

Herstory for Peace: Women's Workshops in Cyprus and Ireland

A Brief Report

This report touches upon adult education for gender equality, women's empowerment, and peace building through exploring the subject of women's history and gender history. It builds particularly on the experiences of the facilitators and the participants in the project 'Herstory for Peace: Women's Workshops in Cyprus and Ireland' which consisted of a series of women's workshops in the two countries.

The aim of the workshops was to use women's history (herstory) as a vehicle to empower Cypriot and Irish women in being active agents of both peace and gender equality in their societies.

The project was implemented between 2021 and 2023 by the Cypriot NGO 'Center for Gender Equality and History' (www.kiif.com.cy) in cooperation with the Irish NGO 'Herstory Education Trust' (www.herstory.ie).

It consisted of a total of twenty-four workshops; eleven targeted Cypriot women, eleven targeted Irish women, and two were intra-national consisting of both Irish and Cypriot women.



Members of the project team meeting in Cyprus, 16 October 2023

In terms of the participants, the workshops targeted women who came from different ethnic/religious communities of Cyprus and Ireland, and of different age groups and backgrounds. Hence they were both inter-communal and inter-generational.

This way, peace education met with gender education, women's history, individual empowerment, community building, and intergenerational dialogue.

The project was primarily funded by the European Programme Erasmus+, and secondarily by the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) as well as the Department of Culture (Northern Ireland), Belfast City Council, and Northern Ireland Youth Forum.

This report concerns you if you are interested in:

- Education / training / facilitation of workshops or lessons in either formal or non-formal education
- Peace building processes
- Gender equality advocacy or gender studies
- Women's history and gender history
- Alternative methods and approaches of teaching history
- Intergenerational practices

In this report, you can find:

- Examples of educational content and activities where gender history and women's history are used as a vehicle for peace education and gender equality.
- Tips for developing and implementing peace workshops and/or women's workshops and/or gender equality workshops.
- Reflections on the methodology and the development of transformative educational experience in adult education through interactive, experiential, and participatory activities.

Transformative education and methodological approach

Before getting into the educational content and the activities implemented during this project as well as the insights, lessons and tips we wish to share within this report, we need to first begin with a few words on our pedagogic and methodological approach.

Indeed, the subject of education—formal or non-formal—has many levels to it. On the one hand, there is the educational content and the material which one provides in order to explore a particular subject. On the other hand, there is the methodological approach one follows, which is often as important, or even more important than the prepared content itself.

One may have great intentions, such as learning about women’s history, yet if they understand this as merely presenting a bunch of information to a group of passive participants, that would be far from inspiring, or leading to any kind of meaningful learning and empowerment.

In this respect, the methodological approach and the format of our workshops were inspired by what we could name as “transformative” or “transformational” education, that is, an education which aspires to bring change in the individuals involved, including their values, beliefs and attitudes, rather than just offer knowledge and skills.

At the same time, new knowledge and skills were also part of our goals, but they were seen mostly as tools for individual and social transformation. For example, the participants learned a lot of new information about the history of women’s political rights—and many other aspects of women’s history—yet the main educational goal wasn’t to be able to name the first women politicians in Cyprus or the women who helped shape the “Good Friday Agreement” in Northern Ireland.

Such a goal could also be achieved—depending on the interest of the participants—but our main educational goal as facilitators was to explore women’s untold stories as a way to potentially change someone’s perspective, and to offer the seed of inspiration and motivation for the participants to become themselves more interested and capable in actively exploring and promoting women’s stories for peace and equality.

Similarly, our aspiration was for the women participants to leave our workshops feeling empowered as women, and inspired to explore their own

history, as well as to deepen their questioning of myths and unconscious stereotypes which assume that women have not been makers of history or active agents of politics, etc.

To achieve this, it was of great importance to create a safe environment. Primarily, this meant a non-judgmental environment, where the participants felt that their opinions, questions, and interventions would be met in a welcoming and understanding manner.

For this reason, we always began our introduction explaining that we wanted this space to be a safe environment and for this reason we would follow some “rules”. One of those was to try to not be judgemental to others and listen with respect, and also try not to say things that may be received as offensive to any category of people as some of them may be here with us. In our experience, this kind of introduction did help in setting an inclusive tone.

Finally, we also put much attention in developing lesson plans based on interactive, participatory, experiential, and collaborative activities where our role was indeed to facilitate rather than teach or assume any kind of authority other than coordinating the process to allow the flow of the workshop, everyone’s participation, and the respect of the timelines. In this respect, standing or sitting in a circle was the default arrangement unless the character of the activity demanded a different setting.

