Feminisms, Gender and Social Media: Public and Political Performativities Regarding Sexual Harassment in Cyprus

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ABSTRACT

This article draws from research on feminism, politics, social media and everyday sexism in Cyprus to examine the power dynamics between discourses of misogyny and feminism as produced in the public sphere. It focuses on how Facebook was utilised as both a digital space for feminist resistance and misogyny in two case studies which involve one female and two male MPs. At the crossroads of emancipatory and hegemonic particularities, we discuss how feminisms and social media operate in the socio-temporal context of the public and political sphere of Cyprus.

Keywords: feminism, gender, social media, politics, sexism, Cyprus

INTRODUCTION

Still permeating multiple facets of everyday life, sexism continues to saturate the social fabric of most societies with a number of shocking cases emerging in public, social, political and even academic life. A central mechanism of creating a collective feminist consciousness is to articulate such persistences of sexism and make them publicly known, by combating them through shaping transformative politics. The latter is more urgent than ever in curtailing the politics of reproduction of sexisms (Franklin, 2015), when those emerge in the public sphere.

The aim of this article is to examine the use of social media in specific case studies that involve issues of sexism and misogyny in order to analyse the way feminisms, gender and social media operate, unfold, are negotiated, shaped and positioned in and through the public sphere in Cyprus today. Two case studies have been chosen for the purpose of examining the way social media have been used to develop a feminist discourse. In both cases the female AKEL[1] MP Irene Charalambidou has experienced sexist and misogynistic behaviour. While the case studies stimulate the discussion of the interplay between gender and social media, we aim to understand and map the impact of public and political performativities on contemporary feminisms but also how such feminisms can be enacted to create a platform for empowering publics on issues of sexisms, gendered violence and social justice.

FEMINISMS, GENDER AND SOCIAL MEDIA: SITUATING CORE CONCEPTS AND THEORETICAL APPROACHES

Historical forms of women's oppression, domination and enactments of power get built into ostensibly non-human objects and the infrastructures that link them, such as social media, thus seemingly sanitising such technologies. Yet, the expansive gendered violence, bullying and online abuse of the digital era underscores the need to question the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of the human-digital relationship. This includes fantasies about the revolutionary nature of new media, as the post-human imaginary moves forward and re-universalises the historical specificity of the category 'human', whose boundaries it claims to supersede.

We situate our discussion of the case studies and the issues emerging in framing core concepts through a feminist theoretical context (cf. Butler, 1990; Hemmings, 2011) that understands social relations as socially constructed, filtered and grounded within the subjectivities of power entanglements and gendered interactions. We

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[1] AKEL stands for *Anorthotiko Komma Ergazomenou Laou* which means Progressive Party of the Working People and it is the largest Cypriot left-wing party.

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take into consideration the debate between scholars highlighting two directions: 1) the democratic potential of new media for providing a platform for feminist activism, a space for alternative discourses to be developed as well as a voice to those excluded from the dominant public sphere (Fotopoulou, 2016; Mendes, 2015; Sadowski, 2016); and 2) those scholars arguing that new media provide just another route for abuse and sexism (Eckert, 2018; Henry and Powell, 2015).

The purpose of this article is to highlight the powerful potential of social media not in a deterministic way but in the specific local context of the case studies discussed. Thus, we begin by drawing on theories of both the networked counter-publics and as Mendes and Carter (2008: 1712) put it, on 'the assumption that the Internet is a misogynist sphere promoting sexual harassment,' to then continue with a brief grounding in the socio-political parameters of the human geography of Cyprus as regards 'women and change' (Hadjipavlou, 2010).

Counter-publics, as Fraser (1990: 61) contends, are the ones generated and hosted within – but subaltern to – the dominant public sphere as alternative norms and styles of political behaviour in public speech. Alternative or oppositional voices of members of subordinated groups are often condensed or even muted in the dominant media and as a result they reach the public sphere weakened if not completely excluded (Salter, 2013: 238). Consequently, the needs of these groups remain unexpressed and unfulfilled and their identities are interpreted by imposed performativities like 'the ideal victim' in cases of harassment. Thus, counter-publics are necessary in order to,

> "serve as parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups [will] invent and circulate counter-discourses, so as to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interest and needs" (Fraser, 1990: 67).

Feminist voices and those of sexual assault victims are examples of such discourse that often need to be amplified in the public sphere. Dominant media produce discourses that either establish performativities about women's identities (Mendes and Silva, 2011) or they portray women as victims (Gallagher, 2005; Lemish and Lahav, 2004). That is why movements like the 'SlutWalk[2]' have used social media to start discussions that challenge patriarchal discourses and to claim new interpretations for feminist identities (Mendes, 2015). We also acknowledge the significance of these networked-publics that work to counter the dominant public sphere. We agree with Sadowski (2016: 56) who argues that 'contemporary digital feminisms are defined and strengthened by the interplay of digitality and materiality as women use social media both, as their only way to produce alternative discourses but also as a way to amplify these alternative voices in the dominant public sphere; a way of altering the press and a way of bypassing the press'.

Still, barriers remain for women fighting abuse in online environments, including media literacy problems, lack of resources, and the questionable legal status of gender-violent incidents on the internet (Eckert, 2018; Fotopoulou, 2016). As Eckert (2018: 1283) underscores:

> "Online abuse is often trivialised and framed as jokes; calls to address online abuse are dismissed as attempts to curb freedom of speech and impose censorship".

