

## **Following the money: news, sexual assault and the economic logic of the gendered public sphere**

### **Abstract**

This article engages with news coverage of the sexual assault scandal involving elite politician Dominique Strauss-Kahn and hotel cleaner Nafissatou Diallo to explore what their media treatment reveals about current relations of gender and power in the public sphere. Several key questions inform the analysis. What happens when a low status complainant speaks to power? What strategies of denigration take place to challenge her credibility? And how (in what terms) do the media make sense of the encounter between the two parties? Feminist media analyses of sex crime in the news have shown how misogynist attitudes underlie the depiction of women who speak out. This analysis reveals how the rules of media engagement are stacked against the speaking subject because she is both female and poor. It finds that economic inequalities, as well as those of gender and race, are dramatically inscribed in the mythic narratives of news. The overall conclusion is that the public sphere and its dynamics of denigration and disrespect towards women who complain are problematically organised along faultlines embedded in the gendered socio-economics of the public and private/domestic realms.

Keywords: news media; gender; inequality; economics; public sphere; sexual assault

## **“...you cannot use your money”: The People of the State of New York v. Strauss-Kahn**

This article addresses *The People of the State of New York v. Strauss-Kahn* and its aftermath.<sup>1</sup> This was a criminal case relating to allegations of sexual assault and attempted rape, formally described as “non-consensual sexual acts”, made by a Guinean immigrant hotel maid, Nafissatou Diallo, against Dominique Strauss-Kahn (commonly referred to in the media by the acronym DSK). Ms. Diallo accused the high-ranking politician of assaulting her in the Presidential Suite of the Sofitel Hotel in New York on 14<sup>th</sup> May 2011. His arrest, made on the very same day, could not have been more dramatic. He was escorted from the cabin of an Air France jet by detectives, just minutes before the plane was due to depart for Paris. Semen was found on Diallo’s clothing, her body was bruised, and, on 24<sup>th</sup> May, it was reported that tests showed a match to a DNA sample submitted by Strauss-Kahn. He was arraigned on June 6<sup>th</sup> 2011, and pleaded not guilty.

The charges were dismissed at the request of the prosecution which raised doubts about Diallo’s credibility and pointed to inconclusive physical evidence. Soon afterwards Diallo waived her anonymity in two major interviews declaring “Now, I have to be in public.”<sup>2</sup> On the 24<sup>th</sup> July she appeared on ABC’s *Good Morning America* (GMA) to declare: “I want him to know you cannot use your power when you do something like this...” In her later *Newsweek* interview of 8<sup>th</sup> August she insisted: “I want him to go to jail. I want him to know there are some places...you cannot use your money” (Dickey and Solomon 2011). DSK countered by arguing that what happened with Diallo was consensual. His lawyers dismissed her GMA interview as an “unseemly circus designed to inflame public opinion” (Anon 2011). They accused Diallo of failing to abide by the rules of legal and media engagement; implying that she was over-riding established standards and protocols of behavior in the public sphere.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> September 2011 DSK was sympathetically interviewed on French TV’s Channel TF1. Speaking to journalist and family friend Claire Chazal he conceded that his liaison with Diallo was the result of a “moral fault”. He described the incident as “inappropriate” but he maintained that it did not involve violence, constraint or aggression (see Xifra 2012). He insisted that Diallo had lied and that he had no intention of negotiating with her over the civil suit she had subsequently filed against him. Having failed to block the suit on the grounds of diplomatic immunity DSK later settled for an undisclosed figure commonly agreed to be about 1.5 million US dollars. The settlement was secured by a confidentiality agreement. DSK never faced his accuser in a criminal court.

At the time of the alleged attack, Strauss-Kahn was the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), a respected economist and the leading candidate for the 2012 French Presidency (Sherwell 2015). He was, in sum, a hugely influential figure of global political stature. The scandal immediately destabilized his career and precipitated his downfall. He resigned as head of the IMF on 18<sup>th</sup> May 2011. This was just two days after the journalist Tristane Banon, who had previously publicly accused DSK of attempted rape in 2002, announced that she was also planning legal action against him (Erlanger 2011). Other potential criminal cases rose to the fore and he faced multiple accusations of sexual misconduct and sexual aggression. Reports of other alleged misdemeanors included one for aggravated pimping related

to a prostitution ring in France for which he was later acquitted. Accounts of this last scandal (which also arose in 2011) claimed that DSK, together with colleagues, attended sessions in a hotel with sex workers. These women were referred to as “livestock” and offered up as the “dessert course” at business lunches (Chrisafis 2016). DSK later reflected that his failure, if there was one, was to fail to understand that the public was not prepared to separate his public persona from his sexually adventurous private life (Carvajal and de la Baume 2011).

