# Trans-Border Crossings: Cypriot Women's 'Liberation' and the Margins

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## Abstract

*Out of the 191 million people living outside their countries of origin in 2005, 95 million were women. In Cyprus more than one-third of all migrant workers are 'domestic workers'. This article focuses on female domestic workers only and specifically on those who work in the households of professional women in both communities. The analysis is based on a qualitative research carried out in 2007 and 2008. Despite the fact that professional women ('madams') are economically independent and have taken on the role of second bread-winner in their households, the sexual division of domestic labour and the value system that sustain the patriarchal structures have still remained intact. Thus, Cypriot women's 'liberation' is enabled through the migrant women's engagement in their households. The migrant women that were interviewed experienced exploitation, abuses, violations of contracts, fear of expulsion, overwork, and violence, but also they developed agency, social networking and assertiveness. A joint struggle is proposed, based on gender consciousness, female solidarity and inter-dependence so that real liberation and social change may be attained. The stakes are different for each person but all connect to the desire for an alternative world of 'real liberation' from patriarchal structures, racism, sexism, and capitalist exploitation.*

**Keywords:** female migrant domestic workers, Cypriot women, 'liberation', exploitation, abuse, racism, women's solidarity.

## The Rise in Female Migration – Feminisation of Migration

The end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first have been called the "Age of Migration", a fact that has drawn the attention of national governments, non-governmental and international organisations and scholars. Centres for Migration Studies have also been established in many universities. A joint report by the United Nations Agency for Population Funds and the

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International Organisation of Migration (UNFPA-IOM) found, in 2006, that women make up half of all migrants. From estimates of 191 million people living outside their countries of origin in 2005, 95 million were women. Included in these figures is an estimate of 13.5 million refugees representing 7% of the world's migrant stock (Ayres and Barber, 2006). According to UN estimates Europe had 64 million migrants in 2005, accounting for one-third of all international migrants and almost 9% of the total population of Europe. The European Commission estimated the non-nationals living in the 25 EU member states to be 25 million which amounts to almost 5.5% of their total population. The countries with the largest non-national populations were Germany, France, Spain, the United Kingdom and Italy.[1] In recent years the highest levels of net migration have occurred in the Southern European countries including the Republic of Cyprus, where it stood at 2.72% in 2005.

Gender issues and the current '*feminisation of migration*' have become a major point of attention due to the changes in the global production and reproduction process. According to Anthias and Lazarides "gender does not mean women but the latter must be given special attention since it is their contribution to migration processes that are still largely ignored" (Anthias and Lazaridis, 2000, p. 5). The labour market is gendered in the sense that domestic work, caring for the elderly and the sex industry are associated with female workers, whereas other sectors such as construction, agriculture and the hotel industry are linked with men. This gendered division has implications that impact on wage differences as well (Agathangelou, 2004; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002).

Yet, there is still not enough reliable information about women as migrants. Equal numbers statistically do not necessarily imply equality of treatment. Women have fewer opportunities than men for legal migration; many women become irregular migrants with concomitant lack of support and exposure to risk; they are more vulnerable than men to violence and exploitation, and their needs for health care, including reproductive health care are not always likely to be met. They also have fewer opportunities for social integration and political participation and none of the 22 receiving states studied in the report has gender-sensitive migration policies (UNFPA-IOM, 2006).

Gender has been identified as a critical issue in circular migration, i.e. migration that follows a cycle whereby migrant workers emigrate repeatedly for a few years at a time for employment purposes, always keeping their country of origin as a home-base, and sending remittances back home (Ellis, Conway, and Bailey, 2006; Yeoh and Khoo, 1998). In north and south Cyprus migrant women from Sri Lanka, India, the Philippines, Turkey, Bulgaria, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan have worked in different places prior to coming to Cyprus as is shown from the data of the interviews in this research. One of the important factors in the escalation of migration as a

1 For details on the flow of migration see: Ayres and Barber (2006).

social, political and economic phenomenon is global changes (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002). The end of the Cold War led to massive population movements to Europe and elsewhere as well as inter-ethnic conflicts in a number of regions. Displacement, according to Anthias, has created "the most powerful image for the modern world in arguments about transnationalism and globalization ... Transactional migration to Cyprus, particularly by women from the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Eastern Europe, has created a migrant workforce" (Anthias, 2006, pp. 179-180). In addition, the creation of new free trade areas leads to movements of labour – whether or not this is intended by the governments concerned (Agathangelou, 2004). As mentioned above, migrant women form the majority in movements as diverse as those of Cape Verdians to Italy, Filipinos to the Middle East, Thais to Japan, Sri Lankans to Cyprus, and Albanians to Greece.

Different theories have been proposed for the study of migration. An integrative model which uses three levels of analysis has been proposed: the macro level which focuses on the relations between the sending and receiving nation-states; the middle-level which focuses on groups and organisations through which the persons and families negotiate the migration routes; and the micro-level which focuses on the particular person when migration choices are based on individual stories, social identities and sources of support. Recent studies have emphasised migrant women as individuals who decide autonomously to migrate and even take initiatives for their families (Oishi, 2002; Maratou-Alibrandi and Papatsani, 2007).

Some scholars have supported the view that women who migrate alone in search of employment and do not follow the traditional pattern of accompanying male family members become emancipated and empowered. In addition, they claim that the act of migration can also stimulate change in women migrants themselves and in the societies which send and receive them. "In the process women's migration can become a force for removing existing gender imbalances and inequities, and for changing underlying conditions so that new imbalances and inequities do not arise" (UNFPA-IOM, 2006). This is part of the liberal approach which constructs emancipation on the basis of multiplicity of choice, without deeply delving into the power frames of such 'choice'. Apart from the benefits, however, there are many costs such as the additional responsibilities and emotional stress they experience in support of their families back home. The loss of qualified and professional women in the countries of origin creates a "brain drain" and the failure of the receiving countries to recognise these talents lead to "brain waste".

