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A feminist position on sharing governmental power and forging citizenship in Cyprus

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In the last three years, two processes have been developing in parallel in the peace field in Cyprus. The first was the resumption of negotiations in 2008. On-going since 1964 between representatives of the Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot sides, negotiations were stalled since the referendum of 2004, in which a UN-brokered peace plan was rejected at referendum by the Greek-Cypriot public (while accepted by the Turkish-Cypriot one). The second process was the consolidation of a group of women, academics and activists in gender and peace, into the Gender Advisory Team (GAT), which closely followed the negotiations since 2009 and drew up suggestions for the negotiators on the mainstreaming of gender concerns in their discussions and the eventual constitution of a federated state. GAT works within the framework of UNSC Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security which Cyprus has also signed (more at www.gat1325.org.) With the Cyprus negotiations stalled yet again and the importance of the conflict overshadowed by economic crisis a question arises of whether the principles of equality on which GAT's recommendations rest should constitute a plane of action not after an agreement but prior to it. In this article we argue that doing so would also place the negotiation mentality in a different frame, giving the exercise better chances of succeeding. We exemplify this using GAT's recommendations on power-sharing and citizenship, two of the 'chapters' discussed in the UN-sponsored negotiations.

Redefining ‘power’ and ‘sharing’

‘Power-sharing’ resonates with all those stereotypes about gender roles in peace work. Intuitively understood as the diachronic domain of men, ‘power’ tends to signal what women should not be interested in. Indeed, at least in Cyprus, most ‘good’ women aren’t: gender gaps are glaringly large on both sides in parliamentary seats, cabinet posts, party leadership positions, and business. Political polling has often portrayed women as less reconciliatory, more nationalist, more distrustful, and more fearful of the ‘other’ (Cyprus 2015, 2012). While this same polling also shows that women are less interested in politics, the details of the negotiations, or aware of specific political issues that make the news, it often proceeds to evaluate their opinion on the specific discursive parameters that have already been shown to be gender-biased. Understandings of ‘power-sharing’ in a patriarchal and nationalist context are part of this problem. So instead of proposing how women can change to enable peace, we propose that we should be asking how the politics of ‘peace’ can change so that they address women’s concerns and needs in more meaningful ways. The point is not to prioritise women’s needs over men’s but to allow greater representation of a number of groups that have hitherto been marginalised (minorities defined by gender, ethnic, sexual, cultural and class criteria, for example).

‘Sharing’, by comparison, carries a more ‘homely’ ring to it than ‘power’, and thus could be a better starting point for unpicking what the ‘sharing of power’ might mean. In the given hyphenated structure (‘power-sharing’), the second term tends both to be effaced by the power of the first, and act as a prop that lends ‘power’ an added ‘technical’ implication. The question of ‘power-sharing’ thus is understood as a technical matter pertaining to numbers in the allocation of government seats in the calibration of each citizen’s vote (as for example in discussion about whether Turkish-Cypriots’ votes should be ‘weighted’ in specific ways and under specific conditions or not).

Together, governance and power-sharing have resonated more with politicians, the vast majority of them male, who propose and reject schemes of assigning such weight to votes, but also to ministries and state institutions. This understanding harks back to the history of political representation in Cyprus, where the 1960 Constitution of the Republic of Cyprus divided citizens on each side of electoral rolls (Greek-Cypriots voting for Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots for Turkish-Cypriots) and assigned governmental and civil service positions on an ethnic basis (the vast majority of these clauses having been suspended since the breakdown of this power-sharing arrangement in 1964).

GAT's recommendations on governance and power-sharing take a different approach. At the height of the most recent round of negotiations in 2009, GAT realised that if things went well we might have successfully concluded negotiations and a bright new peaceful state that caters chiefly to two ethnic sets of men. A 'better' version of the 1960 Constitution would adhere to the principles of a 'bizonal bicomunal federation' agreed since 1977, where difference would be accommodated as long as it is ethnic. And if things did not go as well, we would continue to have two state structures - one recognized internationally, the other not- each catering chiefly to its 'own' men (restrictedly-defined in more senses than the ethnic). Either of the two outcomes would be to the detriment of all those groups who fall through the gaps of the 'ethnic' divide. Women, constituting 49% of the population (www.worldbank.org), are obviously at a disadvantage through this exclusive focus on the ethnic divide. From the inception of modern statehood, women's representation in government has been minimal. And the ways in which the peace negotiations have been structured threaten to perpetuate this situation into the future state. GAT's key concern has therefore been to re-position the interpretation of 'power-sharing' within more pluralistic framings of democratic rights. And while women's rights are central to this attempt, they are not the sole concern. They also embrace the rights of sexual and immigrant minorities, and of children, youth, and the elderly.

