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# Who Takes Care of the Children? Albanian Migrant Parents' Strategies for Combining Work and Childcare in Greece

Armela Xhaho <sup>a</sup>, Ajay Bailey <sup>b</sup> and Erka Çaro <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Graduate School of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands; <sup>b</sup>International Development Studies, Department of Human Geography and Spatial Planning, University of Utrecht, Utrecht, The Netherlands; <sup>c</sup>Faculty of History and Philology, Department of Geography, University of Tirana, Tirana, Albania

## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the strategies Albanian migrant parents in Greece employ to reconcile their work and childcare responsibilities. The institutional context, the informal work setting, and the agency of the migrants all play crucial roles in their childcare arrangements. This research draws on 36 biographical interviews conducted during 2014–2016 with parents in Greece. Our findings suggest that migrants use different coping strategies to manage their work and care responsibilities. These strategies include mother-centred strategies or mothers making career sacrifices to meet their care responsibilities, shared parenting, relying on extended family and friends, delegating care to older children, leaving children to care for themselves, taking children to work, and transnational care practices. This study shows how care arrangement options were constrained and continuously shaped by migration, care, gender, and labour regimes.

## 1. Introduction

Managing childcare responsibilities can be quite challenging for migrant parents, as they need to employ multiple strategies to reconcile their care arrangements and work demands. Among these strategies are care delegation (formal or non-familial informal care), mother-centredness (mothers cutting back on working hours), negotiation of care within the nuclear family, child neglect (leaving children alone), and taking children to work.<sup>1</sup> Childcare arrangement practices are embedded in and shaped by structural factors, welfare regimes, family networks, and opportunities in both the home and the host countries.<sup>2</sup>

Concerning the home country-Albania, care work is generally delegated to women<sup>3</sup> and extended family members.<sup>4</sup> Studies have shown that kinship structures do play a key role in mediating care arrangements, especially across borders.<sup>5</sup> As regards the host country- Greece, both welfare and immigration regimes do play a key role in shaping care practices among migrants. The migration regime of Greece has long been criticized because it has neither designed nor implemented a concise, long-term

**CONTACT** Armela Xhaho  [armelaxhaho@yahoo.com](mailto:armelaxhaho@yahoo.com)

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integration policy for immigrants.<sup>6</sup> Although Greece has been the leading destination country for 500,000 Albanians, they could be regularized only in the late 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Greece Southern Mediterranean welfare model does not provide many formal care options and opportunities for labour market flexibility, which adds another layer of complexity to the care arrangements.<sup>8</sup> Care negotiation among migrant families becomes even more challenging taking into consideration the irregular migrant status. This paper sheds light on the experiences and challenges Albanian working parents in Greece face in managing childcare while subject to the intertwining effects of migration, care, gender, and labour regimes. Although there are a vast number of studies exploring Albanian migration and return migration,<sup>9</sup> the literature on the childcare arrangements of Albanian migrant parents is quite limited.<sup>10</sup> In this paper, we explore the work-care reconciliation strategies of Albanian migrants in Greece, focusing particularly on their transnational care arrangements. Through the analysis of extensive biographical interviews with Albanian parents on childcare, this research aims to fill this gap. The research question we address is as follows: What are the coping strategies migrant working parents employ to reconcile their work and care responsibilities?

## 2. Childcare arrangements in migration and transnational care practices

Migration scholars maintain the idea that child care management in migration is quite stressful and demanding for parents, as they must come up with various strategies to reconcile paid work and child care demands.<sup>11</sup> Parents can choose between the regulated and unregulated childcare options with the latter being a less stressful option.<sup>12</sup> While unregulated care may be formal (such as care provided in an unregulated day home or by a privately employed nanny) or informal (such as care provided by grandparents, other relatives, or friends), the regulated care has to do with formal care provision which is under government oversight.<sup>13</sup>

Much of the literature on childcare arrangements in migration have focused extensively on transnational care practices resulting from international migration.<sup>14</sup> In a transnational setting, care can be exchanged and performed beyond physical proximity.<sup>15</sup> Such exchange practices include sending remittances, visiting the home country, engaging in long-distance communication, and sending letters and photos.<sup>16</sup> More often, mothers tend to use multiple strategies to negotiate gender role expectations, which resonate with the idea of 'good mothering' or 'hegemonic ideologies of motherhood'.<sup>17</sup> In the light of this rhetoric, mothers attempt to compensate for their absence through 'intensive mothering'<sup>18</sup> or by maintaining frequent contact with their left-behind children via regular communication and/or by sending money and gifts. The term 'transnational motherhood' has been coined to describe such practices.<sup>19</sup> However, more recent articles have tried to deconstruct hegemonic ideologies of motherhood, by introducing new practices of mothering ideology, in response to changing social conditions and women's creative notions of agency.<sup>20</sup> Such motherhood practices are coined with the term 'extensive mothering'<sup>21</sup>; 'integrated mothering'.<sup>22</sup> These ideologies reinforce the importance of kin and community members in facilitating child-care practices and encourage work outside the home as a new normal of 'good mothering'.<sup>23</sup>

## **2.1. Structural factors influencing care strategies: migration, labour, care, and gender regimes**

The institutional context and the agency of migrants play important role in configuring care arrangements among transnational parents.<sup>24</sup> Several structural factors can influence parents' specific care strategy choices. Among the factors that influence how care is delivered are countries' migration, labour, care, and gender regimes.<sup>25</sup> Studies have shown that both migrant mothers and fathers negotiate care arrangements within the changing dynamics of migration, labour, care, and gender regimes<sup>26</sup> and within the multiple roles, they play as migrants, workers, and parents.