The DSK-Diallo case was described by commentators variously as an “international firestorm” (Norris 2011), a “media feeding frenzy” (Daguerre 2011) and a “media circus” (Miller 2011). The website of the French Public Radio Service RFI reported the “unprecedented” media scrutiny. Under the title “The DSK case: the ultimate in media noise” it cited data produced by global communication analysis firm Kantar Media stating that between 15<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup> May 2011 DSK appeared on the front page of more than 150,000 newspapers around the world. There was also a massive spike in internet traffic for French online news - with additional people logging on in their millions and many sites noting more than a 50% rise in traffic.<sup>3</sup> According to Kantar, the acronym DSK was cited at least once in more than 33,000 media reports during this period (RFI 2011). Naturally, there was also considerable journalistic coverage in the *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and the *The New York Post* as well as a flurry of opinion pieces and letters to editors (see Brenner 2013,241). Distinctive features of the case rendered it especially newsworthy. It included an elite and influential protagonist embroiled in a scandal close to a political election which many thought he would win; his triumph threatened to be snatched away by a black immigrant hotel worker.

DSK and later Diallo were highly visible figures in the public sphere. Indeed, according to his supporters, DSK was *over*-exposed from the outset by being forced to undertake what is commonly known in the U.S. as the “perp walk” which meant being escorted, wearing handcuffs, from car to court in full public view. In New York City this discretionary practice was encouraged under the direction of U.S. Attorney Rudolph Giuliani for the exposure of white-collar defendants in particular (Skeel 2005,112). This “status degradation ceremony” or “walk of shame” typically showcased financiers, tax defrauders and A list celebrities and delivered them to waiting press photographers (Cavender et al. 2010). It was suggested by Strauss-Kahn and his supporters that he was the victim of a monstrously distorted American justice system which was gleefully hanging him out to dry because he was a European elite.<sup>4</sup> Bernard-Henri Lévy (2011), an immensely privileged public intellectual and defender of DSK, wrote in the *Daily Beast*: “This vision of Dominique Strauss-Kahn humiliated in chains, dragged lower than the gutter—this degradation of a man whose silent dignity couldn’t be touched, was not just cruel, it was pornographic.” His unfortunate but telling phraseology was an early harbinger of the grossly insensitive commentary around the case.

Issues of control and media management were inevitably central to DSK’s response to fast-moving events. Several years later DSK recalled his own sense of disempowerment over this very public arraignment: “I didn’t understand what was going on, I didn’t understand why I was there. I was just understanding that something was going on that I didn’t control.”<sup>5</sup>The story unfolded through statement and counter-statement as the criminal case crumbled and the

prospect of a costly civil suit came into view. In retrospect, coverage of the latter arguably fueled a public conversation which was already taking place about money as well as sex. In fact, the case may be understood as both allegory and as a lesson about gendered and economic power (the two intertwined). This analysis illustrates the rhetorical means by which these were dramatized in the news media to explain the encounter between DSK and Nafissatou Diallo and its aftermath.

### **“Gabby maid dooms own case”: gender and power in the public sphere**

This article focuses on English language print media coverage of events from May 2011 to December 2012 when reports of Diallo’s civil suit settlement emerged.<sup>6</sup> A focus on print media (albeit much of it available on digital platforms) produced a manageable corpus.<sup>7</sup> In contrast to Twitter micro-blogging, for example, which was becoming widely adopted by journalists in this period, a focus on print media also allows me to focus on longer form journalism and its establishment of narrative and myth. The aim here is to engage critically with news coverage and to ask what the treatment of DSK and Diallo reveals about the current discursive shaping of current gender and power relations in the public sphere. To pursue this in detail the article asks a series of related questions. What happens when a poor complainant of low social status speaks to power? What strategies of denigration take place to counter her complaint and challenge her credibility? How is she robbed of respect and recognition in the public arena (Fraser 1998)? And how (in what terms) do the media make sense of the encounter between the two parties? This analysis reveals how the rules of media engagement are stacked against the speaking subject not only because she is female but also because she is poor. It demonstrates how economic inequalities, as well as those of gender and race, are dramatically inscribed in the mythic narratives of news. The overall conclusion is that the public sphere and its dynamics of denigration and disrespect towards women who complain are problematically organized along faultlines embedded in the gendered socio-economics of the public and private/domestic realms. (Fraser 1990; Walby 1997, 166-79). As Nancy Fraser (1998,2) argues: “Gender, in sum, is a two-sided category. It contains both an economic face...and also a cultural face.” This analysis illustrates the analytical and political value of bringing these together.

