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# On mops and maids: Repercussions of paid domestic work on female Albanian migrants in Greece

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**Abstract:** The present study focuses on migrant women from Albania in Greece, who are employed in the sector of domestic work. The aim of the paper is to unravel the multiple effects of domestic work on the living conditions and integration of these women in the host country. The study implements the tool of research literature review. This method was chosen as it includes an objective approach and evaluation of the body of qualitative/quantitative research literature, in order to answer focused questions about the effects of domestic work on migrant women from Albania in Greece, using appropriate keywords in two databases. A review of the literature reveals that the low wages and precarious working conditions that characterise domestic work and care, allow for physical and moral exploitation, while at a social level there is marginalization and difficulty of access of domestic workers to social security, healthcare, community organization and labor representation.

**Keywords:** feminization of migration, women, Albanian migration, gender, domestic work, care work, Greece

## 1 Migration from Albania to Greece

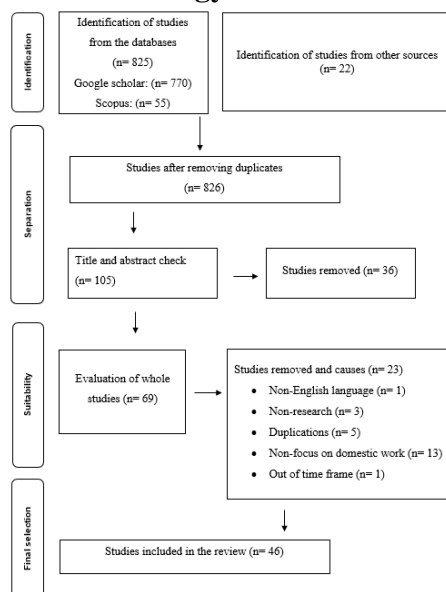
Greece has a long history of migration, either as a sending country or, particularly in recent decades as a transit and receiving country for a significant number of migrants and refugees. A key feature of Greek migration history throughout the 19th and 20th centuries has been the emigration of the active Greek population. Migration flows changed around the late 1980s, with Greece experiencing a migration transition and transforming from a mainly sending country to a country of entry of migrant populations (Kotzamanis, 2008:12). In order to understand the magnitude of the migratory inflows, it is worth mentioning that in 1991 it was estimated that there were about 167.000 foreigners residing in the Greek territory, while in 2001 this number had increased almost fivefold, with foreigners estimated at about 800.000 (Bagavos and Papadopoulou, 2002:52). As to the presence of women in these migratory flows, it is estimated that according to the 2001 census, 45% of the foreign population consisted of female migrants (Maratou-Alipranti et al., 2007:39). The massive influx of immigrants into the country during this period was the result of the collapse of the regimes of the existing socialism in the countries of Eastern Europe and the Balkans, as well as the crises at multiple levels (economic, social, political) that erupted in these countries and especially in Albania (Kotzamanis, 2008:14). The study of Albanian migration occupies an important place in literature, and this is because - among others - men and women from Albania comprise approximately two thirds of the country's migrant stock (Maratou-Alipranti et al., 2007:14). As emerges from the 2011 Census data regarding the countries of previous residence of third country nationals settled in Greece, migrants from Albania made up 31.9% (ELSTAT, 2011:9). Moreover, according to the data of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum (2022) regarding the total of 455.806 legally residing third country nationals, Albanian nationals constitute the 1st ethnic group with 285.842 valid residence permits, which is 60.5% of the total.

### 1.1 Migrant women from Albania as domestic workers in Greece

Domestic work presents certain characteristics that make it special. Firstly, domestic work is a significantly “feminised” sector of employment (Cancedda, 2001:45) in which, especially on the European continent, migrant women tend to be increasingly employed (Triandafyllidou, 2013:2). At the same time, it falls

into the broader category of low prestige work, i.e., those forms of employment “with low or no prestige, which are precarious, secondary, i.e., all those forms of paid and unpaid work that are outside the boundaries of formal employment as unrecorded and considered subordinate by modern society and are usually hidden from the State to avoid taxes, social security and labor rights” (Fouskas, 2012). Therefore, informal economy and low pay are the rule and not the exception for domestic workers. Among its specific characteristics, domestic care and work takes place in a “by definition non-formal” workplace (Triandafyllidou, 2013:2), which is at the intersection of “private” and “public” work (Kambouri, 2007:42) and makes it difficult for the institutions responsible to control working conditions. Domestic work, whether internal or external, establishes a personal relationship with the employer as the very nature of the work itself involves personal tasks, such as taking care of people as well as their personal belongings, therefore a “high level of intimacy” is developed which may be implicit or even unwanted (Triandafyllidou, 2013:2). The intimacy that occurs in the context of domestic work in turn allows room for exploitation, given that the relationship between employer and employee in the informal economy professions is not equal, especially when it is between native employer and foreign worker. Developments in the field of domestic work in Greece seem to follow the pattern of developments in current domestic work internationally. More clearly, as in the bigger picture, domestic work in Greece started to change towards the end of the 20th century into a labor “enclave” almost exclusively reserved for migrant women (Kassimati, 2003:165). This evolution was associated with the simultaneous participation of Greek women in the labor market, and indeed in the case of Greece, a decisive factor is considered to be the gradual questioning of the role of other family members such as grandmothers, as caretakers of young children (Vasilikou, 2009:113). We can see, therefore, that in most countries, including Greece, women’s participation in paid work did not alter the traditional gender roles within the household (Marchetti, 2022:17), nor was there any kind of contestation of gender hierarchies in Greek society as Greek women assigned their “burden” and “responsibilities” to foreign domestic workers (Kambouri, 2007:51). Domestic work in Greece has been associated with Albanian migration and this is because most Albanian women were readily employed in this sector upon arrival and continue to do so (Maratou-Alipranti et al., 2007:169). In fact, domestic work seems to be the only “profession” that the Greek labor market “generously offers” to Albanian female migrants (Psimmenos and Skamnakis, 2008:25). For this migrant group, it is worth pointing out that the characteristics of family migration are mainly related to the tendency of Albanian domestic workers to opt for external domestic work -with cleaning as the main task- in order to balance their work and family obligations (Sakellis and Spyropoulou, 2007:77).