First, a country's migration regime refers to its immigration policies governing entry, exit, and settlement in the country, including the rights of individuals and their family dependents, naturalisation rules, and anti-discriminatory legislation. Migration policies may either restrict migrants' spatial mobility or offer them the opportunity to bring their children to live with them in the host country.<sup>27</sup> Second, a country's labour or employment regime refers to its labour market divisions in terms of ethnicity, gender, nationality, and migration, which are, in turn, reflected in hierarchies of wages, skills, precarity, and social rights and protections. Studies have shown that labour regimes can greatly influence migrant parents' experiences by offering them more flexibility in the workplace or opportunities to organize their working hours to meet their childcare responsibilities.<sup>28</sup> Third, a country's care regime refers to the amount and kind of care provided (through payments, cash benefits, care allowances, services, tax credits) by the public, voluntary, and private sectors.<sup>29</sup> To maintain a healthy work-life balance, working parents need access to formal and informal care arrangements and the support of pro-family policies. After they migrate, families have to look into the availability of care resources and facilities in the host country, which might constrain their choices. The situations of families become even more challenging if they lack personal, family, and social networks to provide hands-on childcare.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, country's gender regime refers to the complex norms and rules that create normative expectations about gender relations in society by allocating different tasks to women and men.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, work-life arrangements are experienced differently by mothers and fathers, since gender shapes the coping strategies in child care.<sup>32</sup> The burden of care work mostly falls to mothers, who are perceived as the primary caregivers.<sup>33</sup>

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1. Field work**

Our analysis draws on 36 biographical interviews with Albanian migrant parents living in Greece. The data were gathered between November 2014 and November 2016. The fieldwork was conducted in Athens, where a considerable number of Albanian immigrants have settled. We gained access to Albanian immigrants first through main gatekeepers (Albanian network groups in social media, heads of NGOs in Greece, social networks in Albania), and we used a snowball technique to interview potential study participants.

### **3.2. Methods**

We use a biographical approach,<sup>34</sup> which implies the collection and analysis of detailed narratives of life histories of the participants. The biographical interview is particularly well-suited to transnational migration research, as it enables us to empirically capture and reconstruct the diverse, complex, and the transformational character of the migration experience.

In the first part of the interview, the participants were asked to tell their own life stories, to encourage them to provide a rough outline of their experiences, while revealing the parts of these experiences to which they attach more value. To obtain a fuller picture of each migrant's story, the interviewer asked questions about their initial journey to Greece, the work-life balance and division of labour within the household, focusing on gender roles expectations and practices of child care arrangement. Though the majority of participants started to talk spontaneously about the role of kinship and family networks in facilitating care work, specific questions were designed to circle back to critical issues such as the impact of immigration status, welfare, gender and labour regimes shaping their care options and opportunities.

### **3.3. Data analysis and presentation**

All interviews were conducted in the Albanian language and lasted from 1–4 hours. All interviews were tape-recorded after oral consent was obtained from the participants. We assured the participants that the information would be kept confidential and that pseudonyms would be used instead of their real names. All interviews were transcribed while preserving the original language, coded with the qualitative program MAXqda 12. version, and thematically analysed.

### **3.4. Characteristics of participants**

The primary analysis of this study relies on interviews with 19 working mothers. However, to get a gendered perspective, we also derived some information from 17 interviews with fathers in Greece. In three cases, we interviewed both partners in a couple. The migrant parents we interviewed had at least one child and one working experience in the host country and had an average of two children. The vast majority of women in our study entered Greece legally through a tourist visa, and became undocumented migrants after overstaying their visa. Some of them had crossed the border illegally, and a few entered through family reunification procedures. However, all the migrant women had regularized their immigrant status by the time of the interview. While the majority of migrants had finished high school (89%), only a few (11%) had a university degree. With respect to occupation, most of the women were employed in the low-skilled service sector. Almost all of them had at least one job experience in the domestic sector, or worked in parallel in other sectors, such as the service sector. The majority of men had been working in the construction sector and were currently unemployed. The great majority of migrants (87%) had been living in Greece for an average of 20 years (16–24 years)(see [Table 1](#)).

