Women and the Media in Northern Cyprus: A Political Economy of Communication and Gender

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Abstract:

This paper highlights the gender inequality confronting women in Northern Cyprus and the role that the media play, perhaps unwittingly, in both the production of stereotypes that normalize inequality and, importantly, the absence of information that might challenge previously held views concerning the value of women in democratic society. It is argued that Turkish Cypriot women in general are often unaware of the extraordinary power of the media to legitimize power relations–specifically gender power relations – and to maintain the gender status quo. The article calls for media workers, scholars, and public intellectuals to highlight and critique the current role of media in normalizing unequal gender perceptions and to rethink the potential role that journalists and media institutions can play in opening spaces for alternative perspectives through the inclusion of more women's voices, women's stories and women's visions for a future gender-democratic society.

Keywords: Cypriot, Gender, Women, Democracy, Social Justice, Media, Communication, Journalist.

Özet:

Bu makale Kuzey Kıbrıs'ta kadınların karşılaştığı toplumsal cinsiyet eşitsizliği ve medyanın, bu eşitsizliği normalleştiren stereotiplerin yaratılmasındaki ve daha da önemlisi, kadınların demokratik toplumdaki değeri ile ilgili görüşleri sorgulayacak bilginin oluşmamasındaki rolüne dikkat çekmektedir. Bu çalışmada Kuzey Kıbrıslı kadınların medyanın, genelde güç ilişkilerini – özelde toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı güç ilişkilerini meşru göstermekte ve toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı statükoyu korumakta gösterdiği olağanüstü gücün farkında olmadıkları tartışılmaktadır. Bu makale, medya çalışanlarını, akademisyenleri ve aydınları toplumsal cinsiyet eşitsizliğinin normalleştirilmesinde medyanın bugünkü rolünü eleştirmeye ve gazeteciler ile medya kuruluşlarını, gelecekte toplumsal cinsiyeti içeren bir demokratik toplum kurmak için Kadınların seslerini, anlatılarını ve görüşlerini içerenalternatifler açmadaki potansiyel rolünü vurgulamaya davet etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kıbrıslı, Toplumsal Cinsiyet, Kadın, Demokrasi, Sosyal Adalet, Medya, İletişim, Gazeteci.

Drawing out a theoretical framework informed by critique emanating from the fields of critical political economy of communication and critical cultural studies, the argument presented here concerns the necessary conditions for the struggle for democratic society through the voices of women who speak directly to this issue and offer their own personal and political understanding of the lack of representation in the highest levels of political, cultural and economic life in Northern Cyprus. The central issue here is to participate in the construction of a form of praxis: a coming together of radical critique and political action in the re-formation of media policy, media institutions and media practices that encourage the building of a foundation upon which women's voices and women's struggles are taken seriously: Where women play a central and key role in the social, political and economic discourses. While I argue that the media play a decisive role in partially structuring the way we think about gender relations in society, I conclude from this that the media have the potential for participating in the transformation of society through a re-imagining of its fundamental responsibilities in democratic society. As Lull argues:

> Media technologies enter cultural settings in ways that extend the characteristic traditions, values, and styles that are already in place while at the same time they also challenge and transform the foundations of culture.[1]

While contemporary structures of media industries and their historical rootedness in patriarchal discourses and hierarchical relations of power tend to thwart attempts at transformation, it is nevertheless a central concern for critical communication studies to uncover the contradictions between the role a responsible media should play in a struggle toward more democratic society and their actual complicity in the production and reproduction of the status quo. Critical communication studies highlight the way in which the structures of media institutions and the production and interpretation of media knowledge helps shape our perceptions of the world. Feminist theory has similarly provided a sustained critique of gender disparities, specifically those of gendered role impositions, and gender representations of women within the historical framework of patriarchal institutions. As Schwoch (et. al.) explain:

> The work in feminist media theory has been concerned with the representation of gender roles... these representations are seen to play a central role in structuring social subjectivity, not only in the roles they depict but also through their particular modes of rhetoric.[2]

Feminist theory is not limited to unravelling the complex historical relationship between patriarchy and unjust gender representations. As Van Zoonen points out: "Along with gender, *power* is another key element of feminist thought" (emphasis in original).[3] In this present case, "power" can also be understood as the power over the telling of stories in Turkish Cypriot society – the structural, economic and political constraints that marginalize Women and thwart the possibility of their representing themselves and their own vision of a future society. Representations are not merely produced at the level of textual construction but are partially a reflection of the values and interests embedded in a particular mode of production – linked as it is to a political economy of production and circulation. The configuration of ownership and control of information technologies and institutions is a result of an historic battle over who gets to speak. Critical communication studies attempts to highlight the arbitrariness of control and emphasize that, under different conditions, it "could be otherwise."

