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the case of populist critique

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ABSTRACT

This working paper enquires into the communication of femicide as a power struggle over the ultimate condition of gendered vulnerability (women killings) for the meaning(s) of and claims to 'being a victim' (victimhood) worthy of attention. Our argument is that the dominant narratives on femicide, legal, socio-psychological and feminist, do not fully grasp this power struggle, which needs to be problematized, instead, as part of today's platformized communication. The major question we ask, therefore, is: how are victim subjectivities authentically articulated and justified through ordinary voices-discourses that get high attention in social media platforms? We try to answer this question by analyzing popular engagement with femicides on the Greek social media, especially, Facebook and Instagram community pages, which involves different social actors and discursive practices of emotionalizing and moralizing victimhood that ultimately articulate a populist critique of femicide. This form of critique, we conclude, is delimited by ideological, institutional, promotional, and commercial boundaries, endogenous to the platformized communication of femicide, begging the question whether women killings can be 'instrumentalized' in favour of social justice for the most vulnerable to gendered violence or is set to reinforce algorithmically biased claims to high-profile victimhood.

1 INTRODUCTION

On 11 May 2021, in the Athenian suburb of Glyka Nera, 20-year-old Caroline Crouch was killed/suffocated by her husband, who staged a burglary as a cover up for his crime and only confessed 38 days later, when the police had compelling evidence to corner him. In the meantime, the event made headlines: pictures of the 'happily married couple' from the husband's Instagram account were picked up and reproduced by mainstream and digital media along with stories about the 'heartbroken husband'[2], the baby found sleeping next to the dead mother[3] and the Albanian and Georgian suspects.[4] Even after his confession, which sparked a wave of indignant demands for punishment and justice – #Glyka_Nera and #Justice_for_Caroline became trending hashtags in no time – it was hard for the Greek public opinion to make peace with the idea that a white upper-middle class handsome man killed his wife. Maybe they were not in a happy marriage after all, fighting all the time as the husband claimed in his confession; maybe Caroline found out about a secret affair or illegal activity and threatened to leave him, as other stories have suggested. Overall, intense feelings and gendered, racialized, and class-based narratives competed over Caroline's murder, raising the question of *who is the victim* in this family tragedy: the dead wife, the widowed husband, or the orphaned kid? It is this idea of victimhood as an emotional and moral compound in the communication of femicide that we want to interrogate in this article.

Caroline's murder was, of course, neither the first nor the last femicide in Greece. 'The number of women who were killed in episodes of domestic violence was up […] to 16 in the first 10 months of 2021, from nine for the whole of 2020', according to the *New York Times* (Kitsantonis, 2022). In the face of this sharp rise in femicides, and the high visibility they acquired thanks to the momentum of the Greek #MeToo movement at the same time, Maria Syregela, the Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, told *The Guardian* that "when the domestic violence law is redrafted in line with the Istanbul convention, we will of course advise that femicide is included" (Smith, 2021).

This and other relevant calls for legal interventions are all but uncontested, in the sense that, as we discuss in the first part of this paper (*The femicide victim in legal, socio-psychological and feminist narratives*), they reflect a dominant narrative that recognizes as femicide victims only

[2] "Murder in Glyka Nera: Without leaving their child from his hug for a moment, he said 'goodbye' to the woman of his life" (Proto Thema, 2021)

[3] 'When I saw the kid, I felt an emotional collapse' (policeman Christos Vardikos in *news 24/7*, 2021).

[4] 'Murder in Glyka Nera: "the policeman who got into the house told me that…" – the pilot's testimony shocks – Albanian perpetrators?' (Athens Magazine Team, 2021).

those who fit into subjectivities determined by the law. A similar logic applies, we argue, to the *socio-psychological* narrative on femicide, where the victim subjectivity is determined by several conditions in violent situations, and to the *early feminist* narrative that exclusively identifies the femicide victim with oppressed and helpless women. Antithetically, *popular feminism* confronts us with the radically contingent nature of victimhood, as reflected in Caroline's murder – was she a helpless young women at the hands of an older possessive man or a defiant woman who had the courage to speak up to him or just a manipulative wife that made him lose his temper?; multiple victim subjectivities may be empowered through and by the media regardless of the legal, social, psychological and, indeed, any other systemic conditions that structure and complicate gendered violence.

