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East German Women in Transition

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Integration of East Germany into the Federal Republic has resulted in high unemployment and a severe reduction of state subsidies for child care and other social benefits. Although confronted with a dramatic change in their expectations, East German women have joined neither the women's movement nor the major political parties in large numbers. Yet it is through pressure within the political parties and through social-political coalitions that progressive policies are most likely developed.

Since unification, the new states of the Federal Republic of Germany that were formerly the German Democratic Republic (GDR) have faced a plethora of problems. The industrial production of East Germany has been reduced to half; wages are 50-60 percent lower than in the west. The new states do not have the financial resources to pay for many of the social benefits, cultural and educational subsidies, etc. that were provided before. Unemployment is high, and it is increasing. By the summer of 1991, half of all those eligible to work may be unemployed.¹ Workers are crossing over to the West, taking jobs for comparatively low wages and then returning at the end of the day to what was once the GDR. Every day, about 500 people move to West Germany with the intention to stay; most of those who leave are young and skilled workers. Investment by West German firms in the East has been slow and hesitant.² In the Spring of 1991, there were large protest demonstrations in several cities as well as strikes.³ Even with impressive outlays of

1 *The Week in Germany* (February 15, 1991, p.5) reported that the German Institute for Economic Research calculated the unemployment rate in the former GDR to be around 10 percent. With 1.8 million people on reduced working hours in January, the Institute came up with a rate of 21 percent. Norbert Blüm spoke of a future rate of up to 50 percent according to the *Spiegel*, March 4, 1991.

2 One problem that seemed responsible for this is the settlement of the property rights of former owners. This has been partially resolved by providing in certain cases critical for the reconstruction effort for compensation rather than restoration of title to former owners, thus not tying the property up in litigation.

3 The Metal Workers Union, for example, succeeded in obtaining a gradual raise in this industry's wages so that by 1994 they will be equal to wages paid in the west. The success of the metal workers' action was important for the strength of the union in the west as well. On the other hand, unless increases in wages are generally subsidized by

the federal government, many people in the East feel as if they are poor relatives that are at best tolerated. They are inexperienced citizens of a market economy.⁴ Thus, there are now many reflections about whether it was a good idea to introduce a market economy so quickly - even in such journals committed to free market policies as the *Economist*.

Why then focus specially on women? It has become increasingly evident that women more than any other group are facing a situation that involves a dramatic turnabout of expectations. Their social self-conception is put into question as well as that familiarity "with the turf" which is so important for the control women exert over their own lives.

After World War II, the two German states started out with very different orientations towards women. The male/female division of labor and traditional gender roles were quickly restored in post-war West Germany.⁵ This in spite of the equal-rights provision of the *Grundgesetz* of 1949. By 1980, under the pressure of the European community, the Equal Treatment Act was passed, and with the growing influence of the women's movement and a greater role of women in political parties (who could point to legislation in East Germany addressing some of the needs of working families), there have been slow but impressive changes. Just over half of West German women are in the labor force. Though this is not particularly high in the Western context

the federal government, there is danger of further job losses.

4 For example, so many people have been besieged by unscrupulous salesmen and have bought into corrupt insurance schemes that the government has had to extend the period for dissolving all such agreements.

5 Marilyn Rueschemeyer and Hanna Schissler, "Women in the Two Germanies," *German Studies Review*, Special DDAD Issue, Winter 1990, pp.71- 85.

as a whole, the supports and family policies are far more developed in the Federal Republic than in the United States. Measures advancing equal opportunities for women and childcare are not, however, as developed as in the Scandanavian countries.

In the GDR, as in West Germany, too, there was a severe shortage of men at the end of the Second World War. The labor force was further diminished by emigration, and the economic system of central planning generated on its own a chronic labor shortage. That condition resulted in policies strongly favoring a high labor force participation of women, though these policies were also flavored at least by ideologies of the Weimar period. Nearly 90 percent of all women eligible to work were studying or in the labor force before unification.⁶ Public policy also supported an expanded system of occupational training. Seventy percent of all women had completed an apprenticeship or more advanced vocational training, and women of forty years and younger had achieved the same educational standards as men.⁷ Finally, the state provided day care centers, generous maternal leaves and other important supports for women. These changes helped to transform the lives of many women by increasing work opportunities and allowing them more choice in arranging their personal lives.

