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“United We Stand”

The Collective Mobilisation of African Women in Athens, Greece

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how African women in Athens are collectively mobilising to resist and manage the exclusionary and othering processes they all-too-often face in their everyday lives. In particular, it focuses on the activism of the United African Women's Organization (UAWO) and its mobilisation of the 'African woman' identity in the fight for greater livability in terms of both material conditions and social intelligibility. Applying the notion of 'acts of citizenship,' formulated by Isin and Nielsen (2008), the paper illustrates the ways in which UAWO works towards claiming citizenship rights for non-citizens creatively, performatively, and in multiple spaces. In so doing, the paper also explores how UAWO seeks to challenge, and potentially transform, the categories of recognition available to African women in Athens.

“United We Stand”

The Collective Mobilisation of African Women in Athens, Greece

“There’s no such thing as the ‘voiceless’.
There are only the deliberately silenced,
or the preferably unheard.”

Arundhati Roy

Abstract

This paper explores how African women in Athens are collectively mobilising to resist, and manage, the exclusionary and othering processes they all-too-often face in their everyday lives. In particular, it focuses on the activism of the United African Women’s Organization (UAWO) and its mobilisation of the ‘African woman’ identity in the fight for greater livability in terms of both material conditions and social intelligibility. Applying the notion of ‘acts of citizenship’, formulated by Isin and Nielsen (2008), the paper illustrates the ways in which UAWO works towards claiming citizenship rights for non-citizens creatively, performatively and in multiple spaces. In so doing the paper also explores how UAWO seeks to challenge, and potentially transform, the categories of recognition available to African women in Athens.

I. Introduction: African women in ‘crisis’ Greece

In recent years, austerity politics, high unemployment and increasing anti-migrant sentiment in Greece have subjected increasing numbers of people to conditions of precarity and uncertainty.¹ As elsewhere in Europe, these developments have inspired defensive, nationalist reflexes that have scapegoated migrants and intensified the vulnerability of Greece’s increasingly diversified and visible migrant population in multiple ways. A climate appears to have developed in which foreignness has become grounds for suspicion – a question you can ask anyone (Ahmed 2016). As a result, those perceived as bodies ‘out of place’, including the women at the heart of this paper, have found it increasingly difficult to secure livable lives.

¹ Throughout this study I use the term ‘precarity’, following Butler (2009a, 2009b), to describe the conditions of human life that social and political institutions are designed in part to minimise by ensuring that certain material needs are met. ‘Precariousness’ is, therefore, as Butler also argues, a politically induced condition to which certain populations are differentially exposed.

When I began my fieldwork in the autumn of 2014, Greece was entering into the seventh year of a debt crisis that many commentators believed threatened not only the collapse of the Greek economy and state, but also the very existence of the European Union (EU). At the time, Greece faced an unsustainable debt of 310 billion euro (£225 billion), economic activity was down by 25%, and some four million Greeks had been driven to the breadline (Pryce 2015).² Greek government policy had also taken a strongly conservative turn, introducing a series of draconian measures that included the dismantling of public goods and services, new forms of securitization, emergency legislation curtailing workers' rights and a more restrictive immigration policy (Athanasidou 2014). Most prominently, the government sought to assert itself through increasingly visible tactics of immigration control, effectively institutionalising racism through the actions of the state.³

African women are amongst those already marginalised groups who have been disproportionately affected by the crisis in Greece. They are more reliant on welfare services that have undergone severe cuts, are more vulnerable to unemployment (which affects their ability to secure and maintain legal status) and are more likely to be exploited within the workplace even when they do find jobs in the limited spheres available to them. Furthermore, these women are subjected to processes of racialization that intersect with gender and migration status to produce specific forms of complex disadvantage. Gendered ethnic and racial frames set the limits of cultural intelligibility in Greece, such that they are made Other in particular gendered and racialized ways. Prevailing stereotypes of African women as oppressed wives and mothers, uneducated and unskilled domestic workers, or sexualised and/or dangerous Others, deny these women visibility in all their complexity and variety (Lewis 2006). This not only exposes them to particular forms of vulnerability in many areas of their lives, but is also a form of invisibility that further marginalises them.

Bearing the external marker of racialized 'otherness' according to dominant normative definitions of Greekness, African women are amongst those who become defined by a static foreignness which constructs them as 'eternal newcomers', "forever suspended in time, forever 'just arriving'" (El-Tayeb 2011: xxv). Invisibility and/or assimilation is not a strategy available to them, as it has been for many white migrants of,

² The escalation of poverty was in large part due to the austerity measures required by the 'troika' (the European Commission, the European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund) in 2010 and 2012. This included: drastic cuts and the freezing of salaries, pensions and benefits; loss of jobs and high unemployment; the dissolution of the public health care system; increases in taxation; and, the privatisation of basic services and infrastructures.

³ On 4th August, 2012, the recently elected New Democracy government launched Operation *Xenios Zeus* – a key tactic of which was the use of police powers to conduct identity checks to verify the legal status of individuals presumed to be 'irregular' migrants. Greece also established thirty 'closed hospitality centres' for unauthorised migrants; raised the administrative detention of 'irregular' migrants and asylum-seekers to a possible maximum period of 18 months, without an individual assessment; and, finally, in 2013, reversed a law that had been ratified by parliament in early 2010, giving citizenship rights to so-called 'second generation' migrants.

for example, Albanian descent. It is far more difficult for them to become less ‘foreign’ by changing their names, learning the language and becoming Greek Orthodox.⁴ Their belonging is thus always open to dispute and misrecognition routinely seeps into their encounters with others. Whether in their interactions with the authorities, employers and co-workers, neighbours or fellow Athenians as they move around the city, the implications of their visibility as ‘non-Greeks’ are inescapable.

Though the normative constructions upon which these racialized and gendered processes and boundaries are based existed long before the current crisis, conditions of austerity, high unemployment, and rising xenophobia have further constricted the already limited spaces previously afforded to these Others as temporary workers and tolerated guests. In Greece, as elsewhere, hardening boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ are shown to be central in determining which bodies belong where, and which forms of social engagement, participation and claims of belonging are made possible. They do so by maintaining and by withholding privileges, and shaping differential entitlement to both rights and resources (Anthias 2006; Brah 1996; Konsta and Lazaridis 2010; Massey 1994; Yuval-Davis 1992; Yuval-Davis et al. 2006). Framed as outside national belonging and the rights and protections associated with it – and made visible in ways that heighten their exposure to discrimination – these women are differentially exposed to precarity as a result (Butler 2009a).

⁴ Converting to Greek Orthodoxy is extremely rare amongst African migrants. Only one of the women I met during my fieldwork had converted.

II. Research Methods

This research has grown out of my interest in some of the less debated aspects of migration to Greece. Rather than focusing on the ‘bigger picture’ of European migration flows, macro-economic indicators and totalizing state discourse, I wanted to analyse the less explored everyday practices and experiences of people affected by migration. In contrast to the quantitative, positivist approaches that often fail to properly contextualize data or address gender-biases in research design (Mahler and Pessar 2006), I employed ethnographic methods to reveal “the actual practices of actual people” (Smith 1987: 213). My interest has been in capturing the complex reality of migrant women’s lived experiences, while also highlighting their agency. Intended as research for women rather than about women (Allen and Baber 1992), my objective throughout has been not only to observe and describe women’s lives, but also to draw attention to their political and social struggles – to challenge the invisibility of migrant women in public discourse and to break down the stereotypical ways in which they are often constructed.

These aims necessarily informed the way I conducted my research. Moving migrant women’s experiences from the margins to the centre (hooks 1994), I did not view women as ‘objects’ to be observed and studied, but rather as co-participants in the research process. As such, they were encouraged to share their interpretations of their life-worlds as subjects with agency, history and their own idiosyncratic command of a story (Madison 2005). Approaching research in this way acknowledges that migrant women are ‘knowers’ (Kihato 2010). This epistemological stance had important implications for the specific methods I chose and how I used them in carrying out the research (Harding 1987). As knowledge-producers, women were given a political personal space in which to articulate their own experiences, in their own words and from their own viewpoints. Overall, adopting a “non-directive” (Abu-Lughod 2000: 23) and more flexible approach enabled me to form my inquiry around matters that the women found most interesting and most central, rather than imposing a preconceived agenda.

Though I am keenly aware that seeking to ‘give voice’ to migrant women in research and analysis cannot be taken to constitute a generous act on the part of the researcher, who ‘releases’ hidden, oppressed and marginalised experiences (Scott 1992, cited in Kambouri 2008: 8), I have tried to be as true to the women’s voices as my abilities and ‘inherently partial’ (Clifford 1986) view allows. Rather than taking the position of ‘speaking for’, as Alcoff (1991) argues against, I tried, wherever possible, to create the

conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with, rather than for, others. This more interactive, dialogic approach informed how I related to women on an interpersonal level, conducting interviews, for example, as an exchange between equals.

The material used in this paper is from data I collected over an 11 month period in 2014-2015, which I spent in Athens conducting research on the everyday lives of African women. UAWO was an obvious place to start, and from my very first meeting with the organization's President I spent a lot of my spare time at their office (see figure 1). In my capacity as volunteer, photographer and friend of the organization I was invited to accompany its members to events, festivals, meetings, conferences and demonstrations. Here I saw women 'in action' as part of the wider (and growing) activist scene in Athens, and was able to observe the way different members interacted not only with each other, but also with others outside of the organization, including activists, politicians, journalists and other migrants. By spending as much time as I could with them, even when



Figure 1: *The United African Women's Organization, Athens* (photo: Viki Zaphiriou-Zarifi)

there was no particular work to be done, I was able to witness the importance of the organization not only in fighting for migrant women's rights, but also as a space in which women could come for help, support and company. Amongst a population made up largely of individuals who are often socially, politically and economically isolated, the importance of this last dimension should not be underestimated.

