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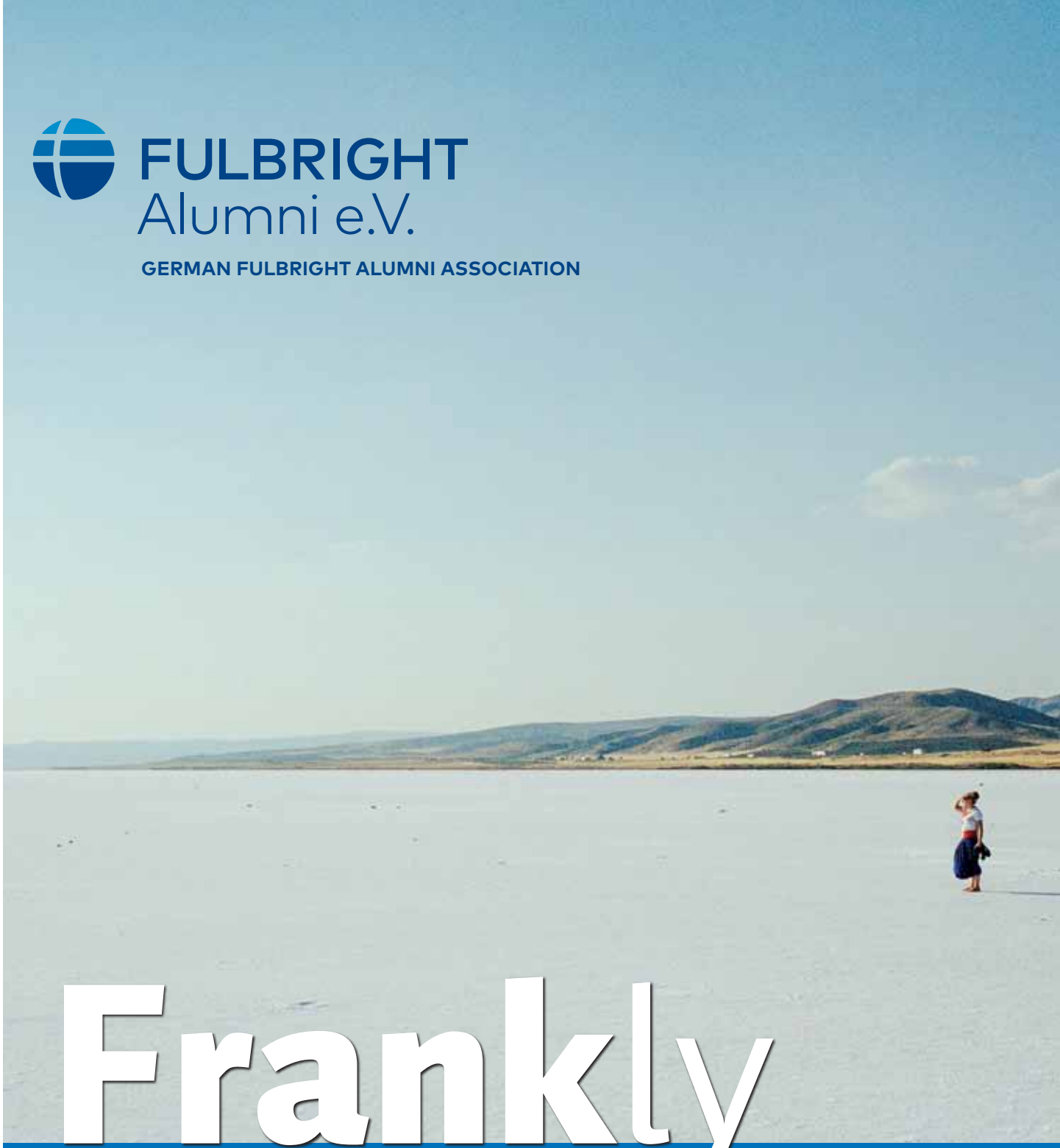

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The Fulbright Alumni e.V. Magazine

