

Feminism in Cyprus: Women's Agency, Gender and Peace in the Shadow of Nationalism

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Abstract:	<p>This article explores the ways through which feminist and women's agency is articulated in the Cypriot context through the paradigms of nationalism, peace and conflict. It does so to broaden our understanding of gendered and peace agency in troubled and divided societies, where complex and conflicting discourses meet. Analyzing data from interviews with feminist and women's groups' representatives, it examines how nationalism and women's approaches to gender, politics, peace and conflict enable or restrict feminist and women's agency. It finds that a strategic essentialism approach has initiated a reconfiguration of gender(ed) power relations, women's agency and peacebuilding processes. It argues that when this approach is combined with feminist theory and praxis and the employment of transnational peace paradigms, the possibilities of feminist and women's agency increase, as long as feminist scholarship and grassroots activism inform each other through dialogue. Therefore, it highlights the nuanced and complex dialectic between essentialist and anti-essentialist feminist gender discourses. Moreover, it challenges arguments about the rigidly hierarchical relation between local and transnational gendered and peace agency paradigms, by demonstrating their malleability and reciprocity. Thus, it contributes to the debate about the modalities and possibilities of feminist sociopolitical intervention in nationalism- and conflict-ridden contexts.</p>

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9 **Feminism in Cyprus: Women's Agency, Gender and Peace in the Shadow of**
10 **Nationalism**
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22 **ABSTRACT**
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29 This article explores the ways through which feminist and women's agency is articulated in the
30 Cypriot context through the paradigms of nationalism, peace and conflict. It does so to broaden
31 our understanding of gendered and peace agency in troubled and divided societies, where
32 complex and conflicting discourses meet. Analyzing data from interviews with feminist and
33 women's groups' representatives, it examines how nationalism and women's approaches to
34 gender, politics, peace and conflict enable or restrict feminist and women's agency. It finds that a
35 strategic essentialism approach has initiated a reconfiguration of gender(ed) power relations,
36 women's agency and peacebuilding processes. It argues that when this approach is combined
37 with feminist theory and praxis and the employment of transnational peace paradigms, the
38 possibilities of feminist and women's agency increase, as long as feminist scholarship and
39 grassroots activism inform each other through dialogue. Therefore, it highlights the nuanced and
40 complex dialectic between essentialist and anti-essentialist feminist gender discourses.
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3 Moreover, it challenges arguments about the rigidly hierarchical relation between local and
4 transnational gendered and peace agency paradigms, by demonstrating their malleability and
5 reciprocity. Thus, it contributes to the debate about the modalities and possibilities of feminist
6 sociopolitical intervention in nationalism- and conflict-ridden contexts.
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15 Keywords: Cyprus, feminism, gender, nationalism and peace, women's agency
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20 Feminism is still a dirty word here. Those involved in the peace negotiations are getting
21 paychecks for doing such a good job promoting the national problem and ethnicity. One
22 becomes quaint talking about women's involvement because the response will be "let's
23 sort out the Greek-Cypriot-Turkish-Cypriot thing first, and then we'll sort out the gender
24 thing."¹
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33 Nationalism has been central in the political history of ethnically divided and postcolonial
34 contexts while, through its regulation and essentialization, gender has played an important role in
35 nationalist projects (Anthias 1989; Yuval-Davis 1997). In Cyprus, the legacies of colonialism
36 and ethnonational conflict have led to a narrow conceptualization of the political and to
37 nationalism becoming a dominant element of the country's sociopolitical life, limiting
38 discussions about the exclusions it produces and perpetuates. Though indispensable for the
39 construction and preservation of nationalism, issues such as women's position in society and
40 politics, gender(ed) power relations and dominant perceptions about gender and sexuality have
41 been rendered politically trivial (Kamenou 2011, 2012, 2019).
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3 In theory, the Cyprus problem and the peace negotiations are gender-neutral. However, in
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5 practice, they are premised on androcentric, heterocentric and ciscentric notions and are
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7 dominated by male sociopolitical actors. Despite their efforts, women have always been
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9 excluded from the negotiation table (Demetriou and Hadjipavlou 2014, 2016, 2018). In sum,
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11 politics in Cyprus has been founded on rendering feminist concerns and women's activism as
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13 less politically important—if not as apolitical—when compared to the national problem.
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15 Moreover, scholarly research on the current role of women, gender and feminism in peace
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17 negotiations remains limited.
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24 In light of the recurrent peace talks and the statebuilding processes that will follow the reaching
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26 of an agreement, this article addresses this omission. It examines the present moment of
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28 feminism in Cyprus by discussing women and feminist actors' endeavors towards gender
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30 equality, political participation and peacebuilding. Aiming to broaden our understanding of
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32 gendered and peace agency in troubled and divided societies, where complex and conflicting
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34 discourses meet, it explores the ways through which feminist and women's agency is articulated
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36 in the Cypriot context through the paradigms of nationalism, peace and conflict. It does so by
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38 raising and addressing a question central to feminist theory and praxis: How do predominant
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40 nationalist discourses and Cypriot women's understandings of, and approaches to, gender,
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42 politics, peace and conflict enable or restrict feminist and women's agency? Through a women-
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44 centered approach to the study of its topic, it aims to transcend the limitations of sterile
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46 dichotomies and identify the strategies through which women's and feminist groups effect a
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48 change of attitudes and practices in relation to gender and nationalism, a shift in dominant
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50 sociopolitical structures and the molding of disruptive opportunities into a politics of gender.
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5 The article draws on long-term research engagement in Cyprus. Analyzing data from interviews
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7 with feminist and women's groups' representatives, it finds that although androcentrism and
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9 multiple essentialisms continue to permeate the Cypriot sociopolitical context, a "strategic
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11 essentialism" (Spivak 1988) approach has been conducive to initiating a reconfiguration of
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13 gender(ed) power relations, women's agency and political and peacebuilding processes. It argues
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15 that when this approach is combined with feminist theory and praxis and the employment of
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17 transnational peace paradigms, the possibilities of feminist agency increase, as long as feminist
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19 scholarship and grassroots activism inform each other through dialogue. Therefore, it highlights
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21 the nuanced and complex dialectic between essentialist and anti-essentialist feminist gender
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23 discourses and troubles some of the supposedly intractable dichotomies between feminism and
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25 national project participation (Garnett 2016; Sluga 2017; Vickers 2018). Moreover, it challenges
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27 arguments about the rigidly hierarchical relation between local and transnational activism/agency
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29 paradigms (e.g., Mananzala and Spade 2008; Spade 2015) by demonstrating their malleability
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31 and reciprocity.
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40 In doing so, this article does not only produce new knowledge about the role of feminist and
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42 women's agency in the troubling of political and peacebuilding processes in Cyprus that could
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44 inform peace talks and the formation of the new unified state. It also challenges and expands our
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46 understanding of nationalism and feminism's role in the intensification and weakening of
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48 gendered conceptions of activism/agency, political participation and peacebuilding when local
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50 and transnational discourses and paradigms merge, cross or collude. Therefore, its findings are
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52 transferable to other contexts where women's agency and gender and feminist considerations are
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3 excluded from the realm of the political. Thus, it contributes to the ongoing debate about the
4 modalities and possibilities of feminist sociopolitical intervention in nationalism- and conflict-
5 ridden contexts (Alvarez 1999; Sluga 2017; Chigudu 2016).
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12 Next, I outline the analytical approach by laying out how the study fits with previous work on:
13 essentialist and anti-essentialist discourses and approaches in women's politics, the women-
14 gender-nationalism relationship, approaches to feminism in women's mobilization and the local-
15 transnational relationship in feminist theory and praxis. Drawing on feminist and critical
16 perspectives, I analyze the interplay between essentialist and anti-essentialist feminist gender
17 discourses and between local and transnational gendered and peace agency paradigms as
18 complex, nuanced and contingent processes that shape, and are shaped by, women and feminist
19 actors' agency. Then, I provide an overview of the Cypriot women's peace movement before
20 describing the employed methods. Next, I present the study's findings, exemplifying them with
21 participant interview excerpts. I conclude with a summary of the study's findings, contributions,
22 limitations and potential avenues for future research.
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40 **ESSENTIALIST AND ANTI-ESSENTIALIST DISCOURSES AND APPROACHES**

