

Not getting it

sexualized violence as a structural problem

by Mia Kirsch

Feminism is an important issue, unfortunately this also becomes obvious in surveys on violence. Rape is still a common crime and the spreading of perpetrators and survivors is highly based on gender. This text intends to explain how the concept of “rape culture” analyses this problem as a structural one. Hopefully, this analysis of society of this problem can contribute to solutions and thus to a future free from violence. One in which people can enjoy a feeling of safeness, regardless of their gender.

Inquiring reliable figures is a hard task. Between one in six and three in for Women in Europe and the US state that they have been exposed to sexualized violence. The variation in this figures are due to imprecise definitions of the term sexualized violence [1]. But even with the lowest figures it is obvious that it's a problem that affects a lot of people. The majority of the people affected are reckoned among the female gender, the vast majority of the perpetrators among the male gender [2]. This points to a structural problem. It is not simply an addition of singular cases of for example mentally unstable men and their individually picked victims who are female by chance. The fact that the survivors were women has usually been the reason for them to be exposed to this violence. It is thus, as in cases of racist crime, group-specific violence. A woman is not harassed in the streets because of the shortness of her skirt or because she was “in the wrong place at the wrong time” but first of all because she is a woman. To highlight the structural, not individual nature of this problem US feminists came up with the concept of “rape culture” in the 1970s. This term is supposed to reveal the social structures that trivialize rape and cover it up and thus contribute to the high number of cases. As incest, domestic violence and rape are highly tabooed issues, especially in the 1970s, the first step was to scandalize the dimensions of the problem. A second step was to detect the cultural and social roots for it.

Street Harassment

As I mentioned earlier, the term “sexualized violence” is not easy to define. On the one hand, being exposed to degrading comments and reduced to one's bodily appearance is a violent experience for women. On the other hand one should not equalize street harassment with rape, by naming both as violence. But in order to explain how there is such a high number of affected people in a society with little visible violence that claims to be “civilized” one should broaden the scope of the term “sexualized violence” to include all sexually connoted acts that cross personal boundaries. From an obscene comment it is not far to an unwanted hand on one's butt and, where unwanted touch is tolerated, rape is made more facile. The roots are the same. The man who thinks he can tell a woman in the street how well her skirt brings out her curves, acts on the assumption that, as a man, he has the right to judge a woman's sexual vibe and to reduce her to a sexual object. So does the young man who assumes that after three romantic evenings he deserves her consent to having sex. If a woman is yelled after in the street how sexy she looks, she is usually expected to see this as a compliment and to be flattered. This is problematic in different ways. For one, it implies it would

be every woman's goal to look good according to male judgement. For another, comments like this are no compliment but a way to assign women to their place in society, as an object that should look nice. Furthermore, street harassment creates a climate of insecurity for women, because torments like this can happen at any time and any place. Maintaining this steady state of insecurity and powerlessness is a convenient way to keep women silenced, to make sure they stay at home or depend on being accompanied in public spaces. In any case, it denies women their autonomy.

Objectification of women

The objectification is a pillar of rape culture. It can also be found in dress codes, for example at schools. Young females are often advised to dress “modest” in order not to irritate their male classmates and teachers by showing their body. Thus, girls and women are reduced to their female bodies which are made a sole object of male desire. At the same time, girls and women are punished for their sexual air while boys and men are considered not to be able to resist it. This reverses the relations of survivor and perpetrator. If a female body has a sexual air, it is in the eye of the beholder. It does not originate in the body itself, but in the beholder's interpretation. Reversions of survivor-offender roles can be found in other areas too. For one, there is the so called “victim blaming”. In no other form of criminal act or violence the survivor's behaviour is questioned in the way it is when it comes to sexualized violence. Did she really say no, didn't she actually want it, why had she been on the premises in the first place, didn't she knowingly put herself in danger? Questions like these try to hand over at least parts of the responsibility to the survivor and to excuse an assault. The mini skirt that was asking for it – sadly one knows these excuses. An other rumour that contributes to ongoing victim blaming, is that of prevailing false charges. It says that there are girls and women who press false charges in the field of sexualized violence, because they want to get attention or to harm the alleged offender. Everyone who knows how survivors of sexualized violence are treated can hardly imagine anyone who willingly takes up this role to attract attention. The second reason is similarly unlikely. Actually, the 8% rate of false charges in cases of sexualized violence is less than the average rate in other crimes, like car theft. Taking into account the dark figures, adding the cases that have never been reported the rate of false charges drops to below 1%. Nevertheless, a person that reports her car stolen is rarely asked if she secretly didn't want it to be stolen, if her car had “asked for it”, or that she should have known better than to park such a good looking car in an area like that.