**Table 1. Migrant's profile**

No.	Name	Occupation	Age	Gender	Migration year	Education
1	Ardo	Unemployed	58	M	1991	High School
2	Marijola	Domestic worker (DW)	54	F	1993	High School
3	Hasan	Unemployed	56	M	1991	High School
4	Besa	DW	58	F	1991	High School
5	Dona	DW	52	F	1992	High School
6	Fabiola	Hairdresser/DW	36	F	1993	High School
7	Aldi	Unemployed	40	M	1992	High School
8	Geni	Entrepreneur	48	M	1992	High School
9	Stavri	Unemployed	47	M	1991	High School
10	Anisa	Hairdresser/DW	32	F	2002	High School
11	Ilir	Entrepreneur	37	M	1996	High School
12	Bela	DW	47	F	1997	High School
13	Glauk	Unemployed	49	M	1991	High School
14	Shqipe	DW	65	F	1997	High School
15	Zani	DW	22	M	1991	High School
16	Alma	DW	50	F	1993	High School
17	Nandi	Unemployed	51	M	1993	High School
18	Fredi	Unemployed	33	M	1997	High School
19	Naim	Deliveryman	35	M	1996	High School
20	Shpresa	DW /cook	42	F	1995	High School
21	Landi	Barber	31	M	1997	High School
22	Lajda	DW	26	F	1997	High School
23	Klodi	DW/office cleaner	35	F	2001	University
24	Ejona	Seller	36	F	1997	High School
25	Bardha	DW	52	F	2004	High School
26	Fati	DW	36	F	1997	High School
27	Eno	Graphic designer	29	M	1998	University
28	Gimi	Specialist	59	M	1993	High School
29	Orida	Agriculture/ DW	35	F	1998	High School

(Continued)

**Table 1.** (Continued).

No.	Name	Occupation	Age	Gender	Migration Year	Education
30	Besi	Construction	29	M	2004	High School
31	Ela	Cleaner/DW	41	F	1999	High School
32	Tatjana	Waiter/DW	22	F	2003	University
33	Vladi	Unemployed	55	M	1997	High School
34	Kastriot	Welder	54	M	1992	High School
35	Sonila	DW	54	F	1997	University
36	Mira	DW /seller	38	F	1997	High School

## 4. Reconciling work-care responsibilities in migration

This section explores how the Albanian migrants negotiated their job demands in order to balance their caregiving roles and responsibilities.

### 4.1. Migrant parenting in Greece

Our empirical data show that the migrant parents faced intense pressure to reconcile work and childcare, as they often had to overcome obstacles related to their illegal status and informal employment, lack of access to family-friendly policies, and other structural barriers in the host country. This experience was highly gendered, and thus had different effects on men and women. Given her precarious position as a newly arrived unskilled migrant, Shpresa, a 42-year-old mother in Greece, explained her daily struggles in managing work and care responsibilities, while facing barriers related to her migrant and employment status. Her lack of access to work-family reconciliation policies made her situation even more precarious:

I was working almost nine to ten hours on the black market and it was quite difficult to work if you had a little baby. We didn't have documents, we were illegal. There was no available option for kindergarten. So, we had to struggle quite a lot to take care of the children and manage to work at the same time. My ambition was to work hard, take care of my home and children, and that was what I had to do as a mother and a woman (Shpresa, 42, cook, Greece).

Another migrant mother talked about her sense of guilt, loss of identity, and struggles to balance the multiple roles she has in different life domains:

I was a mother, I was a worker, a wife. My primary duty was to be a mother, but I did not meet all the expectations of the "good mother". I felt embarrassed about my family and children because I could not get through and stay with them when they most needed me. (Fati 36, domestic worker).

This quote points to the gender role expectations in terms of childcare arrangements.

Geni, a 48-year-old hairdresser and entrepreneur, married with one child, expressed regret about not having enough time to spend with his child. Although he was living with his daughter, his job commitments often forced him to spend a long period away from his family. He explained what it means to be a migrant father in Greece:

I rarely see my little daughter. I don't see her that often, but that's how things work here. This is the sacrifice of a migrant father. So, you don't have many options to choose. I don't really have much time to take care of her, but whenever I return home we have fun at a kids' playground and hang around together. I know that being away from her is painful, but whenever I have some free time, I try to do my best (Geni, 48, hairdresser and entrepreneur)

As it is clear from the above-mentioned quote, as an undocumented migrant father he did not have many job options to choose. The abovementioned cases illustrate that the work-care experiences of working migrants are embedded in the host country's migration and labour regimes.

## 4.2. Family-based care arrangements

The following section explores the coping strategies the Albanian migrant parents in Greece employed to reconcile their work demands and childcare arrangements.

### 4.2.1. Mother-centred strategies

While the responsibility for caring for children lies with both parents, the cultural expectations and patriarchal norms in Albania mean that mothers bear the primary responsibility for childcare. The narratives of our migrants show that mothers were more likely to sacrifice their jobs to meet their care responsibilities. This tendency is well-illustrated by Ejona, a 36-year-old mother who was working in a clothing store from 9 am to 3 pm and from 5 pm to 8 pm. She struggled to find time for her children. She had been working at the same store for the last 13 years, but soon after the birth of her first child, she asked her employer to change her work schedule to enable her to meet her care responsibilities. In many cases, the migrant mothers reported making even greater sacrifices to pursue the ‘mother-centred’ strategy, by working in even more precarious jobs to accommodate their children’s needs. Alma, a 50-year-old domestic worker, said that she felt compelled to sacrifice her well-paid job at a pizzeria, in which she was in the social insurance scheme because she was required to work late into the night. She decided to work in a more physically demanding and less well-paid job as a domestic worker in order to be with her children in the evening. In the narratives of our working mothers, the theme of sacrificing for the children was quite evident. Although mothers were continually influenced by these ideologies, they did not strictly adhere to them. They would rather make negotiations about their working time and conditions than opt out of work and become ‘stay-at-home-mothers’.

