

***Barriers and enablers to cultural integration:
Insights from the community of Nigerian migrant women in Greece***

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Migrant Integration in Greece: Barriers to Multiculturalism**

Abstract

The focus of this research paper is the cultural integration of Nigerian migrant women in Greece. Culture is defined, in a broad sense, as “the way we live” to include language, religion, arts, traditions, customs, cuisine etc. Thus, looking at the daily lives of Nigerian migrant women in Athens, the paper explores the complexities involved in this process, the barriers and the positive catalysts.

More specifically, the research conducted revealed the everyday effort Nigerian migrant women make, on the one hand, to preserve and pass on to their children their own culture; and, on the other hand, to actively participate in the Greek culture, language, cuisine and customs. The Greek language in particular is seen as potentially both a bridge and an obstacle depending on level of knowledge. Social networks of friends and civil society organisations, Nigerian and Greek, play a key positive role in intercultural exchanges.

Other barriers Nigerian women in Greece face in their effort to integrate are the lack of appropriate supportive state structures (functional public services, suitable intercultural dialogue programs and laws which are implemented); limitations related to the Nigerian culture (ethnic divisions and lack of cooperation among the members of the Nigerian community); structural limitations related to migrants organizations (lacking the financial means and the organizational skills to support their members in the process of cultural integration). Last but not least, the racism they confront at the workplace and educational environment, because of the colour of their skin, is another challenge which impacts on their process of integration.

Keywords: *Nigerian migrant women, cultural integration, barriers, catalysts*

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Introduction

This paper explores the process of cultural integration of migrant African women in Greece. The relevant literature in Greece has not reserved an important place for migration from Nigeria, let alone the integration of Nigerian women migrants. The scarce existing articles and data in Greece and in Europe refer to Nigerian women migrants in relation to human trafficking and prostitution¹. However, there is another silent group of Nigerian women migrants who came to Greece and struggle to start a new life just like many other migrant women from other African, Eastern European, Balkan and Asian countries. According to the guide for the migrant communities in Greece, in 2010 there are approximately 20,000 Nigerians living in Greece, the large majority being men.

The focus of this research paper is the cultural integration of the Nigerian migrant women, meaning their inclusion in the Greek society as a two-way mutual process involving both migrants and the host community - as opposed to the state or society integrating subjects.

¹ Dama, G., Nightmare for the daughters of Nigeria, (retrieved in December 2016)

<http://www.enet.gr/?i=news.el.article&id=181311>

Kelly, A, Tondo, F., Trafficking of Nigerian women into prostitution in Europe "at crisis level", (retrieved in December 2016)
<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/aug/08/trafficking-of-nigerian-women-into-prostitution-in-europe-at-crisis-level>

Culture in this paper is defined, in a broad sense, as “the way we live” to include language, religion, arts, traditions, customs, cuisine etc.

We have looked at the daily lives of Nigerian migrant women in Athens seeking to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the cultural obstacles they face, in their effort to make a living in Greece and eventually integrate herein, making use of and further developing the capital they bring with them, their skills, experiences, aspirations etc. More specifically, the main research questions in this paper are: what are the barriers those women face in developing their culture and integrating in Greece? What are the positive catalysts in the cultural integration process? What are the differences and similarities between the Nigerian and the Greek cultures and their impact on integration?

Language, religion, family and gender relations, education and workplace have been the focus of our work. Our research has led us to also touch upon the development of a new hybrid culture which involves the mixture of elements of both cultures.

For the purpose of our research we have conducted a survey with the use of a questionnaire filled in by 20 Nigerian women. Furthermore we have interviewed 4 Nigerian women. Our interviewees were women migrants active in the society who have lived in Greece over 10 years. Given the existing complex cultural diversity in Nigeria (Edewor, Aluko & Folarin, 2014), it is important to note that the above group of Nigerian women is culturally homogeneous, as they are Christians (Catholic and Protestants) from mainly one ethnic group (Igbo) which comes from the southern and southeastern regions of the country.

The first part of the paper outlines cultural integration theories and state policies and the second presents the results of our research.

