

"Our struggle will continue"

Women-refugee activists of squatted Ohlauer Straße 12, International Women's Space in Berlin

Azozomox and IWS refugee women activists

In December 2012, a group of refugees and activists occupied a nearly vacant school in Ohlauer Straße 12, Berlin, and named it as "Refugee Strike House". These refugee squatters had been occupying the public square in Kreuzberg (Oranienplatz) since October 2012, after participating in the "Refugee Protest March to Berlin" from September 8 to October 6, 2012, against racist immigration and asylum laws. The square Oranienplatz was completely evicted in April 2014 when one portion of the refugees agreed to move to other facilities provided by the authorities and another group occupied the vacant school. One floor of the occupied school in Ohlauer Straße 12 was converted into a woman-only refugee space called the International Women's Space¹ (IWS). The school, including the International Women's Space, was largely evicted on June 24, 2014. Some of the squatter refugees who resisted the eviction continued to stay in the building. Right now, year 2015, there are around 24 refugees at one level of the squatted building. Before eviction the building housed more than 250 refugees, while currently most of the space in this building is used by a private security service .

In June 2014, the IWS activists participated in a protest that continued for nine days when they blockaded the occupied school facing massive objection from state police. However, a group of the squatters agreed to go to a temporary shelter offered by the district. An agreement was signed with the local district after nine days of relentless protest where the group organized some meetings to plan the continuation of their activities after eviction. Shortly after, a room was found in a building of a different women's organization where this evicted group continued with their activities, such as holding meetings regularly every Monday and Wednesday. The group has compiled a brochure, published in July 2015, with only testimonies of refugee women in Germany. In December 2014, the IWS suffered one of the biggest setbacks with the death of Sista Mimi, a Kenyan refugee and an activist who played a crucial role in self-managing and self-organizing the space. Below are the interviews² of several women activists whose original names have been changed. They were all interviewed on February 15, 2014, in the Kollektivbibliothek in New York/Bethanien, four months before the June 2014 eviction. Interviews were carried out in German, English and Spanish.

Why did you decide to live in the squatted school at Ohlauerstraße?

Marissa: I wanted to live in Berlin, and I am not allowed to rent a house in Berlin. Even if I was allowed, I do not have the money to rent a place. So I needed a place to stay, because I am from the Heim, from the Lager³, outside of Berlin. And in the Lager we do not have many things that we need but in Berlin you have all those facilities, such as schools where you can interact with people.

So finally my friend who was already squatting the school got me here. At first it was not easy because we shared toilets with men who did not maintain cleanliness. In addition there were no bathrooms.

We did not have a kitchen or provisions to cook, so we were forced to eat out. It was expensive and cumbersome. The only option open to me was to return to the Lager, though I liked staying at the

1 <http://asylstrikeberlin.wordpress.com/refugee-women/http://asylstrikeberlin.wordpress.com/refugee-women/events/>.

2 All the interviews were done by azozomox and Vanessa Diaz.

3 Heim or Lager refers to the official refugee homes, set up by the German government for asylum-seekers, and often situated very far from any infrastructure; in some cases even located in forests with little access to public transportation.

squatted school. Later, we put a toilet and a bathroom in place, cleaned the building and made it livable. Here we met people, activists and organizations, interacted with them, and living was better than the Lager.

In Berlin, we could visit the hospital without any documents, and when we were sick, the doctors came to visit us. Here we are also more involved in politics than in the Heim, whereas in the Lager, with the lack of interaction, awareness of the politics, or involvement with any activities,

I felt psychologically ill due to inactivity. It was very boring and stressful, and the people were not very friendly; racism was stark — I sensed an unwelcoming feeling. Berlin is a multicultural city, there are many foreigners, and the feeling of acceptance is strong. The only problem is that I feel threatened because the building is squatted, the feeling that we have to leave one day is evident. I live every day with the hope that tomorrow we will still have this shelter to sleep in.

Miranda: The mayor of the district Kreuzberg-Friedrichshain, *Franz Schulz*⁴ from the Green Party, mentioned that we could stay for three days and then some decision would be reached. I came one day after the occupation, and there were not many of us inside the school. We had to think of what we were going to do for the following days. This building is so huge that we were still trying to discover it.

We were trying to make a plan. It was uncertain. We started with laying the information on a table at the entrance, doing shifts for 24 hours, 7 days a week. Many people came by to help us secure the place from being taken over by the city.

