

## **TRANSFORMING THE LABEL OF ‘WHORE’: TEENAGE GIRLS’ NEGOTIATION OF LOCAL AND GLOBAL GENDER IDEOLOGIES IN CYPRUS<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines how gender ideologies linked to global processes such as migration and the spread of youth popular culture pose certain challenges for teenage girls who live in patriarchal social contexts. Drawing on a corpus of ethnographic data at a multiethnic middle school in Cyprus, the article focuses on the ways in which language practices mediate this experience and the possibilities that language envelops in the process of gender identity formation in globalizing times. At the intersection of contradictory ideologies ranging from the school’s religious gender discourse, which promotes modesty and chastity, to the predominant media discourse of femininity, which highlights female sexuality, girls’ gender identity claims become fraught with moral implications. In the local peer culture, girls are placed on a fabricated and culturally widespread “virgin-whore” continuum along which different cultural groups – which are often equated with ethnic groups – are evaluated. Paradoxically, girls who embrace sexual freedom (either in practice or rhetorically) may in fact exercise agency and become empowered precisely because of early adolescents’ fascination with sexuality. These girls draw largely on the dominant discourse of femininity abundantly marketed by global media and the pop culture. They thus manage to explore alternative ideas about agency and gender in a locally rebellious manner that defies the traditionalist female roles that school and church promote.

**Keywords:** Gender; Immigration; Youth; Interaction; Sexuality; Globalization.

### **1. Introduction: Gender identity and globalization**

Despite the outpouring of attention to globalization in pragmatics, linguistic anthropology, and related fields, the role of gender in globalizing contexts is just beginning to be examined from a linguistic standpoint (Cameron 2000; Machin & Thornborrow 2003; Mullany 2004; Valentine 2001). As feminist scholarship has revealed, given the cultural diversity among societies and individuals as well as existing gender inequities, global cultural flows have asymmetrical consequences for women and men (Agathangelou 2004; Espiritu 2001; James-Simon & Brettel 1986; Kelson & DeLaet 1999; Krause 1996; Peterson & Runyan 1993; Segal & Demos 2005). In particular, global mass migration becomes intricately implicated in the process of gender identity formation because gender ideologies migrate along with people and are

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not always in accordance with the local gender discourses of the new social contexts in which they are embedded. Pavlenko (2001) argues that in the journey of migration, ideologies of language and gender ingrained in the new language and culture provide women with new gendered discursive practices and opportunities for agency and choice in the performance of self - or, conversely, constrain this process. In addition, with the commercial development of global mass media, such resources as youth magazines, Internet websites, music videos, television commercials, and movie images create and disseminate consumerist versions of femininity, primarily via a global youth popular culture that reaches young women of all social, geographic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds around the world. Smith (1990) points out that these extralocal forms of normative and idealized images enter and organize local sites of action and experience, bringing young women from various backgrounds into a shared ideological space. These cultural flows offer new resources for the construction of selves and others. They allow scripts for possible lives to be imagined; images of standards of living and consumer capabilities to be envisioned; visions about gender and modernity to be rehearsed. However, while the global span of cultural commodities involves homogenizing processes to some degree, feminist scholars focusing on language use express a great concern about the ways in which globally available resources are actively and creatively appropriated by young women in local contexts (Pichler 2001; Skapoulli 2004; Tetrault this volume). This article contributes to this line of research, which highlights the interactional context in which local and global cultural flows are negotiated and (re)signified. In particular, the present article suggests that young women may use global gender discourses to exercise agency in restrictive social contexts, such as the still strongly patriarchal society of Cyprus.

## **2. The local space: Cyprus in transition from tradition to modernity**

The context of globalization presents particular challenges for young women in societies such as Cyprus that are peripheral to globalizing forces and are gradually moving from tradition to modernity and from homogeneity to multiculturalism. Embracing modernity and cultural diversity (as well as the resulting ideological mosaic they create) may be somewhat perplexing for youth in a patriarchal and ethnocentric social space, and particularly for women, who are subject to more severe consequences in this situation.

Although the notion of patriarchy is often used indiscriminately in feminist scholarship, it is a concept that needs to be addressed with regard to the particularities of local contexts. In Cyprus, patriarchy has its roots in religious discourses that divide female and male roles, spaces, and behaviors. Concepts like “purity,” “cleanliness,” “morality,” and “propriety” form the sweeping discourse of female socialization in Cyprus (Vassiliadou 2004), which promotes traditional expectations of women as devoted mothers, caregivers, and wives.

Patriarchal regimes also control women’s sexuality, a vestige of the strong presence of the Orthodox Church on the island. Women’s sexuality is so strongly tied to fertility and procreation that female homosexuality is almost entirely unrecognized (Loizos & Papataxiarchis 1991). Sexist discourses dominate women’s sexual choices, and Cypriot women’s sexuality is key to the way they are evaluated and defined in their everyday life (see also Lees 1989). Being a Cypriot woman implies particular sexual

prerequisites, especially the display of chastity; otherwise a woman may face social isolation (Anthias & Yuval-Davis 1990). These traditionalist discourses of modesty and chastity create particular challenges for young women who concurrently receive more liberal views of womanhood from the new generation of feminist Cypriot women as well as from images that highlight female sexuality within Western-based youth culture.

