



**ADDRESS BY THE LAW COMMISSIONER
OF THE REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS, MS. LEDA KOURSOMBA,
AS HEAD OF THE CYPRUS DELEGATION
AT THE CONSIDERATION BY THE COMMITTEE
ON THE ELIMINATION OF DISCRIMINATION
AGAINST WOMEN
OF THE COMBINED SIXTH AND SEVENTH
PERIODIC REPORTS OF CYPRUS
SUBMITTED UNDER ARTICLE 18 OF THE CONVENTION
ON THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS
OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN**

**GENEVA
15 FEBRUARY 2013**

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 6th and 7th, Periodic Reports 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 responsible to the President of the Republic, with a fix mandate of six years, having competence, inter alia, to make proposals for 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 Leonidas Pantelides.
- Ms Maro Varnavidou, Ministry of Justice and Public Order, Secretary General of the National Machinery for Women's Rights and Vice-Chairwoman of the Advisory Committee on Violence in the Family.
- Mr Costas Veis, Cyprus Police Headquarters
- Mr Demetris Michaelides, Department of Labour, Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance
- Ms Myrto Azina- Chronides, Medical Officer, Ministry of Health
- Ms Eirini Petridou, Ministry of Education and Culture

Madam Chairwoman,

Cyprus attaches great significance to the 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.

The examination of our previous Report before this Committee took place following a major step with a catalytic impact in the history of Cyprus, that is, its accession to the European Union on May 1st 2004. Cyprus now, as a full member of the European Union, moved forward in promoting women's advancement in this new environment together with other European states. Cyprus has just successfully completed the Presidency of the Council of the EU. Among the main priorities of our Presidency was the issue of violence against women, in the framework of which it promoted the designation of the year 2015 as the "EU Year to End Violence against Women", the development of a common European Strategy and a coordinated European awareness raising campaign on Violence against women, as well, as the establishment of a European help-line for victims of gender based violence.

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

Within the context of a robust economy that Cyprus has been enjoying for many years, the European Council, after Eurogroup's recommendation, decided Cyprus to enter the European

Monetary Union in January 2008. Due to the economic achievements our country managed to increase the standard of living of both women and men and promoted numerous reforms, upgrading the role of women in society.

In 2009 Cyprus was hit by the world financial turmoil, the economic impact of which gradually spread over all sectors and areas of life. This caused severe consequences, that in turn decreased prosperity of people, created unemployment, in particular, youth unemployment, while the well-being of the country was overall constrained considerably. This has led Cyprus, in June 2012, to request financial assistance from the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Troika). Within this context, the Troika and the Government of the Republic of Cyprus agreed to a draft Memorandum of Understanding, in which fiscal consolidation is necessary to ensure sound public finances and drive the economy towards a sustainable growth path. The economic adjustment programme agreed should address short and medium-term financial, fiscal and structural challenges facing the country.

I am in the regretful position to remind you that, due to the continuing illegal occupation and effective control of 37% of its territory by Turkish military forces since 1974, the Government is unable to ensure the full realization of women's rights and gender equality in the whole of its territory and, therefore, it is also deprived of its ability to apply gender equality laws, policies and programmes to those living in the part of the country under foreign occupation. It is relevant at this point to remind you that the accession of Cyprus to EU was subject to Protocol 10 to the Act of Accession of 2003, according to which the application of the *acquis* is "suspended in those areas in the Republic of Cyprus in which the Government of the Republic of Cyprus does not exercise effective control". In view of this, no reliable information and data are available regarding the enjoyment of the relevant rights by the population living in the area that is not controlled by the Government. All information and data provided concern the government controlled areas. This is a fact reflected in the Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the question of human rights in Cyprus (1 February 2013).

Madam Chairwoman,

Policy development

The period under review, following the accession of Cyprus into the European Union and the enactment of an impressive number of legislative measures related to gender equality, has been a critical period for the development of a national policy on equality between women and men. A number of National Action Plans and strategies have been developed that, either specifically address issues of gender equality or incorporate gender mainstreaming. These, which are set out in detail in our Country Report, include the National Action Plans on employment in 2004, on trafficking in human beings in 2005 and 2010, on gender equality in 2007, on social protection and social inclusion in 2008 and on violence in the family in 2010.

