

Isolated in another's home:

The effects of the Covid-19 lockdown measures on domestic workers in Greece

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Domestic work in Greek society

It is an unacknowledged fact that Greek society relies heavily on the work of migrant women in order to operate on a daily basis. Since the 1990s, migrant women from Eastern Europe, Africa and the Philippines have performed the essential work of caring for children, the sick, the elderly and the households of Greek families across the spectrum of society. To supply the high demand for domestic labour services, female workers are directed to Greece through a web of employment agencies (both domestic and foreign), smuggling and trafficking networks and word of mouth among communities in need of work. While there is insufficient data on the exact number of women working as domestic workers, it “is estimated that one [in] two migrant women in Greece works in the provision of care and household services”, one of the highest rates among European countries.¹

What is definitely clear is that the labour conditions for domestic workers in Greece are highly exploitative and, in many cases, abusive. The system of migration management adopted by the Greek state has consistently set unsurpassable legislative barriers and bureaucratic obstacles to migrants' attempts to obtain legal status in the country.² Add to this the deliberately vague labour law regarding domestic work which clearly favours the interests of employers over employees and it is no surprise that most domestic workers remain undocumented and, therefore, at the mercy of their employers' quest for cost-efficient services.³ This situation, of course, has been made worse by almost ten years of economic crisis in the country.

“She stood over me and made me iron the same shirt twenty times. At the end I told her I couldn't do it anymore, that I would leave. Even an animal wouldn't be treated as badly as I was.”

¹ Danai Angeli, “Migrant Domestic Workers and Human Trafficking in Greece: Expanding the Narrative,” *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 15, no. 2(2017): 188.

² For a review of the Greek state's reluctance to legalise migrants, see Vassilis Papastergiou and Eleni Takou, *Eleven Myths and Even More Truths: Migration in Greece*, 1st ed. (Athens: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2014), 6.

³ Angeli, “Migrant Domestic Workers.”

—Anna, a live-in domestic worker from Georgia⁴

The testimonies of both live-in and live-out domestic workers regarding their experiences in Greece paint a bleak picture.⁵ The absence of any legal status means that domestic workers are vulnerable workers – unable to claim even basic human or labour rights. This is particularly true in the case of live-in domestic workers, who are dependent on their employers not only for their wage in order to support families back home and also pay off large debts to employment agencies, loan sharks or smuggler networks, but also for their accommodation and day-to-day survival. Under the constant threat of arrest or deportation and isolated from the rest of society, they become dependent and trapped in whatever terms of employment their employers see fit. This may mean having to juggle an insurmountable number of tasks, from caring for young and elderly family members and looking after family pets, to cooking, serving, cleaning, ironing and completing household chores in more than one of the family’s properties. Live-in domestic workers are often expected to work all hours of the day, have no time for rest, very few days off, and little to no privacy or personal space in the employers’ home. They are required to be constantly available without taking up space and their presence must not be felt. In many cases, women working under these conditions also face psychological abuse and even sexual harassment by their employers, who demand servitude and subordination at any cost. And all this in exchange for very low wages, without health insurance or basic work benefits such as pensions or sick pay. It is therefore unsurprising that many domestic workers liken their work conditions to a slave-like experience.

On the other hand, those who work as live-out domestic workers must balance surviving financially (paying rent and bills, caring for children or sending money home) with extremely low wages, the lack of social security benefits and precarious work involving multiple shifts for different employers in often opposite sides of the city. In addition, they must manage the

⁴“Live-in” domestic workers are required to live and work in their employer’s home as full-time maids, nannies, housekeepers and/or carers while “live-out” domestic workers maintain their own home while offering their services in one or more of the aforementioned roles to one or several employers.

⁵For an in-depth account of the experience of Ukrainian domestic workers, see Nikos Xypolytas, *Εσωτερική οικιακή εργασία: Η συμβολή της οικογένειας και των σχέσεων αλληλεγγύης στην αναπαραγωγή της εργασίας* [Live-in domestic work: the contribution of family and solidarity relations in the reproduction of labour] (Athens: Papazisis, 2013).

stress of being undocumented and living with the risk of penalties, harassment and imprisonment from the police and state officials.

