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Women's Role in the German Democratic Republic and the State's Policy Toward Women

By Susanne Kranz¹

Abstract

According to the theories of Marx, Engels, Bebel, and the political leaders of the GDR, the emancipation of women would be accomplished when the emancipation of the working class was realized. They further clarify the general view toward women in a socialist society; these ideas characterized the GDR and the general perception of women. The women's question was incorporated into the social question and the class struggle, and not distinguished as an individual aspect of gender relations. The question is how much equality women in the GDR had achieved and how emancipated the society, truly, was. My main focus is the analysis of the women's movement in East Germany, and whether an independent women's movement existed or not. The state's policy toward women was primarily aimed in the direction of mothers, and not toward women as women. Gradually, women began to realize that emancipation and equality meant more than employment and economic independence.

Key words: Women, Socialism, Germany

Introduction

"The degree of emancipation of women in every society is the natural standard for the general emancipation." This statement by one of the early utopian socialists, Charles Fourier (1772-1837), describes an important source of reflection on the conditions of societies past and present. According to the theories of the socialist thinkers such as Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and August Bebel, and the political leaders of the GDR [German Democratic Republic], when the emancipation of society, i.e., of the working class, was realized, then the liberation of women would also be accomplished. The 'women's question,' that is, the issue of the social and political role of women under East German Socialism, was incorporated into the social question and the question of the class struggle. It was not distinguished as an individual aspect of gender relations. In addition, the 'women's question' seemed central because women appeared to have special needs. The primary concern is that women in the GDR as well as the entire society had achieved a certain kind of equality and emancipation which can only be seen within the specific context of socialism. But overall, the society and women were not much emancipated and ironically, women especially lacked feminist consciousness. The contradictory concept of feminism versus Marxism is a striking arena of concern and interest in looking at East German women's movements as well as the official policy of the communist party versus the reality of women's lives within society. This article examines how these contradictions actually increased throughout the existence of the German Democratic Republic.

The theories of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and August Bebel,¹ are essential because they provided the intellectual and ideological framework within which the

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leadership of the GDR formulated their views of and policies towards women in East German society and politics. GDR leaders, such as Walter Ulbricht² and Erich Honecker,³ implemented these communist ideas into East German political, social, and cultural systems. In addition, these ideas characterized the GDR and the perception of women in a socialist state. Due to repressive state policies and a well-structured security police, the Stasi (Staatssicherheit [State's Security]), women as well as other citizens had no opportunity to organize themselves in an independent women's movement. The society as a whole was not emancipated. People realized too late that they were lacking basic human rights, such as full participation in the political process, freedom to express opinions, freedom to speak, and freedom to travel.

The state's policy toward women was mainly aimed in the direction of mothers, and not toward women as women. Despite the socialist state system the definition of women's role in society remained traditional. It is important to examine the changes in state policy during the existence of the GDR. These policies led to the discontent of women with the system, even though there was never much official resistance among women in East Germany. In the 1970s and 1980s the first women, civil rights, peace, and environmental movements emerged. Additionally, women began to realize that emancipation and equality meant more than employment and economic independence, especially since the socialist definition of emancipation is rather narrow. They realized based on their own lived experiences and the state's claims, that socially and politically they were not equal to East German men. They started to organize themselves in independent state branches through the main office in Berlin, to discuss equality and emancipation and the propagated, officially "achieved" emancipation in the GDR. Moreover, in the late 70s and mid-80s they had established some contacts to West German as well as European feminist. The most important and most influential movements were "Frauen für den Frieden" [Women for Peace], "lila offensive," and the UFV (Unabhaengeriger Frauenverband der DDR [Independent Women's Movement of the GDR]) that was founded in 1989, the last year of the GDR's existence. These movements will be the central focus of my analysis. The UFV was especially important to the societal changes in East Germany during the late 1980s.

Historical Developments: An Overview

The SED's (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands [Socialist Unity Party]) women's policy was characterized by three different criteria which contained elements of Marxist ideology: (1) the realization of legal equality between men and women, (2) the promotion of working women, and (3) special protection of mothers and children.⁴ To achieve these goals the politicians followed diverse programs and ideas which were all based on socialist principles. The party's policy 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."⁵ The consequences of the war and the terrible economic situation made 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."⁶ The ideological and economic interests seemed to be identical.⁷ 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.⁸ The party appeared to consider women's interests as essential.

