

Women at work—experiences and identity in rural East Germany

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The economic restructuring since German unification has produced gender-differentiated patterns in the rural workplace. Most studies of East German labour market changes have illustrated the nature of such patterns in quantitative terms whilst neglecting their impact on everyday life. The relationship between the significance of work for women's quality of life and self-identification, and women's withdrawal from the public has, however, remained under-explored. Based on data obtained through correspondence and in-depth interviews in Mecklenburg-Westpomerania, this paper aims to address this relationship by discussing women's work-related experiences before and since unification.

Key words: GDR, women, identity, work experience

Introduction

With German unification, labour market structures in the former GDR were adapted to the requirements of the market economy. In particular, labour-intensive employment sectors experienced vast redundancies as a result of privatization and economic rationalization. In addition, the nature of the work-place in the New Bundesländer changed. Rather than being fully organized and structured by political leadership and extending into the social life of every worker, as was the case in the GDR, contemporary work practices are far more individualistic, requiring greater personal flexibility and personal ambition. Changes in work-related experiences since unification have, however, been gender-differentiated and changed less for men than for women. The research for this paper suggested that much of men's work in the GDR was carried out individually compared with women's group-based labour. With the dissolution of the rural workplace many unemployed women experienced a sense of isolation, whilst those who remained employed had to come to terms with more individualistic work

practices which impeded the formation of identity through relations with others. The development of social relations through work was further reinforced as the work process for women in the GDR was almost entirely localized. Although women were relatively flexible in their private lives through the management of their multiple roles, their geographic mobility was more restricted than that of men. Therefore many women found the flexibility and mobility required for a number of employment sectors and career advancement since unification problematic.

McDowell's (1992) assertion that 'women's identity is constructed through relations with others rather than, as is the case with men, through the separation of self from others' (McDowell 1992, 411) is relevant in the context of this research as well (see also discussion in Silvasti 1999). The group-based work process had composed a significant part of women's identity formation in the GDR, and many women, therefore, began to experience significant personal disenfranchisement after 1989.

In investigating the role of work in women's self-identity, this paper has two aims.

- 1 To discuss women's everyday work experiences in the rural socialist context and their importance for women's identity formation.
- 2 To address discontinuities women have encountered as a result of economic rationalization since unification and, in particular, the impact of these on the construction of gendered identities.

The paper draws on a study conducted in the 'new' German Bundesland of Mecklenburg-Westpommern. A rural location was chosen for the research as it comprised a highly conflictual space in which post-unification transformation took place. Before 1989, it was the location of particularly close-knit communities embedded in a comprehensively-planned economic and political framework. Relative to urban areas, there could be less anonymity and more social control in rural villages. For similar reasons, after unification, rural areas became subject to more distinct economic and political processes leading to social exclusion. Data for the research consists of correspondence with 40 women, in-depth interviews with 55 key informants and focus group discussions in six rural villages near the Polish border. Analysis was conducted using a modified grounded theory approach.¹

By providing an insight into the meaning of work to women² in East Germany, the paper complements earlier research conducted in the Western context (see McDowell 1992; McDowell and Court 1994; Baylina and Garcia-Ramon 1998; Kyriazis 1998). In critically evaluating gendering processes at work and the formation of identities, the paper draws on work by Dyck (1990), McDowell and Court (1994), Teather (1997), Bartram and Shobbrook (1998) and Phillips (1998), all of whom supported the significance of social and spatial structures to the construction of the workplace as 'feminine' or 'masculine'.

The division of work and gendered identities in the GDR

In the final years of the GDR era, virtually all arable land was organized into large-scale agricultural cooperatives (LPGs) of up to 32 000 hectares and 93 000 animals (Krenz 1996). In particular, in more remote areas the vast majority of villagers found employment in their local LPG. As the result of the organization of LPG responsibilities along the physical boundaries of communities (Iganski 2000), many

respondents in the research indicated that 'the LPG was the village' (029).³

The labour process in agriculture was marked by a range of narrowly defined tasks. Workers were organized into small task-oriented groups, the collectives, where the formal organization of work created distinct patterns of 'female' and 'male' work.⁴ Although the political propaganda promoted women's incorporation into 'male-dominated' sectors (Winkler 1975; Böckmann-Schewe *et al.* 1995) this was rarely realized in practice (DeSoto and Panzig 1994). Instead, the allocation of women within employment was often based upon 'typically female' private roles, such as cleaning, caring and nurturing which were extended to the public workplace. Female work tasks in the LPG, therefore, included 'women projects' (027) which were characterized predominantly by labour-intensive manual work in the fields or animal sheds. In addition to traditional agricultural work tasks the LPG also created employment within the service and health sector as well as within administrative functions.

