Among Cypriot Women: Unraveling the Invisible and Highlighting the Connection to the Visible.

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ABSTRACT

This paper will present and analyze aspects of Cypriot women's lives and desires based on an 11-month research project in which I was the coordinator. I consciously decided to engage only women in the various phases of the project. Why only women? Why women from all the. Communities-Greek, Turkish, Maronite, Armenian, and Latin? The project had clear methodological, personal and political goals: The methodological one concerned the production of knowledge, the personal refers to the empowerment and connection among the women; and the political to unravel the complexity of women's voices and needs. Furthermore, I will discuss some of the major themes and contradictions as well as women's desires highlighting similarities and particularities among the different communities of women as these also relate to global women's issues. Women in all Cypriot communities find themselves in a transitional context where modernity and traditionalism are intermixed in both the private and public realms of their lives. I also make some policy recommendations based on these women's voices and experiences in a country, which is still divided but a full member of the European Union. Finally, I hope to unravel the invisible as this refers to the complexity of voices and highlight its connection to the visible that is, what connects the Cypriot women but has been covered up for decades.

Unraveling the Invisible and Highlighting the Connection to the Visible: Among Women in Multi-Communal Cyprus.

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Introduction

In 1993 a Turkish Cypriot journalist interviewed me on women's issues. We met in the buffer zone, at the Ledra Palace Hotel in divided Nicosia. Among other issues, she asked me what I knew about the lives and struggles of Turkish Cypriot women. I remember I replied by saying that I knew more about the struggles of women in Britain, the United States and Palestine than I knew about Turkish Cypriot women who live a stone's throw away and yet so distant. The same was true for her concerning the lives of Greek Cypriot women.

Soon after, as a feminist academic I decided to carry out a pilot study on women in both communities and look at issues of identity, conflict and women's struggles and desires. I had hoped that it would become a large research project producing knowledge about women in both communities. I was lucky to find a Turkish Cypriot woman, Neshe Yashin who later became my best friend in our efforts to build bridges of understanding across the divide. I finished the pilot study in the South among Greek Cypriot women despite the fact that many were reluctant to respond at first. Neshe in the North managed to have very few out of the 120 questionnaires filled in and she was afraid that we were not going to receive more. When I asked for an explanation I learned that some Turkish Cypriot women were reluctant to fill them in, as did some of the Greek Cypriot women, and others because their husbands or fathers when they saw the questionnaires not only prevented them from responding, but tore them up and threw the papers in the dustbin . I then realized that not only the timing and level of readiness were not ripe but that bicommunal research on women´s issues was not appreciated or supported in a conflict society. Ten years later some of

our findings still confirm the dominance of patriarchy both in the homes and in the public life of women from all communities in Cyprus.

In 2003 we were able to realize this desire for a large research study on Cypriot women 's lives not only in the two major communities but in all Cypriot communities-Greek, Turkish, Maronite, Armenian and Latin. Does this tell us our society has become more tolerant and more ready to listen to women's voices and issues? Or has the change in the political climate in view of Cyprus' accession to the European Union and the harmonization of legislation regarding gender equality opened up space for a public debate on gender issues and thus for academic research? Both conditions may have contributed.

This article analyses part of a pioneering research on the study of women's experiences, vices and desires in all Cypriot communities.

One of the general findings in our research project of 2003 demonstrates that the women in all Cypriot communities find themselves in a transitional context where modernity and traditionalism are intermixed in both the private and public realms of their lives. This can explain the many contradictions, confusion and ambivalences women have expressed in the different issues about which they were interviewed. We found that women's education on gender issues and their sensitization to the prevalence of the male dominant culture in Cyprus was exceedingly low. On the other hand, women were critical of their own oppression and were looking for ways out whereas others would comply to the social pressures in a conscious way.

Living in a conflict society, like in other conflict societies, the "national problem: has historically overshadowed and downplayed women's issues, voices and their different experiences. The conflict was viewed as genderless, implying men's and women's experiences of the conflict are the same or if different this was irrelevant. The predominance of the official masculine discourses in the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities about duty to fight the "enemy" for justice and respect or recognition led Greek and Turkish Cypriot women to internalize their ethnic and national duty roles. Thus, many women did what the community would expect them to engage in denying them the right to be full participants or agents . The absence of a feminist movement on the island further helped the internalization of the male political discourses since all women's associations were

closely tied to political parties. This kind of environment can explain the multiple levels of confusion, levels of violence and contradictions Cypriot women experience to this day.

Women's education as our research (2003) has shown is still contingent upon the socially constructed roles which for women refer first to family, home, caring for the others. They place career last in their scale of priorities whereas men place career on the top of their list and family last. There still exists the perception that more years of advanced education for women would mean higher degree of committment and subsequent neglect of family.

I often hear my female students express this same view internalized from their families and the external environment. Mothers often try to discourage their duaghters from pursuing advanced studies since, in their view, they will not need it. In a way an invisible ceiling is still placed on how much education women must recive, though statistically we acknowledge that today girls 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. 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 behaviour, which until recently were viewed as little more than biological 'givens'. 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.

