EXPLORING GREEK-CYPRIOT FEMALE ACADEMICS' EXPERIENCES OF PRECARITY THROUGH A POSTCOLONIAL LENS: CHALLENGES, HOPES AND THE REALITY OF NEOLIBERAL UNIVERSITIES IN EUROPE

Eleni Meletiadou[1]
Guildhall School of Business and Law
London Metropolitan University

Abstract

This article brings research from the fields of 'the globalisation of international education' (Cantwell, 2011), 'postcolonial knowledge relations' (Beban & Trueman, 2018; Moller Madsen & Mahlck, 2018) and 'intersectional and trans locational gender research' (Yangson & Seung, 2021) together into a meaningful conversation to develop a postcolonial analysis of layers of precariousness in academic work in Cyprus. There is a global tendency for economic interests to gain importance over academic values in higher education, research, and postgraduate training (Olssen & Peters, 2007). The current article addresses a gap in the literature on the challenges female precarious workers in higher education and research institutions (HERIs) are facing in Europe, especially in tiny Mediterranean countries, such as Cyprus. This case study specifically intended to explore the enablers and the barriers that precarious Greek-Cypriot early-career academics had when working in universities in the UK as compared to Greek-Cypriot HERIs. Thus, it explored 22 female academics' experiences of

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[1] Corresponding author: e.meletiadou@londonmet.ac.uk

precarity who first worked in various universities in Cyprus and then moved to the United Kingdom to improve employment opportunities, using lengthy semi-structured interviews and opportunity and snowball sampling. The use of a postcolonial lens unravelled enablers and the challenges for these women. The study indicated that there are still underprivileged groups of young researchers, especially women, in the academy who suffer from isolation, unsustainable work-life balance or even gender-based violence, due to the neoliberal restructuring of the HERI sector in Europe. The study aims to promote Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in HERIs, challenge the increasingly hierarchical and inequitable structures of HERIs (Mavin & Yusupova, 2020) and contribute to our understanding of how HERIs in Europe can reverse the coloniality of power, nationalism and precariousness and better support young researchers in the academy.

Keywords: intersectional gender research, postcolonialism, precarity, work-life balance, young female academics

Postcolonialism and Dimechianism in Cyprus (Greek-Cypriot part)

Postcolonialism or 'postcolonial critical theory' which emerged in the late 1980s – early 1990s, struggles to push back economic, social, cultural, psychological, and linguistic colonial residues. The term is generally applied "to describe any kind of resistance, particularly against class, race, and gender oppression" (Theime, 2003). It fights against unlawful and unfair power structures and relationships. This powerful movement argues for "social justice, emancipation, and democracy in order to oppose oppressive structures of racism, discrimination, and exploitation" (Nayar, 2008, p. 55), by revealing the ugly face of colonial dynamism.

Postcolonialism is concerned with social, cultural, political, economic, moral, linguistic resistance against 'eurocentrism'. Postcolonial writing aspires to resist colonialist perspectives driving towards a change in power (Boehmer, 2007).

Previous literature in postcolonial education theories indicate that ideological imperialism was a tool western Universities used to recruit top talent from their colonies, such as Cyprus, to help maintain their dominance by spreading their ways of life, social norms, and ideologies (Gregoriou, 2004; Klerides & Philipou, 2015; Peters, 2017). In a way, colonial ideologies and fundamental beliefs continued to expand in the colonies preventing decolonisation and respect for local ideas and cultural norms. Exploitation, ideological and financial, continued in the form of neo-colonialism as students from the Global South continued to turn to western Universities as they believed in their superiority, and they hoped they would help them secure a better future. However, they always went back to their countries to spread new ways of living. Particularly young female researchers aspired to live free of patriarchal Greek-Cypriot norms which dictated that they should prioritise having a family over focusing on a career. Therefore, global wealth inequality persists as our brightest minds still escape to western universities forced by unemployment, exploitation, and despair due to the policies of international financial institutions, which always support the interests of the wealthiest (formerly colonising) and most powerful countries (Bah, 2016; Shahjahan, 2016; Smith, 2016; Zucman, 2019).

Western Higher Education institutions seem to promote neoliberalism by exploiting young researchers, especially female researchers, who often must combine their family commitments with their own personal ambitions and career aspirations. The literature indicates that these are often exploited in their home countries and when they choose to migrate in their dream HERIs in Western countries (Aiston & Fo, 2021; Casad et al., 2021).

When nations colonise smaller countries, such as small islands like Cyprus, it is not always about occupying land, but also about conquering hearts, minds and influencing people's directions and choices in life (Muscat-Inglott, 2023). This conquest spreads a syndrome of inferiority among local people and fosters a submissive acceptance of new power hierarchies that never question the power of the ruler, not even several years after gaining back their freedom (Tarc, 2009; Tuhiwai-Smith, 2021). This syndrome of inferiority is also combined with (Western) Eurocentrism as Greek Cypriots often get educated in Western universities as they perceive them as superior. In their societies everything that is Western is superior and promoted in so many ways in local people's everyday life (Andreotti, 2011; Tuhiwai-Smith, 2021). This is also evident in the linguistic imperialism that has had a deep impact on the Cypriot language as we can see so many English words used in everyday language by native Greek-Cypriot speakers, such as 'confirm' (κονφιρμάρω); 'cancel' (κανσελάρω), and 'promote' (προμοτάρω).

