

HOW RACISM PREVENTS THE EMPOWERMENT OF MUSLIM GIRLS AND WOMEN IN GERMANY IMPRESSIONS FROM A YOUTH CENTER IN BERLIN

Osman Tekin and Lisa Gabriel work at the youth center Manege in Berlin-Neukölln, Germany, an institution situated in a multicultural setting and attended by children and teenagers from a predominantly Muslim background. *e-cadernos ces* invited them to debate the reality they are confronted with in their daily work and discuss the issues of xenophobia and political instrumentalization of women's rights. They spoke about their motivations in joining this educational project, their experiences at the youth center, about the German politics on “integration” and feminism. They introduced their contribution by commenting a poster of the nationalist organization Pro Deutschland.



“Our Women Remain Free”: Campaign Poster of the Populist Movement Pro Deutschland in the Summer 2011

Photo by Lisa Gabriel

OSMAN

As someone of no German descent,¹ but an Arab and a Muslim, it has always been very difficult for me to understand German politics. That has to do with the fact that, after 22 years of living here, my family and I still have the status of “tolerated” persons.² I feel that we are not wanted, and that influences a lot your thoughts.

When I saw the poster my reaction was “not again...”. I'm very worried that we Muslims are the scapegoats of the 21st Century. The poster makes me wonder, for instance, how would the German woman – who exemplifies the freedom of women in Germany – look like? The woman in the poster, who represents a Muslim, wears a black veil and black Kajal around her eyes. The purpose: to erase her character and personality as much as possible. The grid accentuates it. My mother and my five sisters wear the veil and it makes me sad to realize how they are perceived here. Unfortunately, many women from Arab-Turk regions suffered severe oppression in their countries of origin, but that also happens to many German women, even today. If this poster is really about the freedom of the women in Germany, why does it exclude the women from the Middle East? It is also disturbing that the poster depicts a woman, but its addressees are actually men. So you realize immediately that it has nothing to do with women and their freedom and rights. It is only propaganda. Women are simply being used to exclude other societies. A very coward and wicked political strategy!

The poster also accuses me of being an oppressor of women. ALL men from the Middle East are here accused of endorsing the same ideology. Such stereotyping is very intense in Germany nowadays. We talk of integration, when we really should be talking of repression.

LISA

This poster helps me express what I mean by the logic of male domination in our society. All the discussions on feminism and gender oppression that I had with Osman in the last two years were marred by the feeling that my political ideals are familiar to him in the form of accusations, since he is always addressed (attacked) as an Arab, Turk, Kurd or Muslim and not simply as a person. We could not naively discuss gender roles and male dominance. Honestly, I think that we hardly got there in our discussions – the images of the German mainstream society and specially its obvious racist strategies of exclusion

¹ In the German original “Herkunftsdeutsch” [of German descent]. This concept is used as an opponent to people with a “Migrationshintergrund” [immigration background], i.e., people who were born in Germany, may or may not have a German passport, and whose family/ancestors migrated to Germany after 1949. The latest concept is often used to refer to colored youth in Germany, whose parents came from South-Eastern Europe, Turkey and Arab countries.

² “Duldung” (toleration) is not a residence permit in Germany, but only the suspension of deportation for a limited period. It often includes the prohibition of employment and higher education.

always got in the way. The poster of Pro Deutschland is actually only a banal and pale illustration of a much bigger political dilemma. It is sad to realize that the opportunity to talk about gender and emancipation in our societies of origin amounts to nothing as long as we do not understand and solve this dilemma. That makes me furious.

