

Susanne Kink-Hampersberger

Inclusion through exclusion? The Frauen*Strand as a feminist action



Susanne Kink-Hampersberger is a sociologist. She researches and teaches in the areas of sociology of gender and education, gender and diversity, social inequality, and school development. She is currently a University College Lecturer for Sociology of Education at the University College of Teacher Education Styria.

Starting Note: My contribution about the Frauen*strand (women's*beach) is a collection of reflective thoughts on a feminist action in Graz Geidorf, which took place in the summer of 2023. At its centre stands the question of whether the exclusion of certain people – in this case men^{*1} – can also lead to inclusion. Specifically, the inclusion of women* of all ages, origins, religions and physical characteristics.

Reflection thoughts 1: How it all began – or: which feminism is mine?

Actually, it all started with a coincidence and the announcement of a special meeting – “Frauengespräche” (Women's talk) – that caught my eye².



Meet Anna Majcan, the new chairperson of the Graz Women's Council @ Margerl Grätzeltreff!

Figure 1: Microphone (freepik.com)

I went there with no expectations other than to discuss feminist issues and meet other feminists.

¹ The use of the * after women and men is intended to draw attention to the social construction of gender and to the visualisation of gender beyond a binary logic.

² All of the following drawn pictogrammes were bought from freepik.com.

Really??

NO expectations?



Figure 2: Reflection (freepik.com)

Ok, let's be honest. Being socialized in a certain university environment, I went there with the expectation of meeting (young) people between the age of 20 and 45 years, discussing queer-feminist topics. Suddenly, I found myself sitting opposite to female feminists mostly aged 60+ and drinking beer.



Figure 3: Beer bottles and cans (freepik.com)

Why am I mentioning this? It serves as an example of my own stereotypical ideas of feminists and lead to the start of the question: What feminism is actually mine?

In this meeting I had the impression that most, but not all, of the present women* there took a clear position in the direction of difference feminism (see Tandon, 2008). At the same time, fascinated by the feminist energy of experienced women*, I have already asked myself the question: Where would I actually place

myself at the moment? Where do I feel I belong?

And then, unexpectedly, the public swimming pool became part of the story.

Reflection thoughts 2: A new idea was born – or: feminism and the public swimming pool

The Margaretenbad (or Margerl) is an institution in Geidorf³. A place where people meet regularly. A place that is used intensively by students, families and senior citizens. A place that represents a piece of GeiDORF (in the meaning of village) for me, my partner and my children.

The public swimming pool, as described in the narratives of the older feminists, as a space that seemed much more liberal in the 1980s, a space in which women* could also be topless and unshaven, and nobody cared about it. One thing quickly became clear: it should become that place again – at least for one day. Goal: revival of the nostalgia of the 1980s – set in a context of feminism – a specific feminism. The public swimming pool as a space for women*. Desires: a ‘male-free’ space; a space where sexual harassment has no place⁴, a safer space for women*.



Figure 4: Swimming pool (freepik.com)



Once more, questions have arisen: What freedom did women already have in the 1980s and where are we currently experiencing a backlash? What did feminists fight for in the 1980s and which feminism is currently predominant? What happened to the women's spaces that were established during the second wave of feminism (e.g. Brückner, 2019; AEP, 2022) and why is it often uncomfortable for some feminists when only women* are addressed?

Figure 5: Open questions (freepik.com)

³ Geidorf is the 3rd (of 17) district of Graz and covers an area of 5.5 square kilometres with around 23,800 inhabitants (if you want to see the city population on a map see https://www.citypopulation.de/de/austria/graz/17455_geidorf/). One characteristic of Geidorf is that the district comprises a large number of universities (including university colleges and universities of applied sciences) – namely 4 out of 8 in Graz. Furthermore, a survey on the quality of life in Graz shows that people who live in Geidorf rate the district as having a high quality of life (for Graz see https://www1.graz.at/statistik/LQI_2018/Broschüre_00_2018.pdf and for Geidorf https://www1.graz.at/statistik/LQI_2018/Broschüre_03_2018.pdf).

⁴ I personally do not believe, and studies confirm this, that sexual harassment only comes from men* and only affects women*. The argument fits more to the logic of difference feminist followers.

Reflection thoughts 3: “Frauen*bad (women*s pool)” – or: how many years will it take to realise it?

