

**Gendered Aspects of Migration in SE Europe: Presentation of the Project  
(Labor Axe)**

*Lambrini Stiliou  
University of Thessaly*

As already mentioned I am here to present some of the findings of this research project that regard the thematic field of labor. Due to the connection between migration and the development of the informal sector of the labour market, the project aimed to explore the contribution of migration to the transformation of the concept of work and its effects on gender relations. More particularly, through this project we tried to approach some of the following questions that regard issues of labor and migration:

- Is there an ethnic division of labor in the city of Volos? In which sectors are the Bulgarian and Albanian migrants employed and how did their job careers develop over the years? Furthermore, which are the strategies of the migrants themselves in this field?
- How is the working identity re-signified through the migration experience and especially in relation to the working experience under the communist regime?
- How are the relationships with the employers shaped and perceived?
- What are the different discourses in relation to work, according to gender, ethnicity and generation?

In this paper I will discuss some of the issues on the basis of our material.

Most of the men - Albanian and Bulgarian – work in the construction area while most of the women work as domestic helpers – the Albanian as live-out domestic cleaners and the Bulgarians as live-in caregivers. None of our informants exercises the same profession as in their home country. This does not seem to be their choice but comes as a result of the particular needs of the host country’s economy. They come to cover a certain demand in this kind of jobs that the locals are rather unwilling to perform. However this division of labor according to ethnicity, but also to gender, binds them with a certain labor sector and leaves them little chances for differentiation.

Furthermore, through this process stereotypes that relate certain professions with certain ethnic groups and gender are generated and reproduced.

A basic turning point in most of the informants' narratives forms the legalisation procedure that for the first time took place in 1998. By that time on the working regime of most of the men improves significantly: they acquire a more stable job, they can pursue better wages, and most importantly they can have stamps and health insurance. However, the most important change is located in their discourse and in emotional level. Security is a word often used when referring to the period after the legalisation process. Comparing the time before and after the legalisation act, Fatmir states characteristically: *"Seven years seemed like we were nowhere. Now, the last six or seven years that we have got our papers, we have settled down. After I gathered the security stamps and I got the first paper I believe I was relieved. I thought that something was done//achieved."* (Up to that moment it seems that they can't plan or schedule anything while the concept of future appears rather fluid and problematic in their discourse.) Because of their precarious existence they are not in a position to assert better working conditions and their rights. On the contrary, they can be more easily exploited and unequally treated by their employers. Even the choice of job – as far as this is possible – is made on different terms after the legalisation act. While the first years in Greece they consider the money the most important element in a job, after the legalisation they perceive the insurance and the stability of major importance. Both these factors are of course directly related to the legal regime concerning their residence in Greece, but they also imply a shift in attitude and in action from present to future.

In most of the interviews with men aged 30-45 work is a central and constant concept in their discourse. Their narrative scheme is set around work, through which a personal success story is produced that runs through the whole interview. Apart from a simple means of survival, job in their case seems to be something deeper and more essential. It seems to work as a means of social prestige and recognition and as a mechanism of a partial acceptance and "integration" in the host society. Typical of that is Stavros' statement that when he first came to Greece he was working from morning to night without a break: *"...we were working from 7.30, 8:00 o'clock in the morning till 4:00 o'clock in the evening. Non-stop. Not that somebody told us to or we felt obliged but to show that we are good people and not to stay without a job."*