Action Plan on Gender Equality

The most significant achievement in terms of policy formulation is the preparation of the first National Action Plan on Gender Equality (2007-2013), adopted in 2007, which incorporates a holistic approach to gender equality, addressing six priority areas, namely: employment, education, decision-making, social rights, violence and gender stereotypes.

Its development was a collective achievement of close collaboration of the Government and local authorities, women's organizations, NGOs, academic institutions and human rights bodies. It was formulated on the basis of international treaties and recommendations, particularly the CEDAW and the Concluding Comments of your Committee on the Cyprus Report in 2006. In addition to the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), EU Law and policies (such as the Roadmap on Gender Equality 2006 - 2010) were also taken into account.

It is worth mentioning that, an interim report on the evaluation of the implementation of the National Action Plan on Gender Equality, covering the period 2007-2010, was carried out by an external consultant at the request of the Ministry of Justice and Public Order. This report revealed that, significant progress has been made in the areas of employment and combating violence against women, while little progress has been observed in the areas of education, mass media and political participation, areas which primarily reflect social attitudes and stereotypes. It, further, revealed that the involvement of sectoral Ministries in the promotion of gender equality has increased, the inter-departmental collaboration on gender equality issues has been strengthened and the local authorities have become more active on gender equality issues.

Institutional mechanisms

In terms of institutional development, the Equality Unit of the Ministry of Justice and Public Order and the National Machinery for Women's Rights, having 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 Machinery has focused its work on the coordination and implementation of the National Action Plan on Gender Equality, as well as the coordination and implementation of the Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the EU programme in the field of gender equality.

A number of equality bodies have been set up or strengthened during the period under review, giving a new momentum to the promotion of gender equality. Special reference is made to the Parliamentary Committee on Equal Opportunities for Men and Women, set up in 2006, which primarily focused on monitoring the implementation of the National Action Plan on Gender Equality. This Committee has been consolidated in 2011 with the Human Rights Committee, and re-named "Human Rights and Equal Opportunities between Women and Men Committee".

The Ombudsperson, in her capacity as an independent Equality and Anti-Discrimination Authority, through her investigations, interventions and reports has had an important impact on society, regarding gender equality issues. This explains the continuous increase in the number of complaints submitted by women and men facing discrimination. As stated in the Annual Report of the Equality Body, 144 complaints were submitted in 2011, compared to 121 in 2010, (19% increase). The Anti-Discrimination Authority received 158 complaints in 2012, compared to 134 in 2011, (18% increase).

The Ombudsperson, acting as the Commissioner for Human Rights, issued in January 2013 a Report addressing domestic violence against women in Cyprus. The Report aims to identify important aspects of the problem and to highlight any shortcomings and deficiencies in the institutional framework for addressing gender-based violence and domestic abuse incidents in an effort to make the fight against such phenomena effective.

The Equality Inspectors of the Department of Labour (of the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance), play a significant role in combating gender discrimination in employment. By Law [the Equal Treatment between Men and Women in Employment and Vocational Training Law - Law 205(I)/2002], they have competence, inter alia, to examine complaints relating to discrimination issues, including pregnancy and sexual harassment, and to advise employers and employees on their rights and obligations.

The Gender Equality Committee in Employment and Vocational Training established by the Law, has also proved to be very active by monitoring the enforcement of the equal treatment legislation in employment and by undertaking a broad spectrum of initiatives in the field of training, awareness-raising and research. It has competence to provide to victims of discrimination independent assistance, including legal aid.

During the period under review, the involvement of women's organizations and NGOs in policy formulation in a number of areas, such as, family and demography, children, social inclusion,

employment, violence and trafficking has increased significantly and their contribution have been vitally important in ensuring that the needs of all women, including vulnerable groups, are taken into account.

Development of statistical data - Training

The development of gender-disaggregated statistics in a more systematic way has been observed during the period under review, with the Statistical Service of Cyprus playing a leading role in this effort. The publication of “The Statistical Portrait of Women in Cyprus in 2008”, followed by an updated version in 2012, provides gender disaggregated data in the sectors of employment, education, health, poverty, public life and violence; this will be an ongoing project.

