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# Women's Studies International Forum

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif)

## Migrating motherhood and gendering exile: Eastern European women narrate migrancy and homing

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### ARTICLE INFO

Available online 2 July 2015

#### Keywords:

Eastern European women migrants  
Greece  
Motherhood/Mothering  
Citizenship  
Emotion  
Belonging

### SYNOPSIS

This article draws on a larger oral history project with Albanian, Bulgarian, Romanian and Polish migrant women living Greece, exploring how migrancy, motherhood and mothering intersect with how a negotiation and translation of emotional, cultural, embodied agency is transformed in the meanings of citizenship on translocal and transnational levels. We unpack gendered representations of how striving to belong is transmitted in migrant mothering practices and how the latter intersect with wider issues of immigration policy and status in an era of crises in Greece. In mapping experiences of migrant mothering through participant narratives, we demonstrate the importance of understanding mothering and migrancy as parallel, complementary and complex performativities. As such they form iconographies of resilience, incorporation and individual agency as women cope with being both migrants and mothers, often without extensive networks of support, and within a context of a wider xenophobic and crisis-ridden Greece.

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### Introduction: gendering citizenship and narrating mothering in the post-socialist imagination

The ideological matrices that shaped contemporary history in the late Cold War and in the aftermath of the collapse of political systems of authoritarian rule, be that dictatorships in the Southern European region in the 70s and the disintegration of state socialism in the Eastern European region more than a decade later in 1989 and 1991, continue to fascinate scholars from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds and research agendas.

A broad spectrum of experts have produced a variety of work on the post-Soviet transition of the 1990s, be that from a sociological, anthropological, economic or international relations approach, among others, reflective of the phenomenon itself. From its conception as a utopia, to its superpower escalation and culminating with its eventual demise, the post-socialist imagination is both a fascinating and a contested one. Above all it is a story of ordinary people in mundane

circumstances who led lives that remain extraordinary, as we still encounter silences, gaps and voids in the rendering of such histories. And, precisely, it is "his/stories" that we often come across as women's livelihoods and agencies are not always made readily available, yet they are stories of strength, resilience, endurance and empowerment.

We have chosen to give voice to immigrant women from Eastern European countries and develop core theorizations of *gender*, *citizenship* and *social justice* in unpacking the past into the present through narrative stories. Through a capacious tapestry of captivating narratives by women in their forties and fifties having spent their childhoods and in many cases a major part of their adult lives in Albania, Bulgaria, Romania and Poland, this article focuses on how motherhood and mothering in the host country (Greece) are being negotiated and experienced and how they intersect with issues of citizenship and belonging. The socio-cultural context in which this study falls is within the Greek nationalist ideology of an ethnic and genealogical perception of citizenship as a dominating force

and the integration of immigrants which has so far been a rather problematic process (cf. Christou, 2006; Michail & Bantekas, 2015).

More specifically, our ethnographic and biographical research examines how post-socialist afterlives unfold in transition, on the local, national and transnational levels, as women become new socio-cultural actors through their memories, perceptions, interactions and experiences of both their Eastern European socialist pasts and their Southern European present lives in Greece, as shaped by past and current crises and struggles, both economic and political. Such a focus aims to disentangle these complex constellations of social/cultural and personal histories that we see as shedding light onto the politics of memory, identity politics and the Left as well as broader regional histories of connectivity and transnationality. The two core research questions that we aim to address are as follows: How do migrant mothers experience their respective roles in contemporary Greece? How is migrant mothering/motherhood as a social practice negotiated as regards citizenship and belonging/homing?

Given the continuous complexity that the dichotomy of private and public invokes, in this article we seek to understand how those two spaces intertwine in the lives of migrant mothers and to untangle where and how migration intersects with mothering/motherhood. As this was an exploratory component of our larger study and not one of the core aims and objectives, our discussion here is a preliminary one and thus the storytelling of our participants provides some insights into their lives in a specific context in Greece, within their post-socialist trajectories. As a result, we wish to understand if our participants are pre-occupied with notions of citizenship and social justice, and, how these relate to their livelihoods. In a sense we wish to make a conceptual link between migrant mothering and citizenship as pushing the boundaries beyond viewing mothers as biological producers of the nation (cf. Yuval-Davis, 1997) and seeing them as co-producers of inclusive socialization of the second generation as agents of intercultural citizenship.

