

After Cologne: Sexism is not an imported product

Saturday 16 January 2016, by [STOCKLE Silke](#), [WEGSCHEIDER Marion](#) (Date first published: 8 January 2016).

Dozens of women were sexually harassed on New Year's Eve in Germany. But rather than connecting the events to everyday sexist violence in Germany, the political and media establishments have focused on the nationalities of the alleged perpetrators argue Silke Stöckle and Marion Wegscheider.

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The NYE festivities in Cologne, Hamburg and other cities witnessed a high number of sexual attacks on women, and in at least one case, a rape. It is disturbing that this could happen, and outrageous that the authorities in the first instance failed to take victims' reports seriously.

Sexual violence against women in Germany is in general a large and indeed a long-existing problem: women are commonly and frequently sexually harassed at large festivals, at the Oktoberfest in Munich or during the Carnival in Cologne and other cities. According to a new study commissioned by the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, one in seven women in Germany experiences sexual violence. One in four women – irrespective of education level or socio-economic status – is exposed to domestic violence. The perpetrators are almost always men, among whom no significant distinction according to religion, background, educational level or social status exists.

In other words, every day there are more than enough reasons for a society-wide outcry over sexism and sexualised violence in Germany. Both phenomena are closely connected to the dominant image of women. Accordingly, sexual assaults on women are all too often not taken seriously, and are at first marginalised – as in Cologne, where victims have had the pleasure of being schooled by local politicians about “rules of behaviour for mass gatherings”, as though the victims, in the face of their determined assaulters, had the possibility to negotiate their way out of harm.

Women are continually portrayed as sexual objects in films, advertising and mass media. But more than this, women's oppression is structurally anchored in our society, evidenced by differences in pay, employment opportunities or dominant role models. There is no equality here, despite frequent public proclamations to the contrary.

Politicians and media stoke anti-Muslim racism

Rather than connecting the events in Cologne and Hamburg to the everyday sexist violence faced by women in Germany, politicians and the media establishment have, from the moment the events

occurred, focused above all on the background of the alleged perpetrators, and on questions of public security. Where sexual molestation is acknowledged as a structural manifestation at all, it is only ever in relation to the “culture” in the supposed countries of origin of the perpetrators. In this way, the debate about the attacks has been instrumentalised from the get-go and, in line with a classic racist line of argument, Muslims or refugees have been stereotyped en masse.

Mainstream media and politicians are in any case stoking pre-existing anti-Muslim racism and further strengthening the smear campaign against refugees: the Minister President of North Rhine-Westphalia, Hannelore Kraft, has stated that criminal, foreign offenders must be deported. And on the broadcasting network Sat1’s breakfast show, we hear the demand to “defend our values, way of life and beliefs” against “Muslim men”. Meanwhile, the relative silence about the vastly numerous male bystanders in the crowd speaks volumes, as does that as well as over a hundred police officers present at the scene who did nothing to intervene in order to protect the women victims, despite the fact that there was even an undercover policewoman among them, is speaking volumes.

A field day for the right

The feminist Alice Schwarzer, who has long sympathised with the conservative milieu and has even expressed “understanding” for the core ideas of the racist PEGIDA movement, is singing the same tune when she speaks of a misguided tolerance towards Muslim men, connecting the issue to terror and demanding compulsory integration for migrants.

For the right, the public debate is ripe for the pickings: the argumentative groundwork has already been laid. Neo-Nazis, ProNRW and the AfD have unanimously demanded that Germany stop all refugee intake in order to protect “our women”. On social networks, street actions including those aimed at inflicting bodily harm against “foreign” men have been advertised.