Alternative Ways of Knowing

The use of gender as an analytical tool in understanding women's and men's experiences in the world has opened up both a theoretical and practical debate amongst academics, activists and policy makers From the moment women entered academia they sought to examine and dispel beliefs suggesting sexual polarities in intelleigence and personality characteristics. Historically, it had been assumed that the development of women's intellectual potential would inhibit the development of their emotional capacities and that the development of men's emotional range would impair intellectuall functioning. (Belenky et. al.1986) This assumption may sound ridicoulous to some of us today, especially in the West, but elements of it still prevail nowadays not only in Cyprus but elswhere. For instance, in Germany as Mathiopoulou (1993) informed us there

are still university professors who would discourage a female doctoral candidate to pursue doctoral studies because she would not have the time to use her academic qualifications after she gets married and has a family, which, due to her biological limitations, should be soon.

Human experience is gendered and this understanding is central to the radical implications of feminist theory which emerges from and responds to the lives of women. The recognition of the impact of gender and an insistence on the importance of the female experience have priovided the vital common ground for feminist research and thought. Listening to women's voices, studying women's writings, and learning from women's experiences have been crucial to the feminist reconstruction of our understanding of the world. Women's persoanl narratives are, among other things, stories of how women negotiate their "exceptional" gender status both in their daily lives and over the course of a lifetime." (p.4-5 Personal Narrative Group, 1989)

Methodology thus matters within feminism because it is the key to understanding and unpacking the overlap between knowledge and power. Women's stories and personal narratives today constitute a valid scientific field of study with new methodologies giving rise to a "a new history of women which is the product of interaction between the political perspective of the contemporary women's movement and the methodology, and an emphasis on the new social history" (Smith-Rosenberg, 1975).

The Research Project.

When we began our research project on "*Women in the Cypriot Communities*", itself a pioneering study, and which is located within the broader global context of studying women's issues and their experiences we viewed reality beyond binary conceptions, as complex. We used both "Hard" and "soft" methods and gained positive insights from both. The data and general observations I refer to here is based on both quantitative and qualitative methods.

In a patriarchal society such as Cypriot the two sexes are socialized into different roles and are associated with different values. It is expected of each sex to behave according to the socially constructed roles, 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. When one gender (and it is often women)

moves from one space to the other or chooses to be in both, then a social "disturbance" is created and any resultant social problems are usually blamed on this "anomaly" We often hear comments such as the anti-social behaviour of children is due to the fact that women have left their household duties to work outside the home, or the increase in divorce and spousal infidelity is due to women's economic independence and their wish to create careers for themselves!

Separating public from private space leads to a separation of mind and body, whereby women are associated with nature, something that is mortal and corrupt, whereas men are associated with civilization, which is immortal and significant. In such an environment, both genders lose. Each is deprived of the full spectrum of choices and a holistic development in a community structured by a variety of connections, rather than by separation and opposition.

In a patriarchal society we also experience a hierarchy in the value system whereby the feminist values of connection, caring, creating a consciousness that is relational, contextual, integrative and life affirming, are considered as inferior or of less importance than those engendered by men's activities such as competition, the exercise of power, rationality, hard headedness, ambition, and efficiency. Thus, as Bell Hooks (2000) would argue, simply changing the structures is not enough. We also have to change the prevalent value system.

The reserach project to which I make reference below took us 11-months to complete, while the idea for this project dates back ten years as I already indicated.. Timing and ripe socio-political conditions play a large role in researching aspects of life in a divided society. The major aim of this project has been to bring to the surface the invisible and give voice to the voiceless. As the co-ordinator of the project and the president of the Cyprus Peace Center, a non-profit NGO which was the body under which the project was conducted, I could not imagine doing research on women in all communities without engaging NGOs from all the Cypriot communities. Yhe issue of exclusion has been a political issue in Cyprus. I also wanted to challenge the bi-communal coneptualization of Cypriot ethnic identies. Thus, I invited the other four partners NGOs which are : A women's organization *Hands, Across the Divide, the Armenian Relief Society, the Maronites Graduates Association, and the Latin Association for Support of Foreign Workers.*

From the beginning I wanted all of us to feel equal partenerss Copies of the project proposal were given to each partner and I discussed the need, the aims, the objectives and other ideas of the project with representative women from each NGO. I expalined why I proposed to focus our study only on women.The project thus left my exclusive control as each of the groups became increasingly involved. Each acknowledged the other's strenghts and capacities. Thus leadership was excercised by each of the participating women. Each took responsibility of a part of the project and we all shared the whole. It was an empowering experience. We introduced the concept of "heterarchy", meaning each one has power and that power is in abundance. Was it an easy process?

Soon after the project was approved and funded by the European Union we organized project coordinators from each group who attended regular meetings. These early meetings were spent getting to know each other and on formulating the questions. This was one of the most exciting phases in the project because we were being informed in an honest way about the hidden women's issues in each community, what issues would be embarasing and why others would not. This process took us more than three months to reach the final draft of the survey questionnaire. So behind every question there is a rich story of the social life of women in Cyprus. The questionnaire consisted of 59 questions covering a broad spectrum of Cypriot women's lives.

Why Only Women?

In our study we chose to listen only to women because as Belenky et al. (1986) tell us in their book "Women's Ways of Knowing", "the male experience has been so powerfully articulated that we believed we would hear the patterns in women's voices more clearly if we held at bay the powerful templates men have etched in the letarature and in our minds" (p.9)

One of our practical aims was to develop a safe thinking space for women from all communities to articulate their opinions, their concerns, their values and voice in addition to realizing their intra-and inter-differences. Another aim was political, that is to raise awareness for the right of women to participate in a world shaped by both men and women. We believe that women need their own space to listen to each other and to affirm that knowledge is also produced through reflecting on our experiences, which become the most important data upon which to

construct our realities The level of commitment increased as we built trust and the project moved ahead. We also wished to develop amongst the working groups the values of cooperation, tolerance, support, and respect for differences, values that we aimed through this project to legitimate and transfer to our society. I believe we succeeded at the level of relationship building amongst more than eighty women from all communities who actively participated in carrying out the various phases of the project

Thus the final educational and political aim was to make this process and its findings owned by many in our society something we did through seminars and a conference.