In the 100th anniversary issue of the journal *Feminist Review*, in his tribute to Avtar Brah, the late and seminal scholar, social and cultural critic, Stuart Hall, in one of his last publications, reminds us that “identities are summoned up, mobilised, transformed and interrogated” in the process of post-war global migration (2012: 29). At the core of the framing in this article on Eastern European women as mobile mothering subjects, in concurrence with Hall, “emerged the idea of a gendered ‘subject’, which was simultaneously social and psychic, interpretive and engaged” (2012:31). Hence, it is the “emotional geographies and cultural translations” (Christou, 2013: 304) of experiences of migrant mothering that we wish to bring to the forefront and the invisible nodes of negotiations that both roles involve in everyday life.

In the sections that follow we respond to the two core questions above, grounding our discussion and findings in the women's narratives, while first outlining methodological and data collection details, participant portrayal demographics, a theoretical framing of our central conceptualization (mothering–migration–citizenship) and a focused overview of the relevant literature that informs our analysis.

## Situating actors and approaches

Our sample consists of twenty-two women (nine Albanian, six Romanian, four Bulgarian and three Polish), in analogy to their actual national presence as immigrants in Greece. Their ages range from forty to fifty-five years, they have lived in Greece for over ten years and speak Greek fluently. Among the women, eleven live in Athens, four in Thessaloniki and the remaining seven in various cities in Central and Northern Greece, such as, Volos, Larissa, Katerini, Edessa, Aliveri and Kastoria. All the Romanian participants are married to Greeks (one to an ethnic Greek from Romania), three among the Bulgarians are married to Greeks, one to a Bulgarian, while the Polish are all married to Greeks and except two, all the Albanians are married to Albanians.

The participants were approached either through our acquaintances or through their immigrant societies in Greece. They were contacted by the second author of this paper (from now on “interviewer”) by phone, were given information on the nature and content of the research and if they accepted to participate, the interviewer arranged an appointment for an interview at a place and time convenient to the participant. Nine among them were met in their homes, four at their work, three at public places and the rest on skype. From September 2012 to May 2013, the interviewer travelled to Athens, Thessaloniki, Aliveri, Kastoria and Edessa to meet those sixteen participants who chose to participate in person. The remainder preferred to give the interview through skype during the same period. None of the participants' partners/husbands were present at the time of the interview.

Coming from different Eastern European countries, our participants presented different trajectories and life stories as well as different mothering experiences. Immigration patterns have been different for each group of our participants depending on the culture of the country of origin and the political and personal reasons that led them to emigration.

Most of our Albanian participants followed their husbands and did not emigrate on their own. Albanian emigration to Greece in the early 90s has been predominantly male-led, with males departing first and women following later. As soon as men managed to settle down and save some money, they returned to Albania to either get married or bring their spouses and children to Greece where they hoped to start a new life. Thus, in the course of time, Albanian immigration developed into permanent family settlement (Michail, 2009). Patrilineality, male moral authority and the formal subordination of women within the household have been the cornerstones of this pattern.

This has been the pattern for seven among our nine Albanian participants, while two followed a different route. One left her village in Northern Albania with a Greek man she hardly knew, without her family's approval, trying to build a life from the beginning away from the traditional roles that a young Albanian girl should comply to. The other one came to Greece temporarily waiting for a family friend from Germany to come and take her to Germany. The friend never came and meanwhile she started working, taking care of an elderly woman. Later she got married to the grandson of this woman and stayed permanently in Greece. She followed postgraduate studies, built a successful career in Greece and in essence she is the only one that at the time of the interview was not working in the domestic service

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