Surviving lockdown

The sudden lockdown measures adopted by governments across the globe in response to the threat of the Covid-19 virus have imposed a new state of affairs within the societies affected. The Greek government's call for "self-isolation", followed by lockdown measures restricting the movement of people outside their homes, has undoubtedly put a strain on the population's most vulnerable – those without homes of their own and those without legal status. Domestic workers in Greece fall into both categories.

“The employers told me that I should not come back; they are worried about the virus and they say they don't need me. I don't know how I will survive or what will happen.”

—Ulyana, a domestic worker from Ukraine

As society has come to a standstill, many migrant women working mainly as live-out domestic workers have reported that they have lost their jobs, as employers are either afraid to have extra people in their homes for fear of infection, or are looking to cut costs in the face of a possible reduction of their own income during the Covid-19 crisis.⁶ In the case of live-in workers, the risk of losing their jobs is made worse by the fact that they will also be made homeless.

Since the majority of domestic workers lack any kind of legal status, they are not eligible for any of the emergency state support or unemployment benefits allocated by the government to ease the financial effects of the Covid-19 crisis. For some women, some sort of support may be found within their own migrant community through a network of friendship ties, temporary boarding houses and informal community and church structures. However, considering the undocumented status of most members of these communities and the limited amount of resources to which they have access, poverty and destitution are a serious threat for most of the domestic workers who have been made redundant.

At the same time, the increase in police checks and controls in public spaces adds an even greater barrier to the daily survival of all undocumented migrants. The real possibility of

⁶Natasha Blatsiou, “Οικιακές Βοηθοίμεμηδενικόεισόδημα και ανασφάλιστες” [Domestic workers with zero income and uninsured], *Kathimerini*, 3 April 2020.

arrest, detention or deportation makes the management of everyday tasks such as travelling to work (for those still employed), getting basic food and medical supplies or transferring money to loved ones extremely difficult. The increase in stress and the psychological effect of living in a state of lockdown is much worse for those living without legal status.

“I cannot leave the [employer’s] house, I’m not allowed. I’m afraid that I will catch the virus and fall ill or that I will make the elderly man ill.”

—Rusudan, live-in domestic worker from Georgia

For those still employed on a live-in basis, the lockdown has worsened the experience of extreme isolation and the condition of total dependency on their employer. Many domestic workers are currently trapped in “self-isolation” with their employers, cut off from their support and friendship networks which they were able to access on their few days off every month. Many women working as live-in maids describe their days off as a lifeline to the outside world: as a motive to get through the week, counting down the days to see friends, attend church, socialise with compatriots. It is also the day to fulfil important tasks such as transferring money back home. The fact that these few lifelines have suddenly been cut may have a very negative effect on the mental health of women working as live-ins, not to mention on their ability to escape psychological abuse or sexual harassment by their employers.

Finally, being undocumented means that domestic workers have little to no access to public healthcare, making it almost impossible to get treatment if they do fall ill. Undocumented migrants already suffer from poor health due to their lack of access to public healthcare and the exploitation at the hands of both the private and public medical sector. They often face huge medical bills since they do not have health insurance to cover medical costs. There are also numerous accounts of incidents of medical violence against migrants,⁷ who have experienced racist and sexist abuse as well as neglectful or unethical practices by doctors and medical staff.⁸ These factors make the possibility of any serious illness an even greater threat for undocumented people across Greece.

⁷Alexandra Tzavella, “Κηλίδες ρατσισμού πάνωστηνάσπρη μπλούζα” [Stains of racism on the white blouse], *Eleftherotypia*, 24 May 2013.

⁸Omaira Gill, “Greek hospitals deepen trauma for refugee women giving birth,” *theguardian.com*, 19 December 2016.

After Covid-19

The overall effects of the lockdown measures on society cannot yet be fully appreciated or assessed. What is certain, however, is that the current health crisis will be followed by a series of financial crises, which will, no doubt, also affect the Greek economy. Since the 2010 global financial crisis, the negative impact on wages, pensions, access to healthcare and social security systems severely has affected the overall living and working conditions of a large part of the population. For those already living precarious, invisible lives without documents, the possibility of another economic crisis poses a real threat to their capacity to survive. The reduction in wages and the increase in unemployment will also make the path to gaining legal status even harder. This means that the exploitation of undocumented domestic workers within Greek society will undoubtedly worsen if the existing climate of economic unrest is to continue in the months or years ahead.