Another persistent legend is, that women say no when they mean yes. The origins of this are complicated. Parts of it stems from the double-standard that is used when it comes to female sexuality. On the one hand, a woman who openly expresses interest in sexual relations and wants to act them out is considered to be a slut and thus not respectable. But if she is not interested or not willing to perform sexual acts, she is considered prude and frigid. There is nothing in between. It has possibly been common in earlier times that women of higher status played “hard to get” in order to be respected while actually consenting to sexual relations. Ridiculous double-standards thus led to ridiculous codes of conduct. Besides this double-standard the negation or tabooing of female desire also originates in this legend. If one assumes that there is no female sexuality, or that it is not important, relationships between men and women are not concerned with what a woman wants but what she is willing to give. This concept of giving and receiving has consequences for other areas too. Just look at the phenomenon of the so-called “pick-up-artists”. This is a method for

heterosexual men to “pick-up” women and trick them into having sex, which is advertized to be an art. This was made popular in the US in “The Game”, a book by the journalist Neil Strauss and has also spread to Europe by now. Aside from that it relies on lies and manipulation, even the general thought of this “art” is sickening. Sex, the core of which is or should be that people consentingly decide to experience intimate moments, becomes something that somebody receives and gets from somebody else. While one could think that precisely somebody's decision to have sex with you causes a wonderful feeling, the Pick-up-Artist wants to make a person give sex to him, or to be available for that. The more hopeless a situation seems to be in the beginning, the more successful “the game” was. And again it is assumed that women have no interest in sex anyway and have to be persuaded or, that their interest or rejection don't count. They are denied any ability to decide on their sexuality self-determinedly and without manipulation. To manipulate someone into agreeing to sexual acts they wouldn't have consented to without the manipulation resembles forcing someone to do so by physical threats. As in rape, the survivors did not agree of their own free will and if the deception is revealed, what follows can be, mildly put, uneasy feelings.

“Getting it” - this misconception also provides ground for the term “friend-zone”. It means that someone who gets along well with women or a certain woman, becomes friends with her, is there for her and becomes her best friend, but never “gets” any sex. It carries a negative connotation and is pitied. Behind that, there are the same misconceptions as earlier. The woman is object of sexual desire, so even if one is friends with her she is a person from whom you could “get” sex and want to “get it”. Men “only ever want one thing”. Sex is thus always a possible goal when dealing with female human beings. If women like sex, want it or not doesn't play any role, they are able to give it. Therefore they are expected to do so and that if one is nice enough, one deserves sex.

In the mind of Elliot Rodger, this delusion reached a tragic peak. In May 2014 he killed six people and himself and injured others in Isla Vista (California, USA). According to a manifesto he spread shortly before the shooting, his reason had been misogyny. Rodger wanted to kill women, because they were responsible that he had never had sex or a romantic relationship, and men, because they were more successful than he was. A BILD-newspaper headline shortly afterwards was “Did he freak out because of this blonde?” and described Rodgers relation to a former classmate in their article, even giving away her full name. Allegedly he had adored her, but she had rejected him. On Twitter, Facebook and other web pages many men agreed that this could have been prevented if any girl had just “put out” for him. A less harmful but nonetheless stupid thought was spread by even more people via #notallmen. The case of Elliot Rodger would not be any reason to question social structures, as not each and every man ran amok or raped women. He had “simply” been a madman. Maybe he did have mental issues that contributed to this drastic act, but he did not simply invent the concept behind it, sex as something one “gets” from women. Furthermore, the #notallmen reveals how many people think that pointing out the high number of sexualized violence was an act of man-hate, because not all men are perpetrators. But isn't it ridiculous to demand that anyone should be praised who doesn't oppress or sexually exploit people? Everyone should be aware that not all men are perpetrators and a fight against sexualized violence should not be directed against men in general. The #yesallwomen was created as a response, that should underscore every-day sexism. Already in the first days there were two million tweets of women reporting their experiences of every-day sexism and misogyny. The thrust was that all women are affected by male violence or have to expect it, even if not all men are or become perpetrators of sexualized violence. „If you're

not part of the problem, maybe be part of the solution”

