

Post-multiculturalist experiments:

On the impact of diversity politics on migrant women self-organisations in Amsterdam

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Maria Schiller

PhD candidate

University of Vienna / University of Kent at Brussels

maria.schiller@gmx.at

Introduction

While multiculturalism in the Netherlands has been recognized for many years as institutionalized political ideology, the past years have shown an increasing evocation of an evanescence or death of multiculturalism. The multifactorial reasons for such a declining reputation - such as the rise of neo-nationalist populism, the declining welfare-state, the killing of Theo van Gogh¹ and the discourse on female subordination in Muslim "cultures" around Ayaan Hirsi Ali² - have been closely scrutinized, whereas the resulting consequences for contemporary policy-making remained largely unstudied.

In my MA thesis I have investigated how the shift in integration ideology has manifested itself in the policy-making of the city, which is often depicted as an innovating force within the framework of the nationstate. Based on my empirical study in Amsterdam in 2006, I will show that the new urban diversity policy however had profound and detrimental consequences for the local scene of migrant women self-organisations. By means of focusing on their case it will become clear how the new diversity politics "in practice" still involves inconsistencies and susceptibilities to essentialist and simplistic conceptions of societal/cultural sameness and difference. The aim of this presentation is thus to put forward some reflections on the repercussions of the identified weak points for a further development of diversity policy approaches.

The ZMV-movement

Since decades migrant women in the Netherlands organise themselves in their own self-organisations. While Turkish and Moroccan women first developed as women's groups or committees within traditional male-dominated migrant worker's associations and later constituted their own women's organizations, women from the former colonies of Suriname, Netherlands Antilles, Moluccas mostly started out as women's groups on the basis of shared nationality or on the basis of identifying as "black women".

These organisations rejected the more simplistic term of "allochthonous women" and the abbreviation "ZMV-women" was created to comprise black (zwarte), migrant (migranten) and refugee (vluchtelingen) women under one term. Their movement developed out of the growing feeling that ZMV-women wouldn't be sufficiently represented in the general women's movement in the Netherlands, which theoretically represented all, practically however targeted mostly "white" women³.

¹ Theo van Gogh was a Dutch filmmaker, who has been widely known in the Netherlands for his provocative and polarizing statements (eg when he described Muslims as "goat fuckers"). One of his last film projects was a collaboration with Ayaan Hirsi Ali, another highly debated work on the "submission" (so the title of the film) of Muslim women. He was murdered on 2nd November 2004 by a young man with Dutch-Maroccan background, who later has been depicted by the Dutch media as a radical Muslim terrorist.

² Ayaan Hirsi Ali was born 1969 in Somalia and came to the Netherlands as a refugee in 1992. In her autobiography she describes that she had experienced a childhood with a strangling orthodox upbringing, suffering a genital mutilation as a girl and later an arranged marriage with a cousin. After receipt of her asylum status in the Netherlands she studied political science and achieved a career in national politics, with her radical criticism of Islam as one of the cornerstones of her political engagement. Since 2002 she was receiving death threats from an alleged terrorist network, which forced her to live permanently in a hidden place under police protection.

³ Botman/Jouwe 2001: 14-15

Diversity instead of Multiculturalism

While the Netherlands with their "ethnic minorities policy" from 1983 onwards adopted a policy which in many aspects reflected a multiculturalism. The history of pillarization in the country had especially paved the way for such a system of recognition of different (ethnic) groups and the institutionalization of pluralism⁴. When funding of migrant organizations in the Netherlands was decentralized to the municipal level in 1985⁵ the significance of self-organizations for the development of local policies towards minorities was recognized and their role as providing the local government with a point of contact with minority groups and as offering a way of participation in local decision-making for their respective groups⁶ was being emphasized⁷. In the 1990ies criticism of the policy as furthering indifference and segregation between groups became increasingly articulated and the emphasis was put on "good citizenship"⁸ and the responsibilities of individual citizen instead of cultural rights and the encouragement of cultural associations. This shift was also reflected on the level of the city, and Amsterdam changed its integration policy in 1999 from the former ethnic target group-approach to a new diversity policy. It emphasized the positive integration of all inhabitants, which are first of all equally "Amsterdammers"⁹, while just in the second instance are being different in terms of other belongings. "Diversity" departs from the idea of societies as composed of different groups, which should have the autonomy or right to organise themselves within the society, and instead focuses more on the entrepreneurial goal to achieve profits for the society as a whole by utilizing the diverse talents of people.

