

Migrant female domestic workers' sexual victimization and assessment of victims' needs: A qualitative study in four European countries.

Abstract

This paper presents the results of a qualitative research study looking into the experiences of sexually victimized migrant domestic workers from four European countries (Austria, Cyprus, Greece and Sweden). Data was gathered via 66 semi-structured interviews conducted from February 2013 to March 2014. The study aimed to understand the experiences of sexually victimized migrant women employed as domestic workers and their needs for post-victimization support.

Thematic analysis of the data illustrated that domestic service is considered by many migrant women as the only way into the labour market. This is especially the case for women, who are either undocumented, have limited knowledge of the local language or lack specialised skills. For participants the consequences of sexual violence were mainly psychological, economic or/and social. Participants' social support networks were reported to be poor while support from social agencies was reported to be minimal. Both governmental and non-governmental organizations need to focus on the problem as well as look into social integration issues. The migrant domestic workers themselves need to develop self- organization.

Key words: migrant, domestic worker, sexual violence/harassment

Introduction

“Domestic Workers” are defined as those persons employed by private households either working in or for private households even if they are not paid by the service user. Domestic work was referred to as the main job-holding of all currently employed persons (excluding occasional babysitters and other workers who have another primary job) and includes only those who are of working age, which is frequently 15 years and over (ILO, 2010).

According to WHO (2002), “sexual violence against women is present in every country, cutting across boundaries of culture, class, education, income, ethnicity and age”. Female migrant workers, in particular those employed in female-dominated occupations such as domestic work, are known to be particularly exposed to exploitation and abuse. Moreover, when this violation takes place within the home, the abuse is effectively condoned by the tacit silence and the passivity (UNICEF, 2000).

According to the ILO (2013), domestic work accounts for between five per cent and nine per cent of all employment in industrialized countries. According to Eurostat data collected in 2005 from 25 EU Member States, the fourth and fifth largest occupational categories for women were those of ‘domestic helpers’ and ‘personal care workers’; these two categories (together with that of ‘other office clerks’) employed 19 per cent of women (Eurostat, 2008). None of these statistical data, however, take into account the actual numbers of persons employed irregularly, within the ‘shadow economy’, in ‘atypical relationships’ outside any legislative framework (Eurostat 2008).

In recent years, the problems faced by migrant domestic workers regarding the full enjoyment of their rights have prompted several studies in Europe, which identified several critical issues, namely the lack of recognition of their work as a proper job - in

some national legal documents, domestic workers are explicitly called ‘helpers’ rather than ‘workers’; their heavy dependence on the employer, particularly if they live in the employer’s house; the often abusive conditions of work; and above all, the lack of a clear legal framework and jurisdiction to prevent and protect them from abuse (Gavanas, 2013; Llacer et al. 2007; Haidinger, 2007; Karakayali, 2009; Tastsoglou & Hadjicostandi, 2003; Calleman, 2013; Hadjipavlou, 2009; Ioannidis, 2012; Karakatsanis & Swarts, 2003 OHCHR’s Regional Office for Europe, 2010; OHCHR’s Regional, ILO, 2013).

In many cases, social, cultural and linguistic barriers as well as their lack of time for social contacts and leisure activities led migrant domestic workers to isolation. In addition their limited knowledge of the legislative measures prevent them to seek and receive support from networks and authorities (Gallotti, 2010).

Furthermore, today, the impact of the world financial crisis is adding new pressures to the situation in Europe. The UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon, recently alerted governments to the adverse effects of the crisis on the situation of millions of migrant workers around the world. He noted how important it was that governments ensure the protection and promotion of the human rights of migrant domestic workers through their legislation and political and social framework (Ki-Moon, 2009).

Sexual victimization of migrant domestic workers

Migrant domestic workers are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence due to structural issues relating to their dependency on their employers and the nature of their work. Firstly, domestic work takes place in the private household away from the outside world and the scrutiny of regulatory bodies (Gavanas, 2013;Llacer et al. 2007;Haidinger, 2007; Karakayali,2009;Tastsoglou & Hadjicostandi, 2003), which

potentially facilitates covering of the worker's exploitation (Calleman, 2013; Hadjipavlou, 2009). Secondly, the migrant domestic workers' dependence on employers, especially in the case of undocumented migrants, for obtaining and retaining employment or work permits might again facilitate the exploitation of workers by their employers (Llacer et al. 2007).

