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*The experience of paid domestic work in the context of Albanian migration to
Greece
A case study*

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One of the basic elements of Greek economy and job market, which affects immediately migrant employment, is the existence and expansion of a large informal unregulated sector².

Migrant women that work in the sector of domestic work lack of occupational status. They usually work without insurance and they are not normally given days off, or holidays. There is no association or other institutions that would represent the rights of women in the labour domain. Moreover, the employer can dismiss the worker whenever he/she wants.

Domestic work is difficult to be defined as a profession, in terms of the tasks included³. In addition, domestic work involves emotional care which increases the difficulty to be considered as a profession. Domestic workers are particularly vulnerable in the domestic space where they work. Employers – as they have shown relative studies – impose them various forms of power and control, and confirm their dominant status. The form of domestic work depends each time on the interpersonal work relationships between employers and employees.

Recent social research on domestic work has explored the intersection of gender, race and class in the mistress-maid relationship, especially in the case of minority/ migrant groups of domestic workers. The main focus of these works is often the exploitative

¹ This paper is based on ethnographic material collected during my fieldwork research from 2001 to 2003. The research conducted in Patras, a Greek city, where I studied a group of migrants from Albania (ethnic Greeks, or the so called “vorioipiotes”).

² See Iosifides (1997)

³ Anderson’ s work (2000) offers a contribution to the theory of domestic work and discuss the problem of its definition.

nature of paid domestic work. Researchers have explored practices and strategies of coping with the problems of domestic work and discuss various forms of resistance⁴.

The domestic space, as a workplace for the women domestic workers from Albania, is one of the fields which attracted me early during my fieldwork research⁵. The overwhelming majority of Albanian women is occupied in this sector of black economy, that is to say paid domestic service. Hence, it was obvious its importance in their lives, which can be confirmed by the relative mentions in our discussions and their narratives of their experiences.

In my research domestic work is not the center⁶. My main concern is to explore the ways migrants perceive and interpret their new social environment and construct a worldview in the frameworks of marginalisation⁷.

In these contexts, I consider domestic work that is carried out in the domestic space of Greek employees, as a microcosm of the interrelations between the two groups (migrants/ natives) that meet and interact in the same environment. Hence, I see the domestic space as a preferential cross-cultural field. For many women from Albania the unique or perhaps the more basic cross-cultural experience they have with Greeks, is the one that is constituted in the domestic work setting.

In the case of women from Albania⁸ in Greece, I observed that they were adapted with comfort and flexibility in the domestic setting, acquiring profits and benefits that were not immediately connected with the improvement of their labour conditions or the increase of their wage. I thus thought, that it would be better to examine precisely what means improvement of labour conditions for these women. How they struggle to

⁴ For a guide to bibliography and a critical discussion of research in domestic work see Constable (1997). She also discusses the issue of power. Her ideas about resistance and empowerment were very useful for my analysis in this paper. I am also influenced by Romero's work (1992). Her study on Chicanas domestic workers illustrate their struggle and their coping strategies for improving working conditions.

⁵ Lamphere (1992) illustrates the significance of research in the workplace, in her study of interaction between new immigrants and established residents.

⁶ In this paper, the emphasis is not on domestic work but on a woman's domestic worker life. So, I am not exploring theoretical issues of domestic work here. I imply or simply mention some of them.

⁷ I mention here Hirschon (1989) and her study on Asia Minor Refugees in Greece. Hirschon illustrates the concept of a people's worldview, or cosmology, as a concept with explanatory value.

⁸ I prefer the term "women from Albania" instead of "Albanian women", to avoid stressing Albania as a country of ethnic affiliation, according to my informants' practices.

strengthen their “place” – their position in the host society – without claiming collectively their labour rights, without many times even mentioning them. I explored the particular practices and strategies employed by migrant women in the context of domestic work.

The concept of strategy is very significant in revealing migrant women’s inventiveness: how they define the framework within they act, how they seek their interests and try to practise some form of power (in a field where each group – employers and employees – struggle for maximizing the advantages domestic work has to offer). The various forms of action that migrant domestic workers develop improve and strengthen their position in the host society, in terms of their own worldview and construction of reality. These are practices of coping with marginalisation. Developing an ethos of adaptability migrants from Albania have a powerful will not to be marginalized in the new social world in which they chose to live.

