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Does Full Employment Reinforce Discrimination?

WOMEN AND WORK IN EAST GERMANY

by Elizabeth C. Rudd

East Germany is perhaps best known in the United States as the location of cold war espionage novels. But East Germany should also be known for its far-reaching policies to facilitate the employment of women. Although East Germany was dissolved in 1990 with the reunification of Germany, we can still learn from the consequences of its social policies on women and work.

Throughout communist eastern Europe chronic labor shortages together with the state provision of inexpensive child care resulted in very high work rates for women. This was especially marked in East Germany, which boasted the most extensive network of child care among the eastern European states as well as the highest work rates for women outside the Soviet Union.

The consequences of East German policy for the organization of work and women's position in the labor force suggest that the full employment of women brings the problems of the compatibility of work and family into the forefront of social issues. It shows that the full employment of women easily goes hand in hand with discrimination against women in the occupational structure. And it shows that work and family policies interact to influence child bearing decisions, workplace organization, and gender equality.

Working Women in East Germany, West Germany and the United States

Prior to reunification, East German women had much higher employment rates than West German and American women. In 1988 in West Germany the percentage of women of working age who were employed was 55%; in East Germany over 90% of the women of working age were employed, studying full time or in an apprentice program.

Table 1 shows the labor force participation rates of men and women in West Germany, East Germany and the United States. I calculated the work rates for men by dividing the number of

men employed by the number of men of "working age," which for men is defined as aged 15-64. "Working age" for women is defined as aged 15-60 in East German statistical reports; therefore I also calculated the women's work rates for West Germany and the United States by dividing the number of employed women by the number of women aged 15-60.

The percentages reported here may look different from ones you've seen elsewhere. This is because there is no standard measure of labor force participation. For example, it is usual for U.S. figures to be based on the number of people aged 16 and over, rather than only on the number of people aged 16 to 64. I have seen the employment rate for West German women reported as about 33%; this very low figure is obtained by dividing the number of women working by the total female population.

Table 1:
EMPLOYMENT RATES
OF MEN AND WOMEN, 1988

	East Germany	United States	West Germany (1989)
Women	84%	69%	55%
Men	82%	79%	77%

Sources: *Statistical Year Book of the Federal Republic of Germany*, 1989, Table 3.9 and Table 6.3, p. 52 and p. 90; *Statistical Year Book for the German Democratic Republic*, 1989, Section II, p. 17 and Section XXI, p. 356; *Statistical Abstract of the U.S.* 1991, No. 13, p. 13 and No. 635, p. 386

Table 1 shows that women's work rates were much higher in East Germany than in West Germany and that American women held jobs less often than East Germans but more often than West Germans. The table also shows that men's labor force participation rates were very similar in all three countries, despite the large differences in women's employment rates.

The higher labor force participation rates of East German women reflect the fact that East German women worked full time continuously over the life course. While most women in West Germany and in the United States work outside the home at least some of the time, they also tend to leave the labor force for family reasons. East German women left their jobs for family reasons as well, but they left for much shorter periods of time and usually did not lose their jobs. A survey of East German households completed just before German reunification discovered that two-thirds of the mothers of infants under a year old were on leave from their jobs. However, fully 75% of mothers of two to three year olds and more than 85% of mothers of four to 10 year olds were working outside the home. Most of the mothers in the survey who were not employed were on leave from their jobs.

In contrast, about two thirds of West German mothers of young children did not work outside the home. In the United States the percentage of mothers of children under the age of 6 who are working outside the home has increased from about 20% in 1960 to about 56% in 1988. Most of these women are working part-time, however. In East Germany most of the mothers of young children were working full time.

East German Social Policies

The East German state attempted to guarantee women's access to employment. This was based on two considerations: (1) chronic labor shortages and (2) the theory that women's equality would only be achieved through the full participation of women in paid labor outside the home. East Germany's 1961 Code on Labor Laws stated:

“. . . equal rights for women in socialist society are realized through their participation in the work process and in the administration of the state and the economy”

The East German state assumed that women were mostly responsible for parenting and housework and tried to create conditions of employment which would allow women to fulfill their responsibilities in both work and family. Although men were exhorted to respect women's rights to self-development, men were not expected to take on any of women's traditional family duties. Section 10 of the family law stated:

“. . . [T]he relationship of the partners to each other is to be formed so that the woman can combine her professional and social activities with motherhood.”

To help women combine family responsibilities with full time employment, the East German state built and subsidized child care facilities. In the late 1940s and early 1950s in East Germany women who worked set up their own child care

centers when necessary. By the 1980s, however, infant care (for children aged 1 to 3 years), preschool care, and after school programs were available for the vast majority of East German children. East German infant care, child care, and after school programs cost parents very little, were open from 6AM to 7PM, and included hot meals. Child care centers were located in neighborhoods or on-site at firms.

Firms were also held responsible for helping women to combine work and family. The 1961 Code on Labor Laws stated:

“. . . the organs of the state and the managers of enterprises bear direct responsibility for the creation of the preconditions that would enable women to participate in the work process, develop their creative faculties, and meet at the same time their vital social task as mothers.”

