

# Guide to dealing with sexual/sexualised violence within the Interventionist Left

Approved on 30 September 2017 at the general meeting in Frankfurt/Main

## I. Basic principles

Sexual/sexualised violence happens everywhere. Also within the left scene, also within the Interventionist Left (IL). This document was created to provide an initial guide to dealing with sexual/sexualised violence within the IL. When we speak of sexual/sexualised violence, we mean both violence that takes place in the context of a sexual act and violence that is an expression of the exercise of power. Violence can be either physical or emotional, and it can occur systematically. This guide is therefore intended to apply to all incidents of violence that occur along gender differences. The guide's aim is to contribute to establishing a common strategy and a common way of dealing with the situation in the case of an attack on one of our comrades. This is in order to act in solidarity with the victims<sup>1</sup>, to support them personally/politically and to empower them as well as to offer them – as far as possible - a safe space. Another aim is to create conditions in which the victim feels able to remain within our structures, as well as empowering them to be able to stay politically active. All members of the group are responsible to contribute to these aims.

Beyond that, this guideline marks the interim position in the discussion on dealing with sexual/sexualised violence within the Interventionist Left.

Within our organisation there exist different views on individual aspects, which we want to discuss and elaborate separately. Despite individual differences we are united in the aim to support attacked comrades. Everybody involved should be aware that it could be necessary to support the victim of sexual/sexualised violence in their everyday lives and that in any case they have to be included in the decision-making process. Our approach is based on partiality and solidarity with the victim. This means that we do not question the perception of the victim. It is up to them to say how they experienced the violence and only they should be allowed to define it.

Being partial is a political and conscious decision taken with the aim of supporting victims of sexual/sexualised violence in a society characterised by patriarchal and sexist power relations.

Most of the incidents of that violence never come up at all, because most of the victims never say anything, because they are ashamed, afraid of being doubted, because they know that they cannot provide "objective" evidence, because they might be (partially) blamed. The consequence is often silence. This silence is an elementary component of patriarchal structures. The approach of partiality gives victims the power to define what happened to them and to break out of a state of powerlessness.

Due to the fears and risks associated with making public sexual/sexualised violence, we assume that false accusations are the absolute exception and that questioning the victim is unfortunately the absolute rule. Therefore, we prefer to take the very unlikely risk that a false accusation may occur, rather than the vast majority of victims remaining silent.

Sexualised violence is an expression of patriarchal structures. These structures predominantly benefit men. Mostly it is men who are the perpetrators. Therefore we refer to the perpetrator<sup>2</sup> using male

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper we decided to use the term "victim". Although it could be associated with weakness or passiveness, it also recognizes the enormity of the system we are against and its brutal potential. Further, the use of "victim" implies that there is also an offender who is responsible.

<sup>2</sup> In German, there are different terms for male perpetrator ("Täter") and female perpetrator ("Täterin"). In the original text, the form "Täter" is used throughout.

terms, even if we are aware that there are other cases, that sexual/sexualised violence does not only take place in heterosexual constellations and that there may also be female perpetrators. We do not want to ignore this, but by choosing the male form of the concept of perpetrator we want to emphasize the patriarchal conditions that lead to such incidents. For the abused comrade we use a gender neutral phrasing, to make visible that people of different genders are affected by sexual/sexualised violence.

Dealing with cases of sexualised/ sexual violence, especially in personal circles, is often very burdensome even for the people not directly affected. A common approach will also facilitate the expression of insecurity, doubts, anger, sorrow and will enable people to help and support each other. In the process, we will need to ask for support from friends as well as professional advice, help and support. Especially the support group as well as the contact group will need regular reflection and discussion of group processes with other comrades. The responsibility for this is to be shared by everybody; the whole organisation, the local group, and individual comrades.

A crucial question that will come up at different times throughout the process, is whether our decisions should at all times and in all aspects reflect the wishes of the victim. The needs of the victim are at the centre of our activity. In the early phases of the process, which often deals with meeting the need for safety and safer space of the victim, they are the only basis on which decisions should be made. In the long term, especially in dealing with the perpetrator, the needs of the victim are still important for our work, but not in any case the sole and absolute criterion for our decisions. In a specific case, it may be that - for example because the process is about guaranteeing a safe space and not about sanctions - we make a decision that ultimately does not fully meet the wishes of the victim.

