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Citation for final published version:

Abdelmonem, Angie, Bavelaar, Rahma Esther, Wynne-Hughes, Elisa and Galán, Susana 2016. The 'Taharrush' connection: xenophobia, Islamophobia, and sexual violence in Germany and beyond. *Jadaliyya* 2016 (Mar 1)

Publishers page: <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/23967/the-%E2...>

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The “Taharrush” Connection in Germany: Xenophobia, Islamophobia, and Sexual Violence

Introduction

New Year’s Eve 2016 witnessed the collective public sexual harassment and assault of [dozens](#) of women during celebrations in Cologne, Germany, reportedly by more than one thousand men. Similar, smaller-scale incidents were reported in other German cities, like [Hamburg and Stuttgart](#). In the aftermath of the attacks, numerous media outlets quoted alleged police sources describing the perpetrators as men “[of Arab or North African appearance](#),” of “[Middle Eastern appearance](#),” or originating from “[Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia](#).” *Die Welt* later characterized the assailants as “[Syrian asylum seekers](#),” citing an unnamed police source. Still others referred to the harassers as “[‘southern looking’ with ‘darker skin,’](#)” reflecting the narrative of one woman who was sexually assaulted that evening. Despite the initial reluctance of German authorities to point fingers, these outlets ascribed the crimes to migrants and refugees from the Middle East and North Africa, often conflating populations with little distinction between those who had previously settled in Germany and those fleeing conflict, thereby obscuring differences in religion and national origins.

Public fear of the growing number of refugees, now rendered by the media as mass sexual harassers, resulted in a public protest on 5 January with 300 individuals criticizing [German Chancellor Angela Merkel](#) and holding signs saying “Mrs. Merkel, where are you? What do you say? This is scary.” On 7-8 January, multiple reports emerged in local and international media of similar New Year’s Eve sexual assaults in [Sweden](#), [Switzerland](#), [Austria](#) and [Finland](#). As a result, this type of incident was portrayed as a [Europe-wide phenomenon](#). On 9 January, a [far-right protest](#) organized by the PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West) movement brought together around 1,700 people, who held banners with slogans like “Rapefugees not welcome.”

On 10 February, the Cologne prosecutor revealed the [nationalities of the 59 suspects](#) in relation to the New Year’s attacks. Among them were twenty-five Algerian, twenty-one Moroccan, three Tunisian, three German, two Syrian, one Iraqi, one Libyan, one Iranian, and one Montenegrin citizens. From the fourteen suspects still in custody at that time, only five were being investigated for sexual crimes. The arrest of suspects of primarily North African origin appears at first to lend some measure of empirical support to media suppositions about the perpetrators of the attacks, though the vast majority were not current refugees escaping the conflicts in Syria and

Iraq and there is wide variability in their national origins. However, such arrests raise important questions about [practices of racial and ethnic profiling](#) in the investigative procedures in which these fifty-nine, out of the reportedly more than one thousand, were identified and located. For the purposes of this article, they also raise questions about the way in which such arrests, delinked from any deeper analyses of sexual violence and of the discrimination facing migrants and refugees in European societies, draw on and reproduce a racist rhetoric that makes it easy to ascribe an inherent sexual deviance to such populations.

We are scholars who have been analyzing and participating in activism on public sexual violence in Egypt and xenophobia in Europe over the past ten years. This article is born out of a deep concern regarding these media and official portrayals of sexual harassment and assault, using Cologne as a specific case. Beginning 10 January 2016 media portrayals of the Cologne sexual harassment and assaults deployed the notion of *taharrush* (“harassment” in Arabic) to establish a connection between these attacks and the collective sexual assaults against women protesters in Egypt since 2011. The term “*taharrush*” has been widely used by Western media and German authorities to portray collective sexual violence as a practice that originates from the Middle East and North Africa and is thus foreign to German and European culture. By connecting Cologne with Egypt in a highly misrepresented way, the media has been able to justify a racist platform against the continued acceptance of migrants and refugees coming to Europe.

In what follows, we show how framing the assaults in this way has made possible their instrumentalization by right-wing politicians and movements to encourage discriminatory and exclusionary policies towards Muslim, migrant, and refugee communities in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. Our analysis reveals what is obscured in this process of representation, focusing on the use of (and contestations around) the term “*taharrush*” in Egypt and on the history of public and private sexual violence in Germany and across Europe. We argue that a better understanding of these frames will lead to recognition of the need to tackle sexual harassment and assault from within their social and political contexts. We suggest that looking at the work of anti-harassment activists in Egypt and Germany will help to elicit more productive responses that do not reify class, racial, and religious binaries and that more effectively address the gender inequalities at the root of sexual violence.