When I think about this poster, I feel really angry and frustrated. Initially this has less to do with its racist message, but with the way in which I, as a woman of German descent, am addressed there. I see the poster this way: you have a German white man speaking with an imagined, undefined, other man. So you open a political space where men negotiate about “their” women and evaluate their freedoms. Therefore I do not exist there as a thinker, as a speaker, as someone who is responsible for herself, as a political actor. The introductory possessive “our” degrades me to a property in quite an ambivalent way: on one hand, my origin, my color and my nationality makes me part of that “we”. But, at the same time I, as part of “our women”, am not part of the “we” that speaks there. Women remain others, those you talk *about*: there is no “we remain free!” Therefore, my origin determines which man I belong to, it assumes that I have to belong to one man. I refuse to belong to anyone. This is a freedom that you cannot take for granted as part of the majority of citizens of German descent. On the contrary, you have to fight for it constantly. That's why I became a feminist.

Feminism means for me self-determination in a world where decisions and evaluations derive largely from the needs, interests and expectations of men. Feminism is for me also a political project of solidarity. For me, it is a commitment to help other people in their self-assertion against patriarchy. A major difficulty here lies precisely in the deconstruction of the patriarchal, hetero-sexist principle that puts women against each other in competition, that lets them be defined by the men (and their interests) whom they allegedly belong to, and that makes them regard other women as threats. As seducers or as a threat for their own concept of femininity. The poster asks me, a non-Muslim woman of German descent, to delimit myself. I should be proud or happy for an undefined freedom, when compared to other women, who apparently live in *unfreedom* – precisely veiled behind bars. I'm asked to look at her as an image that shows me who I am. The woman in the poster doesn't speak. None of us speaks – I guess the message is that we should not talk to each other. But that is precisely the opposite of feminism and the opposite of solidarity.

The gaze of the silent woman is too familiar for me in my own culture. It is the gaze of the woman as a (sexualized) object, as victim or “muse”, who doesn't speak and hasn't got a will. This gaze that excludes us women from the status of full actors is incredibly central in the logic of domination of Western masculinism. Therefore you would never have a poster that says “I will remain free!”.

What finally frustrates me in this poster is the distortion of facts, the way history is ignored and feminist struggles obfuscated. The exclusion of women as women from the domain of civil rights and liberties was constitutive of the political project of (European) modernity. The freedoms, or rather the possibilities that I can take advantage of today, were achieved along decades, through small steps, as part of “equality”. The slogan “Our women remain free” suggests, however, a given situation without prior history, that you have to defend from others’ encroachment. It is very hard to cope with this instrumentalization. For me, it is an affront that a reactionary nationalist organization like Pro Deutschland believes it can adorn itself with the successes of the women's rights movement. The resistance with which the feminist demands have always been confronted, as well as the lack of interest in the very women that the poster intends to depict, are simply hidden. I simply don't believe that this kind of poster has anything to do with our liberation from patriarchal constraints. It is only about male identity and its need to have an enemy. In the end I'm faced here with a caricature of my own utopias: feminism being appropriated for a nationalist project and for racist exclusion.

JUGENDCLUB MANEGE

The Youth Center Manege – in the "Rütli-Ecke Weserstraße" – is situated at an intersection of Neukölln's social landscape. The Weserstraße has become the epitome of the so-called “gentrification.” In the last years, many new shops, cafés and pubs opened there. The demographic has changed as well. As a young international and financially well-off population discovers the neighborhood – bringing an increase of rents – many socially disadvantaged families, who often have a comparatively less privileged migration history, leave the area and move to the suburbs of Berlin. On the other hand, the Manege is situated quite close to the 'Campus-Rütli', also referred to as 'Rütli-Schule', which is at the center of a debate on integration that focuses on the relationship between Muslim youths with an immigration background and the German wider society. The Campus has gained the status of a widely promoted exemplary project.

The youth center Manege is attended mainly by children and teenagers who grew up in the area. Many of their parents migrated to Germany and speak Arabic as their first language. Some families rely on government' welfare payments, have a precarious immigration status, and their environment is regarded as 'unsuitable for education'. The biographies of the children and teenagers in the neighborhood speak of very different migration trajectories, and of social conflicts around poverty, culture, education, societal transformation, and so called 'integration'. Many of them come to the Center every day after school and stay till evening; many can eat there as well. So they spend much of their childhood there, developing close friendships with each other and ties with the staff. The

Manege is a public and open space, but for many of the children and teenagers it is a second home as well.