Therefore, any attempt to foster social justice and foster equity in the academy is undermined as provincial inhabitants of small islands like Cyprus come in hordes to HERIs in the United Kingdom (UK), to study and become a member of these elite communities for which local cultural values and ways of life need to be abandoned (Cupples, 2019; Heleta, 2016)

Cyprus continues to serve as the European border to Muslim nations like Turkey. It is one of the Southern edges of the European continent, so close to areas of continued unrest like Lebanon, Syria, and Israel. Over a century ago, Manwel Dimech identified for the first time that the Maltese people suffered from an inferiority complex (Callus, 2013), which prevented them from "growing up" keeping them in an eternal state of childhood (Montebello, 2009). This concept also seems to apply for Greek-Cypriot people who still believe in the superiority of everything that is British and send their offspring to British universities to receive the best education in the world - as they often claim. Despite their close identification with mother-Greece and their own personal national celebrations of independence, Greek Cypriots still regard British universities superior to their own evidencing once again their own syndrome of inferiority in relation to their former conquerors. Let us not forget the continuing British sovereignty of the Akrotiri and Dhekelia Sovereign Base Areas. As McLeod (2010) claims, there is always a native bourgeoisie remaining which still replicates previous colonial behaviour, standards and norms preserving spiritual and mental dependency on their former colonial masters. As Herman and Chomksy (2002) rightfully remark, Cyprus curiously retains a

sense of nostalgia about its 'special' ties to Britain, Greece, and Europe.

Young female precarious academics, gender disparities in neoliberal universities and postcolonial feminism

Although significant changes in terms of gender equity in the academy have taken place in the past few decades, gender disparities persist, despite considerable efforts (Rivera, 2017). These disparities often begin while female academics are still early career researchers as their numbers have increased considerably even in traditional male-dominated fields like STEM (National Science Board, 2012). However, it is still incredibly difficult for female early career researchers to secure a tenure-track position at research universities, while you can find predominantly women in adjuncts and non–tenure-track faculty (Jacobs & Winslow 2004), especially in male-dominated fields and disciplines in which PhD students are predominantly women (Rudd et al. 2008).

Previous research focuses on what happens to female students while they study or when they graduate and once they secure a tenure-track position ignoring the reality of thousands of female early-career researchers who are struggling to survive and progress in their career. Some of the reasons why there is this discrimination against women in the academy are that they have less mentoring, publication opportunities, social and academic support, equipment, and female role models while they study (Thébaud & Taylor 2015). Supervisors often discriminate against female students as they think they are less committed to an

academic career than male students, even if female students and academics tend to be as highly organised and meticulous in their work as their male peers (Ellemers et al., 2004). They also keep in mind that women often opt to disrupt their academic careers due to family commitments, perceived difficulties in their paths, and anxiety about their work-life balance (Ecklund & Lincoln, 2016).

Moreover, women who remain in their academic career paths must face even more discrimination in terms of pay, promotion, and tenure in various disciplines (Filandri & Pasqua, 2021). Previous research indicates that women, especially in STEM, face negative experiences due to the existence of stereotypes that favour men (Van Veelen & Derks, 2022). Migrant women face additional discrimination due to their background (Morley et al., 2018), as is the case with Cypriot women in British HERIs. Moreover, Cypriot senior leadership teams in Greek-Cypriot universities often favour graduates from British universities as they perceive them as superior to graduates of local universities. Stereotypically masculine characteristics (e.g., self-confidence and willingness to take risks) are more valued in the academy than stereotypically feminine characteristics (e.g., being inclusive, supportive), and increase the possibilities for a promotion to leadership positions for male rather than female academics (Strauß & Boncori, 2020). Women also face considerable hiring discrimination and limited opportunities for advancement, leading female early career academics to leave the academy (Diekman et al., 2015).

Postcolonial feminism aspires to shed some light to the problems migrant women from former colonised countries face to improve their lives as employees in the academy. Since lives and experiences of postcolonial female academics differ from those of Western academics, for example on matters such as (i.e., housework is women's responsibility, women have to resolve any issues relevant to childcare, women have to undertake the so called "academic housework" in their universities so that men can do the research-related tasks), postcolonial feminist research wishes to make these disparities visible and acceptable across cultures and nations. If their lives and experiences are different, they should be judged taking into consideration their origin. Therefore, the current study explores intersections of colonialism and neo-colonialism with gender and nation in the different contexts of female academics' lives and experiences (Schwarz & Ray, 2005). The current study will showcase the degree to which female Greek-Cypriot early-career researchers are fighting against a distinctive colonial legacy that was itself powerfully patriarchal - institutional, economic, political, and ideological (Young, 2004).

Study design

The present study used an exploratory case study qualitative approach (Gustafsson, 2017) to examine female Greek-Cypriot early-career academics' (ECAs) experiences of precarity in HERIs in the UK, when compared to ECAs experiences in Greek-Cypriot HERIs. As a case study, this research examined a modern real-life

phenomenon within a particular context (Yin, 2013). Specifically, the study investigated:

RQ1 Which were the enablers that precarious Greek-Cypriot female early- career academics had when working in universities in the UK versus in Greek-Cypriot HERIs?

