



Volume 8. Occupation and the Emergence of Two States, 1945-1961

“The Strict Husband”: Letters from Readers of *Neues Deutschland* (November 14, 1959)

The constitutional equality of men and women in the GDR and the politically desired employment of women collided in daily life with conventional ideas about gender roles. This letter to the editor from a single working mother in Torgau, published in November 1959 in the SED's central organ *Neues Deutschland*, describes the stress that job and family demands placed on one East German woman. The letter also describes the opposition that women's workforce participation sparked, even among SED party functionaries.

Supplement “For the Woman”

Many female and male readers have written to Frau Renate in the past few days. They all agreed with her thoughts on the equality of men and women, as expressed in her article “His Happiness = Her Happiness?” on the women's page of the “ND” supplement of October 24. But you also had some things to say about this from your own experience. We are printing some of this, and it should interest not only women, but also men. Frau Renate continues to seek your opinion on the theme “His Happiness = Her Happiness?”

Dear Frau Renate!

Your article “His Happiness = Her Happiness?” appeared at the very moment when similar thoughts were stirring in me.

Since September 8, 1958, I have run the school nursery of the special education school Torgau. With the start of the 1959-60 school year, I was also charged with taking over a so-called preschool experimental class for fifteen hours a week. Because of the heavy workload, I am not able to take the six reduced hours for organizational and written planning work to which I am entitled. Moreover, the capacity of the nursery group has increased from the authorized size of 15 to about 22-23.

Since the director and the entire pedagogical nursery realized that it cannot continue this way, they started looking for a half-time worker for the nursery. One evening during those days, comrade S., the chairman of the residential district committee of the National Front and the responsible member of the council of the district of Torgau, rang my doorbell and asked me to sell badges for the 10th anniversary of the GDR.

I then poured out my troubles to him: that I am a single woman and mother of an eight year-old girl, that I am already doing the job of two and have to do the paperwork for the nursery and the experimental class at home in the evening. I thought it should be possible for one of the seventy comrades in our settlement to fill in for me, a colleague with no party affiliation. (Later, I did take ten badges to sell). Then I asked if he, by chance, knew of a helper for me as an educational assistant.

The Promise

By chance, comrade S's wife was with him, and at that moment she joined in the conversation. I spoke at length about the children and the need for a helper. Mrs. S. was very receptive and said that she would think about it and come to the nursery temporarily while her husband took the waters in Bad Liebenstein. If the work appealed to her, she would remain as a permanent part-timer.

Mrs. S. came to the nursery the very next day, initially as an intern. We got along splendidly, since this young woman was interested in pedagogy and also quickly bonded with the difficult special education students, even if – understandably enough – she still lacked a lot of experience. And so she worked four hours every day as an assistant, and she liked the work in spite of some difficulties. One day I asked whether she would be willing to fill in for me for five days so I could take my remaining vacation days during fall break. She immediately agreed to fill in full time for these few days.

Rest Period and Special Diet

After returning from an errand on my first vacation day, I was greeted by comrade S., our assistant's husband, who came to my apartment greatly agitated. Severe reproaches rained down upon me. Back from the health resort, he still had a few days rest period, and, without asking him, his wife had submitted the application and was tied up the entire week, and he had brought dirty laundry back with him. "Well, you women just did this, and I was not consulted at all. And also – what are we supposed to do with the 150 DM that my wife will be earning. I need a special diet, and that doesn't amount to a lot of money."

Since the "Herr state functionary" continued to behave in a very agitated way in my home, I bluntly told him that his wife was an independent person, that she had taken the job on her own, and that she had voluntarily agreed to be a vacation substitute for these few days because she had recognized the necessity. I then asked him about possibly helping his wife out a little bit during this period, some evening or even during the day, while she was working.

I continued, somewhat ironically: Oh, you men, if you bring a few dirty shirts home, everyone must be at your beck and call right away. Hardly anyone asks us working women how we manage the laundry for the whole family. I, for example, have a daughter with a bladder ailment, who generates a lot of laundry. I have to do that, as well, even though my heart is no longer all that strong at age forty-eight. But nobody has ever asked me about that. As for his wife's

income, which comrade S. dismissed so disdainfully, as a woman with occupational training (she was trained as a hairdresser), she would get no less than about 180 DM a month as a part-time assistant. I said that all options of becoming qualified for the job were also open to her. That would have a favorable effect not only on her salary, but later also for the pension – if earnings is all he cared about.

The “Insult”

But comrade S. wouldn't acknowledge anything, and so I made it very clear to him that I considered him a backward, egotistical man and that I would ask for something else from a state functionary, a model. Well, I had gone too far. The young woman had to immediately quit her job on orders from her strict husband, and I had to cut short my vacation after three days. The school secretary, Mrs. F., told me: “Mrs. S. had to quit because you told her husband that he could help his wife out a little at home. Mr. S. felt that was a grave insult.”

Now I ask myself: Is it an insult for a man to lend a hand in the household? If so, we women suffer this “insult” every day. Alas, for the ridiculous, odd ideas that still cling to so many men and lurk in their heads, even state functionaries. Here, the party spells out in detail in its decrees that we so urgently need workers and why. Here, the party is fighting for full equality for women, the foundation of which is, after all, gainful employment, and it wrestles with all the views that block the path of equality. But our state functionary, member of the party. . . Well, I hardly know what to say.

Just Make Concessions?

And what did the director of the special school, also a comrade, say when he heard about my run-in with the state functionary? My director felt it should have been my task to speak calmly with this gentleman and to mollify him, not to tell him the truth so bluntly. Does that mean we women simply have to make concessions to men in every respect? I just ask myself whether these men even know in what times we are actually living.

Charlotte Täuscher, Torgau, Fischeraue

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Translation: Thomas Dunlap