

**Women's Inequality in the German Democratic Republic: The
Discrepancy Between Socialist Rhetoric and Daily Practice**

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Scholars have not seriously considered the study of women in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) until its collapse in 1989. Since then, women's issues have received more attention by historians and sociologists who have examined how the Socialist Unity Party's (SED) prescribed roles for women affected them in daily practice. Women experienced inequality in the GDR through job discrimination, non-fulfillment of their constitutional rights, and the loss of independence in their personal life. In the GDR, SED leaders argued that inequality between men and women had been eradicated; however, women encountered occupational segregation and wage disadvantages. After the first Five-Year plan was enforced, working women, not just housewives, served a primary function in the home ensuring the GDR's stability, despite the absence of gender equality.

The inattention given to women's inequality by historians prohibits one to have a complete understanding how socialist policies affected women's professional and personal lives. The constitution of 1949, the first Five-Year-Plan and the Equal Employment Opportunities Policy in 1952 gave women equal wages in the work force and equality in the home, but in the reality of daily life women experienced gender discrimination. The discrepancy between the rhetoric of the SED and the reality that women faced in daily life is a significant theme throughout GDR history that has been scarcely considered in historical studies until after East and West Germany reunified in 1990. When the economy failed to meet the standards of safe working conditions and living standards, equal wages, equal rights, or food shortages in the 1950s to the 1970s, women were directly affected in their daily lives. Despite the claims made by SED

leaders that women were equal, they were still restricted to lower wages and “female” occupations, such as social services and in office positions.

Women not only experienced long lines at grocery stores, paid high prices that the SED fixed, and endured the limited availability of consumer goods, but they also received a lower income than men in the same field of work and lost managerial and other professional jobs to men. Women also had to fulfill a dual role of a housewife and an independent working woman simultaneously. Women vented their frustration of fulfilling dual roles in the GDR. By writing poetry, novels, and essays, women not only found different avenues to express themselves, but also communicated with both East and West German populations. Female writers, such as Christa Wolf and Irmtraud Morgner, consistently went to public meetings and conferences, gave interviews, published their political views of the liberation of women, and served as liaison between the government and its citizens. ¹ Stories such as Gerti Tetzner’s *Karen W.*, Christa Wolf’s *Christa T.*, and Maxie Wander’s “Ute G., 24, Skilled Worker, Single Mother, One Child,” taken from a collection of her short interviews, help to illustrate how socialist policies affected women in their personal lives, influenced their relationships with other women and husbands, and how they responded to socialist rhetoric. An examination of women’s discrimination in the labor force and at home, in contrast to the promises made by the SED regime, reveals the extent that women experienced inequality in the GDR.

Historiography Research

Socialist policies enacted in East Germany since 1945 until reunification declared women equal participants in the labor force, with a guarantee of available work in all

¹ Ed. and trans. by Nancy Lukens and Dorothy Rosenberg. *Daughters of Eve: Women’s Writing in the German Democratic Republic.* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 14.

sectors of the economy, and with the same wages as male workers. The constitution of 1949, the Five-Year-Plan, and the Equal Employment Opportunities Policy in 1952 stated women had equal rights in the GDR, but on a daily basis, women experienced discrimination at home and at work. Therefore, women were faced with two conflicting policies.

The practice of women's inequality resulted from the socialist policies of 1952. Albert Ritschl, an economic historian, examines the extent that economic policies helped East Germany to prosper during the 1950s to 1970s, and why this prosperity did not continue for the rest of the GDR's existence. Ritschl states that in 1952 under the first Five-Year-Plan, preference was given to investment in primary products and capital goods industries at the expense of a consumer-oriented light industry.² Insufficient supply of consumer goods, a cut in real wages, and unrest within the population led to more emigration to West Germany. This caused the formation of a "New Plan" in 1953, which aimed to cut its investment goals. Women and men were both severely affected by these policy changes in the 1950s. Even if the SED decided to cut its investment goals in heavy industry, women still paid high prices at grocery stores, endured a lack of available food, and discrimination in the workplace. The prescribed role given by the GDR that stated women were to be in charge of the home clashed with the economic policies by SED leaders. In order for heavy industry to increase productivity output, SED officials reduced the amount of available consumer goods, which directly interfered with the expectations of women to maintain the home.

² Albert Ritschl, "An Exercise in Futility: East German Economic Activity, 1945-1989." In *Economic Growth in Europe since 1945*, edited by Nicholas Crafts and Gianni Tonido. (Cambridge Press: 1996), 513.

