

# Introduction

*Thomas Feltes\**

Currently, we are experiencing a number of unsettling occurrences all over the world that are concerned with sexual violence against women. At the same moment, and as a reaction to these violations, women and men alike are standing up to discuss the cultural background and social circumstances of these numerous abuse cases against women, and are demanding a consequent, prompt, legal and socio-cultural reaction by governments, laws and societies, in order to change and finally stop sexual violence against women. Much of the media focus has been on India, South Africa and Brazil – brutal sexual assaults, many of which executing bodily harm with fatal consequences, have shocked the world and drawn attention to a great and, until now, mainly hidden societal problem. The victim could be any woman: young or old, single or married, educated or non-educated. But more often than not, it seems that especially the young, educated, and active women are threatened by sexual aggression. This is especially evident in many Middle Eastern countries in the societal movements of the “Arab Spring”, where female students actually became targets of male gang action, whose aim was to sexually attack politically involved young women. Taking a glance at these various occurrences, it is obvious that these sexual and aggressive actions have to be assessed within the particular cultural, social and religious context they occur. In this sense, the

components of sexual aggression are different and not easily compared, but as with all assaults, equality has to be estimated with the male appraisal that women are potentially “open” to become sexually victimized.

Germany is also having a current discussion on sexism and sexual aggression, and the medial debate ranges between trivialization of the potential harm caused and strong indignation towards the supposed woman-hostile societal and professional structures we still live in. Universities, as institutions with a high potential of awareness concerning gender equality and often a concerned institutional policy, react to this arising discussion with the aim to finally at least offer adequate support to victims and to signalize a consequent zero tolerance policy towards (potential) perpetrators.

Due to their age and lifestyle, female students as a group are especially at risk from various forms of sexual violence – the aim of the three-year European-wide research project “Gender-based Violence, Stalking and Fear of Crime” (2009-2011) was to verify this hypothesis and to collect, analyse and compare relevant data in five European countries. The EU project, which has been funded through the program “Prevention of and Fight against Crime” and initiated by the EU Commission on General Justice, Freedom and Security, was coordinated by the Department of Criminology at the Ruhr University Bochum in

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\* Head of the Department of Criminology and Police Science, Faculty of Law, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany

Germany. In addition, the consortium covers the University of Bologna, Jagiellonian University in Cracow/Poland, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona/Spain and Keele University in the U.K. The victimisation of young women through sexual harassment, stalking and sexual violence, along with their fear of crime, and their need for support, were the subject of an online questionnaire made available at universities in Germany, Italy, Spain, Poland and Britain, to which some 22,000 students responded. An evaluation of these quantitative data were undertaken, along with additional material gathered through interviews with both female students and with experts in support services and the criminal justice system. The resulting insights were used to formulate recommendations for strategic prevention and intervention to counter victimisation from sexual violence. Their aim is to reduce young women's fear of crime and to find ways of guaranteeing them improved support and greater security and safety at their places of study. Two surveys were conducted in the winter of 2009/10 and 2010/11 at 31 higher education institutions in the five European partner countries which were selected on the basis of their representativeness. With the help of an online questionnaire, a combined and shared data base of 21,516 respondents was set up to provide information on gender-based violence, stalking and fear of crime. The results themselves have filled a gap in relevant research on violence by confirming the initial thesis that female students are affected to a higher than average extent by incidents of sexual violence, based on their age and their life circumstances. The students were asked about their sense of safety at the university,

the ways and the extent to which they have been affected by sexual harassment, stalking or sexual violence, the consequences this has had for them, whether they told anyone about the incident and, if so, to whom, as well as their awareness of support services and what kinds of support they would ideally want. It soon became apparent that the survey itself had served as a means of generating greater awareness among the young women of the everyday nature of violent sexual assaults:

*"I was surprised that I had so much to say. I had already virtually forgotten about my experiences or suppressed them and thought I'd have to put a tick next to "no" all the time. Now I've become aware of the fact that it's almost normal for a woman to have experienced this or that negative incident."* (Female student in online questionnaire).

