

A reply to Anne Jenichen on the link between immigration and sexual violence

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In a recent [EUROPP](#) article, Anne Jenichen argued that establishing tougher migration policies in response to the cases of sexual violence that took place in German cities on New Year's Eve is unlikely to be successful. In a reply to the article, [Daniel Falkiner](#) argues that while restricting immigration will not solve the issue of sexual abuse in Germany, the possibility for high levels of immigration to exacerbate the problem should not be ignored.



Anne Jenichen [recently argued](#) that in the aftermath of the sexual assaults that took place on New Year's Eve in Cologne and other European cities, the public debate has unfortunately come to focus on German refugee policy rather than on the incidents themselves and the women who were affected by them.

Jenichen suggests that this outcome is not only morally odious, but also likely to lead to spurious policy, such as the tightening of migration and asylum policies. Restricting immigration won't solve the problem of sexual assault, she writes, because sexual harassment and sexual violence are global issues with a stronger incidence in western Europe than in countries characterised by a so-called 'Arab culture'.

Jenichen's article is undoubtedly written with the best of intentions and raises many good points. Nevertheless, it suffers from a number of serious problems, which are characteristic of the general response of policymakers to the incidents that occurred in Cologne and elsewhere on New Year's Eve.

Consider, first, the article's claim that "prevalence estimates of non-partner sexual violence by the World Health Organization ... suggest higher numbers in western Europe than in North Africa and the Middle East." This is simply not true. Although [the WHO report](#) does state that the world's highest prevalence of non-partner sexual violence is reported in high-income countries (including those in western Europe), it explicitly excludes prevalence estimates for non-partner sexual violence in North Africa and the Middle East against which this rate can be compared, due to a lack of data for countries in this region.

Moreover, even if the WHO report did include evidence to support Jenichen's claim, the report notes that "sexual violence is stigmatised in all settings, and even when studies take great care to address the sensitivity of the topic, it is likely that the levels of disclosure will be influenced by respondents' perceptions about the level of stigma associated with disclosure, and the perceived repercussions of others knowing about this violence."

Such perceptions are likely to be especially influential in honour-based societies in which a woman's sexual integrity is deemed central to determining her social standing, her marriage prospects and even her right to life. It could be observed that North Africa and the Middle East are home to many such societies. Related to this point is the fact that, in the "serious and honest debate on both integration and violence against women" that Jenichen calls for, it would constitute intellectual malfeasance to brush aside the issue of culture as irrelevant.

As the United Nations' 2005 [Arab Human Development Report](#) observes, "culture plays a pervasive role in composing the social context of women's position in the Arab world, and religious interpretations provide a field for conflict over the position of women in public perception and general behavioural patterns. Religious heritage, above all, is a key determinant of the cultural norms underpinning the position of women in the Arab world." The report goes on to note that while the holy texts of Islam can be subject to different interpretations, traditional Islamic heritage in the region nevertheless "promotes and reinforces the existing gender hierarchy."

Partly as a result of this, women in North Africa and the Middle East have the lowest labour market participation rates in the world and some of the world's lowest rates of political participation. They also suffer from high levels of domestic abuse; [research suggests](#) that at least one in three married women in some regional countries is beaten by her husband. In Germany, on the other hand, women enjoy [some of the world's highest levels of gender equality](#) – an impressive social achievement for which Chancellor Merkel herself stands as a powerful symbol.

These social differences point to an uncomfortable and easily forgotten truth, namely, that the majority of migrants arriving in Europe are adult males whose formative years were spent in societies where important social institutions tend to produce radically different expectations about the relations between men and women than those produced by equivalent institutions in Germany. For example, according to the most recent wave of the [World Values Survey](#), in thirteen North African and Middle Eastern countries between 30 per cent to 80 per cent of people surveyed agreed with the statement that when jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women. In Germany, only around 15 per cent of respondents shared this view.

Table: Responses to the statement 'When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women' in selected countries

| | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Neutral</i> | <i>Disagree</i> |
|------------------|--------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Egypt | 83.4 | 5.7 | 11.0 |
| Jordan | 80.6 | 6.3 | 13.1 |
| Yemen | 75.4 | 8.2 | 14.1 |
| Tunisia | 71.1 | 9.0 | 17.2 |
| Qatar | 69.4 | 8.0 | 22.6 |
| Libya | 68.7 | 14.0 | 16.4 |
| Palestine | 65.5 | 11.6 | 21.8 |
| Iraq | 65.2 | 17.0 | 17.2 |
| Kuwait | 62.0 | 17.8 | 18.3 |
| Morocco | 60.6 | 5.5 | 31.1 |
| Algeria | 58.0 | 19.3 | 19.4 |
| Lebanon | 40.8 | 22.0 | 36.2 |
| Bahrain | 30.7 | 49.5 | 18.5 |
| Germany | 15.5 | 23.6 | 60.2 |

Source: World Values Survey (Wave 6, 2010-2014)

It would of course be absurd to conclude from this that all male migrants from North Africa and the Middle East are potential criminals. Nevertheless, it would not be unreasonable to assume that of the thousands of men arriving in Europe from this region each month, a substantial number will be bringing with them the patriarchal values of the environments they grew up in. If we accept this, then it seems relatively certain that as long as Chancellor Merkel's

refugee policy is in place, and the number of male migrants to Germany continues to increase, the number of men in Germany who hold such views about women and girls will also continue to rise.

Measuring this increase in precise figures is not currently possible, but this is not the point. The point is that *any* increase in the prevalence of attitudes that foster gender inequality poses a challenge not only to women's rights but ultimately also to their security, given that [there is a consistent relationship](#) between men's adherence to patriarchal attitudes and their use of violence against women. This issue is especially concerning in light of the [unbalanced sex ratios](#) the current crisis seems to be creating in some age cohorts.

Unfortunately, many of the policy responses under discussion have skirted around these questions. The proposed changes to asylum laws to ease deportation of criminals, for example, are unlikely to have any real impact due to the restrictions placed on authorities by human rights conventions and the intransigence of offending asylum-seekers' home governments. Likewise, suggestions that short educational programmes for men outlining the values of German society will easily transform thought and behaviour-patterns acquired during childhood and adolescence seem somewhat unrealistic.

Jenichen is absolutely right to argue that restricting immigration will not solve the problem of sexual abuse in Germany; native German men will continue to commit sexual crimes for the foreseeable future. But she is wrong to assume that it follows from this that mass immigration will not help exacerbate the problem. As Germans confront the massive changes facing their society, they cannot afford to ignore this possibility. They have a right and indeed a duty to consider the issue of mass migration from all sides – even if this means asking some uncomfortable questions.

One of these might be whether Germany has the resources to fully equip an ever-increasing number of migrants with the social skills they will need to successfully integrate. Another might be whether the asylum policies of [Australia](#) and [Canada](#) have something Germans and their European partners can learn from.

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Daniel Falkiner holds a PhD in International Relations from the LSE. His dissertation examines the links between masculinity, desire and tragedy in international political theory.



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