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TEN YEARS AFTER: GENDER RELATIONS IN A CHANGED WORLD : NEW CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN'S AND GENDER STUDIES

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Gender in Transition in Eastern and Central Europe Proceedings

edited by

Gabriele Jähnert / Jana Gohrisch /
Daphne Hahn / Hildegard Maria Nickel /
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im Auftrag des

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TEN YEARS AFTER: GENDER RELATIONS IN A CHANGED WORLD – NEW CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN'S AND GENDER STUDIES

For many, the November 9, 1989 opening of the Berlin Wall and the October 3, 1990 ceremony in front of the Berlin Reichstag celebrating the unification of the two German states are the two dates which symbolize the radical changes of 1989 and 1990. Many of the women involved in the East German women's movement and in the women's studies programs which constituted themselves in the fall of 1989 will also recall other events and images in looking back. For example, the high-spirited meeting in the Berlin Volksbühne theater in mid-December 1989 at which women from the most varied groups from throughout the GDR spontaneously founded the Autonomous Women's Union (AWU). Or women becoming visible on the political stage and in the media, on the Central Round Table of the GDR as well as innumerable local and district Round Tables. Activists of the period will remember "You can't make a state without women", the slogan they chose for the "cheerful revolution with political consequences", that they had called into being. Scholars will remember founding the Center for Interdisciplinary Women's Studies at Humboldt University or actions at other universities to establish women's studies in higher education. Many, however, will also remember the disappointing results of the March 1990 elections, which opened the path to German unification, but at the same time pushed the newly formed citizen's movements – the women's movement among them – to the fringes of political events. As negotiations over the procedures of German unification began, the participants in the events that had set it in motion exercised virtually no influence.

After the unification of the two German states, the east German women's movement and women's studies found themselves confronted with the consequences of the transformation process on the situation of women and on gender relations, that is, with the effects of the transfer of the institutions, legal norms, of a market economy etc. from west to east. Their political activities as well as their scholarly work were concentrated on these processes. For east German women active in the women's movement and women's studies during this period, the dominant perspective was one of loss – including their own marginalisation – as a result of the loss of employment in the course of restructuring the universities, for example.

By the middle of the 1990's, the institutional transfers from west to east were largely completed. Since then, it has become ever clearer that the crisis-like economic and social developments in East Germany are not the side-effects of a short phase of transition and adaptation to the (more or less) prosperous West German model in a crash course of "catch-up modernization". Instead, they are signs of a crisis of the capitalist system in its industrial phase, of an impending radical reorganization of the economy and the social welfare state and with them, a reordering of gender relations. Our central task today is to analyze these connections and to make this knowledge available to the actors in women's and gender-political interventions. This also presents new challenges to women's and gender studies.

The developments roughly sketched above provide the framework for the three questions which I will raise below. First, I will focus on the changes or modifications in the situation of east German women and – more generally – in practiced east German gender arrangements following the

unification of the two German states which can be regarded as a result of the transformation. Here I am especially interested in working out the ambivalence of these effects in the context of the broader process of restructuring visible in western industrial societies. Second, I will outline several social developments that, in my opinion, lead to new social inequalities and differentiations and ask if and how these are connected with gender differences. Third and last, I would like to discuss new challenges and tasks these development present to women's and gender studies.

I

It is impossible to avoid drawing a fairly gloomy picture when describing the effects of the transformation on east German women. I do not intend, however, to simply add another negative scenario to the many that have already been presented in the last years. I would far rather use my description of the situation as a point of departure for placing the observable conduct of east German women in a structural relationship with the continuing influence of the GDR gender contract on gender arrangements in practice. My question is: do these gender arrangements have ambivalent effects in a changed social context, especially in the context of the general processes of transformation in modern societies.

