

Envisioning a Feminist Global Society

CYPRIOI WOMEN, CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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The North is sad and the South is happy.

(Headline from the widest circulating newspaper in Turkey about Cyprus' admission into the European Union)

Dear Greek Cypriot friends, I want to congratulate you on successfully entering the EU. To tell the truth, I am very sad. My desire was to share the happiness with you.

(Member of Hands Across the Divide, a bi-communal Cypriot women's organization, 13 December 2002)

As a feminist who is involved in the work of 'opening up spaces for non-corporate culture', and for substantive democracy, I wanted to write about our leadership for social transformation in divided Cyprus. I wanted to document how our work through civil society can facilitate opportunities for the constitution of peace and democracy and throw down a challenge to corporate capitalism in the context of globalization. As a feminist who will not be satisfied with less than revolution, my interviews with Cypriot women on their involvement in social change led me to a political and emotional recognition: if we want to contribute to a vision that recognizes the role of civil society as a site of radical political mobilization we need to understand: (1) the forms and dynamics of transnational organizations that are emerging; (2) the different roles that women play in the process; (3) the channels through which issues are brought into and out of transnational agendas; (4) the connections and interactions among transnational, national, local and individual processes.

I interviewed women from six Cypriot nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in December 2002. By self-definition, the first two are bi-communal, the second two global and the last mono-communal.

- Hands Across the Divide (HAD), is the first bi-communal women's NGO. It was registered in February 2001 and is composed of Greek and Turkish Cypriots, British-Cypriot women and a British citizen who played a leading role towards registration as an NGO in Britain. Some of the major sources of funding for this organization come from the British Council and Mama Cash. I interviewed Sophia Georgiou, 26, who is from a working class background and sees herself as a third generation feminist. Magda Zenon

is a middle class single mother who is on the core committee of the organization. I also draw from HAD's listserv discussions to frame some of their comments.

- Youth Promoting Peace Organization. This organization has young Greek and Turkish Cypriot members (15–25) from different political spectrums. It engages in several activities, including festivals and protests along with other bi-communal NGOs. I interviewed Xena G. Constantinou, 24 (MA, Political Science), the only full-time staff member.
- Global Change Institute (GCI) focuses on women's issues such as violence and health. This institute began some of its activities unofficially in 1999. Its membership is transnational, with funding from financial contributions of members and other private organizations. Most activities involve research projects and educational workshops. I interviewed Margarita Sofroniou, 33, a working class woman on the core committee of the Institute, and a working class Turkish Cypriot woman aged 34 who wished to remain anonymous. I am also a member of GCI.
- Immigrant Support Action Group (ISAG) addresses migrant workers' concerns and human rights. This organization started functioning in 1998 'in response to the enormous growth, in both numbers and gravity, of cases of immigrants appealing ... for assistance in dealing with violations of their rights' (ISAG leaflet). Funding comes from subscriptions and member contributions; the Community Welfare Scheme for voluntary organization (administered by the Social Welfare Department); the European Union (for specific programmes and seminars); private sponsorship of specific events (such as the Rainbow Festival); and publications (such as information leaflets). I interviewed Anthoulla Papadopoulou, a middle class woman in her 40s.
- The Grassroots Collective functions as 'a space for marginalized voices to be heard on the World Wide Web and in mainstream media'. The quotation is from Maia Woodward-Dyason, a founding member, whom I interviewed.
- Cultural and Scientific Research Society. Founded in 2002, its membership includes Turkish Cypriot men and women interested in cultural and scientific research. Sources of funding are subscriptions and member contributions. This organization is currently working on two major projects with the United Nations Office for Project Services and the European Union. I interviewed Mevhibe Hocaoglu, who graduated with a degree in Genetics and Anthropology and has been a secondary and high school teacher for the last seven years.

WOMEN AND CYPRIOT CIVIL SOCIETY

Before discussing the involvement of women in transforming Cypriot social relations, it is important to remember that Cypriot history is ridden with

conflict and violence. Following a five-year, anti-colonial struggle, Cyprus gained independence from Britain in 1960. Greek Cypriots (78 per cent of the population) and Turkish Cypriots (18 per cent) struggled for power and representation in the fledgling government. Violent conflicts erupted on the island three years later and again in 1964 and 1967. In 1974, a nationalist coup d'état supported by Greece was followed by an invasion by Turkey that displaced approximately 275,000 persons from both communities and led to the de facto division of the island. In the North, Rauf Denktaş has been in power since 1974. Glafkos Clerides, the current leader in the South, has played a major role in politics since the 1960s.