*Therefore we worked non-stop.*” We could argue that the job worked as an informal “passport”. Through hard working they demanded from the society the legal “inclusion” that the Greek state refused them for such a long time. Men use their narratives of their working experience in Greece to build a strong male identity based on endurance and male working skills: “hard-working”, “master (**mastoras**)”, “people meet me in the street and greet me; they have respect for my job and me”. Stavros, reflecting on his working experience in Greece, stated: *“Bringing into my mind the first years when I started working as an apprentice, I am amazed with what I have achieved. And I like it very much, that things have come this way. Who wouldn’t like to start out as an apprentice and become ‘mastoras’? And I fell very nice.”* This improvement of work experience and status for most of the men which is expressed in hierarchical terms is related also to the specific sectors in which they are occupied. Within each sector there are different positions and specializations according to the different tasks performed. These are described in hierarchical and gendered terms. Work is used as a status symbol through which Albanian and Bulgarian men perform their masculinity and assert their male identity (male honour) that has been threatened by a variety of factors, both during the transition period and during migration. As a narrative strategy, this discourse is also used to counter negative stereotypes of Albanian men as criminals and poor underdogs and thus to strengthen their national identity.

On the other hand, in all the interviews with Albanian women it is evident that the job of house cleaner—practically the only job available in a provincial city like Volos—leads to dead-end and gives no opportunity for social mobility. Contrary to the men who over the years have managed to improve their working regime, women seem to be trapped in a regime that offers no security. The absence of a strict legal framework to regulate the profession of domestic cleaner, leads to the perpetuation of the economic exploitation of these women by their Greek households. One of the biggest problems is the fact that employers rarely issue security stamps. As a considerable number of security stamps are required in order to obtain a working and residence permit, for migrant women this means that they can’t be autonomous and are dependent on a male to remain in Greece. This issue becomes even more important in cases where a migrant woman decides to get divorce from her husband and then she automatically turns into an illegal status. In Greece residence and work permit are indissolubly connected and so the one dependent on the other. Therefore, migrant

women who work as house cleaners and their work is not officially registered, live in a permanent state of insecurity and they have by necessity the status of “dependant member”.

Through the interviews with Albanian women we observed an important degree of differentiation in narratives about work experiences in Greece depending on whether they come from a village or urban setting, their level of education, the nature of their work experience prior to migration, their motivation to migrate, and the nature of gender relations back home. The evaluation of work experience is very different for women from a village background and educated urban women. Ntiana, an Albanian woman who belongs to the first category, does not consider her former work experience in the fields as a job but rather as part of her domestic duties. The change of attitude, produced by migration, becomes more evident when she speaks of her job in Greece, since it is in this context that she starts using terms like working-hours and wages. Similar is the case of Konstantina. In her village in Albania, she was working in the fields. Here she works in a greenhouse, and as she notes she does not have a problem with this kind of job since in Albania she was performing similar tasks, although there she received no wages. At least here she is economically rewarded for what she does.

This pattern of assessment and valuation of work in terms of money is also evident in other interviews with Albanian migrant women. Comparing their working experience here with that in the country of origin most of them stress the money they can earn from work. Sofia, for example, comments in relation to the jobs that she has done in Greece: *“There (meaning in Albania) we also had agricultural jobs, but the good thing (here) was that you had better earnings and that made you happy! I work but I get my wages, I get my sweat. There you worked but you earned nothing, just small things. But here we were thinking that our wages were not wasted. You worked but you were rewarded; Money is that makes you relax.”*

It stands to reason that money, as a basic value of conceptualization of “work”, is related in their discourse to their new working experience in Greece, as well as to their encounter with the capitalist system. However, what we note through the interviews is that this pattern is set in different terms in women’s interviews in relation to those of men. Talking about their working experience in Greece, men rarely mention the money they are making from it. Rather, they underline the special skills that they have developed through it and their advancement in the job hierarchy

since their arrival in Greece. We could argue that money earnings for women become more important because they are related in a way to other aspects of life beyond work. In that way, Sofia will note in another point in her interview that the greatest reward of hard-working and the difficult conditions of life in Greece is being able to go for a walk, visit a café, or go to the movies. In the same way, Ntiana mentions that keeping and managing the money she earns from her job, forms a sign of autonomy. She also sees money as major means to undermine the power of her mother-in-law, who used to control the household through her purse. And I quote:

*“And now that I am working I feel relieved; if I want to buy something for my child, I go and buy it, and that’s it. This has taken all the pressure away. And I say to her (to her mother-in-law) I bought this for the child. ‘Why did you buy it? She already has one.’ ‘I want her to have it; I want her to have it. That’s what I am working for.’ Full stop.”*

In another case, Tzina mentions that with the money that she earns from her job she can buy new clothes, different from the ones that she was used to wear when she was in Albania. In her new clothes Tzina feels “more womanly” as she characteristically underlines. In this way money is related to getting rid of village patterns of life in Albania, which in this case are reflected in dress codes. In this sense, we could argue that these women value their work experience positively.