Women's inequality became more acute in the work force and in the home by the 1970s. Socialist policies curbed women's participation in heavy industry and pressured them to become mothers full-time. Historian Corey Ross focuses on the economic policies of the GDR from 1945-1989, and how they contributed to the collapse of the economy. The GDR economy suffered greatly during its existence because women were excluded from working in certain jobs, especially in heavy industry. SED leaders refused to acknowledge that men and women working under equal pay and equal opportunities could boost the economy. Nonetheless, the GDR boasted in the 1970s of advancements in optical, machine-building, and chemical technologies. Ross states that, "the GDR and the SBZ (Soviet Occupied Zones) was, apart from Czechoslovakia, the first...advanced industrial region to attempt to build Soviet-style socialist economy."³ However, the unexpected collapse of the East German dictatorship radically changed peoples' understanding of the stability in the GDR. According to Ross, East Germans had experienced indebtedness, decrepitude, and severe environmental damage by the end of the 1980s. A woman's responsibility in the GDR to maintain the household involved cooking, buying food and supplies, and creating a sense of security within the family. Economic policies in the GDR disrupted women's efforts to uphold SED expectations of them.

Historians Annemette Sørensen and Heike Trappe have researched wage inequality and job segregation of female workers centered in heavy industry, technology, and social services from 1945-1989. In their article, "The Persistence of Gender Inequality in Earnings," both authors argue that after reunification, women continued to

³ Corey Ross, The East German Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of the GDR (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 69.

be treated differently because of their gender. A considerable disadvantage in wages represents gender inequality in practice. With the limited amount of work that has been written about women's inequality, many historians struggled to learn about how inequality affected women, both working and at home. Sørensen and Trappe use the results from an East German Life History Study done in October 1990, where face-to-face interviews were conducted to determine the difference in women's and men's wages from four birth cohorts: 1929-1931, 1939-1941, 1951-1953, and 1959-1961. Both men and women in the oral interviews discussed the earnings they received while working in the GDR; the oldest would have been at the age of 25-30 years, with the establishment of the GDR, the second oldest cohort would have been reaching adulthood, and the two younger cohorts would have been born while the GDR was still forming. From the results in the Life History Study, Sørensen and Trappe examine the differences in earnings of women and men as proof there was a substantial gender gap in the net earnings at the time of entry into the work force, and there was not any indication of a decline in wages across cohorts.⁴ Women in the oldest cohort, for example, were paid on average 47 percent less than men at the end of 1989, while the gender gap in earnings for the 1951-1953 cohorts was reduced from 22 percent to 19 percent. The youngest age group in 1959-1961 was originally paid 19 percent less than men, but by 1989, pay was reduced to 13 percent (see Appendix 1).⁵ In other words, wages did increase for women from 1945 to 1989, but wages did remain significantly lower than men in the same field. The gender gap in earnings increased over the working lives for the oldest age group, but it remained relatively stable for the 1951-1953 and the 1959-1961 cohorts. Similar to the

⁴ Annemette Sørensen, and Heike Trappe, "The Persistence of Gender Inequality in Earnings in the German Democratic Republic." *American Sociological Review* 60 (1995), 402-403.

⁵ Ibid.

oldest cohort, those working from 1951-1961 did not receive equal wages compared to their male counterparts, regardless of the availability of higher education and job training. Education and training did not help women get professional jobs; instead, they remained in social work, and other areas considered by the SED party as “women’s jobs.”

From the 1980s until reunification, women struggled to maintain their jobs in professional, industrial, and technological sectors of the labor force. SED leaders refused women who applied in industrial or professional jobs. Women workers currently in these sectors of the labor force also lost their jobs to men. Historians Anneliese Braun, Gerda Jasper, and Ursula Schröter state that in the 1980s and in post-reunification East Germany, a significant change occurred in gender relations. Women were pushed out of professional, white collar careers on a massive scale and their positions became filled by men.⁶ To get a glimpse of why such an event occurred, the historians analyze the policies enacted from the 1950s to 1989 and how it changed over time. Braun, Jasper, and Schröter analyze the Equal Opportunities Policy in 1952 and the First Family Code in 1966, which established the contradicting roles of housewife and working woman. In order to promote gender inequality, the SED government enacted the Equal Employment Opportunities Policy in 1952 and the First Family Code in 1966 that established the contradicting roles of work and housewife. These policies did improve East German society because they women had opportunities to go to colleges and universities, receive job training, benefits in health care and centers for childcare. However, they would have done more if the SED did not try to continually marginalize women’s role in society.

