

“Before and after DSK” - France’s women put sexism on trial in wake of Dominique Strauss-Kahn case

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Allegations of rape against ex-IMF chief fuel debate on macho culture among male establishment figures in country

Among a group of women shouting “We’re all chambermaids!”, one softly-spoken 43-year-old was glad to see feminists taking to Paris streets in the wake of the Dominique Strauss-Kahn affair. The well-dressed woman, who now counsels sexual violence victims, said she had been attacked by a French businessman with political connections but had never pressed charges.

“I was raped by a powerful man. I went to the police, they said the pressure would fall on me and I risked being destroyed. I didn’t take it any further. Victims feel they have almost no voice in France. We hope that might change now.”

France now talks about “before and after DSK”. Two weeks since the head of the International Monetary Fund and great Socialist hope for president was arrested and charged with attempting to rape a New York hotel maid, a sexual revolution is underway.

Strauss-Kahn denies the charges against him, but whatever the outcome of his case, it has sparked an outpouring against French sexism and harassment disguised as “gallantry”, as well as a new openness about tackling rape.

France always prided itself on a tradition of unbridled sexuality and a society based on seduction, where Jacques Chirac kissed female leaders’ hands and declared that Michèle Alliot-Marie, who served as justice, defence and foreign minister, had “the best legs” on the right.

Many argued that the dreaded “American puritanism” – the US’s strict laws on workplace touching and harassment – would make France a dull place. But now the floodgates have opened on women denouncing French machismo.

When *Le Parisien* reported this week that the sports minister, Chantal Jouanno, avoided wearing skirts in parliament for fear of salacious comments from male MPs, other political women confessed they did the same.

It wasn’t the Strauss-Kahn charges themselves that caused the backlash. It was the perceived belittling of rape and sexism of leading French thinkers reacting to his case. Suddenly France, the land of feminist luminary Simone de Beauvoir, was being lampooned abroad as a macho backwater. Feminists held street protests and young male politicians rushed to sign a mayor’s anti-sexism petition distancing themselves from what the US media called the reign of the French “dirty old man”.

Despite outrage, the Socialist Jack Lang has stuck by his comments that Strauss-Kahn should have been released on bail earlier, considering that “no one had died”.

The journalist and philosopher Jean-Francois Kahn dismissed the case as a “troussage de domestique”, a phrase suggestive of French aristocrats having non-consensual sex with servants. He later apologised and quit journalism. Women politicians are speaking out. One female Socialist MP wearing trousers and a summer top to a recent commission hearing was reportedly told by a rightwing MP: “Dressed like that, you shouldn’t be surprised at being raped.”

The former environment minister Corinne Lepage told *Libération* she had seen a female MP raise the issue of a rape in parliament and a male MP shout: “With a face like that it’s hardly going to happen to you.”

Women politicians complained of jokes, cat-calls, belittling and attempts to chat them up. Political journalists spoke of politicians who repeatedly texted them, locked them in cars or knocked on their hotel room doors during party conferences. Sexism in French politics had long been decried, notably in 2007 when Patrick Devedjian, a senior Sarkozy ally, was forced to apologise after calling a female politician a “ salope ” - bitch or slut. But since “l’affaire DSK” feminists hope there is no going back.

The real impact is legal. Chantal Brunel, MP and head of France’s observatory on sexual equality, said: “I think the DSK affair will do more to further the cause of women in terms of violence, than any law. Because today laws already exist on violence, the problem is women speaking out.”

Rape crisis telephone lines reported an increase in calls in recent days. Counsellors said the fact the whole country was talking about a sex assault alleged by a hotel worker against a powerful man had broken the “omertà” in France, where only one in 10 rapes are reported.

The renowned feminist lawyer Gisele Halimi warned that if the DSK affair had happened in France, it would likely have been hushed up and never reached court.

Nicolas Sarkozy, whose low poll ratings have climbed slightly in recent days, is sensitive to the national mood. He condemned sexist comments about the DSK case, saying: “Frankly some things we’ve heard we would have preferred not to.” Then this week, the civil service minister, Georges Tron, was forced to resign from government after two women, emboldened by the Strauss-Kahn case, filed complaints for harassment, including inappropriate foot massages and groping.

The state prosecutor opened a preliminary inquiry for sexual assault. Tron denied the allegations and threatened to sue the women for libel. They told French radio they would not be scared off and would pursue the complaint. It is unusual for a Sarkozy minister to leave government so fast, particularly before charges are made, but the president couldn’t risk the effect public opinion.

The former prime minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin said a “return to morals” would now be at the heart of next year’s presidential election campaign.

For many, the French culture of sexual conquest is a hangover from the old, monarchic traditions of the Ancien Régime: powerful men seen as having a right to exact sexual favours from subordinates and political leaders held in esteem for their libido.

The commentator Laurent Joffrin warned that France’s “archaic” notions and heavy-handed seduction were in fact “all about holding women in disdain”.

The historian Dimitri Casali said that in France sex and power had always been linked - Napoleon had 60 mistresses, the Sun King Louis XIV had 300, but Louis XVI who had erection problems ended

up guillotined in the French revolution, he explained in *L'Express*.

But he said the “monarchic tradition” of prizing leaders with multiple sexual conquests “may now be living its final hours”.

Angelique Chrisafis in Paris

In numbers

18.5% of MPs in the French parliament are women, compared to 21% in the UK, 33% in Germany and 46% in Sweden. Less than a quarter of the French senate is female

19% The pay gap between men and women in the private and semi-private sector in France

15% of executives in large French companies are women. A new law sets a 40% quota by 2017

75,000 rapes each year in France, but only 10% of women go to the police. A woman dies every three days as a result of domestic violence

P.S.

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<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jun/03/france-women-sexism-strauss-kahn>