The article adopts a case study method, which is defined as an approach driven by an interest in individual cases rather than by the methods of inquiry used (Stake 2005). This creates a space to develop an exploratory and critically reflective textual analysis of a chosen example. This qualitative study is underpinned by newspaper database research undertaken with three goals in mind: to confirm the extent (scope) of the print news coverage of the case, to confirm or identify key themes and tropes and to track how these changed or were modified across the piece. The broadest spectrum of press reports was included in the search. Tabloids, middle market dailies and the broadsheets were all searched and given equal attention in the research and analysis. Had the research elected to compare the media treatment of a controversial case

across only two papers, one ‘quality’ liberal broadsheet and one conservative tabloid, for example, the differences between the two would be stark. However, when viewed on a far larger scale, the increasing tabloidization of news in general and of the ‘quality’ press continues to erode the distinctions between them in terms of their close interest in the details of sex scandals, crime and the like. While the tabloids continue to frame stories in more lurid and emotive terms than their more sober counterparts, and are distinguishable in this regard, sex crime continues to be problematically reported across the board (Harper and Todd 2015).

As a qualitative, cultural discourse analysis of news this approach allows the description of “the narrative character of media content, its potential as a site of ideological negotiation and its impact as mediated reality....” (Fürsich 2009, 238). Media case studies often focus on the notable, provocative and thought-provoking. The DSK-Diallo case is certainly these things because it altered geopolitical history by hastening the downfall of a man who seemed destined to become the French president. This feature renders it a non-routine and contentious event, an extreme case (Flyvbjerg 2006, 229, 230), but at the same time it bears the hallmarks, writ large, of many other less politically loaded examples, some of which are cited in the literature review below.

When the tabloid *New York Post* gleefully declared “Gabby maid dooms own case” (Italiano 2011) and “UNMAID: Blabber hurts case vs. DSK” (McGeveon 2011) it neatly summarized the ways in which a woman who speaks up about sexual assault is often regarded as the author of her own misfortune. Tackling this example in detail helps to formulate questions and observations that might then be rolled out more generally about the necessary conditions of the possibility of voice for subaltern women in the public sphere. In other words, the case illuminates the *distinctive* characteristics informing the dynamics of power between men and women in the news. From this one example we can then extrapolate a wider argument about media representation and the gendering of the public sphere. The media treatment of the DSK-Diallo case is representative of a class of phenomena: it is exemplary of the wider news media’s sexist treatment of sexual encounters between parties of unequal status through gender, race, economics and combinations of these. In sum, men talk, and money talks, but women are expected to stay silent.

### Women’s voices, sex crime and the economic logic of the public sphere

The analytical frame deployed here is derived from feminist-informed thinking about media representation, the politics of voice, social inequality and the mobilization of male power against women in public domains. Feminist research in media, sociology and linguistics has demonstrated that psychological disadvantages rooted in economic inequality can limit women’s determination and personal confidence when speaking up. As noted elsewhere “Much of this struggle is rooted in historical experience (personal, collective or learned from earlier generations) which warns women that their voices are less valued in certain public domains including in classrooms, in newsrooms, in courtrooms and in government” (Biressi and Nunn

2017, 40). The argument has been well made that women will remember and internalize the hard-learned lesson that speaking out invites mockery and derision (e.g. Spender 1980; Gilligan 1982; Brown 1998). The examination of media testimony is one route into understanding the role of voice as a mode of justification for action and a call for advocacy, for compensation for injury or as reply to an accusation. Women who speak out in public, who complain or accuse do so under intense media scrutiny as well legal duress. As will be seen in the example below their emergent personal accounts are immediately positioned within the already existing structures of institutions, legal apparatuses and media frames which are often “hostile” (Cuklanz 2014,32). To be interpellated thus is to be asked to credit oneself as a subject with rights, self-esteem and the requirement of recognition and as someone who deserves fair consideration at the very moment of one’s greatest vulnerability.

Much of the literature on sex crime in the news stresses the “victim blaming” tendencies of both traditional news outlets and, more recently, social media and these go a long way towards explaining why speaking out is such a challenge. Scholarship has highlighted the gap between the reality of sexual abuse and its reportage (Soothill and Walby 1991) and the ways in which “rape myths”, for example, are perpetuated by newsmakers (see Bonnes 2013 for a summary of rape myth scholarship and its arguments). More specifically, in relation to this article, scholars have paved the way for this inquiry with critical case studies which conceptualise and illustrate the constraints under which women operate when they either choose, or are forced through circumstance, to speak in public about their mistreatment at the hands of *elite* men. There is extensive literature on homegrown American scandals of sexual exploitation, sex crime and misdemeanors between men and women of unequal status. These include incisive scrutiny of Bakker-Hahn (Gamson 2001), Clinton-Lewinsky (Everbach 2017), Packwood/-multiple complainants (Black and Allen 2001) and Thomas-Hill (Morrison 1992; Berlant 1997; Breda 2016). This literature establishes the various ways in which women who feature in stories of sexual scandal risk becoming the scandalous object of the news. They show that women who speak out against powerful men encounter routinely sexist treatment in the news which robs them of respect and diminishes their experience.