⁶ Anneliese Braun, Gerda Jasper, and Ursula Schröter, “Rolling Back the Gender Status of East German Women” in *German Unification: The Destruction of an Economy*, edited by Hanna Behrend. (London: Pluto Press, 1995), 140.

The research of historians and sociologists shows what kind of policies the SED enacted, and how these policies affected women. General studies about SED policies and what they entailed help one to understand how these policies affected women. For example, Corey Ross and Albert Ritschl examine economic policies, such as the first Five-Year plan in 1952, and how the push for heavy industries came at the expense of consumer goods. Anneliese Braun, Gerda Jasper, and Ursula Schröter describe the Equal Employment Opportunities Policy, which encouraged women to enter the work force, and the First Family Code of 1966, that pressured women to become full-time mothers and housewives. From Annamette Sørensen and Heike Trappe, the East German Life History Study done in 1990 reveals gender discrimination in the work place and in the home, as a result of the policies geared to restricting women's roles in society.

Socialism in the German Democratic Republic

Walter Ulbricht's socialist policies illustrated that women's key role was in with the family. The push for heavy industry at the expense of consumer goods frustrated women who were responsible for buying food and supplies. Fixed high prices made desirable goods inaccessible. Tensions arose at work when women entered professional jobs and heavy industry. The socialist policy of the SED was a double-edged sword: women had to be a working woman, but were also expected to stay at home and bear children. The first Five-Year plan, introduced in 1952 outlines the basic ideology of Stalinism. Soviet leader Josef Stalin aimed to improve Russia's economy by heavy industrialization at the expense of consumer goods. Consumer goods such as sugar, bread, and milk sold at high prices, citizens lived in dilapidated housing, and they worked in dangerous conditions. Ulbricht; therefore, modeled the GDR's economy after Stalin.

The purpose of the Five Year plan was to create a peaceful, prosperous Germany, where the working class created the foundation for economic success. Ulbricht states that “our fatherland is guided by a plan [that] considers the needs of the people, and aims at building prosperity and reconstructi[on] of our fatherland. Only a few years have passed since the terrible catastrophe.”⁷ Ulbricht believed that a prosperous Germany and equality of all citizens would eradicate the hatred that plagued Germany during World War II. He feared a third world war, with the development of nuclear weapons in the United States and Russia. He also appeals to the people by telling them that heavy industrial production would boost the economy. Ulbricht argues, “Industrial production will more than double by 1955 when compared to 1936. By next year, 1953, rationing would be abolished and all foodstuffs and industrial goods will be available at fixed and affordable prices [we] will have meat, sugar, milk, etc., *per capita* than we did in 1936.”⁸ However, industrial production trumped the availability of consumer goods. Meat, sugar, milk, and other precious commodities were denied to the public. Women were not specifically mentioned in the First Five Year plan, which addressed the East German people as a whole. In order to achieve prosperity after WWII and to avoid another world war, the labor of the working man was glorified. Despite socialist rhetoric which promoted women working beside men, SED leaders in reality did not acknowledge women’s important role in economic growth.

⁷ Walter Ulbricht. “Our Five Year Plan for Peaceful Reconstruction.” 1952. German Propaganda Archive <<http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/5yrplan.htm>. > (16 March 2005), 2.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Henry Ashby Turner, Germany from Partition to Reunification. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 57.

When the German Democratic Republic was formed in 1949, the constitution established a more democratic, humanitarian government than Nazi Germany and Western Europe. After WWII, Walter Ulbricht established the constitution in order to gain the confidence and trust of East Germans; however, the constitution of 1949 was quickly considered insignificant to SED leaders. SED leaders disregarded the constitution because it was modeled after Western democracy, by giving citizens civil rights and freedoms which were not the ideology and practice of Stalin. For example, the constitution stated that the election of parliament, called the People's Chamber, would have proportional representation, which meant seats that were given would be proportional to their percentage of votes in the population.⁹ This was consistently broken, as a consequence of a coalition required by the Soviets, and which they imposed on all political parties. This coalition became known as the National Front. The National Front included four primary political parties: The Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU), the Democratic Peasants' Party in Germany (DBD), the National Democratic Party of Germany (NDPD), and the Liberal Democratic Party (LPD). These were the only four liberal political parties allowed to operate in the GDR because they were completely controlled by Ulbricht and his colleagues, and were used to indoctrinate others to socialism. Therefore, democratic parties were not democratic at all, but puppet parties used to reinforce Ulbricht's Stalinist ideals.

SED leaders consistently violated the principles in the constitution that guaranteed equal rights to all citizens. Ulbricht's disregard of basic rights is closely tied to socialist ideology. Along with disproportional seats in the parliament and the People's Chamber,

Ulbricht and other SED leaders would determine who was allowed to run for a political office.

