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"We Say: Not in Our Name!" - Interview

International Women`s Space

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3 Die Schreibweise von Schwarz und weiß markiert die soziale Konstruktion der Attribute, die zugleich nicht analog zu verstehen sind. Die Analysekategorie weiß bezieht sich auf Menschen, die als Weiße gelesen werden und die damit verknüpften Privilegien zugesprochen bekommen, während Schwarz eine Selbstbenennung ist, die aus politischen Emanzipationsbewegungen rassistisch Diskriminierter hervorging.

4 Insbesondere die Sonderausgabe zu #RMF vom 23.10.2015 mit Beiträgen von Aktivist_innen.

5 Etwa http://kafila.org/2015/10/24/south-african-student-protests-and-re-emergence-of-peoples-power-camalita-naicker/ (31.1.2016) und http://www.bonfiire.com/cape-town/2015/03/the-feminist-voice-of-decolonisation/ (31.1.2016).

6 Facebook und Twitter sind hierfür zentrale Medien, aber auch die Webseite www.feesmustfall.joburg. Einen Überblick bietet zudem eine Sonderausgabe der Zeitschrift The Johannesburg Salon (9/2015), herausgegeben von #RMF: http://www.jwtc.org.za/the_salon/volume_9.htm (31.1.2016).

7 Siehe https://www.facebook.com/RhodesMustFall/posts/1559394444336048 (31.1.2016).

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"We Say: Not in Our Name!" – Interview

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S SPACE

On 8th December 2012, a group of refugees occupied a vacant school in Berlin Kreuzberg in order to continue protesting against accommodation in lager[1], obligation of residence and the prohibition of employment. The school's occupation was the continuation of refugees' occupation of the Oranienplatz in Berlin Kreuzberg, which was the result of a protest march by refugees from Würzburg to Berlin. Hundreds of refugees stayed at the Oranienplatz for 550 days. It was also a place of many supportive demonstrations against the German asylum policy. On 8th April 2014 refugees ended the occupation of the Oranienplatz, because members of the

Berlin Senate warranted them legal accommodations and lawyers. Meanwhile most of the asylum procedures were executed. In June 2014, the majority of refugees left the school and moved to official accommodations. Yet, more than 40 refugees remained in the school. One month later a compromise stipulated that they could stay in one part of the school, but no new refugees could stay there. The refugees who occupied the roof of the building to prevent the school from being cleared were granted the right to stay in half of the building, which will become a Refugee Center. The Berlin Senate plans to set up an emergency shelter in the other half of the building.

These struggles around the squatted school initiated a large debate about refugee accommodations in public, on the governmental level and within the group of refugees itself. A strong part of this movement was formed of women. The following interview will provide information about the International Women's Space (IWS), a feminist organization by and for refugees. The interview was conducted in written form. Killa Kupfer and Antonia Kupfer emailed questions on behalf of Femina Politica to the IWS, who responded as a collective not individually.

Femina Politica: *How was the International Women's Space formed and what is it exactly?*

International Women's Space: The IWS was formed in December 2012 during the occupation of the Gerhart Hauptmann School. The initiative to create a women-only space came from some women who were already politically active in the context of the Oranienplatz Camp. At that time, the refugee movement in Berlin was male-dominated and we knew that we had to create a space where refugee women would feel encouraged to come and join the movement. We also knew of the difficult life conditions women were facing in the isolated camps and wanted to offer a housing alternative for those willing to leave such accommodations for an accommodation n Berlin. We received a wing on the second floor of the school and created the Women's Space, which consisted of five rooms, three for living, one for working and another used for German lessons, workshops, freeshop[2] and as an emergency room. We also locked a bathroom and toilet to be exclusively used by women, as this was one of the main complaints by those coming from the camps: the lack of privacy in the showers and toilets offered in these shared accommodations.

The Women's Space lasted for 17 months, until the eviction in the summer of 2014, when some of us from the IWS joined the protest on the roof of the school and stayed for nine days.

Our work consists of focusing on a political approach to the refugee movement and making sure the demands of the refugee women are being heard, publicly spoken about and debated.

FP: *What is your political work about and what are you focusing on now and in the future?*
IWS: As Angela Davis said when she visited Berlin last summer: the refugee movement is the movement of the 21st century, the movement that is calling for the rights of all. We fully agree with her and want to make sure the women will make a big difference in how this movement will develop. The refugee women flee for the same reasons as men: from war, famine, 'natural' disasters and political persecution, but they also flee gender-based persecution such as forced marriage, female genital mutilation, systematic domestic violence, rape as spoils of war, for not accepting the gender assigned at birth and many other crimes committed against women because they are women. We want to be a space where refugee women can get together to find ways to fight this oppression, which does not end once they arrive in Germany. Since being evicted from the school, we have been meeting in different places, but we are working to have our own space back, preferably inside the Gerhart Hauptmann School. This time we want to achieve more than we had the chance to in our first 17 months inside the school. The current idea is to invite more women's groups to work together, to maintain the previous space inside the building, where we can offer rooms for different self-organized groups of refugee women to meet, exchange and elaborate their demands. We seek a place where they can get politically active and play the important role we are sure women can play in this amazing movement of people throughout the world.[3]

FP: *We have read your book "In our own words"[4]. What was the process of putting together the book and interviews like?*
IWS: It took us around one year to collect the testimonials and an additional couple of months to transcribe, translate and organize the book. It was a tough process because the women we interviewed had been through a lot on their way to Germany and were under enormous pressure during the asylum procedure here. Some were still waiting for their first interview, some were already in the process of being deported and others had the status of being tolerated. Therefore, nothing was certain for them and this uncertainty generates more stress to an already vulnerable group. The fact that we as the interviewers were ourselves migrants helped because there were some aspects of our lives that we had in common. For example because many of us come from former colonized countries and had to struggle to get our right to stay in Fortress Europe, where we know we are not exactly welcomed. Although the stories we were hearing were not easy ones, we must say it was a pleasure to sit together and spend time with these brave women, who against all odds had completed the journey they had set out to make.

