristics of the sample in the field work:*  
*“Women working in domestic services”*

Characteristics	Origin	
	Ukraine	Albania
Most prevalent age groups	40-59	30-49
Number of interviewed persons	110	190
Female heads of household	82%	12%
Average (duration of) stay	6 years	12 years
Average household size	1.3 persons	3.5 persons
Most frequent educational level	University	Lyceum <sup>4</sup>

According to our findings, the Ukrainian female immigrants are of a high educational level, come to Greece at an older age, alone, leaving their families behind and their stay in Greece is shorter. The Albanian female immigrants, on the other hand, are mostly secondary education graduates, stay longer in Greece and come here with their families and at a younger age.<sup>5</sup>

The findings of the fieldwork are presented below under separate headings dealing with: the job content and special characteristics of the work –mainly in respect of employer-employee relationships; revenues and social security; immigrants’ concepts about employment in general and about their own employment in Greece in particular.

### *2.1. The job content*

The domestic type services referred to in this survey cover (one or a combination of) the following activities: a) cleaning houses, b) cleaning professional premises (offices, hotels and other spaces), c) children’s care at home and d) care of elderly people at home.

At this point it should be noted that a specialisation per nationality in the kind of works undertaken by female immigrants is apparently taking place. This specialisation results from a combination of factors, such as, for example, the expectations from the work, the family situation, the plans for the future etc.

---

4. In Greece, Lyceum consists of the 3 last years of secondary education (16 – 18 years old).

5. The educational level is confirmed also by the data of the 2001 Population Census, ESYE (National Statistical Service of Greece).

*Elpiza (Albania): "In the beginning I lived in (as a domestic housemaid) with my husband... we left (from his job) because our children grew up and we couldn't keep them inside. I've been working at homes ever since ...9 years now.."*

*Roxanne (Ukraine): "I expected to find such a job (a living-in carer for the elderly) in order to send money to Ukraine"*

Thus, as far as the distinction between Albanian and Ukrainian female workers is concerned, Ukrainians mainly deal with the care of elderly people and, therefore, live-in, while Albanians, in order to combine their work with their family responsibilities, work for daily wages, often lacking social security, and live in their own households.

More specifically, it appears from the survey data that the vast majority (about 70%) of female immigrants are employed as domestic help and cleaners, while the rest of them (30%) work in the care of elderly and children.<sup>6</sup> At any rate, it is true that these two job categories, in many cases, are not clearly distinct, since it seems that female immigrants often have a "mixture" of duties.

From the answers we were given, it appears that the exact content of those duties depends on the specific agreement between the employee and the employer. In some cases this agreement may require only cleaning. In others, it could also require ironing, whereas in some others it could even also require cooking. The worker is also sometimes called on to undertake tasks that may not relate to the job of a cleaner, but are supportive to the family.

*Sofia: "I am a domestic help, yes. I do everything, that is, I even go to the post office and pay the bills (laughter)... You know... we are everything ....whatever you like. I iron and I do the nursing; I do everything....whatever you like. I am also a plumber and an electrician (laughter). If a plug comes out of place, I fix it... I do everything. I do everything!"*

*Olga: "I do all the housework here. I also go to their shop... clean the windowpanes, dust the leather items... I do more sophisticated work there and normally I work at their house... I cook, I wash, I iron, I clean... everything"*

---

6. In any case, it results also from the 2001 Population Census that female immigrants are allocated mainly in these two categories in the area of Athens.



*Xeni: "...I mostly do the cooking, the ironing.... All right! I also do various other things. They also have a woman who lives in... I do everything... everything, but the cooking, I do it daily".*

The same applies in the case of women who take care of people as live-in carers.

