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Combatting sexism – with a focus on the workplace


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Combatting sexism – with a focus on the workplace

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Abstract

The paper highlights that sexism in Cyprus remains widespread but underreported, with victims often unaware of complaint mechanisms. Despite progress through laws criminalising sexism and workplace harassment, implementation and awareness remain weak. Recent government declarations, equality strategies, and campaigns show growing political commitment to tackle the problem. At the same time, ECHR rulings exposed systemic sexism in state institutions, such as the Judicial System and the institution of the Attorney General of the Republic. Learning from Germany, Cyprus could strengthen multi-stakeholder cooperation, community initiatives, and workplace training. Recommendations emphasize the need for tougher sanctions, mandatory education, and EU-level monitoring to ensure effective prevention and response.

1. Cyprus context

1.1 Introduction

Sexism persists in Cypriot society, and its negative consequences mainly affect women. There is systematic tolerance, silence, and devaluation, and women experience it daily, either in the form of an "innocent" innuendo, or "excessive" intimacy and "jokes" about appearance, behaviour, and personality. Both society and the state fail to recognise the seriousness and danger of such behaviours, even though they affect around half the population.

1.2 Policy Debate

A limited number of complaints related to sexism were submitted to the competent authorities, and none of them cited sexism as a form of discrimination. The Labour Department of the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance reported that it had received only two complaints, and only one has been investigated¹.

In 2020, the Commissioner of Administration and Human Rights called the Public Administration and Personnel Department to issue a Circular prohibiting the posting

¹ Data received from Alexia Hatzikoumi, Labour Department of Ministry of Labour and Social Insurances.

of material in public service areas that promotes sexism and gender discrimination. The Commissioner made this recommendation after [receiving complaints about posters in public servants' offices](#), with pictures, cartoons, or calendars of naked women or captions with derogatory comments about women.

In 2016, the Commissioner for Administration and Human Rights investigated a complaint about sexism under the Equal Treatment of Men and Women in Employment and Vocational Training Act and issued a relevant report (A.K.I. 76/2016). According to the [report](#), the complainant was treated with discrimination on the ground of sex (harassment) by her superior. The terms “sexism”, “discrimination due to sex”, and “sexual harassment” were analysed in the report, as well as the relevant provisions of the Equal Treatment of Men and Women in Employment and Vocational Education Act. Following another complaint submitted in 2021 regarding sexist behaviour, the Commissioner issued a [report on harassment and sexual harassment at the workplace](#).

Furthermore, according to the key findings of a [survey](#) conducted by the University of Nicosia (2021), the vast majority of employees and all employers acknowledge the existence of gender inequalities in the labour market in Cyprus. 86% of citizens were convinced that incidents of discrimination occur more often to women. 4 out of 10 female employees, mainly in the private sector, have been confronted with gender-related problems. 2 in 10 employees reported they have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace, with the vast majority (78%) saying that they have not reported the incident. A substantial proportion of respondents declare that they are not aware of the institutions that exist in Cyprus, where they could file a complaint in case of harassment or sexual harassment².

1.3 Latest developments

In February 2024, the President of the Republic, Ministers, and Commissioners signed a declaration, co-signed by the Commissioner for Gender Equality, to integrate the gender dimension into public policies and to declare zero tolerance to sexism and harassment. The Declaration was a symbolic but institutional commitment at the highest level of government, and it encourages the wider public and private sector to initiate similar actions³.

The National Strategy for Gender Equality 2024-2026 includes, under the “Gender and Justice” thematic area, a campaign on the Law on Combating Sexism and Online Sexism and Related Issues⁴. On 1st of September 2025, the campaign was launched

² Research Insights Market Research (IMR)/Nicosia University. Taking place: 27-28 January 2021. Coverage: Pancyprrian, urban and rural areas. Sample characteristics. Sample size: 500 persons. Sample selection: random stratified sampling. Data collection: a combination of online and telephone interviews using a structured questionnaire.

³ Κυπριακή Δημοκρατία – Γραφείο Τύπου. (2025). [Δύο Χρόνια Διακυβέρνησης](#).

⁴ Commissioner for Gender Equality of the Republic of Cyprus. (2024). [Εθνική Στρατηγική για την Ισότητα των Φύλων 2024–2026](#)

by the Ministry of Justice and Public Order, in collaboration with the Office of the Commissioner for Gender Equality and the National Coordination Body for the Prevention and Combating of Violence Against Women⁵. The campaign addresses sexism in general and was communicated through social media and radio.

The Cyprus Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCCI), in collaboration with the Office of the Gender Equality Commissioner, is implementing a pilot project aimed at promoting equality in the workplace. The two stakeholders issued an Action Plan with recommendations to companies, regardless of size, to promote gender equality in all different corporate governance levels⁶.

