

## **“Sexism is not a ‘women’s issue’”: Interview with Anne Wizorek**

Anne Wizorek is a consultant for digital strategies and online communication, blogger and feminist. She is one of the initiators of the Twitter-campaign "#aufschrei" and provided an important contribution to the German debate on sexism. She regularly writes on her blog [Kleinerdrei](#) and is an avid [tweeter](#).

### **1 How did #aufschrei get started?**

The beginning of #aufschrei has almost become a legend by now. It always sounds as though we read the article about Rainer Brüderle and then sat down and started sharing our stories because of it. Of course that is completely bogus. What happened on Twitter had absolutely nothing to do with that article – those two things just happened to take place at the same time. This misunderstanding about how #aufschrei started also shows what was so problematic about that debate in the beginning - the fact that a lot of people concentrated on the Brüderle-story and did not understand that it was just one small puzzle piece in the big construct of [everyday sexism](#).

### **2 So, you feel that the topic was not taken seriously enough? Or to put it differently, do you think that #aufschrei would have received as much attention had it not coincided with the story on [Rainer Brüderle](#)?** (More information on the background of #aufschrei can be found [here](#).)

I don't know about that. Of course, it was a catalyst for us and got us immediate media attention outside of Twitter. But I can't say whether we would have gone completely unnoticed otherwise. In the end, it also worked so well because so many were brave and ready to share their stories. That shows that we struck a nerve.

### **3 What is your impression of the debate now, looking back on it? Where are we at now in relation to the original aim?**

I am of two minds on this. In some ways, there is now a noticeable awareness about the topic and people understand that we need to be in an ongoing dialogue on this. But through the debate a lot of people also showed their real face. This is a topic where you notice quickly what makes someone tick. If you take a look around at how the media handled the topic, there were a lot of things I'd rather not have to read again. For example all of the essentialist arguments – that men are hormone-driven and can't control their behavior, or that women would rather play victim than fight back.

Another example was the reaction to our [open letter](#) to the president, Joachim Gauck. Many people accused us of only having written the letter to keep the debate active at all costs. There was also a tendency to read the letter as an attack, when we clearly signalled our intent to have a dialogue. The backlash to feminism was easy to see in the reactions – we were just the perpetually unhappy, angry women who always have something to whine about.

**4 One of the problematic issues was also how the debate was framed in the media. There was a marked tendency to generalize the issue. I am thinking here of your appearance on (the German talk show) *SternTV*, where the host insisted on presenting sexual harassment as clumsy flirtations. Such generalizations preclude serious conversations about systemic oppression and abuse of positions of power.**

Yes, it was extremely difficult to make it plain that we were not, in fact, talking about misunderstandings. Sexism is about clear-cut cases of harassment, where it is clear that it is not wanted – also for the person who is doing the harassing. There are studies that show that both men and women know exactly which kind of behavior is not okay.

With these attempts at trivializing the issue it was easily noticeable that the people in question did not want to understand. It appears that senior editors are still predominantly male. I saw this especially in the fact that almost all interviews I did were with female journalists, there were almost no male journalists interested in talking about this. This also served to relegate the topic to a “women’s issue”. I rarely felt that people understood that this is a human rights issue, something that concerns an entire society. That is unfortunate. Instead of talking about the core of the problem, we were often stuck explaining basic concepts – that we are not talking about flirtation here, but about harassment and abuse and systems of oppression that do not just target white, heterosexual women. I always tried to point out the ways in which transphobia, heterosexism and racism play into this, but that was often the first thing that was ignored.

**5 What is your perception of the public response? Did they really grasp the core of the problem?**

I am of two minds on this, as well. I received many messages that gave me a good overview of people's reactions. Aside from the many women who write, I also heard from a lot of men who were grateful for the campaign, since it also exposes and criticizes certain types of masculinity. From men who understand now what feminism is all about. #aufschrei was an eye-opener for many of them, and now they get how widespread sexism is. But of course

there were also those men who felt the need to explain to me that we should not equate sexism with sexualized violence. Many just did not see the connection – of course those terms do not mean the same thing, but they need to be discussed side by side because they are interrelated. And naturally, there was unfortunately also veritable hate-mail, from men as well as from women.

**6 Do you think it is problematic that it is was not only men but also women who did not make these connections? We spoke with many acquaintances who also insisted on "just not letting it get to you" or "not taking things too seriously".**

Of course it does not help at all when we have female celebrities saying things like, "if someone grabs your butt, just slap him, what's the problem?", instead of recognizing that the problem lies in him thinking he can just grab your butt in the first place. Those reactions show just how internalized sexism often is. Of course that is painful to see. But it shows us that we have to continue to work hard to raise awareness.

