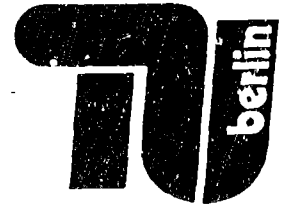


**Technische Universität Berlin**



**WOMEN IN INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION:  
SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND OCCUPATIONAL ISSUES**

**- WITH SPECIAL ATTENTION TO THE SECOND GENERATION -**

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SELF-HELP PROJECT BY  
IMMIGRANT AND GERMAN WOMEN**

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## The Development of a Self-Help Project by Immigrant and German Women

By Sevim Celebi- Gottschlich

Immigrant women have been the topic of a great deal of research - more so than men. Their situation has been repeatedly analyzed with regard to social, legal and health issues. To what extent can we hope that appropriate steps will be taken as a result of this research? Is the legal, health or social situation of these women likely to be improved?

Research into the health situation of immigrant women has shown that measures are urgently required. Until now, though, official policy has not been influenced at all. In fact, I have the feeling that these investigations rather have a negative effect for these women since they give the impression that the women cannot be integrated. The traditional women are especially unwelcome here. I admire these women from the country; how they manage to cope with everything; how they manage to bridge the enormous gap between two worlds - the rural area they come from and the highly industrialised country they have moved to. They work in a factory for the first time in their lives. They have to contend with different people, a different culture, a different language and all the difficulties which result. Many of them find their way here very quickly on their own with their children. I have noticed that when these women are given assistance it is always done with a negative feeling of sympathy. I have the feeling that much of this assistance is not really seriously meant and that many of the women see it not as a support but as a form of observation.

They feel that they are not accepted in this society. Their independence and emancipation are judged according to their headscarf.

The combination of the gap between their traditional culture, the religious differences and the highly industrialised society tends to lead to psychological problems with the women. In their own countries, especially in the country areas, they would have been more readily acknowledged, firstly among other women, and also in society as a whole. The women go to work together, wash together, swap experiences, discuss each other's problems and help each other. The woman always finds support in her large family.

Immigration drastically changes the situation of such women. The immediate result of the differences already mentioned is that the woman loses her confidence. Her husband will have already found his niche in society since on the whole the men tend to emigrate in advance of the women. He is able to assert himself through his work and his language ability. He is also responsible for the honour of the family.

His wife, on the other hand, cannot speak the language,, she may not know anyone and, if she has no children, is completely isolated. She does not have enough courage to go out on the street even if her husband gives her permission. Quite often she is not even allowed to go out. If she has children her situation is even more difficult.

The children cannot speak their native language and they conform more to German habits so that they will be accepted at school. This leads to estrangement between the woman and her children. There is no longer a family bond. She is no longer acknowledged by the family or in society. The only gratification she receives

is from her daily tasks. Even her external appearance prevents her from being accepted by society. It is for these reasons that the women who settle here often become ill.

What solutions exist for them?

There is no solution other than to take pills which leads to addiction. They lose their self-confidence and believe that they cannot be cured. The forms of treatment practised in their own countries are not available here. I can well remember how my grandmother used acupuncture to ease back-pains. I would walk up and down her back or give her massage. If one of the neighbours was suffering from headaches leeches were applied in the place where the pain was. These methods are still used today.

Hot springs, mudbaths and hot sand are still used as a form of treatment. It is simply not possible for many women in West Germany or in Berlin to use such methods.

The types of sport which are on offer here are also unknown to immigrant women. They are therefore sceptical towards them and do not feel comfortable with them.