It might seem that the 'emancipation premise' that is the view that migrant women become liberated from traditional norms and behaviours is only a theoretical assumption, strictly speaking, based on liberal premises of choice and feminist emancipation. However, this is not the case since due to 'feminisation of migration' it is ascertained that migrant women are being recruited in two areas: domestic work, where they have responsibility to maintain households in mostly affluent homes, and in the industries of caring for the elderly and the sex industry. All of these are associated with female work and are marked by exploitation both from employers and agencies which recruit (or even kidnap) them. Thus the liberal claim is restrictive and ignores the capitalist, racialised and patriarchal power relations. These women from the 'margins' are constructed by their employers as

both members of the household and alien subjects who pollute our culture (Anthias, 2006; Agathangelou, 2004). Agathangelou reminds us that "the upper owning class draws upon racist and sexist mythologies that 'white but not quite' and also 'black' women's labour is natural so that it can be sold cheaply" (Agathangelou, 2004, p. 70). Anthias, too, stresses the important role of the media and political and state representations which contribute to these constructions of domestic workers as "local constructions within families, neighbourhoods, and communities" (Anthias, 2006, p. 180). Migrant women often have no choice but to submit to this exploitation so that they can send remittances home and support family, elderly and children. Also, back at home the patriarchal structures do not change and the husband/father re-asserts his authority and refuses to nurture and care for the children: "I found that migrant mothers indeed provide care from thousands of miles away, whereas fathers continue to reject the responsibility of nurturing children" (Salazar Parrenas, 2005, p. 7). The labour of these women is extracted at minimum cost to the affluent employer who can then send the labourer home and the host-country is never burdened with responsibilities to educate the women's children, or provide healthcare when the women become older (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001).

Another concern is the kind of contribution migration might actually make to development since money is often spent on luxury goods, dowries, buying housing rather than on productive investments thus reinforcing capitalist consumerism. In some cases, it is argued, the increased flow of money has led to inflation in the sending countries thus disadvantaging non-migrant families. Some scholars point out that since the migrants generally come from the middle strata rather than the poorest groups in the areas of origin, remittances often exacerbate social inequality, and lead to increased concentration of land ownership in certain countries. The migration of educated persons from less developed countries means a temporary downward social mobility with regard to legal status (Anthias, 2000). Most migrant women do not know their rights – one reason being that they were raised in patriarchal systems where women have low status, learn to be submissive and are accustomed to traditions that curb women's rights and voices (Maratou-Alipranti, 1999; Symeonidou, 2002; Tsatsoglu and Maratou-Alipranti, 2003).

## Background and Methodology

On Sundays and holidays the major squares and parks of the main cities in the Republic of Cyprus are filled with migrant workers – men and women from different parts of the world. In divided Nicosia, a few yards away are the barbed wires and the crossing check points that, since 2003, have enabled contact between people north and south of the island. When some of the female migrant workers in Nicosia were asked about the history of ceasefire lines, barbed wires and check-points they were not only unaware of the local politics but were also uninterested in knowing. They meet in these locations near the Green line on their days off to connect with friends, make telephone calls to their families back home or to shop. Some cook their favourite ethnic foods while others simply sit and relax. Greek Cypriots are hardly seen in such places. The locals simply drive by as if

these people are invisible. The presence, however, of migrants and others in the Republic of Cyprus – whether legal or illegal – is a reality and constitutes a multi-ethnic underclass which provides cheap labour for the locals.

The migrant workers (*metanastes*) have all crossed trans-nationally to seek employment that would ensure a better life than the one back home while at the same time they serve the global economy with cheap labour. Agathangelou (2004) informs us that female migrants leave their country as a result of several forces. Some do so when "the states mediate the relations between the global and local markets in order to facilitate the movement of cheap labour" (2004, p. 79). Another driving factor is "the desire of the upper middle classes to hire reproductive labour cheaply as well as the structural circumstances within which the female migrant worker finds herself" (*ibid*). As a result of economic development in the Republic of Cyprus an increase in the service economy, tourism and construction industry meant that new labour was needed, especially from the 1990s onwards (Trimikliniotis and Pantelides, 2003; Trimikliniotis and Fulias-Souroulla, 2006). According to the latest figures of the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Cyprus as of March 2009 there were 29,000 registered domestic workers out of a total of 67,000 legal migrants from non-European Union countries and 74,000 migrants from EU countries with permanent residency.

Due to the construction boom which began in the north of Cyprus after the rejection of the Annan Plan in 2004 – most of it on Greek Cypriot refugees' land – Turkish and Bulgarian Turks migrated into this part of the island and have been employed in this sector and other services (hotels, restaurants). The migrant workers perform all those jobs the Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots stopped doing due to social mobility and better paid work, as earlier research by Trimikliniotis and Pantelides (2003) has shown. Women, as mentioned above, form the majority among migrant workers in Cyprus and more specifically in the area of female domestic work. In the Republic of Cyprus these women are not addressed by their names but by their country of origin or by their colour: "i shrilankeza mou" (my woman from Sri Lanka), "i filipineza mou" (my own Filipino woman), or "mavroula mou" (my little black one). All designations indicate mastery, power over, control and subordination. "Greek and Turkish Cypriot women of the upper and middle-class seem to equate true femininity with unbridled control over women's labour from other peripheral economies" (Agathangelou, 2004, p. 80).

## Qualitative Interviewing

The research on migrant domestic workers in the south was undertaken with the help of Katherine Scully, a graduate from Yale University. We used in-depth semi-structured personal interviews with female migrant domestic workers employed in the homes of Greek Cypriot professional middle-class women. We also spoke to representatives from NGOs and officials in the Ministry of Interior and Labour and Social Insurance of the Republic of Cyprus. These interviews were conducted mostly in English, and in three instances we had small groups of migrant women

– two groups of Sri Lankan women and one of Filipinas. These women frequent local parks in the major towns of Nicosia, Limassol and Larnaca on Sundays and holidays. We interviewed twenty domestic workers from Sri Lanka, fourteen from the Philippines and two from India. We selected them randomly and through contacts of their friends. Their ages ranged from 22 to 50 years old. All of the women had high school education and six of them had college education. All but one lived in the house in which they were employed. The husbands of three of the women from Sri Lanka followed them after two years, breaking the traditional pattern of sending countries whereby wives would follow their husbands. Most of them were part of the 'circular' migration pattern, and had previously worked in Hong Kong, Singapore, Korea, Lebanon and Kuwait.

