

#IWILLSWIM

**#WOMENRIGHTSAREHUMANRIGHTS #FREECHOICE
#AVAILABLETOALL**

The heat is so densely layered in our house tonight. Unable to sleep, my siblings and I start a synchronized dance with our bed sheets. Lying on our warm beds, we flap our thin, white sheets in an effort to cool ourselves down. Very soon my mother enters the room and tells us to go for a late-night swim. “Otherwise, it will be impossible for you three to fall asleep.” We go just down the road, my brother, my sister and I, and swim in the sea under the moon shadow. The sea was always my safest and most precious playground.

— Later in life, I realized that such familiarity with water and swimming is not so easy or natural for many women around the world. But what is actually ‘natural’ when it comes to swimming? Is it, perhaps, swimming that was not modified by family, culture or education? ‘Natural’ experiences are those directly connected with our emotional impulses. Such experiences can be silenced and shut down. And if we shut them down, we limit the fullness, the complete expression of who we are as humans.

— The inability to swim speaks volumes when discussing gender equality and the way structures of colonialism, racism, and patriarchy frame our realities and positions with regard to self-agency, belonging, and freedom of movement. Why is it that some women do not swim? The reasons of course differ in terms of their economic, political, cultural, religious, ecological and geographical complexities. Oftentimes, the discriminations and injustices imposed on women severely limit women’s self-agency and their ability to learn to swim in a comfortable environment. In my book “#IWillSwim, and My Daughter Will Swim Too”, women shared how their first memories connected to water related to a lack of attention, patience, and guidance from the adults. As a consequence, fear and trauma arose and persisted. What is more, women faced numerous questions about ‘modesty’ or simply expectations regarding what women should or should not do.

— Covering up or not should always be a #freechoice for women. Today populist, Islamophobic, and xenophobic movements are on the rise in Europe. Such political structures are banning gender-segregated swimming classes and *burkinis* as a way of showing what a ‘true’ European society will and will not allow. Banning gender-segregated swimming classes and *burkinis* is not a

progressive or feminist move – this only results in a large number of women being pushed away from swimming. Symbols of devotion or religious belonging should not be mistaken for the symbols of oppression.

— It is hard to pinpoint when misogyny actually *began*. A severe form of it emerged in the Late Middle Ages with the establishment of more sedentary lifestyles. This epoch saw not only the European colonial conquests in the Americas, and later across the rest of the world, but also the beginning of witch-hunts. At first, it may seem that the Inquisition and the imperialists were ‘afraid’ of the *witches* because they believed these women were in union with the devil. Hence, we could blame the witch-hunt genocide on irrational fears and say that people at that time did not know better. But the truth is that these ‘irrational’ fears were thoroughly planned and implemented in order to pave the way for patriarchy and capitalism (Federici 2004).

— One of the most commonly used tests to determine whether a woman was a witch or not was a “swimming test”. The potential witch was first tied up (right thumb to her left toe, and vice versa), and then tossed into a nearby body of water. If she sank, she was regarded as surrendering herself to the holy water, meaning that she was baptized and harmless. In such cases, the woman would be pulled out of the water again (although there were, of course, instances in which she had already drowned). On the other hand, if the woman floated, she was “fighting against the holy water” and judged to be guilty of witchcraft, whereupon she was pulled from the water and burned alive (Andrews 2018).¹⁾

— Women were and still are forbidden from nourishing their connection to nature, sexuality, body-autonomy, knowledge of botany and fermentation, etc. A lot of this knowledge, including knowledge of how to move our bodies in water, has been suppressed by patriarchal structures throughout the centuries. However, swimming is a human right for all, and a priceless life skill to possess. The physical and emotional pleasures of swimming are also immeasurable. The struggle to grant the possibility of movement in water to all is not to be taken for granted but needs to be observed, discussed and put into action. Swimming is not only a sport but also a valuable survival skill and it should be #availabletoall. Swimming is also a human right, and the fight for #womenrightsarehumanrights needs our combined voices.

1)

The water ordeal is also prescribed in cases of alleged adultery. If the accused woman has not been caught in the act, her husband can demand that she clear herself by means of the water ordeal. See Driver 1955: 53.

// References

- Andrews, Evan (2018): 7 Bizarre Witch Trials Tests. <https://www.history.com/news/7-bizarre-witch-trial-tests> (15.12.2021).
- Driver, G. R. / Miles, J. C. (eds. & trans.) (1955): The Babylonian Laws, vol. 2. Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Federici, Silvia (2004): Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation (The Great Witch-Hunt in Europe). Brooklyn, NY, Autonomedia.
- McCance, Dawne / Linklater, Kristin (2017): Crossings: An Interview with Kristin Linklater. In: Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal. Vol. 50, No. 1.
- Lenneis, Verena / Agergaard, Sine (2018): Enacting and resisting the politics of belonging through leisure. The debate about gender-segregated swimming sessions targeting Muslim women in Denmark. In: Leisure Studies, 37(6), 706-720.
- Göle, Nilüfer (2006): Islam, European Public Space and Civility. In: Michalski: Religion in the New Europe. Budapest, Central European University Press.

// About the Author

Anđela Rončević (*1994 in Zadar, Croatia) is an illustrator, visual artist, author and theater maker. She works in the fields of illustration, picture books, community arts, and ceramics. At the age of 18, she left her hometown to study at the United World College of the Adriatic (Duino, Italy). She holds a BA in Human Ecology at the College of the Atlantic (Bar Harbor, Maine, USA). Her bachelor's work is the picturebook 'Figs for Olivera' (originally written in Croatian, translated to English, German, and Italian). "I Will Swim, and My Daughter Will Swim Too" is her practical and theoretical work for the MFA (Art in Public Spheres) at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts (Lucerne, Switzerland). Contact: www.andelaroncevic.net.

// FKW is supported by the Mariann Steegmann Institute and Cultural Critique / Cultural Analysis in the Arts ZHdK

Sigrud Adorf / Kerstin Brandes / Edith Futscher / Kathrin Heinz / Marietta Kesting /
Julia Noah Munier / Mona Schieren / Kea Wienand / Anja Zimmermann // www.fkw-journal.de

// License

This work is licensed under the CC-BY-NC-ND License 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>