The moral panic about female sexuality in Cyprus has taken unprecedented dimensions the last ten years with the increasing numbers of female migrant sex workers, primarily from East European countries. The local media often demonize women of East Europe for their immoral behavior, a discourse which then finds its way into the practices of government officials. For example, Vassiliadou (2004) describes an incident in which a foreign worker, a victim of rape, was asked by the immigration officer who was handling the case whether she was a virgin before the "alleged rape." When the officer was asked to provide justification for his question, the officer replied, "We must make sure they are decent, but they never are" (2004: 61). Researchers so far have made important contributions with regard to both the adult female migrant experience in the region (Agathangelou 2004; Anthias & Lazaridis 2000; Vassiliadou 2004) and the representation of migrants in the local media (Trimikliniotis 1999). However, what is missing from these studies are the experiences, voices, and understandings of young women regarding these ideologies. The current study fills this gap by capturing teenage girls' negotiations of the various gender discourses that permeate their local social space under the processes of globalization and migration.

### **3. Teenage gender identity and heterosexuality**

Perhaps one of the most prevailing ideologies of teenage life that girls encounter in school is the ideology of heterosexuality. As Eckert (1996) points out, the passage from childhood to adolescence marks an important transition in early adolescents' understanding of gender; from an overwhelmingly asexual social order, youth find themselves in a normatively heterosexual one. Romantic and heterosexual meanings begin to replace other definitions of cross-gender relations as teenagers participate in the interactional production of gender. This predominant frame requires girls' engagement with sexuality, an engagement that is often more verbal than physical. By portraying themselves as sexual connoisseurs, early adolescent girls actively challenge their parents' and peers' preconceptions about their ignorance in the much-talked-about domain of sex. On the other hand, girls who (are deemed to) draw more attention to their sexuality or demonstrate an active engagement with sexuality often become the targets of derogatory terms, such as *slut* or *whore* (Canaan 1986; Eder 1995; Mathews 2005; White 2002). This attitude towards particular girls stems from a broader social phenomenon: the regulation of female sexuality.

In Western societies, cultural anxiety regarding sexuality is especially apparent with regard to teenage girls. The social sanctions to which adolescent girls are subject - including being labeled *whores* - convey a straightforward message: good girls are not sexual; girls who are sexual are bad. As Tolman and Higgins (1996: 208) argue, it is precisely during adolescence that young women are "both most responsible for sexual decision making and most penalized for acting on their own sexual desires." And while girls are aware of the cultural norms that constrain their sexuality and the striking asymmetries in gender-appropriate sexual behavior, they are also experiencing their

own sexualization through the media and popular culture. Young women are largely portrayed as desirable, sexually provocative, and sexually sophisticated at the same time that their sexuality is thoroughly policed. In addition, schools' gender policies intensify this tension. Most often, schools perpetuate the patriarchal norms of acceptable gender behavior, thus endorsing rather than challenging this paradox (Halson 1991; Lesko 1988). In navigating this complex terrain girls can hardly avoid the consequences of being characterized as "sexually naïve," "ignorant," or "childish" if they appear reserved or modest and as "slutty," "whores," or "too sexual" if they stress their attractiveness (Bloustien 2002: 108, 117, 119). Lees (1993), on the other hand, reports that girls are labeled *sluts* for many forms of independent acts unrelated to their sexual activity, such as talking aggressively to boys who insult them or going places on their own. These terms define girls by their sexual reputation more than any other aspect of their identity and limit their independent decision making (Lees 1986). Thus, linguistic practices control many aspects of women's behavior, including their sexual conduct. As sociolinguistic scholars report, derogatory terms for women draw attention to their sexuality (which encompasses sexual behavior, sexual attractiveness, sexual availability, and so on). Such terms reflect Western cultural norms in the construction of femininity (James 1996; Sutton 1995).

But young women are not doomed to a never-ending vicious circle of sexualization and sexual condemnation. Research findings suggest that teenage girls subvert this status quo and produce alternative subject positions. Eder (1993) found that early adolescent girls used teasing to transform traditional gender role concepts, such as the view of male aggressiveness and female passivity in the sexual context. Pichler (2001) has documented how girls employ linguistic practices of teasing and boasting to transcend patriarchal norms of gender-appropriate behavior. By adopting a different discourse to talk about their experiences as "bad girls," young women transform traditional gender discourses and introduce new images of femininity into their communities. This article contributes to this scholarship as it shows how teenage girls in the periphery of the Western world, by drawing on discursive genres available to them mainly via global mass media, may subvert the status quo of sexual stigmatization and produce alternative subject positions that celebrate rather than vilify their sexuality. The article contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersection of globalization, gender, and language and sheds light on a linguistic setting beyond the range of the existing scholarship on language and gender, which has traditionally focused primarily on Anglo-American contexts.

