

Conference on Gender Equality Munich, July 7th, 2018

On July 7, 2018, I had the opportunity to attend the conference „Participation of women in society and politics. Looking at Germany and the Global south“

„Engagement Global“, an organisation working for the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, held this conference on the occasion of the 100 years anniversary of the right to vote for women in Germany.

The event was also framed as part of the efforts for the Agenda 2030, which was adopted in 2015 by all UN-members, and addresses 17 goals for sustainable development – the 5th of it: gender equality! http://www.bmz.de/de/ministerium/ziele/2030_agenda/17_ziele/index.html

Engagement Global specifically invited looking at gender Equality in Global South *and* north, to see what we can learn from *each other* in partnership. I am so delighted about this approach – way too often western countries seem to believe that they are somehow by nature the owners of knowing how to design societies of happy, free, equal citizens (strange view, if you remember that the last parts of Switzerland implemented the right to vote for women in 1990!! a time table about the implementation of women's right to vote: http://www.meinhard.privat.t-online.de/frauen/frauenwahlr_weltweit.html)

This approach reflects in the participation of the conference – people of many different cultural backgrounds, different colours of skin, different countries of origin, a big group of women from the African continent...



Rwanda

Just as well we put away this eurocentered view for a while, so we are able to learn about a stunning example from Africa!

The highlight of the conference is defininitely learning about Rwanda, which leaves me with absolute excitement and hope!

Were you like me so far – main association to Rwanda: horror, genocide, incredible pain...?

Here comes a completely new picture:

After the genocide in 1994, Rwanda implemented a program for reaching gender equality in the country, which led to results I would never have expected to happen (or if anywhere in the world, maybe in Scandinavia, which is for sure due to my own Euro-centred ignorance)

Rwanda is apparently becoming one of the top countries in terms of women rights (and a survey of the Thompson Reuters foundation just ranked the US amongst the 10 most dangerous countries for women!<https://edition.cnn.com/2018/06/25/health/india-dangerous-country-women-survey-intl/index.html>).

How come?

First counsellor of the embassy of Rwanda in Germany, Mr. Benedicto Nshimiyimana answers with a simple „Common sense!“ He explains: Rwanda suffered incredibly through the genocide. After it ended, it was mainly women who built up the country and did the reconcilliation work. At the end of the 90ies 60-70% of the population were women. In the aftermath of the genocide Rwandans came to see that the reasons for it were to be found in the discrimination and marginalization of one part of the population. This comprehension acted in favour for fighting against other forms of discrimination. They understood that we also have to eliminate the discrimination of women, if they wanted to avoid future backlashes.

I am in awe of this conclusion. It sounds so logical, and so resonates with my understanding and values, and yet, there are so many countries that did not make this conclusion in such a radical way (amongst others Germany!). When I ask him

what helped Rwanda take this path Mr. Nshimiyimana answers: Leadership is key! The president was a driving force and brought the efforts forth. Commitment and political will led to a program with stunning results in the country:

- today 63,8% of members of the Rwandan parliament are women. This is the highest rate of women in a state government worldwide! (Germany is Nr. 46 with 30,7%! <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm> with 13 African states before them)
- Rwanda has the highest rate of women working worldwide
- Women receive equal pay to men (Germany: women earn 22% less than men)
- an independent gender monitoring office is in place. Unequal pay can be reported to it, it also takes care to have at least 30% of women in every sector, gives annual reports and requirements to the government
- the heritage law was changed in order to treat men and women equally
- there are special grants available for women setting up a business
- a special ministry takes care of gender equality
- prevention programs against gender based violence
- a national women's council is in place
- a state-funded basic health care insurance for the less privileged ones
- there is a gender responsive budget plan in health care
- a woman who gives birth gets 12 months full salary from the government and can then return to her job

Sounds like paradise?!

Well, of course, Rwanda has its challenges, amongst others poverty and high illiteracy.

What strikes me, is the level of commitment and political and social will to make gender equality possible. Definitely an example for other nations to look into and learn from.

I'll stay updated...

And by the way: Rwanda banned plastic bags already 10 years ago and is considered one of the cleanest countries worldwide.

Swanee Hunt: „Rwandan women rising“ <https://rising.inclusivesecurity.org>

He for She

All too often the question of gender equality is seen as a women's issue. It is not. It is an issue for everyone. Wellbeing of women is wellbeing of society. Unfortunately men who take it on as a topic of their own and stand alongside women are still rare. If it happens I am so moved, because I am yearning for that kind of partnership and companionship.