Gabriela: In the first week, we started with 30 people; two weeks later we were 63 people.

Miranda: We had a very old computer and first tried to create some kind of infrastructure for data storage but also some security so we could stop the police from evicting us. But it was a lot of work.

At first, we had many problems to gather people for securing the door. All of a sudden many people and activists started to join in with us to protect the building. We never found a solution on how to establish a strong security at the main entrance to keep off the police. We instead kept the door open and let the supporters come in to protect the building with us from eviction. It was difficult to accommodate all of them. We had long discussions.

What were the reasons for establishing this International Women's Space?

Gabriela: There were not many women in the refugee movement at Oranienplatz. An activist proposed to secure a place inside the school only for women. She went to a plenum at Oranienplatz to announce our plan to take a part of the school and keep it as women's space. The men said, *"Well, we have to discuss this, because we are not sure if we need that"*. But activist woman said, *"I am not asking you for permission – I am announcing that we are going to keep a space for us"*. That was really empowering, and it made me think. At the first assembly of the Women's Space, there were more than 30 women, mostly German activists with some experience in being part of a women's group.

The Women in Exile⁵, a group that had already existed for some time, joined the Women's Space group. A crucial incident happened that involved the people in Oranienplatz. A woman wrote in Indymedia⁶ about her experience of being sexually attacked, which created pressure on the Women's Space to take a position. But we knew nothing about what had happened, nor did we know the woman or the man involved. Due to this incident, some women activists left our organization as they did not feel

4 Franz Schulz was mayor of the district Kreuzberg from 1996–2000 and mayor of the district Kreuzberg-Friedrichshain from 2006–2013 (July 31)

5 Women in Exile is an initiative of refugee women founded in Brandenburg in 2002 by refugee women to fight for their rights. <http://women-in-exile.net/ueber-uns/>.

6 See: <http://de.indymedia.org/2013/05/345257.shtml>.

comfortable in such a situation, and we did not know how to move forward. This was the first time we realized that we had a problem and that we had to find ways to cope with such a situation – such as what to say when a woman reveals that she has been sexually abused. Those were really the sensitive moments that's when our group could have fallen apart.

Miranda: We wanted to do the work outside, mobilizing the women in the Lager, but the internal issues took a lot of our energy. We learned to divide the internal and the external activities. There are different levels of internal work related to the women because we have to self-manage the space, and simultaneously we are part of the bigger movement, which fights for the right of all, women and men. Sometimes it seems to be quite stifling when unforeseen situations and challenges arise because among the women activists there are also conflicts owing to many differences, in terms of our backgrounds, understandings and ideas to cope with a certain challenge for some women supporters and activists, the stress of self-managing school was too intensive.

Is the Women's Space now completely accepted by all the squatter occupants of the school? Were there any discussions or debates continuing on sexism?

Marissa: Sometimes you do not have to wait for people to accept it; sometimes you have to enforce it. And that is what we have really done. Men are not going to sit back and give space to the women. Men have always tried to come inside the Women's Space; they have sneaked in from time to time. We had to be firm and ask them to leave, mention that, *"this place is for women. Men are not allowed here."* One time a man came in when it was snowing. He laid his stuff and blankets at the corridor of the Women's Space, right next to our office. I came along when he was sleeping and asked, *"Why are you sleeping here? This is the Women's Space"*. He said: *"What? Have I disturbed you? Have I entered your room? Get out of here!"* He was very aggressive. When I called my partners, and they wanted to have a dialogue with him, he still refused to cooperate. All other women came out. Seeing the number of women around him, he left. While leaving he abusively said, *"You are chasing someone out, who has been supportive of you in securing this place from the beginning"*. It is often difficult to convince the men or to make them understand, that this is the only place for women (one wing on the second floor) in a huge school, which has four floors. It is not easy; the men, not all, think we, the women, are a bit selfish or something. But that is not the case. We had many discussions and this is something we are doing every day. There came a time when we began to lock the main door to the corridor of the Women's Space, and they began to realize that this is a Women's Space and that we are affirmative. In the beginning we had, besides the lock, a wooden bar as well to secure the door because the men tried to break-in the lock. Several times we had to chase the men out.

Gabriela: We have to understand that the school is an open space, where you have new people arriving every day, and they don't necessarily have any idea about what is going on. The women who live there try to make sure the new people are informed about the women's space. Once we hung posters on the walls with slogans against sexism. Some men did not understand it. When they saw the posters, they thought we were offering to sell sex.

