Women's Studies Research Centers: Report from West Germany

Hanna-Beate Schöpp-Schilling
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By Hanna-Beate Schopp-Schilling

The German autonomous women's movement grew out of the student movement in the late sixties. Today, there are women's centers in most of the larger German cities. The women active in these centers have created a variety of projects, such as homes for battered women, bookstores, publishing firms, restaurants, journals, and health clinics. In addition, there are numerous women's groups in the political parties, the trade unions, the media, and other organizations—apart from the traditional women's organizations—who work for the elimination of discrimination against women without necessarily identifying themselves with all the tenets of radical feminists. A gradual rapprochement of the autonomous groups and other women's groups can be seen at this point once again, as it was during the (unsuccessful) fight for a free abortion law in 1970.

Within this general framework, women scholars, very often in cooperation with, if not stimulated by, women students and the local women's centers, have developed and taught women's studies courses at German universities since the early seventies. By 1977, such courses could be found at almost every German university, the majority of them in the social sciences. Women scholars in American Studies Departments, influenced and encouraged by the women's studies movement in the U.S., have also been active.

While it is fairly easy to introduce a women's studies course at a German university—given the freedom to teach a variety of subjects within the general framework of a curriculum—it is very difficult to secure the continuation of these courses and their acceptance for credit. Most of these courses, so far, have been taught by untenured women faculty. Some of these women have only part-time contracts for just the one course. Others have 3- to 5-year contracts which are not renewable and not tenure-track. In a few cases, women students and women faculty have exerted enough pressure before the expiration of such contracts to get the vacant positions defined and filled as women's studies positions. In most cases, however, the courses are more or less tied to the individual woman teaching them, and disappear, therefore, when that woman loses her position.

Other difficulties arise from the fact that untenured women faculty are often not allowed to teach graduate courses and to accept, supervise, and grade master's theses. From this it follows that many women students are not able to continue their work in the area of women's studies at the graduate level. At present the few tenured women scholars who teach women's studies in their disciplines, or who are at least sympathetic to research on women, are flooded by student demand.

Yet, in spite of all these difficulties, master's theses, doctoral dissertations, and postdoctoral work are increasing in quantity—and getting published. An informal network exists through personal and professional contacts. What is still lacking is a formal network of newsletters, scholarly journals, and conferences to draw together, support, and strengthen the expanding women's studies community.

Several steps, however, have been undertaken within the last two years which promise the existence of such a network in the near future. The first move toward an organized platform for the exchange of German feminist research has been the establishment of an annual conference called the Berlin Summer University for Women. So far, three conferences of this kind have taken place. While the first one was actually organized in the summer of 1976, thereby providing the name, the latter two occurred in October 1977 and 1978, respectively. The attendance of women inside and outside the university at these conferences has increased from 1000 women at the first conference as a whole, to a daily attendance of several thousand from all over Germany at the second and third.

Women in the social sciences have also begun to organize themselves inside and outside their professional organizations. To escape the strictures and impediments of traditional organizational structures, one group of women has founded an autonomous association, "Social Science Research and Praxis for Women, Inc." Another group has attempted to institutionalize feminist research within their professional organizations as an officially recognized "section," in the manner of feminist scholars in the U.S. So far, the two organizational approaches are seen by most feminists as complementary. They agree in their rejection of the definition of women's research as "minority research" and in their firm belief in the critical framework of feminist research.

The two tendencies—i.e., to create autonomous institutions and to work within traditional educational structures—characterize present efforts to establish women's research centers, too. At present, two concepts, supported by two groups of women inside and outside the university—vie for ideological and financial support in Berlin. One group espouses the concept of an autonomous women's resource and educational center which should be accessible for all women. They plan to establish a library on women's issues, develop and offer educational programs for women of all educational backgrounds, and formulate and pursue research projects in direct contact with, and in immediate orientation for, the women who will come to the center.

The second group, stimulated by the existence of women's research centers established at several American universities, has proposed a women's research center at one or several of the Berlin universities. The group has been successful in getting funds both from the Free University of Berlin and from the education ministry for a two-year planning phase, in which a concept for the expansion and institutionalization of feminist research...
The Feminist Women's Health Center in West Berlin

By Mary Grunwald

Last November the Berlin Feminist Women's Health Center (Feministisches Frauen Gesundheitszentrum: FFGZ) called a press conference to mark the first year in its own quarters, pleasantly converted former bakery premises in a quiet, residential part of town. Fifty invitations had been sent out to women journalists; four showed up. Three reacted enthusiastically; one was hostile. When all was said and done and people were on their way out, someone brought up the subject of contraception again.

Most FFGZ clients come for contraceptive advice; many are primarily interested in the diaphragm—devised in Germany in 1880 but virtually unknown in the country today. Gynecologists—85 percent of whom are male—favor IUDs and the pill. As word spread that FFGZ would fit diaphragms, complacent doctors started referring their diaphragm requests to the center. The whole business of diaphragms took on huge proportions and threatened to monopolize FFGZ resources. Thus, although they will still fit them, policy now is to inform women and encourage them to insist on getting diaphragms from their own doctors. "We don't want to be a diaphragm-fitting institute. That's not the point of FFGZ.

There are far too many other tasks," a spokeswoman stressed. There was a little pause. Then the women's page reporter (about 35 years old) for a major Berlin daily spoke up. "What is a diaphragm?" she asked. Whereupon the national news agency's reporter (about 60 years old) chimed in, "Yeah, what is it anyway?" A diaphragm was produced for inspection and explained. The journalists were fascinated. Yet no word has appeared in the establishment press about this uncomplicated aid to emancipation.

FFGZ is patterned on the Feminist Women's Health Center in Los Angeles. Carol Downer introduced the self-help concept to Berlin movement women in 1973; Berliners then went to Los Angeles for training. The current staff of 28 women, ranging in age from 19 to 60, has had remarkable success, especially considering the obstacles to positive change in a homogeneous society where strategic information can be relatively easily suppressed.

FFGZ's basic self-help courses have reached 350 women. The waiting list has 900 names on it. Teachers of courses offered directly through FFGZ are not paid and have to fit classes into schedules including full-time work elsewhere.

Notes

1. Parts of this essay are taken from a longer article on "Women's Studies, Women's Research and Women's Research Centers: Recent Developments in the U.S.A. and in the F.G.R.," to be published in Women's Studies International Quarterly.
2. A listing and description of women's studies courses in American studies in Germany can be found in Dagmar Loystedt and Hanna-Beate Schöpp-Schilling, eds., A Bibliographical Guide to Women's Studies, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1976); a listing of women's studies seminars in Berlin at the universities and in adult education can be found in Frauen und Wissenschaft (Berlin, 1977), pp. 402-8.
3. For more information about this organization, see Tobe Levin, "Women's Studies in West Germany," Women's Studies Newsletter, VII, 1 (Winter 1979), pp. 21-22.