

NSfK Meeting minutes 4/2024

Nordic Himpathy: The Social Construction of Responsibility and Sympathy in Cases of Sexual Violation or Rape

Working group meeting: 5 December – 7 December 2023 and 28 February – 1 March 2024

Host and minute taker: Sara Uhnöo

Names of Nordic delegate members:

Sara Uhnöo (SV), University of Gothenburg

Hannah Helseth (NO), Norwegian Center for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies

Päivi Honkatukia (FI), Tampere University

Hildur Fjólá Antonsdóttir (IS), University of Akureyri

Katrine Bindesbøl Holm Johansen (DK), University of Southern Denmark

The opinions expressed in these meeting minutes are the author's own and do not reflect the view of the Nordic Research Council for Criminology.

Background

In recent years, public debate and awareness around sexual violence as a political issue have intensified in the Nordic countries, most notably during the #MeToo campaign. This has been accompanied by legal reforms and discussions on consent-based rape legislation. Iceland and Sweden (2018), Denmark (2020), Finland (2023), and Greenland (2024) have implemented consent-based laws, while Norway is actively debating the issue. In Sweden, the rape law reform had an explicit ideological intent to shift norms and send a clear message to the public: sex without voluntariness is illegal.

The Nordic Himpathy working group aimed to deepen the understanding of social and legal constructs surrounding responsibility and sympathy in cases of sexual violence across the Nordic countries. The term himpathy—a blend of “him” and “sympathy”—captures the disproportionate sympathy often extended toward male perpetrators of sexual violence, frequently at the expense of female victims.

Outcomes

- During two working group meetings, members shared and discussed their research on various topics, including:

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- Sexual violence and sexual consent among youth.
 - Institutional responses from schools.
 - The processing of rape cases within the criminal justice system.
 - Criminal and non-criminal justice responses to sexual violence.
 - The effects of new consent-based rape legislation.
 - The defense of men accused under the #MeToo umbrella.
 - The Nordic mansphere and its relation to sexual violence.
- The group also explored the analytical potential of the concept of himpathy alongside related concepts such as herasure (erasure of her story) and epistemic justice.
 - Members began drafting a co-authored monograph examining himpathy and the social construction of responsibility and sympathy in cases of sexual violence across the Nordic countries.
 - A roundtable discussion on Nordic Himpathy was organized at the EUROCRIM conference in Bucharest in September 2024.

Recommendations

Expand Knowledge: Conduct further research into the barriers to achieving truly consensual norms in sexual interactions. This should include exploring himpathy and examining how responsibility and sympathy are understood and attributed in cases of sexual violence across Nordic countries, highlighting similarities and differences.

Inform Policy and Public Discourse: Contribute to public debate, scientific discussions, policy-making, and practice by providing new insights into the existence and influence of himpathy in the Nordic countries. The goal is to offer a nuanced perspective on gender equality challenges in the Nordic context, potentially informing both policy and public attitudes.

Host and minute taker

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Working group meeting

Working group meetings serve as a cross-professional expert forum in various areas of common concern for the Nordic countries and is funded by the Nordic Research Council for Criminology (NSfK).

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The Nordic Research Council for Criminology serves to promote criminological research in the Nordic region, and provides the governments with assistance in criminological matters and information on Nordic criminology.