> Critical communication scholarship is rooted in the assumption that social institutions and human relations are relations of history, power and struggle. As such, institutional and social relations tend to reflect the outcomes of historical struggles.[4]

Recognizing the dearth of research currently available concerning the relationship between the mass media and gender democracy in Northern Cyprus, this preliminary study sketches a picture of the perceptions of journalists, media workers, and others, in order to capture a glimpse of the current awareness of the role of media in setting gender agendas. Through interviews with women who are involved in areas that include politics, education, media, law, and business, a picture emerges that challenges the historical and global naturalization of gender disparities: disparities that Turkish Cypriot women have begun to

question amidst a struggle for equality that is essential for the long journey toward a truly democratic society.

The backdrop to this present study is the context in which the question of gender emerges. For 40 years the Turkish Cypriot community of Cyprus has been engaged in a political dialogue for the return of their partnership status as a co-partner with Greek Cypriots of the Cyprus Republic. Throughout this time, the Turkish Cypriot community has been marginalized, left unrecognized by the international community of states, and essentially made voiceless in the international arena. The issue is one of inclusion – the right to participate in the telling of the story of who we are, where we came from and where we are going: the right to participate in the writing of history and the future. This 40 year labor has been called the "national struggle" and it has been the central concern of the majority of Turkish Cypriots and their descendents as one traces a line from 1963 through to the results of the Referendum in April, 2004.

And yet there are important questions that have to be raised about a "national" struggle where over 50 percent of the nation is essentially absent from its history and where that 50 percent has virtually no voice in either historical or contemporary debates on what kind of "nation" is being struggled for and how the nation is to be imagined. What kind of "national" struggle excludes and silences half of its population? Moreover, what are the techniques of "nation" that can systematically isolate over half of its citizens from active participation at most higher levels of decision making without being held accountable – without it even appearing to be a problem that needs to be solved?

It is difficult to imagine a world that has not yet been given a voice and it is almost impossible to start building a new world out of the brick and mortar of the world that still exists – a world saturated in a logic of domination, competition, individualism, greed, endless desire for consumption of limited resources, and rooted in a singular vision of what counts as valuable and worthy of consideration.

How are we to challenge the common sense, taken-for-granted, apparently "natural" world that we live in? How can we begin to criticize the underlying and socially constructed undemocratic, hierarchical relations of institutional power when they seem to "go without saying"? How are we to reveal that the apparently "normal" structured gender relationships of power are actually rooted in history and represent a form of hegemonic control over the story that we tell ourselves about who we

are, what we desire, where we are going and how we are going to get there?

One possibility is to explore, through critique, the dominant ideology, institutions and interpretation of the world in which we currently live in order to challenge undemocratic and oppressive tendencies: Tendencies that thwart free expression of the human imagination, marginalize creative difference, silence the views of contrary voices, and attempt to dominate through political, economic, and ideological control, while presenting the social world as a world already complete and finished. Such a critique offers us the possibility of seeing the world as a social construct and the relationships in it as relative or "arbitrary" – as relationships that "might be otherwise." We need to ask questions about received knowledge: Who tells the social story and from which point of view? Whose voices are heard and whose voices are silenced or marginalized? In whose interests are the historical and contemporary stories about our identities? Are there other, competing stories, and how are they marginalized?

With regard to a Turkish Cypriot "national" struggle for equality with Greek Cypriots, Turkish Cypriot women stand in stark contrast to their male counterpart. This discrepancy offers an ideal opportunity to explore the ideological control over the role that women play in society and how it has been naturalized, normalized and routinized through a variety of institutionalized hegemonic practices – practices that have come to be taken-for-granted to such an extent that they are rarely if ever questioned. When questions are raised, it is often difficult to make one's way through the tightly knit set of socially constructed practices that situate women and women's knowledge as secondary to the dominant story of our time.