Taken individually these examples, and their scholarly explication, illustrate the variety of ways in which women’s voices have been silenced, their views disparaged, their credibility undermined and their bodies made abject. On a case-by-case basis these studies enable the testing and application of academic theories and debates about the gendering of news to a considerable degree. Viewed cumulatively, a much larger pattern emerges, namely the grotesque systemic disparagement and silencing of women and women’s voices in the public sphere across time (e.g. Tuchman 1979; Carter and Ross 2011; Beard 2014; Finley 2016; Biressi and Nunn 2017).

The silence is even more pointed when the man is an elite through his celebrity status, his social seniority and his personal wealth. The DSK-Diallo case falls within this frame. Muriel Rouyer (2013), for example, has analyzed the DSK-Diallo affair from the perspective of French coverage and with reference to the specific conditions of citizenship and participation in the public sphere of the French Republic; conditions which work against a woman who speaks up (see also Bernini 2011). Maria-Belén Ordóñez (2015) considers the media coverage from a postcolonial perspective to explore circuits of desire, affect and power. Her focus is on how the

intimacy of the sex scandal, once exposed, threatens to unravel the political order which maintains the subaltern in her place of subordination. This scholarship is vitally important because the “rhetorical positioning of women in certain spheres and the narrativization of their conduct within them impacts on the way we understand ourselves as citizens, social actors and political subjects” (Biressi and Nunn 2013, 223). This aim of this article is to contribute to this important corpus and extend it by foregrounding, especially, the *economic dimension* of the representation of gender and power in media stories such as these.

The emergence of allegations of historical sex crime against wealthy elites such as TV star Bill Cosby and Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein, together with the disclosure of Donald Trump’s demeaning treatment of lower status women, have highlighted the various ways in which the rich successfully evade, manage or rebuff public and journalistic scrutiny over the short and longer term (Blumell and Huemmer 2017). The Weinstein case, especially, foregrounds the economic dimension of the representation of gender and gender relations in the public sphere because so much of the coverage was devoted to a “casting couch” culture which was used, at the very least, to “explain” the compliance of women (and men) with the directive to say nothing about sexual exploitation. Reports noted that the casting couch had long been part and parcel of the movie business, that insiders assumed that women willingly traded sex for roles or were happily “paid off” to remain silent after a sexual encounter (Kantor and Twohey 2017). The assumption voiced in the media that women’s bodies are tradeable, that women willingly sell their bodies for money, for status enhancement or for career success, is part and parcel of what I am choosing to call the economic logic of the public sphere.

The trading of women’s bodies to support a system of value and exchange and the ascription of financial value to women’s bodies has been a foundational concern in feminist literature. It is part of what Gayle Rubin (1975) has called the political economy of sex. Rubin’s (1975, 158) much-cited essay “The traffic in women” eloquently set out the problem: “A woman is a woman. She only becomes a domestic, a wife, a chattel, a playboy bunny, a prostitute...in certain relations. Torn from these relationships she is no more the helpmate of man than gold in itself is money.” Critically, for our understanding of the media’s depiction of women involved in sexual scandal, Rubin establishes that in a variety of contexts (i.e. not solely that of paid sex work) women are defined in relation to men and in terms governed by relations of power, economics and material inequalities. The following analysis examines how, in one example, the media seeks to explain a reported sex crime and its aftermath in both gendered and economic terms and largely to the detriment of the complainant.

### **The economic logic of the gendered public sphere I: Illegal immigrant, prostitute, gold-digger, honey trap**

In news discourse the scandal of criminal assault is naturally oriented around the law, law-breaking and its legal consequences. Court reports, commentaries from legal experts, the finer points of the law, the significance of evidence and the credibility of testimony are all weighed up by reporters, pundits and audiences. But in addition, these reports often take on the colour, tone

and lexicon of other long-established, mythic and popular discourses and genres to fully make sense of events (Biressi 2001,36). The frames, metaphors, myths and popular genres used to make sense of the DSK-Diallo case nearly always placed the complainant at a serious disadvantage.

From the outset, while Diallo remained anonymous (and thereby voiceless) for legal reasons, speculation grew about her immigration status. There were also unfounded accusations that she was a sex worker “with dollar signs in her eyes” whose trade with DSK had gone wrong (Hamilton and Burke 2011). Others questioned her religious practice. The British *Daily Mail* online noted: “photos unearthed of Muslim maid partying and drinking” (DMR a 2011). The American tabloids showed little restraint and even less judgment in their attempt to characterise the accuser and her lifestyle. Jennifer Bain’s (2011) report “[IMF accuser in apt. for HIV vics \[victims\]](#)” stated: Dominique Strauss-Kahn may have more to worry about than a possible prison sentence. The IMF chief’s alleged sex-assault victim lives in a Bronx apartment rented exclusively for adults with HIV or AIDS....The Post has not been able to ascertain whether the maid, 32, has HIV/AIDS because of medical confidentiality laws.” Several broadsheets followed suit with this story despite the risk of disclosing the complainant’s identity (Swaine 2011).