*Oresta: "I do everything.... I wash her, I feed her, I clean up the house, go shopping, iron... everything.... whatever a house needs. I also prepare the meals... She is incapable of doing anything alone..."*

*Victoria: "I'm a housemaid. I work and live in their home. I live in, having (taking care of) a five-year old child who goes to the children's nursery every day and returns in the afternoon... Eh! You know! I clean up, iron, go walking with the child, read a bit...and so on".*

Given that boarding is mainly related to the care of old people, and that such work presupposes the female immigrant's "disentanglement" from her family responsibilities, it is normal that a specialisation of domestic work occurs according to nationality. So, Ukrainians appear to prefer the care of people and live-in, whereas Albanians opt for the independence that the job of a domestic help/cleaner offers them.

*Oresta (Ukraine): "I won't go from house to house, having to clean it up from scratch and to lift furniture and rugs. No way! And to be told do this and that and the other and then not like the way you do it! Here, I can do as I please".*

*Donika (Albania): "The good thing about cleaning houses is that you have a certain degree of freedom concerning working hours etc. For me (mother of 2 children) that is very important".*

The personal relationship with the employer is a typical characteristic of domestic services, since almost all female immigrants work at private households. Therefore, this relationship is a critical factor in the quality of employment.

The results of the survey show that the majority of the women in our sample are content with their employers. However, when they were called on to substantiate their answers by speaking freely, they expressed complaints against their employers in several cases.

Cleaners state that they are satisfied with their employers for reasons such as the establishment of friendly relationships with them, the trust they enjoy (as shown by the employer's entrusting his/her keys to them or by his/her

absence from home), the long-term association with the same people and the feeling of intimacy with them, the building of bonds (sometimes even based on religious relationships), as well as the provision of aid (of a pecuniary nature or in kind, in the form of recommendation, facilitation in the context of their bureaucratic administrative transactions with the state etc.) by them.

Those who appear to be dissatisfied with their employers claim reasons related to the violation of the initial work agreement, financial exploitation, lack of social security cover or bad attitude on their part.

*Antonia: "Phew! I shouldn't have started .... Work is no shame, but I still do the same job I did nine years ago! We didn't know things well then... that is, that we needed revenue stamps (for social insurance)... You don't get revenues stamps when you work at homes... I've regretted it....So many years have passed... Now I wish I could find another job....but, when you're fifty, nobody hires you".*

The character and attitude of the person they take care of is the predominant factor of discontent on the part of female immigrants.

It appears from the interviews, that many of the female workers –those, in particular, who have been working in Greece for many years– have already chosen their employers on the basis of good working conditions. Others state that they simply leave when they are discontent. Yet others said that they would overlook temporary problems to avoid running the risk of losing their employers if generally content with them.

*"Things were more difficult in the beginning.... when you're in need of work, you aren't in the position to be choosy: you've got to go there, whether you like it or not. However, later on when you know more people and have alternatives.... you choose the best (of them)".*

*"If I just don't like someone as an employer, I avoid her... why should I quarrel? Why should I bother?"*

*"Some gentlemen give more money... I may earn little money, but I don't like going about looking for something better than what I've got now because I may run into something worse than that. This is the reason why I stay put instead".*

## 2.2. Revenues, social security and duration of the working week

The monetary revenues of female immigrants range at slightly higher levels than those of the official minimum wage. In many cases, apart from

monetary revenues, also benefits in kind (food, housing, clothing) are provided, making difficult to estimate the total revenues of female immigrants' as well as the quantitative comparisons among the various types of domestic services.

Social insurance is another area where differences exist. It appears that female workers covered by the national social insurance system are more often those living in and caring for elderly people and/or children, as the exclusive occupation in the home of the employer entails a greater than usual responsibility for the working woman. For this reason, since Ukrainian working women more often undertake this type work, they show a higher percentage of workers insured at work despite their comparatively shorter presence in Greece.

Working hours variability and wage volatility during a working week or month is a common phenomenon in domestic type jobs, as, at any rate, it often happens in jobs closely affected by a personal relationship between the employer and the employee (in the official or unofficial economy sector).