Marissa: Some people do not even know the concept of "sexism".

Miranda: But also we have to add that there are men who do understand what is written on the posters and still took the posters off of the wall.

How many of you are members of the Women's Space? How are you organized? What is your structure like? How do you make decisions and what is actually happening in the

Women's Space?

Marissa: We are about seven living in the Women's Space, but what happens is that women come and go when they find a better place. The school is not the best place to live in. Don't forget that people live here because they do not have another alternative. Immediately, when they get a better option, they leave. We had a woman with three children who left after finding something more stable.

We had another lady, who went to her mother. At present, in the room where I am staying is shared by three women. In another room there are three more women, and two occupants in another room. Usually two or three women share each room. We are seven or eight women right now.

Gabriela: In the Women's Space, we have one room to hold our meetings, another room for German classes and workshops, where we also have a free shop to place donations of clothes, etc. and mattresses for emergency use. One room is kept exclusively for women who need a shelter for a shorter while, say a couple of nights or a bit longer. The women here also decide how many women can share the space with them.

Marissa:

For emergencies, it is acceptable. For instance, right now we have a Roma woman and her three kids sleeping there for two or three nights.

What kind of activities do you have here?

Miranda: The German classes are held two times per week, and it works very well. Apart from the women living here, there are women coming from the Lager to attend the classes. For a time we had a regular sewing workshop.

Gabriela: There is a group of lawyers who come every other Monday. We try to organize two workshops per month, and we just finished a small brochure translated into many languages (Arabic, French, English, Russian, etc.) about the legal rights of migrants, which we are going to distribute in the Lager Eisenhüttenstadt⁷. Some workshops are recorded, so that we can later publish the content. So far we have done workshops about sexism, legal support, self-defense, domestic violence, where we have used testimonies and books like "Let me Speak!" by *Domitila Barrios de Chungara*, a Bolivian labor leader; and "I, Rigoberta Menchu" by a Guatemalan Quiche Indian woman *Rigoberta Menchu* as references.

How do those workshops work?

Gabriela: We usually invite someone from a group who works on the subject in which we are interested. For example, for the workshop on "sexual violence against women", we invited a woman speaker from LARA⁸. LARA offers free administrative assistance for women and girls who have suffered rape, sexual offence or assault or sexual harassment.

Miranda: The workshop on "undocumented work" was with a group from the syndicate ver.di together with the lawyers. Usually we try to pay for the transportation and tickets for women who come from the Lager so they can attend the work-shops of their interest. Sometimes we bring flyers to the Lager

⁷ The Lager Eisenhüttenstadt is a reception camp and also a deportation prison and one of the biggest of its kind in Germany. See: <http://lagerwatcheisen.blogspot.eu/category/allgemein/>

⁸ LARA offers bureaucracy-free help for women and girls who have suffered rape, a sexual offence or assault, or sexual harassment. See: <http://www.lara-berlin.de/index.php?id=21&L=6>.

to invite them. We had workshops with 15 to 20 women. This was on a self-defense course we organized at the beginning.

Gabriela: We have many activities, but what really consumes time is the every-day life in the school. We struggled for a long time to get all the permissions from here and there for the Roma children and adolescents to get accepted in a school. Later we had to find out how to pay for their transportation to the school. Altogether there are around 15 children/adolescents living there, and most of them now go to school.

So you also have some support from hospitals that offer treatment for free?

Gabriela: Every Saturday a group of doctors come to the school. We also have some doctors we can call in case of an emergency, who have also tried to admit patients in the hospital even for the undocumented people.

Miranda: But every situation is different. Sometimes you go to a clinic, which treats migrants for free but you can receive very racist treatment. They speak German or little English, and then they can be very rude; they do not have patience to hear from the patient and do not let the person speak. They do not want to sort it out, and it demands a lot of attention, stressing the patient. One time I was there, and I tried to explain that someone was outside, and that I could help translate for that person. But they didn't make any effort to understand what I was saying. They made it so difficult that the medical problem was not sorted out. And then they came out and told the person that she should bring a translator. This person felt discriminated and maltreated and did not want to go back to this hospital, her pride was hurt. So this is just one example. Sometimes the hospital is very far away and difficult to reach or the person cannot go alone, needs money for the transportation and like.

Do you make all decisions collectively?

Gabriela: Yes, exactly. Every Saturday at 2 pm we have our plenum (assembly).

