Breaking the Silence on Sexual Violence in Cyprus

The EP's Resolution on the Impact of the Turkish Invasion on Cypriot Women and the Expressive Dimension of Justice

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On 8 July 2026, the European Parliament adopted a Resolution on the Impact of the 1974 Turkish Invasion on Cypriot Women and Girls and the Crimes Committed by Turkish Forces and Consequences on Gender Equality. The Resolution acknowledges that Cypriot women's experiences of violence during 1974 are "often being excluded from official historical, legal and institutional recognition" and thus calls to document testimonies and provide support for survivors. This is particularly significant from the perspective of the expressive dimension of justice. Justice requires creating the conditions in which those whose voices have long been silenced can tell their stories, contribute to the historical record, and participate in shaping the collective memory of conflict if they wish to do so. The Resolution therefore provides an important opening for such recognition, but its transformative potential will ultimately depend on whether its commitments to documenting testimony and promoting historical awareness translate into meaningful opportunities for survivors to speak and be heard openly and safely and to have their experiences incorporated into Cyprus's public memory of the conflict.

The Historical Context of Cyprus

The history of Cyprus has been marked by recurring intercommunal violence and profound human suffering. The intercommunal clashes, which reached their most violent peak between 1963 and 1964 as well as 1967, were marked by killings committed by and against members of both the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities. On 15 July 1974, the military junta then governing Greece carried out a bloody coup d'état to remove President Archbishop Makarios III from power. Five days later, on 20 July 1974, Turkish armed forces invaded the island, marking the beginning of a military intervention that resulted in widespread loss of life, mass displacement, enforced disappearances and the occupation of approximately 37% of the island, which continues to this day. On 14 August 1974, Turkey launched the second phase of the invasion.

Among the many violations committed during the conflict was the sexual violence perpetrated against women and girls. Yet, despite the profound physical and psychological consequences of these crimes, the experiences of survivors remained largely absent from public discourse for decades. Their silence was rarely the product of formal legal prohibition. Rather, it reflected the enduring effects of trauma, stigma, patriarchal social norms, fear of disbelief and social exclusion, together with the absence of institutional spaces in which survivors could safely recount their experiences. Consequently, one of the gravest yet least acknowledged consequences of the Cyprus conflict occupied only a marginal place in political and public discourse.

Gradual Change

The position of survivors of conflict-related sexual violence has gradually begun to change. Over the past three decades, international criminal law and international human rights law have fundamentally transformed the legal understanding of conflict-related sexual violence, recognising it as one of the gravest violations committed during armed conflict. From the landmark jurisprudence of the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda to the adoption of the 2000 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, inter-

national law has increasingly recognised that justice for survivors requires more than criminal accountability. It also demands acknowledgement, documentation, reparative measures and the preservation of survivors' testimonies as part of the historical record.

The European Parliament's Resolution on Cyprus was adopted by 575 votes in favour and 33 against, with 43 abstentions. The initiative emerged through the European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, FEMM. The Resolution calls for, *inter alia,* greater recognition, justice, accountability and support for victims, while addressing the long-term consequences of displacement and conflict-related violence.

Specific to the argument in this piece, the Resolution:

> *"Calls on the Commission to support Cyprus in continuing efforts to determine the full scale of conflict-related crimes, including sexual violence, and establish the number of victims, to collect data and safely document testimonies, thus ensuring adequate official recognition, redress and reparation for survivors and, where appropriate, their descendants, to promote historical awareness and to provide support services for survivors through an enhanced national action plan."*

The Resolution consistently refers to Cypriot women and girls and addresses the sexual crimes committed by the Turkish military forces and paramilitary extremist perpetrators during the Turkish invasion. Although non-binding, resolutions represent the majority position of Parliament and constitute an important means of drawing institutional attention to particular issues and seeking to influence the actions and priorities of other actors. In this sense, the Resolution assumes particular importance. More than five decades after the events of 1974, it brings the gendered consequences of the conflict, and in particular conflict-related sexual violence, into a European institutional framework.

The Resolution was strongly challenged by the self-proclaimed "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus," an entity not recognized by the international community. In a statement issued by its "Ministry of Foreign Affairs", "this unacceptable resolution targeting Türkiye will serve no purpose other than contributing to Greek Cypriot propaganda aimed at misleading the international community."

Political disagreement over the framing of the Resolution cannot serve as a basis for denying, minimising or diverting attention from the experiences of women who suffered sexual violence during the conflict. Nor should competing narratives surrounding the events of 1974 be invoked to discredit survivors' testimonies or to transform recognition of conflict-related sexual violence into yet another arena of political contestation.

There is also a deeper transitional justice deficit at play. Cyprus still lacks a truth-seeking mechanism capable of investigating conflict-related atrocities, including conflict-related sexual violence. As Demetriades has observed, Cypriot society has yet to reach agreement even on the basic historical framework through which the conflict is understood, illustrating the continuing difficulty of establishing a shared account of the past. This absence makes the political controversy surrounding the Resolution all the more significant. Rather than allowing disagreement over historical narratives to undermine the recognition of survivors, it should underscore the urgency of creating an institutional space in which experiences of conflict-related sexual violence can be documented, acknowledged and preserved across communal lines.