The new leadership enacted many different laws and regulations for the protection of mothers. Yet the centrality of motherhood in SED policies reaffirmed the traditional role of women in society. In 1950, for example, the "Law for the Protection of Mother and Child and the Rights of Women" was ratified.⁹ It contained instructions about the establishment of childcare facilities, the guarantee of the right to work for women, and improvement for professional qualifications. Women were not allowed to work at night, they were excluded from strenuous and dangerous jobs, and working hours were reduced. In 1952, the SED decided on the establishment of women promoting plans and measures to increase the numbers of female employees in factories. Furthermore, a law for the establishment of places for consultation for pregnant women and mothers was ratified in 1953.¹⁰

The women's committees were significant. Their task was political, anti-fascist and cultural enlightenment, to mobilize women for democratic reconstruction, and to support mothers in raising their children in a democratic spirit. The DFD (Demokratischer Frauenverband Deutschlands [Democratic Women's Association of Germany]) that developed from these committees was represented as its own caucus in the Volkskammer [Parliament]. The main task was to win women, especially housewives, for labor. The SED created Betriebsfrauenausschüsse [Factory Women's Committees] in 1952, which were responsible for achieving equality and the systematic promotion of women in factories.¹¹ Women could articulate their demands and interests. The committees were regulated by the SED which already implied the supremacy of the party and its goals, and strengthened the perception that the entire process was more about state control than emancipation. Furthermore, the party used the committees to reduce the responsibilities of the DFD.¹²

Between 1947 and 1949 the DFD initiated women's groups in the factories which had the same tasks as the new committees.¹³ These groups were abolished by the SED in 1949, only to be reestablished in 1952 by the SED itself. They were perceived as a threat to the state's policy and not officially sanctioned by the political leaders. This demonstrates the influence and power the DFD had already forfeited. Finally, in 1965, the committees that gained much influence among women were transformed into commissions, and subordinated under the BGL (Betriebsgewerkschaftsleitung [Factory Union Leadership]).¹⁴ Women seemed to use the committees frequently for their claims and demands, which appeared as a danger to the party. On February 5, 1965, the FDGB (Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund [Free German Unions Association]) decided, according to an SED ruling, that it would take full responsibility for the women's committees.¹⁵ The committees were real representations for women; here they had the chance to improve their situation. Nevertheless, all these bodies remained under the control of the SED, and automatically transformed women's issues into rhetorical issues. Table one shows how these developments altered the number of female members in the unions. Women realized that the labor unions were their only opportunity to achieve equality or at least a way to make their voices and demands heard, but overall the unions did not add to real power for women. Being a member of a labor union was somewhat an obligation for people who were party members as well.

Table 1 Female Members in Labor Unions¹⁶

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 until 1971, was determined by the concentration of qualified job training and further education of women. Special women's promotion plans were prepared as promotion and qualification of women had always been measured by a male standard.¹⁷ Emancipation was perceived in terms of how women compared with men rather than as independent interests. Women were introduced into male professions and technical work and new laws aimed to improve the situation of women with respect to education were enacted. Special classes and university studies were established to achieve better qualifications for women, and to enable them to pursue further education while being employed full-time and raising children.

Furthermore, regulations which ostensibly aimed to help women to manage studying and learning and caring for their children and families were authorized. Yet increasingly, the image of women as mothers became emphasized because of the increasing birth rate, the high divorce rate, and the wish for part-time employment. At the end of the sixties women's the double burden became visible.¹⁸ When the FGB (Familiengesetzbuch [Family Law Book of the GDR]) was ratified in 1965, it contained social and political regulations that were meant to simplify women's lives, and these regulations lead to the women's policies of the seventies. The FBG encouraged, "mutual upbringing of children, mutual responsibility for the household, and mutual help to combine profession and family."¹⁹ Even though laws were established to improve the conditions of working women, the situation was far from becoming reality. Moreover, the laws that were enacted did not represent real rights or emancipation, and the rhetoric used by the SED served to reinforce the double standard and gender stereotypes.