Cultural integration policies

Cultural diversity can enrich a society. People from different ethnic origins and cultures living alongside can provide an array of perspectives and lifestyles which add depth in peoples' view of the world, demonstrating the interdependence of and the need for each other at a basic human level. Yet, as thousands of migrants have been moving across the world over the last years, we witness different cultures becoming the source of racism and discrimination and social -often violent- conflicts. European societies are tested regarding their readiness to embrace cultural diversity, to demonstrate the necessary degree of tolerance, respect and appreciation to cultural differences. On the other hand, European governments have adopted different approaches over the years in order to deal with the phenomenon of cultural diversity.

US and French policies in Europe are two notable examples of assimilationist policies, with regard to migrants (Joppke, 2012). The policy of multiculturalism, on the other hand, has been pursued by the Swedish, Belgian and UK governments (Kymlicka, 2012). According to the Multiculturalism Policy Index 1980-2010, which monitors the evolution of multiculturalism, the score of Sweden is 7/8 and the UK and the Belgian score is 5,5/8. The Greek score is 2.5/8, the same as the score of Germany².

² <http://www.queensu.ca/mcp/>

The Greek migration policy does not fall under any of the above approaches. It was only in the 2000s that migrant integration emerged in the policy agenda³. As the relevant literature argues, Greek governments have tried to prevent migrants from coming or/and staying in the country. The principle of *jus sanguinis* (right of blood) as a naturalization policy was only recently, in 2014, replaced by the principle of *jus soli* (right of soil). The introduction of Migration Code in 2014 streamlined the Greek legislation with the EU law and a bill granting the Greek citizenship to second generation children, approved by the parliament in 2015 is another step towards the direction of integration - although it is argued that this law has not yet started being implemented⁴. Overall the migration policy is characterized as non-visionary and fragmented.

As a result, no coherent cultural integration policy has been designed, particularly for the first generation migrants. For second generation children, an intercultural education policy was introduced in 1996, which indeed made an important contribution to their integration. Language, on the other hand, a key aspect of integration is mentioned as an objective of the Greek policy in the relevant legislation, but, as our research has revealed, it is not supported, as an objective, by the appropriate institutions and tools. Furthermore, freedom of religious conscience, another major issue regarding cultural integration, is recognized in Greece as a constitutional and human right. However, as the legal framework is unclear, many spaces for prayer of different religions (Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Brahmin) across the country remain in a semi-clandestine status (Syrigos, 2009). Moreover, those religious places of worship are often housed in unsuitable and even dangerous premises (e.g. converted warehouses, basements). The establishment of a mosque in Athens in particular has been a thorny issue over the last years, which is expected to be resolved with the functioning of a mosque in Athens within 2017 (Law 4414/2016).

Thus, when it comes to the cultural integration of first generation migrants, a great deal has been left to the migrants themselves and to the host communities, their organizations and the local authorities. Festivals and events, such as the anti-racist festival and the African food festival organized annually by civil society organizations, provide a space for intercultural dialogue, for getting knowing each other and celebrating cultural differences. Yet, as the results of the research at hand demonstrate, this is not enough.

Nigerian and Greek culture

Nigerian women living in Greece try to preserve their culture and traditions and at the same time, to participate in the Greek culture. 18 out of 20 Nigerian women answered that they are "very much" interested in preserving and further developing their own culture; 2 answered "a little". Furthermore, 14 out of 20 answered that they participate in the Greek cultural life and 6 "not sufficiently" because they do not have money (5), Greek friends (2), or time (2).

Concerning their home culture, they listen to their music, cook their country's food -with necessary adaptations when they cannot find some ingredients- and they also sometimes wear their dresses - although "some might think they are too flashy". Furthermore, at home they speak their own language - if a couple comes from the same ethnic group and have the same language they speak this language, otherwise, if they are both Nigerians and come from different ethnic groups, they speak English. Additionally, they practice their

³ The only exception is the integration policy designed specifically for the migrants of Greek ethnic origin -*homogeneis*- who arrived in the 1990s from Albania and former Soviet Union countries.