Miranda: We have written down the structure of our plenum on the wall of our meeting office. We take the points, list the announcements and the external topics brought up from newcomers. After that is finished, we go on discussing our internal issues.

Gabriela: We have many differences among ourselves. We know that for many women it is difficult to come to a space very much dominated by men. This is now clearer to us, one year after the occupation. Now we understand that many won't work inside the school on a daily basis but will be available for specific activities when they are invited. But we have been getting support from many women's organizations in Berlin, especially in this district of Kreuzberg. We have a great network with some groups.

Do you also have connections to other house-projects, (ex-)squats?

Marissa: Not really.

Gabriela: We have good connections with X-B-Liebig 34 (an Anarcha-Feminist, FLT Collective and Social Living House-project), where we threw a solidarity party, and New York in Bethanien (Social Center and House-project), which is also open to us.

Marissa: We get support from other organizations, like churches or the Muslim community, who often bring clothes and a lot of food. Especially the Muslim community has brought a lot of stuff and has been very helpful. Once they brought so much food that we could share it in the whole house.

What do you think about the German left, the anti-racist movement?

Gabriela: I do not like this theory of privilege explaining everything, feeling guilty of having privileges, often used by the German left because they are white, have a passport, can travel, and work. We are not fighting to get the privileges of the native Germans. The fact that white western people will encounter more open doors here and there doesn't mean they are able to understand the choices they have or that they will use these privileges in a way that will change the world into a better place.

I have seen more often the so-called underprivileged people making these changes. That a political person is aware of his/her privilege is the least I can expect. But to create a false hierarchy where the privileged people, all of the sudden, pretend to be learning from the oppressed just because they have realized how superior they are, is nonsensical.

In my opinion, people should get together when they empathize with others, when they share the reasons to fight together, when they think the struggle is also for them, they should fight not because they feel guilty or have pity. Once I was in a meeting and I wanted to say something about a certain situation involving the refugee struggle and a German supporter said to me, *"This is not about you"*. And I replied that it is about me, it is about all of us. The person laughed. I understood that, at that point, I have lost even my history as a migrant, I was being looked at as a semi-white privileged person, with supposedly had more rights than the refugees in general, but less rights than the refugees when it comes to speaking of my experiences and challenges. I remember asking myself that if it is not because of all of us, what are we doing here? Exercising benevolence? It was a weird feeling and it showed how big our challenge is when it comes to solidarity struggle on a non- hierarchical plane.

Marissa: Our schools are just as good. Many African families put all of their money into education, but then when you come to Germany nobody acknowledges it. Your degree is not recognized. Here you can work as a cleaner or in a hotel, making the beds, as a wait-ress or maybe in the kitchen of a restaurant. And that's because you come from Africa. It is the opposite for a German in Kenya, where he or she becomes a boss because all their qualifications will be accepted. They will be given the best jobs, the best cars and the best houses. There are no Germans in Kenya who want to come back to Germany. They do not have to come back, they live well and they are accepted there. It is the contrary for us.

I come to Germany and whatever education I have is useless. Nobody is interested. It's like, if our schools are not schools, if our education is not education – which is not true. You are treated here as if you have never seen a hospital, as if there are no doctors in your country, whereas from Kenya thousands of nurses are exported to the UK. When South Africa became independent, many nurses and doctors were exported there, as well as to Namibia and Botswana. Sadly the only picture you see here is the wild Africa, the Massai in the wild. They do not represent or show anything about our hospitals or other technical professions, our doctors, our lawyers or our education system.

But when you come as a doctor here to Germany, nobody will allow you to work here. What I am saying is that we should not be judged by the color of our skin or where we come from. More important is what we are as a person, what we know and what you are doing. I have a friend who was looking for a job and was told by the Germans that, *"You are aiming too high"*.

Gabriela: At IWS, we try to explain to the supporters that we are not victims, and we do not need someone for help. Help is not what we need. We need people who want to work together with us. Sometimes girls from universities come and say, *"How can I help you?"* And it ends up that we need to help them finish their studies or PhD theses. We are the living material for their work. Sometimes we

say, “*Hey, come on, we know who is going to help who here.*” These are things we have to say over and over again. There is a lot of racism, and the society has a long way to go if they want to get rid of it. I have lived and squatted in the UK in the late 1980s, and I never faced the racism that I face in Germany, every single day. Consider the language as an example. The postman comes to my house and my name is Ramires-Boll. It is written at the door. Then I choose to sign Boll, because it is shorter. Then the postman asks me: Ramires? If I wrote Boll it is because it is also Boll, but Boll is a German name and he/she gets suspicious because he/she can’t make any connections between my looks and my surname.