Labour market flexibility did not offer these migrant women many opportunities to combine childcare and employment. Many mothers returned to work soon after giving birth. They were also less likely than fathers to either reduce their working hours or work under flex time when their children were very young. In some cases, mothers would look for part-time jobs that enabled them to be with their children after school. The ‘mother-centred strategies’ foregrounds the observation that mothers are more likely than fathers to organize their time around their children’s timetable to meet their care responsibilities. The mothers’ greater willingness to adjust their employment to meet the needs of their children than their similarly situated husbands was in line with the culturally prescribed nurturing norms of motherhood. The gender regime in the home country seems to have influenced gender role expectations in the host country. Having to take care of a child is sometimes seen as an obstacle for mothers who work in precarious jobs without social insurance. But the migrant mothers faced a double disadvantage: first, because of their motherhood role; and, second, because of their migrant status.

Just before signing the job contract, my co-workers told me that I had to assure my employers that I will not get pregnant while working there, otherwise they would fire me. I didn’t want to stay with only one kid, so when I got pregnant and gave birth to my son,

I had to quit the job, because I had no help from others in terms of childcare. My husband was working all the time and this is what it means to be a mother – you have to sacrifice, but at least I was the mother I wanted to be (Ela, 41, domestic worker).

The case of Ela (41, domestic worker) shows how the patterns of childcare were often informed by labour and welfare policies in the host country. The fathers' narratives showed that they also felt guilty about not spending enough time with their children, but they were less likely than their wives to report rearranging or sacrificing their work schedule to meet childcare responsibilities. Vladi (55, unemployed) recalled:

When I think about my past, I would have preferred to dedicate much more time to the kids. Something that I have always felt like a hostage in my life was the fact that I was not present when my third daughter was born. I was not there as a father to see my daughter, to take care of her; and I was not there as a husband to support my wife. I felt very bad. My wife had to stay home and take care of the children up to the moment they had to go to kindergarten. There was no other option, and there was no need for her to work. It was my duty as a father and husband to work. I could not leave my job.

Naim, 35, a father of two daughters works as a pizza deliveryman in Athens. When asked about work-care arrangements, he responded:

I am trying to fulfil all the duties, but it is better this way. I would rather prefer to miss my family and children instead of not being able to provide for them. Instead, my wife was quite brave in taking care of the kids.

By contrast, Kastriot (54, welder) reported that as part of job requirements, he had to travel and leave his family for several days to a month. It is interesting to note that he perceived his wife as substituting for him or 'managing' the situation in his absence:

Being away from my family was indeed a sacrifice. Of course, it has not been easy to fulfil at the same time my role as the father and my duties as a worker. I think that that they have felt my absence, my love, my care, but still this situation is managed very well by my wife.

The above narratives show that gender norms and attitudes affected the ways the migrant parents negotiated care within their partnership. Thus, regardless of their economic contributions as full-time workers, many of the migrant mothers in our study continued to maintain their traditionally ascribed roles, which resonates with the idea of women as the main caregivers in the Mediterranean welfare model. Moreover, although the Albanian and Greek contexts seem not to be that different in terms of gender/caring it is interesting to note how migration intersects with these norms and expectations and provide another burden for them.

#### 4.2.2. *Relying on 'significant others'*

After migration, family networks serve as the main source of support and solidarity for many migrants.<sup>35</sup> The migrant mothers relied on a wide range of other caregiving arrangements. In the section below, we highlight the importance of 'significant others' in care practices.

##### *a. Shared childcare with husbands;*

Narratives of participants show that parents would often share the care responsibilities. Yet, the vast majority of the migrant parents in our study maintained strong gendered boundaries in terms of childcare. Although some of the migrant women had

to rely on their husbands, they still perceived themselves as the main care providers and their husbands as the main breadwinners. Many of the participants said that even when their husbands were unemployed, they would not change the babies' diapers or engage in 'more feminine caring chores'. While maintaining their status as 'good mothers', they considered their partners as less competent and prepared for caring tasks, perpetuating in this way dominant ideologies on caring and providing. Mira's narrative best illustrates this idea:

Sometimes we share the care work, but you can realise how difficult is for men to do women's stuff. Once I left my three-year-old boy with D [her husband], but he could only feed him, nothing else. Yep, he was brave to keep the baby busy by playing but that's all he could manage. He will wait for me to come and change the diapers (Mira, 38, domestic worker and cooker).

Moreover, the deregulation of the labour regime in Greece following the economic crisis affected the childcare arrangements among the migrant parents in Greece. In a few cases when men were unemployed, the care burden would be handled by them. These practices seem to challenge the cultural expectations that place mothers as the central and primary caregivers. Although the majority of the migrant women with an unemployed husband acknowledged that they had been trying to help with the childcare to some extent, they stressed that Albanian patriarchal norms demand that men adhere to more traditional masculine roles. This again shows that gender-based caregiving arrangements are heavily influenced by the traditional gender roles of the origin country, which are expressed in the most extreme form in northern Albania.<sup>36</sup> For example, Fredi stressed that working mothers and fathers manage their shared responsibilities differently:

My wife was the main responsible person that could take care of the children. I have been part of the parental care as the father, but not to the extent my wife did. She has managed excellently all the household, such as cleaning, cooking, ironing, taking care of children. I have been responsible for accompanying them to the kindergarten, doing shopping or other physical labour (Fredi, 33, unemployed).