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45 Essentialist gender discourses are based on the notion that women's experience is unitary and
46 can be described independently of race, class, sexuality and other realities of experience. Anti-
47 essentialist feminist gender discourses reject the existence of a generic "woman" and treat
48 difference as relational and gender as a social institution. The relation between essentialist and
49 anti-essentialist gender discourses and between strategic essentialist and anti-essentialist
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3 approaches is nuanced and complex. For example, it has been argued that essentialist gender
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5 discourses are pervasive because they carry important political payoffs, not least for women who
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7 mobilize around feminist aims. In many instances, a strategic essentialism approach has enabled
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9 political action aiming at real transformation of the gender status quo (Harris 1990; Spelman
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11 1988).
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17 Strategic essentialism refers to “a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible
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19 political interest” (Spivak 1988, 13). It is a conscious, temporary and contingent measure to
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21 advance a social movement. While not denying the existence of differences, it enables the
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23 formation of solidarities around an essentialist group identity that strategically functions as a
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25 political mechanism for change, and collective work towards agreed—yet constantly
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27 negotiable—objectives. Thus, it becomes an effective political approach that allows
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29 essentialized, marginalized groups in particular contexts and situations to render themselves
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31 recognizable as political agents over their own lives, and may serve as a precursor to anti-
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33 essentialist approaches to empowerment (Grillo 1995; Jhappan 1996; Vickers 2006).
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40 **THE WOMEN-GENDER-NATIONALISM RELATIONSHIP**

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44 In Cyprus, the ideologies and structures of nationalism have shaped social relations, including
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46 gender(ed) relations (Trimikliniotis 2007). Since it is primarily men who have defined national
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48 projects, they have constructed women’s position in them based on masculinist notions. For
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50 example, Anthias (1989) explains how the active role of women in the mid-1950s Greek-Cypriot
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52 armed struggle against British rule and for union with Greece has been silenced in official
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3 discourses of the island's history. Conversely, women have been assigned a central and
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5 essentialized role in post-1974 official discourses around displacement, refugees and missing
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7 persons. In nationalism-infused cultures, women's citizenship is of a dualistic nature. It both
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9 includes and excludes women from the general body of citizens, even though women are
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11 expected to biologically, culturally and symbolically reproduce the nation. This has not been
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13 exclusive to Cyprus; it has been a common practice across contexts and time (Yuval-Davis and
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15 Anthias 1989; Yuval-Davis 1997).
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22 Nonetheless, the women-gender-nation relationship is not monolithic. Different gender(ed)
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24 relations play an important role in all dimensions of national projects, while different women
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26 partake differently in different national projects. Through kinship power structures and the
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28 employment of othering as a means of disciplining those women who refuse to abide by the rules
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30 of the national collectivity, women often partake in the regeneration of gendered and nationalist
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32 discourses (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989; Yuval-Davis 1997). It has been argued that, in
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34 Cyprus, naming internal others is a means through which women create places and in-groups for
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36 themselves, acquire a sense of self and group identity and assert their being (Vassiliadou 2004).
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43 The history of nationalisms around the world gives some credit to such interpretations of
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45 women's agency or lack thereof. However, seeing all women as the victims and/or culprits of
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47 nationalism underestimates women's ability to exercise agency over their lives and portrays
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49 oppressive notions as everlasting and impermeable. Research has demonstrated that women's
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51 involvement in national projects differs across geographical locations, historical instances and
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53 cultural contexts and that, in some instances, it has been empowering. In various contexts,
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3 women have strategically employed their “passive” and men-directed involvement in nationalist
4 projects to enter the public political arena, which would have been inaccessible to them
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6 otherwise. Subsequently, they pushed for and won rights and favorable policy implementation
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8 (Anthias and Yuval Davis 1989; Hedström 2016; Vickers 2006). Furthermore, feminism is not a
9
10 monolithic concept but describes a plurality of movements. Similarly, nationalism is a broad
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12 term that is descriptive of multiple variants. Therefore, as the argument goes, nationalism and
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14 feminism could be compatible if women treat the nurturing, caring and “passive” roles
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16 nationalist discourses prescribe to them as less important than gaining their autonomy, exercising
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18 agency and actively participating in the public political arena (Cockburn 2000).
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26 **FEMINIST MOVEMENTS, WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS AND WOMEN IN** 27 28 **MOVEMENTS** 29

