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“Der Sozialismus Siegt¹”: Women’s Ordinary Lives in an East German Factory

By Susanne Kranz²

Abstract

Socialism Triumphs adorned the roof of the office equipment factory (BWS) in the Thuringian town of Sömmerda until 1990. The factory became a driving economic force in the GDR. The city, called “the capital of computers,” represents a unique case of urban development and governmental support, showcasing the state’s anticipated unity of economic and social policy. This article explores the everyday lives of women working in the factory (1946 and 1991) and examines the state-sanctioned women’s policies, how they were implemented and how women perceived these policies and the officially accomplished emancipation of men and women. Sömmerda had roughly 23,000 inhabitants in the 1980s of which 13,000 (nearly half of them women) worked in the BWS. This research relies on archival records and personal accounts by women who worked in the factory. These records shed light on and question the actually accomplished equality of the sexes that was so imperative in socialist state rhetoric.

Keywords: East Germany, state socialism, employment, gender equality

Introduction

The German Democratic Republic (GDR) followed the socialist principle that emancipation was possible only if women were equally involved in the work force. Only then could they become socially and economically independent. However, the economic situation in the first decades of the GDR was stagnant and weak; every worker, male and female, was needed, due to the postwar labor shortage and the mass exodus from the GDR. In the founding years of the republic, the primary aim of the state’s policy was not emancipation or equality of the sexes, even though the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) declared emancipation its goal, but to jumpstart the economy. In 1949, when the GDR was founded, Article 20 of the constitution declared, “men and women are equal; they have the same rights in all spheres of society.”³ The support and promotion of women, especially in the field of professional training, was to be a leading task for the state. Equal employment opportunities, equal payment, and education were encouraged by the SED, and already implemented by the Soviet Military Administration in Germany (SMAD). Through special programs, the state promoted the goal of moving as many women into the labor force as possible. In addition, Article 38 of the constitution declared, “marriage, family, and motherhood are under a special protection by the state.”⁴ This article also contained particular support for mothers, for example, one-year maternity leave, special medical

¹ Direct translation: Socialism Triumphs

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³ *Verfassung der DDR* (Berlin: Staatsverlag der DDR, Oct. 7, 1974).

⁴ *Ibid.*

treatment, material and financial support for births, and family allowance. The protection of the family and the prevention of women becoming materially dependent, were the major duties of the communist state.⁵ The founders of the GDR believed that through education and equality between men and women, the socialist personality (sozialistische Persönlichkeit)⁶ would be strengthened.

This article examines the state-sanctioned women's policies, their implementation in the Büromaschinenwerk (BWS [Office Equipment Factory]), and how women perceived these policies and the officially proclaimed emancipation of the sexes. It further explores the everyday lives of women working in the BWS between 1949 and 1990. I refer to ordinary and everyday lives of women in the GDR supporting the idea that normal lives were possible under state communism distancing myself from the wide-spread belief that the GDR was purely a niche society and/or a dictatorship.⁷ There is no question about the restrictive and repressive nature of the state but the abundant discussions among academics do never clarify what is meant by ordinary, hence this article is placed within the larger context of this issue arguing that East German women and men lived ordinary lives since they lived in this specific society, a society, I argue was neither a niche society nor a dictatorship.

The Larger Historical Context

Sömmerda had 23,411 inhabitants in 1989⁸ of which 13,000 (nearly half of them women) worked in said factory. The city was proudly called “the capital of computers,” occupying a special role in the economy and in the development of the GDR thus representing a unique case of urban development and socialist state support that included, amongst many other things, housing projects, laundries, child care facilities, cafeterias, a swimming pool, showcasing the state's anticipated unity of economic and social policy. The BWS was the biggest producer of personal computers and only producer of dot-matrix printers in the GDR,⁹ and can hence be seen as a model factory, possibly also for the implementation of women's policies. This micro-level analysis, though not applicable to the GDR as a whole, draws a comprehensive picture of the GDR's women's policies in action. The research relies on archival records from the City and District Archives in Sömmerda,¹⁰ including the factory's newspaper *Pulsschlag der Arbeit*¹¹ (The Pulse of Work), and the State Archives in Weimar as well as personal accounts of women who worked in the factory in various departments and positions. These records which include worker union and women's committees' documentation shed light on the actually achieved equality of men and

⁵ *Familiengesetzbuch der DDR* (Berlin: Staatsverlag Dec. 20, 1965), 1.

⁶ An expression that was used in state's rhetoric and Party publications throughout the history of the GDR reinforcing what the state expected from its citizens.

⁷ See Mary Fulbrook's edited volume *Power and Society in the GDR, 1961-1979*, Berghahn, 2009 for several discussions on the topic.

⁸ Rolf Carl, *Sömmerda: Einblicke in die Geschichte einer Thüringer Kreisstadt, 876-2001* (Desotron: Erfurt, 2001), 74.

⁹ Annegret Schüle, *BWS Sömmerda. Die wechselhafte Geschichte eines Industriestandortes in Thüringen 1816-1995* (Desotron: Erfurt, 1995), 74.

¹⁰ Special thanks goes to Thomas Hildebrandt, director of the City and District Archive in Sömmerda, for providing access and insides.

¹¹ *Pulsschlag* was published between 1949 and 1991 (when it was renamed *Wir im Blickpunkt* (Our Point of View)). The archives in Sömmerda house an almost complete collection of *Pulsschlag* (1949 to 1990) and a sporadic collection for the renamed magazine (1990/91). It was initially free of cost but in the mid-50s the monthly issue cost 10 Pfennig until 1991 when the cost was increased to 30 Pfennig.

women that was so imperative in socialist state rhetoric. Before discussing women's lives in the GDR, an introduction to the city of Sömmerda and the history of the BWS is needed.

Sömmerda, a small town in the heart of Thuringia, played an important role in the economic development of the GDR. The city that was first mentioned in historical records in the year 876 attained a special status in the GDR. The BWS which closed its gates in 1995 looks back at a long and tumultuous history. The factory was established in 1816/17 as a rifle factory by Nikolaus von Dreyse.¹² Besides the production of the famous needle-gun, the factory also produced ammunition, tools, button presses and later expanded to agricultural and milling machinery, bicycles and office equipment in the 1920s. In 1828 the city had about 2,500 inhabitants and the factory employed 50 men and 32 women mirroring existing patriarchal divisions of society at the factory floor.¹³ Though all employees had health insurance women's health was only worth half of men's health. For instance, in the case of death, men's families would receive 18 Mark whereas women's families received 9 Mark.¹⁴ Due to the low value ascribed to women, they were often allocated to sections that were considered dangerous such as the ammunition section. Naturally, female employment rates increased during the World Wars, and the BWS played an important role during the wars with the sole production of weapons and ammunition.

