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Abstract

Sexual violence research is often not limited to the direct perpetration of violence, but also focusses on the (inter-)personal processing of the violence experienced. This article presents the various ways in which female survivors of sexual violence in German concentration camps were denied recognition of their suffering, both by the representatives of the Nazi regime in the camps, as well as by their fellow prisoners and finally by the German authorities after the war. In order to understand these complex forms of victimisation, I examine various reasons why women's experiences were often misrepresented and not taken seriously, thereby silencing the victims and making them almost invisible (deprivation of credibility). Against this background, I show why the deprivation of credibility, long after the physical assaults, should be understood as a persistent form of harm.

Keywords

sexual violence, concentration camp, ongoing harm, withheld reliability and recognition

Introduction

Sexual violence research is often not limited to the direct perpetration of violence, but also focuses on the (inter-)personal processing of the violence experienced. In the case of women who have survived sexual violence and the Holocaust, two major issues have come forth in discussions, issues which highlight that the victims were and are partly denied their own experiences: (1.) Survivors of the Holocaust were quite often confronted with the inability, or simply the unwillingness of their counterparts, to listen to them if they wanted to talk about their painful ordeals while in concentration camps. If they found willing listeners, they were often not believed (e.g., Greif, 1999; Sinnreich, 2010; Rosenthal, 1999; Sommer, 2009). (2.) Women who were sexually assaulted were/are often confronted with the accusation of lying about the incident because they sought notoriety, wanted to profit from their accusation, and/or secretly enjoyed the assault (e.g., Manne, 2019).

On the first issue, multiple survivors, whether they were victims of sexual violence or not, reported conversations with acquaintances, friends and even family members, who did not want to believe their dreadful experiences. One example is the experience of Shaul Chasan. He was a survivor of the so-called Sonderkommando — prisoners who had to remove the bodies from the gas chambers and keep the crematoria running in Auschwitz-Birkenau. In an interview with the historian

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Gideon Greif, he recounted the story of how he was frequently not believed. Chasan recalled an incident where while he and his brothers were eating with friends in a restaurant in Greece, his brother's friends encouraged him to talk about Auschwitz. He started to describe his experiences, but when he paused, he was mocked¹ (Greif, 1999, p. 325). Chasan's own brother questioned his credibility in front of those present at the restaurant.

Hört auf, mit ihm zu reden, er ist nicht ganz richtig im Kopf. Kann man das glauben, was er erzählt? Menschen sollen sie verbrannt haben? [Stop talking to him, he's not quite right in the head. Can you believe what he's saying? You think they burned people?] (Greif, 1999, p. 325)

In another example, this time in Israel, other members of Chasan's family did not want to believe him either:

Als ich nach Eretz Israel kam, besuchte ich einen Onkel in Jerusalem, und die gleiche Geschichte wie in Griechenland spielte sich auch hier ab. Ich begann zu erzählen, und er wollte nichts hören: „Red nicht solche Sachen! Meinst du, ich glaube dir?!“ Auch er glaubte mir nicht, und wieder galt ich als unzurechnungsfähig. [When I came to Eretz Israel, I visited an uncle in Jerusalem, and the same story that happened in Greece happened here, too. I started to tell him, and he didn't want to listen: "Don't talk like that! Do you think I believe you?" He didn't believe me either, and again, I was considered insane] (Greif, 1999, p. 326)

Instead of trusting him, Chasan's listeners casted doubt on his memories and his sanity. Chasan and other survivors were confronted with the assumption that they had gone mad because the suffering in the concentration camp had what could be translated as "dried out the brain" (Greif, 1999, pp. 7–8). Chasan went on to say that after he had been repeatedly not believed, he even began to doubt himself and his own memories (Greif, 1999, p. 326).

On the second issue of sexual violence, the question of whether the victim of abuse did feel pleasure during the act has dominated debates surrounding rape. Even today, in everyday life, during criminal proceedings, and in countless newspaper articles, the question of whether the victim welcomed the assault is frequently discussed (Wolters, 2018, p. 50). The victim is often accused of not clearly communicating the lack of consent. Regardless of whether they defended themselves physically or verbally, the affected victims (or survivors) are frequently suspected of having enjoyed the rape. The victim often feels the pressure to prove that they did not consent to this violation. In addition, they are often doubted, and those who assume they will not be believed often remain silent about the injustices they have suffered. Rapists are also frequently unreported, and if a reported case ends up in a trial, the perpetrators are rarely convicted (Mühlhäuser, 2013, pp. 166–169). Such trends lead to the further stigmatisation of the sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) victims, and their experiences of sexual violence being considered a taboo. Both aspects (i.e., that they felt pleasure during the act and that the onus is on them to prove their non-consent) prevent them from reporting the crimes.

In this article, I argue that the women affected by sexual violence in concentration camps were/are trapped in a harmful, perpetual process that is characterised by the deprivation of credibility and refusal of recognition, two mutually reinforcing concepts. While attempts were made to try to articulate the violence faced, these attempts were a failure (refusal of recognition; for reasons which I will explore below). As a result, these women "chose" silence, which further reinforces the refusal of (the) recognition of said violent acts, thus having these women being deprived of their credibility. To understand this specific form of harm, I will not only look at the direct acts of violence; instead, I will focus on the more marginalized and indirect aspects — namely, denied credibility and refused recognition. If these aspects are ignored, only an incomplete or distorted image emerges of what the affected women had to face.

