Saving Fish from Drowning: Swiss Women’s Identity Politics

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Donnerstag, 1. April 2021, 18.15 - 19.45 Uhr
Zoom (Anmeldung unter izfg-info@izfg.unibe.ch)

Two Swiss women medical doctors, born four years apart, are the subject of this reflection on European identity politics in the British colonies in Southern Africa from the mid-1930s to the 1980s. They joined a stream of European women going to the colonies from the nineteenth-century well into the mid-twentieth. For the Swiss women, the move was poignant as they were among the very few European women denied suffrage at home – the other countries are Portugal (1976) and Liechtenstein (1984). Using two academic articles by two historians as common ground for discussion, I critically examine the “price of the ticket” (a phrase I borrow from James Baldwin) the Swiss women were willing to pay for their freedom to live and work in the colonies because their country of birth, Switzerland, denied them, and all Swiss women, equality before the law until February 1971. The two articles also allow for a reflection on the legacy of not just these two Swiss women medical doctors, but the organizations they joined “to do good” in Africa. The key questions that animate this reflection are: first, which fish were these women saving from drowning, the Africans or themselves? Second, what are these women’s legacies considering they raised the national flag of a country that denied them full citizenship on the basis of their sex and gender? I conclude with a juxtaposition of contemporary professional immigrant women who arrived in Switzerland as skilled labor, but become Hausfrauen because of the structural policies that negate their skills, much like some Swiss women experienced at imperial hands in the colonies.