

**Bulgarian migrant women working as live-in caregivers of the elderly:
reflections on “domestic” and “public”**

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Allow me to start this paper by describing two photos.

The first one depicts four women – all Bulgarian - sitting around a table, raising their glasses and looking at the camera. The table is laid with foods and everything signifies that they are about to have a nice dinner. The second photo shows more women standing in front of a table full of all sorts of foods and drinks, again holding their glasses and raising them while looking at the camera.

In spite of seemingly almost the same, there is an important difference between the two photos: they are taken in different settings. In the first photo the action takes place in the living room of the house which belongs to the employer of one of the Bulgarian women shown in the photo. On the other hand, the second photo is taken in one of the most popular parks in the city of Volos, near the sea-front. Before explaining you the reason for the citation of the particular photos here and how they are related to the point that I want to make in this presentation, let me first give the context around these two photos.

The owner of them is Sfetla, a Bulgarian woman who lives in the city of Volos and works as a live-in caregiver of elderly. I first met Sfetla one summer afternoon on the beach, where she and other Bulgarian women working also as live-in caregivers would go for a swim enjoying their 3 to 4 hours off work. I (later on) got to know her better when she came to attend the Greek language lessons organized for migrants by a social and political organization in the city of Volos. Being a member of this organization, I had started teaching voluntarily in one of the classes being held there, and Sfetla was one of my students. Through our constant contact, we came really close and so when I asked her to have a video-taped interview with me she immediately accepted. The interview was based on Sfetla’s personal photo album and

the narration that each of the photos produced. This interview and a number of others conducted with Albanian and Bulgarian men and women living in the city of Volos, were conducted for the scopes of the research project “GAME” (Gendered aspects of migration in Southeast Europe: Integration, Labor and Transnational Communication), which is based at the Department of History, Archaeology and Social Anthropology of the University of Thessaly¹. The specific project investigates the gender dimensions of contemporary forms of population movement within the Balkan region, specifically from Albania and Bulgaria to Greece. One of the basic goals of this project was the creation of a digitized photograph archive and linked website, constituted collaboratively with informants from their photographs and narratives about them. This paper draws on findings of the particular research project. Already from the beginning of our fieldwork research and while trying to build some networks with Bulgarian migrants living in the city of Volos, we got some important information: as somebody told us, every afternoon a number of Bulgarian women would gather in a big park near the university, spending a considerable amount of time there chatting around and enjoying the company of each other. These women were working as live-in domestic workers, taking care of old native men and women being in need of their help. The time that they met in the park was the only chance they had to get out of the house and have some time off work (usually 2 to 3 hours) as at that time their old employers would usually take their midday nap after lunch. Indeed after our first visit there we realized that these women form a type of community, the park being one of its basic points of reference. Most of the women who belong to this ‘community’ are between 40 – 60 years old and have come to Greece alone. Some are married with children while others are divorced. In any case they have some kind of family – husband, children, parents – back in the country of origin whom they economically support through their labor here in Greece. Responding to the question why them and not their husbands have decided to migrate they usually point out the fact that it is easier for women to find a job in one of the destination countries, usually in the service sector. Most of them have a temporary, short-term project related to an income target geared to specific projects at home (e.g. to save money to build a house, pay for the university education of the children, pay off a loan, and so on). However, apart from the economic reasons that are usually alleged by these women, it seems that the decision to migrate works also as a way out

¹ “Pythagoras” – Research Action: Gendered Aspects of Migration in Southeast Europe, EPEAEK II.

to family problems that have arisen in the home-country. Not being able to bear a difficult situation and instead of directly challenging gender ideologies and practices or of breaking with the social and family environment, they choose to migrate as an indirect act of resistance.

Let me now return to the two photos that I cited in the beginning and relate them to the particular questions I want to touch on, in this paper. In both photos, I believe, there is an inherent contradiction between space and function (meaning?). I will start from the second photo. As I have already mentioned the particular park where this photo was taken represents the standard meeting place for the majority of the Bulgarian women who work as live-in caregivers. There, every afternoon they come together to discuss their problems related to work, to express their concerns for the regime of their residence and work in Greece, to exchange information concerning the job market, but also to hear and exchange news from Bulgaria, to arrange their journeys back home and the way to send presents, money and goods back to their family. This locality forms / constitutes a kind of refuge for these women as it is the only place where they can exist beyond their employment status. Because it is the only occasion they have to get out of the house they work, the time they spend there is actually the only personal time they have.

Beginning in the 19th century with the development of capitalist societies, a number of marked divisions emerged distinguishing the public sphere outside the house from the private one inside it, and the working time from the personal time (εργάσιμος και προσωπικός χρόνος). The working time is usually considered the time spent outside the house in different labour environments while after the working day ends the worker is supposed to return to the safe environment of the house to rest and enjoy his/her free time. In the case of the particular group of Bulgarian women a somehow opposite process takes place: the time spent in the domestic sphere is their working time while the time spent out of it, in a public space like the park, is in reality their personal time.

In these two or three hours away from work and because they don't have a house of their own, the park is transformed into a space hosting meanings and activities otherwise related to the private/domestic sphere. Scenes like the one depicted in the particular photo usually take place in the park. Small celebrations are organized on the occasion of different events: birthdays and name-days of themselves and of members

of their family back in Bulgaria, births of grand-children at home, graduations of their children, a permanent return of a member of this “community” to the home-country and to her family. Benches or tables from nearby cafes are used for the food that has been specially prepared and the drinks that have been brought for the celebration. The space is symbolically transformed into a living-room where friends are welcomed and are offered treats through which they become participants in the celebration of the specific event.