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33 Because of its political history and circumstances, Cyprus did not partake in the 1960s and 1970s
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35 European feminist tradition that articulated the demand for women’s personal realization beyond
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37 essentialized gender stereotypes. The prevailing nationalist politics that emphasized the Cyprus
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39 problem as an ethnic issue since the 1960s have hindered women’s mobilization towards
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41 emancipation (Agathangelou 2003; Agathangelou and Spira 2007; Vassiliadou 2002). Since the
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43 politics of nationalism have been the predominant politics in Cyprus, it is principally through
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45 national struggles that women’s voices become to emerge (Vassiliadou 2002; Cockburn 2004).
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48 Nevertheless, this intensified, rather than diminished, their role as the nation’s reproducers since
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50 nationalism is inherently built upon imposed coherence, systematic exclusions and “nature-
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3 based” gender-specific conceptions of agency (Anthias 1989; Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1983;
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5 Cockburn 2004).
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10 Nationalistic aspirations and fears generated by the threat thought to be posed by an opposing
11 ethnic group have resulted in the proliferation of discourses that placed the ethnic group above
12 the individual. This has led to negative views of feminism, which was understood as an extremist
13 form of political expression that prioritizes egoism and opposes conational men instead of
14 creating an organic society (Cockburn 2004; Kamenou 2012). In addition to this or, rather, as a
15 result of this, women’s groups have remained closely linked to political party structures and
16 ideologies. Although workers’ unions expressed demands for women’s rights in the workplace in
17 the 1930s, these were premised on Marxist/socialist ideology that located women in the working
18 class and did not recognize them as a separate movement. In sum, due to the lack of
19 identification with feminist consciousness, their heavy dependence on political parties and their
20 close affiliation with national projects, women’s groups remained rooted in a relational feminist
21 framework (Kamenou 2012).
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40 Relational feminism proposes a gender-based, sexual-dimorphism-based yet—allegedly—
41 egalitarian vision of social organization and understands the non-hierarchical male-female couple
42 and the nuclear family as the basic units of society. Individualist feminism attempts to place the
43 individual—irrespective of gender, sex and sexuality—as the basic unit of society and the
44 recipient of universal human rights. It has been argued that since relational feminism has been
45 less contentious than individualist feminism, it could help overcome resistance to feminism. As
46 the argument goes, integrating relational and individualist frameworks would create a more
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3 fruitful model for feminist politics that would accommodate diversity among women and across
4 national boundaries (Offen 1988). However, it is important to question whom such a model of
5 politics would benefit and whom it would further marginalize.
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12 Some argue that relational feminism has been less contentious because it is premised on gender
13 essentialisms and silences issues of gender inequality and diversity. Its call for equity for women
14 in their traditional familial roles and its central tenet that women and men are fundamentally
15 different make it inevitably and inherently conservative. Namely, it does not challenge gender
16 oppressive structures, it reinforces stereotypes of heterosexual domesticity and it is blatantly
17 heteronormative and cisnormative as it ignores sexual and gender nonconformity (Harris 1990;
18 Karlan and Ortiz 1993). Particularly within contexts where nationalism prevails, a model of
19 politics based on relational feminism may reinforce an understanding of citizenship as
20 intrinsically gendered and of the public/private dichotomy as indispensable for the smooth
21 operation of society (Walby 1994). Additionally, it is questionable whether preserving, abiding
22 by or working in alignment with the gender status quo qualifies as a form of feminism. There is a
23 difference between feminist movements, women's movements and women in movements.
24 Equating all modalities of women's political agency with feminist agency is problematic,
25 because it ignores questions of power structures, objectives and interests (Cott 1989; DuBois
26 1989; Kamenou 2012).
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49 This analysis conceptualizes women's movements/groups as those that make gendered identity
50 claims and take political action around women's issues. Though not necessarily, some of their
51 objectives may be explicitly or implicitly feminist. Furthermore, it does not essentialize them and
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3 recognizes them as internally diverse—i.e., as including women who espouse feminism and
4 women who do not. Feminist movements/groups are conceptualized as those that identify as
5 feminist and engage in political action around explicitly feminist objectives. Resisting the
6 essentialization of feminism, the analysis recognizes the plurality of feminisms and these groups
7 as internally diverse in relation to their members' understandings of, and approaches to,
8 feminism. Lastly, given the essentialization and dualism that attempts to draw a rigid and
9 perennial division between the two types of groups generate, it treats the groups it discusses as
10 porous and responsive to developments in feminist theory and praxis (Basu 2010; Ferree 2012).
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24 **THE LOCAL-TRANSNATIONAL RELATIONSHIP IN FEMINIST THEORY AND** 25 26 **PRAXIS** 27 28 29 30

31 Some argue that, through transnational networks, women's movements achieved broader and
32 more far-reaching impact than local movements (e.g., Moghadam 1996; Weber 2002), while
33 others argue that their transnationalization has reduced their commitment to grassroots
34 mobilization and change (e.g., Alvarez 1999, 2000). However, the character of transnational
35 activism is nonfixed and the local-transnational relationship in feminist theory and praxis cannot
36 be essentialized, since resistance operates simultaneously at multiple levels. In evaluating the
37 local-transnational interplay, the context one examines is important since local particularities—
38 e.g., a history of colonialism and internal conflict and women's activism's roots in national
39 projects—will affect whether a women's movement acquiesces or resists transnational
40 domination (Basu 2000; Cockburn 2004; Naples and Desai 2002).
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3 Research on master national narratives and the formation of a feminist civil society in Cyprus
4 substantiates the argument that the relation between local and transnational movements and
5 gendered and peace activism paradigms is reciprocal and nonfixed (Agathangelou 2003;
6 Cockburn 2004). Studies of Cypriot gender and peace non-governmental organizations
7 (NGOs)—including Hands Across the Divide (HAD),² which is discussed in the next section—
8 demonstrate that they constitute an emerging movement for social justice and that the
9 interactions among transnational, local and individual processes are central towards rendering
10 civil society a site of radical political mobilization (Agathangelou 2003; Agathangelou and
11 Killian 2006; Cockburn 2004). As Agathangelou argues, “opening the windows to substantive
12 democracy and peace requires ... to connect the work we do as feminists and activists with
13 theory, self, and the larger global community” (2003, 298). Feminist theory and praxis are
14 mutually constitutive and necessitate conceptualizing theory as practice and action as theory. In
15 Cyprus, as elsewhere, transnational feminist theory and praxis—that is premised on political
16 solidarity and accountability and is informed by grassroots feminist analyses of peacebuilding
17 and organizing across differences and borders—are needed for resisting power asymmetries and
18 creating a just world (Agathangelou and Killian 2006; Agathangelou and Spira 2007; Cockburn
19 2004).