Portrayals and Politicization of the New Year’s Eve Sexual Assaults

Even prior to 10 January, reports of the sexual harassment and assaults that took place around the train station of Cologne on New Year's Eve identified Egypt as the reference point for understanding these incidents. On that date, [Die Welt](#) stated that this form of attack was so far non-existent in Germany but evoked “scenes of the Egyptian Tahrir Square.” Much of the coverage similarly referenced Tahrir, using descriptive framing techniques that evoked media coverage of the collective sexual harassment, assaults, and rapes that occurred during years of revolutionary protest in Egypt. The effect of this framing was to position what happened in

Cologne as an iteration of the Tahrir incidents, with the common – and problematic – link being the Middle Eastern and North African populations pouring into Europe. In other words, the media positioned migrants and refugees, regardless of their origin, as responsible for bringing Egypt’s sexual harassment problem to Europe.

For example, news outlets focused on the “circles of hell” that Egyptian activists began reporting in protests since June of 2012. In these collective sexual assaults that took place in Tahrir, women were isolated, encircled by concentric rings of men and sexually assaulted, allegedly by state-hired “thugs.”¹¹ As this form of sexual violence increased, [European](#) and [US](#) news positioned sexual harassment as endemic to Egypt and as an example of a prevalent rape culture that was exacerbated following the rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood-backed government of Mohammad Morsi. Reflecting these same notions with regards to the New Year’s Eve attacks, the [New York Times](#) reported that in Cologne “groups of young men began encircling young women.” Citing [Welt am Sonntag](#), [Deutsche Welle](#) stated, “A group of young men would encircle the female victim, close the loop, and then start groping the woman.” In a Bloomberg News wire piece reprinted in the [Chicago Tribune](#), the coverage highlighted how politically commissioned sexual harassment and assaults in Egypt derived from a historical cultural practice of sexual harassment. By situating politicized violence within a “long-standing culture of treating lone women as acceptable targets for harassment,” this news agency drew distinctly cultural conclusions about the Arabized and Islamicized nature of sexual violence in the Cologne sexual assaults.

By means of this associative framing strategy, the coverage managed to align two separate circumstances of sexual harassment and assault and to portray them as manifestations of the same process of collective sexual violence. Here, the social, economic and political specificities associated with each circumstance were ignored. The events in Tahrir, therefore, became evidence of a larger culture of sexual violence particular to the Middle East and North Africa. This culture of sexual violence is purportedly underpinned by a “great paradox” in this region, where sex “determines everything that is unspoken” yet “desire has no outlet,” as [Kamel Daoud](#) notes in his 12 February [New York Times](#) op-ed, “Sexual Misery in the Arab World.” Accordingly, the resulting misery “descend[s] into absurdity and hysteria,” which positions Middle Eastern and North African populations as exhibiting an unruly hypersexuality that ostensibly helps to explain the events of Cologne on New Year’s Eve.²²

The connection made between the sexual assaults in Cairo and Cologne as a practice imported from the Middle East and North Africa into Europe by an undifferentiated refugee mass found further traction in the [Charlie Hebdo](#) cartoon claiming that [Aylan Kurdi](#), the three-year-old Syrian refugee whose family was seeking asylum in Europe and whose body washed ashore in Turkey after their boat capsized in the Mediterranean, would be a “groper” had he lived. Through the body of the male Syrian refugee, and by rendering indistinguishable the Egyptian

and the Syrian contexts, the media not only presented an essentialized image of Arab/Muslim men but also promoted the more troublesome idea of an inherent biological compulsion among such men to become sexual deviants.

From 10 January on, [reporting](#) and commentary fixated on the term *taharrush* as a uniquely Middle Eastern and North African phenomenon. In particular, the conservative tabloid [The Daily Mail](#) defined *taharrush* or *taharrush gamea* as collective harassment, “the Arabic gang-rape phenomenon,” and the “*taharrush* game.” The specific use of the Arabic term, instead of the more common English word “harassment,” emphasizes its cultural link to populations from this region. Moreover, its use ignores the complex construction of meanings that have constituted *taharrush* as “harassment” in Arabic, as we examine below. With the collective sexual assaults in Tahrir underpinning the discussion, *The Daily Mail* noted that Cologne was the first such instance of *taharrush* in Europe. The article claimed that this phenomenon first emerged in Egypt with the attack on former CBS correspondent Lara Logan in Tahrir Square on 11 February 2011, the day of Hosni Mubarak’s ouster.

