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Experiences of Cypriot Women in the Workplace:

Exploring Experiences of Gender Microaggressions

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Abstract

Despite the overall progress of the feminist movement, and the increase of the population of women in the workforce, gender discrimination remains a prevalent experience in the everyday lives of women. As the systemic gender discrimination is being dealt with on an organizational level through inclusive and anti-discriminatory policies, women still become victims of more subtle forms of discrimination, such as gender microaggressions. This study aims to start filling in a large gap in the literature by focusing on the context of Cyprus, a traditionally patriarchal country. It explores the experiences of women in their workplaces, in order to find out the ways women experience gender microaggressions, by whom, and how do they deal with such experiences. The results suggest that women face various types of gender microaggressions in the workplace by both men and women, who express gender microaggressions differently. The results also indicate that the hierarchical position of the aggressor plays a role in how the victims chooses to deal with their experience. Overall, the experiences of gender microaggressions are heavily tied with the deeply enrooted beliefs of the Cypriot culture and the perception of gender roles in Cyprus.

Key words: gender microaggressions, workplace, Cyprus, sexism, gender discrimination, women

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I. The Rise of Gender Microaggressions

As of the year 2021, women have gained a much more prevalent presence in the workforce by acquiring key positions in male-dominated fields such as politics. The overall increase of female employees in the labor force has been the focus of study for many researchers as it sets the foundations for many phenomena to arise. These phenomena are the manifestation of the impact of patriarchal ideals, since the increase of occupational opportunities for women comes hand in hand with experiences of gender discrimination within the context of the workforce.

Gender discrimination is defined as "any distinction, exclusion, or restriction made on the basis of socially constructed gender roles and norms that prevents a person from enjoying human rights" (Newman, 2014, p. 2). With the introduction of more women in the workforce, gender discrimination has taken a more institutionalized form. More explicitly, gender discrimination has been reflected in the wage gap between men and women, occupational sex segregation, and gender differences in positions of authority (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011, p. 765). Additionally, the institutionalization of gender discrimination is further reinforced by organizational structures, policies, and practices that even though they may appear gender-neutral, they often neglect to take into consideration the needs of all genders, and instead prioritize men's privilege in the workplace (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011, p. 767). With the rise of the feminist movement, however, discussions that also take into consideration the position and experiences of women in the workplace have brought visibility to issues of gender discrimination. Therefore, this movement has brought about more positive changes that resulted in the improvement of organizational policies that concern maternity leave, the formulation of stricter sexual harassment policies and

the promotion of unbiased practices that initiate nondiscriminatory and equal opportunities for both men and women. These attempts for gender equality in the workforce can be seen in the decrease of the gender pay gap in the last couple of decades; for example, in the UK, the pay gap has decreased from almost 50% in 1970, to about 17% in 2016 (Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2018).

Although the promotion of nondiscriminatory policies in organizations has seen great development, especially in the last couple of decades, gender equality and the abolishment of gender discrimination from the workforce have yet to be fully achieved. The significant improvement of nondiscriminatory policies has been vital in the inclusion of women in the workforce; however, women still face gender discrimination on a daily basis. Since as a society, we are making improvements in the institutional inclusion of women, it is of equal importance to take into consideration the everyday experiences of women, which include sexism and discrimination. Specifically, within the workplace, although that there are organizational policies that protect female employees from explicit forms of gender discrimination such as sexual harassment, women are still victims of more subtle forms of sexism. Numerous studies that have examined the experiences of women in the workplace have found that women are victims of sexism through their daily interactions with their colleagues (Sue and Capodilupo, 2008; Nadal et al., 2010). These interactions have been characterized as gender microaggressions and are defined as "intentional or unintentional actions or behaviors that exclude, demean, insult, oppress, or otherwise express hostility or indifference towards women" (Basford et al., 2014, p. 341). They can be verbal or nonverbal expressions and due to their subtle nature, they can be difficult to detect. The study of gender microaggressions is important as the experience of such behaviors can have a negative physical and mental impact on the victim. Additionally, significant to the understanding of gender microaggressions is determining the root, which is

usually pre-existing cultural beliefs about the gender roles. Since such cultural beliefs manifest either consciously or unconsciously in the form of gender microaggressions, it is important to study the causes of this behavior in order to be able to recognize and avoid them so that we can create working environments that are a safe space for female employees. Therefore, this study aims to explore how Cypriot women experience gender microaggressions in the workplace by identifying different types of gender microaggressions and detect which factors determine how the victims choose to deal with such experiences.

II. Women in Cyprus

Critical to the understanding of gender microaggressions in the workplace are also the factors that establish women as targets of such behavior. As already discussed, microaggressions are expressions of conscious or unconscious bias towards an oppressed group. These biases and expressions of sexism are conceptualized within the national culture and by extend, are reflected on the organizational culture. Therefore, this develops the need to firstly establish an understanding of the characteristics of the Cypriot culture.

The culture of Cyprus is heavily impacted by the numerous historical events that have taken place in the island throughout the years. In the year 1960, Cyprus became an independent country, which brought about the island's autonomy for the first time. This gives rise to a variety of changes that came with the autonomy of Cyprus, one of which was that women were given the right to vote. Later on, in 1974, Cyprus experiences its biggest historical event, the Turkish invasion, which leaves half of the island occupied by Turkish troops. From then on, the Republic of Cyprus continues to develop with the Cypriot identity carrying the trauma of the invasion. The position of women in Cyprus during the early years of the island's independence is one that is only visible through that of the man; she is a mother, a widowed wife, a daughter who lost a son,

a husband, a father during the invasion. Through the modernization of the island, with the development of factories and businesses, women have been gaining more opportunities for education and employment. According to statistics, in 1992 adult literacy in women was 91%, while in 2011, it had increased at 98.12% (countryeconomy.com). With access to higher education, women have also been increasingly gaining more positions in the Cypriot workforce. More specifically, according to CEIC, in 1990 women's presence in the Cypriot labor market was at 38.369%, while in 2019 the rate had increased up to 45.846% (ceicdata.com).

Admittedly, the numbers indicted by the statistics do not show a radical increase, however, they reveal that women in Cyprus have been steadily gaining a different role as the years proceed. From assuming more traditional roles that expect the women to be aspiring for a domesticated life, Cypriot women in the last decades have been assuming more roles in the workforce. However, as mentioned above, the increase of women in the labor market, does not also signify the abolishment of all types of gender discrimination. Within the context of Cyprus, what is also significantly evident, is the absence of any studies that record the experiences of women within their workplace. More specifically, very little to no research has been done to investigate whether or not women are discriminated against in their workplace and no extant literature draws attention to women's experiences of gender microaggressions within the context of Cyprus. Therefore, this study aims to fill a gap in the literature by exploring the experiences of Cypriot women in their workplace, in order to find out whether or not they experience gender microaggressions. Additionally, it will identify the types of gender microaggressions that are expressed within the workplace and analyze which are the factors that interfere with the victim's decision in how to deal with their experiences.

The following chapters of this dissertation will provide an extensive analysis of extant literature on the development of gender microaggressions and the culture of Cyprus. Proceeding the literature review, the methodology chapter of the research will offer insights in how the research was conducted, provide sample information, and look into the ethical considerations of the research. Afterwards, a chapter is dedicated of the results of the study, where they will be discussed and analyzed in detail. Finally, the dissertation will conclude with the last chapter, which discusses the key findings, limitations, suggestions, and conclusions of the research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

I. Women in the Workforce

As the years proceed and the feminist movement develops, more positive changes occur for women in modern societies. More specifically, throughout the years, women have gained the right to vote, the right to be educated, and develop a career by joining the workforce. However, women's increase of occupational opportunities does not signify the abolishment of gender discrimination. As it can be observed by statistics, according to the European Commission (2021), 67% of women are currently in employment, whereas men's employment rate stands at 79%, marking the gender employment gap at 12%. This gap is also reflected in decision-making positions. According to the European Commission, in 2018, women held only 6.7% of board chairs and 6.5% of CEO positions. These statistics reveal that women have a difficult time surviving and progressing within a system that tends to exclude and marginalize them. The challenges women face in ascending the hierarchical ladder in the workforce is heavily derives from patriarchal ideas and their hierarchical position in society and it is reflected in organizational policies, infrastructures, and cultures. Beginning from recruiting women in the workforce, studies show (Gonzalez et al., 2019) that women are more likely to face discriminatory behavior from employers than male candidates, due to the association of women with patriarchal ideas that assume them to have more caring and communal qualities over men who are associated with leadership skills (Gonzalez et al., 2019, p. 188). Additionally, according to the European Commission, women earn 14.1% on average less than men per hour, since women tend to occupy lower paying job positions. Women's inability to ascend in the hierarchical ladder also derives from the fact that women are absent from work due to unequal parental leaves between mothers and fathers, a factor that contributes to fewer women being

promoted than men (Schwanke, 2013, p. 17). Therefore, organizational policies about parental leave are formulated based on the patriarchal perception that it is more appropriate for women to devote more of their time to family responsibilities, than men. Overall, women's presence in the workforce is dictated by the prevailing patriarchal ideas that are deeply enrooted within the system.