The results themselves have filled a gap in relevant research on violence by confirming the introductory statement above, namely, that female students are affected to a higher than average extent by incidents of sexual violence, based on their age and their life circumstances. At the same time, an evaluation of the quantitative and qualitative data clearly shows that, contrary to the facts, the myth of the anonymous male perpetrator attacking women in public spaces in the dark stubbornly persists. The reality - that serious sexual assaults are carried out principally by individuals well-known to the victim from their close circle of friends - is thus ignored by the women at the expense of their own safety. This may account for the result that, when assaulted by someone they know, female students often feel

partly responsible for it and therefore tend to be reticent to tell anyone about what happened.

Overall, the project's progress and its outcomes had a significant impact on different aspects:

- Concerning research, the research topic was elucidated with regard to the nature of gender-based violence, stalking and female students' fear of crime, and both a broad and representative database for this topic and a comprehensive explanatory model for the topic were established.
- In regards to professionals, the project made an important contribution to raising the awareness among different groups of professionals (stakeholders within the universities as well as those beyond, such as support services, police and the justice system) - in some cases for the first time ever. It got a new discourse going at universities, based on the quantitative and qualitative data available, and prompted the design and implementation of prevention and intervention programs for reducing victimisation and supporting female student victims.

In regards to institutions of higher education, the launch of the survey highlighted the question of whether academic institutions, as students' temporary educational and living environment, should feel responsible for such personal experiences and whether they should contribute actively to the prevention of sexual assault in any form. The search for institutions of higher education to take part in the national roll-outs actually showed the difficulties of universities more or less in every participating country in dealing with the topic, while struggling with

national, cultural and economic-political challenges. The current economic and political context in which national universities are suffering include significant funding cuts, a lack of awareness on the topic, a lack of understanding that this issue is part of the university authorities' area of responsibility, the possible weak position and political influence of the gender equality departments or units within the university structure, and finally issues pertaining to university reputation and student anonymity. At the same time, the response of the students to the survey showed that they value such a commitment by the university very highly. This perception finally enhances the general feeling of well-being at university for students.

For female students, both the survey itself and the reported outcomes contributed to a greater awareness of a problem thus far largely neglected. It also brought to light the existing and widespread incidents of sexual violence, as well as the need for adequate help from the university. In presenting its recommendations for prevention and intervention, with taking into account of all areas of university life, the research project seeks to help enable female students to perceive their university as a place where they are guaranteed safety, support and trust during this important period of their life. The students saw the project as an "initial spark" that might trigger a change in attitude towards the problem. Generally, the female students felt that they were being taken seriously by their universities by being addressed through this project:

*"I think it's wonderful that a test like this is being done, it shows me that it's important to the*

*university that its students feel safe and at ease on the campus” (German student in focus group).*

Other students drew our attention to a further aspect: it is not only a matter of a lack of structural foundations available in victim assistance, but it also concerns a weak motivation to act:

*“There are women waiting for ten years before calling the free phone number set up for help; this means that they knew the institutional framework existed, but they did not turn to them as a result of fear. Therefore an awareness campaign should get to the bottom of this problem and infuse courage into them to do the first step” (Italian student in focus group interview).*

The following articles provided by the different project partners show both of the similarities of the country-specific outcomes. Altogether, it is obvious from the data that female university students are not at a greater risk of sexual violence than women of a similar age in the general community, and may actually be less at risk while at university. In comparison with the overall female population, however, young women in this age group (16-24) are affected to a greater extent, taking into account the different types of gender-based sexual violence. Most of the perpetrators of

sexual violence against female university students are people who are known to the victim, though this varies by type of sexual violence. Female university students generally feel quite safe whilst at university - except when walking alone on university premises in the dark. This fear reflects the stereotype of the violent stranger. Victims of sexual violence are, for a variety of reasons, very reluctant to disclose their experiences to universities or state authorities. But there are also differences that potentially result from cultural exposure to sexual violence and its societal perception. These different approaches are especially obvious between the Southern and Northern European countries in regards to the relevance of the family in the context of (missing) disclosure and the contents of gender roles in intersexual relationships.

For further information, the project website [www.gendercrime.eu](http://www.gendercrime.eu) provides comprehensive information on the quantitative and qualitative outcomes of the project, as well as the recommendations to universities regarding the best practices moving forward.