The Daily Mail mentioned Egyptian activists’ beliefs in the politicized nature of collective sexual assaults in Tahrir, and referred to their claim that the state hired thugs to attack women in order to “stem public protest,” noting that the Logan case signaled a turn. Here, *The Daily Mail* cited Abdelmonem as saying, “this [perception] shifted” (“perception” added by *The Daily Mail*) among activists of presumed state involvement in commissioning sexual violence after Logan’s attack.³³ This representation deliberately misread Abdelmonem’s article, which drew on Langohr’s more detailed study of politicized sexual violence to highlight how the first eighteen days of protest in Tahrir were described by activists as relatively free of sexual harassment.⁴⁴ In relation to these narratives, Abdelmonem stated that the collective sexual assault on Logan shifted the perception of a Tahrir free from sexual violence, and further discussed the nature of politicized assaults that unfolded in the years of revolutionary protest. *The Daily Mail*, however, deployed the idea of a “shift” to imply a turn away from politicized attacks to widespread assaults by mobs of average men against lone women in Tahrir. The effect was to represent sexual violence as a particularly widespread cultural problem in Egypt, which, in turn, could be rendered a problem for Europe following the influx of migrants and refugees.

The framing of sexual harassment in Europe as imported by immigrant populations and as linked to some generalized notion of Arab culture is powerful. It makes possible the kind of racist rhetoric that reproduces and reinforces a European sense of self as defender and protector of human rights (notably women’s rights and the rights of minorities). Meanwhile, it also projects an image of Europe as distinct from, and superior to, the culture of the migrants and refugees now flooding its borders seeking asylum from conflicts and structural inequalities resulting from decades of western interventions in the Middle East and North Africa. Here, Europe is positioned as a civilized site of tolerance and freedom, an idea underpinned by elements of the ideology that

supports the “war on terror:” the notion that Muslim women need to be saved from a misogynistic culture imposed by “dangerous” Muslim men.⁵⁵

The idea of European superiority and of oppressive Arab men has helped to legitimize imperialist military interventions like the war in Afghanistan, exemplified in statements like [Laura Bush](#)’s or [Cherie Blair](#)’s, who justified this war as a fight for the rights and dignity of women. In similar fashion, with the increase in migration from predominantly Muslim countries, European women are also positioned as under threat from ‘dangerous’ Arab men, made all the more explicit in the recent publication on 16 February of the Polish right-wing magazine [wSieci](#) with the cover title “Islamic Rape of Europe” and illustrated with an image of a woman wrapped in the European flag, her blond hair pulled and her white body grabbed by brown hands. In particular, since the summer of 2015, [stories](#) of sexual violence and forced prostitution in refugee shelters and of sexual assaults in German towns, all of them supposedly perpetrated by refugee men, have circulated in online media, echoed by far-right blogs and news pages. This representation ignores that many refugees are escaping from wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, in which successive European and American governments have been the primary aggressors, and which Tony Blair has admitted played a role in the rise of [ISIS](#). Culturalist explanations of these sexual assaults therefore help to further legitimize, but also to conceal, violent and exclusionary foreign/domestic policies in relation to people from the Middle East and North Africa.

Not surprisingly, far-right leaders have welcomed the connection between sexual violence and refugee/migrant populations across Europe. These same leaders have been quick to proclaim their concern for women’s rights. In a column published on 13 January in [The Post Online](#), the head of the Dutch right-wing anti-Islam PVV party, Geert Wilders, and party member Machiel de Graaf wrote an article under the title “After Cologne: Allow Women to Defend Themselves.” Citing Jadaliyya, the two politicians presented *taharrush* as common in Arab countries, proclaiming: “[A] culture that has its own word for group sexual assaults of women is a threat to all women. The existence of the term proves that it’s a widespread phenomenon there.” Cynically mimicking feminist voices that criticize blame-the-victim discourses that focus on women’s clothes and public conduct, Wilders and De Graaf wrote that it was “a shame that our women are advised to modify their behavior” and encouraged them to use pepper spray (currently illegal in the Netherlands, though legal in Germany) against foreign harassers. In a similar tone, [Marine Le Pen](#), leader of the far-right French Front National, quoted Simone de Beauvoir to point to the refugee and migrant crisis as “the beginning of the end of women’s rights.”⁶⁶ By co-opting feminist demands for women’s emancipation and their right to self-defense, these conservative forces instrumentalize the Cologne sexual assaults for their xenophobic ends.

