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WOMEN IN EAST AND WEST GERMANY: VICTIMS OF DISCRIMINATION, HUMILIATION, DOMINATION?*

Petra Bläss**

DISCRIMINATION WHEREVER WOMEN LOOK

The situation of a majority of women in Germany has deteriorated since unification. Only in the unemployment figures do women occupy a leading position. At twenty percent, unemployment among women is twice as high as it is among men. If women do find employment, in many cases, it offers no security in case of illness or old age. In most spheres of public life, women are hopelessly underrepresented. In this respect, there has been a rapid alignment between East and West. Despite their experience in two very different social systems, women in both parts of Germany are feeling the effects of backward-looking policies in equal measure. Under the new version of the traditional division of labor, based on a hierarchy of the sexes, a woman's primary role is to be in the home with the family. In the labor market,

* The following are two essays by the same author. Petra Bläss delivered two separate speeches at the conference. First, Bläss reported on the status of women in Germany during a panel discussion. This presentation was one of a group of "case studies" on the current status of women in Central and Eastern Europe. The panel served as an introduction for the day; it provided a foundation upon which to build and from which to better understand the theoretical presentations which followed. Later in the day, Bläss lectured about feminism and parliament. We have separated the two presentations so the reader can distinguish between the case study and the more theoretical presentation on feminism and parliament.

** Member of German Parliament (representing Sachsen-Anhalt). I wish to thank Frances Olsen and Hermine De Soto for organizing the conference *Women in Central and Eastern Europe: Nationalism, Feminism and Possibilities for the Future* at UCLA and giving me the opportunity to speak about my experiences in parliament. I'm grateful to the sponsors: the UCLA Center for the Study of Women, the UCLA Center for Russian and Eastern European Studies, the UCLA Law School, and the Center for German and European Studies at the University of California at Berkeley.

women are needed merely as poorly paid part-time workers with no social security, or as a "hidden reserve" of labor.

Statistics illustrate women's marginal status in terms of economic power. Twenty-three percent of the female population in Western Germany have no income of their own. Moreover, sixty percent of the women who work outside the home do not earn a living wage. Women already account for sixty-five percent of the people out of work; in some regions the figure is seventy percent. Only forty-six percent of women are in jobs for which social insurance contributions are payable. The situation in Eastern Germany is equally bleak. At one time in Eastern Germany, ninety-one percent of women were employed, but now the process of deindustrialization and job-shedding in agriculture and service careers is having a particularly devastating impact on women. Most women are being squeezed out of the job market, and the ones who are left in the market face massive cutbacks in provisions which made it possible for women to combine motherhood with their careers. Economic restructuring in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) is clearly being carried out at women's expense. Patriarchy and capitalism have formed an (un)holy alliance as part of the policy of annexation that is being carried out by the Christian conservatives now in power.

But all of this is just one aspect of the discrimination women suffer every day. As women's economic power shrinks, we are witnessing a significant increase in violence against them and the reinforcement of patriarchal tendencies. By the hour, women in Germany are humiliated, mistreated, and raped. The number of unreported cases is immense, and only slowly is a social climate emerging in which even sexual harassment at work and marital rape are no longer regarded as trivial offenses.

PERPETUATION OF GENDERED ROLES: OUT OF A JOB, BUT NOT OUT OF WORK

The reality of unemployment has meant that the tasks that women have to do after working a second or third shift, if they had jobs to go to, remain: housework, looking after the children, and caring for sick or elderly members of the family. Essentially, women's workload depends on the availability and affordability of public services (*crèches*, kindergartens, nursing homes). Prior to unification, it was not uncommon for West German women to devote their entire lives to work in the home. Many women in Eastern Germany are now threatened by a similar fate. This may

be of greater concern to women in Eastern Germany because although there has been a radical change in attitudes in recent years in both Eastern and Western Germany, women in the East traditionally have attached greater significance to having a job than many women in the West. Moreover, down to the present day, attempts to give work in the home, so important for society, the same status as traditional gainful employment, thereby granting women greater autonomy with regard to social security at least, have failed.

Thus, as fewer and fewer families can afford to send their children to a crèche or kindergarten, more and more unemployed women keep their children at home. As a result of this fall in the demand for institutions such as kindergartens, many such institutions are being closed in a process which further threatens the mobility of women and impairs their prospects of being reintegrated into working life.

Additionally, because women with an income of their own are the exception and the majority of women are forced to depend on their husbands or partners to make provisions for eventualities such as sickness or old age, marriage is often degraded and becomes no more than an institution of social provision. For women, the result is complete dependence on a working husband or partner, social marginalization, and the threat of poverty if they cease to be married. Half of the female pensioners in Western Germany receive only a small pension. It is therefore women, in particular, who face the prospect of spending their old age in poverty.

REPRODUCTIVE FREEDOM: NO END TO THE ABORTION DEBATE?

For the second time in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany, the Federal Constitutional Court has overruled a decision on abortion taken by a majority vote in Parliament and has called for more restrictive regulations. What is new, however, is that these regulations now also apply to women who, in the GDR, experienced a system for twenty years which permitted the termination of pregnancy in the first three months, on whatever grounds, without compulsory counselling beforehand. Moreover, the Unification Treaty pledged better protection not only for "the unborn," but also for women's right to self-determination than previously had been afforded in East or West Germany. Instead, by reinforcing women's duty to give birth, the

Constitutional Court has suggested that a woman's right to self-determination can be overridden by the state's duty to fulfill its obligation to protect the unborn.

The most important aspect of this ruling, and of the laws that will follow in its wake, is that it reflects attempts to characterize the ideologically tainted abortion debate as "the killing of human life" and creates a climate in which it is impossible, or at least extremely difficult, for women to freely choose whether to complete a pregnancy or have an abortion.

The Court's aim is to give society a discriminatory image of women as lacking not only a sense of responsibility, but also the ability to make their own decisions. It follows from this reasoning that women must be driven by the state, exercising its monopoly on the use of force, into the embrace of "true happiness" — motherhood. This sentiment has a long tradition.

EQUAL RIGHTS, NOW!

In the Unification Treaty of 1990, the German Parliament was called on to promote "the further development of legislation pertaining to equal rights for men and women." Four years later, what is the situation of German women in practice?

The recession has been, and continues to be, taken as a pretext for further bolstering a division of labor based on a hierarchy of the sexes and, by propagating a "new image of the woman," for tying women in the new federal state to their tasks at home with the children. Women are still regarded as a reservoir of cheap labor to be drawn on at will in line with fluctuations in business activity.

The government has enacted a few ostensibly progressive laws; however, the laws fail to accomplish any structural change and the laws themselves do not reflect new feminist ideals. For example, the Federal Government has pushed through an "equality law" intended to promote women within the public service. This small advance over previous legislation is based on adaptations to male standards of work and achievement and subjugates women's needs to economic concerns. This is not the right way to achieve genuine promotion of women.

Women in the Federal Republic of Germany still have a long way to go before they can participate on equal footing with men at all levels of society. A law designed to correct the structural inequality of women and to remove systematic discrimination

against them in public life, at work, and in the family is long overdue.