¹ Author has provided translations for the directly quoted material for readers' convenience.

Sexual Violence Against Women During the Holocaust

Sexual assaults on persecuted women and girls took place in many different locations throughout the Holocaust — in domestic settings, on the street, in prison, in ghettos and, of course, in concentration and work camps (Havryshko, 2020). This article deals with different forms of sexual violence in the concentration camps. The following statements should by no means be regarded as exhaustive. Life and death in the camps were highly influenced by sexual abuse. Already the admission procedure (including the first roll call) was shaped by different elements of sexual violence and is often considered a central moment in the accounts of survivors (Alakus et al., 2006, p. 119). One female survivor described her arrival in Birkenau as follows:

Ich kam nach Birkenau und das war für mich ganz schrecklich, weil du weißt eh, da ist man komplett nackt ausgezogen (worden), weil das Gewand einem weggenommen worden ist, und es sind die Haare geschoren worden, das war das Allerärmste für mich [...] und plötzlich kam die SS durch, und so als junges Mädchen habe ich mich so umgedreht, weil ich ganz nackt dort gestanden bin. Das dürfte der eine (SS-Mann) überzogen haben und ist zurückgekommen und hat mich umgedreht, hat mich von Kopf bis Fuß gemessen und gesagt: „Bist ja doch eine dreckige Saujüdin!“ Das werde ich nie vergessen, das war das Allerschrecklichste. [I came to Birkenau and that was terrible for me, since you know, you were stripped completely naked, because your robe was taken away and your hair was shaven, that was the worst thing for me [...] and suddenly the SS entered, and as a young girl, I turned around because I was standing there completely naked. One of them (SS man) must have felt it was necessary to a double-take, and he came back, turned me around, measured me from head to toe, and said: “You're a dirty Jew's sow after all!” I'll never forget that. It was the most horrible thing.] (IKF-Rav-Int. 3_I, p. 3; cited in Amesberger et al., 2016, p. 91)

Having to strip completely naked in front of the wardens was a terrible experience for this woman. No matter how fragmented the memories of survivors are, almost every woman mentions the admission procedure and the forced nudity (Amesberger et al., 2016, pp. 90–101). Forced exposure was also used as an additional means of punishment during roll call. This experience was described as particularly degrading, especially in winter, during selections in general or when relieving oneself (Halbmayr, 2009, p. 143).

Rape also took place in concentration camps. The Jewish survivor Elias reported:

Einige Male erschien plötzlich die SS in unserem Block. Das Tor zum Block wurde aufgerissen, und die SS-Leute fuhren auf ihren dröhnenden Motorrädern besoffen in unseren Block ein. Die Musikkapelle wurde hereinbefohlen, und die SS-Männer begannen, zu singen und weiterzutrinken und sich, durch die Musik angetrieben, in ihre Laune hineinzusteigern. Ohne Scham fingen sie an, sich Mädchen aus den Bettstellen herauszuziehen, jüdische Mädchen, welche sie mit sich nahmen, um sie dann zu vergewaltigen. Vergewaltigung jüdischer Mädchen war erlaubt. Das war doch keine Rassenschande. Es ist unmöglich zu beschreiben, in welchem mitleiderregenden Zustand diese armen Geschöpfe zurückkamen. [The SS appeared without warning in our block a few times. The gate to the block was torn open and the SS men rode drunkenly into our block on their roaring motorcycles. The marching band was ordered in and the SS men began to sing and drink and, spurred on by the music, they became more aroused. Without shame, they began to pull girls out of their beds; Jewish girls, whom they took with them and raped. The rape of Jewish girls was allowed. It was not a racial

defilement. It is impossible to describe the pitiful state in which these poor girls returned.] (Elias, 1991, p. 147; cited in Amesberger et al., 2016, p. 171)

Numerous stories from other survivors tell of similar incidents (Sinnreich, 2010, p. 111). Sintiza survivors also reported that young Sinti women always lived in fear of being raped (or the *next* rape, for those who were raped before) (Amesberger et al., 2016, p. 171).

In addition to the rapes, there were also so-called love affairs between wardens and female inmates. In contrast to rape, these were less tolerated by the SS themselves. Such liaisons were usually kept secret because the people involved would otherwise face severe punishment. The risk for the SS member depended on his position; the higher his rank, the less he had to fear (for e.g., imprisonment). Although these relationships could be life-threatening for the women, there were some existential reasons for them to get involved anyway. The most common purpose was simple bartering, whereby sex was exchanged for food. However, these relationships should be by no means be trivialised for they were extremely violent and characterised by a strong power hierarchy. It would be incorrect to say that the women voluntarily opted for these relationships. Every decision in the concentration camp was always linked to the individuals' consideration of their own chances for survival. Such relationships could significantly increase the women's chances of survival because these men offered them more bread, clothing, and better protection. However, the women also exposed themselves at increased risk if the man lost interest in them or if others discovered the relationship. The women were also subjected to extensive hostility from their fellow inmates during their imprisonment; many inmates regarded engaging in sexual contact with the wardens as collaboration with the enemy (Amesberger et al., 2016, pp. 178–187).