In 1949, East German law mandated paid maternity leaves for women. The length of time allowed for paid leave was slowly increased until 1978 when the famous “baby year” was introduced. East German women were allowed to take paid leave from their jobs for up to one year after the birth of a baby. Most East German mothers did so.

The “normal” work week in East Germany was 43 and 3/4 hours. Mothers of two or more children were allowed to work a shortened work week of 40 hours without loss of pay. This amounted to one day a month off work with pay, the so-called “housework day.” In addition to their own paid sick days mothers were allowed sick leave with pay for days when the children were sick. Mothers were allowed to refuse irregular shifts, overtime, and work-related travel.

Social Consequences of the East German Strategy

The East German system of combining work and family influenced people's family decisions. The combination of widely available, inexpensive child care and policies requiring the workplace to accommodate mothers' extra responsibilities meant that men and women felt confident that they could afford a family. This resulted in early family formation in East Germany, which can be seen very clearly when East and West German patterns are compared.

In 1989 the average age of the mother at first birth in East Germany was 22.9 years; West German women's average age at first birth was 26.7 years. In East Germany 70% of babies were born before the mother's 25th birthday. The average age at first marriage in West Germany in 1988 was 25 years for women and 28 years for men. For East Germans the average age at first marriage was about three years earlier: 22.7 years for women and 24.7 years for men.

The East German strategy of combining work and family encouraged all women to work full time but did not question the traditional gender division of labor. This perpetuated inequalities between men and women by contributing to the

segregation of women into lower paying jobs and low priority economic sectors in the East German economy.

Since irregular shifts paid more than regular shifts, women's responsibility for children meant that in practice women tended to be excluded from higher paying shifts. Partly because women could legally refuse overtime and irregular shifts, they were less attractive to management in high priority industries where the state exerted intense pressure to fulfill production. These high priority industries also had higher wages.

In East Germany, daily life at work and outside work was marked by the awareness of the difficulty of women's "double burden." Sometimes East Germans even referred to women's "triple burden" — paid work, housework, and children. Because virtually all women and men worked full time, there were no traditional "housewives" to take up the slack and organize private life while others were at work. The workplace accommodated by allowing women paid maternity leave, the housework day, and sick leave for sick children and by placing women in jobs which allowed them to avoid shift work, overtime, and traveling while their children were young.

East German feminists criticize the East German system for stopping short of allowing changes in men's family roles. The policies which guaranteed women's access to full time jobs with regular health and pension benefits also reinforced women's primary responsibility for home and children.

Another criticism of the East German method of facilitating women's employment was that children were raised by day care centers, schools, and after-school programs, rather than by parents. Because the work week was very long (43 and 3/4 hours per week) and both parents worked full time there was little time left for parents and children to spend together. In addition, some people strongly opposed political indoctrination of children in state-run facilities.

These criticisms raise issues which may need to be addressed by people in the United States advocating increased availability of child care programs and parental leave policies. How can we design policies to help people combine work and family which are equally available to men and women? Or, at the very least, how can we avoid perpetuating traditional gender roles through family leave policies? How can child care programs be organized so parents have a say in how they are run? And how can we reconcile the needs of families with long work days?

In the long run, creating work and family policies which give men and women equal opportunities may be far more difficult than unraveling the intrigues of Cold War spy novels.

The Current Situation

In East Germany, both the political commitment to women's full employment and the structural conditions of women's full employment — chronic labor shortage and massive provision of subsidized child care — collapsed with communism and the subsequent reunification of Germany. The government of unified Germany is ambivalent about women's right to work when their children are young. In addition, eastern Germany is suffering very high unemployment (estimates range from 14 to 50 percent, depending on how the figure is calculated.)

The reunification of Germany precipitated the rapid collapse of the East German economy. The closure of East German enterprises means both rising unemployment and the loss of on-site child care centers. Public child care centers have also been shut.

The conditions which facilitated women's employment in East Germany do not exist in the new Germany, since everything is being done on the model of the old West Germany. In West Germany there is very little infant care available and there are very few after-school programs. Moreover, the school day in West Germany for kindergarten through high school is only a half day. Many schools also have classes on Saturdays. This arrangement makes it difficult for both parents to work full time and cuts into weekend time that families could spend together. Even the few schools which have afternoon sessions generally require children to go home for a mid-day meal and then return to school.

In the new system companies don't view the compatibility of work and family as primarily their problem. A survey conducted in West Germany in 1986 showed that only about half of private sector firms offered any measures to help parents combine work and family responsibilities. A related survey conducted by the same work group showed that employers viewed women's family responsibilities as a significant disadvantage. As a result West German employers prefer male employees. Unemployment rates for eastern German women are now twice as high as those for eastern German men.

Despite the contradictions and difficulties experienced by women in the old East German system, women developed personal commitments to both work and family. They valued work in and of itself as well as for the personal independence having a job provided. Both men and women were accustomed to taking for granted women's ability to combine paid employment with parenting and homemaking. Thus the economic restructuring of eastern Germany involves an equally painful process of reorganizing the relations between men and women and the relationship between work and family.

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**Center for Labor Research and Education
Institute of Industrial Relations
2521 Channing Way, Room 205
Berkeley, CA 94720**

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