*Dora (Albania): "There have been times ...she tells me 'today it is not convenient'. I'll skip it. But then you are left without your pay!"*

*Milla (Ukraine): "A lady I was working for, broke her leg... she took a woman to live in for 2 months... I lost them (my payments) but it's OK. I'm not searching (for another employer). The lady will recover and I will go back there..."*

Among the immigrant women participating in the research it appears that most of them work for over 42 hours per week, followed by those who work from 36 to 40 hours (without this meaning necessarily that they work every day). Anyway, in the case of the Ukrainian female immigrants, the numerous working hours relate to their round-the-clock presence at their working place and acclimatisation to the lifestyle of the persons they take care of. In the case of the Albanian female immigrants, the numerous working hours are the result of a parallel occupation in two or more jobs (morning and evening, cleaning and ironing, homes and offices, Saturdays and Sundays) in order to improve their earnings.

*Sofia (Albania): "Aren't there seven days in a week? Well, I work all seven of them (laughter). I work in the evenings too and make them ten (wages)... Wherever they send me, I go. I finish one job and go to another".*

### *2.3. Female immigrants' views about work in general and about their employment in Greece in particular*

The available data concerning the labour force in Ukraine and Albania reveal that women's participation rate displays a steady decline in both of these countries. For example, in Albania, this percentage shows a decrease from 47.5% in 1995 to 44.3% in 2001. In Ukraine, the respective shift is dramatic since it plummeted to 51% in 2001 from 65% in 1995 (United Nations, 2001). This decline is due to the considerable outflow of women who work, or wish to work, in the developed countries.

*Nadia (Ukraine): "Most women of my age are here. The men (there) will take care of our homes and do the housework, so that the houses will not be empty".*

The majority of women who participated in the survey appear to have a positive attitude towards female employment. They believe that women should work regardless of their families' financial status or that they should work to contribute to their family's expenses. It would be expected, therefore, that the interviewed women would be positive about their employment here, since the driving force for their emigration was the improvement of their financial situation through work. This attitude shows no particular differentiation on the basis of the nationalities surveyed.

*Donika: "When a woman is in need of work, she works as I do. When she is not in (such) need, she can do the work that pleases her (...) she feels well and fine (then). Work, in my opinion, is life".*

*Asemina:, "I've always liked to work whether I've got money or not. I just can't sit back at home and get rusty... I don't know how other people feel about it but, normally, work is good to all".*

Anyhow, with reference to the situation prevailing in the country of origin regarding women's employment, most Albanian women claim that the women in their country usually work in order to contribute to the family's expenses, whereas most Ukrainian women believe that women in their country work regardless of their families' financial situation.

*Nadia: "In my country...both men and women work, and I like it, and it should be this way. A woman ought to remain alive and not stay put at home like a piece of furniture, waiting for when the man will come home".*

*Milla: “For as long as I remember both men and women worked in Ukraine. There wasn’t such a thing for a woman to stay at home. We didn’t have this at all. You ought to work. Why did you study then? Why study? To stay at home? Eh! Then, sit back and don’t study. Once you’ve studied, you must work”.*

*Antonia: “In Albania, the man works and the woman works. Here in Greece I was impressed by some women who are staying at home; they don’t know many things but they come out and judge me just because I come from Albania, while they themselves have never worked in their whole lifetime...”*

### **Views about their work in Greece**

Female immigrants’ concepts with regard to the qualitative characteristics of their jobs result from an indirect comparison to the jobs they did in their countries and the kind of life they led prior to their coming to Greece.

Thus, Albanian women, who lived in rural areas and worked in the agrarian sector appear to be more satisfied concerning their employment in Greece in contrast to their compatriots who lived in urban areas, as well as to the majority of the Ukrainian women who come from urban areas.