In addition to this 'participant-observation' research, I conducted in-depth interviews with eighteen women from seven different countries across Africa: from Cameroon, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone.⁵ The approach I took had elements of snowball sampling in that many of the interviews arose from a pre-existing network of women. Although I met several of the women at the same time and always

⁵ Other women I met, but who were less central to my research, were from these and other African countries, including: Kenya, Seychelles, the Congo, and Tanzania.

approached them myself (and not through the more classic method of referrals associated with snowball sampling), there was a cumulative aspect to the way in which I met key participants. Furthermore, upon reflection, I found that the pathways by which I was able to access and approach women was indicative of their (in)visibility and degree of (non)integration into various areas of Greek society. I was able to come into contact with potential research participants through NGOs working with vulnerable groups in general, or migrants and African women in particular, at festivals and demonstrations around specific issues, or at collaborative meetings around shared interests. This, I would suggest, is fairly typical of the overall picture when it comes to Greeks and African women overlapping and sharing spaces in Athens. Even amongst those who work with African women or attend these events and celebrations of other cultures, I met very few people who knew or socialised with African women (and men) beyond these fairly limited spaces. In this sense, despite a very particular visibility, the women were part of a 'hidden population' and had it not been for time spent in participant-observation roles with organizations, gaining access to them would have been much more difficult.

III. The United African Women's Organization, Greece

The United African Women's Organization (UAWO) is not like other NGOs in Greece. Nor is it like the 'national women's associations' it so often gets grouped with, but which tend to focus their energies on cultural activities. It is the first supranational group to emerge independently. Run *by* African women *for* African women, its membership is made up of approximately 70 women from 14 nationalities: Sierra Leone, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Seychelles, Somalia, Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Cameroon, and DRC.⁶ With a small but active core group of members, UAWO can perhaps best be described as a bridge between the informal social networks women have developed and depend upon in their everyday lives, and the more formal NGO-governmental landscape. It does self-advocacy work, political campaigning, promotes the positive image of African women through cultural activities, is an access point to other support services and also has an important social dimension.

Yet it does all this with no formal structure as such. At the time of my research UAWO had one permanent staff member who has since left because the programme she was hired under came to an end. This programme, a combined EU and government funded Action Plan on gender-based violence (GBV) entitled 'Get Out of the Cycle', was UAWO's main source of funding at the time.⁷ The Greek employee not only arranged six seminars on GBV issues for the programme, but also ran the office and took on many other responsibilities. As a native Greek speaker with contacts in other organizations, she was an invaluable resource to many women. She helped them communicate with various authorities, fill out official forms and make phone calls, referred them to other organizations for food, legal aid and medical help and advised them on where to look for employment opportunities. Other than this source of funding, UAWO appeared to sustain its very low-cost operations through private donations made by "*friends of the organization*" who contributed to running costs (primarily, at the time, the office rent and utility bills).

At the time of writing, the organization is homeless – a situation it has faced before and will no doubt resolve soon. Yet despite this somewhat precarious existence, both financially and residentially (a condition it shares with many of the women it represents), it remains, by all accounts, the most active organization promoting not only African women's rights in Greece, but migrant women and migrant rights in general.

⁶ Some members have left due to the economic crisis, but it is unclear how many.

⁷ The programme was co-funded by the EU's European Social Fund and the Greek Ministry of Economy, Development and Tourism (with the support of the General Secretariat for Gender Equality).

The somewhat hard to pigeonhole character of the organization stems in part from its beginnings – emerging as it did from the struggles of real women living in difficult and changing circumstances. Rather than adopting a more rigid organizational structure, UAWO continues to be guided by the needs of its members. Maintaining this flexibility of approach is both a strength and a challenge. Fiercely independent yet open and collaborative, UAWO continues to juggle the complex needs of its diverse and sometimes diverging membership.

How UAWO came into being

In 2004, Laretta was fired from the place she had worked as a domestic worker for 11 years. Like so many other migrant women before, and after her, Laretta was dismissed without warning, compensation nor the *ensima* [social security stamps] she needed to renew her residence permit. This was not the first time Laretta had found herself both jobless and undocumented, but this time she refused to go into hiding.

So I was in the street again with no papers [documents], nothing. Let me tell you. I determine this time. I said ‘why?’ No. That time I was not scared at all, I’m telling you. That is the first time in my life I said something is wrong here. We have to put stop. This time I jump. I begin to find women organizations. I begin to talk, talk, talk to people and because I did that I get my papers again. Because those people that I was talking, talking they just contribute money, they pay for my paper and then I get my paper again. Do you understand what I mean? But this time I was determine. Because I think about that. I remember I was how many years without residence permit and then how I lose the residence permit and I remember what I pass the first time. I said no. [...] Believe me, I become popular in Greece. This time, African woman, who was thinking? Nobody think about that. It’s on that part, I begin to recall that ‘Laretta you are not the only one’. There are some people like him but they cannot talk and I know African women they don’t just go outside to talk. I said so it’s better for us... I thought let us have our own organization. Our own voice that will speak for us. So I decided to form the United African Women Organization.

Determined to fight against the injustices she knew many other African women were also facing, Laretta decided “to cry out for help and for her rights”.⁸ She did so by becoming involved with various Greek NGOs that offered support to migrants. This experience eventually secured Laretta her residence permit. In the process, it also taught her that a different kind of visibility was necessary if African women were to claim their rights. On 27th February, 2005, Laretta called a meeting of (mainly) African women in downtown Athens, and the United Women’s African Organization was formed. Building on the strong social networks African women in Athens employ every day to maximise their livability, the

⁸ Quoted on UAWO website: <https://uaworg.wordpress.com/>

women quickly organized into a formally constituted group with members, aims, and objectives. These aims remain unchanged, and are:

- to create awareness of various issues concerning the African women and their children living in Greece;
- to support and fight for the rights of especially our second generation and at all levels;
- to create mutual bonds of solidarity between Africans and our host the Greeks; to explore and incorporate the rich African woman heritage into the rich Greek heritage;
- and, to work hand in hand with various social, NGOs and other Organizations that stand for justice, non racial and friendly society for all.

Mobilising ‘African women’

Prior to the formation of UAWO, no organizations existed that African women felt sufficiently included their voices. Though a Greek Forum for Migrants (GFM) had been founded in 2002, they did not feel that it adequately represented them or their needs.⁹ There remains a sense that GFM represents the past: “*Greece is changing*,” one long-term member of UAWO observed, “*and the Forum will stay behind.*” As a group, African women had also been largely excluded from the two main sources of organized political activism: labour unions and political parties (both dominated by white Greek men). Even the women-led cleaners’ union was felt by most African women to have failed to represent them.¹⁰ The union’s primary focus on demanding legal contracts in the public sector for cleaners and other temporary workers excluded migrant labourers from non-EU countries by default (not to mention undocumented workers), because under Greek law neither can be employed by the Greek state.¹¹

Nor were the more radical anti-racist and feminist movements of the time considered by the women I met to be spaces in which they could easily articulate their own experiences and interests. Despite having contributed significantly to the politicization of

⁹ UAWO did eventually join the GFM, but it resists being subsumed under it and remains protective of its independent position.

¹⁰ The cleaners protest movement began in 2013 when, in a cost-cutting drive, 595 janitors at the Ministry of Economic Development, Inland Revenue, and Customs offices were placed on ‘reserve lists’. This meant that for eight months they would be paid only three-quarters of their salaries of 300-650 euros a month, and would then be sacked.

¹¹ Though this was later remedied when the Union remanded legal state contracts for all cleaners regardless of nationality or migrant status, their divergent interests had been brought to the fore and African women, once again, felt that neither themselves nor their interests were being represented.

migration by drawing public attention to migrant rights and the adverse conditions many migrants experience in Greece, the anti-racist movement has a history of largely excluding migrants (and, most notably, migrant women), from substantial and equal participation.¹² According to Zavos (2010), this is, at least in part, because anti-racist discourses reiterate the assumptions of the nation-state and of national identity as natural, self-evident and unambiguous ontologies and, consequently, maintain and regulate hierarchies of entitlement and participation.¹³ Evidently, African women’s experiences of discrimination as female, non-Greek and racialized Others, cannot be assimilated into the experiences of either Greek women or male migrants.

UAWO emerged from a recognition that, despite inevitable differences, as ‘African women in Greece’, they occupied a particular position of intersectional disadvantage *vis-à-vis* Greek society and state. “*We have been suffering for long time,*” Lauretta explained. “*We have our own austerity measure for long time.*” Since long before the current crisis African women in Athens have been dealing with what Emejulu and Bassel (2017: 186) have called “routinised crises”. These are the ordinary, everyday and institutionalised social and

economic inequalities based on race, class, gender, religion and legal status that Lauretta is here referring to. Thus, the emergence of UAWO can be understood as a historically specific response, organized around the category ‘African women’, to marginalisation and precarity, and to being racialized. “*The Greeks they are seeing women all Africans,*” Lauretta explained. “*They call them ‘mavri’ [black], they call me ‘mavri’.*” Hence, while many

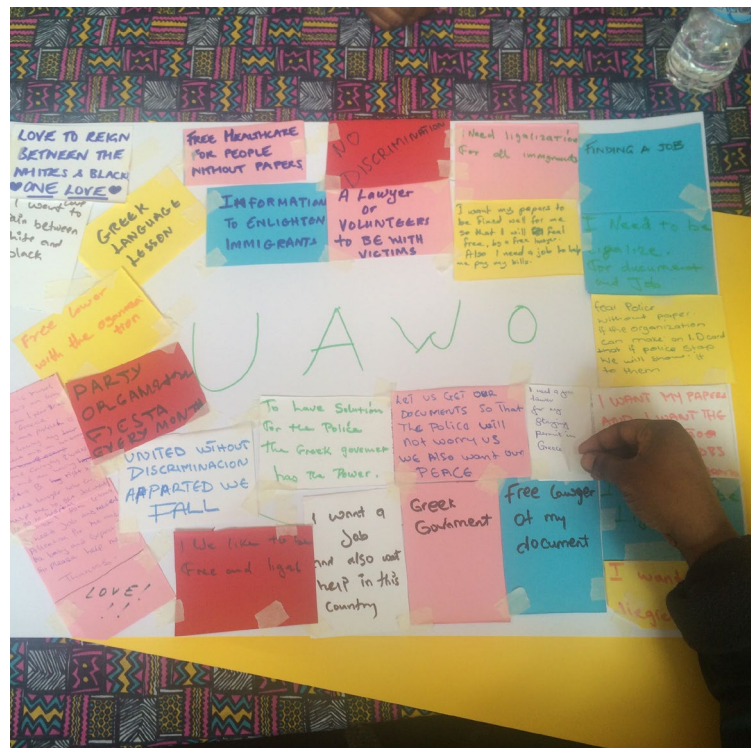


Figure 2: UAWO members express share their needs and wishes anonymously during a seminar (photo: Viki Zaphiriou-Zarifi)

¹² See Zavos (2010) for illuminating discussion on this.

