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### Migrant mothers' everyday practices in nurseries and kindergartens as a strategy for social integration.

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MIGRANT MOTHERS' EVERYDAY PRACTICES  
IN NURSERIES AND KINDERGARTENS  
AS A STRATEGY FOR SOCIAL INTEGRATION

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ABSTRACT

*Access to nurseries and kindergartens for children of migrant domestic workers is a dual path to social integration: (a) it is a condition for their integration into the labour market: their children's access to nurseries and kindergartens and the conditions under which this is possible to a large extent determine the mothers' prospects of getting a paid job, (b) it shapes their perspectives on long-term settlement, which becomes contingent on their children's performance at school. This paper discusses formal and informal practices related to access to nurseries and schools, as well as migrant mothers' reactions to xenophobic attitudes and behaviour by teachers and other children. Migrant working mothers seem to be determined to fight for their children's access to nurseries and schools. Their strong commitment to achieving the best possible childcare on the one hand reflects traditional gender roles (it is women's rather than men's task to find care facilities) and on the other contributes to strengthening their role in the household vis-à-vis their husbands.*

1. INTRODUCTION

It is widely documented that the rapid increase in women's participation in the labour market in Greece was greatly facilitated not only by the extensive unpaid labour of grandmothers but also by the existence of a well-developed network of public and private nurseries and kindergartens – the latter being an expensive last-resort solution when unpaid female labour was not

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available within the extended family.<sup>1</sup> For migrant women, however, public nurseries and kindergartens are more or less the only available means for securing childcare, which is a prerequisite for their integration into the labour market. Women immigrating into Greece with their children, need a paid job, and thus an arrangement for childcare, as soon as they arrive. Early familiarisation of migrant children with the Greek education system through enrolment in nurseries and kindergartens has long-term favourable effects for these children's socialisation and integration into the "new" country.

Migrant children's integration into the education system of the host country has been widely analysed in the context of the recent burgeoning growth of social research on migration in Europe and in Greece. A number of different approaches have become customary in studying children's access to preschool education in the hosting country. The first –"welfare state"– approach conceives of preschool education as a public social service (also available to migrant families. The focus is on discrimination and the way it is nurtured by the workings of the education system. There is discussion of the role of teachers and civil servants and the effects of their behaviour on migrant families and children seeking social integration and full exercise of social rights.<sup>2</sup> The second –"multicultural education"– approach concentrates on children's integration into a foreign school environment, discussing problems of adaptation to both pedagogic and social aspects of their school life. This is the predominant approach in Greece where most research examines teaching methods and teachers' attitudes so as to develop ways of facilitating integration of migrant children into the Greek school system. The major concerns include such questions as how one might moderate the xenophobic attitudes and behaviour of local people, both children and parents, in relation to the increasing numbers of migrant children in public nurseries and kindergartens, or even how intellectual and emotional obstacles to acceptance of foreign language and culture might be overcome.<sup>3</sup>

We opted for a third approach focusing on the role of education and public childcare in shaping migrant mothers' everyday life and work patterns as well as gender relations within the family, the ethnic community and the hosting society. We discuss how from a migrant mother's standpoint

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1. See, among other, Moussourou, 2005, Symeonidou and Magdalinos, 2007.

2. See, for instance Schierup, 2006, Lewis, 1998, and Orloff, 2002.

3. See, Dragona et.al., 1996, Dragona et.al., 2008 and recent articles by M. Pavlou, G. Tzikas, L. Nikas, S. Vassiliadou and N. Giannakista, in AVGI, 2006.

children's integration into preschool education is closely associated with their mother's progress towards finding (and keeping) a job. We examine what changes take place in women's everyday life and how these changes affect their relations with their husbands. From this perspective the role of childcare for migrant women seems to be more important than it is for local women: childcare is evidently a heavier burden for migrant mothers than for local mothers. It may, however, have the effect of considerably upgrading their social integration when and if childcare responsibilities become the motive for them to seek formal admission to a system of social protection. Access to childcare becomes an absolute prerequisite for paid work, not just one option among others as it is in the case of many local women, who can still rely upon their extended family for support.

