

Peter Friedman

WOMEN, PEACE, and SOCIALISM:

Equality of Opportunity in East Germany

EAST GERMANY BOASTS that its Constitution and laws guarantee complete equality to women. The SED says that women today "are hampered only by their own reluctance to make full use of their rights and by the persistence on the part of a dwindling minority of men of outmoded ideas as to a woman's proper role in society." On August 17, 1946, the Soviet Military Administration in Germany issued "Order Number 253", requiring "equal pay for equal work, regardless of sex and age". The State points to this provision (carried over by Article VII of the East German Constitution) as evidence of socialist recognition of the dignity of women.

To the Party propagandists, the role of women in East German political life manifests a fundamental difference between the value placed on women by a socialist society and by a capitalist society: "socialism respects women as men's equals, whereas capitalism treats them as little more than slaves serving the needs of a man's world". *Neues Deutschland* (the official newspaper of the SED) compared the life of women in each of the two Germanies in a front-page photographic spread. One of the photographs shows a West German woman serving her husband breakfast in bed. The accompanying text states that in West Germany women must continually please and serve their husbands, who become intolerant if so much as one meal is ever brought late. By contrast, the photograph opposite depicts a woman in East Germany studying at home while her husband dries the dishes and their daughter helps the youngest child take off his shoes and socks. The caption reads:

Mrs. Edelgard Fellmann is happy. She prepares for her examination as "expert saleswoman". While she learns, her husband does part of the housework. The two children, Marlies and Jochen, also show understanding for their mother; they undress, wash and brush their teeth, completely without her help. The equal status of the woman in all areas of life has led, in most families, to the development of a new moral and spiritual relationship The woman in the German Democratic Republic is no longer the servant of her husband, but a partner enjoying equal rights.

West German sources paint a very different picture of the position actually enjoyed by East German women. The West contends that the real emphasis in East Germany is not upon equal rights for women, but upon their equal obligation to work. "Equality of opportunity" means the obligation to work even at jobs traditionally considered fit only for men. East German law nominally protects women by forbidding their employment in an enumerated list of especially strenuous or otherwise hazardous occupations. In practice, this protection is rendered almost meaningless by an "exception" allowing women to perform the prohibited types of work in cases "where plant conditions are such that their health would not be endangered". This exception makes it possible to employ women wherever needed by declaring that conditions at the place of work would not threaten their health. Other protective laws, such as the prohibition against using women for lifting, carrying, or moving weights of over 15 kilograms, are simply ignored. The lack of adequate health measures and the failure to observe such protective laws as exist have resulted in an exceptionally high incidence of sickness and accident among working women, substantially above the rates among their male colleagues performing the same work.

The new laws on marriage and the family reflect East Germany's concept of equality of the sexes. They provide that a husband may not interfere with his wife's desire to work, but that the wife has no right to demand support from her husband if she is capable of supporting herself. Upon dissolution of a marriage by divorce, the ex-wife (if physically able to work) may be entitled to alimony payments only for a transition period, of not longer than one year, to enable her to find suitable employment. From then on she must provide for herself. Further alimony would only lessen her inducement to find a job and detract from her ex-husband's "joy in his work".

The provisions requiring equal pay for equal work present a distorted picture when considered alone. Almost all of the jobs held by women in East Germany fall into one of the three lowest paid job classifications. West Germany asserts that the admitted increase of women in the East German Parliament, Judiciary, and other government offices is misleading because these positions carry no political influence. The percentage of women in influential positions is said to be no higher than the corresponding percentage in West Germany. The charge that female Parliamentary Representatives exercise no influence appears well founded because the East German Parliament functions as a perfunctory, unanimous vote approver of measures already decided upon by the Party leadership. Judges and prosecuting attorneys, on the other hand, possess a real degree of power, although subject to

control by the Party, the State's Attorney's Office, and (to a certain extent) the Ministry of Justice.* The substantial increase since 1950 in the percentage of women chosen for these offices at least bears out the Government's claim of women's increasing participation in East German life.

Approximately three million East Germans escaped to the West before the sealing off of the border between East and West Berlin on August 13, 1961. As a result, East Germany faced an acute labour shortage. The State has long attempted to persuade women to take full-time jobs. However, with almost 70% of the employable women between 16 and 60 years of age already working, there no longer exists a great reserve to draw upon. Therefore, the current drive seeks to make better use of women already working by convincing them to qualify for more skilled types of work. In exchange, the women are promised responsible positions with corresponding increases in pay.

The Party also concentrates on getting non-working women at least to take part-time jobs. Women are mobilized into "housewife brigades" which work half days or on a one-day-a-week basis. By the end of 1961 there were 6500 "housewife brigades", with over 45,000 members. The search for untapped labour reserves even led to the so-called "grandmother movement", recruiting women already past the retirement pension age. By inducing working women to improve their qualifications and non-working women to accept part-time employment (often as non-paid volunteers), East Germany hopes to ameliorate its labour-shortage crisis.

