Women's Peace-Building Activities
The Case of Cyprus

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When I began the journey of rapprochement with the Turkish Cypriot community I had no clue where it would lead me. The peace process in Cyprus has offered me the most extraordinary experiences of my life.

1974 the island was partitioned with the military intervention of Turkey (one of guarantor powers) following a coup by the Greek junta that overthrew the legal government of the island. The tension and conflict between the two communities continues to impact on the lives of all Cypriots today.

Deciding to work for peace was not an easy. Most of us who chose this path had to change our everyday itineraries (literally and psychologically) by including new routes in our well-protected daily routines. And these were:

• going almost on a daily basis towards the buffer zone which divides the island in two;
• visiting the northern part of Cyprus which is on its own is a controversial act: for some it is the road to freedom, for others it is an act of betrayal;
• welcoming our friends and partners from the other side at our homes and including them in our lives.

One day, as our children and the children of our children will stroll in gardens, debate in public places, or poke through the ashes of a wrecked civilization, they may not rise to call us blessed. But neither will they curse our memory because we permitted through our silence things to pass away as in a dream.

- Jean Bethke Elstein

Cyprus was under British rule until 1959 when the island gained its independence in 1960. The two main communities on the island, the Greek and the Turkish, lived in harmony until the 50s when inter-communal differences began feeding inter-communal conflict. In the 1960s this conflict erupted into severe violence mostly against the Turkish Cypriots who were forced to live in enclaves separated from the rest of their compatriots.

This is precisely what our work is about: to break the silence and make the voices of the people of Cyprus, especially the women’s voices, heard. Civil society in Cyprus is still shaping itself in the newly formed political sphere where citizens need to have a voice in tackling issues such as: citizens’ actions, feminism and gender, environmental concern, and issues that have always been either neglected or taboo. The efforts of the women of Cyprus at all levels, such as businesswomen, educators, youth, political women, and others oriented toward peace-building have been targeted to develop a civil society, where institutional and discursive transformations would enable the creation of new or additional space for public debate aimed at cultivating attitudes of tolerance and understanding and, most importantly, the de-construction of the image of the "other" as the "enemy" which nationalism and extremism has managed to construct throughout the long history of the island of Cyprus.

When I began the journey of rapprochement with the Turkish Cypriot community I had no clue where it would lead me. After ten years of almost full-time involvement there is one thing I know for sure: the peace process in Cyprus has offered me the most extraordinary experiences of my life, full of different and very powerful emotions, new learnings, and a lot of new thoughts and ideas about the way in which conflict affect human lives and the possibilities for conflict resolution. I am fascinated about the discoveries I have made about the "other" community, about our commonalities and differences, about the worries and hopes for the future of Cyprus and our children, and about the cultural richness of the Turkish Cypriot community that still today I cannot share and enjoy.

Above all, I have experienced an inner transformation. I have seen my thoughts and perceptions about the other side take a different shape, prejudices disappearing. I have become more accommodating of different views. I am more tolerant when hearing things I do not agree with or do not like. I have managed to transform my anger and
frustration for the political deadlock into an opportunity for learning about the other side as well as my own community. I needed to understand and learn and I finally genuinely extended my hand out for collaboration with my Turkish Cypriot compatriots.

I must confess that my motive ten years ago when I first attended a bi-communal meeting in Nicosia was purely academic. I had just returned from a Turkish Cypriot community, to its mentalists, educators, doctors, etc. gave its place to a deep concern for the community. I needed to understand that baby burst into tears, probably because it was hungry, tions Development Program (UNDP) (which funded the management in business are applied them heard, to see how the principles of conflict line to raise their voices and make line back to go to the other side was in

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journey of learning about our conflict, about each other, about ourselves It was a unique experience to get to know the "other," the "the enemy," and to learn how to collaborate and create opportunities for each other, think creatively of new options for resolving conflicts and differences constructively. We aimed at ensuring win-win situations for all interested parties, building bridges of communication and bases of trust, developing a civil society that would enable women from both sides of the dividing line to raise their voices and make them heard, to speak openly about our vision for Cyprus and its future. Above all, our goal was to create space for the women of Cyprus to discover the complexity of truths underlying our conflict.