It was also implied that she had exaggerated the abuse she received in West Africa to secure entry to the USA and that she was, in fact, an economic migrant. The decision to drop the case (on the grounds of her poor credibility around her claims that she’d been raped in Guinea) was reported in dramatic terms as reporters relayed accounts from lawyers verbatim: “DSK maid ‘dropped to the floor and rolled around weeping after rape lies were exposed’” (DMRb 2011). Subsequent unsympathetic reports then presented her as the deceitful maid, arguably, setting the tone for later coverage of her as an opportunist financially exploiting a consensual sexual encounter or minor sexual scuffle. It was obvious that Diallo had no money. Reports, both sympathetic and critical, assessed her earning capacity in some detail. Diallo’s lawyer was quoted by numerous sources describing her as a “ ‘simple woman, with little education’, who survives from ‘pay cheque to pay cheque’”(Swaine 2011). *Newsweek* reported, “Some of Diallo’s most upbeat moments...came when she recounted the small promotions and credits available at the Sofitel for a job done well. She was supposed to clean 14 rooms a day for a wage of \$25 an hour plus tips, according to her union” (Dickey and Solomon 2011). The financial gulf between the protagonists was reported by all and is nicely encapsulated in the *Daily Mail* headline “Strauss-Kahn ‘rape victim’ accused of being a prostitute....as he enjoys his first day of freedom with \$700 celebration dinner” (DMRa 2011).

“While money may not always be foregrounded in the evaluation of individuals, their possessions, attributes and actions, it is very often an underlying presence....” ( Mooney and Sifaki 2017: 5). Indeed, the more closely we examine the labels attached to Diallo, the more obvious it becomes that money and the lack of it was central to judgments of her and her actions. Her media story begins with baldly expressed assumptions that an illiterate immigrant would have very few resources to trade aside from her labour and her body. Even if DSK was guilty, she might easily be bought off. Headlines such as “Got it Maid- Bid to pay off DSK’s accuser” suggested that a deal was in the offing: “Pals of disgraced former IMF chief ...have reached out



to his accuser's extended family... in a remote African village for a payoff to keep her quiet.” (Anon/NYP 2011) This notion of the tradability of the female body is in keeping with wider popular discourses which attribute mercenary intentions to women who “cry rape” or “kiss and tell” following sexual encounters with elite or celebrity men. News stories of celebrity assault such as that surrounding the accusations against Bill Cosby, for example, will probe the apparently likely possibility that complainants are extortionists or attention seekers. News coverage of sexual assaults in sports have also figured women as greedy for status and notoriety (Toffoletti 2007). The societal implications of these constructions are far-reaching. As Deb Waterhouse-Watson (2016,956) notes in her analysis of footballer rape trial reporting:

If a statement can signify complainant unreliability in one case, then it can signify unreliability in all cases and thus contribute to victim-blaming discourses and misinterpretations of the legal process. While other statements may dispute the statement’s veracity, its “meaning” of guilt or innocence is rarely challenged. What it is possible for an event to mean is also limited in the context of a narrative about a sexual assault, because of genre conventions and popular beliefs about women, men, and sexual violence.

In this example the generic conventions of popular genres (such as theatre and situation comedy discussed below) and embedded beliefs and assumptions about gender relations, male potency, sexual appetite and female seduction came together to underscore the economic motivation of the maid who “chose” to sue DSK following the collapse of the criminal trial.

Following on from DSK’s own legal team’s claim that she was a “gold-digger” many reports explored the theory that Diallo was an opportunist bent on exploiting DSK’s difficult position and great wealth (Bremner 2012). Headlines such as “From hut in Africa to the glare of a high-profile assault case” (Barnard et al. 2011) emphasised Diallo’s extraordinary propulsion from anonymity (and poverty) to international media notoriety and possibly to new-found prosperity. The tabloids favored punning references to the maid “cleaning up” by making a financial killing. Taken together these built a picture which connected with popular assumptions that gold-diggers (a derogatory term rarely used to refer to men) are out to fleece male celebrities (Smith 2013,195). Again, the tabloids made this most explicit with “DSK Maid is out to clean up - Suit filed as criminal case wavers” (Perone 2011).

