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## Women's Constructions of Women: On Entering the Front Door

By Myria Vassiliadou<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Despite the vast volume of scholarly work on Mediterranean and the Near East the region, issues of marginalisation, discrimination, racism, and ethnic-gender groups as well as the implications of these within the context of various wider forces and structures are only lately receiving any attention at all and this paper is part of an effort to explore and expose them. The aim of this paper is to explore this otherwise forgotten area through the example of Cypriot women and their interpretations of internal 'Others' in Cyprus. It is thus an attempt to analyze the discourses and images adopted by women in Cyprus surrounding 'Otherhood'. Ultimately, the paper represents an effort to use ethnographic fieldwork and empirical data in order to explore and raise questions about women's experiences and attitudes in Cyprus, since the androcentric cosmology common to Mediterranean societies has been largely ignored.

*Key words:* Constructions of Women, Otherhood, Cyprus

### Why The Front Door? Introducing the 'Structure'

The Mediterranean and the Near East have traditionally been the focus of much anthropological research and more recently the attention of social scientists, most notably economists, and political scientists. Despite the vast volume of scholarly work on the region, issues of marginalisation, discrimination, racism, and ethnic-gender groups as well as the implications of these *within* the context of various wider forces and structures are only lately receiving any attention at all. The following analysis is part of an effort to explore and expose them through the example of Cypriot women and their interpretations of internal 'Others' in Cyprus. It provides an analysis of the multiple discourses and images adopted by women in Cyprus surrounding 'Otherness' and raises questions which have been ignored to present day in part due to the 'phallonaesthetic' vision and the androcentric cosmology common to Mediterranean societies (Bourdieu, 2001, p6).

In order to discuss Cypriot women's attitudes, beliefs, and opinions on issues of 'Otherhood', one has to enter their homes, into the so-called 'private' sphere. Entering 'the Front Door', as the title of this chapter states, is an act of particular importance in the case of Cyprus. The 'house', like the patriarchal, capitalist state, is a structure of oppression and domination. It is highly symbolic as the "house is a place of cleanliness and purity as opposed to the street which is dirty ... The street is also a place of sexual impurity ... (and) a euphemism for adultery, as when it is said that a woman deceives her husband 'in the street'." (Dubisch, 1983, p197-8). The concept of cleanliness within the home used to be very dominant in both urban and rural settings, although it is gradually shifting and reconstructing its previous symbolic significance in urban settings (partly due to women's entry into the labor force). A clean woman (*kathari yinaka*, implying a woman who keeps the house clean) and a clean house are important praises which indicate to sexual purity. They are socially implied as mutually constitutive,

interdependent symbolic terms, where one cannot exist without the other: a woman who is occupied with cleaning the house, is not occupied with 'other things', her mind is not 'elsewhere' (*o nous tis enen allou*). Rather, her interest lies within the home and the family. Women's commitment to household chores and responsibilities is made explicitly obvious in a high standard of cleanliness and order, "often at the expense of convenience." (Rushton, 1983, p59). A woman who neglects her house chores, in either a rural or an urban community will be, in the best case scenario<sup>2</sup>, subject to gossip by both women and men as this demonstrates her lack of commitment to the family and the home. The state of a Cypriot woman's house reflects her sexual morality, so both the woman and the man have a vested interest in the house being kept clean (Dubisch, 1986, p.200).

It has been argued that the house represents the center of the family in particular and the society in general. It represents sanctuary as opposed to the competitive and hostile outside world (Dubisch, 1986, p199). Therefore, if the house is neglected, the ability to deal with this world is weakened this being the responsibility of women.<sup>3</sup> The house and the street, similar to the 'private' and the 'public' are interrelated and work in conjunction with one another, reflecting the dominant discourses on sexuality and morality. One cannot be studied and analyzed separately from the other. Although urban middle class women might be argued to be less affected by these standards of moral critique, due to their more<sup>4</sup> career-oriented, 'public-space' lives, they are certainly not excluded from the symbolic ideas and moral evaluations attached to the home, 'proper' behavior, and femininity; rather, different facades for the *same* power discourses are constructed in order for them to be included. As the paper aims to demonstrate below, prostitutes, homosexuals, and domestic workers from Sri Lanka and the Philippines directly relate to, affect, and are affected by these symbolic capital and intentional representations.

Clearly, there are many 'others' in Cypriot society; I intentionally choose to concentrate on these three as first, they were the ones mostly referred to by the women in my research, second, have acquired relatively widespread public interest in recent years predominantly due to dominant European Union accession discourses, and third, they all relate to issues of sexuality and 'morality' –issues which necessitate entering the 'front door'.

