

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND
SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: GERMANY

Transcript of Heidi Meinzolt

**Interviewer: Sławomira
Walczevska**

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University of Michigan

**Institute for Research on Women and
Gender 1136 Lane Hall Ann Arbor, MI
48109-1290 Tel: (734) 764-9537**

E-mail: um.gfp@umich.edu

Website:

<http://www.umich.edu/~glblfem>

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Heidi Meinzolt-Depner is a language teacher, engaged since the 1970s in the peace movement and transnational political activism. She is a member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and she focuses on alternatives to traditional 'security' politics. She was one of the co-founders of the Greens in Bayern. From 1987 to 1991, she became regional spokeswoman for the Greens in Bayern, as part of the Alliance 90/The Greens coalition. During her political career within the Greens, she took on multiple roles, including as spokesperson for the Bavarian state association and for regional and national task forces on European and peace politics. She was board member of the European Greens, as well as district chair and candidate to the German and European Parliaments. She left the Greens Bayern in 2001 after 19 years, to focus on her engagement on other initiatives and in NGOs.

Sławomira Walczewska, born 1960, feminist activist and philosopher (PhD). In 1999, Walczewska published *Ladies, Knights and Feminists: Feminist Discourse in Poland*, the first Polish book about the history of women's emancipation in Poland from a cultural perspective. That book was nominated, as one of 20 books, for the most prestigious book award in Poland at that time, NIKE, in 2000. She is author of ca. 50 articles about feminism and history of the women's movement. She was teaching history of philosophy at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow (1985-1990), history of feminist ideas at the Warsaw University (1997), at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow (2000) and the feminist critics of history at the Viadrina University in Frankfurt a/O (2019).

In 1991 she co-founded the eFKa- Women's Foundation, one of the first feminist organizations in post-socialist Poland. She edited the feminist magazine "Pełnym Głosem" (*In Full Voice*, 1993-1997) and was member of the editorial board of *Zadra*, the feminist quarterly (1999 - 2018). She is director of the Feminist Institute for Research and Education (www.efka.org.pl/fibe).

Sławomira Walczewska: -were involved in a few things. Maybe feminist or not feminist, but how did that come about and how did that develop afterwards.

Heidi Meinzolt: I am postwar generation, I was born in 1952 in a family that from the very beginning always had lively discussions on a wide variety of topics. We were also very critical about political developments and so on. We really had very open discussions. There was also a lot of trouble with the parents in that regard, but I came into contact with the peace movement¹ in Germany very intensively after school and during my studies.

There was also this whole debate about retrofitting² and we were on the streets a lot, protesting very much against the kind of retrofitting. I left this peace policy engagement because I moved to the countryside with my family and we joined this alternate wave and we joined the party known as „die Grünen“³. Because the peace movement did not exist in this very rural area of Lower Bavaria⁴, but also because the connections between the environment, sustainability, peace and, of course, women's rights and especially the participation of women in political decisions became clear to me.

That happened during the early 1980s, and I very quickly became a chairperson with equal rights in Bavaria. Because we, „die Grünen“, had decided on a women's statute. That was a very exciting time, because I worked with a man and we were on equal terms, so to speak. He already had experience in the Bundestag⁵, and I really was a political newcomer there.

During this time I also had a fateful encounter with Eleonore Romberg⁶, who was one of the leading figures of the Munich⁷ peace movement at that time. She was a professor for social work in Munich. At that time she was also the international president of WILPF⁸

¹ The pacifist movement in Germany was at its height during the Cold War era (1945-1990). The devastation of WWI and WWII shifted the country towards peace rather than militarism. Christian-moral ethics drove the pacifist movement along with student protests in the 1960s. See “Pacifism in Germany.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 4 Apr. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pacifism_in_Germany. Accessed 22 April 2020.

² The term ‘retrofitting’ refers to adapting to a new purpose or need. See “Retrofit.” *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/retrofit. Accessed 22 April 2020.