In addition to demonstrating that care work is gendered in Albania, the above cases show that men and women provide care in gender-specific ways. The mothers were more likely than the fathers to make sacrifices to meet their care responsibilities. These sacrifices were often shaped and reinforced by the gender regimes, expectations, and power hierarchies between women and men embodied within the Albanian migrant families.

*b. Delegation of care to older children;*

Delegation of care responsibilities to other older children was considered an option for some Albanian migrant parents who found themselves with extremely limited alternatives. When no other childcare option was available, children as young as seven years old had to take care of their younger brothers and sisters. Marjola recalled her experience:

I had to leave alone my three children: the oldest child was seven years, the second was in kindergarten, and the youngest was 1 year old. I left the bottle with milk for the little baby and I was begging my son to feed the little one until I returned from work. I was crying on

the train to work. If something happens to them, who will let me know. Many times, I found the Albanian neighbours in my home, because they found the children crying (Marjola, 54, domestic worker, Greece).

While delegating caring responsibilities to other older children was quite an uncomfortable situation for many mothers, it was sometimes the only option available to them.

I was somehow obligated to leave my eight-month-son in the hands of my seven-year-old daughter. I know it has been an enormous sacrifice and I was very anxious all the time, but there was no other choice. I was obligated to do that. I had to work because otherwise we would have nothing to eat. I had to teach her how to take care of my little baby and she was used to do that and even nowadays she says to me: "I became a mother when I was seven years old". She had to do that because I was working nine to 10 hours and it was quite difficult for young mothers with little babies. In such conditions, I was obligated to withdraw my daughter from school, because she had to take care of my other child (Bela, 47, domestic worker, Greece).

As these accounts show, children played an active role in care management. They often eased their parents' care responsibilities by taking care of their younger sisters or brothers. The majority of the working migrant mothers felt they had no alternative to leaving their children in the care of their brothers and sisters. Thus, as the abovementioned cases demonstrate, older children were often the principal caregivers when no other options were available, which points to the forms of extensive rather than intensive mothering.<sup>37</sup>

*c. Social and family networks in the host country;*

Cultural values and kinship solidarity play an important role in the exchange of care across borders.<sup>38</sup> Grandparents play an active role in both migration and the management of transgenerational transnational care.<sup>39</sup> Narratives of family solidarity were evident in our interviews with Albanian migrants in Greece, who often were able to rely on their social/familial and kin networks. Extended family members were able to join the family and provide hands-on care for the children only when the status of Albanian migrants was regulated. For instance, Laureta, a 52-year-old house cleaner in Greece and the mother of three children, had to rely on her younger sister, a 14-year-old girl. Laureta's sister came to Greece from Albania with only one purpose: to help take care of her older sister's baby. Then, when Laureta's younger sister returned to Albania, she had to rely on her sister-in-law for childcare. Another mother recounted:

I had to rely on my family members for childcare. I returned to work within the first few days after giving birth. She was so kind to my kid, and for her, it was like a leisure activity, not an obligation. She was supposed to feed the baby, wash him, and other kinds of activities. She was quite helpful and assisted me with the kid. You know, it used to be always like that in Albania. We were raised altogether by our relatives. They are our saviours in the most difficult time, the time when we most need them (Klodi, 35, domestic worker Greece).

The narratives of our working mothers show that their family members and kinship structures represented a good and reliable source of childcare help. The migrant parents in Greece were often assisted by their mothers, mothers-in-law, sisters, sister-in-law, friends, and other family and network members. This was considered a practical solution to compensate for the mothers' absence; a strategy that could

be conceptualized as ‘indirect mothering’.<sup>40</sup> Because Albania is close to Greece, it was quite common for the Albanians in our study to have their relatives visit and help with childcare. This shows that kinship networks play a significant role in care circulation and delegation and that migration for caregiving tasks can lead to linked migration.

#### **4.2.3. Leaving children alone and taking children to work**

Leaving children (under age seven) alone in the house to care for themselves was a strategy used by many migrant parents in Greece who could not afford any of the abovementioned strategies. Sonila (54, domestic worker, Greece) recalled:

I left her [her daughter] alone in the apartment because we were both working long hours and could not find any other solution. We were living in the basement and once my neighbours told me that they had heard the little baby crying. I was freaking out they could find out I left my baby alone, so the next day I switched on the TV and went to work. They could not hear the noise.

Another woman (Besa, 58, domestic worker, Greece) remembered leaving her 18-month-old son alone in the house:

I used to tie him up/cover “kopanec”<sup>41</sup> with ropes and sheets so that he could not move. Only his arms were out of the sheets. I left a bottle of milk near his hands, so whenever he felt thirsty he could grasp the bottle and feed himself. This lasted only for a few hours, but these were the most terrible hours I have experienced. I was in constant fear he would get suffocated. The fear was so strong that one day I took the train back home again upon my arrival at the place of destination because I was not feeling comfortable at all.