Moving beyond the systemic exclusion of women from the workforce, of equal importance are also women's everyday experiences, which consist of various forms of sexist behavior. Laura Bates' book, "Everyday Sexism" (2014), a collection of women's everyday experiences, reveals that sexism remains as a very prevalent phenomenon in women's daily lives. Through the stories shared in Bates' book, it can be observed that the sexism women face on a daily basis in their workplace manifests in various forms, from workplace inequality to harassment and sexual assault. Nowadays, more organizations have set in place clear policies and procedures that are followed after the report of a workplace sexual assault or workplace sexual harassment. However, such policies fail to regulate sexist behaviors that do not fall under the definitions of workplace sexual harassment or workplace sexual assault. In "Everyday Sexism" (2014) and through evidence found in other studies (Sue et al., 2007; Paludi, 2013), many of the experiences and instances that women often face in the workplace are more subtle in nature than sexual harassment, yet still of equal importance as they derive from patriarchal ideologies that tend to oppress women. These types of behaviors are more frequent, as they occur on a daily basis, yet they are more difficult to identify and consequently, are less likely to be reported as sexist and discriminatory behaviors.

II. Defining Gender Microaggressions

In extant literature, these subtle experiences of sexist behaviors women face on a daily basis are characterized as gender microaggressions and defined as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights, and insults towards members of oppressed groups" (Galupo et al., 2018, p.1381). They are usually based on stereotypes and due to their subtle nature, they pass by as undetectable to many recipients and deliverers (Nordmarken, 2014, p.129). In social interactions, microaggressions are common since they often manifest as "brief, unthinking slights, snubs, insults, or other indignities, frequently embedded within a stream of communication" (Nordmarken, 2014, p. 129). They can be both verbal and nonverbal, expressed through body language and facial expressions, remarks, representation, and terminology. Within any social context, the expressions of "microaggressive behaviors often indicate that individuals perceive difference, communicating othering messages" (Nordmarken, 2014, p. 131). In other words, microaggression often tend to target people who are perceived to belong in oppressed groups. As microaggressions are behaviors expressed towards members of oppressed groups, the targets can be women, people of color, people with disabilities, or the LGTBQ+ community. Such othering messages, regardless of their intent can communicate disgust, dismissal, apprehension, confusion, agitation, and general discomfort by the deliverer (Nordmarken, 2014, p. 131). More specifically, the expression of microaggressions against women is being referred to as gender microaggressions and is defined as "intentional or unintentional actions or behaviors that exclude, demean, insult, oppress, or otherwise express hostility or indifference towards women" (Basford et al., 2014, p. 341).

Due to their subtle nature and various forms of expression, microaggressive behavior can often be difficult to identify and it passes by unnoticed both by the receiver and the deliverer. In their work on microaggressions, Sue et al. (2007) developed a model which distinguishes among three types of microaggressions. The first type of a microaggression is *microassault,* which is defined as "an explicit […] derogation characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274). This type of behavior is most likely conscious and deliberate and is expressed when they no longer feel as if they have control, or when they feel safe within an environment to display microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274). The second type of a microaggression is *microinsults.* Microinsults are "characterized by communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's […] identity" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274). In opposition to microassaults, microinsults are much more subtle and occur unconsciously, without the deliverer noticing, while still being insulting towards the recipient. An example of such behavior can be the question "how did you get your job?", which conveys the underlying message that the recipient must have got their job in ways that are irrelevant to their skills and qualifications. Additionally, microinsults can be of nonverbal nature, such as failing to acknowledge the presence a person of a minority group in the room. Lastly, *microinvalidations* "are characterized by communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or the experiential reality of a person" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274). An example of a microinvalidation is the phrase "we are all human beings", which in effect serves to negate one's personal experiences as a member of a minority group.

Although the three types of microaggressions were formulated by Sue et al. (2007) while studying racial microaggressions, they can still be applied to the gender microaggressions

that women experience within the workplace. Admittedly, as Paludi (2013, p. 194) writes, "difference between [gender] microaggressions and other forms of sexism is that research on microaggression stresses that the intention of the perpetrator may be good or unconscious, [and] that the perpetrator may view his or her actions as harmless". Therefore, they can be difficult to identify, as they also "vary widely at work, from obvious attacks to more subtle forms" (Basford et al., 2014, p. 341). Previous research (Sue and Capodilupo, 2008; Nadal et al., 2010) on microaggressions against women has identified the ways in which these behaviors may manifest within the workplace. Firstly, *sexual objectification* is a form of microaggression that can be experienced by women in the workplace and is defined as "verbal and nonverbal indicators that reduce a woman to her physical appearance, her sexuality, or both" (Paludi, 2013, p. 196). *Assumption of traditional gender roles* occurs when it is assumed that a woman must maintain more traditional roles, such as being more family oriented, or acting more "ladylike" (Paludi, 2013, p. 196). Additionally, another manifestation of microaggressions as indicated by Paludi (2013, p. 196), can be *second class citizenship/invisibility* in which women receive less opportunities, privileges, and different treatment than men (i.e., pay gap between men and women). These behaviors are perpetuated by *assumptions of inferiority* that perceive women to be physically and/or intellectually in inferior positions than men. Another more easily identifiable type of microaggression can be the *use of sexist language* (i.e., bimbo, slut, bitch), which is used to degrade and debase a woman. Finally, denying the existence of any type of sexism altogether, while also discouraging women (either directly or indirectly) to express their feminist ideas within the workplace are also behaviors that are seen as microaggressions (Paludi, 2013, p. 197). As previous literature provides a solid foundation of how various forms of gender microaggressions manifest in the daily lives of women, this research aims to explore whether any

of the above are included in the daily lives of women in the Cypriot workplace. Moreover, this research will use the various types of gender microaggressions determined in extant literature as a frame of reference, to analyze women's experiences and attempt to detect additional types of gender microaggressions that have not been yet identified.

III. Gender Microaggressions in the Workplace

When determining whether a behavior is considered to be a type of microaggression, context is highly important. As previously mentioned, the challenge in identifying gender microaggressions lies in how the recipients and deliverers perceive them. When contextualizing the ways in which microaggressions manifest in the workplace in comparison to other social contexts, the reaction that is elicited from the recipients may be different. Within the context of the workplace, there are both written and unwritten rules about how one is expected to express themselves. Most organizations implement dress code policies that define what is appropriate for employees to wear in their working environment. From formal attire to smart casual and casual Fridays, the unwritten rule is that dressing too casually is a frowned upon idea (Schneider, 2006, p. 22). In a professional context, what is also promoted is to treat everyone respectfully by using basic politeness; for instance, saying "please" and "thank you", or holding the door open for other people (Schneider, 2006, p. 23). Additionally, professionals suggest that making jokes or comments that could possibly be perceived as offensive or inappropriate should be avoided (Schneider, 2006, p. 25). Therefore, while a behavior could be perceived as a joke in a different social context, within a professional context, it can be viewed as a microaggression. An example that Paludi (2013, p. 197) uses is when a man displays posters of scantily dressed women in the workplace. Due to the fact that this behavior is exhibited within the context of the workplace, the message that is conveyed is that women are seen as inferior and are treated as

sexual objects. Therefore, this type of behavior is considered to be a microaggression as it falls into the category of the sexual objectification of women. However, within a different social context, outside of the workplace, such behavior may have been perceived as usual. “For example, when women are portrayed as sexual objects in the media, one may assume this to be “normal” behavior and therefore may not question, or challenge its existence” (Paludi, 2013, p. 197). Therefore, contextualizing the expression of microaggressions is important, as it has an impact on how such behavior is perceived within the workplace, where it is expected that professional standards and respect are maintained.

What is also significant about women’s experience of gender microaggressions within the workplace, is the impact it can have on the victim, not only on an individual and psychological level, but also on an organizational level. As noted by Paludi (2013), “gender microaggressions and subtle discrimination towards women […] may have lasting impacts on the mental health of women” (p. 197). More specifically, studies show that the experience of microaggressions within the workplace contribute to women’s “lower job satisfaction, poorer physical health, and higher levels of depression and anxiety” (Paludi, 2013, p. 197). These results are corroborated by studies which examine microaggressions against other minority groups. For example, the results of the research by Sue et al. (2007) on microaggressions against people of color in the workplace, suggest that microaggressions contribute to “a negative racial climate and emotions of self-doubt, frustration, and isolation on the part of victims”. In addition, microaggressions may result in “diminished morality, augmented morbidity and flattened confidence” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 279). Parallel to this, are the consequences transgender people deal with when they experience microaggressions. As noted by Nordmarken (2014), such consequences can be “chronic health problems, and persistent feelings of alienation, anxiety, anger, depression, fear,

hypervigilance, fatigue, hopelessness and/or suicidality" (p. 130). Moreover, as a result, the impact microaggressions can have on the targeted individual are reflected at an organizational level as well. The experience of microaggressions in the workplace contributes to high turnover from employees of underrepresented groups, especially if they are not supported by their organization (Galupo, 2018). Therefore, the experience of gender microaggressions within the workplace can also cause high turnover rates for women. It goes without saying, that these findings suggest how experiences of gender microaggressions heavily dictate and determine not only a woman's career path, but also her mental wellbeing as an individual. Following these findings, this research will explore how experiences of gender microaggressions in the workplace impact women on a personal level, and whether there are any factors that contribute to their decision of reporting their experiences to a superior.

