

THE VOICE OF FEMALE LEADERS

A CONVERSATION WITH İPEK İPEKÇIOĞLU



ERIC SALMON
& PARTNERS

Introduction

Born in 1972, İpek İpekçioğlu is an internationally renowned DJ, music producer, curator, author, and queer activist. She is based between Berlin and Istanbul, and her reputation extends throughout nightlife scenes worldwide. İpek has showcased her music at prestigious events such as Glastonbury, Fusion, Sziget, At.tension, Berlin Festival, and numerous other international electronic and world music festivals. Her unique and hybrid sound mix has garnered international acclaim, captivating audiences from New York City to the Sahara Desert of Mali, Tokyo, and Rio de Janeiro. İpek is widely recognized as one of the Berlin club scene's most prominent DJs.

İpek İpekçioğlu's work delves into social-political issues inherent in everyday life, and she adeptly incorporates them into her musical productions. Her creative endeavors are distinctly intertwined with political perspectives, particularly relating to female, immigrant, and queer topics. Her passion for culturally diverse musical projects, both as a curator and participant, is evident in her body of work. İpek is widely known for her live collaborations with various musicians, as well as her contributions to theater, opera, films, and documentaries.

Beyond her artistic pursuits, İpek is an event manager and a committed activist. She is a member of the artist network "female:pressure" and has co-founded two associations dedicated to social causes. Moreover, İpek is a sought-after speaker on topics related to LGBTQI*+ issues and migration. Her multifaceted contributions extend far beyond the realm of music, making her a prominent figure in both the artistic and activist communities.

Can you share some insights into your journey and the key factors that have contributed to your success?

First of all, my bi-cultural upbringing and perpetual movement between countries, languages, cultures, and music have been significant influences on my life.

Additionally, my gender identity as a queer person has played a crucial role in keeping me adaptable, mobile, and open to challenges and changes. In all my endeavours, I aim to contribute something meaningful and lasting to society, as I consider myself an integral part of it.

Like many second-generation immigrants of that era, often referred to as "suitcase children," I experienced a childhood marked by frequent moves between Germany and Turkey. I was born in Munich but never truly lived there. My formal education began in Turkey, where I oscillated between the two countries for three years. Eventually, I relocated to Berlin with my single mother. In a working-class neighbourhood, I attended primary school, and we changed residences nine times within the city.

My mother emphasized the importance of being proficient in both German and Turkish, including reading and writing in both languages. However, I faced initial challenges with the German language. Initially, I considered pursuing a career as a policewoman or psychologist. However, I ultimately opted for a hotel apprenticeship. Yet, despite my aspirations, I encountered difficulties securing a position in that field. Moreover, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, I no longer felt entirely at home in Germany, sensing a lack of belonging. Consequently, I made the decision to relocate to London, where I took on the role of au pair.

It was during my time in England that I began to grapple with my own attraction to women. This realization was significant, as I had been raised within Turkish culture, which, while familiar with some LGBTQ+ artists, did not provide me with an immediate support network of individuals in similar situations. During my self-imposed exile in England, I engaged in profound introspection and questioned various aspects of my life, including my relationship with Germany, my sexual identity, relationships, coming out, career prospects, and the life-altering decisions that lay ahead.

Recognizing the need to connect with other Turkish lesbians and queer individuals who could assist me in navigating these complex questions, I returned to Germany filled with enthusiasm. There, I embarked on the journey of establishing groups and relationships with German-speaking lesbians, concurrently improving my proficiency in the German language. Simultaneously, I made the decision to pursue a degree in social pedagogy. My deep-seated interest in psychology, coupled with a growing understanding of the challenges faced by immigrants, motivated me to seek a higher level of education. I understood that my aspirations would be limited without a proper university degree.

During my academic pursuits, I was afforded the opportunity to venture into the world of DJing. My very first performance took place during Christmas in December 1994. It

was a time when many German gays and lesbians left Berlin to be with their families for the holidays. However, I couldn't help but think about the migrant LGBTQI+ community—where would they go to celebrate? That's when the idea of hosting the first-ever party for queer immigrants at SO36 was born.

After a Christmas dinner, I transformed into a figure draped in a black chador and armed with a handbag filled with cassettes, as I didn't yet have access to CDs or records. It was with these humble cassettes that I made my debut as a DJ. That experience was transformative. It was a moment of revelation—I realized that this was "my thing." Bringing people together through the power of music and dance, fostering a sense of unity, and creating an environment where individuals could be themselves without the need for concealment—this was akin to an alternative form of healing. It was pure magic!