After the initial training, more specialized bi-communal groups emerged that focused on other interests, such as youth and students, women, environmentalists, educators, doctors, etc. Most of the groups, including the women's groups, were formed by local Cypriot women of both communities (politicians, artists, teachers) and the Fulbright Commission. Other groups were mobilized by non-Cypriot organizations and individuals, as well as representatives of the international community in Cyprus. The American Embassy, particularly under Ambassador Richard Boucher, foreign universities, the United Nations (UN), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) (which funded the participation of Cypriot women at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995), the European Union (EU), the Friends of Cyprus (a group of British Parliamentarians), the Peace Research Institute of Oslo (PRIO) and many others supported the meetings and trainings.

The first two bi-communal women's groups were formed in 1995. One was facilitated by a Senior Fulbright Scholar, Dr. Benjamin Broome, and the other by local trainers. Both groups, focused mainly on gender and peace issues, stopped working after the 1997 ban on bi-communal meetings. The Cyprus Link, a group of 27 Greek and 27 Turkish Cypriot women including women politicians and NGO leaders was organized by Action in the Mediterranean (AIM), an organization based in Brussels affiliated with EU. The second group was a bi-communal group of women created by the Czech Ambassador to Cyprus, also a woman. It operated as a study group interested in issues such as the obstacles to the peace process and the relationship between the EU and Turkey. This group and the Cyprus Link continued to operate briefly after the ban at the village of Pyla, a bi-communal village near the buffer zone in the area of British bases.
The Women and Public Policy Program of the Kennedy School, Harvard University, and Hunt Alternatives, a program developed by Swanee Hunt, former U.S. Ambassador to Austria, organized in 1999 a meeting of 100 women from conflict areas around the world working for peace in their respective countries. That conference resulted in a new global movement of peace activists, Women Waging Peace. Cyprus contributed to the beginnings of this new global movement when I shared the idea of forming a global movement of peace activists with Ambassador Hunt during a peace conference in Sarajevo where we listened to women's tragic stories from the war.

Turkish and Greek Cypriot women formed a new women's bi-communal group with the support of the British Council and the British High Commission under the name: Hands Across the Divide. It is the first officially registered bi-communal NGO.

As a result of the increasing interest in bi-communal meetings from 1995 onwards we established an open and inclusive process in these meetings so that people from both sides could be part of them. This resulted in the formation of several citizens' groups interested in meeting with people from the other side and working collectively toward the establishment of peace in the community.

During the last seven years a number of peace activities engaging women artists from both sides have taken place such as painting exhibitions, poetry readings, and recitals. I sang at the first bi-communal concert together with my Turkish Cypriot partner for the fiftieth anniversary of the UN in 1995. The newspapers on both sides wrote: "You could not distinguish who was the Turk and who was the Greek." I established this bi-communal choir believing that it could become a passport to the peace process for the world. Other projects initiated by Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot women was the language school aimed at teaching everyone each other's language and the "I Want to See My Friend" project, an appeal for communication between the two communities. The socio-political context in which these activities have been taking place has proven to be more powerful and influential than the momentum and the dynamism of the activities themselves.

The difficulties we faced as women with our involvement in the peace process are many and varied. As the work is voluntary we have few resources, such as a suitable place in which to do the work, the necessary equipment, secretarial support, etc. As mothers, wives, professionals with many other responsibilities we must fight with the constraint of time. We need to face those opposing our work and need to train ourselves to do that and face the media, as well as deal with decision-makers. Those of us involved with several groups have to travel frequently outside the town to the only meeting place possible, the bi-communal village of Pyla, a place without facilities or infrastructure. Many times we have felt disappointed about deadlocks at the political level as well as the attitudes and views expressed against our work that block any possible progress. The institutionalization of our work has also been obstructed by certain political forces. The lack of a consistent means of communication has made our lives even harder by slowing the process and allowing room for mistrust and frustration to appear. Last, there is no support system to enhance the work and sustain its members.

Nevertheless, our successes can be summed up as follows:

- New frames of thought have been introduced that enabled people to see things from a different perspective and acknowledge the truth of the other.
- Women have managed to overcome obstacles that men could not.
- Women have proved to be efficient and effective in times of real difficulties and continue to form alliances to confront threat.
- Engagement in processes that promote trust between the two sides continues.
- We have shown passion and dedication to the work for peace and feel represented by the other community when we are not present.

In many instances, women provide new ideas for conflict management that may eventually lead to a solution of the problem. The new realm which we call civil society is a step closer to democratization, to new and expanded roles played by women in the management of the state. Institutions within the civil society create continuities, indispensable for its sustainability as a whole and of its actors and structures in particular. A lot of changes can happen with time. Societies transform and develop and create balances of power necessary for the function of democracy and democratic institutions.