During World War I the numbers of workers spiked to 10,000, decreasing to 1,650 following the end of the war. All women were let go.¹⁵ With the production of the first typewriters the factory began its legacy as an office equipment factory becoming a pioneer in technological development which it held until the end of the GDR. Office equipment, which was exported to 54 countries, included calculators and electronic machines. This was, however, short-lived when in 1921 the allied forces gave permission to revive the armament production of certain goods. Based on records, it appears that the factory was producing much more than what was permitted by the allied forces.¹⁶ In 1938 the factory became part of the Reichswerke Hermann Göring, leading to the termination of the production of office equipment in 1941. During World War II the 12,450 workers were renamed to "followers" and forced to become members of the German Worker's Front (DAF, Deutscher Arbeiterfront).¹⁷ Despite the fact that in the 1932 elections the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) with 40.8% was slightly stronger than the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) with 35.5% in the city, no (mentionable) resistance to the Nazi regime existed in Sömmerda. The weapons production was continuously widened¹⁸ leading to a labor shortage. Between 1941 and 1942 the percentage of foreign workers (involuntary and voluntary) increased from 5.3% to 10%.¹⁹ The proximity to the concentration camp in Buchenwald (close to Weimar) ensured a steady flow of workers and the creation of an external camp in the city; approximately 1,294 female prisoners were forced to work at the factory.²⁰ In 1944 the factory employed 6,104 German workers and 5,283 foreign workers of which more than half were women (47% of these women were of Jewish descent).

¹² Schüle, 11.

¹³ The number of women increased steadily but remained far behind men's employment rates. In 1842 out of 386 workers, 30 were women, in 1855 out of 680 workers 84 were women and in 1867 out of 1,397 workers 253 were women. See *Wir über uns, 1817-1945* (VEB Robotron Sömmerda, 1989), 13.

¹⁴ *Wir über uns*, 30.

¹⁵ Schüle, 113.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 132.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 182-195.

¹⁸ The weapons production included V1 and V2.

¹⁹ Schüle, 195.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 197.

In April 1945 American troops entered Sömmerda but by then prisoners had been released and documents destroyed or transferred to Berlin. Nevertheless, American troops secured machinery, remaining documentation on weapons, patents, worth 6 million Reichsmark, as well as developers and engineers before Russian troops arrived.²¹ In July 1945 the production of office equipment recommenced increasing the labor force from 815 in July to 2,448 in December. As part of war time reparations the factory delivered 1,500 typewriters and 500 calculators to the Soviet Union in addition to the dismantling of 70% of the factory.²² Following the denazification which was considered complete in 1948 in the Soviet zone, full production of office equipment resumed and the factory reopened its export markets. In 1949, the factory, then referred to as Rheinmetall-Borsig AG, employed 5,300 out of the 13,899 people living in the city; by 1951 the number of workers had increased to 7,929 (of which 2,040 were women).²³ The factory became nationally-owned (Volkseigentum) in 1952 and from then onwards was referred to as Büromaschinenwerk. The BWS like many other factories in the GDR became the center of workers' social and professional lives starting from housing developments, childcare and educational facilities, cafeterias, launderettes, a library, all the way to writing, sports and singing clubs.

The Development of GDR Women's Policies

The SED's women's policy was characterized by three different elements: (1) the realization of legal equality between men and women, (2) promotion of working women, and (3) special protection of mothers and children.²⁴ To achieve these goals the politicians followed diverse programs and ideas which were all based on socialist principles. The Party politics toward women was divided into three phases. The first phase, from 1946 until the mid-sixties, was shaped by the integration of women into the workforce because of the "labor shortage and mass exodus from the GDR,"²⁵ making women indispensable workers during post-war reconstruction. Furthermore, "the integration of women was seen as the essential criterion for women to develop as socialist personalities."²⁶ Ideological and economic interests seemed identical.²⁷ Walter Ulbricht, the political leader of the GDR, stated in a speech at an SED meeting in 1949, "The work of women is the task of the entire Party," adding that it was necessary that women participate in leading positions in state, economy, and mass organizations.²⁸ The Party appeared to consider women's interests as essential.

Numerous laws and regulations for the protection of mothers were enacted. In 1950, for example, the "Law for the Protection of Mother and Child and the Rights of Women" was ratified.²⁹ It contained instructions on the establishment of childcare facilities, the guarantee of the right to work, and support for further professional qualifications. Women were not allowed to work

²¹ Ibid, 202.

²² Ibid, 207.

²³ Bärbel Albold, *Sömmerda 1949-1989* (Erfurt: Alan Sutton, 2001), 14.

²⁴ Grit Bühler. *Mythos Gleichberechtigung in der DDR* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus Verlag, 1997), 29.

²⁵ Christiane Lemke. "Women and Politics in East Germany" In: *Socialist Review*, 15, 1985, 124.

²⁶ "Die Frauen – der Frieden und der Sozialismus, Kommunique des Demokratischen Frauenbundes Deutschland (DFD)" in: DFD, *Geschichte des Demokratischen Frauenbundes Deutschlands* (Leipzig, 1989).

²⁷ Gisela Helwig. *Frauen in Deutschland. Auf dem Weg zur Gleichberechtigung* (Informationen zur politischen Bildung, 254/1997), 16.

²⁸ Hannelore Scholz. *Die DDR-Frau zwischen Mythos und Realität* (Schwerin: Altstadt Druck, 1997), 8.

²⁹ Ulrike Helwerth and Gislinde Schwarz. *Von Muttis und Emanzen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1997), 210.

at night, they were excluded from strenuous and dangerous jobs, and working hours were reduced. In 1952, the SED decided on the implementation of women promotion plans and measures to increase female employees in factories. The Party established Factory Women's Committees (Betriebsfrauenausschüsse) in 1952, which were responsible for achieving gender equality and the systematic promotion of women in factories.³⁰ Women had the chance to articulate their demands and interests but the committees were regulated by the SED, already implying the supremacy of the Party and its goals. The committees were used to reduce the responsibilities of the Democratic Women's Association of Germany (DFD),³¹ the GDR's only officially existing and sanctioned women's organization. By 1965, the committees had gained much influence amongst working women but were hastily transformed into commissions, and subordinated under the Factory Union Leadership (BGL).³² Women seemed to consult the committees frequently for their demands, which apparently posed a danger to existing, traditional gender hierarchies. In the same year, the FDGB (Free German Unions Association) decided, based on an SED ruling, that it would take full responsibility for the women's committees.³³ These committees embodied a chance for a real representation of women; here women spoke out and actually improved their situation. Table one shows the impact of these developments on the number of female labor union members. Women realized that the unions were their only opportunity to discuss and possibly achieve equality or at least a way to make their voices heard, explaining the continuous growth of female union membership during forty years of state socialism.