As a result in 1983 some of these women got together with some German women who supported them and founded the "Türkische Frauen und Mädchen Etage" (Turkish Women and Girl's Group). The main aim is to improve the health of immigrant women living in Berlin. The concept of the group is based on the needs of the women who live in the area and come to talk about their problems. The second generation women tend to be more interested in self-defence, keep-fit exercises, swimming, belly dancing, jogging, music groups, events and concerts. We had a room in a house which we had specially planned for these purposes and which was to be refurbished. This was refused by the authorities, however, on the

grounds that there are already enough advice centres in Kreuzberg for foreign women. It was said that there was no need for such a centre even though it was well-known that the problem existed and required urgent measures. For us this was a disappointment and we also felt very discouraged. The voluntary work which the women had done was all for nothing. Many of the women left the group and lost their motivation. I was also disappointed. We needed more strength, courage and energy to continue. In the end there were only two of us left. We have supported each other all along and were determined not to give up. What kept us going was our personal experience in the field of health.

At this point I would like to say a few words about my own experiences. My first hospital visit was in autumn 1970. I had problems with my kidneys, probably as a result of the change in climate and the damp cold. Maybe my psychological situation also contributed - I knew no-one in Berlin, couldn't speak the language and was working in the Siemens factory. From that time until 1977 I often had to go to hospital suffering from colic and kidney stones. After 2-3 weeks in hospital I had brought the kidney stones under control. Over the years I learnt how to look after my kidneys. I knew exactly when and how they caused me pain. I always wore warm trousers and didn't sit in the train anymore. I haven't been to hospital because of my kidneys again since 1977 and my kidneys do not trouble me any longer.

The second time was in 1975. Every afternoon I had a headache and I thought that I had a tumour. Doctors examined my brain, my heart, my eyes and my whole body. For half a year I was sent from clinic to clinic. Their diagnosis was that I had psychological problems. Luckily for me, the second optician I visited (a woman) suggested that I stop taking the Pill. From that day on I had no

more headaches. I was overjoyed. Of course by that time I felt very sceptical towards doctors and pills. (In addition, I cannot use any cream on my skin because I immediately break out in a rash.)

In autumn 1981 I was pregnant. The doctor made an initial examination and predicted that it would have to be a Caesarean birth because my pelvis is so narrow and because of a problem with my spinal column. I wasn't at all disturbed. I was certain that I would be able to bring the child into the world completely naturally and without a Caesarean operation. I had great faith in my body. And, in fact, I did manage it without a Caesarean and without any injections, simply with the help of a mid-wife. The (female) doctor tried to insist on giving me an injection to make the birth go faster even though I had made it quite clear that I didn't want one. I refused it.

A year later I learned to ride a bicycle. In the beginning I was so keen that my legs hurt. I rode on nevertheless. This was a big mistake and soon I couldn't even stand on my legs anymore. I went to an alternative health centre. The doctor took much more time in comparison with the doctors in the hospitals. He told me that it had to do with my spinal column which depressed me very much. It meant that my spinal column would not improve but instead would get worse the older I got. I began to do exercises regularly. At first I couldn't even walk or stand straight. Although I had a very good physiotherapist it was a very slow process. She carefully used good methods and I learnt which movements were good for my body. After the physiotherapy she sometimes massaged me for half an hour. This felt so good and relaxed me to such an extent that sometimes I even fell asleep. She recommended a

clinic in West Germany to me which specialised in problems of the spinal column. I followed her advice to go there for an examination. I had to wait almost half a year. In the end the day of my appointment came and I went there. I had to wait the whole day. At four o'clock it was my turn. The senior consultant looked at the results of my X-rays, said literally a few words at the most in doctor's jargon and then added that he had been to Turkey and that he had learned a few words of Turkish. Then he left. The whole interview lasted 2-3 minutes. His assistant translated for me what he had said in his medical jargon. I was to be operated on. My spinal column would have to be made stronger with metal rods. I would have to stay in hospital for half a year and there was no certainty that I would then be healthy - I might even be crippled. Maybe after the operation I would have to use a wheelchair. I would have to wait a year for the operation. I was totally shocked by the brutal way in which this had been communicated to me. I was not prepared to take the necessary risks. I had faith in my body and over time this faith grew even stronger. I did more exercises and after a year it was much better. I could move freely again and could walk long distances and stand for a long time. I still have some pains now but I think they will go away with time.

