

The difficult path for migrant women entrepreneurship

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Academics and policy makers consider employment to be one of the main tools to support migrants' integration and women's empowerment. Employment is often perceived the remedy for social exclusions and discriminations. However, employment is even more important weight when a subject is characterized by more than one precarious conditions. This is the case for migrant women entrepreneurs.

The rise of migration flows to Greece since the 1990s have been combined with rather hostile policies. Migration has been perceived as a temporal phenomenon, with respective policies focusing on arresting and deporting undocumented migrants. The second wave in the 2000s, with migrants coming mostly from the MENA region and South east Asia, encouraged the introduction of long-term residence permits but there was a relative absence of policies related to migrants' access to the labour market. The 2015 "refugee crisis" underlined the inconsistencies between reception and integration schemes and confirmed that past generations of migrants have actually self-integrated into the domestic social and work life.

According to the 2011 national census, 708 thousand non-EU citizens resided in Greece¹, out of whom there were 327 thousand third-country national women². Moreover, the 2019 labour force survey shows that from the 369.4 thousand non-EU citizens, 195 thousand were employed, with only 18.1 thousand being self-employed³ (174 thousand were employees and 2.9 thousand were family workers). Migrants in Greece are usually occupied in low-status, flexible positions with poor working conditions and lack of collective interests' representation⁴. With respect to migrant entrepreneurship in Greece, the rates are considerably lower than that of natives.

The difficulties seem to be greater for migrant women, since the entrepreneurial environment in Greece, as it is the case in many other countries, it is dominated by native males. Due to the lack of state support, the only actors involved in assisting migrant women towards entrepreneurship are NGOs, private business schools and a few micro-finance institutions. Part of this effort is the ATHENA project⁵, which takes place in six countries and aspires to train 210 migrant women in order to pursue their entrepreneurial dreams.

The ongoing research produced by the ATHENA project in Greece informs about the needs and criticalities of migrant women who are either currently or aspire to be entrepreneurs. Structural barriers, such as difficulties in acquiring residence and work permits, are important factors which prevent migrant women to follow an entrepreneurial path. Migrants face

¹ Page 7 in <https://cutt.ly/5nfZ9EG>

² Table A06 in <https://cutt.ly/Om2J2k3>

³ Population, Education, Employment status <https://cutt.ly/Wm2J43x>

⁴ Fouskas, Th. (2013) The consequences of low status jobs in labour organization and representation of migrants: the case of six migratory groups in Athens. In Psimenos, I. *Work and social inequalities: Personal services and servant labor*. Alexandria (in Greek)

⁵ <https://athenaproject.net/>

additional difficulties in understanding the legal, financial and bureaucratic requirements for setting up businesses. Given the poor training of public employees when dealing with migrant populations, it seems almost impossible for migrant women to find their way out of the bureaucratic labyrinth, especially in cases when they lack Greek language competencies.

The aforementioned factors are also connected with the lack of financial tools, since mainstream banks are at best skeptical in order to provide financial loans to potential migrant entrepreneurs who do not own any property. As such, migrant women rely mostly on their own savings and internal family loans, while the most informed ones make use of the supporting actions of NGOs and micro-credit institutions.

Lastly, the lack of information regarding the way Greek market operates seems to be another inhibiting factor. Business support services and management administration trainings are limited to non-state actors, with relevant information regarding the services provided by the latter being diffused in a scattered manner.

Thinking of employment as a basic tool that fosters social integration, migrant entrepreneurship is an essential step towards long-term social inclusion in the host societies. Following the ongoing research of the ATHENA project, migrant entrepreneurship is, on the one hand, migrants' way out of low-status and poorly-paid positions, and on the other hand, an exit strategy from family dependency. Foreseeing an entrepreneurial career seems to be critical especially for migrant women, since it enables them to seek their financial independence and better schedule family obligations and other unpaid social reproduction activities they undertake. Though, entrepreneurship should not be conceived only through individualistic perspectives but may as well acquire a more collective approach. Collective entrepreneurial paths, as have been drawn by social enterprises and cooperatives over the last ten years in Greece⁶, are inspiring examples that show how work integration can foster equal participation in the decision-making systems, enhance socialization and ultimately lead to the empowerment of precarious populations. The way this can be achieved by migrant women in a country that does not prioritize migrant female entrepreneurship and provide state-funded support remains an open question.

⁶ Kavoulakos, K. & Gritzas, G. (2015). *Alternative economic and political spaces*. Kallipos (in Greek), <https://cutt.ly/Lm9qPso>