Thus, children contributed by taking care of themselves, even if they were quite young. The mothers reported that they did not feel at all comfortable with this option, and were in constant fear that something bad would happen to the children alone in the house. But given their circumstances as undocumented working migrants, they saw this option as the only available solution. In such situations, they were forced to bring their children to work. For example, Fabiola remembered:

If you need to survive you had to “invent” a solution. I took my three-year-old daughter to the house I had to clean. She was a courageous kid and the house owner was so nice to her. (Fabiola, 36, hairdresser, Greece).

In some other cases, children as young as eight years old would assist their mothers by doing some household chores at the houses where they were working. How care arrangements are organized and utilized in the receiving countries may be strongly influenced by the nature of work and employment regimes. Therefore, the lack of formal childcare options for migrant women in the host country and the absence of social networks that might provide informal childcare forced these women to consider such alternatives.

### 4.3. *Transnational care across borders*

In cases in which none of the abovementioned options was available to the working parents, they decided to send their children back to Albania to be cared for by family members. Almost all the working parents in Greece had to rely on their extended family members, usually women, to look after their children for a couple of years. Many of the migrant mothers reported that although they planned to leave their children in Albania for just a few months, their illegal status made it impossible to stick to the initial plan. Thus, they had to prolong their children's stay. Dona explained her situation:

The initial plan was to leave him [my son] with my parents in Albania for one year, but it lasted longer. He stayed there for around two years without seeing me. I had to go through a severe nervous breakdown - the worst period of my life. I went back to Albania after three years and it was shocking because my son did not realise I was his mother. He didn't want to stay with me, he could not call me mum. I was a foreigner for him. This was a painful situation and I could do nothing to bring things back. I lost the love of my son, I lost being called mother. I know it was devastating at that time and it is painful to reveal, but in the end, all my efforts were worth it. I was getting rewarded and earning quite a lot of money. I tried everything to compensate, but nothing could substitute the lost time. Everything I did I did for them, so they could have a better future. I can't get back that lost time. (Dona, 52, domestic worker, Greece).

The anxiety about missing the most important years of their children's childhood persisted for a long time. Structural and institutional barriers, such as strict migration policies in Greece restricted the migrants' spatial mobility as well as their childcare choices. Migrants' choices are continuously negotiated within the opportunities and constraints they face in the host country. 'To understand the choices that migrants make, we must also, therefore, imagine the lack of choices which they may be confronted with'.<sup>42</sup> Many claimed that if they returned to Albania, they risked being arrested by the police and never coming back to Greece. Therefore, when faced with such constraints, they decided to work rather than move back with their children. Leaving children in Albania was considered a viable option to better manage their full workload and ease the cost of living expenses. Although performing motherhood from a distance was not easy, it was not considered as a deviation from the traditional norms. The undocumented mothers had to deal with low self-esteem and self-worth because being physically apart from their children led them to feel depressed and anguished. Because of their undocumented status, they could neither go home to visit their children nor bring their children to the host country. Indeed, one theme that emerged in the mothers' accounts was that they tried to compensate for their absence by buying their children gifts, giving them a better future through remittances. The majority of them complained of being unable to maintain regular communication due to limited opportunities for mass communication at that time. The mothers reported feeling homesickness and embarrassment about their left-behind children, but also that they were happy they could build a better future for their children. One of the interviewees explained:

I stayed more than two years without my children. I was going through a terrible time, wondering whether I could live any more. I was almost experiencing a nervous breakdown. I was not enough mother. I was longing for something bad to happen, so I would be obligated to return to Albania and stay with my kids. Upon my return, the most terrible moment was to see how affectionate they were with my sister and my mom, but not me. It was terrible, I was lost. Did I fail as a mother? Sometimes yes, but everything was meant for them. I knew that they would have a bright future if they were in a better economic position. At least I could change their future for the better (Orida, 35, agriculture worker in Greece).

I feel very bad. I think that Kejda [her three-year-old daughter] got shocked by my absence. She cried a lot those days I was absent. I think she suffered from my absence and I suffer this situation more than her. Is it the way good mothers behave with their children? I know that it is my fault. Maybe I should not have left her alone for such a long time (Bardha, 52, domestic worker).

Feelings of guilt were reported by many of the migrant mothers who expressed concern that they were not fulfilling the social expectations of motherhood. The migrant mothers in our study provided an expanded understanding of motherhood, by challenging the key tenets and expectations of hands-on care with ideas of family's and children's best interests. This implies that a good mother was not necessarily someone who would be attentive to the children's physical and emotional needs, but someone who would actively contribute to the household economy. While we do not underestimate the influence of cultural expectations in care arrangements, the idea of good mothering goes beyond the physical and emotional commitments to the children. The emotional burden and the cost of separation were at some point softened by the economic rewards, which led to better financial stability. The narratives showed that mothers' commitments towards their children were often revealed through intensive work and economic provision, instead of intensive caring.