The third phase began in 1971 and continued until German reunification. It started with the resignation of political leader Walter Ulbricht and the inauguration of Erich Honecker as new leader of the state. At the VIII Party Congress of the SED, numerous new social measures were added to the constitution and the FGB to lighten women's burden of work and family. Previously, the state's policies had been contradictory; it was almost impossible to combine paid employment with work in the household and motherhood. These new ideas resulted in the most innovative actions taken for the betterment of women in society. The conflict between work and household had become too great, and discontent with the state's social policy had increased. In the eighties the economic situation was aggravated; East Germany was not able to fulfill the economic plans it strived for, and it was difficult to provide the population with supplies and food.

Political versus Social Settings

Despite these difficulties, other improvements such as childcare facilities and the integration of women in the work force lead Erich Honecker to claim that the women's question had been solved. He used party rhetoric declaring women emancipated even

though the reality appears to be rather different. Erich Honecker declared at the party meeting:

Comrades we cannot speak of the development of socialism in our Republic without recognizing the splendid part played by women in all our success, no matter where they work. 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 for itself. 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. Further [we must] improve childcare, so that women can work.²⁰

Thus, emancipation of women was officially, but not actually achieved. Socio-political measures were increased and the state's women's policy merged into the state's "Mutti-Politik" [Mommy-Policy], where women again were defined in their traditional roles as simply mothers. All laws were aimed toward mothers and how to improve the conformity of paid labor, household and motherhood. As the contradictions became increasingly visible women realized that their understanding of "emancipation" was different from the views of their political leaders. Women were reduced to motherhood and the responsibility for the household and childcare remained in their hands, even though the FGB ruled that both parents had to cooperate so that profession and household were compatible. Table two shows how housework was usually divided between husband and wife and demonstrates that the main burden was on women. They clearly spent more hours on household work than men.

Table 2 Time used for Housework on Weekdays according to Women²¹

	No Housework	Up to 1 Hour	1-2 Hours	2-3 Hours	3-4 Hours	More than 4 Hours
Wife	---	7	31	32	18	12
Husband	5	48	33	9	3	2

Moreover, if women were unable to combine paid labor with motherhood, it was implied that it was their own failure and their problem because the state had enacted ample social measures and regulations to support them. While The GDR's women's policy was progressive in some fields, the socialist regime maintained and even reinforced traditional gender roles and spheres.

The GDR and the Mother's Policy

In 1949, when the GDR was founded, most of the ideas of Marx and Engels regarding the status of women were implemented in the constitution. Article 20 of the

constitution declared, “men and women are equal; they have the same rights in all spheres of society.”²² The support and promotion of women, especially in the field of professional training, was to be a leading task for the state. Furthermore, equal employment opportunities, equal payment, and education were encouraged by the SED, and already implemented by the SMAD (Sowjetische Militäradministration [Soviet Military Administration]) through their orders. Through special programs, the state promoted the goal of moving as many women into the labor force as possible. Engels and Marx also talked about extraordinary support for motherhood as soon as women were included in the workforce and as soon as they were able to fulfill work and family duties. In addition, Article 38 of the constitution declared, “marriage, family, and motherhood are under a special protection by the state.”²³ Furthermore, this article also contained particular support of mothers, for example, one-year maternity leave, special medical treatment, material and financial support for births, and family allowance.

East Germany followed the socialist principle that emancipation was possible only if women were highly involved in the work force. According to the socialists, the emancipation of women is incorporated in the class struggle and women will be emancipated once the class struggle is completed. Only then could they become socially and economically independent. On the other hand, the economic situation in the first years of the existence of the GDR was stagnant and weak, and every worker was needed in the work force, 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 for women, even though the SED declared emancipation their goal, it was rather to get the economy started. The ideology matched the needs following the war and was used to create a picture of equality between the sexes that was clearly more metaphorical than real.

