

The Silent Presence: Asian Female Domestic Workers and Cyprus in the new Europe

“You know, you’ve got to compromise. It’s a marriage; and it’s a marriage where the bride doesn’t know the groom! And you have to get married, and as life goes on, you’ll find out whether you can cope or not in compromising...” –Greek Cypriot employer on the relationship between Asian domestic workers and employers

What happens when transnational movements bring new interactions between locals and a variety of “others,” particularly when the prevailing local reality is one of ethnic division and conflict between the locals themselves? More specifically, what happens to a person’s ethnic, gender and class identity when they cross an international boundary and are “reclassified” as temporary, low-pay home workers? In Cyprus, the easternmost border of the EU, women from the Philippines, Sri Lanka and India are almost exclusively engaged in domestic work. For most of them, this means they become socially and economically marginalized. Although the successful integration of migrant workers in European societies remains a key objective of the EU given that in most countries of the Union many migrants experience social exclusion, prejudice and discrimination, migrant women continue to be particularly vulnerable in peripheral economies and societies in Europe which also happen to be the economies where they are most likely to find work.

Since the late 1980’s, the proportion of women in the global movement for work has increased dramatically, with more women than ever leaving their families and homes for work in other countries to support their families back home. At the same time, the kinds of occupations available for these women are often low pay, temporary, and in the service sector, resulting in the feminization of poverty and migration on a global scale (Castels and Miller 2003; Brettell 2003). The globalization of the economy has also meant that female migrants now end up working in new places outside of the highly industrialized world. Even in a small country like Cyprus with under one million inhabitants, domestic workers currently make up almost 2% of the entire population, with over 12,000 Asian women working legally as domestics and thousands more being undocumented domestic helpers. The rapid pace of change brought about by a new influx of foreign people in areas of the world such as the Mediterranean—areas which have only recently become zones of immigration rather than emigration—has contributed to rising social tensions and new social issues in many countries (see Anthias and Lazaridis 2000). Cyprus has now found itself at the center of emerging, internal debates about belonging, inclusion, citizenship and racism, and these debates come at a time when the small Republic strives to conform to its obligations of EU harmonization while continues to struggle with its unsolved “Cyprus problem.”

Perhaps the most telling aspect of how migrant women are viewed by Greek Cypriots is by their marked absence and invisibility in daily life. Migrant women are visibly absent in public spaces, much of which continues to be dominated by “the Cyprus Problem.” When they do surface in political and public discourse, they are most often constructed problematically. They are visible to the public gaze on Sundays, their only contractual day off, and they congregate in areas not used by Cypriots like the downtown parks. For this reason the research also explores the social activities and living/recreation spaces of transmigrant women, mainly those

spaces relegated to the border areas/buffer zone of Nicosia which are in large part “non-spaces”(vis-a-vis Greek Cypriots), as the city center has in large part become “ghetto-ized” as a direct result of the political division between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. The research also considers immigrant women’s representation in political and social spaces; in other words, how migrant women in Cyprus are represented (or not) in popular media and in official discourse.

Asian women are particularly important to consider in relation to immigration in Cyprus because they face particular issues by virtue of being *female*, *foreign*, and *poor* in a very male-dominated and status oriented society. I would argue that it is the state’s legal classification of these women upon crossing through Cyprus’ borders that define their experience in Cyprus, directly creating the conditions for their marginalization within the Cypriot society. Legislative directives and policy distinguish women seeking work as domestics from men seeking work in all other occupations for which they are channeled into in Cyprus. As Asian migrant women, they come to Cyprus channeled through the Ministry of the Interior rather than through the Ministry of Labor and, as such, are ineligible to unionize locally. Asian women are also required by law to live within the private homes of their employers, making monitoring of their living and working conditions almost impossible. Most importantly, Asian women are brought to Cyprus for work exclusively as domestic servants. This particular situation vis-a-vie the state actually puts women at an extreme disadvantage as wage laborers and as humans, creating the ideal situation for women to be exploited. It is the racialized and gendered policy at the level of the state which directly influences the social reception of female migrants in the host country. As Donnan and Wilson so eloquently summarize, “...as borders may be both bridge and barrier between these [economic, political and social] spaces, so their crossing can be both enabling and disabling, can create opportunities or close them off,” (1999; 107).