Authors have raised the gaps which exist within legal protective systems that do not provide adequate protection of migrant domestic workers' rights. In a number of countries, migrant workers including domestic workers, are bound to their employer through their employment contract, making it particularly difficult to escape exploitative work environments. Leaving their employer in these cases would risk deportation (reference). Undocumented workers in particular are especially vulnerable to exploitation and abuse since they are not protected by the legislation of the country in which they live and work (Llacer et al. 2007; Haidinger, 2007).

Undocumented migrant female workers without permits are thought to be the most isolated and therefore the most vulnerable of all workers, excluded from social rights and access to formalized labor market relations and living a precarious existence, often institutionalized in legal, social, cultural and economic apartheid (Gavanas, 2013; Tastsoglou & Hadjicostandi, 2003). It is common for migrants not to know their rights and therefore to become more vulnerable to abuse. In particular, in many cases they rely either on their employers and agencies or on their husbands or male relatives to inform them of their rights (Hadjipavlou, 2009).

Additionally, governments have been criticized for paying no attention to issues of equality between domestic workers and other workers, with domestic workers lacking infrastructure and resources (Calleman, 2013; Hadjipavlou, 2009; Karakatsanis & Swarts, 2003). The lack of trade unions, guidelines and information from

authorities leave migrant domestic workers unprotected and vulnerable to abuse (Callemam, 2013; Karakatsanis & Swarts, 2003). Restricted access to resources has also been linked with migrant domestic workers' reluctance to report incidents of abuse and other human rights' violations to law enforcement agencies due to fear of deportation (Hadjipavlou, 2009; Karakatsanis & Swarts, 2003).

Present research

The present work presents results of a qualitative research study which explored the experiences of female migrant domestic workers with sexual violence in four European countries (Austria, Cyprus, Greece, and Sweden). The study aimed to describe the phenomenon as well as to increase understanding of this phenomenon by exploring the experiences of female migrant domestic workers with domestic work, with different forms of sexual violence within the context of domestic work and their reactions to experiencing sexual violence within their working environment. It specifically explored women's perceptions of resources available to them and specific gaps and needs in order to increase their capacity to deal with these experiences.

Methods

Study design

This was a qualitative research study looking into the experiences of female migrant domestic workers with sexual violence in four European countries. Data were collected in Austria, Cyprus, Greece and Sweden using semi-structured interviews (May, 1993). An interview guide was developed to guide the interview process guided by the research objectives and the main issues identified through a review of the

literature. The guide was translated in English, Greek, German and Swedish. The interview guide covered six main issues relating to:

- Women's experiences with domestic work
- Women's perceptions of and encounters with sexual violence
- Information relating to the perpetrator(s)
- Women's responses to sexual violence
- Potential consequences resulting from sexual violence
- Women's perceived needs for support

Participant socio-demographic data were also collected at the time of the interview using a structured questionnaire.

Participant recruitment

The study used purposive snowball sampling to recruit participants. The inclusion criteria guiding recruitment were the following: women migrant domestic workers who had direct or indirect experience of sexual violence in the context of domestic work, and who could communicate either in English or in any of the other partner country languages. Interviews where a friend translated for the participant were also conducted.

Researchers from all four countries approached potential participants either directly or through community leaders, community groups, NGOs or other organisations linked to migrant women and domestic workers. Participants' recruitment proved to be very difficult. In most cases, a snowball technique was employed for participants' recruitment as a useful technique for populations that are difficult to reach. Advertisements were placed in newspaper and websites, and labour market organizations were also contacted.

Data collection

Face-to-face and/or telephone interviews were conducted with participants. Researchers in each country contacted potential participants by phone or in person to arrange the date and time of the interview. The interviews were conducted at places familiar to the interviewees in order to ensure that they felt comfortable and secure. The interview was tape recorded upon the participants' consent and was fully transcribed.