Table 1. Female Membership in Labor Unions³⁴

Year	Number of Female Members	Percentage of Female Members
1952	1,800,000	37
1970	3,400,000	48
1988	5,100,000	53

The second phase, from the mid-sixties to 1971, was determined by the concentration on qualified job training and further education of women. Special women's promotion plans were prepared but promotion and qualification of women had always been measured by male standards,³⁵ proving that the idea of emancipation was interpreted differently by the state. Based on these perceptions, women were introduced into male professions and technical work which from a feminist standpoint could be considered an achievement. The role reversal, however, stopped here; men were not introduced into the women's field of employment. Special classes and university studies were established to enable women to pursue further education while being employed full-time and raising children. A new image came into existence, women as mothers; an image that did rarely serve women since they were perceived as hindrances at the factory floor. Decreasing birth rates, high divorce rates, and the wish for part-time employment were reasons for this. At the end of the sixties the double burden of women became visible;³⁶ a double burden that

³⁰ Helwerth and Schwarz, 211.

³¹ Birgit Bütow and Heidi Strecker. *Eigenartige Ostfrauen* (Bielefeld: Kleine Verlag, 1994), 19.

³² Rosemarie Nave-Herz. *Die Geschichte der Frauenbewegung in Deutschland* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 1993), 108.

³³ Table compiled from information in Herta Kuhrig. "Mit den Frauen – Für die Frauen," in *Geschichte der deutschen Frauenbewegung* ed. Florence Herve (Köln: Papy Rossa Verlag, 2001), 225.

³⁴ Kuhrig, In: Herve, 225.

³⁵ Bühler, 31.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 32.

was actually a triple burden of paid labor, household labor and childcare. To counter emerging contradictions, the Family Law Book of the GDR (FGB) was ratified in 1965. It contained social and political regulations that were meant to simplify women's lives, paving the way for the women's policies of the seventies. The FGB encouraged, "mutual upbringing of children, mutual responsibility for the household, and mutual help to combine profession and family."³⁷ Despite these efforts, the reality looked quite different. In 1961, the Politburo of the Central Committee of the SED had published the Communiqué *Die Frauen – der Frieden und der Sozialismus* (Women – Peace and Socialism) which reported on the status of women and equality, outlining further changes to improve the condition of women. It acknowledged existing discriminatory practices, and called for further professional and educational support. The promotion of women into technical, industrial, scientific, and other stereo-typed male professions, as well as higher and leading positions, was also part of the program. These shifts were clearly visible in the BWS with more women attaining higher qualifications and spreading into all sections and departments of the factory.

The third phase, from 1971 to 1990, was ushered in by the resignation of Ulbricht and the inauguration of Erich Honecker as the new state leader. At the VIII Party Congress, new social measures were added to the constitution and the FGB to ease women's triple burden. These new ideas resulted in the most innovative actions taken for the betterment of women in society yet discontent with the state's social policies increased. In the eighties the economic situation was further aggravated; the GDR was not able to fulfill the economic plans it strived for. Despite this, due to other improvements such as childcare facilities and the integration of women in the work force, Honecker confirmed the solution of the women's question, declaring:

Comrades we cannot speak of the development of socialism in our Republic without recognizing the splendid part played by women (...). One of the greatest achievements of socialism is to have realized equal rights for women legally in every-day life, no capitalist country in the world can claim such an achievement. Women have an important part in our society. Women have proven that socialism cannot be built without their outstanding accomplishments. We truly appreciate the self-confidence with which they solve the problems they are faced [with] in the household and family. The important thing now is the gradual solution of all those problems which determine to what extent women can make use of their equal rights. Without underestimating the increasing cooperation of men in the household, it remains a fact that the main burden is borne by women.³⁸

According to the leadership, women had achieved equal opportunities for work, identical pay, education, and participation in societal and political life. The emancipation of women was officially achieved hence any failure to be a full member of socialist society was credited as the individual woman's failure. A failure that was not openly discussed since father state (Vater Staat) had apparently provided everything women needed to fulfill societal expectations. The women interviewed for this research, as seen later, felt fully supported by the BWS and the state's women's policies and barely addressed the triple burden albeit hinting at obvious gender hierarchies and expectations.

³⁷ *Familiengesetzbuch der DDR* (Berlin: Staatsverlag der DDR, 1965), 2.

³⁸ Erich Honecker. *The German Democratic Republic. Pillar of Peace and Socialism* (New York: International Publishers, 1979), 47.

The State's Women's Policies Reconsidered

During the 1970s and 80s, the contradictions of the triple burden and the women's policies became visible, and women realized that they had a different interpretation of emancipation than the leadership. Women were reduced to motherhood and the main responsibility for the household and childcare remained in their hands, even though the FGB ruled that both parents had to cooperate to make employment and household compatible. State socialism was not able to challenge century old gender stereotypes and women's role in the private and the public sphere. The GDR's women's policy was progressive in many respects but the socialist regime maintained, even hardened traditional gender roles and spheres. Despite all efforts, the labor market continued to be strongly gender segregated.³⁹ Women dominated the occupational fields of education, health care, social services, and textiles. Gender specific socialization processes commenced in kindergarten, all the way through school. Girls were often guided into "gender appropriate" professions. Places for professional training were limited and state regulated. Even though some women successfully entered distinctive male professions, the state never promoted men into female jobs, testament to a superficial and half-hearted commitment to gender equality. As a consequence of this gender segregation, the female-specific employment sector remained undervalued,⁴⁰ yet employment became an essential part of women's identity. Nevertheless, women remained at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy despite existing gender-based laws and regulations, but their wages constituted 40 percent of the family income; whereas women in West Germany contributed 18 percent.⁴¹ Table two shows the labor market divided by gender and income levels. Expectedly women were overrepresented in the lower and middle-wage levels; they earned less, despite having the same qualifications; a fact that many women and men only realized after unification. The constitutional guarantee of equal pay was widely accepted as reality, as is also evident in most of the interviews.

Table 2. Fulltime Workers and Employees according to Wage Level and Gender⁴²

Wage Level (Mark per month)	Male	Female	Share of Females in %
400-500	10,465	17,913	63.1
500-600	25,306	94,692	73.9
600-700	69,422	241,392	77.7
1200-1500	898,419	352,589	28.2
1500-1700	287,247	59,031	17.0
1700 and above	221,895	41,243	15.7

Regardless of these conditions, women wanted to work for numerous reasons. It was considered normal that women worked in the GDR; it was part of an internalized self-perception. Women could not imagine themselves as housewives having been socialized through generations of working women. Table three highlights the importance of work in women's lives as later also emphasized in the interviews with female factory workers. There are obvious differences between

³⁹ Myra Marx Ferree. "The Rise and the Fall of "Mommy Politics": Feminism and Reunification in (East) Germany" in: *Feminist Studies* 19, Issue 1, (Spring 1993), 91.