#### **4. Ethnographic context**

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in the capital city of Cyprus, Nicosia, in a public middle school (i.e., a school for students aged roughly between 12 and 15) which I call Central Junior School. An important aspect of the school is its close relationship with the local Greek Orthodox Church. The church is located across the street from the school, only 20 to 30 meters away, and is one of the richest and most prominent religious institutions in the country. As is not uncommon among schools in Cyprus, the church provides substantial economic support to Central Junior School, an otherwise secular institution. The school population is made up of students who commute from the surrounding villages, those whose parents work in the downtown commercial district,

and children of immigrants who find cheap rentals in the dilapidated houses of the area. This lumping together of children from various residential areas is not unique to Central Junior School; however, what is exceptional is the ethnic composition of the students. The student body consists of 45% native Cypriots and 55% immigrant children, primarily from Eastern Europe as well as Iran and the Philippines, a rare phenomenon in the local school system, as in most schools native Cypriots significantly outnumber their immigrant peers.

In a social space such as Central Junior School, where the rural meets the urban, the migrant the local, and the religious the secular, various gender ideologies co-exist and shape girls' choices of gender performance. An important set of gender ideologies stems from the school's policy (or policing) of gender. One need not be particularly observant to identify the Greek Orthodox influence on the school's regulation of gender display: modesty and chastity pervade the school's gender-oriented rules. School regulations concern the length of girls' skirts (they should not exceed "two fingers" above the knee), the width of boys' pants (no flared legs allowed), the length of hair and use of hair products (boys are not allowed to have long hair nor use hair gel, and girls are not allowed to have highlighted or dyed hair), the length and color of nails (nail polish and long nails are not allowed), bodily adornment (no makeup, no tattoos, and no accessories - except for a small cross pendant, another example that indexes the influence of the Church on school policies); other regulations restrict romantic expressions between girls and boys, such as holding hands, embracing, and sitting on each other's laps. In fact, during the first week of my fieldwork, one of the students was seen by a teacher holding hands with her boyfriend outside the school and he reported the incident to the school's vice-principal, who called the student's mother at home and informed her about her daughter's misbehavior. On another occasion, a girl was sent home to change clothes because her pants were transparent enough to show the thong she was wearing underneath.

The second source of gender ideologies that permeates the local school culture is portrayed primarily by global media and draws on Western-based popular culture. Magazines, newspapers, films, TV shows, advertisements, and other cultural forms provide teenagers with essential resources for gender performance. As earlier studies have demonstrated, young people's gender practices go hand in hand with their consumption of pop cultural products (Bloustien 2002; Bucholtz 2007; Coates 1999; Eckert 1996; Lesko 1988; McRobbie [1978] 1991; Mendoza-Denton 1996). These practices involve, among others, the use of makeup, talk about celebrities and other cultural icons, clothing choices, musical tastes, and a preoccupation with sexuality. Popular culture, ubiquitous as it is in teenage life, not only significantly shapes girls' gender practices but also provides diverse resources for them to express distinctive kinds of femininities.

Other sources of gender ideologies relate to the various discourses that these teenagers are exposed to in their local communities. As far as the broader society of Cyprus is concerned, despite women's efforts to liberalize gender roles, patriarchy is the prevalent model of gender reproduction. Most institutions of socialization (the family, school, church, medicine, politics, and so on) promote traditional gender expectations and role models. These notions are echoed in the discourse of many students, both boys and girls, who articulate gendered stereotypes in a way that serves to maintain male privilege and female subordination (e.g., some boys state that they expect their future wives to cook for them). In the process of producing themselves as gendered subjects,

these young people resort to familiar modes of being women or men and thereby reproduce existing gender styles. This attitude conforms with recent research that has persuasively demonstrated that individuals construct themselves as particular kinds of women and men by engaging in discursive practices that are associated with culturally and community-defined norms of gender performance (Pavlenko et al. 2001).

Like many other social contexts, the discursive space of Central Junior School constitutes an arena of multiple and partially conflicting gender ideologies that carry particular moral import. For this reason, students' daily interactions and gender identity claims, inasmuch as they are confined within a shared ideological space, cannot avoid being fraught with moral implications. The local social categories that emerge and the border work around them are reflected in the linguistic practices of youth in this school. The following discussion demonstrates how teenagers in the school use language, and particularly the linguistic practice of labeling, to negotiate gender identity and the related issues of morality, sexuality, and group identity.