It is in this context that attitudes towards domestic work can be interpreted. Domestic work becomes widely acceptable between migrant women from Albania. It is relatively easy to find and there’s no need to be qualified for doing this kind of job. In addition, as a work, causes competition and rivalry between the members of the group, as networks of close relatives or friends provide opportunities for domestic work⁹. Finding a good domestic work is considered a success. I claim, thus, that domestic work becomes a powerful means for the achievement of the migrant’s group empowerment and progress.

⁹ A point that cannot be illustrated further, since an analysis of the role of the household should be done.

*Evdoxia, a domestic worker from Albania*¹⁰

I turn next to a presentation of a particular case of paid domestic work, which attracted my interest during my research and was studied over a long period of time. This case of domestic work combines general tasks of cleaning (physical labour) and caring (emotional labour). It is a form of domestic work practiced by many Albanian women of my research, especially middle-aged women. As I have already mentioned, I see domestic space as the migrant women's workplace and a prevalent field of exploring migrant women's experiences.

Evdoxia is a 55-year-old woman from Albania – a widow who has lived for the past years in Patras under the same roof with her two sons and her brides. At the time of my research Evdoxia had already worked for Mrs Areti, who is her Greek employer, for at least two years. Mrs Areti reaches her nineties. She is a widow and also childless. She has a few relatives in Patras, but they don't have a very close. Mrs A. is not bedridden, but because of her age, she has to deal with many health problems that require continuous medico-pharmaceutical care.

When she decided to employ a domestic worker, some years ago, she addressed to the circle of her acquaintances in the parish – people who share a common interest in religious activity. I should mention that Greek old women that have an intense religious life (they are “people of the church” as Patrini usually say) prefer Christian orthodox domestic workers from Albania and more specifically “vorioiprotisses” (as they are called). The church of Patras, through its network, has helped enough ethnic Greek women from Albania to work in Patras' Greek households as domestic workers. It is supposed that migrants of this category can adjust better to the requirements imposed by old Greek women: they speak the same language and have the same religion. In addition, Greeks think that in relation to other categories of migrants, ethnic Greek from Albania, are more familiar culturally.

¹⁰ I call the domestic worker from Albania by her first name “Evdoxia”, and the employer more formally “Mrs Areti”, following the common practice of the subjects in my research.

Evdoxia, who was well known in the networks of church, as she had been looking after an old bedridden priest, was recommended. She has to sleep in her employer's house where she stays until midday, according to their informal negotiations. Afterwards, she can be absent for a couple of hours and return at about eight o' clock in the evening. Sometimes, manipulating the labour time she can be absent even in the morning. She gets up at 6 and returns at 9 or 10. (the time interval that she can be absent is flexible and can be changed depending on the case: this is one of the most controversial matters between the employee and the employer where each one tries to impose the best condition for her, negotiating the time limits).

Her duties include general tasks such as cleaning the house, doing the laundry, ironing or cooking. In addition, she provides the medico-pharmaceutical care of the elderly woman and has to help her taking her bath, combing, cutting her nails etc. Activities that take place out of the domestic space are also included: for example paying bills, shopping, accompanying her employer to the church, for a walk and to her summer holidays.

From about eight o' clock in the morning to one o' clock at noon, certain activities in the domestic space are carried out regularly, with the participation in some degree of the employer. I should mention that for an elderly Greek woman as Mrs Areti, the strict planning of daily time with routine tasks is very important and she insists on it.

Thus, they get up at about seven o' clock, then the prayer follows and Evdoxia prepares the breakfast. She helps Mrs Areti in the bathroom and she gives her the medicines she must take daily. Then she opens the windows and makes the beds. The main space for their morning activities is the kitchen, where they are usually together. They discuss about the daily program.. A common topic for example is the preparing of the meal. Then perhaps Evdoxia has to do the daily shopping, go to the nearest super market, to the groceries, to the bakery etc. Evdoxia cooks according to Mrs Areti' s indications. Sometimes, when she feels well, the employer herself helps her, but she usually watches and gives her instructions. At the same time they discuss various subjects. Until lunch, which is always ready at about 12:30, the time is filled

with other domestic or outside activities, depending on the daily program. Therefore, Evdoxia may dust and mop the house, do the laundry or iron etc.

