

LABOUR REPRESENTATION AND TRADE UNIONISM OF IMMIGRANTS: THE CASES OF FIVE IMMIGRANT LABOUR COMMUNITIES IN ATHENS

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1. THE PROBLEM

The research illustrates the influence of work and employment in casual labour market upon the collective affiliation, organization and representation of migrant workers in Greece, through 104 life stories of members and non-members of “communities”¹ that appear to emerge from work and employment. The analysis focuses on the case studies of six immigrant groups, the Albanian, Bangladeshi, Egyptian, Palestinian, Filipino and Nigerian workers in Athens and the role that work community² plays for their integration, into the Greek society and the labour market,

¹ The “community” is a sociological term vague and conceptually differently explained while it is generally used in the vernacular. “Community” is often used as synonym to “society”. The term however implies more generally a lesser entity than the one that it is implied with the term “society”. The substance of idea of “community” is that the persons who are involved with it have an increased conscience that they belong in this and accept its norms and traditions. It has small scale, with a sense of familiarity and it is characterized by personal relations, in Watson, 2005:405. The core of “community” or *Gemeinschaft*, according to Tönnies, it was the sentimental connection with the conventions, the traditions and the customs, a “beloved place” that was watched over in a tradition that was given through the generations from family to family (Bell and Newby, 1983:44). In these (territorial) frames the durable, closely tied up *Gemeinschaft*-type relations were characterized also by a deeper sentimental cohesion, greater intensity of sentiment and extended continuity, and it was absolutely of a more important meaning (Bell and Newby, 1983:44). Considering the proceedings it would be possible to determine the immigrant “community” as “that agreement which “pushes” individuals with same roots, values, dialects and traditions to find themselves with others with common characteristics in a foreign-hostile environment”.

² Tony J. Watson (2005) in his study *Sociology, Work and Industry* reports that one can expect that a professional culture will be particularly powerful, as well as its overflow in regions of life of members of one professional team and beyond the work sphere, when it is about professions where the work and not-work life are narrowly correlated (Watson, 2005:242). Such tends to come into effect with what sociologists call professional community (Watson, 2005:242). Professional community is a form of local social organisation in which the work and not-work life of persons they are to a large extent identified with their professional attribute (Watson, 2005:242). A professional community represents a particular relation between the work of individuals and the rest of their life - a type of relation that its extreme form is probably-always seldom in the modern societies (Salaman, 1974:19). J. E. Gerstl (1961) in his article “*Determinants of Occupational Community in High Status Occupations*” determines the professional community as follows: “A professional community means that persons that are members of the same profession or work together, have a certain type of common life together and are, in a certain degree, separated from the rest of society. The most important element of this segregation and that has presented more often as a characteristic of determination of the professional community, it is the convergence of casual types of friendship and colleague relations” (Gerstl, 1961:37). The members of professional communities are influenced by their work in such a way that their lives of out-of-work are driven-through by their relations of work, the interests and their values (Salaman, 1974:19). The members of professional communities support their lives in their work, their

as well as for aspects of labour representation, social solidarity and identity formation. Moreover the research analyses how far work and employment affects, the formal procedures of working conditions and distantiates them from the rise of forms of collective action and organization. The particular doctoral thesis aspires to enfold an existing inquiring and researching gap. While an adequate amount of significant researches has been produced in regard to the issue of “community” the academic interest for the consequences of work and employment upon the collective organization of migrant workers is comparatively limited.

If we look back in the history of immigration movements and flows we will find out that what concerns the social scientists (considering the international bibliography since the Chicago School researches in 1920 until today) is not the employment of immigrants but where they work, the object of their work and the form of employment as well as their collective organization and formation of collectivities in the frames of an informal economy. Economy is regarded as a vital parameter, not only for the entrance, legality and integration in the host society, but also as a factor that forms cultures, identities, bonds, perceptions and perspectives.

In Greece since 1990 until today, it is realised that the majority of the immigrant workforce is found in low status services. Additionally, an increase in the informal sector is observed but it cannot be estimated if it is greater since the 20th century. Moreover, studies has shown that immigrants in Southern Europe are mostly occupied in services that have to do with care, prostitution, up to any type of services that have low status, uncertain prospects and economic benefits or depend on private households.

Since 1990 until today, we realise that there are no studies (Sociological researches concerning immigrant populations in Greece: 1991-1995 (A) Social stratification and social exclusion; 1997-2000 (B) Collective identity and representation: nationality and religion; (C) Welfare discrimination (state); 2005-2008 (D) Occupational groups (gender, employment, types of work): (a) Low status jobs and access to welfare; (b) Low status jobs and access to collectivity representation and “community” values) that prove evidently formed collectivities (especially emerging from work) among the immigrants (TABLES:1A,B,C,D). *What are these collectivities*

work-friends who are friends outside their work and their interests and their activities of their free time are based on the work space (Salaman, 1974:19).

and how are they formed? We cannot say a priori that they are shaped by the nationality, the gender, the religion or something else.