To the contrary, educated urban women who exercised a profession in Albania, view their work in Greece as a down-grading and humiliating experience. For them the feel of a social “sinking//scuttling” once they come in Greece is very profound in their discourse, especially because of the connotations of the jobs they usually perform in Greece (cleaners and domestic servants). These occupations are traditionally associated with master/mistress and servant relations which are very negatively loaded. In contrast to their narration for their working experience in the country of origin which is characterized by notions like pride, responsibility and initiative, in Greece they describe a situation where they are transformed into tame, little “children”, depended on the needs and the good will of the Greek housekeeper each time. Because of the nature of the job and the duties related to it, dominant stereotypes according to which a migrant is an uneducated person from a culturally and socially inferior country are constantly reproduced in the space of work. To counter this discourse Albanian women stress that a number of the house-keepers they are

working for are uneducated and have no “culture”. These are also the worst employers who show no respect for them

The Bulgarian women who have come alone to Greece and usually work as live-in caregivers of old Greek men and women stand as a different case. (These women are usually 45-60 years old and had already retired before coming to Greece or they had lost their jobs after the collapse of the communist regime. They usually have a whole family back in the country of origin (husband, children and grandchildren) and through their work in Greece they have assumed their economic support. ) Most of these women come from cities in Bulgaria. This is an important difference in relation to the Albanian women and to Albanian migrants in general, who in their majority come from villages and rural areas of Albania. Although this could be considered a random fact related to the role of migrant networks, I believe that it shows a general trend. This is further confirmed by the history of the two countries. In Bulgaria the rapid industrialization favored the development of many small urban centres while in Albania even the existing cities had a rural nature and only the city of Tirana seemed to show characteristics of a so-called urban space.

Having said that, as it appears from Bulgarian migrants’ narratives the role of women in Bulgaria under communism seemed to be more empowered than that of Albanian women. It seems that the impact of the communist ideology in relation to gender issues was more decisive and brought about changes that are reflected in Bulgarian women’s discourse. Many report that a woman in Bulgaria works and participates the same as a man in the labor market. This gives her the right to participate on equal terms with men in the decision-making process that has to do with the family and the household. Elena, a Bulgarian woman, even though for different reasons she is not in favor of the communist system, she typically notes: *“This is the only thing communism does and...neither the husband nor the father is in command. I work and he works, I earn money and he earns money. He can’t, he can’t say to me ‘You will do this, you will do this.’ No.”* In the same context, but from a different point of view, another Bulgarian woman considers women’s emancipation as a defect. Women used to work many hours outside the house while they also continued to perform all the household tasks and take care of the family. She believes that the active role of women did not lead to shared responsibilities but laid all the burden on women. They became the main breadwinners and maybe this is one of the reasons why it is mainly women that migrate from Bulgaria.

All the Bulgarian women, with whom we spoke, used to work in their country. Contrary to many of our Albanian women informants that used to be occupied in the agricultural sector, many of the Bulgarian women were working in factories and state-run enterprises. This is of course related to the distinction that was underlined above between village and city origin. Therefore, the pre-migration working regime is quite different. As it was already mentioned, in the discourse of the Albanian women there is a connection between the agricultural work and the domestic work and both are part of a gendered identity. Our data suggest that migration to Greece for these women signifies a chance to be freed from village life and from tight social control. Through their new working identity they can claim things for themselves. On the other hand, the Bulgarian women had already formed before their migration, an identity through which they draw power and empower their position.