OSMAN

I regard my work as a social worker at the Youth Center as a form of engagement. I try to be a spokesman, an ambassador, and a role model for the children and teenagers. Since I share with them the same background and I grew up in the area, I've known many of them ever since they were in Kindergarten. It is very important for me to encourage them in terms of their integration and capacity for social and communal responsibility and participation. Many of these kids regard a good school graduation as something out of their reach. A major goal in Manege is to have as many of them as possible finish high school and go to university. But for that you need self-confidence, and our programs are meant precisely to encourage them.

The environment in the Manege has also sparked my political consciousness and engagement. For several years I have been representing the interests of the children and the teenagers in the Neukölln bodies.

REACTIONS TO NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES IN THE PRESS

Teenagers' reactions are quite diverse. Some react aggressively because they are tired of being the scapegoat. Others don't feel addressed at all. All of them were born in Berlin and are third generation immigrants in Germany. And, until now, they have been referred to as "foreigners" and "migrants". This provokes a dissonance between their assigned identities: the one that was given to them by the German society and the one ascribed by their families. They say: "No matter where you go, whether here in Germany where you were born or in Turkey or Lebanon, we are always foreigners". These conflicting expectations damage their individuality and leave them with a sense of homelessness. In addition, they are under pressure to prove themselves – again and again – to both societies. In the Manege we use theater to help them overcome their double exclusion.

Such experiences bring about a strong cohesion among them and enable collective forms of opposition. The "others" in the mainstream society are perceived as enemies and a sense of "we versus them" emerges, although the "we" has no real location, since the teenagers have no identification ground in either society. In their families, they fear being referred as "Germanized", while the German society regards them as "foreigners". The expectations that the German mainstream society has towards them are much worse. It is often assumed that boys oppress their sisters, treat them without respect and forbid them everything. Such attitudes are shaped by the immigration experience and also by the general lack of interest in these young people. German society tries to impose a Western

"freedom" upon these young girls, as if it were the "ideal solution." Unfortunately, these young girls become overburdened in such situations because mainstream society asks them to choose between their parents and the Western "lifestyle". Many girls who leave their home usually come back after a few months. Therefore, I believe that, instead of constantly reproaching these boys and girls that they are *unmodern*, it is more important to talk to them about their traditions and talk things over. Explanation is much more useful than constant condemnation. But mainstream German society prefers to focus on coercion and prohibitions rather than on the many good things that you have in those cultures. And, consequently, you severely deepen the gap between these teenagers and mainstream society.

To learn from another society you have to be able to trust it, too. But, unfortunately, that kind of trust is considered worthless by the German mainstream society.

These young people are being used as a political bargaining tool in the so-called "integration debate". No emancipatory political or empathetic education on specific goals is being undertaken. On the contrary, political education is being understood as pressure to conform/adapt. Teenagers from "migrant families" are not expected to position themselves politically and socially: they are often confronted with the argument "Look at your countries, it is much worse there". Gratitude is immediately demanded from them, while their participation and self-esteem are inevitably subverted.

ON THE "FAILURE OF MULTICULTURALISM"

The German mainstream society and many politicians now talk about the "failure of multiculturalism". I think this "failure" began when the immigration generation arrived. At that moment there was no dignified cultural and social integration project. On the contrary, the legislation on residence opened the door for exclusion: various forms of discrimination in the labor market and public education became apparent. Many parents fled to Germany to escape dangerous and unbearable situations. In their homeland they had no possibility of getting an education and had to start working during their childhood to feed their families. Women were married very young. When they arrived, many got no support from the State, language courses were not provided. Since many had no official permission to work, they were forced to rely on welfare payments. Ironically now, young people who were born in Germany are being offered integration classes. The signs of a "failure of multiculturalism" are determined by mainstream society. The strict political standards applied to immigrant families to evaluate their social integration are not applied to families of German descent. How does the integration of many German families look like, why don't we try to "integrate" them as well?