### **5. Labeling and the conflation of gender with sexuality**

At Central Junior School, the symbolic representation of femininity is achieved through an array of linguistic and cultural practices. These identity practices primarily function to mark the faultlines between groups, which for girls also demarcate assumptions about moral distinctions. Morality becomes involved in the process of gender construction as it is integrated into the patriarchal idealized version of womanhood, or alternatively, maidenhood (i.e., virginity). When students examine their own or other girls' gender practices, they often allude to the morality of the referenced individual or group. Assessments of girls' morality is based on a continuum of sexual practices, from the most liberal to the most traditional, along which students place different cultural groups, which are often equated with ethnic groups. For example, immigrant girls from the Pontian Greek minority of Russia, Georgia, and Ukraine are more likely to be associated with the nonsexual category of virgins. Often, boys and girls from various ethnic backgrounds make negative comments about Pontian girls' (supposed) "hairy legs," "mustaches," and even "flat heads," constructing an image of an unfeminine and hence unattractive woman. On the other hand, girls from Romania, Bulgaria, Moldavia, and Russia are overwhelmingly sexualized and often addressed or referred to as "whores."

During individual and focus group interviews, both girls and boys of all ethnic backgrounds affirmed the binary frame of interpretation of girls' gender practices. Girls are placed on a fabricated and culturally widespread "virgin-whore" continuum: those who militantly defend the ideal of virginity represent one end of the continuum, whereas girls who are considered to be 'easy' (*evkoles*), 'loose' (*xapolites*), 'sluts' (*tsoules*), and 'whores' (*putanes*) are located at the other end of the continuum. As this list demonstrates, the linguistic practice of labeling is among the primary mechanisms used for monitoring female sexuality. Labels of this kind are extremely powerful as they exercise an "interpellative function" (Butler 1997: 24). That is, they become involved in the process of subject formation: they confer identities. Although this process, in Althusser's (1971) conceptualization of interpellation, requires recognition by the bearer of the label in question, historicity and convention come into play to create the felicity conditions (in Butler's adaptation of Austin 1962) that make a label constitutive of

identity. In the peer group of Central Junior School, these conditions include the prior exposure of girls in the local ideological space that nurtures the archetypal dichotomy of virgin-whore. Given the influence of religious institutions on the school as described above and the values of femininity espoused in the traditional patriarchal societal system of Cyprus, it is no surprise that these labels target girls' sexuality.

This dichotomy is prevalent in my data from adolescents at Central Junior School. For example, in an individual interview Manthos,<sup>2</sup> a 15-year-old Cypriot boy, admitted that he would not date a girl who is not a virgin because his friends 'might say, like, that your girlfriend is a whore' (*mpori na pusin, as pume, oti en putana i filis su*). During another informal conversation Tomas, also a 15-year-old Cypriot boy, said, 'There is no girl who knows that another girl is not a virgin and doesn't call her a who- (i.e., whore)' (*en eshi kopelua pun a xeri oti i ali en en parthena tze na men tin fonazi tze pu-*).<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in response to my question, 'How do your peers view a girl who is not a virgin?' Tanya, a 15-year-old immigrant girl from a Greek community in Russia, said, 'Like a whore, [they think], "since one guy did it with her, I'll do it too"' (*opos tes putanes, afu ekame to o enas tun to prama na to kamo tzi ego*). Apart from the personal characterization that the label *putana* confers on individual girls to whom it is applied, the loss of virginity is also associated with social decay. Eva, a 15-year-old Cypriot girl, said during a focus group interview, 'Boys think that there are no virgin girls in our school. They think that our society is destroyed' (*Ta agoria nomizun oti en iparhun parthenes sto scholio mas. Nomizun oti ekatastrafike i kinonia mas*). Clearly, such social ramifications often play a decisive role in girls' sexual choices. As the above accounts show, it is often due to others' evaluation (and its repercussions on a woman's image in a small community) that some girls may choose abstention over sexual engagement.

In addition, these statements show that certain labels may not necessarily relate to the actual sexual behavior of girls but to others' presumptions about the term itself. For example, the term 'whore' (*putana*) takes on multiple meanings in the Central Junior School peer group; some students assign it to girls who give their phone number to a boy they have just met, or to girls who kiss their boyfriend on their first date, or to those who are assumed to be having a relationship with two or more boys at the same time, or to those who are believed to have had sexual contact with boys in their early teenage years, whereas others use this term to label girls who have slept with several boyfriends sequentially. Although girls' categorization along the continuum is clearly arbitrary, its existence ratifies the sexual base on which the interpretation of gender practices lies. For young women, gender identity is inextricably linked to their sexual choices, which are used to define them in moral terms.

As noted above, girls from Eastern Europe are a particular target for categorization by Cypriot students at Central Junior School based on sexual behavior. Given the fact that the first women from post-communist countries who migrated to the island were by necessity and often by force employed primarily in the sex industry, the conceptualization of Russian, Romanian, Ukrainian, and Bulgarian women in Cypriot society is associated with sexual promiscuity. A number of studies in the geographic area of the southeastern Mediterranean have documented this phenomenon

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<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout the article.

<sup>3</sup> The truncation of the word *putana* (*pu-*) may be related to my presence. In Cyprus, it is socially inappropriate for males to use vulgar language in the presence of women, especially women who are older than they are.