To lower the incredibly high rate of sexualized violence has been tried in the past by various means. But what actually happened was preventive measures aiming at potential survivors and a malfunctioning judiciary. Looking at the numbers, the preventive approaches have not yet been promising. To warn girls and young women that sexual assault exists and they, for example, shouldn't be out alone at night or get in a stranger's car is understandable. Nevertheless it is part of the problem. For one, these warnings tremendously limit women's possibilities. One has to be constantly cautious and protect oneself. For another, in case of an assault, this leads to survivors blaming themselves for not being cautious enough to prevent it, American colleges advise their female students regularly not to get too drunk at parties. Rape is unfortunately happening regularly at American colleges and when survivors report the assaults they often face the blame they would have drunk too much. It would be reasonable to expect that young men at colleges would be advised not to rape their fellow students if they are drunk. Women already face the threat of experiencing an assault, they should not solely be held responsible for its prevention too. It is understandable that parents raise their daughters with warning words, but wouldn't it be more appropriate to raise girls in the knowledge that they have the same right to be anywhere at any time without having to worry, just as everybody else? Doesn't a lightly dressed and drunk woman in a park at night have the right to physical integrity? And shouldn't she have the right to be in that park, in these clothes and as drunk as she wants?

But girls are still raised in a way that values stepping back and putting others first. That doesn't seem to be a bad thing, putting others first isn't essentially bad. But if one looks at gender specific differences, the problem becomes more obvious. Little boys are less often punished when mistreating other children. Phrases like „Boys will be Boys“ are known to everyone. Little boys are not expected to have much self-control, because they are allegedly more wild and less able to control their emotions than girls. Most of these patterns of childrearing work unconsciously, the adults themselves have been raised in that belief and internalized it. Thus boys grow up to be men who think they have less control over their desires and easily put their own needs before those of others, especially women. And on the other hand women grow up to enduring much, not taking it for granted to be respected and placing their own needs behind those of others, especially men. One approach could thus be to raise children of all genders to respect the needs and desires of other people.

The legend of preventing assault by the cautiousness of those potentially affected has another major flaw. In nine out of ten cases, the perpetrator is part of the survivor's social surrounding, is a friend, a family member or close acquaintance. The rapist lurking in the bushes is a cliché that might actually happen, but only in an absolute minority of the cases. If one were to give recommendations based on statistical evidence, one would rather advise girls and women not to spend time alone with a close relative or friend. That sounds cynical, but is a more realistic warning than to avoid nightly parks. Another myth that should be put right is that of the perpetrator as a sexual predator, as most perpetrators are not conspicuous in any way. The sheer number of cases should make clear that “regular guys” are the perpetrators in most of the cases. In court, many complaints fail because of this. The image of the psycho is so deeply rooted that many judges doubt that a person that appears to be so decent could have done something so horrible. Below 3% of those who are accused of rape

have to spend any time in prison. As mentioned already, most of the incidents are not even reported. If courts are the right way to stop sexualized violence is yet a question without an answer. Still, the state of the law especially §177 [3] in combination with victim blaming in state institutions like police and courts contributes a lot to the high rate of dark figures in sexualized violence and the low rate of convictions.

Endnotes:

[1] The article uses the term “sexualized violence” instead of “sexual violence”. This serves to separate assault from voluntary sexuality and to highlight that the sexual part of the violent action is just a way to assert power. Sex is usually not the prime goal of rape, but serves to subjugate and humiliate the victim.

[2] This article tackles the structural problem of male-dominated sexualized violence against woman-labelled persons, thus the article uses the female form for survivors and the male for perpetrators. As the binary division of gender and the stereotypes that go along with it are central to the problem, these categories have to be used for the sake of understanding. The article centers on female survivors as they are the vast majority, even though the author is aware of male and non-binary survivors. Sexualized violence takes place in various gender constellations that have their own structural problems, but to elaborate on all of them would exceed the capacities of this article.

[3] §177 of the German penal code is problematic, because survivors of rape and sexualized violence are by law only accepted as survivors if they suffered physical violence and/or experienced a situation of mortal danger. The survivor's own perspective to be in a dangerous situation or not to be able to leave the premises is not enough. Thus law forces the survivor to prove that they refused sexual acts, not the perpetrator to prove consent for these acts.

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