Ethical considerations

This study was part of a wider project was approved and funded by the Daphne III programme of the European Union. Because of the sensitive and private nature of the topic of research, a detailed information sheet was prepared which explained the nature and objectives of the research and was given to all potential participants. Women who agreed to participate were explained in detail the aims of the research the topics to be discussed and how the information obtained would be used. Women were also given the option to remain anonymous or choose a nickname they could use for the interview. Written or verbal informed consent (depending on literacy level) was received by all the participants prior to participation. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the interview at any point, that the content of the interview would be confidential and that the material would only be used for the purposes of the study. A list of support services was provided to participants who expressed the need for further support or where negative emotional states resulted from recall of traumatizing events.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Guest, 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldana, 2009; Miles, 1994). Even though thematic analysis is generally understood as an analytic technique used in the context of different qualitative methodological approaches e.g. grounded theory, phenomenology etc, it can also be used independently as a flexible method of analyzing qualitative data guiding the search for themes or patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed in the original language by the research team of each country. To guide the systematic analysis across countries, the primary topics guiding the interviews were used as broad thematic categories. Data were repeatedly read and new categories were developed within the initial guiding themes. Following a systematic analytical process of identifying categories and reorganizing

Results

The demographic information of the participants is presented in Table 1. A total of 66 female migrant domestic workers participated in the study (AU=15, CY=16, GR=20, SE=15).

Working Conditions and risk factors in the domestic sector

For many migrant workers women whose legal status in the country precludes them from paid employment, undeclared domestic work was viewed not truly as a choice but a necessity since they were unable to gain access to the legal labor market. Even in certain circumstances and in certain legal systems, a relatively long stay in the informal domestic service labour market is the only possible way to access a legal status.

Moreover, some regular migrants may also accept undeclared work if required to do so by their employer in a highly asymmetrical working relationship, or because they have not been successful in finding a job in the legal labour market (due to a lack of skills, discrimination etc).

“I came to the country to work exclusively as a domestic worker.” (CY)

“The reasons were economic. Because for a better life.” (GR 1)

“I work with house cleaning since I have to support myself. To get another job, it requires that you can speak very good Swedish and I can't, therefore I work in domestic services.” (SW)

“We are all employed as domestic workers for financial reasons.” (AU)

Migrant women domestic workers were involved mainly with housekeeping and/or elderly care. The law provisions regarding payment and social insurance of domestic workers were not followed for the majority of the participants, regardless of their legal status. The majority of the participants dealt with unfavourable working conditions, work isolation as well as an informal employment status.

Employment conditions appeared to be favourable at first, but the reality was very different with their duties involving responsibility for more than one household, more than 12-hour employment per day, and working at least half a day on their day-off without extra pay, or being forced to work without pay. Even in the case of Cyprus where there was a formal contract agreement with their employer, the working conditions remained unfavorable. Furthermore, the dependency of the participants on employers and agents was a situation that increased their social isolation and exclusion which constitutes an additional risk. Their poor local language skills, and the existing social, structural discrimination and stereotyping, including unfriendly reporting procedures, placed women at risk both directly and indirectly through acting

as important barriers of disclosure deterring them from seeking help and making them more susceptible to sexual harassment.

“It was not an official work, it was not legal at the time, I had no insurance because we did not have a residence permit.” (GR 1)

“Women working in domestic services are in many ways an exposed group in the labour market.” (SW)

“Unfavourable working conditions, including psychological violence and exploitation.” (AU)

Incident-related information

The study shows that women are at risk of sexual violence in all kinds of domestic work responsibilities, in all kinds of “work contracts”. The sexual violence/harassment for the vast majority of the participants started immediately after the onset of employment or a few months later. The participants experienced many different forms of sexual harassment such as sexual harassment via the telephone during the job inquiry, invitations to dinner or evening drinks, requests for additional domestic services such as massage and other sexually-oriented advances, verbal aggression with sexual content, staring and flattering that progressively became more pronounced and overt with petting and unwanted touching that made the participants feel uncomfortable and eventually involved coercive kissing and efforts of seduction accompanied by intimidating behaviour towards the victim. In many cases, the employers used persistent unethical propositions and extra money offers to the participants so that they would respond positively to the demands of the employer. Three participants reported being raped, while one rape resulted to pregnancy. Due to the advanced age of many of them, the employers forced the participants to be

involved in unwanted touching of parts of their bodies and genitals instead of sexual intercourse. In the case of one participant, the employer videotaped the participant while bathing, while another watched porn movies while she was cleaning his room.