Libby Searcy (2012, 183) argues in her analysis of the media depiction of the gold-digger that these insults hinge on an acknowledged *but under-examined* recognition of the economic disparity between the two parties. To extend Searcy’s argument, it is worth adding that men’s possession of the lion’s share of financial resources has been naturalised over time with the differential earning capacity between men and women thoroughly embedded in the sexual division of labour. Consequently, the rich celebrity threatened with media exposure represents, in dramatic form, the vulnerability of everyman to financial extortion from a dependent or needy everywoman. This is the economic logic within which the media naturally operates when it tries to make sense of allegations of sex assault. Prior to the 2017 explosion of coverage around the Harvey Weinstein case the possibility that the celebrity or elite male celebrity might routinely exploit women through his economic power had rarely, if ever, been properly scrutinised by the

popular press and celebrity commentary. The increased audibility and reach of women's voices in this case, as articulated on digital platforms in particular, arguably spear-headed a shift in cultural attitudes towards industry-based sexual exploitation. In further work, it would be rewarding to track the relationship between mainstream print media and social media campaigning and how this shifted, re-routed and even re-set news agendas and the judgements formed there about women who go public about sex crime (see Mendes, Ringrose & Keller 2018).

Other explanations for Diallo's entanglement with DSK also pointed to a financial motivation. If the maid wasn't an opportunist then perhaps she was bait; paid to set him up for a personal catastrophe that would unseat a political titan. An English language news search generated 982 results with the added terms: trap/conspiracy/set up. Again, popular knowledge framed this in gendered terms; most explicitly through the shorthand of the "honey trap" conspiracy (Sage 2011). *The Times* reported how this suggestion was countered by her legal team: "...no self-respecting conspirator could possibly have chosen her as a possible 'honeytrap'. A tall, heavy woman, dressed in a lumpy uniform and in two pairs of tights, Diallo was 'not the sexiest woman in the world', [her lawyer] noted" (Allen-Mills and Campbell 2011).

The labels and evaluations addressed so far: economic migrant, prostitute, gold-digger or honey-trap, reveal what I called above the economic logic of the gendered public sphere. In cases such as these the female subject is always-already compromised. She is seen before she is heard and judged before she speaks on the grounds of the paucity of her resources as well as her gender and ethnicity. Her precarious position is, *a priori*, a marker and a testament to her unreliability. In this next section this argument is further developed by exploring a different but related set of discourses to those just described, that of the master and the maid, and their embedding in the gendered socio-economics of domestic service.

### **The economic logic of the public sphere II: the master and the maid**

As noted above, Diallo was the subject of scrutiny as a sexualised subject. Blunt judgements were formed about her desirability.<sup>8</sup> Diallo was neither dressed for sex nor, according to some, was she irresistibly attractive (the notion of rape as an act of power and domination rather than one of sexual attraction seemed to be inconceivable to many commentators). So how else to explain the encounter? Perhaps her social position as a hotel housekeeper (her role rather than her personhood) rendered her sexually desirable and, even, easily attainable? The quality and the tabloid press were strongly drawn to the narrative of the master-maid dyad; a pairing which is clearly rooted in historical relations of economic exploitation. This pairing and DSK's subsequent downfall was framed variously as bedroom comedy/farce and as domestic tragedy. The press depiction of the master-maid dyad as a real-life sex comedy or farce was fuelled by the power disparity between them, his Gallic background (which invited humour about the amorous French) and the brevity of the encounter which suggested, to some, the kind of sexual misunderstanding commonly associated with the bedroom farce genre. Diallo was depicted as the hotly pursued maid attempting to evade the amorous attentions of an oversexed grabby Frenchman, a trope which is an essentially theatrical conception (Autain 2011).<sup>9</sup>

A selection of headlines and openers across the timeframe of this research are indicative of the range of references rooted in humour, theatre and the absurd: “Strauss-Kahn drama ends with short final scene” (Eligon 2011), “Second act for DSK” (Hinnant 2011), “Behind the Purple Curtain” (Campbell 2011), “It’s a pantomime cast” (Craig Brown 2012), “The curtain is about to fall on the New York sex drama that disgraced Dominique Strauss-Kahn” (Bremner 2012) and “DSK farce no longer amuses” (DiManno 2012). The fact that the case was later dramatized for theatre invited further comparisons such as “Real better than staged” and “Curtain up on the sex scandal France can’t forget” (Campbell 2012). Comedic headlines from the tabloid *The New York Post* such as “DSK bares his naked truth in book: The maid saw my oui-oui and could not resist” (Vincent 2011) again stressed the risible dimension of the encounter. The fantasy of the sexually available maid is frequently evoked. Craig Brown (2012) begins his review of a DSK biography:

The great satirist Auberon Waugh once told me that whenever he stayed in a hotel, he was overtaken by fantasies that a naked woman would step out of each cupboard, offering herself to him. This certainly rang a bell: most men and, I suspect, most women too, will recognise the hotel bedroom as an alternative universe, anonymous and secret, where the possibility lingers that anything might happen, and no one will ever find out.