Evdoxia prefers not to be supervised by her employer. She avoids physical labour, and activities of general housecleaning are carried out hastily and without particular care. Mrs Areti rarely gives instructions on how to clean her house. However she controls special tasks like ironing that demands to be done carefully. She also monitors food preparation, giving her instructions.

Lunch plays a significant role in their relationship as the two women eat together. After they finish, Evdoxia arranges the kitchen, with little help from the employer, and her same routine indications such as "put it there", "these towels need to be washed ". Mrs Areti may also encourage Evdoxia to take some food for her home. Then she can leave.

Sometimes the employer expresses the wish to go out, just for a walk or for shopping. Then they make a small walk in the market, where they meet neighbours or other Mrs Areti' s acquaintances, which Evdoxia knows well now. They always ask about the employee's health and have small talks. Evdoxia participates as if she is not a paid domestic worker but a very close relative to Mrs Areti.

Live- in domestic work is a good choice for women from Albania without pressing familial obligations, for example widows. Evdoxia thinks that this type of work provides her more advantages in relation to other unskilled labour. She prefers the caring of old people. As she explains to me it is difficult for her to clean houses and do heavy- duty jobs. Moreover, as I suggest, staying at night in her employer's house, is a practice for coping with problems of co -residence and lack of space in her own house. In addition she can avoid family conflicts. For this reason Evdoxia says "my brides don' t want me. I am now married with Mrs Areti" , expressing her invidious position in the household.

However, Evdoxia. connects directly her life with the lives of her sons, and she considers herself to be an integral member of their household. Domestic work gives her the ability to support her family. She emphasises the value of family, as most

domestic workers from Albania do. The value of family is presented as the base of their argument that justifies the acceptance of domestic work. Family is Evdoxia's first priority. The following words illustrate this: "For us, the elder, children come first, I do not have anything to wait from life for me".

When she doesn't work, that is to say, when she is absent from her employer's house, during the afternoon, she cares for her family. And, indeed, her program is adapted more to the needs of her family, the needs of the household. The distance from her employer's house to her own is 25 minutes on foot and with quick walking. Evdoxia rarely uses means of transport, because she tries to save money. It's worth noting that Evdoxia herself spends very little for her personal expenses and most of her earnings are saved in the bank. Her sons want to buy a house and she supports them.

When she is at home, she deals with routine tasks. She offers some help to her sons or her brides if she is asked to, and tries to find time for her social obligations: pay a visit to friends and relatives etc. When she returns to Mrs. Areti at about 8 in the evening, she is so tired that the only thing she wants is to climb into bed: "To rest my feet", as she says.

Evdoxia experiences an extremely religious environment working for Mrs Areti. She sleeps in her own room, where pictures of Saints are placed on the walls. There is television in the house but it is out of use. Mrs Areti prefers to listen to the radio and almost always the broadcast of the orthodox church of Patras. Even though Evdoxia has requested to open the television the employer denies it persistently. Mrs Areti likes initiating discussions on religion topics. Furthermore, many tasks performed by Evdoxia are related to religious activity or rules and behaviours in the context of Christian orthodox tradition (for example making altar-bread).

Evdoxia, however has learned how she should behave and she can cope with her employer's requirements. She knows, for example, which are the subjects that her employer likes to talk about, when somebody should keep a fast (that is a basic form of religious behaviour in the Christian religion). Evdoxia, furthermore, never wears trousers (a preferable type of dress for women from Albania): I was impressed

because her employer imposes this behaviour¹¹. Sometimes, when she returns home in the evening, Evdoxia gets into her room with her own key secretly and changes her trousers before her employer sees her. In addition the employer criticises even Evdoxia's young brides that happen to visit her regularly, about the trousers.