Similarly, Henry and Powell (2015: 104) highlight that online abuse 'is often framed as a problem of user naiveté rather than gender-based violence and underline the need for new legal and policy approaches to capture the results of online violence'. Meanwhile, there are accounts that recognise the potential of the internet in providing a tool for solidarity and 'digital sisterhood' (Fotopoulou, 2016: 1) among feminists.

We perceive social institutions as inherently laboratories where sexisms are re/produced in the mechanisms of how power is distributed and negotiated, and in the case studies from our research which we subsequently discuss, at the core of the democratic parliamentary process. As Atkinson (2011: 38) observes:

> "Patriarchy, hegemony, and masculinity are all narrations codified by social institutions, everyday practices, and forms of physical culture, and are disseminated through media".

This is how perpetual patriarchies persist and flourish in the public sphere.

Hence, we draw from Butler's (1988: 522-523) earlier work to underscore the political performativities that are implicated when individual acts and practices are conditioned by shared social structures. In that sense, we recognise a dialectical process of the personal and political which is at the heart of the data we scrutinise here. The victim in the cases examined, recognises that her personal experience is not hers alone but 'a shared cultural situation which in turn enables and empowers [her] in certain unanticipated ways' (Butler, 1988: 522); while further examining the politics and ethics of 'sexism as a means of reproduction' (Franklin, 2015: 14) in the public sphere. This alarmingly continues to align itself to a large degree with instantiations of hegemonic masculinity

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[2] A movement that started in April, 2011 in Canada after a Toronto police officer stated that "women should avoid dressing like sluts" in order to protect themselves from sexual assault.

correspondingly institutionalised and normalised in and through social media. Thus, we identify further elements of the 'digital divide' in re/producing social inequalities that are highly gendered and sexualised. Such a digital divide points to the use of social media in the social reproduction of contemporary sexisms.

Additionally, as regards our theoretical framings, we should highlight that parallel to the discussion here, are the socio-political parameters of the human geography of Cyprus. Especially in relation to 'women and change in Cyprus', whereupon, as Hadjipavlou (2010: 2) discusses, the shifts of gendered socialities and socialisations are shaped by: nationalism, militarism, violence, displacement because of war, fear of the 'enemy', male dominance, oppression, militarism, and women's roles, especially as mothers. As Hadjipavlou contends, the male-dominated national struggle has determined social norms in Cyprus and the traditional right of women to choose a different lifestyle has been considered as 'out of line'. Although Hadjipavlou notes a gradual change in feminist activism in Cyprus, she also highlights that 'the national question' in Cyprus has contributed to making national patriarchies persistent which leaves little to no space for women's movements to develop.

Although we do agree with Hadjipavlou in identifying a period of transformative feminist politics in Cyprus today, we cannot but underscore that patriarchy in Cyprus is perpetual as this continues to happen against a platform of pervasive and challenging struggles for gender equity. It is the realisation that:

> "focusing on sexism *now* and *here* matters because too often sexism is identified as either in the past tense (as what we dealt with, what we have overcome) or as elsewhere (as a problem 'other cultures' have yet to deal with). Sexism is *present*" (Ahmed, 2015: 5).

It is this need that points towards a gender conscious writing that develops awareness of how women act in contemporary male-dominated societies, where female leadership in decision-making capacities continues to be curtailed and marginalised by patriarchal and masculine hegemonies. Such struggles cannot be viewed in isolation from wider regional and global women's struggles (Hadjipavlou, 2010) and require sharper public attention. Our objective here is to shed light on the hegemonic masculinities, sexisms and divisions that women face in the public sphere, but, more importantly, to accentuate women's agency.

The public sphere in this exploration is one conceived as a spatial configuration of social relations unfolding within particular gendered and political performativities. It is of great pertinence that we highlight the gendered inequalities as constituted *within* and *through* the public sphere which aligns with a salient critique advanced by Fraser (1985) of the Habermasian thesis which ignores women's participation in the discussion. And it is this gendered subtext of the public sphere that is salient in dismantling a regulatory framework of gender and sexuality as 'amenable to temporal and geographical hierarchization' (Hemmings, 2011: 157), especially as they seek to 'mobilize gender and sexual discourse for profoundly inequitable and violent ends'.

When such a project of resistance to gendered oppression becomes imperative an intervention in the public sphere, then the appropriation of 'technologies of the self' (Foucault, 1988: 18) becomes part of the resolution, and, by extension, a means to transformative politics. Within this space there is a powerful realisation of the way that neoliberalism enters the picture in hegemonic forms. Dominant elements of neoliberal politics also enter media spaces and by extension social media are co-opted *by* and *for* the principles of neo-liberalisation of the public sphere. Explicitly operating through the affordances of social media, the focus on a particular instance of publicly mediated sexism in Cyprus involving members of Parliament, offers a critical discussion of the neoliberalisation of publics through social media and contemporary gender politics. This is further highlighted by the ambivalent status of social media sites in terms of public/intimate communicative platforms.