⁴⁰ Susanne Diemers. *Patriarchalismus in der DDR* (Opladen: Leske+Budrich, 1994), 127.

⁴¹ Ferree, 92.

⁴² Winkler, 1990, 88 cited in Diemers, 128.

married and unmarried women, yet neither group was concerned with material motives or luxury goods, possibly due to the shortness of such goods in the first place. Women generally seemed interested in gaining professional experience, a sentiment echoed by the women who worked in the BWS.

Table 3. Motives for Women to Work, 1989⁴³

	Married %	Unmarried %	Total %
Material Motives	----	----	----
Acquisition of Subsistence	51.7	85.3	68.8
Acquisition of Luxury Goods	---	---	---
Modernization/Completion of Apartment Fittings	70.7	42.7	56.3
Acquisition of Fashionable Clothes	12.0	26.3	19.3
Acquisition of Vehicle	25.9	6.6	16.0
Ideological, Moral Motives	---	---	---
Contact with other People	44.9	52.6	48.7
Need for Profession	46.5	60.7	53.8
Need of further Professional Education	44.9	62.4	53.8

With its new social policies, the state had increased women's skills and opportunities, but all these measures had "not radically altered women's place in the political arena."⁴⁴ To support the professional development of women and increase women's representation on all levels, factories had to submit affirmative-action plans with detailed information about the improvements for women in training, promotion to leading positions, and working conditions.⁴⁵ The AGB (Worker's Law Book) from 1977 that contained the measures for the affirmative action plans, called women's promotion plans, stated:

1. The measures for the promotion of creative skills of women in the working process, for political and professional training and further education, and for the planned preparation of employment in leading positions as well as the improvement of their working and living conditions are to be fixed in the affirmative action plans.
2. The women's promotion plans are to be agreed on between the factory head and the factory union leader as a part of the factory collective contract.
3. The factory head has, in cooperation with the factory union leader, to secure the participation of women in the preparation of the women's promotion plans. It is held accountable over the fulfillment of the women's promotion plans to the women themselves.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, existing patterns of the sexes and the old division of labor within the family and the labor force remained.⁴⁷ All political improvements targeted women as mothers. Due to

⁴³ Helwig, 94.

⁴⁴ Lemke, 122.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 125.

⁴⁶ Herta Kuhrig, "Mit den Frauen – Für die Frauen" in: Herve, 226.

⁴⁷ Irene Dölling, "Culture and Gender" in *The Quality of Life in the German Democratic Republic* ed. Marilyn Rüschmeyer and Christiane Lemke (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe 1989), 29.

these mommy policies and the social programs, women were seen as privileged because the measures undertaken only applied to women; men did not receive a paid day off for housework every month unless they were single fathers with full custody. This privileged status of mothers increased prejudices against working women which in the long run proved disadvantageous.⁴⁸ Women were discriminated because they and their performance were measured against men's, an aspect to be explored now in relation to the BWS.

The BWS and its Women

The BWS was the most important employer in Sömmerda and hence really had to engage with the state's women's policies. Apart from the early 1820s, the first time women were mentioned in the employment statistics of the factory was in 1950. Interestingly, between 1992 and 1995 when the factory closed its doors, statistics ceased to differentiate between the sexes which could also indicate that all women were let go in the wave of large scale redundancies that hit the BWS and particularly its female workers.

Table 4. Development of the BWS workforce and the population of Sömmerda⁴⁹

Year	Total/Women	Apprentices/Women	Population
1949	5,300	215	13,899
1950	6,858 / 1,625	374	13,568
1955	7,683 / 2,305		13,286
1960	9,429 / 3,243	568 / 174	13,710
1965	9,000 / 3,056	580 / 229	16,200
1970	12,028 / 4,574	1,028 / 493	18,158
1975	14,140 / 5,963	660 ⁵⁰	21,207
1980	13,294 / 5,668	698	22,484
1985	13,527 / 5,653	685	23,382
1989	13,812 / 5,845	672	23,411
1990	11,801 / 4,646	547 / 254	23,077
1991	9,720 / 4,244	468 / 223	22,417
1992	915	291	22,167
1993	394	152	21,925
1994	220	32	21,719 / 25,276 ⁵¹
1995	142	6	21,333 / 24,475

The factory's monthly *Pulsschlag der Arbeit* was published by the factory's SED group. Its first issue in December 1949 discussed the low representation of women in its group (12%) yet the fact that women were allowed to take up apprenticeships was not welcomed by everyone,⁵²

⁴⁸ Frederike Maier. "Frauenerwerbstätigkeit in der DDR und der BRD," in *Ein Deutschland – Zwei Patriarchate* ed. Gudrun Axeli-Knapp and Ursula Müller (Hannover, 1992), 32.

⁴⁹ Table comprised based on statistics in Schüle (385-386) and statistics from the City Archives Sömmerda.

⁵⁰ It is not clear from the records why women apprentices were not listed for these years.

⁵¹ Population numbers for the city have been declining constantly since 1989 but the increased numbers for 1994/1995 are based on the administrative restructuring of East Germany and the inclusion of surrounding villages into the district of Sömmerda.

⁵² "Jetzt will man in unserem Werk auch weibliche Lehrlinge einstellen! *Pulsschlag der Arbeit* (December 1949).

despite the economic needs for an increased female workforce. The factory board, however, argued that based on the exam results women are definitely capable of being trained in technical and/or male-dominated occupations and outdated gender attitudes needed to be challenged. An additional argument was to control the women surplus (Frauenüberschuss)⁵³ that had been created by the war and channel it into the appropriate economic sectors. As early as 1949 the BWS operated its own radio station,⁵⁴ kindergarten, soccer club, library, sauna, art exhibitions and an adult education center. Additionally, an SED Party school (Parteischule) was opened on the factory premises. All these political and socio-cultural facilities and events aimed at creating socialist personalities and the strong socialist families the state envisioned. It further amplified the anticipated self-identification of the workers with their work and the formation of the proletariat.

