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Selected Papers from the Eleventh New Hampshire Symposium on the German Democratic Republic

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Social and Cultural Changes in the Lives of GDR Women - Changes in their Self-Conception

Irene Dölling

Women who were between twenty and forty years of age at the end of World War II and who, in the immediate postwar period, went out to work because they were widowed or remained unmarried as a result of the war, are ordinarily old-age pensioners today. Their daughters are now between thirty and fifty years of age, and their granddaughters often have families of their own. Thus there are three generations of women in the GDR today for whom work outside the home has been a determining factor in their lives, three generations who were drawn into the process which changed the social situation of women in the GDR at various points of time and development. Today, forty years after the war, this process is characterized by: equality as regards profession, education, wages, and legal standing; job security; the right to determine the time of birth and number of children; women's exit from the narrowness of the household; and a social policy designed to improve conditions so that "eine Frau von ihren gleichen Rechten auch in vollem Umfang Gebrauch machen kann."[1] Today women are present in all spheres of public life. Not the fact that women have highly qualified jobs and responsible positions is considered remarkable today, but that so few do. Some one-half of the students studying at GDR universities are women, at technical colleges they make up 84% of the student body, but only 7.4% of the professors and lecturers are women.[2]

How have these changes affected women's lives? Have they eradicated the traditional disadvantages? Or have they added to the burden of women's chores in the household and of bringing up the children? Have

they brought women a new, self-determined understanding of themselves and their role? Or do contemporary women, like their grandmothers, consider the welfare of the family and the functioning of the household to be their prime responsibility? Do they seek happiness above all in marriage and family and regard work merely as a financial necessity? These questions cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. Historical changes in ways of living, in relations between the sexes, in individual attitudes, in needs and aims in life, come about through long and contradictory processes. The emergence of something new is influenced not only by changed conditions, but also by those factors which change only in part or not at all. Changes take place within the stable, traditional cultural forms and norms by means of which people regulate their daily lives. People react to changes, relate to them, and modify their own behavior within these cultural forms.

The analysis of these interrelations is the subject matter of the theory of culture, the scientific discipline in which I work. We understand the theory of culture as a philosophical discipline that examines the interconnections between social relations and the possibilities individuals have for development. We investigate above all the circumstances and relations in which individuals live their daily lives, in which they are active, and in which their needs and abilities are developed. Under socialism, too, these social conditions are still different for men and women. Therefore, the relations between the sexes are an essential element of the cultural processes, and one of the tasks of the theory of culture is to analyze them. In the last few years my work has centered around this subject. In this context, I want to discuss some aspects of the changes in the lives and self-image of women in the GDR. As empirical evidence I will use both sociological and statistical data and GDR literature.[3] I will present this paper in the form of three questions.

1. Emancipation through labor?

In her novel Die Alleinseglerin, Christine Wolter uses an image which in my opinion describes the situation of women in the younger and middle generations in the GDR today:

> Es gibt beim Segeln, genauer gesagt in der Regatta, eine Situation, die man die "aussichtslose Position" nennt. . . . Stell dir vor, dort vor dir segelt ein anderes Boot, das nimmt dir den Wind und wirft dir dazu seine Bugwellen entgegen, so daß du gebremst wirst. Du kannst aber auch nicht zurück, weil hinter dir ein anderer ist und neben dir noch einer, dem du den Wind nimmst und der deshalb nicht schneller werden kann. Auch er hindert dich, einfach auszubrechen, weil er von dir gehindert wird. . . . Merkwürdigerweise rät die Seglererfahrung, nicht zu wenden, nicht auszubrechen: keine Manöver. Eine Regattaregel sagt, man sollte in der "aussichtslosen Position" bleiben, das ist meist besser, man kann dann immer noch in der Gesamtwertung ganz vorn liegen. Die Frage ist eben nur, ob einem die hoffnungslose Stellung und ihre Möglichkeiten klar sind.[4]

That sounds, to be sure, very sober and free of illusions; still, the tone is not resigned. To come to the realization that one cannot have everything here and now can sharpen the senses for what is possible under the present conditions. This can be a productive incentive to make the most of what one has and to deal better with the conditions of one's life and one's own expectations. It can prevent both the senseless expenditure of energy and blindness vis-à-vis the possibilities created by the construction of socialist society, a blindness caused by frustrated hopes for quick and radical change.