¹³ They also, Zavos argues elsewhere, reproduce sexist and racialized borders that place migrants in subordinate and dependent positions *vis-à-vis* Greek male, political patronage and represent migrant women as passive, backward and dominated subjects (as in descriptions of victims of trafficking as passive victims of male violence with no voice, agency or resistance) (Zavos 2014).

of the issues these women face predate the current crisis (even though they may appear ‘new’), the asymmetrical impact of the crisis and ensuing austerity measures have disproportionately fallen on already-marginalised groups. As Laretta also observed:

It will be more worst for us. You understand. Things will change for the worst, not for the best. Why do I think that: because when you eat the boss is that are going to employ – our employers – it’s a domino something. It will fall on you. But when it start, it will start from the bosses and then it will end up in us. So the end we are going to pay the worst.

Economically hard times have compounded the difficulties these women already faced due to precarious employment, legal status or greater reliance on public services. Yet, paradoxically, the crisis has also provided new opportunities. It has brought greater recognition, publicity, and support from other quarters of Greek society (as well as internationally) and has become the basis upon which to build new solidarities with other ‘victims’ of austerity.

Based upon a shared identity, UAWO is also a rejection of essentialised constructions that frame marginalisation, unemployment, poverty and so on as consequences of either individual failure or the result of belonging to a somehow naturally ‘inferior’ group. Even within the solidarity movements of recent years, there is a danger that the very ‘ordinariness’ of the women’s disadvantage, combined with the construction of their positionings as particularly problematic, will exclude them (or differentially include them) in wider social movements and struggles (Emejulu and Bassel 2015). Thus, as Emejulu and Bassel (2017: 197) argue with regards to minority women more generally, African women in Athens need “to navigate *both* material *and* discursive obstacles—about whose crisis counts, who is a legitimate interlocutor and who can mobilise for social justice” [emphases in original]. “*Greece is a country,*” Hana explained, “*that is somehow show you that you are nobody, just stay where you are, you know. So this door is not – it really don’t help most of them to come out.*” In this context, self-advocacy becomes even more vital. As the UAWO website urges, African women must “come together with one voice and fight for their rights and all the privileges they are deprived of, for so long.”¹⁴

At one level, the founding of UAWO can be understood as being about creating a sense of belonging to make life more livable and deal with practical challenges together. At another, however, it was also crucially about creating a public identity in order to claim rights. This was especially important in Greece where participation in political events (such as the Anti-Racist Festival) or in administrative policy ‘dialogues’ has been premised on having an officially designated group membership, and where lack of such affiliations

¹⁴ <http://uaworg.wordpress.com/about/>

renders participation in public contexts problematic and can result in further exclusion or marginalisation (Zavos 2008). Hence, by calling on a cultural identity and the collective affects of belonging, the African woman could officially become a social subject who could then become a subject of rights (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013). This was also about building and politicising a conscious understanding of a shared social position. Recognising that only then can conscious strategies develop to engage with relations of power, UAWO deliberately creates a sense of 'groupness' with others that has the potential to transform how women are able to question and resist as active subjects (Piacentini 2014). Part of this arises from, as it did for Grace, a strengthened sense of one's own possibility: "*When I get there, I can see that I have a potential because their motto is you are not alone. I can see that I am not alone.*"

However, many obstacles continue to plague women's involvement. The paradox is that hard times bring increased material obstacles to participation and greater politicisation simultaneously. Inevitably (and understandably), there are those who come to the organization in their hour of need never to be seen again. Not everyone has the time or desire to be involved in activism – the potential obstacles are many. Live-in domestic work leaves virtually no spare time for involvement; transport costs to attend meetings and events across the city can be prohibitive; and, struggles with documents and lack of employment can be all-consuming. Pressing needs and commitments mean that many will choose to focus on their own and their family's survival during hard times. Furthermore, the gendering of domestic roles often means that women assume so many domestic and job-related responsibilities that they lack the time (and possibly the inclination) to become more politically active, whereas men have greater contact with others (hooks 1984). Hana explained:

They [men] are the one that will go and do the paper, while the woman is at home. The woman just goes to the kitchen and cook, eat, you know. I have seen some African women they don't even know where to pay light bill. They don't pay water bill. They don't know. They don't communicate with landlord even to pay rent. So you find out that the men they make their way, because when you start integrating, doing things on your own, you are more wiser than the person that have never done it.

An "*isolating mentality*", according to Hana, has meant that women have not had "*that strength or that knowledge to approach other Greek organization with their problems.*" This has made a specifically African women's organization all the more necessary. Adanech agreed, adding that women are much more likely to talk about their problems to other African women, who will also much more easily "*see her 'vlema'* [the look in her eye] *and understand the woman.*"

'The house that Laretta built'

UAWO can be seen as an identity-based group in that it is a space of similarity and safety, born in part in order to fulfil needs of recognition, belonging, solidarity or inclusion (Carastathis 2013). Being amongst others 'like you' and having one's experiences affirmed is an important need fulfilled by UAWO; it is also an important part of feeling 'at home'. As Laretta told one new member of the organization: "*make yourself at home. This is the house that Laretta built for you!*" That UAWO has contributed to women's ability to build feelings of 'at homeness' in Athens was reflected in the way many members talked about the organization. Take Hana's comments, for example:

as Africans we have a culture – we are somehow closed up. We prefer to talk about ourselves, our problems within ourselves. So with African Women Organization it has helped many women to... it's like our refuge home. You know, we feel comfortable when we... We safe. We can come, we see ourselves all the same, whether we are from Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, we are all just the same. We all have something common. So we able to relate and say our problems you know in one word that we understand and we feel safe. Because I think all of us here, we are here because of some poverty back home that drove us here and we know the problems back home with our families looking up to us, so we understand immediately somebody will start saying their problem we know.

The double common bond of shared experiences 'back home' and as African women in Athens contributes to a clarity and certainty of identity that life in Greece cannot provide (El-Tayeb 2011). Thus, as a space in itself, and in the creation of other spaces, UAWO contributes to the creation of what Seaman (1996: 53) refers to as a "community of strangers" (cited in Ahmed 1999: 336-7). Here, shared experiences provide an anchor and UAWO serves as an organizational structure that channels personal experiences into common action (Christopoulou and Lazaridis 2011). Women pool common experiences and share information, they find suitable solutions to problems and offer insights and support, and they create and expand networks and coping strategies.

Women talked of UAWO as "*home*", a "*refuge home*" and a "*safe place*" where they "*feel comfortable*", yet it was simultaneously a hub of activism and a place from which many political actions were born. This reminded me of hooks' (1991: 385, 389) writing on homeplace "as a site of resistance and liberation struggle..."; as "that space where we return for renewal and self-recovery, where we can heal our wounds and become whole."

Laretta echoed this approach in a speech she made on International Women's Day in 2009:

We say 'united we stand' and we mean it. We stand and we endure because we have something that makes us strong and helps us stand upright. And this is our organization, which is our home and family..."

In a context in which the mere presence of African migrants has been constructed as a threat to the nation, this statement of togetherness alone can be seen an expression of resistance to the nonintegrative, othering policies of the state. As hooks (1991: 384-5) writes:

“For those who dominate and oppress us benefit most when we have nothing to give our own, when they have so taken from us our dignity, our humanness that we have nothing left, no “homeplace” where we can recover ourselves....”

Thus, coming together as a group in ways that create a sense of belonging by bringing together ‘there’ and ‘here’ is deeply political. It resists negatively ascribed categorisations and seeks to counter the processes and practices that seek to keep these women in a state of permanent impermanence and insecurity and helps women to claim a sense of “in placeness” (Piacentini 2014: 174). Even for women where there is no immediate material gain from joining, this constitutes important social change in the conditions of living as an African woman in Athens (ibid). Gift has found neither legal status nor work through UAWO, but she has gained something else, altogether more intangible but no less important: “*they are my family now.*”

The ‘African woman’ identity

At UAWO feelings of inclusiveness are maintained by the assertion of an African cultural identity and cultural ‘sameness’ (Piacentini 2014). ‘Africa’ becomes an authentic-but-static point of reference for identifications, but it does so without flattening out difference (as processes of racialization do). Calling upon a supranational identity enables UAWO to work ‘above’ and ‘across’ differences, as Laretta explained:

We have a lot of division in Africa, you understand. And this division doesn’t take us anywhere. It just make us to be always African. You understand what I mean. We have divisions. You are from this tribe, you are from that tribe. Even in my country we have about fifteen tribe in five and a half million people. You understand, so we have that division.

Understanding one’s identity as a coalition enables UAWO to cross boundaries imposed by systems of oppression (Carastathis 2013). As will be discussed further in the following section, UAWO also form strategic alliances with many other migrant and non-migrant groups.