The Cyprus Academy of Public Administration, in collaboration with the National Machinery for Women’s Rights and expert consultants, has, during the period 2007-2012, 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 being 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 reintegration 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.

Amendments to the national anti-discrimination legislation, helped to reinforce the protection of the victims of discrimination. For example, the amendment of the maternity legislation in 2011 has afforded stricter protection from dismissal of pregnant workers, even in cases where the employer was unaware of the pregnancy at the time of dismissal. Pursuant to the legislation the pregnant worker has the right to supply the employer with a doctor’s certificate within 5 working days following the dismissal or notice of dismissal and the employer is obliged withdraw the dismissal.

It should also be noted that, in 2011 the female employment rate in ages 15-64 reached the level of 62%, the gender pay gap decreased to 18,3%, the maternity leave was extended to 18 weeks and the parental leave to 18 weeks (23 weeks for widowed parents). The proportion of self-employed women increased from 31% in 2007 to 34% in 2010, while the expansion of child care facilities, in particular for children aged 3-6 years, meets the needs of working parents and children to a satisfactory level.

Vulnerable groups

Cyprus is committed to address the problems of vulnerable groups of women, such as migrants, women with disabilities, elderly women, rural women and single mothers.

Policies and legislative initiatives focus primarily on migrant women and, in particular, female domestic workers. Concrete measures to ensure their legal protection include the setting up of a Ministerial Committee to revise the employment policy, a mechanism for resolving complaints for violations of the employment contracts and the increase of the minimum gross salary.

Efforts have also been made by the National Machinery and NGOs to map the needs of vulnerable groups of women through research and awareness-raising among relevant stakeholders and the public at large, about their rights and their social inclusion.

Violence against women

Major developments have also taken place in the area of violence against women, an issue of a high priority for Cyprus.

In the field of violence in the family, these include the enactment of a new law in 2004 [Law on Violence in the Family (Prevention and Protection of Victims) (Amendment) - L.212 (I)/2004], the development of the first National Action Plan for the Prevention and Handling of Family Violence (2010-2013), the development and adoption of a Manual of Interdepartmental Procedures (currently in the process of revision), awareness-raising campaigns addressed to the general public and to women in particular, encouragement to report cases of violence, systematic training of professionals working in the field, strengthening of the Police Domestic Violence and Child Abuse Office, government support to NGOs providing protection and assistance to women victims, improvement of data collection, as well as the development of research in the field.

It is worth mentioning that in 2012, the first national research on the prevalence of domestic violence in Cyprus and its consequences on women's health, was carried out by the Advisory Committee for the Prevention and Combating of Domestic Violence with the support of the National Machinery for Women's Rights.

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. As a result, a number of important developments have taken place, including the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, the enactment of a new Law in 2007 [Combating of Trafficking and Exploitation of Human Beings and the Protection of Victims - L.87(I)/2007], which fully harmonizes national legislation with relevant international instruments and European acquis. This Law is currently under revision, primarily, in order to transpose the new EU Directive on preventing and combating of trafficking in human beings (2011/36/EU).

A National Action Plan Against Trafficking in Human Beings (2010-2012) was implemented whereas, one for the years 2013-2015 is in the process of preparation, in line with the new EU strategy 2012-2016 on trafficking. The establishment of the Multidisciplinary Coordinating Group for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (MCG), the setting up of a state shelter for female victims of sexual exploitation, the operation of a Police Office for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, the organisation of training seminars for professionals, (including police officers, prosecutors and judges as well as welfare officers), the preparation of a Police Manual on the identification of victims of trafficking, the preparation of a police operational guide to combat THB and the implementation of awareness raising activities, were also pursued. The upgrading of the national referral mechanism has been assigned to an NGO.

In response to the Concluding Comments of your Committee, Cyprus introduced, in 2008, a new system of permits for entry, residence and employment of third-country nationals, thus, abolishing the pre-existing visas for artists, revised the relevant procedures and contracts of employment as well as legislation regulating private employment agencies.

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 Machinery for Women's Rights in line with the National 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, particularly, in view of the Parliamentary and Local elections of 2006 and 2011.