Marginalization in education cannot be ignored. The multilingualism of most children and young people in Berlin has been admitted as a reality only very recently and very slowly. The older generation and their families tend to live relatively isolated. Until now, many of the parents have felt rejected and unwanted, and willy-nilly, they end up transmitting such experiences to their children with the message “you’re not Germans”. The parents’ reaction is nothing but an attempt to protect their children from a society that marks them as outsiders. This experience is replicated by the young. The German society has high expectations on them. Many of them feel they are expected to be grateful all the time. But none of them knows what for. They were born in Germany and many don’t even know their second homeland. The feeling of living conditionally in a country is not very welcoming and having to justify yourself all the time is even worse.

OPPRESSION OF GIRLS AND WOMEN

The failed politics of integration and a general lack of interest in Arab/Turk/Curd women make it difficult to work with these “women migrants” to build trust. Many women from the older generation suffered greatly before coming to Germany with their husbands. Many of them come from rural areas where they had no access to schooling and had no “childhood” at all: they had to marry very young and marriages were obviously arranged. They were supposed to bear many children, who, as adults, would feed the family. Once in Germany, they were either ignored or supposed to embrace “Western freedom”. The men, who took on the role of protectors, could do nothing with this “Western freedom” and, in their eyes, they had to protect their women and children from an unknown lifestyle. We should not forget that they are often threatened with deportation.

I really don’t get it why multiculturalism is always discussed as a question of immigration, thus assuming there is a homogeneous German culture. We, the members of the Manege-team, share much more socially and politically than each of us shares with his or her society of origin. Besides, “multiculturalism” is always being addressed in discourses about development, in processes that try to define backwardness and progress and assign certain people to various “stages”. Therefore, the parents of these young people increasingly understand multiculturalism as nationalism. Since the culture of the “other” is perceived as backward and radical, they are expected to give up their own culture and adopt a new one. There is no cultural exchange, you are always being questioned about the negative aspects of your culture of origin. As a consequence, many of these young people regard “integration” as assimilation and ask why no one discusses the many possibilities of cultural exchange.

Under the circumstances, it is very difficult to work with women and young girls of Middle Eastern origin in public institutions. At the youth center we have as many girls as

boys. This is often not the case, it is actually a great accomplishment. Many of these young girls are the sisters of our male participants and that makes the work much easier for me. If we want to offer girls a “better life” than the life their mothers had I think we have to work *with* the girls and the boys together in a careful, understanding and enlightening way. In the 90s we had to intensively debate the issue of arranged marriages at the Manege but this is no longer the case. I know the parents and I think that much has changed in their lifestyle: today the girls can finish high school and then go to work. These processes require a lot of time and patience, that's the only way to work with them and make life better.

LISA

I first met Osman three years ago. I was looking for a place for a feminist debate – “Who cares? Queer feminism and economic critique” – and asked him about the possibility of doing it in one of the rooms at the Manege. We, the organizers of that event, were trying to subvert social divisions caused by racism by holding our debates in places that were unfamiliar to us. Therefore, outside university and not at the usual locations of the mainstream German political landscape in Berlin-Neukölln. After some initial hesitation from both sides, that event took place at the Manege. Six months later (in the meantime I had finished my studies in Sociology), I decided to return to the youth center for a practical training. My personal interest in youth subcultures and in working with young people from my neighborhood influenced my decision, and so did my curiosity over the dynamic between racism and feminism. Unconsciously, I guess I wanted to experience what happens when I, a radical feminist of German descent, get in a place like the Manege: how will people react at me, what kind of confrontations will I face? Simultaneously, I also wanted to know what would happen with my thinking, and especially with my language and actions the moment I plunge in this everyday world. I was also looking for inspiration. I was interested in establishing connections where the mainstream discourse only pointed at incompatibilities.