Such an approach also creates more space, allowing for divergences and inevitable differences *within* the African woman identity category. Less absolute, it recognises that in any group mobilisation, whether identity-based or not, there is “a negotiation of various

political interests, conflicting though they may be, that exist within an identity category” (Crenshaw 1995: 12). Mobilising the ‘African woman’ identity thus requires on-going curiosity and work, as Laretta recognises:

I want to bring African women together to know, you know, to try to learn about different, different part of Africa. About our divisions and what will make us be together, to make us know that we are from the same – no matter the division – but we are still Africans.

As bell hooks (1984: 55-56) similarly argues, “Divisions between women of color will not be eliminated until we assume responsibility for uniting (not solely on the basis of resisting racism) to learn about our cultures, to share our knowledge and skills, and to gain strength from our diversity.” By providing a space in which women can exchange stories, traditions and experiences of ‘back home’, UAWO continues to pursue the organization’s aim of exploring and incorporating “the rich African woman heritage into the rich Greek heritage.” Satisfied with neither the ‘universalistic’ politics of the Left, which have proven to be ethnocentric, masculinist and exclusionary, nor the identity politics of national associations, which essentialise and reify boundaries between groups (Yuval-Davis 1999), UAWO practices a ‘transversal politics’. It looks for commonalities without being universalistic, on the one hand, while affirming difference without being transfixed by it on the other (Cockburn and Hunter 1999).

Without hindering a common frame of action, the differences amongst members still foster tensions that are not represented in the organization’s public profile of a rather homogeneous and ‘tight’ collectivity (Zavos 2008). Take Adanech, for instance, who insisted on huge differences between Ethiopia and “*the rest*” of Africa (whose “*black*” inhabitants she distanced herself from). Claiming Ethiopia as a more developed and progressive country, she said that Ethiopians were generally more advanced and have a “*different mentality*”. Despite all this, Adanech still insisted on the importance of unity in Greece. First and foremost, she explained, they are all migrants. So, even though in Ethiopia she would not feel the same unity with the other women – would not even be able “*to coexist with them*” – in Greece they are all fighting racism and so to join, for instance, the Ethiopian or Eritrean Association, she argued, would be racist too. Furthermore, Adanech told me, “*if they raise their voices and act a certain way I will understand and know why. I will understand Africans better than you.*”

As with any group of people working together (particularly when they work so collaboratively) there were differences of opinion, disagreements and clashes over priorities, responsibilities and agendas. Some women felt that there was an ‘in-group’ from which they were excluded, and others felt side-lined when new members came in and became

more involved. Over time, I came to realise there was far more politics and negotiating going on than one might at first assume. When Lucee fainted (after a panic attack brought on by document-related anxiety) and I went to visit her to see if she was okay, Ruth, upon learning of my visit, informed me that I should have gone “*on behalf of the organization.*” She explained that now next time Lucee is asked to take part she will use the fact that no one went to visit her from UAWO as an excuse not to. “*I know Nigerian women,*” she emphatically concluded. It was then that I realised how much conscious effort there was to make women feel supported outside of the organization. Some of the acts I had interpreted as the expression of friendship were more deliberate and calculated than I had realised – no less supportive or kind, but not always part of an intimacy I had assumed. I also witnessed what happened when women did not feel there was enough give and take – particularly when it came to persuading women to attend events. Without an immediate gain, monetary or otherwise, some members did not feel they could or should put precious energy and time into participating. Some newer and younger members also suspected more established members of making money from voluntary events where they danced, for instance, and so felt exploited. They failed to see, as one older member put it, that “*you have to put in to get out.*” Ruth added that “*it’s not about dancing for the organization – being part of it will lift self up.*”

Free from the rigidity of institutional, legal and governmental categorisations, UAWO is better able to represent more women. Perhaps most importantly, it does not need to concern itself with document status, except when other organizations, require that the women UAWO ‘sends’ to participate in their programmes have legal residence permits. Furthermore, UAWO represents and stands for those who occupy particular intersections of disadvantage that may not fit the image of migrant women as victims of local, national and transnational networks of exploitation. A particular kind of invisibility afflicts women who are not easily identifiable according to prevailing categories of victim identities or who do not fit homogenised ways to be marginal members of a specific social category (Yuval-Davis 2006). For instance, you do not, as Laretta pointed out, need to be a victim of trafficking to need saving.

Like these trafficking women – they are more prone to be saved than those women. And these categories of women, nobody talk about them, they are not exist. They just don’t exist. You understand? So that is one of the reason we have African women organization to bring out such kind of problems that is... you know... hidden.

Laretta described women who become caught in Greece, trapped in relationships with men who “*are so wicked that they don’t even try for these women to have a residence permit. But at the same time these women are giving birth to children and at the same time they are like slaves.*” Unable to

return home because, given “*the poor conditions we are living in Africa*” and the odd 50 euro the husbands send back every couple of months, they are unable to talk to their families who will “*react very bad to her. They will say she is luck – she is kicking her luck.*” Rather than face the “*disgrace*” of returning home, these women feel they have no choice but to remain in Greece. “*These women don’t have anybody to save her,*” Laretta concluded. This idea of women not existing if they are not recognisable to NGOs who focus on stereotypical notions of victimhood came up repeatedly in women’s narratives. They talked not only of exclusion, but also of isolation and helplessness: being unable to “*do anything without your husband. It’s like you are in a bondage.*” These are the women that many of the members I spoke to felt UAWO was particularly well-placed to help, and who they believed would benefit most from coming together as African women.

Ways of working: reciprocity, advocacy and voice

Processes of gendered racialization produce particular intersections of disadvantage that result in particular experiences, and give rise to particular claims and needs. Laretta put it thus: “*As African women, our problems are vast problems. You understand? It’s vast. A lot of things are inside, because one thing is their problems that people don’t understand about African women.*”

As Hill Collins (1990: 203) argues elsewhere, because “the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power work together to produce particular



Figure 3: Rehearsals for a performance on document issues at UAWO (photo: Viki Zaphiriou-Zarifi)

patterns of domination,” that also serve to justify their oppression, African women’s activism must demonstrate a comparable complexity. Accordingly, UAWO empowers women and reinforces a sense of shared experience and commonality in ways that

strengthens both their individual and collective capacity to resist. Their collective efforts seek to create positive change in women's lives – by securing legal status for their children, by increasing their mobility and ability to speak for themselves, by countering negative racialized representations, and by improving their conditions of work. Through an approach that combines welfare, self-advocacy and collective action, UAWO enables individuals to see how their current or potential everyday activities contribute to and participate in women's activism (Hill Collins 1990).¹⁵ From this perspective, the contributions of individual women – whether of Nneoma caring for her children or Laretta talking back to racist comments on the bus – represent the essential, if often unacknowledged actions taken by countless women to resist negative representations and enhance the possibilities of their survival.

UAWO emerged from, and continues to be part of, what Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013: 190) refer to as “the world of the mobile commons.” This is the wider world of information, knowledge, tricks for survival, mutual care, social relations, services exchanged, solidarity and sociability through which migrants manage their lives. Actions such as accompanying individuals to appointments, sharing information, advocating for others, and engaging with other support groups may not make headlines, but they are crucial to how women navigate challenging contexts. For many women, sharing experiences, planning entrepreneurial activities, learning about rights and trading information on lawyers, services, government benefits and jobs, is critical to how they secure greater livability. As a collective space in which these activities not only take place, but are nurtured, UAWO is a “knowledge and affective reservoir” (ibid) that strengthens women's capacities to counter the differential distribution of precarity, grievability and vulnerability (Butler 2009a).

UAWO also engages in a transversal politics that resists the kinds of autocratic decision-making mechanisms in which certain individuals take it upon themselves to ‘represent’ their communities (Yuval-Davis 1999). Though Laretta has been ‘the face’ of UAWO for a long time, she encourages other women not only to participate, but also to take a lead role. This, according to prominent researcher and human rights activist, Anna Vouyioukas, distinguishes UAWO from other organizations:

I think there is a major difference with the [United] African Women's Organization because they have this approach you know of new members again and again and also empowering women, which is really important. And it's you know so feminist to me. So anti-male or macho, anti-patriarchal attitude because you can see it – there's a different story there. You

¹⁵ This is important because, as Hill Collins (1990: 202) has argued more generally, a focus on public, official, visible political activity, misunderstands the meaning of political activism and resistance in women's lives.

can see men they are very well informed. You know they lobby, they keep the network members close together, they work hard, they know what the situation is all about, blah blah blah, which is great. But on the other hand they will not abandon their seat. There's no predecessors. There's no new people coming in, you know what I mean? With the male dominant pattern of political participation. Which is stopping not just women, but men as well. This is very often the case.

Recognising the danger that exceptionalism or celebrity could obscure discussion about socio-economic and political conditions by making it about a unique individual, Laretta emphasises again and again that this is not about her: *“Let the public see that oh no this is not about Laretta. You understand. So that why we put different, different, different women.”*

Through this feminist mode of leadership, UAWO has avoided some of the pitfalls of other organizations, where they speak “with a unified cultural voice” (Yuval-Davis 1993: 627). By sustaining a more open and inclusive membership, by bringing new members in and encouraging them to speak, UAWO adopts an anti-exclusionary practice that is at once more democratic and looser in structure and, ultimately, enriches the organization as a whole. This is largely, according to Anna Vouyioukas, down to UAWO's leadership: *“You are not a gatekeeper, to use this term. You are a gate-opener. That's what Laretta is.”* Laretta told me that having lived under a dictatorship (in Sierra Leone), she is determined to run the organization not only as a democracy, but also as a feminist one:

women give chance to other women [...] Believe it, it's real – it's rare to see a woman that just want to be there and block the other women. No, believe it, it's true. It's feminist. The men have that, you know, if they are the President, they want to be the President. To be the leader. But women... let us just say women like to work together. You understand? We like to work together. That is feminist life.