When women gathered in the Berlin Volksbühne theater in December 1989, their meeting adopted the slogan: "Defend yourself or it's back to the stove!" At the time, the slogan was primarily in response to a tendency already clearly visible in the political arena to leave women and changes in gender relations out of the efforts then being undertaken to reform and transform the GDR. It soon became clear that this slogan applied not only to the threat of political exclusion, but to changes in circumstances or exclusion from spheres which GDR women had until then taken for granted. Women's explicit second class status on the labour market, the disappearance of the preconditions for combining paid employment and family, unemployment, among other things, were new experiences for women after 1989. Following political unification, these were joined by: the revocation of social policy measures subsidizing child-care centers, for example, the adoption of a jurisprudence and social-welfare regime based on the male breadwinner and housewife family model, the at first delayed, but foreseeable restriction of the right to abortion on demand, etc.

The more the enthusiasm of the first phase ebbed and the women's movement lost political influence, the clearer the negative side of the transition to a market economy became for the previous conditions of women's lives, the more the catchphrase that women were the losers of German unification moved into the foreground. Despite the fact that the new social conditions obviously also opened new opportunities for women (e.g. in the political realm), this refrain gave graphic expression to the fact that, with the transition to a modern capitalist-type society, gender difference as a factor of social differentiation had become more powerful than it had been in the GDR and that being a man or a woman had become meaningful in a previously unimaginable way to the ability to make use of social opportunities or to realize life goals and plans. On the other hand, this catchphrase glosses over the fact that enormous and growing social inequality has appeared among east German women since 1990.

East German women have experienced this new kind of discrimination, as well as their growing social differentiation nowhere more massively than on the job market.[1] Although women's jobs have disappeared no more rapidly than men's, thus far; although the experience of unemployment has tended to be "gender neutral" – in the new states over 50% of the employment-aged population has been unemployed at least once since 1990 (cf. Winkler 1996: 24) – nevertheless, the fact that women are especially affected by the changed economic situation is impossible to overlook. It is visible in their disproportionate representation among the unemployed in general and among the long-term unemployed in particular. It is also reflected in the fact that women are significantly less likely than men to find a new job after a period of unemployment, or to be given an opportunity on the secondary labour market (job-creation measures), or be offered re-training. It is also reflected

in the fact that women are significantly less likely than men to find a new job after a period of unemployment, or to be given an opportunity on the secondary labour market (job-creation measures) or be offered re-training There is a visible trend for women to be more likely to be steered toward occupations or trades which are insecure, less qualified and unlikely to open pathways to professional development. It can be assumed that part-time jobs will increase in the next several years and that – as in West Germany – it will be primarily women who take these part-time jobs. At the moment, however, professional qualification or the level of professional qualification is the decisive criteria for east German women's chances of remaining employed (cf. Schenk 1995 b; Nickel 1997). This also means that the position of women within their families is becoming more differentiated – due among other things to their contribution to household income. Nonetheless, thus far, as in the GDR period, east German women continue to earn an average of 43% of household income and, as before – although significantly reduced in total number – in the majority of households both partners are fully employed (cf. Bericht der Zukunftskommission der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung 1998: 322).

East German women's retention of the model of combining (full-time) paid employment with family practiced in the GDR is undoubtedly one of the most remarkable phenomena of the transformation process. This phenomenon has been described in the sociological literature as well as in the media as east German women's "Eigensinn" or as their "unbroken propensity for paid employment". In contrast to the presumptions of the *Wende* period that employment in the GDR was largely compulsory and women were only waiting for the end of their double-burden, statistics indicate an unchanged desire among east German women to be or remain employed. About two-thirds of them prefer to be employed full-time, while only a very small percentage want to be housewives. For the overwhelming majority of east German women, (full-time) employment is one of the givens in their life plans to which they cling, even under changed conditions.