A social consequence of this state policy is that all Asian females are automatically seen as domestic workers. Although many Asian women working in Cyprus are educated and have led other lives in their home countries as teachers, nurses, clerical workers and mothers, in Cyprus all Asian women are assumed to be domestic workers—there is simply no room for an alternative definition of their identity. Entire nationalities are commonly collapsed into a referent for a domestic worker. So strong are national stereotypes that the word “domestic worker” in Greek is often expressed as *I Filipinisea mou*, as one Cypriot woman quipped, *I Filipinisea mou einai Srilankesa*¹. Clearly, to see a Filipina woman or a woman from Sri Lanka is not to see a *person* from these countries, but rather to see a domestic worker. As a Greek-Cypriot friend of mine explained a personal story of hers when she went to the bank to change money with her Filipino-American friend who was visiting her from the United States, the bank teller asked in Greek, “how long has this woman been working for you?”

Asian women experience racism in Cyprus in a number of ways, which I explored through ethnographic fieldwork with Asian domestics and Greek-Cypriot employers between 2002 and 2004. Ethnic stereotypes inform preferences for particular nationalities of women in relation to their supposed “natural” propensity for

¹ Translation, “My ‘girl’ from the Philippines is a Sri Lankan”.

domestic service, cleanliness, and their ability to be congenial. Women from the Philippines are often constructed as “favorable” in the sense that they are clean, quiet, less likely to complain and Christian, while Sri Lankan women may be preferred by other employers because they are seen as “less demanding,” and “not as outspoken about their rights” as Filipina women. When I asked one Greek-Cypriot employer about her criteria for hiring a housemaid and how she finally came to decide on who she would hire, she explained how the employment agency helped her:

I was thinking about this [issue]. I wanted to bring someone who wanted to *work*. To work in the house, to clean everything. And I wanted her to be good, not just to make like that [flips her hand]. I asked the woman there [at the agency] to advise me, because I had to choose between Sri Lankan girls or Filipino. And the girl there told me that—I had the previous experience with Sri Lankan girls and she couldn't do anything properly, I always advised her how to do things, okay? But the agency woman there told me, yes, well, the Filipino girls understand more easily...if you tell them once something, they understand and they do it properly. The Sri Lankan girls you must tell her 5 times, these [women] are not clever. *But*, Sri Lankan girls are always [willing] to work. With these girls, Filipino girls, you have to accept the fact—she told me, I remember how she [her current maid from the Philippines] was telling [me], looking at me and saying that, “[just] because I am poor, I am [still] a woman like you!”—They don't see you like their boss, they have, you know...[pauses] they don't accept that they are *servants* or housemaids, or lower people than you. They feel they are equal, but because they are poor, okay, they will work for you! The Sri Lankeese are more obedient. And [the agent told me that] you must accept the fact that this Filipina you will bring, she will be like that! She will not be like a Sri Lankan and say ‘okay madam’ and go to do [whatever you want them to do]. And I was wondering what to do!

Here, stereotypes are reproduced by authority figures, the “knowing” and experienced professionals who encounter Asian women looking for work in Cyprus on a daily basis. Because of their position of power and authority in relation to Asian women they are relied on by prospective Cypriot employers as carriers of knowledge through experience, and in this way are more dangerous at validating and normalizing stereotyped ideas about Asian women.

Objectified and mistrusted, Asian women are ultimately defined as *xenes* (outsiders) who do not belong in Cyprus. Many Greek Cypriot employers I spoke with lamented that they could not hire a local Cypriot women to do the cleaning and child minding that they

-I've had several, yeah, and I haven't been always lucky! [laughs] No, no; even the first one I brought—my God! Believe me, I have to tell you something here; I *tried* to get a Cypriot, even to work during the day, not at night because I could get a babysitter...so I would have preferred to find a Cypriot. But at that time [her daughter was 11 and her son just born] it was impossible, you know, to have someone every day. They [i.e., Cypriot women] prefer to work in different houses so they get more money. And some of them, they work in two houses a day. You have to pay *a lot*, a lot of

money to have a Cypriot working for you daily...to have a Cypriot, daily, even four times a week, it costs so much.