At the beginning I didn't intend to work there for a long time, but now we have two years of close cooperation behind us. This long period of political commitment and resistance were shaped by experiences of racism and the social and political exclusion that affects the children and teenagers at the center. We've had many disputes within the team and with the participants about various social and political issues. We have very tense months behind us, in terms of political engagement, but also of friendship. The topic of women's rights and their xenophobic instrumentalization has been with us constantly.

My colleagues usually describe my role in the Manege as follows: I'm charged with initiating political processes and conflicts, I'm a sort of guide to the German mainstream

society and a discussion partner. In my work with the children and the teenagers I try to establish a culture of dialogue where self-determination, social orientation, as well as political awareness are at the forefront. I don't think that I am a role model for the girls, perhaps for some of the older boys. I know that for many there I, as a woman, represent a contrasting experience in terms of appearance, looks and self-image. Therefore I was often confronted with challenges, questions and exclusion. Especially the girls use the contact with me to define themselves and to explain why they are not like me. These are very important conversations because here they have the chance to describe themselves, to mirror and recognize that not everyone is like them and that this is not bad. These experiences are very close to what I experienced in my youth in the German Western province. Also, among citizens of German descent, my way of being diverges from the representations and norms regulating what a girl/woman should be. My otherness was met in the Manege with much questioning, but never with aggressive exclusion. That was different during my youth.

OPPRESSION OF WOMEN

So far I did not witness cases of forced marriages at the Manege. Here we come across above all the sexual division of labor and limitations in everyday activities.

Strict gender roles, oppression of women and violence against women are part of the experiences of almost every teenager, whether from an immigration background or of German descent. But we tend to interpret the forms they assume in relation to geographic and cultural backgrounds. The patriarchal relations and the family structure under which our teenagers and children live are understood in relation with Islam. But I believe that their background is not so much defined by religion but by the traditions and history of their families and by the mafia-like economic structures (ban from working and precarious immigration status for decades) that bring about social exclusion. We should also look at the biographies of the male family members of our boys and see how they, seen as "Arab foreigners", have no alternative role models. Unconscious moments of self-assertion, such as superficial notions of honor, belonging, masculinity, loyalty and strength do not actually derive from religious beliefs; they rather provide unique opportunities for asserting identity and staging "real masculinity" in a context of migration, where an identity of "otherness" is being constantly imposed on them. Although different, the identification of many girls with role models from their communities of origin is also heavily shaped by an opposition to German society. This means that girls stand by their roles and don't like to see them being criticized from outside, even when disadvantages are involved.

At the Manege I came across the issue of forced marriage only once. It was during a conversation with 9 year-old Batoul, who explained to me, without being asked, what a

forced marriage was and that many Germans thought that all Muslim girls married that way. According to her young knowledge of the Islamic religion, forced marriages were *haram*, i.e. a sin. I think that her interest in the issue had nothing to do with any real threat for her, but rather with an assumption that, as a Muslim girl, she should deal with that question and she should distance herself from the potential misrepresentation as oppressed. Astonishing for a 9 year-old.

We surely know that in the wider environment of our children and teenagers there are cases of forced marriages and massive restrictions on their female family members. But we also know that people talk about a “family drama” when a man of German descent kills “his” wife and “his” children, but when the murderer is an Arab, a Kurd, an Albanian or a Turk then people talk of “honor killing”. You cannot have a real confrontation with patriarchy and male domination on such terms. On the contrary, you see young people caught up in a debate where different degrees of gender freedom are weighted and used to determine their value as people and their entitlement to participation. This is tragic especially because it becomes almost impossible for these young people to understand the politics behind the pressure on identity, and to develop alternatives. Some manage it, but most of them fall into a situation where they affirm alleged cultural values from their original background, which they assign to Islam. This is a terrible dilemma and deadlocks the educational work, since discussions about gender roles and emancipation cannot be detached from experiences of racist abuse and exclusion. Last summer at the Manege I was in charge of the case of a young mother who, after more than 20 years in Germany, risked being deported to the country of her parents. The official at the immigration office argued that, although the income of her husband (and father of her daughter) was enough for the needs of the family, women work in Germany and therefore, as a proof of a successful integration, she should have an employment and an income to support herself and her daughter. At that time, a law had just been adopted in Germany, which provided for a childcare allowance for mothers who want to raise their children at home – rather than in a nursery – when they reached the age of one: a government subsidy for the return of (German) mothers to the family role outside the labor market. It is precisely this kind of double standards that makes progressive work with girls and boys from Muslim families almost impossible.