⁴ Kamilalis, T. (2016), Second generation migrants still without rights, <https://www.thepressproject.gr/article/100868/Mia-genia-paramenei-aorati>

religion. Catholics do not have any difficulties in Greece but Protestants sometimes do face some obstacles; for example, their wedding ceremony is not recognized by the Greek state. They mostly enjoy their culture at home and during community meetings organized by their organizations. There are many Nigerian organizations in Greece, as each ethnic group has its own organization, even if this is not officially registered (Papadopoulos, 2009). The ethnic segregation existing in Nigeria has been transported to Greece. The different organizations arrange gatherings for their members to celebrate important dates, like the New Year. These gatherings are taking place at private homes, because even the more established organizations, like the African Women Organization, cannot afford the cost of renting premises. This latter organization had implemented several projects in the past funded by different donors, but once the funding ended, they could not pay the rent and other expenses.

At the same time, Nigerian women migrants participate in the Greek culture. They experiment with the Greek cuisine, they watch TV, "sometimes" they listen to the Greek music and, as we will discuss in the next section in more detail, they learn the Greek language. They would like to be able to enjoy more of the classical arts, like theater and concerts, but most of them cannot afford it. However, the majority of them have a few Greek friends with whom they exchange and learn the local history and culture. Festivals organized by municipalities and citizens' organizations are important spaces for intercultural exchanges.

Language - barrier and enabler of integration

The language of the host country can become the bridge to cultural integration or a significant obstacle (Anthias et al., 1999); therefore a concern of our research was to investigate the level of the knowledge of the Greek language by Nigerian migrant women and its impact on their integration. Furthermore, we tried to identify the mechanisms, social conditions and barriers to the acquisition of the Greek language. Only 2 out of 20 participants in our survey stated that they know Greek "very well", 1 stated that she knows "well", 15 stated their level of language is "average" and 1 said "basic". It is also interesting to note that 14 out of the 20 participants in the survey answered that they have not taken any Greek lessons. The most important obstacles they have faced in their effort to learn the Greek language were the following: lack of information about where they could attend free language courses (62%), lack of time (55.56%) and lack of the financial means to attend paid courses (22.22%).

F., 43 years old, explains how she learned the language and the motivation she could get from the positive interaction with Greeks, in order to further improve her Greek:

"I learned the language by watching TV and with the help of my husband who had come to Greece before me and speaks the language well. I was watching TV, writing down new words and then he would tell me the correct pronunciation....6 years after I had my baby, I started going to open bazaars (panigiria in Greek) selling pants and bras; there, some people would say "you speak very well" and I was very happy and I put more effort to learn better Greek".

As many of our interviewees explained, when they came to Greece, more than 20 years ago, free Greek language courses were not available, as they are today. Over the last few years language courses have been offered by many different institutions, such as the Municipalities, the Ministry of Education, vocational education centers, universities, NGOs, citizens' solidarity structures. Nevertheless and despite the availability of these courses, two important problems have been reported by the participants in our survey: Firstly, most

of the courses provided by public institutions require the submission of migrants' legal documents; however there are many migrants who do not possess them; Secondly, there is still insufficient information about these free courses in a language that migrants can understand.

In conclusion, it is important to note that all 20 Nigerian participants in the survey are fluent in English, as this is the official country language - the former colonial language. This was an asset for their integration when they first came to Greece. D., 45 years old, explained: *"Language is very important for everyday communication: in order to go to the supermarket, talk to neighbors and at work. After 25 years in Greece, I am able to understand the Greek language and speak Greek, but it was also helpful, at the beginning, that many Greeks speak English and therefore, I could immediately communicate with them"*.

Cultural clashes in family and gender relations

In this section we present cultural clashes Nigerian migrant women face within their families, concerning the upbringing of their children and relations with their husbands. Passing on their home country language, values and traditions to their children is not an easy enterprise, as their children are born in Greece and they fully participate in the Greek culture through school, friends, TV, etc. At the same time, Nigerian women find themselves between the modern Greek culture, on the one hand and the more traditional Nigerian culture with different interpretations of gender roles, on the other. As we will see later in this section, the two clashes are also interconnected.

In the interviews we conducted it was underlined that second-generation Nigerian children are not very much interested in the culture of Nigeria. They feel more Greek than Nigerian and their parents try to find the right way to redress this.

M., 49 years old, said: *"We try to tell them this is the way it is here, that they do not belong only here, they come from another country, another lifestyle too"*.

Unfortunately there is no school teaching the language of their ethnic group, their culture and history. This burden falls on the shoulders of the family. Furthermore, sometimes there are important cultural differences concerning for example the upbringing of children: Nigerian women struggle to find a way to reconcile the Nigerian and the Greek approaches, as the rules regarding children's education in Nigeria are much more rigid than in Greece.

