

THE GENDER DIMENSION IN CYPRIOT SOCIETY IN 2019

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While walking in a main street in any of the cities of Cyprus, the pedestrian can see an ad saying that "Male staff is requested". It is well-intentioned to think that this job offer may require the transportation of heavy objects or that it may involve some kind of hazard. This benevolent attitude, however, stems from gender stereotypes that directly associate the woman with physical weakness and the man with the power or ability to cope with certain tasks. Therefore, there are numerous areas that need improvement in terms of eliminating stereotypes and inequality between women and men in Cyprus.

Violence against women and female homicide are the biggest challenges that women face in Cyprus today. More precisely, one in five women has suffered physical and/or sexual violence, while 39% have suffered psychological violence from their partner, according to a recent survey of the European Union's Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA). Not only this, 37 female homicides have been reported since 2000 with the majority of cases falling under the category of murders by partners or former sex partners. It is noteworthy here to mention the internationally known case of the Cypriot serial killer who had confessed in writing for the killing of five foreign women and two foreign young girls over the period of 2016 to 2018 and showed police investigators where he had dumped the bodies at four different locations. The abovementioned horrible crime came out by accident this year (2019) and it shocked not only the whole nation but the whole world. The question raised here is why the government and police were not investigating the cases of these 7 females who were being missed since 2016. The above numbers and omissions say a lot in terms of violence and female homicide in Cyprus.

Women and economy is another big issue in Cyprus. According to the report of the World Economic Forum, 69.6% of the female population of Cyprus participated in the labor force in 2018 compared to 77.4% of the male population. Moreover, Cypriot men's income amounted to € 36,295 per year while women's earnings amounted to € 24,140 per year. In addition to the above, women are more likely to be unemployed in Cyprus, as in 2018, 13.5% of women were unemployed, compared to 12.6% of men.

Another interesting fact is that Cyprus is ranked 111th in the world in terms of the presence of women in legislative or senior management positions in the public and private sectors, with women in these positions being only 20.7% of the total. More precisely, the percentage of women in the Parliament of Cyprus is only 17.9% and with only two of the eleven ministers being women, Cyprus holds the 119th position in the world in terms of the presence of women in government. The figures for the participation rates of women in the local political life and decision-making centres are both revealing and disappointing. The lack of women representation in the European Parliament Members of Cyprus and women underrepresentation in Parliament and Government undoubtedly prove that the process of adding women into the male-dominated political sector of Cyprus is a very slow process.

Things look much better for Cypriot women when it comes to education statistics. However, despite the high number of women in education, statistical gaps appear again at the percentages of doctoral graduates and those involved in research and development. Specifically, 0.4% of women in Cyprus hold a doctorate while the percentage of men holding a doctorate is 1% and among the research and development staff only 42.6% are women.

Probably, the cause of all the above mentioned challenges that women face in Cyprus is the strong patriarchal perceptions that prevail in Cypriot society and the perception that "women are for housekeeping and men for business" which often make women themselves unable to fight for their rights. Indeed, the unequal distribution of responsibilities within the family and the fact that the responsibility of raising children falls almost entirely on the woman's shoulders make things even more challenging for the eradication of this perception.

Cyprus has adopted a legislative framework for the protection and promotion of equality in sectors such as work place, family relations, inheritance and property issues and has also adopted legislation for tackling violence against women and combatting racial and other discrimination. The control and revision of the above mentioned legislations has been incorporated into the existing Equality Action Plan in order for Cyprus to comply with the Commission's recommendations for the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Equality Action Plans include policies for equal distribution of care responsibilities, harmonization of career and family obligations between the two genders, access to affordable and good quality childcare services, equal access to services regarding education, training, health and justice. Among the priorities of this Plan are the combating of all forms of gender-based violence, the elimination of inequalities, discrimination and stereotypes.

Despite the comprehensive recording and organization of actions, it is nevertheless observed that the expected costs for several actions have not been calculated yet. It is indeed very important that actions have been recorded and defined, but if not enhanced by human and financial resources, there is a risk of not being implemented or being implemented to a lesser extent. In addition to cost, the next revision of the Equality Action Plan should incorporate a risk assessment and management mechanism, both in relation to intimate partner violence, and the effects of inequality.

Apart from government actions, women in Cyprus should support each other and be aware of their rights in order to be able to raise their voices and lead out loud. By encouraging all Cypriots to split all unpaid work (like cleaning, cooking etc.) 50/50 between men and women so that they can both thrive, rest and work, women will be more empowered and involved in social services. Running in local elections or supporting open minded candidates is another crucial way to make women having a say in politics and implementation of local policies. Furthermore, women should broaden their horizons and believe in themselves so as eventually to escape from the long term stereotypes which impregnate them with insecurities and weakness. Every woman and girl should respect herself by not being afraid to report any vulnerability or harassment against her because every woman and girl deserves the opportunity to live a life free from violence and discrimination.

Finally, it remains to be seen whether Cypriot society, through the planned actions and awareness for gender equality, will be able to disconnect the term "woman" from the phrase "weak gender" by recognizing the power of each individual, through its diversity.