

»A Bridge between the Refugee Movements and the Feminist Movements«

An Interview with Bethi Ngari

NINA KULLRICH

Nina Kullrich (Hamburg) spoke for *movements* with Bethi Ngari from *Women in Exile* (Brandenburg) on the phone and via mail during the summer of 2016. *Women in Exile* is an initiative founded in Brandenburg in 2002 by refugee women to fight for their rights. Their fundamental political goal is the utopia of a just society without exclusion and discrimination, with equal rights for all, irrespective of where they come from and where they go to. In concrete terms of policy, they focus on the abolition of all laws discriminatory to asylum seekers and migrants and on the interconnections between racism and sexism. *Women in Exile* received the Human Rights Award of the Gerhart and Renate Baum Foundation in November 2016.

Nina Kullrich: Judging from your own broad experience of 14 years of political activism: what are the general challenges of establishing a sustainable, growing, and powerful organisation of refugee women?

Generally it is difficult to find refugee women who are politically active because either they do not have the capacities to engage in political issues or other problems are more pressing for them. Women are normally the ones who take care of the families. Even when it comes to other activities, like German classes, you find them absent.

How do you reach and empower them despite all these difficulties?

We visit the women in the camps. We talk to them. They tell us about their problems, and we try to find ways of dealing with these problems together. We provide them with information; offer workshops. Some of these women stay with us, get politically

involved and become part of our group. Most of them do not become active members, but we often stay in contact or go to demonstrations together.

In 2013, you were part of a women's refugee conference organized by The Caravan, Youth without Borders (Jugendliche ohne Grenzen – JOG) and Socialist Women's Union (SKB) in Hamburg. The stated aim of the conference was the formation of a self-organised women's struggle. How far did you come with this process? Are you working together with (other) refugee women's groups sharing your political goals?

During this conference, we networked with women refugee groups and groups working for refugee women and on refugee problems in general. At the moment, we have networks of women from different parts of the country who are organising themselves or want to start refugee women's groups. We pass our experience on, whenever we are asked. Examples of this are the group in Halle and another one, which is in Nuremberg. The people in Nuremberg have been trying to organise themselves since the end of 2014. Last weekend we made a workshop with some of the women who came to Berlin. You can find the report of the workshop on our blog.¹ The Halle/Magdeburg women started last year, though we have contact with them since 2014. They have come up with a manifesto recently.² The Nuremberg women group is working with the local ›Frauen Café‹ (Women Café) and is organising actions with other groups in town. Both groups are also very active in actions we organise in the whole of Germany and in Berlin/Brandenburg. They took part in our raft tour in 2014 and our last summer bus tour in 2016.

With our bus tours, we want to reach many refugee women and try to mobilise them to organise themselves or to join us on the tour. We want to demonstrate together, do workshops together, many different activities. But to encourage women to organise in their own cities, that is our main objective, and I really hope to achieve it. We also want to make political claims, to bring our issues into the open, as documented on our blog.³

How do you evaluate the situation of the refugee women's movement(s) today?

I would say, now there are women who are getting organised and who are talking for themselves. They have a voice without relying on men or other groups. For example,

1 | See URL: www.women-in-exile.net/?p=3389.

2 | See the November 2016 newsletter of Women in Exile. URL: www.women-in-exile.net.

3 | See URL: www.women-in-exile.net.

women are doing their own seminars now. Before, they were just present in mixed groups, but now they are talking openly about their own issues. Our empowerment workshops are mostly for refugee women: »From Personal Problems to Political Activism« or on »Women Health«. But recently we started to give workshops to mixed groups: »How Open Are My Political Structures to Refugee Women«. We started these workshops after many groups asked us how they could include refugee women in their activities and groups.

On your website, one finds a self-description that says: »We perceive ourselves as a feminist organization and are one of the few links between the women's movement and the refugees' movement.« Can you tell us something about the challenges, difficulties, and achievements you experienced fighting from this particular position?

The first difficulties we had were in 2002 when we broke from the mixed-gender refugee group we were working in. In the mixed group, women's issues were not considered being issues at all. Sexual harassment and lack of privacy, for example, were of no interest to them. So we started to fight from our own perspective. They were not happy that we wanted to form a women's group, so they accused us of being feminist and lesbian. This of course did not stop us from achieving our goals. We consider our group as a safe space for all women to discuss strategies and to bring issues, which oppress women, LGBT and other disadvantaged groups, into the open and fight for change.

Until recently, after hard work, our demands and we ourselves have not been taken very seriously by the authorities for years. Apart from a circular letter published in 2011 by the Minister for Family, Youth and Women of Brandenburg resulting from our activism and asking people working in the *Heim* (refugee shelter) to knock on doors before entering and to separate toilets and bathrooms for the women, other demands – e.g. removing women and children from the *Lagers* (camps) – were just brushed under the carpet. An online petition, which was signed by almost 3,000 people, »Against Violence Against Women« that we handed over to the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth in 2013, has up to now not been reacted to. The minister, after the happenings on New Year's Eve in Cologne, has now allocated a lot of money to improve or build new separate *Lagers* for women. Our demand is: »Women and children out of *Lagers*! Abolish all *Lagers*!«

We are in contact with other feminist groups. We support each other, and we do things together. But one difference to German feminist groups is that within our group not every refugee woman is a feminist. So, if we mix too much right now, these women might simply not understand certain issues, and we would lose our own

goals, our own perspectives. This is why I consider us being a bridge between the refugee movements and the feminist movements.