RQ2 Which were the barriers that precarious Greek-Cypriot female early-career academics faced when working in universities in the UK versus in Greek-Cypriot Higher Education Institutions?

To this end, the study utilised a qualitative interviewing data collection method, which is more suitable for exploratory studies that aspire to investigate a complicated phenomenon like female early-career academics' experiences of precarity in HERIs in the UK versus (vs) Cyprus, applying and intersectional and a postcolonial lens (Punch, 2013). Specifically, a semi-structured interview technique was utilised because it suited this exploratory study's alignment to interpretive philosophy (Saunders, 2016). The latter facilitates experimenting with various answers and permits a balance between focus and flexibility (Saunders, 2016).

The researcher designed and piloted various kinds of open-ended questions that included descriptive, structural, contrast and evaluative content to explore the interviewees' perspective and gather valid information (Elo et al., 2014). To prevent reflexivity error and response bias, the interviewer started with a detailed presentation of the study to develop intimacy as a strategy to

lessen such biases, taking into consideration that case studies have been criticised in the past as their findings cannot be easily generalised (Yin, 2013). Therefore, the present study has limitations because it was a qualitative study which used only a small number of participants from a few universities in the UK who have also lived and worked for universities in Cyprus. It is closely related to the phenomenological and hermeneutical research approach which points to an internal and deep awareness of the essence of research, not at generating generalizable outcomes.

Data collection

Utilising opportunity and snowball sampling procedures (Naderifar et al., 2017), 22 Greek-Cypriot female early-career academics (within 8 years from completing their PhD) who have worked in universities in the UK and Cyprus (see their demographic data in Table 1) were invited to participate in this study as a small (convenience) sample was sufficient for the present qualitative study, which used a lengthy qualitative survey (Vasileiou et al., 2018), and had limitations in terms of time and money (received no funding). Interviewees were located by tapping into the researcher's professional network and by relying on close friends and colleagues. All female interviewees were reassured that the information they offered would be kept strictly confidential and gave us permission to have the interviews recorded and transcribed. The interviewer asked them to offer demographic information via an online survey before the interview to ensure more time was spent on providing answers to the open-ended

questions of the study. Exploratory interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online via Microsoft Teams depending on the interviewees' availability and preferred mode of participation in the interview. Social cues, e.g., body language, were also recorded, as all interviewees were asked to have their cameras on if they had chosen to participate in an online interview. In the case of the face-to-face interviews, the researcher took notes about any social cues detected during the interviews. The researcher secured ethics clearance from London Metropolitan University as all the participants were living in the UK at the time they participated in the study. The researcher collected the data and tried to eliminate biases, which are usually commonplace in qualitative studies (Clark & Vealé, 2018).

Table 1: *Demographic data*

Age	25-35	36-45	46+
	72%	17%	11%
Years of service	**0-4**	**5-8**	
	75%	25%	
Marital status	**Single**	**Married**	
	65%	35%	
Children	**0**	**1-2**	
	70%	30%	
Disability	**Yes**	**No**	
	10%	90%	

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, based on predetermined semi-structured questions (Yin, 2013). These questions were further developed to probe deep into the interviewee's experiences. They aimed to examine their views from both a social and an organisational perspective. The semi-structured interview questions were further elaborated taking into consideration an extensive literature review of precarious early-career women in HERIs and included a list of questions and some prompts (e.g., exploratory) to allow for more discussion. Introductory, barrier and closing questions were used to enable a particular kind of progression in the interview process and included background demographic questions, experience/behaviour questions, opinion/value questions and feeling questions (Collis & Hussey, 2013). Each interview lasted approximately an hour. Female participants were also asked to bring with them photos or small items which they thought related to their experiences as early career academics in HERIs in the UK and Cyprus. These helped evoke memories and facilitated a more detailed discussion of these women's experiences in the academy.

Data analysis

Qualitative research data was collected from non-standardized interviews and analysed using a widely used approach, thematic analysis (Terry et al., 2017). Thematic analysis is adjustable and can provide an insight into prominent themes on the present topic depending on how these are perceived by the participants. The interview data were inductively analysed, according to Braun and

Clarke (2006, p. 87) six-step procedure of thematic analysis: a) familiarisation with the data, b) forming codes, c) identifying themes, d) revising the themes, e) naming the themes and f) creating a final report.

The research team (the researcher and an assistant) used a constructivist grounded theory method to analyse the interviews (Ramalho, 2015). They independently detected main themes that were later joined by the researcher into one report. The researcher named the different codes depending on the actual terms the interviewees employed ('in vivo' codes) and on terms derived from related research and theories ('a priori' codes). The research team was responsible for detecting and interpreting the themes as these emerged from the data keeping in mind the original research questions. A term should have been identified by more than half of the participants to be labelled as a theme. Each researcher separately employed the constant comparison method when coding and revising themes (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). As a result, they correlated the data many times through coding and re-coding to detect prominent common themes and structures (Punch, 2013). Subsequently, their outcomes were compared and synthesised. Inter-validation processes were also used.