And yet, women must protect themselves from exactly these parties and groups, who for their part propagate or explicitly demand deeply misogynist social roles and structures for women. The AfD, increasingly a collecting ground for Nazis, fights to defend the heterosexual family as the only norm, rejects same-sex marriage, and positions women in the classic motherhood role. Additionally, the group wants to see further restrictions on paragraph 218 (making access to pregnancy terminations even harder), organises campaigns against feminism and minimum quotas of women in public life – yet in the same hypocritical breath, claims that equality has already been reached. Even the more moderate conservative party, the CSU, which has this week postulated that “Whoever cannot accept respect for women [as a social norm], cannot have a place here in Germany among our society”, has wrapped itself in lies – see for example the way the CSU voted on the issue of rape in marriage in the not-too-distant past.

Fight against racism and sexism

The fact that the recent attacks occurred specifically in Cologne makes instantly clear the advanced polarisation of German society: the cathedral city is widely regarded as a liberal metropole. Yet just one year ago, that city witnessed a march of 4,000 HOGESA supporters.

Not least for this reason: the sexual attacks of NYE in Cologne, Hamburg and other cities must be taken seriously and the perpetrators punished. We must all – as was done on 5 January before the Cologne cathedral – collectively take to the streets against sexism and racism. Furthermore, we should demand of the media and the political parties that they take action against the ever-stronger

right-wing groups, instead of supporting them with untenable arguments. The next central possibility to take to the streets against the anti-feminist AfD will be the Frauenkampftag on 6 March in Berlin.

As far as the broader German left goes, there must be absolute clarity that women's oppression in Germany is structurally determined and that in the struggle for women's rights, we can in no way allow ourselves to be divided by racism – we must confront both sexism and racism with equal determination.

Silke Stöckle and Marion Wegscheider

Comments

Raitis Iljenkovs January 10, 2016 at 12:48 pm

If the sexism/misogyny is somehow structurally inherent in German society and by no means related with influx of Muslim refugees and immigrants, then why attacks on such a scale committed by men from Muslim countries or any other for that matter have never happened before? Your argument would hold water only if this type of violence would be statistically regular but you know that it is not the case. Why all of a sudden on a New Year's Eve of 2015/2016 this sexism and sexual violence was so blatant if the sufficient and necessary cause, as you state, is the latent age-old structural sexism in German society and there are no other conditions (like cultural background of attackers) at work? I assume that Germany has a better ratings considering the women's rights compared to, let's say, Russia where sexism, misogyny and violence towards women are more widespread but somehow exactly in Germany, in one of the strongest liberal democracies in the world, women have faced massive sexual attacks in a city centre. Why exactly this year after Germany accepted around million of asylum seekers from Islam world women there are facing sexual violence in such numbers? And what about the fact that victims and police are admitting that perpetrators were men predominantly from Muslim countries and had asylum seekers papers with them? It looks like your religious zeal for left ideology has made you immune to facts and you are trying to substitute reality with Orwellian constructions where $2 + 2 = 5$

Everyday Voices January 10, 2016 at 5:13 pm

You are absolutely right, sexism, even in Europe (and America), in the most bucolic countryside and most beautiful ancient cities already exist and is not imported. However, to ignore or deny the fact that some men from Islamic countries view western women, especially white women as fair game for assault because we are not Muslim and we engage in sex prior to marriage anyways, is also unfair. Just because other non-Muslim/White men harass and assault women, it doesn't make what the migrants may or may not have done any less ugly. I understand the authorities in Germany want to maintain calm and not inflame an already volatile situation during a time of huge change in their country, so they've dialed back their rhetoric for the time being. They want to handle it their way and I respect that, I wish authorities in US show this type of restraint. But for apologists to come forward and defend the attackers, by way of victim-blaming (telling women to keep 'more than an arms-length from migrants' is victim blaming) regardless of who they are is unconscionable. And to tell women to dress modestly around areas with a high concentrations of middle-eastern migrants so to not cause 'a misunderstanding' – ummm, misunderstanding about what exactly? That we are

'available' because we are dressed in tank tops and shorts or other revealing outfits? Are people suggesting western women go put on hijab or something similar so there's no 'misunderstanding'? This is where I find the problem with this whole debate.