I believe in the absolute right of every human being to integrity and personal development, but I know that it makes little sense to try and apply objective standards of emancipation on individuals, since this may differ from their wishes and interest. Feminist practices of support and counseling are based precisely on the basic premise that we should start from the needs formulated by the affected and we should empower them to find out and define what they want and need by themselves. This may be a long process,

since victims of gender violence have often been denied the development of their own will and the possibility of affirming it. Nevertheless, feminist counseling should reject paternalistic forms of advice and intervention in how someone should break from an oppressive situation. That would ultimately undermine the process of liberation and emancipation and deepen external control. This means that we have to accept it if the person concerned identifies her/his self with the collective interests of her/his environment, family, partner, girl/boyfriend and does not think as an individual, even if this may harm her/him. Each individual solves the conflict “individual” versus “cultural collective” differently. It would be unthinkable for us to deny assistance to someone looking for support by invoking his/her cultural specificity, but we do try to favor processes of self-assertion that do not collide with the background of the children and teenagers concerned, because we think that these kind of approaches enable more stable changes. We try to support their education and to strengthen their personality and potentialities through theater, music, craft and art. Abusive comments on girls and women are not accepted, nor are pseudo religious justifications.

THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS

The ability of public institutions such as schools to intervene in a sensitive and non-racist way in patriarchal and sexist situations would require that the objective be the emancipation of girls and not any sort of racist integration/adaptation. The German school system would have to commit itself to the tradition of feminist social critique, which ultimately precedes democratic gender programs, so proudly invoked when the differences with Muslim migrants are emphasized. An intensive analysis of the methods of feminist practices of support would also be needed, as well as an examination of anti-feminist tendencies and political forces in the German society. The patriarchal structure of the German family model should be openly discussed, as well as the privileges that are granted to male adolescents. The hypersexualization of female bodies and destructive beauty norms and their social and cultural background should also be questioned. As long as girls in sport and swimming classes have to feel pain and shame under the eyes of their classmates and teachers because of their bodies (too fat, too feminine, unfeminine, always sexualized), I cannot seriously ask a veiled girl to undress herself. Even if I want so much to see her swimming and feeling empowered in a sports competition. Self-assertion among girls and anti-patriarchal emancipation are not European inventions. But schools curricula don't include Islamic feminists; the history of the German women's movement is also barely present there. In my literature classes at high school I only read male authors.

In the construction of Muslims as the “absolute” others, who are measured by degrees of freedom in terms of gender, European society looks at itself in the mirror and sees its actual self: a patriarchal society. It would be extremely helpful to highlight similarities – negative, in this case – and to discuss and change them together, instead of insisting on differences.

OSMAN TEKIN

Osman Tekin, born 1987, looks back on seven years of community work in the youth club Manege and its broader context. Growing up in Berlin right in the neighborhood of Nord-Neukölln he has first-hand knowledge of the issues and challenges concerning the young people visiting Manege. He is an undergraduate student at the Alice Salomon University of Applied Sciences studying Social Work with a scholarship of the Hans-Böckler-Stiftung.

LISA GABRIEL

Lisa Gabriel, born 1983, moved to Berlin from a small town in West Germany 11 years ago. She has a two majors Master degree in Sociology of the Military and National Economics. She has been working in the Manege youth center since three years. Besides that, she is contributing to the working group War and Gender at the Hamburg Institute for Social Research as a freelancer and plans on starting with her PHD by the end of this year.