Learning, connection, tension and frustration, as well as great richness and a wealth of surprises, marked the dynamics of this work. I believe working together has increased our power to be productive and to value our diverse talents and difficulties, avoiding both competition and exclusions, feelings we amply experience when working in a hierarchal setting.

Focus Groups Discussion

In using the approach of group in-depth interviews in each Cypriot community we wanted to highlight each community's legitimacy and to promote the politics of appreciation of each other's commonalities and differences on specific issues. We believe knowledge is produced not only from rational scientific models but also from inter-subjective experiences and interactions with each other and other others. The topics of discussion that we used in the focus group interviews have not been covered in-depth in the questionnaire survey. In particular, the themes discussed during the focus groups interviews addressed the following: *Issues of Self definition* , *Relations of women with other women and the dominant community* :*The "Crossings" with* the partial opening of the Green Line and *what women* expect from entering the *European Union.*

The Political Background

The political situation in Cyprus has changed during the implementation phases of our project and this included three historic events: the submission of the Annan Plan for a Comprehensive Settlement of the Cyprus Problem (2002); the signing of the Republic's Accession Treaty to the EU on April 16, 2003, and a week later (April 23rd) the partial opening of the Green Line when contacts and communication between the communities on the island developed a new dynamic towards

peace-building. In the context of these changes, we believed it was significant to address in our focus group interviews, among other issues, Cyprus' accession to the European Union and what this would mean to Cypriot women; the meaning of the "crossing" to and from the other side. All these historical moments in the context of the Cyprus conflict have had an impact both on the community level and the personal. We wished to observe and have women discuss the reactions, feelings and discoveries about the other.

In the rest of the paper I will make reference to a few selective themes in our analysis, namely, self-Identity /definition and the Others, and   Discrimination and Prejudice. I will then give some general observations about the whole range of issues discussed in our study.

The Analysis

Since women's voices, biographies, life stories all recount a process of construction of the self, these narratives are potentially rich sources for the exploration of the process of gendered self-identity. (Personal Narrative Group, p.5). In addition women's personal narratives can provide a vital entry point for examining the interaction between the individual and society in the construction of gender.

After having transcribed all the material/texts from all the focus groups we have tried to elicit broad categories of themes as these emerged in the discussions. We thus use the classification system of analysis of our data (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Some of these issues are shared, as for instance the role of religion and church in the lives of women; social pressures from external authorities; ignorance about the EU; whereas other issues are of less importance to some or have been hardly articulated by other women, as for instance, the economic aspect which is very crucial to Turkish Cypriot women but not so for other communities. We observe both complexity and uniqueness within and across communities. In general, we have observed a shift in women's lives toward more gender awareness, but not an adequate one yet. There is still a lot of confusion due to lack of appropriate education and familiarization with certain concepts that describe women's condition and issues.

Women, the Self and Others

It is often very difficult in our culture to get women to talk about themselves, their own story and reflect on who they are, what they want and their achievements. This is because we tend to stress the community and communal identity more than the individual. The individual belongs to the group. This is also attributed to gender socialization which promotes the norm for women to speak very little about ourselves and when we do we are judged as inappropriately egoistical and an indication of showing off. Another explanation related to our socialization as well is that women are expected to listen more and speak less and focus on caring and serving the needs of the other or others (father, brothers, husbands, children, parents, community, the nation, etc.) rather than on their own needs and self development as autonomous beings. The equal importance to both levels of development is not stressed. One of our subjects from the Latin Cypriot community expressed this as follows:

"To talk about myself is very difficult because it sounds as if you are either very humble or very arrogant to do so. In general, in Poland we say that whoever is taking pride in one's self is worth of disregard. Thus we were socialized to say only a few words rather than more. Because all about yourself sounds insignificant…" (Latin Cypriot participant)

Most of the women in the Latin group expressed the same hesitation to talk about themselves but afterwards with encouragement and after I pointed out the significance of personal story in the process of learning and producing knowledge they became more at ease. We met the same hesitation from the Maronite group, but the resistance was easier to handle. The Armenian and Greek Cypriot groups were more willing to talk about the self. The Turkish Cypriot women spoke about the self in relation to the Other and the social system, thus stressing the self in the community context. Here we note that both the individual agency and the social structure need to be considered.

"When I talk specifically about myself it was firstly me who felt uncomfortable as when I do something for the first time. Afterwards I questioned myself, why did I do that, why did I go there, did I have to do it?… when the communal structure changed after 1974 I thought about my involvement in the trade union. In order to do this I had to leave my two-month old baby at home

with someone else in order to attend the annual meeting and I felt bad about doing this but later I decided it was the right thing to do for me, but it was a struggle..." (TC participant)

This insight as expressed by some of the women into their own self awareness and struggle for self definition challenges the prevailing Cypriot culture and gender socialization. Most of the Greek Cypriot women, however, focused their pleasure on their children and the gratification they derive from being good mothers. Some of these women, however, regretted that they either focused on the needs of others or on too long working hours and thus neglected the self and when asked to talk about the Self they were not sure where to locate themselves. Does motherhood have a higher status than selfhood? How can both co-exist?

