MAX-PLANCK-GESELLSCHAFT

MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY WORKING PAPERS

Working Paper No. 85

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EXPERIENCES OF DEVALUATION: WORK, GENDER AND IDENTITY IN EASTERN GERMANY

Halle / Saale 2006
ISSN 1615-4568

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Experiences of Devaluation:

Work, Gender and Identity in eastern Germany[1]

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Abstract

The paper starts from the observation that differences in gender regimes between East and West Germany are still commonly referred to in eastern Germany. More concretely, men and women share positive images of the socialist gender model especially with regards to the working mother. This reference to the past is different from that in other postsocialist countries where the evaluation of the socialist gender model seems to be much more ambiguous. I argue that the specific East German interpretations can only be understood within the framework of former partition and later unification. Changes in gender regimes were predominately experienced in a hierarchical situation and often as imposed by West Germans. In this situation the socialist ideal of female integration into the labour force acquired more power as a resource in identity construction than in other postsocialist countries. Experiences during transformation are often perceived as a devaluation of women's paid and unpaid due to the import of a conservative gender model from western Germany. In the almost complete absence of other positive references to the socialist past, this interpretation gains in importance for identity construction. Current public debates about the need to restructure the German labour market as well as educational system contribute further to the centrality of gender images.

[1] This working paper is based on fieldwork which I did as part of my research project on "Changing Social Security Relations in Eastern Germany" at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. An earlier version was presented at the Fifth Nordic Conference on the Anthropology of Post-Socialism, 2005 April 22-24. I would like to thank Anja Peleikis and Birgit Huber for comments on an earlier draft.

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Introduction

In December 2003 on occasion of an informal Christmas get-together, a former natural scientist now working for a social project advising young people in their search for professional training, recalled the following story. During socialism the agrarian research institute in which she worked at that time had developed a new sort of very fast cooking potato. She spoke about the lack of success in exporting it to the West, and added that was because:

> "The West German housewives did not know what to do with them: if they cook potatoes, they put them in the water and go off to phone a friend; and after half an hour our good potatoes were already overcooked." (DN 12/12/2003)

Everybody at the table laughed or nodded in agreement. The image of the West German housewife was obviously not only understood, but also shared by all (mostly female) participants. The story entails an ironic hint to an allegedly social life that left West German housewives with enough time to phone (for hours) with their (female) friends because they do not engage in employment.

This was one of many occasions when during my fieldwork eastern German people referred to their imagery of the West German housewife. It almost always entails a hint to the non-engagement with paid work of West German women and sometimes as above also a hint to them being lazy, as not even fulfilling their duties as women caring for their families. This sometimes ironic and sometimes serious reference is widely shared, a kind of standard local knowledge. Thus, I began to wonder what makes for the centrality of this imagery in the East German interpretation of unification.

Gender, it has been argued, is a crucial category for understanding and explaining postsocialist changes (Gal and Kligman 2000). Being aware of this literature, I was nevertheless surprised when, during fieldwork in eastern Germany, gender was so constantly and explicitly referred to in everyday conversation. In addition to the multitude of situations in which this reference occurred, it was most often mentioned in comparison to West Germany. People in eastern Germany seemed to evaluate the socialist gender regime of the past as almost entirely positive. This kind of straightforward manner of reference as well as its content in eastern Germany was very different from experiences I had in Hungary and Romania, where I had conducted fieldwork in the past. It also differed from what is described in the literature on gender discourse in other postsocialist countries, where the ambiguity of the socialist legacy regarding "women's liberation" is emphasised (Einhorn 1993). This literature is much more in accordance with my past observations than with what I found in eastern Germany, where the discourse apparently differs from that in other postsocialist countries.

The perceived difference of gender systems gains importance as part of a felt sudden and (for some) unrequested imposition of western democracy. Despite huge monetary transfers from western to eastern Germany and large-scale improvements in infrastructure, housing, and general living standards, economic inequality remained. This imbalance constitutes a constant disappointment of the hopes of many, and in addition, public discourse contributed to a degree of psychological exclusion from the now unified state. Against these dividing barriers, as Staab (1998: 159) phrases it, "East Germans soon began to establish their own excluding boundaries which marked their identities off from that of Western Germany." In this situation the socialist gender model of the working woman became one of the few positive features of a newly emerging eastern

German identity. With the incorporation of the former state socialist East Germany into West Germany, not many other material or ideological identity markers remained. In the 1990s the media supported discourse on eastern German specificities – such as the so-called "*Ostalgie*"[3] shows – concentrated on specific consumer items produced in the GDR. With the disappearing of East German brands and the ageing of people who still know them, one might suspect that a specific East German identity may vanish as well. But fieldwork shows that images about East and West Germans are very much alive even after more than ten years of unification. However, the perceived differences are no longer focused on consumer goods. In the absence of decisive material differences, references to different gender constructions were among the most common distinctions made by (male and female) East Germans.

