



**ADDRESS BY THE LAW COMMISSIONER  
OF THE REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS, MS. LEDA KOURSOUNBA,  
AS HEAD OF THE CYPRUS DELEGATION  
AT THE CONSIDERATION BY THE COMMITTEE  
ON THE ELIMINATION OF DISCRIMINATION  
AGAINST WOMEN  
OF THE EIGHTH  
PERIODIC REPORT OF CYPRUS  
SUBMITTED UNDER ARTICLE 18 OF THE CONVENTION  
ON THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS  
OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN**

**GENEVA  
4 JULY 2018**

**-- CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY --**

Madam Chairwoman,  
Distinguished Members of the Committee,

It is, indeed, an honour and a privilege for me and the other members of the delegation of the Republic of Cyprus to appear before your Committee in order to present and elaborate on the 8<sup>th</sup> Periodic Report of Cyprus, submitted under Article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

Please allow me to present the members of our delegation:

- Myself, the Law Commissioner of the Republic of Cyprus, an independent officer, directly accountable to the President of the Republic, having competence, inter alia, to make proposals for the reform of the national legislation in order to achieve compatibility with international human rights instruments, like the CEDAW, and to prepare the country reports under such international treaties.
- The Permanent Representative of the Republic to the United Nations in Geneva, H.E. Ambassador George Kasoulides,
- Mr Demetris Samuel, Deputy Permanent Representative
- Ms Niki Andreou, Ministry of Justice and Public Order,
- Mr Costas Veis, Cyprus Police Headquarters,
- Ms Despo Kyprianou, Ministry of Education and Culture,
- Ms Natalia Andreou, Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance,
- Ms Paraskevi Voskaridou, Ministry of Interior,
- Ms Michaelia Avani, Second Secretary, Permanent Mission of Cyprus

*Madam Chairwoman,*

Cyprus attaches great significance to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), as the principal human rights instrument affecting the status of women in society, and takes seriously into consideration the recommendations made by your Committee in the framework of Government policy relating to gender equality. We strongly believe that, this process of review is a critical element in our efforts towards achieving our common goal, and, in this context, we look forward to engaging with you in the constructive dialogue, which will follow.

Cyprus has been a party to CEDAW, since 1985, and has been submitting its Country Reports since.

During the period under review, Cyprus has made considerable progress and headway in the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. Though in the last five years, the financial crisis has affected the rate of progress in certain areas, the general picture remains satisfactory and major efforts have been made to promote gender equality, particularly so since Cyprus' accession to the EU in 2004.

Therefore, we are here before you to report on the progress within this framework, which has been underlined by a commitment and a strong political will towards gender equality.

*Madam Chairwoman,*

## Policy development

During the period under review, a number of National Action Plans and Strategies have been developed, addressing issues of gender equality. New laws tackling gender inequalities have been enacted and new independent equality bodies have been set up. Furthermore, new policies have been formulated in the field of violence against women, trafficking in human beings, employment, social inclusion, education, health, public and political life, also with a view to highlighting the positive role women can play as agents of change.

These policies, which are set out in detail in our Country Report, include the National Action Plans on *Gender Equality 2014*, on *Trafficking in Human Beings in 2013 and 2016*, on *Youth Employment in 2014*, on *Violence in the Family in 2017*, on *Gender Equality in Education in 2018*, on *Minimising the Consequences of the Economic Crisis in Public Healthcare in 2013*, as well as the *National Strategy for the Prevention and Management of Violence in the Schools (2018-2022)*, also covering the gender aspect.

## Strategic Action Plan on Gender Equality

The most significant achievement in terms of policy formulation was the adoption of the *Strategic Action Plan on Gender Equality (2014-2017)*, which incorporated a holistic approach to gender equality, addressing six priority areas, namely: Administrative Reform, Improvement of the Legislative Framework, Balanced Participation in Decision Making Posts, Combating Violence against Women, Economic Empowerment of Women and Elimination of Social Stereotypes and Prejudices. It was specially designed to promote the implementation of the Concluding Observations of your

Committee on the Cyprus Report of 2013, which proved to be of fundamental importance to us. Furthermore, the Beijing Platform for Action and EU Law policies were taken into account. Its development was a collective achievement of close collaboration of the Government and local authorities, the Commissioner for Gender Equality, women's organizations, NGOs, academic institutions and human rights bodies.

A report on the evaluation of its implementation, conducted in 2017, revealed that significant progress had been made in the areas of employment, economic empowerment of women, combating violence against women, while not much progress has been observed in the areas of mass media and political participation, areas which primarily reflect social attitudes and stereotypes.

