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Federal Republic of Germany (Former GDR)

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1993

https://doi.org/10.25595/166

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Sammelbandbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Dölling, Irene: *Federal Republic of Germany (Former GDR)*, in: Meel, Marga van; Schwefel, Erika; Marks, Arnaud (Hrsg.): The Changing Role of women in Society. Women between Jobs and Family. A Documentation of Current Research 1989 - 1991 (Bonn: Informationszentrum Sozialwissenschaften, 1993), 235-240. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25595/166.

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FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN

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Federal Republic of Germany (Former GDR)

1. Women's present situation in the New Federal States

While research reports for this volume documenting European Women's Research were being received, the societal changeover of the GDR and the reunification of the two German states was taking place. These events brought about far-reaching decisive turning points both for women and for many scientific institutions and research projects in the former GDR.

Facts and data listed in former reports on the social situation of women in the GDR, are meanwhile - as much as the GDR - history. Not only do women represent a proportionally high percentage among unemployed (approximately 58% of the unemployed are women), short-time workers, and those forced into early retirement. They also come to learn that their vocational qualifications do not count quite so much as those acquired by their male colleagues, and that they are "second-hand-labour" partly due to being mothers, in child-bearing age, or too old. Recent surveys (a 1990-study of the Institute for Applied Social Research, INFAS) indicate that for 65% of East German women gainful employment represents an indispensable element in their life planning and that they would not want to renounce employment even with their spouses providing sufficient income. Merely 3% take the alternative "house wife" for a life perspective. In spite of this, the percentage of women among the total number of employed decreases steadily. Although the numbers seem to be somewhat drastic 1) due to recent restructuring processes of the East German economy, administration, education and health system (or due to the lay-off of manpower resulting from that), one can certainly predict that the high level of women's employment once so typical for the GDR (over 90%) will not be attained any longer in the future. Presently, even the childcare network which - although urgently needing improvement - had been established in the GDR to guarantee the compatibility of job and motherhood, is in the process of becoming fragile. Large numbers of day nurseries are being closed (for the future, it is intended to extend the maternal leave of presently 18 months to 3 years) compared to the former situation in the GDR, now fewer preschools and kindergartens are available and spaces have become considerably more expensive. In many day care institutions, the opening hours are inconvenient for women with full-time employment which especially affects single mothers. Although marriage and family represented the norm in individual life in the former GDR, social political measures did provide social security for incomplete families, i.e. single mothers. A lifetime employment (only shortly interrupted after childbirth) was not only the official norm, but for the majority of women an experienced reality. In reunified Germany, jurisdiction, social benefits, as well as the publicized image of women and family are guided much more strongly by the idea of the married couple and traditional gender roles (bread earner, mother/house wife).

These circumstances force East German women to revise the life orientations that they have learned to take for granted, to match them with changing conditions and norms, and to make decisions that they were never asked to make before. For example, one indication for the changes and the individual insecurities involved is that the percentage of female students in first semesters of university has dropped from approximately 50% to 38%. The upcoming reform of the abortion law will have additional far-reaching implications for women's life orientations and life planning in the new federal states. The "Fristenloesung", effective in the GDR since 1972 allowing legal abortion up to three months and covered by the state health insurance, will be up for disposal at the end of 1992 latest. One can already assume today that the abortion law as it existed in the GDR will not be adopted for all of the German nation.
At best (but rather unlikely) we may see a "Fristenloesung" with prior mandatory pregnancy counseling. It becomes evident that the changes in economic and social conditions as well as in norms and values brought about by the German reunification has led to radical changes in the situation of women that call for scientific analysis. This situation is a major challenge for the research on women as it exists: since Fall 1989, because it followed completely different orientations and goals than the research "on women's issues" officially promoted in the former GDR.