IV. The Context of Cyprus

As defined by Hofstede (1997), culture "is the collective programming of the mind, which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (Stavrou and Eisenberg, 2006, p. 1). Within the context of Cyprus, it is important to analyze the cultural perceptions and beliefs of the roles of men and women, in order to understand what sets women as targets of gender microaggressions in their working environments. The culture of Cyprus is one that had been developed throughout the years to be traditionally patriarchal. The history of Cyprus writes the multiple experiences and trauma of war that Cypriots have suffered throughout the years. These experiences have stigmatized the national identity of Cyprus and have created "[a] culture of honoring heroes and martyrs" (Hadjipavlou and Mertan, 2010, p. 243). Multiple academics who have written about Cypriot feminism, have argued that the experience of Cypriot women has been continuously emitted from the history of Cyprus (Vasiliadou 1997;

Hadjipavlou and Mertan, 2010). This emission and marginalization of women is also reflected in the Cypriot workforce. In previous years, there was a prevalent dichotomy of professions that was based on gender. Cypriot women assumed the roles of housewives, nurses, secretaries, teachers or worked in agriculture and factories (Hadjipavlou and Mertan, 2010, p. 251). When women were given the right to vote in 1960 and, later through the years, with the rise of modernization in Cyprus, women were also gaining higher education which was the key for women to enter more "masculine" occupations, such as positions in politics (Hadjipavlou and Mertam, 2010, p. 256). As women started gaining economic independence, the prevailing patriarchal ideology of the Cypriot culture led them to 'double bind roles' with more responsibilities, as they not only had to be labor workers, but also wives, mothers, and housekeepers (Hadjipavlou and Mertan, 2010, p. 256; Stavros, 1997, p. 58). In more recent years, during the last decade, through the legal framework many decisions have been made in order to improve the working conditions for women. According to the website of the Department of Labor, improvements have been made in the social insurance legislation to completely avoid discrimination, the maternity protection legislation has been improved, the health and safety of pregnant women and nursing mothers at the workplace are better protected; in 2017, the scheme for paternal leave has been introduced, equal treatment in employment pensions has been secured and equality in pay, not only for the same or similar work, but also for work of equal value has been secured (Department of Labor, 2021). As the Cypriot government has made attempts to achieve equality between men and women in the workforce, the Cypriot culture that is traditionally patriarchal still prevails and impacts the experiences of women in their working environments.

In order to gain a better understanding of how the culture of a country can impact and reflect on the culture of an organization, Hofstede (1997) conducted a research on more than 100,000 employees in 53 countries and identified five dimensions of culture. These dimensions were: *Power Distance*, which refers to the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept power is distributed unequally; *Uncertainty Avoidance*, which defines the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations; *Individualism*, which is defined as the extent to which people in a country prefer to act as individuals instead of members of groups; *Masculinity*, which is the degree to which "masculine" values persist over "feminine" values within a society; *Long-term Orientation*, which is the fostering of virtues towards future rewards, in particular perseverance and thrift (Stavrou and Eisenberg, 2006, pp. 1 – 4). In Hofstede's original research, Cyprus was not one of countries under study. However, in 2006, Stavrou and Eisenberg measured the culture of Cyprus based on Hofstede's five dimensions of culture.

The results of the study from Stavrou and Eisenberg (2006) provide an insight in how the national culture of Cyprus is reflected on an organizational level, and how that manifests among employees of organizations. More specifically, according to their research, Cyprus has been determined as a *Masculine* country (Stavrou and Eisenberg, 2006, p.4). This dimension describes a society where social gender roles are precisely differentiated – men are assumed to be more assertive, tough, and focused on material success, whereas women are more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life (Stavrou and Eisenberg, 2006, p. 4). In such societies, patriarchal values are prevalent among the population and reflected in organizational cultures. When such societal values that clearly distinguish gender roles are brought into the workplace, the ideal employee is defined as one that cannot be a woman. In their research, Gonzalez et al.

(2018) define the ideal worker as one that is committed, willing to sacrifice his most personal concerns and family responsibilities for the sake of his career and is expected to prioritize the demands of his work and work late nights or weekends if necessary (Gonzalez et al., 2018, p. 188). Therefore, when a woman assumes the role of a mother, who prioritizes the wellbeing of her children and family, instead of her work, she then distances herself further away from the image of the ideal worker. By extent, in more *masculine* societies, where men are assumed to be focused on material success (Stavrou and Eisenberg, 2006, p.4), this role of the "ideal worker" is one that is conflicting with the role of a woman. When the standards of the ideal employee are set in accordance with patriarchal views that differentiate the role of men and women, women are excluded and become more susceptible to experiences of microaggressive behaviors in their workplace.

This brief literature review suggests that there is an extensive analysis on microaggressions and the way they manifest in the workplace against a number of marginalized groups. These studies have offered and identified a variety of types of microaggressions against people of color, LGBTQ+ individuals and women, while also highlighting the impact microaggressions can have on the victim. When contextualizing the phenomenon of gender microaggressions within Cyprus, however, little to no studies can be found. This is evident in the absence of any qualitative studies that aim to explore the everyday experiences of women in their working environment. Most of the literature reviewed, examined the position of women in Cyprus within the timeframe of 1960's and onwards, without mentioning the current experiences and gender discrimination face in today's Cyprus. Even though the number of women in the labor market has increased through the years and the Cypriot government has made attempts to reinforce gender equality, it does not mean that gender discrimination has also been abolished.

Therefore, this research will be attempting to fill in a gap in the literature that has left the experiences of women in the working environment unexplored, by examining women's experiences of gender microaggressions in their workplace.

Chapter 3: Methodology

I. Methodology

For the purpose of this research, the data was collected using qualitative methodology. In order to examine the everyday experiences that occur during social interaction, the most suitable method is qualitative methodology, as it aims to learn "how individuals experience and interact with their social world [and] the meaning it has for them" (Merriam, 2002, p. 4). Therefore, qualitative methodology was deemed as the most suitable approach for the purposes of this study. More specifically, since women's experiences of gender microaggressions is a highly understudied topic in the context of Cyprus, qualitative methodology functions positively in this case, as it allows to interpret the perceptions and experiences of the participants within social interactions. Moreover, as no similar research has been conducted on the topic of gender microaggressions in the Cypriot workplace, previous research that has been done on microaggressions have also used qualitative methodology (Sue et al., 2007; Sue and Capodilupo, 2008; Nordmarken, 2014). Thus, in order to achieve an in-depth exploration of women's experiences of gender microaggressions in the workplace in Cyprus, similar to previous research on microaggressions, qualitative methodology was applied.

II. Participant Recruitment & Sampling Criteria

The recruitment method used for the research was snowball sampling, which involves the participants referring to the researcher other individuals who may be interested in participating in the research (Noy, 2007, p. 330). Initially, the recruitment of the participants begun by asking people from my personal environment if they knew individuals who would be interested in participating in the research. It should be noted that I avoided interviewing people who are within the circle of my close family or friends in order to avoid any arising biases that could

negatively impact the interview process and, by extent, the results of the research. As the snowball sampling method entails, after interviewing the first few participants, I asked them if they could refer me to any other individuals who may be interested in participating. One of the challenges of this recruitment method is the possibility that participants may share with interested individuals the content of the interview. The participants of the research must not know what questions will be asked or what topics will be discussed prior to participating to the interview, as it may affect their responses and by extent, affect the data collected. In order to tackle this issue, participants were asked to not share any content discussed during the interview with any possible interviewees. Instead, they were encouraged to share the information document provided to them by the researcher, which will be discussed later on, in more detail. This ensured that the individuals interested in participating were informed about the topics of the interview and the interview process, without being affected by the interview experience of a previous participant.

The selection of the participants was conducted based on four pre-established criteria. Firstly, all participants must identify as women since the purpose of this study is to examine whether or not women experience gender microaggressions in the workplace. Secondly, the participants of the research must be between the ages of 25 and 65. The youngest age for participation was set at 25, as it is old enough to have gained adequate experience and interactions within their workplace, so that they would be able to share during their interview. The oldest age for participation was set at 65, as that is the retirement age in Cyprus in the private sector. The third criterion for participation was that all participants must have work experience in an office job. The working environment of an office job ensures that the interactions women have experienced is among their coworkers, which is the main focus of this

study. Professions such as retail jobs have been excluded from the research as the main focus of this research is to study interactions specifically with coworkers, managers, supervisors. Since the motto "the customer is always right" is very prevalent in retail professions, interactions among customers and employees create dynamics that are different from those created among colleagues in an office environment. Lastly, the fourth criterion for the selection of the research's participants was they all must have work experience in Cyprus. This is a critical criterion, as the research is contextualized in Cyprus.

