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Are Women the Losers of Unification? (October 1999)

On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the author – long-time editor of the periodical *Deutschland Archiv* – analyzes the present situation of women in the new federal states. She compares their situation with that of women in the former GDR and in West Germany, and explains why many women today feel like the losers of unification.

The Perfect Organizers

“We’re the losers of unification,” says Ursula H., 56, and no one contradicts her. In the northern Saxon town of Lauta, twenty women get together every four weeks in a self-help group for the unemployed. They used to work together in the cable works that shut down in 1991. The prospects are dismal. The few other large companies that existed here in GDR times were closed down as well. Only one out of every ten women formerly employed by the cable works has found a steady job again. The rest of them are trying to bridge the gap until retirement – for some of them, more than ten years – with positions generated by [government-sponsored, temporary] job-creation measures. Once these jobs run out, they are again entitled to full unemployment benefits [*Arbeitslosengeld*], and the downward slide to unemployment assistance [*Arbeitslosenhilfe*], which offers significantly lower benefits, is at least postponed.

The unemployment rate for women in the East German federal states has been double that for men for years. Almost three-quarters of the long-term unemployed are women. This is partly due to the fact that many companies that used to employ mostly women fell by the wayside during the economic transformation process. Also, there is very severe, cut-throat competition. According to figures from the Nuremberg Institute for Employment Research [*Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung*], between 1991 and 1995, men in the service sector gained a total of 114,000 jobs while women lost 50,000. East German sociologist Sabine Schenk noted the following corresponding “developments”: “Branches that used to be female-dominated are becoming mixed branches (trade, banking/insurance, other service sectors). Mixed branches are becoming largely male-dominated branches (other manufacturing industries, agriculture). Traditionally male branches are remaining closed to women.”

Men Favored

This assessment is supported by the fact that female youths are extremely disadvantaged when it comes to training positions in Eastern Germany. Accordingly, one can see that many plant managers clearly rate female employees below their male counterparts. Men are generally favored in hiring. We need to inquire about the extent to which experiences and prejudices from earlier times are continuing to have an impact. Under the SED regime, companies had to accept not only target requirements and other regulations without objections, but also various special regulations for mothers – reduced working hours, paid maternity leave, generous leaves to care for sick children, personal days, etc. Because of the system-induced labor shortage, this did not lead to their being pushed out of companies, but it did foster a tendency to judge women as less reliable or available in principle. Their labor was needed, but the double burden of career and family meant that it was accorded lower status. Furthermore, since the mid-1970s, women who completed secondary school were increasingly steered into training positions with lower status and less pay. Now company managers have free choice; and now the following holds true in East and West alike: in times of crisis, women usually get the short end of the stick.

But regardless of all the difficulties, women still see gainful employment as an essential part of their life plans. Somewhat cryptic attempts to hold this attitude against them – by portraying it as a kind of transgression against the interests of society as a whole – are met with outrage. For example, the Commission for the Future Development of the Free States of Bavaria and Saxony declared: “The high level of gainful employment of women is yet another reason for the higher unemployment rates in Eastern Germany. If the rate of women’s employment were the same in East and West, then there would be no difference in the proportion of unemployed.” In short: Mothers, stay home with your children.

Developments in the West, however, also run counter to such a trend; there, the share of employed women has clearly grown in recent decades. The number of those returning to the workplace after taking a “maternity break” increased fourfold between 1984 and 1992. Sixty-eight percent of sixteen- to twenty-four-year-olds in the East and 53 percent in the West believe that a woman should interrupt her career only for the duration of her maternity leave. The higher the qualifications, the greater the professional ambitions. In this regard, women from East Germany have a clear lead: in 1989 only 12.3 percent of all female employees in the GDR had not completed vocational training; in the West the percentage was twice as high.

New Machos

It is no wonder that in the East, especially, many women over fifty have little enthusiasm for the market economy. Their knowledge and experience are no longer in demand, and they feel like the losers [of unification] with good reason. Almost 80 percent of the unemployed believe that

above all their social security has worsened since the political upheaval of 1989. This opinion is also widespread among the gainfully employed.

East German journalist Dorotea Lieber, an active member of the League of Women Journalists [*Journalistinnenbund*] and the National Council of German Women's Associations [*Deutscher Frauenrat*], probably echoes the sentiments of a lot of women when she says that the social environment in the GDR kept men from "acting macho." Today they can "do that without a care, since they think they have to adapt to a new role model." Ms. Lieber does not believe that women in the East "have more equality" than those in the West, "but their attitude about occupations and economic independence from men was more self-evident and self-assured."

This experience continues to have an impact, as do the various policies on women and the family. In the GDR, work outside of the home was pushed and favored, whereas in the Federal Republic women's formal freedom to decide was and still is limited by unsatisfactory conditions [which make it difficult to combine work and family]. Accordingly, 70 percent of women in the East consider it ideal to combine motherhood and full-time employment. Only 16 percent in the West feel this way, whereas 51 percent orient themselves toward family responsibilities and part-time jobs. In the younger generation, there are clearly tendencies towards a more equal sharing of responsibilities. How things continue to develop will depend on the extent to which policies on gender equality – which have already led to some progress – set new standards.

"We women from the East," says Kerstin Riehle, equal opportunity commissioner in Görlitz since 1990, "have the advantage of being able to compare two different systems, past and present. And some things that are considered visions here ... we really did experience them." But the price was high. Working around the clock, people had no time to think about their situation and women's role. Today the idea is to "sell yourself better." "After all, we have something to offer."

"Many women from the new federal states are well-trained and have bettered themselves by constantly improving their qualifications. The companies should tap these resources of knowledge and experience rather than letting them degenerate. Since we always had to combine career, children, and the household, we're perfect organizers."

Source: Gisela Helwig, "Perfekte Organisatorinnen" ["The Perfect Organizers"], *Das Parlament*, nos. 43-44 (October 22/29, 1999), p. 14.

Translation: Allison Brown