Our engagement with femicide takes its point of departure in this feminist understanding of the relationship between *femicide*, which is itself a gendered condition of ultimate vulnerability (it is about dead women after all), and *speaking in the name of or as a potential victim*, which concerns the struggle over competing claims to and meanings of gendered violence, in general, and femicide, in particular: are all women killed by men femicide victims? What does it mean to be the victim of a femicide? We do not stop at acknowledging that this relationship is mutable and open-ended, however, but we also critically attend to the communicative work that provisionally stabilizes it and effects a temporary closure to the meaning of vulnerability and a hierarchization of claims to being a victim. This points to what Chouliaraki (2021) calls 'affective politics of victimhood': it is an affective politics not least because making and sharing claims to victimhood, nowadays, is largely structured by and regulated in line with digital platforms' algorithmic quest for fast-paced personalized emotional content, or what Döveling *et al.* (2018: 7) call 'social sharing of culturally and discursively constructed emotions.' It is this emotional dynamic that brings people together as users, producers and consumers of content and, therefore, generators of engagement with, attention to and, ultimately, profit out of platforms. Which claims to victimhood, and by whom or which social positions, stand out as authentic and worthy of attention in the digital communication of femicide? Do these claims build up onto a social critique of systemic and gendered vulnerability/violence? In the second part of the article (*The femicide victim in today's platformized communication: emotionalization and moralization*), we come to theorize these questions as problematics in today's platformized communication, specifically in relation to its power in emotionalizing and moralizing femicide, and propose an analytical framework to address them, drawing on multimodal and critical discourse analysis.

Subsequently, in the third part (*Populist critique in the communication of femicide*), we empirically apply this framework to paradigmatic examples from the Greek social media, especially, Facebook and Instagram community pages, including but also going beyond the case of Caroline Crouch, that advance a populist critique of femicide. Based on the analysis of

emotionalization and moralization as discursive practices deployed in these examples, in our concluding remarks (*The politics of victimhood and the unfulfilled promise of social justice*), we reflect on the politics of victimhood that emerges out of certain boundaries or algorithmic biases – ideological, institutional, promotional and commercial – in the communication of femicide: how it 'revolutionizes' the Greek public debate on gendered violence and whether this suffices for directing attention to and empowering not only algorithmically worthy victims but also systemically vulnerable individuals and groups.

2 THE FEMICIDE VICTIM IN LEGAL, SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL AND FEMINIST NARRATIVES

One of the most popular and, perhaps, influential narratives on femicide is the one that considers legal interventions to a criminal justice system where 'the dominant white, affluent, adult, male […] subjectivity is both subject and object of law' (Hudson, 2006: 30). A number of UN declarations and resolutions as well as the Istanbul Convention of the Council of Europe (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2018), have outlined commitments for the signing parties to effectively address different forms of violence against women (e.g., rape, genital mutilation, forced marriage, honor killings, etc.). Until recently, the recognition of femicide as a specific crime was not a popular choice in the Anglo-American and European law, which, in the name of non-discrimination, has preferred the gender-neutral 'homicide', 'killing', 'murder' or 'manslaughter' (see, for instance, Art.299 on intentional homicide and Art.300 on homicide by consensus in the Greek Penal Code). On the other hand, in countries where femicide is legally constituted (mostly in Latin America), there is significant variation concerning its defining elements (UNODC, 2018). Central to both cases, and to the *legal narrative* in general, is a challenging imperative to 'identify' and 'prove' (the gender-related causes of a crime), which mostly allows recognition for victim subjectivities that are "relatively static based on official definitions […] and discovered through the use of largely quantitative data sets produced from official sources" (Hall, 2008: 8). The defining elements and factors in a femicide, however, are not some conditions with self-evident and universal meaning that just need to be proved, but inherently contested concepts under constant negotiation of their meaning, or, as Smart (2019: ix) has insightfully put it, the law is 'a complex site of discursive struggle rather than a simple pragmatic tool of the good'.

Shifting our attention from proving to exploring the complex realities of violence against women, another dominant narrative on femicide emerges: the *socio-psychological*. It descends from early studies in the US that revealed a microscopic, and rather biased, pattern of 'intimate partner homicides', according to which victims were in dysfunctional relationships with older

men (Breitman *et al.,* 2004) or the perpetrators were poor and young members of ethnic minorities, often, with substance abuse problems (Weiner *et al.*, 1990). More recently, though, the socio-psychological narrative has embraced an 'ecological approach' to gendered violence (Kouta *et al.,* 2018), paying attention to individual-psychological along with cultural and structural factors, or as Corradi et al. (2016: 980) put it, 'sociology investigates not violent individuals but violent situations […] which shape the emotions and acts of the individuals who step inside them'. Now, the victim subjectivity emerges as situated and relational, more than the legal narrative can justify, but only to the extent that certain 'violent situations' allow, as if these situations were some objective realities experienced in the same way by all affected parties, irrespective of the histories, practices and norms of victimhood that precede and exceed them.