In this case we have a form of indirect discipline and control of behaviour according to the employer's cultural beliefs: some rules are said orally, other are implied. I report the following, characteristic, in my opinion, example: one day during the Holy Week (a period of intense religious activity for the Greek Orthodox), I met Evdoxia when she came out of the employer's house. It was seven o'clock in the afternoon and she told me that she was going to church. I wondered, however, where Mrs Areti was. As I was informed, she wasn't feeling well, however she obliged Evdoxia to go to church. Despite the fact that Evdoxia accepted her order as part of the work, she preferred to spend enough time talking with me, and only after a period of time, - for fear of being seen by any of Mrs Areti's acquaintances - she went to church.

Nevertheless, Evdoxia claims that she is patient with her employer, being accustomed to hardship because of her life in Albania. She does not feel intense psychological pressure or boredom¹². However she criticizes the religious environment in her workplace. Furthermore, she has invented practices that help her escape from the routine of her work. She likes creating social relationships in her employer's neighbourhood, and she pursues occasions for activity outside the employer's house so as to meet other people, learn news, and gossip. In addition, work hours outside home cannot be controlled easily and this is to the employee's advantage¹³. If she is late, the employer may complain but Evdoxia knows how to maintain the limits of her employer's tolerance.

¹¹ In Greece women that follow fanatically the traditions of Greek Orthodox Church do not wear (or prefer not to wear) trousers, considering them as an inappropriate dress.

¹² Many women in my research report psychological pressure.

¹³ This practice is usually adopted by domestic workers when performing tasks out of the domestic domain.

I turn now to a description of the relationship of the two women in the domestic space more analytically. It's not a typical employer - employee relationship. They both behave as being members of the same family. And indeed, they use the family metaphor to refer to their relations: Evdoxia says that Mrs Areti is "like mother" to her. The old woman sometimes calls her employee and refers to her as "eulogia" (ευλογία) (paraphrasing her name,) which means "blessing", expressing her gratitude towards her domestic worker Evdoxia calls her employer "kira Areti" (Mrs Areti). Kira is a term that expresses intimacy and differs from the more formal "kyria".

A basic element of this intimate relationship is confidence. The employer needs a confident person for working in her domestic and – hence – private space. On the other hand, confidence is a value for Evdoxia as well, who frequently refers with pride to her employer's trust to her. She mentions for example that Mrs Areti is not worried about her money and is not afraid of being stolen by her employee.

During the day the two women communicate and discuss all the time. This has impressed me, as I observed the same pattern of behaviour in other cases of domestic service, too. Discussion during housework or when they relax before sleeping is a striking aspect of this specific labour relation. Mrs Areti stresses that when Evdoxia is not home she has nobody to talk. Evdoxia has the right of her opinion and can speak easily. I will give an example: I witnessed one day a disagreement between the two women at Mrs Areti's home. Evdoxia's bride was present, and Mrs Areti had observed that she wore trousers and commented it negatively. Then Evdoxia reacted intensely. She said that wearing trousers is justified for a young girl from Albania. Moreover, she compared her bride from Albania with her employer's niece from Patras who visits her often. She made comments about her modern clothing, the trousers, the hairstyle, and all those elements that don't fit in with her age or social status.

The interpersonal relationship between these two women is based on mutual comprehension and sympathy¹⁴. The elderly woman is interested to learn everything about her employee. I observed that she knew about her life and her past in Albania, her familial situation and all the problems that she faces now in Greece.

In response, Evdoxia exaggerate her difficulties. In one of her tactics she uses the dominant stereotype of “vorioipirotis” for her own advantage¹⁵. The pattern of her life narratives is based on the dichotomy between here- the present / there – the past¹⁶. Besides, underlining the fact of her early widowhood, she intensifies the employer’s sympathy. These tactics are interpreted in the broader context of domestic workers coping strategies, aiming at a maximisation of the profits that could result from her work. For example, Evdoxia is not given a day-off normally. Nevertheless, she manages to be away some weekends, claiming a trip to Albania for family obligations.