On the other hand, most of the Bulgarian women express a greater insecurity in relation to their work compared to the Albanian women. In most of the cases they depend exclusively on their own working power with which they support also the rest of their family in Bulgaria. Because of that, in their interviews there are constant references to the fear of staying without a job. On the contrary, in the Albanian women's interviews this discourse is almost totally absent. It seems that they rely on and derive great security from their husbands' work.

The ways in which Bulgarian women assess their working situation and their wages is clearly linked to the situation back home. They judge their jobs according to whether these allow them to save up money to support their families at home. Therefore, it is not easy for them to stop working as live-ins and rent their own place, because then the possibilities of saving are minimized and the survival of the whole family is put at stake. On the contrary, Albanian women stressed the situation here. They judge their wages according to the needs that arise in the every-day life in Greece. Albanian families now spend all their money in Greece and the needs of the family are linked to the social reality they experience here.

A common pattern in most of the interviews of Albanian and Bulgarian migrants is the representation of Greeks as lazy persons whose only interest is to entertain themselves and have fun. The critique is especially severe for the Greek women and regards their practice to employ another woman – usually a migrant one – to do the household tasks instead of them. This is further emphasized by a comparison to what used to be the case for women in the country of origin. Stefka notes in relation to a

woman's tasks in Bulgaria: *"In Bulgaria you do everything by yourself! You cook, you clean, you iron, you take care of the children, you work eight hours! Everything!"*

Furthermore, this behavior of the Greek women is used as the main argument by migrant parents to prevent their sons from getting married to a Greek woman.

Many of our informants claimed that Greeks and migrants adopt a different attitude towards work. For example Mpesi, a young Albanian migrant, remarks that in the beginning he was frequently fired from his job in the construction sector because he was working "like the Greeks", which means in slow rhythms and showing laziness. The employers, however, were expecting from him – being an Albanian – to work like "the others", "that were working hard, they were offering everything to the job". For Mpesi, as well as for many other migrants, the bad worker is identified with the Greek worker. This narrative strategy of laziness attributed to Greek people is of course used also as a counter-discourse to all these negative qualities attributed to migrants by the host society. Besides, as Stogianka – a Bulgarian woman – underlines, a person's attitude towards work changes once he changes country and becomes a migrant. According to her "a foreigner" should always show and prove his/her diligence, should always put more effort in the job than if he/she was in his/her country of origin. This is of course related to the issue of hard work as a means of social acceptance - which I stressed before - but signifies also a different job reality. For example some migrants stress that workers during the communist period were lazy, a judgment that is clearly set in comparison with the present experience. According to Stavros during the communist period in Albania there was neither the need nor the motive for somebody to work harder: work was assured, there was no fear of unemployment and even if you worked harder the extra earnings were insignificant. Besides, one of the phrases that people usually use referring to communism is: "They pretend to pay is and we pretend to work." On the contrary, in Greece you have to "look for" the jobs, to be antagonistic, to "drudge and slave", in order to make your living and ensure the future.

In relation to the above, in most of the interviews with migrants of the age group 30-45 (both of Albanian and Bulgarian origin) a common pattern of discourse is the distinction between the collectivity as a feature of life and work under the communist period, and the individualism and antagonism that they experience today. The notion of companionship and the love within the team are used in order to describe working relationships. Companionship moreover is one of the basic things for which they

yearn from their life in Albania or Bulgaria and one of the most important values which they seem to miss in their life in Greece.

Another important issue that came up through the research is related to work as a field of conflict between parents and children, especially between fathers and their sons. As already mentioned work is highly valued by the older generation and there is a constant fear that their children will become lazy just like the younger generation of Greeks. That's why many Albanian fathers take their sons with them to work, in order to introduce them to hard-working and to help them form a particular mode of life.