The theoretical perspective adopted in the paper for examination of the role played by childcare and pre-school education in the integration of Albanian migrant mothers engages with the concepts both of *women* and *gender*: *women* is a reminder of the strongly female character of preschool childcare. In both Albania and Greece it is women's responsibility rather than men's. Nurseries and kindergartens are female spaces in the sense that both recipients and providers of the service are almost exclusively women. The questions to be examined are: what formal and informal practices of migrant can be seen vis-à-vis access to kindergartens? What kinds of relationship develop between migrant women and childminders? How do migrant mothers react to xenophobic behaviour from staff, local children and their parents? The idea of *gender*, by contrast, brings the focus onto the way being female affects social integration of migrant working mothers, enabling us to examine how gender roles and gender identities are changing in migrant families as a result of public provision of childcare and preschool education and how women accordingly acquire the ability to strengthen their position in ethnic communities and in Greek society.

The major question of the paper might thus now be framed as follows: how can childcare (nurseries and kindergartens), a traditionally female area of social policy and an exclusive responsibility of women, be turned into a lever for change, weakening gender hierarchies in migrant families and fostering women's emancipation?

Examination not only of *formal* but also of *informal* aspects of access to, and continuous "negotiations" around, public provision of childcare and preschool education seems to be a necessary step for understanding how access to public services is organized in Greece. It should, however, be noted that the lines of division between formal and informal are neither clear-cut

nor fixed over time. The terms are used here as a reference to the existence (or non-existence) of state policies and services affecting the everyday lives of migrant (and local) women. The wide variety of formal regulations and norms and differing degrees of “flexibility” with which they are implemented are a result, on the one hand, of the poor quality of monitoring mechanisms and high level of ambiguity in policy design, and, on the other, of obvious political “clientelism” and the considerable influence exerted by personal contacts when citizens deal with the state. Beneficiaries must be in constant negotiation with civil servants to secure accommodation of their requirements for social provision and services and move cautiously and consciously between the letter and the spirit of formal regulations. In the case of nurseries and kindergartens, which are the responsibility of local authorities, negotiations are even more fluid, and the boundaries between formal and informal practices more blurred. Particularly when recourse to private sector care may be too costly, migrant working mothers have to learn how to make best use of existing flexibilities in the rules of operation.

Research material for this article is drawn from two research projects on “Gender and Migration”, one conducted at the Panteion University<sup>4</sup> and one at the National Technical University of Athens (NTUA).<sup>5</sup> The objective is to illustrate important aspects of the practices of migrant mothers in relation to childcare. The focus, for several reasons, is on Albanian domestic helpers. Albanian women comprise the largest group of domestic helpers being paid by a daily wage.<sup>6</sup> Albanians are in addition the largest migrant population in Greece, many of them having lived in Greece with their families for almost

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4. KEKMOKOP. There is extensive presentation of KEKMOKOP’s project in this special issue. Material for this paper is drawn from (a) 31 interviews with Albanian women domestic helpers (quotations by Suzanna and Etleva) and 10 with women (local) kindergarten staff (quotations by Dimitra, Evangelia, Dina and Ketty) (“Access to social services” work package. See report by Psimmenos & Skamnakis, 2007) and (b) 6 focus groups with migrant women and local employers (quotations by Konstantina and Linda) (“Everyday life” work package. See Kambouri, 2007). All interviews and focus groups were conducted in Athens between March and September 2005.

5. The project looks at the *Intersecting patterns of everyday life and socio-spatial transformations in the city. Migrant and local women in the neighbourhoods of Athens* focusing on Albanian and Bulgarian women domestic helpers and carers in two central neighbourhoods of Athens. Material for this article is drawn from 20 interviews with Albanian women domestic helpers and 8 Greek women employers of domestic helpers and carers, conducted in Athens in 2006 (quotations by Nora, Nina, Rena and Natasa). See Report by Vaiyou, 2007.

6. For more research findings on Albanian domestic helpers, see Athanassopoulou, 2005, and Siotou, 2005, as well as the papers presented at two conferences: See KEKMOKOP 2007 and NTUA 2007.

two decades.<sup>7</sup> Compared to other migrant groups in Greece Albanians are the target of greater hostility and more open expression of xenophobic and racist attitudes.<sup>8</sup> All these factors put Albanian women at the heart of our analysis.