"When my children were small I stayed at home until noon and then left for the factory. But I never neglected taking my children to private lessons and both of them are university graduates. Everyday I had to drive them home, go to work, be with them to do their homework and watched that they did not waste time playing. I am proud of them. But my biggest regret is that I was working 18 hours a day and had no time left for myself. I had no time for my personal life, I always had to steal time as if I were a thief.." (G/C participant)

A TC participant described a "bitter experience" when it was decided that she would begin her university studies and relatives and neighbors came to her family's home to wish goodbye and to convince the mother not to send her daughter abroad because she will regret it in her old age.

" A woman neighbor came up to my mum and said, 'you are making a mistake here. You should have kept her with you, you know she is the youngest kid and she has to stay with you to look after you, don't send her away'... There is a sequence in what we should do as women,: we go to school, then get married, have kids, get them married and so on. If you don't behave in what the community wants you to do, then the pressure starts".

Another TC participant expressed her experience of social pressure as follows: "*You cannot live on your own, there is a greater power over you, out there and you have to stay within the prescribed circle otherwise people will laugh at you*". Thus the self exists within the community.

Even when women return from abroad after finishing their university studies and decide to have a life of their own both the family and the community pressure starts demanding of them to comply with the traditional role of women, i.e., get married and have a family. Thus the self-autonomy they tried to develop while away from home collides with the lack of appreciation of other non-traditional achievements and abilities of women. As one of our TC participant said,:

"*When I came back to Cyprus, after I finished my studies abroad, I decided against my mom's wishes not to marry. I started work, got my economic independence and decided to stay single. This was something my mum could never understand. Whenever she gets together with her friends that's all she can talk about. I do have many other positive features, can't they talk about them? Instead of looking at my life and seeing that I am happy the way I am, she becomes critical of the way I act and have chosen to live. She is disappointed because I stand outside the socially expected roles for "a normal" woman*".

Another view expressed is that often women themselves undermine their own strengths and abilities which can lead to self-oppression. As one of the GC participants stated,

"*We, as women, have a lot of power and talents but we do not really utilize them. This is so because we get tired and end up by saying 'let the other do it'. There is, however, a contradiction here because we ourselves become demanding of others and our environment but not of us. We live a contradiction, as if trapped .*"

In a male-dominated world, women often adopt styles of behaviors and traits that will help them survive both as women and as "successful" professionals. For instance, one of the GC participants, a business woman, described herself as follows and responds in a way to the comment of the other GC woman.

"I have learned to be in control otherwise I will not be able to survive. I have learned, thus, to dominate irrespective of the others whether men or women. I was once gentle, romantic, I was also very sensitive but not anymore. I have learned to be aggressive and to demand my rights."

Others expressed a sense of guilt if they dare do something for themselves such as going to the hairdresser's:

Even when we go to the hairdresser's we feel guilt because we left the children with our husbands, and we worry in case he is not able to take care of them, or if the children disturb him a lot. Many of us are tortured by the remorse we favour return to the old family values and wish that our daughters marry someone who will not allow them to work

What we have observed, in general, is that women in Cyprus are still struggling to establish a space for the self and accept their identity as individuals. The prevailing perception still demands women to comply with their assigned traditional roles, thus making it difficult for them to engage in personal gratification and self-actualization in ways beyond these assigned roles, beyond guilt, social resistance, guilt and pressure from above. When they do choose what is perceived as the modern way of defining themselves, that is chose to do more than expected of them, they often experience loneliness and marginalization even within their own families, which is still a strong institution in Cyprus.

Discrimination and prejudices

A great deal has been written about issues of discrimination as it manifests in different ways; in the context of minorities, gender, ethnicity, class and age. The dominant group usually tries to impose its norms and values on the Other. Prejudice is one of the most destructive aspects of human behaviours, often producing acts of violence both overt and covert. The classification of social groups into "us and them" whereby we attribute negative characteristics, attitudes and behaviors towards members of the outgroup create a culture of polarization and a tendency to homogenize communities . In our study women spoke both about gender and community discriminations and prejudices.

Gender discrimination

In our focus group discussion the issue of *gender* discrimination was more evident and intense in the experiences of Greek and Turkish Cypriot women whereas other forms of discrimination such as at the *workplace* and the *community* levels were more intense in the Maronite and Armenia groups. For instance, Greek-Cypriot women emphasized the degradation of women, the sex-role stereotyping, the cheap images of women as these are promoted through the media, the school textbooks, in the domestic area and in the broader environment. All these phenomena constitute issues of violence, according to these women.

In addition, women who experienced sexual harassment at the workplace said that the support system is weak. Women do not support other women. The power asymmetry is usually felt as a factor. Women are fearful to report such incidents because of either losing their jobs or not being taken seriously. Or once they do they are made to feel shame and guilt. One GC participant has been sexually harassed by her supervisor and because she did not give in, he made her life unbearable. After a while, she was forced to resign because he showed no respect. Similarly, a TC participant gave an example of such discrimination:

"W*hen I go to a customer they don't respect me because I am a woman. They dismiss me and ask for a male colleague to advise them on their business. Will this change when we enter the European Union and, if so, how long would this take. When I go somewhere, I don't want to be judged according to how I look or the way I dress, I want equal respect"*, she added.