For us, dealing with sexual/sexualised violence goes hand in hand with dealing with possibilities for its prevention. By this we mean the ongoing confrontation with patriarchy and patriarchal structures. Theoretical debates are not sufficient here; the focus should be on dynamics within the respective group. Talking about possible scenarios in advance can, on the one hand, serve to raise awareness and, on the other hand, make it easier to talk about concrete incidents and thus increase the ability to act. The exchange about terms and ways of speaking can also make it easier to deal with sexual/sexualised violence and help to dispel or avoid possible myths. Successful prevention is not only about enabling a professional approach to sexual/sexualised violence, but also about creating a climate of mutual trust and sensitivity that makes assaults more difficult.

## **II. Groups to be established**

In order to be able to act, we have provided for the establishment of different groups that take on different tasks. Whilst the 'approach group' will exist independently of any concrete case, the support and contact group will be created when a concrete case of sexual/ sexualised violence is made public.

### **1. Approach group**

The 'approach group' is approachable for comrades affected by sexual/sexualised violence, especially if they do not want to talk about the incident(s) in their local group. In this case the 'approach group's role will be to give advice to the victim and to moderate and take on responsibility for the further process. The 'approach group' is confidential and contacting it does not mean that a further process will be initiated automatically. In this way, even those victims who do not yet know how they want to deal with their experiences should feel empowered to contact the 'approach group' in order to be supported at this point. Politically, we also think it is important not to blame the victim

and the persons to whom the victim has confided in for the further behaviour of the perpetrator. In this sense, the protection of third parties is not a legitimate reason for us to make the incident public against the wish of the victim, since this implies a moral responsibility of victims in dealing with what they have experienced.

If the victim decides to make the abuse public within the Interventionist Left, then the responsibility of the 'approach group' ends when the support group has been created. If and whether the 'approach group' will want to be approachable by perpetrators or potential perpetrators is its own decision. The 'approach group' sets up its own email address, including a possibility to contact it anonymously. There will be the possibility to only contact the women/lesbian/trans/inter-people or women/lesbian-people or men in the group.

## **2. Support group**

The support group will consist of people that the victim and the local group has a relationship of trust with. It is also desirable that the support group also has the trust of the local group. The constitution of this group can only be legitimised by the victim. Comrades working in the support group will have to be able to cope with the task of supporting the victim and be prepared to face uncomfortable debates.

The central tasks of the support group are:

### **a) Helping to empower the victim**

A comrade affected by sexual/sexualised violence often needs emotional support. In order to ensure support for the victim, encouragement and confirmation of their perception of the events is essential. Victims of sexual/sexualised abuse often feel, among other things, powerlessness and the loss of their own ability to act, so the ability to act of the victim must be supported. This can be achieved in a variety of ways, because everyone chooses a different way of dealing with situations of abuse. It can be important to support the attacked comrade in case of a (temporary) withdrawal in order to protect them against questioning and unmanageable confrontations. It can be equally important to accompany and support them in internal conflicts. It may also be that the victim has a clear understanding of what has happened, but needs support in further action against the perpetrator.

### **b) Representation of the victim**

After the explicitly stated desire by the victim the support group can speak for the attacked comrade; depending on their wish both internally within the organisation and elsewhere. The needs formulated by the victim have priority. This might mean not to give names to the local group. Only in very well-reasoned exceptions and after discussions between the victim and the support group, can a decision be made against the will of the victim.

Because of the great trust given to the support group, it has an immense responsibility. This responsibility must be reflected on all the time, also with help of the local group. It is also important that the possibilities and also the limits of the support work are defined very early on and are made transparent (at least internally). The support group cannot do everything, but it has to gain an overview of who undertakes which necessary support tasks and it must find a solution when support is lacking in certain aspects. Of course single tasks can always also be taken care of by other structures such as friends, relatives or the local group.