20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 **THE WOMEN’S PEACE MOVEMENT**

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49 The women’s peace movement in Cyprus started forming soon after, and in response to, the
50 events of 1974 that had dire effects on women from all ethnic groups (Anthias 1989). Women
51 Walk Home (WWH), an initially all-women movement, formed in 1975. Its members identified
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3 as the mothers, wives, daughters and sisters of Greek-Cypriot men killed or gone missing during
4 the 1974 Turkish invasion of the island.³ It attempted to confront the failure to negotiate a
5 solution to the island's division through peaceful forms of protest. Efforts were made to summon
6 Turkish-Cypriot women to the cause, though the restrictions on freedom of movement and the
7 difficulties in communicating across the divide made this difficult. WWH did not attempt to
8 bring ethnicity and gender into a single conceptual framework. However, it was important in the
9 development of the women's peace movement since it actively confronted the division of the
10 island, carried out high-profile direct actions involving thousands of women and allowed women
11 to create spaces for themselves (Cockburn 2004). Yet, it did not manage to escape the dividing
12 effects of nationalism. In 1989, a subset of nationalist women engaged in partisan politics
13 initiated a mixed-sex demonstration in which nationalist symbols were brandished. This act
14 restated the monopoly of Cypriot politics by political parties and signaled the death of the
15 movement (Black 2005).
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35 In 2002, a diverse group of Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot women formed HAD. The idea
36 for forming HAD was generated in 2001 during a bicomunal seminar organized by some
37 women in Cyprus, which aimed at examining women's role in building contact and confidence
38 between the two communities (Cockburn 2004; Hadjipavlou and Cockburn 2006). HAD's
39 objectives include the interconnection between feminist ideology and conflict resolution values
40 and the promotion of a culture of inclusion and tolerance (Hadjipavlou 2010). Nevertheless, in-
41 group differences arose including in relation to the group's agenda—i.e., some favored
42 immediate political action while others favored social activities to cultivate solidarity—to the
43 issues of a gender perspective and a feminist analysis—i.e., some identified as feminists and saw
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3 the political partition as a gendered phenomenon while others opposed the designation “feminist”
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5 and interpreted women’s issues as relatively apolitical—and to linking feminist theory and
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7 praxis—i.e., some thought talk of “gender relations” was too academic and alienating and too
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9 much stress on feminism might be a diversion (Agathangelou 2003; Cockburn 2004;
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11 Hadjipavlou and Cockburn 2006). Therefore, because of the danger these disagreements posed to
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13 the group’s survival, the bicomunal dialogues remained centered on cultivating empathy
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15 instead of dynamically tackling the problem of identity constructions (Cockburn 2004, 169–196;
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17 Katrivanou 2005). Nonetheless, HAD played a very important role in the development of the
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19 women’s peace movement. It was the first group to transcend partition and bicommunality by
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21 not premising membership on ethnicity. Moreover, it recognized the importance of linking the
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23 local to the transnational and worked to create links with other groups and movements in Cyprus
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25 and abroad. Also, working as a social movement for justice, it was among the pioneers in civil
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27 society mass mobilization in the north in 2003 protesting the division, which contributed to the
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29 relaxation of the partition line in the same year (Agathangelou 2003; Cockburn 2004;
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31 Hadjipavlou and Cockburn 2006).

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40 Aiming to integrate gender equality into peace negotiations and peacebuilding processes and
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42 reconceptualize gender, gender discourses, politics and peace, in 2009, a group of women
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44 formed GAT.⁴ This feminist group consists of women’s rights practitioners, civil society activists
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46 and scholars working on gender in Cyprus from both sides of the divide. Accommodating the
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48 lessons learned from earlier endeavors, it works with a feminist gender analysis, sees theory and
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50 practice as interlinked and calls for a peace solution that will secure inclusion, equality and
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52 fairness for all marginalized groups. GAT uses a multilevel strategy that brings the local to the
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3 national, the regional, the global and the civil society. It collaborates with other women's groups
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5 in Cyprus and abroad and with international feminist and peace organizations and research
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7 institutes. Moreover, it has produced recommendations to the leaders of the two ethnic groups
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9 regarding the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women,
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11 Peace and Security (UNSCR 1325) in Cyprus. Focusing on the implications of a peace plan and
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13 aiming at mainstreaming gender concerns in the eventual constitution of a federated state, GAT's
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15 recommendations address the governance and power-sharing, property, citizenship and economy
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17 negotiation areas. In his report on his Mission of Good Offices in Cyprus on 24 November 2010,
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19 the then UN Secretary-General acknowledged GAT's efforts and prompted the two sides to
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21 seriously consider its recommendations in the peace talks. Furthermore, GAT works closely with
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23 the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative and Head of the UN Peacekeeping Force in
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25 Cyprus and is represented at the Cyprus Talks Gender Equality Technical Committee (GETC),
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27 established in 2015 (Demetriou and Hadjipavlou 2014, 2016, 2018).
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35 **METHODS**