I have noticed that Mrs Areti often addresses to Evdoxia with words expressing sympathy and pity for her problems. She says for example ”poor woman” («το κακόμοιρο», «το βασανισμένο»).

Gradually the employee improves her working conditions and her position in the work relationship. Understanding the dominant framework, she imposes her own requirements that cannot be expressed explicitly. She knows how to negotiate in a framework of restrictions (for example: it is not easy to press for a wage increase, while it’ s easier to achieve flexibility in domestic tasks).

One of the most impressive employee’ s practices is to hold a second job secretly: three times a week she does domestic work for a second employer, for two or three hours in the afternoon. She cares her family, doing general house cleaning. As she

¹⁴ I should mention Petronoti (2003) that provides an interesting study of an employer- employee interrelationship, in the cross – cultural and hierarchical context of domestic work in Greece. In particular she focus on practices of confrontation in the domestic space.

¹⁵ To understand this tactic I mention that the term “vorioipirotis” is attached special meaning and is related to a nationalistic rhetoric. Ethnic Greek from Albania use this term deliberately or spontaneously depending on the situations.

¹⁶ I notice that this is a common pattern of narratives among my “vorioipirotis” informants. I call these “narratives of collective self – presentation”.

claims, this work is quite easy, giving her the opportunity to add 200 euros monthly in her income. Evdoxia had worked in the past again for this family, caring an elderly woman who was bedridden. Offering to Evdoxia a second job opportunity the family expressed its satisfaction for Evdoxia's good caring.

Another tactic in the framework of domestic work is the employee's cooperation with members of her family in various ways. I will give an example. When Evdoxia's older bride was pregnant (for the second time immediately after a failed pregnancy), she had a lot of health problems. Evdoxia asked to be absent from the employer's home more hours than usual and, indeed, she achieved some flexibility in spite of her employer's objections. Then, Evdoxia "offered" her younger bride to replace her at work. The employer, indeed, paid for this without decreasing Evdoxia's wage. Sometimes, Evdoxia's sons may repair something or restore a technical damage in the employer's house. Usually, it is considered as a paid work, rather than a simple offering of help.

Domestic service, as in the case of Evdoxia, often involves not easily observable tasks: The need for emotional care, company and safety, are very important services for the employer. I observed the same in other cases too, and especially, where the employers were elderly women with a few relatives or without close kinship ties.

I suggest that in these cases, while the employer is vulnerable, a dependence on the domestic worker grows, with the latter taking advantage of it. The relation of dependence and the sense that she can difficultly be replaced, strengthen the vulnerable position of the employee in this case. During my research for example, Evdoxia followed a particular tactic of psychological pressure (I saw it as a form of power exercised by her to the employer): she used to tell her employer constantly that she had many job opportunities in her friendly environment, and above all, near her house. She claimed that she did not want to accept them because she understood the difficult position of her employer. And she did not want to abandon her. I don't know if she was telling the truth about having many job opportunities, but these claims caused her employer great anxiety.

I would like now to proceed to another subject: How does Evdoxia, the domestic worker, think about her work? How does she refer to it or to her employer? My ethnographic material gives me examples on the topic, as I often had the chance to discuss with Evdoxia these matters outside her employer's house.

I observed that Evdoxia didn't complain about her work, reporting the difficulties explicitly. However, she used a metaphor for her work that impressed me: She mentions "slavery". It is the dominant metaphor in order to characterize her work, when her employer is not present. In one of our discussions she stressed: "elderly women are the worst. They exploit you more than the others. Whereas in a house all you do is cleaning and then you leave".

Obviously when Evdoxia talks about exploitation, she refers to many aspects of her work relationship, without giving details. She does not say for example that the money she earns is not enough, but she says that another Greek woman had offered her 600 Euros monthly, (now she takes 500).

Such implicit mentions, confirm the fact that Evdoxia does not aim at a confrontation between her and her employer. An immediate rupture is not acceptable. She struggled to be considered as intimate and hence important person for her employer and to make her work relationship more flexible. I noticed that Evdoxia sometimes, used to express feelings of kindness for her employer. It seems to me that she pities her employer for her health problems. She also admits the abuse of her employer's confidence, when she is absent for a long time or she returns late in the evening.