Table 1.Participants' characteristics

	Greece (n=20)	Austria (n=15)	Cyprus (n=16)	Sweden (n=15)		Greece (n=20)	Austria (n=15)	Cyprus (n=16)	Sweden (n=15)
Age (mean)	40.1	37.2	37.1	36.0	Country of origin				
Family status					Albania	8	0	0	0
Single	2	14	5	6	Bulgaria	5	2	0	0
Married	10	1	5	7	Romania	2	0	0	0
Divorced	4	0	3	2	Germany	2	0	0	0
Widow	2	0	0	0	Philippines	1	0	14	1
With partner	1	0	2	0	Georgia	1	0	0	0
Unknown	1	0	1	0	Moldavia	1	0	0	0
Children					Sri Lanka	0	0	2	0
Yes	15	1	10	9	Hungary	0	1	0	0
No	3	14	6	6	Ukraine	0	7	0	0
Unknown	2	0	0	0	Peruvian	0	0	0	1
Educational level					Slovakia	0	1	0	0
Elementary	8	0	2	0	Serbian	0	1	0	0
Secondary	5	2	2	0	Ethiopia	0	1	0	0
Higher education	3	10	4	1	Russia	0	2	0	1
Unknown	4	2	8	14	Bolivia	0	0	0	1
Years in host country*	13,9	-	3,5	-	Ecuador	0	0	0	2
Years in domestic work*	9,3	-	3,8	-	Eritrea	0	0	0	1
Work situation					Estonia	0	0	0	1
Full time	16	1	10	0	Latvia	0	0	0	1
Part time	0	14	6	0	Poland	0	0	0	3
Unknown	4	0	0	15	Somalia	0	0	0	1
Social insurance					Thailand	0	0	0	2
Yes	5	0	10	1					
No	11	15	0	0					
unknown	4	0	6	14	Total number	20	15	16	15

“I would like to show you a text message. I could just understand half of it so I asked my husband... I will show you...: “Hi, saw your ad. Do you sell 6? If so, text me. Johan.” (SE)

“I often get offered more money if I am willing to clean topless or without panties. Sometimes up to 500 SEK per hour. It is insane.... and insulting! I am not a whore, I am a mother!”(SE)

“He opened the door barefoot and in a bath robe. [...] I entered the room and there was already a champagne bottle on the desk. I said: ‘I don’t want champagne.’ He started talking about his shoe shop and that I could work there. He also told me that I could work for his shop as a model. [...] Then he told me that I should start with a massage and that he will pay me 20 euros for it.” (AU)

“...he used to come close while I was washing the dishes, touching my body with his hands while I was ironing he was touching my chest...” (GR 2)

“I want to shout but I don’t know why I cannot shout, I want to ask for help but I can’t because I’m really scared, I don’t know what to do [...] I want to protect myself but I’m just lying there.” (CY)

In most cases, violence/harassment occurred when the employer was alone in the house with the employee, while in a few of the cases sexually-oriented advances were made even when the employer’s children were at home. Most incidents occurred at home, while a few of them occurred in the employer’s car. Long term exposure to sexual harassment was avoided in cases where the incidents occurred immediately following the onset of employment as it caused the immediate resignation and hasty departure of the participants from the domestic work environment in question, while

on the other hand, there is a case in which the victim suffers violence for more than two years, unable to find a new job. Most of the participants experienced regular and repetitive incidents of sexual violence/harassment, while in some cases violence/harassment occurred occasionally. A large number of the women stated that they have been subjected to this kind of harassment on more than one occasion from different perpetrators.

Perpetrator's characteristics and attitude

In all country cases, perpetrators were male and the majority were the employers themselves, aged between 40 to 82. As for their marital status, perpetrators were either widowers, unmarried or divorced, while in some cases they were married. In the case of Sweden, all perpetrators could be viewed as socially well-established, with occupations and steady incomes, while in the case of Austria, there was limited information on the employers' social status.

The vast majority of perpetrators in Cyprus offered money to participants in exchange for sex, and expressed an attitude of ownership towards the women. In the case of Greece, most of them never acknowledged the wrongdoing in the action and put the blame on the participants indicating that they were provoked by their beauty and young age. They also threatened the participants that they would lose their job if they did not respond while on the other hand, apologized and promised that it would not happen again. In contrast, the participants in the case of Austria did not have much to report about the perpetrator's attitude because most of them were harassed immediately after their arrival at the employer's house and had no chance to familiarize themselves with their employer.

Response to violence/harassment

Initially, most of the participants tried to cope on their own, resisting and trying to push them back for as long as possible and to defend their status and their work. Most of them remained at the specific work being in need of the salary, hoping that the situation will be temporary. Their first thought after experiencing sexual harassment was to ignore the situation and continue working, hoping that the harassment would stop. Some others chose not to disclose their victimization and left the job after a short or long period either without a new job or upon finding a new one. In the case of Austria, some participants felt safer during the incidents by pretending to have a husband who is waiting for them although they didn't. Some others in the case of Greece and Cyprus tried to stop the harassment by telling the perpetrators they intended to disclose their actions to their families. However, the vast majority chose not to report the incident, believing that they would not be justified either by their husbands or the police or any other social agency and NGO. In fact, they kept silent and tried to cope with the situation.

