

Sexism - Cologne attacks: Again women are told how not to behave, yet men aren't told how not to rape

Monday 18 January 2016, by [SMITH Lydia](#) (Date first published: 6 January 2016).

Keeping an “arm’s length” from strangers is just one of the suggestions made by Cologne’s mayor to avoid sexual assault, after dozens of women were targeted in the city on New Year’s Eve. Following a crisis meeting after an unprecedented number of women were groped, harassed and assaulted during celebrations, Mayor Henriette Reker issued a “code of conduct” for women, which also includes avoiding straying from your group, even when in a “party mood”.

This isn’t the first time women have been advised to adhere to a code of conduct in response to the abhorrent behaviour of men. Too often, women are reminded to dress more conservatively, avoid drinking to excess and to stop walking alone to protect themselves from sexual assault, yet men, who make up the majority of perpetrators, are issued no advice on how to avoid raping women. It is flawed logic, to say the least.

Perhaps most worryingly, though, this kind of ludicrous advice is often dished out by governments and law enforcement – the very people who are supposed to be protecting us from sexual crime, while ensuring those responsible are brought to justice. In November, women were warned by police to “remain vigilant” after a string of attacks in south London [1].

In 2014, anti-rape posters issued by the NHS warned women that one in three rapes take place when the victim has been drinking, before it was scrapped post-backlash. No posters have been issued by the NHS about damaging gender role expectations, the acceptance of violence and pejorative attitudes towards women that fuel assault.

Many people might assume such advice as common sense. But avoiding walking home alone, whether heading home from work or going to the shops to pick up milk, is impossible for most. In January, it gets dark at 4pm. Staying inside after dark means sleeping at work, or being house-bound for most of the day. And staying an arm’s length from someone is unlikely to dissuade a sexual predator from an attack.

It would be preposterous to apply the same kind of logic to other crimes – avoid carrying possessions outside to escape pick-pocketing, for instance. Nobody is going to stay an arm’s length from other people when out and about while armed with baseball bats and rape alarms, so why dish out such ludicrous advice? It services only to minimise the behaviour of sexual predators, while suggesting women who are sexually assaulted bear more responsibility for the crime inflicted on them than the perpetrators.

Blaming women for being raped places restrictions on their freedoms that simply don’t apply to men. If you’re a woman, you must avoid drinking, short skirts and walking home at night, unless you welcome scrutiny and blame if you become a victim of crime. Men don’t carry this burden.

It also suggests women who fail to adhere to the rules, by God forbid, venturing outside the house without the security of a group, are to blame if they are raped. Victim-blaming has a knock-on effect on the likelihood of a survivor reporting the crime, and subsequently, diminishes the probability of a perpetrator being caught and punished. It is also the worst signal for survivors of rape, reinforcing feelings of shame and dissuading them from seeking help from specialist services.

Moreover, it is nonsense to suggest that adhering to the advice given out will lessen a woman's chances of being assaulted. According to Rape Crisis, around 90% of rapes are carried out by people known to the victim – which derails any suggestion that women provoke an unplanned attack by wearing a short skirt or drinking alcohol.

Yet despite this, most of us believe the opposite. A 2015 survey by the Office for National Statistics found over a quarter of the British public believe that drunk victims of rape or sexual assault are at least partially responsible for the crime inflicted on them [2].

Reker's advice is no doubt well-intentioned – a mass attack on women in Cologne requires a response to ensure both victims are supported and a repeat is avoided during carnival season next month – but a code of conduct is not an adequate preventative measure. By focusing on the actions of women, we run the risk of making the true perpetrators of abuse invisible.

Lydia Smith

P.S.

* International Business Times. January 6, 2016 14:15 GMT:

<http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/cologne-attacks-again-women-are-told-how-not-behave-yet-men-arent-told-how-not-rape-1536355>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3299166/Serial-sex-attacker-Clapham-strikes-NINTH-victim-assaulted.html>

[2] <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/crime-stats/crime-statistics/focus-on-violent-crime-and-sexual-of-fences--2013-14/index.html>