In order to consider the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves it is important to locate and address the dominant storytellers of our time. Powerful contemporary storytellers are to be found in information producing institutions like the media and education, and they are no less powerful a presence in the legal and political arena in the form of political parties and regulatory institutions. These institutions may either challenge or reproduce particular ways of knowing ourselves and each other; they may confront the dominant interpretations of our time and struggle to transform them or reinforce taken-for-granted hegemonic assumptions rooted in history and made routine through habituation and technique and

normalized through institutionalized relations and practices. Giroux has provided a sustained critique of the role that storytelling institutions play in partially shaping the way we come to understand the world:

> ...the insights served up by the [commercial media] to audiences sometimes exceeding millions at one viewing more often than not serve to mystify and further camouflage class, race, and gender antagonisms, and thereby hinder rather than help viewers to understand the conditions of their everyday existence.[5]

Locating these institutions is not difficult, although understanding the ways in which they contribute to the reproduction of arguably unequal gender relations within the political economy of everyday life requires a little thought. A systematic critique of media industries, for example, can locate ownership and control as one of the crucial factors in terms of what kind of information is produced and circulated, and how audiences are perceived of and engaged with. As McChesney has asked: "...who will control the technology and for what purpose?... Who will not control the new technology and what purposes will not be privileged?"[6] The underlying assumption here is that story tellers tell stories from particular points of view and with particular interests in mind. Lack of access to the means of story production institutions and technologies means a lack of competing stories circulating in the society. When ownership and control of storytelling institutions and technologies are primarily in the hands of men, it is less likely that a women's vision of the world will be seen or heard.

Currently, not one woman owns or controls a media outlet in Northern Cyprus – television, radio, nor newspaper. Van Zoonen has highlighted the point that the absence of women in upper management positions is relatively common: "Like most other employment sectors, the media workforce is also horizontally segregated. It is hard to find Women in senior management positions, even in women-dominated areas."[7] This speaks directly to the issue of participation not only in terms of access "to" information but participation in the decision-making processes that ultimately "produce" the information that circulates in society. As Kellner asks: "How can broadcasting serve the public interest in promoting democracy and creating a freer, more egalitarian, more participatory, and hence, more democratic society?"[8] Vigorously encouraging women to

take ownership and control of media channels that open up possibilities for the voices of new visions of society may be one step toward a media service that takes seriously its responsibility to all citizens – opening channels for the priorities of women in society. Giroux has touched on this when he claims:

> To speak of voice is to address the wider issue of how people either become agents in the process of making history or function as subjects under the weight of oppression and exploitation within the various linguistic and institutional boundaries that produce dominant and subordinate cultures in any given society.[9]

Media ownership and control are one area where the unequal distribution of power in Turkish Cypriot society is clearly visible. However, there are others. There are no women political party leaders in Northern Cyprus although the political sphere is a crucial arena in the promotion of democracy. Thus, it becomes crucial to understand the rationale behind the selection of party leaders who can represent the interests of constituencies. Education is another site of struggle over the stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves and the social world, making it another sphere that facilitates the production and circulation of ideas or ways of thinking, and yet none of the presidents of universities in Northern Cyprus is a woman.

In the three areas of media, politics, and education, women are "invisibly" absent from positions of ownership or control – relegated to lower-level positions where decision-making is firmly under the control of males. While gender distribution among the citizenry is about the same, there are no exceptions to male dominance in any of these three areas. Furthermore, when vital issues of the day are consistently represented by powerful male voices on behalf of other powerful males, perceptions of women as potentially equal partners in the political, economic and social spheres are scarce indeed.

It is important to point out here that Northern Cyprus is far from unique in the marginalization of women in political, economic and social life. The Annenberg Public Policy Center's most recent report from the University of Pennsylvania on the "Glass Ceiling" in Fortune 500 communication companies reveals that "the average percentage of

women in executive leadership positions of Fortune 500 communication companies" stands at 15%. The report goes on to explain the industry perception of why the glass ceiling persists: "Women are lacking the characteristics most needed to succeed and, consequently, were often judged to be less qualified than men."[10] Clearly women do not lack the characteristics most needed to succeed in corporate life although we might raise questions concerning the value of characteristics that are necessary for "corporate success" generally.