The second feminist meeting was completely different: younger participants, queer and non binary people as well as older feminists at one table.



Figure 6: Raised Fist
(freepik.com)

And me: finding myself sitting between different logics of feminism. On the one hand those, who represented the position of men and women being different by nature and call for a feminist action exclusively for women. And, on the other hand, those queer-feminist oriented people, who fundamentally questions the binarity of the sexes and demanding an opening of the discussion round and feminist action also for LGBTQIA+ people. And what do they have in common? In the words

of Celia Parbey (2022): “*The overarching goal of all feminist movements is to end sexist oppression.*”



Figure 7: Arrows
(freepik.com)

And which feminism is actually mine?

Why do I feel comfortable to discuss different topics with a group of people who have all been socialised female? Why do I feel uncomfortable and also inwardly resistant thinking of feminist actions that exclude people, who do not fit into the heteronormative, binary construct of our society and e.g. identify as non-binary or trans*? Is it really still necessary to provide spaces exclusively for individuals socialized as female in contemporary times? If so, when and for what reasons?

After a heated discussion among people with different feminist perspectives, we decided to organize a “Frauenbad” for one afternoon @ Margaretenbad. The Frauen*bad, a women*s pool, in which – as the name suggests – only female socialized people⁵ are allowed to participate.



Figure 8: Visitor restriction
(freepik.com)

A women's pool with the aim of offering women* a safer space where they could be who they wanted to be. A women*s pool that appeals to women of all ages, religions, skin colours, physical needs, etc. But: a pool exclusively for women*.

We formulated our concern as a group and referred, among other things, to a survey by “Catcalls of Graz”. In an Instagram post that

⁵ This means that, for example, non-binary people who were socialised as female could already take part at Frauen*bad, but trans* people or non-binary male socialized people could not.

was open for 24 hours, they asked who doesn't go to the public pool because of negative experiences or body image issues (see their instagramm post from 28 May 2003). It shows that approx. 58% of the 369 women* /FINTA* surveyed never or rarely visit outdoor pools due to negative experiences with (verbal) sexual harassment and distorted body (self-)images in society.

Anna – the representative of the Graz Women's Council – sent our letter to the relevant political representatives.

IN VAIN ...

Our request was shot down by politics and the owner of the public pools in Graz with the comment that male season ticket holders could not be excluded from access to the swimming pool.



Figure 9: Open questions (freepik.com)

So we needed to change our minds, or maybe only change the idea a bit?

One question remained: Is a women*'s pool for just one afternoon in Graz possible next year, in 5 years, in 10 years,...

Reflection thoughts 4: The Frauen*Strand (women*'s beach) – or: How much space is given to women and feminist actions?

The need to change our minds meant only to hold on to the old idea but repackage it. The idea of the Frauen*Strand was born. So we couldn't take up the whole place, but we still wanted to create a space exclusively for women*. We wanted to ensure that women* who would otherwise not use the pool for reasons of self-protection or who are not allowed to use it for various reasons, also could have access. Instead of using the entire Margaretenbad, we now concentrated on using the beach volleyball court. This was also approved by the owner of the public pools and politicians.



Figure 10: Enlightenment (freepik.com)

And it seems we hit the mark... Not only was our feminist action mentioned in several newspapers and online (e.g. ORF, 2023; Krone 2023; Mein Bezirk 2023⁶), two television stations reported in the news or on breakfast television⁷ and it also attracted a lot of attention in the social media (one of the facebook posts had 19.826 comments – mostly negative, but also positive ones⁸).



Figure 11: Frauen*Strand Flyer (designed by Laura Eibeck)