The construction of 'female' identity in the socialist community was consolidated through spatial arrangements and the nature of interaction between women in an all-female work context. In addition, although individual women were freed from household duties by the provision of childcare services, mending services and canteens, their domestic tasks were accomplished by other women (Einhorn 1992). Despite claims of women's emancipation under socialism by the State, the construction of female roles was, therefore, not altered merely by their increased participation in the work-place. Instead,

such a 'genderised mode of labour substitution' [...] serve[d] to further entrench the patriarchal nature of gender roles in society because it simply change[d] the identity of the woman doing work that society regard[ed] as rightly theirs (Huang and Yeoh 1996, 489)

In contrast to women's group-based labour, rural men in the GDR were more likely to conduct work more individually, even within the formal context of the collective or brigade. Men's tasks reinforced attributes of masculinity such as operating agricultural or engineering machinery (Winkler 1992; Panzig 1994) or, if in leading positions, controlling labour power. As noted above, their work tasks frequently included more geographic or social mobility than women's, even at the local level. Leading positions often incorporated journeys to other LPGs or the district city for meetings. Owing to health

restrictions for women in certain types of employment, men's work was also more likely to incorporate an element of risk and thus supported the nature of work as masculine.

Key informants to this research argued that contributions to the GDR economy from the male work sector were often believed to be of greater significance than women's, particularly when associated with crop production. To illustrate, within this sector men's work contributed to the accumulation of national assets since grain was a significant international export product. In addition, good harvests enhanced the work of animal production. Key informants further indicated that, as a result of its superior economic importance, crop production received greater financial assistance from the State than other agricultural sectors. In contrast, women's labour was largely for the 'good of the community', for example in occupations providing alleviation from the domestic burdens of working women. Women were, therefore, often placed at the lower end of the production chain and positioned to support more significant male work. This was further reinforced by women's lower representation in leading positions (Shaffer 1981; Edwards 1985; Nickel 1992).

The entire pattern of where women and men worked, what tasks were performed, as well as when and where they socialized, was largely directed by the planned economy of the patriarchal State. In particular, through the division of work based on constructs of the categories 'woman' and 'man', merged within socialist ideologies, gendered spaces were constructed which resulted in a subordination of women as a group. However, the political party was committed to the furtherance of women's interests in rural areas through education, employment and committee work.⁵ Although Spain (1992) regarded such measures as a means to degender spaces, these political efforts were overshadowed by the unaltered existence of patriarchal power structures. Nonetheless, women became dependent on the social context of the workplace and community, though both areas were subject to patriarchal state power, and sometimes even pressure.

Although the State established, even institutionalized, spaces for the construction of gendered identities and preserved gender roles through the strict division of labour, women in this research contested the subordination of their interests in the GDR. They described the work-place as supportive and reinforced the significance of work for their overall

well-being. The following section identifies key experiences associated with work which emerged from accounts by research participants.

The social context of women's work experience

In addition to providing employment, each cooperative assumed social and administrative functions within the village. A wide range of community services were established or financially supported by the LPG. For instance, most LPGs offered childcare services and canteens, whilst various community services, such as libraries, pubs, shops, hairdressers and surgeries were supported through LPG labour power or the provision of localities (Iganski 2000). Through pre-arranged structures provided within the LPG, a strong link was developed between the work-place, social life and, to some extent, the family.

Social events predominantly took place within the context of work. Although club activities largely took place after working hours, most clubs were associated with the LPG and therefore included work colleagues. Participation was politically desired and even essential for obtaining promotion at work (Adler and Kretschmar 1993). Those residents who were exceptionally active or productive in the village or the workplace were both rewarded and encouraged by additional awards such as 'Activist of Socialist Labour' or 'Hero of Labour' (Shaffer 1981), usually with a small financial incentive. Resort-based holidays, supervised by the work-place and maintained by cooperative workers, also constituted a part of such awards for good work performance.