In the history of the immigration flows, what it is perceived is that the collectivities are made through certain parameters, certain forms of life. For example, the “Pole” in America (Zaretsky:1984) is formed and he does not exist earlier. In America however Poles make an entity, the “Polish community”. This “community” however is constructed in America through certain conditions of life and certain activities. It was not created, neither existed. I am not inclined to believe that one can easily speak for collectivities, before the relation of persons with the society and with the economy are examined.

The main aspect of the morphology of the migrant collectivities studied and analysed, here, is emerging from work. Consequently in this doctoral thesis not all the kinds of immigrant “communities” are examined –as for example, neither the religious, the political, the cultural or the regional community, nor the nature of work and the frames of employment– but only these immigrant collective organisations that emerge from the labour identity. Therefore it is examined how the relations of individuals, their identities or their integration, between them and with the remainder society, are influenced. In the context of the new social and economic conditions there are individuals whose thoughts and emotions are shaped around the fear and insecurity, which derives from the unknown or foreigner social and labour environment, the constant quest of collective bonds and that of the personal freedom and exploration of new ways of life and relations.

2. IMMIGRANT WORK COMMUNITIES: A BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In Greece in 1985 decisions of juridical reforms permitted the foundation of immigrant work associations’ with administrative board of their own composition. The first immigrant work communities appeared informally and later with regular corporatist form or as private initiatives. Sociological researches illustrate that the individuals wish or seek to become members of collective organisations, not only because they have the feeling and the need “to belong” somewhere, but also because they believe that via the collective organisation, action and attribute of membership can achieve their each desirable aim. Whether an individual participates and acts collective, or not, it stresses the limits of his identity while it is taking place, that is to

say while it happens, whereas it takes shape and is reproduced in the space of work and of the wider society.

On the one hand, one can assume that the importance of formation of work organisations of immigrants lies in five basic reasons: *first* within a capitalist formation in a context of casual labour market immigrant work organisations are defensive and reformist factors, *second* the improvement of conditions under which labour power is sold to the labour market, *third* the representation of the members in the workplace within the context of certain collectivist principles and organize acts such as strikes or interventions in order to claim rights on the behalf of the worker, *fourth* the contribution in the necessity of adaptation in the foreigner environment and the society of reception *fifth* the maintenance and support of their identity as a minority.

On the other hand, an element in the morphology of the research population is the form of work and employment, which because of its character (informal labour, low status-unskilled jobs, undocumented and non-unionized individuals) brings on the question of the work representation of migrant workers from their collective work organisations.

3. WHAT CONSTITUTES A COMMUNITY IN A CONTEXT OF CASUAL LABOUR MARKET?

The work and employment of migrants are shaped in the frames of globalisation, flexibility and cultural reconstruction. The immigrants face problems of alienation and inequality in the frames of an international system of employment that searches for cheap workforce for industries, manufactures, constructions and personal services. A cheap workforce that will be temporary, its cost of reproduction will be relatively low, and it will not acquire the social rights of native workforce (Psimmenos:1999, 2008).

At present it is observed the formation of a workforce, cut from the family, the traditions, the progress and the sentimental and economic relations, in the society of reception that frames it. The disorganization of the family and its absence is critical, while constitutes an important link with the “community” as the majority of men and women are alone. This workforce is susceptible in every form of exploitation, in flexible work and in the temporary organisation of life with the individual level, occupied in low status jobs that are characterized by decollectivization. As a

consequence, nowadays the immigrant workers are isolated from each other and are scattered among the residences. There are not specific forms of work and employment that ensure the collectivity. Nowadays immigrants are occupied as a flexible workforce in constructions, personal services, etc. A feminine workforce is also appearing, where work and employment are connected directly with the gender and its sentimental and social roles in the countries of origin and reception. The lack of solid forms of work and employment conditions that ensured the collectivity, the absence of labour representation and unionization from the trade unions of the receiving countries, the appearance of a new immigration policy that emerges from the informal and illegal immigration as well as the situation of the countries of origin of the immigrants that are found under economical, political and administrative dissolution, cause interventions creating new vistas of social and work identities. Factors as the black economy, the changes in the labour organization, on the production and on the values, in the frames of the industrial capitalistic society, affect significantly the employment and the collectivity of immigrants.

Additionally, there are not government owned forms of social protection in the country of reception and economic forms of activation that support, the identity of immigrant with the nationality and with the country of reception. Nowadays it appears that due to the new forms of work and employment new forms of collective action of immigrants are formed. In these frames migrants “are pushed” in new ways and forms of collectiveness, social solidarity, collective action and identity, through collective work organisations that expose the nationality of its members. Simultaneously today in all the sociological researches the problem appears to be that the basic characteristics of “community” seem to be absent. That is to say, the characteristics that created collective forms of action, of life, of daily existence, of identity and of work. For this reason we cannot speak for “community”. We can speak however for new forms of collectivities and unions.

4. METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH

The doctoral research was carried out by using a qualitative method of research through in-depth interviews with a biographical form. The immigrant work organizations that were examined are on hand at TABLE:2A. As it is seen they are following: *first* the Union of Albanian Workers in Greece (UAW), *second* the Union of Bangladeshi Workers in Greece (UBW), *third* the Union of Egyptian Workers in

Greece (UEW), *fourth* the Palestinian Workers Union in Greece (PWU) and *fifth* the Union of Philipino Workers-Kasapi (UPW). Analytically five (5) of them were taken from representatives of immigrant work communities, twenty-eight (28) from members of them and sixty-three (63) from non-members of these migrant collective organizations (TABLE:2B). It must be mentioned that the research focused additionally on a non-work migrant community the “Nigerian Community in Greece (NCG)” (table:2C). In GRAPH:1 the total sum of interviews is presented and in GRAPH:1A the position of the interviewees according their participation in their work organization.

5. LABOUR REPRESENTATION OF IMMIGRANTS IN A CONTEXT OF CASUAL LABOUR MARKET? THE CASE OF THE BANGLADESHI WORKERS IN ATHENS: A BRIEF ANALYSIS

Through eighteen (18) extensive, in-depth interviews from the representative of the Union of Bangladeshi Workers in Greece (UBW), members and non-members of it (GRAPH:2), with the analysis of their experiences from their involvement, participations in their work organization, it became possible to add supplementary information on the conditions of life and work of migrants, as well as on the influence of work and employment upon their labour representation, their social and work identity and finally their perceptions about their work organizations and their understanding of self and others.

5.1 WORK AND EMPLOYMENT IN BANGLADESH

The labour condition of the Bangladeshis in their country of origin is characterized by unemployment or sub-employment, while many of them were able to find work only as farmers³. The economic condition was the major reason, in combination with political and administrative problems in some cases, that drove them in the individual or collective, organized or unorganised decision to migrate⁴.

³ Mostly in a familial property, as hired farmers or they rent one.

⁴ (...) *I worked. I worked with my father. In the fields. [My father was getting] a month 15 thousands [taka] around there. It was enough for us* (...) Gani, age 35.

(...) *We worked in the fields. In our field. We make rice, like that*(...) Santo, age 26.

Jahangir (age 27) describes the difficult economic and familial situation that he experienced:

(...) *I was staying with my family. My father had a shop, like a supermarket, all my family lived from this. Together. And it is not so much, it did not go well. And you could not live. I wanted to study and to work at the same time* (...) *I have 5 brothers and 2 sisters. I am smallest of the boys. All are in Bangladesh. Our economic situation, at home, it was not good. I couldn't. A shop we had. And we*

5.2 THE JOURNEY TO GREECE

Here it must be mentioned that the majority of the interviewees were undocumented (16:18)⁵.

5.3 LIVING CONDITIONS IN GREECE⁶:

5.4 WORK AND EMPLOYMENT IN GREECE⁷

The key words that describe clearly the conditions of work and employment of the Bangladeshi migrants in Athens are: insecurity, instability, marginality and low status jobs. The majority of the Bangladeshis is working as fitters or tailors, an occupational specialization that they learned in Pakistan during their journey to Greece (GRAPH:3).

5.5 LABOUR REPRESENTATION OF THE BANGLADESHI WORKERS?

Considering the role of the representative of immigrant workers, a representative of the “*Union of Bangladeshi Workers in Greece*”, when he was asked “*how difficult is it for you to be a representative*” he said:

(...) It is too difficult. That is to say I lost many things that I should not lose. You are a person, a property of Bangladeshis. Whatever they ask you to do you must do it, at any hour in the night, at any hour in the day. You are compelled to face any problems the

couldn't. My mother also worked together in the shop. The shop made roughly 600€ a year. It was too few (...) Jahangir, age 27.

⁵ *(...) [I came] with the trafficker. Through other countries. From Bangladesh I left, with Pakistan. I came on foot. With the smuggler, from India, Pakistan, Iran and afterwards Turkey and afterwards Greece. From Bangladesh, India. India I stayed 15 days. I did nothing. Nothing. Afterwards Pakistan. I stayed 2 years. In apartment I stayed. And I worked there for 2 years, what I learned, tailor. I did not have any friend there that he could learn me, I went to somebody and he showed me. As friend. There I worked as a tailor. After 2 years I left from Pakistan and went to Iran. Him I do not know very well how much time I stayed there. The rests of the 3,5 years the one year in Turkey and half a year in Iran. There I had worked in various jobs. Like in a shop (...)* Gani, age 35.