The constitution of 1949 also assured freedom of expression for writers and artists, and freedom to practice religion. In the first Five Year Plan, Ulbricht states, “The nature of democracy consists to an important degree in the right of the people to criticize problems and mistakes. I ask you to let the government know immediately when you see serious problems or mistakes.”¹⁰ Ulbricht did exactly the opposite. He ignored the basic rights of his citizens. He punished those who spoke against his policies, or who sympathized with the West. The GDR was anything but democratic. The government soon controlled radio stations, theatres and movie houses, publishing companies, magazines, and newspapers. Those private and public employees who failed to submit their shops, and those who would not write or depict social prosperity and growth, were denied paper distribution to publish and write. Organizations that were critical of the regime were denied the right to use public meeting halls for conferences.

Specific policies enacted directly affected women, both in a positive and a negative way. The Equal Employment Opportunities Policy (EEOP), adopted in the early 1950s, was geared to bring women into employment. This policy lasted until the mid-1960s. The EEOP delegated certain household duties and childcare (subsidized by the state) was delegated outside of the family.¹¹ There were three stages of the EEOP: jobs for women, higher education, and legislation that sought to harmonize working and

¹⁰ Walter Ulbricht. “Our Five Year Plan for Peaceful Reconstruction.” 1952. German Propaganda Archive <<http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/5yrplan.htm>> (16 March 2005), 2.

¹¹ Anneliese Braun, Gerda Jasper, and Ursula Schröter, “Rolling Back the Gender Status of East German Women” in *German Unification: The Destruction of an Economy*, edited by Hanna Behrend. (London: Pluto Press, 1995), 140.

motherhood. In 1950, work available for women centered in heavy industry, production, and professional offices. East Germany aimed to reconstruct the economy and pay off debts that it owed to the Allies. With the shortage of men after the war in 1945, SED leaders appealed to women for help. This opened many avenues for lower-class women who had not previously been able to work in a skilled trade. Training women in heavy industry, and in trades such as engineering, became of special importance to SED leaders. University and college courses became available to all women, with the availability of on-campus child-care.

By 1966, the SED regime began to emphasize motherhood as the woman's primary responsibility. The First Family Code of the GDR in 1966 modified women's employment and women's social image.¹² As an increasing number of women became educated, the SED noticed many families had few children or none at all. The regime viewed the low birth rate as an indication that women wanted to relieve the burden of motherhood and work by having fewer children.¹³ As a result, family policies began to emphasize women's duty to bear children for a prosperous society. In the 1960s, day-care became state subsidized, available in state- and factory-supported day-care centers, after-school childcare, kindergartens, and school-lunch programs. In the 1970s and 1980s, the SED focused on legislation that restricted women from the workforce. Regulations included: shorter working hours for women with two or more dependent children, sick leave with pay if a child was sick, one paid day a month, one pay day for household work, the Baby Year (a year's paid leave for each of the first two children, and eighteen months for the third and after), and financial support for parents with three or

¹² Ibid, 141.

¹³ Ibid.

more children.¹⁴ With the emphasis of motherhood, the SED regime placed women in an uncompromising situation. Society expected women to focus on motherhood, with a part-time job on the side. Those in male-dominated fields, primarily in heavy industries, either lost their jobs or worked part-time.

From the examination of the first Five-Year-Plan and social policies geared toward women, SED leaders did not respect how valuable women had been to their ideal socialist state. The first Five-Year plan, the Equal Employment Opportunity Policy, and the First Family Code conflicted with each other by setting two different roles for women to meet. The strict gender roles set for women prevented them from equal treatment in higher education and keeping their jobs, because the SED regarded women's input irrelevant in economic, social, and political matters. The confined role of housewife and mother prevented women from reaching their full potential in society, affected their self-confidence, and their self-esteem. They experienced discrimination from men at work, at school, and in personal relationships.

Women's Reality

The effects of gender discrimination and inequality are represented in literature written by a variety of East German women from the 1950s to the 1980s. They describe the feelings of isolation, depression, and general frustration about their prescribed role in society and how they others treated them. With these writings, a glimpse of daily life helps to understand how these policies affected women and why they decided to publish them.

Historians Nancy Lukens and Dorothy Rosenberg collected a variety of stories, poems, and interviews that helps to understand how socialist policies affected women and

¹⁴ Ibid, 142.

their perspectives on life in the GDR. The majority of excerpts do not have the full text translated into English, but the excerpts do give a glimpse of daily life for East German women. The excerpts below include a narrative by Maxie Wander of a woman named Ute G., a twenty-four-year-old single mother who works full-time, and two interviews taken by Irene Böhme, about Karen A., who struggles to save a failing marriage, and Marianne E., who relies on the companionship of other single women and her children after three failing relationships.

