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Gender risks underlined



Susana Pavlou

MEETING HIGHLIGHTS POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION DANGERS TO WOMEN

By Demetra Molyva

Women in Cyprus are at greater risk of poverty and social exclusion than men because of gender inequality, mainly in the labour market.

The pay gap between men and women here is 23.9% one of the highest in the European Union. The risk of poverty is highest among elderly women.

“Gender inequality is the reason many women in Cyprus are at risk of poverty and social exclusion,” said Susana Pavlou, director of the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies.

She was addressing a meeting in Nicosia titled “Women, Poverty and Social Exclusion” coinciding with International Women’s Day on Monday (March 8) and the European year against poverty which is 2010.

“Although women in Cyprus are not a homogeneous group and overlap with other groups like people with disabilities and the elderly, poverty and social exclusion are not genderless. In all social groups and in all ages women are at a greater risk of poverty and social exclusion than men,” Pavlou told The Cyprus Weekly.

Although Cyprus has quite a high level of social cohesion there are many poverty groups or poverty pockets since inequalities in the labour market such as the pay gap between men and women have an

impact later on in life with elderly women running the risk of falling into the poverty trap.

“The pay gap between men and women, the fact that women earn less and have interrupted careers because of family obligations, and higher unemployment leads to lower pensions and much greater dependence on the social pension,” she said.

Elderly women are the majority of the recipients of the minimum pension.

“They are at the highest risk of poverty and social exclusion than any other of their age group in the European Union. Cypriot women over 70 have a worse fate,” Pavlou said.

Migrant women (third country nationals) have to a large extent contributed to women’s integration into the labour market here by substituting care services that should be provided by the state and are not.

“But the gender patterns of labour have not changed in Cyprus and we have other women doing the care work. Nothing is really changing. The gendered division of labour is not changing in Cyprus.”

She stressed that 88% of single parent families in Cyprus are single mothers and are at the very high risk of poverty.

“Single parent families with one child run double the risk of poverty than the rest of the population, although there is no research in Cyprus to show what is really impacting them. Is it the fact that child payments are not being paid? The national strategy report for social inclusion for 2008-2010 recognises that single parents could be at a very high risk of poverty although the gender is not mentioned. The report foresees an increased benefit for single parents only if they are already receiving public assistance. And because most single parents are in employment, they do not benefit from this and there is no other measure to try and address the high poverty risk for single parents.”

According to Pavlou, poverty and social exclusion in Cyprus are the result of inequalities between women and men and a number of stereotypes in the labour market.

“Inequalities continue in the labour market in Cyprus despite the high employment levels for men and women, because of professional prototypes concerning men and women with children,” said Pavlou.

The meeting was organised by the office of the European Parliament in Cyprus, the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies and the International Organisation for Promoting Women of Europe-Council Cyprus.

The figures

Poverty in Cyprus is at 16%, similar levels as elsewhere in Europe, while the risk of poverty for children is the second lowest. And 4.5% of people live in households of unemployed persons, the lowest percentage in Europe.

Labour market inclusion in Cyprus in 2007 stood at 71% exceeding the national target of 70% and the EU target of 65.4%. Women’s labour participation in 2007 went up to 62.4% exceeding the Lisbon targets for 2010, but the pay gap between men and women continues.

Unemployment percentages for women are higher than for men with a high unemployment percentage

for women aged 35-44. This shows that women in Cyprus face difficulties in finding employment after they have children. A large percentage of women in Cyprus work part time or have short employment contracts. Studies have shown that one of the main reasons women prefer part time jobs is the need to look after their children and other dependents since the state does not provide sufficient services of this kind.

Mixed marriages

The director of Institute for Historical Research for Peace Areti Demosthenous noted the problems emerging from mixed marriages in Cyprus, mainly between Orthodox women and Muslim men, because of cultural differences, rendering Greek Cypriot women more vulnerable and socially excluded.

Government pledge on equality

Labour Minister Sotiroulla Charalambous told the meeting that Cyprus has adopted EU priorities in the fields of equal opportunities for men and women.

“The support and empowering of women as a vulnerable group of the population, is a political priority for the government. A national action plan for the equality of men and women includes priorities and actions supporting women and contributing towards equal opportunities, combating poverty and social exclusion and the reconciliation of family and professional obligations,” Charalambous said.

The Minister noted plans to create the required infrastructure offering services like child care for working women.

Ombudsman Eliana Nicolaou stressed the new law for equal treatment for men and women in the entire phase of employment and making sexual harassment a form of discrimination.