The latest judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) of 3 July⁷ and 27 February 2025⁸, where the Court condemned Cyprus in two rape cases, are dominating the public debate both in the press and with marches and protests by women's organisations and NGOs. In its judgments, ECHR notes that sexist stereotypes are maintained in public proceedings that negatively affect the position of victims and limits the substantial protection that should be offered. ECHR repeated confirmation of the serious and structural pathogenies of a sexist, inadequate, and victim-hostile justice system. In the judgment, serious failures were highlighted, such as victimization, persisting gender stereotypes, and victim-blaming, and gender perceptions influencing the judicial administration.

2. Good practice examples

Cyprus has enacted the [Combating Sexism and Online Sexism and Related Matters Law of 2020](#). The Law criminalises all forms of sexist behaviour in public or private, offline and online. At the same time, the Council of Ministers appointed the Gender Equality Commissioner responsible for monitoring and promoting the implementation of this legislation. This legislation addresses sexism in general, rather than specifically in the workplace. However, complaints of sexism at work are investigated based on the [Law on Equal Treatment of Men and Women in Employment and Vocational Training of 2002 \(Law 205\(I\)/2002\)](#) and the [Law on the Prevention and Treatment of Violence and Harassment in the Workplace \(Law No.42\(I\)/2025\)](#), which entered into force to harmonize the legal framework with Convention No.190 of the International Labour Organisation⁹. In addition, Article 99A of the [Criminal Code Act Cap. 154](#), which has been in effect since 2015, criminalises any conduct intended to insult,

⁵ [Speech in Greek addressed at the press conference for the launch of the campaign](#).

⁶ Πιλοτικό Πλάνο Δράσης για την Ισότητα στον Ιδιωτικό Τομέα – ΚΕΒΕ & Επιτροπος Ισότητας (2024), Πλάνο Δράσης για Ισότητα Φύλων στον Ιδιωτικό Τομέα. <https://www.gov.cy/epitropoi/to-grafeio-epitropou-isotitas-ton-fylon-kai-to-keve-katartizoun-plano-drasis-gia-tin-isotita-ton-fylon/>

⁷ [ECHR Judgment on application no. 28150/22, N.T v. Cyprus](#)

⁸ [ECHR Judgment on application 40733/22](#)

⁹ [Ο περί της Σύμβασης της Διεθνούς Οργάνωσης Εργασίας για τη Βία και την Παρενόχληση στον Χώρο Εργασίας \(Σύμβαση Αρ. 190\) \(Κυρωτικός\) Νόμος του 2024 \(Ν. 17\(III\)/2024\)](#).

threaten violence, or express hatred verbally or in writing to a person or member of a group of persons identified based on sex.

3. Transferability aspects

There are several lessons to be learned from Germany's practices. The establishment of the Alliance and the joint declaration sends a clear message of zero tolerance to sexism and stereotypes. Bringing together stakeholders from all levels of society, including the political hierarchy, could only be impactful.

The practical handbook and the print-on-demand exhibition are smart ideas and resources that can be easily transferred to different contexts (education, media, workplace, etc.).

Based on Germany's practice, the Commissioner for Gender Equality could invite, at the beginning, the trade unions and employers' organisations, and later, the political parties to endorse a declaration of zero tolerance on sexism and harassment. Building on a sequence of actions and following the political declaration and the campaign on sexism mentioned above, such an initiative could be the next step to further involve other actors.

Community-based activities usually yield better results, so collaboration with municipalities and their involvement in this initiative is vital. Such initiatives could also be transferred to the Cyprus context and involve the local authorities by organizing 'days of action against sexism'. Local authorities in Cyprus could have a greater impact in their communities by raising awareness, organising workshops or days of information, and involving even more stakeholders from the private sector.

Based on the description of the practices, a study on sexism in everyday life should be repeated to assess the real impact of the measures taken over the last few years.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

4.1 Recommendations at the National Level

At the national level, strengthening legal protection with clear and strong sanctions for cases of sexism at work should be ensured. Additionally, mandatory trainings for employers and employees on sexism and gender discrimination, annual seminars to all levels of hierarchy (employees and managers), and "Bystander Intervention" workshops¹⁰ should be promoted. At the same time, the Police, Legal Service, and the justice administration should jointly ensure appropriate training courses to be able to identify when a behaviour or an act constitutes sexism.

¹⁰ Training employees on how to safely intervene when they witness sexist behaviour.

As per Germany's practice, enhancing the involvement of the local authorities. In Cyprus, the Office of the Commissioner for Gender Equality and the Union of Municipalities have established an important collaboration, and every year they jointly draft an action plan. Actions regarding combating sexism in everyday life could be included in the next action plan for the local authorities.

4.2 Recommendations at European level

At European level, a European observatory to monitor and evaluate gender equality policies at work by Member States should be established. Good practices on effective policies and measures in different Member States should be shared, and adequate funding for awareness-raising and training activities in the workplace on gender equality, including the prevention and combating of sexism, should be ensured.

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