In which ways have the changes actually altered women's lives and what will the future bring? This has been a focal point both of literature--especially literature written by women--and of science in recent years. The mere fact that women are discussing this question with such urgency is a sign of the basic changes in their lives. Sociologists say that the compatibility of work and family life is characteristic of the present-day self-image of women in the GDR. Going out to work has become a matter of course. Evidence of this is the fact that some 90% of all women capable of doing so go out to work. For today's teenagers working for a living is to a very large extent a basic part of their plans for the future. It

is interesting to note that a considerably higher percentage of girls have a positive attitude towards women's working outside the home than do boys.[5]

The women of the current middle and younger generations have different motives for wanting to work than their mothers and grandmothers had. The latter were usually forced to work for financial reasons. Well into the 1950s, the overwhelming majority of women worked as unskilled labor. For example, around 1950 only about 5% of the women working in industry had some type of qualification. Their daughters and granddaughters usually have better qualifications and vocational training. Today men and women aged forty and younger have an equal level of competence.[6] For women, this has meant not only the extension of their experience by entering social production; increasingly, it has also entailed the augmented development of their abilities, skills, and knowledge. Linked to this is a tendency toward increased emphasis on the qualitative side of their work--for themselves and for society. In addition to an interest in good wages, the content of the work has become a major factor in job motivation.

These changes encourage women's self-confidence, which has developed over three generations and is based on economic independence, on doing socially useful work--and this as well as men, and on the public support women receive when they claim their rights. The tape-recorded interviews published by Maxie Wander show that women of all social strata and in various professions are developing a new identity. The actual changes in their lives have meant that the traditional conception of male dominance, of the "female role" in marriage and in the family are at least being questioned and are causing problems in the relations between the sexes. Women are now defining themselves less in terms of their function within the family. As Helga Königsdorf writes in "Hochzeitstag in Pizunda," "Ich wage jetzt das große Abenteuer. Ich begebe mich auf die Suche nach mir selbst."[7]

A part of this search--for women of the second and third generations it is a determining factor--is the realization that equal rights and work outside the home do not directly lead to the social equality of the sexes. The division of labor into blue- and white-collar jobs, i.e., professions with varying

levels of qualification, cannot yet be abolished. Linked to this is the division of labor between the sexes in the sphere of social production. This means that women are concentrated in the less qualified, largely menial jobs that are not particularly well-paid and which correspond to the "typically feminine" functions in the household and family. Such jobs can be thought of as a transition for women who go out to work for the first time, since the tasks are familiar and the usual conceptions of "femininity" can be maintained. On the other hand, however, the traditional conceptions of the subordinated, supportive, helping function of women are reproduced in the new field of work.

This outcome of the division of labor between the sexes has led to a discussion of whether such forms of work actually do extend women's horizons. For example, monotonous work on an assembly line is unfavorably compared with the variety of chores in the household and, above all, with the rearing of children. However, when the emancipatory effect of many current jobs is questioned, the alternative given is seldom a return to the traditional female duties in the home and the family. Many women reject the alternative of returning to the life of the so-called "mere" housewife--and not only for economic reasons--although a large number of them do see immediate relief from the "double burden" in the temporary interruption of work.[8]

On a long-term basis, the contradictions within the division of labor between the sexes can be solved only with the reduction of unqualified, one-sided, monotonous work, i.e., by enriching the labor functions. Overcoming the division of labor between the sexes is a concrete form of the attempt to decrease social differences under socialism. The speed and course of this process are determined above all by the corresponding material and technical basis,[9] and by subjective factors. These latter include, for example, the positive experiences of women when they break out of their narrow family lives, but also their experiencing of the limits to their emancipation set by the division of labor between the sexes in industry, which causes dissatisfaction with what has been achieved and can give rise to demands for more interesting work.