It's so important because it shows that

- Gender equality concerns everybody
- We are working together on it, and men use their position to create equality for all - instead of the ones that are less privileged being the only ones mobilizing extra resources (of which they already have fewer) in order to liberate themselves

That's why I am celebrating „*He for She*“. The campaign of the UN Women solidarity movement for gender equality invites men to take a stand for gender equality and add their name and photo online.

Men, I want to request of you to consider to participate in the campaign, add your name and publicly support a gender-equal world!

An example for male companionship in this cause is the organizer of the conference – Joy Alemazung. A man organizing a women's conference – you might quickly think that it's another way of patronizing, of knowing better, of showing women the way... Not if you meet Joy. I am admiring his clear and committed way to use his position, knowledge and resources, putting them into service for the cause of gender equality, to create space for women, encouraging them to raise their voices - instead of filling it himself. Not with a patronizing behaviour, but from a place of humility. Thank you Joy for a true example of collaboration.



UN-Women

Board member of the German section of the UN-Women organisation Karin Nordmeyer gives an outline about the organisation and the global situation for women. I am impressed by her broad view, and for me it's the most holistic approach I hear today.

The UN-Women organisation was founded in 2010 – this was the first time that the women's issue was explicitly institutionalized within the UN.

(www.unwomen.org, www.unwomen.de)

Looking into the situation of women worldwide is not very encouraging. Karin Nordmeyer speaks about femicide – the intentional gender-based killing of women, girls and female feti. In fact the killing of female unborn life is rising – and not just in countries that are already known for it (India, China) – also in Europe. Due to femicide, in Asia alone 500 000 000 women are missing! In some Chinese regions the relation of male and female population is even 2:1.

Gender equality, says Karin Nordmeyer, is a transformative goal, that is necessary to reach the other goals of the Agenda 2030 (namely: no hunger, no poverty, education, health and wellbeing, clean water, affordable and clean energy, humane working conditions and economic growth, industry, innovation & infrastructure, less inequality, sustainable cities and communities, sustainable consumption and production, climate protection, underwater life, life on land, peace and justice – and, as a last and overall goal: partnership in order to achieve those goals.)

Yet, if we continued to overcome gender inequality at the same pace than we are acting right now, it would take another 272 years until there is full gender equality on the planet!

Yet in Germany, says Nordmeyer, the trend is going backwards: celebrating the 100th anniversary of the right to vote, we see at the same time that only 31% of the members of parliament are women (Rwanda 64%, Cuba 53%). The pay gap is still big: women earn 22% less than men. Plus, the unpaid care- and housework is mainly done by women. 14% of women have experienced physical and sexual violence before the age of 14.

The political climate is changing, says Karin Nordmeyer, since the rising of right wing populist party AFD, she registers a noticeable lack of mutual respect behind the scenes of the German parliament.

But not only empowering women for more political and social participation is needed. Karin Nordmeyer addresses a topic that gets more and more attention recently: toxic masculinity – the traditional views of how a man should be like is not only suppressing men in their free individuality and puts them in the corset of tight ideas for performance and appearance – it also contributes to keeping women in the same tight corset, too. Nordmeyer even speaks of healing - healing which leads to true partnership: „We need to take men and boys along. We need them to understand: We don't want a piece of your cake. We want a different cake.“

