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Nickel, Hildegard Maria

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Social Transformation and the Family in Post-Communist Germany

Edited by

Eva Kolinsky
Professor of Modern German Studies
Keele University
England

in association with
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1 Women and Women's Policies in East and West Germany, 1945–1990

Hildegard Maria Nickel

For all its ambiguities and problems, the future seemed to be more predictable in communist than in post-communist Germany (Metz-Göckel, 1992). Official policy matched more closely the dual orientation of the female population towards employment and the family than it had ever done in the Federal Republic. While social policy measures in the GDR supported the full-time employment of women, they did not really challenge gender divisions of labour or dismantle traditionalism in gender relations. Gender divisions in the GDR were even reinforced inside and outside the home. After unification these inequalities were intensified by gender differences and the unresolved conflict between employment and family roles that had persisted in the Western part of divided Germany. This chapter presents an overview of women's policies in both Germanies before unification and discusses their effect on the situation of women in the post-communist setting.

THE EMERGENCE OF WOMEN'S POLICIES IN EAST GERMANY

Ever since the establishment of a communist political system in Germany in the immediate post-war years, the integration of women into 'social production' was considered the foremost and most fundamental step on the road to equality. In keeping with traditional ideas of the proletarian labour movement, this policy was seen as a guarantor of women's financial independence as well as their intellectual and political autonomy. Lenin's claim that only the world of employment could liberate women from the 'yoke' and the 'slavery' of housework and give them the opportunity to develop their abilities to the full turned into the ideological assumption that employment equalled emancipation and assured self-realization. In the GDR, occupational activity provided a structure for life

Table 1.1 Women of Working Age and in Employment in the GDR

Year	Women of working age (in 1000)	Women in employment (in 1000)	Women in employment (%)*
1955	6,182	3,244	52.5
1970	5,011	3,312	66.1
1980	5,257	3,848	73.2
1989	5,074	3,962	78.1

* Counting apprentices and full-time students as employed, the employment of women of working age amounted to 91.2% in 1989.
Source: Gunnar Winkler, *Frauenreport '90*. Berlin: Die Wirtschaft 1990, p. 63.

in society and the Socialist Unity Party (SED) hailed it as a 'core element of the socialist way of life' for women and men.

The first stage of GDR women's policy, the integration of women into employment, was all but completed in the course of the 1960s (see Table 1.1.) In the mid-1950s, female employment in the GDR was high compared with Western societies (52.4 per cent) but still lower than male employment. By 1970, gender differences had disappeared for the post-war generations; by the late 80s, women were as active in the East German labour market as men, despite longer periods spent in full-time education and training. From the 1970s onwards, women's employment constituted a norm while further developments focused on qualifications and family support.

The second stage can be called an educational offensive. The introduction of comprehensive schools for both sexes until the age of sixteen halted the earlier practice where girls left school earlier than boys and gained minimal educational qualifications. In addition, the GDR provided special educational programmes aimed at extending the participation rate of women in higher education. By 1980, women had closed the gender gap in higher education (see Table 1.2). The access to university studies turned women's equal involvement into the labour process into a more genuine equality of opportunities and qualifications between the sexes.

In the two decades between broadening women's accesss to university studies and the collapse of the GDR as a separate state, women made gains in several traditionally 'male' fields such as mathematics, natural sciences, engineering or agriculture and consolidated their lead in the teaching profession (see Table 1.3). Economics emerged as a predominantly female field of study, while the female dominance of medicine that had devel-

Table 1.2 Female Students at GDR Universities*

Year	Total student numbers	Number of female students	Female students in %
1949/50	n/a	n/a	28.4
1952/3	n/a	n/a	20.4
1960	99,860	25,213	25.2
1970	143,163	50,689	35.4
1980	129,970	63,266	48.7
1985	130,150	65,079	50.1
1988	132,423	65,152	49.2
1989	131,127	63,728	48.6

* Excluding research students and foreign students.
Source: Calculated from *Statistisches Jahrbuch der DDR* and Winkler, *Frauenreport*, p. 42.

Table 1.3 Female University Students by Academic Discipline in 1971 and 1989

Academic discipline	Total 1971	%	Total 1989	%
Teachers Training	20,764	62	21,327	73
Economics	9,078	38	11,316	67
Languages and Literature	1,078	63	782	62
Medicine	6,619	71	6,941	55
Agriculture	2,432	35	3,198	46
Theology	194	41	279	46
Mathematics, Sciences	5,007	33	3,614	46
Cultural Studies and Sports	742	32	936	40
Law and Social Sciences	3,328	36	3,121	40
Technology/Engineering	8,477	16	10,729	25

Source: Adapted from Winkler, *Frauenreport*, p. 47.

oped in the 1970s was curtailed when the state reallocated numbers and imposed a *numerus clausus* on female students.