2. Was there any research on women in the GDR prior to the turning point?

The social changes from Fall 1989 up to the reunification of the two German states in October 1990 stimulated the emergence of a more feminist-oriented research on women in many scientific institutions or autonomous projects, respectively (which we won't be mentioning here). For its own scientific positioning, this newly emerging research on women includes a critical discussion about the previous research dealing with "women's issues in socialism" as well as an effort to come up with a solution to the question of whether or not research on women even existed in the GDR prior to Fall 1989. Two criteria were used in this process. First, the theoretical approach to explaining the relationship between the two sexes and second, a clearly articulated research interest acknowledging both the assumption that women have to bear with structural deprivation and the goal that women should be enabled to actively pursue their own interests. By comparison, most GDR-publications on "women's issues" can in fact not be considered results of research on women. What existed was a relatively comprehensive research promoted by State and Party 2) on topics such as: the compatibility of job and motherhood; female job motivation and qualification; women in management positions; abortion and the desire to have children; single mothers and their living conditions; sex-specific differences in socialization; career courses; life orientations and conflicts, etc.. These were and still are certainly crucial research fields, yet the unreflected and accepted ideology in "real socialism" of the achieved and realized equal rights of women and the overall solution of women's issues had a significant impact for the theoretical concepts and research guiding interests leading these projects. The subordination of women's issues to social issues resulted in the following theoretical and ideological premises:

- that the hierarchy of men and women structurally engraved in the relationship between the sexes had been continuously neglected: relationships between the sexes were reduced to class interests, or objective economic requirements, respectively;

- that the admitted discrimination of women was never analyzed in its causal relationship to the socio-economic, political and cultural conditions of state socialism resulting in the fact that women's situation at best appeared to be needing improvement rather than fundamental change and critical suggestions;

- that relationships between the sexes were interpreted with respect to economic conditions only from a linear perspective (for example the "necessity" of a sex-specific division of labour in industry as an expression of still undeveloped productive forces), instead of with respect to their dimensions as concrete, everyday manifestations of domination and power relations.
  Accordingly, certain aspects of women's everyday lives are missing in this research, such as domestic violence; commonly encountered forms of everyday discrimination and sexual harassment (at work, in public), the female body as an object of projection by male desires, frustrations, utopias, etc.;

- that women were not viewed as subjects with individual needs whose autonomy could have only be strengthened through the research on women. Instead, they were essentially viewed in a functional role, i.e. in the first place as labour force, child bearers, and stabilizers in marriage and family.

Similar deficits can be observed in the historically oriented research on women which to this day predominantly has dealt with "women's issues as part of social issues" 3). Here as well the old thought pattern of the main versus the secondary contradiction influenced the research concept, according to which women's structural discrimination is at best understood - as Arendt puts it - as "manifestations of women's discrimination" and as a direct result of the "accomplishment of the capitalist mode of production" that would consequently vanish along with "the overcoming of class society, the socialist revolution" 4). "The history of women and women's movement", that was in the first place the invitation to fill in "blind spots" or gaps in historiography and meant simultaneously a vehement resistence toward the "ideology of neofeminism" 5) (Arendt).
In other words: a vehement resistance toward a feminist scientific approach that would essentially view and include the relationships between the sexes as a structural category, and by doing so it would question common standards of objectivity and rationality found in traditional "male-oriented" sciences. Prior to Fall 1989, specifically in the Science of Culture, Art, Literature, and Language as well as in Sociology and Cultural History, female scientists have attempted to develop a more or less explicitly feminist approach to their research (it was the who were extremely active in establishing the research on women). They felt committed to a theoretical approach which would pursue the research of underlying structural reasons causing women's discrimination. This research was

supported by the interest to examine the relationships between the sexes from women's points of view, i.e. the research focused on historically produceed, thus changeable structural discriminations of women. The cultural construction of femininity and masculinity, for instance their concrete manifestation in literature or fine arts as well as their functions in the process of establishing and stabilizing societal power and domination are crucial emphases.
However, weaknesses and limits to these research approaches cannot be overlooked. In the first place, the research projects did not evolve from any concrete movement which gave them a highly academic character. Moreover, they involved an insufficient analysis of the structures of bureaucratic-administrative state socialism from which only the specifics of the relationships between the sexes in real existent socialism, and the functions of the cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity manifested in the reproduction of certain states of power and domination could be derived. This deficit became especially obvious in the research of female cultural scientists and sociologists explicitly studying the patriarchal relationships between the sexes in the GDR. One cannot overlook that functionalistic views could only partially be conquered. Apart from that, however, all this was a fundamental problem for all feminist research (for example in the area of cultural history or the science of literature), because the research guiding interest is at any rate determined by the actual situation. If the latter remains insufficiently reflected, any research proposition will be negatively affected.