From the very beginning the rhetoric used by the factory leadership and the magazine was gender-conscious and very explicit that if women want to be emancipated members of society they have to work for it since the state was providing a comprehensive support network. One repeatedly finds the sentence “women manning up” (Frauen stehen ihren Mann) in publications, supporting the earlier argument that women were compared to men and not seen as women in their own right. Yet throughout its publication the magazine always lists female colleagues/comrades before male colleagues/comrades which hints at a genuine interest in promoting women’s interests/rights and gender equality. It is an interesting linguistic fact that female comrades are mentioned separately since the language used in the GDR and also later by the autonomous women’s groups in the 1980s remained consistently gender neutral (a fact that also led to tensions between East and West German feminists during and after unification); gender specific grammatical forms which are common in the German language are seldom used by women and men in the socialist state, once again supporting existing gender structures which were reinforced by the male-based state and the party leadership yet also underlining the self-perception of a gender less society where men and women work together.

Even though not every issue included women specific themes, International Women’s Day guaranteed an annual celebration of the ideal socialist woman. The magazine reiterated the Party line that the equality of the sexes obliges to strive for knowledge and performance. At the same time four women were promoted to forewoman,⁵⁵ which was celebrated as an important step for the emancipation of women in the workforce, clearly emphasizing the prominence of women as workers rather than women. In October 1952, the Women’s Committee introduced itself in *Pulsschlag*; every factory division was required to have such a committee to ensure the absolute equality of women.⁵⁶ These committees were thought of as a forum for women to voice their concerns but also dealt with promotion and qualifications for women hoping to recruit more women into leadership positions. For the 1950s these measures were quite advanced, however, the factory leadership was not able to distance itself from hierarchical, gender-based thinking patterns. For instance, the same magazine issue that calls for women’s promotion into leadership positions also reconfirms the important role women play in raising the new generation of factory workers,⁵⁷ clearly emphasizing the importance of the private sphere and its demarcation to the public sphere.

⁵³ Ursula Schröter argues that the term “women surplus” should rather be called “men shortage” due to war. See Schröter, “Die schwesterliche Verbundenheit im DFD” in: *Utopie kreativ*, H. 209, 2008, 243.

⁵⁴ The radio station was well received but critiqued for always playing the same LPs.

⁵⁵ It is not clear from archival records how many foremen existed.

⁵⁶ *Pulsschlag der Arbeit*, October 1952, No. 9

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

In 1956, the household day was introduced to the BWS. This day provided married women who had additional household duties (special care for family members) one day off a month.⁵⁸ Single parents (women or men) did not benefit from this measure. The same year, the first women's forum took place where women openly discussed the shortage of consumer goods and groceries. Even though women argued for better representation at all levels, daily bread-and-butter issues remained top priorities.⁵⁹ The following year the government announced the 45 hour week despite fears of not being able to fulfill economic plans, while at the same time offering more social and cultural events and entertainment reconfirming the central role of the factory in workers' lives.⁶⁰ In 1957, the Women's Committee published its first Women's Development Plan (Frauenförderplan) in *Pulsschlag*. It details how many women needed to be trained and qualified for specific positions.⁶¹ Hereafter the plan was published annually and contained the same sections. The DFD was increasingly mentioned in the magazine and the women's development plans but primarily in relation to gender-based issues, rather than political and emancipatory work, already indicating the isolation of the women's organization from the actual important areas of influence. The Women's Committee was to follow up on all measures. In the 1960s and 70s *Pulsschlag* appears to openly critique the state's women's policies and the state for failing its women as well as the factory leadership and the Party for not following through with its promises. This showcases a surprisingly open discussion of gender issues which was silenced during the third phase of women's policies since the equality of the sexes was then completed, and women's issues in relation to the triple burden became women's private failures.

The Communiqué, mentioned earlier, that called for a greater inclusion of women into socialist society was featured in the magazine. The factory was calling on all its different departments to provide more support to the Women's Committee and agreed with the SED's assessment that the achievements and performance of women were not sufficiently utilized to improve society. The BWS saw this challenge in the fact that women were underrepresented in the higher echelons of the factory and its leadership, and overrepresented in lower paid jobs.⁶² It further called for more respect for women and women's work since true equality cannot only be achieved through equality in pay. Nonetheless, the Women's Committees were subordinated to the workers' unions in 1965, displaying a sense of fear or uncertainty about the responsibilities of the committees and their power which can also be seen in the Party's dealings with the DFD and the women's question in general. With this acquisition, the committees' work and decision-making powers were subordinated to the workers' union. However, one should not underestimate these committees; they played an important monitoring function and simply their existence was a step towards gender equality. In the early 1980s they became women's commissions (Frauenkommissionen);⁶³ however, the work remained the same. The commission met regularly to discuss the women's development plans including training and qualification but also childcare provisions, living and working conditions as well as questions about salaries and housing. The

⁵⁸ *Pulsschlag der Arbeit*, July 1956, No. 16.

⁵⁹ Follow ups to these forums appear in the magazine in the 1960s listing improvements in details. However, these improvements are aimed at "typical" women's issues such as hair dressers, cooking, groceries, etc. and do not address women as equal partners, clearly reinforcing conservative and traditional gender roles and stereotypes.

⁶⁰ For instance, the Group of the Writing Worker (Zirkel des Schreibenden Arbeiters) was created.

⁶¹ In 1957 the plan details that 120 women needed to be trained and qualified, for instance, as milling workers, accountants, painters, metalworkers, locksmiths, etc.

⁶² *Pulsschlag der Arbeit*, January 1962, No. 1.

⁶³ From archival records it is not clear in which year this takes place. The first time a commission is mentioned is in 1984 when as part of the factory union elections a women's commission is elected.

political upheavals of 1989/1990 were not discussed in the magazine except for reassurances that social provisions such as the right to work and childcare provided by the BWS will not be impacted by the political developments. As a matter of fact the Party and the 40th anniversary of the GDR were celebrated with lengthy discussions of the achievements of state socialism including the importance of women. In early 1990 *Pulsschlag* introduced a special page called *Pulsschlag Feminin* which was short lived when the magazine was renamed *Wir im Blickpunkt* (Our Point of View) in July 1990.⁶⁴ Any discussion of women's issues or women's rights simply vanished, mirroring the fleeting autonomous women's movements of the GDR. Women's Commissions ceased to exist and Social Commissions came into place, dealing with the sick and handicapped, the protection of mothers and seniors, health care and housing, all bundled up in one category.

Due to the importance of the BWS, living standards in Sömmerda and wages were relatively high compared to other economic sectors and regions. This was further improved by Honecker's announcement of the unity of economic and social policies in 1971. Training and qualification of women were always of highest priority; even though the percentage of women increased consistently, the factory struggled to achieve its set targets of gender equality at the leadership level, a critique that was openly discussed at the women's conferences. The SED was aware that they had highly qualified women whose professional potential was not utilized.⁶⁵ In 1984, for instance, of the 5,657 women working in the BWS, 3,675 (65%) had successfully completed various types of skilled worker training.⁶⁶ Yet out of 703 leading positions, only 90 were women, clearly resembling the GDR's gender structures in the private and the public sphere. The Women's Commissions despite their hard work were not able to dampen or extinguish existing gender biases as seen in 1989 when the commissions still called on outdated gender stereotypes and ideas of motherhood to be abandoned and on male colleagues to provide more support for women in leadership roles, women with children and women within the family.⁶⁷ Table five shows the percentage of women in the different occupations in the BWS but despite obvious improvements, men remained in leading positions in the majority of factory sectors.