This procedure ensured that the final report would be explicit and coherent. They both recommended and examined interview themes. Based on those themes, the research team developed an introductory codebook. Two individual coders coded every interview. Researchers individually examined interviews to identify

parts of speech relevant to the themes. Inter-rater agreement was determined to be considerably high. Using a comparative approach, the first-order themes were joined into several second-order subthemes.

As soon as the initial coding was finalised, the researcher located themes based on the level of inter-rater compliance and the researcher's willingness to adopt a balanced perspective (e.g., positive, and negative themes). Furthermore, the researcher clarified the portrayal of these areas and re-evaluated the interviews to ensure that all related parts of speech were located. Interview passages linked to these themes were individually evaluated by two researchers and subthemes were located and negotiated. An elaborate codebook was formed for every theme. Consensus between respondents was assessed using Cohen's Kappa (K)[2]. Its value ranged from 0.19 to 0.81, which is a good Kappa score for interrater reliability. Interview instances on which coders disagreed were negotiated until a consensus was reached, although in some cases some parts were not included in the coding procedure. Quotations were selected to illustrate the points succinctly.

The study had some obvious limitations because it was a qualitative study which used only a small number of interviewees. It is closely related to the phenomenological and hermeneutical

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[2] The kappa statistic is frequently used to test interrater reliability. The importance of respondent reliability lies in the fact that it represents the extent to which the data collected in the study are correct representations of the variables measured.

research approach which points to an internal and thorough awareness of the essence of research, not at generating generalizable outcomes. Although case studies are not credible and have low reliability, validity, and replicability (Cohen et al., 2013), this research study showed meticulousness and precision but admitting the uncommon context of this case; the research findings will probably not be generalizable. Finally, the study admits that selecting a qualitative interview approach for data collection undoubtedly carries interviewer and participant biases (Punch, 2013).

Findings and discussion

In this section, the results of the study will be presented, thoroughly described, and then discussed keeping in mind the two research questions of the present study.

Precarious Greek-Cypriot female academics' enablers in HERIs in the UK versus Cyprus

In terms of the first research question, we discovered that precarious female academics revealed that they received support in their effort to survive in the demanding world of the academy in Cyprus and the UK (see Figure 1). We identified 4 main sources of support for these women:

(a) supportive female managers in Cyprus vs male managers in the UK,

(b) female colleagues in Cyprus vs male colleagues in the UK,

(c)   close Greek-Cypriot friends in Cyprus vs migrant friends in the UK,

(d)   parents in Cyprus vs relatives in the UK.

The present study revealed very interesting findings about sources of support and encouragement for these migrant women, experiencing precarity to varying extents (e.g., working on zero-hour contracts, hourly paid, fixed-term contracts), who had to fight against all odds both in their home HERIs in Cyprus, but also in the respective institutions later in the UK as they had to overcome different obstacles.

The context they lived in had a direct impact on the kind of challenges they had to face and the support they received.

Supportive line managers (male vs female)   Colleagues (female vs male)   Friends (Greek-Cypriot vs migrant)   Family (parents-relatives)
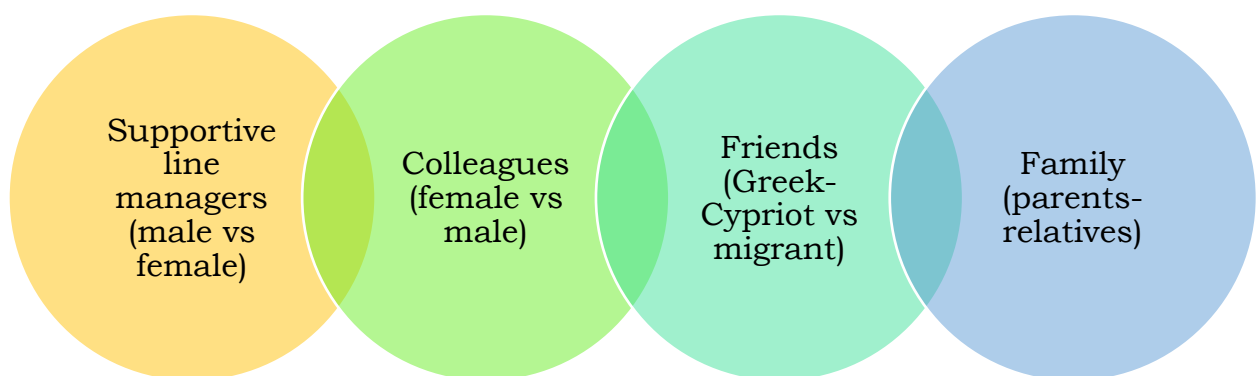
Figure 1: *Enablers*

Greek-Cypriot precarious female ECA participants of this study confessed that they were supported by mostly female managers in Cyprus, because the latter had faced similar challenges, and had fought against male patriarchal stereotypes in the past. They were

more than willing to support and promote them as much as they could, given that politics in Cypriot HERIs prevented young female academics from advancing, particularly because most senior leadership team members team were men.