3. Research on women and its approaches and orientations in the new federal states

The social changes in the GDR caused many research institutions involved in the official research on women's situation in socialism prior to 1989 to disappear. Simultaneously, female scientists at various universities, schools of education as well as at the Academy of Sciences gathered and decided to establish a research on women that would be an indispensable discipline in the scientific community. Most successful so far was the Center for Interdisciplinary Research on Women (ZiF) at the Humboldt University in Berlin, founded in December 1989. 6)
The ZiF is constructed as a network bringing together female scientists and students that perform solitary and disciplinary research. It enables both exchange and discussion and functions as an organizational and technical frame for research projects that are designed to be interdisciplinary. Presently, there is an emphasis on social science and humanities projects. Way beyond the boundaries of the Humboldt University, the ZiF endeavours to establish a network of female researchers involved in women's studies in the new federal states (among others, it is concerned with the publishing of a bulletin that would provide information about projects, conventions, etc. on a regular basis). With the growing number of unemployed female academics, the ZiF has increasingly become a clearing-house and coordinating agency for (interdisciplinary) research projects that are financed through funds provided by the Employment Office (ABM). The ZiF also handles contacts with the institutionalized research on women in the old federal states. Beginning interdisciplinary research projects conducted by female researchers from both

the old and new federal states have been designed and are presently in a stage of fund raising. As important partners (and occasionally commissioners) the ZiF views the agents of equal opportunity in communities and state administrations as well as their respective authorities in the state governments. Research results are passed on to the agents of equal opportunity (presently situated in the states of Berlin and Brandenburg) through regular further education measures.

Now, most projects in women's studies (be they social science oriented, science of culture oriented, or humanities oriented) are primarily concerned with current political processes in the new federal states, with the historical developments preceding the recent changes especially in the former GDR, and with sex-specific aspects of transformation processes in present Europe.
The following emphases can be traced:

- Women and the labour market (The ZiF hosts several projects that investigate women's situation on the labour market with respect to certain occupations, regions, and age groups).

- Socio-cultural changes of women's everyday life (for example the interdisciplinary project at the ZiF "Women's diaries as individual documents of a societal turnover").

- Cultural history of the relationships of the sexes in the GDR (In this area, the majority of projects are biographically oriented documenting the history "from below". The ZiF is preparing a joint project together with female scientists of the Institute for the Research of Social Opportunities in Cologne that plans to analyze the crossing between class and sex relations in both female and male members of the low, middle, and upper class. The analysis involving a comparison between the new and old federal states will be carried out by means of socio-biographic interviews and home observations.)

- Relationships between the sexes during the transformation processes in Europe (Presently, an interdisciplinary joint project at the ZiF conducted together with female scientists from the University Paderborn is dealing with the topic "Women in Eastern Europe. Cultural stereotype and self-perception during democratization".

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1) According to statements issued by the Confederation of German Trade Unions (DGB) the number of employees with companies of the Treuhand (those are primarily the

former large-scale state-owned firms) will decrease to a little under half and the percentage of women among employees of presently 43% will be dropping to 40%.
2) Most of this research was led and coordinated by the scientific council "The woman in the Socialist Society". This council, founded in 1982, and as all scientific councils subordinated to the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (GDR) and meanwhile dissolved, was preceded by an interdisciplinary advisory board which was founded in 1964 upon the orders of the Council of Ministers. This shows that due to the national economy and its need for qualified labour women's policy was an important part of social policy and that the research on specific women's issue was altogether promoted. The results were predominantly presented in information brochures published by this council, but as well in a series of books.
3) A review on this research can be found in the following article: Hans-Juergen Arendt, Historical Women's Studies in the GDR. In: Information by the Scientific Council "The woman...", Vol. 3/1989, p. 53-69.
4) Ibidem, p.56
5) Ibidem, p.65
6) Something comparable was or is being attempted at the universities of Halle, Leipzig and Rostock. The conditions,
however, are not so favourable as they were in 1989.