At present, the third *National Action Plan on Gender Equality 2018-2021* is being drafted, again as a project of close collaboration of the Government, local authorities, the Commissioner for Gender Equality, women's organizations, NGOs, academic institutions and human rights bodies. Drawing from the report on the evaluation of the second Action Plan, the third Action Plan will include the following six thematic areas/objectives that will form the key priorities for action over the next three years:

- Combating all forms of violence against women and gradual implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (“Istanbul Convention”).
- Promoting balanced participation between women and men in decision-making positions in public, political, social and economic life;
- Modernizing / Improving the legislative framework;
- Protecting and Empowering Vulnerable Groups of Women;

- Promoting equality between men and women in employment and
- Eliminating Gender Stereotypes and Social Prejudices.

### Institutional mechanisms

In terms of institutional development, the Equality Unit of the Ministry of Justice and Public Order, the Commissioner for Gender Equality and the National Mechanism for Women's Rights, having both co-ordinating and advisory functions, continue to play a leading role in the overall promotion of gender equality. These include: law reform, awareness-raising activities, support of NGOs and the promotion of gender mainstreaming. In recent years, the National Mechanism has focused its work on implementation of the Strategic Action Plan on Gender Equality, the preparation of the first National Action Plan on the implementation of the UNSCR 1325 on "Women, Peace and Security", the reform of the Family Law and the implementation of the Istanbul Convention.

In addition, during the period under review, a number of equality bodies have been set up or strengthened, giving a new momentum to the promotion of gender equality, mentioned in our Country Report and the Answers to the List of Issues. Special reference I make to the *Commissioner for Gender Equality*, appointed by the President of the Republic in 2014, with a remit to further promote gender equality issues and women's rights in Cyprus. The Commissioner is responsible, inter alia, for the promotion of equality between women and men and the elimination of discrimination against women, the monitoring and coordination of the work of the National Mechanism for Women's Rights, the submission of proposals for legislative safeguarding of equality and the elimination of discrimination in the legislation, the launching of seminars and campaigns to raise public awareness and, in particular,

women's, on their rights, as well as the utilization of European programmes in the field of gender equality.

In the same period, the involvement of women's organizations and NGOs in policy formulation in areas, such as, family and demography, children, peace, social inclusion, employment, violence and trafficking, has increased significantly and their contribution has been vitally important in ensuring that the needs of all women, including vulnerable groups, are taken into account.

### Vulnerable groups of women

Cyprus is committed to addressing the problems of vulnerable groups of women, such as, migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, disabled, elderly, rural, single mothers and LGBTI.

New legislation was enacted in 2015, providing for the civil partnership of the same or different sex couples, ensuring the same rights and the same access to the welfare and social protection system as married couples, with the exception of adoptions.

A bill is in preparation, setting a clear statutory process for correcting the registered sex of trans persons (adults and minors). This will only require a decision by the Registrar and not previous medical intervention or psychiatric reports, promoting respect of the right to self-determination. The consequences on the personal situation, family and other relationships of the person whose gender is redefined, will also be regulated

Through legislation, like the Guaranteed Minimum Income and Other Benefits Law and the legislative provisions concerning single parent families, unmarried couples living together are legally recognized and, thus affording

them the same rights as married couples. Single parent families, mostly women, are entitled to additional support, such as, an additional monetary allowance for each child, and complementary services (care and assistance, transportation, education etc) based on socioeconomic criteria.

Concerning asylum-seeking women, a mechanism has been established for early identification of their specific needs (upon submission of the asylum application and throughout the asylum procedure), while, properly trained female officers and interpreters undertake the examination of their claim. Training and guidelines on preventing gender-related persecution are systematically provided to the staff of the Asylum Service and other Services involved by, mainly, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and within the framework of the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) Special Support Plan to Cyprus.

In the Health Sector, the *National Action Plan on Minimizing the Consequences of the Economic Crisis in Public Healthcare (2013-2015)* has been specifically designed for vulnerable groups in order to intensify the existing public health programmes. Further, women aged over 63 and with limited ability to travel and/or mobility problems, receive nursing care at home.

#### Development of statistical data – Training

The systematic development of gender-disaggregated statistics, in the sectors of employment, education, health, poverty, quality of life and violence has been one of the main priorities of the Statistical Service of Cyprus in recent years.

The Cyprus Academy of Public Administration, in collaboration with the National Mechanism for Women's Rights, the Commissioner for Administration and Protection of Human Rights, the Gender Equality Committee in Employment and Vocational Training and expert consultants, has, during the period 2014-2017, intensified its efforts and has developed training programmes on gender mainstreaming, addressed, mainly, to civil servants and, in particular, the focal points for gender equality, appointed in all Ministries.