However when she speaks for her life in Greece she says (in one of our recorded conversations):

«I felt (when I first came to Greece) that I will find a better life here, that I will see different things, I will also live an easy life, but I feel discomfort! Too much. I say it!. I run, I run... from the morning till the evening...I feel exhausted...

And what do we take? Money. We cannot come up to the monthly expenses...you have to pay the telephone, the water, rent... everything».

Migrants from Albania, and especially women domestic workers, emphasise their dependence on money and the need to survive which force them to work hard. They claim that Greek women don't do domestic work. It is one of the difficult, low-paid and degrading jobs, which Albanian women accepted and tried to cope with. And they say: "we clean houses now, we don't want our children to do the same!" In this phrase it is implied that they don't live for the present: migrants from Albania are orientated towards future by wishing to be not in the margins of the host society but a part of the mainstream.

Strategies of managing domestic work

I turn now to discuss the issue of strategies in the context of domestic work, based on Evdoxia's paradigm. I stress, that the improvement of domestic worker's position is linked more to the way that she perceives her interest (hers and her family's), than to an explicit understanding of her rights in the work sector.

One of the most basic strategies of domestic workers is the selection of their employers. This tactic is reflected in their "preferences". In their discourse, domestic work is separated into two categories that refer not only to a series of different tasks but to a different type of commitments and relations with the employer as well. The category "to clean houses¹⁷" refers to a more explicit category of work, where the relation with the employer is more formal. The category "to care for elderly people" (usually, it is live-in domestic work) implies a 'vague picture' and the domestic work is not easily defined: it is strictly interpersonal and requires emotional labour. Generally, the younger women show an explicit preference to the first category, that usually is a live out domestic work, working for more than one employer daily (or weekly). For older women, however, that cannot put up with exhaustive physical labour, live-in domestic work for elderly people is a better choice.

¹⁷ I use the indigenous categories. Domestic workers from Albania when being asked about their work say: I clean houses or I have one/two... house/s, I care for an old man/woman or I have an old man/woman. This distinction is based on the quality of the tasks performed. The emphasis on the houses: physical labour, the emphasis on persons: emotional labour. They never refer to themselves as domestic workers.

Evdoxia specifically, prefers working for an elderly woman. She claims that she got accustomed to old men and old women and she don' t like cleaning houses. Moreover, her employer provides her safety and stability. She is paid regularly without the fear of dismissal. The employer's social status is a factor of preference. She has a network of remarkable acquaintances that Evdoxia can use to promote her own affairs. Furthermore, as I showed, this work provides her flexibility.

Evdoxia' s main strategy lies in the way she manipulates the relationship with her employer: she avoids conflict and confrontation, encouraging a relationship of intimacy. This is a way of confronting with the problems of a strict and "hard" hierarchical work relationship.

In the relative bibliography intimacy is considered an employers' dominant practice in order to manipulate the domestic workers and bring them to a position of dependence. The term *maternalism* is used to define the superficial interest that the employer shows towards the employee, confirming the latter' s subordinate position. *Paternalism* is also a term often used in the bibliography of domestic work, in order to declare the dominant position of the employer. My ethnographic material offers examples, indicating that domestic workers respond to such patterns of work relationships (either paternalism or maternalism), confirming their subordinate position and the relation of dependence. Thus, for example, they accept with pleasure the gifts and the material benefits of all kinds from the employers. In their employer and her family, they often see a powerful person who can support or help them (doctor and lawyer are common examples of this perception: they emphasise being in the service of such an employer). In addition, the employer becomes part of a network of offering job opportunities (domestic work or other). Contracting spiritual kinship with the employer or with a member of her family is a common practice among migrants from Albania.

In this particular case I present here, intimacy is a powerful means of manipulating the relationship with the employer. Evdoxia expects from her Greek employer understanding, concern and protection. She also asks for respect.

She narrates the difficult years she lived in Albania and the difficulties of survival for her and her family in Greece. She asks for help and advice on various subjects. Mrs Areti responds. She feels pity and compassion for the domestic worker and she wishes to help her as much as possible. The various gifts – material benefits – are an expression of this feeling.