The reasons why women continue to adhere to life-long careers, despite decreasing opportunities, are obviously quite complex. Among them, economic factors are not to be underestimated. Wages and salaries remain lower in East than in West Germany, with differences of between 10 and 35 per cent, depending on the sector. This means that a family seldom can live or maintain its standard of living on a single income. In 1997 about 64% of married male east German employees with children earned less than 2,500 DM per month – in comparison to only about 16% in West Germany (cf. Stolzenburg 1999: 47). Real economic need as that combining a motive for continuing a professional career is joined by an internalized belief which defined the self-image of most women in East Germany that combining career and family is normal. This self image and the east German female biographical pattern are based on a characteristically GDR "gender contract" which remains in effect today. The term "gender contract" refers to the fact that "in every modern society there exists an historically developed socio-cultural consensus jointly supported by both men and women regarding a given pattern of interactions between the sexes, a guide and model as to the 'correct' gender-specific division of labour, family form and way of integrating both sexes into society via the labour market and/or the family" (Schenk 1995a: 478). The GDR gender contract was based on the dual-earner model, that is, both sexes were integrated into society primarily through their participation in the labour force. This gender contract led to gender arrangements in the GDR characterized by the disappearance of the male breadwinner role, by a trend toward female economic independence and a correspondingly strong position in the family.

Although the dual-earner model has been eroded since 1990 by the contraction of the labour market, east German men and women have thus far retained their inherited gender contract. Recent statistics indicate a growing number of men in the younger age cohorts, who – at least as long as there are small children in the household – argue against the wife being employed, as well as the proportion of women who under these circumstances would prefer part-time work (cf. Keiser 1997: 219–222). Nonetheless, in younger as well as older age cohorts, the majority of men and women regard (full-time) paid employment for women as a foregone conclusion. It should, however, also be noted that this GDR-type gender contract always assumed that women bore the main

responsibility for housework and child-raising and that the great majority of east German women had also internalized this norm. The structural separation of production and reproduction on which this gender contract – like all gender contracts found in modern societies – was based on the associated norm of women combining work and family also constitutes an important "conjunction" with the west German gender contract with its comparatively more hierarchical gender arrangements. It can be assumed that at least in the near future the gender contract inherited from the GDR will continue to be practiced by the majority of east German men and women. A return to a gender contract based on the male breadwinner – female housewife model (possibly in the modernized form in which the housewife holds a part-time job as mostly practiced in West Germany) is highly unlikely, at least in part because the transformation in East Germany has from the outset been conducted under the sign of an "unchained" neo-liberal capitalism. In East Germany, flexible labour contracts, hours and forms of work have already been achieved which are seen as "pointing to the future" of West Germany as well, in terms of neo-liberal deregulation and reductions in the social welfare state.

Thus, many private enterprises in East Germany have already ceased to follow the sectoral wage agreements worked out between the labour unions and employers' associations. There are also special regulations for public employees which allow for the (unpaid) reduction of weekly working hours on the grounds of "social redistribution of labour" (cf. Kühnlein 1997: 32). The privatization of previously public services is also frequently connected with the creation of below standard wages, insecure contracts and part-time jobs. The major loss of work places in the primary and secondary sectors of the economy led to the rapid formation of a tertiary sector (non-profit, job-creation programs), in which the previous standards for a "standard labour contract" apply only conditionally.

These developments have both gender neutral and gender specific effects. They are described by the term "feminization of paid employment" among others, to indicate that under these conditions the "standard labour contract" applies increasingly less often to men, too. An interesting and as yet unanswered question is if and when the inherited and thus far practiced GDR gender contract will affect these developments. East German women, by retaining full-time paid employment create quite significant pressure on the labour market. But will this be able to prevent the expansion of (poorly paid, unprotected) part-time jobs in East Germany in the long term and can the practice of gender arrangements based on the double-earner model encourage those forces tending toward a more gender-neutral distribution of "scarce (i.e. paid) work"? The fact that – in contrast to the old Federal Republic – East Germany has thus far not experienced a gender-specific division of the sphere of paid employment into (male, qualified) full-time employment and (female, semi-skilled or unskilled), part-time work, could prove advantageous as a point of departure for a restructuring of the labour market and the development of new occupational forms.

It is also difficult at this point to answer the question of if and how the rather "flat" gender hierarchies of the currently practiced east German gender arrangements will influence rationalization measures in enterprises and the introduction of new forms of labour organization.

Can this be a favorable factor in, for example, seeing to it that the "flat hierarchies" sought after in organizational processes in enterprises or in public administration also lead to the removal or minimization of the hierarchical division of labour along the gender divide which has been common thus far?

