8. Highly educated and/or skilled migrants from third countries and self-employment in Greece: a comparison between men’s and women’s experiences

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**8.1 Introduction**

This chapter explores how highly educated migrants from Third World countries come to Greece and, after taking the plunge into low paying jobs in the informal economy, become self-employed. In running a business both men and women struggle against exclusion and towards inclusion, gain control over their work situation (income, work hours) and find emotional satisfaction and self-fulfillment. By comparing migrant women’s experiences to those of men, I show how women, unlike men, experience this not only as a ‘survival’ strategy or an action driven by economic necessity embedded within existing economic and socio-political structures, but also as a ‘wish for independence’ or an ‘escape’ from potential abuse and harassment, which in turn harbors important subjective meaning for self-employed migrant woman. Although it is very difficult to draw a clear cut distinction between value and disadvantaged entrepreneurs, I will show that the women here are to be distinguished in Valenzuela’s (2001, p. 339) terminology as _value entrepreneurs_, as opposed to the men interviewed who more often fall into the category of _disadvantaged entrepreneur_.

The paper is based on the biographical method\(^\text{11}\), outlined by the editors in Chapters 1 and 2 in this book, and on an analysis of 20 biographical interviews, conducted in 1999–2000 in Athens, with Albanian and African migrants mainly originating from Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Ghana. These interviews represented different types of self-employment trajectories and concentrated on the micro-processes involved in the decision and ability to become self-employed and the impact this had on the migrants’ lives.

I will use a small number of biographical accounts as a heuristic devise to open up a series of debates on ways one can understand the migration and employment

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\(^{11}\)_ A total of 18 narrative interviews were conducted with a heterogeneous group of migrants living and working in Athens since 1990.
experiences of these self-employed women and men in the Greek context. By picking out key extracts from their life stories, I will try to provide answers for the following questions: Why did they become self-employed? What kind of business did they opt for and why? Where did they find the start-up capital? What factors have affected business success or failure? What kind of impact did the business have on their personal life? The women, in particular, will be viewed as social actors whose careers are not only circumscribed by the structures of opportunity existing in the host country, but also by the meaning they themselves attach to their work choices in labor market structures characterized by racism and gender bias. It draws upon research carried out by the author on the self-employment of ethnic minority groups in Athens. This study is conceptualized within existing theoretical approaches to self-employment, where ethnic business is the result of an interaction between ‘individual and group attributes and dimensions of opportunity structures provided by the social environment’ (Uneke 1996, p. 530); for instance, market opportunity structures may favor products or services oriented towards co-ethnics or offer opportunities to cater to a wider, non-ethnic market (Waldinger et al., 1990, p.21), and interact with individual or ethnic group characteristics.

8.2 The context

Greece is a country characterized by a large informal economy, contributing to an estimated 45 % of the GDP (Katrougalos and Lazaridis 2003), high levels of self-employment – one fourth of the labor force (NSSG 2003) – and a high demand for cheap and flexible labor in those sectors of the economy which can easily circumvent state regulations through informal arrangements, particularly where the need for physically demanding work is hard to meet. This, together with gaps and shortages in the labor supply for specific sectors of the economy (such as agriculture, construction industry, tourism, the service sector etc) and certain geographical regions, created an atmosphere which accommodates newly arrived migrants and a ‘silent’ policy of tolerance concerning the entry of cheap labor into the country. All at a time when the country’s politicians, alongside other EU member states, were beating the drum for ‘fortress Europe’ and ‘securing the borders’ from the inflow of unwanted ‘others’ by introducing restrictive immigration controls (see Lazaridis 2003b).

Self-employment among Third World migrants in Greece is limited to labor-intensive light industries, such as service sector firms (restaurants, petty trading, hairdressing salons, small food stores etc) run by the migrant him/herself and their

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