More generally, these assaults have added fuel to the fire of journalists, politicians, and movements that have used them as evidence for the need to crack down on refugees. As

discussed above, far-right groups who seek to overturn Germany's refugee policies have successfully sought to hold Chancellor Merkel accountable. As a result, Merkel recently promised to [deny asylum to those who commit crimes](#). Individuals have also taken matters into their own hands and [attacked local mosques](#) in response. In a broader framework, moreover, the New Year Eve's attacks are also shaping the debate on the UK's referendum on the EU, as "the safety and security of British women" is now presented as under threat by the EU's (and especially Germany's) loss of "control of the refugee crisis," as discussed in a recent [Telegraph](#) article. The instrumentalization of sexual violence by the media and conservative politicians taps into the myth of the "Arab street," understood as a site of backwardness, brutality and "predatory sexuality."⁷⁷ According to this logic, the Arab street would be re-created in Europe following the massive arrival of refugees. These racializing discourses serve to stoke public fears about an oppressive Arab culture infiltrating Western society, thus bolstering the backlash against both migrants and refugees.

What's in a Name? The Concept of *Taharrush* in Egypt

The essentialized nature of *taharrush*, as presented in conservative media coverage since 10 January, has elided the complex circulation of discourses across transnational spaces within which the meaning of *taharrush* has emerged as a signifier of public sexual harassment in Egypt. Instead it is rendered as a uniquely Arab concept with no equivalent in European society. In 2005, the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (ECWR) launched the first campaign targeting public, or what was then referred to simply as "street," sexual harassment. The first academic studies on this issue were published within the following three years. This early scholarship focused on the then-already prevalent sexual harassment on the streets and in public transportation as well as on the activism that emerged to combat it as a social problem.⁸⁸ Public sexual violence in Egypt garnered increasing scholarly attention after the 2011 revolution, following the rapid increase in sexual assaults in and around Tahrir. Much of the research in the post-revolution period centered on understanding the politicization of sexual harassment and assault in protest settings.⁹⁹ Additionally, some research examined activist uses of information and communication technologies to combat public sexual harassment, focusing on its possibilities for challenging patriarchal gender norms, developing response and mitigation strategies and on the pitfalls of making available biogeographic data that could be co-opted by the security state.¹⁰¹⁰

Drawing on Moser's continuum of gender violence, Tadros was the first to make explicit the distinction between politically motivated and socially motivated sexual violence in Egypt.¹¹¹¹ While she defined politically motivated sexual violence as that commissioned by political elites in their quest to maintain political power, socially motivated sexual violence included everyday forms of sexual harassment visible in public space, as expressed through interpersonal interactions, for the maintenance of social power. Both, she noted, stem from the same system of norms and values that inform structures of gender and both serve to maintain patriarchal power.

Both are also mutually constitutive and one does not necessarily precede the other. This is a point the media discussions of *taharrush* have glossed over in their attempt to diminish the significance of politically motivated sexual harassment and to promote the image of a widespread practice of socially motivated sexual harassment endemic in the Middle East and North Africa.

Yet, little is known about the emergence of *taharrush* as a concept denoting the public sexual harassment of women in Egypt and how this emergence intersects with transnational feminist governance surrounding “violence against women.” In other words, little attention has been paid to the way in which the concept of *taharrush* as sexual harassment represents a transnationally constituted idea that involves the negotiation of a range of norms and values circulating in what may be called “local” and “global” spaces. *Taharrush* both aligns with and differs from definitions of sexual harassment visible in Europe and the United States. A recent article examines the work of Egyptian women’s rights activists in deploying the term *taharrush* to name the everyday forms of, or socially motivated, sexual harassment in order to criminalize such behavior.¹²¹² Abdelmonem’s analysis locates these activists within a network of transnational human rights and feminist organizations whose work seeks to criminalize violence against women and who have received international development funding from multiple sources toward this end.

In her preliminary study of more than two hundred and thirty Arabic discussion forum posts, Abdelmonem noted that *taharrush* has been visible as an idea in Arabic online forums since at least the year 2000, not long after the beginning of the Arabic Internet. The term *taharrush* in early discussions was used to primarily reference the rape and molestation of children and women in the private sphere but sometimes also to *zina*—adultery and illicit sexual behavior between consenting adults. In 2006, a conceptual shift was visible in Egypt, as the term *taharrush* was used to refer to the collective sexual harassment that occurred during the celebrations for *Eid al-Fitr* in Downtown Cairo, following the wide dissemination of videos of the incidents by many of Egypt’s well-known political bloggers, such as Wael Abbas and MaLek X.¹³¹³ Occurring a year after the start of the anti-sexual harassment movement, activists worked with these bloggers (and with other media) to promote the use of *taharrush* as a reference for the sexual harassment of women in the streets and on public transportation. From this point on, Abdelmonem noted that *taharrush* became a reference primarily for the sexual harassment of women in public space.