In the process, needs of the attacked comrade may also become apparent, which may go beyond the emotional or political limits of the supporters. But situations like these are not within the limits of this present guideline, but have to be dealt with concretely – there is no silver bullet approach here, same as for other situations described in this guideline.

A prosecution of the perpetrator as well as making use of the criminal justice system can make sense, but can also bring problems. Regarding this aspect, the support group and the victim should not only consult internally but also with lawyers and professional advice organisations.

### **Concrete first steps**

Practical experience has shown that, especially at the beginning, a certain insecurity exists about how the goals described here can be put into practice within the work of the support group. The following description of first steps when founding a support group should offer an initial guide when putting things into practice in a concrete case. Because it is important to offer the victim good support straight from the beginning, it is important not to wait too long with the steps laid out in the following. The procedure according to this guideline will get started only if the victim wants it too. This is independent of how they describe the abuse.

The first step is normally a spontaneous talk with the victim. This will have to happen in a safe space. Here it should be mentioned one more time that the victim does not need to say more than that some kind of abuse has taken place and - if wanted - which immediate protection measures should be implemented. (Doctor's notes, moving out, professional help, throwing the perpetrator out of parties, out of a shared flat, etc.).

A support process by comrades of the IL always takes place on the basis of these guidelines and as a collective process. As a first step, it is also vital to consider who will be in the support group.

Before the support group meets with the victim as a third step, it should meet alone, so that all the members of the group understand the current state of affairs and have the possibility to talk about their own fears and limits/boundaries. It can also make sense to reflect on the basics of how to deal with sexualised/sexual violence, focused on taking the perspective of the victim, and to seek professional support, for example at a counselling centre. Next in this meeting, the group should talk about possible goals of their work, and have a preliminary clarification of their work structure (when and where can meetings take place, who can be the "main contact point" for the victim). Lastly the group should develop an idea of the next steps (founding of a contact group, contact with the perpetrator, information for the local group, etc.). It is also necessary at this stage to think about which questions the victim needs to be asked in order for further work to take place.

At the end the support group should meet with the victim. This meeting should help the victim to figure out and explain their needs (quietness/protection/trust/closeness/distance/clarity/self-determination) in order to know which kinds of support make sense, and to discuss the questions and ideas from the previous meeting. On this basis the precise work structure of the group can be decided, collective ideas of the rough plan and the goals of the process can be developed, and the next concrete steps can be discussed.

### **3. Contact Group**

The contact group keeps in contact with the perpetrator and tells him the demands of the victim and the decisions of the support group. Furthermore, the contact group should challenge the perpetrator to face up to what he has done and, if he shows a willingness, to support him in doing so. The contact group must take care, in doing this, not to become, without wanting to, the representatives of the perpetrator. The basis of partiality should also be adopted by the contact group. The work of the contact group is above all characterised by a confrontational approach with the perpetrator.

The contact group should involve the people around the perpetrator; explain their own steps as well as those of the support group and the local group; in order to prevent the emergence of a counter-productive environment around the perpetrator that would hinder the process.

No friends of the perpetrator should work in the contact group. Otherwise, this could lead to difficult conflicts of loyalties when the members of the group have to take the perspective of the victim. At the same time, it can be difficult if friends of the victim work in the contact group, where their presence can lead to complicated relations in the contact group and in work with the perpetrator (for example through an assumed insider knowledge of the victim). Not all the people in the contact group should go to the meeting with the perpetrator; on the contrary, a division of tasks can be helpful. However those attending the meeting should look to have a gender balance.

The comrades in this group must also be clear on the limits to what we can achieve in such a situation. As non-professionals we are clearly not in the position to replace therapy or similar steps. We should therefore neither claim nor burden ourselves with such a goal. Nevertheless we are convinced that, as personally/politically involved people, we have significant possibilities to have influence over the perpetrator and together to at least recognise if not yet break long established patterns of behaviour.

