Gender, migration and socio-spatial transformations in Southern European cities

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Introduction

In the context of processes implied in the term “globalization”, Southern European countries, formerly “sending” economic migrants to the European and global North, have become “receiving” of ever more diverse flows: temporary and transnational migrants, “sans papiers”, refugees, human trafficking circuits, as well as movements of elite groups. Women’s migration forms an important part in these flows, leading to modified approaches of migrant movement/settlement as well as representations of “the migrant”. These processes deeply affect the ways in which local development may be examined and evaluated in Southern European cities, where migrants are primarily directed.

Local development as it is approached in this chapter does not refer to industrial districts, innovative success stories and dynamic enterprise clusters, as is the case in the vast literature accumulated since the 1970s (for a review see Hadjimichalis 2006a; also Becattini et al. 2003). The term is rather used as a reference to the ways in which migrant women and men, as active agents, develop practices of survival and integration within and beyond the economy, combining in different ways global/local constraints and opportunities. The vital contribution of migrants to the productive structures of Southern European cities and regions is not discussed here but it is taken as an indispensable backdrop (for an elaboration see Hadjimichalis 2006b).

I first discuss some features of an emerging “Mediterranean model” of migration which accounts for much of the economic success in Southern Europe since the 1990s; then these features are further elaborated in relation to local development through examples drawn from research in Athens (Vaiou et al. 2007) and references to Barcelona and Naples; in a third step, the gendering of migrant settlement experiences is examined in relation to socio-spatial transformations. Athens is used as “canvas” to discuss patterns of migrant settlement and dynamics of local development. This tactic does not lead to a comparative study nor does it intend to underestimate differences among cities and homogenize diverse experiences of migration. It is rather an attempt to go beyond widespread arguments about “deviance” from mainstream patterns and “idiosyncratic” characteristics and critically examine the ways in which alternative understandings may be developed about recent development patterns in Southern European cities.
A Mediterranean model?

The changing nature of global migrant movements after 1989 alongside specific local development patterns in Southern European countries has led many researchers to talk of a “Southern European” or “Mediterranean” model of migration (among many see King 2000, Macioti and Pugliese 1991, Bettio et al. 2006, Tastsoglou and Hadjiconstanti 2003). Differences among countries and particular localities are significant, while the complex geographies of movement/settlement cannot be understood in a simple North–South scheme, especially in view of the recent transit flows. However, common features can be identified, three of which are discussed here: the informal, cities as migrants’ destinations and the growing demand for female labor.

The attractions of the informal

Informal activities and practices are an important historical feature of Southern European economies and societies and form part of dynamic and innovative processes of local development (for a detailed discussion of the multiple meanings and uses of the term “informal”, see Vaiou and Hadjimichalis 1997/2003). Through such practices large social groups have found ways of integration not only in the labor market, but also in broad areas of social and economic life, including access to housing and property, ways of avoiding taxation and circumventing bureaucratic procedures, and securing caring services for children, the sick, the old and the disabled. In short, the informal has been central in the development of a know–how of survival which legitimated, among other things, the limited and sometimes controversial involvement of the state, the latter going hand in hand with limited expectations from, or in some cases mistrust towards, the state. Therefore, informal practices enjoy widespread social acceptance and they have to be seen as a “cause” or a parameter of attraction, rather than as an effect of the new migratory flows (see among many Reyneri 1998).

Migrants are attracted to Southern European countries, on the assumption that it is easy to make a living, or even make money, even without a residence/work permit. Finding an informal job comes out prominently in many migrants’ own accounts about the reasons for choosing particular countries and places. Opportunities and earnings vary among countries and localities but there are widespread expectations that, sooner or later, they can somehow regularize their status (see, for example, Pugliese (2002) for Italy, Martinez Veiga (1998) for Spain, Bagavos and Papadopoulou (2006) for Greece) – an expectation which has so far been verified, at least in part, through a series of “legalization processes” which aim to regulate migrants’ status and, mainly, to restrict new entries.

The main requisite in order to acquire a residence/work permit is a legal employment contract and proof of having paid social security contributions for a specified period of time (Solé et al. 1998, Pavlou and Christopoulos 2004), a result of which is the fragilization of the legal status of migrants who often oscillate between legality and illegality. They seem to be caught in a vicious cycle between a growing demand for (informal) low-paid, flexible labor and the reproduction of that demand also through the migrants’ acceptance of informal jobs – for lack of alternatives outside the informal. Despite differences among migrant groups, to do with particular migration strategies and individual or family projects, women migrants seem to be more vulnerable than men in this vicious cycle.

