

## Feminist Encounters: Germany, the EU and Beyond

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While all the post-unification reflections in this volume need contextualization in German history, European politics and Western culture, the encounters among women and women's movements in and after unification demand an even wider framework, that of global feminist politics and gender change. Everywhere in the world -- not only in Germany, Europe or even that nebulous space, Western society -- the status and consciousness of women has been undergoing transformation. Political interventions into gender relations by social movements, transnational advocacy networks and states are ubiquitous. Both nation-states and supranational bodies have increasingly recognized women as individual citizens with legitimate aspirations to personal self-determination and their fair share of social decision-making power.<sup>1</sup>

There is thus no way to consider the position of women in more-or-less unified Germany today without examining the global context of feminist politics. Especially since the 1995 Fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing, one can speak of a transnational feminist network that encompasses grassroots movements, more formalized NGOs, and government agencies as well as individual elected representatives, academic researchers and multi-issue activists. Gender has been actively "mainstreamed" by state

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<sup>1</sup> Ann Towns, 2010. *Women and States: Norms and Hierarchies in International Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

policy at the urging of both the UN and EU.<sup>2</sup>

Much of the drive for achieving gender equality has thus shifted to the transnational level. Globally, feminists moved from outside positions in social movements to insider roles in both intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations. Insider feminists brought both their expertise and networking power to bear to drive forward the project of gender mainstreaming and to lobby for specific measures advancing gender equality, a world-wide process that Alvarez called the “NGOization” of feminism.<sup>3</sup> The EU, as a new political entity just taking shape in this era, was particularly susceptible to the influence of women’s organizing for two reasons. First, the EU sought democratic legitimacy for itself outside the national party systems of its members. The “proxy publics” of civil society networks – for which the European Women’s Lobby is the model of early and effective mobilization – offered a non-electoral mechanism for soliciting expert proposals and demonstrating popular support for what the European Commission would do.<sup>4</sup> Second, women’s organizations and experts constructed quantitative and qualitative measures of gender equality on which the member states could compete for recognition and rewards. The EU had the power to press the states perceived as laggards, such as West Germany had been, to achieve more,

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<sup>2</sup> Melissa Haussman and Birgit Sauer, 2007. *Gendering the State in the Age of Globalization: Women’s Movements and State Feminism in Postindustrial Democracies*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.

<sup>3</sup> For a good discussion of the emergence and relevance of the term see Sonia Alvarez 1999 “Advocating Feminism: The Latin American feminist NGO ‘boom’.” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 1(2): 181-209. For NGOization in Germany see Sabine Lang, 1997. “The NGOization of Feminism.” In *Transitions, Environments, Translations: Feminisms in International Politics*, J.W. Scott, C. Kaplan and D. Keates, eds., New York: Routledge, pp. 101-120.

<sup>4</sup> Sabine Lang, forthcoming. *Proxy Publics: The NGOization of Civil Society and the Public Sphere*

and the FRG could be made to feel that its own standing as a “leading state” in Europe was at stake in these well-publicized league tables and EU evaluations.<sup>5</sup>

In this context, the German commitment to gender equality was articulated in the 1992 reformulation of its Basic Law, which no longer says merely that men and women have equal rights, but also that the state has an obligation to advance this equality by active effort. In addition, Angela Merkel’s chancellorship carried significant symbolic value, putting an exclamation point on the dramatic increases (from under 10% to over 30%) of women in the *Bundestag* across all parties since the 1980s. There are gender equity efforts in academia, as universities seek to remedy an internationally low level of women in professorships, and some recent consideration of gender equality on corporate boards.<sup>6</sup> The reform of parental leave in 2006 was the most notable state shift, dismantling at least one key element of the institutionalized male-breadwinner family norm by making leaves shorter but better paid and reserving some of the time exclusively for fathers.<sup>7</sup>

While gender relations in Germany thus shifted considerably over the past two decades, it is hard to attribute much of this change to the unification process, though there is also little reason to see the tensions and costs of unification as having been an obstacle. The real pressure for change in gender policy and practice has come primarily from Germany’s membership in the EU, which is more responsive to global gender norms than

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<sup>5</sup> Anna van der Vleuten and Mieke Verloo “Disappointing pioneers and surprising laggards: Understanding disparities between reputation and performance” In *The Discursive Politics of Gender Equality: Stretching, Bending and Policy-making*. Emanuela Lombardo, Petra Meier and Mieke Verloo (editors), 2009, Routledge.