## 2 Methodology



**Figure 1:** Flow chart

for their community organisation and representation? How are these effects reflected in their access to social protection and health care?

This paper takes the form of a literature review, emphasizing the secondary analysis of research on the effects of domestic work on female migrants from Albania in Greece. The literature review carried out was a non-systematic review and was conducted according to the principles of systematic literature review using the PRISMA method. The aim of such reviews is to minimise bias, which is achieved initially by pooling all studies around a topic and at the same time by adopting a rigorous methodological framework with predefined a priori eligibility criteria, so that ultimately the review is not left to the researcher’s personal choice and availability but follows a clear methodological protocol (Moher et al. 2015:1). Through the literature review, based on the “PRISMA” method, a search of appropriate research in Google Scholar and Scopus databases was conducted to answer the following research questions: How do the characteristics of domestic work affect women migrants from Albania in Greece on a personal and social level? How are these effects reflected in their primary and secondary ties (family, society)? What are the implications

### 3 Findings

**Personal level and primary bonds:** Before documentation of the effects of domestic work on Albanian migrant women begins, it is worth mentioning that almost all the effects are related to the specific characteristics of domestic work, as analysed previously. In particular, due to the fact that domestic work is classified as a low prestige occupation and therefore relatively low paid, women are pushed into overworking, which may include working in several different homes, overtime and even working on weekends and holidays in order to increase earnings. Indeed, Albanian domestic workers are paid less than other migrant women (Lazaridis, 2000). All these conditions affect, according to a wealth of empirical evidence, the daily lives of third-country women, family relationships - lack of personal and quality time - and are associated with fatigue and health problems (Syrigou-Rigou, 2000; Stratigaki and Vaiou, 2007; Mousourou, 2007; Kambouri and Lafazani, 2008; Kassimati and Mousourou, 2007; Papataxiarchis et al., 2008). Indeed, as Sakellis and Spyropoulou point out, domestic workers are often confronted with a “feeling of exhaustion, endless routine and stress in trying to successfully meet their work, financial and family obligations” (Sakellis and Spyropoulou, 2007:88). According to the research data, it follows that Albanian domestic workers perceive their employment in the domestic sector as devaluing. This is related to the fact that most of the workers either have vocational training or even a university degree or they used to work in clerical posts in Albania, which they lost due to the economic-social changes after the fall of the communist regime. Therefore, the fact that they have now agreed to perform unskilled labor, such as domestic work, which is not in line with their educational and work profile, is perceived by them as a downgrading (Damianovic, 2011; Lambrianidis and Lymberaki, 2001; Vaiou, 2002). This phenomenon is often found in contemporary domestic work theory and is even identified in literature under the term “brain waste”, which describes the employment of migrant women in inferior positions that are not related to their qualifications (Kofman et al. 2000:61). In terms of employment-related effects, central to domestic work are the interpersonal relationships that develop between female workers and their employers. Undoubtedly, the fact that domestic work is performed within the domestic space gives the relationship between worker and employer a strong interpersonal connotation, which is not found to a similar extent in other occupations. A review of the research shows that this interpersonal contact ultimately works to the detriment of migrant women, because the remuneration, the subject matter and the terms of employment are agreed on at a personal level and can be changed at any given moment depending on the employer’s intentions and the trust he or she feels towards the migrant women (Charalampopoulou, 2004). Therefore, the volatility and instability of working hours and wages are constantly experienced by domestic workers as a result of their personal relationships with their employers (Sakellis and Spyropoulou, 2007; Tastsoglou and Hadjicostandi, 2003). At the same time, interpersonal relationships make women workers easily exploitable and manipulable, creating perceptions of obligation towards their employers (Psimmenos and Skamnakis, 2008; Lazaridis and Romaniszyn, 1998; Anderson, 1999), while they also seem to create higher expectations on the part of employers (Styliou, 2004).