This second stage of women's policy also brought an extension of day-care facilities for children and a broadly-based campaign against the traditional division of roles in the organization of housework. The revised

family law of 1965 reflected this new understanding of women's role in society (see Chapter 2 in this volume).

The third stage of women's policy (1971–89) concentrated more specifically on measures to reduce the conflict between career and family and assist women in combining both. Since the mid-1960s, the driving force of policy change was a drop in the birth rate and an increase in the divorce rate. While the East German state advocated patterns of social stability and family orientation that no longer reflected actual developments, its main emphasis lay on supporting families and mothers. The introduction of one year's paid leave after the birth of a child, low-interest loans on marriage and shorter working hours for mothers are examples of a women's policy aimed at assisting traditional families and motherhood rather than enhancing women's career opportunities and rights of equality. This policy shift underpinned a polarization in the treatment of men and women that extended to substantial income differences, different career patterns, different access to leadership positions and different time resources (Winkler, 1990).

Seen as a whole, GDR women's policy provided protection mixed with restrictions. The sheer number of women involved in paid employment and the relatively high degree of material independence derived from this came close to emancipation. Geissler even speaks of an 'equality bonus' in the GDR compared with the FRG (Geißler, 1992). This was evident in the fact that most women of working age were in employment or full-time education (over 90 per cent), most had completed some form of vocational training (87 per cent) and 90 per cent of working women of childbearing age were also mothers, since they could rely on almost universal childcare facilities (Nickel, 1993). A product of state policy, equality in the GDR was 'patriarchal equality' (Nickel, 1990). That is to say that equality, its definition and the measures to secure it did not arise from women's own actions or initiatives but were instituted from above, shaped by the state on women's behalf rather than created by women themselves. Thus, cultural stereotypes conducive to paternalistic and patriarchal gender relations remained unchallenged, while traditional views of gender roles in society were reproduced despite women's near-equal socio-economic participation. Domestic duties are a good example of these problems. Although almost all women were in full-time employment and in this respect equal to men, they spent considerably more time on housework than men. In the early 1980s, 60 per cent of women spent two or more hours per day on housework, a further 38 per cent up to two hours. As far as men were concerned, 50 per cent spent less than one hour per day on housework while just 14 per cent reported doing two or more hours (Frauen im mittleren Alter, 1993: 258).

Such contradictions contributed to the high divorce rate despite social policy programmes to assist families. Women chose divorce as a way of rebelling against the traditional views and behaviour of their husbands. GDR women's policies, it seems, have transformed women but had little effect on men. Although 'transformed' in their way of life and personal expectations, women remained subject to the constraints of traditional gender roles and cultural stereotypes in society. Largely ignored in the public domain, these unresolved conflicts manifested themselves all the more powerfully at the individual and personal level. Rising divorce rates went hand in hand with a high occurrence of remarriage, although there is no evidence that second or third marriages and second or third families solved the gender conflicts that were endemic in the GDR.

East Germans continue to attach great importance to the family (Gysi and Meyer, 1993) and the nuclear family of a couple and their children remains the model in German society. Before unification, both parts of Germany underwent similar developments despite their different social and political orders. These developments included

- a trend towards smaller families;
- a general reluctance to marry and a growing number of births to single mothers;
- a growing number of separations and divorces;
- a growing number of second and third families, i.e. changes in the composition of the family as a result of divorce, remarriage or cohabitation;
- a growing number of women in employment or willing to work, in particular mothers;
- a pluralization of family and household forms. (Mayer, 1992)

Family changes in East and West took a similar course towards individualization, and pluralization but some important differences pertained. In East Germany, both marriage and divorce were more frequent than in West Germany. In the early 90s, 70 per cent of East Germans and 64 per cent of West Germans were married and nine per cent of East Germans compared to six per cent of West Germans were divorced. In the West, 28 per cent of the population lived in one-person households; in the East, so called 'singles' constituted only 19 per cent (Keiser, 1993). In the GDR, people married young; in the late 1980s women were on average 22.7 years of age, men 24.7 when they entered into their first marriage; the marital age in West Germany was 25.9 years for women and 28.1 years for men. Every second East German woman had given birth to at least one child before her twenty-second birthday; by the age of twenty-five, women had

given birth to 75 per cent of their children. Ninety percent of all East German children were born to women under the age of thirty (Gysi and Meyer, 1993).