Confirming previous studies both postcolonial and not (e.g., Burton & Bowman, 2022; Morley, 2013; Stavrevska et al., 2023), male managers supported these female young researchers/academics more in the UK. They were kind and showed understanding to migrant women as many of them were migrants themselves or had families as well and could understand the hurdles married women with children had to face. They tried to show some flexibility and tolerance when they had to make changes in their timetables or asked to work more days from home due to childcare. They adjusted their timetables or offered alternative solutions that matched their needs, and were also willing to support them when they had to reduce their workload. One of the interviewees, a young academic, married with one young child under the age of 10, revealed:

> When I was in Cyprus, I could not negotiate when and how I would work. I just accepted orders. My female manager was trying to help me every time she saw that I was struggling, but single men were making all the decisions there and they could not understand what I was going through. It was either take it or leave it. I did not have any connections with the leadership team, and I was always at a disadvantage. In Cyprus, it is all about who you know. If

you know people, they help you. If not, they will not take your needs into consideration. In Cyprus, they also avoided women with caring responsibilities as they wanted people who could be available at an extremely short notice, that is young male colleagues with no family responsibilities. In the UK, male managers showed more empathy and understanding. Some of them were migrants and they all had kids at some point in their lives. They were willing to adjust my timetable and offered part-time positions that suited early career researchers' needs. I must admit that I managed to strike a better work-life balance in the UK (Participant 5).

Another participant was thankful to her parents who supported her, although she had to pay the price for it (full control over her personal life-patriarchy). They allowed her to stay with them, paid for her personal expenses and offered her a shoulder to cry on when she felt incredibly challenged due to the long hours she had to work to keep her part-time job in Cyprus. The same interviewee confessed that things changed when she went to the UK, as she could support herself financially, but still needed emotional support which was abundantly offered by relatives living in the UK. Her parents wanted her to come back to Cyprus, and only her aunt could understand that there was no way back to financial insecurity. Since she often felt isolated and homesick as she managed to make very few friends in the UK, her aunt was always happy to listen and provide valuable advice as she had been living in the UK for 20+ years.

I am grateful to my parents who fully supported me in Cyprus as they paid for my personal expenses and allowed me to stay at home as I could not afford renting a flat, but they also wanted a full control on my life. They prevented me from even thinking of leaving Cyprus and always encouraged me to get married, find a boring permanent job and forget about my dreams. I was patient at first but then I realised I had to leave Cyprus if I wanted to fulfil my dreams and ambitions. When I went to the UK, things improved moneywise as I am really hard-working and there are so many opportunities to find employment, unlike Cyprus which is a ghetto for young female early-career academics who should consider work as a hobby as they cannot rely on their salary to survive. My aunt offered me enormous support in the UK as she was also a rebel who left her house in Cyprus and stood on her own two feet. She offered psychological support, encouragement, and valuable advice when I felt homesick and slightly isolated as I was not able to make friends as easily as in Cyprus. I am still so grateful to her… (Participant 16).

A Greek-Cypriot early career researcher was also grateful to her male and female friends in Cyprus as they were always sympathetic to what she was going through as she had not been able to find a permanent full-time position for years. They used to comfort her and remind her of the important things in life, that is her health and her family. Later, when she went to the UK, she

also made new female friends she could rely on when she needed references and connections to find a better job. Corroborating research by Sang et al. (2013) and Thomas (2017) who also used a postcolonial lens, these female friends were usually migrants themselves who knew what it was like to be living alone without any friends or family in the UK. They were always willing to share some valuable tips and share information about possible openings which would enable her to secure a tenured position.

> I remember how miserable I felt as I was exploited for years by many Higher Education Institutions in Cyprus. Thank God, I had my friends both male and female. I had lots of friends, and they were always there to comfort me and remind me of the positive sides of my life there, i.e., I was healthy, and I had a loving family. When I moved to the UK, I struggled to make friends and when I did, they were not Greek-Cypriots, but female migrants. They could understand me better and were not jealous of me. They knew what I was going through and offered valuable help and advice. I was able to find better positions because of them. They continue to support me even now and I definitely support them. I am happy with my position now after fighting alongside my migrant friends for many years. It does not come easy, but at least in the UK you can make your dreams come true. In Cyprus it is hopeless unless you know people, or you are willing to be extremely patient and put up with simply anything your- usually- male managers asked you to do (Participant 4).

In conclusion, the findings of the current study indicated that Greek-Cypriot precarious female early-career academics were able to find help and psychological support in their efforts to reach their professional goals in life, and survive due to the encouragement they received from their families, friends, line managers and colleagues both in Cyprus and in the UK with some differences in the kind of support they received. Postcolonial stereotypes were evident in the support they received in Cyprus as they were asked to conform to male stereotypes and prioritise their families over their own personal and professional ambitions adding to the existing postcolonial education literature (Mangiarotti, 2023). This clearly supports the assertion of postcolonial feminists' claims that women in former colonial countries live a different reality than Western women and should be judged taking into consideration their context as their lives are often influenced by patriarchal stereotypes (Deridder et al., 2022; Vijay, 2023). The interviewees seemed grateful and appreciative for the support they had. Voicing precarious migrant researchers who were vulnerable to discrimination and under-representation, the current study allowed the participants to present their own experiences and stress not only the challenges they encountered but also refer to the people who supported them showing perseverance, understanding and good will. Adding to Madsen and Mählck's PDE Volume 7 (2018) Special Issue on Postcolonial Critique of Knowledge Relations in Higher Education, the current paper unravelled the enablers that precarious Greek-Cypriot female academics faced adding to the existing literature on academics'

experiences from other postcolonial settings, i.e., Malta, revealing that unlike postcolonial stereotypes, male managers can also support their female precarious employees if they are open-minded and show empathy.