It can thus be stated that while work outside the home alone does not bring about the emancipation of women, and certainly not under the present circumstances of the division of labor between the sexes, women would have no basis upon which to build without work. For this reason, the government is intent upon helping women make better use of their vocational training. This means creating conditions in which women can fully use their qualifications, without impairing their possibilities for motherhood.[10] It also entails increasing women's flexibility by giving them more opportunities--they now have fewer than men--for further training in their professions.[11]

2. Is there a "new motherliness" in reaction to the "double burden"?

That women see the compatibility of work and family as essential for their identity is, on the one hand, an expression of a basic change in their lives; on the other, it points to the fact that their traditional feeling of family responsibility continues unabated. Women still do two-thirds to three-quarters of the housework. They are usually responsible for both the household and for bringing up the children.[12] The present stage of development in the productive forces, which necessitates the division of labor between the sexes in industry, also causes a discrepancy between the progress being made in the "private" and the social reproduction spheres. As a result, the traditional roles of men and women within the family and the corresponding norms of "typically" female and male behavior continue to function and be reproduced. This also means that changes in the sex "roles" do not take place as a radical break with the past but as modifications of the normal division of labor in the family, and very often they are so gradual that individuals involved hardly notice them. That young men now look after their children, take them to kindergarten or to the doctor is still not completely "normal," but it no longer causes a sensation.[13] To do this would have been unthinkable for their grandfathers. Despite these tendencies, however, most women still bear a "double burden," have little time for themselves, and are very often overtaxed.

In the early 1970s several socio-political measures were introduced with the aim of improving the

situation of working women with children: shorter daily working hours and longer holidays, increased prenatal and postnatal leave (to 26 weeks), a fully paid "maternity year" after the birth of a second child, and 18 months paid leave after the birth of each subsequent child, for example. These measures help balance the unequal conditions between men and women, but they cannot eliminate the inequality. In fact, in some respects they consolidate the traditional division of labor in the home.

In the years ahead, women's lives will continue to be determined by a typical contradiction: they must develop skills and needs in two very different spheres and make these--relatively--compatible in their self-conception. Feeling responsible for the functioning of the household and for a harmonious family atmosphere conflicts, to varying degrees, with the demands made by a job and by interests oriented toward career and self-development. In her story "Selbstversuch," Christa Wolf describes the dilemma of many women: "zwischen Mann und Arbeitsdrang, Liebesglück und Schöpfungswillen, Kinderwunsch und Ehrgeiz ein Leben lang zickzack laufen wie eine falsch programmierte kybernetische Maus."[14]

These contradictions are reflected in decisions women are making today in regard to their professional life: part-time work, temporary retirement from work while the children are small, accepting jobs for which they are overqualified because the work place is near home and they aren't required to work shift, and sacrificing their own job development for that of their husbands. The higher the qualification, however, the fewer the women seeking such solutions; women with higher levels of education and training tend instead to search for ways in which they can use their professional skills in the same way as men. And they are being encouraged to do so--with social encouragement plans and individualized working time, for example.[15] But these women, too, have a "double burden."

3. Is there an "unbroken conservatism" in sex relations and norms?

The solutions discussed show that women are trying to cope with conditions in which they are at a real disadvantage. The solutions they find should not