After unification, 64 per cent of households in the new Länder and just 52 per cent of households in the old Länder included children (Keiser, 1993). In the GDR, very few women did not want children. Even women in top management positions usually had at least one child (Frauen im mittleren Alter: 256). More than one in ten households in East Germany were single-parent households (11 per cent), about twice as many as in the West. One in five East German children and one in ten West German children grew up with only one parent. In the GDR, single parents were almost always women; in West Germany, men accounted for 12 per cent of the total (Grossmann and Huth, 1993: 139).

For all the contradictions, discrepancies and indisputable multiple burdens shouldered by women, the salient feature of emancipation in the GDR was that it allowed employment to be reconciled with motherhood. Both areas were deemed compatible, making women financially and legally independent of their male partners. Of course, traditionalism persisted in gender relations and social polarization resulted in a high degree of gender segregation in employment and in an uneven distribution of resources and power between women and men. Yet, in economic terms, men and women were relatively equal, an equality supported by organizational structures at the workplace and in society which were perceived as less hierarchical than their post-communist replacements.

FOUR PHASES OF WOMEN'S POLICY IN WEST GERMANY

In East Germany, women's policy had been an integral part of social policy; in West Germany the link remained more tenuous, since social policy never abrogated the 'strong male breadwinner model' (Ostner, 1995: 3). From the mid-1960s onwards, however, four phases of women's policy are evident as socio-economic modernization transformed established structures, opened new choices and exposed persistent gender inequalities.

The first phase began around 1966 and combined traditional elements with aspects of a modern women's policy. Family and career were no longer perceived as blunt contradictions but as fields of activity which women might wish to pursue and combine. Part-time working and the so-called 'three-phase model' dominated the political discourse at the time (Erster Familienbericht, 1966). The 'nature of woman', however, was still

equated with motherhood and care for the family, while policy targeted women as housewives and mothers (Frauen im mittleren Alter: 20).

During the second phase of women's policy from the early 70s onwards, vocational training and employment gained prominence as core parts of a woman's life alongside family duties. Women's policy was, first and foremost, educational policy designed to secure equal opportunities through educational qualifications. The new woman of that period enjoyed the freedom to choose between career, family or career and family and proclaimed her right of self-determination. Designed to facilitate women's emancipation, women's policy stressed education and paid employment as the means to establish equality. Legislative reform at the time centred on marriage and the family and replaced the traditional housewife model by a concept of partnership between women and men (Frauenbericht, 1972; Zweiter Familienbericht, 1975).

During the third phase of women's policy (1976–80), freedom of choice and equal opportunities remained core issues but the family gained a new centrality. This time, concerns focused on problems of compatibility. No longer indebted to the 'three-phase model', women's policy now faced the challenge of making family and career compatible without forcing women to choose or alternate between them (Frau und Gesellschaft, 1980).

Commencing around 1979, the debate on 'new motherhood' marks the fourth stage of women's policy. Neo-conservative policies now sought to amplify the role of the family. In fact, women's policy became family policy. From freedom of choice between family and/or career, the policy agenda had again shifted to women's 'nature'. Rather than focus on working women as a group, the 'new motherhood' policy suggested that each woman could find her own subjective way to combining family and career. Exonerated from the task of reconciling the conflict between family and career, social policy ceased to be women's policy (Dritter Familienbericht, 1979).

The neo-conservative interest in 'new motherhood' could not halt the modernization of life-styles and the pluralization of relationships in modern industrial society. They are evident in a decline in the number of marriages, in rising divorce rates, the postponement of childbirth, an increase in childlessness and a break with traditional family structures. These changes in marriage and in the family appear to have been initiated largely by women and reflect the transformative changes in their socio-economic position and personal aspirations (Meyer and Schulze, 1993).

In the wake of post-war economic growth in West Germany and the structural changes in the labour market arising from it, the proportion of women in paid employment increased by ten per cent since 1960, to reach

58 per cent in 1991. The sharpest increase occurred among married women and mothers. In the early 1990s, more than one in three of women worked part-time (Meyer and Schulze: 167). Employment opportunities grew fastest in public services and retailing. Since the late 1960s, educational reforms have improved women's qualifications and opened new employment opportunities, although equality has proved more attainable in education than in the labour market.