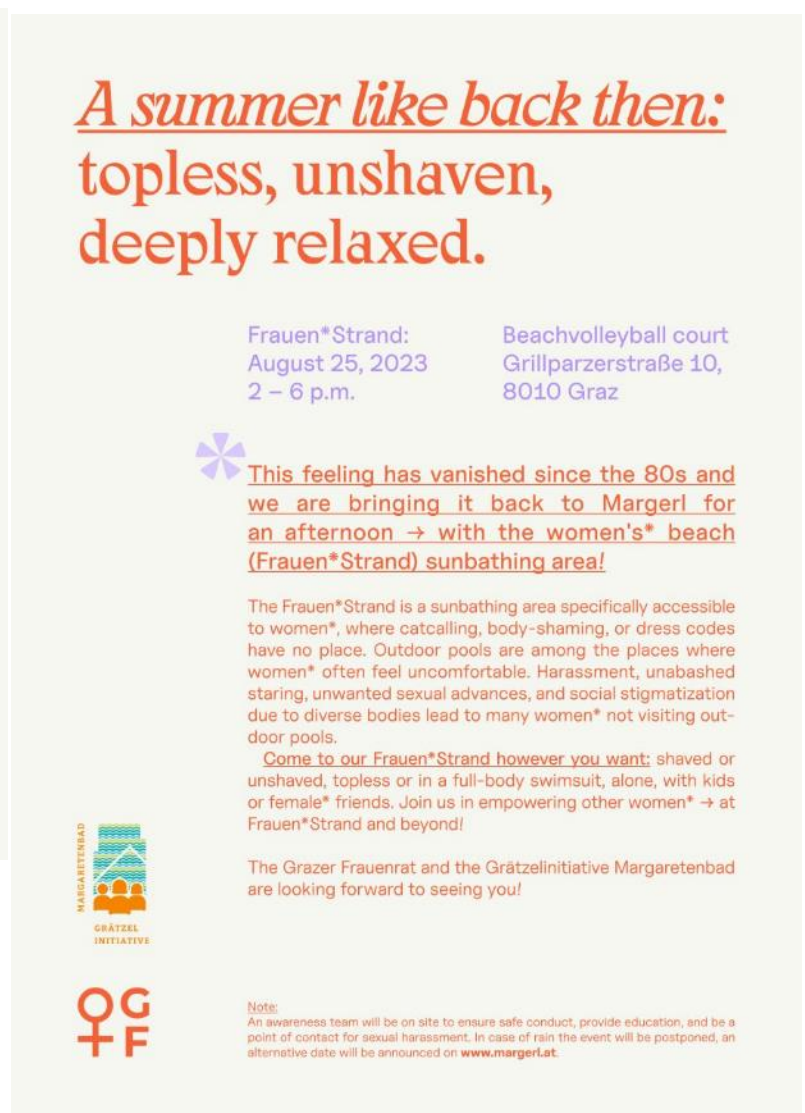


Figure 12: Frauen*Strand Flyer (designed by Laura Eibeck)

⁶ The ORF "Österreichische Rundfunk" is public, the others are private newspapers.

⁷ One was the regional news from ORF with round about 1,2 Million Viewers (see <https://werbenma9.orf.at/steiermark/fakten>), the other a private nationwide television station (<https://www.puls4.com/tv/cafe-puls/staffel-2023-2/episode-241/aktion-badespass-nur-fuer-frauen>).

⁸ The comments ranged from "regression to the Middle Ages", "nobody wants to see them anyway" to "really great and important action".

And then the day had come.



Figure 13: Frauen*Strand
(photo by Smirna Malkoc)



Figure 14: Frauen*Strand wall (designed by
Clara Sinnitsch & Laura Eibeck; credit by Sin-
nitsch)

About 100 women* enjoyed the beach on this August afternoon in 2023 in Graz. They relaxed, ate, chatted, read and drank. Lying topless or covered up in the sun and swam in the pool. Alone or in groups. And they all contributed to empowering each other, taking up space and spreading feminist action.

But:

How did the other pool visitors react?

How did men*, who are not allowed to participate, react?

How did the sportspeople who were unable to use the beach volleyball court react?

With the exception of a few comments and thanks to the excellent work of the Awareness Team Graz⁹, most of the reactions were positive.



Figure 15: Group of people (freepik)

⁹ It is an association that campaigns for more awareness at events and in clubs. See [awa_graz](#) on Instagram.

But one fact still leaves me wondering today: how can a public space that has been occupied by 100 diverse women* for three hours be back in the hands of – mostly male, young, white, able-bodied and well-trained – athletes within five minutes of the official end?

Reflection thoughts 5: Inclusion or exclusion or: feminism and participation

To come back to the topic of the issue and the question I asked at the beginning: the exclusion of certain people – in this special case men* – can also lead to inclusion? Have we really created inclusion with our feminist action and the decision to only allow female socialised people on the Frauen*Strand?

Today, I have no clear conclusion for myself. On the one hand, the conversations showed that many women* used the feminist action to dare to go to the public pool again. Different Women* who have not entered a public swimming pool for years for various reasons. At the same time, I'm still frustrated about the joint decision to only allow female socialised people on the Frauen*Strand.