Marissa: We went to the Vivantes-Hospital and went to the reception. There was a lady, at the reception, and she was on the phone. She took her time, talking on the phone instead of attending to us. Then she hung up and did something else. Then she picked up the phone again. She was not even looking at us as we were waiting in front of the window of the reception. She just wanted to boil us up and was totally ignoring us. Eventually she spoke to us. We gave her the names and she kept asking, “*WHAT, what name?*” She only spoke in German and didn’t look at us. It was so annoying. She was so rude. You could just see the hate in her attitude, which meant that, “*I am obliging myself to talk to you*”.

Miranda: You could clearly see how they treat a white person better than how they were treating our friend who was black. And when the doctor came he talked from a distance. With the white patients he got physically closer. It was so obvious. We went there at 1 pm, and she wasn’t admitted until 10 pm. It took 9 hours for her to be attended to by the hospital. And then, when they admitted her, they first put her in isolation or quarantine because she is from Africa, and they were suspecting that she had a very contagious disease or something.

Gabriela: This also helps us understand our space. The people living in the school are vulnerable, and the school itself is vulnerable. Every day you see it, and every day you start to solve all sorts of problems collectively; this is also why we are there. Since recently, every Friday we have meetings with the district to try and sort out the situation of the school. We know the problems we have there cannot be solved on the district level. We know we are dealing with federal regulations against asylum seekers and migrants.

But there are other problems too, which do not make the situation easier. The black people living here have to face problems daily whenever they step out of the occupied school. So you cannot expect them to come back to the school in the best of moods. There are many young people here who just want to live like other young people around. For instance, when they go to a club, security doesn’t let them in. There was a woman who worked in a place, and the boss said, “I am not going to pay you”. And to whom could she complain? Since this incident, we participated in a workshop that was organized by another group about the working rights of illegalized people and what they can do when they work and do not get paid.

And then, as you said, you have a lot of so-called German white left groups or people who are paternalistic?

Gabriela: Absolutely paternalistic, they have to stop “*el colonialismo metido en la cabeza, así*” [the colonialism in their head]. There are Germans in our group who are conscious about what’s going on, but this thing of “I’m guilty, because I’m white” must stop. If they were really willing to struggle against this enormous guilty feeling, they could start by understanding that a woman who came all the way from a far away country with no visa, money, or connections, and ended up finding her way to the occupied school, to the movement is a capable person. This person cannot be treated as a child who is

learning about life from scratch.

Carmen: I think the German left has done little work in the sense of understanding what racism means in reality. There exists the theoretical discourse about racism, but in the base, no real work has been done with people who are victims of racism. Actually the people of color should attend more workshops about racism. There should be such workshops regularly in this country, which underscores it was a colonial power and still is. This maybe could be a way for the German left to fully understand what that means. This society is based on bourgeois principles and structures, and many on the left come from this bourgeois background and simulate an understanding. But in reality they do not want to give away their privileges and structures. I always remember the Antifa, who do politics somehow as a “left sport”; they do not want any real change because they have this middle-class thinking. They have the system somehow in themselves.

I come from South America (Chile), from a family, who were partly members of the Revolutionary Left Movement MIR⁹ (Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria), which is a Chilean political organization and former guerilla organization, and for me it is very strange. I am in the Queer Scene and with the Transgeniale-CSD.¹⁰ In 2013, we had a racist incident,¹¹ and now this community is split because these dominant structures appear again and again, although there exist these anti-racist discourses. When you cannot trust the left, the radical groups here, then could you trust the rest of the society?

The left is somehow still saturated in this colonial way of thinking. These are old structures, but many deny it. They do not see that and when you criticize that – either they remain silent or do not want to deal with it right away. But you have to deal with it, you have to work with the people and listen – and yes – it probably hurts.

Gabriela: It scares me that if the authorities close the school and evict Oranienplatz, refugees will be sent back to the Lager, to the isolation; people will be forgotten and hardly anyone will join the fight anymore. I fear this because this has happened in the past. For a long time, Berlin was quiet about the struggle of the refugees although in other parts of the country there was a lot of activity and work done by refugee- and migrant-groups like *The Voice of the Caravan*. I am afraid that if our fight will be disrupted if we are dispersed, if we don't have an address like the occupied school or the camp in Oranienplatz, the repressive system will devour us.