In the last few years, however, even before the opening of the borders, there was increasing and open

6 A third of the women in the former GDR worked part-time, typically six rather than eight hours a day. This percentage is similar to the percentage of women working part-time in West Germany, except that part-time work in the Federal Republic may involve less than 15 hours a week with all the accompanying consequences.

7 Women comprised about half the college and university students; they concentrated mainly in economics, education, literature and languages.

discontent about issues of women that were still unresolved in the GDR. The official Democratic Women's Federation, which started out in the Soviet zone of Germany as an effort to encourage women to join the workforce, transmit official ideology, and teach women needlework and all the other necessary skills they needed to run a good household, was not an organization that addressed the real needs and frustrations of working women, even if it did important work with the elderly and make some improvements in the residential areas.

Complaints in the GDR revolved around what is a familiar theme: the difficulties of integrating work and family life, even with the expansion of day care centers in the 60s and housing availability in the 70s and 80s. The extensive use of shift work despite the complaints of workers about its effects on family life, the long work day and, for many, a strenuous commute to and from work, the often uncoordinated schedules of men and women, the inadequacy of consumer goods and other services, etc. resulted in exhaustion and strain for both men and women.⁸ These difficulties were compounded by the unequal division of labor in the family, which was indeed only slowly changing among the younger and more educated couples - more so with marketing and the care of children than with other household chores. And for single women with children (a third of all children in the former GDR were born to single mothers) there were special problems. Aside from loneliness and the financial constraints of managing on a single income, those who lived in the new residential areas that surround urban centers complained about the lack of activities in the community for single parents, the

⁸ For more details, see Marilyn Rueschemeyer, *Professional Work and Marriage: An East-West Comparison*, London: Macmillan and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981. (paperback 1986)

difficulty of leaving the children and returning to the city again after the work day, and the boredom of their lives.

Sociologists working on the issues of women typically pointed to the small number of women in the highest leadership positions in industry, in the university and in politics even if a third of all middle-level positions were held by women. There was discrimination in hiring; and from childhood on there was still a tendency to channel women into more traditional fields and free-time activities.⁹

Yet a Spiegel poll published on January 1st, 1991, showed that two thirds of the East Germans interviewed considered the GDR ahead of the BRD in matters of gender equality; nearly a third of West Germans agreed. More than half of the East Germans, women as well as men, thought that women had equal chances at work, while a third saw men getting preferential treatment. Asked whether one should resign oneself to the fact that day care centers would no longer be guaranteed, two thirds disagreed¹⁰ In the former GDR, over 80 percent of children aged 1-3 were in nurseries, and nearly 90 percent of those between 3 and 6 were in kindergardens.

Women were active and involved in the dramatic changes that occurred in East Germany, even before the borders opened. They became more involved in professional

9 Hildegard Nickel, "Sex-Role Socialization in Relationships as a Function of the Division of Labor: A Sociological Explanation for the Reproduction of Gender Differences" in Marilyn Rueschemeyer and Christiane Lemke (eds.) *The Quality of Life in the German Democratic Republic: Changes and Developments in a State Socialist Society*, New York and London: M.E. Sharpe Inc., 1989, pp. 48-58.

10 Spiegel Spezial, *Das Profil der Deutschen*, Nr. 1/1991, pp. 46, 66.

associations in the last few years, an indication, I think, of their belief in actually being able to bring about some real social change. One interesting example involved elections in the Union of Artists. There was a great increase in the number of women elected to the district leadership. A third of the new people elected (half of all those in leadership positions were new) were women.¹¹ The district elections did indeed have consequences for the National Congress elections even if the changes were less far reaching than anticipated.¹²

Women took an active part in the demonstrations that erupted in cities throughout the GDR. Yet they felt it was imperative now to organize an independent association to articulate the social policies and programs they envisioned; in part that was due to what the women interpreted as insufficient support by the general opposition groups. In 1989, an independent women's movement was formed, a coalition of groups from all over the GDR which included socialist women's initiatives as well as Christian women's groups.¹³ Women actively participated in the Round Tables where democratic political negotiation and administration took place during a temporary period of GDR government before the elections of March 1990. The Round Tables existed all over the country either as coalitions or as replacements of the old leadership.