Laretta has also been motivated by a strong sense of justice and the need to *“keep fighting for the voiceless, because you have many voiceless women here that they cannot say or do anything. They are mix up.”* According to the UAWO website, Laretta was moved to set up an organization for African women because she saw that they “lack the ability to express their problems.” Countering the silencing of African women's voices in politics and in wider society has continued to be one of UAWO's central aims. Indeed, the powerful (empowering) experience of public-speaking led Laretta to believe strongly in sharing the microphone, wherever possible, with other women:

That is what I am giving to other women. [...] I give them chance. I give them the microphone, you know. You know how powerful this tool? Somebody to give you a microphone? It's a power. This microphone that I am using, I give to them. Another weapon, you understand. I just don't use the microphone for myself. I said come and use it. Don't be afraid.

Speaking for oneself as a member of a group opens avenues for women both individually and collectively. It gives them the power to “talk back” to authority and challenge the politics of domination (hooks 1989) not only through political events and campaigns, but also in their everyday lives. *“When you give them that – empower them to meet the public, it’s something like integrating,”* Laretta explained, *“So they begin to open. You know, they begin to feel free. [...] it’s empowering them to integrate little by little in the society.”* Talking about and sharing one’s own vulnerability thus becomes a way to assert oneself. It demands recognition as actors with the ability (and right) to speak and be heard. These everyday acts, in turn, disrupt prevailing assumptions of them as voiceless, helpless individuals. They are acts of citizenship that chip away in often imperceptible ways at prevailing power relations and can, over time, effect important social change (Piacentini 2014).¹⁶

African women engaging in public speaking in Greece is particularly radical because, though migrant men may also be seen as ‘unwelcome Others’, they are not entrapped under the expectation of silence in the same way that migrant women are. Silence, in exchange for being ‘here’, is a precondition for being marginally, and partially, accepted within a predetermined and delineated space (Christopoulou and Lazaridis 2011). Contributing to the production of vulnerability, this is a silence that is conditioned by the expectation of further silence, permitting neither integration nor acceptance (ibid). Gender thus functions as a signifier of vulnerability and victimhood, and of oppression and backwardness, as well as ‘otherness’ (Zavos 2010, 2014). In this context, the sight and sound of African women speaking in public remains somewhat subversive, as if they are breaking an unspoken contract of silence by doing so (particularly when they speak of their own experiences and even more so when they do so in Greek).¹⁷

As Zavos (2014) argues in her illuminating discussion of migrant women’s public performances, the public presence of migrant women in Greece crosses several normalised and normative boundaries: the gendered inscription of the public domain, and of politics, as a masculine domain where only universalizing narratives are considered ‘properly’ political; and, the racialized/nationalised culture of political engagement, where – if women do engage in public politics – it is mainly native (Greek) women. So, when African women are publicly present, when they stand up and talk of their own experiences, they are doing more than challenging prevailing notions of migrant women as backward, passive victims.

¹⁶ When African women speak Greek, as UAWO encourages them to do, this also challenges assumptions about their inability or lack of desire to learn Greek.

¹⁷ This is perhaps the one criterion that could be a potential obstacle to women speaking in public. UAWO felt it was important for women to speak in Greek wherever possible to counter the image of African women as too lazy, uneducated or foreign to learn the language.

Even though it takes place mostly within prescribed spaces, collectively speaking out in protest in this context is a deeply revolutionary act.

Prioritising authenticity of voice and the experience of speaking out for oneself, rather than qualifications, eloquence or language skills, is a radical departure from the way conventional politics are ‘done’. UAWO’s approach is in stark contrast to and, indeed, challenges, those that seek to conduct politics in generalised terms and neutralised language – in ways that avoid the individualised or personal account. Consider Anna Vouyioukas’ comments:

I’m touched to be honest because sometimes she might have a person who she knows is not the right person and I’ve told her this. I’ve told her ‘Lauretta I don’t think she did well – you should have somebody else’. She said ‘no Anna, we should have her, because only this way they will learn.’ [...] So she will let a woman who has suffered speak publicly about what participation is all about or what her working conditions are all about. Speaking from her heart, being very individual, being very “sentimental” (quote, quote, okay?). Speaking with passion. And she thinks this is political. So, she’s not, you know, radicalising the agenda but she is bringing a lot of new elements in this.

At conferences, political meetings, parliamentary debates and so on, many of these women, as marginal Others, lack the authority of political, academic or institutional discourses. What they do have, however, is the passion of experience and remembrance. Not “the authority of experience” which, hooks (1994: 91) warns, is all too often used to silence and exclude, but the “spirit that orders those words, that testifies that, behind them – underneath, every where – there is a lived reality.”

When women get up to speak about their own experiences, they are claiming to know their truth. Theirs is the particular knowledge that comes from suffering that is, according to hooks (1994: 91), “a way of knowing that is often expressed through the body, what it knows, what has been deeply inscribed on it through experience.” It is this passion of experience and remembrance that Hana refers to when she says “*you really feel the voice. The pain. The cry*”:

They have so many organization out there that are mostly the Greeks. Even representing African communities, things like that, which they never really go into because I don’t think that... what will I say? Somebody representing somebody and being that person is two different to be. Because when we have the Africans, we really – it’s like a story written. We don’t go out, go and search, go, go to know what is happening Sierra Leone, to know what is happen, to see the life. Even when we are not there we feel it because our families are going through things there. We are losing family. Like now in Sierra Leone, this ebola, we have lost people. People are crying there because they are losing their families, they are losing their children so it is – we are inside the problems. We are the ones facing. We are the victims, you know. So, we really feel it and we know it more than any other group that will represent us. Just reading it and saying it, you know, because sometimes the African women organization when someone will try to force women to talk, when they stand there to talk, you really feel the voice. The pain. The cry. That this is really the victim of what is you know.

Even if you are not first-hand but you are there from family members, you see. So, it's really UAWO that is why we are.

Far from non-political, the women's testimonies, grounded in felt and lived experiences, give them a power and an authority that theorizing alone could never carry. Insisting that this is the most important location from which one can know, UAWO challenges what it means to be political, who has the right to speak, when, where and to whom. Crucially, articulating experiences of victimisation, exploitation and abuse for themselves, is a display of agency that simultaneously counters the tendency to view these women as backward and voiceless. Using the victimhood narrative as an effective way for women to access the public sphere and highlight inequalities as a public issue requiring policy action, while rejecting the role of passive and vulnerable objects, UAWO performs a tricky but necessary balancing act.¹⁸ As Sassen (2002) points out, there is, after all, a distinction between powerlessness and the condition of being an actor even though lacking in power. For African women in Athens seeking greater livability, this is a crucial difference and one they work hard to highlight.

¹⁸ This can be the high price paid by minority women in order to be seen and heard by policy-makers (Emejulu and Bassel 2015).

IV. Claiming Visibility...

Recognising the connection between visibility and rights, UAWO seeks symbolic gains in order to secure a foothold in public debates from which they can make claims. In the struggle over what kinds of protests against the prevailing regime of citizenship can be seen and heard (Tyler 2013), UAWO have identified and mobilised collectively as mothers on behalf of their children, as activists, as ‘exotic Others’, and as women mobilising international discourses of equality and women’s rights.

Applying an ‘acts of citizenship’ framework of analysis to these four, sometimes overlapping, areas of UAWO activism, the following section illuminates how UAWO appropriate stereotypical representations of African women to collectively resist and counter processes of marginalisation. The notion of ‘acts of citizenship’, as formulated by Isin and Nielsen (2008), introduces the idea of citizenship as enacted performatively to refer to the acts by which actors constitute themselves as subjects of rights. Thus, subjects who are not citizen may *act* as citizens, thereby constituting themselves as those with ‘the right to claim rights’ (Isin 2009). Crucially for our purposes here, this expands the idea of citizenship to include acts performed in and through bodies, in the media and on the internet, at the borders and on the streets (ibid).

... as mothers: No to Racism from the Baby’s Cradle

UAWO launched its first campaign in late November 2005, with the support of antiracist, feminist and other migrant groups. This campaign, entitled ‘No to Racism from the Baby’s Cradle’, began with a demonstration in central Athens. Posters were prepared appropriating the well-known Benetton advertisements that depicted a group of babies of different skin colour (see figure 4), and leaflets were handed out demanding legalisation, the right to birth certificates and citizenship rights for children born in Greece to migrant parents.



Figure 4: Campaign poster for 'No to Racism from the Baby's Cradle'.

The text reads: "We return with the demand 'NO to racism from the cradle'. Birth certificates should be issued to migrants' children born in Greece and (they should be registered with the municipality."

Conceived by individual mothers who had been contesting policies harmful to their children on a daily basis, the campaign proved to be an extremely effective way to mobilise women who had previously been uninterested or unable to participate. Hana's response was fairly typical. Tired of "*facing this discrimination*" at her children's school alone, she immediately understood that "*I cannot fight alone. It's something we have to come together, bring this out because maybe there are things some people take advantage because it's not known.*" Starting with this campaign was particularly effective because the issue was shared by all migrant parents and so provided solid grounds on which to build strategic alliances with other migrant groups. Mobilising the mother stereotype as a way to demand recognition and respect for themselves, as well as papers and citizenship rights for their children was also a clever political move. It appropriated the most 'benign' of the gendered stereotypes through which African women are commonly 'seen', which was also one that Greek parents and those sympathetic to children could relate to and, crucially, be moved by.