Migrant settlement in Southern European cities

An important aspect of recent migrations to Southern Europe – and one that remains less
discussed – is the settlement of migrants in central areas of cities. In the 1990s, metropolitan areas, like Milan, Rome, Naples, Barcelona, Madrid, Lisbon, Athens, and many smaller cities have begun to host a multi-ethnic/multi-cultural urban population of various origins, with profound effects on urban dynamics. The literature on these effects emphasizes mainly segregation and/or spatial marginalization of migrants, especially when it refers to the beginning of the 1990s (see, for example, Malheiro 2000, Iosifidis and King 1998). In many cases arguments are drawn from Northern European cities, for which there is much more evidence, both for earlier and for more recent migrations. Southern patterns, however, do not seem to verify a simple geography of urban center-periphery division, based as they are on different histories of urban development and modes of urban governance particular to specific cities and their respective countries.

After the Second World War, many Southern European cities have followed processes of “additive growth”, with a considerably reduced influence of central plans and provisions (Leontidou 1990). Such processes have contributed to the growth of neighborhoods with poor social and technical infrastructures; at the same time they account for a certain homogeneity of urban space with limited divisions and tensions. It is in such areas that post-1989 migrants seek to settle. Formerly unused spaces in apartment blocks and other buildings become re-integrated in urban life and new activities diversify urban realities. Migrants do not settle in some remote periphery, but rather in centrally located socially mixed neighborhoods, with diverse typologies of housing stock and many opportunities to find a job in an extensive and varied formal and informal labor market, as well as better possibilities to escape controls. A relatively fast improvement in housing conditions becomes a prime parameter for social integration, supporting ideas that integration in the city takes place before integration in the host society (Germain 2000); hence a renewed interest in the much contested notion of “neighborhood”, which is also reflected in EU policies of the early 1990s (examples here include projects like the Quartiers en crise or Développement social urbain).

A growing demand for “female labor”

Feminization of migration has been singled out as one of the major general trends in recent migrations (Castles and Miller (1993) among the first), referring to women moving independently from men and/or families, albeit in widely different proportions among different ethnic groups. Since the early 1980s, in Southern Europe this presence is related to demographic and economic changes which have led to a growing demand for female labor, particularly in cities, for a restricted range of “women’s jobs”, most prominently domestic helpers, carers and “entertainers”. Low birth rates and high life expectancy gradually led to an aging population in need of caring, at a time when local women have been entering paid work at an ever increasing pace (Bettio and Plantenga 2004), thus contributing to a general rise of the standards of living. In this context, caring and domestic labor cannot be accommodated in the context of families, in line with the familial model of welfare, prominent in Greece, Spain and Italy, and to a lesser degree Portugal. The state is a “carer of the last resort”, as Bettio et al. (2006: 272) call it, in a system based mainly on monetary transfers (pensions, subsidies, etc.).

The caring gap which develops in the last decades is partially covered by migrant women from Eastern Europe and the Balkans in Greece, from Latin America in Spain, from Africa in Italy, from former colonies in Portugal. It is to these areas of work that a lot of recent research has been devoted (among many, Andall 2000, Campani 2000, Papataxiarchis et al. 2008, Parella Rubio...
2003, Ribas 1999), combining a variety of sources and methods and highlighting a variety of aspects and perspectives. Migrant women’s labor covers caring needs, at prices which make it accessible even to lower income households, securing at the same time a rather stable income for themselves and their own families. By the same token it contributes to a new gendered model of caring, which remains in the context of families and among women and leaves men mostly uninvolved.

The features of the “Mediterranean model” briefly sketched above account for migrants’ practices which form part of local development in the places where they settle for longer or shorter periods of time, i.e., in multi-functional and socially mixed central neighborhoods of Southern European cities. Informal practices and employment patterns, small family businesses, modes of access to housing, networks of mutual support and exchange of caring services all point to patterns which are historically embedded in these places and highly gendered. However, they acquire new dynamics and modalities as they mix with migrants’ different habits, cultures, ways of doing and being in the city – which are further examined in the next section.