Maxie Wander

Born in 1933 in Vienna, Austria, Maxie Wander moved to East Germany in 1959 and worked as a reporter, a secretary, and a librarian before dedicating her career to writing. Wander is better known in the West than many female writers because of her published autobiographical reflections written in 1980 during her struggle with cancer, *Living would be a Great Alternative*. She also wrote short stories and prose pieces, such as “Kinderprotokolle” (documentaries for and about children). Her only independent collection, *Good Morning, Beautiful: Women in the GDR*¹⁵, a collection of interviews with women, was of immense significance to GDR women’s writing and to the genre of short prose in general.¹⁶ A selection from *Good Morning, Beautiful*, written in 1977, is about a skilled worker, single mother, named Ute G.

Ute G. was twenty-four years old at the time of Böhme interviewed her. She represents an East German woman who refused to be a housewife, and who devoted her life to a working career. As with many women, Ute G. became more independent of men

¹⁵ Maxie Wander, “Ute G., 24, Skilled Worker, Single Mother,” in *Daughters of Eve: Women’s Writing in the German Democratic Republic*, Ed. and trans. by Nancy Lukens and Dorothy Rosenberg. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 40.

¹⁶ Ibid.

who had influenced her life while growing up, such as her older brothers and later her husband.

Ute's family life is similar to many East German women. From the description of her family as a whole, each member practiced their prescribed role. Ute describes her mother remaining in the kitchen the majority of the day and cooking. She complains that her brothers were able to play freely while she and her sister were expected to cook.¹⁷ Regardless of her duty to help her mother maintain the house, Ute did not agree with a confined role in the home like her mother. For Ute, her mother's lifestyle is one that prohibited her from reaching her full potential. In fact, it seems that Ute saw the life of a housewife as despicable, a cage which one is forever imprisoned in. In response to strict roles in her family life, Ute devoted a lot of her time to vocational school during and after her pregnancy, "I get one day of study leave a month besides the day for housework, and I get off once a week to go to class, too...I volunteer for a lotta [sic] social projects...."¹⁸ Ute resisted many of the prescribed roles that GDR society gave women and used the resources available to become more actively involved in her community than remaining at home. Socialist policies prohibited women from working in political office, in heavy industry, and in professional careers. Women such as Ute G. became involved in volunteer organizations in order to actively participate in society. Volunteering was a common activity for women in the GDR, because it gave them a sense of purpose. Like Ute, women felt volunteering was an appropriate way to make a difference.

At the time this interview was written in 1977, social policies were beginning to restrict women's roles in the labor force. Apart from a decrease in available jobs,

¹⁷ Ibid, 41.

¹⁸ Ibid, 47.

socialist policies geared toward a woman's role as mother. Ute had a son when a single teenager,¹⁹ which affected later in life. When trying to find a job, she states:

Being a single mother was a real disadvantage. Four years ago I applied for an apartment, 'cause the law says that an unmarried mother and child count as a family and have a right to appropriate housing. Married couples who applied later than I did already have an apartment, not me.²⁰

In the GDR, citizens had the right to housing space on the basis of family size and were guaranteed a maximum rent of five percent of net household income. In addition, the prices of foodstuffs, water, power, garbage collection, children's clothing, etc. were highly subsidized.²¹ Single mothers found it harder to get these privileges.

Unsurprisingly, this example illustrates the socialist rhetoric and practice in reality.

Many women like Ute became grew up in the 1950s believing in socialism, and tried to utilize it in daily life. With an emphasis on motherhood and family, many women either married early or had a child outside of marriage. The state generously offered paid maternity leave of twenty-six weeks in 1976,²² and a paid month leave for housework,²³ but the SED party did not practice the social policies they gave to single women.

Even though Ute expressed the limits to being a single mother, she ultimately decided that she'd rather remain unmarried. Interestingly, she identified a life-long partner named Ralph, who was as independent of socialist ideology as she is. For example, Ute described a time when Ralph and she were quarreling, and he cried:

¹⁹ Ibid, 41.

²⁰ Ibid, 45.

²¹ Ed. and trans. by Nancy Lukens and Dorothy Rosenberg, Daughters of Eve: Women's Writing in the German Democratic Republic (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 10.

²² Lorna Martens, The Promised Land? Feminist Writing in the German Democratic Republic (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 6.