In a context where ‘the Cyprus problem’ has been presented as ‘urgent’ and everything else ‘secondary’, and because, despite its persistence over three generations now, ‘the Cyprus problem’ is likely to be outlived by the problem of gender inequality, women, along with other social groups, have a stake in the phrasing of the constitution, the government’s organogram, the design of the courts, the make-up of the police, and so on. The recommendations put forth by GAT serve, above all, as a reminder that ‘sharing’ must not be about ethnic ratios solely, but about gender ones as well. And that it needs to be framed in the aim not of a compromise against some ideal of autonomy, but of obligation, cohesion, cooperation, and inclusion - all necessary components of participatory democracy.

Framing gender equality within the constitution rather than in secondary legislation is crucial to this. While the constitutions on both sides are currently mired by ‘special temporary measures’ for the purpose of curtailing rights, a future constitution must fulfil the promise of inclusion for everyone. The citizenry that will be expected to hold up the future constitution as its own, needs to see its place clearly reflected therein. Women need to be acknowledged as the hitherto politically silenced majority, who, now unequivocally have recourse to ‘The Law’. Gender equality must therefore be enshrined in the foundation of the state, and not subject to ‘emergency measures’ and special laws that could abrogate the rights gained by reflecting gender concerns in other legal bodies.

The hitherto exclusionary and divisive application of special measures must be turned on its head in a Constitution that commits the State to ensuring the actual implementation of gender equality. The distribution of cabinet, parliamentary, and local government seats along gender lines must complement ethnically-based distribution. Far from being seen as a negatively-connoted ‘positive discrimination’ measure favouring women who would not otherwise deserve such seats, allocations based on gender quotas must be viewed as a measure addressing historical power imbalances. This

proposition is of particular relevance to Cyprus, where ethnic quotas have been normalized in public perception to the exclusion of all other kinds of quota systems.

As the Cypriot conflict experience has proven that discrimination may easily topple the state itself (as happened in the 1960s and 1970s), it is crucial that discrimination is addressed as an issue of constitutional priority and not a side issue. For the same reasons that 'power-sharing' has become a 'male' topic, the language of all peace agreement and state documents must seek to overturn assumptions embedded in words about men's and women's roles in society. 'Morality', 'honour', 'ownership', 'protection', 'order', 'role', are such words; particular descriptions of parent-hood, home-making, and the public-private distinction are other minefields, which weaken women's agency. Thus, the wording of the terms of a peace agreement is not merely an issue of semantics but of essence. It must be seen in the wider effort to inaugurate a more just and less prejudiced society where equality is engrained in public perceptions. Key to this is the overturning of historically-engrained perceptions of women as victims, symbols of the nationalist order, and integrally tied to the domestic but not the public realm (Vassiliadou, 2002). Furthermore, coming out of a conflict nationalist culture, it is essential to avoid feminizing pain and suffering and address psychological trauma and pain as gender issues that have affected both men and women.

The language of an agreement must, in short, enable a paradigm shift in women's position within Cypriot society. To bolster this, equal access to justice must be ensured for women across the constituent states. Women's rights must be ensured across the whole of Cypriot territory and not be determined by a woman's location. This also calls for a shift in the conceptualization of citizenship.

Reconsidering citizenship and inclusion

At the heart of the rethinking that GAT proposes lies the reconfiguration of concepts about ‘citizenship’ on a more inclusive basis. In Cyprus, the experience of emergency legislation shows that so-called ‘temporary measures’ may remain in place long after the end of hostilities, with adverse effects on large numbers of citizens, be they minority members or not. The side-lining of gender within the frame of the ethnic conflict makes it all the more important to protect gender-relevant citizenship rights from suspension under exceptional legislation. Non-discrimination is a vital presupposition to securing this form of citizenship.

To effectively eradicate already existing forms of discrimination, these must first be acknowledged. Cyprus’ modern history is rife with exclusions that are ethnically determined - e.g. of acknowledged and unacknowledged minority groups, effacement of hybrid identities, etc. (Constantinou, 2007). These exclusions impact on gender in two ways. First, they distribute power along ethnic lines, overlooking gender differences. The needs of men across ethnic groups are thus prioritised over those of women. Second, in being based on a particular image of an ‘ideal’ citizen, stereotypes are formed and become engrained in the public imagination of citizenship. This ideal citizen is, in Cyprus, male, belongs to majority ethnicities (Greek-Cypriot / Turkish-Cypriot), and is the protector of the nation – thus able-bodied, masculine, heterosexual, and combat-ready. The historical construction of this citizen has assumed that women, by correlation, are the ‘weaker sex’, in need of men’s protection (in a father’s home, or in marriage), and vulnerable to assault by the enemy. Their traditional status has been in the home, as reproducers of the family and nation (Anthias, 1989). Over the decades, these imbalances have been subsumed into the heritage of the Cyprus conflict, rendering gender differences invisible against the hegemonic idiom of ethnic difference (Demetriou, 2012). Even when women took up other roles as wage earners, this perception of gender roles

remained intact (Agathangelou, 2004). This legacy must be addressed on both the institutional and societal levels.