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40 This article is based on long-term research engagement in Cyprus on gender, sexuality and
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42 ethnonational politics, coupled with native sociopolitical and cultural insight on the topic.
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45 Among other things, my research investigates how feminist and women's agency is articulated in
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47 the Cypriot context through the paradigms of nationalism, peace and conflict, based on research
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49 participants' perspectives. This article draws on data from interviews with twenty-four
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51 representatives of feminist and women's groups. The employed participant-centered research
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53 approach enabled me to situate participants within multiple complex, overlapping and often
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2
3 conflicting national and transnational discourses and practices and, thus, to investigate the
4 various aspects of agency formation (Levy and Hollan 1998).
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10 Literature on women, gender and peace has convincingly made the argument that to understand
11 women in peace politics and their role as agents of change, one has to listen to their voices.
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14 Therefore, I used interviews as tools to prioritize women's voices and gain an insight into
15 subjugated and situated knowledges (Agathangelou 2003; Anthias 1989; Cockburn 2004). By
16 sharing their stories of agency through interviews, participants often complicate the
17 epistemology of nationalism and conflict and redefine the rules of those who claim to be
18 speaking on their behalf by calling for collective action beyond gender, ethnic and other
19 divisions towards a just society (Agathangelou and Spira 2007; Cockburn 2004).
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31 I conducted interviews in 2009 and 2017 to identify changes in approaches to gender, politics,
32 peace and conflict and in opinions about the impact of nationalism on feminist and women's
33 agency from the early stages of civil society mobilization on gender issues—that the island's
34 2004 European Union accession facilitated (Kamenou 2012, 2016, 2019)—until today.
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39 Collecting two sets of interviews across almost a decade introduces a temporal dimension to the
40 analysis of women's and feminist agency. This allows to note constancy or changes in
41 participants' perspectives on the issues under investigation and, thus, to qualify and extend
42 earlier studies of feminist and women's movements in Cyprus. Moreover, it enables a more
43 nuanced understanding of the interaction between essentialist and anti-essentialist feminist
44 gender discourses and between local and transnational gendered and peace agency paradigms
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3 across time, and of these interactions' impact on interviewees' approaches to gender, politics,
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5 peace and conflict.
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10 I recruited participants through snowballing beginning with personal networks. I interviewed
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12 participants in Greek or English. The interviews lasted from one to three hours. They were
13
14 structured as conversations and I asked broad open-ended questions to enable detailed accounts
15
16 (Riessman 2008). I audio-recorded all interviews upon participants' agreement and later
17
18 transcribed them verbatim. I then translated into English the transcripts of interviews conducted
19
20 in Greek. I analyzed the transcripts manually to identify key themes and recurrent ideas and used
21
22 thematic narrative analysis to capture how participants define and construct their experiences. I
23
24 employed the narrative analysis approach as it is appropriate for research that aims to include
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26 participants' voices while examining the workings of power and agency (Orbuch 1997;
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28 Riessman 2008).
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35 Two major themes emerged from coding the data: strategic essentialism as an approach to the
36
37 exercise of women's agency because of the predominance of nationalism and its accompanying
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39 (gender) essentialisms, and enabling of feminist and women's agency because of the
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41 development of anti-essentialist feminist theory and praxis and the employment of transnational
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43 peace paradigms. I labeled these "Appropriating Essentialisms: Women's Agency through
44
45 Nationalism" and "Anti-Essentialist Theory and Praxis: Women's Agency through Feminism" in
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47 the sections below. I selected interview excerpts as exemplars of each of these themes. I edited
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49 quotes for clarity, but not content. Edits are indicated within brackets in the excerpts.
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GENDER, WOMEN AND AGENCY IN CYPRUS

Appropriating Essentialisms: Women's Agency through Nationalism

Women in Cyprus have strategically employed their men-directed involvement in national projects to enter the political arena and push for gender equality. For, especially in postcolonial contexts, sometimes, this may constitute the only route into androcentric and male-controlled political structures. The following excerpt from an interview with a Greek-Cypriot woman who had actively participated in WWH activities and subsequently became a member of parliament supports this argument. She explained:

[W]omen's groups have always fought a double fight. ... [W]e might be women's groups that fight for the national cause, but we are also women's groups that ... exert pressure to change the law in order to help women have a better life.⁵

As this excerpt shows, amidst a context where nationalism was the prevailing political ideology, early attempts at gender equality could not evade it. In this context, some women legitimized their entry into the political arena by employing the essentialized identity "woman" as this is defined in nationalist discourses—i.e., "woman" as men's auxiliary in national struggles—and subsequently worked towards ameliorating women's lives. This did not suffice to dismantle nationalist and essentialist gender discourses. Nevertheless, it created opportunities for disrupting them and highlighted the nuanced and complex relation between strategic essentialist and anti-essentialist approaches to women's empowerment.

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3 Even though nationalism may serve as a vehicle of women's empowerment, this is not the case
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5 for all women. Namely, nationalism is empowering for women who are already in a privileged
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7 position and have access to state and political parties' power structures. The same participant
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9 reported:

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11 They [i.e., the women's marches] weren't easy. ... The [WWH] women were not
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13 independent. They were ... members of political parties' women's groups. ... Yet,
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15 who pressed their political parties and the parliament to amend the laws pertaining
16
17 to women's rights?
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21 During the interview, this participant explained that women who participated in WWH activities
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23 were involved in party politics and, because of this involvement, later obtained positions of
24
25 political influence. Whether of the left or the right, whether espousing or opposing nationalism,
26
27 due to the framing of the Cyprus problem as an ethnonational issue, all major Greek-Cypriot
28
29 political parties have at times and to varying degrees initiated or supported national projects, in
30
31 which agency was based on essentialist notions of gender (Cockburn 2004; Hadjipavlou 2010;
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33 Vassiliadou 2002). This excerpt, in which the interviewee draws a link between political parties,
34
35 national projects and opportunities for women's empowerment grounds this argument.
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42 Adopting a radical approach to feminist politics is often difficult, particularly in nationalism- and
43
44 conflict-ridden contexts (Agathangelou 2003; Cockburn 2004; Vassiliadou 2002). The stages of
45
46 women's emancipation struggles are not expected to follow the same trajectories everywhere as
47
48 gender issues are intertwined in different ways into political, social, cultural and personal
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50 histories in different settings (Basu 2000; Beckwith 2007; Naples and Desai 2002). Therefore, as
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52 this excerpt indicates, in the first stages of women's emancipation, assimilation and adoption of
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3 the male paradigm might be unavoidable. Even so, unless women understand their empowerment
4 as a non-hierarchical collective process, the nationalism-feminism relationship becomes
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6 dangerous. When nationalism appears to promote feminism, it may benefit some women at the
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8 cost of the group and further limit women's agency while leaving class issues, heteronormativity,
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the male paradigm might be unavoidable. Even so, unless women understand their empowerment as a non-hierarchical collective process, the nationalism-feminism relationship becomes dangerous. When nationalism appears to promote feminism, it may benefit some women at the cost of the group and further limit women's agency while leaving class issues, heteronormativity, cisnormativity and the public/private dichotomy intact.