²³ Ibid, 27.

Sometimes he cries like a baby. Maybe all men are emotional just like women...I always wanted a man I could look up to. Ralph said right away that he didn't wanta be a tough guy, he thinks gross because it's unnatural and dishonest, like submissiveness in women.²⁴

Therefore, Ute has a relationship that is different from the expectations of her parents. Her parents prefer Ute to marry Ralph since they have been together for so long, but Ute is content to remain single. The relationship Ute describes with Ralph is one that is fulfilling without the need of a marriage certificate, which states that it is so.

Ute G. is an example of many independent women in East Germany who decided to live differently than SED policies. She chose to go to school and work full-time, instead of working at home. Her relationship with her partner Ralph is very different from SED policy because she had a child with him but does not have any desire to marry him. Ute appears to be an independent woman since a young age, who resisted the social roles that the SED prescribed to women.

The First Family Plan in 1966 that provided state-subsidized day-care and financial support for single mothers who raised children helped women make ends meet. SED policies stated that single mothers with children could also receive better housing and safe living standards. State-subsidized day-care and financial support was received to single mothers; however, the SED did not help women move into better living conditions. Similar to Ute, single women were promised better housing immediately after they applied for it, but the SED did not fulfill these promises.

²⁴ Maxie Wander. "Ute G., 24, Skilled Worker, Single, One Child," in Daughters of Eve: Women's Writing in the German Democratic Republic Ed. and trans. by Nancy Lukens and Dorothy Rosenberg. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 47.

²⁵ Ed. and trans. by Nancy Lukens and Dorothy Rosenberg. Daughters of Eve: Women's Writing in the German Democratic Republic (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 170.

Irene Böhme: Karen A. and Marianne E.

Irene Böhme was born in eastern Germany in 1933. She held jobs in bookstores, as an editor, and as a dramaturge. From 1961-1969 she was an editor for the East German weekly *Sonntag*, a cultural and political paper. She spent the next ten years (1969-1979) as a dramaturge for the Volksbühne am Luxemburgplatz in East Berlin, before emigrating to West Berlin in 1980 where she was dramaturge for the West Berlin national theatre from 1981-1985. From her interviews of East German women, which these two selections “Karen A” and “Marianne E.” are from called *Die da drüben* (Those “over there,”) in 1982, she explores experiences and perspectives of East German women from different generations and backgrounds.²⁵

Karen A. was born in 1937 in eastern Germany. She immediately married her boyfriend after high school in 1955 and started a family. At the time, she was working for her mother in an office. She had dreams to go to college, but never went. Karen A. describes a disintegrating marriage, “For ten years we moved from one construction project to another and lived in villages, never more than three years in one place. Just when I’ve gotten used to the new job and begun to make friends, it would be time to move.”²⁶ She took it out on her husband when they argued, because she tried to live up to her husband’s expectations.²⁷ Karen A. wanted a companion, not someone that she depended on. When she and her husband split up in the late 1960s, she presented mediocre work to her colleagues in school and did nothing to maintain her house. Only when her husband became “shacked up with another woman with two children,”²⁸ Karen

²⁶ Ibid, 173.

²⁷ Ibid, 174.

²⁸ Ibid, 176.

A. decided to give up pursuing a degree and started to learn languages in order to save her marriage. After reconciling with her husband, Karen A. began to use her knowledge of Russian, Polish, and Czech in order to translate for construction workers.

For Karen A., learning languages and working beside her husband instead of working at home was a more fulfilling experience in her life. From her interview with Böhme in 1982, it seems she needed to discover her strengths on her own, while making a living without her husband. This helped her gain independence, individuality, and self-discovery.

At the time of this interview was published in 1982, socialist policies continued to confine women to prescribed “female” jobs. The SED party wanted women as full-time mothers. Accordingly, heavy industry and technology employers began to both fire their female workers and replace them with men, or persuaded them to work part-time.²⁹

Hildegard Maria Nickel states that from 1975 onward, the number of women in technological work declined; maintenance mechanics for data processing and office machines dropped from 30.1% in 1975 to 18.4% in 1987, skilled workers from 49.7% to 20.1%, electricians from 7.9% to 3.7%, and control panel operatives from 25.9% to 8.4%.³⁰ Women were encouraged to pursue jobs in social work, teaching, and office jobs. Some continued to pursue professional careers, such as Karen A., but employers preferred male workers.

²⁹ Anneliese Braun, Gerda Jasper, and Ursula Schröter, “Rolling Back the Gender Status of East German Women” in *German Unification: The Destruction of an Economy*, edited by Hanna Behrend. (London: Pluto Press, 1995), 140.