At least five thousand people still come every year to the solidarity-demonstration for *Silvio Meier*, who was killed by the Nazis in Berlin in 1992. And this is very important, but how many people come to express their solidarity for *Mete Eksi*, *Ouri Jalloh* or *Antonio Amadeu* or many other non-Germans and/or persons of color who have been killed?

Miranda: We were mobilizing to go to the just-opened Heim (refugee-camp) in Berlin-Hellersdorf (suburb of Berlin) in 2013, but many refugees were afraid because of the Nazis. People said that being African, having a dark skin color, would make you a target. Though we wanted to go, there was also the anxiety and fear for our lives because we knew there was a strong Nazi presence. But not just the Nazis, ordinary people came out from their houses, the German people, to demonstrate against the Heim and against, a hundred or so, Syrian refugees who came to this area. So it's like, if you are black

⁹ See the website for more details: <http://www.mir-chile.cl/>.

¹⁰ T-CSD: Transgeniale Christopher Street - Day (Gay-Pride) is a demonstration and festival, held each year in Kreuzberg, Berlin, to celebrate the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people, but also to protest against racism, gentrification, capitalism and nationalism. The T-CSD so far took place from 1998–2013.

¹¹ One performance of the artist “Miss Pünktchen”, which was an official solidarity act of the T-CSD 2013, included racist words – also the n-word. See also, the criticism towards the organizers of the T-CSD 2013 and the declaration and apology of the preparation group: <http://transgenialercsd.wordpress.com/>.

around there, you are just one person, isolated among so many Germans.

If you are attacked, you will not even be able to spot who did it as there will be so many of them.

I mean, if such a thing happens then who is going to defend you? Who are you going to take to court? So sometimes, there is no point of putting yourself into such problems. For instance, at the demonstration, though many of us wanted to protest against the Nazis, almost none of us, Africans, had the guts to participate.

Marissa: Many times, I have experienced open racism at the train. When I was working around Lichtenberg (a district of Berlin) and had to take the U1 from Warschauerstraße, wherever I sat no one wanted to sit next to me or close to me or even on the opposite seat. The train could be overcrowded but still no one would come close to me. And this has not happened only once or twice. I became so scared that I said to myself, "*Someday this exclusion will kill me!*" So I changed my route though it took longer to travel because I got scared for my life.

And what about the experiences with the police?

Miranda: Anytime somebody is sick and you call the ambulance, they come together with the police. And when the ambulance comes, they don't take the people. Last time they left somebody who was sick, and the person couldn't even walk, but they said the patient should walk to the hospital and left.

And when the police enter the building, how do they react?

Gabriela: Last time the police went to every room.

Marissa: They checked our identification, which scared us.

Miranda: They went through the whole house, came in riot gear, checked IDs, held people in their rooms and detained some of us. The police inspected for many hours and blocked every activity until they were done. No one could get out of the building. We had to sit and do nothing. In half an hour, there were a hundred policemen and policewomen. They stormed the Social Center *Irving Zola* (which, meanwhile, was used by the refugees) and photo graphed all the occupants. This incident happened in December 2013.

Do you have any connections with other anti-racist/women struggles from other countries?

Gabriela: We hope that with the "March for Freedom" to the European Union from Strasbourg to Brussels in May/June 2014¹² we will be able to connect and interact with other groups, broaden our network and alliance. However, we still have to find out how many of us can technically join the march, because refugee women and men cannot leave the German borders.

How is the relationship with the local people of this neighborhood?

Marissa: There were some complaints in the beginning by one person, I remember. He wanted to collect signatures against us, because he said we made too much noise and all that stuff, and that the occupied school should be closed. So we had to mobilize against this. Now it subsided. We have neighbors who bring clothing or other stuff or come to ask what we need.

¹² See: <http://freedomnotfrontex.noblogs.org/route/>.

Maybe the biggest enemy is not the neighbor, but rather the yellow press, popularly ‘tabloid journalism’?

Marissa: Yes, they come around and want to interview us. The first question they ask is if we have heard about someone who was raped here in this place. Last time, there was one journalist who even helped to clean up the place, and he did not say he was a journalist. Eventually he asked about six women who supposedly had been raped in this place. I said, “*What? Six women, when did that happen?*” This is just a newspaper story. I mentioned that we were living here, and we don’t know of anyone being raped. Truly, the media flocks around this place with cameras to construct stories.

Do you let the journalists enter the building?