Although such socio-cultural and political arrangements within the community affected all residents, women particularly associated a number of personal benefits with the way in which the work-place and community services were organized. Through a gender contract (Perrons and Gönas 1998), women received certain assistance to alleviate the burden of domestic responsibilities. The availability of an extensive network of low-cost childcare facilities enabled women to participate fully in the labour market and 90 per cent of women were employed (Shaffer 1981; Winkler 1990; Einhorn 1992). In addition to a shorter working week for mothers with two or more children, a range of other financial and social benefits were fondly remembered by the women (Dölling 1991; Einhorn 1992; Marx-Ferree 1993; Kolinsky 1996). Every month women were given a

day's leave for household duties. Furthermore, the availability of central kitchens, and opening hours of local shops adapted to women's working shifts assisted their organization of housework (Iganski 2000). The right to work and to housing guaranteed women both social and financial security. Furthermore, basic medical provisions were made free-of-charge and many foodstuffs were heavily subsidized. The close proximity of local services was essential to women since only a small proportion of women had a driver's licence.

Formal awards and the yearly celebration of the International Women's Day were another component of a gender contract by which women accepted the dominant patriarchal structures and within which they traded some of their freedoms and choices for personal benefits and public recognition. Many women in the research stated they 'simply believed all the rubbish [the Party] told' them (Herta) and indicated that existing political arrangements were advantageous for them as individuals and beneficial to society as a whole. They recounted several memories, mostly from the context of their collectives, illustrating the feelings of pride and empowerment experienced within their daily routines. A number of respondents even used the term 'family' to describe feelings of integrity, purpose and reward in the collective. Women respondents, therefore, acknowledged that their collective provided an essential means of social life. They regarded it as a platform for social security, cooperation in the labour process, comradeship, mutual support, comfort, and consequently their overall quality of life.⁶

Places for gendered identities

The above discussion suggests that the distribution of work and the gender-differentiated use of community services contributed to the formation of gendered identities in the rural context of the GDR. However, gendered identities were not solely constructed through women's integration into economic and socio-political processes subsumed within state ideologies and easily identified from the outside. In fact, little can be said about such identities without including meanings that actors themselves ascribed to daily activities and the kind of negotiations carried out within dominating structures (see also Gregson *et al.* 1999). The findings support Phua and Yeoh's (1998) discussion indicating 'explicitly inequitable divisions of labour' (311) in negotiating the actions and meanings of everyday life. Women's content-

ment was developed and maintained, at least in part, by the presence of particular meeting places that 'emerge' during the course of the day's activities' much like Dyck's (1990) 'unfocused locales' (473). In this context they included

- waiting for children at the nursery, kindergarten or school;
- standing in line at the shop or post office;
- attending social events;
- chance meetings; or
- organized occasions, such as birthday parties or weddings.

Many of these sites were commonly associated with women's places as 'sites of communication [...] which not only relay[ed] information, but negotiate[d], and share[d] meaning of available concepts' (Dyck 1990, 481). Dyck therefore acknowledged unfocused locales as places that contribute to shaping gendered identities and meanings.

The women in this study indicated that the function of unfocused locales was to provide places for the maintenance of their social networks which were fundamental to their overall well-being and quality of life. The loss of such sites, perceived by the women as part of the work-place, was of particular significance for women to whom the work-place was a mechanism which united togetherness as well as diversity, continuity and balance. The following section explores the significance of economic rationalization after unification for the gender-differentiated patterns of individual women in the research.

The restructuring of the rural labour market

Undoubtedly, the greatest impact of unification on women's lives in rural areas came with the mass redundancies associated with the economic restructuring, particularly in the previous 'female' work sectors. Between 1989 and 1995, a total of 86 per cent of agricultural employees in Mecklenburg-Westpomerania were made redundant (Krambach *et al.* 1997). Female employees were more affected by economic rationalization, as 75 per cent of the jobs lost had predominantly been occupied by women (Deutscher Bundestag 1992). Unemployment statistics for May 1998 indicated that women constituted 60 per cent of all unemployed in Mecklenburg-Westpomerania (Arbeitsamt Neubrandenburg 1998).