For the interviews carried out in northern Cyprus in the Turkish Cypriot community we adapted the same semi-structured questionnaire. Women were contacted in the Turkish language by two Turkish Cypriot female students, Pembe Bilen and Ziba Sertbay, and a post graduate researcher, Dogus Derya who translated and transcribed the interviews in English (Dr. Biran Mertan a psychologist, helped with the contacts in the north). The interviewees, from various regions of Turkey, Bulgaria, Takjistan, and Kurdistan, totalled twenty-two and their ages ranged from 26 to 45 years old. They were all married and live with their families in the cities of Nicosia, Famagusta and Kyrenia. Unlike in the south, none stayed in the houses of their employers. Three of them were illiterate and ten had not finished elementary school while eight had secondary school education and only one had college education. This is a major difference compared to the female migrants interviewed in the south who were all educated, some with college degrees.

In both communities the major issues we studied included the procedures the women used to come to Cyprus; their working conditions; the treatment they experienced by their 'madam or 'hanım' in the family where they worked; their salary status; awareness of their rights as migrant labourers; solidarity with other workers, agency and networking; and how their lives might improve back home. We also asked whether they knew about the Cyprus conflict and if their 'madams' showed interest in their home country.

Migrants from non-European countries entering the Republic on a work permit are rarely allowed to stay long enough to acquire citizenship and those who desperately need to, resort to marrying elderly Greek Cypriot men to enable them to bring their children or simply to acquire citizenship status. According to Trimikliniotis and Fulias-Souroulla (2006) immigration to Cyprus "matches the characteristics of the guest-worker system, with immigrant labour undergoing official recruitment on the basis of a strict system of quotas of work visas, to be allocated to specific sectors of employment and employers ... partly because of the temporary dimension of their stay in Cyprus, migrant workers have never been considered as settlers in the country" (p. 7). Thus, when their visa expires they have to return home. Today, EU country citizens are given priority over non-western or third country nationals and cuts are currently instituted to visas for domestic workers from Asian countries, and preference is given to Rumanian, Bulgarian or Polish citizens who have no limitations on residence and employment terms.

## Racism and Exploitation

Even though the issue of gendering migration in the Republic of Cyprus has attracted research attention, sensitisation of society at large has not yet occurred (Trimikliniotis, 1999; 2001; Trimikliniotis and Pantelides, 2003; Kadir, 2001; Lenz, 2006; Agathangelou, 2004; Trimikliniotis and Fulias-Souroulla, 2006; Anthias, 2000; Panayiotopoulos, 2005). One of the major findings in our research indicates that racism is the primary issue in ordering the lives, opportunities, and experiences of female migrant domestic workers in both southern and northern Cyprus. Because of the way these domestic workers are constructed by their employers and the media – their colour, the way they dress and being different – many experience discrimination, overwork and exclusion. Clarisa from the Philippines, aged 24 and college educated, who had worked in South Korea prior to coming to the Republic of Cyprus said: "I think the factory work in Korea was easier than housework in Cyprus. In Korea I worked in the factory for twelve hours and it was easy work. Here, I feel I work twenty-four hours and nobody cares. In the streets I feel racism and I am often approached for sex" (she showed us the bodily gestures men use when they try to buy sex from these women, and calling out the amount of money they will pay them). "Being approached for sex is horrible. Yes, we are poor but we do not want that ... it is so humiliating". Sexual harassment is a frequent complaint of many female migrants in the south who said that they did not feel safe walking in side streets in the cities on their own.

Age sometimes becomes an issue because a number of Sri Lankan and Filipina women look much younger than their passport date of birth indicates so the employers often doubt the validity of their documents and start harassing them to tell the truth about their age. But as one Sri Lankan widow with two children back home told us, "if God is inside you, you stay good-looking outside, it is a God's gift". She did not know how to convince her employer that she was telling the truth. The looks of these women are racialised and sexualised and their bodies become sites for exploitation. There are, of course, other cases where in the migrant workers' experience, racism is such a powerful influence that migrant women have deliberately changed their age on their passports in order to better their chances of employment.

According to KISA (Movement for Equality, Support and Anti-racism) – a non-governmental organisation – the number of female migrant domestic workers in Cyprus has increased because the maximum duration of stay for non-EU citizens has been shortened from six years to four years since Cyprus became a member state of the EU. In the past if someone stayed longer than the six-year period they were afforded additional rights: a fact that was regarded as a 'problem' by the state officials. Currently, if a non-EU citizen in the Republic of Cyprus stays beyond the four-year maximum then s/he is considered illegal and must leave. This is one way of demotivating migrants of non-EU countries from wanting to come to the Republic of Cyprus.

The exploitation that migrant women undergo is also a product of the racist Cypriot understanding of separate 'appropriate' roles, rights, and the position of foreign women. The vast majority of migrant domestic workers in Cyprus live and work under unfavourable conditions,

many of them viewed as the "slaves". Furthermore, there is a high percentage of women who live and work under conditions which violate the normal understanding of human rights and human dignity. In the south almost all domestic workers live-in, and the 'house', like the patriarchal, capitalist state, becomes a structure of oppression and domination as the house, according to Dubisch (1983) quoted in Vassiliadou (2004), is highly symbolic, "a place of cleanliness and purity as opposed to the street which is dirty ... and a place of sexual impurity" (Vassiliadou, 2004, p. 53).

One young Filipino woman regretted coming to Cyprus. She thought that Cyprus, being part of Europe, would treat her much better than other places she had worked before, but she discovered that European membership did not necessarily mean the implementation of European values, laws and principles. Her employer does not keep to the terms of the contract, and within the same salary she is asked to clean two large houses instead of one as per the agreement. In the Philippines, she was a teacher of mathematics in a high school but lost her job because of high unemployment. Her work day starts at seven in the morning and finishes at eight in the evening with one hour's rest. Her 'madam' always complains that she does not clean every corner thoroughly because she notices dust, "which I cannot prevent as it comes through the open windows", Ester said in despair.