### Employment

During the period under review, gender mainstreaming and positive action measures were gradually implemented at all levels in various policy areas, particularly, in the area of employment and vocational training, aiming at the economic empowerment of women. These include: measures for the integration and re-integration of women into the labour market; the reconciliation of family and professional life; the closing of the gender pay gap; and the support of women's entrepreneurship. Furthermore, several *activation schemes* were introduced to tackle unemployment and increase labour market participation.

The gender pay gap has decreased significantly and keeps following a downward trend, reaching a percentage of 13,9% in 2016, decreasing from 16,8% in 2010. The Republic of Cyprus now ranks 5th among EU Member States, having accomplished the highest percentage decrease in the gender pay gap during the period 2010-2015, despite the economic crisis, and having to implement a strict economic adjustment program for the 2013-2016. As several of the measures are ongoing or expected to have long-term benefits, and due to the gradual but continuous advancement of women's position in

the labour market, the downward trend of the gender pay gap is expected to continue.

Further, several maternity protection legislative provisions have been enacted, improving the level of protection for pregnant women. In March 2018, the Penal Code was amended with the addition of the offence of "Preventing a mother from nursing", aiming to safeguard the right of nursing mothers to breastfeed their children in public places.

Additionally, in 2017, the right to two weeks paid paternity leave has been safeguarded through legislation, coupled with specialized legislation for the protection of employment for fathers who take their paternity leave.

### Violence against women

Preventing and combating violence of any form and, particularly, violence against women is an issue of high priority for Cyprus. In this regard, important developments have taken place, such as:

- The ratification of the *Istanbul Convention*, in November 2017,
- the development of the *second National Action Plan for the Prevention and Handling of Violence in the Family (2017-2019)*,
- the development and adoption of a *Manual of Interdepartmental Procedures*,
- the encouragement to report cases of violence,
- the launching of awareness-raising campaigns addressed to the general public and women in particular,
- the systematic training of professionals working in the field,

- the strengthening of the Police Domestic Violence and Child Abuse Office,
- the Government support to NGOs providing protection and assistance to women victims,
- the improvement of data collection, and
- the development of research in the field of violence against women.

In the framework of the implementation of the *Strategic Action Plan on Equality between Women and Men 2014-2017*, large awareness raising campaigns have been implemented to encourage women to report incidents of violence and to sensitize professionals and the society at large. Further, in 2016, the National Mechanism for Women's Rights worked on the design of actions aimed at prevention. More specifically, it has launched seminars, lectures and workshops for university students on gender-based violence, domestic violence and trafficking in women, aiming at awareness-raising.

To give full effect to the Istanbul Convention, a bill aimed at criminalizing harassment and stalking, has already been tabled before Parliament, whilst a second bill, criminalizing all forms of violence against women, is currently being prepared. In the same vein, the Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance has called for proposals from NGOs for the development of two new shelters, as well as a Centre of Multidisciplinary Support for women victims of violence.

The *Advisory Committee for the Prevention and Combating of Violence in the Family* aims to create, inter alia, a centralized data mechanism for gathering reliable and comparable data on domestic violence in compliance with the Istanbul Convention and the EU Victims' Rights Directive. [2012/29/EU]

Special emphasis is given to the mobilization of NGOs in relation to the prevention and handling of violence in the family. In 2017 the amount of €137,000, was granted to the *Association for the Prevention and Handling of Violence in the Family*, through the Grants-in-Aid Scheme, for the support of its Shelters, the Crisis Center and other relevant programmes. The Association operates two shelters which provide a safe environment for women who have experienced violence and are at immediate physical and psychological risk from their family. In addition, with the financial support of the Government, a telephone helpline for the victims of domestic and gender-based violence, run by the same NGO, is operating as of January 2017, on a 24-hour basis.

The Cyprus Police has also been making continuous and systematic efforts, aiming at higher levels of sensitivity, awareness and professionalism among police members handling cases of domestic violence. *A Protocol on Risk Assessment of Intimate Partners Violence* has been implemented by the Police since January, 2018. Within this framework, specialized training programmes are carried out, aimed at police members dealing with these issues, as well as newly recruited police officers.

In addition, violence against women is the subject matter of a specific Project, run by Police and a partnership of NGOs, which aims to prevent and combat violence against women through awareness-raising campaigns on gender issues. *A Police Training Manual* has been prepared, to be used in police training as a guiding tool for dealing with such cases.

### Trafficking in women

Combating trafficking in human beings (THB), in general, and trafficking in women and children, in particular, has been another priority issue for Cyprus.