To summarize: Ten years after the "Wende" gender relations in East Germany have shown themselves to be a highly ambivalent configuration. Transformation and neo-liberal deregulation have led to "gender" having gained in importance as a factor of social differentiation and inequalities along the gender divide having deepened. At the same time, despite an unmistakable assimilation to west German conditions, the differences are still visible in east German women's retention of full-time paid employment and the practice of gender arrangements influenced by the gender contract inherited from the GDR. On the one hand, the "flattened" gender hierarchies – in the context of crisis-like economic conditions – could just as easily aid neo-liberal deregulation, e.g. a tendency

towards a "feminization" of employment, as east German men, are as a rule, are not the sole breadwinner in the family. Or women's retention of the combination of (full time) employment and family under changing conditions could make it easier to introduce more flexible hours and forms of labour organization as well as to violate the sectoral wage agreements. The "emancipatory potential" that could be attributed to east German women's self-image during the GDR period, reveals itself in the changed social context as highly contradictory. On the other hand, the "flattened" gender hierarchies could also be advantageous in reducing inequality and prejudice along the gender divide. The last, however, is more likely to be possible on the micro-political level. On the larger political stage, after the brief hope of the "Wende" period, a gender or women's policy with the goal of a fundamental change in gender relations is today less of a theme than ever.

II

I have thus far sketched a few aspects of the situation of east German women and the characteristics of east German gender arrangements. In doing so I have recreated the perspective which has thus far dominated social science research on women and gender: a focus on the structured, hierarchical, and hierarchizing arrangements of the sexes – in the sphere of employment and in other social spheres. It was and is the contribution of women and gender studies to have introduced the concept of "gender" as a significant factor of social differentiation and as a "social placing device" into the analysis of society. This continues to be a primary task for a socially critical women's and gender studies. At the same time, women's and gender studies are faced with the difficulty of both focusing its attention on institutionalized gender relations and their hierarchizing effects in all spheres of society, while at the same time not limiting their focus to the inequalities and discrimination created by "gender". Women's and gender studies has not always succeeded in accomplishing this conceptual feat, frequently – and in my opinion this applies to east German women's studies in particular – it has limited itself to the analysis of the situation of women or of gender inequality. This tendency to a narrow subject focus has been referred to increasingly critically in theoretical discussions, as witnessed by the debate in the German-speaking regions on "gender" as a social-cultural construction. These debates, however, also reflect social changes currently underway that are more or less accurately described by terms such as "globalization", "unchained capitalism", "the end of the social welfare state", or "the end of the labour society". The restructuring of modern gender relationships taking place within this context and their new configurations also requires that women's and gender studies develop a changed and broadened perspective on both its object and in its methods of study.

A brief listing of these social changes includes:

1 In the past decade, the end of socialism and the coalescing of Europe into an economic and political system have led to intensified and in some ways new experiences with "ethnic conflicts", with outbursts of nationalism, and – as demonstrated by the so-called "Kosovo – war" – the ways in which they are "settled". This decade has experienced "streams" of refugees and a wave of migration to the rich countries, which wish to enlarge their economic and political power through a unified and border-free Europe and at the same time to create new borders to exclude those who do not meet certain norms. Those with the status of citizens, and with it, the right to certain state services, those who are tolerated with limited rights as "ethnic minorities", those who have an EU passport and thus can enter and those who must remain outside – these are the markers of social differentiation, in- and exclusion. This means that women's and gender studies must not only pay greater attention to the interplay of ethnic and gender differences and ask how these two vectors of differentiation overlay or reinforce one another or function as a hierarchy. It is also necessary to understand modern gender relations (in Western European states) as they are created and

institutionalized within the framework of nation states (or EU status) and the rights of citizenship. That is, as a relationship that not only places the two gender groups in a hierarchical order "internally", but also as part of a complex network of asymmetric power relationships with economic, political, social ordering, inclusive and exclusive, sub- and super-ordinating effects within which women are in no way only disadvantaged.