(Agathangelou 2004; Anthias & Lazarides 2000; Vassiliadou 2004). As a consequence, for women from Eastern Europe, any marker of their ethnicity in the local context carries a range of negative connotations with regard to their morality. Local media and folk discourses feed such stereotypes, which find their way into youths' interaction at school (see Agathangelou 2004; Vassiliadou 2004).

The following examples shed light on this stigmatization process. In an individual interview, Tanya, the Greek Russian immigrant girl quoted above, said of two other Eastern European girls, 'The guys from other schools who come here and go after Amanda and Serena, they do so because they know that she's from Romania; they think you're a whore' (*ta agoria pu erkunte pu alla scholia tze vurun tin Amanda tze ti Serena, kamnun to giati xerun oti en pu ti Roumania; nomizun oti ise putana*). This view of Eastern European girls is also evident in a conversation between two male students, Marco, a 15-year-old Cypriot boy, and Luke, a 14-year-old East European boy who was adopted and raised by Cypriot parents from infancy. The topic of the larger conversation is girls; here the boys evaluate the attractiveness (or lack thereof) of different girls at their school:

### Example (1)

1 Marco:        *entaxi, i Rossides en kales*  
2 Luke :        *enta, i parapano en putanes*

1 Marco:        O.K. the Russians are good  
2 Luke:        what, most of them are whores

This brief exchange and Tanya's comment indicate the ethnic character that the term 'whore' holds in the local context. As earlier research has demonstrated, prejudiced discourses of sexuality often intersect with similar stances on ethnicity to form ethnosexual boundaries between groups (e.g., Hall 1995; Nagel 2003). Ethnosexual imagery finds its way into youths' articulation of gender identity as well as into their moral interpretation of other students' gender practices.

The following conversation among three 15-year-old girls is evidence of how the label 'whore' is used to form such ethnosexual and moral boundaries. Mara, a girl who is half Cypriot and half Arab, describes to her friends Mimi, who comes from a Greek minority community in Georgia, and Vania, a Cypriot girl, her interaction with Serena, a girl from Moldavia:

### Example (2)

1 Mara:        *Efonaxa tis "putana!"*  
2                *etsi gamo to,*  
3                *tze lali mou "skase, skase, skase" [...]*  
4                *Tin putana re*  
5                *xeris enta mpu na tis po aman mu pi tipote?*  
6                *"Kori mou tzimithu llio giati pu to polli gamisi kremunte oi sakules su."*  
7 Mimi:        *Kalo, eh? Men parexigite en alithkia.*

1 Mara:        And I called her "whore!"

- 2 just like fucking that,  
 3 and she goes “shut up, shut up, shut up” [...]  
 4 the whore  
 5 you know what I’ll tell her if she says anything?  
 6 “My girl, go get some sleep on you because from too much fucking  
 you got bags under your eyes.”  
 7 Mimi: Nice, don’t get it wrong, that’s true.

This narrated incident demonstrates that sexual labels are employed not only as reference terms when students talk about other girls but also as address terms and direct insults. Despite Mara’s portrayal of Serena as ineffectual in her response, when I asked Serena herself about her experience in Cyprus, she expressed disdain as well as frustration with her peers’ “outdated” (*kathisterimenes*) ideologies. She affirmed, however, the ethnic basis of such comments:

### Example (3)

- Serena: [...] *lene oles i Rossides, i Rumanes, oles putanes [...]*  
*an foras kati na fenete to vraki su, “ ooh, putana”*  
 Serena: [...] they say all Russian, Romanian women (are) all whores [...]  
 if you wear something that shows your underwear, “ooh, a whore.”

These examples demonstrate the mechanisms by which some immigrant young women experience the paradoxes created by a pervasive discourse of femininity, one that gains its authority and power from its ubiquity in media images and popular culture as well as the local traditional discourses of womanhood they encounter in their daily peer interactions. On the one hand, girls receive messages that they must enhance their attractiveness and sexuality and on the other hand, they are accused of being overly sexual. The impossibility of the task of bridging these two worlds in one body is evident.

However, the sexualization of these girls, and particularly the use of the label ‘whore’, is not indiscriminately addressed to any girl from Eastern European countries but only targets those who claim a position in the local heterosexual market, that is, those who highlight their femininity in visible ways (e.g., through clothing and makeup). In fact, the local girls who cared most about Eastern European girls’ morality were those who also participated in the local heterosexual market. Dina, a Cypriot girl, complained that boys do not pay attention to her and her Cypriot friends even if they “chase” after them, whereas Russian and Romanian girls ‘dress up provocatively’ (*ntinunte proklitika*) and ‘sit around doing nothing but showing off and they win them [i.e. the boys] over’ (*kathunte me to hava tus tze kamnun tes kamposes tze kerdizun tus*). As these comments demonstrate, girls who assert an open attitude towards sexuality become targets of verbal assaults, either directly or indirectly. Somewhat paradoxically, however, these girls possess cultural capital with tremendous prestige in the teenage group. Given early adolescents’ fascination with (and to a large degree, ignorance of) sexuality, girls who have knowledge about or firsthand experience with sexual activities enjoy conversational authority on these issues. The following is an example of the subversion of the process of stigmatization, whereby stigmatized girls enjoy status and power over peers whom they position as naïve. Eight girls participate in this interaction,