WORDS OF PARTICIPANTS:

“I was surprised at how quickly I felt safe in the group. The topics were fascinating and moving and ... impactful.”

“An atmosphere was created in which everyone could participate. The activities were both fun and educational; stimulating. Every detail was well considered.”

“In this workshop, I liked the interactive work the most and the feeling of trust and speaking my heart out without fear.”

“What I liked best is that it was not just one-way, didactic. It was an exchange.”

Preparing the ground: Introductory Activities

As is often the case in non-formal educational workshops, the first activity which took place during the Cypriot workshops was an introductory activity aiming to break the ice, give everyone the opportunity to meet or get to know each other better, build trust, and set an inclusive tone.

When the workshop consisted of a new group of participants, this first activity would be for everyone to stand or sit in a circle and take turns to share their name and what brought them to the particular workshop. We called this ‘The circle of introductions’.



Workshop in Deryneia, Cyprus, 5 April 2023

This was important for many reasons. Beyond breaking the ice, it accomplished the engagement of the participants and allowed for the facilitators to get a feeling of the group including their expectations of the workshop as well as the interests, knowledge, and expertise that could be used throughout the workshops for the whole group to benefit.

At the same time, through this activity the participants were able to identify common interests and experiences. The question “What brings you to this workshop?” allowed for the participants to say a few words regarding their own field of interest, or their connection to the subject of the workshop.

As the workshop was about women’s history, gender equality, and peace education, many women participants shared biographical information about

either working or volunteering in subjects such as formal or non-formal education, history-teaching, storytelling, gender studies, gender activism, peace building, etc. In the context of our workshops, this worked wonderfully for networking as many women expressed interest in the work of other participants and exchanged contacts.

Another introductory activity we used during our workshops was ‘What’s your name’¹, an activity which basically uses the group’s names as a means to learn more about one’s identities along with personal and collective stories hidden in one’s name.

This was achieved by first asking from the participants to reflect individually on the meaning and/or origins of their name including questions such as “Do you know the meaning and the origins of your name?” “Is it linked to a particular culture/country/religion?”, “Do you know who chose your name and why?”.

Although at first some participants would say that their name had no meaning, we encouraged them to look it up online where they usually learned new things about its meaning or its origins.

After allowing a few minutes for this reflection, everyone would take turns and share their name and a few things on their name’s meaning, origins, cultural or religious implications, and how it was chosen for them. After the circle, we would initiate a discussion to collectively reflect on the implications of this activity.

At this point, we had the opportunity to observe the diversity or homogeneity of the group, the fact that our names carry so much personal and collective history while they also carry assumptions linked to one’s background, social expectations, and prejudices.

WORDS OF PARTICIPANTS:

“What I liked best was the community building, hearing stories from women with very different backgrounds and perspectives. It feels very uplifting.”

“New acquaintances were exciting. I became motivated. Looking forward to the next step! Thank you!”

¹ An activity inspired by a previous work of our organisation which had taken place under a project coordinated by the Cypriot NGO, Association for Historical Dialogue and Research (AHDR), hence a similar activity can be found in detail in the publication *A Space of Our Own: A Handbook on Gender and Monuments in Intersectional Public Spaces*, AHDR, 2023.

A key aspect of this discussion referred to the links between names and gender. For example, there are assumptions and expectations inherent in names' qualities, such as assigning particular qualities to female names (Joy, Love, Kindness) and other qualities to male names (Brave, Strong)—depending on the group's language. There is also the maintaining of the patriarchal linear through the process of naming a child—who names them, or whose surname one gets etc.

This way, the participants had the chance to get to know each other on a deeper level and felt seen by others, and more connected as a group, while touching upon issues such as diversity, prejudice, stereotypes, and history.

A different introductory activity which was conducted in the Irish workshops was aiming to first allow each participant to get in touch with their own feelings and intentions before getting into the icebreaker and the getting to know of the group.

The activity was a journaling activity where the participants were asked to write down the answers to three questions: “How do I feel now?”, “How would I like to feel at the end of the day?”, “How would I like the group to feel at the end of the day?”.

This was individual work for self-reflection. Beyond accomplishing more presence and awareness for each participant before getting into the group work, this activity was also linked to the end of the workshop where the participants were asked to reflect on the intentions they had set at the beginning and whether they were met by the end of the workshop.