Another major aspect of sexual violence in the camps are, of course, the camp brothels. Brothels existed in ten concentration camps: Mauthausen, Gusen, Flossenbürg, Buchenwald, Auschwitz-Stammlager, Auschwitz-Monowitz, Dachau, Neuengamme, Sachsenhausen and Mittelbau-Dora. These camp brothels were set up for certain prisoners² between 1942 and 1945 on the orders of Heinrich Himmler (Sommer, 2009, p. 12). The number of men the forced sex workers had to deal with on a day-to-day basis varied from camp to camp but was always meticulously organized by the camp administration. The survivor, Mrs. W, reported:

Wir mussten jetzt jeden Abend die Männer über uns rübersteigen lassen, innerhalb von zwei Stunden. Das hieß, die konnten rein, mussten ins Ärztezimmer, sich ne Spritze abholen, konnten zu der Nummer, also zu dem Häftling, konnten ihre Sachen da verrichten. Rein, rauf, runter, raus, wieder zurück, kriegten sie nochmal ne Spritze. Der Häftling musste raus. Wir hatten ein Badezimmer mit soundsoviel WCs. Also an Sauberkeit hat es da nicht gefehlt. Und dann kam gleich der nächste wieder. Am laufenden Band. Und die hatten nicht länger wie ne Viertelstunde. [We had to let the men climb on top of us every evening for two hours. That meant they would come in, go to the doctor's room, get an injection, go to the number, i.e., to the prisoner, and do their business there. In, up, down, and back out again, they got another injection. Then, the prisoner had to leave. We had a bathroom with many toilets. So, there was no lack of cleanliness. And then the next one came in straight away. Non-stop. And they had not lasted longer than a quarter of an hour.] (Mrs. W. in Mieder & Schwarz, 2003)

The use of condoms is not known from any of these brothels. The women had to bear the risks themselves and were required, among other things, to douche after sex. Inevitably, some women became pregnant. In such cases, the women were forced to have abortions and had to

² This text deals exclusively with the camp brothels for the inmates. There were also brothels for the guards of the concentration camps, the so-called *Totenkopfverbände*. They probably existed in Buchenwald, Mittelbau-Dora, Flossenbürg, Mauthausen, Dachau and Auschwitz (I, II, III) and have hardly been researched to this day and are not part of this article (Alakus et al., 2006, p. 78–80).

resume forced labour in the brothel after a short break (Sommer, 2009, p. 212). The brothel visits were intended exclusively for particularly hard-working and important inmates and were by no means open to all prisoners. Eligible prisoners had to pay a small fee to visit the brothel, part of which was officially supposed to go to the women, although in all probabilities, the SS kept all of this money. Not a single contemporary witness reported being paid for her work in the brothel (Sommer, 2006, p. 47). When recruiting for the brothels, the SS always followed the strategy of maintaining the myth of voluntary registration for this type of work. This influenced both the women's immediate situation and their future reappraisal. The men of the SS shifted the responsibility for the women's fate onto the women themselves. This manufactured voluntariness had far-reaching consequences. Many of the other prisoners disassociated themselves and became hostile towards these women. This gave rise to the myth that the women themselves were to blame for their situation by "voluntarily" reporting. In addition to the sexual violence, the women were exposed to disparaging and hurtful remarks from their fellow inmates. Many women's harrowing experiences of sexual abuse in the camps were either not believed or not taken seriously (Alakus et al., 2006, pp. 143–152).

In addition to the specific situation concerning sexual violence in concentration camps, there is a general tendency not to believe victims of sexual violence (for e.g., Manne, 2019; Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2022).

"They Made Me Doubt Myself": On the Destabilisation of Interpretations of Sexual Violence

There is a widely-shared taboo surrounding rape — discourses on rape are characterised by a certain image of the victim, portraying the survivor as having been harmed in a way that can rarely be cured. According to cultural scientist Mithu Sanyal, the victim's fate is often interpreted as something worse than death (Sanyal, 2016, p. 52). Ideas about the perpetrators also play a role here. Often, it is believed they have committed an unforgivable crime from which they can hardly rehabilitate from or resocialise themselves. Sex offenders have the potential to arouse the wrath of the masses, especially if the victim is considered innocent. At the same time, everyday forms of sexual violence are normalised and trivialised by denying them the status of "real" rape. Laura Wolters concludes that there is an incredibly powerful and ambivalent rape taboo that determines our thinking along the dichotomy of violence and sex (Wolters, 2022, p. 60). She continues that the way we look at the victims of rape today is initially determined by pathology and ultimately by the narrative of traumatisation. I argue that this is essential because it also influences how we perceive survivors and whether we perceive them as credible witnesses. According to Wolters, there is a certain historical continuity in the interpretation of sexual violence: What rape violates is not necessarily physical. Rape can damage or affect aspects of honour, innocence, hysteria and/or trauma. All terms indicate that sexual violence not only damages the body but is *more* than that. There are different interpretations of what this "more" may mean (Wolters, 2022, p. 78). Shaming and punishment in the context of abuse carry a whole arsenal of cultural set pieces, interpretations, and implicit theories. It refers to normative ideas of sexuality, gender, purity, honour, and much more (Wolters, 2022, p. 97).