My experiences with doctors and hospitals strengthened my wish to do something with health in the group. I had noticed that in general health problems are only treated with pills. So, we made health issues related to immigrant women living in Berlin an integral part of our concept for the group.

In 1984 we had the idea of doing something for young women wishing to make a career in the area of health. I had worked at the Employment Office and so I knew what possibilities were available

to foreign women. For immigrant women of the second generation the only training programmes offered were in the fields of textiles and hairdressing. There are not enough qualified foreign women working in hospitals and health centres. There are sometimes translators but this is not enough to build up a trusting relationship between the doctor and his/her patient. So we decided to set up a scheme to prepare young women for a career in the health services which would develop training possibilities. However, we didn't know how we would manage it. Some of the women gave up and one even said that it was going against God's wishes. At this point I would like to express my gratitude to Jutta Kämpfer. She kept on and we encouraged each other, spoke with other women and visited careers advisers at the Employment Office. We formed another group and our strength increased once more. We were all working and some of the women also had children. It was very difficult to prepare our concept simply relying on voluntary work. None of us had any experience with setting up a project. So it cost us a lot of effort, time and nerves, although looking back we can say it was all worth it. Everyone made contributions according to their capabilities. I wanted greater numbers of immigrant women to join in. It was one of our wishes that many more women would be able to achieve their aims independently. Our project for the training of young women was introduced to the Employment Office through many discussions and they welcomed it warmly. The Employment Office offered financial support for one year for a project preparing young immigrant women for a career in the health services. The first year of the project was a huge success.

We chose the name AKARSU for the project. It is the Turkish word for "running water" and is a symbol for movement and health. Our



aim is to set up a health centre for and with immigrant women. As a first step we have set up the following projects:

- Initiation and support of self-help groups for immigrant women who want to treat their physical and psychosomatic problems together;

- Initiation and support of self-help groups in the field of health care (At the moment there are about 60 women involved in these groups although until now we have only been able to work with volunteers and "ABM employees" (people given jobs under the West German government's job creation programme). As far as we know these are the only self-help groups for foreign women in the field of health.);

- The project set up to prepare 30 young immigrant women for a career in the health services. The first course has already been successfully completed. The second course began on the 1st of September this year with 38 participants;

- Additional training help for young women doing vocational training to become a doctor's or chemist's assistant.

The centre was set up at the end of 1983 by Turkish and German women who were working as social workers, in advice centres or in the field of health in Kreuzberg. These women were therefore confronted every day by the bad health conditions and complaints of the women living there. There was a lack of self-help projects, especially for immigrant women, and this led the women to plan groups and advice work in the fields of health and psychology. We applied for financial help but instead of the support and advice which we had hoped for we experienced only rejection, vague promises and in the end the project was completely thrown

out by the authorities. Nevertheless in 1986 we began work on the project with the help of the community association "Kotti". The first course for young women to prepare them for careers in the health services began on 1.9.87 with financial support from the Employment Office.

Most of the visitors to the health centre are immigrant women from various countries, but mainly from Turkey. Many of the women bring their German colleagues, neighbours and relatives with them so that they can also do something for their health. Many women were informed about the health centre by other advice centres for immigrant women.

The women come to us because they feel physically unfit or because they are suffering from symptoms which are getting worse every day. They may be suffering from back-pains, breathing problems, migraines, or pelvic pains. Many complain of feeling permanently tired, problems with eating, lack of strength, feelings of fear, sleeplessness and depression. They are continually visiting doctors or taking pills. Some of them, especially the younger women, come because they want to do something to stay fit and to build up a resistance to illnesses. The age range goes from 14 to 60.

We would like to set up self-help groups for pregnant women, for women suffering from cancer and for mothers with handicapped children but to do this we would need more workers which would be impossible without some form of financial support for our work.