Table 5. Women's representation of different employment sectors⁶⁸

Occupation	1969	In %	1989	In %
Employees	4,216	40	5,845	42
University Cadres	5	2.6	154	23.2
Technical College Cadres	20	3.4	479	38
Forewomen	16	6.4	66	14.6
Skilled Workers	1,043	23.3	4,136	45.9

As seen in tables four and five, the BWS effectively implemented state policies on women's education and professional development, and constantly increased the percentage of its female workforce, until early 1990 when the GDR was already in the midst of its transformational process. In mid-1990 women and men became increasingly concerned about job security and

⁶⁴ *Wir im Blickpunkt* was published until July 1991.

⁶⁵ *Pulsschlag der Arbeit*, November 1982, No. 23.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Pulsschlag der Arbeit*, January 1989, No. 2.

⁶⁸ Schüle, 301.

childcare provisions.⁶⁹ The BWS leadership, despite tumultuous times, tried to strengthen the trust in existing social services,⁷⁰ but the societal developments had snowballed into something far beyond the control of the factory leadership. A young mother expressed her fear of losing her job and childcare as follows:

In the last months many ideals and dreams of a just society went down the drain. They ended at the trash of history and chances for recycling are few. Does this country's child support have to be one of them? As a young mother I cannot ignore that more and more women returning from their baby year are not reemployed. It seems it's easiest to cut positions of young women raising their children at home. Where is the respect for human beings and the acceptance of the still existing labor laws, if a skilled worker, some single parents, is offered work in the three shift system as cleaners or kitchen helpers (...)? Either we are still spoiled from old times or we really need to adjust to the hardcore laws of social market economy. In these uncertain times one cannot expect any clear perspectives. It is almost understandable. But the propriety and dignity of human beings – the respect for working women and mothers – cannot be derailed.⁷¹

A loss of social provisions that had been ensured by the factory since 1949 proved dramatic for many working women. Employment rates dropped drastically after 1991. According to archival records, in 1990/91 the city had 3,510 unemployed out of which 2,323 were women. The BWS was forced to offer early retirement (at the age of 57) to many of its employees, women and men; a form of discriminatory practice GDR citizens were not accustomed to. Until late 1990 the factory leadership ensured its workers that no redundancies were required, the tone, however, changed quickly in 1991 when it was clear that downsizing and major restructuring of the BWS were inevitable.⁷² Initially workers were told that the factory was not at risk and were offered to be retrained but in 1992 it was clear that no salaries could be paid leading to massive redundancies, completely altering the socio-economic landscape of the city. Since December 1989 Sömmerda had joined the larger opposition movements with a demonstration calling for a new socialism. In 1990 (continuing into 1991) these political demonstrations turned into workers strikes in the hope to retain job security and the right to work as guaranteed by the constitution of the GDR. With the economic and monetary unification in June 1990 the BWS became a corporation and was turned over to the Treuhand,⁷³ to be privatized, introducing market-economic conditions leading to the loss of its Eastern markets. The district of Sömmerda was hit the hardest by job reductions in East Germany; 4 out of 5 industrial jobs were lost,⁷⁴ and women were affected disproportionately. The majority of the buildings of the BWS were either destroyed⁷⁵ or redeveloped in the early 1990s giving way to new, small-scale industrial developments.

⁶⁹ In 1989 the BWS had 5 child care centers providing 526 kindergarten and 272 nursery places (see Schüle for statistics), while in 1990 it had 4 childcare centers with 668 places (already in decline due to families resettling in West Germany).

⁷⁰ *Pulsschlag der Arbeit*, May 1990, No. 9.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Wir im Blickpunkt*, January 1991, No. 1.

⁷³ The Treuhand was charged with the privatization of state owned factories and companies.

⁷⁴ Schüle, 356.

⁷⁵ The majority was blown up, also holding a symbolic meaning.

BWS's Women's Voices

Interestingly, the factory had collected index cards of its female employees starting in 1949; no such records seem to exist for men.⁷⁶ These cards include family members, marital status, training and educational programs completed as well as all jobs held before joining and during employment in the BWS. It is not clear when women left the BWS and whether these records were ever updated in terms of children, marital status, etc. Many women started working at the BWS without any qualifications but at some point during their work at the factory all women received some formal job training. Others had completed job training before entering the BWS but were often retrained; for instance, a trained photographer became an engineer or a hairdresser qualified as an assembly line worker. The cards also recorded when women took maternity leave. Though incomplete it appears that most working women were mothers. Even though this index does not provide a full picture of the women in the BWS it offers an insightful glance at the female workforce.

Picture 1 Sample of Index Cards of Female Workers⁷⁷

The image shows two sample index cards from the BWS. The left card is an 'Arbeitskräftekarte' (Employee Card) for a woman named Sömmerda, born 1923, with handwritten details including her address and family status. The right card is a 'Berufsgangkarte' (Career Card) showing her employment history at VEB Robotron Büromaschinenwerk Sömmerda, with dates and job titles like 'Werkungslernende' and 'Projektl. I.D.'.

As part of this research, six women were interviewed, who worked in various sections and departments of the BWS as well as hierarchical ranks. Even though these interviews cannot be generalized to all women working in the factory, some conclusions can be drawn about the work environment and the self-perception of women in the BWS and the GDR. All of these women worked at the factory between the 1960s/70s and early 1990s; none of them chose to leave the BWS voluntarily but were let go and chose early retirement, even though this was not really a choice for them to make. All were mothers yet none reflected on the triple burden as an obstacle; two were SED members,⁷⁸ three FDGB members, two DSF (Society for German-Soviet Friendship) and one was a member of the holiday commission, a group deciding the state-planned distribution of holiday places.

⁷⁶ The archive holds thousands of these index cards; given the sheer amount of cards, it was only possible to skim through them to get a general idea of the female workforce.

⁷⁷ Arbeitskräftekartei, City Archive, Sömmerda.

⁷⁸ Questions about SED membership do remain in some cases a controversial issue until today, so I am not sure of this number reflects the actual SED membership which was often required for further professional training and education.