D. explained:

"Parents in Nigeria guide children how to dress, talk, walk, act, respect one another and what kind of education they will get. Children born by Nigerian couples in Greece have been very much influenced by the Greek way through the school and the overall social environment. If you tell your child "I want you to study hard so as you become a doctor, the kid will tell you "did I tell you I want to be a doctor?". In Africa the kid would never dare to give you that reply".

M. gave another example related to the attitudes of children:

"In my country kids would never call you by your name, they would either call you by your husband's name or your kids' name. But here, kids call a woman by her own name".

Given these realities Nigerian migrant women in Greece have to find their own position and figure out what is best for their children. These differences and potential emerging conflicts

mobilize them to engage in a dialogue with the new environment and adapt to the new norms.

M. continued:

"We try to adjust our behavior to the norms here, at least some things which might be too rigid in our country. We try to train ourselves. There things we have to borrow from here and take back to our country or in our family."

Nevertheless, in the everyday struggle they have no one to help them, to create the space for a meaningful exchange of experiences and provide advice, as to how to address these difficulties; neither the schools, nor migrants' communities offer any relevant service. Additionally, there is another inherent cultural characteristic, a taboo, that makes it even more difficult for those women to seek support.

J., 38 years old, put it in the following words:

"We, Nigerian people, are very difficult and closed people. Unless we have a very good friend, African women do not talk about personal matters, their family, or the way they are treated by their husbands. You might tell your story, I will listen, but I will keep mine to myself."

Furthermore, migration of Nigerians to Greece could also result in challenging traditional gender roles and empowering women. Yet, this is not a linear and straightforward process and in many cases, the result is just the opposite, that is further seclusion of women and limited mobility.

In Nigeria women are under men, as F. put it, "Nigeria is a men's world". On the other hand, in Greece there is a different culture regarding gender relations, but Nigerian migrant women cannot profit from it. Nigerian women who migrated to Greece have gained power, as they work and provide for their families, but many of them keep on living in Greece the way they did in Nigeria, suppressed by their husbands, not allowed to go out of the house and take advantage of new opportunities.

As M. and F., co-founders of an NGO for migrant women, said:

"Most Nigerian women will never be allowed to mix with us, for example, or participate in a training/awareness raising program, because their husbands are afraid that the next minute their wives will change their ideas and start being more aware of their role. Many women from many countries come and take active part in what we do, but no one from Nigeria".

An important parameter to consider with regard to this problem is also the application of the law. As abuse and violence at home is a dire reality for some Nigerian migrant women, during our interviews, the catalytic influence the law could have on their life was duly emphasized. It goes without saying, in order for a woman to report an incident to the police she should be documented, otherwise the entire family's safety could be jeopardized.

F. said:

"In the UK / USA Nigerian women know that the law works and their husbands know that if they treat their wives badly, once they find the way to report them to the police, they are finished. But here, in Greece, that kind of law does not work".

Additionally, there are cases where women have reported incidents of abuse to the Greek police and they have been completely ignored.

"I have a neighbor migrant and her husband drinks a lot. One night he came back home drunk and he beat her a lot. She called the police to come and arrest him, but the police did not come; instead they told her to go to the police station to report the case. When she went there, they asked her to bring her husband there. She said you should come home and arrest him. Finally she brought the drunken man to the police station and the policemen wanted to put both in the same cell for the night. She told them, I have the kids alone at home, I cannot spend the night here and the answer was "then go back home with your drunken husband and if he wants to kill you, let him kill you". She had to go home with her husband".

As gender is a socio-cultural construct of female and male identity that determines what kind of attitudes and attributes are expected and valued in a certain context, the problems discussed above directly affect the children too. Our interviewees underlined the fact that their children live through these conflicts at home with their parents which is a traumatic experience, difficult to overcome, as they grow up.

