

Who Is to Blame for the Cologne Sex Attacks? - Racism and discrimination, sexual assault between the lines

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According to many European publications, all refugees and migrants should be held collectively responsible.

Who is to blame for a sexual assault? The answer would seem to be obvious: It's the perpetrator. But the public debate over the recent sex attacks in Germany suggests that when the criminal is a refugee or a migrant, the blame shifts to any number of other factors: race, culture, religion, and even politics. The attacks in question took place on New Year's Eve in Cologne and elsewhere. As revelers were heading home through the train station, women found themselves surrounded by men described as having a North African or Middle Eastern appearance. Several hundred women were groped and robbed; two were raped. For several days, neither the police nor the newspapers made any reference to the attacks, fueling criticism of a cover-up. Only when the victims came forward and protests were staged did media attention begin to focus on the assaults. A woman identified as "Muriel" tearfully told the BBC: "We were fondled. I was touched between my legs." Another woman, identified as "Busra," said: "They felt like they were in power and that they could do anything with the women out in the street partying."

Even as the attacks were being investigated, however, blame was immediately put on Chancellor Angela Merkel's decision to welcome 1 million refugees and migrants into Germany, with still more to come. In mid-January, the German weekly magazine *Focus* featured on its cover a naked white woman whose body was dirtied by muddy handprints, meant to signify, I suppose, the defiling touch of brown and black men. The caption read: "Women complain of sex attacks by migrants: Are we tolerant or are we blind?" The Munich-based newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* published an interview with a psychologist on the "mentality" of Arab men, illustrating it with a picture of a black hand reaching between a pair of white legs. The Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* put a 1910 painting called *The Slave Market* on its cover, along with an article asking whether culture played a role in the Cologne sex attacks. The answer was conveniently provided by the painting itself, which depicted Arab men disrobing white women, presumably in preparation for selling them as sex slaves. And a February cover of the Polish magazine *W Sieci* depicted a white woman whose blonde hair and European-flag dress were being pulled by brown and black hands. The accompanying article was titled "The Islamic Rape of Europe."

These sensationalistic stories quickly shifted the debate from sexual attacks on women to German and European tolerance toward foreigners; that is to say, from actual crimes for which the perpetrators are individually accountable to potential crimes for which migrants and refugees should be held collectively responsible. That shift was evident even in more substantive articles. In February, for example, the Algerian novelist Kamel Daoud wrote an opinion piece for *The New York Times* that critiqued sexual mores in the Arab world and argued that "people in the West are

discovering, with anxiety and fear, that sex in the Muslim world is sick, and that the disease is spreading to their own lands.” In his view, what happened in Cologne has its roots in an Arab sexual culture that is poisoned by religion. Formerly an Islamist, Daoud is now a devout secularist—an intellectual journey that has taken him from believing that Islam is the only solution to believing that Islam is the only problem. Any serious discussion of sexual culture in the Arab world, however, cannot simply begin and end with Islam.

Like Daoud, I was born and raised in North Africa. I’ve been the victim of sexual assault several times: When I was barely 13 years old, I was molested on a crowded bus; when I was 17, I was groped on the street in broad daylight on my way back from school; and when I was 22, a coworker grabbed my wrist and told me to sit on his lap. The first two attacks were by Muslims; the third was by an atheist. Were the first two motivated by Islam and the third by atheism? Rather, it seems to me, power was at the core of all three. Morocco is undeniably a patriarchal society, where women’s rights lag behind. But to contend that sex in the Muslim world is “sick” and that “the disease” is spreading is to suggest that rape and sexual assaults were unknown in Europe prior to the arrival of migrants and refugees. (In fact, a 2014 survey found that 35 percent of German women have experienced some form of sexual violence.)

This rhetoric about sex-crazed migrants and refugees is nothing new; it’s been used for many years by neofascists in Europe, and it can have violent consequences. Already there have been reports of mobs attacking migrants in “revenge” for the Cologne assaults. Nor is this rhetoric unique to Europe. In the speech announcing his run for the presidency last June, Donald Trump said that Mexican immigrants are “bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.” When confronted about his comments by CNN’s Don Lemon, Trump insisted he was right, adding: “Well, somebody’s doing the raping, Don! Who’s doing the raping? Who’s doing the raping?” Many men, and of all backgrounds, as it turns out: One out of every five women in the United States has been sexually assaulted?

I know well the emotional and physical toll that a sexual attack creates. And I happen to be an immigrant, which means I’m also acquainted with the pain of being seen as a label, not as a person. So I have watched this controversy unfold with a mix of horror at the violence and weariness at the racism. I want to see the perpetrators of the attacks in Cologne—as of this writing, three Germans, two Syrians, one Iraqi, 25 Algerians, 21 Moroccans, and three Tunisians stand accused—be put on trial for what they have done. Sex crimes are not, nor can they ever be, justified by race, religion, or culture. Sex crimes are exactly that: crimes. They ought to be swiftly investigated and severely punished, no matter the Perpetrators.

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P.S.

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