Marissa: We have been refusing to give interviews, but sometimes they target us when we leave the building. They come and ask if something is true, we might say no, and then there is another question, and you find yourself answering. In the end, you have actually been interviewed without your knowledge.

Gabriela: Last week, one woman of the house was quoted in the newspaper, but she had not even spoken to a journalist. They want to find stories they can publish and influence the public opinion against us.

Marissa: They come every day and even want to take photos of the rooms. The entrance is open, so anybody can come in pretending they are just curious as a person and then find someone, who feels seduced to say something. One time the toilets were really fucked, and some people let the press take photos. The next day you could see how the media used these images against us. One journalist came into the Women’s Space and opened the doors of the rooms to look around without any respect for our personal space. I asked the person to leave: “*This is the Women’s Space! What are you doing here? Get out!*” This has even happened at night around 10 pm.

Miranda: When the incident of rape was posted in Indymedia in May 2013¹³, the mainstream media spotted it, they wrote terrible things, abusive articles, and we had to call a press conference at Oranienplatz to make our position clear. To our astonishment, we met some resistance from some refugee men, who were at the time very dominant at Oranienplatz. The idea that a women’s group had organized a press conference to talk about women’s issues was alien to them, and the men felt uncomfortable about the fact that the women were being protagonists. The impression was that we would be allowed to speak if we were going to speak for the men, in support of the men.

Not being there to do such a job, these men could not comprehend why the women needed to hold the press conference or clarify their stance. On that day, there were many journalists, thirty maybe, and the women started to speak and were interrupted by one man on multiple occasions. The man even said, “*Who are you? We’ve never seen you here working for us.*” It was really embarrassing for us.

We were there to speak against sexism, against prejudice, showing our solidarity to the woman who had published her state- ment in Indymedia and also to the men in general, but were victimized for our efforts and common struggle.

Gabriela: I remember that my body was trembling. I could not believe it. We had worked so hard with other men from the movement, to formulate our statements. And there we were waiting for a man to calm down and let us speak. However, we did speak after some other men of the movement were able

13 See: <http://de.indymedia.org/2013/05/345257.shtml>.

to calm the agitated man. Surprisingly enough, the next day, the press did not mention the brawl, which was a relief.

What was the clarification to this incident?

Miranda: We are constantly there, and we have not seen or heard about rape. It was not just responding to the lady who wrote about being abused. She told about what had happened to her when she was involved with the movement at Oranienplatz, before the school was squatted. People were using this information to connect rape to the school that women were being abused in the school.

What do you think about what was written in Indymedia? How do you see it in the end?

Gabriela: Our position is that she is telling the truth. A woman usually doesn't like telling a story such as that.

Miranda: Anyhow, the newspaper took advantage of this information, and we made the statement to remind the public that sexism and rape or assault or violence on women is everywhere in society. And the school is a part of the society. We wanted to show that as a group we were openly fighting against it. Our concern in this regard, what is the general society doing against sexism or violence against women? How is the general society dealing with everyday patriarchy? Unlike the media broadcast on the rape incident at the school, there are many sexual crimes that are commonplace in the wider white society, then why don't we see any big media coverage on those?

Marissa: Take, for example, the *Oktoberfest* at München where every year women are assaulted.

Gabriela: With the school, we have to be really careful because, in the racist fantasy, black men are sexualized, and black women are potential prostitutes.

What is the situation right now with the school? Do the authorities want you out?

Gabriela: The talks are still going on. They want to turn the squatted school into a house for projects. They talk about resettling the majority of the refugees some place else. To give space to projects, the living space should be smaller. The majority of the people would have to leave and we know they would opt to send people to the Lager. And this is exactly what we are fighting against.

Miranda: The school is full. There are people sleeping even in the corridors under bad conditions. Some sleep next to the toilet if they have just arrived. There are different plans in the rounds of negotiation. The district says only around 20 to 30% of the place could be used for living spaces. And this is impossible because this is one of the prime alternatives to the Lager.

Marissa: The negotiation meetings are not easy, and it takes forever to agree on anything. Because, where should we all go, when we have nothing? Why should we leave? At the beginning 50 or 60 people were participating in the meetings between refugees, activists and supporters. It takes time to develop something dynamic, something that will work better for all of us.

Miranda: The main topic now is the security, and the refugees themselves want to take responsibility for that.