The 'Cyprus Problem' has remained a central phenomenon in political debates and discussion. The South desires demilitarization of the island, a unitary state and membership in the European Union. The North wants two independent states, a confederation of two states or a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation. Both sides seem intransigent on how to reconcile the differences. Economically, Greek Cypriots in the South enjoy high levels of access to economic resources, whereas economic conditions have deteriorated in the North (Gurel 2000: 2).

The participation of women in 'official' political life is quite recent. In 1994, the National Machinery for the Rights of Women was established in the South as a result of extensive consultations with interested women's organizations, which in turn led to the promotion of women's rights (Shambos 1999). In the North, the first woman entered the Turkish Parliament in 1960. The representation of women in NGOs is slightly better. Increasingly, more women are participating in politics through this sector. In the North, for example, women's representation on union executive boards is about 10.8 per cent (Guven Lisaniler 2000: 4).

From my conversations, it seems clear that my interviewees believe that women's NGOs play a unique role in shaping and challenging the way political life is organized in two important ways: (1) through the creation of alternative structures (Hocaoglou); (2) and the insertion of gender issues onto political agendas by arguing the importance of overcoming women's marginalization 'by culture and customs' (Woodward-Dyason). Yet, women activists acknowledge that new openings are also riddled with constraints. Let us listen to these conversations to hear how women consider themselves involved in processes of change.

WOMEN'S CIVIL SOCIETY INTERVENTIONS

Gender and Class Relations in Ethnic-Divided Societies: Economics Equals Politics

My own interest in an anti-corporate feminist movement emerges out of my experience with the Cypriot ethno-national conflict and war of 1974 which

killed many people, especially women and children, and ripped the working class from its social fabric of family, community and home. The nationalist politics that emphasized the Cyprus Problem since 1963 stalled working class women's healing from the traumas and violations of the war and women's mobilization towards emancipation (Agathangelou and Killian 2002). On both sides, the dominant, aggressive, 'macho' politics pushed women into the margins of social hierarchy even when socioeconomic conditions demanded women's active participation in the market.

During my interviews with them, younger educated women from the North and South claimed that both governments collude with the economic powers of the island to preserve the 'status quo' rather than transform the conditions to respond to women's basic needs such as health care and employment. Hocaoglu, for instance, remarked that many women chose the 'strategy of waiting for better times', postponing life plans and future prospects. Sofroniou and Anonymous had the following to say about nationalist politics:

As long as we talk about the Cyprus problem as a racial issue without addressing the class question we are missing the politics of economics. Both states are interested in sustaining the 'status quo' because it enables them and their people in the market to ensure more investments by foreign capital. In our organization, when we talk about mental and other health concerns, we also discuss issues of race and class in an effort to challenge the 'status quo'.

(Sofroniou)

I wanted to migrate in search of better conditions. However, I chose to stay because my mother is still here. I am hoping for better times to come, and then I can decide what to do next. In the North, women's work is a major economic source and the state uses it to preserve the 'status quo'. Moreover, the state uses the excuse of the embargo to control social relations within the North and retain its patriarchal order nationally, communally and in the family. What I am doing now is using this organization to move beyond this patriarchal order and towards making people conscious about the politics of division.

(Anonymous)

Many of us in Cyprus now actively participate in the creation of organizations that put forward an alternative agenda to the nationalist-capitalist one. However, contradictions emerging from our class and racialized social location do not disappear in the process of establishing a political alternative movement. Our politics can be the 'terrain of combat' to determine the leadership of a national/global popular movement. As Anonymous put it, as feminists our politics entails a critique of 'common sense' and includes efforts to make the existing contradictions visible and to change the status quo.

Moving Beyond the Divide: Challenging the Physicality/Ideologies of Division

The major political intervention of Hands Across the Divide is to 'mov[e] beyond the divide by challenging the physicality/ideologies of the division'. The idea is to make visible to wider audiences how women of the North and South resist nationalist agendas, and to promote diversity and increased access to resources as essential features of institution-building and the transformation of communication patterns. HAD also seeks to introduce non-violent methods of political participation. As the press release on the creation of the organization in 2001 states,

we aspire to live in a united country and to create a democratic society, where there is equality, including equal access to resources and gender equality, and respect for all, irrespective of differences. Our mission is to contribute towards a culture of peace and multiculturalism. We stress the urgency for an agreement on the Cyprus Problem and accession to the European Union.

(‘Statement for Peace’, 8 January 2001, from HAD listserv)

From its inception, HAD committed itself to peaceful resolutions in transforming the physical division of the island, stressing that the violence of war is not separate from violence in the everyday lives of women, and therefore called for the demilitarization of Cyprus. The claim is that nationalist ideology fosters values such as ‘machismo’, xenophobia and homophobia, and that these values have imbued families, education systems and the social environment with the culture of violence and war.