III. Sample Information

The participants of the research were 12 Cypriot women between the ages of 25 and 51. All the participants have a working experience in Cyprus in an office environment; eight of the women are employed in the private sector, while the remaining four hold job positions in the public sector. The colleagues of most of the participants were women, meaning that they work in a female populated environment. It must be noted that female populated workplaces does not presuppose that there are more women in positions of leadership than men. Instead, it refers to workplaces where the majority of employees identify as women. More specifically, 7 women mentioned that the majority of their coworkers are women, while the 5 of the participants have more male colleagues than female. In regard to the participants' job positions, 6 of them held entry-level/ administrative positions, 4 held executive positions and 2 managerial positions. Their working experience in their current working environment varied between 2 to 22 years.

The below table provides more information about the participants of the research. It indicates the pseudonyms that each participant was assigned to for the purpose of preserving their anonymity, their age, the position they hold, if they work in the public or private sector, if they

work in a male or female populated environment, and lastly, their years of work experience in their current workplace.

Participants' Demographics						
Pseudonym		Age	Position Held	Sector	Female/ Male Populated	Years Working (in current workplace)
1	Mary	27	Entry-level/ Administrative	Private	Female	4
2	Marina	25	Entry-level/ Administrative	Private	Male	2
3	Mina	40	Executive	Private	Male	15
4	Melina	44	Executive	Public	Male	18
5	Maria	25	Entry-level/ Administrative	Private	Female	3
6	Marianthi	46	Manager	Public	Female	20
7	Marianna	51	Manager	Public	Female	22
8	Melissa	39	Executive	Public	Female	10
9	Maya	28	Executive	Private	Female	5
10	Marian	32	Entry-level/ Administrative	Private	Female	7
11	Melanie	31	Entry-level/ Administrative	Private	Male	5
12	Magdalene	43	Entry-level/ Administrative	Private	Male	12

IV. Data Collection and Interview Process

The most suitable data collection method for the research was to conduct interviews. Due to the fact that interviews are more interactive compared to other data collection methods, such as a questionnaire, they allow the interviewer to "press for complete, clear answers and […] probe into any emerging topics" (Alshenqeeti, 2014, p. 40). This allows the researcher to gain more information about the topics discussed during the interview, which can be then interpreted according to the topics of the research. It is important to bear in mind that the research aims to unveil the interviewees' experiences of gender microaggressions in their working environment –

this, however, does not presuppose that the participants of the research are able to recognize that possible experience they may have had can be characterized as gender microaggressions. Therefore, during the interviews, their experiences must be deeply examined by asking questions that prompt more detailed answers from the interviewees.

In order to ensure that the interviewees were comfortable during the interview, the interviews were conducted in a place of their choice. The setting of the interview is one of the most vital parameters to look after when conducting the interviews, as it is important for the interviewee to feel comfortable to express themselves, in an environment where they feel safe and will not be distracted or interrupted (Gill et al., 2008, p. 292). Eight out of the twelve interviews took place in the house of the interviewees, while the rest took place online, through Microsoft Teams. The reasons that some of the interviews were conducted online was either due to the Covid-19 measures, or because it was more convenient for the interviewee. In both settings, all the interviews were conducted in a quiet environment with only the interviewee and the interviewer present. For the interviews conducted with physical presence, the conversations were recorded on the researcher's cellphone through a recording application. The interviews conducted online were recorded both on the researcher's cellphone and through the Teams application. All interviews lasted approximated 45 minutes.

For this specific research, I chose to follow semi-structured interviews for two main reasons. Firstly, it is an accurate enough tool in collecting individual's thoughts, opinions, and feelings about a specific topic (Barriball & While, 1994). Secondly, semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer to clarify and provide the interviewee with any further information or explanations when needed, without changing the content of the question. Additionally, semi-structured interviews follow a number of key questions to be addressed that help set the thematic

areas to be explored, while simultaneously allowing the interviewee and interviewer more freedom to diverge from a topic in order to pursue a specific response in more detail (Gill et al., 2008, p. 291). As the topic of the research may be sensitive for some interviewees and thus, more difficult to discuss, the flexibility of semi-structured interviews allows the interviewer to ask for more elaborate responses whenever deemed necessary. At the beginning of each interview, all interviewees were reminded that our conversation will be recorded and that they have the right to withdraw from the interview anytime they want or not answer to a question if they would like to do so. The interviewees were already aware of this information, as the information document was sent to them prior to agreeing to participate in the research.

The interview guide was developed in three sections. The first section consisted of three opening questions that helped collect demographic information about the interviewees, while also subtly introducing the topic of the interview. Beginning the interview with questions that can be answered easily by the participant is important, as it helps them open up more easily and build up confidence (Gill et al., 2008, p. 292). Additionally, these questions were chosen since information such as their age, position, and years of working experience may play a significant role in their experiences in the workplace and interactions among their colleagues. The second section of the interview guide consisted of questions that would give an insight of the participants' experiences in their working environment. These questions aimed to investigate their feelings towards their working environment and their colleagues, as well as elicit any positive or negative experiences they might have that can be significant to the purpose of the research. Finally, the third section of the interview guide was the closing questions, which included three questions that asked them to give their opinions about the topics discussed previously. Finally, at the end of each interview, the participants were thanked for their time and

asked if there is anything they would like to add or if they have any questions for the interviewer. This gives the opportunity to the interviewee to share additional information that they may not have been asked about or forgot to mention during the interview and ask the interviewer for any clarifications regarding the interview. Allowing the interviewee the opportunity to freely share their thoughts once the interview has ended, can often lead to the discovery of new, unanticipated information (Gull et al., 2008, p. 293). After the interviews were conducted, each interview was transcribed accurately.

V. Data Analysis

In order to begin the analysis of the data, the interview analysis was implemented in four stages, with the first stage being the transcription of the interviews. The second stage was note-taking while reading the transcriptions. During this stage, the notes served as indications of what was discussed during the interviews. The third stage was creating codes for important information provided by the interviewees with the main goal to create analytical categories. These codes could also be referred to as keywords that were used in the last stage of the data analysis process. The fourth stage was to find commonalities in the codes created on stage three of each interview, in order to formulate the analytical categories and common themes and observations among the interviews. This process resulted in the creation of three analytical categories: the type of gender microaggressions experienced by the interviewees, how women and men express gender microaggressions, and how the interviewees dealt with microaggressions. These three categories will be discussed in a later section of the research.

VI. Ethical Considerations

In qualitative research, where the data collection method is semi-structured interviews, one of the many ethical challenges that may arise is that of confidentiality. In order to ensure that

the participants were fully informed about the research, prior to conducting the interviews, all twelve participants were provided with an information document, which also included a consent form. The information document offered to the participants details about the topic of the research and important information about the procedure of the interview, such as what will be discussed and the estimated duration of the interview. Additionally, the document stated that participation to the research is voluntary and that participants have right to exit the interview at any time and request for their information to not be used in the research. In case they choose to withdraw their participation consent, any information collected during the interview will be discarded. Finally, the information document included the contact details of the researcher in case they needed further clarification. Lastly, the information document disclosed the anonymity of the participants would be preserved, as their identity would remain undisclosed with the use of a pseudonym. Additionally, the information document stated that all answers they provide will be used for the purpose of this study. Attached to the information document was also the consent form, which had to be signed by the interviewees in order to participate to the research. By signing the consent form, the participants confirm that they have understood the purpose of this study and consent to any information provided during the interview to be utilized. In order to be completely sure that the participants understood all of the information of the information document, at the beginning of each interview, they were asked if they had read the document and if they had any questions. In case any of the participants had any concerns about information they were provided with, they were provided with the required clarifications by the researcher. Then, they were asked if they would still like to participate in the research and the interview proceeded accordingly.

Another aspect of the research that should be mentioned is the power dynamics that are created between interviewee and interviewer. Firstly, due to the fact that the research focuses on women, the interviewees shared the same gender as the interviewer. In my experience throughout the interview process, this proved to have a positive impact, as it helped the interviewees open up and express themselves more easily. This could be explained by the fact that the interviewees may assume that due to our shared gander, we would also have shared experiences. This helped the interviewees feel more comfortable to address sensitive topics that are easier to share with an individual who may have possibly been affected in similar ways due to their gender. On the contrary, however, this could also be an area of concern, as the interviewees assume that the researcher is already aware of the situations they were in and how they were impacted by the instances they described. For example, the interviewees would say expressions like, "since you are also a woman you know …". In order to avoid any biases created during the analysis of the data, the interviewees were always encouraged to share more explanations of their experiences. This was achieved by asking questions such as, "how did this make you feel?", "can you give me an example?", "what do you mean by that?". This further ensures that the interviewee has the ability to talk in more detail about their experiences, without allowing room for the researcher to fill in unclarified gaps with biased assumptions.