Gabriela: Now the Senator for Integration in Berlin, *Dilek Kolat*, has come offering to negotiate with

us. The Senate wants to have a list of the people living in the school as well as to know in which parts of Germany people have their cases registered. They say they could transfer their cases to Berlin. There is a group from Oranienplatz and the school who meets with the Senate on this matter. The district won't participate in this meeting. So if the Senate transfers the cases to Berlin, then refugees would be staying in Berlin without fearing the Residenzpflicht. Residenzpflicht means mandatory residence. It is a legal requirement affecting specifically applicants of refugee status or those who have been given a temporary stay of deportation. Those affected are required to live within certain boundaries defined by the applicants' local foreigners' office. Residenzpflicht only exists in Germany or within Europe, and several migrants and refugee advocacy organizations have opposed the Residenzpflicht as a violation of fundamental human rights.

Marissa: But we don't know if we can trust the Senate.

Miranda: The Senate interferes because they say the school has not been managed well, that we are devaluating the market value of the school property. The district operates the school, but the district cannot sell the house; to sell the house, an approval from the Senate is required.

Marissa: There is a lot of pressure coming from the media. All of these bad reports about violence create pressure on the district, and if the police decided there was imminent danger in the school, they would storm in. And the Senate would take control of the situation without having to share decisions with the district.

Gabriela: Many demands we have are of the responsibility of the Senate of Berlin and of the Federal Government. They have to get involved. The house was not only squatted, it is a part of a movement whose main demands are to stop deportation; close the Lagers; and give permission to the refugees to stay, study and work. This is not some demand only on the level of the district's responsibility, but our demands are addressed to other levels of the Federal German Government.

Maybe some last words for today:

Marissa, Gabriela, Miranda, Carmen:

Asylum to women persecuted because of their gender!

This is political persecution! We need more recognition on gender-based persecution!

End of Patriarchy!

Stop Residenzpflicht! Freedom of movement! Close the Lagers!

We want to live in apartments like everybody else.

We want the right to work, to study and to stay in Germany as long as we want.

And our struggle will continue...

More information

* **International Womens Space**

<http://oplatz.net/category/international-womens-space/>

* **Ohlauer School:** <http://oplatz.net/category/international-womens-space/>

* **Women in Exile, Refugee women get loud! :**

<http://womeninexile.blogspot.de/>

* **Respect, for the labour rights of refugee and illegalized women:**

<http://www.respectberlin.org/wordpress/>

* **LIA, Ladies International Association München:**

<http://www.lia-munich.de/>

* **Refugee women rights:**

<http://asylumlaw.org/countries/index.cfm>

Notes

1 See:

<http://asylstrikeberlin.wordpress.com/refugee-women/http://asylstrikeberlin.wordpress.com/refugee-women/events/>.

2 All the interviews were done by azozomox and Vanessa Diaz.

3 Heim or Lager refers to the official refugee homes, set up by the German government for asylum-seekers, and often situated very far from any infrastructure; in some cases even located in forests with little access to public transportation.

4 Franz Schulz was mayor of the district Kreuzberg from 1996–2000 and mayor of the district Kreuzberg-Friedrichshain from 2006–2013 (July 31).

5 Women in Exile is an initiative of refugee women founded in Brandenburg in 2002 by refugee women to fight for their rights. <http://women-in-exile.net/ueber-uns/>.

6 See: <http://de.indymedia.org/2013/05/345257.shtml>.

7 The Lager Eisenhüttenstadt is a reception camp and also a deportation prison and one of the biggest of its kind in Germany. See: <http://lagerwacheisen.blogspot.eu/category/allgemein/>.

8 LARA offers bureaucracy-free help for women and girls who have suffered rape, a sexual offence or assault, or sexual harassment. See: <http://www.lara-berlin.de/index.php?id=21&L=6>.

9 See the website for more details: <http://www.mir-chile.cl/>.

10 T-CSD: Transgeniale Christopher Street - Day (Gay-Pride) is a demonstration and festival, held each year in Kreuzberg, Berlin, to celebrate the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people, but also to protest against racism, gentrification, capitalism and nationalism. The T-CSD so far took place from 1998–2013.

11 One performance of the artist “Miss Pünktchen”, which was an official solidarity act of the T-CSD 2013, included racist words – also the n-word. See also, the criticism towards the organizers of the T-CSD 2013 and the declaration and apology of the preparation group: <http://transgenialercsd.wordpress.com/>.

12 See: <http://freedomnotfrontex.noblogs.org/route/>.

13 See: <http://de.indymedia.org/2013/05/345257.shtml>.