The article is divided broadly in two parts corresponding to two distinctive phases in the process of encounter between migrant mothers and the public childcare and pre-school education system. The first part focuses on formal and informal practices associated with access of Albanian children to nurseries and kindergartens. Access requires proof of the mother's employment status, documentable, in the case of domestic helpers, by evidence of independent contribution to the national social security system (IKA). This is a major problem for most female domestic helpers given that they work informally and have at best only such social rights as are obtainable via their husband and at worst no rights at all. The second part of the article focuses on how children 'adapt' or 'perform' in the nurseries and kindergartens as part of the process of socialisation and eventual successful integration into the Greek education system. This second phase involves local parents and children insofar as they shape the school environment (friendly, xenophobic or racist), in which children have to spend long hours and to a large extent form their gender and national identity.

## 2. NEGOTIATING ACCESS TO PUBLIC NURSERIES AND KINDERGARTENS

Research on the ways in which migrant families in Europe manage work and care has shown that pressures both to and from work (eg. long hours, pressure not to miss work) are important constraints. Although there are some social networks organizing informal childcare, time is a rare resource in all migrant families with the result that this type of care is rarely available. Seeking informal care from other migrant women does not seem to be a solution either as illustrated in the following quotation:

*“And little by little I started looking after the kid... Until then ... that woman who looked after him left for her own country, she is from Georgia. And another woman came and the kid could not get along with this other woman and I told her: find someone else, I cannot help because*

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7. Albanian migrants have been the focus of a large body of social research. See among other contributions: Lambrianidis and Lymberaki, 2001; Milesi, 2006, and Kassimati, 2003.

8. See Ventura, 2004, for a comprehensive analysis of nationalism and racism in Greece.

*it is a difficult job. It takes a lot of patience. I have worked for 20 years. I prefer cleaning, (I prefer) to know my job and not to be bothered”.*  
(Nina)

Formal care is thus in effect the only option, often supplementable by arrangements such as older children taking care of younger ones, employment of low-cost childminders or even leaving children alone, usually before or after school hours and on Saturdays when parents still have to work (Wall and Sao Jose, 2004).

In Greece public preschool care has since 2001 been provided by local authorities,<sup>9</sup> which set the rules of access on the basis of demand, availability and their own political priorities. There are two kinds of nurseries and kindergartens: the regular ones operating on a daily schedule covering only a few hours (7:45 to 12:45) and the so-called *oloimero* (*all day*) nurseries, meaning in practice a somewhat extended schedule (7:45 to 3:30).<sup>10</sup> There is obviously little correspondence between the working hours of the former and the needs of a mother in a full-time job, either in the public sector or the private (when commuting time is taken into account). They are certainly in no way adapted to the working hours of migrant domestic helpers, for whom the only practical option is the *oloimero* schedule, which is available in one third of public kindergartens. Growing demand, however, in the context of a new policy extending compulsory education to pre-school level, generates increasing numbers of jobs for nursery staff.<sup>11</sup> Migrant children make up a significant proportion of this growing demand for municipal nurseries. In many areas they contribute to keeping schools open where there has been a considerable reduction in the number of local children. As for the service provided, with few exceptions municipal nurseries and public kindergartens provide parents only with the security of knowing that their children are spending some hours in an environment of professional care. It is up to the

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9. Law 2880/2001.

10. Though all day nurseries and kindergartens have been legally permissible since 1997 (Law 2525/1997), it is only since financial support became available through the Community Support Framework (2000-2006), in the context of “gender equality” provisions, that all-day nurseries and kindergartens have been introduced.

11. The government announced that from the 2007-2008 school year there will be a further extension of kindergartens, as they will be upgraded to a status of *compulsory* pre-school education, thereby increasing job opportunities in the sector. In view of the 2007 elections there were undoubtedly clientelistic considerations behind this otherwise positive measure.

parents to provide all necessary material such as paper, markers, painting material etc., as well as lunch.<sup>12</sup>

Almost all professional staff stated that the main objective of kindergartens is to contribute to children's "socialisation". This conscious mission of the profession seems to be even more important when it comes to migrant children. Migrant children may need additional effort from the teachers and they therefore tend to bring higher levels of job satisfaction, especially to those who are devoted to their job.