During these years, the state enacted further laws that enabled women to work and also made it possible for them to deal with their household. The SED followed the idea that women in a communist state are responsible for the housework and the family. Regarding the family and household issue, the Marxists left an enormous degree of interpretation to the SED because Marx, Engels, Bebel, and Zetkin never really said much about these matters, and left men completely out of the household and family sphere. In communist societies, families were the smallest cells in society. According to the FGB, “Equal rights of men and women determine the character of the family.”²⁴ Furthermore, the protection of the family and the prevention of women from becoming discouraged due to material dependence, were the major duties of the communist state.²⁵ The founders of the GDR believed that through education and equality between men and women, the family would be strengthened. For Marx and Engels, the family was already essential for society. It also held an enormous significance in East Germany. A strong communist family would support the state and help to build a powerful socialist society.

According to the ideas of Marx and Engels, the women’s question in the GDR was seen as solved. Women had achieved equal opportunities for work, identical pay, qualified education, and participation in societal and political life, even though these rights were more imposed by the state than fought for by women. Moreover, the protection of mother, child, and family was incorporated into politics.²⁶ In 1961, the Politbüro of the Central Committee of the SED published the Communiqué “Die Frau – der Frieden und der Sozialismus” [Woman, Peace and Socialism] which reported the

status of equality and women, and outlined what had to be changed in politics to further improve the conditions of women. Furthermore, it called for a decrease in discrimination against women, and for additional support for women in the work place and in education. The document called for an increase in the number of women in the work force, more qualified and better education, and additional improvements for working women and mothers. The promotion of women into technical, industrial, scientific, and other typical male occupations, and the increase of women in higher and leading positions, was also in the program. In the sixties when the communiqué was published it was still possible to have an open discussion about emancipation and equal rights for women which never occurred again until 1989 when the independent women's movement arose.

Despite these efforts, the labor market continued to be strongly gender segregated.²⁷ Women dominated the occupational fields of education, health care, social services, and textiles, although in these female areas women earned less than men. Girls were guided into typical women's professions. Places for professional training were limited and mostly the state regulated who received which training and at which place. Even though women were successful in entering distinctive male professions, in which they were also paid less than men, the state never promoted men into female occupations. There was clearly no equality between men and women. This aspect of socialist society again demonstrates the contradiction between socialist rhetoric and socialist reality.

Women were at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy. Even though women earned only about 762 Marks per month, while men were paid 1000 Marks, women's wages contributed 40 percent to the family income; women in West Germany contributed only 18 percent.²⁸ Table three shows how the labor market was differentiated between men and women according to wage levels. Women were overrepresented in the lower and middle-wage levels; they always earned less, even though they had the same professional qualifications and even though some of them might have worked more and harder than their male counterparts. The higher the wages become, the fewer women were working in these professions.

Table 3 Fulltime Workers and Employees according to Wage Level and Gender²⁹

Wage Level	Male	Female	Share of Female 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

According to communist ideology, the GDR achieved complete emancipation of women simply by introducing women into the labor force and supporting them in their job and housework as much as possible. In comparison with many western countries women in East Germany were economically more emancipated because the GDR had one of the highest female employment rates in the world. Thus emancipation was primarily visible in the employment rate since this was the leading aspect of equality in a socialist society. In 1989, 91 percent of East German women of working age were employed and

87 percent had completed formal occupational training and were seen as skilled workers and professionals,³⁰ but not on equal term with men. Moreover, according to the state's program for education, 50 percent of university students were women in 1988 (see Table five).³¹ Women in the GDR never had to fight for some of their rights, such as the right to work and the right to abortion; they were granted or rather imposed by the government from the very beginning of the state's history. The state did not ask what rights women required; it simply provided women with the rights the state thought are accurate within the socialist context.

Table four shows the various developments in the labor market between the GDR and the FRG [Federal Republic of Germany]. East German women were highly involved in work even though they had the same number of children or more than women in the West. The state's policy regarding the high employment of women was successful. According to the party and the state, it appears that women in the GDR had no problems to combine their paid labor with raising children, which was far from reality. In context of socialist terms regarding emancipation, the state was able to achieve its goal, the liberation and emancipation of women through employment.

Table 4 Working Mothers Percentage by Population³²

	GDR	FRG
With 1 child under 17 or 18 of age	80.0	43.0
With 2 children under 17 or 18 of age	76.0	33.8
With 3 children under 17 or 18 of age	69.0	31.0

Despite these achievements, women were still discriminated against, unable to obtain leading positions in factories, in politics, and in management: they were not able to get a job in the higher ranks. The above-mentioned communiqué "Woman, Peace and Socialism" was one program that tried to eliminate differences between the sexes, but it was not successful because the political leadership that was not really interested in social changes. It appears that the program was only released as a form of propaganda, to demonstrate to the people that the government was concerned with improvements for its women.