**Social level and secondary bonds:** At the social level, domestic workers from Albania experience what is often found in literature under the term “triple invisibility” and describes the position of migrant females as women, foreigners and with socio-class origins of low social status (Maratou-Alipranti et al., 2007:39; Athanasopoulou, 2008:272; Vasilikou, 2007, 2009; Kambouri, 2008; Thanopoulou, 2007; Hantzaroula, 2008). This “triple invisibility” from the social fabric is also experienced by domestic workers as a consequence of their employment. As Olsson’s research shows, Albanian domestic workers face phenomena such as isolation and social marginalization, either due to their working conditions (domestic space, long hours, etc.) or due to the very nature of their work - especially in the case of domestic work (Olsson, 2014). Continuing, at the social level, Albanian domestic workers often face racist and discriminatory attitudes, mostly related to the work they perform (Olsson, 2014; Sakellis and Spyropoulou, 2007; Kassimati, 2009). As Browne and Mirsa explain, the fact that domestic work has historically been associated with the employment of ethnic minority women, has contributed to the perpetuation of discriminatory attitudes against them by employers and the social environment (Browne and Mirsa, 2003). Racism and discrimination do not only extend beyond the boundaries of ethnicity but in many cases take on a social connotation, with racism taking on a class dimension. In particular, Olsson's research data shows that domestic workers from Albania are, due to their gender, ethnicity and employment, placed in the lower strata of the labor market, resulting in a growing status gap between them and their employers (Olsson, 2014).

**Community organization in associations and labor rights claim:** In terms of participation in migrant community associations, socioeconomic precariousness has deepened Albanian domestic workers feelings of isolation and has distanced them from other migrant women, has reproduced individualism and reinforced individualistic attitudes towards others in Greek society. It has also further encouraged dependence on employers and/or on representatives of migrant communities, leaving them exposed to exploitation, further compromises to employers' demands and the formation of a patron-client relationship between migrant workers, employers, representatives of migrant community associations and lawyers (Fouskas, 2012). Due to a global demand for domestic work and unskilled manual labor that isolates the migrant worker, along with the diminishing need for collectivity and the absence of occupational options, there are extremely limited instances of workplace resistance and rights claims by migrant female workers in host societies. Migrant women are more likely to be disciplined by the demands of their employers or completely abandon claims for their labor rights (Fouskas, 2012).

**Access to healthcare and social protection:** As can be seen in almost all the studies included in the review, the most significant impact of domestic work on Albanian female migrants concerns their interaction with the welfare state and the extent of their access to social benefits. This effect confirms the theory on the marginal position in which migrant domestic workers in Greece tend to find themselves in terms of social protection due to their gender, legal status and the nature of their work (Xypolytas and Lazarescu, 2013; Anthias et al., 2013). According to empirical evidence, most Albanian domestic workers work without social security benefits (Skamnakis and Malekaki, 2017; Charalampopoulou, 2004; Bacharopoulou et al, 2007; Balli, 2009; Psimmenos, 2007, 2011; Maroukis, 2018). The reasons that prevent them from accessing health care and social protection can be divided into three levels. First, in many cases there is no intention on the part of the migrant women themselves to find insured work, as in their initial years in the country they desired higher earnings and “more cash in hand” without focusing on social benefits (Skamnakis and Malekaki, 2017:122). Additionally, migration policies and bureaucratic restrictions - such as linking social security to residence/work permits rather than individual incentives such as retirement - further distanced them from the welfare state (Psimmenos and Skamnakis, 2008:167; Psimmenos, 2011); and finally, at the employer level, the indifference on the part of the employers to provide social security benefits, and even in many cases the refusal to hire domestic workers who sought insurance contributions, sealed uninsured domestic work in the country (Charalampopoulou, 2004). These conditions trap female workers in an environment of informal work, without health care, social protection, and retirement prospects. In order to fill this gap, domestic workers resort to self-insurance or insurance through their spouse. Albanian domestic workers have attempted to buy their own insurance to enjoy social benefits. However, this possibility became a burden in the last decade because of the recession, with social security contributions being felt as a financial drain and avoided as much as possible (Skamnakis and Malekaki, 2017; Xypolytas, et al, 2017). Regarding insurance through the husband, it is worth mentioning that especially for Albanian migrant women, social insurance through family reunification has deeper roots and is linked to the means and process of their entry to Greece through the strategy of family reunification (Vullnetari, 2009). Although insurance through a family member seems to bridge the gap created by uninsured domestic work, it negatively affects women's empowerment and independence and ultimately renders them dependent on their husbands.

#### **4 Conclusions**

Domestic work is not just another occupation. On the contrary, it brings together certain characteristics that affect domestic workers in a particular way. It is notable that even nowadays, the occupation of the domestic sphere remains worldwide largely a “female affair”, with migrant women being hired either to “substitute” or to complement the gender roles of other women (Labadie-Jackson, 2008:70; Lymberaki and Maroukis, 2005). This model is also found in Greece with migrant women, mainly from Albania, almost monopolizing the domestic work and care sector. The link between female migration and domestic work goes back in time and is based on the fact that domestic work is a kind of unskilled labor, in many cases performed under “harsh, anarchic, stigmatised and poor working conditions”, which almost exclusively only female migrants are equipped to endure (Farris, 2015:12).

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