In contrast to other acts of violence, suffering from sexual abuse is often accompanied by a destabilised interpretation of the harm experienced. Victims are frequently denied an unambiguous interpretation of the abuse they have endured. This can be done not only by perpetrators but also by third parties (Wolters, 2022, p. 278).³ A person beaten up on the street may not be able to count on the empathy of others without reservation but can assume that his or her experience will be unequivocally recognised as a negative, unwanted experience. Victims of sexual violence, on the other hand, are regularly denied this acknowledgement. In the case of sexual violence, the attack targets not only the body that is sensitive to pain, but also the body that is capable of pleasure. Social scientist Gaby Zipfel concludes that the entanglements of sexuality, violence, and shame already arises during the assault. According to Zipfel, sexual violence is essentially an attack on the body that feels pleasure: "Sexual violence subjugates the victim's body through pain and at the same time takes possession of its libidinal sensibility" (Zipfel, 2018, p. 91). Therefore, shame in connection with sexual violence means a feeling of complicity, which results from the involvement of one's own sexually-sensitive body. The assault imposes a disturbing uncertainty on the person concerned about their own feelings: *How can violence that is done to you be accompanied by physiological arousal?*

³ One example of this is the incident which occurred on New Year's Eve in Cologne, Germany, in 2015, when several women were sexually assaulted. When they approached the police and other security staff for help, they were not believed. In some cases, the women were even sent back into the crowds from which they had just fled. The authorities dismissed what was done to the women by sending them back into the crowds and exposing them to the perpetrators again (Wolters, 2022, p. 273).

In the worst case, this experience leads to dissociative experiences for the victim — at least situationally. The victim's own body can be experienced as an accomplice in the attack on themselves. It is not entirely uncommon for victims of sexual abuse to exhibit signs of sexual arousal during the assault (Levin & van Berlo, 2004). Victims describe this as additionally disturbing, shameful, and confusing. This is neither an exoneration for the perpetrator nor a paradoxical triviality. It is precisely the empowerment over the libido of another that Zipfel wants to place at the centre of the concept of sexual violence (Wolters, 2022, p. 95).

Moreover, forced acts of cooperation are often part of the victim's experience of the assault. In this way, the perpetrators also gain access to the victims' interpretations of the situation. This unsettles victims in their unambiguous perception of the event and influences, or restricts, their available range of actions (Wolters, 2022, p. 284). Among other cases, Wolters refers to the case of Debbie, a survivor of a gang rape. In an interview, Debbie remembers how she started to distrust her own perception and doubt her interpretation. She described how her interpretation of the situation was made fragile by the perpetrators, who repeatedly tried to make her complicit in the violence that had been inflicted upon her, until ultimately, her authority to interpret her own experience of the ordeal was taken away from her (Wolters, 2022, pp. 211–212).

On the one hand, this means a special act of exercising power by the perpetrators because they are able to enforce cooperation. On the other hand, this also means (almost contradictorily) that the victim has a perceptible scope for action, which generates feelings of shame, co-responsibility, and complicity (Wolters, 2022, p. 219). In this way, the victims' experiences of evidence are called into question, and suddenly, the violent nature of the harm inflicted on them is also called into question. They are compelled to participate in the forced interactions, and this compulsion creates ambivalent interpretations in the victims (Wolters, 2022, pp. 221–222). The described feelings of shame and guilt indicate that the experience of sexual violence and in particular, the forced participation in this interaction leaves its mark on the victims. These can seldom be removed by subsequent countermeasures. As a result, the victims are denied stable interpretations of violence. Of course, this does not imply that sexual violence accompanied by a stable interpretation of violence is less horrific or that the victims have ambivalent feelings about their own will or the desirability of the interaction. They experience their own interpretation as fragile insofar as they are not (or cannot be) validated in the interaction. The sexual violence here is not just an act in which the victim is objectified. The most distressing aspect for the women, in retrospect, is not that they were turned into objects but rather into victims that feel like accomplices (Wolters, 2022, p. 222). Perpetrators carry out violence as persons on persons, in that, in most cases, on subjects with agency, on subjects capable of acting. As another survivor reported: “[T]hey didn't just rape us, they took away our self being, they humiliated us, they cast so much shame onto us, they made me doubt myself. They've just changed every single little thing about me” (Wolters, 2022, p. 211, original in English). In the context of victim blaming, certain options for action on the part of the victim (even before the crime) are interpreted as complicity. For victims of sexual violence, forced acts of cooperation also mean considerable uncertainty about their own authority of interpretation (Wolters, 2022, p. 209).

In addition, Wolters comes to the rather unexpected conclusion that sexual violence can not only be viewed as something standing outside the ordinary, but instead, has continuities with the mundane, the banal, and the sexual (Wolters, 2022, p. 282). She summarises:

Der Zwang zur Mitwirkung entzieht Opfern die Deutungshoheit über die ihnen angetane Gewalt und zwingt sie, stärker als der sexuelle Übergriff allein schon nahelegt, die erlebte sexuelle Gewalt nicht (nur) als Ausnahmezustand zu erfahren, der das Alltägliche auslöscht, sondern gerade auch in Kontinuitäten mit dem Sexuellen, mit der Welt und mit sich selbst. [The compulsion to participate deprives victims of the authority to interpret the violence inflicted on them and forces them, more than the sexual assault alone suggests, to experience the sexual violence they have experienced not (only) as a state of emergency that erases the everyday, but also in continuities with the sexual, with the world, and with themselves.] (Wolters, 2022., p. 222).