On the other hand, Mrs Areti expects the same feelings from the domestic worker. She pursues to reduce professionalism and convert their work relation into a kinship relation. What she expects and what she pays for, is more emotional service than cleaning.

As I described, Evdoxia's presence in the employer's house, is particularly "visible". The two women are always more or less in the same space and they are talking constantly. They gossip, exchange their opinions and comments on various subjects and they tell old stories. The dialogue with the employer strengthens the position of women domestic workers, allowing them "to have a voice" and hence identity, instead of being simply "the woman" or "the Albanida" (as Greek employers usually call the domestic workers from Albania): I believe that this practice is a way of re-interpret and reverse their hierarchic relation with the employer.

Religion, ethnic identity and other cultural patterns like attitudes towards family is a common cultural basis, which helps Evdoxia to emphasise "sameness", in the cross-cultural interaction with her employer. Talking constantly about her family and connecting the members of her family with the employer intensifies intimacy. The employer likes the frequent visits of Evdokia's young brides. Gradually intimacy converts to a relation of dependence. The elderly woman is afraid that Evdoxia will abandon for a better job, and claims that she tries not to disagree with her any more.

Intimacy is a characteristic feature of domestic work in the cases I observed. Generally, in their relations with the employers, migrant women from Albania show a remarkable disposition to extroversion. They may conceive the domestic space, their workplace, as a field of "penetration" in Greeks' world. They try to learn the new social environment and understand the dominant patterns so that they can use them for their own interests (and not only in the framework of their labour relation). Many

women have admitted in our discussions that they have learnt many things working in their employers' houses.

Women domestic workers are very careful, however, in creating relations of intimacy: they try to develop them as far as they serve their interests and in a way that the employer will not turn intimacy into exploitation. Yet, it seems difficult to be avoided.

Conflicts between employer and domestic worker are usually of a mild form. In the cases where the employer is too demanding, behaves in a bad manner or doesn't pay enough, the domestic worker does not overreact. She asks, for example, in a calm way what she wants, presenting her own arguments and then she may quit the work relationship.

The whole manipulation of domestic work suggest that women try to confront the difficulties of their work in an indirect and implicit way: for example telling lies and trying to deceit the employer as in Evdoxia's case of. Such practices are justified by the employees' experience of exploitation in the context of domestic work. In my view this could also be seen as a way of redefining or reversing hierarchical relationships as in the case of women's having a "voice" in the domestic space.

The significance of work in the world of Albanian migrants

To understand domestic workers practices and strategies it should be useful to set domestic work against the background of the wider context of indigenous thought. More specifically, I explore the meanings attached to the concept of *work*. How does the overall perception of work shape and influence the practices of the subjects in a new environment?

Migrants from Albania emphasise work and the way they work as basic elements of their identity: being from Albania means to work hard. Images of the "other", of the "Greek", are constructed in oppositional terms: the general idea they hold about Greeks is that they are lazy, they avoid hard work and especially the younger "wait them all ready from their parents", as they mention. Greek women are also believed to avoid working. They are blamed for keeping their houses dirty and waiting for "the

woman”.¹⁸ Evdoxia in my paradigm believes that her employer does not understand the difficulties she is confronted with, because she has not worked ever in her life. In one of our conversations Evdoxia claims that «Greeks sit in an office or in a shop and wait for the work to come», while «we catch the work from our hands», expressing a popular view among my informants.

For migrants from Albania work is associated with hard physical activity. This connotation is implicit in the term “δουλειά” (an alternative term for work which is more preferable among my informants). It’s worth mentioning the frequency of the adjective «σκληρός» «hard» in their speech. They often say in order to declare their way of working "with sweat and blood": it is precisely an expression of the extreme distress.

Work, “δουλειά”, is highly valued. It is considered the primary source of personal advancement, and collective progress. "With work you can go on" according to popular expression. And also “you accomplish” or “you do” a lot. The central place of work in their system of values has been constituted historically. It is rooted in the dominant ideology of communistic Albania. Employment was one of the main preoccupations of the state, which was obligated to secure jobs for the citizens. Everybody, men and women worked – unemployment as exist in capitalism was unknown. Even the institution of voluntary work functioned additionally in ideological level rendering the work synonymous of offer in the collective good and interest.