### **Who is Behind the Front Door? Methods of Entering**

The paper is the result of an exploratory study. Using an inductive approach, the empirical findings rest on my study of urban, middle-class women through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and participant observation in three non-governmental groups which constituted of women. All the women, aged nineteen to forty-five, lived in both sides of the divided capital of Cyprus, Nicosia. More specifically, twenty-one of them were Greek Cypriot, two were Turkish Cypriot, one was Armenian, and one was a Maronite, thus reflecting (not proportionally) the major communities on the island. About half were involved in voluntary work or associations and groups that deal with 'women's and family issues'. The rest did not express a particular interest in women's issues. My fieldwork and subsequent analysis are based on my intensive personal experience as a female participant in this line of activities, and my predicament as the 'native' feminist researcher<sup>5</sup>. They thus represent a challenge in aiming to describe, analyze and explore

the data I have gathered as both an insider and an outsider at the same time. The biggest difficulty rises in trying to discuss the manifest and the latent, and in clarifying who, the women in my sample, speak for, as we share a lot of common social characteristics. I am pointing to a conscious recognition that this can and does affect my 'findings' in this study (Stanley and Wise, 1983, p228). If part of this study is argued by some to be a research of myself, then by acknowledging explicitly my 'subject position,' I also demonstrate a 'strong objectivity.' (Charles, 1996, p30). If, further, coming to conclusions is treated as a social process, it can be demonstrated that interpretation is a political and unstable process between the lives of the researchers and those of the researched. "Interpretation needs somehow to unite a passion for 'truth' with explicit rules of research method that can make some conclusions stronger than others." (Holland and Ramazanoglou, 1994, p127).

As most studies concerning Cyprus tend to concentrate on rural communities and urbanization, people in cities, and especially women, have been totally neglected as 'subjects for research' (although the European Union accession efforts has led to a very recent, less than three-year-old interest in the subject of 'women' as an area of study and social engineering) (see Vassiliadou, 2001). However, the social anthropological fascination with 'studying the natives' has left little or no information on half of the population in Cyprus, especially the lives of middle-class women in urban settings.<sup>6</sup> My initial question was whether the women mentioned above were regarded as somewhat 'privileged' by society in general (due to their class, education, financial situation, place of residency, and opportunities) and other women in particular, would also be less restricted by patriarchy (in terms of class, for example), and more likely to express 'tolerant' attitudes. However, no information existed on the lives, attitudes, and experiences of these women, and my aim became to find out who they were, what they thought, and eventually, what they did.

My current research indicates that these women find themselves caught between their attitudes and practices. Words are deeds, Wiitngetein argues, and attitudes can be argued to themselves represent practices; I will not concentrate on this debate in this paper, but rather, for the purpose of discussion, I will hereby use attitudes to indicate that this is what women think, and practices to problematically indicate what women 'do', that is, how they behave. The conflicts and contradictions they face are part of their everyday realities; however, women deal with these in different ways. Some experience them unproblematically, others find them to be sources of tension and struggle, and yet others accept them despite their convictions because they feel there is not much they can do about it. Nevertheless, all of these women adopt techniques and coping-mechanisms, which allow them to adjust to the demanding environment they live in. In the process of doing so, they tend to create 'others' amongst women whom they exclude from the in-groups they form. An exploration of stereotypes about internal 'others' (such as homosexuals, domestic workers, Eastern European prostitutes) will thus be offered. In my broader study, I also examine women's attitudes towards Greek/Turkish Cypriot women (the major ethnic communities in Cyprus), but since this falls under a different area of analysis, and relates to nationalisms and ethnic identities, these 'external' others (women they do not 'live' with) will not be part of the focus in this paper (Vassiliadou, 2001).

It is important to point out here that although feminism is a general theory of the oppression of women by men, it is a highly contradictory one. Although contemporary feminists in different parts of the world strongly disagree on the uniformity of women's oppression, feminism itself cannot exist without some element of universality (see Ramazanoglou, 1989, p22). Thus, questions of 'Otherness' have to be dealt with caution. It has been pointed out, for example, that there are risks associated with the 'cultural relativism' of feminists uncritically supporting practices for women in other societies that they would not support in their own. Risks are also associated with feminists' efforts to deal with 'Otherness' and distancing themselves from women's movements in various other parts of the world (Maynard, 1996, p19). I am not arguing in this paper that the experiences of urban-middle class women in Cyprus are more or less 'serious' than the experiences of the 'other' women they create. They are all part of patriarchal regimes and occupy different spaces within it, with less or more choices at a time. I am, nevertheless, arguing that their experiences, similarly to the experiences of numerous of other women throughout the world, have been less heard and understood, and that in order for women's oppression to be over, it needs to be voiced, understood, and explained in as many of its contexts as possible. I thus accept throughout the paper that gender is mutually constitutive to ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and age and the underestimation of their interaction in society is an incomplete process.