RayB January 12, 2016 at 5:03 am

In answer to the previous posts when was the last time the ethnicity and origin of sexual abusers and those who perpetrate violence against women in Germany mentioned by the media? As in the UK, the vast majority of violence against women in Germany is committed by white indigenous males, sometimes in groups, yet their ethnicity and origin is never an issue or mentioned by the media.

I also disagree with victim blaming and the argument that women are in any way culpable or should alter their behaviour to accommodate sexism is completely wrong but so is playing into the hands of those stoking up a racist backlash against refugees because some of them have committed a crime.

The struggle against women's oppression can't be won unless we challenge the sexist behaviour that cuts across all ethnicities and cultures rather than just highlighting one group. There are many refugees who do not engage in such behaviour and the danger is that by generalising not only is the everyday sexism that is still endemic in Germany and the UK underplayed or ignored but the focus is diverted away from the social structures that allow it to continue.

PW January 13, 2016 at 12:07 am

Sexism isn't imported but this sure as hell is.

<http://speisa.com/modules/articles/index.php/item.2374/german-police-it-s-an-arab-rape-game-called-taharrush-and-now-it-has-come-to-europe.html>

Ryan January 13, 2016 at 4:30 pm

The whole point about this, which you seem to have missed or be determined to miss to prove your specious point, is that this is NOT "everyday sexist violence". As long as people continue to be in denial about this, the problem will only get worse.

RayB January 14, 2016 at 1:20 am

Ryan you appear to assume that the type of crimes that were committed against women in Cologne don't happen everyday in Germany. It is unclear whether you are claiming that before the refugees arrived, German men (either alone or in gangs) never groped, abused or raped women or that these crimes have no connection or are irrelevant to the issue of violence against women in Germany. The under-reporting and failure to take these reports seriously by the German police and local authorities is not unique to this event and is part of a wider disdain and trivialisation of women's safety across the West.

In what way is it specious to point out the endemic and institutionalised sexism in Germany that encourages men to objectify women, or to highlight the hypocrisy of the media who rarely report the ethnicity and origin of those who perpetrate these crimes unless they are classified as non-white? In what way are the thousands of reports made by women about sexual violence and the even greater number of crimes that go unreported every year that do not involve men of North African origin invoking a straw man or besides the point? Violence and abuse within the family perpetuated by someone a woman knows or is related to, usually a male, is far more common than random acts of violence outside the family by complete strangers. The media had the perfect opportunity to make

this connection and highlight this risk yet this has been obscured behind the sensationalist headlines of the media who trade in racist stereotypes. German racists and Nazi's (who fetishize the oppression of women) have already used this issue to carry out racist attacks. Any activist who wants to fight women's oppression would find the possibility of these incidents being used to promote racism deeply worrying especially as there has been a rise in attacks against Muslim women across Europe.

The long term solution to sexism and violence against women is to get rid of capitalism and its institutions that legitimise and entrench this behaviour. There is no contradiction in socialists arguing that sexism and racism are aspects of a capitalist system that seeks to divide and weaken any opposition to its continuing exploitation of both male and female workers. In the short term, targeting those who actually commit these crimes regardless of their ethnicity or origin is far more effective in ensuring the safety of women than making racist generalisations about a particular ethnic or cultural group. Sunny Hundal's argument on Newsnight and in The Independent that to tackle violence against women all refugees should undergo some form of compulsory integration training not only feeds the racist stereotypes he claims to deplore but is deeply patronising and obscures the ongoing objectification and violence women endure everyday in the West.

I look forward to a thorough and comprehensive socialist analysis of these incidents in relation to the wider issue of women's oppression in the West because this will undermine racist stereotypes about refugees and offer a strategy for fighting both women's oppression and racism.

P.S.

* Rs21. January 8, 2016:

<http://rs21.org.uk/2016/01/08/sexism-is-not-an-imported-product/>

Originally published in German by marx21:

<http://marx21.de/silvesterattacken-sexismus-ist-keine-importware/>

* Translated into English by Kate Davison.