Working within a globalized, UN-espoused definition of sexual harassment as a form of violence against women, early activists deployed *taharrush* to name public sexual harassment because, for them, it conveyed enough conceptual weight to make possible the criminalization of the problem. *Taharrush*, then, appears as a conceptual space that serves as a sort of contact zone, as discussed by Pratt, where global and local norms of violence are negotiated, resulting in a notion

of sexual harassment that has been in flux in Egypt for more than a decade.¹⁴¹⁴ Within this contact zone, early activists sought to divest *taharrush* of any connotation of rape, which is a discursive practice that has since continued with other feminist NGOs and community-based initiatives, such as HarassMap and Nazra for Feminist Studies. The use of the term *taharrush* by activists reflects an attempt to draw on and reconcile multiple norms of sexual violence circulating across “local” and “global” spaces in order to derive a particular conception of sexual harassment that would resonate within Egypt and would facilitate social perceptions that it is a problem worth combating and criminalizing. Appropriations of *taharrush* or *taharrush gamea* by European and US media ignore this struggle among Egyptian activists and elide its complexity, making it possible to cast *taharrush* as a practice particular to an unruly migrant and refugee population originating in the Middle East and North Africa. Exoticized and rendered foreign in the European context, the use of *taharrush* renders invisible the reality of gender-based and sexual violence already prevalent within European societies.

Various European outlets deployed additional Arabic terms to connote collective assaults and gang rape, including *mu'aksa*, usually translated as flirtation or teasing, and *htk 'ird*, translated as indecent assault (literally, violation of honor). In particular, the conservative Spanish paper [El Mundo](#) conflated three of these terms, recognizing in the New Year's Eve assaults a “modus operandi ‘made in Egypt’ [that] is common and known in North of Africa with names like *taharrush* or *mu'aksa* or *htk 'ird*.” In discussing the supposed spread of rape culture from the Middle East and North Africa into Europe, US conservative political blogger [Breitbart](#) similarly wrote that *mu'aksa* is how sexual assault would have previously been discussed before the emergence of *taharrush*. While the term *mu'aksa* has received little academic attention, what has been written highlights it as a form of ritual courtship in public space, within which women are themselves positioned as in control of their sexuality and able to fend off those who transgress sexual boundaries.¹⁵¹⁵ In contrast, *htk 'ird* is far more problematic a term that appears in the Egyptian penal code as a reference for sexual assault and has a strong connotation of lost honor and shame. These implications have the effect of inhibiting women from reporting cases of sexual assault and rape and therefore feminist activists have sought to eliminate this term from the penal code. They have also argued for the law to more explicitly cover non-penile-vaginal rape, given the vagueness of the term of *htk 'ird* and widespread social perceptions that it signifies only penile-vaginal rape.¹⁶¹⁶

What the media coverage has done in its quest to distinguish European culture and society from that of Middle Eastern/North African/Arab/Muslim migrants and refugees is to essentialize the variegated meanings encapsulated in these terms and to deploy them as synonyms for collective assaults or gang rapes. In so doing, they present them as multiple references for a singular idea of collective sexual violence intrinsic to societies and cultures in the Middle East and North Africa that are now invading European society. These reports conveniently ignore the work of Egyptian feminist activists, both at the level of political advocacy and community-based mobilization, in

challenging the use of some of these terms, negotiating the use of others, and seeking to offer terminological clarity of what each of these means.

The Myth of a Germany Free of Sexual Violence

Since the New Year's Eve attacks in Cologne, a minority of European feminists, gender rights activists, and left wing commentators have challenged the racialization of the incidents by pointing out the wider context of sexual violence across the continent. They have also disputed the conceptual binary that contrasts “Arab” or “Tahrir-like” sexual harassment with other types of sexual violence. To make their point, these voices have deployed two methods of argumentation.

Some shared [personal testimonies](#) of rape that occurred in private and [public spaces](#), perpetrated by partners as well as by strangers, and described the feelings of guilt and helplessness that accompanied these experiences. Others referred to responses, ranging from [dismissive](#) to [deeply sexist](#), to recent social media campaigns in the [Netherlands](#), [Belgium](#) and [Germany](#) that provided a platform for women’s testimonies about day-to-day experiences with sexual violence and harassment in public and private spaces. These stories resist definitions of sexual violence that single out supposedly innate Arab sexism or public and group harassment, as categorically different from a broader spectrum of sexual abuse, including rape and harassment in private spaces and intimate partner violence. These narratives, and the responses to them, also highlight the pervasiveness of victim blaming and so-called “slut shaming” within the wider European context and the consequent [social pressure to stay silent](#).