Today, the majority of girls and women regard employment as a normal aspect of their lives while they are of working age, albeit with interruptions for the birth of a child. Many, however, find it impossible to plan their lives in such a way that they can successfully combine family and career (Frauen im mittleren Alter: 24). Their working lives perforated by career breaks and stunted by a lack of employment opportunities, women also face the social risks of partnership instabilities and uncertain family structures. In the light of such discontinuities, women's economic security and their ability to earn their own livelihood must remain in doubt: 'For West German women, having a family entails a conflict-ridden decision between motherhood and career which has never confronted East German women in this form' (Meyer and Schulze 1993: 168). The high employment rate of women in the GDR underlines this contrast.

Finally, the transformation of women's roles in society has to be seen against the background of changed moral and sexual values since the 1960s. The decoupling of female sexuality and motherhood gave women a greater choice in planning their lives and shaping their relationships. In West Germany, demands for equality between the sexes and women's self-realization originated 'from below', from the women themselves. In the GDR, no such development occurred. In the West, the new women's movement brought issues of gender relations and sexuality into the public domain. It could even be argued that West Germans have acquired a greater sensitivity to gender issues and hidden stereotypes than East Germans. Such acceptance of equality between the sexes, however, appears to be more symbolic than actual, since large income differences and hierarchical structures exclude West German women from equality. At the very least when giving birth, West German women have been economically more dependent on their male partners than women in the former GDR.

POST-COMMUNIST TRANSFORMATIONS

When the former GDR joined the Federal Republic, its policies, institutions and legal frameworks came to an end. The provisions that took their

place constituted transformative changes for East German women and quickly eroded the 'equality bonus' mentioned earlier. For many women, post-communist developments consisted of a decline in social and economic status and negative adjustments to Western inequalities. The integration of GDR society into the German market economy confronted women with an entirely new context that made entirely new and complex demands on the individual.

The centrally controlled economy that had dominated East Germany for forty years had rendered employment predictable, institutionalized its own version of equality and applied a paternalist form of welfare policy. The unification of Germany applied economic criteria and measures of efficiency to all relationships and activities. These criteria proved particularly detrimental to women. Berger was quick to spell out what few wished to admit openly at the start of the unification process. Institutions may be abolished as legal entities or established to precisely defined indicators and by certain deadlines. The recruitment of new personnel to operate these institutions and the upgrading or retraining of 'old' employees is a time-consuming and slow process. The rate of adjustment to these new conditions, it has been suggested, declines 'the further one moves away from the systemic sphere of instrumental social institutions towards established practical orientations, cultural patterns and norms' (Berger, 1992).

There is little research as yet into how these two 'time-frames' intertwine and how their different speeds and logic influence each other. Some conclusions can, however, be drawn. Pressures to change institutions can result in rapid and far-reaching transformations, while day-to-day actions and attitudes will adjust at a slower pace and to a different agenda. It is impossible to predict with any degree of accuracy what will be salvaged of women's emancipation as it manifested itself in their employment and their right to earn a living in the GDR. Unified Germany appears to witness a blending of lifestyles as dispositions and expectations in the eastern and western parts of the country begin to resemble one another. In fact, the process lacks equilibrium and amounts to a hegemony of the old Länder and their traditions over the new. Generally, West German standards are likely to prevail, although pressures for reform from East to West cannot be ruled out and may manifest themselves in the future!

East German women are still as inclined to work as they ever were, and women who have been forced out of paid employment are keen to return to it. Moreover, East German women set great store, in theory at least, by the possibility of combining career and family, production and reproduction, even if doing so is less straightforward than in the past (see Chapter 6). It seems that East Germans, women and men alike, regard employment as an essential aspect of their cultural and personal identity. Attitudes to

women's employment differ greatly between in the old and new Länder (Erster Frauenreport, 1993). In the early 1990s, 93 per cent of East German and 75 per cent of West German men agreed to their partner working full-time if there were no children. These figures decreased to 54 per cent and 21 per cent respectively when children under the age of three had to be cared for. More generally, 37 per cent of East German but 76 per cent of West German men believed women should not work when the children are small (Dannebeck, 1993: 244–46).

