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Situation of a Foreign Women in Switzerland

Writing about the situation of women is not new, as a matter of fact, so much has been written about us and still so little is understood. To me, this seems to be a misconception.

Paula Charles

There is a little bit more to say on my identity as a woman. First of all, I am black and different. What do I mean by being different? It is not my blood, which has another colour, but my way of living and thinking in this very stiff society; it is hard to get rid of it. This message here is a very touchy subject. As an exotic woman, I should not even start thinking straight, much less so, thinking intelligent. I know it is an old cliché, like why should a blond woman have brains and little boobs. That is what I am forever fighting against, as a strong intelligent woman without an education, who knows who she is, what she wants and where she wants to go to.

As a strong individual, confident, straight forward and, may I use this word, a radical woman, spiritual about my perception and passionate about my role as a foreign woman in this somehow narrow and conservative country, I am supposed to have lost my femininity just by being me, looking men straight into their eyes, in what ever position they happen to be, and let them know I am walking side by side with them and not two steps behind when the moment of competition arrives. Frankly, I am in no competition with men or with

this society, but I am someone, and I have something to say in this system. I am part of this system and it is part of me.

Are there many situations that have changed in the role women are playing today, compared to yesterday? You asked and I give you my perception:

If we are going to talk about European women especially in countries like Switzerland, there are two sides to it. Seeing through my eyes as a foreign woman, the women here came a long way and changes can be seen. When I first came here, the word woman was almost a curse; women groups, women organisations, women getting together to discuss women's issues. These women knew that they had to take the bull by its horns, not always being seen as a baby doll. I have nothing against baby dolls, but it is not just about having the longest hair, a tiny waist and long legs that makes us women. We had more to offer, but how do we go on about it without being misunderstood and without muscles? We wanted a change, I know it from myself; I wanted a change. It didn't feel right, having half the bacon, when I could get more and have the balls to admit such, on top of that not being a white woman in this very white society. Women just simply wanted change. Changes that would represent them allowing their voice to be heard and to be seen and not only standing behind and be an observer, but a participant in what is right for our well-being.

This is supposed to be so simple, yet to men and women of this society, women like myself seem to be a danger to them because we don't accept the crumbs being thrown at us. Changes have always been a powerful word and what ever is new has always brought confusion and misunderstanding. I know, I have been there, not only from the European point of view, but remember, I am a Caribbean and my view as a woman most times is quietly pushed under the rug.

Misunderstood

As a young woman I was not different from women of this society at least that's what I thought. But there was a difference, the way I saw myself from the age of about sixteen in the late seventies, with all what's been going on, talking about women's issues and freedom for all, there was something wrong there, because the men were on top, the few women that tried, women like Angela Y. Davis, the Afro African American who also had a tiny waist and long legs was already feeling the pinch not only as a black woman but as a woman period. For many people in politics, her power and strength was distracting by just simply telling like it is, in the view of a women's eye, who was tired of being misunderstood just by fighting for the simple things (women rights) just to hear this word even I get goose pimples. There was so much proper - grander and misrepresentation about what she was trying to tell women, she finally went Downunder and faced imprisonment.

Switzerland has changed but a lot needs to be done still for women like myself who are struggling in your white society to have a say, without all the educational papers and the money that you had the luxury to have.

My fear that I am afraid to let you know that I think different was only as a writer

and coming out with my books (Go Josephine – Schwarze Frau – Weisser Prinz) by Limmat Verlag that gave you a glimpse at how our struggles as a none Swiss was the beginning of our fight to at least get a tiny, a very fine foot into the door.

In my mother's days this was the most drastic step to have even opened your black mouth and add to that, you are a woman. This word almost stinks, and the solidarity between us blacks was at a very low peak, because of fear, poverty and in most cases being a single mother. How can one be afraid to express themselves of only wanting to take charge of their lives? When I write this story, it didn't make any sense to me then – and it doesn't make sense now. Yet this is what this issue is all about, and all I can say to this is that it is unbelievable how selfish society can be, and how blind some of the powerful men are.