While the specific present-day eastern German images of the socialist gender order develop in the framework of German unification, they do not lack a concrete basis. The interpretations of experiences after unification are often linked to the differences between family and labour market policies in the former GDR and FRG. In the hierarchical situation of unification, experiences in the new labour market and with new western German superiors are often interpreted in the framework of former different gender attitudes. Eastern Germans feel that western German practices and norms devaluate the paid work of women and especially mothers. In addition some public discourses on the former state socialist day care system are felt as devaluating the unpaid female care work within the GDR system, while in other discourses calls are made for reforms that resemble that system in some elements. Within these contradicting messages the former socialist gender model of combining motherhood and employment gains in positive evaluation while eastern Germans missing its official recognition. Through the constant reproduction in discourse gender images remain a vivid element of self-description.

In order to make my argument, I will first give a brief introduction to the two German gender regimes as they existed prior to unification and then describe some of the changes after unification, especially with regard to paid and unpaid women's work. I will go on to explore how the changes were experienced and interpreted by men and women in eastern Germany against the historical background.

Women's Work in the Two Germanys before and after Unification

The already indicated differences in gender ideologies and practices have their roots in the existence of two German states after the Second World War. The rather permeable early post-war demarcation line quickly developed into a border that also marked the line between western capitalism and Soviet socialism in the emerging Cold War. From the beginning the two new states developed quite distinct gender regimes. In the effort to enhance the difference, both countries were somewhat extreme in their policies, even in their respective political alliances.

The most obvious difference regarding gender was female participation in the labour market. The ideological assumption was in both cases gender equality, but while the GDR opted for a model that came closest to a "universal breadwinner model", West Germany followed the male breadwinner model (Fraser 1997). While the GDR tried to ever enhance female employment rates,

[3] *Ostalgie* shows, as they were called, and various other formats, such as TV documentaries, movies and literature, thematised the sudden loss of East German brands that was often experienced as a loss of personal and collective identity. In German the phenomenon of nostalgia for the socialist past, that is, remembering "what was good in the GDR"; is often labelled *Ostalgie* (*"ost"* means "east" in German) and mostly has a pejorative connotation.

the West German conservative welfare state generally relegated women to an unpaid homemaking and men to employment (Esping-Anderson 2003). With more and more women entering the labour market and the increasing influence of feminist debates, this model until the late 1980s modified into a male breadwinner model with female supplementary income *"Zuverdienst"* (see also Pfau-Effinger 1998, Crompton 1999, Rosenbaum and Thimm 2006). Nevertheless public and feminist debates in West Germany still put much emphasis on acknowledgement of female care work. The opposition between the two political models of equity were accompanied by ideological loaded differences regarding parenting. Both distancing themselves from fascist models, East Germany rejected the model of the housewife while West Germany, with its conservative family model, largely refrained from intervention in education and family matters.[4]

Before unification, these policy configurations clearly shaped women's lives and labour market roles. The most obvious difference could be seen in employment rates and working hours. Throughout their lifetime, East German women generally had higher employment rates and more working hours than their West German counterparts. Women's participation in the labour force was, at 89%, among the highest in the world. In fact, the GDR had one of the highest rates of female employment even among socialist states topped only by the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia (Einhorn 1993: 266, Rudd 2000: 519).[5] However throughout socialism the labour market remained gender segregated with women concentrated in less well paid jobs in administration, education, public services and caring professions.[6]

The decisive element in encouraging women to work was the massive development of public child care. Especially for children below the age of three, attendance in nurseries in the GDR was extremely high compared to West Germany as well as in comparison to other socialist states.[7] At least in the cities, most children were cared for in public facilities from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. This enabled parents who worked the so-called "normal shift" from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. to drop off and pick up their children from child care without extra help. In extreme cases, children could be accommodated in weekly crèches, where they could stay all week including the nights. In addition, special programmes, which, for example, enabled mothers to study, constantly furthered the qualification of women.

