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## **Germany's Catholic Church struggles with women and power**

***Catholic women are demanding change in the church and giving Germany's bishops an earful as they meet in Fulda. The bishops are under pressure — from the progressive grassroots at home and from a reluctant Vatican.***

By Christoph Strack

DW (23.09.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2n5MS1u> - They won't let up. Catholic women protested in the central city of Fulda ahead of the plenary assembly of Germany's Catholic bishops on Monday afternoon. "We want to be visible and audible. And I believe that we owe it to the women and men of the Catholic Church that we are heard more," said Mechthild Heil, head of the Catholic Women's Community of Germany (kfd). With 450,000 members, the biggest Catholic women's group in the country is pressing for women to gain access to all church offices — including the priesthood.

Heil and around 150 kfd members demonstrated in Fulda, making their way through downtown with a group of drummers, banners, placards and big pink crosses on their way to the seminary next to the cathedral. There they issued their demands to the bishops and spoke with the head of the German Bishops' Conference, Cardinal Reinhard Marx.

The lead-up to this protest has been long: Nearly 10 years ago the scandal over sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in Germany broke as numerous cases at a Berlin Jesuit school came to light. New information, as well as increasing numbers of cases and reports from victims, has continued to emerge since then. In the past decades, well over a thousand priests committed tens of thousands of offenses against thousands of victims. They were hushed up and ignored until a study in autumn 2018 revealed the magnitude of the scandal. That prompted a growing discussion about patriarchal thinking in the male-dominated church and the relationship between abuse of power and sexual abuse.

But the issue is also about women. "We can't avoid the question of women," said Osnabrück Bishop Franz-Josef Bode, vice chair of the German Bishops' Conference. Bode and other bishops have been calling for a debate about allowing female deacons in the church.

Many prominent nuns go further still. Women should "pose the power question," said Sister Katharina Ganz, mother superior of the Oberzell Franciscan convent, and underlines that no pope has said that excluding women from the ministry — as deacons, priests or bishops — is part of church dogma.

## Post from the pope

Bishops and laypeople in Germany want to embark on a "synodal path" and tackle fundamental questions. On the subject of women in church office, a preparatory working group found that as women and men are equal in legal terms in most countries, women's position in the Catholic Church does "not reflect the societal expectations of equitable participation in leadership services."

But there is a deep chasm in the church. In late June, Pope Francis wrote a letter to German Catholics that was interpreted as being as encouraging as it was admonishing. Ten days ago, important cardinals of the Roman Curia joined in and admonished the German bishops, while Cologne Cardinal Rainer Maria Woelki, Marx's most important opponent in the German Bishops' Conference, declared the discussion about women becoming priests over.

It remains unclear what will happen with the "synodal path." Marx spoke to Pope Francis late last week in Rome and will discuss those talks when he meets with the bishops, who are divided over "the women question."

"Somehow it harks back to the old days when Woelki says: 'The debate is over,'" said Heil of the Catholic Women's Community. Woelki's rejection is out of tune with the times. "It is the last attempt to say: 'I am putting my foot down,'" she told DW. There are issues of power and historical arguments for excluding women from the priesthood but there is no theological argument, she said.

That's why they're demonstrating. Every September for the past 10 years, Heil's group has rallied under the slogan "Stand up for a gender-equitable church!" But this is the first time there's been a full-throated demonstration like in Fulda.

## Compensation for abuse victims

There has been some movement when it comes to dealing with cases of sexual abuse. For the first time ever, a prominent representative of the victims will be allowed to speak to the assembly of bishops. Matthias Katsch, spokesman for the Eckiger Tisch victims' initiative, said he will present the 69 men with his group's recommendations for redress on Tuesday, which include financial compensation of €300,000 (\$330,000) for victims of sexual abuse. So far, the bishops have consistently rejected across-the-board settlements.

Monday's women's demonstration won't be the only protest during the four days of discussions. On Thursday, the group Maria 2.0 plans to demonstrate under the slogan "Now it's time: Women fight for their church," while the Catholic Youth Community (KjG) will push for "courageous" structural change in the church.