### **What was Behind the Door? Analyzing Cypriot Women's Narratives**

One of the ways in which women in my sample were able to create spaces for themselves was through the construction of 'others' amongst women whom they excluded from the in-groups they formed. The question then does not necessarily lie within who the 'other' becomes –the other can be anyone over whom women have power upon- but rather how these women acquire a sense of identity through the creation of this 'other: who they 'oppose to', compare themselves to in order to create a sense of self or group identity. These women's narratives will be used below to best illustrate this.

### **The Threat of the Dirty House**

Since many urban middle-class women in Cyprus are in full-time, paid employment, their 'double-shift' can be relieved with the employment of domestic workers. Dilemmas are posed in these women's lives since they need to work in order both to contribute to the household income (and to be 'modern' and 'Western'), whereas at the same time the family needs to be looked after (by women) and the house to be kept clean. There is a rapidly growing tendency for families or couples to employ domestic workers from the Philippines and Sri Lanka to live in the house and either be responsible for housework, or look after their children and/or the elderly (on occasions, these women are also responsible for cleaning shops, restaurants, barns. Although employed for one or the other, most often than not, they do both). The employment of domestic workers lies in the necessity to preserve the patriarchal regime, unquestionably release pressure from the state's lack of a sufficient welfare system which will support women's employment, and ultimately encourage the further shift into the capitalist economy.<sup>7</sup>

One of my interviewees had been employing a woman from the Philippines for three years when she explained: "I don't like it that she is around the house all the time but at the same time it is a big relief to be able to do what I like without having to worry

about leaving the kids with a baby-sitter or alone.”<sup>8</sup> In two other cases, the parents of interviewees employed Sri Lankan women who were ‘given’ to their daughters on a weekly basis to help them with domestic chores without additional payment, and often on top of their workload. The mother-in-law of an interviewee, Sappho, employed a woman from the Philippines who also cleaned the latter’s house twice week. This interviewee’s advice to her mother-in-law was not to let “Nina think that she can do whatever she pleases. If she mixes with all these other maids, she is going to start wanting more and asking for things. She should know her place. She is lucky to have this job, most women in her country become prostitutes to survive.”<sup>9</sup> Sappho was referring to another worker, a friend of Nina’s who openly complained that she was made by her employer to work all day and on occasions not allowed to leave the house on Sundays as indicated in her contract.<sup>10</sup>

It appears that a number of ‘privileged’ women have their needs “met through services provided by subordinate, servile, or enslaved women... Women’s successes in achieving educational and occupational parity with men have enabled a growing minority of successful women to buy cheap domestic services from more disadvantaged women.” (Ramaazanoglou, 1989, p107). Most women in my study accepted this situation with domestic assistants and their behavior toward those women supported it. Although most of them argued that women are oppressed by men in Cyprus and that they have to suffer because of it their practices were once more an indication of the contradictions these women encountered. *Domestic assistants were not included in their definitions of the ‘women’ category.* These domestic workers often have ‘bad’ reputation in their countries because they go abroad to work, they ‘leave’ their families and children, and are considered to be of dubious sexual morality and decency. They are thus being marginalized by being women; by being poor; because of their low-paid, low-prestige work; and by their employers -men and women, in complex, multi-leveled, direct, and indirect ways.

One fifth of my interviewees expressed their disapproval of the abuse of these women both on a social and a personal level. These women were involved in voluntary work, considered themselves feminists, and refused to employ these domestic workers. By refusing to employ them these women tried to show their contempt about the way domestic assistants are manipulated, but at the same time denied these women the opportunity to work for more money than they would be able to earn in their own countries. Evidence from my broader study supports that women who identify themselves with feminism (irrespective of their individual definitions of the term) in urban Cyprus are more aware of gender as well as class and ethnic divisions within their society than non-feminist or anti-feminist women are. In line with the current literature, awareness of one type of oppression increases awareness of other types of oppression. Some women’s consciousness and experience of actually ‘being the other’ seem to lead to their acceptance of members of groups in society who are themselves ‘others’.

