

Women in a Unified Germany

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Introduction

The German reunification process has not been just one of political and economic unification, but also has involved the merging of two very different societies. After the establishment of the FRG (Federal Republic of Germany) and the former GDR (German Democratic Republic) as separate entities, the countries have pursued two greatly diverging paths. One similarity between the two countries, however, was the fact that the social and political environments of both were male-dominated. Even so, the FRG and the former GDR differed significantly with respect to the roles that women played in the professional world and in the home.

When the GDR became five new *lander* (states) in the FRG, many old East German laws and culture were rejected; and the GDR was expected to conform to West German standards concerning law and culture. Because of political doctrine, approximately 90 percent of women in the GDR were in the labor force. They benefitted from such provisions as a comprehensive child care program, abortion rights and extensive job training. Many of these benefits were lost in the reunification process. In contrast, women in the FRG had a much lower labor force participation rate, lacked adequate child care, had extremely limited abortion rights and had much less access to job training than women in the former GDR. The German government political regime failed to recognize the large role that gender played in the reunification process.

In this essay I focus on employment, family and marriage, politics, education and several other issues that have affected the women of Germany. I look at how German history and culture have had an impact on the forming of opinions on topics related to women and how changes have occurred during the reunification process. Finally I speculate on how these issues will have an impact on the lives of German women in the future.

Women in German History

Throughout Germany's long history, women have always been considered inferior to their male contemporaries. These attitudes eventually developed into the laws, customs and religions of the various cultures that Germany has seen. This was especially true of the ancient German nomadic tribes. In tribal societies, females were expected to be involved only in domestic issues. They were first under the control of their fathers before marriage and then of their husbands after marriage. Women were not given any independence from their husbands or fathers. If they were widowed, law required them to acquire a male guardian for their children. What is more, the male children were considered more important than the female children. As a result, women rarely inherited any of their father's property if they had brothers, even if they were first born.

Later during medieval times, this attitude was still prevalent in the Germanic culture. People of the medieval period believed that women were much more emotional than intellectual. At this point in time, the Christian religion was very important to people. Many churchmen considered that women were prone to lust of the flesh and carnal behavior because of their emotionality. As a result, some churchmen even thought that women should be excluded from the church. (Craig, p. 148) This was not to be the case. Women were allowed to participate in the religious ceremonies, but they were excluded from certain activities such as singing. (Craig, p. 148)

The attitude toward women began to change throughout Europe in the 1700s. Many men began to realize that women would be better mothers and wives if they were educated in intellectual matters as well as in cooking and housekeeping. This resulted in the encouragement of aristocratic women to pursue an education, although not a professional education at the university. (Craig, p. 149) However, women were not encouraged to compete with men. Instead, they were urged to be familiar with various intellectual subjects, but not too familiar. Even so, many influential male thinkers of this era, such as Humboldt and Goethe, still did not feel it was proper for women to be educated in this manner. (Craig, p. 152)

As the eighteenth century came to an end, this point of view began to fade. The newly emerging bourgeois society did not favor the education and liberation of women throughout modern Western society. As a result, women all over the world, including Germany, lost many of the advances that they had made during the previous century. This occurred due to the bourgeois belief that a woman's "place" was to take care of the household, that she did not require an education outside of the home and that it was not natural for a woman to be involved in politics. This opinion was portrayed in popular German culture of this time by (among others) the German composer Richard Wagner and also by the philosopher Frederick Nietzsche. (Craig, p. 154)

Women's rights movements began to emerge in the mid-nineteenth century, however, and a revival of the quest for better treatment began. Many ideas proposed at this time, such as employers providing maternity and health insurance and establishing an eight-hour work day, conflicted sharply with the older bourgeois ideas. This, however, did not stop women from speaking out.

After World War 1, the traditional beliefs of a woman's place in society were altered throughout the Western world. During the time of the Weimar Republic (1919-1933), women gained numerous freedoms and were able to attain many goals. One of the more important advances was the Republic's requirement of secondary education for women in 1920. (Craig, p. 162) Women also gained suffrage under the Weimar Republic. Unfortunately, the right to vote still did not empower German women to alter their circumstances through politics in a male-dominated political world that was not ready to relinquish its power. (Craig, p. 163)

These gains for women were quickly cut short with the rise of the Nazi party in 1933. Interestingly, many women supported the National Socialist Party because it advocated returning to the family values of the past when women were encouraged to stay at home and concern themselves with taking care of the household. There were many women in Germany who felt burdened by their new political responsibilities and felt the desire to return to this simpler way of life. As a result, during this period the number of women enrolled in the universities declined drastically, and women were encouraged to drop out of the labor force, marry and raise families. There were approximately seven million women in the National Socialist Frauenschaften, which was the women's Nazi support organization. (Craig, pp. 164-65)