Thus, we perceive resistance as emergent to the situation above and reactive to the hegemonic forces of sexism and neoliberalism. We agree with Douzinas (2014: 89) in how resistances are situated in the local in concrete multiform ways and against a balance of forces. Meanwhile, we explore how resistance unfolds in public and digital space in broadening our understanding of technologies of the self and the mutual configuration of gender identities in theorising their relationship and co-construction (Siles, 2012). Still, we remain alert to the context of cyberspace as one of power, exclusion, social control and sexisms through the visual and digital semiotics of misogyny, harassment, hatred and bullying. Contemporary, urgent and of similar destructive embodied, affective and corporeal impact, digital sexual harassment/sexism is not just something that happens in cyberspace and thus not 'real'; digital sexual harassment/sexism targets women and it is gender discrimination, often vile and violent. Yet, the actual lived experience of internet practices of women reveals that the ways they use the internet to transform their material, corporeal lives is multifaceted in a number of complex ways that both resist and reinforce gender hierarchies (Daniels, 2009). Empirical research in understanding those multifaceted ways is useful in informing theoretical claims of the subversive potential of digital technologies, in both informative and transformative ways.

This article aims to be a pathway to a feminist storytelling 'from below', meaning the emphasis is given to the discourses that are usually condensed in the Cypriot public sphere, where the particular execution of praxis by women in everyday life should serve to further enhance reflexivity concerning the position of women in politics, publics and academia. While we acknowledge the empirical discussion as an impetus to wider theorising about

feminism and social media, we also take stock of the temporalities and spatialities of our research in framing our own positionalities and collaborative writing. In this respect our feminist knowledge project has benefited greatly by echoing Hill Collins' (2000) insistence on placing empathy at the centre of understanding community formation and as the crux of an authentic dialogic relationship with members of those communities in evaluating knowledge claims about them. Most importantly for our insights here is the emphasis on empathy as imperative to practices of feminist solidarity within communities that have suffered the wider trauma of their historiography as in the case of Cyprus. We therefore see our positionality and article as one mobilising agency, whereupon:

> "Agency is mobilized discursively as the *opposite of inequality* rather than part of the negotiation of power relations in constrained circumstances" (Hemmings, 2011: 209).

This is otherwise expressed as an attempt to move beyond seeing agency as the opposite of presenting Cypriot women as the sufferers of trauma, instead understanding this as a characteristic of women's position that does not necessarily constitute the 'basis of empathetic recognition' (Hemming, 2011: 211).

THE CYPRIOT SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

Cyprus is an island with a complex history that has been dominated by periods of imperialism and colonisation with the objective of having control of the broader geopolitical region in the Mediterranean Sea. This resulted in the emergence of different religious communities such as Muslims and Christians. During the British colonial period (starting in 1925) due to 'the politicization of the communal differences' imposed by the British (Hadjipavlou-Trigeorgis and Trigeorgis, 1993: 343) and the modernisation process that the Cypriot society was undergoing, the largest religious communities (i.e. Christians and Muslims) have transformed into the ethnic identities, known today as Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots. Consequently, this enhanced antagonistic nationalism between the two communities. Despite the 1960 official Independence of Cyprus, antagonistic nationalism persisted. This led to ethnic conflict that peaked in the period 1963-1968 with extremists involved in both communities. A coup against the then President of Cyprus, Makarios, organised by the Greek junta in 1974 led to the invasion of the island by Turkey supposedly as an attempt to protect and restore the rights of the Turkish-Cypriots. Since then, the two communities reside separately in segregated parts of the island, with the Greek-Cypriots living in the Republic of Cyprus controlled south, and the Turkish-Cypriots in the northern part of the island under the administration of the 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus', which is recognised internationally only by Turkey. This series of events resulted in what is known today as the 'Cyprus problem' which despite several international agency and governmental attempts to find a solution through negotiations between the leaders of the two communities, reaching a mutually binding agreement has still not been achieved[3].

The dynamics involved in the Cyprus problem are complex and multidimensional, the two communities – and even different groupings within them – have different narratives that conceptualise the history of ethnic conflict and the need for coexistence according to political loyalties. Apart from the historical and political aspects of the Cyprus problem however, there are also social implications that influence the way ascribed gender roles have developed in Cypriot society. As Karayanni (2006) places it,

> "Cyprus forms a crossroad where ethnic, sexual, gender, and race politics are complex, interwoven, and endlessly negotiated" (p.252).

However, 'the Cyprus problem' has dominated all aspects of Cypriot society, reinforcing patriarchy, hegemonic masculinities and traditional gender roles, thus leaving little space for women's agency and voices to be heard. The history books of Cyprus are full of heroic men who fought for freedom whilst the women appeared as passive victims of violence and thus powerless without the presence of the masculine figure in the house. The complexity of the Cypriot history created a masculine dominated socio-political landscape where issues of gender or sexual equality have only recently not been considered taboo. Karayanni explains the way the socio-political history of Cyprus intervenes with the way issues of gender and sexuality have developed in the Cypriot society:

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[3] According to Tzimitras and Hatay (2016: 3) "In 1983, Turkish Cypriots unilaterally declared the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, an entity that remains recognized as a state only by Turkey. Today, the internationally recognized Republic of Cyprus (RoC) is a state de facto run by the Greek Cypriots, while the island's north has developed separately, with heavy reliance on Turkish aid and the Turkish military. Although since 1979 both communities' leaders have agreed in principle that the island should be reunited under a federal system, negotiations to achieve that reunification have so far been unsuccessful".