³⁰ Hildegard Maria Nickel, “Women in the GDR and New Federal States” in *Gender Politics and Post-Communism: Reflections from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union*. Edited by Nanette Funk and Magda Mueller. (New York: Routledge Inc., 1993), 140.

Karen's struggle to find her identity and become independent of her husband could have been aggravated by the waning availability of jobs for women from the 1960s to the 1980s. In other words, the inattention by the SED government to practice women's equality contributed to women's fight for autonomy, such as Karen A.

Marianne E. came from East Prussia to Mecklenburg at the age of seven in 1945. She states that, "a woman came along and told us we could stay with her... [We] got some land through the land reform, and became farmers."³¹ Marianne appears to have grown-up relatively independent and sure of herself. She went to school and worked on a farm until she was eighteen, when she married right after high school. Marianne's experiences with men, unlike Ute G. and Karen A., show the negative aspects of socialism and women's inequality on a more acute scale in her personal life. In the GDR, socialist practice did not reflect the equal rights of all women. For example, in both of Marianne's marriages, her husband left her with a child for another woman. Without companionship and raising two children, Marianne tries to make a living by working in cooperative stalls, as a technician, and she later volunteered as a brigade member and in the governing board to improve management at work.³² She continues to build friendships in the 1970s with other women who work with her and also have children, later moving in with a woman in a similar situation. Exposure to single motherhood and making her own living has made her "more skeptical" of men and what they can offer.³³ Many women such as Marianne became disillusioned when they did not experience the ideal social livelihood and family. Surprisingly, Marianne does not feel anger when

³¹ Irene Böhme, "Women and Socialism: Four Interviews" in *Daughters of Eve: Women's Writing in the German Democratic Republic*. Ed. and trans. by Nancy Lukens and Dorothy Rosenberg. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 175.

³² *Ibid*, 176.

³³ *Ibid*.

thinking back on her previous marriages in 1982, but thanks them for the children that she has that kept her motivated and determined to continue on.

The perspective of Marianne represents what many East German women felt. Women, who struggled to find a career where they were respected as individuals, or those who experienced failing marriages, tried to focus on the positive outcomes of their struggles. For Marianne, the children that she borne from her two failed marriages gave her strength to continue getting an education and a stable career. Marianne E. maintained relationships with single women who also had children from a previous marriage. Karen A. spent time with other women while her husband worked at construction sites. Since women were placed in a confined role as a mother who works on the side, many women sought others in similar situations. These relationships built a support system that many women felt that the SED could not provide.

Conclusions

The interviews of Ute G. in 1977, Karen A. and Marianne E. in 1982 give a glimpse of how socialist policies affected women in their daily lives. All three women struggled for an adequate education or job training in order to enter professional jobs. Even with the availability of job training and education, Ute G., Karen, and Marianne encountered obstacles from male colleagues, teachers, and employers. For Karen and Marianne, socialist policies geared toward family stability and prescribed roles for women in the home affected how men treated them in their relationships. They both strove to find their purpose in their relationships and in society as a whole. Ute G.'s perspective of her mother, who remained a stay-at-home mom for most of Ute's childhood, contributed to her desire to get an education and support herself. Similar to

Ute, Karen and Marianne sought an education in order to participate more directly in the labor market and make a living like their partners.

The time period of these interviews reflects the perspectives and experiences of Ute, Karen, and Marianne. In Ute's interview, she talks about her life primarily in the 1950s and the 1960s. During the 1950s and 1960s, Ute, Karen, and Marianne were faced with conflicting messages: work full-time and be a full-time mother. According to Ute's interview, she decided to remain single without children and focus on her career. The SED responded to the decisions of women to work full-time as resistance to socialist ideology.

Ute G.'s relationship with her partner Ralph is different compared to Karen A.'s or Marianne E.'s relationships with men. Ralph was supportive of Ute's desire to become independent of him, and he encouraged Ute to explore her interests in school and in jobs. When Ralph and Ute began to date in the early 1950s, the SED practiced women's equality as stated in the constitution of 1949. Overall, women's inequality had not affected the way men treated women. As more socialist policies encouraged women to be full-time mothers in the 1960s, men's perspective of women began to conform to socialist ideology. In other words, men supported the state's desire to direct women's role toward full-time mothers than independent working women. They began to exercise gender discrimination in the work place and in the home. Therefore, Marianne's and Karen's experiences differed from Ute, in that they became involved with men who agreed with women's role in the home. While Ute lived with a man who became exposed to more liberal policies that celebrated the independence of women, Karen and Marianne lived with men who tried to keep them at home.