Precarious Greek-Cypriot female academics' challenges in the UK versus Cyprus

In terms of the barriers that these Greek-Cypriot precarious female academics faced in Cyprus vs the UK, our interviewees highlighted: (a) career advancement, (b) sexual harassment in Cyprus only, (c) unfair pay particularly in Cyprus, and (d) limited work-life balance more in Cyprus rather than in the UK.
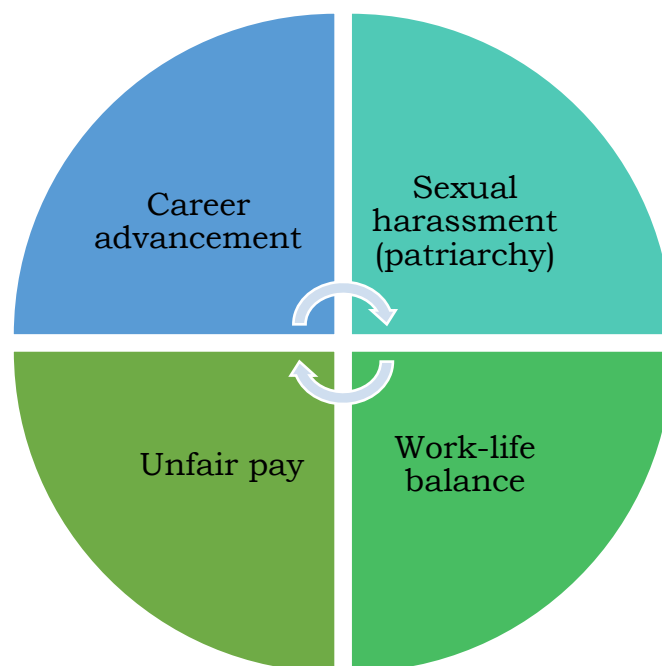
Figure 2: *Barriers*

Interviewees indicated that the barriers, in terms of career advancement, were considerably more in Cyprus rather than in the

UK; possibly due to the prevailing belief, especially in Cyprus, that the academy is particularly demanding as a place of work and requires full commitment which female academics are unable to provide due to family commitments and their own female features (i.e., being risk averse) (Blair-Loy 2003; Madera et al., 2009). In the UK, it was easier to find a tenured position as there was a wider offer of academic positions as there are more universities than in tiny Cyprus. Migrant Greek-Cypriot female academics had to overcome several barriers (i.e., due to language, their gender and ethnicity, which corroborates Strauβ & Boncori (2020), but it was relatively easy to find a permanent position within a few years if they were persistent and hard-working.

> … In Cyprus, you need to work countless hours nonstop and never complain to survive. This is the norm. You have to be excellent in everything just to keep your job, research, teaching, administration etc. Moreover, women are never good enough. They are considered fragile and a necessary evil only if they need someone to take care of students. Research is only for men who are considered to be smarter, more persistent, and available. Things were so different in the UK. You only had to be good at one thing and people appreciated your effort. There were so many women working in the academy and so many of them leading academic departments. Of course, there are cultural differences, and you have to improve your command of the English language, but it is easier to find yourself a decent job… (Participant 2).

Moreover, some interviewees referred to the countless hours of unpaid work and unfair pay as they could not complain, especially in Cyprus. This was just part of the things they had to tolerate for many years to get some work experience before they could even be considered not for a permanent but a better paid position. One of them highlighted that this was the most difficult period of her life. Unfortunately, previous research has also confirmed this harsh reality female early-career (postcolonial and non-postcolonial) academics had to face in other countries as well (Barbezat & Hughes, 2005; Garvis & Black, 2018). Later, when they moved to the UK, the condition was similar in the beginning, but they were able to secure better positions quite fast as there is more demand for academics.

It was so challenging…So many hours of extra work without getting decently paid and being unable to fully support yourself and pay your bills? My parents and friends told me to be patient and keep quiet, but I could not. Did I have to suffer just because I was a woman and supposedly, I was weaker? I had to quit and grab another opportunity in the UK. Things were difficult there as well but at least I could support myself and gradually secure a better position. Women always being paid less is more common in small countries like Cyprus in which men are the breadwinners and women just have a convenient part-time job to keep themselves busy outside their house and away from their family responsibilities. Their job is just a

break from their family life. We were even brought up to be thankful for this low-paid opportunity" (Participant 14).

Academics also mentioned the sexual harassment they had to suffer from male supervisors and male managers in Cyprus, comprising sexist comments and invitations to go out and have "fun". Supervisors and managers in the UK were very careful about how they treated their female students and colleagues as they could get into trouble if the women reported them. However, no one could touch male offenders in Cyprus. No woman would report something like this formally. They would be ashamed and afraid that they would be accused of provoking it, or of a so-called "misunderstanding" - thus corroborating previous postcolonial studies by adding these Greek-Cypriot precarious academics' experiences to findings by Bondestam & Lundqvist (2020) and Burton and Bowman (2022) on sexual harassment in the neoliberal academy. Patriarchy was still strong in postcolonial Cyprus while things were very different in the UK, where social justice is a major concern, especially nowadays because women tend to report harassment. Therefore, men tend to avoid any such instances.