"Conquest and colonisation direct the scripting of national manhood and it is significant to decipher how the process of scripting gives conquest and colonisation access and control over every individual subject's body. For the grand and magniloquent narratives that determine the gender character and sexual politics of a small and young republic traverse culture and society as they run their course through people's bodies at every moment. Each subject moves through her everyday affairs with movement and gestures that are sometimes inherited from parents but always learnt through the context of the socially adopted and accepted body politic" (2006: 252).

Clearly, the body politic defines gendered politics in Cyprus.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

We chose to use primarily Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in this research, because methodologically our point of departure focuses on 'the role of discourse in the (re)producing and challenge of dominance' (van Dijk, 1993: 249). We used CDA to analyse data derived from (a) posts published in the MPs' Facebook accounts, (b) newspaper reports published in the Cypriot newspapers *Alitheia, Fileleftheros, Kathimerini* and *Simerini,* and, (c) an in-depth interview conducted on 16 March 2016 with Irene Charalambidou, the female MP involved in the case studies. The semi-structured interview took place at the MP's house and lasted approximately one hour. Charalambidou was asked, using open-ended questions, to describe the incident, the aftermath reactions to it and the way social media, specifically Facebook, was used in comparison to print and broadcast media to discuss the story.

The qualitative analysis of the Facebook posts and the newspaper reports covers the period of June 2015 (when the first incident occurred) until mid-August 2015 (a few days after the Attorney General's decision was announced, namely to acquit the male MP in the second incident of all charges). Both the Facebook posts and the newspaper reports have been originally published in Greek and have been translated in English for the purpose of this article.

We do not claim that the conclusions we arrive are representative of all the feminist and misogynistic discourses that exist in the Cypriot public sphere. However, they do draw a picture on the canvas – which is almost blank in lesser researched countries like Cyprus – of the relationship between the two opposing discourses and the dominance/power dynamics they attain when produced by 'old' and new media.

CASE STUDIES

In both cases the female AKEL MP Irene Charalambidou is involved. The first case study involves the male DISY[4] MP Andreas Themistokleous who in June 2015 used misogynistic language via Facebook to refer to Charalambidou. Themistokleous' Facebook post was in response to an article published in the Cypriot *Fileleftheros* newspaper, which criticised male MPs (including himself) who had rejected a law intended to criminalise hate language aimed against LGBTQ communities.

The second case study occurred in late June 2015 and involved MP Charalambidou and the DISY deputy leader Andreas Kyprianou; it regards the subsequent police investigation of an incident of sexual assault when Kyprianou reportedly tried to take a photo up her skirt ("upskirting"). Following this incident, both MPs announced through social media that they had reported the other to the police.

Before moving on to the analysis and discussion of these case studies, it is useful to provide some contextual information about the female MP, Irene Charalambidou who has been the victim of misogyny and abuse in both the case studies examined in this article. The following section aims at clarifying why Charalambidou provides a good example for analysis of feminist activism in Cyprus and explains further why she could be considered more than just a political opponent with whom one might have ideological differences that could lead to verbal confrontation.

TRANSCENDING STEREOTYPES OF FEMININITY WITHIN CYPRIOT SOCIETY

Building on Hadjipavlou's (2010: 2) argument that women in Cyprus are left with little space to raise their voices, we argue that there is no appropriate space to question the female stereotypes of women as the mother, wife or sexual object for men that has dominated the Cypriot public sphere during the historical and modern periods. Charalambidou has been one of the women who had challenged both gender stereotyping and masculinity hegemony, and perhaps this is one of the reasons she is more often than other female politicians, the target of

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[4] DISY stands for *Dimokratikos Synagermos* which means Democratic Rally and it is the largest Cypriot right-wing party.

sexist attacks. Irene Charalambidou became known to the public in the mid-1980s as the presenter of the very popular television programme *A Pleasant Saturday Evening*[5] that was broadcast by the public television channel of Cyprus. This was a lifestyle programme – the only television show of its kind of the only television channel of Cyprus until the 1990s – which Charalambidou presented for two decades. Thus, the current MP had played a dominant role in the public sphere as a lifestyle icon during that period. Charalambidou had been featured as a lifestyle persona on numerous magazine covers and interviews in Cyprus from the mid-1980s onwards, her profile was a pioneering challenge to conventional female gender stereotyping. According to Panayiotou (2009), the 1990s lifestyle magazines were a place in which the sexualised representation of women had become a central point of reference in the Cypriot public sphere; commonly the representation of women had passed from one kind of swimsuit advertisement to a kind of soft porn imaginary. Thus, Charalambidou's central role in the lifestyle scene of the 1990s made her, in a sense, one of the iconic female images of eroticism in Cyprus.

However, during her last six years on television (2005-2011) Charalambidou chose to abandon the role of this lifestyle icon and to change her career by moving from hosting lifestyle television shows to the presentation of 'serious' political programmes. This could be considered as her first attempt at resistance as she opposed the concrete forces that dominated and managed to recreate her image/identity as a typical feminine woman. Transcending from lifestyle to the political was successful despite the initial disbelief she received. In 2011, Charalambidou successfully attempted to enter an area of power in which masculine hegemony had been solid since the beginning of its existence, in the Cypriot Parliament. Even fifty-seven years after its first composition, the Cypriot Parliament is male dominated, with only nine female MPs out of the total of fifty-six. Charalambidou has been elected to Parliament with the support of AKEL and her participation in parliamentary committees is always vigorous, outspoken and powerful, something which seems to be not only intimidating for some of the male MPs, but it seems to challenge the masculine hegemonies of the Cypriot public sphere in general. Thus, Charalambidou has been a woman who might have embodied multiple, and, for many, rival roles in the male-dominated Cypriot society. The discussion of stereotypes is useful for the remainder of this article as the incidents on which it focuses are iconic of this ambiguity with which Charalambidou is confronted with when she embraces roles outside the stereotypes of female eroticism that she was for years assigned to. One could argue, that it is the very act of Charalambidou claiming roles outside the ones she was stereotyped with that triggers incidents of misogyny and abuse against her, since this transcending of femininity stereotypes challenges the masculine hegemony in Cypriot society.