These latter are considered by the *feminist narrative* and attributed to the patriarchal system, wherein being a woman is almost synonymous to being a victim (Hunnicutt, 2009; Radford & Russell, 1992). Most notably, in second-wave feminism, the woman is often thematized as a 'wounded identity' in need of protection and recognition (Brown, 1995), and a 'false dichotomization' – victim vis-à-vis agent – is therefore established and reproduced, crucially depriving women-victims of power, agency and visibility (Schneider, 2000). On the contrary, in the postfeminist narrative of popular feminism, the boundaries between being a victim and an agent are rather porous. Fused with (neo)liberal ideas of choice and autonomy, this narrative speaks of multiple victim subjectivities which can acquire their own distinct voice and get empowered in the realm of popular culture and commercial media platforms (e.g., #metoo t-shirts). This fluidity, however, is not always to the benefit of vulnerable women; perpetrators of gendered violence may well be presented as victims of 'hysteric' and 'vindictive' women (as in the case of Caroline), in what Banet-Weiser (2021) understands as a dialectic of popular feminism with popular misogynism. Hence, Schneider (2000: 396) is right in contending that "neither victimization nor agency should be glorified […] viewed in isolation or perceived as an individual or personal issue", since bearing witness to women as oppressed victims does not necessarily challenge patriarchal structures, while recognizing them as empowered victims may just serve to insidiously mystify gendered power relations.

All the narratives discussed so far are concerned with the conditions under which someone becomes a victim (vulnerability) and what it means to be a victim (victimhood), drawing stable and uncontested associations between such conditions and meanings, like the legal, the socio-psychological, and the early feminist narratives do, or mutable and relativist associations, like popular feminism does. Following Chouliaraki (2021), we argue that it is not either about stability or about mutability; victimhood is, in principle, a mutable/contestable condition which is articulated, in communicative practices, as a stable/de-contested form of vulnerability. The fact that Caroline Crouch, for instance, was killed by her husband did not

stop the struggle over reclaiming her victimhood as imperfect, with claims that she was aggressive, planning to leave her husband, etc. The establishment of temporary closures in the otherwise open-ended meaning of victimhood is not something that can be theoretically predetermined but needs to be empirically analyzed as the potential of concrete moments in the communication of violence, suffering, trauma, and pain – in our case, femicide. It is in the communication of femicide, as our own analysis will demonstrate, that the legal, socio-psychological and feminist arguments are emotionally and morally articulated as claims to victimhood, accommodating an incipient form of reflexive social critique of femicide – in this case, populist critique – at the very moment they compete for recognition and 'authentic and moral legitimacy' (Schwartz, 2021) – not all femicide victims manage to 'feel' real and 'sound' right enough to capture our attention and yield political responses. To understand how this struggle over authentic and morally legitimate victimhood effectively plays out in today's spaces of visibility and publicity, what we discuss in our conclusion as politics of victimhood, we need first to understand the emotional and moral dynamics of today's *platformized communication*.

3 THE FEMICIDE VICTIM IN TODAY'S PLATFORMIZED COMMUNICATION: EMOTIONALIZATION AND MORALIZATION

3.1 Theoretical Framework

Platformization expands on and accentuates the long-lasting process of *mediatization* of everyday life in contemporary societies, where 'the media can no longer be understood as bounded institutions, professionally or physically, apart from the rest of the society. Rather, they are an aspect of everyday life manifested in technologies, human practices, and social meanings in all social domains' (Cui, 2019: 4158; see also Couldry and Hepp, 2017; Kissas, 2019). In the digital age, multiple and differentiated communication practices, logics, and expectations come to converge and be intensely networked, and embedded in our cultures and histories, collapsing the social world into a novel techno-social realm of connectivity which privileges 'popularity, hierarchical ranking, quick growth, large traffic volumes, fast turnovers, and personalized recommendations' (van Dijck, 2013). 'Arrested' in this realm, the lived experience of human suffering and pain is communicatively amplified and turned into a shareworthy and monetizable story of 'high profile individual victims' (Walklate *et al.*, 2019); a platform content that has an emotional thrust and moral grip strong enough to make us freely spend some of our viewing time on it (attention as free labour) and, by extension,

generate platform views and data to-be-sold (attention as profit), what Webster (2014) refers to as 'economy of attention'.

Now claims to victimhood far-exceed the journalistically administered authenticity of the 'human-interest story' (Fingenschou *et al.*, 2023) and proliferate in the shareworthy content that users of digital media platforms, especially social media, create. This is a high-remit user-generated and personalized content that is not valued as much for reflecting common interests and collective values as for its power to capture the 'heat of the moment'. By this we mean, the affective intensity not of centrally orchestrated and staged 'media events' (Dayan and Katz, 1992) but of first-hand personal experiences and personally expressed feelings with which platform users can directly relate and engage (like or dislike, comment, share, report, etc.) (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). Social media content captures, therefore, the *emotionalizing* power of connecting and enacting networked publics as authentic 'communities of sentiment not interest' (Finlayson, 2020: 68).