> I remember that line manager. He was so polite at first and then he started making these stupid sexist comments and invited me for a drink and then to go to his place to show me his 'collection of stamps'. As soon as I realised his intentions, I left and found another job. These situations are common in Cyprus. This is not the case in the UK. Men

are afraid that they may lose their job and their reputation. Men are very careful in the UK, while men think they are almighty in Cyprus as they can get away with anything as the society tends to always find excuses for men but never for women (Participant 20).

Finally, early-career researchers complained about the lack of work-life balance while working for the academy in Cyprus. Early-career researchers were expected to be available 24 hours a day to cover for permanent employees. That is why men were preferred and more easily promoted as they did not have any family obligations. They were career-oriented and more committed to work. In the UK, female early-career researchers faced more pressure in terms of publications - thus corroborating postcolonial studies such as Rivera's (2017) on gender and relationship status discrimination in academic hiring - but were offered flexibility in terms of teaching as several of our participants revealed. Laws were protective for female employees, and they were taken into serious consideration in British Higher Education Institutions:

I cannot possibly work night and day. I have two kids. I have to be able to see them during the day. My line manager in Cyprus did not care about that. They fired me and got a man to replace me. It was easy peasy...When we moved to the UK, I realised that laws were respected there and that women were offered more flexibility to combine work with their family responsibilities. I was relieved that I could be a mother and an academic without feeling any

guilt about leaving either my kids or my career behind…"
(Participant 8).

In conclusion, our participants portrayed in detail the challenges they faced in HERIs in the UK vs Cyprus, but they also discussed the kind of support and encouragement they received from their family, friends, managers, and peers. They revealed that they felt considerably challenged to work and live as female early career researchers in Cyprus as they could see no hope, no light at the end of the tunnel. The reality as migrant early-career researchers in the UK was also harsh as they had to start from scratch, work twice as hard as their male colleagues or their British counterparts (i.e., as they faced language and cultural barriers), but were able to get what they deserved, that is a tenured position, relatively fast. They clearly indicated that patriarchal beliefs, which persist in postcolonial Cyprus, prevent young female early-career researchers to progress in their careers and survive in a highly competitive academic world which does not offer any flexibility to women if, for instance, they have increased family responsibilities.

Main findings, implications, and possibilities

The female academics of this study described their challenges and their enablers reflecting on their experiences in HERIs in Cyprus vs the UK. The findings of this study contribute to the feminist perspective, which highlights the degree to which women are still working against a colonial legacy that was itself powerfully patriarchal - institutional, economic, political, and ideological

according to Young's study (2003) on postcolonialism in Africa. This is evident in these women's narratives which belong to a long history of prejudices and inhuman remarks against females in postcolonial contexts. These women questioned their inferior status and asked for amelioration in their social position in line with Freedman's study (2002) on migrant women in Europe in their quest for equal justice and equal opportunities for females. The current study sought to answer the question why women are treated as second-class citizens, were oppressed, and enjoyed lesser opportunities than males as Filandri & Pasqua also indicate in their study on gender discrimination in the Italian academia (2021).

The precarity of the temporary conditions of service for non-permanent academic staff, especially women, increased their anxiety as they felt insecure and unable to survive without financial support in Cyprus while they felt more isolated in the UK as they missed their immediate family. The aspirations and prospects for career progression of precarious academic women were impacted detrimentally by patriarchy in Cyprus as male stereotypes prevailed making it almost impossible for young female early-career academics to secure a permanent position. This further elucidates Zucman's study (2019) which explores global wealth inequalities.

Young female academics had to manage increasing workloads without being offered any flexibility due to family commitments i.e., the care needs of children and households which significantly

affected women's advancement prospects, especially in Cyprus. This confirms Ecklund & Lincoln's study (2016) on work-family conflicts in academic science adding further evidence regarding these women's struggles to maintain their work-family balance.

These female academics, who worked as part-time members of staff and did not receive a fixed salary monthly, were paid from external grants or from departmental budgets. They were therefore particularly vulnerable and had to be willing to be practically 24 hours a day available to fill in gaps. When that external grant came to an end or that budget was reduced, these academic members of staff had to fight for their survival and became even more scared due to the uncertainty they were facing. Moreover, the main issue was not the fact that this budget could become non-existent from one day to another but that this insecurity had a profound impact on these female academics' quality of teaching and research. These women also confessed that more academic work was imposed on female rather than male academic workers as they felt even more vulnerable and afraid to refuse to do the extra work than men. Additionally, women were often given administrative tasks and teaching while men focused mostly on research which allowed them to move fast in tenured positions. Moreover, female academic members of staff on temporary contracts revealed that schools were facing issues of academic staff shortage and that women academics often had to take on extra responsibilities to support permanent members of staff when for example they fell ill. Consequently, the impossibility of getting a promotion and the rare opportunities of getting a permanent position, became even more

evident in small countries where the law of offer and demand puts young female academics at a disadvantage as they cannot often commit to a highly demanding almost exhausting academic career or long working hours which leaves them no time to fulfil family related obligations.