We consider a positive development the fact that, at present, out of 11 Cabinet Ministers 4 are women, out of 13 members of the Supreme Court 3 are women, whereas out of 6 elected Members of the European Parliament 2 are women. Women appear in high ranking independent positions, such as Auditor-General, Accountant-General, Commissioner for Administration, Law Commissioner and Commissioner for Children's Rights, Chair of the Cyprus Securities and

Exchange Commission and Chair of the Commission for the Protection of Competition. Further, there is a continuous increase of women at the hierarchy of the civil service where, in 2011, women held 33% of the senior posts, as well as in the Judiciary, where women constitute 44% of the Judges.

We are, however, concerned about the under-representation of women in the House of Representatives and in the Municipal Councils, as resulted from the 2011 elections: Out of the 56 MPs, only 6 are women (representing 11%), whilst out of 468 elected members of Municipal Councils, only 84 are women, (representing 18%).

The use of quotas has been raised by the National Machinery and NGOs and discussed. However, the negative prevailing view (regarding their use on the candidates' list) has not changed.

A positive step is the fact that, for the first time, we have 2 women candidates for the Presidential elections taking place next Sunday.

The establishment of Women's Multicultural Center, as foreseen by the National Action Plan on Gender Quality, with the full support of the Government aiming to bring together women from all communities in Cyprus in the promotion on gender quality, reconciliation and peace, is a noteworthy initiative.

Education

In terms of education, Cyprus has achieved equal access to education for women, with statistics showing that more women than men are attending higher education institutions. Whereas in the past, there was a higher proportion of men completing tertiary education, in 2010 the trend was reversed with a higher proportion of women reaching the level of 32%, in comparison to 30% for men. Moreover, the percentage of women graduates of upper secondary level who pursue further studies, is higher than that of men- in 2010/11 being 84% for women and 72% for men. The percentage of women age 18-24 that have dropped out of the education system is significantly lower (8,11%) to that of men (15,2%). In the age group of 16-24, internet use is at the same level for both women and men.

It is important to mention that the ongoing Education Reform promotes equality. In contrast to the traditional curriculum, which is orientated towards providing equal opportunities for all children without assuming responsibility for inequality in the results, the reform curriculum applied, aims to offer every child the ability and the opportunity to achieve the educational potentials to the maximum without jeopardizing the quality of the provided education. An immediate result is the fact that, education in public schools at all levels has transformed and focuses, nowadays, more on accepting differences, tolerating, respecting others, as well as preparing tomorrow's citizens for living in an inclusive world where stereotypes are lifted and boundaries are abolished.

The Ministry of Education and Culture developed in 2009 an Action Plan on Gender Equality in Education, aiming at promoting a comprehensive and systematic approach to gender equality policies in education and training. Within this perspective, challenging traditional stereotypes on gender roles, have been regarded as a crucial point in the development of the new school curricula, in teacher training, in career advising and in the cultural programmes.

The University of Cyprus has upgraded its Gender Studies programmes, offering courses at post-graduate and doctorate levels, while all Universities have intensified their research work on women's issues, such as, the research on "the gendered map of Cyprus tertiary education" in 2009 and "the gender equality in employment" in 2012.

Health

In the field of Health, several programmes for women have been developed. In the framework of primary prevention, a network of GPs, Health Visitors and Community Nurses offers health

promoting services, such as public awareness and education campaigns on the strategies for Women's Health. Regarding the provision of health services, pre-natal care, delivery and post-natal services are offered on a regular basis. These services are offered for free to all migrant women, irrespective of their status, at the State Hospitals.

With the adoption of the "National strategic plan for the promotion of breast feeding" this year, Health Visitors will perform house visits and give active support, encouragement and care to young mothers.

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 interim evaluation of the implementation of the National Action Plan on Gender Equality, which took place in 2010.

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, the continuing problem of violence against women, as well as 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, as well as the media.

More attention will be given to address 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 working for the further advancement of women, despite the global economic crisis, which has already negatively affected the country's economy and social cohesion. The greatest challenge for the future is to maintain and secure the necessary resources for the effective operation of the institutional mechanisms and the 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, but as a prerequisite for social development and growth.

Thank you Madam Chairwoman