How can they go out there and talk about women's issues when they cannot even understand women, and their favourite word is women are too complicated, women don't know what they want and women like myself that speak their point of view want to wear the men trousers. That isn't my case. The reason why they get so nervous about us is that they never listen, it begins at home (communication) and I believe in all this world it is all about that. All that noise we are supposed to make, all we are asking is let's talk, let's communicate, let's get to the table we are used to sharing meals where getting together is the point at the dinner table, let's get to the women point...

Living with yourself

How can you live with yourself if you know you are not representing your true quality? What is wrong with that? For centuries women have taken the blame by just simply being woman. The confusion

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about who we are and the roles we are to play as humans got so complex and complicated for absolutely no reason at all. I guess we as women are still baffled.

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How can men be so abrupt to tell us how we should interpret our lives, when they themselves didn't realise what was standing in front of them in the first place. We were either too emotional, or we were told we misunderstood what they want best for us. How can they say how I feel, when they don't let me talk? How can they when they already made up their mind and put all of us in the same box. We are all the same. I hear this all the time.

I personally knew too well I as a woman and a foreign woman was at the bottom class and I would have to fight my way double hard than the European woman to get my point of view heard. All I am suppose to do is smile sweetly and I might get somewhere.

This is where the Swiss women's role plays a very big part. The role of Swiss women has changed dramatically in the last twenty years since being here. For such a small country I find the women here who believe in themselves who decided to make education their weapon, can be pleased at the results which is seen today through the eyes of women like myself. I am also quick to point out there is still a long way to go to continue the struggle not only in the men society, but most importantly the young women who are coming up.

It is just a few years ago the women in Appenzell got the permission to have a say in their homeland. At that time I was stunned, I did not realised the Swiss women's role in Switzerland and at that time did not understand the hard work and pressure some of the women in power had played to make this long walk home come true. and I believed many of the foreign women here have no idea. Again

they have already enough struggle to be accepted for just having the colour of their skin, and to fight the struggle to get to put food in their mouths with respect, the last thing they would want to add to their plate is getting mixed up into Swiss politics. I am talking about those women who don't know on what they are sitting right this moment. Some Black women would get angry at me: «Paula why are you wasting your time in this country? What do you think you are going to gain by speaking out? This is not your country girl, they only want to use you for their purposes. Look at all what you have done for this country, have they ever recognised you as a speaker for women? A woman in your situation with not half of the chances they have. Paula you are not accepted and you have done far more on women's behalf than you could imagine. So girl stop here! Have they ever given you some kind of recognition for your hard work. You are not good enough Paula. And that's how they see us.»

I still went on, I knew someone had to do the dirty work, someone had to start. I wasn't alone doing that, but I was alone with my own people. I was mystified. In all honestly I did believe you had it better and easier than women like myself. I was blind and blocked within me and your system as a foreigner who was being sucked by your people men and women just because she was a woman with a different background not being able to communicate to you in your language, much less to understand and to be understood.

I was looked out of your struggle because even from you I got nothing at the time I needed you most. You never realised how much you had even though you were going through your own struggle to make a difference as a serious woman in your society and not as a sex object, as a mother behind the kitchen, with nothing more to look forward to, which was exactly the

situation I was going through. At the same time without women like you, my work would not have been possible. I got a chance through your education, tact and perseverance. You helped me to make another tiny step forward, with that I have been able to transform and transfer my words to the black women of Switzerland and I hope someday elsewhere.

Our social welfare or if you like standard of living of the up and coming black women has changed dramatically in the last few years. The few who have stood up against the toughest odds are finding their strength. Our confidence and most importantly our self-esteem. But the struggle is tough, it is back breaking, because we still have to face you women of Switzerland who already have a say and we want to be part of that, yet when I look around me it looks impossible, even to the point

of separation. And that's where the work begins. The insecurities and the jealousies that we face between us, is a mountain we must climb. A healthy way of life through your eyes as Swiss women could only make women like me continue the toughest fight ahead. It is called fair play, and fair rights for women of all roots.

My success is your success and only together we can make it happen in Switzerland. Remember you have come a long way, and believe me I know that.

Paula Charles ist auf der Karibikinsel St. Lucia aufgewachsen, ist Schriftstellerin und lebt in Zürich. Von ihr sind im Limmatverlag erschienen: «Go, Josephine, go» (1993) und «Schwarze Frau – weisser Prinz» (1996).