### **The Threat to the Sexual Morality of the ‘House’ -Homosexuality**

All the feminist women in the sample were further more tolerant of issues concerning homosexuality and sexual orientation and did not consider homosexuality as “negative behavior in any way”. The same could not be argued for the rest of the women in the study. Although they explained said that they accepted homosexuals, they did not

“particularly want to have anything to do with them. Let them do what they want to do, but I don’t have to be exposed to it.”<sup>11</sup> These findings could be compared to the Cypriot Social Attitudes Survey. Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the decriminalization of homosexuality; 41 percent said that homosexuality ought to be decriminalized whereas 59 percent disagreed. Women showed lower levels of tolerance towards ‘deviant behavior’: 66 percent of the women as opposed to 51 percent of the men disagreed with the decriminalization of homosexuality. If these numbers are compared with 1994, 71 percent of the people disagreed with the decriminalization, in 1995, the percentage was 61 percent, and by 1997, it was down to 59 percent. Such findings on attitudes concerning homosexuality contrast with findings in other countries like the United States. For example, American women were found to be more accepting of homosexuality and to have a greater tendency to regard the basis for sexual orientation as somewhat social rather than natural (Kane and Schippers, 1996, p663).

The rapid and sharp social changes taking place in Cyprus are clearly reflected in people’s attitudes. Recently, a ‘new’ dilemma arose within the ‘authorities’ and the state and consequently within society in general. After a gay man took the State to the European Court of Justice, the law concerning homosexuality was expected to change, since the Cypriot government has been trying to facilitate membership with the European Union. In a heated debate in which the media and eventually the people were involved the Cyprus Weekly (1997, p7) explained, that “The House of Representatives will decide after Easter what its stance will be on decriminalizing homosexuality. At the moment, Cyprus is failing to conform with a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights to make homosexuality legal.” Most of the House Members were in favor of accepting the ruling to decriminalize homosexuality but the Orthodox Church took a vocal, strongly opposing stance on the matter, considering homosexuality a sin. It is important here to point out that according to the law, homosexuality can only be ‘committed’ by men and involves penetrative, anal sex. Women’s homosexuality was not, and is not an issue. It is not illegal and thus does not need to be decriminalized. *Lesbians were not and are not there, they do not exist, and they do not matter.*

Upon discussing female homosexuality, one interviewee, Phryne, argued that she was aware of “numerous examples, but they are not out in the open, *for obvious reasons.*”<sup>12</sup> She gave an example concerning a woman who had been in a gay relationship for six years and was “a lesbian until she could not stand the pressure any longer and decided to get married.”<sup>13</sup> She is currently married, has three children, and her husband knows nothing about her previous sexual activities. She explained that if he found out “he would kill her”. The reasons were not discussed or explained further by the interviewee; they are part of an accepted, unchallenged, dominant discourse. Another case involved a gay female couple that was in a monogamous relationship for almost a decade. They lived abroad for the whole period since they were terrified with the idea of returning to Cyprus. In fact, remaining abroad for all that time was a struggle they went through simply in order to be together. A lack of options pushed them into finally returning to Cyprus despite being unable to express their relationship in public. When one of them decided to ‘confess’ her sexual orientation to her family, she was treated with pity and she was regarded as ill. Similarly, Korinna argued that lesbian women were not to blame for their ‘condition.’ “It is not their fault really. We should not reject the *poor people*, but accept them. Feel for them. They are born that way.”<sup>14</sup>

Sixty five percent of women in my sample were accepting of homosexual behavior; the predominant majority identified themselves as feminists whereas the rest were indifferent. Further, women who claimed to be indifferent to feminist ideas were less tolerant, and the remaining three were very critical of gay people. One of these women considered herself an anti-feminist and the other two indifferent to feminism. Feminist opinions appear to be linked in the sample to higher levels of tolerance and greater understanding toward 'others'. The consciousness, personal experience, and awareness of 'otherness' appear to be related to greater acceptance of social groups that could fall under similar categories of oppression and exclusion.

In general, deviation from heterosexual sex seems to "posit a threat to the view that sex is innate" (Loizos and Papataxiarchis, 1991, p227) and therefore homosexuality is treated with "exaggerated horror." In Cyprus, as in Greece, homosexual behavior has been interpreted as involving an 'active', very masculine man, and a 'passive,' 'feminine' man. Cypriots widely accept that the passive member in a male homosexual relationship is the 'real homosexual', the *poustis*; <sup>15</sup> the active partner is jokingly called *kouloumbaras*, and he can be more socially accepted as a man who had 'normal' sexual urges fulfilled with a member of the same sex. Many sexual activities jokingly described by soldiers (eighteen to twenty year old men) involve "X having been f ... d by Y, because he is gay."<sup>16</sup> This contradictory attitude on male homosexuality is reflected in the study by Georgiou mentioned above, who found that "the Cypriot priests ... believed that the passive homosexual was by far worse than the active one ... and also reflects the societal attitudes of the majority of Cypriot males." (Georgiou, 1992). One of my interviewees told me that her husband had such experiences with two men in the army and that he confessed it to her when they first met; she found it strange but acceptable because her husband was the active partner: "he is not exactly a *poustis*, right?"<sup>17</sup> Sexist, essentialist discourses dominate in these interpretations, as traditional associations of sexual passivity and weakness are connected with gay men, who are 'feminine in behavior' (*yenekotoi, poustidhes*). By penetrating, and thus feminizing the homosexual man, the conceived 'straight' man acquires power. However, a commonly used term to "suggest the possibility of sexual attraction between women" (Loizos and Papataxiarchis, 1991, p229) does not exist. Further, "not only is there no female counterpart to the *poustis*, but there is no common term for a woman who would wish to take a 'male role, either.'" Female homosexuality, if expressed, is a deep secret that no one wishes to uncover. The association of women's sexuality to fertility is so strong that a need for women to 'express' sexuality in ways that cannot result to procreation is beyond perception (Loizos and Papataxiarchis, 1991, p229).