In 2011, you formed the group ›Women in Exile & Friends‹ – what does the concept ›solidarity‹ mean to you? Within several antiracist movements, refugees refer to non-refugee activists as ›allies‹ or ›supporters‹ – why did you chose the term ›friends‹?

Friends are not only supporting our work, but we also respect each other's contribution to the movement. From the beginning, we agreed that we are the experts of our situation and we are the only ones who could bring our issues to the public, but that we can work together and use each other's experiences to enrich our fight. The fact is that we have a common fight, and respecting each other's position and working together is more dynamic.

In the beginning of 2016, you took part in organising the refugee conference in Hamburg titled »The Struggle of Refugees – How to Go on«, with more than 1,500 refugees and non-refugees attending. In the run-up of the conference, part of the organisers' team said that the important issues the conference was going to address involved violence against women, empowerment of women, and the silencing of women within refugee movements and protests.

The Hamburg conference was a clear example of male dominated refugee groups. They took the stage and talked about women's issues while individual women and women's groups were present at this conference. I hope we have all learned something from this conference and have reflected on why there are so few women in the refugee movement. Initially, we took part in the conference because we wanted to network, to exchange experiences, to attend different workshops and give a workshop on health issues of refugee women.

During the conference, however, we had to make the experience that refugee women were not considered when the workshop rooms were being allocated. It was assumed that the women's workshops would take place at the women space. A space, which was supposed to be a safe room for women who had to take a break from the conference. Therefore, the first workshop took place with a lot of difficulties: The facilitator had to have someone to hold the laptop for us to see what they were talking about; there was absolutely no material for a workshop. It started quite late because women could not find their way to the room, which was partly hidden. The other workshop, which was being given by us, had the same problems, and we

all agreed that enough was enough and decided to let the organisers know it in our own way.

So, we went to another workshop that should also be on feminist issues, where one woman and two men were talking. For me, feminism does not mean that the largest part of a workshop is given by men. We went to the main hall, where we also found predominantly men on the stage talking and moderating. After entering the stage, some women apologised to us for the room problems, but most people accused us of weakening the movement. This intervention contributed to a lot of controversies, and refugee women were accused of being used by non-refugee women and non-refugee groups to sabotage the conference. This was a scandal because it seems that even our complaints were not taken seriously. But I don't remember any more details here and I also don't want to put my energy into that.

But I remember that all the women were in solidarity; they agreed on what should and should not have happened. They were happy that it was finally discussed why men are always moderating, why women do not have a voice, why it is that whenever they want to talk, there is somebody talking louder than them. At least, two of the men who were very critical about the women's protest in this Hamburg conference attended our »How Open Are My Political Structures to Refugee Women« workshop two weeks ago and said they understand that it is important to have a refugee women's group and that it would be good to sometimes meet and try to organise together.

After the sexual assaults in Cologne and other German cities on New Year's Eve 2015/2016 sexist and racist debates on migration increased, whereas sexualised violence against refugee women (and the structural conditions facilitating them) are still silenced, marginalised, and disguised. You published an open letter on that issue, and have been documenting women's experiences for many years – what ways did you find for yourself to be heard?

It is a pity that it took the Cologne incidence for the authorities to acknowledge that this problem – sexual and physical violence inside and outside the camps by refugee and non-refugee men – exists. On the other hand, we see this as a double standard, blaming foreigners especially from North African countries and soon after declaring these countries as ›safe‹. It is an open secret that this happens all the time in big festivals like the Munich Beer Festival – and no one talks about it. That is why we came up with our open letter⁴, which demands that the authorities should not

4 | See URL: www.women-in-exile.net/?p=3017.

legitimise deportations because of this incident. Sexualised and physical violence is not coming from refugee men only.

What do you find missing from current public debates about sexualised violence?

A clear policy for refugee women; how to protect them and not to isolate them in the name of protection; their cases to be treated like every other case of sexualised violence.

Anti-feminists often refer to women as victims in need of protection by men, the police, or the state; feminist groups often reject this concept of ›safety‹ because it means restrictions of women's rights and leads to more surveillance and police presence in public spaces. Have you developed any critical concepts of the term ›safety‹? How does it relate to your concept(s) of ›empowerment‹?

Refugee women should be considered as women living in this society and be treated as such. We don't want any special treatment, but we want that women can turn to the police in case of sexual harassment, that they can make a claim as any other woman can. Refugee women should not be discriminated as asylum seekers. I know that there are feminist groups fighting patriarchal and conservative concepts of ›security‹, but because our situation is different, we also have to call for legal rights, the state, even the police. But first and foremost, we fight to overcome the Lager isolation, the divisions among us. We do not want more protection by demanding more security guards, but rather ask for protection against the violence from the securities, because in the camps it is often they who are the perpetrators of sexual harassments. I think this issue again is a good example of where our group works as a bridge between feminists and refugee women's groups. Empowerment in this context for me means to educate women about their rights and fight for them.

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Umkämpfte Bewegungen nach
und durch EUropa

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