We did not succeed in establishing a mechanism of coordination of the different activities which has resulted in many uncoordinated acts carried out by exclusive groups with closed membership. No mechanisms have been formed to transfer the knowledge and the experience of those who have benefited from meetings and conferences. The lack of a strategic plan on citizens’ peace-building activities have made the growth and develop-
ment of our work even harder. Different groups, different
dynamics, different leaderships constrained the process
from reaching a "developmental maturity" as I call it, the
stage where the constituencies of the realm of peace-
building processes harmonize and consent to co-exist and
gradually co-create a new situation of actors and struc-
tures. Those actors and structures that emerge from social
continuities would in return become the transformational
constituencies of a given situation into a new one.

What needs to happen, I suggest, is a multi-level
collective social transformation that does not come through
scattered actions and initiatives, but through a well-
coordinated movement that works in parallel on both
sides of the island, taking into consideration the con-
straints of the situation on each side. There are times when
an action or reaction needs to take place loudly in one side
because it will be more effective, but on the other side it
may have to be a subtle, low-profile action because of the
socio-political factors.

Throughout the process we have experienced a transfor-
mation from one system of thought to another, from one
pattern of behaviour to another, that has involved empiri-
cal changes appealing to each one of us differently, as
different as the way in which each one of us relates to the
process and its content, to the other, and to the institu-
tions. The constituencies of the process and its many
variables are perceived differently by each one of us. And
it is here precisely where the role of the civil society comes
in: it is in our hands to create the context, the space in
which we can or need to operate. It is up to us to shift from
the amateurish sentimental participant to an articulated
constructive agent whose contribution will constitute and
influence some of the major transformations required for
the peace process to be legitimized and effective. These
transformations must take place simultaneously both
institutionally and discursively.

The resources in Cyprus that provide for the bi-com-
munal work are limited. It is with the contribution and
support of that larger communities have provided that the
peace work could be sustained to the degree possible.
Throughout the years we collaborated with associations of
expatriate women especially in areas with large communi-
ties such as the UK, political forces, funders, international
organizations, foreign representatives, etc., in an effort to
create a support system that strengthen the process and
empower ourselves.

Women's motivations for being involved in bi-commu-
nal efforts are multiple. Mainly there is an eagerness to
prevent any further violent acts against any member of
either of the communities of Cyprus, and to advocate for
a peaceful settlement of the Cyprus problem. We consider
that conflicts that ultimately lead to war as a mode of
extinguishing the other is a failure of humanity to sustain
human life that is priceless and irreplaceable. We would
like to see a future where all the inhabitants of Cyprus live
in peace and harmony, drawing lessons from the past to
shape a better future where resources will be allocated to
the development of the humanity, health, and education
rather than armaments.

We must insist and press for more human contact in
Cyprus. It is through our contacts with women from the
other side that we empower ourselves especially during
times of despair when the political climate is completely
negative for a settlement of the problem. It is the encour-
agement we get from the other community that keeps us
going. The fact that we can extend our hands above the
barbed wires gave us strength to continue. I knew that
during the time I was traveling to meet my Turkish
Cypriot partner in Pyla, she was traveling towards me. A
vision was created collectively inside us that inspired us to
develop new ways to look into our problems and ourselves
as well as to the possible solutions. That inspiration gave
life to our dreams for a better Cyprus and a better future
for our children.

At times of disappointment and low morale, a call from
the other side is enough to make us stand up again and
continue. The road ahead of us is still long and difficult.
The key is hard work, continuous, uninterrupted, focused
implementation of our ideas into actions. People around
us will be enlightened by the paradigm of our cooperation
as they see us working together and learn from each other.
We must support each other even when we disagree. We
must open new paths for new people to come into the
process and join efforts. We must open roads for people to
develop themselves and actualize their potential with
equal love and care for the friend and the "enemy." We
must forge ahead and make significant political interven-
tions through the institutionalization of our ideas and
structuring of our work. Special efforts must be made to
promote the equal inclusion of women in the decision-
making, especially for those women with peace activist
backgrounds.

For many nights ahead of us we shall remain sleepless,
worrying and thinking. We may not even live to see the
results of our efforts. We shall know though deep inside
our consciousness that we have fulfilled the promise to
ourselves: we have made our contribution for a better
future for Cyprus. We owe this to our children and the
generations to come.

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dedicated the last ten years of her life to peace-building
between Greek and Turkish Cypriots in Cyprus.