

THE CYPRUS PROBLEM:

“WHEN WE ALL THINK ALIKE, NO ONE THINKS VERY MUCH”¹

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Scratch the surface of any negotiating team participating in the Cyprus peace talks for the last 40 years or so and what you will most probably find is an array of middle-aged, British-educated, male lawyers and civil servants, associated each time with the party coalition in power. Bearing in mind that five out of seven Cypriot presidents had trained as lawyers (even His Beatitude Archbishop Makarios III had studied Law) and an equal, albeit incongruent, percentage of them had been British-trained, this should come as no surprise. We all have, after all, the tendency to affiliate ourselves with someone we feel more comfortable with and that usually includes someone of the same gender, background, education and experience. Therefore, it is no coincidence that the women are nowhere to be seen.

Indeed, if one ventures into the murky territory of looking for prominent Greek Cypriot women who have so far played a substantial role in local politics and thus, subsequently, in attempts to resolve the major foreign policy predicament that is the Cyprus problem, among what constitutes half the population, in a timeframe spanning 55 years from the inception of the Republic, only three (!) women can be classified as such, having served as Foreign Minister, Attorney General and EU Commissioner respectively. All three of them made headway along an endless sea of suits; they stood out by outshining their peers, both in terms of academic qualifications, professional integrity and hard work. They insisted until their achievements could no longer be ignored, forcing the argument home that this time the right guy for the job had to be a woman.

But if those were difficult times, with few women being equipped to command such positions of power, what about today? As the negotiation process, more than any other time, seems to be heading to a solution, facilitated by both a female UN Secretary General Special Representative (Lisa Bittenheim) and a female Head of the UN Peacekeeping Forces (Major General Kristin Lund), the Greek Cypriot women around the negotiating table remain conspicuous in their absence. Why that poses a problem of some particular kind remains a mystery to many (men). Are women anyway not the ones taking minutes, preparing working notes, undertaking administration and research tasks, discreetly swinging those box files around? Are they not occasionally asked to head a team or two, granted participation in the Technical Committees running in parallel with

formal negotiations? Are they not often responsible for the necessary nitty-gritty groundwork in the sidelines without which decisions cannot be made?

If one takes the rational actor model at heart, then, putting questions of justice and thus, equal female representation in decision-making positions aside, such notable absence of diversity among this particular group of decision-makers, would not be a problem. Whether decisions regarding the resolution of the Cyprus problem are taken by the closed circle of the current entourage of the President's *men* (a manifestation of 'denocracy' i.e. the practice of confidentially deciding in a 'den') or anyone else for that matter, this should produce no difference in outcome. Or should it?

Theory has it that agents make choices based on rational preferences and constraints, but in this case, we are specifically concerned with men's preferences, based on male perceptions of constraints. An exemplary case of such masculine thinking is pointed out by those Pentagon papers that reveal that Lyndon Johnson refused to withdraw from the Vietnam War, as he felt he would not appear very 'manly'. So much for rational preferences and rational constraints.

In fact, cognitive/behavioural analysis points out that the stickiness of the leader's preconceived beliefs, convictions and perceptions, the way that the leader processes information and his/her individual personality traits make an enormous difference as to how outcomes are arrived at. Adding to the perils and possible pitfalls of leadership, possibilities of a debacle loom larger if a decision-maker chooses to take unchallenged decisions in a group of like-minded people (in this case, a group of men more often than not in the President's own spitting image). The aptly described 'groupthink' phenomenon befits a number of spectacular fiascoes in foreign policy decisions, often arrived at by even the best and brightest among leaders, who sleepwalked their way to disaster, in the absence of a devil's advocate to blow the whistle of danger (John F. Kennedy and the Bay of Pigs incident comes pointedly to mind).

Even if there is no intention to deceive, or let alone fail, information presented in such an exclusive 'old boys' club would be routinely handled by joining the missing dots in a way convenient and/or acceptable in the eyes of the beholders. In the absence of a diversity of perspectives, what happens is that opinions converge, tunnel-vision prevails and consensus remains unchallenged to avoid upsetting a tightly-knit homogeneous team. Lack of diversity comes at a huge price.

In fact, experience shows that bringing the female perspective on the table pays off. The recent P5+1 nuclear deal with Iran was brokered by three women. When Federica Mogherini was asked how the deal was made, she said: "when the men veered off course and went on historical tangents or started to get tangled into debates about who gave more, the

women walked them back to the present” -simply put, the women never saw this as a pissing contest but as a results-driven process of opportunity.

At a point in time where we know that half of all peace agreements worldwide fail within the first five yearsⁱⁱ, with less than 8% of themⁱⁱⁱ having had any significant female contribution, perhaps it is time we did things in Cyprus a little differently, time we did things the smart way, time we brought the women into the picture.

ⁱ As quoted by Walter Lippmann, well- known political commentator, advisor to American President Woodrow Wilson.

ⁱⁱ See the 1990s Human Security Report Project.

ⁱⁱⁱ World Economic Forum data vouch for this number.