WORDS OF PARTICIPANTS:

“I really enjoyed the journaling exercise as it gave me a better understanding of myself and what I would like to achieve in the future.”

“The journaling was the most impactful tasks for me so I could spend time reflecting on my personal journey and my contribution to my community's journey.”



Workshop in Belfast, Northern Ireland, 23 September 2023

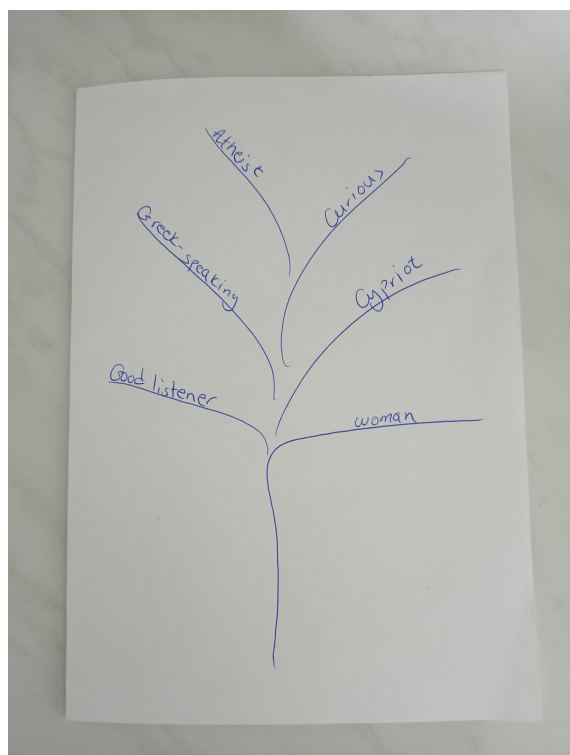
An activity of self-reflection to explore identity, diversity, and belonging.

After the introductory activity or activities, a main activity which took place at the beginning of the Cypriot workshop was a simple yet powerful one, drawing on the fundamentals of identity and diversity.

More particularly, the participants were asked to draw a tree with six branches and write in each branch one identity they had that they recognised as important to them. Such identities could be social like being of a particular nationality or faith, being of a particular gender, or following a particular ideology or worldview. They could also be about having a particular profession or a particular characteristic, such as being caring, emotional etc.

After writing these down individually, we would ask everyone to share some or all of their identities with the group and say a few words on why the particular identities were important to them. This accomplished once again a deep self reflection along with a deep sense of connection while it highlighted the diversity of the group and put light to several common identities.

In the Cypriot context, diversity was highlighted by the existence of different ethnic backgrounds (Greek Cypriots, Turkish Cypriots etc.) as well as the diversity of opposing political views (Left-wing, Right-wing, etc.) while the common identities which were repeated were that of being a Cypriot and that of being a woman.



An example of a 'Tree of Identity'

After the sharing, a discussion was facilitated focusing on what identity and diversity mean about belonging with questions such as: “Why do we feel good if we hear someone sharing an identity with us?”, “How do we feel if we have an identity no-one else shared?”, and “Do we need to have the same identities in order to belong in a group or in order to welcome someone in our group”?

This activity accomplished not only to highlight the importance of diversity as the ground on which peace and equality can flourish, but it was also an opportunity for the group to discuss the significance of gender identity in one’s life while offering a chance for the women participants to narrate their own personal stories through sharing aspects of their identities.

Setting the ground for herstories: Deconstructing the past

The introductory activities described in previous chapters had aimed to create a pleasant, honest, and safe learning environment. Moreover, activities such as reflecting on our own identities had opened the mind and the heart of the participants to the significance of embracing diversity and respecting each perspective. At this point, it was time to introduce the main subject: history, or better yet, herstory.

In the Cypriot workshops, the first activities done which were directly related to history were a women’s history “quiz” and an activity examining the objectivity / subjectivity of historical sources.

The ‘quiz’ activity was a carefully designed set of questions aiming to show how little we actually know about the history of women in Cyprus. It included questions such as “When was the first time women of Cyprus voted?”, “When was the first women’s organisation established in the island?” and other similar questions.

In the Cypriot context, although such questions seem basic, most participants were not able to answer them because such historical milestones are not part of school textbooks nor are usually part of public discussion. Indeed, the ultimate goal of this activity was to highlight the extreme invisibility of women in history-writing and history-telling in Cyprus.