"I could handle the situation by myself." (SW)

"I quit this job without indicating the real reason for this decision. I found some excuses to tell his wife, such as that I had been tired, that the house was very big, that I had found something closer to my house."(GR 3)

"(I) don't do anything because (I was) always thinking of (my) debt in Philippines so (I) can't be unemployed." (CY)

"I am not married, but I said that I am married and that my husband knows where I am."(AU)

"I don't believe that I should have reported it. I would not find justice." (GR7)

"I kept suffering sexual harassment by a 66year-old man."(SW)

When they realized that the situation would not change, some of the participants in the cases of Greece and Cyprus chose to talk to their husbands or their relatives, by asking for help. Only a few decided to seek help from the authorities, NGOs, church and recruitment agencies. In the case of Austria, none of the participants denounced the incident to any type of authority or organization. Instead, in the case of Sweden most of the women chose to share their stories with other women, like friends and colleagues. The vast majority of the participants had not sought professional help after the incidents, either psychological or the help of women's organisations/shelters.

"When I was really sad I went to church and prayed and said to myself 'It will be all right.'" (SW)

"Sharing with colleagues is good because you get a lot of tips, on how to act and sometimes who to avoid. Some men call around and you learn to recognize some of them." (SW)

*"Eventually I spoke to my husband because I could not afford it anymore."
(GR 2)*

"I asked Philippine Embassy for help and then went to the Labor Inspectorate." (CY)

"You do not seek any help when you are a foreigner." (AU)

Preventing factors

The need to earn money and the fear of deportation was a factor preventing women from immediately trying to leave the employer's house while social isolation meant they did not have access to information or social support for dealing with the situation. Barriers that prevent women from reporting the incident and seeking help and thus being subjected to sexual harassment, is a very critical issue. For all the

participant countries and their cases, several barriers emerged as inhibiting and preventing women from reporting their victimization such as the following: *Poverty* due to debts and the need to work. *Fear* of deportation, of not being paid, of bodily harm or abuse. *Poor social networks* due to low integration in the local society and the absence of relatives. *Access to information* is limited, for all participants due to their social isolation, their absolute dependency on employers and agents, their limited local language skills and the limited tools to help them access information on their rights as well as on official complaint procedures. *Perceptions of discrimination* that place negative stereotypes on domestic workers. This led to the women's perceptions of injustice and not believing that they would ever find justice for what had happened to them even if they reported the event. *Psychological trauma*, that arose from the actual repeated subjection to sexual violence/harassment. The loss of confidence, increased anxiety and worries, decreased productivity and focus, were reported to be the accompanying factors that created the emotional- psychological conditions that disempowered and disoriented the victims.

"It is because we are alone, unprotected, we do not have our family support, especially now that, okay, I'm alone. I don't I have a boyfriend to protect me."(GR3).

"I don't do anything because I cannot be unemployed....fear of losing my job, I have two kids." (CY)

"The fact of being a foreigner is the main reason why I did not seek any help." (AU)

"There was no SOS line or something in internet, I didn't know where to turn...I don't speak the Swedish language fluently." (SW)

“I did not want to say anything, because first of all, it’s a disgrace, I was ashamed.” (GR 4)

Consequences of sexual violence/harassment

Some participants did not want to talk about this experience and recall unpleasant feelings, while some had a strong need to share their experience.

The consequences are short and long term ones and are physiological, physical as well as economic ones. For all the women, sexual harassment resulted in increasing levels of uncertainty about their future and how to handle the situation. This was also accompanied by high levels of stress and anxiety. The majority of the participants experienced fear, anger, rage, emotional suffering and pain as well as uncertainty and insecurity. For a certain period of time, many of the participants suffered depression and psychosomatic symptoms.