Some of our participants experienced discrimination by other women, which is both indicative of the lack of women's solidarity and also a power issue. For instance, when women school inspectors had to evaluate the work of other women in their effort to exercise and maintain their power and status they appear to be very strict, dominating and unjust. Younger more educated women in lower positions felt that their supervisor who had less knowledge than them used her power over them thus creating an unhealthy relationship, not conducive to learning and professional development.

Turkish Cypriot participants experienced control and domination by their mothers who would not allow their daughters to go out and date different men because the society does not allow it but would feel comfortable if their sons did it

Community discrimination

Discrimination and prejudices are equally prevalent at the community level. Such behaviour is often expressed in terms of power relations, feelings of superiority and inferiority. Often the dominant group feels superior and does not really care to get to know and understand the minority cultures. The dominant group assumes that it knows what it is fair and best for the less powerful ones who in turn often internalize their lower status as if it were the natural state of affairs.

Maronite women, coming from a small community and having to struggle for their cultural and social survival encountered more discriminatory practices in their social interactions with the dominant group. In general, Maronite women perceive, for instance, both the living standard as well as the level of education of the Armenians and Greek Cypriots as being higher than their own. In addition, they perceive the Armenians having a historical advantage in that they share a common enemy with the Greek Cypriots, i.e .the Turks, and thus make them feel closer to the dominant group. They also think that the others perceive them as peasants with little education and speaking a strange language, which characterizes them as barbarians.

On the issue of historical advantage the Armenians argue that, because of the genocide against their nation by the Turks, they have suffered much more during the 1964 inter-communal violence events and after the 1974 invasion and invited the Maronite women to understand. Some said:

"*Many of us lost their homes and properties in the northern part of Nicosia in 1964. There was a rich Armenian neighborhood then. ... This experience hurts us a great deal and we try to avoid talking about it.*"

Maronite women also stressed the disastrous effects of the 1974 war on the cohesion of their community, their displacement from the Maronite villages except a few hundreds who stayed at Kormakides as enclaved persons. They repeatedly mentioned their concern about the shrinking of

their community and the loss of their sense of cultural identity. These are related issues felt by many minority groups.

Another traumatic experience of prejudice against the Maronites was vividly described by one the participants who felt rejected the minute it became known she was a Maronite by religion: *"When I was 18 I had an operation at the hospital and in the same room there was a woman from another village who was operated, too. One day my mother came to see me and told me that she would not come the next day to see me because of Easter preparations. When the other woman patient heard this she remarked that Easter was in two weeks' time. And then my mother said to her that we are Maronites and that we celebrate Easter earlier than the Greek Orthodox. The Greek Cypriot lady then turned to me in great surprise and said, 'so you area a Maronite?! It is a shame such a good girl like you to be a Maronite!.' She befriended me for three days and as soon as she heard that I am a Maronite she changed her attitude and I felt rejected "*

Other Maronite women said that they may be working with their colleagues for years who do not know they are Maronites. But once the issue of one's religion and identity comes up in conversation the orthodox colleagues are disappointed when they find out. *"The stereotypical saying is 'you don't look it'. The word Maronite sounds as if we come from the outer space, something strange…."*
Due to discriminatory practices that many Maronites have experienced they tend not to reveal their Maronite identity as long as possible.

Being different is perceived as being inferior or vulnerable to discrimination. For instance, children from mixed marriages do not reveal that the grandfather or grandmother is a Maronite. In addition, a lot of Maronites try to hide the fact that there are some differences between them and the Greek Cypriots or with the other communities. We adopt such behaviors as a self-protection mechanism. It is a means of protecting yourself against the other. If you say you have differences, you simultaneously join the opposing camp", some said.

At home, however, young mothers try to transfer to their children a sense of pride in being Maronites coming from Kormakitis or from the other inaccessible villages in the northern part of Cyprus. The trend to make visible their Maronite part of identity is regaining ground recently and they demand social acknowledgement something the accession to the European Union will help.

Some Latin women also experienced communal discrimination. In particular, one has described her own experience in the workplace. She was considered a non-Greek speaker, although she had completed a Greek secondary education and was top in her class in both Greek and Latin. Despite her repeated applications for promotion she was forced in the end to resign so as not to receive another letter of regret. She believes both her gender and her religious background influenced the decision reached by the promotion committee.

Other Latin women also described their disappointment concerning delays in governmental procedures such as getting a Cypriot passport, despite the fact that they have been living on the island for many years, or even decades, and have had the right to vote.

Discriminatory practices against their community as a whole, have also been described by the Armenian participants. In particular, emphasis was given to the degree of ignorance the other communities exhibit towards the Armenian community. For instance, a participant gravely disappointed explained how the majority of Cypriots could not tell the difference between Armenian and the Turkish languages *"Something I do mind is when we talk with each other (in Armenian) and they (GCs) listen to us and ask whether the language we speak is Turkish, they do not understand, they don't understand the difference. We have been here for so many years and I believe they ought to know by now to distinguish who we are and our language."*

In other words, discrimination arises out of ignorance and lack of contacts and invisibility of the Armenians in the mass media. Both sides have a responsibility for such phenomena the Armenians for not making the necessary effort to inform the other Cypriot communities about their history on the island, and the dominant group for not giving enough opportunities to all minorities to do so.