11 "Zu den Sektionswahlversammlungen der Bezirksorganisationen des Verbandes Bildender Kuenstler der DDR," *Bildende Kunst*, Heft 10, 1985, p.434.

12 See Marilyn Rueschemeyer, "State Patronage in the German Democratic Republic: Artistic and Political Change in a State Socialist Society" in *Journal of Arts/Management, Law*, forthcoming.

13 Brigitte Weichert and Helmut Hoepfner, "Frauen in Politik und Gesellschaft" in Gunnar Winkler, ed., *Frauen-Report '90*, Berlin: Verlag Die Wirtschaft, pp. 199-227.

There were many meetings with West German women, under a variety of auspices - of political parties, women's movements, feminist intellectuals, etc. It is not surprising that these revealed tensions between West and East as well as a growing number of divergent interpretations and understandings of the causes of remaining gender inequalities in the GDR. In the beginning, a number of GDR women involved in these meetings often felt that their point of view and their concerns were not respected but that a feminist theology was presented to them, to take on as their own holy cause.

At one meeting of Greens from East and West, two western Green representatives put down the idea of motherhood while their East German sisters - many of whom were single mothers - had their children in the very next room cared for by two young women. The East German women finally took over the meeting to discuss their own issues.¹⁴ The differences between the two groups were not surprising. An interesting study of women members of the West German Bundestag indicated that the younger cohort of Greens (compared to the somewhat older SPD women who wanted to combine family and career and the even older CDU women who were generally more conservative in orientation) have been more strongly influenced by feminist notions that family commitments and women's equality are mutually exclusive and that women should remain single to fulfill their potential.¹⁵

14 These remarks are based on observation of a meeting in Rostock.

15 Eva Kolinsky, "Political Participation and Parliamentary Careers: Women's Quotas in West Germany," *West European Politics*, Vol.14, Jan. 1991, Nr.1, pp.56-72.

A little less than a year ago, probably the loudest voices expressed concern about maintaining abortion rights, day care centers, the right to work, everything that had been gained by women in the GDR. With unification, voices that were less publicly heard in the old regime were now being openly sounded, voices that were more in tune with the Christian Democratic Party "choirs" all over the land, accompanied by the appropriate *Blockflöten*.¹⁶ Now the appropriate goal of women should be to stay at home and establish that family life that fits more with traditional values. Clearly, while the financial and occupational situation remains so fragile, such a retreat into the family nest is impossible for most people. Some women talked about how hard it had been, how their children and family life had suffered because of their working, because their children were in day care centers, etc. For some, it is easier to blame the difficulties of their children - the deep alienation of so many young people - on these factors rather than on the way their parents interacted with the apparatus of the state.

These of course were not only new voices. The less skilled the women, the less enthusiastic they were about their work; and the more other factors - location of day care centers, workplaces, access to markets, attitudes of husbands - made it difficult to combine work and family commitments, the more appealing that "other life" became.

There are also a variety of intellectual or professional reflections critically evaluating the women's policies of the GDR past. The state from its very beginnings

¹⁶ Here the word for a musical instrument also refers to the political parties in the former GDR which were not really independent of the dominant communist party. The suggestion is that some former GDR citizens are conforming now to the CDU party line.

was patriarchal in personnel and outlook. Of course gender inequalities remained, given that the main goal of the state was to use the labor of women. There was no real analysis of the problems and the restructuring that would have to take place on all levels of GDR life in order to create real gender equality.