The inconsistencies of government policy which undermined statements about women's equality is demonstrated in educational policy. Schools and universities, as mentioned earlier, had particular programs and classes for working women. Young female students and couples with children received special assistance through financial support, the guarantee of a day care center, and easy access to apartments and dormitory rooms. Most women gave birth to children during the time they studied at universities, making them eligible for additional assistance. These measures arguably enabled and encouraged women to gain more education, yet at the same time they were still expected to bear children and take full responsibility for child rearing. Table six shows how qualifications among women improved. During the years the number of female students rose steadily, which was also used by the SED to emphasize their commitment to equality and emancipation, but again a contradiction in itself.

Table 5 Female Students 1951-1989 in Higher Education³³

Year	Total %
1951	21.60
1960	25.25
1970	35.40
1980	48.67
1981	48.84
1982	49.25
1983	49.98
1984	49.91
1985	50.10
1986	50.34
1987	50.19
1988	49.19
1989	48.57

Despite these efforts, women remained underpaid since they were not represented in leadership positions and often women had to work part-time because of their obligation as mothers. Women in the GDR spent an average of forty-seven hours on housework per week.³⁴ Women came home and worked their “second shift [which gave them] no time for self-reflections.”³⁵ The time deficit and the double burden discouraged some women from attaining more and better education because they had to plan their time carefully, and for most working-class and middle-class women there was simply no time for anything else. Women in East Germany seldom had leisure time, and if they had, they did not want to spend it studying. Women were under considerable stress with their “two jobs,” and they were underrepresented in leading positions because they “avoided extra work responsibilities.”³⁶ Regardless of these conditions, women wanted to work for many different reasons; moreover, it was common that women did work in the GDR. Women could not imagine defining themselves solely as housewives. Even after reunification, only three percent of the East German women could think of becoming full-time housewives.³⁷

Table six shows the importance of work for women. There is a wide difference between married and unmarried women, but both groups were not primarily concerned with material motives, luxury goods, which were anyways difficult to get in the GDR, and ideological or moral reasons. In general women seemed to be interested in gaining further professional experience that might promote them to higher educational ranks, which proves the significance of education and professional training for women.

Table 6 Motives for Women to Work, 1989³⁸

	Married %	Unmarried %	Total %
Material Motives	----	----	----
Acquisition of Subsistence	51.7	85.3	68.8
Acquisition of Luxury Goods	—	—	—

Modernization and 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

The Third Phase

In 1971, the Socialist Unity Party enacted further laws and regulations toward women, but again aimed at mothers only, reinforcing gender stereotypes. The party decided that, starting immediately, maternity leave for one year would be paid, and women would be guaranteed the right to return to their jobs after their maternity leave. The working hours were shortened from forty-three and a half hours a week to forty hours a week and regulations concerning shift work were enacted. Women received one paid day for household work every month, they could take off work when children became sick, and childcare facilities were increased. Furthermore, they received maternity assistance of 1,000 East German Marks per child. Families would not have to pay back their marriage credit with the birth of their third child. Young couples were given an advantage in getting apartments. Women also had the right to free abortions within the first twelve weeks of their pregnancy, and they received free contraceptives. In 1972, the SED decided to grant women self-determination over their bodies.³⁹ The law that enabled women to obtain legal abortions was discussed neither before its ratification nor after. Women received it “from above.” Women were not regarded as necessary in the fight for their rights in the GDR, at least not for the right to work and abort; rather, it was the state’s task to take care of women’s rights and emancipation and the state successfully imposed the socialist ideas of emancipation on them. The state regulated and defined women’s rights and had full power over them and their rights.