*"The positive thing (with migrant children) is that these children are a challenge on their own- because if a child is "lagging behind", the importance of your job becomes more obvious. The same is true with children who have some handicap or those who come from poor families. You see that they are like sponges. I felt this very strongly in Elefsina, where I asked them to bring old newspapers and nobody had newspapers to bring. Probably newspapers never enter their homes. Well, these children showed a spectacular progress that year. That is to say your work counts for more". (Dimitra)*

For migrant mothers, children's access to nurseries and kindergartens is a prime consideration. From analysis of research material we can identify three issues which shape this process: work permit, in-school segregation and time constraints:

### **Work permit**

In the early 1990s, when migrants started coming in large numbers, it was relatively easy for migrant children to obtain a place in the municipal kindergartens, where such existed. Stricter rules were introduced when demand started to grow, possibly to some extent in response to the discomfort of some Greek parents, owing to the high proportion of migrant children in classes. Nowadays more and more kindergartens accept children of women who are formally employed – i.e. who have formal proof of paying contributions to the social security system (IKA).

As already mentioned, domestic workers usually work informally. Employers are not motivated to pay their share of social security costs

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12. Usually the "cleaning lady" of the kindergarten, who is a civil servant, receives a small extra amount of money (50 Euros per month) from parents as recompense for heating the food and cleaning the tables and the kitchen.



insofar as the work is performed in the 'private' space of the home and therefore not subject to any form of public labour inspection. Migrant women are similarly unmotivated to pay personal contributions if they have access to social security as dependents of their husbands. They thus find themselves in a vicious circle, in the sense that they cannot seek formal employment if they have no access to child-care and cannot obtain access to child-care if they are not in formal employment. To move from an undeclared to a declared job domestic helpers have to negotiate with employers, who are thus required to formalise their employer status and pay their contribution to social security costs. In order to facilitate this task, domestic work has been accorded a special simplified position in the social security system, treated as a kind of dependent employment with multiple employers and a daily wage.

*"They say to me. 'Make a statutory declaration!' But most ladies won't do this for me. One lady, who is very kind, thank heavens –I go to her twice a week– did it for me. She did it as if I work for her every day. But the difficult thing about it afterwards was –I handed it to them and they took it– wherever I went to work, when school started, they say to me: 'We want all the telephones of the places you work', and this is where the trouble starts!". (Suzanna)*

In some (not very unusual) cases migrant women succeed in gaining access, despite the lack of 'proper papers', through the intervention of women employers who happen to have contacts either with decision makers in the municipality (on a personal or political basis) or with the kindergarten staff. The importance of informal relations is illustrated by Etleva:

*"For my bigger daughter, when I went to ask at the pre-school, they said something like: 'You have to have insurance stamps. We don't take Greeks without insurance stamps. Are we going to take you?' And I went away. OK. And this year I said: 'I'm going to have to send both my daughters', because I couldn't get by - there was so much rent and other expenses. And to a lady I work for, I say all this: 'I'm in need', I say. 'I can't sit around any more without work'. And she says: 'I'll help you. You go to the Town Hall, to Mrs. X, I don't know what her name is, she's...what is it, not the mayor...the deputy mayor! And you'll go there. She's a very, very good person. And you'll tell all this, and she'll help you'. And that's what I did. And I went ... Can you help me, I say, for my children to go there?' 'Why don't they take them?' she says.*

*'Because I don't have IKA' I say. 'I have all the other papers! Whatever they ask for'. She asks me: 'Does your husband have IKA?' I say 'Yes. He works all the year and he's been here for 14 years!' Straight away she rings up the teacher at the pre-school and says: 'The Albanian girl, Etleva, will come to you and you'll take her girls and you'll enrol them!'''. (Etleva)*

### ***In-school segregation***

After the first step of access, through formal or informal arrangements, migrant mothers face yet another difficult situation: the risk that their children may be victims of explicit or implicit ethnic segregation in classes and schools. Informal practices for segregating children include “virtual inscriptions”, so that migrant children are directed to specific kindergartens or classes. A kindergarten teacher has described the practice as follows:

*“.. (this usually happens) in schools where the principal or some teachers who have been there for many years –it is practically ‘their’ school– have been used to working at a certain pace and believe that they have a right to a smooth or easy class. On the side of the administration, I know of a case now, in a primary school where there were many children in the first grade and it had to be divided into two sections. One section got 20 Greek and 2 Albanian kids, while the other 18 Albanians and 2 Greek ones ... The principal of the school, together with a senior teacher, had chosen to ‘pass the Albanians’ to a young colleague. The case became known when the parents of the two Greek kids who were in the class with a majority of Albanians complained, considering this a hindrance for their own children”. (Evangelia)*

Such practices are quite common among administrative and teaching staff. They tend to “move on” migrant children so as to reduce their job burdens. It seems easier to deal with local children given that they are spared the extra communication problems involved in contact with children and parents who do not speak Greek fluently. Communication problems are probably overemphasized, since, as it is often pointed out, relatives act as translators, facilitating communication with migrant mothers. Children, too, learn very quickly to speak Greek owing to their youth and resultant high learning capacity, further enhanced by their wish to become integrated into the class. Segregation practices may be an outcome of the reactions of local parents, attributable to their worries about the high number of migrant

children in some classes. Such worries may lead them to a decision to take their children away from the nurseries and kindergartens and place them in private institutions.

### ***Time constraints***

The greatest childcare problem for migrant working mothers, especially domestic helpers, when it comes to kindergartens, is the kindergartens' working hours. The problem is aggravated when the kindergarten is not in the neighbourhood where they live. Commuting may take a very long time for working mothers, particularly those who work in upper-class residential areas, at a distance from their homes. Children have to be taken from kindergartens by 3.30, 3.45 at the latest, reducing the mother's working day to 6 hours (ordinary kindergartens finish at 12.20, making the working day even shorter for mothers). A domestic helper describes the time pressures on her as follows:

*“If I have time to go and work and come back, of course I will go. I can start from here, from my house, let's say at 8:00 o'clock. I don't know how long it will take me to go... One hour? And I have to be back at latest at 3:20, because at 3:30 the kindergarten must close, because the teachers will be leaving [...]. I cannot work for more than 5 hours. If it is near here –let's say, near my house, so that I don't lose time on the road– I can go and work more. If it is near. If it is a long way I cannot work for more than 5 hours”. (Nora)*

Almost all teachers interviewed complained about delays in collecting children. Some stated that they had tried occasionally to take children home themselves. One teacher even wondered if she should take the stranded child to the police:

*“.. it has happened that I have had to wait until 4 o'clock for a child to be picked up, instead of 12:20 when we finish. I almost took the kid to the police because the mother had left a telephone number which was not valid. I searched around in the neighbourhood... The child was crying because she was in panic, much as I kept telling her that –OK– we were together. Hours passed. The child was hungry. Then, when the mother finally came to pick the child up, she said that there was some misunderstanding with her husband. This had happened before. .. I told her that next time ... I will not think about whether they have papers or not. I will take the kid to the police”. (Ketty)*

One teacher eventually took the child to the police and later regretted doing so as the police responded that the child had to be sent to a public institution for abandoned children! (reported, off the record, by Evangelia). In most cases mothers have realized the risks of lateness and have arranged other solutions such as to have the child picked up by another (female) family member (aunt, mother-in-law etc. or older sibling who attends a public elementary or high school operating on a timetable even shorter than the one for “ordinary” kindergartens!).

*“When Aristides was small, the kids of my brother used to pick him up (from school). On one occasion Aristides was on the morning (shift) and they were on the afternoon. They changed it...it was like this and they went first to pick him up and then they went to school. We arranged it like this. All the family has helped me”. (Rena)*

*“If I am late (to work), I call someone, my mother in law or my sister in law, and I tell them ‘go to pick up Panayotis’ (from the nursery) and they go”. (Natasa)*

Occasional problems occur in the case of sick children who have to stay at home. The formal regulations for nursery staff do not provide for delivery of medication to children, as it is outside the scope of their job description. Rigid application of the rule, even with an everyday anti-fever medication such as aspirin, may often be perceived as an offensive attitude by migrant working mothers, who have no other care alternatives and risk losing their wage if they take time off to look after a sick child. For nursery staff to provide medication for the children of local salaried women may, by contrast, be seen as something positive and professional.

