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Women's Liberation Gaining Ground (April 22, 1977)

Despite prevailing policies and contrary to social norms, West Germany continued to see a trend towards single lifestyles and a decline in birthrates. According to the author, both these phenomena reflect women's increased efforts to forge independent paths.

Lysistrata on the Move: The Birth Rate Is Not Dropping due to the Pill; It is Women's Emancipation That Is Teaching Society Fear

Civil society is becoming introspective. It has to deliberate awhile, because what is going on in its own ranks is breaking the rules. Lonesome – twosome: this word pair in its original meaning is starting to lose its significance. What is supposed to have a negative connotation, and what [is supposed to have] a positive one, is being turned upside down. The bond for life, the institution of the family, seems to attract people less and less. Although society and the state are doing all they can to make it as uncomfortable and difficult as possible for bachelors to do their own thing – as compared with tax gifts for families – the number of those who prefer the single life to tying the knot is still growing. And those who tied the knot are increasingly untying it and becoming single again.

It is women, in particular, who are declaring their independence, throwing in the dishtowel and leaving the reservation known as matrimony. Or they avoid it in the first place. “We no longer want to be there just for society,” which to them means having and raising children. At least they don't want that right away. Society was, for a moment, speechless. And then it calculated what that meant: If this trend continues, then the 57.9 million citizens of today's Federal Republic will have reduced their numbers to 22 million by about the end of the twenty-first century. Whether in light of overpopulation in other countries this is tragic or not is beside the point. What politicians are worriedly asking themselves, however, is who will be working for our pensions in forty or fifty years? And not only for those presently in the workforce, but also for the pensions of the mothers now pushing their way into working life, whether divorced or single, and those women who unequivocally refuse to get married and produce children in the Federal Republic?

After all, bachelor life is not all that rosy. A state that bases the feasibility of its system on the family cannot afford to pay for all the loners, the roughly 1,226,000 unmarried men over thirty and the approximately 8,172,000 single, divorced, or widowed women twenty and older. Bachelors have no lobby. As the blind shells of population policy, they have more disadvantages than benefits in income tax and social insurance contributions. They pay less into the pension funds than married people, although when it comes down to it they have no

widows, widowers, or orphans to whom to transfer their claims from the state. The same thing is true for health and unemployment insurances.

Children – Why all the fuss?

For women, on top of all that, comes discrimination in the professional world. The labor market holds space for them mostly in the textile and clothing industries and in the service sector and health care. Seventy-seven percent of gainfully employed women work in only sixteen different occupations. Although the Institute for Labor Market and Vocational Research at the Federal Agency for Labor in Nuremberg has recently determined that women could very well assume more than one third of all jobs presently held by men, roughly 480,000 women are unemployed. Not only do they lack “appropriate qualifications,” as managers have divulged to the vocational research institute, they are also prematurely catapulted out of the professional world by mutual agreement of works councils and employers.

Employers and employee representatives invented the notion of an “employment agreement” that women can retire as early as age sixty. Consequently, working women who have turned sixty are often enough forced to leave their jobs. Exceptions are made only for hardship cases, and what is considered a hardship case is again decided by the works councils and employers. This generation of single women has a bad deal anyway. During the war and in the postwar years, they usually had to temporarily abandon their careers to raise the postwar generation and do reconstruction work for society. The state did not give them credit for these years in their pension funds since they were neither soldiers nor prisoners of war. The situation of young mothers is similar. In its *109 Tips for the Woman*, the federal government generously assured in April 1976 that: “A woman can also give her notice following the motherhood protection period¹ in order to devote more attention to her child.” If a woman follows this advice she loses all entitlement to her former workplace, as is guaranteed, for example, for soldiers released to serve in the army, but the politicians in the coalition government failed to mention that in their informational brochure before the federal election campaign.

Working women have to tolerate additional disadvantages. They continue to dream of equal pay for equal work, of greater responsibility and less subordinate positions. Their taking refuge in the household is usually a result of bad experiences in professional life. To this extent the findings of the family ministry thus need to be viewed as ambiguous: Of the roughly 550,000 working mothers with at least one child under the age of three, two-thirds would be willing to give up their jobs if they received a parental leave allowance. This does not have to mean they also want to give up their careers, and certainly not forever.

Meanwhile a new consciousness is becoming widespread. Women of marriage age are undermining “child production.” The German population is not being threatened by a kink due to the pill. More likely, a creeping Lysistrata movement is becoming manifest.

