

A harder life after the wall fell

by Sabine Kergel

Le Monde Diplomatique, English Edition, junho de 2015-10-01

The women of what used to be East Germany miss their old equality, independence and excellent childcare provision.

Most sociologists believed that, after the reunification of Germany, living conditions for women on both sides of the old border would eventually equalise. They were too optimistic. In the former Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) only 16% of mothers with children aged between three and five were in full-time employment in 2007, against 52% in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). While the birth rate in former East Germany has now fallen to West German levels, there are still considerable differences (1). In 2009, 61% of births in the former GDR were out of wedlock, compared with 26% in the former FRG.

East German women were especially hit by the social and political changes of reunification. In the old GDR, working mothers easily reconciled family and professional lives, unlike their counterparts in the West. Reunification led to a sharp rise in female unemployment in the East and resulted in drastic changes to their way of life and future plans, as well as a loss of self-confidence.

In Germany, as elsewhere in Europe, the labour participation rate for women rose after the 1950s, but was far higher in the GDR than in the FRG. Just before the fall of the Wall, 92% of East German women were employed, compared with 60% in the West — enjoying near-equality with men, unique in the world. Where West German women adapted their life plans to fit in with an overall scheme still shaped by the traditional image of the patriarchal family, in the East women's economic independence from their husbands was a given.

The spectacular fall in the birth rate in East Germany during the 1970s encouraged the regime to provide incentives for working women to have children, and special efforts were made for single or divorced women. Although the ideological justification (producing manpower to build a socialist society) was often mocked, the government's policy enabled women to reconcile career plans with parental constraints, whereas on the other side of the Wall, motherhood often led to privation and even poverty, especially in the event of divorce or abandonment.

Single parents suffer

It is not surprising that East German women perceived unification as detrimental to their standard of living. With the unprecedented experience of unemployment they discovered that a system of values they had taken for granted had collapsed. "When you go to the employment agency today and say 'single parent with two children', they don't know what you're talking about. The agent I was talking to didn't even look at me," said a former shop assistant in East Berlin. In East Germany women were protected by the omnipresent state, which relegated the roles of fathers and families to second place. Children were socialised in institutions largely disconnected from the family unit. Reunification did nothing to eradicate East German women's desire for independence.

A survey of unemployed female Berliners in the early 2000s revealed that they had very different attitudes to work and children on either side of the Wall. All the women felt that children were central to their lives but only those from former West Berlin attached more importance to children than to their jobs. While fully aware of the hardships that lay ahead, they tended to see unemployment as an opportunity to fulfil themselves as mothers. The East Berliners wanted to balance their children's education and their careers, believing that children would grow up in better conditions if their mothers worked. They thought they would be happier as working mothers and better able to fulfil their maternal roles, since their financial independence would benefit them as well as their families.

West Berlin mothers felt that they were the best able to take care of their children. They recognised the usefulness of day nurseries, but adapted to their rigid opening hours. East Berlin mothers, used to more flexible hours in the GDR, considered that access to day care was essential, since employers consider it when hiring. In 2000 an unemployed sales assistant was indignant about the jobs she didn't get because she was a single mother. "People keep saying to me, 'you've got two children? Oh well, I'm afraid that won't be possible.' They don't even listen when I tell them that I have access to day care." For young women the situation is made worse by the expectation that they may have another child: she felt obliged to tell a prospective employer she wouldn't be having another child, and she could not have imagined having to say that in a job interview during the Communist era.

All the job-seeking East Berlin mothers had to accept these humiliations, show their qualifications and convince their future employers that they had mastered the new rules of the game. Their counterparts in West Berlin found the demands of the employment market were the real issue. A single mother applied for a job close to her home. "It would have been perfect. They wanted me to type, make phone calls, look after clients, etc. And then the woman director said, 'We may sometimes ask you to work for more than 40 hours a week or at weekends.' I replied that it was impossible, that I'd prefer to work a 30-hour week as in my previous jobs. That was a mistake. She got really angry and started shouting at me that with all the unemployment I should consider myself lucky to find a job at all. Then she asked me how it felt to be a welfare scrounger, a parasite living off society ... I really want to work, but what kind of society are we living in if we have to leave our children in care from dawn to dusk?"

According to sociologists Jutta Gysi and Dagmar Meyer, "The most positive outcome of East German family policy was women's economic independence — quite inconceivable today. True, their wages were on average 30% below those of men because they were in less qualified jobs ... but they didn't live in fear of losing their homes or not having a place in childcare, because they could depend on solid and reliable social welfare. That is an important prerequisite for equal rights, perhaps even the essential one" (2).

In 1999 a chef, 28, married and with two children, who found it hard to adapt to the new social order and be dependent on her husband, said: "We've become dependent on our partners, dependent on the money they're willing to give us, and dependent on the way the government assesses all of that. If it decides to stop your benefits, that's it. There you are with a headache, because money is a subject that returns time and again and there's nothing we can do about it."

That East German model of gender equality collapsed with the Wall, but a quarter of a century later it still shapes the way mothers brought up under it see themselves and their role in society.