³ Die Grünen refers to ‘The Greens’, a green political party in Germany. The German Green Party and Alliance 90 merged together in 1993 to form the Centre-left Greens which focuses its efforts on economic, ecological, and social sustainability as well as nonviolence. See “The Greens.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 18 Aug. 2019, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alliance_90/The_Greens. Accessed 22 April 2020.

⁴ The Free State of Bavaria is the largest German state with a population of 13 million. Bavaria’s central cities include Munich, Nuremberg, and Augsburg. See “Bavaria.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 22 Apr. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bavaria. Accessed 22 April 2020.

⁵ The Bundestag is the German federal parliament, whose members are elected by the people of Germany. The Bundestag was established in 1949, succeeding the Reichstag as a legislative body in Germany. “Bundestag.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 30 Apr. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bundestag. Accessed 22 April 2020.

⁶ Eleonore Romberg was born 19 June 1923 in Munich-Ramersdorf. She was a German sociologist and activist for the women’s and peace movement. She was also a member of the Bavarian state parliament. See “Eleonore Romberg.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 18 Dec. 2018, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eleonore. Accessed 22 April 2020.

⁷ Munich is the capital city of Bavaria, a German federal state. See “Munich.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 26 Apr. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Munich. Accessed 26 April 2020.

⁸ The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) was established in 1915 with a vision of a feminist peace. WILPF fights against patriarchy, militarism and neoliberalism through multiple

and during her time in the state parliament, she gathered many women around her who looked after armament sites in Bavaria. That's what this league work was all about, working for women's rights locally, to stand against violence against women, but it was also within this peace context.

She put this group together really well, and for me she was already a kind of mentor, one you could not ignore, because she said: "Tomorrow evening we will meet. You must be there." Sometimes it wasn't so easy because I had little kids there and I was a single parent for a while. But Eleanor Romberg had a co-worker, who later became the secretary general of WILPF in Geneva and then again for the „Grünen“, and that's where it came full circle, with Barbara Lochbihler⁹ sitting in the European Parliament.

Through the team, the National Working Group for Peace, but above all this league policy, I really entered into feminist discourse. And that's where I learned a great deal.

First of all, to understand how women see something differently, which contexts of life they put into the foreground and how they derive political demands from this. Since I studied languages myself and was always very interested in international affairs, I then joined - well, while I was still with the „Grünen“, I was on the European board of directors, where we really devoted ourselves to peace policy, but also increasingly to feminist policy fields, especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall¹⁰.

And in 2000 I left the „Grünen“ and became more active in the international women's league. There I was in charge of European coordination for many, many years, and it was very enriching to see the different contexts from which women participate in political work, but also how they set different priorities.

It is really something that has grown, this feminist commitment. It is also very clear to see where the differences are when I say that we have made a major campaign such as 'Move the Money from War to Peace'. Where is the money really needed? Especially when you look at what has happened in the health sector or in the whole field of reproductive medicine through the privatization of hospitals in various countries, for example in Greece.

There is a lack of money everywhere, and the fact that the social burden is once again on women simply drives them out of politics in part. I do not mean party politics, but simply political commitment. Yes, education is a very important point. I myself have been a teacher at grammar school throughout my career.

methods of work including analysis, awareness-raising, advocacy, activism, and building alliances. See "Our Movement." *WILPF*, 30 Apr. 2020, www.wilpf.org/our-movement/. Accessed 26 April 2020.

⁹ Barbara Lochbihler is a member of Die Grünen, a part of the European Green Party. She has served as a member of the European Parliament (MEP) from 2009 until 2019. She also served as the Secretary General of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) between 1992 until 1999. See "Barbara Lochbihler." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 1 May 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbara_Lochbihler. Accessed 28 April 2020.

