

Women in East Germany are professionally better off than women in the West. Will this remain so?

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By Hildegard Nickel

Measured against Western modernity, East Germany was considered socially backwards. An exception was the role of women. By the beginning of the '90s both West and East Germans were prepared to admit that women in the East had greater access to equal opportunity. In East Germany, qualified work for women was a given. This was embodied in policies that mandated all-day childcare in kindergartens and schools, which enabled mothers to work full time. Female emancipation, especially in the area of employment, was considered a measure of social emancipation. While this model of equal opportunity also constituted an enormous burden for women, it resulted in a wide-reaching economic equalisation of the sexes and financial and legal independence of women from male 'providers'.

In the eyes of the law, women and men are equals. But how does the equality of men and women look from a social perspective? What does the social framework of the united Germany mean for the advantage that women in the East once had? In a society like West Germany's, where life opportunities and social security depend largely on gainful employment, the equal participation of women and men in the workforce is still the best measure of social equality. Looking at the results, two things become evident. First – and hardly surprising – is the fact that women in today's Germany occupy an inferior position to men. Secondly – and this was not necessarily to expect – the equalisation in gender relations that was achieved in the East seems to be relatively resistant to change.

Despite an overall narrowing of the gap in the labour force participation rates of men and women, the figures for women from the East and West differ significantly. In East Germany, the participation rates of women (72%) and men (80%) are much closer than is the case in the West, where 80% of men but only 62% of women work. The participation rates in part time work also differ greatly: for women from the West, it's 42%, for women from the East, 23%. In West Germany, almost twice as many men were in leadership positions as women in 2000 (20.8% versus 11.1%); in East Germany, women (12%) and men (14.4%) were on more equal ground. As a result, in the case of full time employment, there is almost no difference between men's and women's incomes in East Germany, while women in West Germany still earn barely 75% of men's gross income.

At the same time, the 'equality advantage' of East German women has been steadily reduced. The perspective and situation of the younger generation is particularly telling in this context. Completed professional training is a given for 85% of women in both the East and the West. Despite a constant improvement in their degrees, however, women are finding ever less access to qualified employment and are opting increasingly for public-subsidised professional training, especially in East Germany. While this is preferable to no training at all, it rarely leads to regular employment, but rather to temporary

employment situations that are associated with a high likelihood of unemployment. These integration problems early in professional life could explain why, as a representative study of 1999 showed, more girls from the East (20%) than the West (12%) offer to defer to men in situations of job shortages. More girls from the East (21%) than from the West (19%) agreed with the statement: "It is more important for a woman to support her husband in his career than to make a career for herself."

A look at these ambivalent developments in East Germany suggests that the social balance is becoming ever more precarious and that social integration is lacking on. The gulf between those who stand behind globalisation and the privatisation of all branches of life on the one side and marginal employees (women, young people without or with qualifications, the elderly, immigrants) on the other, can no longer be ignored. This is accompanied by a "social vulnerability" (Castel) which affects women in particular, as the employment market both sucks people in and blocks them from entry. At the same time, the social security systems that once offered mothers an alternative protection to that of their providers or the state, are dissolving. The paradoxes that go along with this new social vulnerability is a central dilemma that would be solvable if social progress were in fact taking place.

The federal government paints a positive picture of progress in the East – how could it not? But those affected see things differently. In general, it has to be said that the East German economy has not caught up with the West – neither in the efficiency of its market nor the development of its regional structures. Instead, underemployment has reached historic levels and these, combined with demographic instability, make East Germany the largest enclosed territory of economic-social underdevelopment in the 15 countries of the EU. What psychological effect does this have? What does it say about social progress in Germany?

The rebuilding of the East only has a chance of success if the central obstacle to progress – economic stagnation in the former West Germany – is overcome. At root we're dealing with two transformation processes and their alternating complexity and dynamic. Long before reunification, structural changes had begun in West Germany, which involved an eroding of the welfare state. A real recovery by the East would involve a change in the course of federal policy: strengthening the domestic market and creating more work. This seems unlikely given the general political submission to the TINA principle (There Is No Alternative) and the apparently self-explanatory logic of economic necessity. The East seems doomed to remain stranded.