Samira Bellil, who is also a survivor of a gang rape, reported an interplay between physical and sexual situations of violence and phases of rest. This alternation between extreme violence and

banality was also extremely upsetting for her. In retrospect, she described the contrast between assault and small talk as particularly disturbing:

Durch mein Verhalten habe ich das unangenehme Gefühl, gefügig zu sein. Aber was soll ich tun? Ich will doch nicht sterben! Jahrelang hat mich dieser Gedanke gequält. Ich fühlte mich schuldig, weil ich mich nicht gewehrt hatte. [My behaviour gives me the unpleasant feeling of being submissive. But what should I do? I don't want to die! I was tormented by this thought for years. I felt guilty because I hadn't resisted.] (Bellil, 2003, p. 30; cited in Wolters, 2022, p. 128)

On the Disregard of Gender-Specific Violence in the Concentration Camps

The process of dealing with the extreme violent past of the National Socialist Regime in Germany initially began without considerations of the gender-specific experiences of women. For a long time, the memorials in Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, and Mauthausen did not even address the fact that there were also, in existence, assigned women's camps (Alakus et al., 2006, p. 118). In 2005, the topic of forced sex labour finally gained greater attention with the exhibition, *Sex-Zwangsarbeit in NS-Konzentrationslagern* (Forced Sex Labour in NS Concentration Camps in Mauthausen) (Alakus et al., 180–182). The existence of camp brothels was mentioned only 70 years after the end of the war in the implicated memorial sites (Schneider, 2017, p. 9). The suffering endured by forced sex workers went unmentioned for a long time. According to Monika Hauser, the founder of the women's rights organisation *medica mondiale*, remembering is always connected to its flip side: forgetting, defense, and denial. Women who were raped in the context of war are on the fringes of social debate and historical reappraisal. For the survivors, decades of non-recognition mean marginalisation (Hauser, 2006, pp. 86–90).

Insa Eschebach also concludes that forced sex work in the camp brothels was and is highly taboo and subject to double invisibility. Firstly, even during the National Socialist regime, brothels were not shown during guided tours of the camps. Second, some of the brothels were and still are not mentioned on guided tours of the concentration camp memorials after 1945. The existence of the camp brothels was therefore made taboo both by the SS leadership and by the work of the memorial sites (Eschebach, 2006, p. 13). Historian Robert Sommer also describes the work of the memorial sites in connection with the camp brothels as a policy of repression. At the memorial site of the former concentration camp Dachau, the barracks of the camp brothel disappeared from the grounds of the memorial site in 1960; similarly, records also showed these barracks having disappeared from the blueprints. When the memorial was designed, the camp brothel was deemed unworthy of remembrance and was quickly erased from the presentation of the past (Sommer, 2009, p. 16). The worries (of the former prisoners) that this would create a false image of the concentration camp, one that had "entertainment opportunities" for the male prisoners, certainly also played a role (Paul, 2006, pp. 98-99). Meanwhile, there was an increased interest by historical research on the topic of camp brothels. The subject is partially addressed at the memorial sites where brothels existed. In the Ravensbrück Memorial, for example, the topic was dealt with extensively, forming a significant part of the exhibition. According to Sommer, the qualitative dimension of the camp brothels is, unfortunately, still often overlooked (2009, p. 19). Not only was the disregard of the different experiences based on gender in the concentration camps an issue, but also the derogatory way in which some scientists wrote about the affected women.

Stigmatisation of Affected Women in Scientific Publications

The fact that most forced sex workers in the camp brothels did not receive rehabilitation or compensation payments can also be seen as an aspect of the consistent stigmatisation of the victims in various publications. It was not only the women's former fellow inmates who reported disparagingly against them, but also academics whose work contributed to the fact that most of the women affected preferred to keep their experiences of sexual violence a secret. Historian Falk Pingel categorised the brothel under the heading of cultural activities in the concentration camp (Pingel, 1978). In doing so, Pingel thus categorised visits to the camp brothels as a possible leisure activity for male inmates and completely ignored the sexual exploitation of women that took place there. The suffering of those affected went unmentioned in his remarks. Similarly, Wolfgang Sofsky only touches

on the subject of forced sexual labour in a peripheral way. Sofsky only refers to the female forced sex workers as *whores* whom the male prisoners could meet in the concentration camp brothel:

Für sexuelle Bedürfnisse hatte er (der privilegierte Häftling, K. R.) einen jungen Knaben oder eine Frau im Bordel. [For sexual needs, he (the privileged inmate, K. R.) had a young boy or a woman in the brothel.] (Sofsky, 1999, p. 176)

In the first edition of Sofsky's book, *Die Ordnung des Terrors: Das Konzentrationslager* (1999), *woman* was originally referred to as *whore*. Neither the author nor the publisher commented on the change in the revised edition. It is also not clear at whose suggestion the change was made. In the chapter on labour and slavery, Sofsky then explains the bonus system within the camp. However, he does not categorise forced sex work as a form of forced labour, but instead, considers it to be one of the privileges of a few male prisoners (Schneider, 2017, p. 21).