Chapter 4: Analysis and Discussion

I. Types of Gender Microaggressions

Microaggressions are defined as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slight, and insults towards members of oppressed groups" (Galupo et al., 2018, p. 138). Identifying expressions of microaggressions, especially in the workplace can be quite difficult since they can take the form of more obvious attacks or be more subtle expressions (Basford et al., 2014, p. 341). The ambiguity of a gender microaggression is further enhanced by the intensions of the deliverer as they may be good or unconscious. In addition to this, the deliverer may view their actions as harmless (Paludi, 2013, p. 194). There is a variety of ways that have been identified, through which gender microaggressions can manifest in the workplace. Examples of these can be *sexual objectification, assumptions of traditional gender roles,* and *assumptions of inferiority* (Paludi, 2013). Among these, this study exposes different levels of gender microaggressions that have not been discussed in the literature. More specifically, this study reveals that women can be both direct and indirect targets of different types of gender microaggressions. Additionally, it is also revealed that women become targets of gender microaggressions in the workplace, when they assume traditional gender roles. The following section discusses in detail the different types of microaggressions that have been identified through the analysis of the interviews.

i. Sexual Objectification

Many of the instances that the female participants have described, fall under the categories that were mentioned above. Firstly, one of the incidents described by an interviewee, referred to as Mary, is the below:

> *Some time ago I bought a new pair of eyeglasses which had a red frame. When I wore them to work one of my female colleagues complimented their color and said that it suits me well. One of our male colleagues was present and heard us talking and he felt the need to add that they look like pornstar eyeglasses. Neither of us laughed, but he did excuse himself by saying "don't take it so seriously, I'm joking.".*

The example Mary gave can be identified as an experience of a gender microaggression for multiple reasons. Firstly, it is important to keep in mind the context of this incident. The comment of Mary's colleague that described her eyeglasses as "pornstar eyeglasses" can be perceived not only as unprofessional, but also as offensive especially when delivered by a colleague within a working environment. In addition, Mary's experience can be approached as an instance of *sexual objectification. Sexual objectification* is defined as "verbal and nonverbal indicators that reduce a woman to her physical appearance, her sexuality, or both" (Paludi, 2013, p. 196). According to this definition, the association of a colleague to a pornstar, objectifies the woman and reduces her merely to her outer appearance. The reaction elicited not only by Mary, but also by her female colleague who was an observer of this interaction, reveals the inappropriateness of such a comment, especially when delivered in a working environment as well as the discomfort the target can feel.

ii. Direct and Indirect Targets

As briefly noted above, this study exposes another level of gender microaggressions, which reveals that women can be both direct and indirect victims. As illustrated in the quote above, both Mary who was the direct target of the gender microaggression and her female colleague who was an observer, felt awkward and uncomfortable. The fact that Mary's female colleague was also a woman, constitutes her as an indirect target of the comment made by their

male colleague. Therefore, it is important to note that in many instances gender microaggressions can be delivered directly to a certain person, but they can also be experienced indirectly. This can also be observed in the following example given by another participant of the study, Marina. As she describes,

> *We are a small team in my department – it's me and two other male colleagues and I have only joined them recently in the past year. I have noticed that they usually talk about other women of the office in inappropriate ways. […] They don't do it in a gossip kind of way – it's more sexist I'd say. For example, they share small comments or jokes about women's appearances, bodies, outfits. […] it's not something that happens all the time – only every now and then. But it's still very uncomfortable to hear, especially since it makes me wonder if they talk about me like that when I'm not present.*

In this case, Marina was an indirect target of a gender microaggression as she was an observer of gender microaggressions made towards other women. This instance can be classified as the indirect experience of a gender microaggression, not only because both of the direct and the indirect targets were women, but also by how Marina felt experiencing them. As she says, the comments her colleagues were making towards other female colleagues were "inappropriate", "sexist", and "very uncomfortable to hear". It is important to highlight that due to the fact that Marina identifies as a woman herself, she also relates on a certain level to her colleagues who were the targets of these gender microaggressions. Due to the fact that her male colleagues targeted other females of the office, Marina's experience of these indirect gender microaggressions created the concerns that she was also a target when she was not present. In other words, Marina is also considered a victim of gender microaggressions because she identifies with the target group, and also because she is

negatively impacted by the experiences. This is also reflected in previous research on microaggressions that show that the experience of gender microaggressions can result in "emotions of self-doubt, frustration and isolation" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 279). Therefore, the results from this study reveal that the experience of a gender microaggression can be both direct and indirect when the individual identifies with the targeted group and the impact it can have on the either target is equally prevalent.

iii. Traditional (non)Assumptions of Gender Roles

Another instance that was described by one of the interviewees was the following:

> *One time I was trying to pick up a box that was full of documents and files that I needed for a project. One of my female colleagues saw me and came to stop me, saying that I shouldn't lift heavy things because I wouldn't be able to get pregnant in the future. […] then she made a male colleague help me lift the box, even though I told her about a thousand times that it wasn't that heavy* (Melanie).

This example reveals how more traditional ways of thinking and perceiving the differences between the two sexes can impact a woman's experience in her working environment. As illustrated above, the way a woman is treated within the workplace is often dictated by the physical abilities of her female body, which can often be impacted by more traditional ways of understanding the definitions of 'man' and 'woman'. This experience that was described by Melanie can be classified as a gender microaggression that is characterized by *assumptions of traditional gender roles.* These microaggressions occur when it is assumed that women must maintain more traditional roles, such as being more family oriented, or acting more "ladylike" (Paludi, 2013, p. 196). In this case, the assumption of traditional gender roles derives from the fact that Melanie was viewed as

physically weaker compared to a man. In addition, she was also expected to have as a priority the preservation of her ability to bear children in the future. In other words, it was assumed by her colleague, that she aspired to assume the role of a mother. This is an element that is heavily prevalent in traditional gender roles that predispose the woman as more family-oriented in comparison to a man, who must shape her lifestyle in accordance to becoming a mother.

Through the analysis of the interviews, another type of gender microaggression is identified, and it comes in contrast with the aforementioned category of assuming traditional gender roles. More specifically, this type of microaggression arises as the negative treatment women receive when they do abide by traditional gender roles. An example of this is when one of the interviewees, who will be referred to by the pseudonym of Mina, could not work overtime since she had to pick up her daughter from an afternoon lesson. While Mina was collecting her belongings to leave from the office, her supervisor yelled at her in front of the rest of her colleagues, “you are leaving from 5:05? It’s unacceptable for you to leave when we have so much work to do”. Mina prioritized her family responsibilities and still had to leave from work; nevertheless, her supervisor’s comment made her feel extremely embarrassed. This instance is an example which reveals the conflictual societal expectations of women, which are reflected in the workplace. As seen previously, women become victims of gender microaggressions when they do not assume the traditional gender roles. In the case of Mina, however, she was a victim of a gender microaggression, even though she chose to abide by the traditional gender that assumes her to be more family oriented. However, by prioritizing her family responsibilities and her role as a mother, she was again a victim of a gender microaggression. This relates back to the topic of who is an ideal worker. The ideal worker is one that sacrifices personal concerns and family

responsibilities and prioritizes work demands (Gonzalez et al., 2018, p. 188). Therefore, a female worker who abides by the traditional gender roles is one that cannot be a good employee. At the same time, this phenomenon also reveals that social expectations of women are conflictual and therefore, can never be satisfied. Whether a female employee assumed traditional gender roles or not, she still remains susceptible to experiences of gender microaggressions within the workplace.

Another experience similar to the above, but more subtle in nature, was the following:

> *Many years ago, when I was pregnant with my first child, I had this manager at work who liked to smoke a lot. […] So, a few weeks into the pregnancy when my belly started to show, I noticed that sometimes when we would talk while he was smoking, he would directly blow his cigarette smoke into my face. I never said anything about it, I just avoided talking to him when he had a lit cigarette […] Although I'm not 100% sure if it was intentional or not, it definitely felt like it was.* (Melina)

Similar to the above, Melina, describes an experience that occurred during her pregnancy, more specifically when her pregnancy started to become more apparent. This experience can also be determined as a gender microaggression due to the fact that it targets the specific individual during her pregnancy, something that refers back to the negative experiences of women when they abide by traditional gender roles. In other words, when a female employee assumes traditional gender roles that involve pregnancy and motherhood, they become more susceptible to experiences of gender microaggressions. Additionally, this incident also appears to be quite ambiguous, as Melina is not completely sure if her male supervisor was acting this way on purpose. This is something that characterizes gender microaggression on a wider range; due to their subtle nature, many instances of gender microaggressions go by unnoticed, and by extend,

they remain unreported. Similarly, this interviewee hesitated to report this incident as she was unsure of what the intentions of her male manager were.

iv. Assumptions of Inferiority

Finally, through the analysis of the interviews, another form of gender microaggressions was revealed and it can be observed in the following quote from the interviewee, Maria.