(...) Komotini. I was arrested by the police, and the put me in jail. They kept me 3 months and then they told to leave in 15 days. But I didn't leave. I went immediately to make the papers for political asylum in Komotini (...) Santo, age 26.

⁶ *(...) When I arrived at 11o' clock in the evening, I didn't know anything, where to go, what to go, I did not do nothing, simply we waited there, and when we saw that someone from Bangladesh passes by we asked him (...). They took me with them with the others, and we went home. I did not have other things with me. I had only 10 dollars (...)* Zahid, age 31.

⁷ *(...) Because I did not have money and I should have to work. The first work that I did was, with furnitures. I made furnitures. As carpenter. Carpenter. Chairs, tables. This work I did not know, I had not studied it. I learned it here. When I came here a friend of mine find me a job as assistant. And learned (...)* Jahangir, age 27.

Bangladeshis face, for this, an entire life I run to hospitals, to police stations, to prisons, to employers, to social services, to municipalities, wherever you can imagine. And up to this moment, that is to say I have been exhausted. Because we are two-three individuals who we run the association. And most of them expect many things. And the Bangladeshis have not learned to work, all, from a small piece it comes out a big piece. Leave others to work and what they need we should help them. They need money, we can give money, but also to do something with a law that we do not know many things. Because I know the language I can make translations, with the services and the law procedures (...).

He describes his role perceptions as:

(...) I believe that, each organisation and each team can measure better from doing something from the individuals alone. (...) I do believe in this. But I see that the conditions are too, difficult, and we cannot, that is to say we can accomplish little more from what it can be accomplished by one alone, because we have certain contacts with certain organisations, institutions, that show us that if one day we organized all, then we can do many things (...).

The representative demarcates the role of the “*Bangladeshi Workers Union*” and emphasises that it does not represent a specific profession and it is not an effort to create a trade union, as:

(...) No, no. It does not represent certain profession. It is not a trade union of workers. Simply it has elements of a trade union, because it is addressed to the workers. It is not only for the construction-site workers but for all the workers. All the economic immigrants and Bangladeshis, (...) have important epicentre their work, therefore from around there you should focus. We sent persons to learn the laws, to be mediators, in order to help these persons in labour. When to take authorisation, when to take the extra salary, how to do all. What they are eligible, if they are eligible for example working residence and these things (...).

The representative described some incidents of his intervention:

(...) Yes. There was a certain accident, for someone, that he worked in a factory and the machine smashed and incapacitated his hand, and we went to the employer and the employer denied it, -I do not have to do with this things, and obligatorily we went to a

(...) In a restaurant. Scullery. I get each day 25 euros. For 8 hours. 7 days, every day. (...) Islam, age 32.

lawyer and that is to say we tried juridicially. Ok, the kid did not take anything, compensation, nothing. He didn't keep the job because he couldn't work on something else. But the majority of the cases were for agreement, that is to say were not for conflict. It was for agreement, we went to the boss. Most times we did not go for claim, because, now, most of the workers are in the trade unions and know what to do (...).

The representative emphasized the importance of participation to the “*Union of Bangladeshi Workers*” towards a Greek trade-union as follows:

(...) Yes of course. Because there they do not understand a lot of things. There will be no one to explain them, therefore they search at least for their people, with language as theirs. More they have to gain from the Union. This is not compared. This with the Greek trade unions is one per cent. Once again they cannot claim their rights from the Greeks. And of course because they are few who go to the trade unions, and those who go do not know anything and the people there treats them insignificantly (...).

6. COLLECTIVE ORGANIZATION AND LABOUR REPRESENTATION OF BANGLADESHIS IN GREECE?

The Bangladeshis are very often dominated by feelings of isolation and avoid the active participation and action in collective activities. The difficulty of renewal of authorisations of work and residence, the fear of the deportation for the informal individuals and the economic difficulties from the complete and constant lack of employment, leads directly and precisely to situations of marginalisation, decreasing simultaneously the confidence toward government owned services but also to collective organizations.

The answers that the Bangladeshi workers gave concerning the question “*Why haven't you been a member of the Union of Bangladeshi Workers in Greece (UBW)*” are distinctive (TABLE:3). As it seems most of them are afraid and discouraged to go out of their residences in order to avoid being arrested by the authorities.

In particular, two Bangladeshi workers described why they didn't join the “*Union of Bangladeshi Workers*”:

(...) The problem, firstly, are the papers. If I do not have the papers I am not in the mood to go, to an association. This is reasonable. If we had papers everybody would have gone. We would do whatever we wanted to (...). I believe that they will help me in the

association. With my papers, in the work, with the boss. I believe that they will help me. I went for my papers but they could not help me. They had a lot of people and I went 2-3 times and they had a lot of people, thousands, and they could not help me. I brought this paper afterwards. Very late. Late and then they could not (...) Jahangir, age 27.