### **III. Directions for Action**

#### **1. Phases**

In cases of sexual/sexualised violence there needs to be a quick and reliable reaction from the organisation. First, it is important that a safe space for the victim is established, and takes full effect. In order to find a way of doing this we have divided our guidelines into phases. Sexual/sexualised violence can occur in many forms and intensities. This means for us that in each case we need to look for a suitable, individually tailored approach. Therefore, even if these guidelines are to provide important orientation and instruction, it may happen that the proposed procedure is inapplicable in particular situations. The procedure proposed here should therefore not be followed schematically, but it should rather be adapted to the particular situation.

It can be important, in dealing with a case of sexual/sexualised violence, to include breaks in activity, meaning that the active process is suspended for an extended period of time (possibly several months). This has the function of giving time to process the experience, above all to the victim, but also to the others involved. Since this process is stressful and difficult for everyone, the victim and all the other members must be given time to ascertain if they can actually cope with the current situation, before the next steps are dealt with.

#### **Phase 1: Safe Space and Self-Empowerment**

Each member that hears about sexual/sexualised violence in our structures, offers the victim immediate support. The priority is the immediate founding of a support group, whose composition is agreed to by the victim.

Next to the previously stated tasks, an important aim of the group at this stage - provided it is wanted - is helping in dealing with everyday life (doctor's notes, organising professional psychological help, communicating with further help - for example a women's refuge - etc.). The support group also organises the first contact with the perpetrator and the first announcements and demands (immediate measures) to him. If it is necessary, the support group itself speaks with the perpetrator. If it is in line with the victim's wishes, the contact group can also inform members of the local group.

The person named by the victim as the perpetrator will immediately be removed from all IL meetings, actions, and communication structures. Whether he is finally expelled from the organisation will not be discussed at this point. The local group discusses and decides if additional measure that are not part of the initial measures covered by the support group are necessary. These might include, for example, making the case public, expanding the safe space, etc.. Possible follow-up measures

are communicated to the support group - the decision whether to take action is made by the victim in consultation with the support group.

With the consent of the victim, the assault will be discussed by the support group as soon as possible at a future meeting of the coordination committee (KoGre). At the latest by the following next meeting of the KoGre, a mentor local group will be appointed. The task of the mentor local group is to supervise the process in the victim's immediate local group; and to discuss with them, in order to give them support and regular feedback about their assessment of the concrete actions of the process. Moreover, the establishment of the mentor local group should ensure a nationwide collective connection.

It is recommended that, in this early stage, the comrades in the local group again exchange general ideas on dealing with sexual/sexualised violence. This is to make sure that when taking further steps, everyone has internalised the foundations for dealing with sexual violence in a way that shows solidarity with, and takes the perspective of the victim. In the first phase, after the disclosure of abusive behaviour, the protection of and support for the victim have absolute priority. This means that the creation of a safe space according to the needs of the victim must be the first step. The next step is to create a space to discuss and develop a collective political approach internally and externally. Doubts and possible questions must at first be deferred. In order to avoid doubts and questions being shifted into informal settings - which would facilitate the development of vaguely opposing positions, with only a superficial commitment to collective responses - it is necessary to immediately agree on a date and time for discussions and debate. This should aim at finding ways of dealing with personal insecurities, as well as doubts. Questions and doubts being given an internal space for discussions should not be a topic of discussion with 3rd parties, including in informal conversations.

## **Phase 2: Discussion within the local group**

As soon as possible there is a discussion within the local group (eventually extended to other comrades of the IL). The support group reports to this meeting about the process until that point and also informs the group about the abuse, if authorised by the victim. The contact group reports about the current state of dealing with the perpetrator. If people from outside IL work in the support group or the contact group, these can also be invited to the discussion (potentially temporarily). Then the contact group and the support group can be asked further questions. Of course these questions can remain unanswered. The most important part however is an exchange about how individuals feel about the situation. For this discussion a large degree of openness, as well as empathy and sensitivity, are necessary. The discussion serves to come to terms with emotional turmoil, to reflect on possible connections between the abuse and social structures of the local group as well as personal emotional involvements with the perpetrator and with histories of sexual violence, and to ensure that all members of the local group act responsibly.