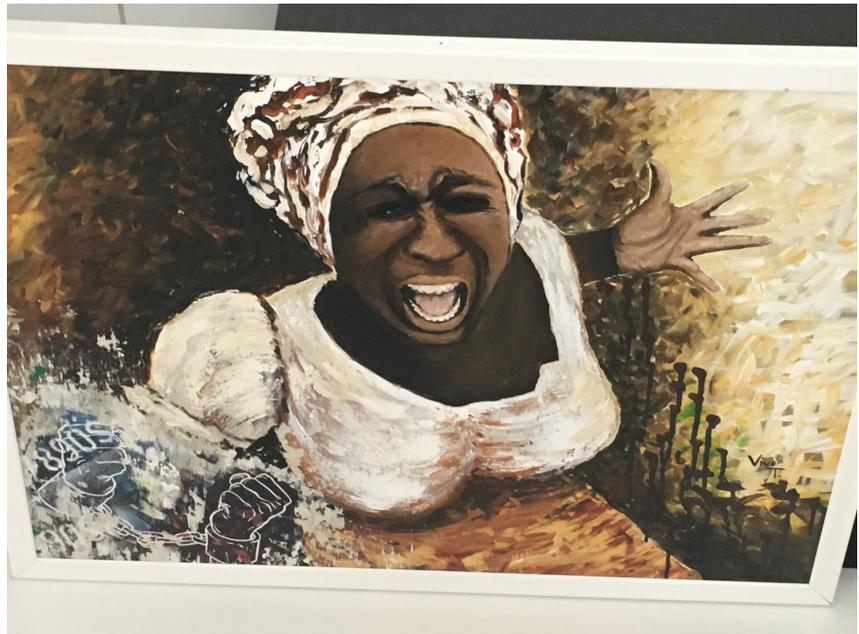
Female voices

Artist Dr. Vivian Timothy came from Nigeria to Germany 25 years ago. „My society had stolen my voice“, she says. In Germany she rediscovered her passion for painting – her artwork is an expression of her struggle for freedom and authentic expression, which is her drive for her work: „I don't check who is liking what I do, and who doesn't. I do it for me.“ Her pictures address the life of Nigerian and other African women. They all show women – expressions of pain, expressions of strength, empowerment. „Colonialism has stolen the voice of women“. Vivian Timothy brings it back. „We are strong now. We've become the architect of our destiny.“



The desire for women to show up, to raise their voices, to take the place in society that they desire – is a returning theme that day. Several speakers share their experience – and concern – that when you

ask a woman to take on a task or responsibility, the first thing she'll say is: „Am I good enough? I think I can't do it...“, while men more easily say „Yes, sure, I can.“ I celebrate to hear this phenomena being addressed. Because inequality and suppression don't just happen, but are always embedded in societal structures. We need to recognize that a woman will respond differently than a man. Not because she is a woman – but because she was socialized as a woman. We need to recognize that for a woman to take on a responsible task is a much bigger step, a much bigger risk, a much bigger effort than for a man – because she *learned* that she should not. Because she internalized the proposition of her own inadequacy, insignificance and powerlessness. I'm not saying that she can not step out of this narrative, but the prize she pays is high. When we seek for social change and gender equality, this is important for us to know – otherwise the best equal structures will never lead to true equality.



What is missing?

First of all: men. With hardly any men in the audience, I wonder: how can we find more male allies? What can motivate men to come to such conferences and learn about a deeply important issue for every society? Only if we work on it together, can there be trust and therefore equality between the genders.

More people: I leave the conference deeply inspired and very grateful for having had the opportunity to meet and learn from encouraging people. I can only guess the amount of resources that were put into making this day happen, and would love to see this happen on a much bigger scale – so we can use our potential fully, give many more people the opportunities to learn, network and take action.

A deeper and more holistic understanding of what we want to create and what needs to change:

The many inspiring and hope-giving things I hear that day – I still also hear many things that pain me, as I see them as deeply rooted in a patriarchal way of thinking and seeing the world:

„I built this up on my own, I am independent.“ This proud statement of a female entrepreneur rather pains me – instead of individualized striving, delivering performance, proving that I can do it alone... I want to see the power of community, the value of cooperation and the recognition of deep interdependence.

„I am obliged to give something back...“ I sense the underlying believe that *„only if I give something back I deserve to receive“* - an expression of the performance-driven notion of „deserving“ and debt, on which capitalism is based, rather than a needs-based cooperative approach to a flow of resources.

„We don't cry any more, we are strong now“, „Sometimes I am not strong, sometimes I sit at home and cry“ are sad statements for me, a

continuation of the deeply patriarchal notion that emotionality is weak and rationality is strong – which cuts us, as a society and as individuals, off from resources that are an important part of Human communal life.

„If you are attached to your content, you make yourself vulnerable“ states that vulnerability is an unwanted state, although it is in my eyes a very necessary notion that we need to re-learn if we want to overcome patriarchy's legacy of force, control and protection.



„We have to be willing to accept to be beaten up when we step in the front row“ „We need to play the game around money and power if we want to have a say“ holds up the assumption that there is no other way to gain power than within the current narrative of what power is: control. This is the inherent, self-sustaining logic of patriarchy, which leaves no space for imagination what power could be: access to resources, based on cooperation and care for all life.

I'd rather go with what Regina Thum-Ziegler of the political group „Women's list“ says: „**We want to change the game!**“

(You can read more about features of patriarchy and how to overcome them here: <http://thefearlessheart.org>)

Oppression and inequality of women is just one symptom of a disease that we see all over the world, and that leads into war, exploitation, destruction and oppression. Control over women means control over life. If the power I am offered implies that I have to continue the game of controlling life – I don't want it. I want a power that can deeply change our way of being with ourselves, with our fellow humans and with all beings around us, including the planet.

I am looking for allies with whom I can ask: What does it really mean to transform our society, which mindset do we need in order to create the world we desire? Often quoted, and so true, Albert Einstein said: „No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it.“

Joy Alemazung ends his closing words with an appeal: „Let's reflect: Where did I refrain from doing anything, that might have moved something?“

And I want to add: Let's reflect: What can I do today, that will be a step towards the world I want us to live in.

And furthermore: Who can I be today, that will lead me there?

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