“The most difficult period was when I returned to my house. I had nightmares about the time spent at my employer’s house...In my dreams I used to see myself locking the door and him coming into my room with a spare key ... I was terrified...” (GR11)

Women who were raped appeared to be severely emotionally traumatized. The participant who got pregnant reported having suicidal thoughts and limited emotional attachment to her baby. She said that she hated the baby and she wanted to die. This woman said:

“I try to get up every morning [...] I cry to my husband, I want to go home [...] every time I remember I’m out of my mind, I feel I hate the baby [...] I don’t know why it happened to me, so many women do bad things while I was

so focused on my work, why did it happen to me [...] I think it would be better if I died because I can't accept what happened to me.”(CY)

For one participant, the sexual abuse resulted in gynecological problems most likely linked to sexually transmitted diseases.

Upon escaping from the violent situation, the trauma remained in the vast majority of the participants. Many of the women expressed feelings of distrust towards other persons, especially unknown men, which affected the women's personal lives. One participant reported:

“If this could happen at my work, who knows what could happen on the street among strangers?” (SE)

Some of the women reported feelings of anxiety, especially when meeting with new clients. One participant reported:

“Sometimes when I know I'm going to meet a new client, I think about it a lot and have trouble sleeping the night before.”(SE)

Some but few, reported difficulties in their sexual lives, such as unwillingness to have sexual contact even with their husbands

*“I had fended my husband off completely. I could not even stand his glances.”
GR 6)*

“For four to five months I didn't want to have any sexual relations with my husband. I didn't want him to touch me at all.” (GR 11)

As almost all of them were economic migrants, many of the participants experienced economic difficulties. Finding a job in another sector was quite difficult due to the low skills in local language, the lack of documents, the poor social networks and the low level of social integration. Some chose to work in other sectors such as the agricultural sector.

“I chose not to work as a domestic worker again and I started assisting my husband in agricultural tasks. I felt safer to work with my husband even though the nature of work was harder and the salary was low.” (GR 6)

Some of the participants were confronted with long term unemployment after leaving their jobs while others were trapped in this employment for a long period due to their difficulty in finding new employment options.

“I have two children to raise. I could not leave the job before finding a new one. So I suffered harassment. I could not tell anyone. I did not want my children and my husband to find out. If I had not found a new job, I'd still be there.” (GR 7)

Victims' self-reported needs for support

After such a traumatic experience and despite the cultural differences between the northern and the southern countries, the new needs that emerged for the victims have many common characteristics.

A micro and macro need is emotional *or psychological support*. Women reported experiencing severe emotional trauma and shock following instances of sexual violence/harassment and their first response after realising the severity of the situation involved the need to report this to a person who would believe them as well as help them. Although this experience was traumatic for all participants, none of them asked for help from a mental health professional. Some believe they have overcome the experience and some do not feel well with the revocation of the experience and prefer to *“forget”*. But there are many who believe that even today they are in dire need of psychological support. Some of the factors that appear to play a role in this are: the intensity of the event, the duration of exposure to harassment, the support received

from their families, and whether they have ever spoken to someone about this experience, and of course the fear of deportation and the fear of making the experience known.

An important issue that was raised by many of the participants had to do with *the active role the organizations and the authorities should undertake*. A majority of the participants knew of women's organisations but viewed these as organisations only dealing with domestic violence. They mentioned the need to be more active in protecting domestic workers and providing them with support.

“Of course they should be more active because ultimately, the problem remains for us who are immigrants in a foreign country even though we are legitimate and work well in homes and then there is harassment and then ... we have no rights.” (GR15)

The need to create *help lines* offering psychological and legal advice anonymously was also underlined by many of the participants, mainly those who were undocumented or were married.

“The existence of a SOS line is important because I believe that other women and girls have this same problem, but simply, too many things "fall under the table" because there is no an entity that you can say what costs you so much pain. To feel relief, to be helped; there is no such thing. Because many women prefer to open up over the phone, rather than sit in front of someone and talk about this, they are ashamed. The shame is great. And if there was such a line it would be very good.” (GR2)

“It would be very useful if there was somebody to give me assistance either via the internet or by phone. I could say anonymously what I'm facing and they

would tell me what to do. It would not be found out within the community, no trouble would be caused but I would be protected.” (GR4)

Furthermore, women discussed their *need for support in reporting sexual violence/harassment* to the authorities and acting upon the situation. The fact that only very few of the participants (n=4) reported the incident to the authorities and the police, raises the issue that there is a great need for emotional, informational, as well as legal support.