The Expressive Dimension of Justice

Freedom of expression has traditionally been understood through the lens of the relationship between the individual and the state, with constitutional and human rights law primarily concerned with protecting speakers against censorship, criminal sanctions and other forms of governmental interference. This conception remains indispensable as it safeguards political dissent, facilitates public debate, and protects the exchange of ideas upon which constitutional democracy depends. Notwithstanding the importance of such protections, they do not fully explain the experiences of many survivors of conflict-related sexual violence.

The prolonged silence surrounding the experiences of many women and girls affected by the Cyprus conflict illustrates this limitation. There is little evidence that survivors were prevented by law from speaking publicly about the violence they had endured. Instead, their silence reflected the cumulative effects of psychological trauma, shame, patriarchal social norms, concerns about stigma and the absence of institutional environments in which disclosure could occur safely and with dignity. For many women, speaking publicly risked social exclusion, disbelief or renewed victimisation. Silence, therefore, cannot simply be interpreted as the absence of speech. Instead, it reveals existence of structural barriers that rendered meaningful participation in public discourse extraordinarily difficult despite the formal legal freedom to speak.

This distinction highlights what might be described as the expressive dimension of justice. Justice for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence cannot be exhausted by criminal accountability, reparations or official acknowledgement. It also encompasses the conditions under which survivors can recount their experiences, have those experiences received with dignity and respect, and contribute to the collective understanding of past atrocities. Recognition therefore performs an expressive function. It affirms not only that grave violations occurred but also that survivors are recognised as authoritative participants in the historical record rather than remaining peripheral to it. Understood in this way, freedom of expression serves not merely to protect speech against state interference but to facilitate the communicative conditions through which recognition itself becomes possible.

Scholarship on epistemic injustice provides a valuable framework for understanding the relationship between survivor recognition and freedom of expression. Fricker defines epistemic injustice as a distinctive form of injustice in which individuals are wronged specifically in their capacity as knowers. One important manifestation is testimonial injustice, which occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to assign a credibility deficit to a speaker's testimony, thereby denying it the recognition it deserves. Dotson develops this account by demonstrating that epistemic injustice may arise even before testimony is offered. Through what she terms testimonial smothering, individuals may truncate or withhold their testimony because they reasonably conclude that their audience lacks the competence or willingness to understand it, making silence a rational response rather than a freely chosen one. Dryzek and Niemeyer have argued that epistemic injustice extends beyond failures of credibility or understanding. They identify expressive epistemic injustice, whereby individuals are wronged not because they are formally prevented from speaking, but because the surrounding social and political conditions inhibit their ability to express their experiences meaningfully. Their analysis shifts attention from the mere legal freedom to speak towards the communicative conditions necessary for meaningful expression.

This insight is particularly relevant to survivors of conflict-related sexual violence in Cyprus. Their prolonged silence can be explained by trauma and the risk of disbelief. However, it reflects a broader social environment characterised by stigma, patriarchal norms, political sensitivities and institutional neglect, in which many survivors could reasonably conclude that speaking would not result in genuine understanding or recognition. Viewed through this lens, the significance of the European Parliament's Resolution lies not only in acknowledging survivors but also in contributing to the conditions under which long-silenced experiences can finally enter public discourse. This is the expressive dimension of justice: one that depends upon robust truth-seeking mechanisms, an intercommunal approach to recognition, and the creation of the social and legal conditions necessary for freedom of expression to be meaningfully exercised across the (Cyprus) divide.

Conclusion

The European Parliament's Resolution represents an important and long-overdue step towards recognising survivors of conflict-related sexual violence in Cyprus. Yet, if Cyprus is to achieve a genuinely inclusive form of justice, it must first establish an independent mech-

anism capable of investigating and documenting conflict-related sexual violence committed against all survivors, irrespective of community or perpetrator. Such a mechanism could be, for example, the precedent of the Committee on Missing Persons in Cyprus (CMP), co-funded by the European Union and composed of Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot members, together with a third member appointed by the United Nations. Not without its challenges and setbacks, the CMP demonstrates that bicommunal and internationally supported cooperation is possible when addressing the painful legacies of the conflict. A parallel, although necessarily distinct, model could be envisaged for conflict-related sexual violence. Drawing inspiration from the CMP's institutional structure, a dedicated bicommunal mechanism could provide a secure and confidential process through which survivors from both communities could voluntarily provide testimony and have their experiences documented and preserved, with appropriate safeguards and psychological support. Only based on such a shared factual record can recognition fully contribute to justice, reconciliation and lasting peace.

At the core of any such mechanism should be the recognition that, in traumatised societies, freedom of expression entails more than the liberty to speak. It must also enable those whose experiences have long been excluded from public discourse to become part of a shared public memory. In doing so, it can serve both individual dignity and the broader pursuit of reconciliation.

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