(...) No. I did not want to go, because I am too young for this. I have problems with my papers. I am afraid to do something so young. If I do not do a renewal, what to do, how to live. How to send money. The money that I get aren't enough (...). Santo, age 26.

Factors as fatigue due to exhausting timetables are enough to depress, Islam (29) an economic migrant from Bangladesh:

(...) I do not have each day free, only Saturday and Sunday. When I have free time I do not go outside. The problem with my papers, if I go outside I will go to prison. I only go to the mosque. It is here near Euripidou Str. I go and I leave fast. I do not have time to speak for the homeland, for works, for culture. I now fear, the police, because when I go outside, the police awaits, then it is a problem for the immigrants from Bangladesh (...). Islam, age 29.

Abu (28) describes that he didn't know where to go or he hasn't heard anything about it:

(...) I do not know (where it is). Most of them do not know. I stay in Piraeus and am far from it (...). Abu, age 28.

At the same time the low level of trust and confidence towards the Union of Bangladeshi Workers in Greece (UBW) its representatives and members, distantiates or make them indifferent with no expectations from it. In addition a Bangladeshi worker, Imran (36) said that he would never join the Greek-trade union of his profession:

(...) No I will not go, I will not go to the Greek Trade Union. I will go there. Because they cannot explain me well, what is the problem (...) others will not understand me. Our pain (...). Imran, age 36.

Concerning the Bangladeshis, what is understandable from the analysis of the interviews is that in a context of a capitalist social and work environment, of casual labour market and of division of labour, the immigrant work organizations seem to be

substituted by squares, house-meetings and personal attempts for solutions that are not based on a collective organization or action but on a colleague or friendly wider social network in the city. In conclusion findings from the transcriptions and the analysis of the interviews identified that the consequences of work and employment in casual labour markets influence the collective organization of migrants not only in the level of production, economy and labour representation but also in a level of work, culture and social identity.

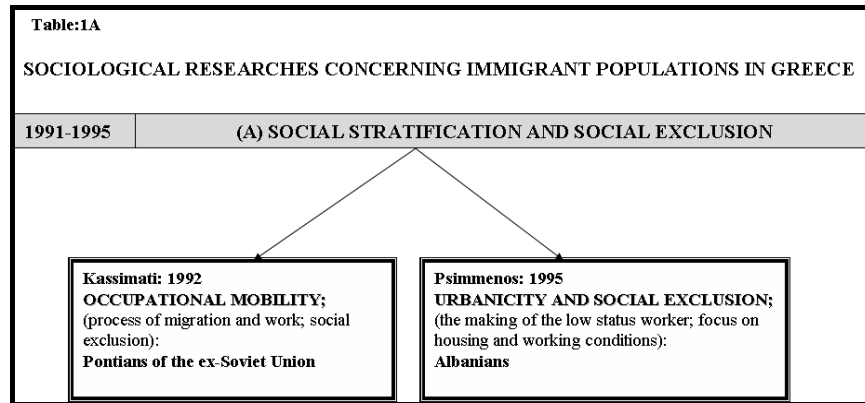
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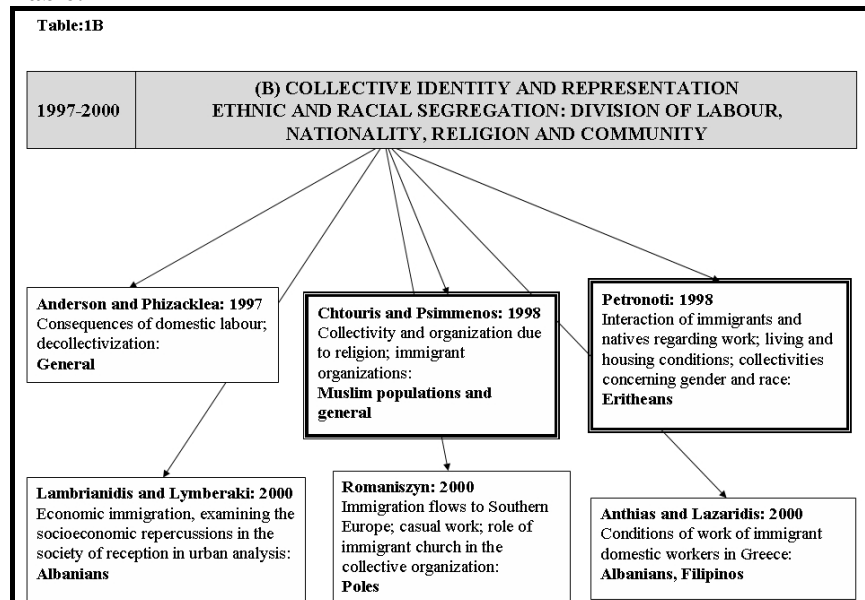
ANNEX OF TABLES AND GRAPHS:

Table:1A



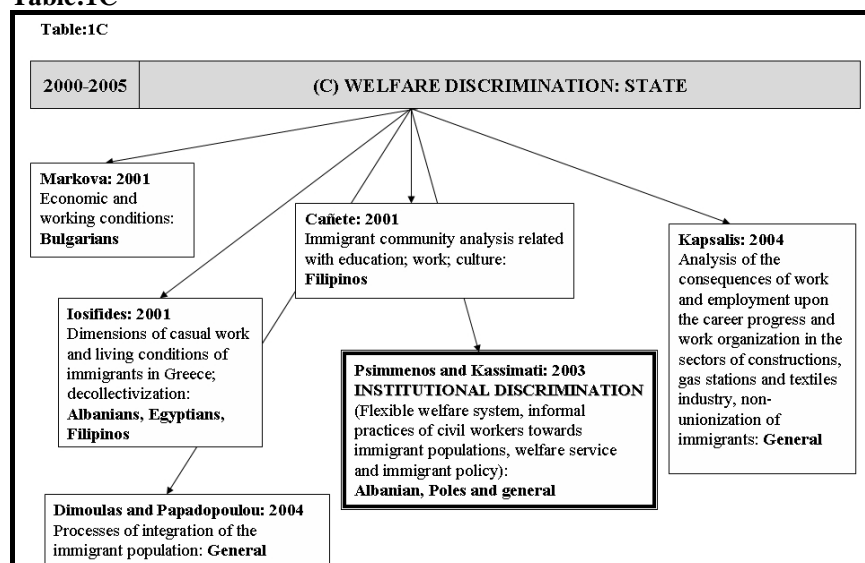
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Table:1B



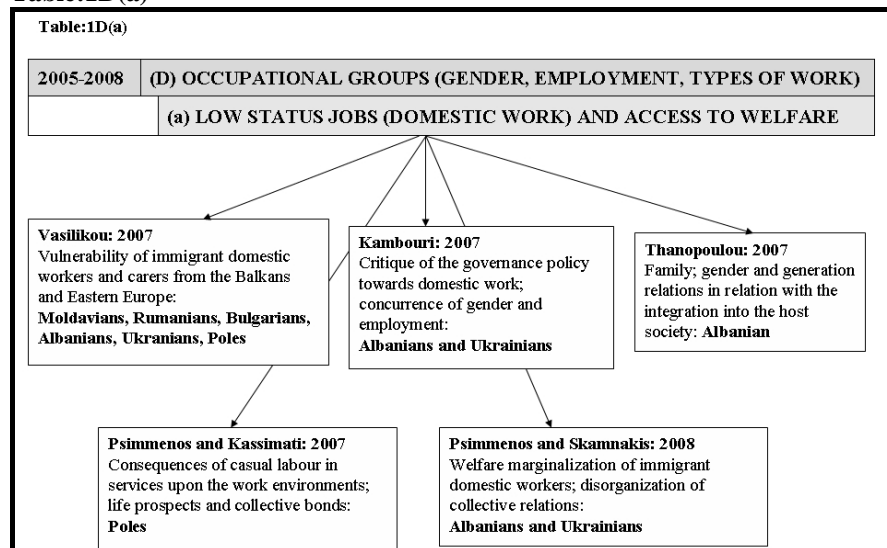
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Table:1C



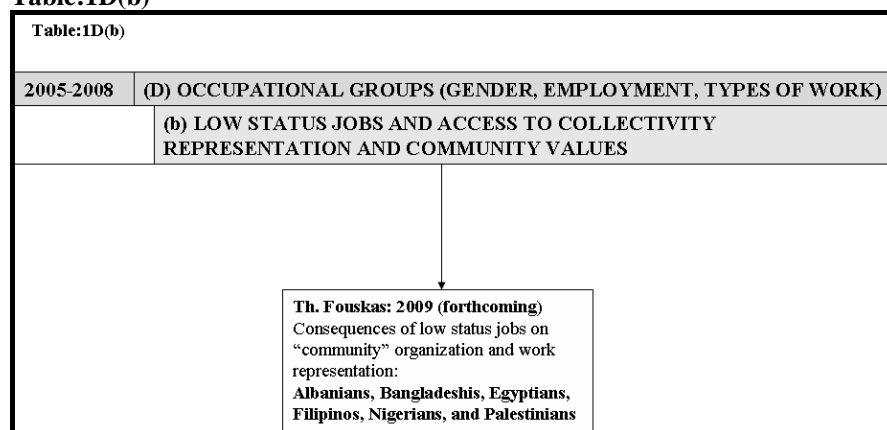
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Table:1D(a)