From that point forward, I continued to share my music at a variety of events, including LGBTQ+ gatherings, gatherings for migrant women, and political assemblies. My musical interests extended beyond English music; I was particularly drawn to Middle Eastern music, encompassing Turkish, Kurdish, Arabic, Greek, Klezmer, and other ethnic music genres. My primary focus was not just on the music itself but on creating visibility, unity and promoting acceptance of diversity within both the LGBTQI+ scene and immigrant communities.

Subsequently, I was honoured to assume the role of "Resident DJ" at "Gayhane," a Berlin party with a clever wordplay that combines "gay" and "meyhane," the Turkish term for "tavern." This event was tailored to cater to the queer migrant communities hailing from the Middle Eastern countries. My tenure as the Resident DJ at Gayhane was a pivotal point in my career, significantly elevating my recognition within the scene. The party rapidly gained popularity and found its home in the renowned "SO 36" club in Berlin. Remarkably, it has now been thriving for 25 years, continuing to be cherished within the LGBTQ+ community and garnering substantial coverage in numerous articles.

Through the medium of music and dance, we initiated the creation of safe spaces, free from racism, heterosexism, homophobia, and sexism. Here, one need not conceal any aspect of their personal identity. Fuelled by my passion for music and my influence, I became a trailblazer in this movement. It all began with a Christmas party, and today,

we have evolved into a substantial community with a powerful voice, while I, as an artist, have gained international recognition.

In 1997, I successfully completed my studies and authored my thesis titled "Being a Lesbian and Turkish: Is this a Paradox?" This work was groundbreaking, being one of the world's initial contributions by a person from a queer-immigrant background. It sowed the first seeds for recognizing the counselling needs of LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Simultaneously, alongside my social work studies, I embarked on a journey to study law. Shortly thereafter, I received a compelling offer from the German Red Cross to serve as a director, enabling me to spearhead various projects with my dedicated team. Consequently, I temporarily set aside my legal studies and continued to work as a social worker and DJ for several years.

Ultimately, in the year 2000, I made the life-altering decision to transition into a full-time career as a freelance DJ. This transition required meticulous financial planning. I actively participated in trade shows and events to bolster my presence and began working as an independent contractor. It was evident that in the world of DJing, if nobody knows you, nobody will book you.

At the outset of my DJ career, the genre of music I specialized in was virtually absent from mainstream and LGBTQ+ clubs. Consequently, I ventured into producing niche music, often categorized as "World" or "Oriental," with limited acknowledgment within the broader club scene. However, my persistent efforts led other clubs and venues to embrace this unique music, giving rise to new scenes. It is essential to note that during this period, few women were active DJs. From the very start, I openly identified as a lesbian and actively engaged in feminist and anti-racist movements, successfully amalgamating my political convictions with my fervour for music.

Throughout my career as a DJ and my extensive travels, I was fortunate to receive invitations to major festivals that were not traditionally associated with the genre of music I championed. Notably, I performed at renowned events such as the Glastonbury Festival, Fusion Festival, and Garbicz Festival. My music journey also took me on tours across diverse destinations, including the United States, China, Armenia, Japan, Brazil, and Pakistan, where I chose to present my music in a more understated manner.

My contributions to the music scene did not go unnoticed. In 2005, I secured victory in the "World Beat DJ Competition" held in London, and I was hailed as the "hippest DJ in Europe" by the Swedish magazine QX. Furthermore, Zitty Magazin honoured me by recognizing me as one of the most influential cultural figures in Germany. In 2018, I was bestowed with the "Lesbian Visibility" award by the German Senate in recognition of my significant contributions to the LGBTQI+ Movement.

In a unique accolade, one of my musical compositions found its place at the Pergamon Museum. Remarkably, I stand as one of the rare producers and musicians who have been featured as a persona in museum exhibitions. This recognition stems from my enduring dedication to fostering communities through the transformative power of music and dance.

In addition to my career as a DJ and music producer, I have established extensive collaborations with the German Foreign Office and the Goethe Institute. Through these partnerships, I have had the honour of representing Germany's cultural diversity on an international stage. Notably, I had the unique opportunity to perform at Schloss Bellevue, the official residence of the President of Germany, where I held the distinction of being the first and only DJ to do so.

A significant facet of my work has revolved around the endeavour to showcase that the artistic and musical contributions made by migrants in Germany are intrinsic to the broader German identity. This mission has been a cornerstone of my career, harmoniously bridging my passion for music and my profound interest in diverse cultures.

How do you define leadership, and what qualities do you believe are essential for effective leadership in any industry?

Unity, inclusivity, and the celebration of authentic expression stand as the primary driving forces in all of my endeavours, including my musical pursuits. My perspective on leadership is somewhat distinctive and leans towards a holistic approach. I am perpetually committed to finding ways to fuse individuals, audiences, and artists from a spectrum of communities, backgrounds, and age groups into my creative concepts, projects, events, and DJ performances. In my view, "leadership" embodies the

incorporation of these values. I firmly believe that each of us should, at the very least, endeavour to craft our own distinctive definition of "success" before contemplating the essence of effective leadership.