Disproving the stereotypes about women's behaviour in the labour market, women in post-communist Germany have been particularly flexible in adjusting to the new work situation, improving their qualifications and devising schemes to remain in employment or in the job market (Nickel and Schenk, 1994). They have reacted to the new uncertainties by placing a special emphasis on holding on to their employment, even if this might mean forgoing established rights. Although parents in post-unification Germany are entitled to paid leave with a guarantee of re-employment, only 0.7 per cent of women who claimed parenting leave between 1991 and 1992 interrupted their employment to do so (Holst and Schupp, 1993: 6). Compared with the 'baby year' of the GDR era, the new regulations were perceived as unclear and laden with risks of unemployment at a time of general employment loss.

In devising strategies of coping with the transformation process and of adjusting to the new conditions, women have tended to rely on social and cultural norms derived from their pre-unification experiences. A case study of female employees in the insurance sector found three broad strategies of responding to change and managing it (Thielecke, 1993). The first strategy was adopted by 'high performer-type' women who welcome the risks associated with the individualization of employment as a personal opportunity to develop their abilities. Mostly young, these women feel that conditions in the GDR had never stretched them nor allowed them to get ahead. Equipped with high educational and professional qualifications, these women hardly differ in their lifestyles from men. While regarding employment as compatible with partnership, they do not regard it as compatible with motherhood. Of the two roles, work and family, work appears to offer the higher personal rewards and scope for personal satisfaction. As one interviewee put it in Thielecke's study:

> 'Over the past 18 months, I have felt happiness and success like never before in my life. Really ....I have become a workaholic through and through. Maybe I was not exploited as much in the past, I can't really say, but I feel better now. Now I am certainly being exploited but I do it

gladly. I stay until ten or eleven o'clock at night and do not ask for extra pay... I do it voluntarily, I feel good about it, get a kick out of it and the company also benefits' (Thielecke: 129–30).

While the high performers are a product of post-communist transformation, women with children and 'normal' East German biographies remain the largest group. These women fight for their jobs, but without career ambitions: 'I do not want to have a career. It is too late for that. I just want a job which I enjoy' (Thielecke: 134). These women do, however, have a certain order of priorities. Fighting for a job may involve the family in making some concessions but should not be detrimental to it. What the family can be expected to bear is discussed and agreed with its members. These employed family women appear to be able to rely on the support of their partners and on the widespread acceptance by East German men of the tried and tested 'compatibility' model.

The third strategy of adjusting to change consists of a general lack of orientation. Not specific to any generation, women in this group do not have clear ideas about employment, prefer to wait and see, have relatively few vocational qualifications and adhere to highly traditional lifestyles. These women have been quick to agree terms to end their working lives. It seems they are under no illusion about their poor chances in the transformed labour market and have tended to opt for redundancy pay rather than attempt a change of job.

Together, the strategies of adapting to transformation indicate that adjustments vary between men and women and between different groups. The structure of social inequality itself has been transformed and become more diverse. In the context of a fierce struggle for a slice of the social cake, these developments will accentuate disparities between men and women and also give rise to a growing differentiation between various groups of women. In contrast to the GDR, where they hardly mattered, social factors like motherhood or childlessness, single parenthood, partnership, number of children will take on the function of social dividing lines. Already women generally (and in particular, East German women) are more at risk from material under-provision, while households with more than three children in both parts of Germany are especially likely to face poverty (Hanesch, 1993; see also Chapter 6).

The declining birth rate and the decrease in the number of marriages and divorces suggest that East Germans are recasting their personal lives in their transformed society. They are seeking to minimize individual risk in an environment based on risk and individualization. Ultimately, production and reproduction must remain compatible, not just for individual

women but in society generally. The acrimonious talk of crisis in health care, care for the elderly, care for children and concomitant changes in generative behaviour point to a lack of social consensus and a new potential for social conflict. It remains to be seen whether the transformed structures will foster adjustment to the new roles or whether they will produce detachment and resistance among those whose values and individual plans in life cannot be reconciled with the new realities.

Increasingly women derive their own social security from their own efforts and especially from paid employment. In the past, marriage may have served to provide security for life; today, marriage has become less stable and therefore less reliable in economic and in personal terms. In tackling the conflict between productive and reproductive work, women are more than ever thrown back on their own resources. The family group cannot be relied on to cushion the effects of harsh social conditions, although families may play a supportive role in individual circumstances (Bertram, 1993; Frisé, 1993). It is up to the state to devise a social policy that addresses the unresolved conflict between production and reproduction. Without a major reform of social policy regulations, the modernization of German society may become unhinged by its own shortcomings.

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