The fact that sentiments are more effective than social and economic interests in bringing users together does not mean that emotional claims to victimhood do not have a *moralizing power* that may serve to reflect and reinforce such interests and power relations. Social media content may no longer rely on the journalistic commitment to neutral and objective reporting of facts that encourages dependency on official-institutional centers of social, cultural, and political authority, what Ward (2019) examines as the 'bias of objectivity'. It is traversed, however, by an algorithmic commitment to data-based, user-customized/targeted 'prompts, recommendations, reminders and suggestions [that] effectively guide or manipulate [claims to victimhood] with a goal to making [them] productive and thus profitable to the network owner', to paraphrase Faucher (2018: 126). This is an 'algorithmic bias', after all, that needs to be scrutinized both in structural/politico-economic (e.g., platform ownership and commercial imperatives) and individual/sociological terms (e.g., users' preferences and promotional pursuits), as well as, even more crucially, in ethico-political, in the sense that algorithms come to materialize pre-existing class-related, gendered and/or racialized ideologies (ibid, see also Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez, 2021). In so doing, algorithms tend to channel and direct attention to claims to victimhood that are not necessarily produced 'by those who have historically suffered but by those in positions of patriarchal power' (Chouliaraki and Banet-Weiser, 2021: 7). Overall, platformization entails social media users being selectively confronted with certain compelling and trending emotions that morally catalyze and justify connections with 'similar', algorithmically recognizable victims, and, inevitably, disconnections with 'unintelligible' (non)victims (Döveling *et al.*, 2018).

The power of platformized communication to emotionalize and moralize femicides is, as we wish to argue, fundamentally discursive. It rests with discourse as the socially regulated potential of language, and all forms of semiosis, to produce meaning which is integral to the

social practices where digital platforms are used, thus organizing and ordering the meaning of these practices (Djonov and van Leeuwen, 2018). As Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999: 26) have pointed out 'discursive constructions of practices are themselves parts of practices', or, put it that way, social practices are always (but not only) discursive practices. By this token, we now proceed to introducing our framework for analytically interrogating emotionalization and moralization as *discursive practices* in platformized communication.

3.2 Analytical Framework

Emotionalization is the discursive practice that establishes the affective, more than the perceptual, meaning of femicides: the meaning that 'feels' true instead of being factually proven to be true; it reconstructs women killings as an 'authentic event worthy of "our" emotion' (Chouliaraki, 2015: 1363). Emotions in the context of social media discourse transcend the indeterminate and elusive intensity of bodily affect, as Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) stresses, and act, instead, as the 'point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning' (Massumi in Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019: 7). Emotional meanings are, so to speak, caught up into the 'semiotic resources that we co-orchestrate into multimodal meaning potentials on the social media screen displays' (Poulsen and van Leeuwen, 2018: 593), such as the texts and images, along with GIFs and hashtags, that we post on Facebook and Instagram. Therefore, the key to understanding emotionalization as discursive practice is *multimodal analysis*: an analysis of how multiple semiotic modes are combined and coordinated in social media content to articulate emotional claims to victimhood and, in so doing, grant authentic legitimacy to certain femicide victims instead of others (see Kissas, 2022).

If emotionalization is the discursive practice whereby the affective intensity of femicides turns into concrete affective meanings attending to and negotiating the authenticity of femicide victims, moralization is the discursive practice whereby these meanings on-screen are articulated as off-screen ways of morally engaging with femicides in the context of social practice. Affective meanings are also, or 'always-already' in the Althusserian view of practice (Althusser, 1984), ethico-political meanings that are built in social media content as algorithmic biases encouraging homophily. They invite users to come together into communities of like-minded, networked publics 'activated and sustained by feelings of belonging and solidarity' (Papacharissi, 2016: 310) not by and large, but toward similar and recognizable femicide victims. 'Emotions circulate in public discourse', according to Wahl-Jorgensen (2019: 7), 'in patterned ways that have profound social and ideological ramifications', not least because emotional meanings, like all meanings, come about from a social position of power, as Foucault (1980) has famously argued. It is through the struggle for power, Laclau and Mouffe

(1985) complement, that temporary closures are effected, as illusions of fixated meaning, to the otherwise open-ended and radically contingent nature of (femicide) meaning. Social media content materializes these closures, what we introduced earlier on as politics of victimhood, by tactically embedding emotional claims to victimhood into certain systems of moral evaluation, justification, and critique (Chouliaraki and Kissas, 2018). Understanding how this embedding is discursively performed is the object of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): an analysis of how claims to victimhood are morally hierarchized and legitimized within social media content in line with social relations of class, gender and ethnicity outside of it, so as to classify femicides into categories of 'our' victims, worthy of attention, engagement and action, and the 'others', unworthy non-victims.