Women in Northern Cyprus lack the necessary conditions for equal participation in the construction of society – from ownership and control of major political and informational institutions to setting the agenda for the production and distribution of knowledge in society. The "official" national struggle is the patriarchal struggle waged by highly visible and powerful men. Just a cursory glance through the history of what had been called the "Cyprus Problem" reveals the invisibility of women from the political arena: Denktas, Clerides, Papadopolos, Makarios, Simities, Erdogan, Gul, Eroglu, Talat, Ecevit, Annan, Blair, Bush, and the names of countless other males that come tripping from the tongue highlight the "male centered" national struggle that is the "Cyprus Problem." One question that might be asked is this: Is there another "national struggle" that could be couched in terms of gender? Is it possible that the absence of representation of over fifty percent of the population constitutes a crisis for democracy?

With regard to the Cyprus Problem, women are notably absent from participation in any area of decision-making, negotiation, cooperation or compromise – relegated to positions within low-level visibility NGO's, women's organizations and bi-communal activities. While these are extremely important contributions to dialogue and peace, they receive scant attention in the press or acknowledgement in the mainstream. When it comes to active political control over agendas, women are almost invisible as can be seen from the last general elections where out of 49 women candidates across the political spectrum, only three were elected as representatives – one for the Republican Turkish Party (CTP), one for Democrat Party (DP) and one for National Unity Party (UBP). The fourth party, the Leftist Peace and Democracy Movement (BDH)/Communal Liberation Party (TKP) elected no women members as representatives despite the fact that they offered their Party members fourteen women candidates: the largest number of women candidates of any political

party. Of course, this suggests that women and men failed to vote in sufficient numbers to elect a representative number of women to the Turkish Cypriot parliament.

How do Turkish Cypriot Women interpret this dynamic reproudction of male control over informational, educational and political institutional life?

Fatma Ekenoğlu, a member of parliament for CTP and the current Speaker of the House, theorizes that the reason that competent women are relatively invisible in political life is because their husbands have taken the initiative and that Turkish Cypriot society does not expect both spouses to be visible in the political arena: "The number of effective and competent women in CTP is higher compared to the society, but since they are together with their spouses in the same [social] environment and since their spouses are already in the foreground, the society has difficulty in accepting it." Ekenoğlu suggests that the conservatism in the society is echoed to some degree in the political party's response to social pressures: "This happened inside our party which we define as a 'progressive socialist party'. It wasn't accepted by the society. "Ekenoğlu has aspirations for seeing a woman prime-minister or woman president in Northern Cyprus but reflects: "As we all know, women don't vote for women candidates... unfortunately they voted for men and elected men candidates."[11]

At issue here is the way in which images of women are produced and reproduced via the stories we tell ourselves about the "acceptable" position of women in society – most especially as those stories are uncritically reproduced by our daily media institutions. While women are regularly evaluated in terms of their marital status, they nevertheless play an essential role as workers within the labor force and as citizens within the framework of democratic society. These roles often conflict and the potential for women to express their active agency as participants in the shaping of both economy and politics is often undervalued. A crucial area of concern here is that Turkish Cypriot Women often fail to link their immediate experiences with the overarching structural constraints of capitalism and patriarchy as they are played out in everyday life. Without such a frame of reference, critique tends to become personalized and the structural inequalities in women's lives go unrecognized. However, as Ellen Riordan, argues: "Women... need to understand their lives as economic and shaped by both capitalism and patriarchy."[12]

There are regressive pressures that arise from within community that are then reproduced in the content of media knowledge that tend to neglect or downplay the potentially active role that women might play within the political economy, and relegate woman instead to the background of social life. The "common sense" view of the role of women in society often contradicts the necessary conditions within which women can effectively participate in the shaping of the world: If women are "supposed" to be at home, "looking after their men", then how can they be "out there" participating actively and effectively in political life? As Lisa McLaughlin suggests:

> The problem could be better understood as one of mobility; traditionally, women have been consigned to the intimate sphere of the home and family, while men have been allowed more mobility between spheres of politics, economics, civil society, and the intimate sphere. In this configuration, while men have access to all spheres, the sole sphere established as the appropriate place for women is one in which social discourses are depoliticized, where matters related to women's lives are conventionally off-limits as topics of public discussion and areas of political intervention.[13]

This problem arises not only from the patriarchal structure of the society but also from the absence of serious and systematic media challenges to the status quo and to the stereotypical attitudes toward gender relationships in society.