Brigitte will point out that: *“Working in Greece is very tiring for girls who were not used to doing such kind of work in Albania. On the contrary, for girls who worked in the fields as farmhands, this kind of work looks as if they work (comfortably) at a ministry: they are neither cold nor hot; they eat and drink well; they do everything they like”.*

Sofia compares her work in Albania to that in Greece, saying, *“Working here is as different as the day from the night... We worked in the fields all day, come rain come shine, without any future at all... and have your employer say that you haven’t done this well and so you won’t be given your wages... Things were very difficult... There are not such problems here”.*

*Dora (Albania): “I did agricultural works there. I grew tough a bit in so doing... because of the hard life...lifting weights...the animals...working in the fields. All right, whichever way you see it, it was much harder there than it is here”.*

*Elsa (Albania): “Everything here is better (than in Albania). You work indoors... Working in fields isn’t the same thing as working at homes. It may be tiring as well but not as much as working outside”.*

It is worth noting that most female immigrants do not regard their employment in Greece as a “job” but rather like the everyday household duties (of a woman), which they also had back home.

*Nadia: “How can I put it? What I do here is not my work. It’s a job to earn my living. It’s not what I want to do, but what I have to (do). It’s not what I wanted or would like to do: I work here just to earn money and help my children and grandchildren. I work because I have to. I may like what I do as a woman, but this is not a real work. It’s like working at home. I did the same in my country. I worked at a bank and also did the housework as I do here. No, you can’t call it a job”.*

*Roxanne: “I am a cleaner. What is it I can like or dislike? I don’t know. I’ve found this job and know what to do and I’m content. What I like is difficult to say, because a chemist’s work and a cleaner’s work isn’t the same thing. However, no one is to blame for this. I came here to work. I knew that my work would mean my being a cleaner... I can’t do other (kinds of) work here. I do my work as any woman does at her home”.*

*Milla: “I may not do what I’ve studied, but I can’t work at an office here. I neither look nor hope for something else; I’ve never had any hopes for something else because when I came here I didn’t speak Greek at all; where could I go and who would employ me? I came just for this work. I knew it and I work all right. I’m happy now”.*

Although, the immigrant women questioned in the survey seem to have accepted their new jobs here, it is true that during their early years most of them had difficulty in adjusting to their new working conditions, and there are some who have not yet been reconciled with this sudden change in their working lives.

*Brigitte (Albania): “And just think of it: from a teacher (I used to be)... to come here and to be told that ‘this is a vacuum cleaner!’... I went to the bathroom and cried, saying to myself that they are showing me now what a vacuum cleaner is ...”*

*“Terrible, terrible.... I couldn’t, I just couldn’t. It was terrible. I don’t know how to call it.. I don’t know... I wept, worked and wept. And to go, leave the office you are in and run to buses in a country you don’t know at all, and back then, I didn’t speak Greek... Then, insults came... Oh! You come from Albania...she is from Albania. These things hurt you”.*

*Annia (Ukraine): "This has hurt me many times.. I compare my being an accountant back home to the fact that I am like this...inferior here, and that hurts me".*

*Donika (Albania): "I'm happy because I work for people who respect me and love me... but, deep down, I don't feel good with myself... I don't feel good, because I haven't managed to do what I used to dream".*

Many immigrant women in our sample have expressed a negative opinion about their work in Greece. Nevertheless, save for a few exceptions, the majority of the female workers neither think of changing their jobs nor are they looking for something else. Their responses are indicative not only of today's reality, and especially of the situation prevailing in the labour market in Greece, but also of the way they see themselves in this country.

*Oresta (Ukraine): "No! What else can you do here in Greece? I'm alone and I don't speak the language. No! It's OK here".*

*Milla (Ukraine): "Oh! I don't think so. I don't think so. Where can one find another type of job here? Even you (natives) can't find a proper job...! You can hardly find a job yourselves ... Greek women, natives ... How can we find one? Where shall we look for it?"*

*Elpiza (Albania): "Here? I don't know... it is very difficult... because when I first came here I didn't speak Greek ... What am I to say now? Am I to become a secretary?! I'm ok now, I'm ok...."*

### **Employment experiences in Greece**

Considering that Greece is currently going through the second decade as a reception country of immigrants, it is normal that immigrants have an employment history which includes, apart from the years of their employment, a change in the nature of their work.