The current study applies a post-colonial non-western feminist view on the phenomenon of precarity in the academy which negotiates the political demands of postcolonialism alongside the social challenge of everyday patriarchy, typically supported by its institutional and legal discrimination; which translates into of i.e., sexual harassment. The paper's discussion addresses a gap in the literature on Greek-Cypriot precarious female ECAs' experiences in HERIs in the UK vs Cyprus adding an intersectional and postcolonial lens to previous studies conducted by Le Feuvre et al. (2015) on ageing and Ozkazanc-Pan (2012) on Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI).

Adopting a postcolonial perspective, the current study aimed to give expression to the postcolonial experiences of Greek-Cypriot early career academics undermining discourses which supported colonisation i.e., the myths of patriarchal power and the imagery of subordination (Boehmer 2006). These women sought to take their rightful place in the world, forced to flee to HERIs in the UK to escape a dim future in postcolonial Cyprus. It seems that ideological imperialism persists as an increasing number of females 'top talent' flees to the West, i.e., British HEI, to escape poverty, compromise, and failure (Klerides & Philipou, 2015).

Implications

This study on the precarity of the work of early-career academic women is significant because it offers insights into precisely how such precarity is experienced in Western ex-colonial countries like the UK versus former postcolonial tiny countries like Cyprus. Through thick, descriptive analyses of enablers and challenges these women faced as they moved from universities in their home country when they realised they were facing a dead end to the renowned universities in the UK in search of a better future. The current research allows readers to explore the organisational structures and constraints these women face nowadays as they struggle to produce academic work of high quality while living in precarity. The present research offers various recommendations which aim to influence HEI policies and practices as regards the temporary and insecure employment status of Greek-Cypriot early-career women academics who have worked in HEI in Cyprus and the UK. There is therefore a need to:

- Moderate management expectations from the top down especially in post-colonial Cyprus where these women's voices need to be heard as their misfortune also affects the quality of education offered to students as well.
- Make imminent changes in these female precarious workers' work timetables and the internal rules which restrict their career promotions and opportunities to secure a permanent position These changes should take

into consideration these women's needs, especially those with family commitments.

- Devote time, energy, and money to collect data cross-institutionally from various HEI regarding the issue of precarity to influence senior leadership and HRM decisions about the appreciation of female precarious academic employees' academic work and their progression in the academy.

- To efficiently aid these early career researchers and academics, more investigation is needed on how HEI can assist these women catering to their needs. Further support is needed for women academics with young children or elderly family members who require additional care as they are often fragile (Meletiadou, 2023).

- Detect which academic members of staff, especially precarious women, need additional support and offer additional budgets to the schools which will ultimately offer support to these workers in need.

- Work intensively to identify and bring about transformational change in institutional norms around gender, disability, employment, and care responsibilities, i.e., avoid ignoring female precarious workers who have additional needs while fully supporting male employees. Measures to promote work-life balance across institutions should also be enforced to avoid making overwork a way of life for academic employees.

Suggestions for further research

This specific study is based on a rather small sample of precarious female academics who have worked at only a few HERIs in Cyprus and the UK. Therefore, its outcomes cannot be generalised. Nevertheless, as there is not sufficient research on Greek-Cypriot early career academics' experiences in former colonial vs postcolonial universities in Europe, this research is significant as it explores the phenomenon of female precarity in the academy in the present context. This will hopefully motivate more researchers to explore even more aspects of female precarity in the academy, applying an intersectional lens (migrant academics).

Future research needs to be planned in more HERIs, involving more stakeholders from wider HERI contexts to obtain more generalisable, reliable, and valid findings. It would be fascinating to compare the facilitators and the challenges of precarious female academics in Cyprus and the UK with other former colonial and postcolonial countries in Europe and globally. The similarities and differences from such comparative studies would advise universities on ways to empower and advance precarious early-career female academics. Such specific knowledge is significant in building gender equity internationally.

Conclusions

Taking into consideration the outcomes of the current study, the systemic and institutionalised inequalities that precarious female

academics experience in HERIs have deepened considerably especially in universities based in postcolonial contexts. This study contributes to existing research through introducing perspectives from Greek-Cypriot and British Universities and, more significantly, addresses women's perspectives of the impact of postcolonialism on their employment prospects in tiny countries like Cyprus. This study shows that the variability in employment agreements for women contributes to the uncertainty that they already experience in terms of their careers and progression within the academy. Increased workloads, unfair pay, and work-life imbalance that are impacting on the lives of early-career female academics within the academy are felt to be ignored. While career and promotion prospects are under threat, the prevalence of patriarchal beliefs in Cypriot HERIs has impacted the aspirations of Greek-Cypriot women and led to an increased resentment and their subsequent migration in the hope of a better future within the British academy.

Greek-Cypriot early-career academics on precarious contracts saw prospects of financial safety and career prosperity vanish in postcolonial Cyprus. The academy — which has been overwhelmingly dependent on the availability of academics to migrate without second thought to find employment — is turning into a place in which people with family responsibilities or aspirations to have a stable personal life and friends cannot possibly survive and/or remain. (Meletiadou, 2023). The current study wishes to remind senior leadership teams that there is still an opportunity — should they choose to seize it — to remake the

working cultures in the academy (especially in postcolonial universities) and support young early-career academics/researchers.

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