The present campaign is set forth in the Communiqué, "Women, Peace and Socialism", issued in December, 1961, by the Politburo of the SED and still hotly discussed throughout East Germany. The Communiqué was presented ostensibly as an answer to women's complaints that "many men still regard us female co-workers in the petit bourgeois sense simply as women". The Communiqué hails equal rights for women as an essential principle of Marxism-Leninism, but criticizes East German women for not attending evening courses in order to qualify for more skilled positions. At the same time men are taken to task for not respecting the abilities and achievements of working women and for not entrusting qualified women with middle and higher leadership positions. The Communiqué closes with a call for a national discussion involving the entire East German population.

In order to better understand the reactions called forth by the Communiqué and the position of women in East Germany today, we might first look briefly

*Recent reforms have stripped the Ministry of Justice of much of its former power of control over the courts.

at the history of the East German women's movement since the end of the Second World War.

In December, 1945, the provincial governments of the Soviet Occupational Zone of Germany formed a number of "anti-fascist women's committees". They were to organize meetings and discussion groups in order to enlist women in active support of the policies of the Occupation Authorities. The founding of the German Democratic Women's League (DFD) in March, 1947, brought the local women's committees together under one central organization. The work of the DFD included guiding all women in line with the program of the SED (formed out of a forced merger of the Social Democratic Party with the Communist Party) and helping in the reconstruction of the Soviet Zone and in wiping out all traces of "fascism and militarism".

On October 7, 1949, occurred the formal transformation of the Soviet Occupation Zone into the at least nominally sovereign East German State. The DFD "voluntarily" took on the task of educating women to become conscientious citizens of the new nation. Since 1952 the DFD has had its own parliamentary representatives, 24 out of the 25 of whom presently belong to the SED although over 80% of the women in the DFD are without party affiliation. The West German "Ministry for All-German Questions" (Bundesministerium für gesamtdeutsche Fragen) describes the 15-year work of the DFD as an unbroken chain of earnest collective and individual pledges, headed by the promise to continually bring new additions into the labour force in order to support the Party's political and economic plans.

The DFD encourages the "activist movement", based upon the Soviet Stakhanovite system. Individual workers voluntarily pledge to produce a certain amount over the figure called for by the year's economic plan. Party officials then refer to these increases as justification for raising the norms on piece work. One of the most famous activists, a weaver named Frida Hockauf, promised to weave at least 45 meters of material over the norm for 1953. Her slogan, "As we work today, so we shall live tomorrow", was intended to spur a mass movement of voluntary pledges similar to her own. Frida Hockauf's performance brought with it financial rewards as well as national renown. For her nomination as a "Heroine of Labor" she received 10,000 marks; the award to her of the "Clara Zetkin Medal" assured her a pension of 200 marks per month upon retirement, and as a Representative to Parliament she draws a monthly compensation of 500 marks.

The Communiqué called upon the people to help in realizing the goal of equality for women. Since December, 1961, East German newspapers have been printing a stream of letters allegedly written by people from all walks of life in

response to the call for discussion throughout the land. Former residents of East Germany have assured this writer that many of these letters are actually written by Party officials, and then simply brought to the purported author for his signature. The letters fit into two main categories: letters containing complaints and suggestions, and out-and-out recruiting letters. Most of the letters carry women's signatures, but a few have been signed by men, in line with the Party's admonition that both sexes bear responsibility for the realization of women's rights.

Letters falling into the first category, of complaint and suggestion, range all the way from criticism of unsympathetic male factory managers to requests for a higher proportion of "ladies' choice" dances. They draw attention to factors preventing women from realizing their potential contribution to society and point out ways to eliminate these obstacles. "Lack of self-confidence", for example, is cited as one reason why few women participate in courses qualifying them for better jobs. One letter writer regrets that "many women consider it sufficient if they work eight hours during the day and then look after their households", instead of staying in the evenings to take part in qualifying courses "which are especially important to insure fulfillment of the program for the chemical industry".

Female students came under attack for seldom studying the technical sciences, such as engineering. The lack of women in these fields was traced back to the toys their parents gave them during childhood. Boys played with mechanical and construction type toys, while girls received dolls and sewing kits. Thus, Socialism continued the arbitrary divisions created under Capitalism to perpetuate the suppression of women. First, the old bourgeois conception about certain professions being for men only must be rooted out and replaced by modern socialist thinking. With parental re-education the distinction between girls' toys and boys' toys will gradually disappear. Once the toy barrier falls, women will naturally flow into the sciences in the same proportion as men.

Certain practical suggestions arrived for lightening the burdens on working mothers: factories could open their own kindergartens, enabling mothers to drop their children off on the way to work and pick them up on the way back; members of the "grandmother movement" might tend the pre-school age children of working mothers in the neighborhood. Other suggestions included setting up community washing machines and establishing a community lending service for all kinds of household appliances (private individuals ordering appliances have had to wait an average of about three years for delivery).

