

# Feminist Politics at the Local Level (1986)

## Abstract

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This text attests to the broad scope of feminist politics in West Germany. According to the three far-left members of the women's movement, who also held positions in Frankfurt's city parliament, feminist politics involved a critique of male language forms, a willingness to move into "male" political terrain, and diverse forms of political action extending well beyond parliamentary work.

## Source

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### The Project "Autonome Frauen im Römer:" Feminist Politics in the Frankfurt City Parliament

In Frankfurt, as a trio of autonomous women from the women's movement (two of us are elected city councilors from the Green party, one is an assistant to the parliamentary party caucus), we are doing feminist politics at the parliamentary level. We are supported by a group of autonomous women who meet weekly to help develop and aid our work. We do feminist politics when, for example, we oppose the rail-less downtown<sup>[1]</sup>, and justify this on the grounds of the sexual division of labor; when we fight the ordinance on prohibited zones and conduct our campaign under the motto: "Women against double standards"; when we start our speech on the budget with a quote from the classic cookbook by Davidis about thrifty housekeeping; or when we propose financial support for women's projects in the city. We also do feminist politics when we repeatedly criticize male forms of speech and, for example, reject the concept of *Milchmädchenrechnung*,<sup>[2]</sup> a favorite expression of male parliamentarians. In our article, we want to report quite concretely about these politics: feminist politics within the traditional political realm of a parliament, as we understand it, should put women and their diverse forms of living and working into the public's field of vision, so that they become a central political theme for the public in Frankfurt. Difficulties arise for our kind of feminist politics, however, when we have to concretize improvements in living conditions for women, as they make their way toward greater autonomy, at the level of measures, city ordinances, and the like, which have to be implemented by an administration. What is it all supposed to add up to, or rather, what kind of an urban world and an urban society do we really want? Recently, in our discussions, we've solved this problem by talking about our feminist utopias, whereby it remains largely open as to what exactly this means to us, given that the life plans and the everyday lives of women are as different as the explanations and interpretations that are provided. [...]

Against this background—as a central critique made by "radical" feminists would have it—feminist politics in patriarchal structures seems to be condemned to failure from the outset. Or—as the critique is also sometimes formulated—everything that feminist politicians work hard to accomplish every day (and perhaps even succeed in doing) within these structures is not feminist enough, because it has been adjusted to the patriarchal system—otherwise it wouldn't have commanded a majority. This critique (which can also be substantiated quantitatively) cannot be so easily dismissed, for ultimately women really are a minority in parliamentary bodies, so that resolutions can only be passed by a male majority—and, ultimately, what man saws off the tree branch on which he's sitting? We maintain, nevertheless, that we are doing feminist politics in the city parliament, since we formulate and realize concrete approaches to feminist politics and assert ourselves and are earning credentials as feminists, embedded as we are within patriarchal structures (out of 93 city councilors, only 22 are female).

What are we really characterizing as politics here? In this context, the question seems to require renewed clarification. In numerous discussions with other women, we now observe a trend toward apprehending

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“politics” again as the concept was traditionally sold to us: parliamentary work, party politics, and governing. Is this a step backwards? The women’s movement started out with the slogan “The personal is political.” This slogan was thoroughly revolutionary, since it enabled us, after all, to comprehend and feel our existential problems within a patriarchally defined society not as a matter of individual failure, but as collective oppression—and therefore as collectively and individually changeable structures inside and outside ourselves. In the meantime, things seem to have gone back to the way they were before. The personal remains personal—conflicts with men at the level of personal relations are no longer a subject for discussion; quota-based access to public power, the whether and if, the how and when are the questions of the women’s movement.

We, by contrast, are sticking to the idea that for the variety of questions and demands raised by the new women’s movement there must be a corresponding variety of levels of action for feminist politics, requiring correspondingly different approaches. When it’s a matter of pressing feminist demands during street actions, for example, we have different opportunities and obstacles than when it’s a matter of the daily “private struggle” with a partner (in case there is one) about housework or family work or in university structures.

For us, parliament is *one* additional level of action that we are now trying out in order to broaden the sphere of influence of feminist politics and make it public.