2 At the same time, as Brigitte Young among others has described, globalization leads to new "social cleavages" (Young 1998: 192). Splitting into a labour society attached to a weakened nation state on the one hand, and a money society which, since the deregulation of financial markets, is active and interconnected on a global scale, leads to an "erosion of the normal labour contract", to the reduction of social welfare state services via privatization or a trend to relocation within the family (i.e. generally at the expense of women), to a loss of "state" jobs, formerly a predominantly women's domain, etc. These processes deepen gender-specific inequalities in many ways. (cf. Sassen 1998). At the same time, new social differentiations – e.g. according to age and level of qualification, possession or lack of a job (in the primary sector of the labour market) – that are not necessarily "gender neutral", do not necessarily run primarily along gender lines. In a system of "cumulative inequality" (Kurz-Scherf 1998: 26), "gender" will continue to play an important role, but the complex effects of the factors of social differentiation, which assign social opportunities in a globalized world refracted by regional, national and cultural specifics, are increasingly less capable of being adequately addressed with an analytical approach focused solely or primarily on "gender" as a "social placing device".

3 Recently, social and cultural changes have been observed which have been described in women's and gender studies as an "erosion" of gender differences, among other terms, as a tendency for gender hierarchies to become dysfunctional with the introduction of new forms of labour organization, or as the "feminization" of male employment or male employment biographies in the course of the erosion of the "normal labour contract". These changes observed also as changes in gender arrangements have (re-)stimulated a feminist debate over the opportunities for increased gender democracy in "post-industrial" society, for a fairer distribution of productive and reproductive labour, or a social revaluation of paid employment and household labour. The vision of a new "gender contract" developed in these debates has not, however, been sufficiently located within the context of the social transformations now underway. An indication of the lacunae in the feminist debate is visible not only in the connection between globalization and "gender", but as mentioned above, also in an inadequate conceptualization of the way in which the modern gender relationship is embedded within the framework of the nation state.

Ingrid Kurz-Scherf has pointed to the "structural deficit of solidarity" (Kurz-Scherf 1998: 34), which is inherent in modern societies and which under the changed conditions of neo-liberal deregulation constitutes a "condition for a possible collapse of social integration" (*ibid.*). This deficit is reproduced institutionally as well as in daily practice and stabilized not least by a "culture of dominance" (Rommelspacher), which is "male" to the degree that it constructs, regulates and normalizes the metabolic process between nature and labour as a mastery by force, power as dominance and submission, the state as authoritarian state bureaucracy and the economy in terms of competition (cf. Kurz-Scherf 1998: 35). In the history of modern societies the "culture of male dominance" has thus far been directly tied to relations of dominance between men and women. Under current conditions, this connection can obviously be loosened or in certain spheres even completely dissolved without the culture of male dominance disappearing along with it or even losing in importance. According to Kurz-Scherf, a scenario can be imagined in which a growing division between a super-rich elite and an economically and culturally pauperized population exposed to the risk of poverty would lead to new inequalities. In this process previous lines of differentiation along "gender" could certainly "erode" in a way, that "below" in the less powerful segments of society, gender hierarchies would be decreased, not least under the pressure of women demanding equality. At the same time, however, the culture of dominance can serve to legitimize

the aspirations of the powerful elites to disengage themselves "from the social context of modern societies" (38), that is, serve notice on solidarity. New inequalities legitimized by the norms of the culture of dominance could thus include "gender-crossing", "above" as well as "below" without having to abolish gender difference, or the "genderization" of social reality. A concentrated focus by women's and gender studies on the institutionalized relationship between the sexes is not necessarily able to grasp these aspects. Women's and gender studies would thus fail to reach far enough in its analysis, if it were to "limit itself to the relations of dominance between men and women and their transformation" (42).

In the second part of my paper, I have pointed out a new set of questions which arise for women's and gender studies out of social developments which can now be observed. In my third point I would like to go into this a bit more deeply. In doing so, my sphere of reference is – as in my remarks thus far – the German-speaking region.