Journalist Faize Özdemirciler, writing for *Afrika* newspaper in October 2003 suggested that the position of women in society is partly the fault of women themselves: "If there's a gender problem, it's not a problem that constitutions or laws will completely solve. Women are also at fault; they are also making mistakes themselves because Cypriot women have accepted the facts. They have passive souls.... When we look at the women generally, this is how it is.... Her man can act in the political sphere, and she's behind him preparing and organizing things for him. She's not stating her opinion, she's accepting her condition."[14]

Özdemirciler's views concerning the possibilities inherent in a more representative body of women in political life is far from encouraging as she perceives a need for the 're-education' of women to understand their

real conditions before they act. Özdemirciler poses important questions concerning the way women approach significant personal, social, political and economic problems: "Why are we approaching our own problems like men? Why can't we approach them like Women? You see in the parliament? What would happen if there were more Women? Nothing would change because they would be like men when they go there because they know that they have to be like men to survive, and that's what they're doing."

Two issues are at stake for Özdemirciler: first, an increase in the number of women in the Turkish Cypriot parliament would not bring about radical change or improve democratic representation for women's ideas while the meaning of politics and the patriarcal ways in which we understand political life remains unchallenged. Özdemirciler's argument parallels the point made by Jane Arthurs in the context of women's entry into the media workforce as she is quoted by Byerly and Ross in answer to their question of whether recruiting more women into the media is a satisfactory solution. Arthurs' unoquivical answer is "More women in the [televisual] industry is not enough: there need to be more Women with a politicized understanding of the ways in which Women's subordination is currently reproduced and with the will to change it."[15]

Özdemirciler's second point is that Turkish Cypriot women must begin to question whose system of values have permeated cultural, social and political economic life in Northern Cyprus: where do these values come from? For women to be successful within patriarchal structures is it necessary to adapt to a world not of their making? To adopt a system of values, conditions and constraints that do not arise from their own needs? Is it enough to participate in a corporate world imagined without their participation? Women should not only have the opportunity to re-imagine the world in order to re-make it according to their own needs, desires, hopes and dreams but also to share those visions through access to the means of producing and circulating information. In terms of the possibility of democracy, is it enough to ratify the decisions – political, economic and social – that have been structured without their participation or contribution?

However, Özdemirciler was not convinced that 'gender' was necessarily the deciding factor when it came to thinking about challenging patriarchal relations of power in society. Throughout our discussion the issue of "power" seemed more pronounced than that of

specific genders: "Whether women are 'becoming like men' or whether we should call it something else, I don't know. But power shapes women and men to itself. Power demands something of you; if you become like that, you're there. If not, you're not there. It doesn't matter much if you're a man or a woman at that point."

Özdemirciler's argument betrays her own perception that women are actually treated in a fundamentally different way than men in society and so on issues of power she finds herself unable to make the necessary connections between patriarchal ideology and power. This in turn forestalls the realization of possible correctives to questions concerning whose vision of the world dominates and how women might challenge that vision and provide alternatives.

Women journalists hold positions within culture industries that are essentially sites of struggle over the stories that are shared by members of community, and the stories that they tell have a potentially radical influence on our shared consciousness about ourselves. As Michael Billig points out in another context: "Newspapers operate directly, through their messages [and] stereotypes..."[16] When newspapers are primarily filled with stories about important men making important male decisions about important male problems, that's the kind of world we most often respond to in our daily lives. What chance do women journalists have to alter our perception of what counts as important while still working within male dominated and controlled media institutions – endlessly bringing to the front burner the important male questions of the day?

Sevgül Uludağ is a Turkish Cypriot journalist and a woman activist currently working for *Yenidüzen* newspaper in Lefkoşa and she speaks directly to issues like these: "My whole life I have stood for change: to change the gender roles, to change the militaristic culture that we have, to make people aware that everything is learned or taught by society... so if we've learned these roles we can actually change them... so I tried to bring in human portraits from other parts of the world for people to read and to have an impact on people."[17] Uludağ's commitment to changes in perceived gender roles has gone beyond her work as a journalist and into the society at large where she participated in the founding of the "Woman's Movement for Peace and a Federal Solution" in 1986 and earlier still as a founder of the Peace Committee in 1982. In 1991 with other journalist friends she set up a Woman's Research Center which

partially led to the creation of the "Woman's Platform" consisting of a number of Woman NGO's between 1995 and 2000.