At the same time, many recognize that individual women's lives were affected by their participation in work, that the workplace, especially the more skilled occupations, did empower them and did affect their sense of competence and independence, as well as provide financial resources and community outside the house. So with all the attractions of that grass on the other side, there are many women who would not think of staying home and not working, who search for a compatibility between work and the family, fewer hours, more time to be with the children, "going out to lunch, playing tennis", as one East German SPD woman functionary fantasized.¹⁷ In a poll by the Institute for Applied Social Research in Bad Godesberg taken in the Fall of 1990 only 3 percent of 1,432 women between 16 and 60 in the new states described "housewife" as a "dream job"; 58 percent thought that mothers with careers were "just as good" as mothers who stayed at home.

We still do not know how the employment of women and their social and economic situation more generally will develop, but we can say a few words about the reality of women's lives since unification. At this point, a higher percentage of women than men have been laid off (52 percent vs. 48 percent), and women are most likely going to be continually affected by high unemployment. They are strongly represented in light industry, textiles and clothing,

17 During an interview in the fall of 1990.

electronics, chemistry and plastics - industries which have been adversely affected by unification, and they are less represented than men in construction, transportation, and other industries which will necessarily receive support. Better educated women often filled administrative positions, many of which were related to the central economy and are likely to be decimated; they have been involved in cultural institutions, publishing houses, etc. that continue to be reduced. This has affected the atmosphere at the workplace so that already over a year ago, women talked about the growing tension and decreasing rapport among their colleagues. In the view of many women¹⁸, although they are formally represented by a union, they again do not feel represented by anyone and have voiced complaints about exploitation, and not only in terms of salary. Women mentioned that they are afraid to open their mouths. Indeed, the Federation of German Trade Unions reports that infringements of the labor laws are common in eastern Germany. Ursula Engelen-Kefer, the deputy director of the West German Federation suggested that companies try to take advantage of the unfamiliarity of employees and workers' councils with the laws and that these problems would become even more serious when negotiated protection against dismissal runs out at the end of June 1991.¹⁹

The East German sociologist Hildegard Nickel predicts that training quotas for young women will no longer apply; interests and personal preferences will again acquire greater weight; the spread of technology will make the administrative spheres connected with these attractive to

18 Interviewed in the Spring and Fall of 1990.

19 Interestingly, Engelen-Kefer noted that although the East German courts were not yet fully functioning, "some 40 union legal offices in eastern Germany in some cases had to initiate more than 2,000 legal proceedings a month." *The Week in Germany*, April 26, 1991, p.5.

male labor, introducing competition in finance, marketing, personnel management.²⁰ Because of the extreme situation, government measures are being initiated to deal with unemployment and job creation; these are mandated to benefit women in proportion to their share of the unemployed.

East German women are not unlikely to face discrimination when they apply for high level jobs, and they have limited recourse for challenging such decisions. The EEC stipulations are relatively weak. The present government coalition is discussing strengthening the laws against discrimination. Women's rights were also among the components introduced in West German labor negotiations during the last few years.

Anticipation of difficulties with daycare and concern about the primary wage earner provide good excuses for turning the woman down and choosing the man. And temporary and part-time work are less secure than being a permanent member of the work force.²¹ The preference for hiring men is combined with the expectation that women will take care of "family" matters.

The time women devote to confronting the new challenges of the market economy is a further factor inhibiting them from taking the time they need to search for work. Dealing with schools, medical care and a different style of consumerism calls for a great deal of attention and energy.

20 Paper presented at the IREX subcommission on women and work in the former GDR and the United States, Humboldt University, Berlin, 1991.

21 As it stands, protection from being fired under Federal law lasts from the beginning of pregnancy until some weeks after the birth. (*Informationen*, Nr.1/1991, p.28. and information from Dr. Hanna Beate Schoepp-Schilling, Ministry for Women and Youth).)

Even if both men and women see these tasks as vitally important, they are absorbing and enormously time consuming. They also re-enforce traditional notions of the gender division of labor.

Single women with children among the unemployed face special problems. The special supports for these women - access to childcare facilities and kindergardens - are endangered. Several proposals are being discussed now to insure daycare with support from the Federal government. These proposals are being debated and face stiff opposition. In the meantime, the five new states are responsible for their own policies and financial support of daycare while they face extreme budget difficulties generally. Even with continuity assured until the summer, many parents are concerned about the loss of daycare or expenses for daycare they can ill afford. University students or students in vocational training will also face new problems. They no longer will be able to count on childcare supports and other facilities for students with children.