As noted above with regards to the organization's changing circumstances, UAWO is not only a flexible, but also an evolving entity. Where possible, they experiment and try to learn from what works and what does not. They cannot afford to waste precious resources, time and energy on repeating mistakes; and, when successful, they build and repeat. Widely considered a success, this campaign proved formative in that it established several ways of working that have continued to characterise UAWO's approach. Firstly, they formed alliances with other groups from the outset. The campaign was launched with the support of the Pan-Hellenic Network of Women Immigrants, and went on to create a broad 'initiative committee' made up of trade unions, other migrant organizations, and municipal government representatives. Secondly, understanding the importance of media coverage, UAWO ensured that all demonstrations and events were covered widely by newspapers, radio stations and TV channels.¹⁹ Thirdly, the campaign adopted a multifaceted approach, including a petition, a series of public events (later to include concerts, debates and press conferences)



Figure 5: UAWO pose for journalists with then Minister for Immigration, Tasia Christodoulou, at a rally for 'second-generation' rights outside parliament on the even of a vote on changes to citizenship law. 24th June, 2015 (photo: Viki Zaphiriou-Zarifi)

and the establishment of a website to coordinate members, spread information and raise awareness.²⁰ Lastly, although the campaign was issue-led, it also looked to broader, longer-term goals: aiming towards wider social intelligibility, mobilising increasing numbers of migrants, building networks of solidarity and gaining the support of the Greek public. These were reflected in the two main campaign aims which, according to a leaflet published in 2006, were:

¹⁹ The first demonstration was held on 3rd December 2005, the second on 7th October 2006 and there have been many since as the issue has evolved. For instance, during my fieldwork there was a rally outside parliament in 2015 as a vote was taking place on a new citizenship law for children of migrant parents.

²⁰ This website no longer exists.

1. To gain the support of the Greek public, thereby creating a feeling of solidarity towards migrants more generally.
2. To encourage second generation migrants to come out of isolation, find a voice and rally for their rights.

This campaign had a significant impact, not least in that it succeeded in its stated goal of mobilising a whole generation. Many ‘second-generation’ activists today acknowledge the debt they owe to UAWO and this campaign, bringing the issue as it did to the attention not only of other migrant groups, but also to large sections of Greek society.

The ‘No to Racism from the Baby’s Cradle’ campaign also marked a significant departure from the way things had previously been done on the Athenian activist scene. Instead of Greek activists taking leadership roles with migrant groups in support, this campaign was initiated, orchestrated, and organized by the women themselves.²¹ Moreover, the presence of African women and their children at the front of these demonstrations was, at the time, a completely novel sight. Previous demonstrations were usually dominated by Greek activists and migrant men (Zavos 2014). Understanding the power of their collective presence and visibility on the streets of Athens, the children of women from different African countries were instructed to sing Greek Christmas songs. Bringing together linguistic and religious signifiers in this way was a powerful statement of belonging. It also marked the beginning of what has become a significant movement in Greece.

In a context in which certain bodies being seen as political is a display of power and agency that can provoke anxiety, fear and resistance from some quarters, politically ‘coming out’ as mothers in this way proved to be an extremely effective strategy. Though it may appear to reinforce stereotypes, the women adopted the pre-written scripts according to which they are normally ‘read’ in Greece in order to subvert such representations. By speaking in public spaces for the first time ‘as mothers’, they were able to voice their own claims in ways that contrasted with prevailing representations of victimhood and backwardness and marked the emergence of new political subjectivities and discourses (Zavos 2014). As Zavos (2014: 232), observes, “Identifying migrant women’s agency in such acts of performative appropriation of available discourses and terms of address is important for recognizing the different ways in which they actively wield power and recast national and political imaginaries.” Constituting themselves as the mothers of those with ‘the right to claim rights’ (Isin 2009), they were speaking to the norms within which they lived, rather than operating outside them. Acting as citizens by proxy on behalf of their

²¹ See Zavos (2010, 2014) for further discussion on how things were previously done.

children they were thus able to claim social intelligibility within common and culturally legible discourses.

Strategically, this was a relatively unthreatening way for women who had been constructed as Other to announce their arrival on the political scene without provoking a backlash. By politicising the mother stereotype, they were able to push the political agenda while simultaneously validating their claims for respect and understanding, and justifying their reasons for migrating to Greece in the first place (Zavos 2012). As Anna Vouyioukas commented:

They were there for their newly born or young children's rights. So they sacrificed – this is a narrative which comes up very often among migrants – that you sacrifice (and not just migrants in Greece, Greek migrants elsewhere) you sacrifice, you put aside your aspirations, your I don't know plans for the future for your children, and then you realise – this is the situation in Greece – they were for nothing, because they are in a worst position than you! They do not have some kind of an identity. They belong nowhere. There is this no-man's land thing in the legislation so they don't – they are not from Nigeria because they were born in Greece, but they are not Greek because they are not given some kind of an identity or citizenship. So no matter what you have done in order to have a better future for your children, or give life here, give birth to your child here, it's for nothing!

Invoking the narrative of parental sacrifice is a way to tactically build alliances by appealing to commonality with Greek women. It also deflects criticism, justifies migration (for the future of their children), and evokes sympathy while allowing women to be seen as non-political and, therefore, somehow less threatening (Zavos 2012).

Refocusing attention away from 'dangerous' Others and onto their children, the campaign also disrupted the easy pigeonholing that often accompanies stereotypes. The tendency is, for instance, to treat victims of trafficking separately to mothers, failing to recognise that women may (and often are) both. Similarly, the families of domestic workers are often rendered invisible so that women are not hampered from performing their roles (see also Andall 2003). By claiming visibility and rights on behalf of their children, African women were reminding Greek society that they are more than domestic workers, prostitutes, victims of trafficking and exotic Others; that they are worthy mothers struggling to feed, clothe and educate their children, just like 'us'.

Crucially, the campaign also played to the sympathies of the Greeks. Although it was not an issue that Greek citizens shared a direct concern for, it was certainly one that they could be moved by. Anna Vouyioukas explained that they were "*touched*":

because the Greek people are very sensitive when it comes to children. Instead of claiming citizenship for themselves or long term residence for themselves or indefinite time residence, they claimed citizenship for babies born in Greece. And the slogan was amazing. And it touched Greeks because they made you realise this child was born here. They attend the Greek school. They speak Greek. They feel Greek. They want to hold the flag, whatever.

And you don't recognise this? So this was amazing. And they were pioneers because then other migrant communities and NGOs followed them.

By invoking the common language of parenthood and, specifically, motherhood, the campaign strategically connected this 'universal' theme to other issues. The campaign tackled racism (not least with its memorable title), raised the issue of residence permit renewal and highlighted the precarity living as a 'foreigner' in Greece entails. They did so by pointing out that, despite being born and raised in Greece, at the age of 18, these children would suddenly become "foreigners" and "economic immigrants" who must enter into the cycle of resident permit renewal. Introducing a discourse that would become part of other struggles for rights, they argued that their children belong to a "grey zone" of illegitimacy, without basic rights, marginalised and socially excluded. Furthermore, the situation in Greece was, they claimed, worse than any other country "on the planet".²²

UAWO thus entered the political landscape with a multi-layered strategy that mobilized important forms of embodied resistance as a way to call attention to the unjust effects of precarity. By using already legible cultural codes surrounding motherhood, they were able to cross other racialized and gendered boundaries and so enter the political field. Using new forms of embodied political interventions, they engaged a vocabulary that breaks with masculinist models of autonomy because they showed that vulnerability is part of resistance and that modes of alliance are characterized by interdependency and public action (Butler et al. 2016).

²² These quotes are all taken from a campaign pamphlet.

... as *anti-austerity activists*

Alongside the narrative of financial crisis and social *anomie*, there has also been a more positive commentary on the crisis in Greece pointing to a shift in values towards a more democratic and inclusive form of politics. Protest, dissent, non-compliance and outrage has been expressed on the streets by increasing numbers of people demanding to be heard. Quick to recognise an opportunity for visibility of a more positive, agential nature (Zavos 2012), UAWO has taken its place in the endless demonstrations, occupations, festivals, performances, solidarity meetings and events taking place across the city. The crisis has thus brought UAWO not only increased publicity and greater recognition, but also opportunities to articulate their grievances and demands alongside those of others and to



Figure 6:
UAWO attend an anti-racism demonstration, Syntagma Square 21st March, 2015 (photo: Viki Zaphiriou-Zarifi)

form new alliances in broader struggles for social justice. As a form of protest, demonstrations are popular in Greece and during my year in Athens I joined members of UAWO on several occasions to march the familiar route, usually terminating in front of Parliament in Syntagma Square. Thus asserting their presences and disrupting the everyday rhythms of the city by bringing the centre to a near-complete standstill, these women, alongside others, claimed their right to the city they now call home.

This growing movement has included anti-austerity protests and rallies, politically themed festivals (most notably the Anti-Racist Festival) and a proliferation of ‘international’ days (such as International Refugee Day). The displays of diversity at such events, even if they are somewhat transient and do not extend to other areas of the women’s lives are nevertheless important and mark a significant and positive change in Greek society.

Tsilimpounidi (2012: 549) argues that “diversity is one of the strong elements of the Greek social milieu since 2008: such protests had created a faceless, borderless, multicultural and polyvocal movement.” This ‘facelessness’ is an altogether more positive kind of invisibility for African women. I observed that, for many women, being part of a multitude collectively mobilised in resistance was both empowering and liberating. It was as if in these spaces of protest, a reversal took place; citizens took their places alongside, and sometimes even identified with, non-citizens to claim rights they now felt they too were being denied. Thus, citizens and non-citizens alike acted *as* citizens together.