> *When I first joined my team, I had very little to no autonomy in my work. At first, I thought it was because I was new; but when I would compare myself to another male colleague who was also fairly new to the team with the same responsibilities as me, I felt that we were receiving unequal treatment from our manager. […] For example, I would receive more guidance, more feedback on my work that at times felt more like criticism, compared to my colleague who was often left to his own devices. This eventually stopped when during a project I had to make a decision on my own, which helped the job get done much more efficiently. After that my manager seems to trust me more; […] when I think about it, it is quite unfair that I had to prove myself and my abilities in order to gain his [the manager's] trust"* (Maria).

According to the above statements of Maria, she felt that she was being treated unfairly by her manager compared to her male colleague. This experience can be categorized as a gender microaggression that is impacted by *assumptions of inferiority*. As Paludi (2013) writes, assumptions of inferiority preserve the impression that women are physically and/or intellectually in inferior positions compared to men (p. 197). This becomes evident in the quote above, as the manager of Maria tended to underestimate her skills, which became even more prevalent when she would compare herself to a male colleague of the same position and same responsibilities. In addition to this, Maria only faced equal treatment, when she

had to divert from her manager's control and received an opportunity to prove herself and her skills. In other words, this incident reveals that women become victims of gender microaggressions due to the fact that they are assumed to be in inferior positions to those of men. Moreover, they tend to be less trusted by their superior with more autonomous decisions. At the same time, in order to gain an equal position to those of their male peers, they have to prove their skills and abilities.

All in all, the results of the study depict three types of gender microaggressions that can be found in previous studies, while also further enhancing pre-existing literature by revealing more ways through which gender microaggressions can manifest. One of the characteristics of gender microaggressions that is identified through this study is the direct and indirect experiences of gender microaggressions. As previously analyzed, experiences of gender microaggressions can be both direct and indirect, as long as the victims identify with the target group. Also, significant to mention is that victims of direct or indirect gender microaggressions can be equally negatively impacted by such experiences. More specifically, this study shows that both direct and indirect victims of gender microaggressions experience feelings similar to victims of racial microaggressions found in the research by Sue et al. (2007). Such feelings can be "self-doubt, frustration and isolation" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 279). In addition, the research offers a different perspective in the assumption of traditional gender roles. As the study shows, society's expectations of women to assume traditional gender roles, become contradictory when they are reflected in the workplace. As discussed above, there is an overall expectation from women to aspire to become mothers, be more caring and prioritize family matters. In the workplace, when female employees who do not aspire to these social expectations, they become targets of gender microaggressions. At the same time, these social expectations are also

paradoxical, since the study shows that when women who do assume traditional gender roles, they are also susceptible to experiences of gender microaggressions, due to the fact that it is highly conflicting with the image of the "ideal worker". Consequently, women can be targets of gender microaggressions whether they meet society's expectations or not. Moreover, all types of gender microaggressions detected in the analysis of the interviews possess common characteristics, such as the difficulty to determine what constitutes a gender microaggressions, along with the ambiguity behind the aggressor's intentions. This ambiguity further contributes to the subtle nature of gender microaggressions that makes them more difficult to be identified, not only by the recipient, but also by the deliverer.

II. Gender Microaggressions by Men Vs. Women

The types of gender microaggression that have been discussed above can become more complex when taking into consideration the gender of the deliverer. Due to the fact that seven out of the 12 participants of the research work in female populated environments, many of the experiences they described involved female aggressors. Interestingly enough, when one begins to take into perspective the gender of the aggressor, the ways through which gender microaggressions manifest become more visible and complicated and vary in nature.

Beginning with the gender microaggressions that were delivered by men, it is worth noting that even though most participants of the research work in female populated environments, the majority of the incidents reported during the interviews involved men as the aggressors. Gender microaggressions that were delivered by men are observed to have similar characteristics to the three types for racial microaggressions described by Sue et al. (2007). More specifically, it is observed that gender microaggressions delivered by men have the characteristics of microinsults, which are defined as "communications that convey rudeness and

insensitivity and demean a person's […] identity" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274). This is depicted in the incident narrated by one of the participants, Maria, who as she said, she was treated unequally by her male manager. In this case, the participant felt that her skills and abilities were not being recognized in an equal manner as her male peer, due to the fact that she was a woman. As Maria says in the interview, "*it is quite unfair that I had to prove myself and my abilities in order to gain his trust".* Another characteristic of a microinsult is that they can also be of nonverbal nature, just like it was in the case of this interviewee. Although Maria was never explicitly told by her manager that the discrimination she was facing was due to her gender, she was still being denied the autonomy that her male peer had. Therefore, this example depicts the tendency of male aggressors to unconsciously demean the identity of their female colleague. As illustrated by this example, the expression of the gender microaggression and the discrimination between gender derives from pre-existing unconscious ideas. This is an overall characteristic of gender microaggressions, as they are usually determined as expressions of pre-existing unconscious biases (Paludi, 2013, p. 194).

Furthermore, such expressions of gender microaggressions which are determined by unconscious biases, are influenced by what Hofstede refers to as *Masculinity.* According to Hofstede, the culture of a nation is inevitably reflected within the culture of an organization (Stavrou and Eisenberg, 2006, p. 1). In the research conducted by Stavrou and Eisenberg (2006), it was found that Cyprus is a country with a more masculine culture, rather than feminine. The masculine culture of Cyprus constitutes the social gender roles of the country to be more precisely differentiated, that expect men and women to assume more traditional gender roles (Stavrou and Eisenberg, 2006, p. 4). Due to the fact that men in more masculine societies are perceived to be closer to the image of the "ideal worker" that was previously discussed in the

literature review (see chapter III), women are often more susceptible to becoming victims of gender microaggressions within their workplace. An element that places women in even more susceptible positions is when they assume the role of the mother, which is highly conflictual with the role to the "ideal worker". The female participants who were also mothers described facing gender microaggressions by their male colleagues, such as purposefully smoking in the presence of a pregnant woman and being judged for prioritizing family and not being able to work overtime. Similar experiences were reported during the interviews that involved mothers being criticized by their male colleagues for taking *"too many days of annual leave"* (Marianna) for family matters, such as to take care of their sick child. Due to the fact that the female participants often prioritize their family over their work, they can never be seen as a "good worker". Therefore, it is observed that men tend to deliver gender microaggressions to a female colleague, due to the conflictual role of the mother and the "ideal worker".

Women, on the other hand, have different ways of expressing gender microaggressions towards other women. What can be observed from the descriptions of the female participants is that female aggressors tend to express gender microaggressions in more subtle ways and they usually manifest through the daily routine of the office. An example given by Marianthi, one of the interviewees, where this was depicted is the following:

> *There was once this director we had at work who would bully us for our working hours – mostly me actually. She knew which car I had, because I would usually park across from her, and whenever I would be late in the morning, once every blue moon, she would specifically ask, 'where is she?', 'why isn't she here yet?'. Keep in mind that usually she would be the one who would come in late to work. […] She didn't stay long in the organization.*

Similar incidents to the above involved annual leaves. As Marinna mentioned, during the summer, Christmas, or Easter there would be a lot of tensions in the office among the female colleagues due to the fact that they had to coordinate with each other who would be missing and when.

Regarding gender microaggressions delivered by women, it is interesting to note the reasons behind such behavior. When one of the interviewees was asked, "why do you think there's this kind of behavior among the women in your office?", her reply was:

> *Well, you know how women are. When you have a lot of women in one place, there's bound to be competition. […] Women are competitive.* (Marianna)

This notion of women competing with each other was also detected in the interview of another participant. She described the following:

> *A manager from a different department would complain all the time about the way I would manage my own department. My [management] style tends to be a lot more relaxed compared to hers. […] The only way that we resolved the issue was by moving my department to a different building. […] At times I think she was being competitive with me.* (Melissa)

It can be argued that the overall phenomenon of women being competitive with each other derives from the unconscious need to survive within an environment where the ideal employee is a male (Schwanke, 2013, p. 21). As it has been argued, this environment initiates the production of a phenomenon called the "Queen Bee Syndrome", through which a woman who has achieved a position of authority, will not share information, or encourage other women to advance, precisely because she wants to maintain a place with the men at

her level, by aligning herself to the men's perceptions and interests (Schwanke, 2013, p. 21). Whether consciously, or unconsciously, this manifests through expressions of gender microaggressions against other women in the workplace. In addition to this, another interesting report from Maya, an interviewee, was when she was the aggressor towards one of her female colleagues. Even though the interviewee did not to elaborate on this specific incident, she mentioned that *"I called another colleague a word I shouldn't have, especially since she's a woman – and I am too – and since then we aren't in very good terms"*. This indicates that the gender microaggression she expressed can be possibly classified as a microinsult, meaning that it demeans her colleague's identity. In other words, gender microaggressions delivered by women tend to be products of an overall attempt to survive within an environment that usually alienates and excludes them.