The second type of argument is more analytical and seeks to highlight existing knowledge, activism, and research findings around sexual violence in Germany, and Europe more generally, all of which have been virtually ignored in the debate about the Cologne sexual assaults. Research around sexual violence in general and sexual harassment in particular continues to be scarce in Europe compared to available data on other types of violence, but the research findings that are available clearly demonstrate its deeply disturbing pervasiveness. The [largest, and first Europe-wide, investigation into the issue](#) was conducted in 2014 by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). It demonstrated that sexual violence is “an extensive human rights abuse” across Europe. One in three women reported some form of physical or sexual abuse since the age of fifteen. More than half of all European women, including sixty percent of German women, reported that they had experienced sexual harassment or stalking since the age of fifteen. Only thirteen to fourteen percent of the women surveyed across Europe reported their worst incident of partner or non-partner violence to the police. [Research](#) conducted by the German Ministry of Family Affairs in 2014 found that one in seven German women have experienced sexual violence, while one in four have experienced domestic violence. Only eight percent of the women surveyed had filed a police report.

In Germany in particular, some feminists have [criticized](#) the [absence of statutory legislation](#) against sexual harassment and the problematic legal definition of consent. According to a 2015 [review](#) of German gender equality policies by the European Parliament, eighty-five to ninety-five percent of rape survivors do not file a police report. In 2012, only 8.4 percent of reported acts of sexual violence resulted in a conviction. The report attributes these dismal statistics to the definition of rape and sexual assault in Article 177 of the German Criminal Code concerning rape and sexual assault. Survivors must have been physically coerced for perpetrators to be prosecutable. The verbal lack of consent of the victim does not qualify as grounds for prosecution. These serious legal lacunae make it nearly impossible to police and punish the kind of pervasive sexual harassment of which the events in Cologne were one, albeit unusually highly publicized, instantiation.

In a [recent piece](#) published in the German edition of *Vice* magazine, Stefanie Lohaus and Anne Wizorek of the German feminist collective [Ausnahmslos](#) (“No Excuses”) addressed the social stigma that survivors of sexual assault continue to face as another cause of the low rate of police reports and convictions. One of the reasons why so many women reported the sexual assaults in Cologne, Lohaus argued in an [interview](#), is that the perpetrators were already widely and publically framed as guilty. In “ordinary” cases of sexual violence, this kind of support from the survivor’s social environment is rare and thus the risk of going to the police far greater.

The framing of the assaults in Cologne as “imported” and thus exceptional in both their form (public group harassment and theft) and causality (“Arab culture” or “Islam”) erases this broader context addressed by German feminists and women’s organizations and exceptionalizes street harassment at the expense of attention for the much wider spectrum of physical and sexual violence demonstrated by the FRA report. It also glosses over the wide range of policy changes demanded by the [Council of Europe’s Istanbul Convention](#) on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence that came into force on 1 August 2015 and which Germany ratified.

Moreover, the racialization of violence against women as a quintessentially “Arab” phenomenon renders invisible the widespread and documented incidence of racially and religiously motivated public violence against Muslim and Arab women in Europe. Following the attacks in Paris last year, [British](#) and [Dutch](#) anti-Islamophobia initiatives documented a spike in physical and verbal attacks against Muslims, predominantly perpetrated by white men. The vast majority of the victims were women. In relation to this, in January of 2016 French Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve told French newspaper [La Croix](#) that attacks against Muslims reached an all time high in 2015, with four hundred incidents across the country.

The racialization and culturalization of sexual violence invalidates – and worse, jeopardizes – the work of citizen initiatives across Europe and in other parts of the world to shift attention from the

perpetrators of sexual assault to the general culture of silence and complicity that makes this type of violence possible. In recent years, several citizen initiatives have sprung up across Europe and the US that have made the pervasiveness of sexual harassment more visible through research, mapping and grassroots education. In the UK and in the Netherlands, the initiatives [Hollaback!](#) and [Straatintimidatie](#) (Street Intimidation) respectively, found that fear of sexual assault results in nearly universal self-protection strategies among women and LGBTQ individuals, such as not going out late at night or avoiding certain areas. In Spain, feminist and women's organizations have been organizing for years to stop the rise of sexual assaults and rape during the celebration of the [San Fermín](#) bull-running festival. In the US, "[Stop Street Harassment](#)" found in 2014 that, in some states, as many as eighty to one hundred percent of women have experienced some form of street harassment.

These organizations have identified the widespread stigmatization of survivors as well as the passivity of bystanders as major factors that perpetuate sexual violence. Therefore, the focus of these initiatives is on educational efforts that address the general public, and sometimes men exclusively. The racialization of sexual violence or its exclusive attribution to particular groups of men (whether ethnic minorities or class-based groups) undermines these efforts and denies the underlying culture of silence, complicity, and structural gender inequality that enables violence against women.