### **The Threat of Sex outside the House – The Evil of Prostitution**

The restrictive construction of female sexuality within the context of procreation described above is dominant *only* in the gender-role expectations for Cypriot women. Foreign women are considered different. They are simply there for Cypriot men to have sex with. They are considered 'easy' and as long as they are 'lured', they will give a man 'what he wants.' Their attraction to the Cypriot man, or their willingness to be involved in sexual intercourse is irrelevant. After 1974, this 'foreign' woman was generally the tourist woman from Western Europe, and especially Scandinavian countries. This 'more

sexually liberated' woman became 'the official reason for the increase of divorce' since she readily accepted the advances of the Cypriot man, who was in many cases, married.<sup>18</sup> However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cyprus has witnessed unexpected changes in the family structure. Thousands of Russian, Rumanian, and Ukrainian women came to Cyprus to work as 'artistes', although the official number limits them to 1500. The requirement has been that they become strippers/dancers in inner-city cabarets that have increased rapidly to reach a number close to a hundred. For an island of half a million inhabitants, the figure is relatively high. Numerous cases have been made public concerning the owners of these clubs who force the women to sleep with the customers for money, most of which are received by the club owners. Women between the ages of eighteen to twenty-five offer their 'services' to Cypriot men for prices varying from thirty to one hundred Cyprus pounds. 'Massage parlors' are advertised on an everyday basis in the press, only later to be discovered to operate as 'homes' for these affairs. Prostitution has reached uncontrollable rates<sup>19</sup> and is linked to another 'new phenomenon' in Cyprus, that of organized crime. Currently, all fifteen agents bringing foreign artistes into Cyprus have a criminal record. Nevertheless, the issue of trafficking of women is never addressed publicly by the authorities and to present date, a systematic study on its extent has not been published.<sup>20</sup>

At the House Crime Committee, which discussed the link between prostitution and organized crime, the then Interior Ministry Permanent Secretary said: "Prostitution will always be there whether it stems from cabarets, night-spots or pubs and we can't stop it. If we closed all the cabarets, would not artistes work in massage parlors, brothels or enter the island as tourists and work as prostitutes." (Cyprus Weekly, 1998, p6). He also said, "the committee was considering limiting the number of foreign artistes at each cabaret. This would mean, however, that the remaining women would simply have to sleep with more men" (Cyprus Weekly, 1998, p6) and, closing the cabarets would force the problem underground. The reasons behind the "fact" that women would have to sleep with more men remains unchallenged. In fact, it is taken for granted and given as a reason for the perpetuation of the present, patriarchal status quo. The problem does not appear to be prostitution itself, or the exploitation (and/or trafficking) of the Eastern European women, but rather the links of prostitution with organized crime. Cyprus is a place where prostitution has been accepted as part of society and '*ierothoules*' (sacred servants / legal prostitutes) have been serving the 'common good'; organized crime has 'got in the way' of smoothly run, patriarchal affairs. The construction of the body 'as a sexually defined reality and as the depository of sexually defining principles of vision and division' (Bourdieu, 2001, p11) creates attitudes and experiences about the biological differences between men and women, but also amongst women themselves. Men have the sexual urges, some ('good and mostly ugly') women deny them, and some ('bad and mostly beautiful') women accept them.

Similar to northern Cyprus, in the non-occupied, southern Republic of Cyprus which is under study here, Russian and Rumanian women are seen as a source of disorder and danger, but they

"...Also have a more complex role in helping to define community boundaries at a time of change in gender roles and expectations ... The two aspects of female sexuality symbolized by Russians and Rumanians—deviant and unambiguously

dangerous, as well as modern, attractive, and ambiguous- are present in constructions of gender and sexuality that also apply to Cypriot women. Russian and Rumanian women are an embodiment of the outsider within a role that is illustrated by the way in which they are incorporated into 'traditional' structures of authority and control." (Scott, 1993, p400).