### 3. FIGHTING FOR CHILDREN’S (AND THEIR OWN) SOCIAL INTEGRATION

Informal practices in the childcare and pre-school education process, including different types of explicit and implicit negotiation, extend beyond the relationship between migrant mothers and school staff. They involve interaction with local children and parents whose attitudes and behaviours contribute to shaping the conditions of migrant children’s in-school socialisation and integration. Education and learning may also be facilitated or hindered in accordance with the degree of strictness or leniency of individual observance of state rules and regulations. The classroom and school can be a

testing ground for increasing or lessening xenophobic and racist feelings and practices. Training courses on intercultural education methodology are reported to have brought important insights to teachers. They seem to be helpful for sensitising them in their dealings with migrant children, discouraging racist attitudes and providing teachers with the means for proper handling of children who reproduce parental prejudices against Albanians. Irrespective of teachers' training and sensitisation on racist attitudes, migrant children develop their own direct or indirect strategies for integration in class. In this process two characteristic behaviours can be identified: Children want to disencumber themselves of their Albanian (foreign) names and they want to participate on equal terms in national holidays and school events. It was frequently reported that the practice is current of children in nurseries and kindergartens insisting on being called by Greek names. Some, like Antonis in the following interview, may be quite persistent:

*“It has happened to me, on the first day in class, that I hold the list and to call him by a name, and then, when the turn comes for them to say their names, he says ‘Antonis’. I let this pass. But I keep it in mind and I ask his mother and she says ‘I know. He likes that name and at school he wants to be called that’. I told her I would prefer him to keep his own and all that. She says he doesn’t want to. He feels better like this. OK, since he feels better using that (name) and the other kids know him by it and he responds to it, I let it pass. Now I am not sure if I did the right thing. But I let it pass. The whole year went like that”. (Dimitra)*

Children understand that naming facilitates belonging and they certainly want to belong to their class on equal terms with local children. Discussions in focus groups have highlighted the extent to which some children want to get rid not only of their names but also of their national identity, refusing even to speak Albanian or talk about their past in their country of origin. An Albanian mother said:

*“ It is a problem I think about a lot. I teach the children at home to be honest. Not to hide. But let’s say they see the other kids who behave differently or who have problems and at some point they start hiding. I realized that my son did not want to speak Albanian in the street. ‘Mommy don’t speak to me’ he said to me and I was surprised. Although in the beginning my son used to talk about his experiences on his holidays in Albania, he stopped doing this. He realized, in other words, that it was an annoyance to him”. (Konstantina)*

Celebrations for national holidays<sup>13</sup> are further occasions for migrant children to show their commitment to integration or even adopt a new national identity. In accordance with the principles of intercultural education, at school events most teachers avoid assigning roles and tasks to migrant children that extol Greekness. They try to concentrate on questions of peace, on children's lives and in general on more universal topics rather than those involving nationalistic images.

In some cases this effort to respect different national identities may exclude some children from key class activities. It may be perceived as offensive opposition to children's strong disposition towards integration into Greek society at any cost. Both mothers and teachers in fact report that children want to participate in all school events religious or national on the same basis as local children.

*"I perform prayer in class. Let's start from this. For children from other countries I ask the parents and for the two years now that I have been working here and teaching foreign kids (because before that I did not have any in class,) they have said: 'yes, they will participate'. I have not seen anything different. Now, on national days I follow the program, as on religious days. It has not happened to me that children have not wanted to participate, make flags or do homework. On the contrary, they do everything eagerly. They even parade, they take part of their own accord.. Of course I will avoid giving them a part in the Christmas play. I will find something else, or we will improvise a play without such prominent religious elements, on national days too". (Dina)*

Migrant mothers are equally eager to integrate and in this process develop attitudes of mistrust and aggression towards nursery and kindergarten staff and above all local parents. They fear that their children are being treated badly or differently, which is indeed often the case. They expect better service from the kindergarten and tend to believe that some of the restrictions and limitations are being applied specifically to them. Living at the subtle and constantly shifting boundary between formal regulations, subjective interpretations by staff and migrant mothers' understanding of informal and formal rules, working mothers fight tooth and nail to optimise their children's chances in the Greek educational system.