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Table:1D(b)



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TABLE 2A:

	NAME OF MIGRANT LABOUR ORGANIZATION	AREA
1	Union of Albanian Workers in Greece (UAW)	Omonoia, Athens
2	Union of Bangladeshi Workers in Greece (UBW)	Omonoia, Athens
3	Union of Egyptian Workers in Greece (UEW)	Omonoia, Athens
4	Palestinian Workers Union in Greece (PWU)	Victorias Sq., Athens
5	Union of Filipino Workers in Greece (UPW)	Amerikis Sq., Athens

Fouskas, 2008

TABLE 2B:

	NAME OF MIGRANT LABOUR ORGANIZATION	MEMBERS	NON-MEMBERS	TOTAL SUMS
1	Union of Albanian Workers in Greece (UAW)	5	16	21
2	Union of Bangladeshi Workers in Greece (UBW)	6	12	18
3	Union of Egyptian Workers in Greece (UEW)	7	10	17
4	Palestinian Workers Union in Greece (PWU)	5	14	19
5	Union of Filipino Workers in Greece (UPW)	5	11	16

	SUMS:	28	63	91
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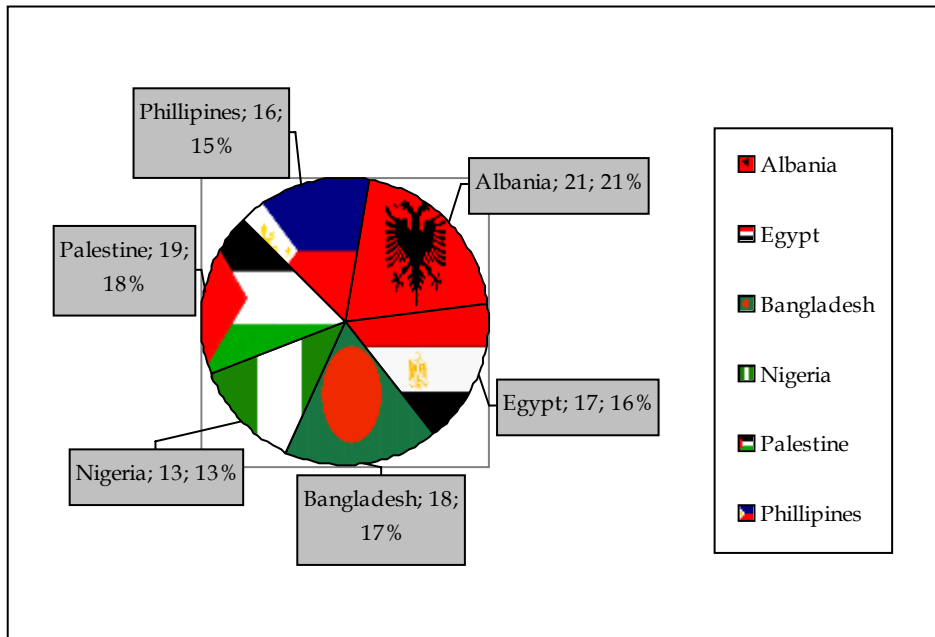
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TABLE 2C:

	NAME OF MIGRANT ORGANIZATION	MEMBERS	NON-MEMBERS	TOTAL SUMS
6	Nigerian Community in Greece (NCG)	4	9	13

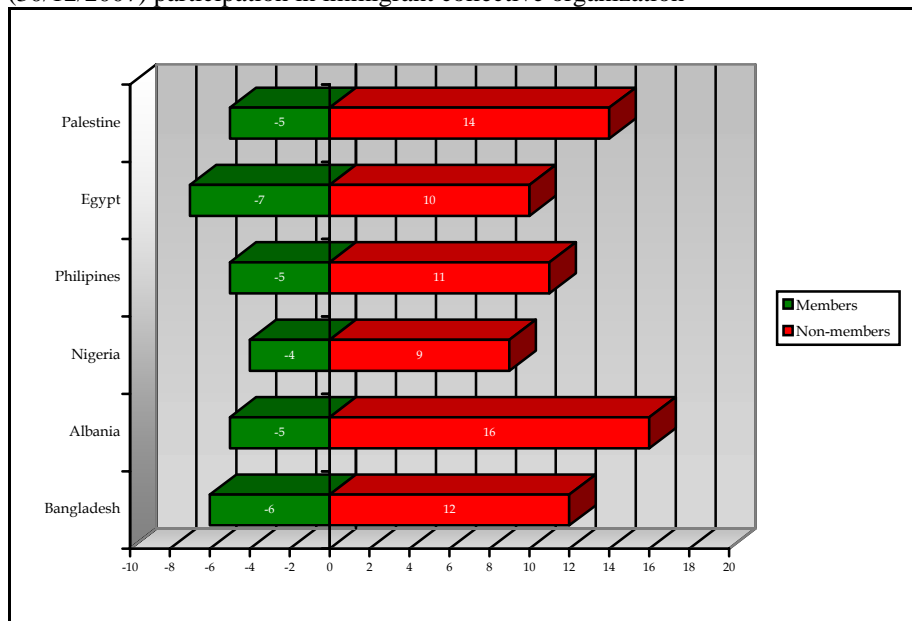
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GRAPH:1: Pie chart of total sum of the non-statistical sample of qualitative research (30/12/2007)



