

Cologne and the ‘sexism of the other’: Why tougher migration policies won’t solve sexual abuse

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Sexual assaults, theft and violence occurred in several European cities on New Year’s Eve, most notably in Cologne. [Anne Jenichen](#) discusses the debate that ensued following the incidents, criticising the focus on the race of the perpetrators in much of the subsequent discourse. She argues that restricting immigration won’t solve the problem of sexual assault, which is a global issue with a strong incidence in western Europe.



On new year’s eve, large groups of men – alleged to be of Northern African provenience – harassed women and stole cell phones and other valuables around the Central Station in Cologne. The incidents were not confined to one place, as similar episodes were reported across other German cities and in a few other European countries.

Cologne’s police forces received more than 500 complaints of sexual assault and theft for that night. The police department of North Rhine-Westphalia appointed a taskforce to clarify the circumstances. Most of the suspects arrested so far, with a few exceptions, do not hold German passports, and some entered Germany as refugees. The last aspect produced the largest public outcry.

Meanwhile, the unfolding debate has taken on a life of its own. It is still not really clear how many perpetrators were involved, how many of them were refugees and from which regions, whether the acts of sexual harassment were a diversionary tactic to facilitate theft or whether it was an aim in itself, and how exactly the mobs organised themselves.

But for many, the judgement already seems to be clear: admitting refugees to the country entails increased crime, particularly against women. Saving ‘white women’ from ‘brown men’ is an age-old racist theme which surfaces again and again in this debate, clearly illustrating the intersection of sexism and racism. An especially crude expression of this was the title of the German weekly ‘Focus’ (“Frauen klagen an”, i.e. “Women complain” which could also mean “Women file lawsuits”), showing a naked white woman with black hands painted all over her body.

Most of the debate, therefore, has not been over the incident itself, but on Germany’s refugee policy.

German politicians from the governing parties have discussed tightening German asylum law, even

though legal measures to deal with criminal asylum seekers are already in place. Fortunately, there have also been moderate voices expressing unease about the racialisation of the debate, albeit these are much less audible than those calling for stricter action against criminal asylum seekers and the restriction of immigration.

Suggestions include the lowering of hurdles against the deportation of criminal refugees (from a now one-year sentence to suspended sentences, for example, for theft), residential obligations for asylum seekers and recognised refugees to prevent their concentration in big cities, as well as caps on the number of refugees that can be permitted



per year (regardless of the circumstances of individuals arriving once such a ‘cap’ has been reached).

The incident in Cologne thus inflamed a debate that has been rumbling on for some time. The incident and the sexualised violence it entailed have been used to justify tougher German asylum laws. Foreign politicians, such as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Polish head of government Beata Szydlo and US presidential candidate Donald Trump, have picked on the debate as well, using the case as confirmation of their warnings against ‘open borders’ and the intake of large numbers of refugees.

Right-wing extremists have not failed to make use of the xenophobic undertones of the debate to provide legitimisation of their world views. A mob of right-wing extremists arranged to meet via social media for manhunts to protect ‘their’ women against non-Germans in the aftermath of the Cologne incident. That this did not spark a similarly heated public discussion on the perils of xenophobic violence is simply deplorable.

The victims and the acts of sexualised violence have by now faded into the background. The debate almost exclusively focuses on the potential perpetrators and their ethnic background; with some exceptions, such as the Twitter campaign [#ausnahmslos](#) (“noexcuses”), which, under the header “Against sexualised violence and racism. Always. Anywhere”, calls for closing the protection gaps in German criminal law on sexual assault and rape, and for support for the victims of the Cologne incident.

But tougher immigration and asylum legislation won’t solve the problem of sexual assault. Sexual harassment and sexualised violence are worldwide problems. Prevalence estimates of non-partner sexual violence by the [World Health Organization](#), for instance, suggest higher numbers in western Europe than in North Africa and the Middle East. So much for ‘Arab culture’; a popular reference in the German debate for explaining the alleged connection between refugees from Arab countries and sexualised violence in public places. The prevalence of intimate partner violence, which usually takes place in private, is estimated as being higher for North Africa and the Middle East than in western Europe, but domestic violence is seldom a topic that lends itself to public outrage.

Sexual harassment takes place particularly where perpetrators expect impunity due to strong dependencies and power inequalities, such as in the workplace, or due to the anonymity of empty streets or large crowds. Each year, for example, there are several cases of attempted and actual rape, and numerous cases of sexual harassment, at the ‘Oktoberfest’ in Munich (the biggest beer festival in the world) and during the carnival in Cologne, even though the real numbers, particularly of those cases which go unreported, are contested. Public outcries in those cases, though, never materialise.

The incidents in Cologne and other German cities were utterly unacceptable. These cases need to be thoroughly investigated and the perpetrators punished, irrespective of their background. A serious and honest debate on both integration and violence against women is also absolutely necessary. But racialising the issue of sexual violence will not solve anything: neither in the case of integrating refugees nor with regard to the protection of women.

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