Racism in education and at work

The educational attainment level and the employment are important indicators in migrants' integration in the EU countries. Based on the data collected, it becomes clear that the educational level of the Nigerian migrant women is low. 8 out of the 20 participants in the survey had finished the primary school, 5 gymnasium, 4 lyceum and 2 went to a vocational education school. Furthermore, when they came to Greece, their first concern was to support their families and make a living; therefore education has not been a priority for them. The participants in our survey understand the critical role of education, with regard to their integration in Greece, because as they said, "better professional qualifications can help us get a better job and improve the quality of our life". When asked if they want to continue their studies, 13 out of the 20 participants answered "no" and 7 answered "yes". Furthermore, those who answered "yes", they said they would like to advance their knowledge of the Greek language as well as attend some vocational education school. Concerning the barriers they face with regard to continuing their education, these are: lack of information about existing possibilities (8), lack of time (5), the cost (3), servants unwilling to help (2), their legal status (1).

The story of M. 49 years old, highlights racism, as the most critical barrier she had to overcome in order to attend a private vocational education school and further develop her professional qualifications. In 2009, when she tried to apply, the school administration discouraged her and tried to prevent her from studying. Luckily, a Greek friend could help her through personal acquaintances.

"At the beginning, they said "it is not easy for you to study, you do not know the language well, etc.". But there were other students, British and American, who did not know the language at all. Then I met N. a Greek friend who helped me. She talked to the owner of the school whom she knew well and convinced her to take me in. The next day, I went to the administration of the school, they asked for my documents and allowed me to proceed with the application process".

As for the attitudes she faced, while she was studying, she says:

"Overall it was fine, but I faced some racist attitudes from one professor who did not want to answer my questions and refused to provide explanations / clarifications in English, although he spoke very good English and all the books he used were in English. Students were amazing".

Concerning employment, 14/20 have a full-time job, 4 a temporary employment and 2 are unemployed, 16 have low-skilled jobs.

The four women interviewed told us that they think there is a compatibility of values and attitudes at work in both countries, Nigeria and Greece and they did not face any significant difficulty in their adaptation to the work environment in Greece. However, it appears that racism is also an important obstacle faced at the workplace. Three out of four interviewees who have worked in different jobs in Greece made clear that they faced discrimination and racism because of the color of their skin.

M. and F. described the racist attitudes they faced at a pastry shop they worked for 4 and 1.5 years respectively

M. said:

"I have faced racism because of the color of my skin and this is not what I perceived but what I was told. After I sent my CV and all the required docs and information to (.....) company, I went there for an interview and they hired me. Then the manager of the shop saw that I am black and said "there is no way that you will work here". After pressure from the lady who interviewed me, he accepted to hire me, but I spent there 4 years of misery. Ever since I left that company no black person worked there again".

F. said: *"At my work, there were other white migrants there as well but they did not face a similar attitude. This is because they had the same color with Greeks and they could not be identified as foreigners. In the last working environment I faced the same attitude: when the management changed the new boss came to me and said "here is Greece (edo einai Ellada), it is not for you".*

Conclusions

Nigerian migrant women try hard to become a part of the local Greek society despite the hardships they have faced, since the trip they took from Nigeria to Greece. From the data collected it is evident that they have already gone a long way, as they have managed to start a new life and at the same time, they have been struggling everyday to make their homes a fertile ground of intercultural dialogue addressing difficult and complex situations in their relationships with husbands and children. There are several barriers they have to deal with in their everyday life: lack of appropriate supportive structures (functional public services), their own cultural limitations (ethnic divisions and lack of cooperation), structural limitations (lacking the financial means and the organizational skills).

On the other hand, integration is a mutual process which requires equal efforts on the part of the majority. Through the encounters with the participants in our survey, the non-visionary way of the Greek state of dealing with migrants with the lack of necessary services and the appropriate institutional framework has been substantiated. Even existing laws to protect migrant women against violation of their fundamental rights, discrimination and unequal treatment are not being implemented.

This paper sought to make a contribution to a much needed dialogue about the cultural integration of Africans, and more specifically of Nigerian women, in Greece. It is acknowledged that it is one-sided, as it is based on the views of the Nigerian women only.

The next step should be looking at the issue of their cultural integration from the point of view of the Greek majority. Few people in Greece have any kind of experience regarding

the Nigerian culture or any other African culture. Some might know the African music and a few have travelled to Africa - mostly its northern part - and more recently, they have heard about Yiannis Antetokounmpo, the 23 years old NBA basketball player of Nigerian origin who was born in Greece but was qualified for Greek citizenship after his was recognized as a world sports figure.

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