## V. Conclusions and discussion

This article advances our understanding of the various strategies migrant parents in Greece employ to manage their childcare responsibilities in the context of international migration. Our research suggests that the need to combine work and childcare in order to provide for their family led the migrant mothers in particular to develop arduous coping strategies and make profound sacrifices. In this article, we have shown that these migrants used a wide range of childcare strategies similar to those mentioned in other studies.<sup>43</sup> This article makes a novel theoretical and empirical contribution by highlighting the diversity of the care arrangements and practices of the migrant parents, which were influenced by the intertwining effects of migration, labour, care, and gender regimes.

While both the mothers and the fathers struggled to manage childcare, the working mothers were more likely than the working fathers to sacrifice their time to provide daily physical childcare. We found that even in cases in which the childcare was shared in dual-earner couples, the mother was the primary caregiver most of the time. From the interviews with migrant mothers, it was clear that they had to make many sacrifices to balance their dual role (as worker-parent) and survive in the host

country. They tried to meet the 'social expectations of motherhood' by adjusting their working lives to accommodate the demands of their children. This is what we called a 'mother-centred strategy'. In a few cases, the husbands assisted with childcare responsibilities. However, while the majority of mothers did not overlook their economic contributions to their care practices, they continuously reinforced the rhetoric of 'good mothering, and the importance of emotional bonding and nurturing. The mothers' inability to stay with their children was a source of anxiety and guilt.

This was partly because when the women came to Greece to join their husbands, they were the primary caregivers, while the men were working longer hours in more physically demanding jobs. However, in order to support their families, they were obliged to find a job. This situation put them under constant pressure because they did not know where to leave their children while they were struggling to work on what was usually a non-standard schedule. Because of their undocumented status and precarious working conditions when they first came to Greece, these women had few childcare options. They could not rely on formal care options or on family networks (since these options were not available directly after arrival). Thus, when they arrived, they had to choose between having their husbands or their older children provide care, a practice that seems to reject the idea of mothers as the single primary caregivers.

Our study confirmed the assumption that care work is gendered. This means that the main responsibility for providing care continues to fall on women, even when they are employed full-time. It also appears that the division of care labour confirmed the gendered differences in care practices. In other cases, the parents had to rely on the older children of the family to provide care. Thus, the authors have given voice to other invisible actors of care work such as older children, who challenge the normative understanding of care delivery and the prevailing narratives of children as passive dependents who need care.

In a few cases in which none of the above options was available the women had to leave their children alone in the apartment or take them to work. This shows how structural challenges in the labour market put women in very precarious positions. Abandoning their job could push them into poverty, so they had to work in order to earn a living. Thus, the strategies they used reflected their position in the labour market, while also pointing to the conflicts they experienced in combining work and care as migrants. The majority of the parents also had to rely on social and familial kinship networks for childcare. However, this option was often not available until a later stage, when their relatives or friends could join them through family reunification procedures or other strategies. Moreover, it is important to recognize that the authors were able to shed light on the importance of reverse remittances<sup>44</sup> within the context of reciprocal social relations.<sup>45</sup> Finally, in cases in which the parents had no other childcare options, they were forced to leave their children behind in their origin country for an extended period. As it is evident, nearly all the mothers relied on the support of the family and kin network for child care, reflecting a more delegatory practice of mothering—integrative mothering.

While the article does not disregard the dominant cultural depictions of 'good mothering' as an ideology embedded and shaped by the traditional gender role models of the Albanian family, it provides a more nuanced and novel understanding

of the concept, by unpacking the complexities of motherhood roles as opposed to a more normative understanding of 'hegemonic and intensive mothering'. The irregular immigrant status and the precarious working conditions in the host country made it impossible for mothers to strictly abide by the physical and emotional care commitments towards children. While in few cases mothers had to adjust work to comply with the social expectations of motherhood, in many other cases when they were confronted with economic hardships and instability they would rather reject the predominant expectations of caring responsibilities and let in other family members take care of their children which resonates with more delegatory forms of motherhood.<sup>46</sup> The stories revealed that often cases, they had to rely on their family/social networks for the care of their children or leave them in self-care. In contrast to the existing scholarship on 'intensive mothering', Albanian migrant mothers found it difficult to contact their left-behind children for an extended period (up to 3 years) due to their undocumented status. In addition, in the late 90s communication via mobile phones and social media with family members in Albania was uncommon practice, due to lack of access to such technologies after the collapse of the communist regime.

This article shows that the motherhood concept is fluid and evolving in time and space. Hegemonic ideologies of motherhood are constantly challenged and shaped by structural and cultural forces women find themselves in (gender regimes, immigrant, welfare and labour regimes). In addition, this article makes an important contribution in terms of the agentic capacities of mothers, who were in several cases able to make their own independent choices regarding care arrangements. When confronted with limited opportunities for formal and informal caring assistance, instead of moving with their children in Albania, they decided to leave their children in the care of their families back home, shedding light on the importance of other caregivers. Reframing motherhood along the lines of intensive mothering entails a narrow understanding of the concept. A closer look at their narratives reveals that mothers would justify the separation from their children by emphasizing their economic independence and the ways their employment benefited the family and children. It is noteworthy to mention that, in general, they did not want to be stay-at-home mothers, the status they had when they first arrived in Greece. These narratives illustrate a novel contribution to mothers' sense of creative agency<sup>47</sup> and their resilience in challenging the hegemonic underpinnings of motherhood with alternative forms of mothering, which implies: a) economic- self-reliance—financial independence; expanding the notion of good mothering with ideas of working mothers; and reliance on family and kin network for childcare.<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile, the study showed that caring and earning are not 'opposed categories', and that motherhood and fatherhood are not binary identities, but relational concepts unfolding and overlapping with each other.<sup>49</sup>