III. Dealing with Gender Microaggressions

One of the biggest characteristics of gender microaggressions is that they are extremely underreported. Due to their subtle nature, expressions of gender microaggressions are often invisible to many deliverers and recipients, which in consequence, leaves many incidents unreported (Nordmarken, 2014, p. 129) This, however, is not the only factor that causes victims of gender microaggressions to not report their experiences. In addition, when such incidents are recognized as gender microaggressions, they still remain unreported due to the prevalent impression that reporting it to a superior or an HR manager will bring no consequences (Hashmi et al., 2013, p. 453). The findings of this research, further support the claims found in the literature regarding the lack of report of gender microaggressive incidents. More specifically, seven out of the twelve female participants of the study claimed that they never reported to anyone the incidents of gender microaggression that they have experienced in the workplace.

According to the results of the study, it is indicated that there is a vital factor that either consciously or unconsciously dictates how the interviewees reacted to the gender microaggressions they have experienced. Overall, the results show that the participants reacted in three different ways; they addressed their aggressor directly about the incident, they reported the incident in their performance evaluation report, or they did not report it at all. However, what is also further observed in the findings is that the job position of not only the participant, but also the position of the aggressor are a significant factor in how the victim of the gender microaggression decides to deal with their experience. Three out of the six female participants who hold entry-level positions reported incidents where their aggressor was a colleague of theirs on the same level as them; these women did not report their experience to a supervisor or an HR manager, instead they directly addressed their colleague who was involved. Additionally, one female participant who holds an executive position and one a managerial position, during their interviews, they also reported incidents by colleagues on the same level as them, however, they chose to deal with the incidents differently – they chose to report the incidents they have experienced during a meeting with the HR manager of their organization. Finally, the remaining seven female participants of the research, described experiences of gender microaggressions exerted by a colleague in a higher position, which have never been reported to a supervisor or an HR manager.

The fact that the job position of the victim and the aggressor have an impact in how the recipient of gender microaggressions react to the incidents they experience, reveals the pre-existing conceptions and dynamics that are created among colleagues in lower and higher positions. Returning back to Hofstede's five dimensions of culture, the first dimension he discusses is *Power Distance. Power Distance* refers to "the extent to which the less powerful

members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (Stavrou and Eisenberg, 2006, p. 1). According to the research conducted by Stavrou and Eisenberg (2006), Cyprus is defined as a country with a high rate of power distance. By extent, this means that in Cypriot organizations the hierarchical structure is prevalent to a high degree (Stavrou and Eisenberg, 2006, p. 2). In other words, hierarchical roles in the Cypriot workplace tend to be solid, accepted and expected by employees. In the case of the female participants who experienced gender microaggressions by colleagues on the same job position as themselves, decided that directly approaching their colleague was the most suitable way to deal with the incident. More specifically, one of the incidents described by the participant in an entry level position was when one of her male colleagues would allocate tasks unfairly:

> *He did this a couple of times – when two other colleagues were present, he would tell me to do tasks, while everyone else would just sit around and do nothing. I don't understand why he thought he had the right to boss me around when, a) him and two other people weren't doing anything and b) he isn't my boss. […] The second time he did it, I asked him, 'what is your problem with me?' – of course he pretended to be cool and said nothing is wrong.* (Marian)

In this incident, Marian mentioned that she felt "targeted", as she was the only one who would be "bossed around" by this specific person, among a group of two other colleagues. Due to the fact that they had been colleagues for two years, as she mentioned, she decided to address him directly regarding his behavior. As it can be observed, when the power distance between two colleagues is minor and they hold the same position on the hierarchical ladder, then it is easier for the victim to directly approach the deliverer of the gender microaggression.

On the other hand, the majority of gender microaggression incidents that were not reported, are delivered from colleagues in higher positions than the recipients. In organizational cultures where the power distance rates are high, it is observed that the several organizational issues arise, some of which are organizational communication, decision making and ethical behavior (Khatri, 2009, p. 3). When it comes to communication within organizations with high power distance, employees in lower positions tend be unwilling to share their opinions and disagreements openly with their peers; this is due to them being fearful of losing face or making someone else lose face (Khatri, 2009, p. 3). This can also be observed through the experiences narrated by the participants during their interviews. More specifically, when they were asked the question "why did you never report the incident to a superior or an HR manager?", the responses received were:

I was scared I would lose my job (Maria),

They wouldn't believe me anyway (Magdalene),

It was easier to not make a big deal out of it and just let it pass (Marina),

I don't think anything would have changed if I had reported it (Melina),

Nobody would take it seriously enough (Mary)

Nobody would care (Maya)

The interviews reveal that the high rates of power distance in the Cypriot workplace creates a major communication gap between employees in higher job positions and employees in lower job positions. In these cases, these women found it easier to not communicate an incident that made them uncomfortable as they believed it would cause more inconveniences for them, than bring about solutions. As mentioned above, the rigidity of hierarchical structures makes it difficult for employees in lower positions to question and challenge the

authority of their superiors. Moreover, Hofstede's theory implies that decision-making in organizations with high power distance is centralized to the higher job positions, which makes subordinates unwilling to express their disagreement to their superiors' decisions (Khatri, 2009, p. 4). This further explains the overall unwillingness of the interviewees to report their experiences as they have this pre-existing belief that challenging the authority of a superior would only prove to be futile.

Another factor that plays an important role in the victim's decision on how to deal with an experience of gender microaggression in the workplace is the existence of policies and procedures. As mentioned above, two female interviewees who experienced gender microaggressions from a same-level colleague, had reported the incident during their performance evaluations. It is worth noting that their decision to report the incident could have been impacted by the fact that the aggressor was a same-level colleague, meaning that the aforementioned theory of power distance may not have been as a determining factor as it was for the cases previously discussed. However, this also signifies the importance of an HR department. In both cases, both participants mentioned that their companies have a trustworthy HR department that has facilitated an environment where open communication is welcomed and encouraged as it can be constructive. This further highlights the need for well-structured HR practices, such as performance evaluations and the existence of policies and procedures. When the employees are not only aware of the organizational policies, but also feel confident in the practices of the HR department, it makes it much easier for victims to report cases that made them feel that concern them and make them feel uncomfortable. Specifically, studies have shown that when an employee trusts their HR department, they have better individual work performance, discretionary behavior, satisfaction and organizational commitment (Kramer and

Tyler, 1999; Dirks and Ferrin, 2001; Ferrin and Dirks, 2003). Therefore, the role of the HR department and its practices is vital in how experiences of gender microaggressions are dealt with. By extend, reporting these experiences will lead to dealing with gender microaggressions more appropriately, based on pre-existing policies and procedures. This prevents the victims from dealing with the detrimental side-effects that come with the experiences of gender microaggressions in the workplace.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

I. Key Findings

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of gender microaggressions of women in their workplace, specifically in the context of Cyprus. Additionally, this study unveiled the various types of gender microaggressions that women experience, how gender microaggressions manifest differently when the aggressor is a man and a woman, while also examining the factors that impact the victims' decision in dealing with such experiences.

First and foremost, the types of gender microaggressions found in the results are sexual objectification, assumptions of traditional gender roles, and assumptions of inferiority. These three types of gender microaggressions already existed in extant literature. However, this research has identified two additional types of gender microaggressions that have been absent from previous literature. Firstly, this research reveals that women have the ability to be both direct and indirect victims of gender microaggressions. So far, the literature has been discussing the types of gender microaggression women face when they are the direct targets. However, this study reveals that an individual can be an indirect victim of gender microaggressions, as long as they identify and relate to the direct victim of such behavior. In other words, when a woman is the witness of a gender microaggression towards another women, she becomes an indirect victim herself. The second type of gender microaggression that has been identified through this research, is that women who do assume traditional gender roles, for example the role of the mother, become more susceptible to experiencing gender microaggressions, due to the fact that such roles do not comply with the characteristics of an "ideal worker".

In addition to the above, the results offer a distinction between how the two genders perform or express gender microaggressions. Men's way of performing gender microaggressions

is through expressions of microinsults, which are often motivated by women's assumptions of traditional gender roles that are conflictual to the role of the "ideal worker". On the contrary, women tend to express gender microaggressions towards other women in more subtle ways, through the daily routine of the office, by viewing each other as competition. Women's perception of other women as competition is consciously or unconsciously developed through the need to survive in an environment that tends to exclude the presence of women. In both cases, the conscious or unconscious motivation behind gender microaggressions is rooted in stereotypes emanated by patriarchal ideas. Moreover, the data also suggests that the way victims deal with gender microaggressions heavily depends on the hierarchy that exists in their organization. More specifically, victims who experienced gender microaggressions by a colleague on the same level as them, chose to directly address their aggressor. On the other hand, when their aggressor was a coworker from a higher position, the victims preferred to not report their experiences to anyone, out of fear of losing their jobs, or due to the fact that they believed nothing would change. The only time incidents of gender microaggressions would be reported, was when the organizations of the victims had a trustworthy Human Resource department. This further highlights the importance of an HR department in organizations, as well as the presence of clear and transparent policies and procedures that exist to protect the employees from incidents that compromises their physical and mental well-being.