**Athens and other Southern European cities**

As already mentioned, cities in Southern Europe receive the bulk of recent migrants, thus becoming a prime site of major transformations. In 2001 and according to the population census, migrants were 7.5 percent of the population resident in Greece (or 797,000 people) and 11 percent of the population of Greater Athens (or 321,000 people), although many researchers consider these figures an underestimate. Almost half of the migrants residing in Greater Athens live in the central municipality of Athens and not in some remote periphery (Figure 39.1).

A closer look at migrant settlement within the municipality of Athens reveals interesting patterns to do with the forms of concentration (Figure 39.2). An extensive nucleus is immediately identifiable in an area which includes the “heart of the city” and a range of neighborhoods at its immediate vicinity. The latter are part of the intensive urban growth of the 1960s and 1970s and retain a strong presence of local households. Some 215 ethnicities have been identified in the resident migrant population, with Albanians being the vast majority (51.1 percent), followed at a distance by Poles and Bulgarians (5.0 percent and 3.8 percent respectively), with quite different migration patterns and gender composition.

A similar pattern has been identified in Barcelona where most of the recent migrants have settled in the city itself and in the poorer parts of the Old City (Ciutat Vella) from where locals and internal migrants of the previous decades had partially left (Fullaondo and Elordui 2003; for mappings at various scales see Martori et al. 2005, Elordui and Cladera 2006). In Naples, migrants who are in “transit” and intend to move soon to the Centre or North of Italy tend to settle in housing complexes in the periphery, already abandoned by locals and run down. When their plan is to stay more permanently, however, they seek low-cost housing in very central neighborhoods (Schmoll 2008).

In these central, densely populated and socially mixed areas support networks and integration mechanisms from below are in operation, along with (and sometimes against) policies from above. Migrants’ activities and everyday practices contribute to new dynamics and to the constitution of places-within-places, in the cities of destination where women’s involvement is determinant. This last remark aims to underline the particular ways in which women and men interpret, live and attribute meanings to the spaces of the everyday, the neighborhoods of their new settlement. Three interrelated aspects of their contribution to local development are
discussed here: revitalization of the housing market, intensification of local commercial activity and the intensive (re)use of public spaces.

**Revitalization of the housing market**

The influx of migrants to the city center creates a considerable demand for housing, particularly after a first period of temporary arrangements, in the case of Athens in cheap hotels, overcrowded and rundown flats and even public squares. The municipality of Athens, like most historic centers of Greek cities, includes a rich typology of urban neighborhoods, resulting from a complex set of micro-local histories. After 1980, young households with better incomes started moving towards suburban areas, in search of better living environments. This movement, however, never reached the dimensions of an “exodus” (Emmanuel 2002). It rather led to successive reorderings of the built stock in many central neighborhoods, such as manufacturing micro-firms in basements and lower floors of apartment buildings or, later, empty flats. Such restructurings kept prices low and attracted students, lower income households and, after 1990, migrants.

Migrants live in basements and lower floors of the same apartment buildings in which students and professional premises (lawyers, doctors, engineers, etc.) occupy the middle ones, while higher income, mainly elderly households remain in the upper floors – a pattern which contradicts theoretical arguments of gentrification based on rent gaps (e.g. Smith 1996). Migrants have upgraded through personal labor many old flats and paid higher rents than were proper for what they rented, usually in older apartment blocks. Initially, newcomers usually...
cohabited with friends or relatives and/or sought smaller and cheaper flats and, most importantly, owners who would accept them. As their job situation and incomes became more stable, they looked for better housing conditions, usually in the same neighborhood, where networks and ties were already being established (Vaiou et al. 2007).

The case of Neapolitan “bassi” is indicative of how migrants have contributed to put back into the property market stock which was unused or poorly used and partially devalued. The difficult living conditions in these flats are compensated by the centrality of their location and the opportunities to earn a living that the city center offers (Peraldi 2001). They are also compensated by the possibilities for contacts and networking in the context of everyday activities (Coppola 1999). In a similar vein, in the neighborhood of Raval in the Old City of Barcelona property prices had gone down due to the rundown condition of old stock – which attracted incoming migrants, mainly single men. The latter formed a first link in migrant networks, attracting more migrants who looked for housing near their compatriots. This process led to rent increases and to the re-insertion in the market of premises that were in poor condition (Garcia Armand 2005).