The other goal was to plant the seed of curiosity and inspiration with regard to exploring this history and recognise that although it is widely invisible, it is however rich and interesting if one has the eyes and the motivation to explore it.

The second activity was called “Guess who”. This included the distribution of a number of historical texts to the participants without at first revealing who wrote it and when it was written.

The participants were divided in groups and were asked to make some guesses regarding each text such as: What was the gender of the author? What was the nationality and the social class of the author? When was this written? What kind of text it was (letter, article etc.)?

This was a hands-on way to acknowledging that history-writing and history-telling is not ‘objective’ as all texts or other sources of information were themselves filtered by the author’s personal characteristics and biases as well as the time they were written and for which audience. At the same time, the historian who interprets the source is obviously also vulnerable to their own personal and social characteristics and point of view.

The ‘Guess who’ activity worked as complementary to the “quiz”. The “quiz” revealed the invisibility of women. The “Guess Who?” revealed the mechanisms by which subjectivity, authority etc. define which event and which person is deemed worthy of being recorded.

It is not then incomprehensible how the textbooks of the mainstream Cypriot schools, which are extremely focused on reproducing nationalistic values and narratives while guided by patriarchal norms are quite talkative when it comes to the history of military generals, war heroes, and politicians (generally all men) but silent when it comes to social history, stories of the popular classes, women’s contributions, and peace heroines.

In the Irish context, a key ‘herstory’ activity was a reflection on the ‘Peace Heroines Exhibition’, a touring exhibition created by the Irish project partner, Herstory Education Trust, in collaboration with the National Museums NI and the Republic of Ireland’s Department of Foreign Affairs Reconciliation Fund.

The exhibition focused on women who acted for peace in Northern Ireland, and it included women’s portraits, stories, and workshops.

In the relevant activity, the facilitators asked from the participants to spend 20 minutes in silence, viewing the Peace Heroine exhibition—a digital tour of the exhibition is also available online (www.peaceheroines.org).

After this, the participants were asked to gather in a circle and share a story or an insight which moved them, and why. At the end, a discussion was initiated by the facilitator guided by questions such as: Did you recognise any of the women presented? What qualities do peace heroines possess? Whose story is missing?

At a first level, this activity accomplished the recognition of the invisibility of women's history in the Irish context, similarly to the Cypriot context discussed above, as well as the inspiration and empowering aspect of learning about women activists and pioneers.

At a second level, the Irish workshops linked this activity to the subject of power, which was dominant both in the workshops of this project, and in the Peace Heroines exhibition itself. Therefore, later activities highlighted that peace heroines were brilliant at mastering personal and collective power, working in partnership models rather than dominating ones, and generally explored what power means and what peace means from this perspective.

Analogous activities in the Cypriot context included a women's history walk in the city of Nicosia as well as an activity which asked from the participants to work in groups and present a three-minutes story of a woman or a movement led by women which they found inspiring.

WORDS OF PARTICIPANTS:

“It really is an eye opener on women in our community. It really taught me that women from Northern Ireland aren't appreciated enough. Even women from all over the world.”

“I was very impressed by the part where we talked about the history of Cypriot women. I realised how little I knew. It is especially very nice to learn about the history of all women on the island together. ”

“May we be together on many days commemorating and recognising women as agents.”



Project participants visiting the Peace Heroines Exhibition, Belfast, Northern Ireland, September 2023

Creating change and reimagining one's personal and collective vision

Another important aspect of our workshops was the provision of the space for the participants to create something new using the information and the experience gathered during a workshop, and to express their own takings, dreams, and visions.

In the Cypriot workshops, such activity was the 'creation' activity which would take place towards to end of a workshop. Here the participants were divided in small groups (ideally of 3 individuals) and were asked to create something to symbolise what the workshop represented to them or something they had taken from it.



The 'creation' activity during a workshop in Famagusta, Cyprus, 20 May 2023

That could be a slogan, or a painting, or a crochet craft, or a poem, or a song, or whatever they could make up with the materials provided by the facilitators—we were careful to provide many materials such as large pieces of paper to use as canvas if needed, different crayons and markers, wool, thread, crochet needles, stickers, and other craft making materials.

Though at the beginning some participants would seem reluctant to come up with ideas or uncomfortable with creating anything, each group resulted in creating beautiful and inspirational pieces.

Similarly, the participants in the Irish workshops were often asked to write their own poems drawing upon well-known poems read during a workshop;

poems were used to illuminate aspects of the history of the Irish conflict and its representation in public space and landmarks.