In a study of the development of feminist ideology and mobilization in Europe, Offen (1988) notes that the word "feminism" does not resonate well with many women who are, nonetheless, in favor of projects that could be described as feminist. The phenomenon Offen discusses is applicable to the case of Cyprus. As the data analysis reveals, the need to compromise and adapt to the essentialist logic of gender complementarity so as to access the established power structures and attempt to change them from the inside seems to be a reason why numerous Cypriot women oppose "feminism"—as a term rather than an ideology or political practice—even though they are engaged in what could be described as feminism. Indicatively, a Greek-Cypriot woman who was a member of the Cyprus Federation of Women's Organizations (POGO) for three decades and continues to participate in the women's peace movement stated:⁶

I don't like the term ... because ... feminism goes beyond the limit. ...

Unfortunately, some feminist movements in Europe ... reached the point of upholding [the view] that [women] must have the upper hand, meaning [they must] extinguish men. ... Here [in Cyprus] we are organized. ... And because of this, I believe the Cypriot woman has a lot to gain.⁷

This excerpt is indicative of the rejection of feminism based on interpreting it as a radical extremist ideology and practice that destroys social organization and cohesion and, thus,

1
2
3 reinforces gender and other social divisions. This notion of radicalism in feminism, which
4
5 associates feminism with hostility to men and unconventional forms of politics, is premised on a
6
7 view of organization as oppositional to radicalism and as inherently conservative. However, as
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10 Ferree (2012, 4) explains:

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12 Radicalism is relational, a specific type of challenge to the politics of a particular time
13
14 and place. That which is radical ... conflicts with institutionalized patterns of power, and
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16 in the long or short term undermines the pattern itself. ... The new world that seemed
17
18 alien and disturbing now appears to be the ordinary, natural arrangement of things.
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24 Some argue that the difficulties Cypriot women's groups face for effectively challenging
25
26 nationalist discourses and articulating an anti-essentialist feminism stem from women's
27
28 internalization of sexist and masculinist assumptions (Hadjipavlou and Mertan 2010; Vassiliadou
29
30 2004). Although this idea cannot be entirely rejected, arguments about women's false
31
32 consciousness do not fully explain why the development of a Cypriot feminist movement has
33
34 been hindered and they annihilate the possibility of agency. Previous studies have showed that
35
36 there are other reasons also that we need to discern, if we are to thoroughly analyze and evaluate
37
38 the status and future of feminist and women's agency in Cyprus, like sociopolitical and structural
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40 limitations (Agathangelou 2003; Cockburn 2004; Demetriou 2018). The data analysis supports
41
42 this argument and reveals that what may appear as women's impasse is actually the result of such
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44 limitations, which the island's historical particularities have shaped and conditioned. Namely, the
45
46 country's historical legacies have facilitated the predominance of nationalism and partitocracy
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48 while, as a result of a narrow conceptualization of the political, the momentum that generated
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3 feminist movements elsewhere has been missed in Cyprus. Another Greek-Cypriot POGO
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5 member who actively participates in the women's peace movement said:
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8 [W]e have not had a feminist movement in Cyprus; because the first demands that
9
10 the feminist movement set ... have been taken up by the unions ... and the
11
12 political parties. ... But this led only to some degree [of success] ... even though
13
14 more complex actions are needed. But this is because, at this point in time, it is
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16 harder for a purely feminist movement to be created and to mobilize.⁸
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22 This interviewee espouses feminism and adopts an anti-essentialist position in identifying the
23
24 reasons behind the nondevelopment of a Cypriot feminist movement. Her view that the takeover
25
26 of women's issues by male-controlled political parties and unions has limited women's
27
28 opportunities to initiate feminist action concurs with previous analyses into gender mobilization
29
30 in Cyprus (e.g., Demetriou and Hadjipavlou 2016, 2018; Vassiliadou 2002). Moreover, the
31
32 divergence of opinions between this and the previously-quoted POGO woman is illustrative of
33
34 the diversity of women and opinions—including about feminism—within women's groups. This
35
36 reinforces arguments about the need to de-essentialize “woman,” gender and feminism (Basu
37
38 2010; Ferree 2012) and highlights the need for analyses, like the current one, that examine the
39
40 nuanced and complex dialectic between essentialist and anti-essentialist feminist gender
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42 discourses.
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50 The lack of a feminist activism tradition that this interviewee discussed a decade ago does not
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52 mean that feminist women's agency is impossible. Regardless of the concessions they had to
53
54 make, women's consistent appeals for peace and the abolition of oppressive gender structures
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3 reveal a considerable level of conscious strategy. This is a type of an anti-essentialist first-step
4 choice when having to balance powerful nationalist discourses and male prerogatives with
5 feminist objectives. When rupture from the system is not a viable option, a temporal
6 appropriation of its logic and mechanisms could provide women the opportunities and legitimacy
7 needed to negotiate their position within the system and subsequently challenge it. In this
8 process, both the context within which they are situated and transnational discourses and
9 practices that find their way into local ideological and practical repertoires will influence local
10 understandings of, and approaches to, gender, politics, peace and conflict.
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24 **Anti-Essentialist Theory and Praxis: Women's Agency through Feminism**

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28 This is a time of stalemate of the peace negotiations and of local and transnational economic and
29 sociopolitical changes that necessitate a reworking of the meaning of, and interconnections
30 between, gender, citizenship and justice. In this context, local actors seek to bring to the political
31 forefront gender issues and move beyond the mere incorporation of women's perspectives into
32 political processes to the elimination of all social divisions and hierarchies. The work of GAT
33 exemplifies such an intersectional approach and feminist transversal politics (Cockburn 2004;
34 Yuval-Davis 1997). A Turkish-Cypriot GAT member explained:
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44 Our goal is not to see these [marginalizations] replicated in the post-solution state and to
45 reimagine citizenship and the true meaning of democracy as the elimination of social
46 hierarchies and exclusions, regardless of ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, race and
47 class. ... Intersectionality ... might not resonate with Cypriot society because we were
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3 taught to think and act based on what makes us different ... [However,] we see it as our
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5 objective to instill feminism and a feminist intersectional consciousness.⁹
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8 This excerpt speaks to GAT's intersectional approach towards changing the sociopolitical
9
10 ordering in Cyprus so that the concepts of democracy, equality and citizenship become
11
12 decentered from ethnicity and come to address other aspects of personal and collective life also
13
14 (Demetriou and Hadjipavlou 2016). As this interviewee explains, one of GAT's propositions that
15
16 testify to its departure from previous efforts and to its radical feminist approach relates to its
17
18 conceptualization of citizenship. In its recommendations, it challenges the logic of ethnic
19
20 separation and calls for untying rights of citizenship—like rights of residence, work and
21
22 movement—from the ethnically-determined act of voting (Demetriou and Hadjipavlou 2018).
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25 GAT's recommendations, strategies, values and proposed worldview form the basis of a
26
27 contemporary feminist intersectional consciousness and feminist transversal politics that aim to
28
29 render the advantages of feminism pervasive and permanent (Demetriou 2018, 180–181;
30
31 Demetriou and Hadjipavlou 2016).
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38 Another occasion for the development of feminist intersectional consciousness and transversal
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40 politics is created through the employment of transnational discourses and paradigms. A Greek-
41
42 Cypriot GAT member stated:
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44 UNSCR1325 allows us to link our demands to a ... transnational framework. ...