-But why would you prefer a Cypriot woman?

-Because they *know* how to work! They finish early; I was very, very happy with the Cypriots, they know the house, they *know* how to clean! The first one [foreign domestic worker] I brought, I don't think she ever *lived* in a house, a proper house—most probably she was living in the jungle. She came [from Sri Lanka] in her sari—I gave her clothes, of course. I think she was a Buddhist—no, she *was* a Buddhist because she was praying, and her room had a funny smell; most probably she was lighting those things? And she *couldn't* speak English! Ahhh! When she came, she was supposed to know how to clean, she was supposed to know how to speak English, how to cook, how to manage children—she knew *nothing*!

This employer's first experience with a culturally foreign woman left her frustrated and at the same time feeling culturally superior. This employer felt a strong preference for hiring a local Cypriot woman for a number of reasons. First, she would have not had the cultural and communication issues that she had with this woman from Sri Lanka. Above and beyond communication, however, Cypriot women are culturally familiar with expectations of cleanliness, maintaining order, and how best to achieve these. Defined in relation to *xeni* (foreign female), Cypriots are kin and countrymen—familiar and to be trusted as insiders. As an unwritten rule, one's own countrymen/women are more easily trusted and are therefore the best choice when it comes to seeking domestic help. Yet this employer goes several steps further to exoticize this woman. The idea that she came straight from the jungle removes her completely from civilization—and therefore humanity—situating her as savage, closer to animals, and stripping her of culture and indeed that which makes us human.

Since Cyprus joined the European Union in May 2004, Greek-Cypriots emphasize their identities as European and differentiate from Turks (and thus Turkish-Cypriots with whom they share their small country), the Middle East, and the East in general. The added dimension of “visually-foreign” people from Asia has complicated existing identity politics and opened new debates about racism and xenophobia within the Greek-Cypriot community. However, the idea of immigrants gaining citizenship in Cyprus is still a sensitive issue for most Greek-Cypriots. It is important to emphasize that “immigration” itself is already a highly emotionally charged concept for Greek-Cypriots, linked to the 1974 war and the arrival of mainland Turkish settlers in the north of Cyprus. While Turkey still looms large in popular fears about the future of the Republic of Cyprus for Greek-Cypriots, immigrants are the new “eastern Other”; A survey of Greek Cypriots done by the RAI market research company in 2002 found that 81% of Greek-Cypriots polled believed that social problems in the country were a direct result of the influx of foreigners to the island.² Even the media in Cyprus has gone so far as to call the recent influx of Asian migrants “The Second Invasion,” the first being the Turkish invasion of 1974.³

² The Cyprus Weekly, November 22-28, 2002, p. 12

³ This comparison aired on all major local television news stations in 2002.

Despite the fact that the recent media attention has continued to focus almost exclusively on the two largest ethnic communities on the island—the Greek-Cypriot majority and the Turkish-Cypriot minority—and its continued political conflict, the very presence of “visibly foreign” Others has recently begun to open up the Greek Cypriot society to issues of race and racism. Over the last several years, a small number of concerned Greek Cypriot citizens have formed support and outreach organizations to try and begin confronting racism in relation to immigrants. The media has also begun to present stories on migrant women, the treatment of foreign maids, the issues of trafficking in women, media racism, etc.⁴ There is a recent, albeit quiet, debate which is beginning to create awareness among Cypriots about their everyday practices towards foreign “others” on the island.

That growing awareness is coupled with legal pressure from supranational bodies like the European Union to accept and tolerate difference. Perhaps given enough time, Greek-Cypriots will become more open and tolerant of the diverse social reality that is around them. However, the ability for Greek-Cypriots to conceptualize or accept members of particular ethnic groups as equal citizens may not be so quick in coming, particularly if South Asians continue to be channeled to Cyprus as unskilled service workers and continue to be severely economically and socially marginalized as they are today.

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⁴ For example, March 24, 2006 edition of the Cyprus Mail highlights the need for journalists to be more culturally sensitive and to avoid reproducing ethnic stereotypes.