Issue 2022

Democracy by Design

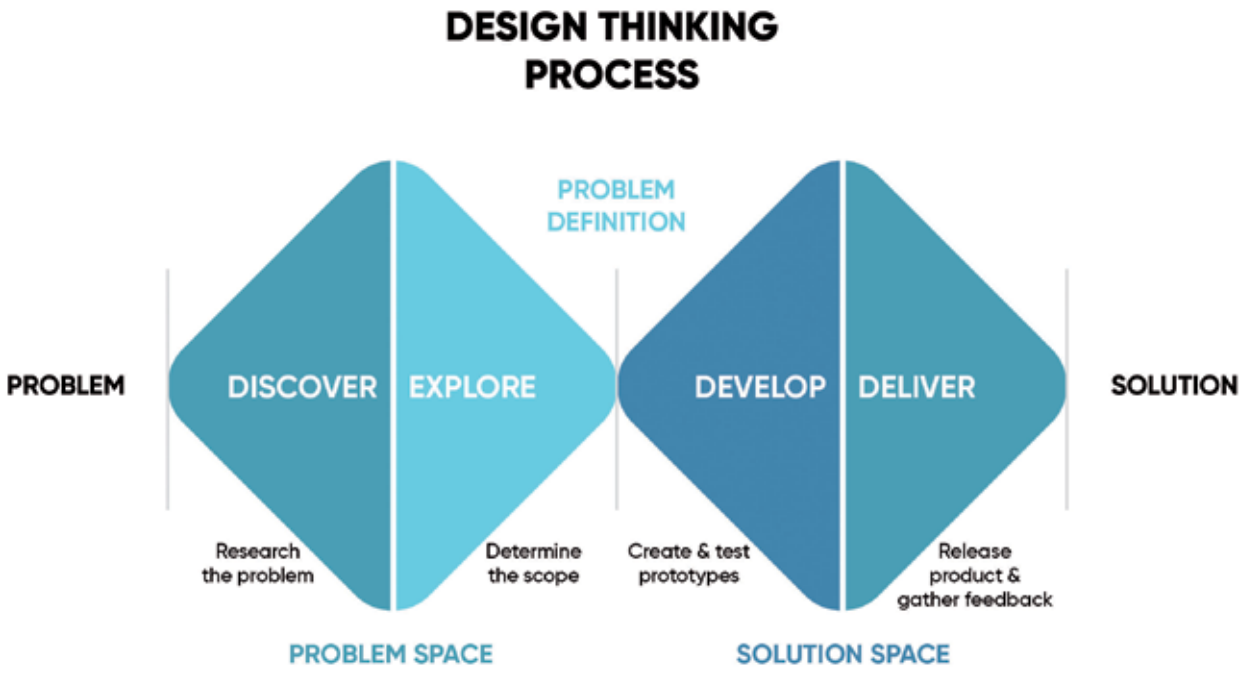
A New Gender Equality Project Offers Tools to Increase Inclusivity and Participation

by Kate Miller

"The students in our classes are part of a new generation of language learners," the teacher told me as we climbed the stairs to her first-period English class. "When I was in school, the foreign language we learned was Russian. Now students learn English."

It was the first day of my Fulbright Teaching Assistantship, and I was only beginning to understand the changes that the fall of the Berlin Wall had brought to this school in the former East German state of Brandenburg. Almost immediately after the German Democratic Republic (*DDR*) collapsed in 1989, the educational landscape had shifted underfoot as the newly reunified German government replaced Soviet-era textbooks, lesson plans, uniforms, student organizations, oaths of allegiance, and flags.

I joined the staff of the school at the start of the 2006-07 schoolyear, nearly 17 years after the fall of the wall. In that time, a generational shift had emerged not only between teachers and students, but also between the teachers themselves. Younger teachers, who had only vague recollections of life in East Germany, chatted with me enthusiastically, in American-accented English, about the *Friends* broadcasts they had watched throughout their teenage years. The textbooks they used in their classrooms were slightly updated versions of the ones they had read as students. Older teachers, on the other hand, told me they had developed their English vocabulary while struggling to read the liner notes of the contraband Bruce Springsteen albums that their friends had smuggled behind the Iron Curtain. The textbooks they'd studied as children were



The Double Diamond model. Source: Adapted from British Design Council.

Source: IKEM



The EQT toolkit includes a handbook, poster and card game; photo: Ellery Studio



A section of the EQT handbook debunks common myths on the gender pay gap; photo: Ellery Studio

Kate Miller (center) and other members of the EQT project team celebrate news that the EQT poster has won the Main Award in the Equality and Woman's Promotion (print) category at the Malofiej International Infographics Awards; photo: IKEM



Kate Miller (second from left) examines prototypes of the card game and poster; photo: Ellery Studio



now displayed in museum exhibits alongside other artifacts from Germany's past.

It would be easy to view this rapid succession of political systems as a phenomenon unique to German history. But the past few years have exposed the vulnerability of democratic systems, including our own, to threats that are both external (as in Russia's invasion of Ukraine) and internal (as in the refusal by political candidates to accept the results of democratic elections). The strength of democratic values – among these, that government must be representative of the people; that elections should be free and fair; that there should be a balance of power across government – depends on how strongly government officials and everyday citizens commit to upholding these values, in theory as well as in practice.

Evidence shows that we continue to fall short of these values in key areas, including in the workplace. More companies than ever are publicly committing to promote gender equality in their organizations, but women continue to make less money than men on average, even when they have the same qualifications, tasks, education and professional experience. Workplace sexual harassment is much more likely to target women than men.[1] And while women outperform men on leadership skills tests, they remain underrepresented in top management positions.[2]

In 2018, I became part of a team working to address the stubborn persistence of gender inequality in the workplace. The product of our work, called EQT: The Gender Equality Toolkit for Working Women and Friends, is scheduled to be released this winter. The goal of our project is to provide tools to increase inclusivity and collaboration, and we structured our creative process to apply these principles in practice.