Conclusions

The Cologne sexual harassment and assaults can never be excused, regardless of the origins of their perpetrators. However, it is imperative to deconstruct the racist rhetoric that has singularly ascribed such forms of sexual violence to Middle Eastern and North African men, highlighting the politics this rhetoric obscures. Sexual violence has been both decontextualized and instrumentalized in Egypt and Germany in parallel ways, through slightly different means but with similar ends. In both contexts, the underlying intent of the politicization of sexual violence has been to deter and discredit either protesters in the case of Egypt, or migrants and refugees in the case of Germany and Europe. This politicization of sexual violence allows particular political actors, parties and movements to exclude those they denote as "other." Instead of creating an environment free of impunity for sexual violence, such politicization continues to silence the voices and struggles of women whose experiences and activism are rendered invisible in the political arena. Therefore, it becomes far more important to pay attention to the forms of sexual violence that women across Europe regularly suffer and the daily struggles of groups seeking to combat such violence. Only then might it be possible to better understand and more appropriately respond to the sexual harassment and assaults that occurred in Cologne and other locales in Europe.

In addition, there is a critical need to discuss how the Cologne incidents have elided the very complex and long-standing situation of discriminations faced by migrant and refugee populations

in Europe. More nuanced and detailed analyses are required to better understand Europe's insecurities with respect to its minority populations and the deployment of technologies for constructing knowledge and policing that continually position migrants and refugees as a potentially criminal entity prone to such collective sexual assaults. Within this context, the politicization of sexual violence is not concerned with women, per se, but is singularly geared toward obscuring the voices of migrants and refugees that have long been making their way into Europe. It invalidates their experiences of poverty and war, obfuscates their need for assistance as a result of the role that Europe – as well as the US – have played in generating the politico-economic conditions and conflicts that precipitate im/migration, and dehumanizes them as people deserving opportunities to live safe and fulfilling lives.

Acknowledgments: For her contribution in researching, editing and providing beneficial feedback in the writing of this piece, the authors would like to expressly thank Renata Moreira Fontoura, an MA student in the Department of Post-Graduate Studies in Anthropology at Federal Fluminense University (UFF) and member of the Center for Middle East Studies (NEOM) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Tags: public space, sexual violence, *taharrush*, xenophobia, Islamophobia, Cologne, Germany, Egypt, activism, refugees, migrants.

Quotes:

“Exoticized and rendered foreign in the European context, the use of *taharrush* renders invisible the reality of gender-based and sexual violence already prevalent within European society.”

“Reporting has elided the complex circulation of discourses across transnational spaces within which the meaning of *taharrush* has emerged as a signifier of public sexual harassment in Egypt.”

“There is a critical need to discuss how the Cologne incidents have elided the very complex and long-standing situation of discrimination faced by migrant and refugee populations in Europe.”

¹ See FIDH, Nazra for Feminist Studies, New Women Foundation, and The Uprising of Women in the Arab World, “Egypt: Keeping Women Out. Sexual Violence Against Women in the Public Sphere.” Joint Report, 2014. https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/egypt_women_final_english.pdf. See also Vickie Langohr, “‘This is Our Square.’ Fighting Sexual Assault at Cairo Protests,” *Middle East Report* 268 (2013). <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer268/our-square>.

² Kamel Daoud's theses have been vocally opposed by scholars in the region. On 11 February, 19 scholars wrote a response to Daoud's [early analysis](#) of the Cologne sexual assaults,

printed in *Le Monde* on 31 January. The collective response was published in English on Jadaliyya.com.

³ Angie Abdelmonem, “Reconceptualizing Sexual Harassment in Egypt: A Longitudinal Assessment of el-Taharrush el-Ginsy in Arabic Online Forums and Anti-Sexual Harassment Activism,” *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research* 1, no. 1 (2015), 23-41. <http://gsrc-mena.org/kohl/reconceptualizing-sexual-harassment-in-egypt/>.

⁴ Vickie Langohr, “‘This is Our Square:’ Fighting Sexual Assault at Cairo Protests,” *Middle East Report* 268 (2013). <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer268/our-square>.

⁵ See, for example, Lila Abu Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Sherene Razack, *Casting Out: The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008); Gargi Bhattacharyya, *Dangerous Brown Men: Exploiting Sex, Violence and Feminism in the ‘War on Terror’* (London: Zed Books, 2008).

⁶ Simone de Beauvoir’s words, quoted by Marine Le Pen, were: “Never forget that all it would take is a political, economic, or religious crisis for women's rights to be called into question.”

⁷ See Paul Amar, “Turning the Gendered Politics of the Security State Inside Out?” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 13, no. 3 (2011), 299-328; and Asef Bayat, “The ‘Street’ and the Politics of Dissent in the Arab World,” *Middle East Report* 33 (226). <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer226/street-politics-dissent-arab-world>.