Interestingly, as these women (and men) were enacting citizenship in these ways, some more radical citizens were claiming the migrant label to highlight their experiences of marginalisation. In Exarchia, the traditional anarchist stronghold neighbourhood of Athens, street art with faceless figures and the tagline ‘we are all immigrants’ began to appear in 2011.²³ While this was a powerful statement of solidarity, it was primarily about highlighting the marginalisation and feelings of non-belonging among citizens under the crisis. The positioning (in terms of experience, needs, relation to the state and so on) of a marginalised Greek citizen is qualitatively different from that of a non-citizen migrant; invoking similarities is in danger of unintentionally obscuring this fact. This is a constant struggle for UAWO and its members: how to form allegiances with others and still be seen and heard. There is, UAWO has learnt, sometimes a price to be paid for forming alliances. For instance, the VAW Action Plan mentioned above was proposed by Greek “*friends of the organization*” who were better placed to fulfil the requirements of form-filling and project applications – they had the fluent Greek, bank accounts and experience necessary for accessing funding. However, the failure to identify issues that were perceived to be most pressing in the women’s lives by the women themselves (namely, documents and protection for domestic workers) led to tensions, frustrations and a feeling of not only wasted opportunities, but also of being used.

It remains an open question how far these seemingly inclusive spaces will sustain solidarity with African women’s interests and activisms, and whether they will extend to, and bring greater recognition and rights in, other areas of their lives.²⁴ Nevertheless, taking up space in the city, being part of performances of solidarity and becoming visible as political agents alongside others is an important way for women to “talk back” to modes of inferiorisation. In these acts of citizenship, women are fighting for a democratic

²³ See Tsilimpounidi (2012) for further comment on this.

²⁴ Emejulu and Bassel (2015: 93) raise similar concerns in their study on minority women’s rights in Scotland, England and France.

transformation from below; they are actors rather than subjects (Tsilimpounidi 2012) which is a powerful statement of belonging. In contrast to their everyday experiences on the streets of Athens, within these transient spaces women appropriate social narratives of difference in ways in which they are celebrated for their non-Greekness. I witnessed how empowering an experience this is in and of itself. The hope is that, over time, through regular visibility and presence of this kind, women will carve out more space for themselves in Athens and become recognised as subjects that count in other areas of their lives also.

... exotic Others: detoxified difference/eating the Other

Amidst the growing anti-austerity movement, women have been creating new pathways to greater livability not only in terms of social intelligibility, but also in material terms. They have organized and taken part in events where they assert their ‘African-ness’ on their own



Figure 7: UAWO dance group performs at a fundraising event for Sierra Leone (photo: Viki Zaphiriou-Zarifi)

terms and as something to be celebrated. By taking ownership of the ‘African women’ identity thus, UAWO uses it as a way to build a common bond (see above), to counter prevailing notions of them as negative Other, and to earn

some income. Identifying an appetite for ‘exotic’ cuisine and handicrafts, women use their skills and creativity to earn both money and positive recognition as ‘exotic’ Others. Thus, as bell hooks’ (1992: 21) writes in her chapter ‘eating the other’, through the commodification of Otherness “ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.” I saw women dance at events (figure 7), turn up in full eye-catching ‘traditional’ dress (figure 8), and sell their ‘exotic’ food and handicrafts. In contrast to the negative value often attributed to them in other spheres of their lives, in

these spaces women found ways to be appreciated for what they were, rather than feared for what they were not.

Increasingly, however, I found these events somewhat problematic. There was something reductive about the ways in which the women were seen even in these liberal, diverse spaces. The paparazzi-like attention they received when they wore their African dress, although it represented an opportunity for visibility of a positive kind, troubled me. This attention, though superficial, also, in theory at least, raised women's profiles and gave them a chance

to articulate their concerns to journalists, TV channels and so on. This was all 'a good



Figure 8:
Members of UAWO attending a fundraising event for Sierra Leone
(photo: Viki Zaphiriou-Zarifi)

thing'. Perhaps,

I reflected, it was the contrast between these events and the exclusion women experienced in their everyday lives that bothered me – a lack of connection between these and other spheres of the women's lives. I had, for instance, spoken to several liberal activist (white) Greeks who confirmed that they did not socialise with any migrants outside of these events.²⁵

The problem, however, also lay with the reduction of the stranger to the level of 'being'. By emphasising the association of being with the body through food, dance and dress in these limited spaces, the African woman stranger comes to be assumed to be knowable (Ahmed 2000). Rather than being "Different to the point of being unknowable" (Berger 1975: 254), visibility of this kind allows for the perception of being 'known' as exotic Other and creates a distance that makes proximity less threatening. The "detoxification of one's neighbour", Zizek (2010) has argued, suggests a "clear passage

²⁵ Equally, at these events, migrant groups remained in their community groups with very little interaction between them.

from direct barbarism to barbarism with a human face.”²⁶ Difference thus “decaffeinated”, to borrow Žižek’s phrase, is safe for appropriation and consumption, along with other products stripped of their malignant qualities (such as cream without fat, coffee without caffeine and beer without alcohol) (ibid). It is also far less threatening than claims to equality, similarity and/or co-presence on the buses, in the workplace and in the neighbourhood. In contrast to the dangerous stranger who transgresses boundaries by wearing the same clothes, shopping in the same places and eating the same food (signs that she may even be seeking to become ‘one of us’ (Lazaridis and Wickens 1999), in the ‘other spaces’ of festivals, bazaars and cultural events the Other is made known in specific ways that ultimately operate to maintain both her marginalisation and the status quo. Reinforcing her position as temporary guest, Greek culture is (re)constructed as dominant and the Greek tradition of hospitality acts a form of defence, enabling both fears of loss of ‘purity’ as well as demands for recognition to be temporarily ignored (Veikou 2016).

... as women: *International Women’s Day*²⁷

Another campaign which provided alternative images – counter-representations – that make women visible while trying to minimise the risk involved in visibility was the photography project Laretta devised in 2015 to mark International Women’s Day (IWD). The idea was that four African and four Greek women would wear each other’s traditional dress, and that together these eight women would symbolise the 8th of March (IWD) and female solidarity. Consider the following, in which Laretta calls on the “*mutual bonds*” of oppression and motherhood amongst women:

The project is one of our struggles for immigrant rights and especially women’s rights so that’s why we did the photographs because we are women and for women’s day we wanted to give a message to Greek society that we should have that mutual bonds between us. They should understand that we are living in their country – and especially women – women are the ones who give birth to children and women are the ones who are more oppressed in this society. Especially immigrant women.

Though highlighting oppression in this way can be seen as a reductive and stereotypical form of legibility, as Butler points out, oppression is itself a sign of intelligibility (Lloyd 2007). Hence, by making themselves recognizable as lives that are vulnerable, grievable and worthy of protection, they have successfully gained a foothold in public debates. Calling

²⁶ In the article Žižek (2010) argues that “a closer look reveals how their multicultural tolerance and respect of differences share with those who oppose immigration the need to keep others at a proper distance [...] This leads us to today’s tolerant liberal multiculturalism as an experience of the Other deprived of its Otherness – the decaffeinated Other.”

²⁷ The accompanying article, which I helped write, was sent out to UAWO’s mailing list and posted on its social media sites. See Appendix.

upon 'women's rights', and using the platform of the much publicised IWD, UAWO were thus able to align themselves with feminist organizations in Greece and beyond.

According to Butler (2004b: 14), one way for those who are deemed illegible and unrecognisable to resist normative constructions and hierarchies is to insist on being 'like you', and to speak "in the terms of the 'human'". The IWD project was very much about this – about talking back to discriminatory binaries to emphasise commonality and humanity over stereotypes and dehumanization. As Laretta explained:

The idea behind this is we have to inform the Greek people – to remind them that we are here ourselves, as women. And as women we need to have that mutual bond with the Greeks in general, and especially the women [...] it's something that is a symbolic something to gain public opinion that they can see that no matter the difference between us, we can fit in the same clothes or shoes or whatever it is so that we can fit in the society, you understand. That I can fit in your clothes and you can fit in my clothes so we have to work together to make a better society.

Simultaneously a proclamation of presence, commonality *and* difference, the project was intended to remind the Greek public that 'we' are 'like you' and that we can work together, across differences, for the good of all. The project was thus also a manifestation of UAWO's aim to work "hand in hand" and "create mutual bonds of solidarity between Africans and our host the Greeks". In this way, strategic alliances were formed not only with other Others who occupy similar positions of disadvantage (like migrant women who "*face the same problems like job, like residence permit*"), but also with Greek women. Recognising thus that there are different levels of common political work, from tight formal organization to a loose informal network, from an ideological alliance to a single-issue based coalition has been one of UAWO's strengths (Yuval-Davis 1999).

Normative conditions shape who may be recognised within contingent socio-political cultures as a subject capable of living a life that counts (Butler 2009a). Hence, by leveraging the modes of recognition available to them in order to assert their humanity through commonality, UAWO was doing more than claiming public recognition as being 'like us'. They were fighting the misrecognition, stereotyping and dehumanization that permit all kinds of violence. Inverting expectations – by putting a black woman in a Greek costume and a white woman in an African one – Ruth explained that they were deliberately challenging racist inferiorisation:

So it was very, very important and like what happened yesterday – it looked strange to them, but a lot of them can get the message that we are sending message that everybody we are one. There's no difference – the colour, no matter where you come from, no matter the colour you have – we are all the same thing. We think the same way. There's nothing different from us as a human being. So they have to learn that. It's very, very important for them to know that one and change their ways of treating people, when you are with them.

The assertion of equal humanity – that “*there’s nothing different from us as a human being*” – is crucial because, as Athanasiou points out, when a life that does not figure as normatively human is violated, this violation remains unrecognised, misrecognised, or recognised in an injurious way, through terms that enable derealizing violence (Butler and Athanasiou 2013).