On a more focused note, my professional portfolio encompasses the curation of interdisciplinary festivals, event organization, music production, facilitation of DJ workshops, and writing. Consequently, I find myself shouldering the responsibility of self-management within my career. I operate independently, opting to forgo the involvement of an agency, and personally oversee all management duties, which include the booking of the bands I am set to perform with.

Interestingly, I have come to realize my inherent reluctance to embrace a conventional employer role. In my perspective, leadership within a collective implies the delegation of responsibilities and the active engagement of others, granting them the freedom and opportunities to contribute their unique ideas. My consistent aim is to foster an environment where every team member experiences a genuine sense of belonging to a collaborative unit, all the while providing them with the means to independently cultivate their skills and expertise. Empowering individuals to strengthen their abilities on an individual basis is a fundamental aspect of my leadership philosophy.

“For me, leadership within the crew means delegating tasks and enlisting others to participate. I always aim to create such environment where everyone feels a part of a team and empower people to build up their skills also individually.

Within the teams I collaborate with, I place significant emphasis on acknowledging various perspectives and addressing contemporary issues such as social and political matters, economics, identity, empowerment, and the importance of using suitable language. It is crucial to actively engage with these topics and deliberate on how I intend to incorporate them into my work. Given my role as an activist, there are occasions when I must make the difficult decision to decline certain requests in order to stay aligned with my core beliefs and principles.

An additional dimension of effective leadership, in my view, is the positive rapport I maintain with artists, regardless of fluctuations in their compensation. They appreciate the value of our collaborations because they recognize my consistent infusion of fresh ideas and my ability to secure valuable opportunities on noteworthy stages, which often catalyse new avenues for their careers.

In my role as a curator, I actively seek out unexplored territory, identifying gaps within the artistic landscape, and discerning how we can meet those unmet needs. This process entails close collaboration with various stakeholders, including venues, artists, and technicians.

Within my team, I foster a climate of open and constructive dialogue. Effective communication, as is the case in all aspects of life, occupies a central position within my profession. Regular team meetings, supervision, and occasional workshops all serve to enhance our collective collaboration.

Can you share a specific challenge or setback you encountered in your career? How did you navigate through it, and what lessons did you learn that can be applicable to other leaders?

I have frequently encountered challenges stemming from preconceived notions about me as a female DJ of Turkish-German heritage. These preconceptions often lead to me being narrowly defined by my cultural background or gender, overshadowing my skills as a musician. This has, at times, hindered my ability to be taken seriously within the music industry.

Furthermore, I have observed the existence of numerous male-dominated DJ collectives that exclude women, and they sometimes exhibit apprehension in the presence of strong female and queer personalities. This poses a significant barrier to achieving gender diversity and inclusivity in the field.

When it comes to financial matters, I've noticed pronounced differences in how men and women handle money, as well as the differing treatment they receive during financial negotiations. Notably, male DJs with no exceptional skills often succeed in demanding higher fees than their female counterparts. This discrepancy in the perception of monetizing one's own value remains a critical issue.

I wish there were specialized workshops designed exclusively for women, aimed at empowering them to harness their strengths and gain a better understanding of the economic value within their professional domain. This encompasses the pivotal issue of how to evaluate one's worth in negotiations with others, particularly in the context of the electronic music scene.

In the club scene, it is evident that men frequently assert their demands for considerably higher fees as a matter of course, such as requesting one hundred thousand euros for a single gig, while women, even if they possess higher levels of recognition, tend to ask for less. Consequently, it becomes imperative to address pertinent questions surrounding how one negotiates their work, what constitutes fair compensation, and how to gauge one's intrinsic value. This endeavour is by no means straightforward, given that art defies quantification based on sales figures and demands a nuanced, subjective appraisal.

In summary, confronting these challenges is an inherent part of our journey. I firmly believe that sustaining our resilience and unwavering commitment to our beliefs are paramount in navigating this terrain.

How do you maintain resilience and drive during challenging times, and what strategies have helped you overcome obstacles?

I've encountered periods in my career when I received fewer bookings due to my association with what's often labelled as "ethnic music." My non-mainstream approach was sometimes perceived as not justifying the admission fee, leading to fewer opportunities. Moreover, my advocacy for the queer community and my distinctive style as a woman, queer individual, and Turkish-origin DJ have, at times, resulted in devaluation and reduced bookings.

Throughout my journey, there were instances where my music choices were met with negative reactions, particularly when they introduced unfamiliar rhythms that challenged the dance norms. Some individuals critiqued my DJing skills at the booth and undermined the value of my music.