Very often immigrant women start working in Greece as live-in help. It is a convenient job for newcomers, who know practically nothing of the host country and not only do they have no money at all, but in many cases they have also debts to pay back home. In this type of work, they normally stay for a few years in order to learn the language, to get to know the Greek way of life and to save money, since they have practically no personal expenses. After that initial stage, many of them (especially the Albanians in our survey) choose to work independently and live in their own place.

*Asemina (Albania): "When I came here, I didn't speak Greek at all and ran into great difficulties. So, I thought to work in-house for a Greek*

*family.... I worked there for two years, learnt Greek and, then, I decided to work outside.....Together with my sisters, we rented a flat and began to work as wage earners, living together”.*

Indeed, most of those female immigrants who have been living in Greece for many years have worked their way towards jobs with better working conditions, higher revenues and for better employers than before, without this development meaning that these changes have brought about major qualitative changes in the characteristics of their work.

According to Maria: “...*cleaning homes is always the same thing*”, while Minia says, “*I still clean up houses....dirt does not change through years, dirt always remains the same*”.

With regard to women’s views about their working conditions, they seem to believe that an improvement has taken place through time, due to:

- their better knowledge of the Greek language and, consequently, their ability to
  - better communicate with their employers and have a better understanding
  - express their needs and assert their rights
- their gradual integration into the living conditions and the way of life of the host country
- their familiarity with the working conditions
- the improvement, limited as it may be, in their revenues, and
- their (more widespread) cover by the Greek social insurance system, and their consequent feeling of security in cases of illness or accidents.

*Fioretta (Albania): “In the beginning, I worked from seven o’ clock in the morning to two o’clock after midnight at a hotel in the Island of Aegina. I worked in the kitchen, cleaned up the rooms and the whole hotel, I served...; I did everything.... everything. Then, we came here, rented a flat and I started cleaning houses. I only work in the morning now”.*

*Annia (Ukraine): “In the beginning, I worked and lived in ... for 5.5 years. Then, I found a night job for a lady and, after that, I slowly found a morning job too, cleaning houses. It’s better (for one) to work outside (homes)”.*

### ***Insecurity about their job prospects***

Despite the instability and uncertainty observed in jobs of the tertiary sector, the general impression is that female immigrants do not feel insecure in relation to their work. This is mainly due to the fact, as they themselves point out, that there is an increasing demand for domestic type jobs, while



also the length of employment in the same houses and by the same employers plays an important role.

*Asemina: "I've been living in Greece for at least 12 years and I have never been out of work, not even for one month. Even when I ask for it or like to have some rest, it hasn't happened to me... I work".*

*Elpiza: "I haven't thought of it.... I haven't thought of it... just because I'm still young... I don't know... because I have a steady job... I haven't thought of it as yet".*

*Olga: "No (I don't worry), not at all.... These people are afraid of losing me. They give me whatever I want. They trust me very much. Also their children living on their own now, it's me they want to go to their homes; they want nobody else... I'm not afraid of staying without a job. I'll always have one".*

*Roksani: "No, no. ...I feel secure now. I've been working there for many years and –how can I say it to you? – I'm confident... Do you understand what I want to say?"*

In the case of the Ukrainians, there is an additional reason for them not to feel insecurity about their future: many of them are planning to return to their country.

*Tania (Ukraine): "Things are good now because I can return to my country at any moment... In general, for the people who came to Greece because they had debts to pay off, I think that there are still these two periods: the period during which you still have liabilities (debts) and the other... when these liabilities are finally over. Then, you can go back at any moment. In the first period, you can't leave even if you're dying".*

*Larissa (Ukraine): "Almost all Ukrainians of my age who work at homes will go back... they have no future here, because our insurance covers only hospital expenses... so they will all return".*

However, a number of interviewees express a certain degree of insecurity about their future attributed to a series of reasons: 1) the financial shortage of their current employers, who either are not in the position to spend money on such kind of services or wish a reduction in the hours of the services provided, 2) the increase in the number of immigrant women coming to Greece and seeking work, 3) the consequential reduction in pay for domestic work etc.