Uludağ described the need for women to enter the political sphere:

> Not like Margaret Thatcher! We want women's politics! We want change! Psychologically it helps if any woman is elected, but what's the result? So after four women were elected [in the previous elections] we went to them and reminded them of what they had to do for women but you know, they did nothing because they were following party lines and they were not connected to the woman's movement.[18]

The project "Woman's Platform" described by Sevgül Uludağ points toward the necessity of challenging and changing privileged stories about women's place in society. One way the Women's Platform tried to resist the dominant decision-making mode of the broader society was to work toward consensus – a time consuming process that requires great empathy, understanding and good will. The story ends abruptly, according to Uludağ as financial constraints on the woman's NGO and involvement of outside political interests in the potential influence of the Woman's Platform brought the project to an end in 2000. Nevertheless, the project might suggest ways in which women can work to produce and share new ways of being together into the dominant society – especially through increased cooperation and concern across or beyond specific political party lines.

In an another interview with Sevgül Uludağ she highlighted what she perceives as a struggle toward a democratic society: "We're not after power in the sense of the word, we are after change. So we are not after power, we are after changing relationships, changing the way people think, changing their attitudes toward life. I have experience working with women only and because of the way they are educated in society, because of their gender roles, women tend to work with a minority mentality. This means you expect the majority to do things for you. There's jealousy, there's gossip, and there isn't a normal relationship. Therefore, it is more difficult to work [toward change] only with women.[19]

Uludağ was not suggesting that only women have 'abnormal relationships of power' with each other. Rather, she was speaking to the

root problems of contemporary patriarchal society: "We don't have normal relationships because society is structured in a way to control and when we look at what happens, the woman suffers at home but also the woman can crush the children... or she has power over older people.... I've seen this.... When a child goes to school the teacher or headmaster has control.... When he goes to the army, it's the commander. So [society is filled with] hierarchical relationships. There's always violence. We're not after violence, we want to do away with violence.

Violence here is hierarchical in its expression and tends to control and limit rather than encourage creativity and risk. Uludağ doesn't see much hope for real change in society merely through a change in managers of industries. As she comments on the possibility of women taking over managerial roles in newspapers: "[The newspaper] wouldn't change much because the ownership would have to change." The issue here is not only the male-centric nature of ownership and control of media industries but also the way in which ownership of these industries is financially supported and locked into the rational of market forces. As the prominent feminist political economist Eileen Meehan has shown,

> ...media now earn most of their revenues from advertisers; advertisers' willingness to pay more for young male consumers has the effect of defining that demographic category as the audience. Because advertisers pay less for women, female consumers are a niche audience... A feminist political economy [of communication] illuminates this irrationality and in doing so problematizes any claim that [the media] are truly mass media from an industrial perspective.[20]

Unfortunately, there have been few studies conducted as yet on the relationship between media gender representations in the Turkish Cypriot media and the ways in which gender is perceived and understood within the Turkish Cypriot community. In the most recent study on gender equality in Northern Cyprus, conducted in 2004 by the "Turkish Cypriot Association of University Women," only one brief reference to media's role is made: "Thus, to build a gender aware country, the education and the positive influence of media are needed."[21] In another excellent and timely study by Güven-Lisaniler, an important argument is framed as a call for increased sensitivity and awareness in the construction of

knowledge in educational institutions in relation to the "gendered" stories that children are told in the course of their education.[22] However, the author makes no connection between school knowledge and the ways in which knowledge is most often framed within the mass media – a source to which both students and teachers turn for their understanding of the world. This may be one of the current "blind spots" with regard to the production and reproduction of unequal gender relations in Turkish Cypriot society today and an area for increased awareness and research.

Whether it is a political party controlling the production and circulation of information or a corporate institution, the agenda set for the ideological direction a newspaper or television station takes is difficult to change. One example of this was CTP's advertising campaign for the December 2003 elections where a full-page advertisement in Yenidüzen depicted a semi-circle of men standing while a small group of women candidates sat inside the semi-circle on chairs: women seated and men standing which raises the question: who is ready for action?