However, even when the focus is on negotiating political, democratic and peaceful conflict resolution of the Cyprus Problem, it is difficult to escape the structural contradictions within the organization. This is what Georgiou had to say about peace and our organization:

No woman in our group ever lived in a peaceful country. We would give like a general statement of what peace is ... If we do engage in specific definitions of peace, we will end up touching issues we are trying to avoid ... for example, what does 1963 mean, what does 1974 mean [years of major intercommunal violence]? They [the rest of the women in HAD] all object to bringing in politics. I think we should go there, and if the organization collapses, let it collapse. If we cannot talk around the past, deal with it, how are we going to do the work that we think peace requires? We cannot disconnect the present from the past.

(Georgiou)

In HAD, peace becomes difficult to talk about because of the fears that ‘as women we could commit the same mistakes of the past’, and for some, it is a way to protect the national/ethnic interests of the group being represented. However, internalized strategies (e.g. leaving conflict resolution to the very

politicians who contributed to the institutionalization of the conflict) move us away from being 'transparent' with one another and thus reproduce the same divisions – political, social, economic and spiritual – we want to transform.

HAD's approach to peace and its involvement with other NGOs became transformed once there was enough momentum socially in the North to protest President Denktash's approach to both peace and entry into the European Union.¹ This larger movement in the North pushed HAD to transform the stalemate around the issue of peace and create momentum in the South to support the Turkish Cypriots' protests against the oppression and authoritarianism of Turkey and Turkish Cypriot elites. Here is how Uladag, a member of HAD, responded to seeing photos of women in the South collecting peace sentences from people, an activity simultaneously undertaken by both sides to make people aware of our position on peace.

We got very good coverage from BBC, [A]ssociated [P]ress, etc. and I made translations of this coverage so that our people will be happy and smiling to see that their efforts are visible! When I looked at the photos I was there with you ... the way you approached people and pinned the white ribbons on them and asked for a sentence for peace ... I could feel all your feelings ... I guess this is the value of our group: having built this connection between us that the border cannot and will not break.

(Uladag's e-mail to HAD listserv, 15 January 2002)

Simultaneously in the North and South, such efforts are starting to erode the political boundaries between the two sides. The possibility of moving beyond the ethnic divisions within Cyprus and incorporating international support from other women is real. In the same e-mail, Uladag talks of work taking place outside Cyprus. Many Turkish and Greek Cypriot women travelled abroad to educate Greek, Turkish and US citizens about the division in Cyprus and ask for solidarity:

Some friends in Turkey really pushed some women['s] groups there to acknowledge that they have not taken up their responsibility for Cyprus and managed to get a response. [T]his group of women['s] NGOs who have created a platform against war planned a visit to Cyprus in February 2002 to arrange a workshop against war and to see what can be done in the near future. I also think they'll visit Palestine and Iraq.

(Uladag's e-mail to HAD listserv, 15 January 2002)

HAD has not yet as a whole discussed difficult questions regarding the implications of a peace plan. However, the work towards peace opens up a different space for women in Cyprus who desire peace, one in which women can see themselves as major agents in international politics and in their own society. Questions of the last forty years of unequal economic development

and its implications for women on both sides have not yet been addressed. Yet the proposal of peace, distributed in Cyprus and abroad, opens a window to a civil society agenda that can challenge the fragmented boundaries of politics and economics, gender, class and race and help forge solidarity with other women's organizations. We can offer a vision of global governance that challenges the corporatist agenda of globalization (Klein 2002).

Forty years of separation have alienated the two communities in Cyprus. The struggle of our Turkish Cypriot compatriots inspires us to continue the efforts towards a unified Cyprus and the well being for all through the accession [of] a reunited island to the European Union. We therefore urgently demand the signing of a peace agreement. Join our voices – write a sentence for peace!

(Hadjipavlou's e-mail to HAD listserv, 13 January 2003)

This proposal reveals a major change in HAD and the solidarity that is forged through the praxis of protesting, action and a unified movement against the oppression and exploitation of the state and its masculinized elites. However, its actions in civil society cannot be isolated from the political state. The view is that emphasizing the empowerment of the individual at the expense of the community is problematic and can only effect local change (meeting at Pyla, December 2002). A few of the women I interviewed critiqued this same conceptualization of civil society practices.

For some, the work they do is a matter of life and death. It is their struggle ... But I think the Greek Cypriots forget this. They can imagine that they are living in a peaceful country, but the Turkish Cypriots can never forget it. We enjoy *luxury, material progress* ... [T]he invasion created certain circles of opportunities; in fact, we take pride in that we are a state [South] that has gone through war but now we have achieved so much and it is only half a country. What would we be if it was whole? But the Turkish Cypriots live the results of the occupation. I do not think we realize that ... we do not feel it.