In what follows, we empirically analyze emotionalization and moralization as part of social practices of platformized communication that involve different individuals and groups being self-organized in and through social media to engage with femicide victims. Specifically, we apply multimodal analysis and CDA to posts-examples from Greek community pages on Facebook (Yes, you are misogynist [Ναι, είσαι μισογύνης], The Purple [Το Μώβ] and Witches of the South) and Instagram (Colorful Creatures [Πολύχρωμα Πλάσματα], Wonderful Women [Υπέροχες Γυναίκες] and Women Like You) that have 'paradigmatic' value[5] for understanding the populist critique of femicide that these practices discursively articulate.

4 POPULIST CRITIQUE IN THE COMMUNICATION OF FEMICIDE

In the social media arena where the communication of femicide unfolds, various actors, often 'digital natives', coalesce, organize, and express through Instagram and Facebook community pages in different communicative moments, namely, *news reporting*, *deliberation*, *confrontation*, and *protesting*. As we explicate in what follows, they all thrive on a culture of 'bottom-up *populist* mobilization' (Aslanidis, 2017).

[5]We borrow the term 'paradigmatic' from Flyvbjerg to refer to a process of data selection that seeks 'to maximize the utility of information from small samples and single cases' (2006: 230). These are samples/cases that can be easily and widely recognized, by scholarship and other interested parties outside academia, as exemplars for the information they provide on the research subject-matter; 'they are selected on the basis of expectations about their information' (ibid) – e.g., to be representative of the general characteristics of the subject-matter, its modes of operation, logics of application or other more specific properties.

The Greek community pages that we have examined largely appropriate some of the generic conventions of mainstream medias' *news reporting* to multimodally articulate their own emotional claims to authentic victimhood:

- *sound/image-bite*s, like the eye-catching red-background poster in an Instagram post by *Colorful Creatures* (2021a) which contains basic information about a femicide in Lakonia and the phrase 'IT'S NOT JEALOUSY THAT KILLS BUT THE PATRIARCHY';
- *melodramatic tone,* as in another post by the same page (2021b) regarding a femicide in Thessaloniki: 'one more added to **the tragic list** of women whose **life thread was brutally cut** by a man […]';
- *plot-twist trope,* as in an Instagram post by Women Like You (2021d), deployed to dissolve doubts over a femicide in Thessaloniki: 'A **turn of events** in the murder of a woman in Thessaloniki. Her estranged husband from Trikala was the murderer, not her mother-in-law that was initially suspected'.

Altogether, these 'digitally mediated [semiotic] resources' (Poulsen and Kvåle, 2018: 703) capitalize on the populist news style of 'crisis and breakdown' which, as a form of emotionalizing discourse, 'relates to a more general distrust of […] the complicated nature of policy solutions' (Moffitt, 2016: 45). The crisis discourse speaks to technocratic governmental politics of gender equality that are too hard to grasp by the average person and not radical enough to fight deeply rooted systemic patriarchal views – women as '**property, accessories, objects**' of their '**father […] partner, husband, lover**' (see Colorful Creatures, 2021a). At the same time, however, this distrust towards political complexity encourages to draw a simplified and uncomplicated picture of patriarchy. Dramatized appeals, like 'how many more [will die]?' (see Colorful Creatures, 2021b) and 'the list [of dead] is growing…' (see post by Women Like You), serve to conceal, as Laclau (1990: 92) would put it, 'the precarious character of any positivity, the impossibility of any ultimate structure'. They close the meaning of femicide down on the moral demand 'to act decisively and immediately' (Moffitt, 2016: 45) upon a problem that cannot be solved from one moment to the next. This does not only create an unfulfillable expectation that would probably pile up more public disappointment and distrust, but it also establishes a populist hierarchy of moral legitimacy of femicide victims based on visible and attention-catching urgency instead of invisible vulnerability.

Beyond reporting femicide news, community pages also put such news to open debate. Here, crisis-reporting gives its place to *ironic deliberation* which serves as an emotionalizing discourse that rejects forms of knowledge regarded dogmatic or simply irrelevant. Typical in this regard are three poster-like posts on Instagram by *Women Like You* which share users/followers' opinions and views from other pages, such as:

> the debate over what is/is not femicide (2021c): 'those of you who consider the term Femicide unsubstantiated or misplaced **just have no idea what it is about** […] I urge the **light-hearted**

> **objectors** to study [that] femicide exists when a Woman is murdered because of her gender' (from a lawyer);
>
> the debate over whether the murder of an old woman suffering from Alzheimer by her husband is a femicide (2021a): 'the incident in Porto Heli should not be analyzed […] independently from the feminist debate on feminization of care and gendered socialization – things that must be part of a class-driven analysis anyway but are **comfortably ignored by comrades** […]' (from a Facebook page);
>
> the debate on the case where a man had repeatedly threatened his estranged wife before killing her (2021b): 'in a self-centred society, everyone cares about their **little "job", "little home", "little life"**. Even if we hear voices, screams, threats from next-door, **we raise the volume of our TV and everything is ok…**' (from another Instagram account).

