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# FEMINIST POLITICS — EXPERIENCE IN PARLIAMENT

Petra Bläss

“Feminism” means the identification and representation of women’s interests. A feminist perspective examines social conditions with reference to the status of the female sex. Feminist politics aim to abolish gender-based differences in power and status and to achieve true equality of the sexes. This goes beyond formal equality of opportunity; it is not merely a question of equality before the law. A pure equal opportunities policy enables women to take on male roles, but often at the expense of their female identity and motherhood. If women are guaranteed equal rights on a formal basis only, their role as (potential) mothers acts as a filter in the selection process, with the result being that, despite their equal rights, women are excluded from countless careers and fields of activity. Equal opportunities policies must therefore take account of the biological and socio-psychological differences between men and women, and must seek to guarantee equal rights to women while expressly protecting women’s special needs.

Admittedly, legislation in the form of maternity protection already exists in some areas, but these measures are inadequate and do little to change the essentially male bias of society. True equality for women in every area of life is a prerequisite for women’s emancipation.

We have not overlooked the fact that the social deformation caused by thousands of years of patriarchy also has turned the perpetrators into victims. Condemned to be heroes, locked into a rationality which exploits man and nature, and alienated from vital areas of human life, men, as well as women, are the victims of their own history. Feminization therefore does not promote women’s dominance over men, but seeks to end the domination of one sex over the other. The aim of true equality is to create the preconditions for women to exercise their right to develop

their potential in any way they choose, something which men have always taken for granted.

Even though men have determined the course of events for so long, we are not trying to make women more like men. Instead, we believe that both women and men have to change. This is why we deliberately use the term "feminization." We mean that our society must adapt to reflect women's attitudes toward life, women's experience, and their cultural heritage, which, until now, have been suppressed. In dialectical terms, which are comparatively free of masculine connotations, antipatriarchal politics are merely a first negation, signifying a victory over patriarchy and a movement toward a new way of life for women and men.

"Before this objective can be achieved, the interests of women as a disadvantaged group must be identified and contrasted with those of men, who are the privileged group. Gender-based inequality must be revealed. Men will have to relinquish their privileged position as women achieve emancipation, but this will bring them great benefits on a personal level. The fact remains that men's opportunities to achieve personal fulfillment are just as restricted by the patriarchal system as women's are. Emancipation, in our view, must therefore be achieved by society as a whole."<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of antipatriarchal politics is to reveal gender-inequalities and to eliminate the privileges which men enjoy on account of gender. We believe that one of the most important objectives of equal opportunities policy must be to abolish male privilege; to fight for equal rights for women in the workplace, in political life, and in all areas of society; and to break down the patriarchal structures which continue to be present in personal relations between the sexes. Women's suffrage, women's constitutional equality, and, in the former socialist countries, women's far-reaching equality of opportunity in the workplace, were all fought for and achieved by women who believed in these ideals. Yet these battles for equality, no matter how indispensable, can only play a limited role. They represent a negation of patriarchy, for they demonstrate clearly what women are no longer prepared to accept. However, they are rarely a positive demonstration of what women actually want.

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1. "No good government without women," Manifesto of the Independent Women's League, at 15.

A feminist policy which fails to acknowledge the interaction of sex and class and ignores the fact that oppression, exploitation, and alienation of women are an integral part of every form of exploitation and oppression will fail to tackle the underlying causes of the subjugation of women and cannot hope to achieve its aims. On the other hand, the bitter experiences of the movements of the Left and, in particular, the state-organized efforts under socialism, have demonstrated clearly that socialist politics do not automatically overcome gender-based inequalities. However, the perpetuation of both patriarchal structures and conservative images of women and family inevitably results in a deformation of society which contradicts the humanistic aims of the socialist movement and paralyzes its development.

We regard feminist policy not as a sub-department of the campaign for social justice, but as an independent movement with its own purpose which transcends conventional definitions of left-wing politics. Like the ecology movement, the women's movement intersects with socialist politics, so that as socialist women we can work to promote feminist objectives within a party like the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) and, at the same time, work within the women's movement to achieve socialist objectives. Equal importance is attached to both of these areas of activity. By recognizing the importance of women's independent politics, a modern socialist party proves its ability to accept diverse approaches to a common goal. In order to prove its own commitment to the principle of feminization, it should not only include women's issues on its agenda but also should modify its own political ways.

Many other demands, which we express in our policy for women, have emerged as a result of the campaign for social and economic equality. These demands also reflect a specific form of feminist social theory which critically examines our civilization as a whole and attempts to promote new ways of life and new methods of production. I believe that feminism is rapidly becoming a wellspring of modern socialist theory and policy development, and this, in my view, is to be applauded.

#### THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN EAST GERMANY — WHICH WAY FORWARD?

The promising start made by the women's movement in the GDR in autumn 1989 undoubtedly set standards for the future. Women from all walks of life, fearing that their interests would

(yet again) be ignored at a time of radical social change, joined together, united by their determination to stand up for their rights. On December 3, 1989, approximately 1000 women, chanting slogans and banging saucepans, took over the "Volksbuhne" theater in East Berlin to launch the Independent Woman's League (IWL). The adoption of the IWL's manifesto, "You can't build a state without women," was welcomed with wild applause, although in practice women soon found that they had to fight to make themselves heard in the male-dominated political forums. Women throughout the GDR fought for and won the right to speak at the Round Tables, thus ensuring that women's issues were included on the agenda. For the first time, feminist theory and politics, which were officially taboo in the GDR, gained greater publicity. There was a wealth of opportunity for enthusiastic and committed women to become actively involved — in fledgling women's projects, in the Round Tables, in the newly established equal opportunities organizations, or as representatives of the IWL in the Modrow Government and the Central Electoral Commission. In (almost) all of these areas women found that they were able to contribute and make things happen.

There was a rude awakening in March 1990, however, when the elections to the People's Chamber took place. The IWL was treated so shabbily by its alliance partners, the Greens, that when the seats in parliament were allocated — and there were depressingly few of those — the IWL was left with virtually no representation. New conservative power structures were soon established which very quickly put an end to the program of renewal in the GDR, and threw our original concept of a feminist awakening into further disarray. Suddenly, we found that all of the premises on which we had based our ideas were being called into question, and the social achievements which had seemed secure — such as the comprehensive child-care system and the rights of working parents — were now threatened.

East German women have not put up the massive resistance for which many people had hoped. The euphoria of the democratic revolution is a thing of the past. Yet, I believe that women can do much to campaign against the rollback which is now under way. Extensive research and studies have shown that the women citizens of the new federal states are not prepared to seek happiness exclusively in hearth and home.

Feminists are campaigning, many of them singlehandedly, in the Bundestag, in the Land parliaments, and at the local level.

Committed equal opportunities commissioners are working actively on the spot. Women's projects and refuges have been set up; this has taken a great deal of hard work and has often provoked conflicts with the authorities. Feminist round tables and discussion groups have been set up at various levels.

The women's movement is constantly confronted with the conflict between autonomy and integration. Feminists in East Germany promote a double-handed strategy to deal with this problem. First, women should work on consciousness raising within women-only structures in order to break free of the behavioral patterns and constraints imposed by patriarchy. Second, and at the same time, women should work through cooperation and integration at parliamentary and at political levels to bring about changes in the structure of society.

The glib assumption that women have withdrawn from public life needs to be examined more closely. It cannot be denied that this now appears to be the trend, but it has many different causes and, in my view, is not simply women's way of adapting to the new situation. Women's experience in (already) inflexible structures, such as parliaments and commissions, has made them feel yet again that they cannot change anything, and they have now given up hope. What is more, their energies are sapped by the great effort needed to cope with the new problems arising in daily life.

It must be difficult for outsiders to understand the scale of the changes that have occurred in every area of life — the new employment opportunities, or lack of them; the new health and education system; and the dramatic increase in the cost of living. The political commitment of women working on a range of specific issues — in support groups for the unemployed, in tenant's associations, on behalf of foreigners, and in single parent groups — should not be underestimated.

The status of the Independent Women's League (IWL) has now changed; it is no longer a political association which could stand for election under GDR law, but is now a registered society with a political agenda. At its Fourth Congress in November 1992 the IWL discussed its interpretation of "feminism" and possible ways of translating its ideas into effective policies. Early on, IWL members decided to work through the political institutions as well as at project levels, well aware that this kind of strategy could open up new opportunities but also could cause conflict. At the heart of the matter is the controversy about our parlia-

mentary work. Should feminist policy approaches be implemented through established hierarchical structures, and if so, to what extent? It is very challenging to represent a political philosophy which claims to have a global approach, which criticizes patriarchy and calls the established division of power between the sexes into question, and at the same time to be involved in day-to-day politics, at whatever level. Our main objective must be to promote a feminist awareness to counteract the misogyny of today's politics. In my view, this also means that we need to demonstrate how to create nonhierarchical structures and work together in harmony and solidarity. We can do this by networking between our existing groups and by cooperating on joint projects. The softly-softly approach hitherto undertaken by women in East and West in their joint campaign against the emerging rollback will be successful only if the barriers both inside and outside parliament can be overcome.

#### FEMINISM IN PARLIAMENT: POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS

Feminist policy approaches, in my view, mean defining and working through the fundamental gender-specific division which determines life within our society. Unless we succeed in eliminating this division, we will not create a humane and just world. The oppression of women is a pillar of the power structure in any society which is based on exploitation, violence, and alienation. Feminism, in my view, means revealing the patriarchal structures which underpin overt discrimination against women; it means eliminating male privileges and campaigning for equal rights for women in every area of society.

It seems to me that feminist politics are an extremely unwelcome intrusion into Bonn's male-dominated political arena. The motivation — and the legitimation — for my work has always been the determination with which women in the GDR rose up in autumn 1989 and demanded their rights. This also means we cannot remain content merely pursuing entrenched and outworn policies for women which have now become institutionalized, for such policies fail to address the underlying structures of society which are the root of women's problems.