According to KISA the exploitation of migrant domestic workers is multi-faced. They are exploited and vulnerable at every step along the way – from their home countries and Cyprus. This includes the requirement for women to pay for and undergo expensive 'training' to acquire the skills necessary to be a domestic worker in Cyprus. These women come to Cyprus through official or unofficial agencies which demand heavy fees. Agencies operate in both the sending and receiving countries. Domestic workers come to Cyprus because they face grave financial hardship in their home countries; however, these women have already accumulated a debt even before arriving in the host country. The agencies inform them that if they come to Cyprus they will earn a lot of money and be able to help their families, so they invest in the trip. Some of them sell their property or secure hefty loans in order to pay the agencies' fees but when they arrive in Cyprus the reality they discover is quite different. Ultimately, the women are compelled to accept abuse. They are overworked but remain silent out of fear of losing their jobs. Many are reluctant to return at the end of four years because they have not earned enough money to compensate for the enormous investment they made in the first place. In addition, others arrive from conflict areas and find that Cyprus is a more secure place to stay and the standard of living is also much better. Therefore, they continue to live in Cyprus, illegally cleaning houses here and there under fear of expulsion. The main problem they face, apart from their low salaries which are discussed below, are difficulties in extending their work permit.

## Salary Issue

Although all female domestic workers receive a salary which is greater than the salary available to them in their home countries, it is a fraction of the salary a Greek Cypriot would receive for the same amount of labour. In some cases, employers refuse to pay the full salary guaranteed in the

contract. The current salary is between €282 to €300 per month plus social security. Only in one case out of the thirty-six women we interviewed did the domestic worker receive €450, and this was because she did not live-in but rented a room with friends. This woman, a Sri Lankan aged 28, had been in Cyprus for two and a half years and worked for a 'madam' with two children aged 9 years and 8 months. She looked after the children in addition to cooking and cleaning the house until 8 p.m. Prior to coming to Cyprus she had finished high school, completed one year of college, and had been employed as a domestic worker in Lebanon and Kuwait since she was aged 20. Another woman from Sri Lanka who worked 13 hours a day asked the 'madam' for a raise. 'Madam' not only refused her request but accusingly stated that she did not "move fast enough, you are slow, that is why".

There have been many complaints about the low salary scales and the Cyprus government will need to review its policies to make the domestic work sector attractive to EU nationals though this might face resistance from employers. Occasionally, a few of these women resort to other practices in their free time in order to earn more money, such as selling sex or cleaning other houses, and in both they risk arrest and deportation if brought to the attention of authorities. Regrettably, their employers do not question the conditions which lead these women to engage in such acts and society at large readily condemns them and the media portray them as immoral and "dirty". Moreover, the local press sensationalises incidents like these and accuses the 'victims' of undermining the 'morality codes' of the Greek Cypriot community. It rarely seems to occur to the journalists to investigate and condemn the 'demand' side of sex work. An example of this was in November 2008 when a group of young domestic workers were arrested in Larnaca on charges of 'selling sex' in their free time. The press (print and TV) characterised them as 'whores' and demanded their immediate deportation so as not to tarnish the reputation of the Cypriot households in which they were employed.

Some domestic workers informed us that they were not allowed a private life: their employers were said to check their outings and discourage the formation of intimate relations (e.g. having boyfriends) because if they became pregnant, as a result, they would work less and demand health rights. There are 'madams' who do not supply soap or shampoo or washing powder so the women have to buy these items from their salary. They feel very upset and angry about this because they want to save their money. Many have expectations that their salaries will increase, especially if they work well and their employer is satisfied but this does not always happen.

## Living Standards

Standards of living vary from one case to another. An employer who does not respect or allow normal or healthy living standards will not normally face any consequences. Although most employers meet basic requirements, there have been cases reported by our interviewees of employers who would not permit their housemaid to leave the house, to rest, or eat sufficient amounts of food. Most housemaids eat after the family has finished their meal or they are requested

to take their food in their room. Often, they are not allowed to cook their own ethnic food because "it smells badly". There are a few 'madams', however, who invite their housemaids to sit at the table with the family but only if there are no guests. Many of them gather on Sundays in their friends' rented flat and together they cook their ethnic dishes and spend their time pleasantly listening to their own ethnic music or watching a film from their country. This is their way of keeping the connection with their home country and family. It also shows that there are no appropriate places for entertainment and social interaction for live-in domestic workers.

Although employment contracts establish a normal seven-hour work-day, most employers require somewhere between 10 and 13 hours of work a day. As employers face few consequences for violating the terms of the contract, the numbers of hours that domestic workers must work is, practically, at the discretion of the employer. A majority of the domestic workers, whom we interviewed, expressed a willingness to work overtime but resented the fact that their extra work was not compensated for by an increase in over-time wages. Furthermore, the majority felt like second-class citizens and believed their hard labour was degraded and undervalued by the other women they serve. It seems, as Agathangelou also noted, that Greek and Turkish Cypriot 'madams' and 'hanıms' seem to equate 'true femininity' with unbridled control over women's labour from the 'margins'.

Cherry, a young Filipino aged 23 years old, worked for a family in which both 'madam and sir' had their own business. They had two children, aged four and one whom Cherry looks after. In violation of the contract, she worked 13 hours a day, and when she complained about it she was told: "you are not a Cypriot to deserve more". This response reveals not only racism but also the 'madam's' class politics as it is gendered and racialised. Through her comment, the 'madam' constitutes herself as the powerful one who hires a 'migrant domestic worker to serve her'.

> "In the morning every day at 7 o'clock I go upstairs and help get the children ready, then feed them. The four-year old goes to nursery and when the one-year old sleeps I start to clean the whole house ... I clean very carefully because madam wants everything to shine. She always complains and I feel scared when she becomes very angry and I want to leave but I had spent so much money coming here, I cannot. I came here to earn money. I finish work at eight o'clock at night and I am exhausted. I think I am going crazy. Sometimes, my body hurts so much ... I work 13 hours and she gives me only 150 Cyprus pounds. If I complain she tells me 'you are not a Cypriot to pay you to work only seven hours'. Madam knows this is illegal but she also knows that I am afraid to do anything about it. I am a single mother with one child back home and I send all the money I earn."