Furthermore the use of the specific site and the practices performed by the Bulgarian live-in caregivers related to it, signifies an effort to symbolically inscribe their presence into the urban space beyond the given terms and conditions of visibility available to them. Migrant women working as domestic workers are often perceived in the bibliography as socially “invisible” mainly because of the kind of work they practice and because of their citizenship status. Confined to the space of the house - for them a workplace – and to the role of modern servants their presence is seldom analysed in other contexts than that of their working environment and what is stressed is the degree of agency that this context deprives them of. Nevertheless, these women exist as social subjects in multiple contexts and roles.

It seems to me that for these women the park plays the role of the home that they don’t have in Greece. First, in the sense of the physical space that hosts meanings and activities that would normally be inscribed in someone’s domestic space and secondly in the sense of the commensality that it produces; being a member of it and participating in its practices feels in a certain degree like being at home. Everything that is experienced in this space and the sociability that is produced and reproduced there has a direct connection to the home in the country of origin. Births, marriages, baptisms, birthdays and other important events of family members back in Bulgaria, are all celebrated within this Bulgarian community of women live-in caregivers in the site of the park.

I would now like to return to the first photo and examine its different setting: the place of the house where these women work.

In Greece, until recently, it was usual for the extended family to stay together in the same house. When the parents would get older, one of the children would undertake the care of them, sharing also the same house. The last years because of the weakening of the institution of the family and of certain social values related to it,

there are a great number of elderly people staying alone, in a house different than that of their married children. The Bulgarian migrant women come to make up for this vacuum. Consequently in the specific case, the domestic space which is directly related to the performance and reproduction of family relations and structures “accommodates” new roles and practices and a working regime which is promoted, exactly because of the weakening of these particular family structures.

Instead of family relationships as part of the extended household, we now have special working relationships which, however, seem to be structured as a mirror image of kinship relations. The Bulgarian woman performs tasks and duties that children are supposed to assume for their parents and she is furthermore expected to fill the emotional gap that they have left. In this sense, the space of the house takes on a new lease of life through these women’s presence and activity. They actually become the new “mistresses” (‘νοικοκυρές’) of the house being responsible for its physical and social reproduction. Except from doing all the household tasks, keeping everything in order within it, preparing the meals, doing all the shopping and every task outside the house that is related to the good sustenance of its “life” and structure (like paying the bills), they are also producing a social life within the household.

Firstly, through the relationship with their employers, the old woman or man in their care; a relation which cannot be depicted in strict job terms. Living in the same house twenty four hours a day, they share the same daily routine and they jointly produce and reproduce the household. One of the elements of primary importance characterizing the domestic space are the relationships being developed, because of the meanings which take place within it. This element seems to be missing from the houses of the elderly people who usually stay alone until they employ a Bulgarian live-in caregiver. The admission of another person in this space, except from the practical needs that it comes to serve, also creates a new social life for the household. We most of the times tend to think of the women working as live-in domestics, only in relation to their job status and treat the houses where they work – but also live – as a workplace. This means that we usually examine narratives, practices and roles as these are produced in the context of a working site and relationship, but we often forget that at the same time this house is for the live-in domestics some form of home. Practicing their job duties means also creating and preserving a household and being a significant part of it.

Through the first photo that I described to you in the beginning of this presentation, it became evident to me that except from a particular daily-routine within the house which focuses on the relationship of the elderly person with the live-in caregiver and which produces specific meanings, new meanings are created within it which regard the personal and social life of the Bulgarian woman. The scene depicted in the particular photo, is not something uncommon as Sfetla, the Bulgarian woman to whom this photo belongs, explained to me. In the houses where they work and stay they pretty often get visits from friends and arrange meetings for coffee or lunch. Particularly, the absence of the employer and owner of the house from the dinner shown in the photo signifies the possibility for different spheres of action to coexist within the house and also the degree of "**domestication**" of space by the Bulgarian live-in caregiver. This photo theme evokes memories of any other family or friends dinner; the interesting part in it though is the Bulgarian care-giver in the role of the housekeeper. Depending on the years of work and the relation of trust built with the employer there is a greater degree of reappropriation of the domestic space and a greater need to inscribe their presence there beyond the given terms of the work regime.

This last point becomes evident when looking at the personal photo album of Stefka, another Bulgarian woman who has worked for many years as live-in caregiver in different houses of elderly people. Stefka has a passion with photography, so there are a great variety of photos taken at different moments and settings in her album. Among them, there are some who depict Stefka in different rooms of the houses in which she has occasionally worked. The interesting part in these photos is that she is always pictured alone and never in the company of her employer or any other person. Furthermore, there are no indications that there has been a special occasion, like a celebration, in the context of which these photos were taken. The coded message of these photos regards two elements: the particular space and this woman's presence in it. What a viewer can read in them, "helped" by the specific "pose" and the simplicity of the setting, is a person posing in the interior of his/her house. The practice of Stefka to be photographed in all the houses she has worked in the specific way – never in a common photo with her employer and with no "signs" revealing her working identity – might be seen as an act of resistance. She chooses to portray a different relation of

herself with the domestic space questioning the roles, and notions of power and hierarchy inscribed in it as a working environment.

Conclusion

Through my contact with Bulgarian migrant women in Volos, working as live-in caregivers of the elderly, I realized that two particular places, a specific park and the domestic space of their employers, constitute the most important points of reference around which they construct their every-day lives and their migration experience in Greece. On the one hand, the park transfigures the concept of home for the whole community and symbolizes their need for personal space and time. Through the practices performed there a collectivity is produced and reproduced through which the site acquires a transnational character. On the other hand, the domestic space apart from signalling a new working relationship that it “accommodates”, it also accommodates new meanings which are determined by its Bulgarian residents and which go beyond their role as domestics. In this way they reappropriate the space of the house and transform it into their home, in an attempt to cope with their given position in it.