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## Domestic violence affects over 100,000 women in Germany

***For the first time, federal police have released national data on violence in relationships in Germany. The information shows that murder, sexual offenses, bodily harm and stalking are not uncommon between partners.***

DW (22.11.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2q1h1m5> - The Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA) together with the German Minister for Family Affairs, Manuela Schwesig, released the

statistics in Berlin on Tuesday. This is the first time police were releasing numbers showing the extent of violence in intimate relationships, the BKA said in a press statement.

According to the BKA's figures, in 2015, a total of 127,457 people in relationships were targets of murder, bodily harm, rape, sexual assault, threats and stalking. Eighty-two percent, or over 104,000, of these were women.

Among the women, over 65,800 suffered simple injuries, 11,400 were badly injured, 16,200 were subjected to threats and nearly 8,000 were victims of stalking. Three hundred thirty-one women were killed intentionally or unintentionally by their partners.

In cases of rape and sexual assault, almost all the victims were women. Over ninety percent of victims of stalking and threats were also female, according to the statistics.

In a press statement, the BKA's President Holder Munch explained that police had registered several cases of abuse, starting from subtle forms of humiliation, insults and intimidation, psychic, physical and sexual abuse to rape and murder.

"Domestic violence against women, against men, against children is not a private affair, it is a punishable offence and must be tracked accordingly," Family Minister Manuela Schwesig told reporters.

"Violence, that takes place within one's own four walls, in a place where one should feel secure, is unfortunately true for many women. This taboo, of not speaking about it, must be broken. For the first time numbers for this particular subject have been specifically evaluated," she added.

"We need these numbers, because they help in making domestic violence visible. They also help in developing measures to prevent and fight against domestic violence," she said.

Schwesig also urged victims to call the "Gewalt gegen Frauen" (Violence against women) helpline at 08000116116. The 24-hour number offers free counselling to victims in 15 languages.

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## **Cologne sex attacks: MPs debate tougher laws**

***The German parliament is debating draft laws to give women more protection in sexual violence cases.***

BBC (28.04.2016) - <http://bbc.in/1Oko4d2> - Dozens of sexual assaults in Cologne on New Year's Eve shocked Germany, increasing the pressure to pass tougher laws on rape and molestation.

The new legislation could make groping punishable in more cases.

Campaigners for women's rights want the "No means No" principle enshrined in law. They say a woman should not have to prove that she resisted physically.

Justice Minister Heiko Maas wants courts to be able to punish sexual violence in cases where a woman felt unable to resist physically.

It is argued that current German law does not adequately protect victims who come under sexual pressure, who lack any means to defend themselves or who are subject to a surprise attack.

The tougher legislation would include: a woman assaulted in a park without any witnesses nearby, or a wife assaulted at home at night, who does not want to distress her children.

The justice ministers of Saxony and Bavaria say groping ought to be punished by up to two years in jail or a fine.

The Saxony Justice Minister, Sebastian Gemkow, said it was time for the judiciary to treat groping as a criminal offence, not as a type of "insult".

"For the victims it's simply incomprehensible when the judiciary dismisses such cases as 'irrelevant'," he said.

### ***High-profile campaign***

Only one in 10 rapes is reported in Germany currently, the n-tv news website reports, and of those, the conviction rate is only 10%.

Some female celebrities are prominent in the "No means No" campaign, including writer and journalist Susanne Froehlich, actors Sibel Kekilli and Jasmin Tabatabai, musician Judith Holofernes and TV chef Sarah Wiener.

A leading campaigner in the Social Democrat (SPD) party, Elke Ferner, said the draft law under discussion still had shortcomings.

"Unfortunately the principle still holds that a women must fight back in order to prove that she resisted," she told Die Welt newspaper (in German).

"A 'no' must be sufficient to signal that there is no agreement.

"Of course that refusal would also have to be proven, but the law would thereby establish a norm which any moderately intelligent man could understand," she said.

Women made more than 550 complaints of sexual assault after the New Year's Eve celebrations in Cologne. Similar attacks also happened in Duesseldorf and Hamburg, on a lesser scale.

Victims described how suddenly gangs of drunken men - many of them North African migrants - surrounded them at night, groped them and stole items such as mobile phones.

Police say many of the attackers may never be caught. Several North African men have been convicted of theft.