although not all of them take part in this excerpt: Mara, Mimi, and Vania (seen in example 2); Zoe, Lilia, and Semeli, all from Cyprus; Amanda, from Romania; and Serena, from Moldavia (seen above). These last four girls - Semeli, Lilia, Amanda, and Serena - are portrayed as *monternes* ('moderns') by their peers, an identity that they themselves assert during individual interviews. The topic of sexuality was introduced in this interaction by Vania, who asked Amanda if the government official from the Ministry of Health who was visiting their school that day had come to her class to talk about AIDS and contraception. In the subsequent discussion, one of the girls mentioned flavored condoms and Zoe requested further clarification on the issue. The example begins right after Zoe's request:

#### **Example (4a)**

- 8 Lilia: *Exigate tis Zoe gia ti fraula.*  
 9 Semeli: *Kori, to profilaktiko eshi geysi fraula, banana, trois to as pume.*  
 10 Lilia: *En tze trois to, glifis to.*  
 11 Semeli: *Tin ora pu to choris tze kamnis tu pipa, niothis ti geysi.*  
 12 Zoe: *Kori, men mu lalis pellares.*  
 13 Lilia: *En tze pistevki oti eshi pipa.*  
 14 Amanda: *Kori, ais sta astia, en to metaxi, enta mpu,*  
 15 *enna tu glifis to villo tu mazi me to profilaktiko, gamo to?*  
 16 Semeli: *Ne, ah?*  
 17 Lilia: *Ne, re.*  
 18 Semeli: *Etsi pu tu tin edoka.*  
 19 Lilia: *En aidia.*
- 8 Lilia: Girls, explain to Zoe about strawberry.  
 9 Semeli: See, condoms have strawberry flavor, banana, you kind of eat it.  
 10 Lilia: You don't eat it, you lick it.  
 11 Semeli: When you put it in (your mouth) and give him a blow job, you feel the flavor.  
 12 Zoe: Girls, don't tell me nonsense.  
 13 Lilia: She doesn't believe that there's such a thing as a blow job.  
 14 Amanda: No, seriously, meanwhile, what the fuck,  
 15 will you lick his dick with the condom on?  
 16 Semeli: Yeah, huh?  
 17 Lilia: Right.  
 18 Semeli: That's how I gave him one.  
 19 Lilia: That's disgusting.

Clearly, the question of ownership of and rights to sexual information is central in the above conversation. Heritage and Raymond (2005: 36) suggest that the use of linguistic practice to patrol and defend "territories of information" can be one mechanism through which identities are invoked, sustained, and elaborated. Here, Amanda, Semeli, and Lilia use their knowledge about sexual practice to project a sexual identity that in other contexts might be (and in fact has been) condemned. In individual interviews I conducted with other Cypriot and immigrant girls, these four girls were portrayed as morally loose for a variety of reasons (e.g., for kissing boys on the first date, for

wearing miniskirts that show their underwear, for flirting with strangers). Another girl once told me that on a bench in a park near the school there was a graffito that said, 'Amanda, Serena, Semeli, Lilia = whores'. However, as Example (4a) shows, girls who in other contexts are targets of sexual slurs gain conversational authority via the display of knowledge about sexuality. Lilia, Semeli, and Amanda pursue notoriety for sexual behavior (which they may or may not have actually experienced), behavior that acquires particular value due to other girls' ignorance about it. Such claims of authority, however, are displayed cautiously, that is, within the safety of a group identity. The girls align themselves as knowledgeable and experienced, a position they manage interactionally by building on one another's assertions. For example, Lilia in line 8 does not provide an answer to Zoe's question herself but assumes the right to address the question to others, thus positioning herself in the knowledgeable group. Semeli takes up the challenge to disseminate information about a practice that involves secret and taboo knowledge (at least among her peers here) and extends the topic beyond the requested realm (flavored condoms) to include the sexual practice of fellatio itself—an act which does not involve condoms, according to some of the girls. Lilia's scornful comment in line 13 again portrays Zoe as naive and herself, who can judge others' ignorance, as an expert on this issue. In addition, Amanda's repudiation of the scenario proposed by Semeli (the use of condoms during the act of fellatio) portrays her epistemic authority on this particular sexual practice. Amanda, a 15-year-old Romanian girl, is the most prominent cultural icon in the local heterosexual market. As I learned in my interview with her, as well as my visit to her home, Amanda enjoys relative freedom from her parents, a freedom that includes her sexual choices as well. During the individual interview, Amanda verified that the linguistic practice of labeling targets primarily Eastern European girls and women (herself included); however, as Example (4a) and a number of other instances in the data suggest, she does not hesitate to publicly display an open attitude towards sex and sexuality, in contrast to other girls who take a defensive stance toward this issue (see Skapoulli 2002).