A.P., a trained poultry farmer born in 1946 into an agricultural family, began working at the BWS in 1967 as a welder (Punktschweisser) in the metalworker/locksmith department (Blechschlosserei).⁷⁹ She was married and had a six month old child when she started working. During her years at the BWS she acquired three additional qualifications, one, for instance, in business.⁸⁰ She also obtained her qualification as a forewoman in fine-tool technology. As discussed in *Pulsschlag*, the BWS continuously tried to increase the number of forewomen in order to attain gender equity inscribed into the state's women's policies. The underrepresentation of women in technological and manufacturing jobs that was often the case in the GDR does not apply to women in the BWS yet women did remain underrepresented in leading positions and overrepresented in lower wage jobs.⁸¹ One important reason for A.P. to pursue these degrees was a wage increase; when she started working at the BWS she earned 390 Mark. She had also worked in jobs below her qualificational level, like many women in the GDR did. In 1987, she decided to begin her engineering studies at the university, becoming a team leader in her department with a monthly salary of 1,300 Mark; a job she says, she did with great pleasure and much "Herzblut" (blood, sweat and tears).⁸² She emphasized that she took any opportunity she had to expand her work experience, highlighting the state's continuous support for women's education and professional development as set out in its policies discussed earlier. A.P. found fulfillment in her work, feeling that she could develop into any professional direction she deemed appropriate without limitations. She experienced the closure of the BWS with great sadness and thought that women born between 1936 and 1958, really were the losers of the unification since they were too old for anything.⁸³ A.P. strongly believes that for women in the GDR who wanted to achieve something all doors were open. She never felt discriminated on the basis of her sex reiterating the state's rhetoric on the achieved equality of the sexes. This sentiment is mirrored by most interviewees, and interesting given the fact that Schüle describes the BWS as a male factory, despite the large number of women employed there.⁸⁴

S.M., born 1953, worked in the BWS from 1978 to 1990 and was a single parent of a daughter born in 1979. She had completed her university studies as an engineer by the time she began working which facilitated her direct entry into the innovation department at a higher level of the factory's hierarchy. Her wages increased from 820 to 960 Mark. She also utilized any educational and training programs the BWS offered within her field of expertise and her time limitations due to being a single mother. True to the GDR's identity as a worker and peasant state, S.M. with a university degree earned significantly less than some women working on the factory floor who obtained professional training on the job. S.M. felt that she was accepted in her field as a qualified and respected colleague and did not encounter any gender-based discrimination, being paid the same as her male colleagues. Furthermore, she always felt equal to men who had the same qualifications which she took for granted since her years at university, where 90% of the students

⁷⁹ Some German job description are difficult, at times impossible, to translate into English hence some of the translation may not reflect the exact meaning of the occupation in German.

⁸⁰ She also became a skilled worker in cutting tools (Zerspannungsfacharbeiter) and a forewoman for fine tool technology (Meister Feinwerktechnik).

⁸¹ See Heike Trappe, Rachel Rosenfeld, Brigitte Young, Hannelore Scholz and many others for detailed discussions on the GDR's sex segregated labor market.

⁸² A.P. July 2014, Sömmerda.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Annegret Schüle, "Industriearbeit als Emanzipationschance? Arbeiterinnen im Büromaschinenwerk Sömmerda und in der Baumwollspinnerei Leipzig" in: Gunilla-Friederike Budde, *Frauen arbeiten. Weibliche Erwerbstätigkeit in Ost- und Westdeutschland nach 1945*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1997, 101.

were men.⁸⁵ S.M. is also an example of the success of the GDR's women's policies and their implantation in the BWS. She felt particularly supported by the factory through childcare provisions, the quick allocation of an apartment, which were not guaranteed in the GDR due to shortages, and further professional training opportunities.

U.W., born in 1955, began her apprenticeship in the BWS as a mechanic in 1972. Since then her salary increased from 400 Mark to 500 Mark until 1990. She believes that men and women were paid based on their qualifications and not on the basis of sex. As a woman she said the BWS provided her a secure employment opportunity and professional development, e.g. evening courses to become an engineer.⁸⁶ Moreover, she felt the BWS provided additional support for working mothers with shortened working hours which were introduced with the women's policies as seen above. The BWS offered a three shift system and employees could choose if they wanted to work a single, double or triple shift. Remuneration depended on the shift system chosen. U.W. never felt discriminated as a woman and thought that generally women in the GDR were supported and protected by the state.⁸⁷ U.W.'s experiences reflect the successful implementation of the GDR gender policies in the BWS and also reinforce the image and self-perception of the socialist woman the state had created.

P.K., born in 1955, joined the BWS in 1979 after completing her studies as an engineer. She became a scientific assistant and the team leader of her section in 1984. Her wages increased from 855 Mark to 1,140 Mark in 1991. Overall she believes that men and women were equal but in individual cases if a woman had a higher educational or professional training than a man there may have been some form of discrimination, however she doesn't categorize the discrimination. P.K. explains that women had very good opportunities to grow in their professional lives with special women's classes, evening courses, etc.; however, she also draws attention to that fact that women had to fit into a societal picture.⁸⁸ This picture included fulltime work, comprised of shift work, societal engagements, children, etc.; if one were to look for individualistic solutions, such as part-time employment, that was only possible with medical proof.⁸⁹ P.K. had one child which also meant that she worked 43.75 hours a week; the 40 h week only applied to women with more than one child. The 40 hour week for everyone was introduced into the BWS only in August 1990,⁹⁰ showing a demarcation from the state's gender-based employment policies discussed above. P.K. did not want to obtain any leading positions because there was no financial benefit since white-collar employees did not earn substantially more than skilled workers. She believes that this was one reason why some people did not strive for professional development. Often higher positions also came with a much higher workload and responsibilities, something women shied away from given their responsibilities. Workers were more interested in maintaining personal contacts/networks and hobbies since these were much more important for survival than they are today.⁹¹ As seen in the BWS, the factory provided for these leisure activities and personal contacts and friendships within the workplace itself, emphasizing the inseparable identities of workers and citizens as well as the state's possible interference into the private lives of its citizens. P.K. does not think that the role of women in the GDR was anything special; it was normal that women

⁸⁵ S.M. July 2014, Sömmerda.

⁸⁶ U.W. July 2014, Sömmerda.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ P.K. July 2014, Sömmerda.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Thomas Hildebrand, *Die Wende 1989-90 in den Kreisen Sömmerda und Erfurter-Land* (Sömmerdaer Heimatheft, Landratsamt Sömmerda, 2010), 69.

⁹¹ P.K. July 2014, Sömmerda.

worked, including in male professions, normal that women were independent and that men and women were equal. Even though life in the GDR may have not been as self-determined as one would have wished, the social structure provided for everyone.⁹² P.K. argues that people had less room for personal development but also less anxiety and fear about their existence. Household and childrearing was shared by both, P.K. and her husband equally challenging existing ideas of women's triple burden in GDR society.