Cherry feels trapped despite the injustice and bad treatment she receives from her well-to-do madam who receives services at very exploitative rates. As Agathangelou (2004) said, the idea of women as servants is based on the assumption that women's labour is a 'natural resource'. "It is perceived as just a 'natural' extension of femininity, a 'natural' extension of race (i.e. the perception that these women are docile, etc.), thereby not costing the same as men's labour" (p. 83).

A Sri Lankan interviewee, Shandra, told us that she had such a heavy workload that after many days of scrubbing, her muscles would spasm and freeze, and her hands would cramp into curled fists, forcing her to pry her fingers open each morning. She never eats with the family, but always alone in the kitchen. Many of these women suffer bodily injuries due to heavy housework – climbing up on ladders to clean high dirty windows and cellars. In other circumstances these 'madams' would call someone from a cleaning company to do this job and pay extra money. These women are treated according to a patriarchal, hierarchical understanding of dominant and subordinate relationships. As long as the professional middle and upper class 'madams' do not question their roles in reproducing the system within a world structure that draws upon ideologies of nature versus culture to further profit generation, the prevailing system will remain intact (*ibid.*).

## Emotional and Sexual Abuse

Very few domestic workers found relative comfort with their employer, and would consider using words such as "kind" or "nice" to describe their 'madam' who gave them gifts occasionally. (We found this to apply more with reference to the Turkish Cypriot 'hanıms' as will be shown below). Others, however, reported living in a constant state of psychological fear, with a 'madam' who would unpredictably scream, threaten deportation, or physically attack them. One interviewee told us that she suffered so much mental abuse that she began to have 'out of body experiences', describing her state as, "physically I am present, but mentally I am absent". Another interviewee reported experiencing crushing depression each morning, when she awoke, moaning, "Oh my god, it's morning again, and then madam is going to yell at me again". A third feared that she had developed a heart condition: that her employer's threats of deportation caused such acute panic attacks, she feared her health was permanently affected. Some religious Sri Lankans viewed their ordeals as "maybe a trial from God" and refrained from complaining. These professional 'madams' use 'power' over these female workers in the same way that men and the system control them. In turn, the 'madams' objectify and commodify the domestic workers. The 'madams' seem to reproduce the very system that subjugates them but are often unaware of the implications.

In addition to emotional abuse from the 'madams', some of the domestic workers reported incidences of sexual harassment from male employers. Some had repeated offers of money for sexual favours, while others reported attempted rapes. The embarrassment and social stigma surrounding sexual abuse suggests that actual incidences are probably much higher than those reported, as in the case of Rashini, aged 40 years old from Sri Lanka, who worked as a domestic worker for a doctor's family. The 'madam' was a lawyer.

> "At first all was good though I had to work long hours. I got attached to the children and it was a kind of consolation for me not to think about my daughters and son all the time. Then something terrible happened. 'Sir' started coming to my room late at night, and asking me for sex. I was shocked and of course I refused but he would not stop. Weeks went by

> and I decided to talk to madam. She started shouting at me that I was telling her lies and that I was imagining things. She not only did not believe me but the next day she threw me out of the house. I was sick for days and then I could not go back to my country. I needed to work and send money, my husband had no job. I told nobody about it out of fear. So I started cleaning houses here and there. A good madam helped me find houses to clean. I stay in a basement with three other Sri Lankans. Every time I see a policeman I get so scared." (Rashini, 2004)

Rashini, after three years of working as an illegal migrant, left Cyprus in 2006 because her health was deteriorating and she was taking all kinds of anti-depressant pills. She never revealed the name of her employer. The 'madam' with not a second thought dismissed Rashini without fear of any ramifications or lack of compensation, but instead viewed her as a 'bad woman' who tried to mar her husband's reputation. Hence, the 'madam' tries to seemingly protect both the patriarchal male authority and her own marriage while reproducing the very system that leads to dysfunctional relationships. This is one example of similar stories we heard from female migrant women in the south who constitute part of the global restructuring of economies to generate more profit for less cost. All of these avenues of exploitation derive from an ingrained racism, and classicism which causes the Cypriot employer to view the female migrant worker as "unequal", or an object of property thereby allowing the employers who do not perceive their actions as discriminatory and unfair, to treat the employee profoundly "unequally": to pay the employee unequally, to extract unequal amounts of labour, to expect sexual favours, and so on (Agathangelou, 2004). None of the domestic workers we interviewed in the northern part of Cyprus complained about sexual harassment but only of emotional abuse.

## Agency and Networking

Of course, the female domestic workers are not only 'victims' of global economy and of their 'madams' but some of them also find ways to exhibit agency and to assert their rights as well as set up networks and small makeshift ethnic 'businesses'. Azita, from Sri Lanka, is 44 years of age, well-educated, and used to work for the army in her country. When she first came to Cyprus she worked in a doctor's house in Paphos in the western part of the island. The family had a large house and she also had to clean the doctor's office. The doctor would often corner her and offer her money to have sex with him. He would explicitly cite her low wages in order to make his offer more enticing, but she resisted. She told us that she "used her brain" and would make obstacles for him until his wife returned from work. She could not stand it for long so she spoke to a female lawyer and the doctor was charged with sexual harassment and was denied a further permit to employ any other migrant female worker again. Azita, not only knew her rights and how her dignity was violated, but also challenged the patriarchal and racialised system. She was later employed at a household in Nicosia where both 'madam' and 'sir' were overly demanding and verbally abusive. "The parents beat the children and the children were abusive to me. I could not stand it and left".

The third family she now works for is "good, stable and I am happy to work for them. They respect me as a human being". She told us of many other cases of domestic workers from Sri Lanka and India who are sexually abused but are too ashamed, fearful or powerless to report it. She cited her intelligence, maturity and experience as tools that helped her escape the aggression of her two previous employers and she seemed unscathed, describing it without any particular emotional attachment. Still, she was not satisfied with her meagre salary. As she was talking to us she divided up, into thirty days, her salary of CY£150 to reveal that domestic workers receive only CY£5 (about €8 / US$12) for more than eight-hour's work per day. To complement her salary Azita conducts a little business in the recreation park on Sundays, cooking and selling ethnic food.

