

Women's Peace-Building Activities The Case of Cyprus

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Ce sont les expériences personnelles de femmes de la Grèce et de la Turquie Chypriote de toute catégorie qui ont travaillé à bâtir la paix et à développer une société civile qui cultive des attitudes de tolérance et de compréhension et surtout à dé-construire l'image de l'«autre» comme l'«ennemi».

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

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.

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. In

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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 di-

vides 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.

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 postgraduate program in the U.S. in conflict management and was curious to see how the principles of conflict management in business are applied to ethnic conflict. That first contact with the peace process changed my life as well as the way I looked at things. "Talking with the enemy" was not common and still is not in this society that carries its perceptions and prejudices along from generation to generation. The curiosity of that time gave its place to a deep concern for the Turkish Cypriot community, to its needs and problems, hopes and aspirations as much as I had for those of my own community.

The first time I crossed the green line back to go to the other side was in 1994. It was a step I took full of mixed feelings, fear and eagerness, worry and desire, sorrow and joy. We stopped at a market in Kaymakli to buy water. I stayed in the bus watching a man holding a baby only a few months in one hand and a bottle of milk in the other. The moment that baby burst into tears, probably because it was hungry, I realized I was experiencing the course of life on the other side. That baby was born to live in an environment of equal opportunities, a new soul on this earth that needed to be nourished to grow in safety and peace. That child is like my child, I thought. The feelings I had toward it were not at all different from my feelings toward my own children. As a woman and a mother and a conscious citizen, I felt there was no other road for Cyprus than the road of peace and reconciliation at the citizens level which I consider as important as any resulting agreement at the high political level.

It is not surprising that the first attempts for inter-communal peace were made by women in the late 1980s. The Peace Center in Cyprus was founded by two women scholars in 1993, Dr Maria Hadjipavlou and Dr Emy Markides. It was the Peace Center that organized the first bi-communal conflict resolution trainings for Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot women with assistance and funding from the Fulbright Commission of Cyprus, the American Center, and the American Embassy.

The extensive training we women had in communication and conflict resolution skills, mediation, training of the trainer, and interactive management was above all a

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 interna-

tional 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.

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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:

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. Our work has been obstructed by certain political forces.

- 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 structures. 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 constraints 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 transformation from one system of thought to another, from one pattern of behaviour to another, that has involved empirical 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 institutions. 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-communal 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 communities 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-communal 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 encouragement 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 interventions 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.

Katie Economidou is a Greek Cypriot woman who has dedicated the last ten years of her life to peace-building between Greek and Turkish Cypriots in Cyprus.