“Also, these people who are abused are afraid to report it, you know, some of them [...]. They should know that there is a center or there is a person who can help them” (CY x)

“My suggestion to the police, for example is that if there is a complaint especially in domestic work, they should be alert, be active, investigate, not be blah blah, not to be like that.” (CY x)

“I don’t believe that by reporting to the police I can be vindicated. I thought that once. But then I thought that my husband would be informed. It would not be any better but rather worse. And my employer said that the police would not believe me a stranger. So I suffered the harassment from a 66-year-old man. I was only 36 at the time.” (GR7)

“We don’t have rights here, we are foreigners. The police don’t provide us with any help.” (GR11)

It is worth mentioning here that of those who eventually reported the violence to the authorities, only in one case was the outcome in favour of the domestic worker.

Participants reported *the need to feel safe* when they report their experience to the authorities mainly in terms of their residency and employment permits. The work permit is their main need. This involves a more migrant-friendly attitude as well as a

more migrant-friendly system that allows for the women's interests and rights to be safeguarded.

"I would never have been in such a situation of harassment if I had had access to the regular labour market at that time." (AU)

"I was afraid that I would lose more than just my work. That I would not only lose my job but that I might be in danger regarding the status of my work here." (GR4)

"First of all, we were in the country illegally. If the same thing was happening in my country I would have complained. Yes I could talk. Because I would have the power to denounce it and it would not affect me. If I denounced the harassment here, the first thing they would ask me for is my residence permit and work permit. I had neither the one nor the other. As a result, they would kick me out of the country without my being able to do anything." (GR6)

The need to develop employment opportunities for the victimized migrant domestic workers and the development of safe systems for job inquiry was reported by the majority of the participants as more important for them than any other institutional help.

"This type of employment will always be risky and I can't avoid this risk. There is no organisation that can protect me if I have to go to a stranger and work as a cleaner." (AU)

Improving migrant domestic workers' educational level, gaining new skills and learning the local language were some additional needs commonly reported by many participants in an attempt to improve their interaction with the local community and their communication with their employers at the workplace.

“I would like to have a better education, yes, of course, I want to, but I can’t; I must first learn the Greek language better.” (GR8)

“I already go to a school and learn Greek. I can now discuss and I feel very nice. I needed that. I feel at the same time that I am part of a group and I feel very good about it. I want to trust people again.” (GR17)

After the incidents of sexual harassment, *new financial needs* were created. Some of the participants immediately left the job without first having a new one with many remaining unemployed for a long time and some still being unemployed. Some, although they wanted to leave the particular job, they did not do so for the simple reason that they could not survive without it. Economic necessity obliges them to remain and be exposed to repeated harassment and thus deepen the trauma.

“After the incident, I was unemployed for five months.” (GR4)

“Of course; I’m unemployed, I haven’t work ever since. I turned down several jobs because I did not want to work in houses were men live.” (GR2)

“First I had to find another job and then leave. This took 2 years...So I suffered the harassment for 2 years!” (GR7)

Finally, another issue stressed by some participants was the *need for migrants’ self-organization* through the establishment of migrant organizations/unions aiming at defending the rights of domestic workers.

“Yes, I think that we have to do something to better the conditions for women who work as domestic workers. We must speak out and not be silent. We need to talk and be united and solve some of our problems. By being silent, nothing can be improved. We should not be alone when facing harassment. We need to discuss these things and other problems to improve the working conditions of domestic workers and we must not be ashamed.”(GR4)

Discussion

Domestic services are considered almost the only way into the labour market for those migrant women who are either of undocumented status or have poor knowledge of the local language or low and uncompetitive skills and limited knowledge of their working rights (IOM, 2009; OHCHR's Regional Office for Europe, 2010). These workers are exposed to exploitation and abuse due to the lack of recognition of their work as a proper job, their heavy dependence on the employer, the lack of clear legal protection or the undeclared nature of their work (OHCHR's Regional Office for Europe, 2010). Therefore, several international organizations have raised this issue by proposing the development of protective mechanisms and capacity-building (CEDAW, 2008; IOM,2010; ILO,2010; United Nations, 2010).