*Roxanne: “Yes, I am (worried) now because it is an Italian company and, although I haven’t been told anything as yet, I’ve understood that something is going wrong with it”.*

*Nadia: “This year, I’ve heard from some friends of mine that it’s more difficult to find a job... In any case, you can find a job... you can find a lower wage. Yet, when I speak some Greek and have been living here for so many years, I don’t want my work to be tiring. Because I am 53 years old now.... I want a job, where I won’t get too tired but earn my money”.*

In addition, those who are employed to provide live-in care services have one more reason to feel less secure about their future, since their job is directly dependent on the lifetime of the elderly or on the time of independence of the children (if they take care of infants/children).

*Oresta (Ukraine): “Eh! For as long as Maroula is alive... that’s it! For as long as I can take care of Maroula.. I don’t know what I’ll do afterwards.. I haven’t thought of it”.*

### ***The problems they face at work***

Fatigue constitutes one of the basic negative characteristics of these professions, especially to women who clean up homes and it is usually accompanied by health problems.

*Milla (Ukraine): “My work is tiring. Of course, it’s very tiring. Tiring! Of course, how can it not be tiring? You go to other people’s homes and do the general cleaning every day. Isn’t it tiring? I get tired, but I can stand it for the time being. I still can cope with it”.*

*Larissa (Ukraine): “...one out of thirteen women are suffering from breast cancer which is due to detergents like chlorine. When I said so to a lady in a house, she looked at me as if I had come up with Einstein’s theory: she neither believed me nor did she want to think of it”.*

*Brigitte (Albania): “...I see my friends, each one has a different health problem: one in her womb, the other in her spine, another one has got her hands operated. I mean I couldn’t do it for much longer...”*

Processing the answers, it seems that the problems expressed in the survey are directly related to the specialisation in employment.

Cleaners, due to the nature of their work, are dealing with more than one employer, while the work itself is hard and tiring. The fact that they are paid

by the hour makes easier both their falling prey to financial exploitation and remaining uninsured. At the same time it gives them the opportunity to make more money.

*Larissa (Ukraine): "Were I to be a robot, I would have run out of batteries. However, we humans are strong..."*

In addition, the Albanian women lay emphasis on their employers' bad/racist attitude towards them, especially during the first years of their work in Greece.

The live-in carers (mostly Ukrainian women) appear to have problems related to the ignorance of the Greek language due to their comparatively shorter time of stay in Greece as well as problems of monotony, isolation, psychological burnout and lack of free personal time, attributed mostly to their staying at their work place on a 24h basis.

*Oresta (Ukraine): "... it is (my) loneliness. She has this illness and she can't talk. It is like talking to a wall. She's got no brain at all".*

*Mila (Ukraine): "... I can't work in-house. I did it in the beginning, because I couldn't do otherwise.... Five years I had a job inside. Eh! I abandoned it, because staying inside is tiring; psychologically I mean, because physically it is easier, but psychologically it is dreadful. I, personally, cannot stand it..."*

### **Everyday life**

As far as immigrants' daily routine is concerned, it becomes evident from their stories that their lives here are, to most of them, directly connected to a series of repetitive activities.

In the case of women cleaning houses, their day is spent cleaning other people's homes and then their own, without rest or any personal time for enjoyment or social entertainment. This results in feelings of exhaustion, endless routine, and stress in an effort to respond successfully to their working and financial obligations, as well as to their family responsibilities.