The technique of unsettling the order of things by juxtaposing things not usually found together (here, an African woman in an Ipirot costume), is one UAWO has employed before. Putting on short theatrical performances in which “*the Greeks play the African – the immigrants- and we play the Greek*” to show “*how they treated us in the office – bureaucratically,*” UAWO have made powerful statements about prejudice and inequality. Role-reversal disrupts expectation within the realm of the familiar, thereby shedding light on women’s experiences in ways that make it harder for others to turn away. Thus



Figure 9:
*International Women’s
Day project, 8th March,
2015*
(photo: Viki
Zaphiriou-Zarifi)

employing modes of representation that deliberately confuse, the opportunity is created for women to behave in ways not prescribed, and perhaps not always sanctioned, by dominant norms (Hetherington 1998). By challenging dominant ways of being, the IWD project created “a space of illusion” that highlighted the constructed nature of national identity thereby exposing every real space of assumed national belonging as “still more illusory” (Foucault 1986: 27). Without offering resolution or consolation, these tactics disrupt and test our customary notions of ourselves (Johnson 2005: 87) – and, in doing so, those of others. Thus, UAWO is widening possibilities and creating a little more space for themselves.

As with many UAWO actions, the IWD project operated at multiple levels. On the surface, it was presented as the opportunity to exchange cultural traditions (which remains

one of the organization's specified aims and objectives) and as such, was a very positive experience for all the women who took part. Ruth beamed as she told me how happy it made her when the Greek participants enjoyed wearing her daughter's clothes. Despite being looked at strangely by some members of the public, the visibility she experienced gave her a sense of belonging.

It was something unusual. Some of them just look like 'what is these people doing?' It look strange to a lot of people. A lot! A lot of people who saw us yesterday they are thinking 'are they crazy?' Or 'what are they doing?' you know. It looks very strange yesterday to a lot of them. For me yesterday I feel belong, you know? In a positive way yesterday I feel. Because they looks at me... what are they going to say about me? I'm just a Greek woman. Normally, without the dress, I feel I'm a foreigner. Yesterday I don't feel that...I feel like them [the Greeks], you know? It make me feel belong.

Lauretta agreed: "*it make me feel I belong more*" she said, though this was soon undercut by sadness at her lack of citizenship, which she felt would allow her to be able to feel that



Figure 10: *Women pose outside parliament for the International Women's Day project, 8th March 2015* (photo: Viki Zaphiriou-Zarifi)

much a part of Greek society every day. The location of the exercise was also hugely significant in this regard. Most of the photographs were taken in front of parliament – a potent symbol of the Greek nation-state from which these women are, on the whole, politically excluded (figure 10). Appearing so publicly in Syntagma Square amongst the hordes of passers-by, and by taking control of their image themselves, the African participants experienced a feeling of hyper-visibility in ways that contrasted dramatically to their everyday experiences of “visible invisibility” (Kandyliis 2017: 478) as Other. In a context in which even everyday routine activities like travelling on buses, working or living in the city are

transformed into forbidden and illegal acts (Lafazani 2013: 6), it is not difficult to see why, in Laretta's words, "*The pictures says a lot of... it has a lot of meaning to us*".

The location also signals another, considerably more controversial, level at which the project acquired meaning both *vis-à-vis* Greek society and for those taking part.

Remaining within the bounds of gendered constructions of women as bearers of tradition and reproducers of the nation (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989), the project deliberately subverted national and nationalist symbols. The traditional Greek costumes the African participants (from Sierra Leone, Ghana and Nigeria) wore represented three regions that are part of the narrative of Greek national identity and the formation of Modern Greece. By dressing in costumes from Thrace, Asia Minor and the island of Ios, they were claiming – albeit temporarily – an identity they



Figure 11: *A member of UAWO in a traditional Thracian costume* (photo: Viki Zaphiriou-Zarifi)

are told daily, both implicitly and explicitly, can never be theirs (figure 11). By deliberately transgressing normative notions of 'Greekness' in this way, the women mounted a new means of resistance to dominant, seemingly natural forms of identity and belonging.

Rewriting the script of what it is to be an African woman in Athens they had, for a time, unsettled definitions provided by Greek socio-political discourses and widely propagated as truth (Wearing 1998). By appearing as Greeks in front of one of the main symbols of state power alongside white Greek women in their own traditional dress (a 'version' of themselves widely accepted and even celebrated), the women disrupted "what has become settled knowledge and knowable reality" and used, as it were, their "unreality to make an otherwise impossible or illegible claim" (Butler 2004b: 27). Far from being

intended as a 'passing as white' (which would support the national desire to assimilate difference), this was a deliberate disruption of the 'face of the nation' (Ahmed 2000). By subversively appropriating tradition – by fusing and *confusing* the difference between traditional images of Greek and African femininity, the women were presenting a challenge to established norms and concepts. Highlighting the constructedness of identity and national belonging denaturalizes 'fixed' social categories. After all, as history tells us and the 'Greek' costume from Asia Minor illustrates, there is nothing fixed, given or natural about the boundaries of the nation-state.

In these cracks, openings begin to appear and new lines of alliances and solidarity emerge. For when African women demand to be recognized as equal to Greek women, even if this effort fails again and again, there is value in the calling into question of "the normative horizon in which recognition takes place" (Butler 2005: 24). This crisis puts the current norms of recognition into question, establishes a critical point of departure for the interrogation of available norms and sets up the possibility that a new set might be developed (*ibid*). This is perhaps what gave Ruth, Laretta and others such a lift that day – the feeling that they had rattled the norms they were so often excluded by and suggested the possibility of alternatives.

V. Conclusion

Recognising that change can only be worked out or negotiated on the basis of the given order – that there is little to be gained by indulging in the “fantasy of godlike power” in which they can remake the world (Butler 2004b: 3) – UAWO works towards improving the situation of African women in Athens incrementally. It does so by providing an important collective space from which women can make rights-based claims for themselves, address practical needs, and perform a kind of affective politics that not only counters isolation, but also collectivises problems and their possible resolution (Zavos et al. 2017). As this paper has shown, UAWO also works within dominant scripts – even sometimes using gendered and racialized stereotypes as resources – in order to present its members in recognisable ways. By appropriating available modes of recognition and appearing to stick (more or less) to the categories available to them, women are able to articulate their own claims and perform acts of citizenship in ways that present themselves as lives worthy of public recognition and of protection. Using their bodies to claim presence and a more positive visibility in the media, on the internet, and on the streets, women are constituting themselves as citizens – as those with ‘the right to claim rights’ (Isin 2009). This is about more than symbolic forms of representation; it is about using common narratives to disrupt the reproduction of both symbolic and material hierarchies that regulate access to resources (Tyler 2013).

Though social intelligibility is crucial to living a livable life, recognition does not in and of itself lead to a redistribution of rights and resources.²⁸ As several of the examples discussed in this paper illustrate, hierarchical binaries of difference may be reinforced even as a more positive recognition and sense of belonging are attained. By conforming to the notions Greeks may already have about ‘Africans’ and ‘Africa’ the danger is that stereotypical representations confirm that these women are of ‘another place’, such that they remain strange (and estranged) yet become familiar in their unfamiliarity. Hence, whether women’s efforts to unsettle norms that construct them as ‘ungrievable’ or ‘out of place’ bodies to be feared will also lead to more rights and resources in the longer-term remains an open question.

Nevertheless, when women constituted by that which is “before and outside” themselves (Butler 2004b: 3) in ways that often deny them a voice take control of their image to represent themselves as actors, an altogether different kind of visibility is made

²⁸ See Fraser (1995, 2000) on the relationship between struggles for recognition and the redistribution of rights and resources.

possible. Attempts to restore the African identity on a more positive footing, through their own initiatives and with pride, are, at the very least, a form of self-representation that contributes to the empowerment of women who are all too often ignored, inferiorised and excluded in many areas of their daily lives. The hope remains, therefore, that by continuing to provide counter-narratives to their 'out of placeness' (Piacentini 2014), these women will achieve a more positive and, gradually, less stereotypical visibility that will lead to their wider acceptance in Greece's changing socio-political landscape.

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APPENDIX

IN CELEBRATION OF INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Make It Happen

This year's theme for International Women's Day is '*Make It Happen*'. As an organization fighting for the recognition of migrant women's rights we at the United African Women's Organization (UAWO) have together been trying to 'make it happen' since we formed in 2005. Our organization was founded on the belief that in order to make it happen we must join together; that by working together far greater things can be achieved than by fighting and struggling alone. On this International Women's Day UAWO would like to take the opportunity to call not only on African migrant women, but on women and men across Greece to join in solidarity for greater gender equality and recognition and respect for migrant women's rights.



Sadly, the reality in Greece today is that public attitudes, the media and the law are all too often dominated by traditional male-oriented, patriarchal depictions of migrant women as dependents of men or as victims – rather than as independent migrants who are active agents in their own right. This more traditional focus on men or, at best, families, means that migrant women – despite representing 46 per cent of the total migrant population in Greece in 2013 (according to official UN figures) – continue to be largely neglected. As a result, migrant women's specific needs, motivations, diverse characteristics and varied migration experiences are very rarely taken into account. This amounts to direct or indirect discrimination against them.

It is our experience that, despite some efforts made by a few small organisations (such as our own) to challenge such tendencies, many of the issues that affect women's lives on a daily basis remain ignored. Greece continues to lag behind most other EU members with respect to the rights of migrants in general and female migrants in particular. Too often serious abuses go unchecked because of insufficient legal protections – a condition made worse by law enforcement agencies that fail to provide adequate protection for migrant women, particularly those who are undocumented.



Today, as part of the International Women's Day celebrations, we are publishing this photography project in order to demonstrate how we can transcend our differences and to express our solidarity with women all over the world who continue to fight for their rights. Through these portraits we hope to remind everyone – migrants *and* Greeks, women *and* men – that beyond the traditional identifications of motherhood, dependency on men, vulnerability and victimhood we, as migrant women, face complex and often hidden realities.



The photographs are intended as a celebration of all that has been achieved regarding the social, economic and political rights of women, but they are also a reminder that much remains to be done and that in order to face the challenges ahead we must face it together – as women and men, but above all as human beings with a shared common humanity.