This policy remained even after a decline in birth rates, while other socialist governments introduced more "traditional" family policies like generous maternity leaves (for Hungary see Haney 1999, for Czechoslovakia Haskova 2005). It was only in the 1970s that the concentration on day care changed in favour of the introduction of more "conservative" measures thought to make it easier to combine one's duties as a mother and a worker. The GDR followed herein the example of other socialist countries and introduced the so-called "baby-year" as a main feature that allowed mothers to stay at home for one year after giving birth to a child. Nevertheless, the principle that both men and women should engage in paid work and be given the opportunity to do so was not

[4] For a more detailed comparison especially of family policy and kinship models see Borneman (1991).
[5] For more detailed accounts of the influences of these policies on women's life courses see Merkel (1994) and Tippach-Schneider (1999).
[6] For the general gender regime in socialist countries see Verdery (1996), for socialist patterns in industry see Shapiro (1992).
[7] In 1989 in the GDR 80.2% of all children in the respective age group were cared for in crèches, as for example compared to 4.4 % in Poland or 8.6% in Hungary (Einhorn 1993: 262).

affected. Consequently, nearly all mothers combined work and family simultaneously (Trappe 1996).[8]

In contrast, throughout that period, West German policy deterred women, especially mothers, from paid work. In 1989, women's participation in the labour market in West Germany had reached only 56% and a large portion of that was part-time work. In the East, women's participation rate varied little in dependence of marital or parenting status, whereas in West Germany, women's engagement in paid work was very sensitive to marriage and age of children. After having given birth and taken maternity leave, only a small percentage of mothers returned to work at all and most of them only on part-time basis. In 1991 in West Germany more than half of all mothers (57.3%) with children under the age of three counted in official statistics as "persons without income."[9] This situation was accompanied by a chronic lack of public child care facilities and schools, whose programs only lasted a half-day and lacked after school programs. These policies were further supported by tax policies that taxed a second income severely. Indeed, while the GDR, even among the state socialist societies, had one of the highest rates of female integration in the labour market and public day-care coverage, it was the opposite situation in the FRG, where even in comparison to many other western countries female participation rates and public childcare coverage had always been low. These differences between the former GDR and FRG form one crucial dimension for understanding the eastern German interpretations after unification.

After 1990, as state socialism collapsed, the West German state literally took over East Germany, setting in motion a rapid transformation of East German political and economic institutions, including employment structures. The majority of East Germans had troublesome experiences in the course of transformation, especially regarding unemployment and the ideological devaluation of their socialist past. The prominent interpretation of many of these experiences in a gendered framework of devaluation in explicit or implicit comparison to western Germany is remarkable. Following unification, amongst others, East German women's employment status changed markedly due to a combination of factors, including policy changes, and an acute labour market crisis. During the 1990s, overall sex segregation in the labour market increased in the east because of changes in occupational structures as well as changes in sex composition within professions. Men in the East increased their engagement in occupations that had previously been female dominated (such as social workers, bank employees, cooks), while at the same time occupations dominated by men became increasingly closed to women (Rosenfeld and Trappe 2002, see also Nickel 2000). Women's labour force participation declined from almost 90% to 72%, but still exceeded that reported for western Germany by ten percent. Another substantial difference remained between mothers in eastern and western Germany. In 2000, 30% of women with at least one child under the age of 4 were employed in the east, compared to only 15% in the west.[10]

The labour market behaviour corresponded to contemporary attitudes concerning gender roles. In 2000, in the east, both men and women expressed favourable attitudes towards a mother's

[8] I use this description to indicate how widespread some life patterns were and do not want to indicate here that everybody was content with that development. Especially in literature and theatre the mismatch between socially prescribed roles and subjective experience would be expressed (Sieg 1995). The contradiction is most often phrased around the term of a "double burden" of women.

[9] The social policy facilitating part-time employment had the effect that the percentage of mothers with children of 0-14 years grew around 10% from 1972 to 2000 in West Germany, while in the same period the percentage of mothers working fulltime halved (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend 2003: 245).

[10] These figures changed until 2000, but are still not the same: 49.3% of mothers with small children in the West and 35.1% in the East were without income in 2000 (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend 2003: 245).

employment, while in the west, women expressed significantly less favourable attitudes toward a mother's employment and men were by far the most opposed to mothers working. This general pattern endured throughout the 1990s with growing divergence between east and west since unification (Rosenfeld, Trappe and Gornick 2004: 113 -114). This growing gap between east and west regarding gender attitudes hints at the fact that differences are not disappearing, but still exist or are even gaining in importance.[11] I argue that in order to understand this development, one has to have a closer look at how the restructuring of the economy is experienced and understood in everyday life.