Gülşen Bozkurt, one time BDH Health Minister but not re-elected for office in the 2003 elections, spoke to the need for an education system that challenges the way we currently think about the voices and capacity of women. BDH/TKP put forward 14 potential women candidates and not one was elected by party members. Bozkurt explained: "Yes, because our thinking has still not changed. Women may not trust women. If women voted for a woman, she would certainly have been elected." One of the major cultural barriers to women's active participation in political life, according to Bozkurt, is the perceived roles that women should or should not play out in society: The solution to this situation from Gülşen Bozkurt's point of view echoes earlier suggestions: "We have to take a lot of time to educate the women about their rights, to change their thinking, this is the problem."[23]

Gülden Plumer, director of the Turkish Cypriot Association of University Women, spoke both to the issue of the marginalization of women in political life and to the way in which women exclude themselves from participation in decision-making processes: "Women are not ready. It is a big responsibility. It is part of our culture that women have to take care of the house and children and they have to work – or they take responsibility of running for office. To become a candidate means devoting time to the project and men are willing because they think it is a way to get a job and earn money. But women take this very

seriously. We think if you become a part of a political party you have to SERVE."[24] Plumer's argument speaks to the heart of what politics is – a hierarchical, patriarchal struggle for power or a form of service to a community of fellow human beings? A system that owes its construction, its very foundation to a discourse that primarily favored men and systematically excluded women is probably hostile to the needs and demands of women and obviously cannot take into account the voices of those who were silenced during its development. The choices for women are generally difficult choices to make: find a way to compete and struggle within a vision of politics, media and education that tends to reflect male, patriarchal values or try to imagine another way that coincides with the values and demands of women. Even those women elected to positions of relative power within the political parties this year are relegated to work on the patriarchal Cyprus Problem and they will rarely get an opportunity to offer any effort to the National Gender Struggle. Most of the women contacted throughout this project have argued that until the "Cyprus Problem" is solved, women's problems will have to wait. Some fail to see the difference between the historical patriarchal struggle for control and a struggle of women for the right to participate in deciding what the Cyprus Problem really is, how it should be understood and what needs to be done to resolve it. Women basically take up positions in a political arena where decisions of this kind have long since been made by males. Their task is merely to take up the issues as previously defined and be accountable to their male party leaders.

Plumer sees the marginalization of women in Turkish Cypriot society as a reflection of a much larger, indeed global, marginalization of women: "You know why [women and democracy] is not taken seriously? Because this is not only a problem on this island – this is a worldwide problem. This is why the issue doesn't shine in our country – because nobody really believes it can change. This is the way the world is running."

The idea of a world that is "running" in a particular way runs the risk of supplanting the real expression of patriarchal power with something like a "machine" that simply moves on its own. At a recent conference at Eastern Mediterranean University (EMU), a seminar looking at the task of preparing students for their future in the 21st century had this caption: "It has now become almost a truism that we will only survive and prosper in the 21st century if we are able to embrace rather than resist change:

Easier said than done." The caption hides the most important questions: Who is producing the change that we ought to embrace? Why shouldn't we challenge and resist it? Whose voices were included in the process of imagining it? Whose voices have been excluded and pushed to the margins? Whose interests will ultimately be served if women merely "embrace" a future that they had no part in imagining?

It is essential that women have a central role not only in making "a vision" of the future a reality, but in actually envisioning that future themselves. Understanding the role that the media currently play in shaping our perceptions of the world is also essential and in order to understand the role that the media play in partially arranging our perceptions of reality, they have to be situated in their wider contexts of patriarchy and power.

The Turkish Cypriot artist and author Özden Selenge spoke to the need for a re-education of men and women in Turkish Cypriot society in order to bring about a radical transformation in gender relations and thus promote a more democratic society:

> Our education system should change to begin with. It's an old, stereotypical system where they tell you to join the dots as he had said.[25] This education system should end. With all my heart, I want an education system which is freer, more humane, more productive, and which prepares children for their future.

Selenge explained her view of the future where specifically vertical relationships of power are eliminated – where a horizontal organization places all people at each others' service:

> We have been imitating men... even in women organizations. In all women organizations the biggest fight has been who is going to make herself listened to more or whose going to be obeyed by others.... These are all going to be solved...with everyone being equal or if there has to be a president [of an organization], people will take turns or let there be no hierarchy.[26]

The December 2003 election results point, among other things, toward the dilemma that women face in their efforts toward a gender representative politics. Existing structures are 'unfriendly' toward women

candidates for the most part because what 'counts' as politics is already framed within a patriarchal discourse that has, historically, excluded the voices of women. A truly "gender equality politics" would be fundamentally different from what we have today. This is not to say that contemporary politics can be transformed merely through the inclusion of women within the already existing political sphere. When we ask "What would a democratic gender politics look like?" we are really trying to imagine a new world – a world where the expressed hopes and aspirations of women are taken seriously and are fundamental in the actual shaping of the grounds upon which decision-making ultimately takes place.