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13. 25th March, commemorating the outbreak of the Greek uprising in 1821 against Ottoman rule, and 28th of October commemorating the country's refusal to surrender to Italian aggression during WWII.

*“... some Albanian mothers are very assertive. They seem aggressive and it may have to do with the feeling they have of inferior social status , a kind of restriction they experience. Of course, they support their children like lionesses when they feel that they are not being treated right”.  
(Evangelia)*

Migrant mothers’ high esteem for the preschool education system may protect teachers from strong contestation. The complaints are mostly about local parents who support the xenophobic and racist attitudes of their children and so determine the class environment. Incidents like the one described below are not unique. Local parents are blamed for transmitting to their children’s classmates more generalized feelings of hostility to Albanians.<sup>14</sup> A characteristic incident, as reported by a migrant mother at the focus group discussion, illustrates the situation:

*“My son, in the old house, had two friends about his age and they wanted, they told him, to learn Albanian. And they took a piece of paper and they did this and my son went to the house of one of them. ‘What is this’ says his father. ‘I don’t want to hear what you say’. My son comes back ‘Mama, what is wrong with Albania?’ I don’t know. I cried with my child”. (Linda)*

Analysis of research material indicates how important childcare is for domestic helpers. It is not only a prerequisite for their integration into the labour market but is also a way of facilitating both their children’s and their own integration in view of their decision to remain in Greece. With this in mind they actively seek to maximise chances for their children by providing education in the Greek language and socialisation with local children from an early age. In 2003 a decision by the Ministry of Education, which received a great deal of publicity and was widely debated, served to uphold these expectations. The decision concerned an Albanian school-boy (Odysseas Tsenai) who had got the best marks in his school and was therefore entitled to lead the school parade and raise the Greek flag on the national holiday of October 28. The question of whether his ethnicity should be an impediment

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14. A large-scale opinion survey in Athens and Thessaloniki, undertaken by a professional specialist on behalf of UNICEF in 2001, demonstrated that local parents (mothers more than fathers) are more xenophobic than their children (girls less than boys). More specifically 42% of parents believe that the presence of migrant children in schools is a negative development! (UNICEF, 2001).

to this triggered a variety of racist reactions, but these were thwarted by the government's firmly negative response. Secular principles had prevailed over religious ones and national prejudice. The incident marked a contribution to the empowerment of migrant women in their role as mothers and a sanction for related hopes of social integration (and mobility) of their children (and themselves) by means of the Greek education system.

*“If I was like Odysseas I would have raised it! (the greek flag) And as for me, if a day comes when my daughter...well, why shouldn't she raise it? You don't know what a pleasure it would be for me! Why shouldn't she raise it? I would be pleased! You don't know what a pleasure it would be for me! Why not? And would you like me to tell you something? I no longer want to go to Albania! I tell my husband this, to buy a house here”. (Suzanna)*

All this may help to explain the reluctance of some migrant women interviewed to acknowledge offensive behaviour by kindergarten staff or by other children's parents. But wherever they do register awareness of such behaviour, their response is to complain actively and seek restitution. Proper behaviour by kindergarten staff is appreciated. They are indeed expected to prevent aggression against their children on the basis of ethnic origin. The same dynamic attitude underlies migrant women's requests for full support from the kindergarten system. Extra teaching help is explicitly demanded in cases where children face language problems or other learning difficulties that local children might also face. But extra support would be refused if its provision were seen as discriminatory or exclusive to migrant children.

#### 4. CHANGING GENDER IN THE “MODERN” GREEK SOCIETY

Albanian women go out to work and bring home an income which, more often than not, is more regular than men's. This in itself is a new source of power within their households and a basis from which to negotiate individual identities and gender relations. Their husbands, on the other hand, find it difficult to adapt to the new conditions and to what they see as a loss of power in the family, especially during periods of unemployment or work much below their own level of skills (see, also, Vaiou, 2003).