In general there seems to be a different attitude towards work between the first and second generation. For the first generation hard-working is the total value, it is the one that permitted them to stand up again once they came to Greece, and one of the main reasons why they left their countries. The younger generation, though, and especially those who took the decision to migrate by themselves don't focus on job opportunities and economic reasons as their main motivation to migrate. Greece is presented as a place of escape while the migration project is described in adventure terms. We may suggest that this discourse is a kind of response to the initial stereotype of a ragged and hungry Albanian man who can do anything to find a job.

In relation to the above, younger migrants often stress in their narratives that Greece is a country where "you can have fun". Therefore the elements of entertainment and of a different way of life are central in their discourse about Greece. To the contrary, members of the older generation, both men and women, see Greece mainly as a country where you can find a job. The above distinction is further corroborated by the way in which the two generations choose to spend their wages. Several young male migrants report that much of their expenses concern their entertainment or the acquisition of consumer goods, related to a particular youth culture (a point that will be further analyzed by Alexandra). On the other hand, after the fall of communism the older generation has experienced a situation of total insecurity and of great shortages. The need to survive in the beginning and the fear of not finding themselves in the same situation again has led them working endlessly in order to improve their position in their new environment. They perceive money as a major value and they try to spend it with great economy or to invest it in real estate in Greece and in Albania. Some of our informants in an effort to present a positive image of the conditions and relationships in work, emphasize the fact that their nationality and migrant status are in no way related in the way this reality is shaped. What is over-emphasized and

stressed as meaningful in the perception of the self is its working value. However this choice of viewing and presenting reality shows some ruptures in their narration. For example, in the following quote of Vasiliv's interview it is clear that he has a perfect sense of his different identity and that he is also compelled to a different working reality because of this identity: *"Will any Greek guy come and work in the jobs that we do? No. Never. We do the black jobs. The foreigners."* Furthermore regardless of their job skills and position within the job hierarchy (sinergeio) they belong to "a lower class", as an informant stated, because of being foreigner, migrant, not Greek. Kostas, for example, is an Albanian migrant who managed after many years of work to set up his own business in Volos. However, as he reported many Greek people don't visit his store because of his Albanian origin and he has also faced many problems with the authorities. Therefore, it is evident that even though he is now the "employer", the "boss", he is still treated as "an Albanian" by the Greek society.

Speaking of their employers, most of the migrants note that over the years they have developed a good relationship with them, although in the beginning there was mistrust because of their Albanian identity. In some cases the employer has also become their godfather or the godfather of their children or has helped them in different ways with life in Greece. Some refer to them in friendly or kinship terms and feel proud that they have managed to gain their trust. For younger men who have come in Greece in their teens together with other young boys of their age, work has also played the role - especially the first years - of a shelter and has stand as a place of relations who can't be defined in strictly job terms. In this context the employer or some co-worker of an older age, usually incarnated the role of the "absent" father for the migrant-child. So, Takis for example referring to one of his first jobs in Greece and to the person who was in charge, notes: *"I would say that he was a very nice guy...and he stood for me. In the beginning he was teaching me the language. He wasn't treating me in a special way, as a foreigner. He was treating me as, as a small child and he learned me some basic things: how is Greece, what you have to do, what you have to be careful about...and stuff like these."* This relationship with employers or co-workers that is expressed in paternalistic terms is not confined only to the working environment. Therefore, in Ilias' case his employer acted also as an intermediary for Ilias to find and rent a house, he is his god-father and the general prop for whatever difficulties Ilias might face. On the other hand, in Takis' case, the working environment is also

the main place of networking and of connection to other forms of sociality. People to whom he is friends with, goes out with, socializes in different ways, are always persons whom he knows through work. In contrast, for young migrants who have attended or still attend the Greek education system, school seems to be the main place of “meeting” with the Greek society.

Through this paper I tried to show how the working identity is transformed in the context of the migration experience and how it is further inter-related according to gender, leading into different conceptualizations for men and women. Instead of a longer conclusion, I prefer to leave this role to the discussion that I hope to follow, leading to a fertile contribution to what has been noted here.