Eugen Kogon, a political scientist and sociologist, and a survivor of the Holocaust, also wrote about the forced sex workers in an equally derogatory way in *Der SS-Staat* (1947). The book is now in its 47th edition and has been translated into twelve languages. Kogon writes about the women who were forced to work in a camp brothel:

Die mitgebrachten Krankenblätter wiesen immerhin überstandene Krankheiten von einer Art aus, die nicht gerade einen übermäßig seriösen Lebenswandel ihrer Vor-KL-Zeit dokumentierte. Bis auf wenige Ausnahmen haben sie sich in ihr Schicksal ziemlich hemmungslos gefügt. [The medical records they brought with them showed illnesses they had survived of, the kind that did not exactly document an overly respectable lifestyle in their pre-KZ days. With a few exceptions, they accepted their fate rather blithely.] (Kogon, 1974, p. 194)

Kogon's and Sofsky's accounts are significant, even if, or precisely because they only mentioned the fate of the women concerned in passing. These depictions were read countless times and thus had a lasting impact on the image of the forced sex workers and their history (Schneider, 2017, pp. 21–22). While the texts by male authors were widely printed and read, the eyewitness accounts by women, especially those who were victims of sexual violence, were considered insignificant (Schneider, 2017, p. 35). Not only were the stories of the affected women hardly ever presented accurately and completely in academic publications, even their former fellow inmates did not acknowledge their suffering.

Stigmatisation by Fellow Inmates

According to Christa Paul (1994), in her essay on forced prostitution in German concentration camps, women who had already worked as prostitutes prior to their imprisonment were already stigmatised and discriminated against inside the camp itself. If women were selected for forced sex work in Ravensbrück, then taken to other camps for the forced sex work, and then returned, they were also affected by severe stigmatisation and discrimination (Paul, 2006, p. 91). Fellow inmates claimed that the women working in the brothels had unlimited access to food, alcohol, cigarettes, elegant clothing, jewellery, soap, and perfume, which further intensified the hostile environment for those affected. In a written report in the archives of the Ravensbrück Memorial, a former inmate concluded:

Zu dieser Arbeit meldeten sich unsere Prostituierten freiwillig und betrachteten es als Ehre, ausgewählt zu werden. [Our prostitutes volunteered for this work and considered it an honour to be chosen.] (Ravensbrück Memorial Archive Doc. 42/986, p. 22; also cited in Paul, 2006, p. 97)

Further, Auschwitz survivor, Eva Lingens-Reiner, criticised the women who testified during investigations that they had been forced to work in the brothels and had lied (Paul, 2006, p. 97).

Additionally, the call for the political prisoners to boycott the brothels was not justified by the fact that the women suffered severe sexual violence as part of forced sex work, but by the assumption that the SS wanted to corrupt the political prisoners by forcing them to visit a camp brothel. Not all political prisoners complied with this boycott call. In *Der gesäuberte Antifaschismus* (1994), historian Lutz Niethammer refers to documents from a political party, the SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands) party investigation in 1946. Among the topics covered in these records are the brothel in Buchenwald and the behaviours of the communists imprisoned there (Niethammer, 1994). For the SED, the question of whether the men had complied with the boycott of the brothel had become a benchmark of the men's political integrity. There were mutual accusations between surviving communists from Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen as to who had visited the brothel during their imprisonment. Some men were afraid that they would not be able to make a career in the SED because of these accusations. This circumstance further promoted the men, who visited a camp brothel, to remain silent about their experiences. The perspective of these men would certainly be important in order to paint a more accurate picture of the camp brothels and is completely missing today. Moreover, former political prisoners also contributed to the fact that camp brothels were not mentioned in memorial sites and publications. The taboo was justified by the assumption that otherwise, a false image of everyday life in the concentration camp would emerge (Alakus et al., 2006, pp. 176–182).

Paul argues that it was precisely the taboo that led to a false image being conveyed. Forced sex work was, in fact, part of everyday life in many concentration camps, even if only a few prisoners (in proportion to all prisoners) were allowed to visit the brothel (Paul, 2006, pp. 98–99). It can be summarised that a derogatory tone can often not only be found in past academic publications regarding the women who had to work as forced sex workers, but also in reports by fellow inmates.

On the Significance of Holocaust Literature and Hegemonic Narratives

Today, an almost unmanageable amount of literature about the Holocaust is available. However, only a small number of these literary testimonies have established themselves as canon, shaped many other narratives and, thus, the academic discourse on the subject. Narratives that deviate from this canon are perceived as disturbing because they confront the reader with preconceived expectations and problematise routine processing.

According to Dennis Bock (2017), analyses of narratives about the Holocaust have shown that individual accounts follow dominant, sometimes hegemonic, narrative structures. One narrative pattern, for example, is that survivors' accounts unfold along specific stages. Certain places or scenes in the camp are described, for example, the arrival at the camp and the selections; the arrival at the ramp in Auschwitz-Birkenau has developed an almost archetypal character. Depending on the place, time, and situation, a relatively constant ensemble of characters has also developed. According to Bock, in the process of reading Holocaust literature, the reader acquires not only general knowledge about German history, but also, implicitly, certain narrative patterns, characters, and storylines. This can create expectations in the reader. The recipient then associates the topic of the Holocaust with recurring events. For example, the topic of Auschwitz is associated with deportation and selection (Bock, 2017, pp. 62–68).