Unlike Ute's relationship with Ralph, Karen felt that her husband did not understand her desire to discover her strengths in school and work. She felt suffocated in a relationship where her husband did not understand what she wanted. In Marianne's interview, she describes her loss of faith in men to provide fulfilling relationships. The departure of her former partners during her pregnancy reflects the lack of respect that GDR society had of women.

The socialist rhetoric of the SED party alienated women not only because SED leaders expected women to fulfill two conflicting policies (to be a full-time worker and to be a full-time mother), but the inability of SED leaders to practice their policies stated in the Equal Employment Opportunities Policy and the First Family Policy caused women to lose faith in the socialist state. Many women appealed to Walter Ulbricht and other SED officials, but their complaints and suggestions fell on deaf ears. In response, women built close relationships with their children and other women who experienced similar hardships. For example, Marianne's children gave her a sense of purpose, and helped her continue to persevere through failing relationships at work and in her personal life. She also moves in with a single co-worker who has a child. Building friendships with women who had similar experiences helped form a support system that the SED could not provide. Instead, women sought companionship at work which encouraged women to move on from failing relationships and help them realize how valuable they were in their children's lives and in society.

Walter Ulbricht's policies directly affected women's ability to get jobs in certain sectors of the economy. The violation of civil rights in the constitution of 1949 and the first Five-Year plan in 1952 provided the political framework in women's inequality for

the next 40 years. Economic policies attributed to the first Five-Year plan prevented women from working in heavy industry, technology, and professional jobs. They were also paid lower than men in the same jobs, regardless of job training and education. From the East German Life History Study by Sørensen and Trappe, it is clear that women entering the work force in the 1950s to the early 1960s still received less pay than men by 1989. This indicates that the SED did not respect the constitutional rights of women: to receive equal wages and have access to the same jobs as men. Anneliese Braun, Gerda Jasper, and Ursula Schröter's study concerning the inability of the SED to practice the Equal Employment Opportunities Policy and the First Family Plan in reality help one understand to what extent women encountered gender discrimination. Women lost their jobs to men or were forced to work in positions that the SED considered female jobs. Therefore, women did not have equal opportunity to work in the same positions as men, despite claims by SED leaders.

Women's inequality represents the weakness of SED leadership as a whole. East Germany became a weak socialist state because its government did not acknowledge the constitutional rights of its citizens, particularly women. East German leaders did not acknowledge that women actually held the GDR together economically, politically, and socially. They hoped to improve GDR political and economic stability after WWII, but SED leaders refused to make the necessary changes to do so. SED leaders felt that socialist policies would automatically solve the problem of inequality. They lacked control over women's role in the home that they had prescribed. Women continued to form relationships with women that built an informal support system completely separate from SED jurisdiction. In other words, by forming support networks, women became

independent of the SED's restrictions on women at work and in the home. SED leaders could not exert their control on East German women.

A study of gender discrimination in the German Democratic Republic can only help one to understand certain aspects of women's inequality. The inattention to gender studies in the GDR until the 1990s may reflect the lack of knowledge that women experienced discrimination during its existence. Limited sources on women's perspectives about the GDR can only give a glimpse of how women experienced discrimination.

Appendix

Figure 1. Annemette Sørensen, and Heike Trappe, "The Persistence of Gender Inequality in Earnings in the German Democratic Republic." *American Sociological Review* 60 (1995), 402.

Table 1. Coefficients for the Effect of Gender on Logged Net Monthly Earnings at the Beginning of the First Job, from Five Models with Different Control Variables: German Democratic Republic, Four Birth Cohorts

Models	Birth Cohorts			
	1929–1931	1939–1941	1951–1953	1959–1961
Gross effect of gender on earnings	-.26* (.08)	-.36* (.04)	-.24* (.03)	-.23* (.02)
Net of vocational training	.01 (.09)	-.33* (.04)	-.25* (.03)	-.23* (.03)
Net of vocational training and full-time employment	.01 (.09)	-.33* (.04)	-.24* (.03)	-.22* (.03)
Net of vocational training, full-time employment, and industry	-.03 (.09)	-.28* (.05)	-.22* (.03)	-.19* (.03)
Net of vocational training, full-time employment, industry, and percent women in the occupation	.15 (.11)	-.17* (.06)	-.19* (.04)	-.13* (.03)

Figure 2.
Annemette Søren

sen, and Heike Trappe, "The Persistence of Gender Inequality in Earnings in the German Democratic Republic. *American Sociological Review* 60 (1995), 403.

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