Young women find that “the world has become hostile to mothers and children,” and their arguments range from the patriarchal man to nuclear power plants. They see the panic of politicians over the decline in birthrates as nothing more than “national vanity.” “They should be happy,” announce non-mothers of childbearing age, “unemployment, overcrowded university

¹ According to Germany’s *Mutterschutz* regulations, employed women cannot be forced to work from 6 weeks before delivery to 8 weeks after and are protected from job termination for four months after they give birth – trans.

lecture halls, job cutbacks in the interest of rationalization, costly social policies, insufficient daycare, no positions for teachers – why all the fuss?”

Thirty-two percent of men recently polled by the women's magazine *Brigitte* thought little of equal rights and found good reasons for their view, such as: “Men don't want women with backs like lumberjacks and paws like construction workers,” or “women are too emotional to hold top positions,” and “as soon as they become mothers, I prefer to see women devote themselves entirely to their children.” The men were almost 100% united in one tendency: Regretful head-shaking, but only one half of humanity can hold the reins. The logical consequence of that: The other half wants to prove the opposite in order to be given its due.

Marriage counseling centers in the Federal Republic are increasingly experiencing that conflicts that break up a marriage emerge from the wishes and desires of women for independence. Even young mothers with small children are grabbing their kids under their arms and are determined to try to make it on their own. Seventy-two percent of divorces are filed not by the men, but by their “better halves.” The hard struggle to survive that the single mothers face proves how serious they are. In view of this development one is tempted to claim that the number of male bachelors is growing only because the women are tired of providing unpaid services in the household.

Swinging singles

Of course people still do get married. But wherever existing families can create a new consciousness for young people through more open-minded child-rearing, marriage is at least postponed, delayed. As an alternative to family, shared households are often mentioned as a way of avoiding isolation or loneliness. Under certain circumstances this social form of living together or alongside one another can definitely be recommended. On the free housing market, one- and two-room apartments are relatively expensive as compared with apartments for a larger family. And based on the consumer principle in which everything is cheaper by the dozen, loners certainly cannot profit. With respect to food alone, not only do they pay more for small amounts, but part of it also always ends up going bad and landing in the garbage.

So what speaks for refusing to offer the state its blessing of children to guarantee the pensions? Women are seeking financial independence and self-affirmation in a career. They are avoiding the stress of double and triple burdens of being housewife, mother, and employee. They enjoy their freedom. “You come home in the evening, drop your things, and put up your feet.” A glance at the personal ads, under the category “Marriage and Partnerships,” under “Miscellaneous,” however, would seem to suggest that, in the long run, putting their feet up is not enough for women and men starting around 35.

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In the Federal Republic, politicians and experts from the Ministry of the Interior cannot think of anything better than pointing, somewhat dismayed, to women's changing sense of sex roles, since the mother role is no longer the center of all [women's] wishes, but is instead being pushed aside by professional plans. And now they are considering what to do about it. Of course, the role of motherhood has to be valorized. Here come the parental leave allowances, housewife pensions, loans to start a family. Daycare is back in the picture. Part-time work should be promoted. That is a promise that can only come from someone who stubbornly and apparently naïvely ignores the labor market situation and the wishes of employers. And now help is finally being offered to assist women in overcoming their role

conflicts – with increased propaganda. The federal government will once again distribute information, and this time the opposition probably won't disparage the anticipated new edition of *Tips for Women in the Household* as party propaganda. The important thing is to help women who are on their own in the business world back onto the straight and narrow – destination: delivery room.

There was a "marriage loan" once before, "if the future wife gives up her employed position at the time of marriage at the latest." People were already tricked by this one in June 1933 in an effort "to lower unemployment."

Because women show solidarity with each other more and more in groups, they can more realistically appraise their situation. They can also seek their own ways, which can and should guarantee them a more satisfying lifestyle when compared with the sphere that society intended for them. The chances seem greater that women's interests will be advanced through the women's movement than by having women continue to wait patiently to see what the 479 men in the Bonn parliament will offer them as the ideal combination role between mother and working woman.

Source: Viola Roggenkamp, "Lysistrate geht um. Kein Pillenknick, sondern die Emanzipation der Frau lehrt die Gesellschaft das Fürchten" ["Lysistrata on the Move: The Birth Rate Is Not Dropping due to the Pill; It is Women's Emancipation That Is Teaching Society Fear"], *Die Zeit*, April 22, 1977.

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