



Cologne: Why cultural explanations are dangerous for feminism

written by Julie Billaud
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The sexual assaults that occurred in Cologne on New Year's Eve will long be remembered in Germany and in Europe more broadly. What a pity that each time women experience violence the same level of emotion is nowhere to be witnessed! Let's be honest, what triggered the alarm was not the horrid treatment of women on that night. Rather, it is the nationality of the attackers that was at stake, the



victims once again being relegated to background discussions. As if sexual violence was a crime only committed by “others”, “non-white” Muslim men, those who come from elsewhere. This Orientalist discourse, fueled by rampant Islamophobia in Europe since 9/11, has sadly become commonplace.

Yet, according to UN figures, it is estimated that [35% of women worldwide have suffered sexual or physical abuse](#) at the hands of their intimate partners at some point in their lives. [70% of female murder victims are killed by their male spouse](#). The aggressions in Cologne are not an isolated event but are rather part of an alarming global context of widespread discrimination and violence against women. This trend can be noticed in the paternalistic reaction of Cologne’s mayor who recommended women to keep an arm-length distance with strangers. Again, women were the ones to be disciplined, not the men who assaulted them. This remark was all the more shocking that it came from a woman.

Despite these undeniable facts, the discussion remains focused on the nationality and religion of the attackers. Ironically, we never hear anything about “Bavarian culture” when [women are assaulted each year during the traditional “Oktoberfest”](#). Thus, Cologne feeds the stereotype of the “rapefugee”, a combination of the words “refugee” and “rapist” which appeared during the demonstrations organised by the extreme right movement Pegida after the events. [Riss, the cartoonist of Charlie Hebdo](#) – a French satirical newspaper that has now become the symbol of freedom of expression worldwide – did not hesitate to reinforce racist amalgams by drawing Aylan Kurdi, the dead child drowned while his family tried to join Europe, as a sexual abuser in adulthood.

Cultural explanations are used to silence the dynamics of sexual nationalism at work in the current “refugee crisis”. Indeed, debates on national identity that have emerged in many European countries often mobilise gender and racial stereotypes. Preserving “our values” and “our identity” requires to portray the “other” (Muslim, refugee) as occupying a diametrically opposite moral universe, particularly on issues pertaining to women and LGBT people’s rights. Nationalist parties (but also more traditional right and left wing parties) use this classic



version of colonial feminism to justify their securitarian and discriminatory policies towards refugees and Muslims.

While [European Muslim women are increasingly victims of Islamophobic attacks](#) which do not trigger any reaction from the public or governments, feminist issues are manipulated by the very people who in other circumstances have little interest in women's rights. The feminist movement itself is deeply divided between a universalist trend that promotes emancipation through assimilation of differences and a more open one that takes into account race and class inequalities. The first trend, which currently dominates public debates, is dangerous because it excludes "non-white" women who experience other forms of discrimination. Furthermore, it reinforces the stereotype of the misogynist Muslim man on which deadly nationalism flourishes throughout Europe. After Cologne, the European feminist movement will have to make decisive decisions which involve its own future. Feminists everywhere should remember that Muslim men do not have the monopoly of rape and that in the struggle for equality, nothing is ever gained by vilifying others.

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