The outcome of these interviews implies some awareness of the deeply rooted patriarchal structures in Turkish Cypriot society and the implications of these structures for the status of Women across political, economic and cultural life in North Cyprus. Women interviewees expressed awareness of the necessity for change or at the very least, for a questioning of the existing gender relations in society. However, the basic awareness of inequalities as expressed by participants in this study has not translated into a sophisticated critique of the problem nor has it given rise to a specific prescription for transformation and change. For example, there was little if any awareness of the crucial role that media play both in perpetuating stereotypes of gender across genres and in the structures of ownership and control of media industries. None of the women interviewees expressed an awareness of the role that media could play in giving importance to gender politics as an essential component in the promotion of alternative ways of thinking about political life. Where women and women's interests are under-represented in the media it is less likely that stories legitimizing the world views of women will circulate within the larger society. As Graham Murdock and Peter Golding have recently observed, in relation to the increased importance of media in political life:

> If we define citizenship as the 'right to participate fully in social life... and to help formulate the forms it might take in the future... those without access to the technology will be shut out of opportunities to practice their full citizenship.[27]

While Murdock and Golding's point may be premature in the context of Turkish Cypriot gender politics, in that women have displayed

a lack of awareness of the power of media in the legitimization of power relations, it nevertheless highlights the necessity for women to claim the right of access to technology and to the telling of their own stories as one avenue to full participation in the struggle for a truly democratic society. Such a claim will only be possible as that currently marginalized 50% of the Turkish Cypriot society becomes aware of their current condition and begins to question their marginalized status in the making of their own history.

The picture emerging from this study is both grim and hopeful. Hopeful, because there are signs of awareness of gender inequalities among some Turkish Cypriot women who are attempting to increase and harness that awareness in the development of a gender platform. Yet at the same time it is grim in as much as Turkish Cypriot women in general are often unaware of the extraordinary power of the media to legitimize power relations – specifically gender power relations – in society and to maintain the gender status quo. Moreover, the deeply rooted patriarchal structures that have historically shaped Turkish Cypriot institutions and social practices make challenges to the distribution of gender power, and to ways of thinking about and responding to gender issues, problematic. A cursery glance at the current state of gender relations in Turkish Cypriot society suggests that little distance has been covered in shifting perceptions of gender. What has been achieved appears superficial or merely cosmetic if one takes as a measure indicators like the number of women elected to represent the citizenry during the last elections: (only two women were elected to parliament in the last general elections) or the number of women in controlling positions in media industries.

The development of gender awareness and an understanding of the role of the media in shaping gender perceptions is essential in any struggle for gender equality. A concerted effort is needed on the part of women scholars, intellectuals and other knowledge workers to bring to light both the current role of media in normalizing and perpetuating unequal gender relations and the potential role that media could play in hightening awareness of these gender inequalities while opening up a space for the inclusion of more women's voices, their stories and their visions for a democratic society.

Endnotes

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[14] Interview with Faize Özdemirciler at *Afrika* on October 24, 2003.

[15] C. M. Byerly & K. Ross, *Women and Media: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford, 2006), 91.

[16] M. Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London, 2004), 124.

[17] Interview with Sevgül Uludağ at Yeni Düzen on November 5, 2003.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Interview with Sevgül Uludağ at Yeni Düzen on November 12, 2003.

[20] E. Meehan, "Introducing the Issues: An Interview with Eileen Meehan," *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 23 (4) (Oct. 1999), 322.

[21] F. Bhatti, *Women in Working Life in North Cyprus* (Nicosia, 2004), 44.

[22] F. Güven-Lisaniler, *Assessing the Status of Women: A Step Toward Equality: Gender Equality in Employment and Education in North Cyprus* (Famagusta, 2003), 117.

[23] Interview with Gülşen Bozkurt of TKP in Lefkosa on December 19, 2003 in Lefkosa

[24] Interview with Gülden Plumer, Director of Turkish Cypriot Association of University Women in Lefkosa on December 24, 2003

[25] The interviewer had asked whether women were actually free to participate as unique individuals in society or whether their roles were reduced to playing out a role that had been assigned to them simply "joining the dots" together rather than painting their own pictures.

[26] Interview with Özden Selenge at her home in Lefkosa in March, 2004

[27] G. Murdock & P. Golding, "Dismantling the Digital Divide: Rethinking the Dynamics of Participation and Exclusion," in Calabrese and Sparks, *Political Economy of Culture*, 244.