During the period under review, new comprehensive tools have been developed in a continuous effort to combat trafficking in human beings that affects significantly women. These are: (a) a new legislation, which, inter alia, transposes Directive 2011/36/EU into Cypriot law, (b) the National Referral Mechanism and (c) 2 the two National Action Plans Against Trafficking in Human Beings (namely, 2013-2015 and 2016-2018). Further, the Anti-trafficking Police Office has been strengthened with specialized agents, thus expediting investigations and prosecutions. Several cases have been brought before the court, resulting to convictions and increased sentences. The support and protection given to victims, especially women, has been a major factor in successfully filing a case before the court.

Overall, Cyprus has succeeded in taking the crime of trafficking in human beings out of invisibility, placing it in the social sphere, including schools, universities and army camps. Awareness-raising in trafficking in human beings has also been achieved through press conferences and daily news reporting, training programmes and seminars. At the administrative level, it has grown into an ongoing consideration of policy development.

The US Department of State Report just released (June 2018) acknowledges that, the Cyprus Government has made key achievements during the period under review, (including convicting more traffickers and increasing victim protection efforts by improving the quality of service, increasing resources to NGOs, and holding monthly trainings for Government run shelter staff). Therefore, Cyprus was upgraded to Tier1.

## Political and public life

The balanced participation of women and men in decision-making positions in public and political life, has remained a priority for the *National Mechanism for Women's Rights* in line with the *Strategic Action Plan on Gender Equality*. Measures taken towards this direction, include awareness-raising campaigns with the broad participation of women's organisations, meetings and contacts with political parties and media organizations, dissemination of statistical data and research findings, exchange of good practices in the framework of conferences and seminars. These were enhanced, particularly, in view of the Parliamentary and Local elections of 2016.

Despite the increasing numbers of women actively involved in public and political life in Cyprus, women are still underrepresented at the decision-making level. However, in terms of political appointments, high-ranking posts have been filled by women: The Council of Ministers, at present, includes women as Minister of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance and Minister of Transport, Communication and Works; also, as Deputy Minister of Shipping and Deputy Government Spokesperson.

Women have also been appointed at high ranking positions, such as Law Commissioner, Commissioner for Children's Rights, Commissioner for Administration and Human Rights, Commissioner for Gender Equality, Commissioner for the Environment, Commissioner for the Protection of Personal Data; also as Chairperson of a number of important authorities, such as, the Cyprus Radio-television Authority, the Securities and Exchange Commission, the Cyprus Hydrocarbons Company, the Commission for the Protection of Competition and the Gender Equality in Employment and Vocational Training Committee.

Furthermore, women hold the constitutional posts of the Governor of the Central Bank and the Accountant-General.

It is important to note that at these high ranking political positions, there is a shift to appoint women in sectors that traditionally were considered to be within male expertise.

There is a continuous increase of women in the Judiciary, where women constitute 50% of the judges (59 out of 119). There are also 5 women out of the 13 judges in the Supreme Court.

In the hierarchy of the civil service, in 2014, women held 38.5% of the senior posts, compared to 33% in 2011.

We are, however, concerned about the under-representation of women in the House of Representatives and in the Municipal Councils, as resulted from the 2016 elections. In Parliament only 17.86% are women whilst 10.26% were elected to the post of Mayors; only 4.65% are members of Municipal Councils, 14.85% members of Village Councils and 45.2% members of School Boards

Also, women continue to be seriously under-represented in business leadership positions. They represent, on average, around 10.8% of the largest publicly listed companies at a national level, though they participate actively in the labour market and are more qualified.

The National Mechanism for Women's Rights, as well as several NGOs have raised the issue of positive action measures and, in particular, the use of

quotas in the candidates' lists, in the framework of their campaigns to increase women's participation in political and public life. Though they have not yet been officially adopted, recently, there seems to be a more positive approach by Government and civil society.

## Education

Data from the Report of the European Institute of Gender Equality (EIGE 2017) on Gender segregation/differentiation in education, training and the labour market in the EU Member States, show that the percentage of women graduates of tertiary education in Cyprus (34,6%), is higher than men's (29,7%) as well as than the EU's mean score in women and men, respectively. They also show that Cyprus has a high concentration of women in the fields of natural sciences, mathematics and statistics and it was one of the countries that has shown the biggest increase in these fields.

The findings of the international survey PISA 2015, focusing on 15-year olds, are in line with the findings of EIGE's Report, as it showed that, in Cyprus, in contrast with other OECD countries, girls outperformed boys in all three subjects (science (17 points difference), mathematics (5 points difference) and reading (52 points difference)).

Also, according to the Statistical Service of Cyprus, women have a much higher representation at all levels of tertiary education (bachelor, master and doctoral level), in private and public universities, in all ages.