According to the results of the present study, the phenomenon of sexual violence/harassment against female migrant domestic workers remains silent and is underreported. Findings reflect other European studies as well as with the United Nations report on "Rights of Migrant Domestic Workers in Europe (Gavanas, 2013; Llacer et al. 2007; Haidinger, 2007; Karakayali, 2009; Tastsoglou & Hadjicostandi, 2003; Calleman, 2013; Hadjipavlou, 2009; Ioannidis, 2012; Karakatsanis & Swarts, 2003; OHCHR's Regional Office for Europe, 2010)

The study shows that the profile of the migrant women employed as domestic workers as well as the employment processes and procedures are different in Austria, Cyprus, Greece, and Sweden. Nevertheless, their victimization seems to follow a common pattern. One commonality that cuts across all participant countries is the gendered nature of sexual assaults committed against women employed in the domestic sector. In this respect, the surrounding gendered cultural assumptions that often legitimize

unwanted sexual advances towards females (WHO, 2002) intersect with a number of other vulnerabilities, such as disadvantageous economic condition, labour exclusion, legal status, social isolation, poor social networks, and ethnic vulnerability, all of which are factors that can be labelled as social and cultural vulnerabilities. Indeed, according to UNICEF (2000), there is no one single factor to account for violence exerted against women. Several complex and interconnected social and cultural factors have kept women particularly vulnerable to the violence directed at them. Among them, the lack of economic resources underpins women's vulnerability to violence and limits the power to escape (UNICEF, 2000). Nevertheless, although numerous studies exist on violence against women, they do not focus on the phenomenon of sexual violence against migrant domestic workers and the contributing factors.

According to the present study, what seems to be important for the protection of those women is the development of a safe job inquiry system, enabling employers' evaluation as well as securing their working rights. The United Nations considers this issue of vital importance. The adequate protection of human rights of migrant domestic workers should be recognized, on an international as well as on a European level, as a major challenge and it needs to be taken on with the aim of guaranteeing these workers the full enjoyment of their human rights, regardless of their citizenship status (OHCHR's Regional Office for Europe, 2010). State laws and policies are severely criticized for transforming migrant domestic workers into an underclass of workers through maintaining unequal employment rights and conditions between domestic workers and other employees (Cavano, 2013; Calleman, 2013; Hadjipavlou, 2009; Ioannidis, 2012; Maratou-Aliprant & Fakiolas, 2003). This low protection of domestic workers' rights is thought to deepen and reinforce their

dependence on employers and increase their vulnerability to sexual victimization (Calleman, 2013; Karakatsanis & Swarts, 2003).

The study claims that improving the migrants' legalization procedures in the host countries could reduce illegal work and increase reporting of sexual violence/harassment, since the risks of human rights abuses are particularly high for migrant domestic workers with irregular or undocumented migration status (OHCHR's Regional Office for Europe, 2010). However, even migrant domestic workers whose migration and employment statuses are fully legal are usually in a less favorable position than the national workforce in terms of the protection of their rights (OHCHR's Regional Office for Europe, 2010). Therefore, equal access to the regular labour market is of key importance in the prevention of sexual violence/harassment and can be enhanced through adjustment of corresponding migration and labour policies, skill building and language learning programs and through efforts to remove the existing perceptions of domestic work as heavily gendered and racialised. Social inclusion measures as the above mentioned could minimize linguistic and cultural barriers as well as social isolation.

Additionally, this study underlines that the sources of informational and practical support should be made more available to migrant domestic workers through links with migrant communities or other social groups that these women might have contact with. NGOs or public agencies which are active in the sector of violence against women, should extend their activities on immigrant communities and make their services known. Additionally, the current findings clearly indicate the need for the development of anonymous, gender and culturally-sensitive and user-friendly information web tools, or SOS lines, and providing access to legal and psychological support and working rights' resources.

It is also very important for women who are linked to employers through employment agencies to receive comprehensive induction programs in the country of origin or destination. These programmes should include training on sexual violence/harassment and labour rights as well as housekeeping skills which seem to be the only concern of employment agencies at the moment. Clear information on employment rights, labour legislation, gender violence legislation, and common practices of reporting sexual violence /harassment with contact details of key organisations in the country of employment should be provided prior to or on arrival.

Raising public awareness and promoting migrants' social inclusion is of key importance in addressing discrimination against migrants in the domestic sector. Additionally, the research shows that it is important to ensure that gender remains mainstreamed in all policies and campaigns that promote rights of migrants.

Moreover, at a policy level, the situation with sexual crimes against domestic workers is often exacerbated by the absence of adequate legislation that protects the victims and prevents these crimes. Specifically, in the case of Cyprus, sexual crimes against domestic workers, if not resulting in aggravated crimes or not perpetrated by strangers in the street, virtually fall outside of any legal frameworks. In this respect, the research results emphasise the urgent need to set up appropriate legal frameworks, among which are the Istanbul convention on Violence against Women and the ILO Domestic Workers convention.

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Bios (50 words maximum each author)

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