These activities accomplished two outcomes. On the one hand, they contributed in the self-reflection and the transformational and learning aspect of the workshop. On the other hand, they encouraged personal and collective action on behalf of the participants.

A very powerful activity accomplishing personal expression and reflection as well as encouraging active citizenship and the taking up of community projects by the participants was the 'Tree of Transformation'; an activity developed and implemented in the Irish workshops.

In this activity, the model of a tree was used to symbolise individual and communal life. At first, each participant was asked to work individually in creating their personal tree. Particularly, they were given a tree template and were asked to write down their dreams on the tree's leaves; they could, of course, add more leaves if they wished.

Then, the participants were asked to write at the tree's roots the things that could nourish and support those dreams, the same way that a tree needs its root system to expand and grow to match its brunches.

The second part of this activity moved from the personal to the collective. At this point, the participants were asked to create a giant tree to represent their vision for their community.



The 'tree of transformation' as shaped by the participants during a workshop in Belfast, Northern Ireland, 23 September 2023

To do this, the participants would first reflect on three questions: ‘What are your dreams for your community?’ (What = Leaves), ‘What are the values of your community?’ (Why = Trunk), ‘What actions (personal and collective) can support and nourish your community to realise these dreams and values?’ (How = Roots).

Next, a participant would draw a large tree at a giant piece of paper representing the tree of the community and all participants would place coloured post-its on the tree’s leaves, trunk and roots accordingly—green for dreams (leaves), yellow for values (trunk), orange for actions (roots).

A discussion was facilitated at the end of this activity revolving around the themes repeated across the group and whether the different dreams, values, and actions were or not in harmony between them.

Reflection, evaluation, and closing

A key aspect of our workshops was that reflection and evaluation was a constant part of the activities. Indeed, their interactive and participatory nature allowed for each activity to include time for a reflective discussion sharing thoughts, insides and feedback, and/or the use of art and creativity for reflection according to the content and the goals of each particular activity.

At the same time, the closing of each workshop was always dedicated to reflection and evaluation the same way that each workshop would always begin with an introductory activity.

A typical closing activity which worked particularly well for our workshops was for the participants to gather in a circle and share one take up from the day and/or one thing they expected from the next workshop. This was a simple yet very powerful activity.

Furthermore, at the end of each workshop, the facilitators distributed anonymous questionnaires with four basic questions: What did you like best in this workshop? What did you like less in this workshop? What would you do differently? Any other thoughts about this workshop?

The questionnaires in addition to the observations recorded by the facilitators during and after each workshop have been the basis for the writing of this report, with the hope that the recording of this experience will be helpful to anyone who is interested.

Tips to facilitators

We close this report with a list of ‘tips’ which we think can be useful to potential facilitators of similar workshops:

- ✓ **Be aware of the day and time of the workshops.** Especially women are often swamped with responsibilities and have very tight schedules. In our experience, a workshop on a workday was difficult for them to attend. The weekend worked best. Even then, too early in the morning or too late in the afternoon may be inconvenient.
- ✓ **Be aware of the duration of the workshop.** When you plan a workshop make sure that you have considered the needs and the number of participants while deciding its duration. For some women a full day workshop (5 hours) is too long whilst for others a half day workshop (3 hours) does not offer enough time to have a complete experience. If you have a large number of participants, then you can always consider having a two-day instead of a one-day workshop.
- ✓ **Be aware of delays.** In our experience, it was inevitable to have some delays, either at the beginning (i.e. participants arriving late) or during the breaks, so we always calculated the lost time in the schedule.
- ✓ **Be aware of the catering.** If you are offering food, make sure that you know beforehand any dietary restrictions the participants might have. Also, make sure you offer a variety of snacks to satisfy everyone’s preferences.
- ✓ **Be aware of the space.** Creating a safe and comfortable space for the participants is very important. Make sure that the space you have chosen is accessible to all, offers comfort, and isolation (privacy). For instance, two women with movement disability were able to participate in our workshops exactly because the space chosen was accessible.
- ✓ **Be aware of the instructions.** Make sure that you are well prepared for the instructions of each activity. Explain them in detail, and ask the participants often if they understood every step.
- ✓ **Be aware of the time allocated to each activity.** It is important to plan enough time for the implementation of each activity so that the participants will have the space to understand and experience it. Avoiding an overcrowded schedule will also avoid stress and rush for you as well as the participants.