
RESEARCH REPORTS

Immigrant women and entrepreneurship in Greece

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This ethnographic research on immigrant women and entrepreneurship was carried out in Athens and addresses the growing interest of Greek people in immigrant women's skills and services, particularly African hairdressing. The interaction between immigrant hairdressers and Greek customers appears to be instrumental in understanding how national identity constructs articulate with Western debates and lifestyles.

Key words: Immigrant women, national identity, consumerism, self and the other.

This research focuses on Greek women's interaction with African hairdressers who run small salons in Athens. Given that hairstyling is both an aestheticized commodity and an embodied dimension of identity carved out in self-care regimes of body culture, immigrant entrepreneurs' narratives enhance our reflexivity on the ways with which the Self and the Other are re-created in contexts of consumption. Moreover, such narratives illustrate that while Greek customers include elements of local African traditions in their stylistic choices, such choices do not reflect on their social views and perspectives; that is, the ways in which they perceive cultural difference and think of and deal with immigrants in general and African hairdressers in particular.

The ethnography suggests that hairdressers' shift from employment to business ownership is consistent with the accelerated pace with which ethnic goods and traditions are incorporated in Western fashion and with the lax market system and expanded sectors of informal labour prevailing in Greece. The appeal exerted by African hairdressers on Greek customers also relates to generalized perceptions of black women as 'naturally' resourceful in body decoration. By extension, salon owners decorate their small premises with meticulous care – for example, with posters depicting African landscapes and black fashion models – making them spaces in which Greek customers have access to 'authentic' hair arrangements; these spaces satisfy curiosities about unfamiliar customs and weave imaginative bonds with the world beyond their geographical borders. Advertising 'Africaness' as 'authenticity' works as a strategy that bestows notability to African entrepreneurs as holders of particularly desirable cultural properties and places them in the interstices between modernity and tradition.

In their daily life, entrepreneurs try hard to safeguard the delicate balance between economic needs, rigid migration policies and the benefits (symbolic and material) drawn from ownership. To achieve this, they resort to self-discipline and intensive labour, adapting their work schedule to domestic and family obligations. The most significant device with which they reinforce salons' maintenance is anchored, however, on the diversification of their economic activities. In addition to hairstyling, most of them sell a broad range of jewellery and cosmetics products, face and body creams which are manufactured abroad in keeping with African people's taste. The crucial point is that by importing such goods to European cities, entrepreneurs retain networks that extend beyond national borders and, at the same time, trade ethnic goods in the national markets. They also enrich and promote their activities by training immigrant and Greek apprentices. Undoubtedly, culturally specific coiffures are conceptualised as tokens of a global fashion world, in which these entrepreneurs transmit their skills to 'hosts' who otherwise look down upon immigrants' cultural heritage as 'lower' to the Greek one.

It seems reasonable to say that the experiences of African hairdressers dispute the assumption that immigrant business ownership is little more than an innovative way to confront unemployment. The dynamics of their pursuits supersedes economic factors; it brings out the perplexity of their attributes as women, wives, mothers and formally unqualified albeit unique providers of 'authentic' services. As dynamic agents, these hairdressers have a remarkably good grasp of how to cope with shortcomings and they take immense pride in eliciting modernity out of a repertoire of culturally inherited aptitudes. More significantly, they realize that by arranging Greek customers' hair they channel informal but nonetheless meaningful processes of integration in key sectors of Greek society; namely, consumption and body culture.

By all accounts, the most interesting finding of this research concerns the variable meanings that entrepreneurs attach to the relationships that they develop with their Greek customers. In spite of the indispensability of their skills and of the trust and physical intimacy involved in the act of hairdressing, essential ties and communication with the Greek clientele are virtually absent. As a consequence of the different access immigrants and nationals have to civic and social rights in Greece, in addition to the reinforcement of intense dislike of 'others', the use that Greek women make of African coiffures intensifies rather than eliminate cultural hierarchies and discriminative attitudes. In other words, the fact that both Greek and African women assess modern aesthetics in relation to ethnic workspaces by no means counteracts the representation of

Greek national culture as devoid of foreign influences. Instead, ethnic hairstyles as fashion icons serve the dual purpose of projecting Greeks' standards of consumption as an irrevocable part of Westernization and as culturally 'pure', prior to immigration.

However, it is important to note that the antinomies that mark the interaction between Greek nationals and immigrants include the potential of their resolution. The potential of defining Greek customers' tastes and looks amidst restrictive policies and values is an accomplishment with major symbolic beneficial implications for African entrepreneurs. African entrepreneurs use this potential reflectively and for their benefit.

It should be stressed that, although Greek women who step into African salons are relatively few and differ in age, education and social and occupational status, the aspiration they all share 'to look different' is pertinent to the way in which socially and politically marginalized immigrants are empowered by their encounters with privileged members of the host society. By advocating the transformation of an ethnic hairstyle into a constituent of mainstream fashion, while at the same time maintaining ties with their cultural history and performances, immigrant entrepreneurs mediate between different social and cultural settings, re-contextualise the meaning attached to African legacies and contribute to the amalgamation of ethnic with global imperatives of fashion. Combined, these processes operate as an instrument with which entrepreneurs 'correct' wider asymmetries and cast strong links between the new environment and the world left behind.

In view of the above, immigrant entrepreneurs intuitively and critically understand that Greek women's fascination with elements of ethnic cultures is not conducive to open-mindedness; instead, Greek women remain conditioned by stereotypical representations and are unable to modify or free themselves of their stereotypical attitudes towards immigrant producers of difference and modernity.

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