R.W., born in 1945, began working at the BWS in 1968 as a maintenance engineer in the three shift system and became a scientific assistant in 1981 in the computer/data center. She constantly undertook additional job training due to her position. Her salary increased from 780 Mark in 1968 to 1,300 (plus 200 Mark shift bonus) in 1988. She felt as an equal partner to men in the BWS and definitely supported by the state's women's policies. Job security and a sense of a protected future were perceived as the main benefit.⁹³ For R.W., as for all other interviewees, working was part of one's self-perception, just being a wife and a mother was not enough. She emphasized that the second income was also needed for the family's living standards which included a nice apartment, a car and regular holidays. Security, once again, emerges as the major incentive. R.W. concludes by saying that the sense of safety was taken for granted and only now, looking back, one understands its implications.⁹⁴

L.G., born in 1946, worked at the BWS from 1965, as a mechanic, to 1990, when she had become a department head. While working, she successfully completed her engineering studies hence her wages rose from 780 Mark to 1,200 Mark. L.G. and P.K. are the only interviewees who were aware of gender-based wage differences. P.K. stated that she earned less than two of her male colleagues despite having better professional and educational qualifications. She considered taking this up with her superiors but then decided it was not worth the trouble,⁹⁵ supporting Sandole-Staroste's argument that "because gender prejudice was not supposed to exist under state socialism, it could not be publicly articulated and questioned."⁹⁶ L.G. inquired with her superiors about wage differences and was told men earned more than women if they were members of the SED.⁹⁷ She further explains that the BWS strove for a quota system to include more women and independent (non-SED) workers into leading positions but this proved more successful on the lower levels. L.G. highlights that if a woman wanted to achieve something in a male-dominated profession she had to work much harder than her male counterparts. Out of six interviewees four worked in male-dominated sections of the BWS. L.G. mentions that her own experiences with the Women's Committees were rather disappointing since she felt that they listened but there was no follow up.⁹⁸ However, apart from the lower pay she never felt discriminated against on the basis of her sex and she felt lucky to have been able to pursue her professional career and to even be allowed to work, something not common in many other countries. According to Schüle, in this male dominated factory the negative image of the female factory worker had disappeared; women profited from the growing prestige of the factory, especially during the 1980s when it became the most important computer producer of the GDR.⁹⁹

⁹² Ibid,

⁹³ R.W. July 2014, Berlin.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ P.K. July 2014, Sömmerda.

⁹⁶ Ingrid Sandole-Staroste, *Women in Transition: between Socialism and Capitalism* (Wesport: Praeger, 2002), 20.

⁹⁷ L.G. July 2014, Sömmerda.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Schüle, 1997, 116.

Despite all of these women's mostly positive experiences and general satisfaction with the BWS and the state's women's policies, many women in the GDR looked for ways of coping with the triple burden and chose not to qualify further or worked in jobs below their qualifications in order to avoid additional responsibilities. "Younger women sometimes tried to balance effort at home and at work by taking jobs with more flexible working conditions, such as part-time work, less shift work, or closer proximity to the home or child care centre."¹⁰⁰ The way women defined and perceived themselves, as evident in the interviews, is closely aligned with the state's women's policies, a definition that lost immediate significance at the time of unification,¹⁰¹ especially in the BWS, when women had to adjust to yet another patriarchal system although under capitalism.

"Socialist elites responded in a more 'progressive' way than the capitalist elites to the needs of women, particularly with regard to combining the responsibilities of family and paid work. This was rooted in socialist ideology, and in the socialist system, which depends for its existence on women's labor in the public and the private spheres. Achieving any goal in the socialist system was possible only with –never against–one another, therefore cooperation and not competition was emphasized. This explains, in part, why women in East Germany look for ways to work and solve problems together with men: Socialist ideology shaped, in profound ways, the relations between women and men."¹⁰²

This socialist self-perception and self-identity becomes clear when studying gender relations in the GDR and women in the BWS.

Conclusion

According to communist ideology, the GDR achieved complete emancipation of women simply by introducing women into the labor force and easing yet not eradicating the triple burden. Based on that characterization of gender equality the GDR was progressive compared to many western and non-western countries because it had one of the highest female employment rates in the world. In 1989, 91 percent of East German women of working age were employed, and 87 percent had completed formal occupational training and were skilled workers and professionals.¹⁰³ Compared to all existing gender policies, the policies on women's employment, education and professional training were successful. On the surface, it almost appears as if women in the GDR had no problems combining paid labor, childcare and the household. The reality, however, was quite different in some respects. Even though politicians believed the women's question had been solved, women were still discriminated against in leading positions in factories, politics, and management; often hitting the socialist glass ceiling. The BWS showcases the state's women's policies with almost half of the work force being women, yet when it comes to leadership positions and challenging existing gender stereotypes in the private and the public sphere, the factory failed just as the state's women's policies and the Party. Since state policies supported women, more was

¹⁰⁰ Heike Trappe and Rachel A. Rosenfeld, "A Comparison of Job-Shifting Patterns in the Former East Germany and the Former West Germany" in: *European Sociological Review*, Vol. 14, No. 4, 348.

¹⁰¹ See Sandole-Staroste's *Women in Transition* for a detailed exploration of East German women's changing social, economic and political lives.

¹⁰² Sandole-Staroste, 6.

¹⁰³ Ferree, 89.

expected of women, but the triple burden left little time for further professional training which would have enabled them to play a more pronounced and decisive role in the social and political system, despite the fact that many women, as seen at the example of the BWS, successfully acquired further professional training. It took many years before women and men realized that the GDR was a paternal state, and both sexes were limited by gender expectations and gender divisions of labor at home and in the workplace. This study points out that East German society and its women were not as black and white as often portrayed. The GDR was a nuanced and complex society; it had obviously not achieved gender equality, despite its proclamation in the early 1970s, but it had accomplished more than many other countries, including unified Germany in the early 2000s. This analysis provides interesting insides and from the small sample of BWS women it is clear that women took advantage of the opportunities that were given to them and many felt fulfilled in their professional lives and supported by the state. None of the interviewees perceived the triple burden as a hindrance to becoming, in their perception, equal partners in society. The BWS successfully implemented all state-sanctioned women's policies, the number of qualified and educated women increased consistently until 1990. Women were more outspoken and articulate about their issues and concerns than often assumed or "allowed" by critics. At the same time women felt more appreciated by society, the workplace and the state than they do now. There is no discussion that the state socialist system was patriarchal, restrictive and controlling but women need to be looked at in their own right as women and not as gender-neutral, oppressed and victimized citizens of the GDR since this is purely a continuation of the GDR's legacy of comparing women to men, of women manning up.