¹⁰ The Berlin wall was a physical barrier built in 1961 that divided Berlin until its destruction in November 1989. The wall isolated West Berlin from the East German territory. The division represented ideological differences, with the East aligned with the Soviet Union and the West aligned with western values. See "What Was the Berlin Wall and How Did It Fall?" *Imperial War Museums*, www.iwm.org.uk/history/what-was-the-berlin-wall-and-how-did-it-fall. Accessed 29 April 2020.

SW: It's also interesting to see what experiences you as a teacher have gained regarding the inequalities between women and men. How did you react to this?

HM: Among other things I taught physical education and nowadays we also talk about body awareness. Well, I have always used sport as a discovery of my own body and also as a way to improve creativity and cooperation, even though I never did competitive sports myself. That was a point for me where I tried to define this field, especially in regards to girls, because as women we were only allowed to teach girls in sports.

For example, I did a lot of self-defense with the girls. Not primarily martial arts, but also self-awareness and violence prevention. That was a very important point I made. That made it natural. For example we were attacked by a gang of girls on a school trip once. That was a problematic experience, because I honestly could not imagine violence to that extent. I actually tried to de-escalate the situation instead of protecting myself. That's what you learn in theory.

And then I got into a brawl. That was a key experience, where I thought to myself, you just have to think about violence and be more alert. But then I worked with the guys who were apart of this group-- We worked on it together, how do you deal with aggression, or how to prevent it. Perhaps something else entirely, we intend to... I am working in this political context on the implementation of UN Resolution 1325¹¹ on the participation of women in conflict resolution. We have initiated an action plan in Germany and are also working internationally as an organization. But it has always been about-- Now I have lost my train of thought.

In connection with this group from the OSCE¹² and these post-Soviet countries, however, I noticed that a gender awareness is marginal. Both in the institutions and in civil society representation. There were Russians who simply walked out when they were asked to speak. But when it comes to Shrinking Space¹³ for civil society, it is not gender neutral, women are usually the first ones to go.

Three years ago, when Germany chaired the OSCE, we set up a working group on Women and Gender Realities¹⁴ in the OSCE Region. That is a great piece of work,

¹¹ The United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security on 31 October 2000. The resolution emphasizes the participation of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-buildings, peacekeeping, and humanitarian response. See "Landmark Resolution on Women, Peace and Security (Security Council Resolution 1325)." *United Nations*, United Nations, www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/. Accessed 29 April 2020.

¹² The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) is the largest regional security organization with 57 participating States. The OSCE aims to provide peace and democracy for billions through political dialogue. See "Who We Are." *OSCE*, www.osce.org/who-we-are. Accessed 29 April 2020.

¹³ The 'Shrinking Space' for civil society refers to a worsening global phenomenon. Both non-democratic and democratic governments have introduced restrictive laws limiting the operations of civil society organizations (CSOs). The closing space represents a general authoritarian pushback against democracy. See "Shrinking Space for Civil Society: The EU Response." *European Parliament*, www.europarl.europa.eu/portal/en. Accessed 29 April 2020.

¹⁴ The Working Group on Women and Gender Realities in the OSCE Region was founded in 2015 to discuss how mechanisms of justice and women's involvement in peace negotiations have been influential and how these processes can be replicated and adapted in different countries. See "Working Group on Women and Gender Realities in the OSCE Region." *Working Group on Women and Gender Realities in the OSCE Region | Civic Solidarity*, www.civicsolidarity.org/member/1451/working-group-women-and-gender-realities-osce-region. Accessed 29 April 2020.

because women simply question completely different things on the subject of migration. One example would be: why do women have to flee? There are also a lot of patriarchal persecutions in their country of origin. What horrible things they experience, simply gender-specific violence, and when they arrive here, either they end up in the field of prostitution or in so-called anchor centers, where they end up in the same place as all the men, where they cannot even lock the shower.

In other words, they have to live under conditions that are unacceptable and that our policy supports. We discuss the fact that these unacceptable things are happening specifically to women and in these contexts we try to better ourselves politically. And now with the era of women's suffrage here, that is something I think is super exciting, because it builds a bridge between women who have always stood up for this right to vote, because they said: we need the right to vote in order to have a transformative political effect, in order to change things from our point of view. Or at least to bring our perspective into politics or peace negotiations or something like that.