It is also worth asking whether the discussion on re-building the East is a problem of East/West perspectives or whether this discourse is more a metaphor for a neo-liberal project aimed at radically re-shaping Germany's welfare-state in the name of social-political progress. The oft-quoted statements by the Chancellor that accompanied the Hartz reforms were: "We have to get rid of this loser mentality" and "This doesn't just affect those on welfare but the middle class as well." Such reforms are aimed at the institutions of social security and risk protection that form the core of German society. Social vulnerability and precarious subsistence are not being imposed on East Germans alone, they (or at least

the anticipation of them) are also a threat to the middle of society, which already feels that its social basis is threatened, especially in light of the discussion of the cost of German unity.

Following the implementation of social reforms, there will be a discussion of the role of the individual and the collective. Such a discussion was neglected in the West as well and the political class, cutting across all parties, agrees that it must be held: with full rigour and speed. The result of this discussion seems to have already been determined – less solidarity, more self-employment ("Me Inc" enterprises). A process of social insecurity and jeopardy is being set in motion which threatens not just marginal groups but everyone. Exclusion from the labour market is increasingly a problem for the "entrepreneurial middle" in the West. The concomitant inability to achieve a minimal standard of prosperity is already a bitter reality for many young families, even in West Germany. In both West and East Germany, uncertainty, fear and lack of a future perspective create a cultural climate that is unfavourable to social progress and prevails a civil society of self-confident, independent and free citizens from developing. In the political arena, questions about a current plan for a future-oriented, humane society are answered with reference to Agenda 2010 or the next reform.

The double transformation process in East and West Germany is long from over. The political course that is being followed at the moment is, however, no solution to the overcoming the dilemma of progress that faces all of Germany. Those who want responsibility to be returned to the people, but at the same time operate only in the realm of the market, do not offer the people a credible social policy: this is evidenced in the results of the most recent state elections in both the East and the West. "Good social policy is not possible without good economic policy" (SPD Chairman Franz Müntefering). Economic policy can only be seen as a motor of progress if it is reliable, instils trust and offers people the opportunity to partake in its outcome.

Surveys on the question of justice offer an insight into the various perspectives on progress in Germany. Justice was a central principle of cohabitation in both East and West Germany and often served as a basis of comparison of the two systems. The understanding of justice is therefore especially useful in comparing notions of progress in East and West Germany. I would like to concentrate here on the East German perspective.

In the early 1990s, the East German population still had great hopes for a fast equalisation of working and living standards between the East and West. Since 2000, and in the younger generation since 2002, a clear change of attitude has been evident. A significant share of East Germans observe that the difference between East and West is not decreasing but in fact increasing. Nonetheless, there is a general satisfaction in East Germany shared by its youth, even though young people are more critical of society than the older generation. German reunification is celebrated by most. Given the nature of the atrocities of the former GDR, a comparison with the degree of consent in the new social system would not be justified. There is, however, a general dissatisfaction with Germany's political system, which offers few opportunities for active involvement in policy-making, and with its current economic order. Among young adults, concerns about subsistence are accompanied by a general scepticism of the tenability of the current social system.

A surprising finding of sociological youth studies in East Germany is the maintenance of "double identities" (Förster): youth feel they are "already" German citizens but at the same time "still" East German citizens. Despite the collapse of socialism, a majority of East German youth identify with socialist ideals. This trend is on the rise, not, as one might expect, on the fall.

The generally sceptical East German view of social progress in Germany is not only to be found among those who have suffered material loss or social exclusion. It is also evident among those who consider themselves to be well established. East Germans believe that East Germany was the fairer society in a historical comparison. This applies to the situation of women, the division of labour, social achievement, salaries and income, the distribution of property and the opportunity to train and study. While ever more East Germans may support the idea of income differentiation based on individual achievement, the demand for a opportunity, equality and justice continues to grow. An understanding of "fair society" is well anchored in the East German collective. The culture remains; it not simply disappears with economic transformation.

Peter Förster: "Junge Ostdeutsche heute: doppelt enttäuscht"; Detlef Oesterreich: "Gleichstellung von Frauen aus der Sicht ost - und westdeutscher Jugendlicher", in: Das Parlament, 7. April 2003; Mona Granato: "Qualifizierte Berufsausbildung für alle: Junge Frauen im Ost-West-Vergleich", in: WSI Mitteilungen Oktober 2004; Hans-Böckler-Stiftung (Ed.): Armut und Reichtum in Deutschland. Düsseldorf 2003.

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