The discussion continues with Zoe persistently seeking an answer to her inquiry:

**Example (4b)**

- 20 Zoe: *Kori, ego en ti geysi pu en ekatalava, pantas tze trois to.*  
 21 Lilia: *En gi'avto. Gi'avto echun kales geysis.*  
 22 Zoe: *Men mu lalis pellares.*  
 23 Mimi: *Ma glifis tu to tze pianis ti geysi pu to::: profilaktiko?*  
 24 Lilia: *Ne, alla en aidia.*  
 25 Semeli: *Kori mu, tin ora pu tu kamnis pipa, en tou tin iglifis?*  
 26 Zoe: *[kori men mu lalis pellares]*  
 27 Lilia: *[echo spiti profilaktika] echo spiti profilaktika, ah?*  
 28 Semeli: *[kori, pellares lali]*  
 29 Lilia: *[ tze anixa na do ]*  
 30 *tzen aidia. Fantasu tzin to prama mes sto stoma su.*  
 31 Amanda: *Ne, anixa tze ego tze-*  
 32 Lilia: *En to sirtari mu gemato.*  
 33 Semeli: *Eshi ena prama pu to mpiis mes sto stoma su-*  
 34 Amanda: *Ne, tze vromozoli.*

- 20 Zoe: It's the flavor I didn't understand, as if you eat it.  
 21 Lilia: That's why- that's why they have nice flavors.  
 22 Zoe: Girls, stop telling me nonsense.  
 23 Mimi: Do you lick it for him and get the flavor through the:: condom?  
 24 Lilia: Yeah, but it's disgusting.  
 25 Semeli: My girl, when you give him a blow job don't you lick it for him?  
 26 Zoe: [don't tell me nonsense]  
 27 Lilia: [I have condoms at home] I have condoms at home uh?  
 28 Semeli: ["nonsense" she says]  
 29 Lilia: [ and I opened to see ]  
 30 and it's disgusting. Imagine that thing in your mouth.  
 31 Amanda: Yeah, I opened one too and-  
 32 Lilia: I have- my drawer is full.  
 33 Semeli: It has a thing that you stick into your mouth.  
 34 Amanda: Yeah, and it stinks, doesn't it?

In this part of the discussion, Mimi treats Amanda, Semeli, and Lilia as authorities on this topic. In line 23 she requests clarification about why condoms are flavored, and by doing so, tacitly expresses her interest in (and ignorance on) the topic. It should be noted that Mimi is one of the girls who in Example (2) depicted Serena as a whore. Here, however, she takes on a less assertive role and recognizes the authority of her peers in matters of sexuality.

This example reveals the complexities of girls' positioning on the virgin-whore continuum and the multiplicity of youth identities at play in different contexts. Girls who embrace the dominant discourse of sexualized femininity as portrayed in consumerist ideologies of sexuality may become empowered through the epistemic authority they gain in certain conversational contexts but may become targets of verbal assault on other occasions. Although certain labels may be extremely powerful as they exercise an "interpellative function" (Butler 1997: 24) that confers particular identities, they only become consequential in relation to specific local and interactional contingencies. For instance, Amanda, Semeli, and Lilia take agentive sexual subject positions and subvert the stigmatizing character that this kind of talk about sex might otherwise signify to some of their peers. Similarly, Serena in Example (2) was reportedly ineffectual against Mara's aggressive insult, whereas in the interaction that precedes Example (4) (which could not be fully recovered and analyzed due to recording problems) she claims a more assertive self by stating that she enjoyed a one-time lesbian encounter with her girlfriends Amanda, Lilia, and Semeli.

What the data suggest is that as early teenagers are just starting to explore the question of sexuality, epistemic authority on this issue takes on enormous value in the peer group. The members of the "modern" group here do not treat sex as taboo but as an ordinary activity that becomes an object of casual derision. In this way they index their intimacy with sexuality and thus construct social distance from their less experienced peers.

Despite the ostensible sexual knowledgeability of most of the "modern" girls in this interaction, a closer look at the linguistic formulation of the girls' utterances shows that what they claim to have is unproblematic access to condoms, which are symbolic of sex, without actually having had sexual experience (with the exception of Semeli, who claims that she has had oral sex). For the most part the girls do not talk about specific

experiences but about hypothetical scenarios (lines 25-26 and 30), occasions in which boys were not present (lines 29 and 31), and information that does not necessarily involve firsthand experience (lines 9, 10, and 11). Global media and popular culture are the likely sources of this knowledge. In fact, in a later part of the interaction Amanda exclaims: '[Zoe] has cable TV and she doesn't know what a fucking blow job is!' (*[i Zoe] eshi LTV tzi en ixeri enta mpu eni i pipa gamo to!*). This interpretation suggests that girls embrace a sexual identity that emerges interactionally as relevant and valued, independently of their actual experience.