ONLINE MISOGYNY: AN ATTEMPT TO CONDEMN THE EMERGENCE OF FEMINIST DISCOURSE IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

We consider the hostile discourse produced in Facebook by male MPs against Charalambidou on two different occasions, as forms of what Henry and Powell (2015: 759) define as 'technology-facilitated sexual violence and harassment' since they both use gender-based hate speech in their Facebook posts. We perceive violence in this case as Henry and Powell define it: 'as physical, emotional, symbolic and structural' (ibid).

The first case was initiated when the *Fileleftheros* newspaper published an article signed by a male journalist on 31 May 2015 criticising the male MPs that rejected the law about criminalising hate speech against LGBTQ persons. The article's concluding section stated:

> "Seeing Stella Kyriakidou, Irene Charalambidou and Athena Kyriakidou [all female MPs] fight for the rights of a community [LGBTQ] that is still under attack, I dare to say that they have much more manhood!" (Kallinikou, 2015).

This article was shared 101 times on Facebook and caused 276 comments and 987 likes, thus we can tell that a discussion was triggered online about the rejection of the law concerning verbal violence against LGBTQ persons by male MPs. Charalambidou shared the article in her Facebook account on the same day accompanied by the comment:

> "We don't measure manhood with barbarism but with the soul that accepts and fights for a human being. Our society changes but some people want to keep it in the medieval period" (Facebook, 31 May 2015).

On 1 June 2015, Themistokleous (male MP) updated his Facebook status as a response, sarcastically referring to Charalambidou 'as the utmost authority to measure bodily manhood' (Facebook, 1 June 2015). The first thing that should be noted here is the fact that Themistokleous is using Facebook to respond to Charalambidou, even

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[5] Irene Charalambidou was the presenter of this programme for the period 1987-1994.

though she did not refer at all to Themistokleous in her own Facebook post. The male MP was criticised in the newspaper article that Charalambidou shared, but not directly by her. It is also worth highlighting that the conclusion of the newspaper article mentioned two other female MPs apart from Charalambidou, but Themistokleous chooses to attack only Charalambidou through his Facebook account.

This is one of the few historical cases in which arguably, feminist discourse is being produced by a Cypriot newspaper, and this challenges the established discursive contexts of the Cypriot print and broadcast media in which normally the patriarchal voice dominates. So, in cases like this, we see Facebook becoming a tool for producing misogynistic discourse in the hands of those that attempt to condemn feminist discourse and regain power and control of the discussion in the public sphere. Interpreting this through the lens of Butler's (1988) notion of performativity, this online discourse is an attempt to determine how female identity is performed. Themistokleous assigns to Charalambidou power – when referring to authority – which becomes suitable for measuring manhood in a sexualised way.

The second case study began offline, outside the online environment, between the MPs Charalambidou and Kyprianou on Friday 26 June 2015. It concerned the subsequent police investigation of an incident of assault/sexual harassment. Ironically, the incident occurred at the end of the House *ethics* committee's meeting, when Charalambidou pointed her mobile phone camera at Kyprianou in a gesture indicating she would take a photo of him lighting up a cigarette before he had left the room, in violation of a law that prohibits indoor smoking in the parliament building. Kyprianou then reportedly started moving toward her aggressively shouting 'just do it' and hurling insults while positioning his mobile phone under her skirt trying to take a photo. He reportedly also called her a 'slut'.

House speaker Yiannakis Omirou announced that the incident, which he characterised as 'an insult to parliamentarism' (Twitter, 27 June, 2015), would not be swept under the rug. Neither AKEL nor DISY had at the time yet commented on the incident. The incident quickly reached the public through a brief news report in *Politis* newspaper website a few hours later. The report however, referred to it as a brawl between the two MPs and it excluded any reference to the avowedly sexist attack directed at Charalambidou. The report received 7 online comments criticising Kyprianou for smoking indoors and it was shared 160 times on Facebook but due to the fact that its focus was on the prohibited smoking of Kyprianou in Parliament it did not trigger any discussion about sexism. This was the only reference to the incident in the media on that day, with the next one to arrive one day later from the same newspaper, with a more extended news report that included all the explicit details of the incident, but this was framed in the form of a commentary article criticising the sexist attack towards Charalambidou. This commentary article could be considered the one which triggered the subsequent online discussion on Facebook about the incident since as soon as it was published in the online portal of *Politis* newspaper it was shared 1700 times on Facebook. Meanwhile, none of the rest of print or online editions of the major Cypriot newspapers included the incident in their news until the first days of July 2015, after the two MPs posted in their Facebook accounts and the online discussion on the issue burst into the public sphere.