It should not be about questioning the credibility of the victim, but about creating a clear framework and a confidential space in which it may be possible to learn to deal with one's own doubts. Existing doubts, consternation or inner refusal to believe the accusations should be allowed and not formally forbidden, because they will not disappear that way. With the aim of solidarity with the victim, however, they should not be the guiding force or remain in the room. Rather, this space should be used to allow people to deal with them and to find a way to really create the demanded solidarity and partiality.

If the victim is a member of IL, they can obviously come to the discussion. This does not mean, however, that the victim has to explain or justify anything. They are neither an object for questions nor a sexual violence expert, rather they may be simply a comrade that comes to a discussion of the local group. It can also make sense, however, to have part of the discussion without the victim - for

example because it can be painful and bitter to hear about concerns, or to realise how emotionally important the perpetrator is/was as a friend and comrade for the other members of the group. It should be avoided by IL members to not speak as they would like to, out of concern for the victim. The procedure must be clarified before the meeting and the victim can also come to an understanding with the support group before the meeting about some ground rules for the discussion. Afterwards the discussion must be explained transparently to the victim (if they were not part of it and want to hear what was discussed).

In the discussion it is also important to consider that all members have very different experiences with the topic of sexual/sexualised violence and it is especially important to be respectful with each other. Further arrangements could be necessary for this discussion (place, breaks, etc.).

The discussion takes place so that questions can be asked and concerns addressed. While doing this, people must be aware that concerns can also put the experience of the victim in question. However, the goal of people stating existing concerns is to produce the active solidarity of everyone. The basis of the discussion is taking the side and showing solidarity with the victim.

Whereas the first phase looks to quickly implement the needs of the victim for protection and support, and therefore should not last too long; the second phase, which includes the above mentioned collective discussion, can take longer. The measures implemented to protect the victim during the first phase remain in place at this point.

### **Phase 3: Further Steps**

After phase 2, and after the situation of the victim is stabilised, there will be the debate about a final exclusion or the possibility of a return of the perpetrator. The desire to quickly return to “business as usual” should not be allowed to be the motivating factor for anyone here (except maybe for the victim). There should be a rough classification of the incident in order to determine how to proceed (e.g. verbal harassment, systematic violence, stalking...). The victim and their opinion on this question are a very important factor in the group’s decision. If the local group decides to expel the perpetrator, which can also be the case contrary to the request of the victim, the normal procedure applies.

If the victim agrees that the perpetrator can continue to work in our structures, they work with the support group to develop the conditions for this (e.g. he can only continue to be a member in another local group). Independently from this, the contact group (in consultation with the local group) develops criteria that the perpetrator must fulfil. If, in the ongoing process of work with the perpetrator, the basis for continuing mutual trust is lost, this can justify the exclusion of the perpetrator.

## **2. Dealing with the Perpetrator**

During the whole process, the contact group continually confronts the perpetrator. Perpetrator work, in the sense of a psychological or therapeutic reprocessing, cannot be achieved through this. Our role is more to achieve a constructive contribution to dealing with events, and to initiate further reflection from the perpetrator about his behaviour. To us it also cannot be the simple solution to expel the perpetrator from left structures, and then to think that the problem is solved. This would effectively let the perpetrator off the hook from his personal and political responsibility, and also not fulfil our own political responsibility.

Room should also be given to the perpetrator in the confrontations with him. However, experience shows that it is important that he does not determine how he is approached. He should be given the opportunity to take positions, but the framework and arrangement of these opinions (roughly: where and to whom, verbally or in writing, and further restrictions such as no gossip about earlier consen-

sual sex with the victim, no redefinition by them of the incident) must be defined and enforced by our structures. The perpetrator should however have the possibility to name points that are important for him to be known by the support group. The contact group decides which statements contain information that is important for the work of the support group, or are relevant for a political debate in the IL. The state of perpetrator work (at least until the end of phase 2) is only reported by the contact group, and not by the perpetrator himself.

In further dealing with the perpetrator, the IL - and above all the contact group - must themselves set the principles and boundaries of the confrontation. This can mean for example that the perpetrator cannot paint himself as victim, that he must acknowledge his own wrongdoing and confront himself with this. This can also for example mean that we request that he undertakes therapy or makes use of other professional support services.