The health centre can be used by any foreign woman or women's group for help with self-help issues in the field of health. German women are not excluded but there should not be so many of them that they dominate the atmosphere, the speed at which things

develop -or the language used. Most of the women bring children with them so we also have someone to look after them during group meetings.

One of the principles of our work is that we look at the whole situation of the individual women and not just at their symptoms. We pay particular attention to their everyday problems and the stress which they are exposed to which causes their illnesses. Their situation becomes a vicious circle since their symptoms make them less capable of coping with their daily lives thereby leading to yet more symptoms. After a while it appears impossible to break out of it.

The first thing we do is to encourage the women to help themselves on a very elementary level so that they feel better and begin to build up their self-confidence again. We do this using gentle methods of working on the body which help the women to feel and become aware of what is going on with their bodies (in contrast to mechanical gymnastics for example).

Tensions are recognised and eased through concentration on breathing, conscious movements and other techniques. As the tensions are eased so are most of the accompanying unpleasant feelings, fears and stress. On the whole the woman then feels peaceful and well.

Our aim is to help the women to deal with their symptoms and exhaustion in a positive way. We want to search with them to find ways in which they can improve their general state of health and then maintain it at a good level, using methods which are suitable for them. In this way they can regain their self-confidence and strength enabling them to be more independent again.

There are hardly any self-help groups for immigrant women in the

field of health care. There is not enough support available to enable such groups to be set up and maintained with and for them. Our centre is the only place in Berlin where immigrant women are given the opportunity to practise the exercises described previously. The Turkish women who come to AKARSU who want to do something to improve their health and general fitness level discover a way of relating to their bodies which is completely new to them. On the whole they would be far too inhibited to take part in a group with both male and female members or in a German group. It is possible that they will gain enough courage and security at AKARSU to take such a step later.

As for the training course we offer, as already stated it is intended for young women who want to take up health-related careers, such as nursing, nursing assistant, and doctor's and chemist's assistant. The aim is to improve the qualifications of the participants so improving their chances of getting a training vacancy in their desired field. The course consists of a combination of general subjects, intensive German lessons, lessons on health issues and help with applications and job searching.

At the beginning of the first course there were 30 participants and these were joined later by another girl who had had to abandon her training as a hairdresser owing to health reasons. The youngest participant was 16 and the oldest 22. The average age was 17. Eight of the women had completed the simple "Hauptschulabschluss" (secondary modern school), 15 completed a more advanced "Hauptschulabschluss" and 6 the "Realschulabschluss". Two participants had no kind of school-leaving certificate whatsoever. With one exception the participants all lived in Kreuzberg or neighbouring districts. As regards their wishes, 12 were aiming to become doctor's assistants, 12 to enter the nursing

profession and 7 to work in a chemist's. We managed to find training positions for 22 of the women.

The Employment Office has given support for a second year which started on 1.9.88, again with 30 participants. There is a great need and the Employment Office has a long waiting list of candidates. So the criticism that immigrant parents do not allow their daughters to undertake further education can be refuted. It is sometimes still difficult, though, to persuade members of traditional families that it is necessary for their daughters to learn a career. We feel it is of great importance that the parents are informed about the training opportunities on offer. We visit them at home and invite them to come to us so that they can see our facilities for themselves. At the same time we invite the mothers to come and do something for their health and to learn a different way of treating their bodies. We have also been successful here. Increasing numbers of women take part and bring their children and neighbours (some German). There are now six groups each with 7-10 women who are aged from 14-60.

We offer private tuition to the young women who took up training positions last year. This tuition is funded by the Employment Office.

In conclusion I would like to emphasise that despite great success, we still rely solely on voluntary help for our project of health care for women of the 1st and 2nd generation. We are still trying to obtain funding from the authorities. Exactly who they are and how long they will leave us to struggle is unknown!!!