As Charalambidou explained during her interview, she avoided making it public (through Facebook) or reporting it to the police immediately after it took place because she was initially upset and needed some time to put her thoughts in order, but also because of the pressure she received from her colleagues that the matter was just kept political and not read as an incident of sexual harassment. According to her, however, when on the next day she saw the post of Kyprianou on his Facebook account describing the incident from a misogynistic perspective and blaming her for the incident, she decided to both report it to the police, and, share her thoughts on Facebook. Kyprianou's Facebook post included the following:

> "The specific MP while she was sitting inappropriately on the Parliament desk and not on the seat, she was photographing me and another colleague without us knowing it while we were mistakenly lighting a cigarette on our way out of the room! After my remark that this is unacceptable and unethical and after my demand to delete the photograph she denied and started verbally abusing me! If the indication to Mrs Charalambidou when facing the mobile phone towards her, saying that if we wish we could also photograph the indecent way in which she was sitting and expose her, is considered an inappropriate assault then it is deemed to one to judge it! Just because she is a woman she is not legitimised to verbally abuse and to behave inappropriately by exposing her colleagues, to violate the law and then to hide behind the status of a woman in order to defend herself!" (Facebook, 28 June, 2015)

The male MP resorts to Facebook at the time when feminist discourses seem to trigger a discussion in the public sphere. Kyprianou's Facebook post is an attempt to control the discussion that started in social media by determining the topics pursued. He comments twice about the way Charalambidou was sitting on the desk and not on the actual seat which he defines as 'inappropriate' and 'indecent'. Kyprianou highlights Charalambidou's posture as an improper one for a *woman* and a *politician*, to justify – but also to minimise the abusiveness of his act of photographing up Charalambidou's skirt, and for calling her a 'slut'. This comment implies that Charalambidou's

sitting was outside the expected *gender-performance* and for this reason Kyprianou justifies his behaviour. In other words, Kyprianou reproduces the misogynistic argument that is dominant whenever sexual harassment issues are discussed, contending that the male abuser is usually provoked by the scanty outfit or sexualised behaviour of the victim. An argument similar to the one used by the police when lecturing a group of Toronto students: that women should avoid dressing like sluts in order to be safe (Mendes, 2015) which led to the emergence of the feminist protest SlutWalk movement.

Thus, in this context too, we see Facebook being used as a tool for expressing misogynistic discourse in an attempt by the abuser to overcome the unlawfulness of his act and the characterisations that the public has already started assigning to him. In other words, the male MPs are following the offline behaviour of hegemonic masculinity (Atkinson, 2011) which manifests the traditional gender hierarchies that dominate Cypriot society.

NETWORKED COUNTER-PUBLICS FOR AMPLIFYING FEMINIST VOICES

Facebook in the Kyprianou-Charalambidou case however, has also been utilised by the victim, Charalambidou, and the wider public as a tool for shaping public discourse, and, for amplifying feminist voices against sexual harassment in the Cypriot public sphere. Charalambidou's Facebook post was much shorter and less descriptive than Kyprianou's:

> "On Friday in a Parliamentary room I have been victim of an indecent assault by an MP colleague. I reported the assault to the police. This report was one of my obligations. It is of no importance neither that the one who made the assault is an MP nor which is the political party that he belongs to. Assaulting a woman in an attempt to humiliate her is a crime despite who makes it. If I, while holding a public office, do not react, how can we expect any woman to react when she receives such an assault and to struggle with the social pressure, the internalisation of an unjustified self-guilt and with the insolence of the abuser that considers that he has the right to 'put her in her place'? Confronting my dignity and the dignity of every woman I did the least of my duty. Thereafter, it is a matter of law." (Facebook, 28 June, 2015)

This post received more than 1100 likes, and 116 comments, of which the vast majority supported the post, and it was shared 54 times. In contrast to the post of Kyprianou, Charalambidou's, instead of blaming the abuser, focuses on raising solidarity against all forms of abuse towards women through resistance. The post indeed triggered solidarity as during the following days more women used their Facebook accounts to express their resistance and demand punishment for the abuser.

Another female MP of AKEL, Koukouma, used her Facebook account to highlight the absence of politicians' comments from the public discussion of the matter. Koukouma, begins her post with the following:

> "It is a few days now that we expect that the party of DISY, the President of DISY, the Commissioner of Gender Equality and of GODISY[6] will react to the incident." (Facebook, 29 June, 2015)

Her post received 178 likes, 13 mostly supportive comments and 21 shares.

Similarly, Anastasia Papadopoulou[7] made a post to her Facebook account in the form of a commentary article, to refer to the Kyprianou-Charalambidou incident, intended to highlight not only the unacceptability of Kyprianou's acts, but also the absence of reaction from the members (male and female) of Parliament to it. Charalambidou shares in her Facebook account Papadopoulou's post by saying "Ethos has no colour or party. Thank you Skevi Koukouma, Roula Mavronikola[8], Anastasia Papadopoulou for doing what is self-evident" (Facebook, 19 June, 2015). This last reposting/sharing of Charalambidou offers the first indications of a counter-public that started forming online and is aimed at generating and promoting in the public sphere new relations of solidarity against gender violence and harassment that cannot be limited by ideological party political differences. Charalambidou's resharing/posting received 103 likes and 2 supportive comments from female users that are worth mentioning since they constitute evidence of raising resistance and solidarity among women. In the first comment the user stated: "From now on I vote women only, it's time to put an end to the humiliation and abjection of some people", and, in a similar tone the second user wrote: "Bravo to the women that supported you." The first comment is an example of how a discussion that developed online can influence the public sphere since the user states her intention to vote 'women only' in order to end the humiliation of women. As Warner (cited in Salter 2013: 229) contends:

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[6] The Women's Organisation of DISY.