There were also many women who opposed the Nazi party. It is difficult to estimate the number of these women because most showed their opposition simply by not doing anything to support the party. Those

few women Political leaders who Publicly made their opinion known often suffered severe consequences for standing up to the Nazi party, such as exile, death in concentration camps, or the taking of their own lives. (Craig, P. 165)

It is quite possible that the Nazi party philosophy toward women may have cost them the war, or at least brought them to defeat more quickly. For example, the Nazis refused to allow women to work in the factories. This change alone could have freed up over three million more men to fight in the war effort. (Craig, P. 165)

The fall of the Nazi government resulted in the establishment of the FDR and GDR in 1949. The government of the FDR wanted to give women equality by law and included this provision in its constitution, the Basic Law. As Article III of the Basic Law states simply, "Men and women have equal rights." (Kappler and Grevel, P. 360) An additional law was passed in 1977 that is designed to protect women's rights during divorce proceedings. This law established no-fault divorce and also allows a divorcee to share in her ex-husband's pension. (Kappler and Grevel, P. 360) There was, and still is, a big difference between the law and reality, however. These laws are rarely enforced and are difficult to use in a lawsuit because they can be interpreted many different ways and have many loopholes.

Currently, women in the recently reunified Germany are striving to obtain true equality. The main efforts at this time are being directed towards equality in the workplace, which is still dominated by men in the higher levels of management, and also towards equal pay for similar work.

Female Employment in Germany

The Germans have a philosophy about the role of women in their culture. This philosophy is summed up in three words: Kinder, Kuche, Kirche (children, kitchen, church). (Aldhous, P. 1475) Many Germans still have difficulty adapting to the view that women can work outside of the home and family, and German culture makes it very difficult for women to do so. Some obstacles include the lack of child-care facilities and the fact that stores are only open during normal working hours, making it very difficult for working women to shop. Part-time jobs are virtually non-existent.

The employment rate of women in Germany has been drastically lower since reunification. The primary reason for this is the fading away of the former GDR's political and social philosophy according to which everyone was obligated to participate in the workforce in the communist system. Many of these jobs were unnecessary, and there was considerable overemployment as a result. When the reunification process began, many of these unnecessary jobs were eliminated, leaving many in the former GDR unemployed. By 1993, the unemployment rate in the former GDR had increased from the theoretical zero percent to 15.1 percent. (Weisfeld) This rate has been falling since December of 1993 and as of May 1995 was 13.3 percent of the population of the five new lander. (Junghans)

The Kinder, Kuche, Kirche philosophy was, and still is, particularly strong in the former West Germany. Full employment was never a political aim in the FRG, and this is reflected in the vast difference between the participation rate of women in the FRG's labor market compared to that of the former GDR. (Goldberg, p. 40) Many women leave the job market after giving birth due to the lack of child care in the FRG. This was not true for mothers in the former GDR, who had a 26 week pregnancy leave and additional maternity leave, and were also provided with extensive child-care facilities by the state.

A tremendous difference between the FDR and GDR can also be seen in the way that men and women were (and still are in the FDR) treated in the labor market. Although equality was guaranteed in the constitution of the former GDR, women still faced discrimination. They faced a "glass ceiling" in terms

of advancing to executive management positions, and women who were trained in technical fields were often still employed as clerks and secretaries. A large pay gap also existed between men and women. In the former GDR, women earned approximately sixty to sixty-five percent of the wages of their male counterparts. (Neubaumer) An even larger difference was seen in the FRG. Many women in both former East and West Germany were employed in "traditional" jobs as clerks, administrators and child-care workers. After reunification, many of these jobs were eliminated because of cutbacks in the five new lander. (Maier, p. 270) Many women are still encouraged by society not to enter the job market because they allegedly take away jobs that men could have. A law was passed in 1980 in the FRG that made it illegal to discriminate against women in the workplace and requires that men and women must receive equal salaries and benefits for the same job. (Kappler and Grevel, p. 360) This law, however, is poorly enforced.