Similarly to the Maronites, Armenian women expressed their concern about the cultural survival of the community. In particular, the younger participants mentioned that their parents encourage them to get married to an Armenian man, thus loyalty to the community becomes a personal duty: *"Yes, my parents want me to get married to an Armenian. I have been hearing this since I was a little girl and I know inside me that I will marry an Armenian. I do not blame them because we are a small community."*

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS AND OBSERVATIONS

The findings of this research project have revealed the multiple realities that Cypriot women experience. These realities refer alike to the domestic, the personal, the interpersonal, multi-communal and public levels. The situation in Cyprus is every bit as complex and multi-level as the Cypriot women have revealed through their own experiences in the different communities. This diversity has been expressed in their individual views, understandings, values and priorities concerning both private and public issues, such as the issue of individual autonomy and self-development, the institutions of marriage, family, education and religion, as well as issues of the 'other', of politics, the European Union dynamic, the partial opening of the Green Line, and future solution**.**

In conflict cultures there is a tendency to homogenize the communities, failing to acknowledge their complexity and, thus, prolonging misperceptions and stereotypes. In our findings, the issue of heterogeneity and multiple voices has emerged as a richness and a welcome factor in helping us to build a multi-voiced and multi-cultural society. For this purpose, our subjects stressed repeatedly the role of education, both formal and informal. The fact that the national issue, as defined by the dominant group, often sidelines the needs and concerns of smaller communities, which suffer from cultural and social marginalization, or even extinction, has been raised as a serious issue by women in our focus group discussions.

Another neglected aspect of reality in a conflict culture is the internal differentiation in communal life. We found this to be very strong in all communities, with notable differences in terms of class, age, ideology, education and contacts with the 'Other'. For example, the Armenian *young* women have been socialized to marry within their community and feel it their responsibility

to comply in order to perpetuate the community. As to class, some Maronite women from urban areas were reluctant to send their children to a newly founded Maronite elementary school which would be attended by lower class children from rural areas, whom they feared might lower the standard of education. Many Maronite and Armenia women talked in the focus group interviews quite strongly about the discriminatory practices and the prejudices they experienced both as individuals and as communities in the education system and in the attitudes of Greek Cypriot teachers. The Armenian women in addition spoke about discriminations with regard to their religion from the Greek Orthodox church. Many wondered whether this will change with Cyprus EU accession.

As mentioned earlier Cypriot women find themselves in a transitional context where modernity and traditionalism are intermixed in both the private and public realms of their lives. Some of these contradictions have been obvious with regard to personal choices. For instance a high percentage of women from all communities, including even university educated women, still marry by arrangement. The most liberated in this respect seem to be the Armenian women. Arranged marriages are normally understood to take place either because of economic interests or family social status. But it is noteworthy that that scarcely any of these women said that her arranged marriage was motivated by those factors.

An unmarried woman is perceived as being more acceptable today than in earlier years. Nonetheless, a high percentage among the Maronite and Greek Cypriot women believe that an unmarried woman is considered a failure in their communities. This conflicts with the high number who, in defining themselves, chose the "I am me" personal definition, rather than choosing to say "I am the wife/daughter/sister/mother/ of so and so." The Turkish Cypriot women believe their community to be more tolerant and liberated in accepting unmarried women (almost 90% believe this to be the case) Yet when asked the reason they got married, more women (including university educated women) of the Turkish Cypriot community than of any other, responded that their marriage had been an arranged one (57.5%).

Another surprising and contradictory result we observed is concerned with divorce and the quality of women's married relationship. Divorce is highly acceptable, and women say they would

choose it if their relationship was not working out. This applies across all age groups. But a very high percentage of women refused to talk about the quality of their relationship, because either they felt uncomfortable or they chose to remain in denial, as this realization is often hurtful. On the one hand, at an abstract level there is a trend for liberation and choice. On the other, this is not manifest in the more directly private realm - notwithstanding the fact that the subjects were assured anonymity and confidentiality. The same contradiction is observable in attitudes toward abortion. On the one hand women in all communities do not go to church frequently. On the other, they tolerate church pressure and influence on their choice regarding abortion. This is more evident amongst the Greek Cypriot and the Maronite Cypriots .

In the focus group discussions, the Greek and Turkish Cypriot women spoke very openly about the domestic violence which they attributed to power inequalities.. Some women spoke about the abusive relationships with their husbands, feelings of humiliation and lack of communication. In such dysfunctional relationships the women feel alienated, or leave the home, or go for a divorce. Some however, spoke of staying in the relationship due to family and social pressures Many spoke about husbands' infidelity and extra-marital affairs as a frequent personal and social problem. The Greek Cypriot women said that even when they confront their husbands with evidence of their infidelity, they not only denied it but also confront them with "you are a fool, you are crazy and ready to be admitted to a psychiatric hospital" Such abuses lead women to doubt their own worth, state of mind and even try to induce guilt in them as if it were their fault This explains the increase in the last few years women's health problems both physical and psychological, such as sleeplessness, migraines, stomach-upsets, dizziness, depression, Fathers' power over their daughters were more talked about among the Turkish Cypriot women.   They explained this social phenomenon as part of the economic dependency of young women.

On the premarital sex issue, individually the women feel this is acceptable. Yet they do not feel their community would consider it acceptable for a woman to be sexually active before marriage. A further contradiction was revealed here. While women as individuals were thus showing themselves to be relatively liberated, their answers to another question showed them to lack pride in being a woman.

In a further question we asked whether they lived in a patriarchal system, according to certain criteria. The majority of women in all communities believed there to be equality. Yet the majority at the same time believed in the existence of patriarchy – apparently unaware of this contradiction. A very high percentage of women from all communities believe they have equal opportunities and responsibilities in the areas of securing a job, in financial security issues, in professional development, in social placement, in religious life, involvement in financial contribution to the family, etc.- all areas in which one would have expected to perceive inequality . Only in the arena of politics do they believe they have fewer opportunities and thus when they participate in organizations it is usually in cultural, educational or charitable organizations. Of course, the stereotypical expectation of more responsibilities in the upbringing of children and in the housework still prevails.