In the Republic of Cyprus, the symbolic and eventual problem is not much the Eastern European women's entry as workers in the tourist industry, but rather their entry as 'artistes', available to dance and 'fulfill the sexual wishes of men' (*sexualikes epithimies ton antron*), with money as their only demand. In many cases where Cypriot couples separate after the man's affair with an Eastern European woman, the immigration authorities are called to 'kick the woman out of the country' so that the man can return home. An immigration official explained that they were thus safeguarding the traditional Cypriot family.<sup>21</sup> The common story involves a middle-aged man who gets involved with a cabaret dancer in her late teens or early twenties and then decides to leave his family in order to live with her.<sup>22</sup> When one of the women in my study was recently subjected to the same experience, the first thing she was asked by her relatives was whether she would like to see the woman out of the country. Her positive reply led to Immigration officers deporting the woman a few months later.<sup>23</sup> Further, when I escorted a Russian student to the Immigration Authorities after she had been forced to have sex with her Cypriot guardian, the immigration officer asked me (as I was translating) if the woman had been a virgin before the 'alleged rape.' I asked whether that made any difference to her case and he replied, "most of these common women are asking for it, you see. They are poor and they come here to lure our men. We must make sure they are decent, but they never are."<sup>24</sup>

Many women support the sentiments of the immigration officer and they openly express hatred and disgust about the morality and behavior of Eastern European artistes. Regarded as a direct threat to their marriages, and thus the 'legitimation' of their status in society, Eastern European women are expected to leave the island and 'leave us in peace.' Throughout the study, the women I interviewed and observed appeared to have clearly defined perceptions about these 'other' women. Although most of them claimed to acknowledge women's oppression, they appeared inflexible and intolerant in their attitudes and behavior toward 'other women', especially if these are prostitutes.

Middle-class Cypriot women's gender awareness processes do not necessitate their internalization and practice of discourses which are alternative to patriarchy: "during the initial stage of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or 'sub-oppressors.'" (Freire, 1970, 1993, p27). Nevertheless, and as mentioned previously in the paper, the feminist women in my sample illustrated that their awareness of gender oppression within their society increased their awareness about other levels of oppression within the same social structure.

### **Upon Closing the Front Door – Who is Left Out? A Discussion on Women and other 'Others'**

Since a Cypriot woman's sexuality is important in the way she is judged and defined in her everyday life, (Lees, 1989, p19) being a '*Kypraia*' (being a Cypriot woman) carries certain sexual 'prerequisites', especially her conformity to "rules about

sexually appropriate behavior – otherwise she becomes excluded.” (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1983, p68). Compared to Western women, Cypriot women are considered as ‘naturally’ less attractive, less sophisticated, and less sexual. Confusion is created in these women’s lives since they are currently receiving contradictory messages on ‘proper’ behavior and appearance. One woman expressed her dilemma on how to deal with these antithetical images, saying that “men in Cyprus pretend that they like modern women, that they admire them, and they certainly desire them; but, the truth is, when it comes down to marriage, they care about how you dress, who you slept with in the past, why, where, do you smoke, do you drink, is your skirt too short? They compare us with European women. They want us to be like them, have sex with everyone, but when it comes to serious commitment, they cannot cope with us being anything like them. Whatever we choose to do is wrong.”<sup>25</sup> This woman’s sentiments and observations point to the symbolic antagonism between the Occident and the Orient, the ‘West’ and the ‘East’, the ‘civilized’ and the ‘backward’, all within the context of the varying faces of patriarchal discourse.

When Eastern European prostitutes come to Cyprus, they pose a threat to Cypriot women’s identity. In the case of middle-class, urban women, they also represent a very antithetical challenge, as these prostitutes are both ‘Western’ looking, but lower class (‘they dress like *horkatisses*’- peasants, as one interviewee explained). The definition of membership within an ethnic group is directly related to the proper performance of accepted gender roles, and “both identity and institutional arrangements of ethnic groups incorporate gender roles and specify appropriate relations between sexes, such as, for example, who can marry them.” (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1983, p68) these relations are increasingly becoming confusing for Cypriot women, who are caught between resisting and adopting the socio-cultural changes in the symbolic definitions of ‘proper’ female behavior.