III

1 As the developments outlined above make clear – and in accord with the long-running debate over the category "gender" – the object of women's and gender studies can be reduced neither to men and women, nor to the historically created relations between the two gender groups. The term "gender as a structural category", commonly used in German feminist discussion since the mid-1980s is based on the idea that the term "gender" refers less to a clearly delimited social sphere which is the object of (feminist oriented) social science. Instead "gender" is to be understood as a mode and practice of constituting social reality. In the 1990s the potential "analytical opening" (Gümen 1998: 188), which lies in "gender as a structural category" has been deepened and refined through discussions of "gender" as a socio-cultural construction. The term "to engender/gendering" emphasizes that all social relations are "gendered", that the gender relationship is created and reproduced in all social relationships. (cf. Becker-Schmidt 1998; on the limitations of "gender as a structural category" cf. Dölling 1999).
An urgent task for women's and gender studies is to apply the potential of the category "gender" as a tool in analyzing the multiple ways, including those detached from "the relations of dominance between men and women and their transformation", in which gendered social realities are currently produced and institutionalized in the actions of individuals. This would, in addition, support the political project of "gender mainstreaming". The goal of the project "Women's and Gender Policy on the EU-Level" is to include "gender" as a dimension in every (political) decision from its inception (cf. Stiegler 1999). This assumes the necessary competence to discern and describe the gendered and gendering dimensions of organizations, institutions and the decisions made by them as well as in the actions of individuals as actors.

2 A comprehensive review of the multiple ways in which "gendering" takes place in actions and as the effects of "gendered" institutions on the actions of individuals places new demands on women's and gender studies' ability to integrate itself within the academic field. This expanded perspective demands more than inter- or even trans-disciplinarity (cf. Hark 1998). It is also a question of whether we are capable of adequately analyzing the "gendered" or "engendering" dimensions of complex interconnections within contemporary social realities without stronger ties or better integration into the mainstream of our respective disciplines. Or put the other way around: our goal of understanding "gender" as a mode and a practice for the creation of social realities can only achieve its full effect and validity, if it is applied as a conceptional and methodological tool for understanding complex interconnections in mainstream projects (cf. also Brown 1997).

3 In closing, a short comment on so-called "east German women's studies". It essentially originated after 1989. In my view, there are several reasons why it no longer makes sense to talk of east German women's studies. For one thing, the subject focus of the east German women's studies was an

analysis of the transformation of GDR society into a federal German reality from the perspective of women or gender, as well as the study of gender relations in the GDR. This produced an abundance of data and knowledge and it has been the not insignificant contribution of east German feminist scholars that the gender-specific effects and forms of the transformation processes were studied and that the east German perspective on gender relations and the history of women was not left out of the evaluation of GDR history. At the same time, I would basically agree with Sarina Keiser's characterization of east German women's studies as "concomitant empirical research", which is "characterized primarily by current situational aspects" (Keiser 1997: 85) and is lacking both in "guiding, over-arching themes as well as the corresponding theoretical approaches and explanatory efforts" (*ibid.*; cf. also Dölling 1998b). This deficit is one of the reasons that east German women's studies plays a marginal role in the scholarly arena. Another is that east German women's studies, with a few exceptions, has not succeeded in achieving institutional stability. The vast majority of those scholars who were active in women's studies after 1989 have – at the latest with the end of job-creation program supported research projects and other support programs – left the field or are active at its furthest periphery.

Most important, however, – and in my view most decisive – the focus on West – Easttransformation processes has proved to be too narrow. What we need today is a women's and gender studies which is set up both conceptually and in content to address gender relations and the general effects of "gender" in all the relations of a globalized world. This definitely includes, as I have tried to show in my first point, considering the specifics for example of east German gender arrangements in empirical studies. In this modified and broadened context, the products of east German women's studies thus far have an intellectual value which is not to be underestimated for our research in times to come.

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Endnotes

1 In the following comments I concentrate on the sphere of paid employment. For a more comprehensive description of the situation of women after German unification see Dölling 1998 a; Nickel 1997.