

Women Overcoming racism(s): Living Together / Cohabitation by Respecting the Dignity of Others

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First of all, I would like to begin by expressing my gratitude to Ms. Möbius and the Protestant Church in Berlin (Ev. Akademie zu Berlin) for this invitation.

As I was thinking about the topic of racism(s) and which role women can/ might be able to play in overcoming this societal disease; I was reminded of the words of the French feminist sociologist Colette Guillaumin (1999:46) : „Race does not exist. But, it does kill people“.

While „race“ does not exist, **racism** certainly does! Racism is an ideology and a system of oppression that creates power structures, which position human beings in hierarchical relationships to one another. In addition, racism(s) is /are a practice(s) that is/are intertwined with the enslavement, colonization and exploitation of humans for economic profit.

Within this system one particular group of people has taken it upon itself to exercise power over another on the basis of skin colour. This system is also built upon an implicit or explicit set of beliefs, erroneous assumptions, and actions based on an ideology of the inherent superiority of one racialised group over another.

Racialisation, what is that exactly and what are its indicators?

Racialisation is the very complex and contradictory process through which groups come to be designated as being of a particular "race" and on that basis subjected to differential and/or unequal treatment.

Residing here in Germany for the past thirty years and working as a diversity and social justice trainer; I can state that many do not fully understand what racism actually is. In my trainings, I often use the following formula so that individuals are better able to grasp what racism is:

Racism = Racial Prejudice + Power: It is of utmost importance to understand that power is undoubtedly the primary feature of racism.

As a human being who inhabits a **Black** (and I must underline this fact) female body, my life experience (whether in the United States or in Europe) has shown me that I am never permitted to forget these two significant and visible aspects of my identity - 1. My **Blackness** & 2. **My gender**.

Further, in various situations I have also experienced that my „race“ has at times been perceived before my gender.

Racism is a subject that concerns not only Black people and People of Colour, but all members of our society. Racism inflicts injury upon each and every one of us as well as our entire society.

Not only are Black people and People of Color stripped of their dignity, this applies to white individuals as well, particularly when they practice racism or allow racism to occur.

I believe that it is time for all regardless of race, gender(s), age, various abilities, religious background, sexual orientation or social status, to participate in what the the UCC (United Church of Christ) has proposed; a „Sacred Conversation on Race“.

In order, to have this „Sacred Conversation“ and make a whole-hearted attempt to combat and overcome racism; there are several points that I view as vital to starting up this conversation. However, due to time limits, I will only be able to touch upon three points during this brief talk:

1. **Recognising and respecting the dignity and humanity of the marginalised:** The discussion of racism(s) in German society is primarily shunned and viewed as a taboo. The common view concerning this issue, is that this societal ill exists elsewhere,(USA, South Africa, France) but not in the Federal Republic of Germany. Further, I have also seen that many individuals from the dominant group in such trainings, fail to see minority groups as human beings worthy of respect that deserve to be treated with dignity. In fact, many from the dominant group are far too focused on our „differences“ and often fail to recognise that there is actually much more that connects us than separates us.
2. **Self-reflexivity:** Black people or People of Colour“ should not be the sole initiators in the discussion about ”race“ and racism. It is extremely necessary that white individuals take responsibility for self- education regarding the topic of racism and racist practices. Critical Whiteness Theory and understanding exactly how whiteness functions and its connection with power and privilege are essential in order to thoroughly tackle this societal problem. Listening and being prepared to unlearn ways, ideas and behaviour are crucial to this process. The acknowledgement of everyday racism in our language and streetscapes.
3. **The Protestant Church as an agent of change:**

It is my conviction that the Church (in this case, the Protestant Church) has a responsibility to assume the role as a social justice player in the struggle to overcome racism. Moreover, the Protestant Church must look at it’s own history and participation in racism and the preservation of racist practices. That means, the introduction and adaptation of a theological approach, which includes Critical Race and Critical Whiteness Theory. These theoretical approaches will indeed prove to be vital in scrutinising existent racist structures and practices.

The Church must become more involved in actions and activities that challenge and combat racism. Here, comes to mind the activist work off he African diasporic community here in Berlin around the renaming of approximately. 79 streets and places in Berlin that bear blatantly racist names or the names of individuals, who committed crimes during Germany’s time as a colonial power on the African continent, i.e. „M“-Strasse/ ~~Mohren~~strasse.

And last but not least, it is important to facilitate open and honest dialogues concerning the existence of racism (s) within German society and the ensuing socio-psychological effects upon Communities of Colour. For such a dialogue to occur, it would be necessary to create networks/working groups accompanied by a consistent „outreach strategy“ to Communities of Colour that can support and maintain this work.

In closing, I would like to quote the Black German Poet, academic and activist May Ayim, who succinctly spoke about the issue of racism shortly after German Reunification.

Ayim stated:

„Rassismus und Verdrängung“ wird auf absehbare Zeit ein aktuelles Thema in Deutschland bleiben. Das ist bezeichnend und beängstigend, und dennoch ist es für mich kein Grund zur Resignation, sondern viel eher eine Aufforderung zu verstärkter Aktion was z.B. bedeutet, mehr und bessere Strategien und Bündnisse zu schaffen ... Und dazu brauchen wir nicht Freundinnen und Freunde zu werden, sondern müssen lernen, zusammenzuarbeiten“. – May Ayim
„Grenzenlos und Unverschämt“ (1997)

“Das zusammenzuarbeiten“/working together, is in my opinion a crucial aspect of living together.

Thank you for your attention and I look forward to a lively discussion!