In the place of settlement, in Greece, hard work is praised, as I have already mentioned, and the present success is considered to be a result of it. However at the same time, and according to the conditions of a new social world, individual adaptability and flexibility, individual skill in negotiating and making connections or taking opportunities, are praised too.

These attitudes are expressed in their narratives. Migrants from Albania tend to narrate stories of their efforts to earn a living in a framework of constraints. They

¹⁸ The usual expression for calling a domestic worker.

emphasise their cleverness in overcoming the difficulties, and in manipulating the situations for their own advantage.

Such attributes are in accordance with the new framework within migrant from Albania act: from the strict dependence on the state (in Albania) in the individual responsibility of their work setting (in Greece).

Now, in the place of settlement, domestic work is defined in these contexts: it is also highly valued, as it is linked to the economic survival of the household. Men are very proud of women' s work and a commonly heard statement is: “we have been very much helped by our wives”.

For domestic women from Albania, domestic work does not mean only hard work. They redefine work in terms of profit, either material – money and gifts given by their employers – or symbolic: networks with members of the host society that increase their social position. Among migrant women a common pattern of narratives is about their employer's support. (eg offering of a second job,). In the symbolic profit we can also include all kind of knowledge (useful information and advices, learning of Greek language, comprehension of dominant cultural patterns), that is the outcome of cross-cultural relationships and interaction in the domestic space. In the context of domestic work, women adopt practices and strategies for promoting their own and their families' interest.

Since their arrival in Greece, migrants from Albania try to re- construct their lives, re – interpreting and re- defining basic attitudes and beliefs. This is a process that is performed by contrasting past with present, communism with capitalism and western culture, images of Albania with images of Greece. Work is perceived as a more dynamic and more creative force now, as it is linked to individual progress: progress is perceived in terms of material fulfillment: it is connected with accumulation of capital, consumption, and ownership. These new experience affect the way they think of capitalism, of western world. Their overall ideological orientation towards work is in accordance with the basic principles of capitalism. And helps them to adjust to difficult working conditions, by emphasizing not the hierarchical structure of the work relationship but the possibility of not being marginalized and improving their position in the host society.

Images and representations of domestic work in migrant women's discourse

During my fieldwork research, domestic work was a current issue in women's conversations. In my view, images of domestic work constructed in this way, served as a metaphor of identity. By stressing their work ethos, women from Albania claim respect and equal treatment in Greece. Moreover they justify their presence in Greece, redefining negative migrant stereotypes.

In addition, speaking about the difficulties of their work, they set it in the wider context of their experiences after migration and the problems of discontinuity, social and personal disruption, racism and marginalisation. Contrasting images, emphasizing the change in social status that came as a result of migration, are prevalent. I often heard them saying, expressing their bitterness «we came here to clean folk's houses», which is an implicit comment on the dominant and degrading stereotype of Albanian domestic worker in Greek society.

Women from Albania, working in the sector of domestic service, mention exploitation and narrate stories of bad employers. They stress not only physical distress but also depression. However, developing a rhetoric of their predicament, that centers around the economic survival of the family, they justify the great acceptance of domestic work.

Domestic work is indeed orientated to the needs and family's interests. «You earn good money», as they say, a common phrase reflecting the significance of profit and in particular of money. Domestic work is presented as a means for the achievement of their expectations. Most women in my research see domestic work as an immediate way of supporting their families and enjoy its relative independence and flexibility.

In the field of domestic work, migrant women invent strategies of coping. Various forms of action are possible. In the case I presented, I stressed Evdoxia' s strategy of intimacy in her relationship with her employer. Other women may pursue more professionalisation, and avoid emotional labor, familiarity or reject their employers' maternalistic practices. Acting in a framework of constraints women from Albania in Greece, redefine work conditions and their position in the host society. In the framework of their ideological orientations, their beliefs and values, this is demonstrated more fully.

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