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46 Nonetheless, we must not forget that none of these [frameworks] can replace our own
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48 action or compensate for its lack. We must work using these tools ... while always
49
50 keeping in mind the realities and conditions with which we are faced. ... We need to
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52 cultivate a stronger sense of reflexivity and ... strive for substantive equality.¹⁰
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3 States' responsibility towards ensuring the inclusion of women in all aspects of public life
4
5 constitutes the core principle of UNSCR 1325. Therefore, it is an important tool in the hands of
6
7 local actors who seek to bring to the political forefront issues of women, gender and sexuality
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9 (Hadjipavlou 2010). As this excerpt shows, in pursuing an anti-essentialist approach towards
10
11 dismantling nationalist and essentialist gender discourses, GAT pays attention to local
12
13 particularities and treats gender equality not merely as a matter of top-down implementation of
14
15 external directives and policies, but as a matter of intercommunal grassroots efforts. Therefore, it
16
17 works as a funneling mechanism that collates the wants of grassroots and civil society women
18
19 and gender activists, articulates them through specific interpretations of UNSCR 1325 and,
20
21 through its radical recommendations, struggles to incorporate them into the negotiations and
22
23 high-politics institutions and mechanisms (Demetriou and Hadjipavlou 2016, 2018).
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31 Critical-reflexive exercise of agency is important for a movement's aims and objectives to
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33 remain meaningful to its constituency (Agathangelou 2003). Commenting on the development of
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35 gender and peace mobilization in Cyprus during the past one-and-a-half decade, a Turkish-
36
37 Cypriot HAD member explained:
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40 We [i.e., HAD] were the first to go out in the streets and demonstrate. ... There has been
41
42 change. But the problem is that this is a very individualistic, capitalist society. ... So, we
43
44 need a lot of grassroots work. ... The new generation [of professional NGO activists],
45
46 think it's all about the money: "if you don't have it, then you buy it." ... These power
47
48 struggles [among women] and lack of collaboration are part and parcel of neoliberalism
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50 and the workings of the global economy. ... That's why we need to ... stand together.¹¹
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3 This interviewee sees NGOs as a form of neoliberal cooptation and points to challenges feminists
4 face when trying to affect change from within the NGO sector. Namely, under the paradigm of
5 neoliberal NGOization, feminist ideas are adapted to neoliberal rationalities and women's
6 empowerment is sought through the production of subjects of consumption and capitalism. The
7 neoliberal cooptation of feminism impacts the way agency is conceptualized. It is located in the
8 individual and their choice-making, while collective forms of action are eroded (Alvarez 1999;
9 Prügl 2015; Rottenberg 2014). It is against this cooptation that depoliticizes feminist struggles
10 and detaches them from the grassroots that the interviewee calls women to stand together, so that
11 the political possibilities of feminism as a social movement may be actualized.
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26 It has been argued that social movements' NGOization has led to the dominance of neoliberal
27 human rights-oriented and identity-based politics that ignore intersectional aspects of lived
28 realities and inhibit intersectional politics at the national and transnational level. Moreover, they
29 conceal local particularities' subordination by transnational structures and the hierarchical
30 relations between "metropolises" and "peripheries" (Mananzala and Spade 2008; Spade 2015).
31 However, a closer look at transnational discourses and paradigms of gender activism reveals that
32 they are not monolithic or inflexible. They are adopted in multiple and constantly negotiated
33 ways in different settings, as part of a discursive-sociological approach for formulating
34 intersectional, transversal and counter-hegemonic responses to national and transnational
35 agendas (Lombardo and Forest 2012).
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51 For example, being aware of the limitations of UNSCR 1325 as an exemplar of liberal
52 peacebuilding—e.g., it makes no mention to the gender regime that causes women's exclusion
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3 from peace processes—GAT uses it as a tool in the transition from liberal to radical postliberal
4 peace. As Demetriou and Hadjipavlou explain, “It might not ... be a resistive force per se but it
5 does provide the possibility of ‘resistance’” since “post-liberal peace formation [is] already
6 enveloped into liberal peace discourse” (2016, 85–86). Using UNSCR 1325 for building a
7 locally relevant set of measures, GAT has developed a critique of the current structures in
8 Cyprus and recommendations that, although radical, the leaderships are morally bound to take
9 into consideration. In sum, the radicality of GAT is its attempt to instigate a shift in the
10 governmentality of the negotiations from one of conflict to one of reconciliation. The novelty in
11 GAT’s approach is that beyond arguing that a gender-equality perspective is necessary for
12 creating a more just and diverse democratic society, it also understands, and works based on, the
13 premise that the transition to peace must pass through and surpass liberal values (Demetriou and
14 Hadjipavlou 2016, 2018).¹²