I think there is sufficient scientific evidence that peace agreements only make sense if women are involved accordingly and are also involved economically afterwards. Yes, we are discussing such issues right now with countries where traditional values are held in such high regard. We are, of course, also present in Poland, but we are also involved in this whole region. Whether it is Armenia, Georgia, Russia or Ukraine, everywhere we hear the same thing: traditional values and human rights. This is not specifically about women's rights; it is actually a Western concept that does not fit in with our values. I view that as a very big task at the moment, also in terms of the perspective of the European elections.

SW: How did you solve the situation with the women's gang back then? What conclusions did you come to with the other students when it became clear that women are not only victims, but can also be perpetrators?

HM: For me, this has always been connected with the fact that women need empowerment, training and participation, because only then can they really be protected, when there is an awareness that they are not only victims as such. Even if that is of course a very important point, that protection is crucial. But I do think that Resolution 1325 really has set a milestone by bringing together these different P's, with protection, participation, but also the prevention of violence and possibly also the fourth, criminal prosecution. I think we have to make it clear to many people that these P's simply belong together.

SW: In the beginning you talked about discussions with your family. In the course of your work, your activity, your commitment, did you ever get recognition from your family after these heated discussions? What were your experiences with that?

HM: Yeah, I think so. Even my parents, who were liberals that had a rather social democratic orientation, at some point voted for the „Grünen“, because they actually realized that this is a force. At least at the time when I was also involved in that. And I have two sons, and one of them told me that he was really proud of the fact that I actively stood up for these rights.

How much of it they implement in their own relationships, I mean, I think everybody has to make their own experiences first. But I think they have already understood that the-- Well, the girlfriends and partners of my sons are very independent young women who also have a profession. I also have a really excellent partner who supports all this. My partner doesn't just endure it, my partner supports me, which is not bad.

SW: What did it look like in your generation, this woman/man relationship? The gender contract so to speak.

HM: I have actually always acted very independently. Because I had my own profession, my own money, a big independence. It gave me huge opportunities, the fact that I didn't have to fight for my existence and such. I can see what is happening in my surroundings, but many, also of the feminist pioneers with whom I am concerned, large parts have already had the privilege. That is, to be free by not having to fight for the very simple existence.

So, of course, it's an incredible opportunity, but you have to take it. Many of my colleagues and ex-colleagues are all about leisure activities or holidays but for me that doesn't really exist. But at least I never get bored. Yes, there is so much to do when you want to save the world. [laughter]

HM: That just takes up your time. And you still get to meet amazing people all over the world and it's just super exciting and sometimes easier to work with women in the world than in a mixed environment--or with too many men, I think, that makes it more difficult.

SW: But 20, 30, 40 years ago the situation was different between women and men? Would you say that's true?

HM: I'm not sure. My mother trained as a primary school teacher, but she never actually worked after her traineeship because she got married and had children. And then she worked in my father's office from time to time. But she always regretted it and encouraged her daughters to develop a profession and independence, she wanted her daughters to be stronger and independent. But for me it was actually no longer a question at all. Going through the vocational training and working in the profession, even while I had small children. I have always worked.

SW: And at school? Could you say that girls, boys were looked at differently?

HM: There are a lot of clichés, of course, so let's just say the-- Well, I myself went to an all-girls high school. It was still like that then, in Munich it was separated. Back then the girls-only schools were municipal and the boys' schools were state schools and therefore, there were already a few mixed ones, but--and an incredible amount of silliness and nonsense came out of them.