[7] Member of the committee in the protection of children and of the central committee of the Cypriot right-centre party DIKO.

[8] Roula Mavronikola is a female MP of the Cypriot socialist party, EDEK.

> "Counter-publics serve not only to create a forum for alternative viewpoints but rather to modify existing principles and values, and to challenge (and even disrupt or transform) the normative structures of the public sphere".

Hints of counter-publics appeared offline because of the discussion which developed online on Facebook. The Cypriot print media (which until then covered the case very sparingly) started dedicating more space to the case, and more social actors started joining the discussion. These examples of challenges to the gender normative structures of the public sphere need analysis. To be precise, we observe that the Cypriot newspapers *Simerini* and *Alitheia* do not refer at all to the Kyprianou-Charalambidou case, while another two major Cypriot newspapers *Fileleftheros* and *Kathimerini,* make a small reference to the case in their commentary columns in the period 28-30 June 2015. We also observe that the aforementioned newspapers dedicate much more space to the case with both reports and commentary comments on the case from 1 July 2015 onwards (presumably following the online reactions). Meanwhile, social actors like NGOs and the Cypriot Ombudsman joined the discussion. Six Cypriot NGOs joined the discussion by publishing a common press release to support Charalambidou. The announcement, apart from criticising Kyprianou's behaviour, the lack of reaction from the majority of MPs, but also the statements of the Speaker of the House, calls for further action on a series of gender and political issues. Their call for action included: the need for reviewing the immunity law that protects the MPs but also the need for the media to raise a discourse of resistance against sexist/gendered violence and to stop silencing misogyny, transphobia, homophobia and racism, while disregarding the rights of others. This post is first of all illustrative of the activism that the discussion about sexism triggered after the spreading of the incident online. It also constitutes an exemplification of the fact of the silence in the Cypriot public sphere through print and broadcast media on sexism, and, thus, how other means – like Facebook in this case – provide alternative areas to facilitate discussion.

Charalambidou, in her attempt to raise these issues further, shares the Facebook post of the journalist Costas Genaris that mentions:

> "Why does CYBC ignore popular sensitivity and insists on inviting in its studios an MP who is indicted for an indecent attack against his female colleague and of whom the lift of his immunity law is being asked by social institutions? Is the respect of CYBC towards its audience and to the laws that big? And where is the sensitivity of the FEMALE [his use of capital letter] presenter towards the victim of this attack?" (Facebook, 17 July, 2015)

Meanwhile, Eliza Savvidou, the female Cypriot Ombudsman, published a press release about the case on 2 July 2015 which Charalambidou shares on her Facebook timeline. The significance of this share lies in the fact that Charalambidou uses her Facebook account once again in order to empower resistance, since she also de facto provides evidence of support from the state. Charalambidou shares the article while quoting Savvidou who mentions among other issues:

> "The recent serious incidents against a female MP in the House of Representatives unfortunately are not the only ones. On the contrary, they are part of the general framework of the sexist and belittling behaviour towards female politicians in the public sphere. Sexism towards female politicians exists and the equality law has failed to confront it. The unacceptable sexist attacks against the female MP indicate that the area of politics is still male-dominated" (Facebook, 2 July, 2015).

Two days later, Charalambidou reshares on Facebook the Ombudsman's statements as published by *Fileleftheros* newspaper. This time Charalambidou amplifies her voice of solidarity and refers directly to her friends/followers in order to acknowledge their support and solidarity. She says:

> "I had a torturous week. However, I had your absolute support and this helped me hold on. We still have a way to go because we need to bring justice to every woman whose voice suffocates under the mud that others throw in order to silence it… It is both our obligation and our duty" (Facebook, 3 July, 2015).

This post received 288 likes, 17 shares and 28 comments. The fact that even though the actual article shared refers to the same points as previously, i.e. the statements of the Ombudsman, yet this time the followers' support is much bigger with 288 versus 58 likes, in an example of the positive impact that the discourse of direct acknowledgement and of the call for further solidarity can have.

Another example of Charalambidou resisting the silencing strategies towards women that dominate the Cypriot public discourse, is her post as a reaction to the statement of the Speaker of the House. Omirou made a public statement to the Cyprus News Agency on June 30th, saying that the incident between the two MPs should not

have been reported to the police, and, it should instead, have been resolved between the two of them. Charalambidou commented on this statement as follows:

> "'Be silent to survive'? Is this the message that the President of the Parliament sends to the women of this place with his statements? Shall we hide under the mantle of solidarity among colleagues insulting and vulgar acts? Is our only concern not to confront the system? And then we are wondering why people discredit us! It was my obligation to report the incident. I did the least of my duty for my dignity and the dignity of every woman. I did not choose to settle but to do the right thing. Are you going to say about me too: 'Put her on a leash!'" (Facebook, June 30, 2015)