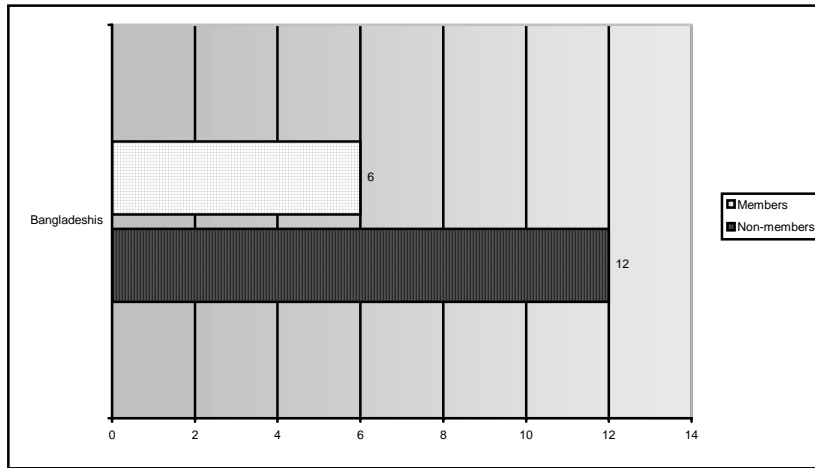
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GRAPH:1A: Column chart of total sum of the non-statistical sample of qualitative research (30/12/2007) participation in immigrant collective organization



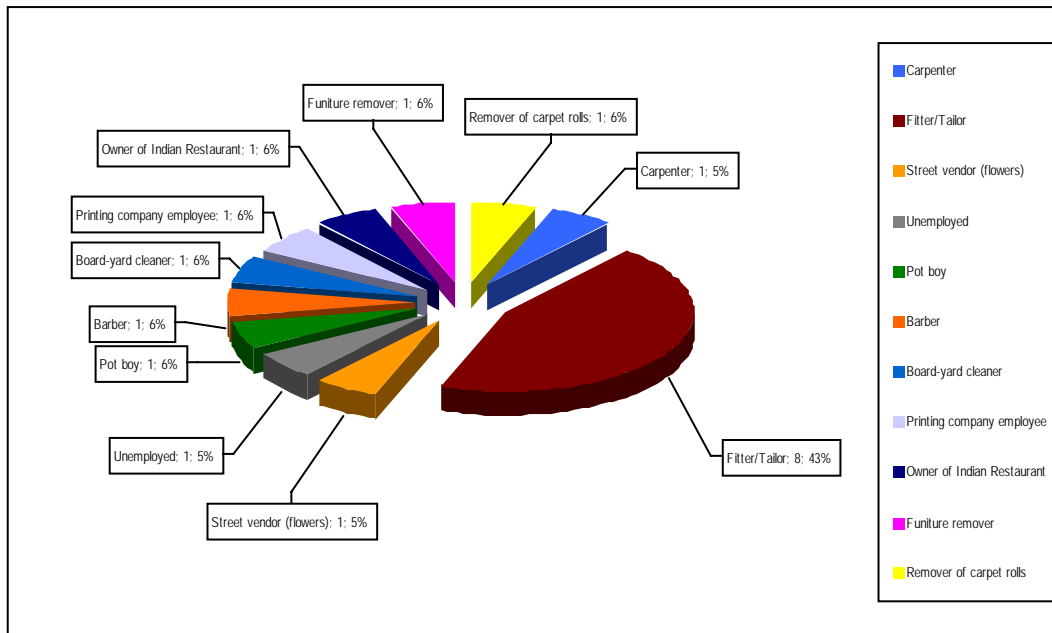
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GRAPH:2: Column chart participation of Bangladeshis (sum: 18) in collective organization (UBW)



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GRAPH:3: Pie chart occupation of Bangladeshis in Athens (sum=18)



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TABLE:3: Column chart Bangladeshis non-members (sum: 12) of collective organization (UBW)

Q: WHY HAVEN'T YOU BEEN A MEMBER OF THE UBW?	
I was afraid to go due to legal status	5
I didn't know where to go	2
I wasn't able to go (tiredness)	1
I wasn't able to go (timetable)	2
I don't want to interfere	1
I am a member elsewhere	1
N/A	
SUM	12

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