be seen only in a negative light, however. The women of the first generation were faced with a situation in which they were forced to work in order to feed themselves and their children; they had neither kindergartens nor creches to help them. In the 1950s the women often organized such facilities at their place of work, through the factory women's committee. The system of day-care centers known today became a comprehensive system only in the 1960s. Today women have little difficulty finding a spot for their children and know that the children are well looked after while they are working. This improved situation has caused many women to reconsider the significance of having children for their own happiness and self-fulfillment, and the importance of the family for providing the emotional security that is the basis for the harmonious development of children. In contrast to their mothers, women today can see that going out to work is not enough for their emancipatory needs and their identity. Emancipation also includes the ability to bring up children and to develop and maintain harmonious human relations--and having the time to do these things. When women today insist on their motherliness and caring for others, they are not merely adhering to traditional functions. It is instead a matter of the harmonious development of individual needs and skills in a human totality. This conception includes men as well as women, and overcomes the one-sidedness of traditional female and male "roles" and the apparent or real privileges these involve. With such a conception the current achievements are seen critically. The prerequisite for such a view is the refusal to live in accordance with imposed norms--to be a "vorzeigbares Beispiel für gehorsame Gleichberechtigung" (p. 207), as Christine Wolter puts it in her novel; that is, the insistence on being oneself. Many women today share this critical view and will not give it up, because they are not willing to give themselves up.

The changes in the lives and self-conception of women are taking place largely within the framework of the traditional functional divisions between men and women, and within sex stereotypes. However, they have caused the practices and norms in relations between the sexes to crack and become more equivocal. The fact that women are emphasizing the value of motherhood, that they are refusing to take on managerial positions, can be the conscious rejection of a

life that they consider unacceptably one-sided. However, it can also be understood as exploiting advantages given to women by patriarchal traditions: "zum Beispiel Rückzugsmöglichkeiten bei Bequemlichkeit, Angst vor Verantwortung oder der Last von Entscheidungszwängen."[16] When women emphasize their femininity in their clothes and their behavior, this can be a sign of the more or less "blind" acceptance of the "feminine mystique." However, it can also be a consciously chosen protection against the insecurities and uncertainties of their female identity experienced by many women who have stepped into what have hitherto been purely male domains. Today, the usual motivation of women for working is the extension of their social contacts and interests, not the amount of money they earn. This may reflect the conception still widespread among many men that they are the "family provider." And this can definitely contradict women's real feelings of economic independence--evidence for this is the number of divorces initiated by women. The fact that men and women in all age groups place marriage and family high up on their list of values (next to profession) says nothing about the changed conceptions and practices of the division of labor within the family, the relations between men and women, adults and children, that lie behind the apparently unbroken "conservatism," nor does it say anything about the experiences and problems of single-parent families and, above all, the problems resulting for the children.

In a recent interview, Irmtraud Morgner reflected on the currently contradictory situation of women, and I would like to close with a quotation therefrom:

> Kurzum: Emanzipation (nicht nur der Frau) ist kein Kampagnethema, sondern--nach Marx --ein Epochenproblem. [Dabei]. . . kann es sich nicht um irgendeinen kleinen Nebenwiderspruch handeln. Oder gar um eine Mode, heute "in" und morgen passé.[17]

Notes

[1] Erich Honecker, Bericht an den VIII. Parteitag der SED (Berlin: Dietz, 1971), p. 62.

[2] See, for example, the experiences reported by the Science Trade Union about the situation of women at GDR universities and colleges in Informationen des wissenschaftlichen Rates "Die Frau in der sozialistischen Gesellschaft," No. 2 (1982), pp. 6-29.

[3] Literature is useful here for two reasons: first, because art reflects social processes from an individual point of view and shows the effects these processes have on individual action and conflicts; secondly, because the changes in people's way of life and the conflicts in human relations which result from these changes are often expressed in the arts before they are documented by scientific investigations.

[4] Christine Wolter, Die Alleinseglerin, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Aufbau, 1984), pp. 208-09.

[5] Rolf Borrmann and Hans-Joachim Schille, Vorbereitung der Jugend auf Liebe, Ehe und Familie (Berlin: Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1980), pp. 91ff.

[6] Brigitte Weichert, "Zur Weiterentwicklung der gesellschaftlichen Stellung der Frau in den 80er Jahren," in Informationen des wissenschaftlichen Rates "Die Frau in der sozialistischen Gesellschaft," No. 5 (1982), p. 6.