Men appear as the scapegoats in most of the complaints: if only husbands would stop lagging behind the times and give up playing the tyrant at home, and

if only factory and office managers would judge women on the work they perform and discard archaic notions about their limited drive and ability. Plant supervisors should encourage women to qualify for better jobs and help them in every way possible during their period of study: "Whoever blocks the path of a woman, obstructs the development of the entire society and contradicts the essence of our State". Not only should women be encouraged to qualify for better positions, but qualified women should be given jobs commensurate with their enhanced abilities. A special county meeting called to discuss the Communiqué bewailed the low percentage of women in leadership positions. In one cotton-spinning factory, it was pointed out, women accounted for 80% of the employees but only 12% of the master spinners. "The managers in most industries take this debilitating condition as given and consider the filling of top positions a privilege reserved to men".

"Many men piously support women's rights at public meetings, yet consider that what they do at home concerns only themselves". Several women complained that their husbands showed little or no interest in their career aspirations. They suggest that where the wife works during the day and studies in the evenings the husband should help with the housework. Mrs. Eva Thalner holds up her husband as a model of how a man conscious of his political and social responsibilities may support his wife in her endeavors to learn a profession. Mrs. Thalner writes that during the two years when she lived away from home, studying to become a teacher,

My husband looked after the entire household by himself—buying food, preparing meals, doing the cleaning, etc. At the same time, he took care of his sick mother and provided for his father. We entrusted our eight year old daughter to the good care of a children's home. Now we are happy that the period of separation is over and that I find full satisfaction in my profession.

From all indications, Mrs. Thalner's husband represents the exception even for a socialist society. Most East German men still possess the outdated notion that housework is women's work and that equal rights may be a fine subject for discussion at women's meetings but should not be brought back to disrupt the harmony of the home.

The second category of responses to the Communiqué, which we have called the "recruiting letters", supports the West German allegation that the Communiqué represents nothing more than East Germany's latest attempt to get more working mileage out of its women. These letters endorse work as the key to a woman's fulfillment. They argue that equal rights for women imply a corresponding obligation upon women to give these rights meaning through engaging in the productive

process. Only the financially independent woman can enjoy real equality. As one letter puts it,

A woman can not stand on her own two feet in this life if she is materially dependent on her husband In any case, I would feel like a parasite if I simply sat and waited for the money which my husband earned and gave to me. And what kind of an answer could I then give to my grandchildren if they ever ask me, "What have you done for the building of our Republic and the securing of peace"?

Part of the lack of interest in qualifying for better jobs is ascribed to the "false" conception of many girls that they need plan to work only until they get married. What these girls supposedly fail to realize is that without continuing to work after marriage they can not satisfy either their material or spiritual desires. Only the family in which both husband and wife are working can afford automobiles, television sets, and washing machines. Furthermore, the non-working woman misses the emotional satisfaction of contributing her best to the society in which she lives.

Another approach tries to persuade women that the wife who works stands a greater chance for marital happiness than the woman content to stay at home: "The housewife leads a monotonous existence. Her husband participates in the mainstream of life, returning home in the evening full of interesting things to talk about, while she remains perforce a passive listener." Working wives, on the other hand, have a lot to tell their husbands and can fully hold up their end of a conversation. Nor need they lag behind in their understanding of politics and of the special historical role being played by the East German Workers-and-Peasant-State.

Doctors have been criticized for urging mothers not to work for the sake of their children. A psychologist at an East German clinic for nervous diseases declared that the majority of children with strong neurotic and behavioral problems come from families with non-working mothers. Most important, both parents could insure a peaceful world for their children by working now to build East Germany into a strong, impregnable State.

Neues Deutschland reported, in May, 1962, on changes made in the first five months after issuance of the Communiqué. Industrial, Party, and Union officials now listened attentively to the requests and complaints of the women's committees. Previously such matters were often ignored or dismissed on the excuse of having no time to consider them. Some factories announced installation of their own laundry services and kindergartens, and had made plans for giving women more positions of leadership. The Party asserted that the basic problem remained men's failure to respect women's capabilities as the equal of their own. Male functionaries now

made sure that the qualifying courses for women started with the foreseen number of candidates, yet they made no effort to assist or encourage women in bearing the extra burden of the qualification work. Managers continued not to give women the type of positions called for by their qualifications. Therefore, many women refused to sacrifice the time to acquire qualifications which they might never get an opportunity to use.

East Germany admits that many of its own citizens believe the Communiqué to have been issued solely because of a pressing need to increase the strength of the labour force. The official Party explanation put it somewhat differently. It states that the Communiqué calls for "assisting working women and girls in their development and for utilizing the creative power of women for the victory of Socialism".

Although intended originally as a means of harnessing more womanpower, certain side effects of the Communiqué may prove more important in the long run. Functionaries will no longer dare cavalierly to dismiss suggestions from the local women's committees. The number of women in leading positions, both in industry and in political life, should increase. Moreover, the "great discussion" about the contents of the Communiqué will continue to give East German women the chance to let off steam and to rehash grievances against their husbands, their bosses, and the entire male breed.