The onset of the pandemic brought forth new challenges in my life. I ventured into organizing events such as QueerPingPong with a friend, creating opportunities for safe

distancing while still enjoying music and dance. However, this period introduced moments when I no longer felt like an artist, primarily because I couldn't perform in front of a live audience, and I deeply missed that interaction.

This shift also cast a shadow of financial uncertainty, as the income from fees came to a halt, necessitating a dip into my savings. I found myself pondering my future and contemplating whether I should explore an alternative profession.

During this trying time, music production became a source of solace and a means to stay creatively engaged. I conducted live streams and prioritized physical activity to maintain my inner strength. When faced with issues that perturbed me, I turned to music production as a form of self-expression and addressing these concerns. Some of my work is available on Spotify, while the majority can be accessed on Soundcloud. Additionally, maintaining contact with friends and family, even if only through phone calls, provided invaluable support.

What initiatives or strategies do you implement to promote diversity and inclusion within your work?

The stage serves as my platform, and music is the tool I employ to convey my thoughts and ideas. I don't just view myself as an artist; I also consider myself an activist who leverages this platform to address issues like racism, homophobia, transphobia, and

sexism. In my music production and festival curation, I consistently prioritize diversity in my artist selection. I take into account the often greater number of "cisgender" males, those individuals who were biologically born as males and identify with their birth sex, referred to as "cis male" or "cis female." There are also those who identify as "non-binary." Personally, I tend more towards identifying as "non-binary," but I retain my identity as a woman and engage with it in a political context. This demonstrates that categorizing things neatly isn't always straightforward. I'm pleased that we now have a broader range of terms at our disposal. In my work, I consider the gender composition of those I collaborate with.

“In the club scene, men often demand higher fees, while women, even if they may be more well-known, ask for less. Therefore, it is essential to address questions about how one negotiates their work.”

I actively seek ways to enhance the visibility of "cis women," queers, and other individuals to ensure equitable and just representation. However, it is not always straightforward. For instance, if I come across an exceptional group online that predominantly comprises men, I encounter difficulties in booking them. In such cases, I inquire if they can include women in the group, or I book an additional women's band. It troubles me when I observe only cisgender men on stage, as this does not accurately mirror the diversity of our society. On the contrary, I aspire to foster diversity in both club and concert cultures.

While promoting women is a key focus for me, it's not the sole objective. When examining festivals, it is often evident that approximately 80% of the artists are male, and only 20% or even as low as 10% are female, with even fewer queers represented, if at all. To counteract this, I advocate for the implementation of quota regulations at festivals. Some festivals must adhere to these quotas if they wish to obtain government funding.

Furthermore, I actively participate in various networks, including the "female: pressure network," a community of producers, curators, activists, musicians, and visual artists. Within this network, we engage in discussions on various topics and work towards

advancing the rights of transgender and female identities within the music scene. I have also served as an extended board member of the Berliner Clubcommission, where I focused on issues related to awareness and diversity within club culture.

As a successful artist and leader, what advice would you give to aspiring musicians and young leaders aiming to make a positive impact in their respective fields?

Keep nurturing your curiosity and have the courage to acknowledge your own mistakes. It's akin to taking a plunge into cold water. Just like we all learned to ride a bike by falling down and trying again, continue to explore, adapt, and evolve. Stay informed about the current developments in the music industry or any field you're passionate about, and be prepared to embark on new journeys and explore uncharted territories. I firmly believe that when one door closes, another one opens, possibly leading you in a new and unexpected direction. Always strive to broaden your horizons.

I've come to understand that being open to new ideas and embracing diverse approaches is of utmost significance.

Reflections

One cannot help but acknowledge the impressive nature of her achievements. Her professional background is notably outstanding. Her life journey, however, has been far from uncomplicated. As the offspring of an immigrant and a single mother, of Turkish descent, her arrival in Germany was marked by a resolute determination to succeed. The realization of her lesbian identity did not deter her, but instead, served as a catalyst for pursuing higher education. She recognized that, as a migrant, she needed to aim higher than merely obtaining a minimalistic qualification.

Her unwavering resolve and unwavering commitment during her formative years are commendable. At her current stage, she continues to be an inspiring figure, consistently defying challenges and confronting various forms of resistance.

Particularly striking is her contemporary perspective and the courage with which she lives openly as her true self. Her advice to leaders is noteworthy, advocating a shift away from conventional paradigms, urging the consideration of local residents, women, and immigrants, irrespective of their origins. She emphasizes that evaluations should be based on qualities and impressions, rather than superficial considerations, with a focus on a person's character or likability as the ultimate determinant.

In summary, her journey serves as an inspirational narrative.



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