In the case of Amsterdam it is possible to distinguish two phases of diversity policy: After the conceptual framework has been introduced in a first phase from 1999 until 2002, the second phase was initialized in 2003. In a policy paper¹⁰ the framework for a political debate on integration in the city based on the public debate on the failure of multiculturalism, which has been consolidated after 9/11/2001 and the murder of Pim Fortuyn, has been sketched out. A follow-up paper¹¹ issued the role of self-organizations and affirms the effective regulation of subsidies for municipal migrant self-organization. It pleads to adapt the criteria for municipal subsidies to prefer activities, which would further participation and integration. After the murder of Theo van Gogh in 2004 eventually, the municipality of Amsterdam reacted¹² with plans for an inventory of subsidies in 2005, whose goal would be "preventing terrorist or criminal activities and groups from utilizing the subsidy system"¹³.

⁴ Entzinger 2003:64

⁵ Rijksregeling Welzijn Minderheden, RWM

⁶ which was institutionalized in so called "Adviesraaden"

⁷ Commissie Blok 2004:485-486

⁸ Penninx 2005: 6

⁹ Translates as "inhabitants of Amsterdam"

¹⁰ "Belonging and Participating: Starting points for integration in Amsterdam" (vgl. Municipality of Amsterdam, 04/2003)

¹¹ "Integration in Amsterdam: Work in Progress" (Municipality of Amsterdam, 2003)

¹² Action plan titled "We Amsterdammers" as part of the municipal integration and diversity policy (Voortgangsreportage Wij Amsterdammers, 28/04/2005)

¹³ (ibid:11)

Muslim women as problem group

The shift away from multiculturalism however was accompanied by a broader public debate about Islam, which suddenly became a new "hot issue". A "radical hardening of public debate in the Netherlands"¹⁴ has been observed in this context. This was triggered most prominently by the murder of Theo Van Gogh and by politicians as Pim Fortuyn, Ayaan Hirsi Ali and today Geert Wilders.

In Amsterdam this more ideal shift in public discourse seemed to have nonetheless contributed to the changes of funding possibilities. The municipal policy declared the "Muslim women" as the new target group of emancipation policies, while non-migrant women were supposed as fully emancipated and therefore established as norm.¹⁵ The category of migrant women then was further fragmented by constructing religion/secularism and education as the criteria in differentiating the formerly dominant category of "allochtonous women" into educated and secular western-oriented migrant women and retarded Muslim women. The latter were singled out and positioned on the lowest level of a ladder of emancipation. This class-difference however bears powerful consequences in terms of funding. Just women on the lowest level of emancipation were considered for political support and funding, while women in self-organizations, many of which do have higher education, seemed to be seen as sufficiently emancipated and thus deprived of funding.

New funding scheme

At the same time a restructuration of the whole system of subsidies was put into practice, which reflected the policy shift away from multiculturalism¹⁶. It was no longer groups which organized on the basis of shared ethnicity that were the target group for subsidies, but on all inhabitants of Amsterdam who wanted to "belong and contribute"¹⁷ through voluntary work. Funding on the city-level was now restricted to collaborations between self-organizations which should link more than one neighbourhood; there were no more structural subsidies but project-related subsidies with a broad range of criteria and targets to be fulfilled; and there was a decentralization of subsidies to the level of the neighborhood; competences for funding thus were split on two local levels.¹⁸ Migrant women self-organizations were very much effected by these changes, as their municipal structural funding was completely cut in 2005.

¹⁴ Prins 2002:364

¹⁵ "Emancipation of the autochtonous woman can be seen as achieved. (...) Emancipation of women however still is on the social agenda. Specific attention is targeted on the emancipation of Muslim women. Participation on the labour market and in the educational system are highest priority here." (Municipality of Amsterdam 2003:18).

¹⁶ Subsidy regulation on integration and participation 'SIP' (Municipality of Amsterdam, 2004)

¹⁷ Municipality of Amsterdam 2003

¹⁸ This was still heavily criticized: "Well, what the municipality wants is that there is going to be a counselling institution (...) on the level of the city. And this counselling institution has to be a cooperation of these four organizations. Ahm, and the work that we have done for our basis until now, in the plan of the municipal government should be continued on the level of the neighborhood, in Zuidoost thus, and Amsterdam West and neighbourhood, what do I know, the Baarsjes, or wherever. You see? Well, this should be delegated, delegated to the following level, thus the neighborhood level." (Ip 1, 11/10/2006, 47)

While already announcing a strengthened focus on integration and participation and an increased coordination with the neighborhoods, the integration report of 2003 had still emphasized the migrant self-organizations role as bridge between migrant population and municipality and thus proclaimed increased investments into the self-organizations¹⁹.

The change from a multiculturalist to a diversity policy therefore was not the sole reason why migrant women self-organizations in Amsterdam have been dispensed, because not all of them were mono-ethnically defined. Instead it seems more likely that the new focus on Muslim women as a problem group, which developed as part of an Islamophobic discourse, has played a role for the decision to refrain from subsidizing the relatively well-educated migrant women that weren't organized on the basis of religion. In the mail communication between migrant women self-organizations and municipality an interesting point is evoked: The municipality argues to cut the funding of migrant women, who organize on the basis of ethnicity, as they don't focus on "particular groups Amsterdammer". While this expression seems rather fuzzy, it has to be interpreted as a reluctance to name that Muslim women would be the new focus group of subsidies towards migrant women. However a focus on Muslim women as problem group in the context of a diversity policy doesn't seem as very much more complex to a multiculturalist focus on ethnic groups, which has been disqualified as potentially stigmatizing the groups in question.