Domestic workers also create their own support and networking systems. For instance, some of the women were well-informed and knew their own rights and would ask for legal advice. Others created support groups, shared their experiences and helped each other. The older Sri Lankan women would lend support to newcomers and brief them on general Cypriot working conditions, their rights, and where to ask for help.

The Filipino women are more organised than the others and often contact their local honorary Consul for help. One of the Greek Cypriot daily newspapers, '*Politis*', publishes a special supplement now and then about Filipino life and news in Cyprus, in an effort to make their presence visible. In addition, KISA organises a 'rainbow festival' annually which is dedicated to the cultures and presence of migrant workers in Cyprus, and offers an opportunity for Cypriots to get to know the different 'others' as well as appreciate and enjoy multi-ethnic performances, ethnic cuisine and culture.

On the issue of the migrant women's awareness of the Cyprus conflict, almost all knew nothing about the issues involved or why the United Nations Peace Keeping force has been in Cyprus. None of the women we interviewed had crossed to the north yet. They tended to stay together and create their own closed communities. The Republic of Cyprus has not really created structures or places for them to spend their free time in a respectful and enjoyable environment despite demands by local NGOs, nor have 'madams' asked their housemaids about the political situation in their own countries, such as the conflict in Sri Lanka or the problems in India or the Philippines. Only during the devastating tsunami did the Cypriots become mobilised to send financial aid. The major focus and interest for the migrant women is economics, while for the Cypriot middle-class professional women it is their 'liberation' from household duties and child care, which ignores the fact that they themselves are the products of patriarchal, phalocentric ideologies and a global neoliberal system.

## The Experience North of the Green Line

The Turkish Cypriot community which made up 18% of the total Cypriot population prior to 1974 is today overwhelmed with the influx of many thousands of predominantly Turks from Turkey – which largely constitutes the 'settler problem' (there are many categories of 'settlers') –

and many Turkish Cypriots talk of becoming a minority in their own community. The exact number of these settlers/migrants is not known, as numbers are politicised (Hatay, 2005). Similarly to the south there are different groupings of workers, some with work permits and others who are non-registered workers. An attempt was made to ascertain the number of migrant female domestic workers but a clear classification for the different categories of immigrants could not be found. The migrant female women that we interviewed came from Turkey (Arab, and Kurdish origin), Bulgaria and Tajikistan.

The procedures used to come to northern Cyprus differ from the ones used by the female migrants in the Republic of Cyprus. The Turkish female migrants do not use any agencies. The majority follow their husbands, brothers or friends who arrived before. Some of the Bulgarian Turks first travelled to Turkey but could not find work there. Later, after they heard that the construction business in northern Cyprus was thriving, they came to the island. According to the 'social network' theory the majority of these workers used the information passed on by friends, relatives or neighbours to explore working opportunities, as in the case of Sebile and her family:

> "It was my brother who came first fifteen years ago and lives in LefkoKa with his wife and he told me to come and work here. He found me this job. He told me there was this couple that was trying to find a trustful woman who would take care of their children. My brother and Hanım (madam) work together. When I arrived hanım got me a 'work permit' and registered me to the responsible authority. I do not know my rights but if I am in trouble I will inform my brother. He knows how to solve problems. They are nice people and treat me very well and sometimes we have coffee together ... I have friends who go to work as domestic workers in other countries and most of them suffered badly and returned to Bulgaria. It is a pity to work like an animal in order to live like a human being" (Sebile, 2007).

Sebile, aged 39, married with one child, is aware of global migration problems, and the exploitation and mental abuse that many of her friends have experienced. She considers herself lucky because she has her brother to take care of her problems since he knows the system. Thus, the gendered roles and dependency relations continue to be reproduced in the patriarchal new environment, reinforcing the continuation of gender roles and disproving the claim that female migration challenges gender imbalances (UNFPA Report, 2006). In similar pattern to the Filipina and Sri Lankan domestic workers in the south, the Bulgarian Turks also seem to stick together to help each other and form their own community. Münever and her family came to the island in 2006 through connections and friends who had become citizens of the 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC)' and they knew how to use the system. So, when Münever and her family arrived, they established links with the Bulgarian Turkish community which helped them to integrate:

> "Actually we have Bulgarian Turks who have been living in Cyprus since 1999 and they helped me find a job. They are Bulgarian citizens but they also took the TRNC citizenship.

> The woman who helped me find a job was a neighbour of my relatives in Bulgaria. At the beginning we stayed at their house and we moved to our house after my husband and I earned the required money to rent a house. I have no working license [and] I am an unregistered worker. If the government registers me, it will force me to pay taxes. I don't want this. I cannot give the money I earn with difficulty to the authorities ... you should not tell anyone but I am an illegal worker ..."

Münever is aware of her obligations toward the system but is prepared to take risks because her financial needs are more urgent. We interviewed other women like her who are illegal, with no working permits and live in fear of being discovered. Fatma, who is 37 years old, is an Arab Turk. She is illiterate and cleans the homes of Turkish Cypriot professional women. She told us:

> "We are not citizens. We have been living here since 1993 but could not be citizens. I don't know why. My husband said we had to file an application in order to be citizens. We did two years ago and the officials told us we have to work five more years after our official application. I hope when we become citizens the government will provide services for my disabled children".

Fatma has five children, the eldest is a boy of 14 and the others are girls – two of them are severely disabled. Her son takes care of the girls when Fatma works. Her illiteracy keeps her dependent on others which makes her life difficult and because of this she wants to educate her children. This is an additional reason for coming to Cyprus:

> "I really want to educate my children because if you are illiterate you have to suffer like me ... I took my disabled daughter to the hospital, waited there for long hours, but nobody called our name. I went to a nurse and asked her why and she pointed to a board, which she read to me saying, 'please take a number to see the doctor'. If I were literate I could read it and take a number. I spent too much time at the hospital for nothing, you understand me?"