The Fieldsite

The data presented here are based on fieldwork in Rostock, a city of about 200,000 inhabitants on the Baltic Sea. The focal point of my research was a former large socialist enterprise in the port of Rostock. Following unification it became a public enterprise with currently only about 150 employees left. It now mainly manages the buildings and infrastructure on the vast territory of Rostock port. During fieldwork I spent one month in each department and depending on their respective special tasks, I was more or less included in the work process. I also joined some of the employees in going to work by bike or train. In addition to that I did biographical interviews and approached a random sample of 23 employees with a questionnaire. The kind of fieldsite has some influence on the data presented here. A relatively large proportion of employees is female because, as noted above, administration was female dominated during socialism. Also, the workforce is comparatively old, meaning most employees started their work life during socialism. This is due to the greater job protection; the so-called social plans that guided lay-offs favoured older people. Outside the enterprise I took part in many everyday activities in the city such as leisure activities and sports and followed two social projects (one of which is the one mentioned in the beginning, the other one a non-profit café run by Protestant women). As the experience of gender differences was a recurrent topic in all different kinds of settings, I include here fieldnotes I took outside the enterprise as well.[12] In the following I will delineate the most frequently named dimensions of the interpretations with regard to female paid and unpaid work. Although paid and unpaid work is connected, for reasons of convenience I separate them here. I will first talk about experiences that centre on the question of women's professional work and then their on unpaid work at home.

Experiences of Devaluation of Women's Professional Work

In any given society, gendered patterns like the ones presented above with regards to the labour market are more or less widely shared knowledge. In addition, gendered patterns might be more or less contested and politicised. In the case of the GDR, public sources often made reference to the socialist efforts for gender equality and contrasted it with the West German situation. This policy of stressing the difference surely contributes to the very explicit reference to the above described

[11] Although I am not concerned with the influence of these policies and attitudes on gender arrangements within families here, there is some evidence that they had a lasting effect. For example, Gottschall and Henninger (2004) found in their research that only eastern Germany showed "structurally different arrangements" from a male bread winner model. Similarly, in time budget studies there are some hints to a slightly more egalitarian division of labour within households (Rosenfeld, Trappe and Gornick 2004: 119, cited there also Künzler, Walter, Reichart and Pfister 2001).

[12] The stationary phase of fieldwork took place from February to October 2003, followed by shorter visits until December 2006. In the following, quotations from the research diary are marked with DN and date.

different patterns of labour market integration in the former GDR and FRG. As stated in the beginning, various age and occupational groups made reference to these patterns often and in different circumstances. Most often they clearly disapproved of the West German model of housewives and experiences in different situations were easily interpreted in the framework of pre-existing experiences. The continuity and mobilisation of such knowledge in identity construction was strengthened as only few people had experiences that would have put their imagery in question.

In the following I will delineate different aspects of that imagery. The first is the reference to female employment in general, and especially to East German working mothers as opposed to West German housewives. A second field is the interpretation of transformation as devaluation of women in male-dominated sectors, and the non-promotion of women into leading positions today as compared to the past. These experiences are all expressed in terms of negative consequences of the introduction of West German norms at least by generations who lived most of their life in the GDR. This is aggravated by the simultaneous feeling of a devaluation of the unpaid care work women did in the GDR in contemporary German discourse, which will be described in the last section.

The Imagery of the West German Housewife and the East German Working Mother

As highlighted in the entry story about the fast cooking 'socialist potato', the image of the West German woman as a housewife and probably also as lazy (she phoned with a friend for hours while cooking potatoes) is an especially strong one. Instead of slowly vanishing after unification, the imagery was sometimes even reinforced. For example, an office clerk admitted that during the socialist era she believed that in West Germany, working men used to rush home at noon to their cooking housewives. Shortly after unification her brother moved to the West, and she learned that "they do not even cook. They sit at home, and the men even do the shopping" (DN, 8/30/2004). As in the potato story, this account does not reveal any critique of gendered division of household task. Instead cooking is seen as an uncontested female obligation. Thus, in her view although West German women are not employed and "sit at home"; they also do not fulfil their duty as housewives. This statement suggests a general acceptance of the "traditional" division of household labour, which is nevertheless connected with the moral obligation of both partners to paid work.[13]

Likewise telling were instances of discursive inclusion of the ethnographer during fieldwork. For example, in more than one instance people identified me as being eastern German when they realised that I had small children, but was obviously nevertheless working. For example, in a conversation with an elderly woman, after having talked a lot about her own life, she asked me about mine and when the topic of having children and working came up, she suddenly shouted to her husband who was in the kitchen: "She comes from the West, but she has very reasonable opinions" (DN 05/22/2003). This indicates that many eastern Germans do not suspect that western German mothers work and as in the example, they often clearly disapproved of this non-working.