Women in science have a particularly difficult time establishing themselves in careers in both the former GDR and FDR. There are several reasons for this. Besides the social pressure in Germany for women to stay at home and take care of their families, many of the older generation of males who dominate the sciences are not willing to include women within their ranks. They are reluctant to relax the twelve-hour work days that are standard in German laboratories to allow women with families extra time to care for their children. As a result, many women with families do not continue to pursue careers in the sciences. The few prominent German women scientists, such as Christiane Nusslein-Volhard, have sacrificed having children for their careers. Many German women scientists believe the system will eventually change, although it will take time. It is speculated that once the older generation of male scientists with the Kinder, Kuche, Kirche philosophy passes from the scene, the new generation of men who replace them will feel comfortable with professional women and will be willing to work with them and their needs. (Aldhous)

There are, however, a few innovative companies that are willing to deal with the needs of women in the workforce. For example, B. Braun in Melsungen has established a five-shift system specifically designed for working mothers. Women in this program work various part-time shifts over a period of five weeks. A six-and-one-half-hour night shift is worked on the fifth week of the cycle. (This night shift has only recently been instituted with the lifting of the restrictive labor laws for women, which prevented women from working certain hours.) The women employed at B. Braun receive such social benefits as medical care and pensions, are able to supplement their family's income, and can also have time to spend at home. This program has been in effect for over fifteen years and has proven to be very successful.

An additional reason why more women in Germany do not pursue careers outside the home is the tax structure. A married couple with only one employed spouse pays lower taxes than a married couple where both spouses are working outside of the home. If a married couple has only one earner (Couple A) and has the same gross income as a married couple with two earners (Couple B), Couple A will have a higher net income. This occurs because a smaller amount of taxes is taken out of Couple A's salary due to the progressivity of the German tax structure and "splitting." Splitting occurs when one's income is divided in half and then taxed. (Neubaumer)

Currently, women are overrepresented among the unemployed, making up about sixty-five percent of the unemployed in the unified Germany. Women are also underrepresented in new employment opportunities. Only one in four new jobs goes to women. (Goldberg, p. 41) It is especially difficult for unemployed men and women in Germany to adapt to their situation. The Germans define themselves by their work and are psychologically affected by unemployment. Because most of their social interaction is centered around the workplace, the unemployed are cut off from socializing and communication with others outside the home and family. They are not used to sitting around the home doing nothing but household chores. Many of the unemployed even become physically ill from not working. These

physical and mental ailments usually cause the unemployed to accept any job offer they can find. German women used to take pride in and care about the type of job they had, but now they are happy just to work. This results in women sometimes holding positions for which they are over-qualified. (Junghans)

Child Care

One of the main barriers for women pursuing careers in the FRG is child care. Not only is child care expensive, but it is also difficult for families to find even if they can afford it. Furthermore, most facilities are only open for a half day. As a result, many mothers find it difficult to return to work after giving birth to a child. The situation is especially hard for single mothers. A single mother with a low paying job usually cannot afford to send her children to a day care center, and as a result she must remain at home to take care of her family.

By way of contrast, child-care facilities in the former GDR were extensive. The day care centers there also had long hours to allow mothers to work the standard 8 3/4 hour shifts. These day care centers were very inexpensive. Parents only had to pay for food and diapers for their children. The rest was subsidized by the state. Eighty percent of children from infancy to three years were enrolled in kinderkrippen (nurseries), ninety-four percent of children age three to school age were enrolled in kindergarten, and eighty percent of first through fourth graders went to kinderhorte (after-school care centers). (Goldberg, p. 36) Unfortunately, many of these facilities have been closed since reunification.

Women in the FRG have been fighting to establish child-care facilities at their places of employment for a considerable amount of time. One of the few success stories is the establishment of day-care at the Max Planck Institute for Developmental Biology in Tübingen, Germany. Many women at the institute employed as research scientists wanted to be able to have a family as well as to continue their research. It was a long and frustrating struggle for Maria Leptin and Sigrun Korsching, two research scientists who are also mothers. They tried to convince the Max Planck Society (MPS), which provides funding for the institute, that there was a dire need for a day-care program. After more than a year of intense lobbying efforts and generous support from some of the senior scientists (including Christiane Nusslein-Volhard), a day-care facility was finally established in 1992. Unfortunately, funding was limited; and Leptin and Korsching handled the administrative duties for the facility for the first couple years. But the efforts of these two women has paid off. The MPS has now recognized the need for this program and has established funds to guarantee the future of day-care at the institute. (Aldhous, p.1475)

The lack of child-care facilities in Germany has resulted in an increase in the rate of sick leave of female workers. This is due to the fact that they are usually secondary wage earners in the family and must stay home with the children if they are sick. (Neubauer) There has also been a decrease in the birthrate and a growing number of abortions in the former GDR. These trends are occurring because more and more young women in the five new lander have chosen employment instead of a family.