By textually harnessing the suspicion towards expert knowledge, ideological dispositions, and everyday petit-bourgeois self-interest, these posts render the very populist 'disregard for hierarchy and tradition' (Moffit, 2016: 44) an authentic claim *par excellence* to victimhood. Unlike the crisis discourse, ironic discourse seeks to throw the outmoded moral clash among grand narratives of victimhood into relief – women either as victims of gendered/patriarchal norms or victims of class exploitation – thereby fostering a critical, dialectical consideration of the multiple structural overdetermination of victimhood (class, gender, cultural norms/beliefs, etc.). At the same time, however, as Chouliaraki succinctly puts it (2011: 370-71),

> these systematic references to a vocabulary of justice […] do not, in fact, constitute a resource for the exercise of judgment. What renders judgment marginal to the communication of [femicide] is the fact that […] references to justice are fully embedded in the story-telling conventions of the post-humanitarian genres and, therefore, are always formulated as subordinate to the dominant reference to a 'vocabulary of the self' as the legitimate source of knowledge on the world.

Contrasted to TV volume-raising as an act of silencing the pain of femicide victims, scrolling on our Instagram feed to debate the cause of someone's pain may signal some kind of moral engagement with victims; it is still about 'us', though, how 'we' feel and what 'we' want. Ironic deliberation hierarchizes, therefore, neoliberal self-oriented morality as a response to gendered violence, in a discursive move of 'constitutive distortion' (Laclau, 1996) – as a result of the very constitution/closure of meaning of gendered violence in the ironic discourse – that precludes scrutinizing class, gender and race themselves as 'harms of post-recession neoliberalism' (Chouliaraki, 2021).

Social media debates often exceed deliberation and develop into a head-on confrontation with common mainstream sources of authority and knowledge. Typical in this regard is the Facebook page *Yes, you are misogynist* and a post (2021d) that takes some users' comments under a news article (shared as screenshot) about a femicide in Dafni (Athens) as indictive of

'how **patriarchy has been naturalized** to such an extent that remains invisible […] **women don't even dare to imagine** a world where men would not exert gendered violence'. In another case, Caroline's murder, the page confronts a psychologist, whose only concern was, as a post cynically puts it, that 'a child will grow up without her mother's murderer […] **so turn a blind eye to gendered violence** […]' (2021a), as well as, in a different post, it confronts right-wing/conservative politicians: 'they fear the transition from the particular [the murder of a woman] to the general [femicide] […] **we are incapable as society** of eliminating and dealing with it [a social phenomenon], without understanding it in-depth' (2021b). Here, ironic appeals to our collective failure, as society, to act upon injustice are multimodally translated into an 'imaginary of repressed vindictiveness', what Demertzis calls 'ressentiment' (2006: 119). Ressentiment is tactically and reflectively deployed into the articulation of a populist critique of the establishment, explicitly in terms of the gendered power relations that politicians, experts and the media serve to rationalize and normalize. In its resentful-ironic attack against the patriarchal establishment, however, the confrontational discourse tends to close the contingent (meaning of) antagonism between feminism and misogynism – where 'who' represents 'what' is not fixed – down on an fixated antagonism between women as a *de facto* 'feminist people' and men as the 'misogynist establishment' *par excellence* – '**we** as women and as feminists can see the world through **their** [men's] eyes […]' (Yes, you are misogynist, 2021c). Hence, the confrontational discourse on femicides employs the typical populist dichotomy 'the virtuous people' versus 'the vicious establishment' (Mudde, 2004) to establish a hierarchy of morally homogenous victims that constitutively distorts the social heterogeneity of vulnerability.

Finally, the Greek social media pages that we consider in this paper have often extended a call to action-protesting, be it online, like the protest organized by the Instagram page Wonderful Women – 'for every femicide, the exact same post. We share until the feed of those who don't understand blackens…until the whole society realizes it' (2021) – or offline, like the traditional marches organized or promoted by the Facebook pages *Witches Of The South* and *The Purple*. The emotional force that mobilizes protesting over femicide victims is, in both cases, *anger*. This is obvious in a picture posted by *Witches Of The South* (2021): a protest banner with the imaginative slogan 'We are full of **stORGI**', where storgi [στοργή] is the Greek word for 'affection' while the capitalized ORGI [ΟΡΓΗ] is the Greek word for 'rage'. It is also graphically captured by the **angry emojis** in the *Wonderful Women's* post (2021) and the sequence of provocative passive-voice verbs in a post-poster by the *The Purple* (2021): '[I was] **derided**, **slaughtered**, **punched, shot, put to death**'. Calls to protesting are, therefore, multimodally registered in 'angry populism' (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018). This is an emotionalizing discourse that is not only instrumental to social mobilization and political empowerment (as the history of civil rights movement teaches us, for instance) but may also acts as a moral force of feminist inclusivity and egalitarianism by creating what Laclau and Mouffe (1985) call 'chains of