Another, rather counterintuitive, occasion in which that imagery came up was around eating in the enterprise canteen. When I talked about my observation of some superiors not eating in the

[13] In time budget studies, married working women in the GDR claimed to spend 1.17 hours a day with the preparation of meals, while husbands stated that they devote 0.18 hours a day to this task. Similarly, doing the shopping and going to service or administration organisations took 28 minutes per day for wives and 15 minutes for husbands. Both men and women approved of the more or less traditional division of labour. Only 2% of both sexes said that they were unsatisfied with this way of dividing labour (Winkler 1990: 269-271).

canteen, a common eastern German explanation was to link this fact with the occupational status of women. The argument ran that western German men were used to going home for a cooked meal either at noon or in the evening. Like the potato story, one female department head ended her comment with the rhetorical question: "Perhaps their wives cook them something in the evening?" (DN, 8/20/2003, see also Thelen 2006). Men widely share the opinions given by women and during fieldwork, men mentioned them as often as women did. In addition, it is not only when asked directly that men refer to the specific differences in gender images after the political changes.

This widely shared image of the West German housewife is contrasted to the hard-working women of the GDR. One very typical example mentioned again by men and women alike are conflictive conversations with their western German relatives. In the eastern German description of such encounters, older western German women showed envy about high pensions received by their eastern German female relatives in comparison to themselves. My female informants commented: "but we also worked our whole lives", and men did the same: "but our women also worked their whole lives", both implying that their western German counterparts did not engage in paid work. Western Germans often followed up these comments with inquiries as to how the eastern Germans had managed to balance family obligations and wage labour. These statements and stories are always told with pride. Having worked despite having children is seen as an achievement and one of the few things to be proud of even after 1989.

Interpreting Transformation in Terms of a New Gender Regime

Many informants interpret unification as a challenge to the socialist gender model. A revealing incident was when a female employee in her late 50s who worked in the finance department out of the blue told me: "You know what I do not like about this system? – The position of the woman in society." (DN, 05/20/2003). As this statement did not develop out of any other communication, it seemed to be something she wanted to tell me as someone working on "postsocialist transformation".

In a similar situation a male janitor, aged 51, described in quite similar terms what he sees as a disadvantage of the transformation. His statement develops out of a longer story in which he started with the comment that in general he was happy about the political changes, because, as he said: "I always had problems with the communists". He then went on to comment on what he saw as the diminishing role of people in political decisions since 1989. Then he paused and continued: "(…) and you know, what else bothers me? – The relation between man and woman in this society. Before, in the GDR, it was normal: the woman worked normally." In both cases the speaker uses the classic socialist wording of "(man and) woman in society" without any irony in tone or gesture. Both really meant what they said. In the last part of his statement he refers to general acceptance of employed women in the GDR society. He then went on to tell about his experience in the workers' council and with a potential new western German investor:

> "Today you have quotas for everything. When I was in the workers' council, if a woman was on the list and she only got one vote, she was nevertheless a member. And, you know Mrs. Müller [another female employee who worked in a job generally considered typically male], she normally worked with us and she has two children, who were small at that time. Then came a *Wessi* [a western German] who wanted to take us [his department] over; he could not understand that she worked regularly with us." (DN 08/20/2003)

He mentions a working mother in his male-dominated department who worked despite of having small children. He adds that the potential new western German owner was, to say the least, surprised at this fact. In his statement, he uses the usually pejorative term '*Wessi*' for him and it becomes obvious that he disapproves of his attitude towards the female colleague. From such a description it is not a long way to the suspicion that women would not have had much of a future if a change in management would have taken place.