*Antonia (Albania): "We wake up... go to work like robots... without love... we come back....Have the children had their lunch? Did anyone ring me up? I have to go for ironing... I'm going for ironing.. Oh! I haven't managed to finish all my works... and your day passes in this way... and you wait that Sunday comes so that you will get an additional hour of sleep and, then, do the house chores... I also go to church for one hour in the morning... I wash some cups there ... I go there and then*

*back home... we have lunch in the afternoon. I do the ironing... the chores and then Monday comes and the “marathon” starts again...”*

*Larissa (Ukraine): “On week days I wake up and say to myself ‘Which house am I to clean up today? .... Do I remember the address? ....I am forgetting the floor’... I get up, filled with stress... Unless I hear the noise of cars driving past, I wonder if it is still too early or I had fallen asleep and have lost my job... At work every day it’s the same... balcony, living room, loo... nothing changes.... I work for many hours and, when I return home, I neither watch television nor read newspapers... I sometimes come back even after midnight...”*

*Elsa (Albania): “I’ll wake up and feed the children then go to work at eight o’clock, come back at two o’ clock, after that, I’ll start doing my house chores, deal with the children, wash, iron... the same things all the time... Housework. Over and over. This is what a woman does: she is meant to do nothing else but house works”.*

In the case of women providing live-in care, the days pass by slowly, monotonously, with no particular ups or downs. For some women everyday seems the same.

*Oresta (Ukraine): “Well, it’s quite an easy daily round....On weekdays I get up at 7:30, do the laundry, make the beds and then I help the lady get dressed. I give her milk to drink, wash the dishes and clean up the house until lunchtime. We eat together and then I put her in bed to take her nap. Around five o’ clock in the afternoon I wake her up and feed her again. I also comb her hair and we sit and watch TV together. The time we go to bed depends on whether there is something interesting on TV... Sundays I have my day off. But everything is closed, so I stay at home. I have nowhere to go”.*

There are others that live only for their day off (usually Sundays). Then, they have the opportunity to meet their compatriots, in specific places (Ukrainian restaurants, church etc) and share their views on everyday life and their memories from the time they were in their home country.

*Victoria (Ukraine): “I wake up at seven o’clock and drink a cup of coffee...it gives me strength for the rest of the day. Then, I take the child to the school and I return back home. I clean the house, do the washing and all the usual housework. In the afternoon I look after the child and I go to bed at eleven o’clock. The day I enjoy the most is Sunday. I have*

*the day off and I go to church. There, I meet my friends and we go for coffee and afterwards we go out for lunch. These 12 hours pass by so quickly that I can hardly wait till next Sunday”.*

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

Greek economy has been showing remarkable performances expressed mainly by economic growth rates ranging at a higher level than the relevant average rate in both European Union's and Eurozone's member states for the last decade. At the same time, however, it appears that this growth in Greek economy is not accompanied by respective performances in terms of changes in employment. It is worth noting that, according to the 2000 Lisbon Summit Conference's resolution, EU's member states have to adjust their economic policies in order to increase the employment rates 5 percentile units and reach the level of 70% at a European level by 2010.

For countries like Greece, with low employment rates, this means, among other things, a change in stances and attitudes, as well as in stereotypes, since women's transition from home to work is necessary for the accomplishment of the desirable employment rate. Something like that does not seem to be achieved since a multitude of counterincentives against work emanate from the way in which Greek economy functions. This consequently keeps Greek women inactive, providing their work out of the economy and the labour market. Instead they remain inside their families' fold, without contributing to the economic growth.

The reasons why a large proportion of Greek women remain outside the labour market include: a) few attractive jobs on offer, b) poor incentives to seek paid employment, c) low incidence of part-time employment (expensive for the private sector, virtually non-existent in the public sector), d) inadequate work/life balance policies and, finally, e) the discouragement effect. However, despite the low female participation rate, there is a high demand for paid domestic services.

Demand for these jobs has been in a 'shadow situation' on the grounds that Greek women would not accept such kinds of occupation which are classified in the secondary sector.<sup>7</sup> This latent demand is activated through the increase in the supply created by the advent of female immigrants.

---

7. There is a certain concern about whether immigrants will occupy work posts that would otherwise be occupied by Greeks. The fact that the unemployment rate among, mainly, women and long-term unemployed individuals is high, will also contribute to the tenability

Therefore, the advent of female immigrants has led to the creation of a working environment that is defined by gender division of labour (which accounts for the reason why women are chosen) and forms professional characteristics placed, socially and economically, at the lowest points of the hierarchy scale.