These dominant narrative patterns have displaced and/or marginalised other narratives. I argue that sexual violence is one of these marginalised narratives. Although sexual violence must have been omnipresent in the concentration camps, it was merely recognised in the aftermath. One example is how the books of Jewish writer and Holocaust survivor Yehiel De-Nur are handled in Germany. De-Nur was one of the first to write down his experiences in Auschwitz. However, his texts are not personal accounts of his experiences but represent a kind of literary memory of many. De-Nur's books, therefore, not only contain his own experiences, but also fictional characters and plots that are intended to bundle the memories of the so-called *Ka-Tzetniks* (a Yiddish term for a prisoner in a concentration camp). De-Nur published under the pseudonym *Ka-Tzetnik 135633* because, according to his own statement, he did not want to be constantly associated with the traumatic experiences of the Holocaust. His identity was finally revealed at the Eichmann trial in Israel in 1961.

In two novels, De-Nur deals with the sexual abuse of the underage siblings Daniella and Moni. While De-Nur's stories have fallen into oblivion in Europe, they are still among the most important works of remembrance culture in Israel today. The Israeli Ministry of Education even made the books part of the curriculum in public schools in 1990. In the two books, *House of Dolls* and *Piepel*, sexual violence is widely discussed to capture the cruelty of the concentration camps. De-Nur wanted to present a picture that shows the Holocaust in all its atrocities, including sexual violence. He

broke many taboos with his novels. In response, he was accused of creating perverted novels that were pornographic and insane. As a result, his books were increasingly considered taboo and reduced to pornographic trashy literature by (especially European) historians and publishers (Bashja & Zinner, 2017, p. 81). While in Israel, De-Nur's work was seen as an important step towards breaking the silence about sexual violence during the Holocaust, the books are almost completely unknown in Germany or are hidden among the shelves of sleazy pornographic literature (Sivan, 2010).

The Ideal Victim

The survivors' struggle for recognition after 1945 led to the early development of certain Holocaust narratives that were considered bearable and re-countable. As a result, only specific groups and individuals were able to tell their stories and be heard. This allowed certain stereotypical representations to emerge, those which overshadowed the actual historical facts. Suffering, hard work, hunger, pain, deprivation, and exploitation characterised these narratives. In addition, the refusal of any form of collaboration and corruption as well as the resistance of the survivors were placed at the centre of the narratives. The stories of the women in the camp brothels were overshadowed by other stories from other prisoners. The dominant narrative of the victim was mainly determined by male prisoners, some of whom had visited the camp brothels themselves (Schneider, 2017, pp. 20–21). Most of the early reports about the concentration camp brothels were written by former political prisoners. These eyewitness accounts endorsed the suffering and behaviour of the political prisoners and devalued the fate of the forced sex workers. Many survivors, therefore, had to conceal or reinterpret certain aspects of their fate in order not to lose their victim status. This was also related to the compensation that officially recognised victims of National Socialism could receive (ibid., pp. 27–34). Martin Sabrow noted:

Um seine auratische Kraft als Mittler zwischen Vergangenheit und Gegenwart ausbeuten zu können, muss der Zeitzeuge daher eine Reihe von Anpassungsprozeduren durchlaufen und Zulassungsschranken überwinden, die seinen Opferstatus sichern oder im Extremfall auch seine mögliche Täterrolle kaschieren... [In order to be able to exploit the power of his auras as a mediator between the past and the present, the contemporary witness must therefore undergo a series of adaptation procedures and overcome admission barriers that secure his victim status or, in extreme cases, conceal his possible perpetrator role...] (Sabrow, 2012, p. 29; cited in Schneider, 2017, pp. 33–34)

During the Holocaust, women (and their fates) often had to conform to stereotypical gender roles. Women were characterised as caring, self-sacrificing, or loving. Above all, they remained stuck in their roles as mothers and wives. Women could earn some recognition when they conform to prevailing gender roles. Alongside stereotypical gender roles and associated images, gender was a neglected category. The standard for acceptable narratives of fate was set by men and so the most credible narratives were male themselves. For a long time, the testimonies of female survivors were considered insignificant and were hardly noticed. The lives and deaths of women in the Holocaust were reduced to a background narrative. The camp brothels in particular did not fit into the preferred picture. After all, the male prisoners who visited the brothel also became perpetrators when they raped the women who were forced to work there. This fact did not fit into the clear dichotomy of perpetrator-victim relationships (Schneider, 2017, pp. 34–35).

Recognition of Victim Status in Courts and Society

For many survivors of sexual violence, liberation from the concentration camps did not mean the end of their stigmatisation. In particular, women who were exploited as forced sex workers in the camp brothels were not immediately recognised as victims of National Socialism. Instead, they were sometimes even accused of complicity. Margarethe W. is one of the few women who spoke about her experiences as a forced sex worker in Buchenwald after 1945. In an interview, she talked about her problems after the war. After her imprisonment in a concentration camp, she became seriously ill and suffered from epileptic seizures until old age. After the war, she lived in the GDR (German Democratic Republic). Two former political prisoners, whom she had met in Buchenwald, helped her to obtain a pension as a political victim of fascism. Margarethe W. later moved to FRG (Federal