As far as nurseries and kindergartens are concerned, interviews and focus groups have shown that they constitute places of continuous change in the position of migrant women both within the family and within the ethnic community and Greek society as a whole. Examining migrant children's



access to and integration into nurseries and kindergartens reveals some aspects of changing gender relations in the process of migrant women's own integration. Changes in gender relations occur in the context of changes in three different sets of relations affecting migrant mothers' working and daily lives: (a) relations to the Greek state and its formalities, (b) relations to the labour market and the social security system, and (c) relations to their female employers.

- a. Migrant mothers bear the burden of dealing with Greek bureaucracy (at national or municipal level) for the purpose of securing their children's access to preschool education. They become familiar with informal practices and with the flexibilities of regulations and rules that are required in order to survive in the host country. They are forced to develop the important skill of managing contact with the Greek state, which is also useful on other occasions and probably enhances their position in the ethnic community. This situation represents a clear shift from the arrangement they knew in Albania, where the interlocutor with the state was male. It also sets them apart from most local women, for whom negotiation over access to the preschool education system remains a very simple task.
- b. Migrant women who work as domestic helpers find themselves in a vicious circle: they need a formal job in order to gain access to public childcare, which, in turn, remains a prerequisite for "formalising" their job. Employment in an overwhelmingly informal sector of domestic work makes access to the formal labour market even more complicated. Migrant mothers' fight for integration into the labour market and enjoyment of proper social protection for themselves and for their dependents reinforces their economic role in the family.
- c. The process of continuous movement in and out of the labour market of migrant mothers brings women employers into the picture either as informal employers (refusing to pay their contributions to the social security and therefore hindering access to childcare) or as (again informal) allies in helping to deal with the rigidities of formal regulations and rules, as for instance around childcare arrangements. In both cases the relations between employer and worker constitute something *sui generis*, which is hard for the state and the traditional trade unions, with the bureaucratic approach that characterizes them, fully to understand. Turning unpaid domestic work to a "professional occupation" shapes the understanding of gender divisions of labour in their families for both (working) women –employers' and migrant working mothers'.

Changes in the above set of social relations seem to have positive effects on migrant women's position in their families and in gender hierarchies. In this context childcare, traditionally a female responsibility, becomes a tool for emancipation. Working migrant mothers are responsible for childcare arrangements outside the home and are thus responsible for the child's first step towards socialization and eventual integration into the Greek preschool system. By comparison with local women, who are also burdened with most of the childcare in accordance with the gendered division of labour in family, migrant women seem to experience fewer feelings of guilt for their recourse to external childcare. For them the choice between paid childcare and full-time jobs (often two full-time jobs) is not really a choice and is really not an expensive arrangement when compared to a grandmother's unpaid caring labour, which is still an option for some local women. For migrant women access to nurseries and kindergartens is both a *necessity* and a *way of improving* their position in family and their families' position in Greek society. For local women, it is a something *commonplace*, one among a number of possible caring arrangements facilitating their access to paid labour, with less bearing on wife-husband relationships.

In local families issues of integration and children's socialization remain a major objective of the preschool education system, as, in general, education still counts as an important factor in social mobility. However, in contrast to what happens in migrant families, education in the case of non-immigrants interacts with other important mobility factors in Greek society, including the professional occupation of the parents, family property etc. For migrant families successful integration into the education system opens one of the very few "unpredictable chances" for social mobility, given that chances for upward mobility through the labour market, especially of a type that would involve radical change in occupational position, are extremely limited.

Maximisation of opportunities offered through outstanding performance by migrant children (such as that of some of the first-comer Albanians) is dependent on active mobilisation of mothers who argue, often aggressively, against racist and xenophobic behaviours by local nursery and kindergarten staff and local parents at school. Nurseries and kindergartens become places of interaction in the process of building gender and ethnic identities. Through formal and informal relations between women, men, nationalities and work relations, social change is shaped and adopted by individuals and institutions. It remains to be seen whether gender or ethnic relations in Greek society are impervious to change, notwithstanding the establishment

of a number of institutions and practices designed to reconcile European principles of gender equality and multicultural diversity with traditional gender hierarchies and nationalist approaches in both the family and the state.

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