II. Limitations and Recommendations

The phenomenon of gender microaggressions has been a topic that has been researched numerous times throughout the last few decades, since it has been a constant in the experiences of women, not only in their workplace, but also in their daily lives. In the context of Cyprus, however, very few to no research has been done on the experiences of women, and even fewer

on women's experiences of gender microaggressions in the workplace in Cyprus. It should be noted that there is a significant gap in the literature that discusses the most recent characteristics of the Cypriot culture and society, which could have been a challenge as no pre-existing frame of reference that can be used for the purposes of this study is provided. However, the absence of any previous research in the context of Cyprus, constitutes this study as the foundation for possible future research since it contributes significant findings about women's experiences of gender microaggressions in the workplace, as well as the ways in which the Cypriot culture is reflected in the culture of organizational hierarchies and dynamics.

As the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of gender microaggressions Cypriot women face in the workplace, the interview guide included more generic questions that were not leading, in order to avoid skewing the answers of the participants. This, however, prove to be a challenge in certain interviews, as the participants were finding it more difficult to open up, which resulted in shorter interviews with fewer data. Additionally, another challenge of this study is the small number of participants. The small number of participants provided access to smaller data; however, this allowed the researcher to provide a much more detailed analysis of each interview. A suggestion for future research would be recruitment of a larger number of participants and possibly the application of a mixed methodology, by conducting interview as well as a questionnaire. A larger amount of data would allow for better conclusions, or even formulate a model similar to that of Sue et al. (2007), which categorizes the types of microaggressions women phase in their working environments. By extend, the study of a larger sample of female experiences would result in categories of microaggressions that are more representative of the women's experiences in their workplaces in Cyprus.

Moreover, the participants of this study were mainly women from female populated working environments. A future study could compare the ways through which gender microaggressions manifest in female populated working environments and male populated working environments. In addition to this, as the results of the study have shown, men and women tend to express gender microaggressions differently; another study on how the two genders express gender microaggressions would be significant, as it could reveal the perceptions and dynamics of gender in Cyprus, which is a heavily unexplored area of research. Additionally, since gender microaggressions can be experienced in all types of working environments, it would be interesting to investigate other professions, beyond the working space of an office. For instance, a research on experiences of gender microaggressions of female employees in retail jobs by customers, which unveils a different type of power dynamics, would also offer a more complex understanding of perceptions of gender and hierarchy in the culture of Cyprus.

III. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study significantly contributes to the absence of research on Cypriot women's experiences of gender microaggression in the workplace. It brings to the front a variety of issues that can be used as topics for research in the future. Simultaneously, it contributes to already existing literature on gender microaggressions by offering new types and characteristics of gender microaggressions, while also providing in insight on the factors that impact the victims' decision in how to deal with their experience. Nevertheless, the overall results of the study suggest that women in Cyprus do experience gender microaggressions in their working environments. This experience is heavily tied with the Cypriot culture as the national culture is highly reflected in the culture of Cypriot organizations. The ways through which aggressors express gender microaggressions derive from deeply enrooted beliefs that characterize the

Cypriot culture and the perceptions of gender in Cyprus. In a similar manner, the Cypriot culture is reflected in the ways in which the victims choose to deal with their experiences of gender microaggressions.

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Appendix 1: Information Document

ΕΝΗΜΕΡΩΤΙΚΟ ΕΝΤΥΠΟ ΓΙΑ ΣΥΜΜΕΤΟΧΗ ΣΕ ΕΡΕΥΝΑ:

Διαβάστε προσεκτικά αυτό το έγγραφο πριν αποφασίσετε αν θέλετε να συμμετάσχετε.

- **Τίτλος ερευνητικής μελέτης:**

"Women's Experience in the Cypriot Workplace."

- **Τι αφορά αυτή η έρευνα?**

Η έρευνα διεξάγεται στα πλαίσια της διατριβής της ερευνήτριας, Γεωργίας Χατζηπολυδώρου, φοιτήτριας στο μεταπτυχιακό πρόγραμμα Διοίκησης Ανθρώπινου Δυναμικού του Πανεπιστημίου Κύπρου.

- **Τι περιλαμβάνεται στη συνέντευξη?**

Στη διάρκεια της συνέντευξης θα γίνει μια συζήτηση για το θέμα όπως αναφέρεται πιο πάνω. Η συνέντευξη προβλέπεται να διαρκέσει 45 λεπτά με 1 ώρα.

- **Θα είναι ανώνυμες και εμπιστευτικές οι απαντήσεις μου?**

Όλες οι πληροφορίες που θα δοθούν στη διάρκεια της συνέντευξης θα είναι εμπιστευτικές και ανώνυμες. Η ταυτότητά σου και το όνομα οποιωνδήποτε άλλων ατόμων αναφέρετε θα παραμείνουν εμπιστευτικά και ανώνυμα. Η καταγραφή της συνέντευξης θα αποθηκευτεί σε υπολογιστή που προστατεύεται με κωδικό. Οι απομαγνητοφωνήσεις και όλα τα άλλα έγγραφα που σχετίζονται με αυτή την έρευνα θα κατατεθούν σε έναν υπολογιστή με κωδικό πρόσβασης. Τα δεδομένα που θα συλλεχθούν θα χρησιμοποιηθούν για ακαδημαϊκούς σκοπούς.

- **Γιατί να συμμετάσχεις?**

Η συμμετοχή στη μελέτη είναι εθελοντική. Εάν συμφωνήσεις να συμμετάσχεις μπορείς να ζητήσεις διακοπή της συνέντευξης ή αποχώρηση από την έρευνα οποιαδήποτε στιγμή. Εάν επιλέξεις να αποχωρήσεις από την έρευνα, οι πληροφορίες που έχουν ήδη ληφθεί δεν θα χρησιμοποιηθούν.

- **Με ποιόν τρόπο μπορώ να επικοινωνήσω για τη μελέτη στο μέλλον?**

Γεωργία Χατζηπολυδώρου

Email address: Hadjipolydorou.georgia@ucy.ac.cy

Appendix 2: Consent Form

ΈΝΤΥΠΟ ΣΥΓΚΑΤΆΘΕΣΗΣ

- Έχω μελετήσει τις πληροφορίες του ενημερωτικού εντύπου σχετικά με την έρευνα "Women's Experiences in the Cypriot Workplace".
- Είχα την ευκαιρία να κάνω ερωτήσεις σχετικές με την μελέτη και έλαβα ικανοποιητικές απαντήσεις από τον ερευνητή.
- Κατανοώ ότι αποσπάσματα από τις απαντήσεις μου στην έρευνα μπορεί να χρησιμοποιηθούν σε μελλοντικές δημοσιεύσεις.
- Όλα τα αποσπάσματα θα είναι ανώνυμα.
- Δίνω την συγκατάθεσή μου να γίνει ηχογράφηση της συνέντευξης.
- Με πλήρη γνώση όλων των παραπάνω, συμφωνώ να συμμετάσχω στην έρευνα.

Ονοματεπώνυμο συμμετέχοντα

_____

Υπογραφή συμμετέχοντα συνέντευξης Ημερομηνία

_____ _____

Υπογραφή Ερευνήτριας Ημερομηνία

_____ _____

Γεωργία Χατζηπολυδώρου

Appendix 3: Interview Guide

Interview Guide

1. How old are you?

2. What is your current job position?

3. How long have you been in this position?

Main Questions:

4. Talk to me about your working environment? [i.e. your relationships with your colleagues, your managers, the organizational policies]

5. What are somethings you like about your working environment? [ask for an example]|

6. What are somethings you like as a woman about your working environment? [ask for an example]

7. Why is that something that you like?

8. What are somethings you don't like about your working environment?

9. What are some things you don't like about your working environment? [ask for an example]

10. Why is that something you don't like?

11. How would you describe your relationship with your colleagues?

12. Tell me about an instance that made you feel positively.

13. Where there any instances that made you feel negatively?

14. Could you give me an example?

15. Who was involved in this instance?

16. Why do you think they acted that way?

17. How did it make you feel?

18. Would you say that this kind of behavior made you feel excluded/ threatened/ targeted as a

woman?

19. Did you do anything about it? [Reported it to HR or discussed it with another colleague]

20. If yes, why? If not, why not?

21. If you could turn back time, would you change anything in the way you reacted?

Closing Questions

22. Do you think the culture of the workplace plays a role in how such instances are handled?

23. Why do you think that?

24. How do you believe these experiences should be treated in the workplace?