Generally, people believe that western Germans do not like to employ mothers. Another female employee in her late 50s and mother of three said in conversation that, were she to have children now, she would choose not to have three. She and her colleague agreed that as a "woman you have no professional chances *(Berufschancen)* anymore." Her colleague added that she is happy that her daughter is with the police, "because that is safe" and when I asked if she believed that her daughter as mother would otherwise be unemployed she replied: "Yes, sure or they would send you off after the legally fixed times. You hear that often enough" (DN 05/20/2003). Ten years earlier Rudd (2000) already found similar interpretations of labour market exclusion experienced by mothers in eastern Germany. Since then these evaluations do not seem to diminish, rather on the contrary, with an ever more insecure labour market in the background, eastern Germans relate even more positively to the past gender model, making almost no reference to negative features such as the obligation to work (seemingly more prominently mentioned in the beginning of the 1990s).

Additional features mentioned by my informants are related to a perceived new emphasis on physical attractiveness for female employees and distrust in their abilities to express authority in leading positions or generally male-dominated professions. Regarding the first, a rather heavy woman in her 50s for example once pointed to herself and said: "Look at me, I will not get another job anymore" and she added that this was different in the GDR. In a similar way, a male janitor explained the failure of his daughter on the labour market. She is a single mother who after having been pregnant "did not lose the weight again and this is also a problem today, because the bosses do not want that" (DN 08/18/2003), because, as he saw it, "in the new times attractiveness counts". The perception that women's physical attractiveness is becoming more important than actual performance again devalues her professional abilities. Thus, women in eastern Germany often feel their work as devalued because they want to be remunerated for their work and not because of their gender or because of physical attractiveness. While this is probably true everywhere, the framework of unification makes it easier to externalise reasons and find excuses for personal failure in the labour market in the terms of a 'new and oppressive' gender regime.

With regards to managerial skills, unemployed female professionals with experience in leading positions often interpreted their failure to rejoin the labour market as a result of the mistrust of western German managers in their abilities. One such woman from the social project for the youth reported being asked several times in interviews conducted by western German managers: "Do you believe you are capable of taking on a leading position?" (DN 05/05/2003). She interpreted this question as posed to her because of her gender and saw an underlying assumption of the western German male manager that she would lack the self-confidence necessary for a leading position. Concerning male dominated professions, a female civil engineer in the construction department of the enterprise for example reported that since unification it was much more difficult for her to be accepted as an expert in meetings. She attributed this difficulty to the attitude of western Germans who dominate leading positions in the construction sector.

Another aspect in the quotation given above is the reference to equity policy, introduced by West German labour law. The janitor's negative view on this subject is shared by the female head of the workers' council in the enterprise. She thinks it is "terrible" and "*Wessi*-like" (typically western German) if she is praised in union gatherings as being eastern German and female (DN, 07/25/2003). The explicit reference to instruments of gender mainstreaming policies or general gender awareness is important, because it is evaluated again as a western German imposition. Referring to the past, the evaluation and advancement of female employees is viewed as to have been a gender-neutral acknowledgement of achievements. The other way round, if female employees are not promoted, this is also attributed to the new western German gender regime. This experience is re-enforced, because it is a very typical situation that the only western Germans in an eastern German enterprise are in superior positions. Thus, eastern German employees experience employment decisions by western German superiors. That contributes to the awareness of East-West differences by eastern Germans, while they may go almost unnoticed for western Germans.

In this respect the studied enterprise is quite typical. The highest manager is a western German, four other persons in higher positions are from western Germany, and the remaining workforce is local. Since there has been little hiring and the desire to reduce the workforce is prevalent, new employees are often a topic of general discussion. One topic in these discussions is gender. For example, one middle-aged female employee asked me: "Did you notice already that [the manager] only hires young men and no women?" (DN 12/10/2003). Another female employee present in the conversation nodded in agreement. Similarly, during fieldwork a recurrent topic was the choice of a male western German as the new head of the financial department instead of the female eastern German assistant of the former female head who retired. One of the female clerks in the department commented: "They don't take women in such positions anymore. That's over." (DN 05/13/2003). Her pessimistic comment indicates that during socialism, women had better chances to be promoted into leading positions. The woman concerned was not as explicit, but she also attributed her failure to her gender (DN 09/18/2003).

Generations and New Gender Images

One might suspect that the younger generation will not share the views of the generation in their 40s and 50s presented here. As they lived all or most of their lives in a unified Germany, younger people do not share that much socialist memory and perhaps more importantly do not share the experience of a sudden break that takes into question so many dimensions of every-day life. However, memories, norms and values are also transmitted within families and as the region does not experience significant western German in-migration, alterations may be slow.