[More precisely, these data show:

- For the years 2011 to 2016 women are higher represented than men, in total numbers (e.g. in 2015 – 2016: public universities: women 6429 / men 3695; private universities: women 4733 / men 4304).
- In 2016:

- for the ages between 30 – 34: women 62,1% / men 43,9%.
- for the ages between 25 – 64: women 45,7% / men 37,8%.
- In 2017
  - for ages between 30 – 34: women 63,5% / men 47,2%.
  - for ages between 25 – 64: women 46,2% / men 38,4%.]

The MOEC, through the Action Plan (2018 - 2020) of the Interdepartmental Committee for Gender Equality in Education, on the basis of the said international research findings, has set a number of goals in order to improve women's participation in political and public life and to promote gender equality and elimination of stereotypes.

## Health

The Ministry of Health offers accessibility to women for all Health and Public Health Services. It has developed a new *Strategic Plan for the years 2016-2018* and it will also continue to develop and implement National Programmes that target specific, vulnerable and age groups (i.e. elderly, children, women in reproductive age).

Additionally, in 2016, the Ministry of Health has introduced, free of charge, the HPV Vaccination, to 12 year old girls, through School Health Services (to public and private schools), providing protection from the sexually transmitted virus. The simultaneous intensification of lectures on reproductive issues, contraception, and information on HIV / AIDS, and sexually transmitted diseases will build a robust background.

Regarding contraception, the Ministry of Health provides, free of charge, oral contraceptives to vulnerable women aged 18-55.

A recent development is the de-criminalization of abortion by an amendment of the Penal Code (Section 169A), pursuant to which termination of

pregnancy, up to the 12<sup>th</sup> week, is not a crime, thus promoting respect of women' s reproductive rights and autonomy.

### Reform of the Family Law

The reform of the Family Law has been among our priorities during the period under review. To this end, the Ministry of Justice and Public Order, calling upon the expertise of judges, lawyers, the Commissioner for Children's Rights and academics in the field, proceeded with the preparation of seven bills, which are now under discussion in Parliament.

These bills aim to modify the Family Law in an effort to safeguard the rights of women and men, as well as the best interest of the child, thus achieving full harmonization with relevant international and European Human Rights instruments, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

This modernisation of family law will particularly benefit women, in many ways, such as: (a) the protection of family home is strengthened, with the provision that neither of the spouses will be able to dispose of it without the consent of the other, (b) efficient procedures for obtaining information on spousal property for the purpose of calculating alimony are established, and (c) the presumption of one spouse's contribution to the increase in assets will be revised and reassessed.

In line with CEDAW 2013 Concluding Observations, a *Research on the economic consequences of divorce on both spouses – Gender-based economic disparities of divorced spouses*, has been conducted. The survey has, inter alia, manifested that the economic crisis has had devastating effects on the standard of living of divorced spouses, especially women, who

are the primary caregivers of their children. Major issues include the reduction of their income, the increase of unemployment, the elimination of social service programmes for children and the defaulted loans. Taking stock of these findings, the new *National Action Plan on Gender Equality* sets out the aim of Protecting Vulnerable Groups of Women, such as single mothers. Numerous actions are planned in this regard.

Madam Chairwoman,

### Future priorities

During the period under review, there were significant positive developments in most areas covered by the CEDAW and, undoubtedly, the position of women in the Cypriot society has improved. This was also the outcome of the evaluation of the implementation of the Strategic Action Plan on Gender Equality, which took place in 2017.

Despite the significant positive developments, traditional perceptions regarding the role of women and men, as well as gender stereotypes, continue to impede de facto realisation of gender equality. This is reflected, inter alia, in the under-representation of women in political and public life, in the continuing problem of violence against women (though we are encouraged by the fact that, it is on a decreasing scale), the gender pay gap and gender segregation in employment. Based on this acknowledgment, Cyprus is determined to intensify its efforts to eliminate gender stereotypes, primarily in the sphere of education and the media.

More attention will be given to addressing the problems and multiple discrimination faced by women belonging to vulnerable groups and to ensure

the full implementation of the existing legal framework safeguarding women's rights.

Cyprus is committed to continue to work for the further advancement of women, despite the global economic crisis, which has negatively affected the country's economy and social cohesion. The greatest challenge for the future is, to maintain and secure the necessary resources for effective operation of institutional mechanisms and further development of programmes promoting gender equality, so as to prevent any setback in what has been achieved so far. After all, gender equality should not be regarded as an economic burden for the society; it should be considered a prerequisite for social development and growth.

Thank you Madam Chairwoman.