[7] Helga Königsdorf, "Hochzeitstag in Pizunda," in her Meine ungehörigen Träume (Berlin/Weimar: Aufbau, 1978), p. 129.

[8] I do not consider the term "double burden" appropriate and use it here only because it has become customary and therefore generally understandable. It corresponds to daily experience insomuch as women still typically bear the responsibility for the household and family. However, it also suggests that working is an (additional) burden and thus, in my opinion, veils over the fundamental importance of work outside the home for women's emancipation.

[9] Changes in the material and technological basis are themselves very contradictory. The introduction of new technologies in the next few years will not automatically lead to a reduction in the division of labor between the sexes in industry; it will instead first be linked to forms of reproduction and the reconstitution of this division.

[10] Weichert, pp. 10ff.

[11] "In der Industrie ist der Anteil von ausgebildeten männlichen Facharbeitern mit Zusatzqualifikation zwei- bis dreimal so hoch wie bei Frauen. . . Neben der Berücksichtigung der Bildungserfordernisse durch das immer schnellere Voranschreiten des wissenschaftlich-technischen Fortschritts geht es heute darum, ungerechtfertigte Differenzierungen im Qualifikationsniveau, im beruflichen Einsatz für verschiedene Bereiche oder Berufe aufzudecken und im Sinne der weiteren Förderung der gesellschaftlichen Stellung der Frau abzubauen." ("Die berufliche Qualifizierung der werktätigen Frauen als Beitrag zur weiteren Förderung der gesellschaftlichen Stellung der Frau im Prozeß der Gestaltung der entwickelten sozialistischen Gesellschaft," in Informationen des wissenschaftlichen Rates "Die Frau in der sozialistischen Gesellschaft," No. 5 [1983], p. 10).

[12] "Die Doppelbelastung der Frau in Beruf und Haushalt wird durch die zurückhaltende Beteiligung der Ehemänner an der Hausarbeit nur sehr langsam gemindert. Untersuchungen ergaben, daß in den Familien der DDR 1965 47,5 Stunden und 1970 47,1 Stunden für Hausarbeit geleistet wurden. Davon leisteten:

	1965	1970
Männer	11,6%	13,0%
Frauen	79,4%	78,7%

Die Veränderungen sind sehr geringfügig und deuten auf einen 'Jahrhundertprozeß' hin." (Alice Kahl, Steffen H. Wilsdorf, and Herbert F. Wolf, Kollektivbeziehungen und Lebensweise [Berlin: Dietz, 1984], pp. 99-101). This corresponds to the fact that men define themselves largely through their work and their public activities. Although most men, when planning their lives, place great value on having a

family, their functions as husband and father are of secondary significance for their self-conception.

[13] At the moment, the greatest changes in the traditional division of labor within the family can be seen in families in which both husband and wife either are highly qualified or work shift. Working in different shifts means that the husband not only helps in the household, but, at definite set times, is responsible for it and for looking after the children. Joan Ecklein has shown that there is a discrepancy between men's verbal acceptance of equality and their actual, practical behavior within the family (Joan Ecklein, "Die sich verändernde Rolle der Männer in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik," in Informationen des wissenschaftlichen Rates "Die Frau in der sozialistischen Gesellschaft," No. 3 [1984]).

[14] Christa Wolf, "Selbstversuch," in her Unter den Linden, 3rd ed. (Berlin/Weimar: Aufbau, 1976), p. 112.

[15] For example, factory management is obliged to set up special plans for female university and college graduates which contain concrete steps toward their professional development and eliminate conflicts between the assuming of a responsible position and their personal situation, e.g., birth of a child or caring for children already born.

[16] Quotation from Irmtraud Morgner, in Eva Kaufmann, "Interview mit Irmtraud Morgner," Weimarer Beiträge, 30, No. 5 (1984), 1501.

[17] Kaufmann, p. 1502.