Restricted Options

For the migrant women self-organization this fragmentation of politics meant to be confronted with two options, that both implied profound changes for their organizational structure and for their clients: either they would decentralize their activities and give up their political claims on the level of the city, or they would give way to the pressure of the municipality, which had offered the four migrant women self-organizations (in the same letter which announced the elimination of their funds), to merge into a single migrant women's organization on the level of the city (and cut the ties with their clients and give up their supporting activities and counseling work).²⁰ This latter option had been presented as the only possibility to remain funded on the level of the city.

The four organisation agreed in November 2004 to collaborate for a municipal advice body called "SAMMAS" vis-à-vis neighbourhood bodies, agencies, welfare institutions, etc. and to contribute to the municipal agenda concerning the emancipation of migrant women, but they also insisted on their different organizational identities and specific activities for their different clients. During my field research in 2006 it became clear however, that two of the organizations weren't accessible for interviews or observations, as their existence was on very shaky legs:²¹ The

¹⁹ Municipality of Amsterdam 2003:13

²⁰ This was laid down in a municipal policy document named "Motie D"

²¹ Since we have been cut short on finance as part of the communal savings we are depending on voluntary work. Even if we would really like to contributed to the research, we are very restricted in our time. This is one of our biggest problems. Formerly we disposed of "professionals" as employees and we were able to react on societal questions and research in a fast and adequate manner. (Email, 30/10/2006).

question then is, how long Sammas will remain functioning if its parts are threatened in their existence? It seems that merging into an umbrella organization might not prevent the organizations to fall apart.

One of the self-organizations, namely Zami, had decided to opt out and to take a "third way" into autonomy from the municipality. Zami wanted to recover its independence not only as an independent association from the municipal organisational structure, but also to be able to independently decide about the contents of its work. As compared in 2005, Zami had been less institutionalized than the other organizations, and thus there were less, yet still many, obstacles for such a step. As with this step Zami was "*again was back to zero*" (Interview, 11/10/2006, 19) the organisation's board started with a profound re-definition and search for new spaces for the organization's future work. While all these strategies have been securing the Zami's existence, there are many difficulties in upholding continuity in the organizations's work. Zami however is in an ongoing process of re-definition and establishing a new and clear-cut agenda, and tries to search for new funding opportunities, such as consulting work.

Repercussions for Diversity Policies

Amsterdam already in the 1990ies experienced a shift away from a multicultural policy targeted at ethnically defined groups and to a policy which emphasized the citizenship of the cities inhabitants. This shift was finalized in a diversity policy, which serves as paradigm for all integration measures since its introduction in 1999. However, the situation is being complicated by public and political discourses triggered by several terrorist attacks outside the Netherlands and murders of Fortuyn and Van Gogh within the country. While there has been no official rephrasing of the diversity policy in reaction to these events, my analysis shows that the system of subsidies for migrant self-organizations, being a part of the municipal diversity policy, has been inventarized and that there have been major eliminations and restructurations in response to these discourses, of which the city's migrant women organizations have been just one target.

The linkage of a diversity policy, conceptualized as anti-essentialist, but with essentializing and stigmatizing discourses on Muslim women as problem group, seems to produce a contradictory politics. Diversity becomes a signal word for all and nothing, while a combined feminist and anti-racist claim, as it lies at the basis of the migrant women's self-organizations, is devalued as both too specific and too broad. These organizations thus have been confronted with either becoming marginalized (as voluntary organizations on the level of the neighbourhood) or becoming instrumentalized (as municipal umbrella organization). While the organizations have chosen different strategies, all of them currently struggle to uphold the organizations existence. Many migrant women of these organizations supported a diversity policy when it was introduced in 1999, but this view has in many cases drastically changed. One reason is the already mentioned utilization of religion (in combination with gender) instead of ethnicity as basis for essentializations. Diversity politics seems to miss the means to deal with essentialist discourses. It thereby ignores the potential of self-organizations as important partners in such a dialogic

exchange with migrant populations, and their potential in bringing debates on societal discriminations to the fore. Ethnicity and gender intersect in the positioning of migrant women, who therefore dispose of valuable knowledge on complexity as everyday reality in our societies. Diversity politics turns out as unable to balance sameness and difference while acknowledging complex identities and belongings. This provokes questions on its ability to come to terms with future challenges and conflicts in our current societies and thus leads to the imperative for an ongoing refinement of the theoretical and normative framework of diversity politics.

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