equivalence'. Angry populism articulates *women* ('I am here […] a shadow among visible and invisible murderers', we read in *The Purple's* poster while seeing the shadow-drawing of a **woman face** at the background), *feminists* ('the **feminist movement** points a finger to the state, the patriarchy and the Balaskas […] we will not remain silent', we read in the post by *Witches Of The South*) and *femininities* (the 'We are full of stORGI' slogan is **gender-neutral**) as 'groups and demands that share common grievances and frustrations' (Katsambekis, 2022: 62), thereby bringing them together into one victimized people. Arguably, Instagram and Facebook activism does justice to the contingent antagonism between feminism and misogynism, instead of drawing a monolithic line between men and women, and also follows popular feminism in reflecting upon victimhood as a status that gives power to women. At the same time, however, by hierarchizing the unity of victimized people over the differences among social groups within it, the activist discourse of angry populism fails to reflect upon victimhood as a status that is unequally granted to women by power, as a result of the social differentials that still condition the dynamic of their claims to belonging to the victimized people.

To sum up, emotional engagement with femicide victims through Greek community pages on Facebook and Instagram gives rise to a spectrum of populist critique that is characterized by moral ambivalence. Dramatic reporting and ironic deliberation are discursively mustered to hold the patriarchal establishment accountable for femicides in ways that, often, are not sufficiently self-reflexive, as to whether what we, as online communities, demand (swift action) and do (scrolling) is indeed to the benefit of victims. Similarly, resentful confrontations and angry protesting are discursively articulated as bottom-up opposition to the misogynist establishment in ways that promote an inclusive and empowering victimhood, often at the expense of attending to the structural overdetermination of gendered violence, or *vice versa*.

5 THE POLITICS OF VICTIMHOOD AND THE UNFULFILLED PROMISE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

Following the debate that was sparked on social media by a series of women killings in Greece in 2021, this article has enquired into the communication of femicide and the redefinition of victimhood within it, from a problem resolved in legal and socio-psychological certainties or collapsed into feminist relativities to a problem of platformized communication, caught up in an emotional and moral struggle for authentic victims, worthy of attention. Our multimodal analysis of the engagement with femicide victims through Greek community pages on Facebook and Instagram has demonstrated how these certainties and relativities are semiotically turned into competing emotional claims to victimhood, made by different social

media actors who speak in the name of, or as potential, femicide victims. It has also shed light, through critically interrogating the discursive articulation of these claims as morally justified (CDA), on the political responses that femicide communication may enable and the power relations that it may sustain and reproduce. This emotional variation, moral ambivalence and, ultimately, political consequentiality of the digital communication of femicide in constituting the meaning(s) of 'being a victim' comprises what we understand as *politics of victimhood* and what we want to further contemplate in our concluding remarks. Especially, we want to reflect on its algorithmic biases, as a set of ideological, institutional commercial, and promotional boundaries in femicide communication, and its potential to raise awareness for those who suffer gendered violence and expose, at the same time, the structural conditions and systemic issues of their vulnerability.

Even though the ordinary digitally native actors, who make the most out of social media to engage with femicide victims, do not have an electorate or sponsors to please, certain boundaries to how far they can go with fostering empowerment and inquiring systemic vulnerability are in place. First, as we have shown in our analysis, the populist debate on femicide mobilizes deliberational irony to reflect on the structural overdetermination of victimhood and draws on the resenting irony of confrontation to discredit misogynist-sexist views. These views, however, often represent ideas with which Facebook and Instagram pages fully agree (deliberation) or disagree (confrontation), and in that sense, they encourage connections among the *ideologically* 'similar and recognizable', while the ideologically 'unintelligible others' are rather disconnected (Döveling *et al.*, 2018). Second, in the case of femicide news, there is an attempt to expose the patriarchal structuring of victimhood through the populism of crisis-reporting which, nevertheless, remains under the grip of a *long-institutionalized* and *commercialized* news genre. Finally, the angry call to action, through original activist posts or snapshots from marches and demonstrations that have played a crucial role in the successful proliferation of feminist protests, urges an empowering and inclusive populism at the very moment that it satisfies platforms' *promotional* needs for maximum attention. Such ideological, institutional, promotional, and commercial boundaries to the communication of femicide are pertinent to the wider media ecosystem of our age that thrives on the 'communication, amplification and monetization of vulnerability on and through social media platforms' (Chouliaraki, 2021: 20); what we have theorized as platformized communication.