But the issue at hand is not merely a matter of ownership and distribution of knowledge, let alone a factual representation of life experience. The discussion also entails assessments about whether the act of fellatio should be enjoyable or not. Lilia repeatedly describes it as 'disgusting' (*aidia*) (lines 19, 24, and 30) and Amanda states that condoms 'stink' (*vromozoli*) (line 34). Therefore, the girls not only talk about sex as experts but they also evaluate a sexual act in terms of its physical pleasure and thus desirability. Here sexual knowledge, identity, and desire (or non-desire) are coordinated rather than being mutually exclusive or problematically related (cf. Kulick 2003). Part of the way one adopts a sexual identity is by claiming desire (or revulsion), which here is inextricably linked to speakers' display of knowledge, whether acquired through direct experience or not. As Bucholtz and Hall (2004: 19) put it, "longing is always articulated through and against standpoints of belonging." Desire thus can be a locus of identity and can be interactionally performed.

The data demonstrate that in navigating the ideological terrain of the peer world, girls must constantly negotiate their gender practices and sexual choices. In this process, language provides useful resources for managing the social, moral, and ideological milieu. Linguistic practices such as labeling constitute the major mechanisms by which female sexuality is monitored by peers. These data further reveal that the peer social order - perhaps the most basic and consequential of social institutions for young women - provides the primary mechanisms for policing their sexuality, making noncompliance extremely consequential. Paradoxically, girls who embrace sexual freedom (whether actually or rhetorically) may in fact exercise agency and become empowered precisely because of early adolescents' fascination with sexuality. These girls draw largely on the dominant discourse of femininity abundantly marketed by global media and the pop culture. They thus manage to explore alternative ideas about agency and gender in a locally rebellious manner that defies the traditionalist female roles which school and church promote. This study reveals that despite the homogenizing power of global discourses on female sexuality, women and girls are not mere consumers of cultural forms but construct their own meanings and identities in relation to them (Radway 1984).

## **6. Conclusion**

The preceding analysis suggest that gender ideologies, linked to global processes such as migration and the spread of youth popular culture, pose certain challenges to female students at Central Junior School. The peer group constantly monitors the practices through which gender ideologies are embodied for the ways they implicate girls' sexual and moral character. Indeed, the sexual practices of girls become fundamental to these youths' interpretations of gender identity precisely through this conflation of sexuality

with gender. In this way, the virgin-whore dichotomy endures in the local context and has repercussions in the microcosm of peer interaction. Thus the moral identities of girls are defined on the basis of gender practices that relate to the individuals' presumed or real sexual choices as well as to Cypriot common-sense prejudices about specific immigrant communities. In this context young girls from Eastern Europe can scarcely avoid establishing a sexual reputation, being marked as oversexed or undersexed, depending on their ethnic descent. The moral dimension of sexuality is particularly powerful in the school space due to the strong influence of the church, the patriarchal character of the broader society, and the moral panic promoted by the media in Cyprus with respect to women from Eastern Europe.

Given this situation, Eastern European girls face a recurrent set of dilemmas. They enter a social space in which their ethnic descent marks them with sexual and moral stigma, making virtually any attempt to highlight their femininity subject to verbal harassment. For these girls, participating in the local heterosexual market entails being regarded as sexually promiscuous and thus invites social condemnation. To counter this dilemma and disrupt the process of stigmatization, some girls claim an assertive and agentive self precisely by claiming an overtly sexual identity. Such dilemmas, and the practices through which young girls manage them, reflect one way in which gender becomes a critical organizational variable in the unequal access to and distribution of global resources, resulting in discrepancies in the ways in which globalization is experienced. For example, while Western-based discourses of femininity distributed via global media, and reflected in popular culture more generally, portray a sexualized teenage body and a sexually liberal, agentive woman that any young woman can seek to embody, as a practical matter members of different ethnic groups pursuing such an ideal in traditional social contexts are likely to have very different experiences. The findings of this study suggest that such cultural ideals, though apparently available to all young women, have distinctly unequal consequences for girls who live in a social space at the intersection of tradition and modernity; moreover, girls come to use these ideals in various and occasionally contradictory ways in specific contexts, enabling them to claim a much broader range of nuanced interactional identities than simplified media portrayals might otherwise suggest.

By examining the concrete interactional practices and occasions in which gender becomes relevant for these girls, this article illustrates how pervasive dominant discourses of femininity interweave with local cultural understandings and how morality intertwines with both sorts of discourses to shape the contexts in which teenage girls are called upon to construct a gendered self. Regardless of their ethnic background, girls evaluate their own and others' sexual practices in the context of diverse discourses of femininity that enter their local communities via school policies, global media, and cross-cultural contact with their peers. Struggling to become their own persons, young women find themselves entwined in local social networks and at the mercy of their peers, a situation that reveals the complexity of globalization and its unpredictable and varied effects on young women's lives.

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