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.”⁴⁰ Women remained through all these years underrepresented in political offices and high managerial positions even though their skills and education were advanced enormously. In 1989 there was only one woman employed as a minister in the cabinet, Margot Honecker, wife of Erich Honecker, who was Minister of Education, while the cabinet contained thirty-seven ministers. Furthermore, five women worked in

the State's Council of the GDR. In three decades there were only two female ministers: Rita Kuckhoff was Minister of the German Central Bank from 1950 to 1958, and Eli Schmidt who was the director of commission for trade and supply for four month in 1953. These women worked in leading positions in a time when emancipation and equality were still declared goals of the state, and when open discussions about women's issues were still possible. Often women were relieved from their duties because they did not represent the opinion of the SED. Even though the participation of women in leading positions seemed fairly small, the female membership "in state representative bodies was higher than in most West and East European countries."⁴¹ The numbers seem rather impressive, but the reality was somewhat different and women did not have much real political power. The double standard was reinforced once again.

All firms and factories had to submit affirmative-action plans with detailed information about the improvements for women in training, promotion to leading positions, and working conditions.⁴² The AGB (Arbeitsgesetzbuch [Worker's Law Book]) from 1977 that contained the measures for the affirmative action plans, called women's promotion plans, stated:

Paragraph 30

- (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.⁴³

According to Christiane Lemke, these plans were not very successful due to family matters, male prejudice against women, and the lack of qualification and higher education. The old role patterns of the sexes and the old division of labor within the family and within the labor force remained.⁴⁴ Parallel to these measures the birthrate declined and the number of divorces increased. This provided reasons for additional government improvements; for example, paid one-year maternity leave for the second child was approved. But again the government measures targeted mothers only, which were underlined by the socialist society. The higher divorce rate was a result of the economic independence of women, and through greater involvement of women in social and work life. East Germany had one of the highest divorce rates in the world. In 1981, twenty-nine out of ten thousand inhabitants were divorced, while in West Germany only thirteen per ten thousand people obtained a divorce.⁴⁵

According to Myra Marx Ferree, the state's "mommy politics" shows that East German women understood the term emancipation differently from the SED.⁴⁶ It appears that women did understand the contradiction between state's rhetoric and reality, but they did not know how to confront the state since everything was under complete state control.

Because of the “mommy policies” and their associated social programs and regulations, men saw women as privileged because the measures which were undertaken were valid for women only; men did not receive a paid day off for housework every month for example. This privileged status of mothers increased male prejudices against working women and in the long run were disadvantageous.⁴⁷ Women were now acknowledged as a disturbance to the working process and were accountable for losses because they needed to stay at home if their children became sick or if they became pregnant. It was usually women who took care of ill children since men earned more. Women were degraded because they and their performance were measured against men’s capabilities.

Because the two German states developed in different and unique ways, they “had instituted quite different gender regimes” which enacted dissimilar laws and regulations regarding women’s status.⁴⁸ Table eight illustrates the diverse women’s policies which were enacted by the GDR and FRG and it also illustrates the different approaches the governments took. East Germans used the opportunities the state gave them for childcare and other social support, while West Germans preferred private childcare. Most women in the west were dependent on private childcare because the childcare institutions provided by the state only operated for a few hours every day. Table seven clearly shows that it was normal for women in the East to work and take care of their children. Even school children attended after school care facilities so that working mothers were able to participate in full-time employment. There were not many similarities between the East and West German perceptions on childcare, family life, paid labor, and general gender roles.

Table 7 Women’s Policy in the GDR and Comparable Measures in the FRG, 1990⁴⁹

Policy Measure	GDR	FRG
Marriage loan	5,000 Marks, 25% reduction per child born	None
Maternity leave	Six weeks before and 20 weeks after birth. Full pay	Six weeks before and eight weeks after birth. Full pay
Maternity grant	1,000 Marks	DM 100
Educational leave	Since 1976: one year; up to three years if no child care accessible. Pay between 90% and 65% (mothers only)	Since 1985 up to 18 months; max. DM 600 pay per month. Mothers or fathers can alternate once.
Paid leave to care for sick child	Four weeks per child (mothers only)	Five days per child (mothers or fathers)
Working hours	Entitlement for mothers with several children to a 3-hour reduction from 43.75 to 40 hours per week	No provision

Crèches	80% of all children under three, full-time	4% of children under three, full-time
Kindergarten	94% of 3-6 year olds, full-time	About 70% of 3-6 year olds, up to 3 hours per day
Care after school	81% of 6-10 year olds	3.6% of 6-10 year olds
Housework day	One day per month for all working mothers	No provision
Contraception	Free provision of contraceptives, including abortion	No free provision