6 CONCLUSION: FROM A POLITICS OF VICTIMHOOD TO A POLITICS OF JUSTICE?

Greece's long-awaited #MeToo movement has undoubtedly created the fertile ground for a productive and dynamic debate on femicide; a debate that has been almost inexistent until very recently in the Greek public sphere, or limited, at best, to the 'niche' circles of politicized feminists, human right advocates and activists. It is important, therefore, to recognize and carefully consider in its expansion, the digitally enabled and platformized potential for a social critique of femicide, not only with the aim of empowering authentic and legitimate victims but also with that of inquiring systemic and structural vulnerability in gendered violence. We need to focus on how women killings can be 'instrumentalized', so to speak, to emotionally empower and morally prioritize the economically, socially, and politically most vulnerable to gendered violence, pushing for effective structural changes towards – not just urgent demands for here-and-now – social justice. As we see it, this potential for extending the politics of victimhood to a politics of justice is not as much a matter of overcoming as of reevaluating and reappropriating, or 'reprogramming' as Castells (2009) would say, the ideological, institutional, commercial, and promotional algorithmic biases in the communication of femicide.

First of all, the communication of femicide, and gendered violence at large, does not need to be non-ideological to be justice oriented. It is not ideology *per se* that prevents social media actors from engaging with the most vulnerable but certain dogmatic and polarizing ideas. Ideological critique, however, is not all about this kind of ideas; it may well be about hybrid, flexible and adaptable formations of grand and polemic as well as mundane and reconciliatory ideas that inform and guide, without sweeping off, political practice (Freeden, 2000; Kissas 2017), like the ideas of recognition (of difference) and redistribution (of resources) that Fraser and Honneth (2003) locate at the heart of a politics of justice.

Second, the communication of femicide cannot entirely escape commercial imperatives and promotional pursuits, on the one hand, because in a context of pervasive social insecurity, vulnerability has become a rich source of popular and viral digital media content that is profitable to the platform owners. On the other, because 'digital recognition is today a key site of struggle against corporate and state agendas' (Chouliaraki, 2021: 21), which means that a justice-oriented discourse, before interrogating systemic vulnerability, needs to make it visible and, to do so, cannot but find its way within the emotional and moral attention economy of social media platforms. This does not have to be either eradicating or letting platforms' promotional and commercial forces uncontrolled and unaccountable; in-between these extremes, there could be a 'responsible media capitalism' (Curran, 2011) that would regulate these forces in line with enhanced civic standards.

Last but not least, along with digital recognition goes digital interconnection as key to taking public action, especially for social media movements that enjoy no previous collective or connective bonds and also lack organizational structure (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). As we have seen, the communication of femicide invites us to interconnect through sharing feelings of vulnerability as a personal(ized) matter more often than through sharing encounters with vulnerability as a social condition of structural openness to gendered violence. For this to change, digital media content does not have to lose its personalized character and emotional thrust but rather invest on emotions that call into being an inclusive political subject, wherein vulnerability is experienced as a harm that is equivalently shared by different classes, genders, and races, as a result of being (perceived to be) inflicted upon them by the same system of power, what Laclau (2005) understands as the populist logic of a democratic and egalitarian politics. Justice-oriented social critique and action presupposes, therefore, a connective and inclusive discourse of shared injustice, like the one traced in angry populism, that is well-informed – here is where the ideology of justice steps in – to target the 'right' enemy, like resenting populism does (missing out on inclusivity, though). Beyond patriarchy without economic exploitation or class inequality without gendered asymmetries, the ultimate enemy must be neoliberal capitalism and the multiple, insidious, and pernicious, obstacles it raises in the long way towards social justice for known and less known or unknown victims.

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Communication and Difference	Mediation and Resistance
Globalisation and Comparative Studies	Media and Identity
Innovation, Governance and Policy	Media and New Media Literacies
Democracy, Politics and Journalism Ethics	The Cultural Economy

Contributions are welcomed from academics and PhD students. In the Autumn Term we also invite selected Master's students from the preceding year to submit their dissertations which will be hosted in a separate part of this site as 'dissertations' rather than as Working Papers. Contributors should bear in mind when they are preparing their paper that it will be read online.

Papers should conform to the following format:

6,000-10,000 words, 150-200 word abstract, papers should be prepared as a Word file, Graphs, pictures and tables should be included as appropriate in the same file as the paper, The paper should be sent by email to Bart Cammaerts (b.cammaerts@lse.ac.uk), the editor of the Media@LSE Working Paper Series.

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