After more than two decades since the end of the 1980s, there is an observable tendency for migrants to buy flats in older apartment buildings, where prices per square meter are
lower. Albanian households in Athens are the main protagonists in this process, since they tend to pursue longer term migration projects, and women among them are key actors. In a situation of limited household resources, women’s work, predominantly as domestic helpers and carers, yields a much more stable income (and possibilities to save) than men’s seasonal or occasional work mainly in construction; on the other hand, and in this context, women have a decisive say in matters of housing (location, size, internal arrangement, etc.), not only “here” (in the place of destination), but also “there” (in the place of origin), where they also invest in housing purchase and/or improvement. In interviews with Albanian and Bulgarian women this continuous concern with securing better housing conditions “back home” comes out vividly; it clearly determines practices of income spending in both places and affects housing markets in several cities and towns of the Balkans and former USSR where most migrant women in Athens come from. Remittances not only cover immediate survival needs “there”, but also trigger developments in the housing market and the growth of construction activity, with significant multiplier effects.

**Intensification of commercial activity**

As migrants settle more permanently, they begin to contribute to local economies through their activities and their incomes mostly spent locally, with immediate effects on local shops and services. It has been estimated that migrants accounted for 1.1 percent out of the 4.5 percent GDP growth in the 1990s (Labrianidis and Lyberaki 2001). Extensive fieldwork in neighborhoods of Athens, including detailed land use mapping, revealed a considerable number of shops addressed to migrants, as well as shops owned or run by them (Vaiou et al. 2007). In one such neighborhood, Kypseli, with more than 25 percent migrant population, 53 such shops were identified in an area of about 700 by 700 meters. These shops not only serve the different ethnic groups living in the area, but also a broader community of customers from the immediate vicinity and sometimes from other parts of the city.

Mini-markets, bakeries, money transfer offices, call centers, hairdressing salons, bars, video clubs, internet cafes, fast-food stands, (ethnic) restaurants – all seem to fill a gap in the market, exceeding the local areas and the specific ethnic communities. These shops attract customers through specialized offers, long opening hours, higher quality service and affordable prices. They also play a stabilizing role in the neighborhood: they make the migrants’ presence more visible, promote different selling/buying habits and usually function as points of reference for various groups of migrants and as contact places between migrants and locals. At the same time they are important employment and income generators. In this process migrant women are again key actors, both as consumers and as workers, in “family businesses” or in shops of their own.

The majority of migrant women living in Kypseli are employed: more than 70 percent of women from the Balkans (but 49 percent of women from Albania who usually come with their families), 50–70 percent of women from Africa and Poland (but less than 30 percent of women from Arab countries). Their paid work may take them to any part of the metropolitan area, but their daily activities as “homemakers” evolve mostly in the neighborhood: in local shops, in the weekly open markets, in municipal health consultancies, schools and other services. They not only buy for day-to-day needs “here”, but also invest in consumer goods and appliances for homes “back home”; for the latter case neighborhood shops are preferred, even though they may be somewhat more expensive, because items can be paid off through monthly installments, which are made possible through personal contacts with local...
shop-owners. And it is women rather than men who determine such decisions to spend family or personal income, based on short- and longer term projects.

Similar processes of migrant women’s involvement as consumers and as workers in local commercial activities and services are identified for the Old City of Barcelona (Aramburu 2002). Women may be earning their income all around the city, as domestic helpers, carers of elderly people, employees in shops and services, but they spend locally, in the immediate vicinity of their home (Garcia Armand 2005). In their role as “homemakers” they not only contribute to an intense local commercial activity, but also to a slow but visible change of attitudes. Examples like these help explore the “hidden” aspects of place-making which relate to household processes and extend over space at various scales.

**Intensive use of public spaces**

The numerous presence of migrants in public spaces of Southern European cities has been an important part of urban transformations since the early 1980s (for Italy) and 1990s (for Greece and Spain). At times, public squares and parks are used as temporary sleeping places for newcomers, usually men; but most intensely they are used as meeting and recreation spaces for various ethnic groups who thus make their presence visible to other migrants as well as to locals. Piazza Municipio or Galleria Umberto in Naples are associated with the presence of Somalis and Eritreans respectively, while the area of the Central Station, characterized by a continuous presence of migrants from Senegal and the Maghreb, is thought by many to be an “arabized” locality (Cattedra and Laino 1994). Plaza dels Àngels or Plaza dels Caramelles in the Raval are intensely frequented by women migrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh, the Philippines or Latin America who oversee their children playing in a public space full of tourists (who visit the adjacent Museum of Modern Art or the Centro de Cultura Contemporana de Barcelona) and students from the nearby Department of Geography and History of the University of Barcelona (“Un barrio con futuro”, special issue of the local newspaper El Raval, November 7, 2007).