FP: *Were there special topics or repeated issues that stood out while you conducted the interviews?*
IWS: Violence against women perpetrated by the patriarchal system, a system in which a woman has no rights. Europeans may think that they are advanced towards a

fairer society, but we believe that until we have abolished this system completely and all around the world, no one can celebrate a single victory regarding the liberation from oppression and safety of women.
Once in Germany, there are many recurrent problems women are faced with: the difficult access to language courses for refugee women plays an important role in destabilizing this community because the asylum process is immersed in German bureaucracy. Bureaucratic documents are usually difficult to comprehend even if one understands the language, but when you do not and your life depends on understanding each line of such documents, the situation becomes a nightmare. Women have to rely on the support of German volunteers, available in their spare time, to help them translate these letters and to accompany them to the foreign office, etc. They will also have to pay and trust lawyers whom they do not know to speak on their behalf and to interpret what is being requested in those letters.
The loneliness and the isolation in the camps will influence the psyche of the women. To be placed in shared accommodations, where men are in the the majority, is certainly another factor of destabilization. Many women have been socialized in places where women and men do not share many common spaces. So, what for Western women may be trivial, like cooking in the same kitchen as men and using the same toilet and shower as men is a new and sometimes frightening situation for many refugee women.
Furthermore, the health support refugee women receive falls short. Many women told us they were left without appropriate care to cope with depression. The lack of perspective makes many women resort to marriage with a German man and becoming pregnant as a desperate attempt to solve the endless waiting time for a stay permit and this can create a catastrophic situation. If these women become victims of domestic violence they have few means to put an end to it, as the law forces them to stay with their German or European partner for at least three years, so they are trapped. There are ways to end the marriage and keep the right to stay, but this information is still mostly only available in German and hardly accessible to refugee women. In consideration of this we are planning to create a small brochure about the rights of refugee women to survive domestic violence in marriage whether it is with a German partner or with the partner with whom she has arrived in Germany.

FP: *What are the problems of women* staying in camps?*
IWS: The camps themselves. Who wants to live for years and years in a shared accommodation with security at the door, controlling and criminalizing the inhabitants of such houses? Why are women placed in these houses with no right to privacy, having to share common toilets and bathrooms with men, without even having a key to lock their rooms from the inside? Living in the middle of nowhere, having to walk kilometers to the nearest supermarket in rural areas? Completely excluded from the society around them? This is the problem. Women must be given proper accommo-

dation in order to be able to rebuild their lives. That is why they fled to Germany, for nothing else.

FP: *In the camps you went to, were there special spaces or offers like German language courses for women* only?*
IWS: Not that we remember, not in the houses we went to.

FP: *In which ways does the German asylum system discriminate women* and what needs to be changed?*
IWS: Refugee women are invisible in Germany. They are rarely mentioned in the media. Many women's organizations still cannot offer alternative shelters or counseling to refugee women. This may be because such organizations are not equipped with translators, don't have enough social workers or psychologists prepared to work with women coming from different backgrounds, or because some treatments or support are only available to women who have a health insurance that covers the cost of the services.
The fact that only 33% of the refugees coming to Germany are women plus the fact that the current conditions are miserable makes the lives of women seeking asylum in Germany extremely vulnerable.
Take the recent incidents in Köln during New Years' Eve. Women were sexually assaulted. The police watched and did nothing. Refugees or foreigners in general are being blamed for it, as if there had been no previous cases of sexualized violence against women in Germany, as if German men were harmless beings. Now look at the way refugee women are living in the camps and see how much attention the same media provides when abuse is reported. This is a clear case of explicit racism. White men can get away with the same crimes the men who acted in Köln are being accused of. Refugee women can be – and they are – harassed daily in the shelter, compound and the media and the authorities respond with a heavy silence. It makes no sense at all to make a big case out of what happened in Köln and other German cities, when the reasons behind such commotion are nothing but racist propaganda against refugees. No women will be ever safe in a society, which selects cases to be concerned with. All women must feel safe or no one is.
There is a lot of discussion about integration, but the discussion is still permeated by racism and sexism. If we follow how the debate about what happened in Köln is being conducted, we see that there is no mention of the sexualized violence the refugee women are going through. It is as if refugee women do not deserve the same or any attention 'white' women victims deserve. Therefore, we want to remind the public that refugee women, when they live in houses where they cannot even lock their rooms from the inside, when they are living in small towns and are the stranger in the village, vulnerable to racist abuses and attacks, are potential victims of sexualized violence. The refugee women are here and we feminists must recognize their presence and include them in the debate. This is also integration. We must unite against

the right wing extremist demagogic speech. It is outrageous to see men with a career in propagating hate now offering themselves as defenders of women's rights. To see politicians from all parties considering closing borders and some openly advocating faster deportations in the name of protecting women is at the least disgraceful. We say: not in our name!

FP: *Thank you for this interview.*

Anmerkungen

1 By lager we refer to Erstaufnahme- and Sammellager.
2 A freeshop is a place where people exchange goods or deliver and receive them freely.
3 For further information on IWS please look us up on the internet: https://iwspace.wordpress.com/.
4 International Women Space (Ed.), 2015: In Our Own Words. Refugee Women in Germany Tell Their Stories. In unseren eigenen Worten. Geflüchtete Frauen in Deutschland erzählen von ihren Erfahrungen. Berlin.