The interviewees, like those in the Republic of Cyprus, all mentioned that they came to north Cyprus to make a better life for themselves and their children, especially the Bulgarian Turkish women who claimed that they suffered a great deal due to racism under the Bulgarian government,

> "they put great pressure on us, simply because we were Turkish. They forced us to change our names. They did bad things to us. We were not allowed to speak our language but I have to say even those times were better than today. The economic situation was better."

Some of the Turkish migrant women had difficulties in adjusting to the Turkish Cypriot culture – food, lifestyle and customs. Sebile said:

> "I do not know how to say it but I have not adapted to the Turkish Cypriot way of life. They speak loudly, for example. I think they like to tell naughty jokes, especially jokes about sexual issues which make me so embarrassed, they are too modern for us".

When some of the 'hanıms' have guests they call the domestic workers to help serve and clean the house, but never to cook for them, for as Emine said:

> "I never cook for the hanıms, our food is different from theirs. Our meals are too hot for them, you know, we use a lot of pepper and other spices. Turkish Cypriots are like Europeans. I only go there to clean."

Emine experiences a clash of cultures, and norms as well as a social distance defined by race, class and gender. Thus the 'hanım', who seeks her own 'liberation' from housework, objectifies and constructs the 'migrant woman' as the 'other', someone who is there to serve her and provide her labour for a 'clean home' at a very low cost.

In north Cyprus not one of the domestic workers lives in their employers' house unlike those in the south. It is not a custom in the north. One explanation put forward could be that these domestic workers come to the north with their families; secondly, Turkish Cypriot women do not like to have a 'stranger' live-in, thus they have a different understanding from Greek Cypriot women of 'home and private space'; and thirdly, because of economic reasons, the domestic workers make more money as a family than as individuals. They take care of the children, clean the houses or care for the elderly persons and "when hanım finishes her job and comes home she finds a clean house and all in order then we leave". They believe that they 'liberate' the 'hanıms' from housework and child care so that they can promote their career and form better relations with their husbands. Consequently, like in the south, the patriarchal structures and sexual division of labour remain intact too.

## Salaries and Working Conditions

Unlike the domestic workers in the south most of our interviewees in the north seemed content with their salaries and the working conditions. They did not have to send money back home since they lived with their families and their husbands were also in work. They were employed mostly in the construction industry or as road workers. Fatihe, who is aged 39 and illiterate with three children, found that most of the 'hanıms' are 'nice persons' and asserted:

> "if they do not like my cleaning, they kindly warn me and ask me to clean better. They don't shout at me like the crazy woman in Gönyeli who shouted at me and was obsessed with the hygiene of the kitchen. She made me cry so I left her. I tell you, I can never work for people who forget that I am a human being as they are. I have dignity; it is a matter of honour."

Fatihe, developed such a close relationship with one of the 'hanıms' who asked her whether she wanted more children and when she replied that she did not, the 'hanım', who is a pharmacist, talked to her about contraception and the pill:

> "She gave me some pills and told me those pills prevent pregnancy and I should use one every day if I do not want any more children. She is a wise woman and helps me whenever I need her. So, I listened to her and started taking these pills. I do not know how to say it, I am a little bit shy ... but you know my husband refuses to use any protection, which means the pill will save my life. I am so pleased; I kept this as my secret and did not tell my husband."

Due to the fact that many interviewees were illiterate and came from 'traditional' social backgrounds they had no information about reproductive rights and their sexuality was controlled by men. They told us that they were embarrassed to discuss issues of sex, reproductive health or sexuality. These issues were taboo for them. When they heard Turkish Cypriot women talking about such issues they felt shy and uncomfortable. Whereas for women in western countries the pill was part of the sexual revolution and helped women have control over their bodies and reproductive rights, for many of the female Turkish or Bulgarian Turkish migrants these were unspoken issues. Apart from these cultural differences between Turkish Cypriot women and the migrant domestic workers there are differences in the standard of education, class, race, and lifestyle.

Their working day is usually eight hours, but they do not work on Sundays or holidays. However, they have 'double work' because after their paid work they continue their unpaid work in their own home. It is the 'hanıms' who arrange the working hours for them according to their needs, unlike the south where the domestic workers have a fixed contract which shows a different arrangement of social work. Ayşe, who is 33 years old and has four children said:

> "I start work at seven o'clock in the morning and my work finishes at five in the afternoon. I work eight hours per day. I clean three houses per week. I have rest breaks and eat my lunch. I get the minimum wage because I am illegal. One of the hanıms has her own business with her sister".

Ayşe, unlike other Bulgarian Turks, wants to return to Bulgaria after she and her husband save enough money. Others do not want to return to Turkey, like Fatma, who has 14 siblings in Hatay and sometimes they call her to go back but she refuses, thinking of the difficulties and hard times despite the fact that she finds life in the north expensive:

> "I do not want to return because I will have to work in the fields and fruit gardens there all day. It is much easier to clean people's houses. I will never go back. If we buy a house in Lefkoşa, our life will be much better ... Houses are too expensive here; we don't have enough money yet. My husband has a car but we don't use it because fuel is expensive."

The migrant domestic workers find life very expensive in northern Cyprus as part of the global capitalist restructuring. Yet compared to the life they had prior to coming to north Cyprus they would still prefer to stay and nurture their dream of buying a house one day and becoming part of the capitalist consumerist class. There are some who admitted to us that they feel lonely and long for a sense of community and appropriate places for entertainment. They find Turkish Cypriots very individualistic and distant. Emine, like others said, "sometimes I feel abandoned and want to cry loudly ... I know there are other women like me but I don't know personally anyone in this part of the city".

As in the south, many of these women do not feel integrated in the local society and experience racism, sexism and discrimination. A few of the Bulgarian Turkish women complained that they work 'like slaves' to make ends meet. Others from Tajikistan find certain 'hanıms' arrogant. They

humiliate them or treat them 'like dogs'. But others felt satisfied with their salary in comparison to what it was like in their home country. Some earn 70 Turkish Liras (TL), i.e. €35, a day cleaning three houses, with the exception of ironing laundry for which they are paid extra. In Bulgaria, they said, a female worker is paid 200TL per month (€100) on average and they wondered how they could live on so little money. Though their incentive for coming to northern Cyprus was to earn money, some stressed the psychological isolation stating that "we feel we are in 'exile' even though they [locals] speak the same language and have the same religion".