The historical aspects in which gender relationships manifest themselves, such as ethnicity/race (in this case darker-skinned Asian women and/or lighter-skinned, blond Eastern European women) and class (the interviewees being of ‘higher’ class than their ‘others’), are often neglected in feminist scholarly work and active and passive forms of resistance in which women have been implicated throughout the ages become marginalized. At the same time, the concept of patriarchy is assumed to be a generalized term for the oppression of women, whether or not combined with race. It starts from the premise that a particular form of male domination of women exists everywhere, and uses this as a basis to analyze specific relationships between men and women. The suggestion that Cypriot women feel the need to behave ‘modern’, like ‘Europeans’, which I quoted above, for example, assumes an improvement in the lives of women. Thus, women who do not behave like ‘Europeans’, such as women from Sri Lanka and the Philippines, are backward. Acting like a ‘Cypriot’, can be derogatory for these middle-class women; being a Cypriot is embarrassing, *unless* compared with something profoundly ‘worse’, such as being a Sri Lankan or a Philippino woman. When it comes to stereotypical acceptance of the perceived Western (see Eastern European here) ‘look’ it is clearly better (as these are “beautiful, long-legged bitches”) and worse (because “they are sluts by nature”) at the same time. Various levels of contradiction arise in these women’s lives, since they want to be European at the level of *assumed* attitudes, and often reject *assumed monolithic, dominant* ‘European’ practices.

Many issues are raised by this particular expression of patriarchal structure in Cyprus. Ethnic, class, and gender divisions are mutually constitutive and in this context create difficulties for all the parties concerned. Under patriarchy, wives, lovers, 'proper' women, prostitutes, wealthy and poor women of various colors, and their offspring, are the losers of the 'regime' that has no 'clear' winner. Men in Cyprus control this regime only to destroy their marital relationships and the lives of poverty stricken young European women (whom they manipulate and eventually leave in most cases), but also create the path for organized crime (again, committed by men and profited by men, but where the bearers of the cost are predominantly women) to flourish in the society where they live. By rejecting artists, Cypriot women practice their agency and struggle to safeguard their marriages, whereas by choosing to work in cabarets in Cyprus, Eastern European women can escape poverty and unemployment in their countries. These women make choices and conscious decisions -based on the options available, themselves limited by masculinist structures of power- over how to deal with the war that men have declared against them (see French, 1992).

The sheer attempt of discussing patriarchal, phallogocentric ideologies and social constructions can be argued to be a result of discourses which are themselves products of these ideologies of masculine domination. In the same line of thought, it can also be argued that when Cypriot women create 'others', whom they perceive as being dominant over (as in the case of the domestic workers or homosexuals), or dominated by (as in the case of prostitutes), they perpetuate an ideology of this historically and socially constructed masculine modes of thought.

However, having said that, one is not to assume that women's agency is 'lacking', but rather that it is restricted but existing structures of masculinist power and structures of violence, symbolic or other. The process through which Cypriot women produce, and construct 'others', reflects what Bourdieu describes as the 'long collective labor of socialization of the biological and biologicization of the social' (Bourdieu, 2001, p3). *These women biologize and hierarchically perpetuate one male and three main female, opposing sexualities: the male is always the sexualizing beast, the aggressive, uncontrollable sexual animal; the woman, on the other hand, can 'choose'.* She can first, accept the above and deny the existence of her sexuality, thus being the woman behind the front door; second, she can transfer that identity to the domestic worker and go out to reconstruct her sexualizing self into a 'career' self that is in 'public' life but not in the street; finally, she can choose the uncleanness of the street, thus serving the needs of the male and the needs created by the first choice. In the process of reproducing masculine domination, the woman acquires agency, thus perpetuating the ever-lasting ambiguity of gender identities and discourses within the *context* of that domination. Agency is in restricted by particular structures and thus in a sense becomes another form of being dominated upon.

In this paper, I used women's narratives to explore how they create what Bourdieu named the 'categories of understanding'--"or in Durkheim's terms, the 'forms of classification' with which we construct the world (but which, as products of the world, are largely attuned to it, so that they remain unnoticed)" (Bourdieu, 2001, p3). Women (mostly non-feminist) often (re)construct and categories that are by and large part of the dominant (see masculine) discourse, thus perpetuating that very same discourse which

dominates them. By taking a feminist stance, *some* women aim to challenge this discourse and thus become less likely to reproduce it. The problem lies within the feminist debates which often operate within masculinist discourses as these represent a structural ambiguity whereby one challenges and at the same time reproduces essentialising, phallogocentric notions of women's experiences. By creating 'Otherhood', women in Cyprus become involved in an ambiguous, contradictory process through which they support and perpetuate non-feminist, hierarchical, capitalist, and patriarchal values and at the same time challenge these values by trying to express their agency within them.

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<sup>2</sup> As the worst case could often result in domestic violence and sometimes divorce because the woman neglects her duties.