This type of commentary arguably shifted the explanation of DSK’s mistake or miscalculation (in whatever way we might read this) away from the initial one of a sexual services transaction gone awry to a botched domestic incident; in the words of the *The New York Post* this story might be better read as “an upstairs downstairs saga” (Peyser 2011). The hotel maid (the “housekeeper”), who services rooms, works in a quasi-domestic public/private space: cleaning up, changing bedding and scrubbing toilets. In her analysis of the representation of women cleaners Katarzyna Marciniak (2008, 342) observes: “...removing other people’s dirt—in various cultural contexts by an immigrant, migrant, or guest worker, intertwines with racialized processes of social abjection and consolidation, at the most intimate, private level, of the status of the ‘rightful’ subject”. This mediated master-maid relationship between DSK and Diallo should also be understood in postcolonial terms.... “those with power try to find a refuge in their privilege and wealth....” while the abjected body of the immigrant maid is rendered as “a body that does not matter...a body both out of place and in a place to serve...” (Ordóñez 2015, 165).

The cumulative burden of representation borne by Diallo was therefore considerable. Her personhood bore traces of historically embedded practices of exploitation. She was, as a maid, quite literally a “domestic”, disenfranchised in the public sphere and with limited rights in the private sphere. Indeed, well-known journalist Jean-François Kahn (a friend but no relation to DSK) suggested that this hotel guest was guilty merely of “tumbling the chambermaid” (*troussage de domestique*) – a reference to the upper class feudal privilege of having casual sex with a household inferior such as a servant (Rouyer 2013, 189). Critics argued that J-F. Kahn’s interpretation of the event stood as a mark of contempt against women and disdain towards Diallo’s social class. Sociologist Éric Fassin noted: “Once the gender narrative emerges to make power visible in a story that might otherwise have been reduced to mere seduction gone wrong,

other narratives of domination suddenly emerge. The first pertains to class” (Fassin 2011; Kerr 2011).

The impact of this domestication of a sexual assault is to render it private, personal and of less than significant public interest. It becomes, at the very least, refigured as a story of two victims rather than just the one. As we know, in crime reportage “domestic” assaults and even murders are often described as individualised tragedies which belie the wider exploitative relations of gender (Boyle 2004). The DSK-Maid dyad coverage privatised her experience by returning her firmly to the domestic realm. News commentary returned her to the private sphere and thereby obscured her economic contribution to society. It is this contribution which arguably affords subjects the privilege of citizenship and voice.

### **Conclusion: Paying the price, counting the cost**

In Lauren Berlant’s (1997: 222-223) terms Diallo’s decision to speak in public and to directly tell the story from her own perspective might be read optimistically. It could be argued that she was a practitioner of “diva citizenship”; being one of a small number of women who openly testify to their “imperiled citizenship” through “acts of risky dramatic persuasion” such as her interview on *Good Morning America*. Certainly, Diallo’s action precipitated DSK’s downfall and she interrupted both political culture and business-as-usual with dramatic effect (see Ordóñez 2015). And DSK himself felt that the episode had cost him dearly both professionally and financially. Reports noted that other women, as well as Diallo, were set to gain financially from his behavior including earlier complainants and even his own wife. “Enraged wife hits **DSK** in pocket” noted *The Sunday Times* (Campbell 2011) of the woman who had actually financed her husband’s legal defense before deciding to leave him. In a CNN interview with Robert Quest conducted several years later DSK revealed his disappointment at the penalty paid:

STRAUSS-KAHN: ...I don’t think I have any kind of problem with women. I firmly have a problem with understanding that what is expected from a politician of the highest level is different from what can do Mr. Smith in the street [sic].

QUEST: That’s the price of being at the top?

STRAUSS-KAHN: Exactly. And I didn’t want to pay this price, so finally, I paid it twice.<sup>10</sup>

DSK, however, was never prosecuted; his accuser failed to achieve redress in a public court. As Beatrix Campbell (2013) notes in her account of gender after neoliberalism: “In no society in the world does the criminal justice system take the side of women. ... This is the routine, everyday manifestation of The Impunity.” Coming to voice in the public sphere without coming into power is therefore deeply problematic when it comes to confronting the injustices faced by women in general and by women of color especially (Hill Collins 1998:76).

Diallo did not have her day in court. Moreover, while she did not lose the media case against DSK over the longer term neither was she the victor. Diallo's decision to report a sexual assault led to one of those tinderbox moments when conventional politics and media coverage are interrupted by an event with almost unquantifiable long-term political consequences. Hence the huge media coverage. In summing up news on this scale it is evident that popular knowledges and mythic narratives were deployed and organized along gendered and economic lines. When subaltern women speak to the news media, their rarity renders them conspicuous, vulnerable and the object of unlimited fascination. This revealed itself in the tropes used to describe Diallo. As outlined here Diallo was depicted as a sex worker, a sexually available maid, a gold-digger, a deceitful economic migrant and a honey-trap. DSK was figured as an elite whose sexual voraciousness constituted a tragic personal flaw of Shakespearean proportions. But more than this, for those interested in the complexity of social identities and their representation in neoliberal times, the news reports of the DSK-Diallo case represent both an allegory and a lesson about the continuing gendered relationship between capital and labor, between the privileged and the precariat and between public and private selves.