(Georgiou, emphasis hers)

Interconnections of Global and Local: 'Doing Concrete Work ... We Are Not Philanthropists'

Papadopoulou, who is both a member of HAD and ISAG, described ISAG's activities as twofold: linking the local with the global movement, which is 'combat[ing] xenophobia and racism in Cyprus and [working] internationally, in co-operation with other organizations' (ISAG leaflet) through concrete activities. ISAG is the only organization supporting immigrants' rights by raising awareness and sensitizing the public, the media and society in general, regarding racism, xenophobia and social exclusion; developing and

improving support services; contributing towards building a multicultural society. Papadopoulou describes for us ISAG's approach to social change:

Peace is a prerequisite for anything else, and it is not only the absence of war. It is a condition. I consider it to be indispensable ... In the last months it became so apparent that the Greek Cypriot community has its own biases, and we as an ISAG should discuss them and say what they are! Our work is to raise awareness about the evils of racism and show that racism is not only due to color ... I think apart from the fact that civil society is an agent of change, it is a sector, if you like, and I believe it will grow in Cyprus with time and very soon it will exercise a lot of pressure on government and all social institutions. Change will emerge through criticism, by campaigning, and also *by doing a lot of concrete work* ... Look at ISAG ... *we are not philanthropists. We reject the idea of philanthropy and charity. Also, civil society is a changing environment, it cannot be but just that because we have to respond to change very quickly, to needs in different ways; we cannot be rigid, and of course we have to provide an educative role as well* ... ISAG definitely is trying to change conditions.

(Papadopoulou, emphasis hers)

ISAG's constituency comprises women and men, and its major goals are to address the politics of migration and attempt to involve migrants in their committee work. Papadopoulou articulates a substantive understanding of peace by arguing that it is a 'condition' and also moves to say that feminist work is not philanthropic/charitable work. Rather, it is concrete action or 'praxis' towards putting forward an alternative to the current racist system.

Another feminist stated that the difficulty with changing and putting forward an alternative is the identification of 'fissures' in the current hegemonic system. For example, Constantinou emphasized,

After the solution we'll not be dealing with the division but reunification. Our organization has to change its politics. We will have to cooperate with other organizations outside Cyprus. Our approach ... peace has many concepts embedded in it like anti-racism, and equal rights, and we will have peace when everybody is living, well ... there is no peace when kids are dying in Africa, not just when we are not having war.

Feminist alternatives are difficult because, as Sofroniou put it, 'at times we cannot assess accurately the connections among what is going on globally, what is going on in our country and how those relations affect us and our organizing'. She claimed that the movements in civil society could be effective and transformative when linkages are made with the global, that is, with other organizations working towards transforming the neoliberal capitalist system or the 'socialist system for the rich' (McClaren and Farahmandpur 2000: 25). Sofroniou continued,

[W]hat needs to happen for social change is not a mere movement. The movement has to have a vision to challenge and confront the corporate global system, which benefits the 10 per cent of the world at the expense of the 90 per cent. We need to move beyond incrementalism as the only choice for change. True expression of the individual can only happen when the system does not rob her of her resources by distributing them to the ones who already have accumulated many resources. A conscious debate around the meaning of civil society is part of the ideological 'war', if you will. Talking about individual oppression and human rights of women without locating them in a larger vision that challenges corporate globalization is once again incremental change, which ends up supporting some women at the expense of millions. For me, feminism can contribute towards peace once it has identified the methods by which the society has forced all of us to internalize its class, gender and class contradictions.

Sofroniou's words bring to the fore that opening the windows to substantive democracy and peace requires for all of us a move beyond liberal values and an ability for us to connect the work we do as feminists and activists with theory, self, and the larger global community. Social change in Cyprus can only result if we sustain clarity regarding the larger corporate politics in relation to our local practices.

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Note

- 1 For the first time after the 1974 invasion of Turkey, hundreds of Turkish Cypriots protested their leader's position towards the division of the island and argued that he is an obstacle to their European integration along with the South.

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Postscript

On April 23rd, 2003 the borders 'opened' up in divided Cyprus. The barbed wire and the soldiers in khaki with their guns across their shoulders are strong reminders of how tenuous the new situation is. Yet, many Cypriots from both sides overcame the fear and suspicion, sustained through years of separation and ideological inculcation, to move across the line to see the 'other'. The collaborations among different peace and women's organizations, the Turkist Cypriot movement against the status quo, and the many people who 'dared to dream and dared to speak when no one else did' (Uladag, May 12, 2003 email to HAD) contributed to this moment. This development brings home once more the urgency of feminists' desires to review and envision our engagements in the Cypriot context and to work for further feminist cross-border collaboration.