## Rights and the Cyprus Conflict

No-one we interviewed in northern Cyprus knew their rights or even understood what the concept of 'rights' entailed. Most of the Turkish domestic workers did not know where the Turkish Embassy was in case they needed any help. Most of them said that if they were to face any problems or get into any trouble they would go to their husbands or brothers. None of the women spoke of organising or becoming involved in an association. On occasions some of the employers asked about their families and offered help or a Ramadan basket (goods given as charity on specific religious days). Others showed no interest in them.

Following a similar pattern to the south, the majority of domestic workers in the north did not know anything about the Cyprus conflict either. Only the Bulgarian Turkish women had heard that "the Christians and Moslems of Cyprus did not get along and that the Greeks dominated the Turkish Cypriots as did the Bulgarians to the Turks". Some Bulgarians had crossed to the south and commented that the Greek part is more developed and rich but they would not like to work for Greek 'madams' because "they have a different religion and a different language". Most of them were not interested in politics because "politicians ruin people's lives". Sebile did not care because: "I am not a Cypriot, I don't have to think about the Cyprus problem. If I continue to live here I may start to worry but now I don't want to" The 'hanıms' never talked to them about the conflict, but they sometimes heard related items about it on TV, which they found 'boring'. It is not surprising that the Cyprus conflict is an irrelevant issue to the migrant workers on both sides but an every day issue for the Cypriots. In fact the Cyprus conflict trumps all other serious social issues such as women's rights, racism, exploitation of migrants, discrimination, and sex trafficking. Some work has been done in the last few years but much more needs to be produced so as to sensitise the societies at large.

## Concluding Remarks

The female migrant domestic workers in both parts of Cyprus experience problems and challenges as do migrant women in many other European countries.[2] Following the pattern found in the rest

2 [See: www.FeMiPol.uni-frankfurt.de].

of Southern Europe, women enter the Republic of Cyprus as domestic workers and in the northern part of Cyprus they arrive with their families under various residence statuses.

The female domestic workers in northern Cyprus do not use the same procedures to enter the country nor do they have any training prior to arriving as do many domestic workers in the Republic of Cyprus who all come via agencies and require work permits. In the north, all the interviewees arrived with their families, but laws and regulations appear ambiguous and are mostly not observed. Most of them said that in addition to coming to Cyprus for economic reasons their aim was to also educate their children in Turkish Cypriot schools. As the Cypriot women acquire higher education and become part of the financial markets, the need for employing other women to take care of their household increases since the structures and gender roles remain intact. The migrant women's cheap labour replaces the state obligation for child care, welfare for the elderly and flexible working hours for mothers.

The issues concerning migrant women in Cyprus and elsewhere are pressing for two reasons. Firstly, they are important regarding the protection of human rights and democracy. Secondly, the treatment of migrant workers – taking female domestic workers into account – will certainly, and indeed already has, brought a profound change to the social fabric of many societies including the Cypriot society where we noted an increase in mixed marriages with Cypriot men or women. In the south mixed marriages reached 24% in 2004 and 20% in 2006, and in the north they are more than 15%. One other pressing issue is to inform migrants of their rights and resources, legal and structural. According to KISA most of the migrants readily admit that they do not know their rights and they rely on their employers or agencies to tell them. Similarly, the domestic workers in the north are not informed either and rely on their husbands or male relatives. Their own agency is thus undermined by patriarchy and the hierarchical structures as well as sexual division of labour. Many female migrants in both the south and north feared that if they filed a complaint their employers would ask for their deportation which shows that although the laws exist they are not used. Cypriots need to acknowledge that the migration flow has been beneficial to both sides of the island in that migrants undertake tasks undesirable to Cypriots due to social upward mobility and thus they contribute to the local economies.

From the analysis of our data it is apparent that the argument put forward by the neo-liberal approach that the migration process can be a means of empowerment for migrant women does not seem to be so; the majority remain vulnerable, their labour objectified, and racialised (Abraham, 2002). Empowerment should mean knowledge of their rights as human beings and as workers in the global economy. Training and seminars should, therefore, be organised for this purpose.

While the presence and employment of female migrant domestic workers has relieved Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot professional women of their household duties, and allowed them the time and psychological space to pursue their own career and personal advancement, no transformation of gender relations has simultaneously occurred. In the Republic of Cyprus, domestic workers have been bringing up the new generation of children who sometimes treat their carers as 'servants or slaves', thus adopting gendered and racialised behaviour. And there is a high

probability of them perpetuating this practice in their adult life if left unchecked. This is also a result of the very slow adjustment of the Greek and Turkish Cypriot male mentality with regard to their sharing of responsibilities in the private sphere (Peristianis and Kokkinou, 2008).

Many domestic workers receive unequal and exploitative treatment from the 'madams/hanıms' whose 'liberation' is facilitated through these very same women whom they often mistreat and abuse, having constructed them as both members of the household and as 'alien subjects'. Many of these professional women adopt a racist attitude, perceiving their domestic workers as inferior and being at the 'margin' – there to serve them so that they have it all – a career, a clean house, children taken care of and a relaxed husband. Hence, the hierarchical, patriarchal system is recreated within the madam-domestic worker relationship. The 'madams' do not seem to recognise that had it not been for these women they would not have been able to promote their professional careers, have a clean home and their children cared for, as well as travel and develop their autonomy. Both 'madams' and the domestic workers need to become aware of how the patriarchal and global capitalist processes are obstacles to their true 'emancipation'. They should struggle to cease being victims of such conditions, be they at the state or the public and domestic sites in male dominated Cyprus. A joint struggle is proposed here based on gender and class consciousness, female solidarity and the acknowledgement of inter-dependence. The stakes are different for each group of women but all connect to the desire which needs to be cultivated for an alternative world of 'real liberation' from patriarchal structures, racism, sexism, and capitalist exploitation. Of course, more research needs to be undertaken in order to become more informed about similarities and differences of the conditions of female domestic workers in divided Cyprus so that a better understanding may be gleaned of the struggles for social changes and what this might entail.

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