**7 Do you feel that women in Germany are developing a different relationship with feminism as a response to #aufschrei and the sexism-debate?**

Just yesterday I attended an event where I spoke to two women who did not have a positive relation to feminism. To them, feminist were those women who work in Women's Studies departments – the idea was very remote and abstract for them. Through #aufschrei, they learned what it is really about, and that it is also something that concerns them. Maybe also because it was not marked as an explicitly feminist topic. The stories that the Twitter-users shared were very emotional and personal – that touched a lot of people. You can read the statistics and be shocked, but for many that's really just abstract figures. But through these stories from people around them, they could put a face to the topic, it became tangible. That is what really drove it home for many of them.

I was particularly moved by an e-mail from a woman who expressed her gratitude because through the campaign, she was able to talk to her husband for the first time about the things that happened to her. I mean, imagine this – they are married, and she never before talked to him about what it is like for her, as a woman. That's what really shows how taboo that topic is in our society. It's omnipresent, and yet so invisible at the same time.

There was also criticism, of course – people felt that we were encouraging a victim mentality. But I don't think that's what this is about, on the contrary. You have to give a name to these things, because the issue has to be tackled by society as a whole. It's no use for any one

person to try to muddle through. And exactly that act of voicing things that usually remain unsaid is incredibly empowering. It is important to have this opportunity to realize that you are not to blame and that there is no reason to be ashamed. For many, it is exactly this self-blame and shame that make everything even worse than the violation itself.

**8 That is pretty sad, considering that the feminist foremothers already discovered this in the 60s with consciousness raising events.**

Yeah, it's not as though we haven't already been there before. But our generation has this mentality of, "oh, we no longer need feminism, we have already achieved everything".

**9 So there is a basic lack of awareness?**

Yes! My favorite example, which is still incredibly wide-spread, is that of the little boy who teases a little girl. And when she complains about it, she is told, "don't make such a fuss, he just likes you". That is where it starts. At that young age, when we have our boundaries violated and no one takes it seriously. How are we supposed to learn to be aware of our boundaries?

And when it comes to our generation, I get the impression that many women don't realize something is wrong until they enter their professional lives. And then they see men zooming past them while they have to work three times as hard. And if they then also express the wish to have a family, it gets really complicated.

**10 What should our next step be? The topic is out in the open now – how can we take advantage of that moment? How do we push aside generalizations and bad jokes and enter a serious dialogue on sexism and feminism?**

This is something that needs to be tackled on all levels. In a political context, I think installing a women's quota, for example, can help create a less sexist working environment.

Above all, though, I see this potential on a personal level. In my experience, and this was confirmed again with the feedback to #aufschrei, the situation is the way it is largely also because men keep their mouths shut. For example, when they see a friend crossing a boundary, they often do not have the courage to say, "hey, this is not okay". They are afraid such a reaction would make them look "soft". But men should become more active. Not only when they witness a situation in their circle of friends, but also for example if their favorite brand starts a sexist marketing campaign, that they'll say, "no, I won't buy this anymore". I wish that they would start to rebel, that they leave behind this comfortable status quo where

they just cross their arms and say, "this is a women's issue, there is nothing I can do, anyway". When men, especially, become visible as allies, that is a huge step in the right direction. A great example for this is the [Ring the Bell](#) campaign.

Role models, of course, are very important in this. Unfortunately, few men in positions of power in Germany really reacted in an exemplary way in this debate. On the contrary: We have a president who claims not to see the problem.

**11 Awareness is also created via terminology. The term feminism has a negative connotation these days – how can we change that? How can we make feminism accessible for a new generation?**

Personally, I am a great fan of media such as blogs and social networks, and of presenting information in ways that are accessible and easy to digest. You can see this working nicely with US blogs such as Feministing.com, founded by Jessica Valenti. I would also like for us to work more with German terminology and really develop a language for our feminism instead of using English terminology that feels alien to many. And most of all: We need to become visible. It was a great benefit for us that we grew closer together as a community through #aufschrei. Additionally, I would like for male allies to become more visible to show: this is something that we need to tackle together.

We also need to work on the representation of the term "feminism". I saw in many conversations that feminism is often viewed as a monolithic concept, shaped largely by Alice Schwarzer. We should show that there is not just one feminism, but that we all contribute our own thoughts and ideas and are always in an open dialogue.

**Editor's Note:** Some information on the debate from an academic perspective can be found [here](#).)