The research findings suggested that reorganization of the rural labour market after unification was largely based on conservative and discriminatory employment practices and resulted in the unequal integration of men and women into the economy (Marx-Ferree 1993). Signs of a 're-gendering' (Bondi 1992) of employment and associated power structures were evident in the accounts of several respondents who indicated that the process of labour market restructuring polluted previously fixed identities of men or women. 'The idea of fixed and opposed gender groups [was] blurred' (Cameron 1998, 294), as men advanced into 'female work' and women experienced the social and economic degradation of unemployment. Two examples from the agricultural and public sector studied in the research for this paper illustrate this process.

One key informant described changes in the animal production sector. In contrast to the dozens of women employed as manual milking personnel prior to unification, three men operated milking machines after unification. The explanation given for this dramatic change was not economic rationalization *per se*; instead, it was stated that the work task included a greater level of responsibility in operating new, expensive machinery. The respondent believed that men had greater confidence and were more flexible than women. Such selection criteria were prioritized over men's qualifications which were largely equal to those of women. Another example was the changing nature of previous female employment in the public sector, such as banking. The banking profession experienced a rise of public status in the New Germany compared to the GDR (see Einhorn 1993), and an increase in male employment which effectively 'pushed' women out of this sector.

Losing full-time employment largely resulted in women's relocation to the domestic sphere as mothers and wives and dependency on a husband's income or state benefits.⁷ Women were led to believe that the home ought to be their prime source of identity formation along the lines of a traditional gender role model (Rueschemeyer 1994; Duncan 1996). In addition, potential employers or training opportunities often also functioned as restrictive gatekeepers who formed, consolidated and institutionalized gendered patterns in the labour market (Schmitt 1998). Once constructed, such boundaries could entrap both men and women in gender roles through the distribution of labour, conditions within the domestic sphere and the contemporary gender

contract in general. As many women themselves did not openly reject these structures it became more difficult for them to break out. However, as will be discussed below, many women experienced considerable inner conflicts trying to adapt to the conditions and boundaries of their 'new' lives.

'Inside, the soul gets ruined'

The role ascribed to women after unification was far from satisfying for them. For example, none of the interviewed women claimed to be relieved at being able to stay home and spend time with their families. Instead, they felt angry at being forced to 'play housewife' (011), to be 'back at the hearth' (010), or 'back with the pots' (017). Even though most women did not actively look for employment or write frequent job applications, they remained registered as unemployed. Key informants interpreted this behaviour not only as a means to continue claiming benefits but as an indication of women's dissatisfaction with their exclusion from the labour market.

As discussed above, women identified themselves with their work in the GDR and, being unemployed, felt stigmatized as 'good-for-nothings'. They explained that 'inside, the soul gets ruined' (016) and that a 'tremendously important thing was taken away' (017) from them. Many women respondents claimed that, because there was no space for them in the contemporary society, they isolated themselves. Although some women stated they were very busy doing things around the house or garden, many also described how they almost went out of their minds from being restless and helpless.

It is evident from comments made throughout the interviews that many women have become entrapped in socially and physically-confined spaces. Phrases used by women to describe their experiences included:

- rephension;
- weakness;
- listlessness;
- bitterness;
- desperation;
- depression;
- loss of social contacts;
- isolation;
- low mobility;
- insignificance of certain freedoms;
- lack of support;

- low self-esteem; and
- loss of faith.

Some women made it very clear how they felt by pronouncing that, to them, ‘everything today is shit’ (Hanna).

The accounts of respondents suggested that experiences at work in the GDR still determined women’s perceptions of self-worth, identity and social integration after unification. In addition, the extent to which the previous gender contract, and the presence and function of unfocused locales had been maintained were further denominators in women’s overall quality of life. The vast majority of former meeting places for women disappeared after large-scale privatization in the village. Simultaneously, the previous social structures of the LPG and women’s role within these ceased to exist leaving women without a reason to meet. In short, unification led to the renegotiation of the gender contract and gendered identities which existed in the GDR.

Conflict in the ‘family’

Problem-solving in the GDR was usually conducted within the collective context, where togetherness was emphasized and small conflicts were resolved. With rationalization, the advent of unemployment and fragmentation of work after unification—both sectorally and geographically—there was no longer a common mechanism to provide such a balance or ease conflict automatically. The respondents indicated that negative experiences both individual and social were frequently addressed but rarely solved owing to a general lack of communication. Negative experiences, therefore, often became frustrating and created social schisms within the village. The fragmentation of rural communities unleashed previously dormant and newly-composed social conflicts. Many women also stopped contacting former friends, and friendships became more fragile as the socialist work and communal context was lost.

