

The Visibility and Civil Participation of Women in Cyprus

Magda Zenon. Founding member and President of Hands Across the Divide, Cyprus

Cyprus is a divided island in conflict. And as is common in such societies, women's issues and voices are usually silenced as the national issue takes precedence over all other questions.

Everything in Cypriot society is viewed within the narrow focus of "the national problem", and all-important issues in daily life, including health, education, women's development and gender discrimination, do not get the attention they deserve or are marginalized. This identification with the national problem and with specific ethnicity in a patriarchal society such as Cyprus deprives women of other choices in relation to their self-definition as individuals or as a part of a gender group. It is thus not surprising that gender inequality has never been addressed as a social and political issue. The conflict is viewed as genderless, implying men's and women's experiences of the conflict are the same, or if they are seen as different, only the official male discourses are heard.

According to the latest research (Hadjipavlou, 2004), women in all Cypriot communities find themselves in a transitional situation whereby modernity and traditionalism are mixed in both the private and public realms of their lives. Women's education is still largely dependent upon socially constructed roles, which for women are related first and fore-

most to the family, home and caring for the others. They place careers last on their scale of priorities, whereas men place their career at the top of their list and family last. The perception still exists that more years of advanced education for women would mean a higher degree of commitment and a subsequent neglect of the family.

Female students from the University of Cyprus have often been heard expressing this same view, which they have accepted by dint of hearing it said in their own families and in the wider community. Mothers often try to discourage their daughters from pursuing advanced studies since, in their view, daughters will not need them once they get married. In a way, an invisible ceiling is still placed on how much education women should receive, though statistically we acknowledge that girls today receive much more education than their mothers or grandmothers. This attitude "you have had enough education, time to get married" derives exclusively from the gendered understanding of the right to education and the socially prescribed roles for women. In spite of this, the performance of women in education today is good and often better than that of men, even in tertiary education except at the level of doctoral studies.

Social history has enabled us to study and

understand women's attitudes, beliefs, the "cycle of life" and historical phenomena such as reproduction, family structures and love-related behaviour, which until recently were viewed as little more than biological "givens" (Sylvester, 1989). This has also allowed us to gradually replace the simplistic view that women are merely the victims of the patriarchal order of things with women's agency.

According to Hadjipavlou's research, in a patriarchal society such as Cyprus, the two sexes are socialized into different roles and are associated with different values. It is expected that each sex will behave according to socially constructed roles, gender stereotypes and expectations. In addition, the space in which each gender is expected to move and to be self-actualized is socially determined, that is, the private space is associated with the female and the public with the male (Tickner, 1992).

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When one gender, and it is usually women, moves from one space to the other or chooses to be in both, then a social "interruption" is created and any resultant social problems are usually blamed on this "anomaly". As a consequence of this, we often hear comments along the lines that children's rebellious behaviour is due to the fact that women have abandoned their household duties in order to work outside the home, or the increase in divorce and infidelity is due to women's economic independence and their wish to establish careers for themselves.

Women are under-represented in public life and in the centres of decision-making in the Republic of Cyprus in comparison with other EU member states. Of the total 53 members of parliament, only eight are women, though the Auditor-General and the

Ombudsperson are both women. Cyprus is one of the only two countries in the EU with no women in a ministerial position. Amongst the Turkish Cypriot community, we find that women are more visible in public life, since the president of their House is a woman, the minister of education is a woman and three of the 50 members of parliament are women.

But beyond these facts and figures, what is more worrisome is that very few women really feel the need to participate more actively in politics, environmental issues, trade unions, the community and local government, where they could become visible and apply social pressure for changes that they would wish to see as women. So beyond the figures and the legislation available in Cyprus, the primary issue that I feel needs to be addressed is whether Cypriot women actually do want to be part of the decision-making process and be visible in society, so that these spaces do not continue to remain predominantly a male domain and that discourses become more holistic or balanced.

The absence of a non-partisan feminist movement on the island has further helped the acceptance and the entrenchment of male political discourses, since all the existing women's associations are closely linked to political parties and they often adopt party agendas and ideologies. The fact that most women's associations are totally accountable to the party has also led to the increased marginalisation of women and women's issues. The establishment of a multicultural NGO – which has often been discussed but has never materialised – could perhaps serve as a non-partisan forum for women candidates and offer a supportive environment during election campaigns, something that today is left in the hands of each political party.

This kind of environment can explain the multiple levels of confusion, levels of violence and contradictions Cypriot women experience to this day. Some of these contradictions are

obvious in terms of personal choices. In smaller private discussions during a research project (Hadjipavlou, 2004), Cypriot women often spoke about the issue of domestic violence, which they attributed mainly to an unequal distribution of power. Some spoke about abusive relationships with their husbands, feelings of humiliation and a lack of communication. In such dysfunctional relationships women feel alienated, leave the home or opt for a divorce. Some, however, stay in the relationship due to family and social pressure. Many spoke of their husband's infidelity and extra-marital affairs as a frequent personal and social problem. Many women said that even when they confronted their husbands with evidence of their infidelity, they not only denied it but also confronted them with "you are a fool; you are mad and a prime case for admission to a psychiatric hospital". Such abuses lead women to doubt their own worth and state of mind and are even intended to make them feel guilty, as if it were their fault. This explains the increase in women's health problems, both physical and psychological, including sleeplessness, migraines, stomach upsets, dizziness and depression. This also explains why, according to the *New Publication Health Survey* of 2003 of the Statistical Service of the Republic of Cyprus, women appear less able to face their problems as compared to men.

Prior to Cyprus's entry into the EU, many women stressed the role that the accession of Cyprus to the EU could play for women's issues, for women's voices, and for women's more active participation in public life. For this to happen, however, it was commonly acknowledged that systematic information needed to be disseminated to women and the wider public in all communities.

Today, following Cyprus's accession to the EU, complete information is freely available and all laws ensuring the equality of women

in society at all levels are in place, yet women still appear reluctant to use them when faced with discrimination, whether in the workplace or elsewhere. An example of this is the pay gap between men and women at 25% in Cyprus – a much higher percentage than the average of 15% in the EU.

All laws ensuring equality, yet women still appear reluctant to use them when faced with discrimination

In a patriarchal society there is also a hierarchy in the value system whereby the feminist values of connecting with others, caring and creating a consciousness that is relational, contextual, integrative and life-affirming are regarded as inferior or of lesser importance than those engendered by men's activities, such as competition, the exercise of power, rationality, hard-headedness, ambition, and efficiency. Thus, simply changing the structures is not enough. The prevalent value system of society itself also has to change.

Thus we can conclude that the women of Cyprus themselves need to find their space in the society of today. This can only happen with changes in individual and public awareness of women's issues and increased public debate on such issues, which are as important if not more so than the international efforts to solve the Cyprus conflict. It would help significantly to have new programmes, run and managed by both men and women. You never see a woman on a Greek Cypriot television programme discussing defence issues, for instance, and taking a different standpoint to the one put forward by men, that is, arms build-up and strategic defence. Women's perspectives will broaden this debate and others and will enrich the political agenda and hence the whole of society will benefit. Changes in individual and public awareness of gender issues and the gender sensitisation process require everyone's

participation – the state, its institutions, NGOs and the media.

Finally, the need for the integration of gender analysis in every level of education and continuous research into gender issues is of paramount importance to help us identify areas for change and to connect these to the macro level and the global agenda for gender equality and to the construction of a better world for all.

References

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