On the level of institutions, the position of the army as a privileged body within the government mechanism, which perpetuates masculinist, combat, and violence-oriented stereotypes, must be reassessed. The assumption that proper personhood consists of heterosexuality (i.e. the assumption of hetero-normativity), purity of blood, and affective orientation towards the nation (the precepts of ethno-nationalism) should be superseded by more inclusive concepts of personhood and citizenship, that are sensitive to multiple differences. To achieve this, institutional reform, including of the military, and extending to the media, education, and migration policy, must be complemented by measures that render unacceptable (through criminalization) actions and behaviours that seek to marginalise and victimise others across a range of identity vectors.

The approach to citizenship must leave behind once and for all the treatment of women as the property of men. Such an approach is implied for example in the 1960 Constitution's citizenship rule that 'the wife belongs to the community of the husband'. A fresh approach to citizenship must recognize the equality of men and women in acquiring, changing, or retaining citizenship. This should hold not only for citizenship, but also for membership of communities or constituent state/federal units, where the criterion of marriage is clearly discriminatory on gender grounds. The framing mentality of negotiations thus far has taken the rights-obligations model of citizenship as a basis and has viewed voting rights as a key determinant of citizenship. It has hence interpreted ethnic belonging as corollary to federal unit / constituent state membership. This mentality de-prioritises other forms of citizenship and perpetuates an exclusionary rather than inclusive approach to citizenship.

To rectify this, citizenship rights must be viewed in their multiplicity: cultural rights (e.g. to education) must be seen independently from political rights (e.g. voting). Breaking up this unitary bundle of citizenship rights would allow their transferability between federal units / constituent states. This is especially important to citizens who are not voters, i.e. minors. Rather than determining that where children live will also determine the educational, language, and other cultural rights they have access to, on the basis of the kind of voters they are expected to become, those cultural and civic rights that are not tied to voting should be equally accessible to all citizens. Thus, where people are educated, or even work and access social rights, should be a matter of free will rather than being determined by birth or residence. Minors, who are excluded from some political rights due to age (mainly voting), should be able to enjoy all other citizenship rights everywhere on the island.

Those groups who are excluded from citizenship rights by virtue of not being citizens must nevertheless not be allowed to fall beyond the purview of state protection. Statelessness must not be considered a tolerable condition. Similarly, the vulnerability of persons whose rights are under threat in their own states must be recognised and rights should be granted to them to ameliorate their predicament. Such vulnerable groups are refugees, victims of torture, and victims of trafficking. It should be recognised that large numbers of such persons exist in Cyprus and will continue to remain in a precarious state following a peace agreement.

To effectively achieve all this, gender differences must be treated as an aspect of all social relations and gender differentials accounted for across all state structures. Specialised structures devoted to implementing and monitoring gender-mainstreaming must also be set-up to ensure that efforts are effective. This includes specialised offices, as well as the integration of gender expertise within existing offices pertaining to equality and social and economic rights. Education should aim at

fostering a new citizenship consciousness that addresses the inequalities created by history and introduce more inclusive mentalities of citizenship.

The state should take legal and practical steps to eradicate gender-based violence, which has traditionally been obscured by nationalist rhetoric. The results of this have been the failure for example to address domestic violence as a public issue and the treatment of gender-based violence perpetrated in the course of hostilities according to a patriarchal 'honour-shame' model (which prioritised the needs of the nation over the needs of women, as for example in the case of war rapes). To combat domestic violence effectively as a public matter, protection within the federal units / constituent states must be complemented by efficient cooperation across the state structures that span them, including the police and courts. To redress these failures more widely, matters of civil law (which have been often relegated to a status within communal legislation) must be given attention and streamlined across the island, not treated as corollaries to tradition or religious custom. The recognition of civil partnerships falls within this frame. Equality in parental rights is another aspect. Marriage, divorce, and custody, are matters where equality provisions should be propped up with gender-sensitive provisions, arising from the recognition that across the divide, women are often the partners who face harder economic and social problems after the break-up of marriage.

Concluding thoughts

The recommendations on power-sharing and citizenship are only two examples of how the mainstreaming of gender in the peace negotiations, and the implementation of an agreement, as well as in efforts outside the formal frame of negotiations, will contribute to a different understanding of the problems that have mired the island over the decades. These have not only been problems of ethnicized politics and foreign interventions but also of a social and patriarchal order. 'Cyprus' from

this perspective might slowly begin to look like a different place, a place other than conflict, war and trauma, a place where the future can be imagined productively and built solidly. This is what a feminist (in a non-exclusive sense vis-à-vis men) 'sharing' of 'power' should be about. It allows us to imagine a Cyprus where both men's and women's experiences talents and rights will be actualized. Such sharing of power must embrace new views on citizenship and governance.

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