To illustrate, a number of respondents indicated that unemployed women envied those who were employed, because they believed their social contacts were equivalent to those of the former collectives. In addition, employed women were seen as achieving something and having high self-esteem. Women who were still working did not, however, confirm these perceptions. Although being part of the labour force made women feel more socially-

integrated and purposeful, they did not always experience a good level of social interaction. In addition, being employed did not prevent women from experiencing de-qualification either. In many cases even those who were in leading positions in the LPG or had university degrees in the GDR had to accept work below their qualifications and capabilities, for example, as a fork-lift truck driver (075) or motel receptionist (097).

In spite of their problems, it was clear to working women that they were advantaged over and above the benefits of employment and regular income. Firstly, working contributed to women’s mobility, whilst secondly, they had the opportunity to communicate and understand other people’s norms and values at the work-place. Thirdly, working women could attend training courses provided by the work-place in order to hone their skills to the rapidly changing market place. Finally, most employed women respondents took greater interest in their environment, provided more constructive criticism on policy and regional development issues, and were more socially active than unemployed women.

Spontaneous gatherings in the villages, so-called ‘gossip networks’ (024), also took place within the boundaries of women’s employment status, separating one group of women from another. Most gossip network protagonists were largely either middle-aged unemployed women or senior citizens, who spent much of their time in the village. As they were less mobile, both geographically and socially, than (commuting) employed women, they no longer shared common experiences and were, to some extent, left behind. Many women experienced self-doubt and had to cope with being categorized as a social group they did not wish to belong to. The presence of gossip networks, therefore, presented a space for these women to negotiate an identity through each other rather than complying with the stigmatized social image of the unemployed. Although this identification process adopted a strong demarcation from other women, it had arguably become an essential strategy for women trying to cope with the multiple stresses imposed by unification. There was, however, little networking between women within and between the groups of employed and unemployed in order to find strength and solutions in their unity. Instead, women remained divided and entrapped in the home, ashamed of their unemployment (Breakwell 1986) or, if working, as fearful of being blamed for their employment.

Conclusion

Although women were generally unable to challenge existing gender inequalities in the rural work-place in the GDR, they also created spaces within their daily activities in which they found comfort and support. Such spaces were often located within the context of work, shared with other women and became an essential part of their self-identification.

The research for this paper suggests that women's own experiences of socio-political conditions in the GDR presented a contrast to common interpretations of socialist structures and oppression. This may indicate that women respondents suppressed the most upsetting impressions in order to move through their lives relatively undisturbed, or that the importance of meaning-making within micro-niches within patriarchal structures is easily ignored.

Many women in the research themselves believed that only a social context equivalent to that experienced in the GDR could resolve social problems which had emerged since unification. Women, therefore, expected that their integration into the labour market would automatically solve problems associated with social diversification and lack of self-identification. By adopting a 'wait-and-see' attitude, however, women also denied themselves alternative opportunities to make changes they could identify with. They did not recognize that, although work has been a significant element, it was not an exclusive means. A key task for political actors should, therefore, be to provide opportunities for women's training and further qualification to widen their horizons, whilst emphasizing the development of local socio-cultural spaces more. In so doing, women may be encouraged to review their choices and become more pro-active in creating spaces for communication, mutual support and, essentially, mechanisms for self-identification.

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Notes

- 1 For detailed discussion of respondent characteristics and use of methods see van Hoven (2000)
- 2 Gregson *et al.* (1999) also provide a good discussion on the need to break out of previous 'static' concepts of work by focussing on the cultural and historical context in which the work process takes place.

- 3 Quotes by respondents are indicated either by number (if key informants or correspondents) or by pseudonym (if participants were in focus groups).
- 4 See Winkler (1992) or Einhorn (1993) for figures on division of labour.
- 5 The furtherance of women's interest was relatively advanced in the GDR in that enterprises such as the LPG were required to develop 'women's furtherance plans' in association with their crop and animal production plans. Issues such as qualifications, cultural and political education and community service were elements of these plans (see Barkholz 1977; Rennwanz 1986).
- 6 Similar observations were made in earlier studies such as those by Rueschemeyer (1981; 1982), or Kahl *et al.* (1984).
- 7 In the GDR, women were regarded equally as workers and as mothers. Through their full employment they contributed, on average, 40 per cent of the overall household income (Marx-Ferree 1993).

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