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33 GAT’s employment of UNSCR 1325 could be interpreted as strategic essentialism. Like the
34 relation between essentialist and anti-essentialist gender discourses, the relation between
35 strategic essentialist and anti-essentialist approaches is nuanced and complex. Anti-essentialist
36 approaches see intra-group differences as being as important as intra-group commonalities. Thus,
37 they ask “that we define complex experiences as closely to their full complexity as possible and
38 that we not ignore voices at the margin” (Grillo 1995, 22). Seeking to unearth the diverse
39 realities of gendered experience and place them in the center of its work—including in relation to
40 how it employs UNSCR 1325—GAT’s aim and most important contribution so far has been the
41 opening of a public discussion on the issues on which it focuses and the opening up of the
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3 concept of “activism” as a plural one that consists of multiple voices and perspectives
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5 (Demetriou and Hadjipavlou 2016, 2018).
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10 Contrary to the (neo)liberal logic’s (neo)colonialist-imperialist notion of “dialogue” that
11
12 obscures differences in positionality, this notion of dialogue between scholarship and activism is
13
14 true conversation whose purpose and effect is transformative sociopolitical action (Agathangelou
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16 and Killian 2006; Agathangelou and Spira 2007). A fundamental part of feminist intersectional
17
18 and transversal politics, it is an honest and reflexive counter-hegemonic process for fostering
19
20 mutual understanding and cooperation, naming injustices and diffusing feminism beyond the
21
22 hegemonic core of scholars/activists/actors, organizations and issues (Alvarez 2000; Hadjipavlou
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24 and Mertan 2019; Yuval-Davis 1997).
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30 **CONCLUSION**

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35 In this article, I show some of the ways in which nationalism and women’s approaches to gender,
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37 politics, peace and conflict facilitate and restrict feminist and women’s agency. Women’s
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39 engagement with national projects has enabled some of them to enter the existing power
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41 structures and subsequently push for and gain women-specific rights and gender-oriented policy
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43 implementation. In this way, they helped initiate the process of the reconfiguration of gender(ed)
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45 power relations, women’s agency and peacebuilding processes.
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51 Although problematic since it cannot deconstruct essentialisms, eliminate hierarchies or
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53 guarantee feminist agency, these women’s strategic essentialism approach has—willingly or
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3 unwillingly—created a rupture that progressively allowed explicitly anti-essentialist feminist
4 groups, like HAD and GAT, to identify and create further disruptive opportunities and to
5
6 successfully mold them into a feminist politics of gender that transcends ethnic and other
7
8 divisions and promotes social justice for all. Important in this process is the employment of
9
10 transnational peace paradigms. As this analysis demonstrated, when national and transnational
11
12 discourses and paradigms are critically employed by local actors, their potentially oppressive
13
14 effects are avoided and they help cultivate reflexivity and a feminist intersectional consciousness
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16 that instigates feminist transversal political praxis.
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24 Anti-essentialist feminist scholarship could assume a pivotal role in the cultivation of such
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26 consciousness among activists while, through dialogue, activists could keep scholars informed
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28 about their real-life priorities. The challenge consists of molding discourses and political action
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30 schemes based on local understandings and objectives, and in ways local women and feminist
31
32 actors see fit for themselves. The possibilities of feminist and women's agency increase, as long
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34 as local actors manage to employ such discourses and paradigms in ways that do not violate local
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36 women's needs and as long as scholarship and activism inform each other through continuous
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38 constructive dialogue.
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44 The women in this study do not represent all women in Cyprus who mobilize around gender or
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46 peace issues. For example, there are women who view gender as sex difference and women for
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48 whom peace does not involve or necessitate ethnic coexistence. What this study does is to
49
50 highlight the nuanced and complex dialectic between essentialist and anti-essentialist feminist
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52 gender discourses and the ways in which women in troubled contexts, where essentialisms and
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3 hierarchies abound, may assume a political agency that resists these essentialisms and
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5 hierarchies. The lessons learned from GAT's work and its implications for feminism are all the
6
7 more important as they are transferable to other nationalism- and conflict-ridden societies where
8
9 gender inclusion and opportunities for the exercise of feminist agency are far from given.
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11 Unfortunately, the awakening of nationalist forces around the world imperils these opportunities,
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13 even where they were once considered a given.
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19 Limited understandings of the workings of agency overlook how predominant and alternative
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21 discourses and paradigms of activism/agency intersect and influence each other. This study
22
23 challenges arguments about the rigidly hierarchical relation between local and transnational
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25 gendered and peace agency paradigms by demonstrating their reciprocity and malleability in the
26
27 hands of local actors. Thus, it contributes to the debate about the modalities and possibilities of
28
29 feminist sociopolitical intervention and highlights the importance of shifting our attention to
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31 gender(ed) agency. It also points to the need for more research on the ways through which anti-
32
33 essentialist and feminist women's agency becomes possible and manifests itself in troubled and
34
35 divided societies, and on the impact of such agency on gender(ed) power relations, nationalism
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37 and other essentialisms, national politics and peacebuilding efforts.
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44 Despite recent developments that may point to a willingness to accept women as political actors
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46 and treat gender issues as political and peacebuilding issues—e.g., the 2015 establishment of the
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48 GETC—politics in Cyprus is still dominated by men and premised on androcentric, heterocentric
49
50 and ciscentric notions and practices. More research is needed into not only how dominant
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52 discourses and practices inhibit the reconceptualization of gender, gender(ed) agency, politics
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3 and peace, but also how they may be appropriated and employed so as to be eventually
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5 undermined. This is all the more imperative given the rise to power of forces inimical to hard-
6
7 won, yet tenuous, democracy and feminist achievements.
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10 11 12 **NOTES**

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16 ¹ Turkish-Cypriot Gender Advisory Team (GAT) member. Participant 213644, interview with
17
18 author, Nicosia, 2 August 2017.

19
20 ² <http://www.peace-cyprus.org/Womenbridges/>

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22 ³ <http://www.cyprus.com.cy/womenwalkhome.htm>

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24 ⁴ <http://www.gat1325.org/>

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26 ⁵ Participant 212527, interview with author, Nicosia, 26 January 2009.

27
28 ⁶ <http://www.pogocy.com/>. Formed in the late 1930s as the women's branch of the communist-
29
30 leftist Progressive Party for the Working People.

31
32 ⁷ Participant 210023, interview with author, Nicosia, 13 January 2009.

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34 ⁸ Participant 210029, interview with author, Nicosia, 19 January 2009.

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36 ⁹ Participant 213679, interview with author, Nicosia, 5 September 2017.

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38 ¹⁰ Participant 213653, interview with author, Nicosia, 9 August 2017.

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40 ¹¹ Participant 213668, interview with author, Nicosia, 8 August 2017.

41
42 ¹² Nonetheless, such postliberal feminist discourses may also challenge the possibilities of peace,
43
44 as they do not always and/or fully evade the (neo)liberal project's notion of "peace" and its
45
46 accompanying capitalist funding structures (Agathangelou and Spira 2007; Agathangelou and
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48 Turcotte 2010; Trimikliniotis 2016).
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