<sup>3</sup> The idea of the street being dirty, wrong, immoral, can also be seen in the neglect and the disinterest of the people for the street. When I asked a woman why she put a lot of rubbish right outside her (spotless) house she said: "I don't care. It is not in the house, it is in the street. And it's not mine, is it?" For a related discussion, see also Vassos Argyrou, "Keep Cyprus Clean: Littering, Pollution, and Otherness", *Cultural Anthropology*, 12(2), pp.159-178, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> More than before, and more than women in the countryside, but not more than men.

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed discussion on feminism in Cyprus, see Myria Vassiliadou, *Narratives of Gender Consciousness: A Qualitative Approach of Feminist and Other Identities*, International Society of Political Psychology, Twenty-Fourth Annual Scientific Meeting, Panel 7.3 The Construction of Gender Relations, Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico, 15-18 July 2001.

<sup>6</sup> For an interesting discussion on anthropology and the woman as a 'native', look at Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Introduction – Cartographies of Struggle, Third World Women, and the Politics of Feminism,' in Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, & Loudres Torres (eds.), *Third World Feminism and the Politics of Feminism*, Indiana University Press, 1991, pp.31-32.

<sup>7</sup> According to the only NGO in Cyprus in support of the rights of migrants, the Immigrant Support Action Group (ISAG) set up in 1998, there are about 12000 domestic workers out of a total of around 35000 migrants with papers (many more come illegally), in a country of 700000 people. The position of domestic workers vis-à-vis their employers has further worsened after a decision of the Council of Ministers in December 2000 where the possibility of domestic workers changing their employer (which they had before) was abolished at the consent of the latter. Amongst other of the many serious problems they face are the physical and psychological violence they are often subjected to (there have been many cases of repeated sexual abuse and rape by different male members of the same family). Further, their contracts are not honored, their passports are often held by their employers, and they work on average fifteen hours a day without overtime payment.

<sup>8</sup> *Private Conversation with Author*, Interview with Olympias

<sup>9</sup> Present at a discussion with Sappho and her mother

<sup>10</sup> Strong evidence by the Immigrant Support Action Group, demonstrates that domestic assistants from the Philippines and Sri Lanka are treated like second-class citizens, and on occasions like slaves, by both men and women who are 'sirs' and 'madams', hold their passports, and often deposit these women's salaries in the bank so that they do not spend it.

<sup>11</sup> *Private Conversation with Author*, Interview with Korinna

<sup>12</sup> *Private Conversation with Author*, Interview with Phryne

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Private Conversation with Author*, Interview with Korinna

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<sup>15</sup> The *poustis* (passive homosexual) is "strongly denigrated as someone who fundamentally lacks full humanity, and his weakness exposes him to all sorts of evil dispositions ... *Poustis* comes to be a synonym for liar or thief, a man without dignity, and it strongly contrasts with the characterization of the man who adopts the 'male' role and who may claim a 'supermale' reputation, much as he might if he consorted with a prostitute" (Loizos and Papataxiarchis, 1991, pp227-8)

<sup>16</sup> *Private Conversation with Author*, Interview with Sappho.

<sup>17</sup> *Private Conversation with Author*, Interview with Jezebel

<sup>18</sup> For a thorough discussion on tourist women and Mediterranean men, see Sofka Zinovieff, 'Hunters and Hunted: Kamaki and the Ambiguities of Sexual Predation in a Greek Town', in P. Loizos & E. Papataxiarchis (eds.), *Contested Identities: Gender and Kinship in Modern Greece*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991.

<sup>19</sup> In June 2003, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Alvaro Gil Robles described the evidence on human trafficking in Cyprus as "striking", and gave as an example the number of women working as 'artistes' in cabarets. "Compared to the size and population of the island, I think you show a lot of interest in these matters," said Robles. He added that the matter needed closer attention. "In order to deal effectively with criminal circles that operate with human trafficking, legal measures need to be taken for the protection of victims and witnesses, and more concern shown for the victims."

<sup>20</sup> The Ombudsman 's Office is currently in the process of carrying out its first investigation on the issue.

<sup>21</sup> *Private Conversation with Author*, Interview with Immigration Officer

<sup>22</sup> I am personally aware in detail of nine cases, and I have heard of similar cases very regularly, especially due to my involvement at the Centre for the Prevention and Handling of Domestic Abuse. Most interviewees in this study have also described several similar incidences.

<sup>23</sup> *Private Conversation with Author*, Interview with Sappho, July 1997. My interviewee asked me not to get into details about her case, as 'everyone would understand who I am.'

<sup>24</sup> *Private Conversation with Author*

<sup>25</sup> *Private Conversation with Author*, Interview with Thecla.

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