What, then, do we characterize as feminist politics in parliament; more to the point, how do we orient ourselves in everyday municipal politics, where questions are raised and problems are on the agenda that previously had never arisen so concretely in feminist discussion.

An initial answer to this question is that we are trying to look at every one of our tasks in parliament with a feminist gaze, a gaze that originates from women’s living conditions and experiences, the personal and public life of women, a gaze that we first had to learn in the new women’s movement. This means, especially, using a feminist cognitive interest<sup>[3]</sup> to unravel the traditional male fields of politics—e.g., fiscal policy or transportation policy—and find out more about what the particular measures or decisions precisely mean for women. We will describe this more precisely using the example of city planning for the projected removal of the streetcar from Frankfurt’s downtown. In this context, the aim is always to get away from argumentation based on objective constraints and even to name those responsible as persons. In so doing, we get to know them and learn how to defend ourselves against them; no longer do we have to feel that we are *only* under compulsion from an overpowering, inscrutable “system,” but instead we can see those responsible as men acting concretely. Here, the communal women’s group is an important site for discussion and work on these topics, yet at the same time is also the central site for supporting us emotionally and politically. As a rule, what the group decides then becomes what we represent in public.

For us, feminist politics also means that we are always fighting against the patriarchal division of women. To use the example of a restricted zone ordinance under discussion for the city (the municipal regimentation of prostitution), this means that we have not joined the SPD and its slogan “No prostitution in residential neighborhoods,” which means agreeing to the division between “good” wives and “bad” prostitutes, but that, instead, we have spoken out against any regimentation of prostitution and demanded improvements in working conditions and social security for women active as prostitutes.

Fighting within parliament against the patriarchal division between women, i.e., moving toward partial cooperation with women from other parliamentary parties, is something we have not yet succeeded in achieving. Moreover, our demands or contributions, as a rule, are distinguished from those of women in other parties by virtue of their radicalness. As an example, we may cite the old ASF<sup>[4]</sup> demand for municipal women’s offices. We reacted to what we regarded as an unacceptable proposal by the SPD with a supplementary proposal that demanded an expansion of powers and personnel appointments.

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We were then able to agree with the SPD women on a compromise. The CDU women, by contrast, defended the establishment of a “one-woman-equal-status-position” extolled by the CDU as “ground-breaking”—but whose powers are limited to those of an ombudswoman from the municipal administration. In addition, admittedly, there has so far been no attempt on the part of women party members from the SPD or CDU to work out a compromise with us.

For us, feminist politics does not mean having ourselves deputized to formulate others’ interests, but rather encouraging and giving women in the city their own space, including parliamentary space, to present and justify their demands. Concretely, this means, for example, that we are repeatedly requesting speaking rights in committee meetings for women’s initiatives and projects, although these are routinely dismissed by the CDU majority. Frequently, the few female city councilors that there are from the CDU then justify their rejection of our proposal, for example, by pointing to our feminist group’s lack of representativeness, meaning that they’re actually taking care of business for the men. For us, doing feminist politics also means using every opportunity to take a public position, to take part in discussions to which we are invited as city councilors, to use our status in order to bring women into the public discussion and to learn for ourselves about how to be active publicly and how to argue in a way that people can understand.

## NOTES

[1] Here, the authors refer to potential plans for the removal of streetcars from Frankfurt’s downtown—trans.

[2] *Milchmädchenrechnung*: simple-minded reasoning (literally: milkmaid’s calculation)—trans.

[3] Here, the German term is *Erkenntnisinteresse*—an academic or philosophical term meaning either: a) the reason somebody is interested in investigating a topic; or b) an epistemological concern, often related to the pragmatic or material motivations behind intellectual inquiry—trans.

[4] ASF: *Arbeitsgemeinschaft Sozialdemokratischer Frauen* (Working Group of Social Democratic Women)—eds.

Source: Elke Kiltz and Brigitte Sellach, “Das Projekt ‘autonome Frauen im Römer’: Feministische Politik im Frankfurter Stadtparlament,” *Beiträge zur feministischen Theorie und Praxis* 1986, n. 18, p. 41 ff. Republished with permission from the authors.

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