These issues, combined with concerns about future abortion regulations could theoretically play themselves out in the formation of a strong woman's movement or in strong women's involvement in political parties. In fact, the independent women's groups are not that active and have not been able to mobilize women to any substantial degree. The formerly state-run Women's Federation, even after conducting secret elections and initiating new activities, has a very low membership.

Why this weakness in women's collective organization? Aside from the fact that many women are concerned with issues they consider more important right now, the hesitancy to get involved is first of all related to the role of the state in the former GDR. It was the State that addressed the

issues of women on its own terms, developed the policies that affected their lives, and presented the public interpretations of these policies and goals as well. There was no mechanism enabling women to be their own advocates. Thus it is no surprise that women have limited practice in forming pressure groups and becoming their own advocates, even if these groups might be really important for what they want to accomplish.

Furthermore, they are unlikely to become active if they feel they have no impact. In the former GDR, there were strong tendencies to withdraw from public life and concentrate on the more private sphere. That inclination is likely to continue. It will be all the stronger among all those people - often highly qualified - who did get involved with the state and party in the past and now are seen as compromised.

Finally, inequality is rapidly increasing in the eastern part of Germany. Those who are relatively well off, now experience gains in income as well as through social supports of the state, while the many others who lose in this process are the weakest and have the least power to organize. This applies to women generally and to those threatened with unemployment as well as single mothers in particular.

Such weakness of women's collective organization does not bode well for the chances of legislation and administrative action supportive of women's interests. The women's bureaus that were instituted in each community in the spring of 1990 - with at least one full paid position in every community with more than ten thousand people - are no substitutes for political organization and influence.

Certain developments in the West German political parties seem particularly promising. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) now has as its goal a quota of 40 percent women for all party offices, a goal they hope to reach by the year 2000. In public administration, the SPD has a 50 percent quota as its goal which is presently being challenged in the constitutional court in Northrhine Westfalia. In the meantime, 26 percent of Social Democratic deputies in the Bundestag are women. That compares to 13 percent in the CDU/CSU, which has its own plan for a women's quota based on membership in the party, 19 percent in the Free Democratic Party (FDP), half of the transformed communist party (PDS), three women and five men in the Bundestag delegation of the Bündnis 90/Green coalition. Altogether, 20 percent of the Bundestag members are women.²² The large percentage of highly educated women, especially among the deputies of the SPD and the Greens (before their recent loss) provides another potential support for policies fostering gender equality.²³

22 In 1989, nearly a fifth of the council seats in municipalities and cities with a population over 20,000 in the Federal Republic were held by women compared to only 12.5 percent in 1984. *The Week in Germany*, June 15, 1990, p.6.

23 Eva Kolinsky suggested that with quota commitments, the political parties in Western Germany were increasingly geared towards educated middle-class women with the possible consequence that the lower stratum would be increasingly less integrated. (Kolinsky, *op.cit.*, p.70.) CDU Minister of Women and Youth Angela Merkel of eastern Germany is critical from another perspective. She recently spoke out against the "rigid quota system" suggesting that it was "constitutionally questionable and ill-equipped to master the varied tasks of public administration and a flexible personnel policy." *The Week in Germany*, April 26, 1991, p.2. Her political opponents have accused her of mouthing policies set forth by Chancellor Kohl and of not furthering the position of women.

Kohl appointed four women to the new cabinet: Irmgard Adam Schwätzer (Free Democratic Party), Hannelore Rönisch (CDU), Angela Merkel (CDU), and Gerda Hasselfeld (CSU).