Both Diallo and DSK were globally mobile workers; although her journey to America was, no doubt, more arduous than his. She originated from Guinea, he from France. They both worked hard for their money. She, however, did so anonymously and without public recognition. As Kristie Dotson and Marita Gilbert (2014 881) argue:

.. Diallo is a part of the service industry in a city with one of the most tourist-driven economies in the world. The city would scarcely function without Diallo and the labor of countless nameless others like her. Yet the unfortunate truth is that Diallo's complex social identities were used to undermine her credibility.

In reality, DSK and Diallo were both following the money, both playing their parts in the economics of financial flow, exchange and production. But his subjecthood and his labor were legitimized and respected in a way that hers never could be. Diallo threatened the order of things. By suing an elite and holding him to account in the court and in the media, she appeared to be trying to convert male labor into female wealth and thereby reversing the gendered economics which remain the foundation of social stability (Rubin 2010). The media's overall message was that DSK was guilty of arrogance and sexual incontinence and Diallo was guilty of trying to get something for nothing.

This characterization of Diallo persisted long after the case was settled. Diallo was even smeared with commentary which implied that she had been richly rewarded for a brief skirmish with an annoying libertine. *The Daily Mail* headline "Maid paid \$1.5 million by Dominique Strauss-Kahn to drop rape allegations now runs her own New York restaurant" is typical (McCormack 2015). The accompanying photo-caption read: "The six-minute encounter in May 2011 between Nafissatou Diallo...and Strauss-Kahn led to his resignation from the IMF, ultimately ended his marriage and shattered his dreams of becoming French president." This suggests that Diallo had been enriched, the recipient of wealth beyond her hopes, for a few

minutes of inconvenience. Consequently, the enormity of her encounter with the law and with the media was obliterated. This news coverage is a reminder that struggles around gender, recognition and respect, and the depiction of these struggles, are always tangled with issues of economic power and control. In this example, commentary was shaped by the economic logic of the public sphere which frames and understands gendered power relations in transactional terms. News reports formed judgments and framed opinion based on the subjects' economic power or lack of it and the perceived value of their labor. These reports firstly established what Diallo was worth and then whether she was worthy of public recognition.

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<sup>2</sup> “Dominique Strauss-Kahn accuser gives first interview.” <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-14271114> July 25.

<sup>3</sup> For a first-response qualitative analysis of French online dailies *Le Monde*, *Le Parisien* and *Le Nouvel Observateur* see Marie-Joseph Bertini (2011).

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the case from the perspective of national ideologies see Julia Lefkowitz (2013).

<sup>5</sup> CNN interview with Richard Quest 9 July 2013. <http://cnnpressroom.blogs.cnn.com/2013/07/09/cnn-exclusive-dominique-strauss-kahn-talks-europe-european-banking-and-the-infamous-perp-walk/>

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of West African coverage of DSK-Diallo see Michelle Tjondro (2014)

<sup>7</sup> A provisional *a priori* coding scheme was prompted by a range of sources including the research questions and concerns outlined above and published case studies on similar topics. Additional codes emerged from a schematic reading of the data as it unrolled (around, for example, the apparent theatricality of the DSK-Diallo encounter) . A Nexis UK news database search showed 322 results for UK national papers in the timeframe and 21 in the The New York Times (including blogs) and in the The Washington Post combined (search terms DSK/Diallo/Strauss-Kahn). A search for English language news using these terms generated 979 results (646 newspaper hits plus magazines, web news inter alia). A second news search (with the added terms: trap/conspiracy/set up) yielded 982 results. This method of data collection provided the written content of each article. This broad set of keyword searches, together with refining sub-set searches, evidenced the story's ongoing newsworthiness and provided the data from which to identify patterns and repetitions in the story treatment.

<sup>8</sup> The magazine *Paris Match* both disclosed Diallo's identity too early in the legal process and then, prompted by DSK's lawyer's expression of surprise at the alleged victim's plain face, went on to assess her looks in some detail ( Desnos 2011)

<sup>9</sup> An English language news search in the Nexis database generated 980 results for keywords DSK/Diallo Strauss/Kahn/drama/stage/theatre.

<sup>10</sup> <http://cnnpressroom.blogs.cnn.com/2013/07/09/cnn-exclusive-dominique-strauss-kahn-talks-europe-european-banking-and-the-infamous-perp-walk/>