Republic of Germany). Here, however, she was not recognised as a victim of Nazi persecution because she had been classified and imprisoned as a so-called asocial person.⁴ It was not until 1988 that she was able to obtain a small amount of ongoing financial support from the hardship fund of the state of Schleswig-Holstein. Two years later, Margarethe W. died of a stroke. On the day of her death, she was informed by the court that her compensation pension had been denied (Alakus et al., 2006, pp. 186–187). The awarding of compensation was not only based on compliance within the deadlines and the nationality of the victims during their time in concentration camps. Persecuted persons also had to prove that the damage to their health was indubitably caused by persecution and detention. These damages were often played down by the consulted experts and blames were put on reasons other than the experiences in the concentration camp. Also, the psychological and psychosomatic consequences were not taken seriously during the evidence-gathering procedures. Throughout the compensation proceedings, survivors were often confronted with the perpetrators. In addition, many doctors, civil servants, and judges from the National Socialist regime continued to work in their previous roles. In some cases, the same people who had decided a few years earlier whether to send the persecuted to a concentration camp were now acting as experts and examining and assessing the damage to the health of their victims. Some even ruled as judges on the awarding of said compensation. The information from the National Socialists' files often carried more weight in the proceedings than the statements of the survivors themselves (Alakus et al., 2006, p. 184). Some of the former forced sex workers were accused of collaboration. Women who were raped outside the brothels, for example, as *mistresses* of SS men, were also accused of the same thing. The victim status of all these women was called into question, and with it, their right to reparation. If the women broke their silence about the sexual abuse they had suffered, they could lose their entitlement to compensation payments. Only one application for compensation is known, in which the surviving woman was able to claim the severity of her depression and that her nervous breakdowns were due to the sexual violence she suffered in a camp brothel (Sommer, 2009, p. 237).

According to historian Claudia Schoppmann, the division of victims into these categories of whether they were worthy or unworthy of compensation and the hierarchisation and exclusion of former victims of persecution did not end after 1945. This exclusion can still be seen today, for example, in the inadequate representation of certain persecuted groups in memorials and compensation proceedings. For example, homosexuals (another persecuted group) who were deported to a concentration camp did not receive compensation payments in either the FRG or the GDR (Schoppmann, 1997, pp. 268–269). Survivors who had to wear the brown, black or green triangle (the black (formerly brown) angle was used for “asocial” inmates and the green angle for criminals [Schneider, 2017, p. 30]) in concentration camps were also excluded from compensation payments. Survivors, therefore, had to provide individual proof that they were victims of National Socialism for political, religious, or racial reasons to receive the corresponding payments. Survivors unable to provide this proof were not officially recognised as victims by either state (GDR and FRG) and thus considered unworthy of compensation (Schneider, 2017, p. 30). The classification of the value and unworthiness of suffering in post-war German society (Schneider, 2017, p. 33) meant that some victims of National Socialism were not recipients of any reparation attempts, compensation or otherwise. Consequently, there are still people (if they are alive today) who have also never received rehabilitation. It was only through the commitment of various non-governmental organisations and the perseverance of individuals such as Christa Paul and Reinhild Kassing that some forgotten victims were persuaded to claim their right to have their victim status recognised (Sommer, 2009, pp. 17–18).

It is not a new observation that sexual assaults form part of terror and war, and yet they are so taboo (especially in public) that these crimes continue to be concealed instead of being remembered so that the victims are finally given a voice (Turner, 2016, p. 17). Sexual violence was part of the National Socialist terror (Paul, 1994, pp. 134–136). The lack of institutionalisation (no legal recognition of victim status, hardly any representation in memorial sites, the underrepresentation in academic publications, no annual lectures on the subject, etc.) means that the fate of the women is increasingly disappearing from view. If there is a lack of institutional resonance, if a topic is not part of the routine work of institutions, it is also largely forgotten (Illouz, 2019, p. 88).

⁴ Asocial is a National Socialist umbrella term under which supposedly inferior people were categorised and persecuted, including, for example, the Roma and Sinti, homeless people, prostitutes, and alcoholics. For more information on the concept and history of the so-called asocials, see, for e.g., Amesberger et al. (2021).

Only recognition and institutionalised remembering can help to prevent the horrors inflicted on women from being consigned to oblivion.

Concluding Remarks

In this article, I wanted to show that women who were raped in concentration camps are subject to two ways in which the victims' credibility, their sanity, and ultimately the accuracy of their reports are called into question: (1.) as survivors of the Holocaust and (2.) as survivors of sexual assault. To show this, I reconstructed the ways in which women, who suffered sexual abuse in concentration camps, were denied accountability and recognition. I aimed to show that this denial is a form of harm that goes beyond the actual physical act of the endured abuse. Firstly, in the years immediately after liberation, the topic of gender was ignored in analyses of the Holocaust. Secondly, the reports of women who were victims of sexual assault in the camps were not taken seriously, ignored, or written about in a derogatory way. Both scholars and former fellow inmates have often marginalised or completely misrepresented the plight of these women. In particular, female prisoners who were forced to work in the camp brothels were denied their status as victims and were even accused of collaboration. These women were rightfully concerned that they would be denied the status of victims of National Socialism, which went hand in hand with them not receiving the corresponding compensation payments. To understand this specific form of harm, it is therefore insufficient to only look at the actual acts of violence; instead, the treatment of the women and their experiences (after 1945) must also be understood as a form of harm.

In summary, the approach of HARM can help us understand how to recognise certain violations as such. Finally, I argue that forms of omission can also be harmful, for instance, the failure to include camp brothels on camp maps or tours, the omission of speeches and commemorative events on the subject, and the omission of texts on women's suffering from standard historical works. The lack of representation is ultimately a form of denied recognition that can marginalise and damage the survivors further, even long after the physical violence they suffered has ended.

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