In fact, statistics as well as everyday conversations during fieldwork still show a large wage labour orientation for young people. However, there are also hints to a slow adaptation to western German patterns. The youngest people working in the enterprise are two 18-year-old female trainees. In an interview they also reported gender discrimination experienced when entering the labour market after school. One of them explained that young men had better chances of getting professional training in interesting sectors. As an example, she explained that she had applied to one of the major insurance companies and did not succeed, but that she knew one of those who got a job there. Based on this experience, she argued, that young women need at least a high school diploma, while for young men a lower certificate is enough to be allowed into more interesting professional training. However that may be, in her interpretation of the incident, she, in contrast to

the older interviewees, does not link her interpretation to unification and an entailed shift in gender regimes. An even more interesting hint to a slow, rather unconscious adaptation to western German models is their answer to my question, how they envisage their future. They were the only ones I met, who talked of postponing having children, because then they would "have to be at home for three years". Without exception, all other eastern Germans I talked to during fieldwork in Rostock made a reference to the socialist institution and time-span of maternity leave, the so-called baby-year. But these very young women apparently took over at least part of the western German model in which women have to stay at home with small children for three years (DN 04/10/2003). When I remarked that a re-entry after three years might be difficult, they were terrified. Thus, both are still very much wage labour oriented, but adjusting to new models of parenting at home, their position in the labour market might change in the future.[14]

Experiences of Devaluation of Women's Care Work

As in other socialist countries, despite high employment rates the domestic division of labour in East Germany remained highly gendered (Gysi 1989).[15] However, as indicated in the introduction, the difference between the two German states regarding women's integration into the labour market was supported by a different ideology about women's role in the raising and education of children. As already mentioned, extensive public childcare was almost universally available in East Germany. It was not only a measure to enhance the chances to combine family and employment, but promoted as a positive influence on children's development and health. In contrast, outside-the-home care for children, especially below the age of three, was viewed very critically in West Germany. The stress in public discourse was on the children's need for their mother during the first years of life.[16] The GDR system of state-provided public care was additionally criticised for its supposedly politico-ideological aspects. In her work on gender in eastern Germany Rudd (2000) interprets the postsocialist changes as devaluing family work. In contrast, I argue that because the caring work of mothers gained in socially attached importance, women feel that their past practices are devalued.

In the first years after unification, the educational system in the GDR attracted negative media interest. A bestseller, published shortly after unification, about the East German educational system asserted that it caused psychological damage and that it was the reason for many problems in society (Maaz 1991). Almost the same debate started again in the late 1990s with statements made by Christian Pfeiffer (1999), a criminologist, in a public round table discussion at the university in Dresden and in interviews with several newspapers where he argued that East German education suppressed creativity and individuality. Moreover, he asserted that state-educated children were reduced to subjects, who would function best in groups. The new public debate centred around the speculation that neo-fascist violence in East Germany could be explained as the result of the public day care system in the GDR. Although these discussions more or less vanished from the surface of

[14] In another more recent study in eastern Germany we found evidence of a slow orientation towards western German models in the generation of young parents those between the age of 20 and 30 (Baerwolf and Thelen 2005, Thelen and Baerwolf forthcoming).

[15] However, there is some evidence for a more balanced situation in the GDR, where the state took over duties that were previously performed predominantly by women (Rosenfeld, Trappe and Gornick 2004: 119-120).

[16] For the historical development of the West German concept of being a "good mother" see Vinken (2002).

public debate, during fieldwork, many eastern Germans still quoted this kind of analysis with indignation.

Women felt that their care work as mothers was devalued because they were portrayed as bad mothers who left their children in theses terrible institutions. Most informants therefore wanted to defend themselves and the former system of public care. They would explain that they could be calm while at work because they knew their children were well-cared for and they would go on to recall the many activities that were organised for the children, which one could not have done alone with them as a mother. They emphasised that day care was really good for children. One woman in the finance department made a typical statement:

> "One always knew, that are well-cared for, nothing [bad] will happen and what they all organised with the children: they do handcrafts, make excursions and walks, all that would have been impossible alone [as a mother]" (DN, 05/13/2003).

The only critique was that working hours had been too long. Thus, the strong West German rejection of socialist day care also eased the identification with the past. This discourse again was embedded in commentaries on the contemporary restructuring of day care. Day care in eastern Germany is no longer considered a right for everybody but only for those with employment. Moreover, a reduction in facilities' opening hours has made it more difficult to work full-time and causes higher financial costs. One woman evaluated the newly introduced procedures her daughter and son-in-law had to go through to ensure day care for their daughter as "hostile towards children."