This study shows that while some migrant parents had more childcare options, others were quite constrained by various structural opportunities in the host country. The migrant mothers were quite active in trying to navigate within various childcare strategies and chose the ones they considered best given the obstacles and opportunities they faced, which were shaped by the migrant policies, labour markets, and welfare and gender regimes in the destination country. The study has

highlighted that the migrants' childcare arrangements and practices varied from one case to the other. Why the mothers chose one strategy over another, or how they combined various childcare practices, needs to be analysed in light of the resources available to them. This study offers important insights into how work and care are organized transnationally at the intersection of migration, labour, care, and gender regimes.<sup>50</sup> Migration policies played a key role in either facilitating or hindering the migrants' childcare options. Some of the undocumented migrant women had extremely limited options concerning care strategies, as their precarious legal and employment status was a major constraint for most of them. Moreover, the gender ideologies in childrearing practices these women brought from their home country dictated how and by whom their children were cared for. The lack of family-friendly policies promoting the integration of work and family life in their host country affected the migrants' childcare strategies.

Our findings have widened our understanding of how migrant parents utilize care strategies and maintain emotional ties with their children. These new childcare practices and strategies are embedded beyond the nuclear family and physical proximity. While there was considerable diversity in the strategies the parents used to manage childcare, not all of these options were available at a particular point in time. It is important to note that different groups of migrants face different hardships in their host countries, which makes managing childcare quite challenging. Undocumented migrants are more likely to be segregated in low-level and informal jobs sectors.<sup>51</sup> Their precarious working situations make it difficult for them to reconcile work and childcare. Therefore, when analysing parents' care strategies, it is important to take into consideration a variety of other factors, such as their migration status, gender, place of residence (urban vs rural), ethnicity, race, class, nationality, educational attainment, and professional work experience.

Finally, the study contributes to the limited research literature on how Albanian migrants manage childcare within their socially defined roles as parents, workers, and migrants. The life course approach integrated these three domains and allowed us to see the dynamic interrelatedness and chain changes that one role can bring for the other life domains. Therefore, change in one's status i.e from irregular to regular migrant or from illegal to legal employment status provided better job opportunities for parents, which triggered changes in other life domains i.e, better work and care reconciliation strategies.

This article looked at the childcare strategies and arrangements utilized by working parents, and especially by mothers, but it did not consider the quality of care provided by other caregivers or the diversity of parenting styles. The intersections of age, gender and class backgrounds in mothers' narratives is an important topic for future research. In order to provide a fuller picture, future studies might examine practices not only from the perspectives of the mother and the father, but from the perspectives of the children themselves as care receivers, and other caregivers, such as family members.

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## Notes on contributors

**Armela Xhaho** is a PhD Research Fellow at the Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, Netherlands. She holds a MA in Gender Studies, from Central European University, Budapest and BA in Psychology from University of New York Tirana/State University of New York. Armela Xhaho works as a researcher at the Institute for Democracy and Mediation since March 2016. She has over 10 years of solid experience in civil society sector, coordinating national and multi-stakeholder research projects in the area of human rights, social inclusion and migration. She has robust competencies in project cycle management, fundraising, policy advocacy, research methodology, data processing and analysis. In the framework of Industrial Citizenship and Migrating project (2015–2017) she has coordinated research activities (conferences, workshops and policy events) and field work with labour migrants in Albania, Kosovo, Germany, Switzerland and Greece. Her main research interests are gender and migration studies, human rights and social inclusion.

**Prof. Dr. Ajay Bailey** holds the chair in social Urban Transitions at Department of Human Geography and Spatial Planning, Utrecht University. Prof. Bailey leads the research line Global Migration, Culture and Place working at the interface of anthropology, geography, demography and public health. As an anthropologist and a cultural demographer, Prof. Bailey has produced 30þ

top peer-reviewed international publications; one highly cited monograph; and has supervised 10 PhD researchers. Prof. Bailey is passionate about qualitative research, teaching, and capacity building of young researchers. His work significantly contributes to expanding the field of transnational mobilities, ageing, inter-generational relations, health systems research, health services, reducing barriers to care, while establishing meaningful North-South and South-South collaborations.

*Erka Çaro* is a researcher and lecturer at the Department of Geography, University of Tirana, Albania. Moreover, she is a senior researcher and a member of the executive board of Western Balkans Migration Network. Dr. Erka Çaro completed her PhD in 2011 in Demography from the Faculty of Spatial Sciences at the University of Groningen, Netherlands, and has since then worked as a post-doc on the TWES project. Her research interests include areas such as migration, labour mobility, labour and migration politics, trade union relationships with migrants, gender studies, human and political geography, Western Balkans, Southern Europe.

## ORCID

Armela Xhaho  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7560-8617>

Ajay Bailey  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3163-6805>

Erka Çaro  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9183-9642>