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#MeToo shows sexism is not men of colour's prerogative

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In early January 2016, news of mass sexual assaults on the New Year's Eve in the German city of Cologne was dominating headlines in Western media. Reports of theft and sexual assaults were multiplying by the day and many were describing the perpetrators as "refugees" or Arab men.

Subsequent investigations revealed that dozens of men of North African background had mugged and sexually assaulted women that night, though not on the mass scale that had initially been reported.

Yet journalists and politicians all over the world were quick to frame the Cologne events as the result of the "inherent" sexism of the brown men who had committed them. In the German press, the nearly unanimous position was that these men came from societies and religious backgrounds in which women are subjugated and mistreated. There were similar sentiments expressed in the rest of Europe and even the US.

"The relationship with a woman, so fundamental to Western modernity, will long remain incomprehensible to the average [refugee or migrant] man," declared Algerian author Kamel Daoud in an article published in the French newspaper *Le Monde*. Similarly, a New York Times editorial warned that: "Europe must find a way to cope with a problem that has been largely ignored until now: sexual aggression by refugees from countries where women do not have the same freedoms as in Europe."

A year and a half later, another major sexual violence scandal took the media spotlight in the West. In October 2017, accusations of sexual assault against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein encouraged many women and men to come forward with their stories of sexual abuse in Hollywood and beyond. The perpetrators identified were overwhelmingly white. The mass scale and organised legal and illegal cover-up of these crimes shocked Western societies.

It is in the aftermath of these revelations and the dramatic growth of the #MeToo movement that we should look back at the events in Cologne and the notions of masculinity, violence and race.

The myth of the sexual predator of colour

The impact of the Cologne events on German and international politics is hard to ignore. All across Europe - as well as in the US - conservative and right-wing political forces invoked Cologne as proof of the incompatibility between Islam and gender equality and as a sign of the danger Muslim men present for women in Western societies. [\[1\]](#)

Two years later, not only does the most powerful country in the world have an Islamophobe as a president, but Germany, too, has seen the right-wing AfD (Alternative for Germany) rise to be the third largest party in the Bundestag.

The Cologne attacks had a widespread international resonance because they played into the widely spread stereotype that non-white males (Muslim and non-Muslim alike) are sexual predators by default.

This idea dates back to colonial times, when French, British and Dutch settlers described male colonial subjects as

savages who oppressed their women, as Frantz Fanon, Anne McClintock and Ann Stoler masterfully detail in their respective works. [2]

Throughout the 2000s, the idea that non-white masculinity is tied to sexual violence was reinvigorated and there was a literal explosion of articles in Western media about the gang rapes committed in the French cities' suburbs by predominantly young men of North African origin or about honour killings in mostly non-Western communities. [3]

In the US, African American men have been disproportionately visible when accusations of rape or sexual assault on university campuses have surfaced and have been subjected to tougher punishments than white men accused of similar crimes.

Of course, the hyper-sexualisation and criminalisation of black male bodies have a long and brutal history in the US, tied as it is to slavery and its aftermath, when African male slaves were described as beasts with incessant lust for white women's flesh and lynched if they were thought to have had contact with them. [4] This history has produced what American political activist and academic Angela Davis has called "the myth of the Black rapist".

In the West, when non-white men are implicated in cases of sexual harassment and violence, the debate inevitably is much less about the nature of gender-based violence and its systemic presence in our societies, and much more about the "evidence" these cases provide for claims that misogyny is "naturally ingrained" in the culture, religion or race of the men involved.

To paraphrase the words of French Muslim feminist Souad Betka, a man of colour "is always more than a man. He is the tree that represents the forest." His actions, that is, are not merely expressions of his own personality but of the "racialised" community to which he is taken to belong.

#MeToo and women of colour

With men of colour facing suspicion and a high level of criminalisation and violence in the West, women of colour have faced a genuine dilemma.

Many of them have wished to denounce sexism and gender violence within their communities, but without reinforcing racist stereotypes about their "cultures" as especially patriarchal or backward.

It is in light of these experiences that we should look at the #MeToo campaign as an extremely important movement, potentially enabling women of colour and Muslim women to fight against sexual harassment without feeling the burden of "disloyalty" towards their communities.

By exposing just how white men are frequent perpetrators of sexual violence, and especially by revealing the magnitude and pervasiveness of sexism, sexual harassment and rape in Western societies, the #MeToo movement has accomplished something extraordinary.

It has given the white mainstream very clear evidence that sexism and gender violence are in no shape or form committed only by men of colour. Furthermore, it has forced the wider society to take women's daily experience of harassment and assault more seriously and has created a climate in which women have begun to feel more confident about speaking up.

In short, #MeToo has been such a big catalyst for what looks every day more like the emergence of a new feminist movement, because it speaks to women across the class, race and sexuality divides. The movement points to the fact that sexual harassment and violence in many ways functions as a "great equaliser" among women because the overwhelming majority of us have experienced it in some form, regardless of our backgrounds.

Yet, while sexual violence knows no race, colour, gender or class, the response to sexual violence certainly does.

Yes, powerful white men are losing their jobs over allegations of sexual harassment and assault, and this is historic. But their easy access to financial resources, good lawyers and a network of support, as well as the racial biases of the legal system, all make it more likely that these men will receive lighter punishment, even when found guilty, as the case of Stanford swimmer Brock Turner so painfully demonstrates. [5]

Not only are men of colour more likely to be convicted for sexual assault when compared with white men, but for many women of colour reporting rape or sexual assault may prove more challenging. [6] Studies show that young black women are less likely to report rape on university campuses, and women of colour are over-represented in work sectors in which they are more vulnerable to sexual abuse, such as the care and domestic sector. [7] Additionally, undocumented female migrants find it particularly difficult to report sexual violence both for fear of being misbelieved but also for fear of being deported. [8] Above all, women of colour and working-class women often do not speak up because they lack collective power in their workplace, and are "denied social supports such as free healthcare, outside of it" as the promoters of the International Women's Strike on March 8 clearly state. [9]

It is not by chance, then, that in spite of the fact that the #MeToo campaign was founded 10 years earlier by black activist Tarana Burke, the movement arguably only gained such momentum when white women with access to financial and media resources began coming forward. [10] As Catherine Rottenberg rightly points out this fact in itself "raises the absolutely crucial question of when and where claims of sexual harassment and assault are heard and whose voices count". [11]

Cologne after #MeToo

If #MeToo has been tremendously important in debunking the myth of the man of colour as sexual predator, the movement, however, must be careful not to adopt a "carceral feminist" approach. [12] That is, #MeToo must recognise that mass incarceration, deportation and over-policing to sort out gender violence have a disproportionate impact on people of colour, as the Cologne events clearly demonstrated.

This is not to suggest that women who experience sexual violence and harassment should not come forward and report these acts to law enforcement agencies. In the absence of alternative and effective structures to deal with gender violence, women can only turn to the resources with which the state provides them.

However, if we are really serious about combating gender violence in all of its various forms, the #MeToo movement must initiate a much needed conversation about the type of gender justice we envisage, about ways to discredit stereotypes of man of colour's aggressive masculinity as well as about the kinds of infrastructure we need to enable all women – but particularly women of colour – to speak out without fear of racist repercussions.

[Aljazeera](#)

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- [1] https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/01/11/german-sexual-assaults-lead-to-i-told-you-so-claims-on-muslim-immigrants/?utm_term=.f91bff1086c2
- [2] See [Fanon](#), [McClintock](#) and [Stoler](#)
- [3] [See here](#) and [here](#)
- [4] <https://www.theatlantic.com/politic...>
- [5] <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices...>
- [6] <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news...>
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