The toolkit was the unexpected product of a renewable energy conference that was attended by several of my colleagues – all women – from the Institute for Climate Protection, Energy and Mobility (IKEM). When they returned, they described the sexist scenarios they had experienced at the conference, which included groping at the conference bar, repeated interruptions while delivering speeches, and requests for women at the conference to take notes and clear plates for men. A common thread emerged: None of my colleagues were satisfied with the way they had responded at the time. Together, we began brainstorming ways for IKEM to shine a light on experiences of sexism at work and initiate productive conversations on the topic.

To discuss the direction that the new project could take, we met with a design team at Ellery Studio for Creative Strategy, a Berlin-based design studio that has collaborated with IKEM on past projects, including *The Infographic Energy Transition Coloring Book*. We pitched some ideas to the team, led by two Fulbright alumni: Eugen Litwinow, Ellery Studio's managing director, and Bernd Riedel, head of creative strategy and design. Over the course of several meetings, we developed a general outline for a toolkit that would target workplace sexism from multiple directions: A handbook would supply facts and historical background on gender inequality; a vibrant, hand-drawn poster would use infographics to present a history of feminism; and a card game would prompt players to respond to a range of workplace scenarios in real time.

Our team developed the toolkit using a procedure called design thinking, an iterative approach that integrates end-users directly into the development process. The design thinking model provides a loose structure for a creative process that includes several steps: discovering the context for the problem through research, defining the prob-

1. *Amy Blackstone, Heather McLaughlin, and Christopher Uggen, State of the Union Report 2018: Workplace Sexual Harassment (Stanford: Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2018): p. 38, https://inequality.stanford.edu/sites/ default/files/Pathways_SOTU_2018_ harassment.pdf.*
2. *Jack Zenge and Joseph Folkman, "Research: Women Score Higher Than Men in Most Leadership Skills," Harvard Business Review, June 25, 2019, https://hbr. org/2019/06/research-women-scorehigher-than-men-in-most-leadershipskills.*



Fulbright alumni Bernd Riedel (front row, left), Kate Miller (third row, second from left), and Eugen Litwinow (third row, second from right) attend the launch of the EQT fundraising campaign with other project team members and supporters; photo: IKEM

lem, developing and testing prototypes, and delivering the product. Even after the product is delivered, design teams continue to gather input so that they can refine the product – a feedback loop that, with each iteration, incrementally improves the result.

In keeping with the principles of design thinking, we obtained user feedback at each step of the production process. The discovery phase of our project, for example, included not only desk research on gender inequality, but also interviews with women from a range of fields – including tattoo artists, waiters, engineers and Army veterinarians – about their experiences of sexism in the workplace. We integrated these stories, along with our own, into the 'situation' cards in the EQT card game.

In the interviews, we found that nearly all of the women described their own reluctance to initiate conversations about gender inequality at work, either because the subject seemed too complex to untangle in casual conversation or because they were wary of voicing a perspective that was likely to meet with deeply entrenched opposition. In response to these findings, we established an approachable tone for the toolkit with comics-style illustrations and upbeat, solution-oriented text. To allay concerns that the topic was too overwhelming for casual conversation, the card game offered a manageable solution: The goal of the game is not to find one sweeping solution to gender inequality, but to address such inequality as it manifests itself in daily life – as a series of individual interactions between women and colleagues, employers, casual acquaintances, and others.

By placing end-users at the center of the production process, we were able to create the conditions for non-hierarchical communication and decision-making. The result is a richer, more nuanced product than we could otherwise have achieved, and it reflects the experiences and perspectives of everyone who contributed to its production.

In recent years, growing attention has been paid to potential applications of design thinking outside the creative industry, in particular as a model for consensus-building among diverse stakeholders in business[3] and in governance.[4] Amid the instability and unrest affecting democracies around the world, approaches that encourage participation and inclusivity are more important than ever. Our own democratic system is facing challenges that seemed inconceivable to me during my year as a Fulbright teaching assistant. This has magnified the importance of what we, as citizens, do to put our democratic values into practice. In the workplace and in everyday life, our goal must be to create an environment in which each of us can find our voice – and trust that it will be heard.

The EQT project was supported in part by a grant from the Alumni Engagement Innovation Fund (AEIF).
For more information or to purchase a toolkit, visit: **http://shop.ellerystudio.com.**



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3. *Daria Habicher, Greta Erschbamer, and Harald Pechlaner et al., "Transformation and Design Thinking: Perspectives on Sustainable Change, Company Resilience and Democratic Leadership in SMEs," Leadership, Education, Personality: An Interdisciplinary Journal no. 3 (2022): p. 145–156, https://doi.org/10.1365/s42681-022-00028-x.*
4. *Michael Saward, Democratic Design (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2022), p. 31–35, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198867227.003.0002.*