    Women often are underrepresented in public life and in the centers of decision-making. And yet we observe in this study a worrisome fact: they do not really feel the need to participate more actively in political, environmental, trade union, community and local government, where they could become visible and apply social pressure for changes they would wish to see. Thus this spaces are predominantly male.

    Another finding that may be regarded as surprising is on the issue of collective identity. In all communities the majority of women reported feeling themselves to be 'Cypriot'. This might be because being 'Cypriot" promotes a more personalized narrative whereas the official narratives related to Greece and Turkey are masculine and more intolerant. We also correlated this with ideology, on the hunch that it would be those on the left that would espouse Cypriot identity. Yet we found on the contrary that those identifying as 'Cypriot' did not espouse any particular ideology. Among the Turkish Cypriot women there is a percentage who, despite being born in Turkey, declare themselves pure 'Cypriot ' A very low percentage feel themselves simply 'Greek' or simply 'Turkish', despite the strong official narratives stressing Hellenism and Turkishness.

    Another surprising result regards women's voting behaviour. A very low percentage of women from all communities, especially in the younger age spectrum, did not identify 'sensitivity to women's issues' on the part of the political parties as being a significant factor in their voting

choices. On the contrary, it is considerations such as the best leader, the best position on the Cyprus conflict and party ideology that are more significant for them. This contradicts with women's popularly expressed desire to be part of the decision-making processes and to be visible in public life, so as to promote women's issues and concerns, but also to break the stereotype that politics is a man's place. Another contradiction is that while women participate little in public activities and politics, they would overwhelmingly vote for a woman president of Cyprus.

We intentionally used the feminine values of "peace" and "love" giving a broad non-stereotypical content and we found that women's understanding of these values are indeed broad. Women, in our study attribute many more characteristics to these values than merely the negative definition of peace as 'the absence of war', and of love as either religious or erotic. The fact that women connect peace with social, cultural and political aspects of life, and love with tolerance, trust and understanding, respect for self, allows a space for optimism concerning the possibility of creating a culture for structural and value changes. Changes in education will play a crucial role here.

Women's political and historical awareness about the causes of the Cyprus conflict varies according to the experiences each community had with regard to the different factors that contributed to the creation and perpetuation of the Cyprus conflict. This identification with the national problem and with specific ethnicity deprives women of other choices with regard to their self definition as individuals or part of a gender group. It is not thus surprising that gender inequality was never addressed as a social and political issue.

That lack of communication and contacts among the communities contributes, among other issues, to the perpetuation of the Cyprus conflict and this belief is shared by a high percentage of women in all communities. This affirms the support we found among women for a policy of rapprochement and inter-communal contacts toward building mutual understanding and trust, elements that would contribute to future co-existence As some Maronite women have put it, "without rapprochement we cannot get to know the other. They (the Turks) are people like us and we must learn to co-exist peacefully."

Throughout the focus group discussions the educational curriculum, the system and the present textbooks were viewed as mechanisms that promote and reproduce the national narrative as defined

by the dominant group, which is based on the "enemy construction" and the invisibility of the other communities in Cyprus.. The majority of women from the minority communities strongly stressed the absence of their history and culture from the main textbooks and how this generates prejudices, discriminations and exclusion.

Connected to the Cyprus problem, many stressed the role the accession of Cyprus to the European Union 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 needs to be disseminated to the women and the wider public in all communities.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

One important conclusion from this study is the need for changes in public consciousness with regard to women's issues .What has emerged clearly from the interpretations and analyses we have given about Cypriot women's lives from all communities is the lack of public debate on these issues which we consider as important as the international efforts to solve the Cyprus conflict. When we speak about changes in public consciousness on gender issues we mean that the participation of the state, its institutions, the NGOs and the media need to be part of the process.

The Role of NGOS

Since the desire of all Cypriot women as this emerged in both the quantitative and qualitative analyses is to have opportunities to get to know each other, the role of NGOs is significant. They can undertake the organization of social gatherings, informal meetings, cultural events, seminars on issues that interest women of different ages, as well as exchanging success stories of women in the different communities. Another activity that NGOs can organize is an annual festival, in which women artists and creative minds will discuss and present their work. Such activities will help gradually eliminate many of the misperceptions and negative stereotypes that still prevail in the lives of many women. Such activities can be funded by the government sector and international NGOs and supported by the Council of Europe or the universities. Seminars on women's empowerment and training in gender awareness will familiarize men and women with the sex-

stereotypes as limiting factors in the development of a civil society offering equal opportunities to all its citizens.

The Mass Media

The media, as a change agent in how women are portrayed or made visible in both the private and public life, is a mechanism that can be utilized positively to promote women's empowerment and visibility in all aspects of life. For the promotion of women in public life, special training seminars can be organized by the NGOs in cooperation with government institutions and the media. Cypriot journalists and media persons need to be sensitized on the importance of gender issues in affecting change, the language they use -which is often gendered - and to avoid women's images which are degrading or sex specific It would help greatly to have new programs which will be run and managed by both men and women. We never see a woman on a TV program discussing defense issues for instance, and giving security a different understanding than the one which is given by men, ie. Arms built-up and strategic defense. We believe women's perspectives will broaden the debate and enrich the political agenda whereby the whole society will benefit.