Emancipation, in the communist sense, enabled women to have a life independent from men, and to earn their living on their own even though they had children. Yet the autonomy from men put them in a condition of dependence on the state. The emancipation realized from above; according to the Marxist understanding of emancipation, was the state's task.⁵⁰

Conclusion

The women's question was a class, not a gender question. Women were regarded by the state as a part of the class struggle, not as individuals with some distinct needs from men. Because of this, women in East Germany lacked feminist consciousness.⁵¹ The state defined them as workers and women saw themselves as workers just as men did. The term "feminism" was not used in East Germany. Feminism, as practiced in capitalist countries, was seen as pure hatred toward men, and for the political elite in the GDR this was not the goal of socialist society. Feminists were perceived as a disturbance within the class struggle and a danger to the objectives of communism. Men and women (read: mothers), were equal parts of the society and had to practice solidarity in support of the communist idea.

The state and the party strove to make women's lives easier with all the enacted laws regarding motherhood, but in so doing, strengthened traditional gender stereotypes. The rights given were under complete state control as were the labor unions and women's organization. Under these circumstances the entire society, not only women, could not be emancipated. The contradiction between socialist rhetoric and socialist reality is indeed obvious throughout the history of the GDR and is reflected in the tensions between the ideals of socialism and socialists views of women's emancipation.

Notes

¹ August Bebel was one of the most important social democratic politicians in the 19th century.

Furthermore, he was a worker, a Marxist revolutionary, and an acknowledged publicist.

² Walter Ulbricht (1893-1973) was the political leader of the German Democratic Republic from 1953-

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- 1971, when he was replaced with Erich Honecker. Ulbricht was a member of the KPD and during the Second World War he emigrated to Paris. He returned to Germany in 1945 and became an active member of the SED which emerged through reunification of the KPD and SPD.
- ³ Erich Honecker (1912-1994) held the political leadership of East Germany from 1971-1989. He joined the Communist party in 1926. Honecker was arrested by the Nazis in 1935 and sentenced to ten years of prison for communist activities. After the Second World War he became one of the first members of the SED.
- ⁴ Büchler, Grit. *Mythos Gleichberechtigung in der DDR. Politische Partizipation von Frauen am Beispiel des Demokratischen Frauenbundes Deutschlands*. Frankfurt a.M.; New York: Campus Verlag, 1997, 29.
- ⁵ Lemke, Christiane. "Women and Politics in East Germany". In: *Socialist Review* 15, 1985, 123.
- ⁶ Die Frauen – der Frieden und der Sozialismus, Kommunique des Demokratischen Frauenbundes Deutschland (DFD) In: Demokratischer Frauenbund Deutschlands (DFD), *Geschichte des Demokratischen Frauenbundes Deutschlands* (Leipzig, 1989).
- ⁷ Helwig, Gisela and Nickel, Hildegard Maria. *Frauen in Deutschland 1945-1992*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993, 16.
- ⁸ Hannelore Scholz. *Die DDR-Frau zwischen Mythos und Realität* (Schwerin: Altstadt Druck, 1997), 8.
- ⁹ Helwerth, Ulrike. *Von Muttis und Emanzen. Feministinnen in Ost- und Westdeutschland*. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1995, 210.
- ¹⁰ Hildebrandt, Karin. *Historischer Exkurs zur Frauenpolitik der SED*. In: Bütow Birgit and Strecker, Heidi. *Eigenartige Ostfrauen. Frauenemanzipation in der DDR und den neuen Bundesländern*. Bielefeld: Kleine Verlag, 1994, 330.
- ¹¹ Helwerth, 211.
- ¹² Bütow, Birgit. *Studium, Studentenforschung und Geschlechterfrage in der DDR. Versuch einer Rekonstruktion*. In: Bütow Birgit and Strecker, Heidi. *Eigenartige Ostfrauen. Frauenemanzipation in der DDR und den neuen Bundesländern*. Bielefeld: Kleine Verlag, 1994, 19.
- ¹³ Büchler, 30.
- ¹⁴ Nave-Herz, Rosemarie. *Die Geschichte der Frauenbewegung*. Bonn: Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, 1993, 108.
- ¹⁵ Herta Kuhrig. *Mit den Frauen – Für die Frauen*, In: Florence Herve. *Geschichte der deutschen Frauenbewegung* (Köln: Papy Rossa Verlag, 2001), 225.
- ¹⁶ Kuhrig, In: Herve, 225.
- ¹⁷ Büchler, 31.
- ¹⁸ Büchler, 32.
- ¹⁹ *Familiengesetzbuch der DDR* (Berlin: Staatsverlag der DDR, Dec. 20, 1965), 2.
- ²⁰ Erich Honecker. *The German Democratic Republic. Pillar of Peace and Socialism* (New York: International Publishers, 1979), 47.
- ²¹ Scholz, Hannelore. *Die DDR-Frau zwischen Mythos und Realität*. Schwerin: Altstadt Druck, 1997, 11.
- ²² *Verfassung der DDR* (Berlin: Staatsverlag der DDR, Oct. 7, 1974).
- ²³ *Verfassung der DDR* (Berlin: Staatsverlag der DDR, Oct. 7, 1974).
- ²⁴ *Familiengesetzbuch der DDR* (Berlin: Staatsverlag der DDR, Dec. 20, 1965), 2.
- ²⁵ *Familiengesetzbuch der DDR* (Berlin: Staatsverlag Dec. 20, 1965), 1.
- ²⁶ *Die Frauen – der Frieden und der Sozialismus, Kommunique des Demokratischen Frauenbundes Deutschland (DFD)* In: Demokratischer Frauenbund Deutschlands (DFD), *Geschichte des Demokratischen Frauenbundes Deutschlands*. Leipzig, 1989.
- ²⁷ Ferree, Myra Marx. "The Rise and the Fall of "Mommy Politics": Feminism and Unification in (East) Germany". In: *Feminist Studies*, Spring 1993, Vol 19, Issue 1, 91.
- ²⁸ Ferree, 92.
- ²⁹ Diemers, 128.
- ³⁰ Ferree, 89.
- ³¹ Lorna Martens. *The Promised Land? Feminist Writing in the German Democratic Republic* (Albany:

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- University State Press, 2001), 7.
- ³² Helwig, 94.
- ³³ Diemers, Susanne. *Patriarchalismus in der DDR. Strukturelle, kulturelle und subjektive Dimensionen der Geschlechterpolarisierung*. Opladen : Leske + Budrich, 1994, 199.
- ³⁴ Irene Dölling. *Culture and Gender* In: Marilyn Rüschmeyer and Christiane Lemke. *The Quality of Life in the German Democratic Republic* (Armonk, NY: M.E.Sharpe, 1989), 27.
- ³⁵ Nickel, 7.
- ³⁶ Lemke, 126.
- ³⁷ Ferree, 92.
- ³⁸ Helwig, 94.
- ³⁹ Helwerth, 225.
- ⁴⁰ Lemke, 122.
- ⁴¹ Lemke, 129.
- ⁴² Lemke, 125.
- ⁴³ Herta Kuhrig. *„Mit den Frauen – Für die Frauen*, In: Herve, 226.
- ⁴⁴ Irene Dölling. *Culture and Gender* In: Marilyn Rüschmeyer and Christiane Lemke. *The Quality of Life in the German Democratic Republic* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe 1989), 29.
- ⁴⁵ Helwig, 213.
- ⁴⁶ Ferree, 89.
- ⁴⁷ Frederike Maier. *Frauenerwerbstätigkeit in der DDR und der BRD*, In: Gudrun Axeli-Knapp and Ursula Müller. *Ein Deutschland – Zwei Patriarchate* (Hannover, 1992), 32.
- ⁴⁸ Eva Kolinsky and Hildegard Maria Nickel. “Reinventing Gender after the GDR” in: Eva Kolinsky and Hildegard Nickel. *Reinventing Gender. Women in Eastern Germany since Reunification* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 1.
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- ⁵⁰ Jenny Niederstädt. *Vereinigung zu Lasten der Ostdeutschen Frauen* In: Wolfgang Dümcke and Fritz Vilmar. *Kolonialisierung der DDR* (Münster: Agenda, 1996), 256.
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