Figure 16: Thinking process (freepik.com)

At this point I would like to add the thoughts of my dear colleague Anita Thaler, who came to the following conclusion:



I think that with your activity 'all men*' were officially and explicitly excluded whereas usually in public or semi-public spaces also implicit limitations are there. Many women* are excluded, but also males. There is classism, ableism, racism and discrimination on the intersections of gender, sexuality etc. at work here. This is highlighted by your action. To see how much more diverse this specific space became for one afternoon and after that switched back to this very homogenous and privileged masculinity of users. This shows that an action which excludes formally people can paradoxically work towards more inclusion in future by visualizing the informal mechanisms of privileged access to public spaces. (Anita Thaler on 14th Nov. 2023)

Figure 17: Anita Thaler (freepik.com)

And finally: can we actually include a broader and more diverse range of women*, when organizing such a feminist action apart from Margaretenbad, which is located in the middle-class district of Geidorf?

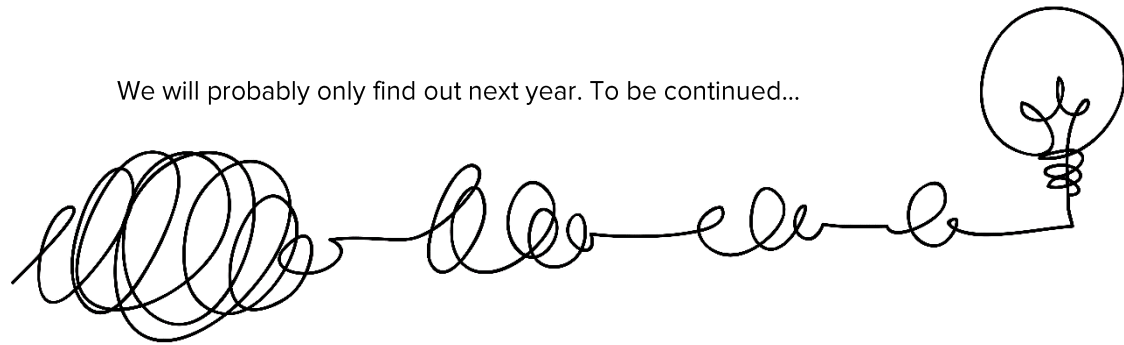


Figure 18: Idea process (freepik.com)

And last but not least:

A special **THANK YOU** to ...

... Anna Majcan, a great feminist and activist, who has done the main work for this action.

... Smirna Malkoc, Claudia Baiser and Irene Windisch, who also put a lot of heart and soul into it.

... the Graz Women's Council, who also supported the campaign.

... Clara Sinnitsch & Laura Eibeck, who designed the wall and flyer.

... the Awareness Team Graz, who provided a safe space.

.... (all those I have forgotten to mention)

... and of course all the women who made the campaign what it was: simply wonderful!

References

- AEP (2022). *Frauenräume. Gestern. Heute. Morgen*. See: <https://aep.at/frauenraeume-gestern-heute-morgen/>
- Brückner, M. (2019). Frauenprojekte im Fokus der Geschlechterforschung: vom feministischen Aufbruch zur Institutionalisierung. In Kortendiek, B., Riegraf, B., & Sabisch, K. (Eds.). *Handbuch Interdisziplinäre Geschlechterforschung* (pp. 963-972). Springer-Verlag.
- Krone (2023) *Geschützt vor Belästigung: Liegewiese für Frauen*. See: <https://www.krone.at/3087861>
- Mein Bezirk (2023). *Safe-Space gegen Belästigung. Ein Strand nur für Frauen im Margaretenbad*. See: https://www.meinbezirk.at/graz/c-lokales/ein-strand-nur-fuer-frauen-im-margaretenbad_a6212409
- ORF (2023): *Margaretenbad öffnet für einen Tag „Frauenstrand“*. See: <https://steiermark.orf.at/stories/3220285/>
- Parbey C. (2022). *Feministische Strömungen. VON WOMANISM BIS WITCH FEMINISM*. See: <https://www.goethe.de/ins/es/de/kul/sup/fem/22665970.html>
- Tandon, N. (2008). *Feminism: A paradigm shift*. Atlantic Publishers & Dist.