⁸ See Nadia Ilahi, “You Gotta Fight for Your Rights: Street Harassment and Its Relationship to Gendered Violence, Civil Society, and Gendered Negotiations.” Unpublished MA thesis, American University in Cairo, 2008. http://dar.aucegypt.edu/bitstream/handle/10526/3259/Ilahi_Thesis_AUC.pdf?sequence=1; Fatima Peoples, “Street Harassment in Cairo: A Symptom of Disintegrating Social Structures,” *The African Anthropologist* 15 no. 1&2 (2008), 1-20; Helen Rizzo, Anne M. Price, and Katherine Meyer, “Targeting Cultural Change in Repressive Environments: The Campaign Against Sexual Harassment in Egypt,” Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights Report, 2008. http://ecwronline.org/pdf/studies/AntiHarassment_for_ECWR.pdf.

⁹ See, for example, Hind Ahmad Zaki and Dalia Abd Alhamid, “Women as Fair Game in the Public Sphere: A Critical Introduction for Understanding Sexual Violence and Methods of Resistance,” *Jadaliyya*, 9 July 2014. http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/18455/women-as-fair-game-in-the-public-sphere_a-critical; Paul Amar, “Turning the Gendered Politics of the Security State Inside Out?” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 13, no. 3 (2011), 299-328; Vickie Langohr, “‘This is Our Square:’ Fighting Sexual Assault at Cairo Protests,” *Middle East Report* 268 (2013). <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer268/our-square>; Vickie Langohr, “New President, Old Pattern of Sexual Violence in Egypt,” *Middle East Research and Information Project* (2014). <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero070714>; Mariz Tadros, “Reclaiming the Streets for Women’s Dignity: Effective Initiatives in the Struggle Against Gender-Based Violence in

Between Egypt's Two Revolutions," Institute for Development Studies, Evidence Report #48: Empowerment of Women and Girls, January 2014.

<http://www.wluml.org/sites/wluml.org/files/Tadors%20Reclaiming%20the%20Streets.pdf>;

Mariz Tadros, "Politically Motivated Sexual Assault and the Law in Violent Transitions: A Case Study from Egypt," Institute for Development Studies, Evidence Report #8: Sexuality, Poverty & Law, June 2013.

<http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/123456789/2950/ER8%20final%20online.pdf?sequence=1>.

¹⁰ See Nicole Sunday Grove, "The Cartographic Ambiguities of HarassMap: Crowdmapping Security and Sexual Violence in Egypt," *Security Dialogue* 46, no. 4 (2015), 345-364; Loubna Hanna Skalli, "Young Women and Social Media Against Sexual Harassment." *Journal of North African Studies*, 19, no. 2 (2014), 244-258; Chelsea Young, "HarassMap: Using Crowdsourcing Data to Map Sexual Harassment in Egypt." *Technology Innovation Management Review* (2014).

http://timreview.ca/sites/default/files/article_PDF/Young_TIMReview_March2014.pdf.

¹¹ Moser, Caroline O.N., "The Gendered Continuum of Violence and Conflict: An Operational Framework." In *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors? Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence*, eds. Caroline O.N. Moser and Fiona Clark (London, Zed Books, 2005). Mariz Tadros, "Politically Motivated Sexual Assault and the Law in Violent Transitions: A Case Study from Egypt," Institute for Development Studies, Evidence Report #8: Sexuality, Poverty & Law, June 2013.

<http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/123456789/2950/ER8%20final%20online.pdf?sequence=1>.

¹² Angie Abdelmonem, "Reconceptualizing Sexual Harassment in Egypt: A Longitudinal Assessment of el-Taharrush el-Ginsy in Arabic Online Forums and Anti-Sexual Harassment Activism," *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research* 1, no. 1 (2015), 23-41. <http://gsrc-mena.org/kohl/reconceptualizing-sexual-harassment-in-egypt/>.

¹³ See Helen Rizzo, Anne M. Price, and Katherine Meyer, "Anti-Sexual Harassment Campaign in Egypt," *Mobilization* 17 no. 4 (2012), 457-475.

¹⁴ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London, New York: Routledge, 1992).

¹⁵ See, for example, Diane Singerman, *Avenues of Participation: Family, Politics, and Networks in Urban Quarters of Cairo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); and Lucie Ryzova, "'I am a Whore but I Will be a Good Mother': On the Production and Consumption of the Female Body in Modern Egypt." *Arab Studies Journal* 12/13, no. 2/1 (2004/2005), 80-122.

¹⁶ FIDH, Nazra for Feminist Studies, New Women Foundation, and The Uprising of Women in the Arab World, "Egypt: Keeping Women Out. Sexual Violence Against Women in the Public Sphere." Joint Report, 2014.

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