Education

Throughout history, education has played a key role in the obtaining of equality for women. The educational system in the former GDR provided excellent opportunities for both its female students and female professors. On average, women of the former GDR are better trained than women of the FRG. In 1991 the GDR was ranked first in the world with respect to literacy rates of adult women. (Goldberg, p. 35) It was also ranked third in the world in the proportion of women involved in higher education, falling only behind the United States and Canada. (Goldberg, p. 35) In 1975 women made up forty-nine percent of those involved in vocational training in the former GDR, and by 1989 only ten percent of

women in the former GDR did not have a college degree or a vocational certificate. (Maier, p. 268)

On average young women in the FRG have more years of education than young men because young women have had difficulty finding employment or job training. Instead of being idle, these young women decided instead to attend the university. (Neubaumer) In order to improve the German education system with respect to women earning advanced degrees, the government established the HSPII program in 1991. This program provided DM 700 million (\$400 million) to be used over the next ten years to increase the number of women in higher education who are working toward advanced degrees. (Aldhous, p. 1477) This program is especially designed to attract women who did not complete their education because they chose to raise a family. Some of the benefits of the program include child care allowances and grants for women who re-enter the educational system.

Although the government is trying to encourage women to pursue advanced degrees, the structure of the educational system still makes it very difficult for them to obtain such degrees, have a family, and establish a career. The reason is that one cannot obtain a PhD in the German educational system until one's early thirties. As a result, many women take time off to raise a family after receiving their degree but then have difficulty reentering the job market and establishing careers. Very many successful women have no children because of this. (Aldhous, p. 1477) Due to the small number of women with PhDs, there has been an extremely low number of women working as senior faculty members in the FRG. For example, in the five sciences of biology, physics, chemistry, mathematics and geoscience, women make up only two percent of the senior faculty. (Aldhous, p. 1475) This is one of the lowest levels in the world. (Aldhous, p. 1475) By way of contrast, until 1990 approximately thirty-five to forty percent of the academic faculty in the former GDR were women. Still, the "glass ceiling" was very apparent since only nine percent of these women faculty members were tenured. (Goldberg, p. 38) However, after reunification the level of women faculty dropped sharply because of the restructuring of the East German academic system. Hundreds of jobs were eliminated during this restructuring, and a disproportionate amount of job losers were women. (Aldhous, p. 1476)

Maniage and Family

Formerly, West Germans married later than East Germans. The primary reason for this was that people in the West were first more concerned with establishing financial security before thinking about marriage and children. East Germans, however, were encouraged to marry and have families by the government. Since 1989 there has been a large decline in the marriage rate in both areas of the country. For example, forty percent fewer couples were married in 1991 than in 1990. (Gugold) There has also been a significant decrease in the birth rate as well as an increase in the abortion rate. An increase has also been seen in the number of households with only one or two children and a decrease in those with three or more. Currently, 8.4 million married couples, out of a total of 19.5 million, are childless or no longer have children living at home. (Kappler and Grevel, p. 362) This trend has been occurring because women are reluctant to have children due to the difficulties of being employed and pursuing a career. (Junghans)

The federal government is conscious of the fact that it must encourage couples to have children in order to maintain its population at its current level. The government has therefore taken several steps to try to ensure this. Since 1992, it has mandated that if one parent stays at home to take care of the children, the couple will receive an allowance of DM 600 for up to 18 months. During this period of time, the nonworking parent cannot be dismissed from his or her job. (Kappler and Grevel, p. 363)

Unfortunately, domestic violence against women in the five new German lander has increased with reunification. One reason for this is the fact that the husband has traditionally been the breadwinner of

the family, and he feels that he should be entitled to make all of the major household decisions. This sometimes results in conflicts with women who were previously very independent and contributed forty percent of the family income. Frau Gugold has observed that, while there have been only twelve non-Germans killed in Germany since reunification in incidents related to xenophobia, 500 German women have been killed in incidents involving domestic violence.

The Future of Women in a Reunified Germany

Unfortunately, it seems that too many German women have been the losers in the reunification game. In order to effect change, German women must unite and actively campaign for rights and privileges related to employment, child-care and education. Currently progress is moving slowly due to "old" ideas and values and an unwillingness to change. On the other hand, women must become more flexible in the types of jobs they seek, and may have to sometimes accept jobs for which they are overqualified when confronted with unemployment. As Barbara Gugold observes, "Five decades of economic independence cannot be wiped out so easily."

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