Women active in the Federal Republic are turning to the State for measures, laws, policies, that address the issues of women. That in itself is not unusual because West Germany is a "Sozialstaat", with a long welfare state tradition. Any complete understanding of women's issues in Germany must take this into account, even though these welfare state policies may be quite conservative in their overall conception of gender issues. West German women are advocates on their own behalf, and they are skilled in this, though this does not mean that the forces that promote gender equality are winning all or even most battles. Some of the proposals have multiple consequences. Extending the eighteen month parental leave to three years, moderately funded by the federal government, would increase the possibility of remaining home and returning at a later period to work; but it may also mean a neglect of daycare centers, making it more difficult for both parents to seek employment. It may also lead to discrimination in hiring against which, as mentioned above in connection with EEC directives, there exists only weak protection. And it may result in channeling women into the household for several years. There is no consensus in West German society on these issues, and at this point, most women in eastern Germany do not feel enough a part of the system to work in it on their own behalf.

In the five new states, the Social Democrats (who in the West were, together with the Greens before their recent defeat, most progressive on women's issues) were successful only in the state of Brandenburg, the area surrounding Berlin. Regine Hildebrandt (SPD), the Brandenburg minister for Social Policy, Labor, Families and Women, has become a heroine because she distributes birth control pills without cost, continuing the GDR policy.

In more recent state elections in West Germany, the Social Democrats gained votes. After the last of these, in the Spring of 1991, they will be able to form the government in Rhineland-Palatinate in coalition with the Free Democrats or with the Greens. As a result, the conservatives have lost their majority in the Bundesrat, the second house of the German parliament.

Ironically, according to some of my colleagues in West Germany, unification has created opportunities for West German women to push for gender equality that did not exist before. Many of the new policies I already mentioned have come about as a result of the tensions that developed after unification. Another example is the abortion issue, the much debated paragraph 218 in the criminal code. In spite of intensive maneuvering of Kohl and the CDU²⁴, there is a good chance that the criminal code will be liberalized. The agreement underlying the current government coalition provides for a Bundestag vote according to each member's conscience on this issue and not along party lines. The FDP has a proposal that abortion be legalized for the first three months of pregnancy with only one condition - that the women have counseling; the SPD has the same proposal, only without conditions; Rita Suessmuth, Speaker of the Bundestag and one of the most popular CDU politicians, has proposed a third way, which is considered somewhat more conservative but still more flexible than the current regulations, while the state of Bayern is pursuing constitutional claims against the current conservative regulation as too permissive.

Other policies that are being initiated include increasing the number of days allowed for sick-leave from five to ten (for single mothers twenty) days as well as raising the age of the sick child to include those 12 and

24 See *Spiegel* of March 11, 1991. Some of the politics are difficult to assess at a distance. Kohl broke up the ministry on women, the elderly, youth, etc. into three ... All heads are women and said to be relatively weak. The abortion issue was taken out of Angela Merkel's (East German CDU) ministry for women and put in the ministry dealing with families. But Merkel who declared her opposition to the liberal GDR regulation runs a party commission on the issue. Other East German women with the same position play also key roles in the CDU strategy.

under. Previously in the Federal Republic, parents were allowed to stay home only if a child was eight or younger. These measures, as well as the eighteen month parental leave and the plans for its extension (with 600 marks for half a year and then staggered according to income) were in response to tense reactions in East Germany to the loss of similar benefits. As important as these are, they may aggravate discrimination in hiring if stronger legal measures against such discrimination are not forthcoming.

As it is, the percentage of women in the highest positions in politics, economic institutions, and in the university remains low in all parts of the country. These hurdles were not overcome in either West or East Germany.

Even with the possibility that women advocating gender equality will lose on issues they consider vital, there is a feeling of excitement about many of the policies that are now being discussed in the political arena. But these are discussions of *policies*. The *reality* of the lives of women in eastern Germany is characterized by a great deal of tension, insecurity, and even despair, both because of general economic and social conditions and because of their particular situation as women in the new states.

However, it is through the political system that the supports for both men and women to play new and equal roles in both public and private life are most likely to be advanced. The hesitation of East German women to actively participate in shaping politics will endanger their interests in the long-run. Furthermore, to be effective, it is necessary for East and West German women to find a way of joining forces. Without such cooperation the participation of East German women will be weak. Unfortunately, the state of the East German economy, the present preference for hiring men, and the absorption of many women into the

"private" sphere leads to a vicious cycle of retreat from both the economy and the polity and to even greater difficulties of reintegrating into the public sphere in the future.

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