Another factor in the positive evaluation of the old system in the GDR is the international discredit of the West German educational system. The alarming results of the PISA study (Programme for International Student Assessment of the OECD) in Germany opened a new discussion about the now shared German day care system. With even the OECD criticising (West) Germany for its poor system of childcare, reforms bring back several features of the GDR system. For example, new policies introduced education plans for pre-school children, all-day schools and general improvement of public childcare. Most of these planned or implemented reforms are new features for western Germany and they are promoted as features adopted from the Nordic countries, like Finland or Sweden, which had better results in the PISA study. However many of my eastern German informants repeatedly said, that this is in fact the old GDR system. They often recalled how "Margot [Honecker] brought the GDR school system in two suitcases to Finland and they bought it and now we buy it back". But still, they see their public education system as devalued, because it is now being introduced as something new. They experience the discourse as constantly denying their experience and a failure of politicians to admit that fact. This contributes to the constant process of reinventing a distinct evaluation and identification with the GDR system.

In addition, some eastern Germans feel a loss of rights with the introduction of West German family laws and rules. When I asked the woman cited above about what she meant with the "position of woman in society" today, she explained that mothers today have to ask the fathers if they want to make a decision for their children, for example, when they apply for a passport for them. She experienced the change as a loss of women's rights as mothers. While feminists have analysed socialist policies regarding women as fixing conservative role models, citing for example the so-called household day, days off because of a child's illness and similar measures, these models gave women a lot of power in the family. The new seemingly more gender-neutral West

German laws come along with a more conservative family model and are thus experienced as devaluation. This becomes very clear in the second example that this woman brought forward in connection with “the position of the woman in society”. She explained how she and her husband had applied for credit. She signed all the papers, because at that moment she earned more money and had a permanent job. When the bank sent back the contract, it was sent to her husband and she could not even get it from the post office without his signature. She was very indignant because of this incident in which her husband was automatically ascribed, as she interpreted it, the main position as credit taker. This was to her mind a clear sign of the inferior position of West German women as wives. The whole field of women’s work as mothers is linked to the ideal of the working mother. Rejecting the imposed West German model of the caring housewife contributes to the identification with the socialist gender model.

Conclusion

Gender relations are deeply embedded in society but it is a contested question how much conscious equality policy can change them. The case of the GDR seems to indicate that a policy “from above” indeed can be quite successful. Socialist ideas and practices seem to be quite influential in postsocialist eastern Germany. However, the German case is special as the troublesome experiences of transformation are interpreted in the framework of unequal unification and many developments are rejected as coming from outside, e.g. West Germany.

In the period after the Second World War and before unification, the two German states developed different gender regimes especially regarding working mothers and public education. Both countries were somewhat extreme, even in their respective political environment. Socialist inspired family policy was implemented more thoroughly in East Germany than in other socialist countries, while on the other side of the border a much more conservative gender arrangement persisted than in most other Western European countries. As a consequence, female labour market participation was extremely low in West Germany and extremely high in East Germany. This was accompanied by a negative discourse on public child care in West Germany that persisted after the new wave of feminism and the opposite discourse in the GDR.

These differences constitute for some of the background of interpretation of experiences after unification. In contrast to other postsocialist countries, the economic and political system in eastern Germany changed overnight and as a consequence, changes in the gender regime were experienced as imposed by the West. Many female employees express experiences of devaluation of their professional work. This situation was aggravated by the fact that often the only western Germans in enterprises were in the position of superiors. The experiences recounted concerned a devaluation of their professional knowledge in male-dominated professions, their leadership qualities and ability to work while having children. At the same time public discourse devaluated their unpaid work as mothers as well. As changes in gender regimes after unification were predominately experienced in a hierarchical situation in which West Germans were superior, the socialist ideal of female integration into the labour force acquired more power as a resource in identity construction than in other postsocialist countries.

This contributed to the fact that the gender discourse in eastern Germany is different from the one in other postsocialist countries. While western feminism and achievements like quotas or gender neutral naming of professions are rejected as elsewhere in the postsocialist world, great emphasis is

put on equal female participation in the labour market. This shows that the socialist ideology often portrayed as only being superficially accepted in fact has a thorough influence on peoples' interpretation today. How long the socialist gender arrangement will continue as an important point of reference remains to be seen. There are indications in the generation of now very young women that, at least partially, shifts towards the West German gender model will take place in the near future.

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