In Athens particular micro-spaces are appropriated, regularly or occasionally, by different ethnic groups in all the central public squares, parks and gardens. In the neighborhood of Kypseli two different public spaces illustrate emerging development patterns: the main square and the municipal market (the agora). The agora, a covered market which for many years was a landmark for the area, was occupied in December 2006 by local left-wing activists to prevent its demolition by the Municipality and to stop a plan to build an office block and a large underground garage. The act initiated a broader mobilization in the neighborhood (and beyond) demanding public spaces and defending a site of collective memory. It now works as a self-managed social center and hosts various cultural, political and artistic projects and events of local and city-wide reach (Figure 39.3). Migrants from the area are active in the center, which has become a meeting point with locals, while the evening school offering free courses of Greek language by volunteer teachers contributes to build contacts among people of various ethnic backgrounds.

The main square of Kypseli, one of the very few public open spaces in the neighborhood, is bustling again with activity since the early 1990s. Migrant children from a variety of countries and places communicate in a whole host of languages and body movements, while their mothers learn to accept different playing habits, “other” attitudes towards children, “strange” ways of sitting and socializing. Repopulation of the square by migrant women and children has brought back also local, mainly elderly women, hesitant in the beginning but later eager to reuse.
an emblematic place in their neighborhood (Figure 39.4). In their narratives, the square of their memories comes out as a different place where a complex mix of languages, music rhythms, smells and bodily appearances are encountered, gradually tolerated and often positively appreciated. Bodily presence and common daily practices contribute to contact and familiarization with “others” – which in turn mobilizes (informal) processes of networking, mutual support and, perhaps eventually, integration. Here the practices of women and men are distinctively different and imply a multiplicity of relations initiated and organized around shared experiences and practices of caring.

Gendering migrant settlement

The numerous presence of women in recent migration flows is by now well documented, both in terms of general numbers and in terms of autonomous presence within these flows, thereby challenging representations of “the migrant” as a man, young, economically active, moving alone. Approaches which integrate women’s experiences and gender perspectives question the ways in which migration as a global set of processes can be understood. Such approaches also question in different ways established understandings of local development and point to some “hidden” aspects of local/global links which require a multi-scalar perspective. Decisions to migrate are part of complex migration projects which involve people and households/families in different countries and important negotiations of gender power, which are linked to the changing spatialities of migrant households.

Between global restructurings, countries and individuals, families are constituted as dispersed in different places, support networks are formed in neighborhoods, integration mechanisms are devised, linked to (micro)
spatial scales and collective action. In these processes, migrant women's involvement emerges as quite distinct from that of men. The absences and presences of migrant men point to lives more focused around paid work and disconnected from the caring aspects of everyday life. Women's invisible and undervalued everyday activities on the other hand contribute to constitute “familiar places” within Southern European cities and play an important role in transformations and developments both “here” and “there”. Their everyday and longer term practices related to paid work, housing, household provisioning, populating public spaces and services and networking account to a large extent for the revitalization of urban neighborhoods which were on the verge of being devalued.

The organization of care, characteristic of the Mediterranean model, reveals important sites where masculinities and feminities are negotiated personally and socially, among migrants, between migrants and locals, and among locals. The minutiae of everyday life, and the different involvement of women and men, permit a clearer view of the gendered aspects of migrant settlement, in which power is enacted but also resisted. Attention to these gendered aspects reveals different dynamics of local development and of the changing spatialities of everyday life across places and borders, which constitute slow but deep challenges for local development. To what extent such patterns may survive the deepening economic crisis is an open question for Southern European cities and societies.

References


Further reading


Dyck, I. and McLaren, A. (2004) “Telling it like it is... Gender, place and multiculturalism in migrant women’s settlement narratives”, Gender, Place and Culture, 11:4, 513–534. (A reflection on methodological issues and knowledge production related to gender and migration.)