It was actually only very late during my political years that I really began to deal with the women's movement as such. I always knew that we as women have a different approach in that regard. I read a lot about that. So quite simply when I was at any political meetings or any meetings of the „Grünen“ during the evening I already thought: "How can I make sure my children are going to bed now? And the men who were there

also had small children. But they never worried. They just knew that somebody will do it. I think women tend to be involved more in certain aspects of life. Which is an insane advantage on the one hand, because you're closer to these things from an emotional point of view. On the other hand, it makes it of course more difficult to act in such a power-political and straight way. It's difficult to just say to yourself: I am here and that's where I want to go and that's where I'm going now, I no longer look to the right or left. So this type of thinking is more difficult for us, for the majority of women, you can never lump it all together, I think. But it's also an invaluable advantage. There's a reason that women in the world are first... I discussed this with Bosnian women, for example. They were very pragmatic. So much so that even during the attacks on Sarajevo¹⁵, when they had to hide under a staircase that offered them protection, they still did a bit of school work with the children. These very existential things. Sometimes they simply looked to see where they could get something to eat. Or to make sure that they have clean water for themselves and their environment. This is where we come back to the aspect of the environment. I am also deeply convinced that women care less about weapons. That does not mean that they are more peaceful per se, but the question of what means I use to assert myself is different. And then, of course, there is the whole complex of sexual violence or sexualized violence, which is also used strategically in conflicts and wars. At first I could not imagine that at all. Well, it took a while until I heard about it. I learned about it from stories, especially from the Balkans¹⁶. How this sexual violence is used. But at the same time one has to quote what the founding mothers of the International Women's League said at the 1915 congress. They said that women can never be protected in war. So that is clearly part of this whole women's movement, that is what we have-- And that is why for me it has always been very closely connected. The women's view, the feminist view of violence. Although some of them come from the feminist side from certain traumatic experiences, sometimes from their own, and some come more from the peace movement. And I came more from this side.

SW: And your contacts with the feminist women's movement were more connected to your activity in the „Grünen“ party?

HM: It has developed from it, because for the „Grünen“ party we took care of this - demonstrations against the retrofitting stories, but then also in connection with armaments¹⁷ in general. And at that time, one of the great slogans was non-violence. Well, that is closely connected to it, and we just carried out studies on arms sites in Bavaria and on arms conversion. That we did for sure. And at the same time, I think that was the advantage, otherwise there would be no other party for me either-- We actually had a 50% quota and zipper system¹⁸ from the very beginning, if somebody talks-- then

¹⁵ The Siege of Sarajevo was the siege of the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Sarajevo was besieged by the Army of Republika Srpska during the Bosnian War from 6 April 1992 to 29 February 1996. See "Siege of Sarajevo." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 20 Apr. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Sarajevo. Accessed 27 April 2020.

¹⁶ The term 'Balkans' is a geographic region also known as Southeast Europe. See "Balkans." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 30 Apr. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balkans#Balkans. Accessed 26 April 2020.

¹⁷ 'Armament' is a noun referring to a military force, naval force, or military weapons and equipment. See "Armament." *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/armament. Accessed 25 April 2020.

¹⁸ The zipper system is a method of drawing up party lists in proportional representation electoral systems. See "Zipper System." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 31 Dec. 2019, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zipper_system. Accessed 27 April 2020.

there was a speech list for women and a speech list for men, and if the list for women was empty, then no man was allowed to speak anymore. And such mechanisms and the quotas made an insane difference to the culture of discussion in my opinion. Number one on the list was a woman. That no longer exists in the „Grünen“ party, but these were things, where--yes or the struggle, both 218¹⁹ and now this 229A or abortion law as such, or so-called advertising for abortion, these are things that we in the „Grünen“ party discussed a lot at that time. It was not always met with full understanding.

¹⁹ Section 218 of the German criminal code outlawed abortion, with a punishable 10-year jail sentence for women and doctors. Abortion is permitted under Section 218a called *Exception to liability for abortion* for women in their first trimester with mandatory counseling or in cases of medical necessity. See “Abortion in Germany.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 1 May 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abortion_in_Germany. Accessed 1 May 2020.