Indeed from the analysis of the answers regarding the job content, it becomes evident that these low quality jobs are undertaken by individuals who are exclusively motivated by the sole prospect of meeting their basic needs. In other words, these jobs could not be perceived as an opportunity for a considerable improvement and advancement of the workers' position in both employment and social life.

The female immigrants from Albania and Ukraine who took part in the survey exercise their right to work in the context of a profession characterised by all the features of the secondary sector of labour market and, in many cases, of the informal "black" labour: adverse working conditions; low support rates by social insurance; limited prospects of both economic and social advancement and questionable quality of relationship with their employers. At the same time, they are subject to the typical gender discrimination related to decisions taken with regard to family programming and, apart from their work, to their full encumbrance with the responsibilities managing their household entails.

All these aspects referring to the specific field of economic activity are corroborated by the fact that the whole of the workers employed in this field concerns, interchangeably, two typical categories that bear the brunt of the impacts of a segmented labour market: sex and ethnicity. It results, therefore, that the vast majority of employees in this field concerns *female immigrants*.

This negative scheme appears to be faced with dignity by the female immigrants who took part in the survey and they display a positive and, in

---

of this concern. However, it is true that "*while one may expect some specific categories of workers to be in competition with immigrants in the Greek labour market, something like that does not seem to happen. Due to the relatively high educational level, which entails expectations for a relatively high professional and social status, good working conditions and high revenues, as well as to the traditionally strong family ties, many Greek young women seeking employment have the option of continuing to live with their families, who will support them, ...while they are waiting to land a job corresponding to their educational level and expectations*" (Lambrianides & Lymberaki, 2001). Therefore, there are very serious reservations as to whether Greek women would respond to the demand for domestic services.

many cases, aggressive approach to the problems the struggle for survival entails.

*Tania: “Well, I’ve got to say something here about the people who come to Greece: Simple, desperate, poor people CAN NEVER come here but only strong people who are in the position to get to know the ropes in order to come here can make it. I’m sure that, when you ask them, you’ll see that they’ve come up against many obstacles...however... they held a strong weapon in their hands and had great will in their souls. ... They wanted to survive... They were unable to compromise with the misery that had hit them. Whoever could remain patient and live unhappily for years in Ukraine.... would never leave his/her family to jump into the void....”.*

So, despite the fact that they were uprooted from their natural social habitat, usual occupation and daily routine, they can cope today with the demands of their individual jobs with dignity, appearing, finally, to succeed in overcoming difficulties and in creating better prospects for themselves and, mainly, for their children.

*Xeni: “In general, everything is fine. I would say, that is, humans are never satisfied no matter how many things they have.... I want us to be healthy and to work. Just that and nothing else. It is this I pray for: may my children be healthy and work and all the rest will follow suit. When they are healthy and have a job, they can cope with all other things successfully. This is how we ourselves also came to Greece: with a spoon in our bag and now we’re well. Aren’t we?”.*

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Doeringer P. and M. Piore, 1971, *Internal Labour Markets and Manpower Analysis*, Lexington Mass D.C. Heath.
- EKKE [National Centre for Social Research] – ESYE [National Statistical Service of Greece], 2005, *A Panorama of Greek Census Data 1991-2001*. Application under experimental and restricted use at the EKKE.
- Edwards R., M. Reich and D. Gordon (eds), 1975, *Labour Market Segmentation*, Lexington Mass D.C. Heath.
- European Commission, 2004, *Employment in Europe 2004*, Employment and Social Affairs.
- Labrianides L. and A. Lyberaki, 2001, *Albanian Immigrants in Thessalonica*, Paratiritis (in Greek).

National Statistical Service of Greece, *Labour Force Survey 2006*.

National Statistical Service of Greece, *Population Census 2001*.

Sakellis I., 2000, *Population and Labour Force in Greece*, Benos, Second edition (in Greek).

Tilly C. and C. Tilly, 1998, *Work under Capitalism*, Westview Press.

United Nations, 2001, Economic Commission for Europe, *Statistical Division*.