This post received 412 likes, 14 shares and 60 comments, most of them also critical of Omirou's statement. Charalambidou's language illustrates her persistence to resist, but also, to empower other women to act similarly to any attempt of muting the agency of the female public voice and resistance in a call to collective action. Omirou uses what Herring (1999: 152) defines as the "rhetoric of harassment" which attempts to invoke libertarian principles of freedom of expression, constructing women's resistance as censorship, a strategy used for 'limiting the scope of female participation in order to preserve male control and protect make interests'. Charalambidou also refers in the last sentence of her post, to a phrase that the Greek MP Samaras used a few days before. Charalambidou's reference to Samaras' comment could be considered as an empowerment strategy from Charalambidou towards the female public since it highlights the fact that the attempt for male dominance of the public discourse is not a local but a global one, consequently the need for resistance is a large-scale, translocal and transnational endeavour. As pointed out by Fraser (2008, cited in Henry and Powell, 2015: 772) a global feminist movement will reframe gender inequality 'as involving multiple sites – both local and global and must be seen as interrelated and […] mutually reinforcing' in its achievements.

CONCLUSION: REFLECTING ON FEMINISMS, SOCIAL MEDIA AND PERPETUAL PATRIARCHIES IN CIVIL SOCIETY

This article suggests that social media platforms like Facebook could provide a space for generating new discursive contexts that could be used, for both disseminating misogynistic positions and for stimulating resistance to gendered violence. The analysis highlighted that both the misogynistic language produced on Facebook and the physical sexual offenses represented have challenged Cypriot social norms. In the Charalambidou-Themistokleous case, Charalambidou has been attacked by the misogynistic discourse produced by Themistokleous who used Facebook at the moment when feminist discourse appeared in the mainstream Cypriot public sphere. Similarly, Kyprianou in the second case study used his Facebook account as a tool for expanding misogynistic discourse online in an attempt, on the one hand, to control the discussion, and, on the other hand, to justify his illegal act of sexual assault/sexual harassment against Charalambidou.

Nevertheless, Facebook has also been shown to be a tool of resistance and for amplifying feminist voices through the way in which Charalambidou used it in the second case study. This article suggests that the fact that Facebook enabled the victim to amplify her voice and the fact that it integrated it with other feminist voices, empowered feminist discourse in the Cypriot public sphere, even (and perhaps especially) when legal norms have failed to provide justice. Thus, it seems that social media can provide a platform for counter-publics where the opposing discourses of misogyny and feminism can compete for maintaining or countering the dominance of patriarchy in public spheres. However, we agree with Salter (2013: 237) that the boundaries between counter-publics and hegemonic discourses are permeable and that alternative discourses can reproduce the structures and norms they are critiquing.

We acknowledge that the form of feminism that has been discussed in this article has been enacted by women in power with forms of symbolic capital. We cannot ignore however, the participation of women that are not in power in the discussion, as it is the very act of political expression online that according to Papacharissi (2002: 17) offers a sense of empowerment. This can also be effective in realising the structural limitations of a democracy and committing to forms of activism in order to overcome them. It is important to draw upon the decades of feminist and intersectional theorising that connect important systems of oppression and social categories of gender, race, class, age, disability, sexuality. In a sense, Sandberg's (2013) type of high achieving women evokes bell hooks' (2000: 45) analysis of 'power feminists' with the realm of white, wealthy, professional women who contend with an inherently hegemonic patriarchal system, but in their struggle to succeed they also clearly reflect and sometimes duplicate characteristics and behaviours of white men of privilege rather than those of oppressed groups. Social media can reinforce the neoliberal agenda of individualism and corporatism and that is why this article points towards the need for expanding research on the use of social media for countering discourses of misogyny and

abuse by less privileged groups of women. We thus perceive feminisms of resistance in relation to social media as *new geographies of empowerment* in the digital era in which misogyny, sexism and gendered violence continue to explode.

Social media can offer alternative opportunities for accessible and inclusive participation, yet, they also remain tools used for perpetuating dominant sexist discourses advancing patriarchal social norms. Recent studies (Demirhan and Çakır-Demirhan, 2015) highlight the potential for social media to challenge some traditional gender roles and sexism. Although we remain sceptical as to the extent of such a transformative potential of social media *per se* in actually eliminating sexisms and changing gender stereotypes, we cannot but be hopeful when social media can be utilised as educational tools in academic, community and policy contexts. In this instance social media can become pedagogic tools and not just communicative outlets.

As such, we are offering a more nuanced examination of social media which is not either all-for or all-against its political, emancipatory and social pedagogy potentials. We re-centre the discussion of social media harassment of female politicians away from the almost obsessive loci of UK and US public figures, while giving insight into a transnational situation, something not often (if at all) discussed outside of Cyprus.

The case studies examined in this article were an attempt to place the research agenda on the impact of the use of social media away from these utopian or the sceptical points of view. We recognise that the use of social media might not be enough to promote social change from below, but as this article shows it can change – even temporarily – the flow and dynamic of the discussion in the public sphere, in terms of introducing topics that would otherwise be left outside, and in terms of changing the hierarchy of what is being considered important, relevant or newsworthy. We are also aware though, that as soon as the discussion expands from the social media to the broader public sphere then it can be assimilated as part of the same sociocultural system, vulnerable to the same limitations and the same forces of power. Hence, it is beyond the potential of social media whether this new flow of discussion will be controlled/ceased or enhanced. It is unrealistic for one to expect that social change from below could come from the use of social media alone. As this article suggests, the use of social media could be considered as one of the forces that may contribute positively towards societal change from below but the rest remain constrained by the powers that dominate the sociocultural local context.

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