The State and its institutions

Formal education has been discussed as the main factor in creating misperceptions or complete invisibility of the other and the plea was for changes both in the curriculum and the content of textbooks, especially history, geography and literature. The methods of teaching, issues of democratization and promotion of values, such as tolerance, respect for difference and appreciation of one's own and the other's culture, that is learning to live with "otherness". This is the role that the State can undertake in collaboration with conflict resolution experts and NGOs. New books on gender issues, multi-communal literature books, books on the EU in a simplified form should be in the hands of all students in the primary and secondary level of education. Courses on gender should be introduced from the kindergarten to the university. This requires training for men and women teachers on both gender and multiculturalism

Another institution that needs to become more open is the Church with regard to showing religious understanding and tolerance to other faiths and denominations. A dialogue among the heads of the

Church in all communities could help address some of the issues raised in this research which identifies a perception of the Church functions as an oppressive institution.

The Establishment of a multi-communal NGO

We believe the creation of a large and inclusive Cypriot Women's multi-communal NGO to address common issues and organize activities that would enrich the understanding and connections, as well as bring out the differences could be very relevant to the wider goal of multiculturalism in Cyprus, peacebuilding processes and gender equality. Such an NGO can celebrate certain events and international Days so as to strengthen further the feeling of connection and civic identity.. In addition, it can serve as a non-partisan forum for women candidates and offer a supportive environment during election campaigns, something which today is left in the hands of the political party apparatus.

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

Bibliography available on request.

The full report of the research referred to here will be published in April 2004 as¨

Hadjiapvlou, Maria (2004) Women in the Cypriot Communities Interpreting Women´s Lives. Nicosia: PC Publishers.

Other research findings reinforce what was observed in a previous qualitative study in 2001 held only in the Greek Cypriot community and both women and men in the age range of 25 to 55 believe that women's position in society in the last fifteen years (1989-2001) has changed as follows:

women of Cyprus have become more active, have equal opportunities in education, equal work opportunities, financial independence, they are developing,… they think like men, have their own jobs, their car, they go for trips, etc…so they broaden their horizon about life….
There has occurred a revolution in the way they dress, more recognition of the sexual needs of both genders and more participation in decisions regarding the family and the household and a somewhat involvement in politics and public life. A successful woman does not yet feel so comfortable and at ease as does a successful man…"(EDI ….

There is acknowledgment that Greek Cypriot women have advanced in a number of aspects of their lives in the last twenty years.There is, however, a confusion as to the actual consciousness raising process, a mixture of seemngly substantive changes such as equlity in education, work opportunities, travelling, dress fashion and participation in decisions concerning the family. All these refer to external goal directed activities It is noteworthy, however, that the criteria and points of reference the Greek Cypriot women of that study use to define themselves as far as success is concerned are those that men have developed which translate into **'**women thinking like men**'.** Thus the "mask" is still on as a protective mechanism whereby changes in dress and travelling abroad can allow women to speak.

This is exactly the opposite of what the feminist theories and the feminist movements have tried to claim and achieve for women, that is a legitimation of the equal value of women's thinking and experiences which are different from those of men. Gender consciousness does not necessarily follow aquisitiono women's human rights as research among women in Cyprus has shown.

Living in a conflict society, the national problem has historically overshadowed and downplayed women's issues and their different experiences. The conflict was viewed as genderless. The predominance of the official masculine discourses in both communities about duty to fight for justice and respect or recognition led Greek and Turkish Cypriot women to internalize their ethnic and national duty roles. Thus, many women did what the community would expect them to engage in denying them the right to be full participants. The absence of a feminist

movement on the island further helped the internalization of the male political discourses. This kind of environment can explain in a broader sense the multiple levels of confusion, levels of violence and contradictions Cypriot women experience today.

Women's education as our research (2003) has shown is still contingent upon the socially constructed roles which for women refer first to family, home, caring for the others. They place career last in their scale of priorities whereas men place career on the top of their list and family last. There still exists the perception that more years of advanced education for women would mean higher degree of committment and subsequent neglect of family.

I often hear my female students express this same view internalized from their families and the external environment. Mothers often try to discourage their duaghters from pursuing advanced studies since, in their view, they will not need it. In a way an invisible ceiling is still placed on how much education women must recive, though statistically we acknowledge that today girls 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. 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 behaviour, which until recently were viewed as little more than biological 'givens'. 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.

Alternative Ways of Knowing

The use of gender as an analytical tool in understanding women's and men's experiences in the world has opened up both a theoretical and practical debate amongst academics, activists and policy makers From the moment women entered academia they sought to examine and dispel beliefs suggesting sexual polarities in intelleigence and personality characteristics. Historically, it had been assumed that the development of women's intellectual potential would inhibit the development of their emotional capacities and that the development of men's emotional range would impair intellectuall functioning. (Belenky et. al.1986) This assumption may sound

ridicoulous to some of us today, especially in the West, but elements of it still prevail nowadays not only in Cyprus but elswhere. For instance, in Germany as Mathiopoulou (1993) informed us there are still university professors who would discourage a female doctoral candidate to pursue doctoral studies because she would not have the time to use her academic qualifications after she gets married and has a family, which, due to her biological limitations, should be soon.

Human experience is gendered and this understanding is central to the radical implications of feminist theory which emerges from and responds to the lives of women. The recognition of the impact of gender and an insistence on the importance of the female experience ha