<sup>6</sup> Myra Marx Ferree, 2010. “Gender politics in the Berlin Republic: Issues of Identity and Institutional Change” *German Politics & Society*, 28 (1): 189-214.

<sup>7</sup> Angelika von Wahl, 2008. “From Family to Reconciliation Policy: How the Grand Coalition Reforms the German Welfare State.” *German Politics & Society* 26 (3): 25-49.

its member states are.<sup>8</sup> But as Miethe notes, the GDR's gender policies were closer to those norms in the EU than to those of the FRG at unification, so this shift toward the EU standard makes gender politics one domain in which citizens in the East could actually see the West moving slowly in the direction they rightly could identify as theirs.

Certainly the progress made can not be attributed to the emergence of a stronger, more unified feminist movement after the *Wende*. Indeed, as both Miethe and Gerhard point out, the experience of unification was one of mutual disappointment and demobilization over time on both sides. Feminist hopes were initially high, but quickly dashed. In the East, the feminist hope was for a reformed socialism that would build on the accomplishments of the GDR but in a more participatory democratic and less gender-differentiating way. In the West, feminists looked eastward for what they expected to be already liberated and easily mobilized recruits to their movement. As these two essays explore, the encounter was more traumatic. Each side had illusions about themselves and the other that the collision of two feminist movements in a single political space brought to the fore.<sup>9</sup>

The “mother-workers” of the GDR took the claims of freedom of choice in the FRG too literally, not recognizing how fundamentally lacking systems of support for combining work and family in the FRG still were and how important this lack was to any real freedom to choose. Feminists in the FRG were themselves struggling against the prevailing “wife-mother” model of the West German system (embedded in everything from school and store hours to pay and pension systems). Against this systematic

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<sup>8</sup> Silke Roth, 2008. *Gender Politics in the Expanding European Union: Mobilization, Inclusion, Exclusion*. New York: Berghahn Books.

<sup>9</sup> The analysis here recapitulates that more extensively developed in Myra Marx Ferree, “Patriarchies and Feminisms: The Two Women’s Movements of Unified Germany.” *Social Politics*, 1995, 2(1): 10-24.

marginalization, feminism in West Germany was largely practiced as a program of women-specific policies and projects to advance women's status. This model of autonomous feminist work for women seemed to feminists in the East to recapitulate the errors of the GDR in relying on a "mommy politics" of supporting women rather than offering a more fundamental challenge to gender inequality in both men's and women's lives. But the autonomous organizational approach was institutionalized as the template for what counted as "feminism" and (mis)guided the perceptions of West German media, parties and movements.

Feminism in the GDR had been primarily practiced as embedded activism integrated either within democratic movements or the socialist state. For such activists, the new divisiveness of electoral politics posed a particular challenge. Spread among diverse Western parties (from the CDU to the Greens), the movement-based Eastern party (Alliance '90) and the PDS, all of which made persuasive claims for feminist support, the "feminist vote" became invisible and thus was politically discounted. The measures on which women relied for employment, childcare and life planning collapsed around them. Local feminists did mobilize to stop as much damage as they could, and their limited success partly explains why childcare centers remain much more available in the new federal states than in the old FRG.<sup>10</sup>

The one feminist umbrella organization that emerged in the East at the time of the *Wende* (the UFV) fell apart afterward because of its intentional internal diversity. On the one side, the dissident anti-institutional civic/cultural movement politics of some

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<sup>10</sup> Both structural availability (311 public childcareplaces/1000 children aged 0-3 in the East and 19/1000 in the West) and individual choices reflect the persistence of a different gender culture in the ex-GDR in the ensuing decade. See Karsten Hank and Michaela Kreyenfeld, 2003, "A Multilevel Analysis of Child Care and the Transition to Motherhood in Western Germany," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 65, no. 3.

feminists produced deep hostility to the PDS, and on the other side, feminists with strong institutional ties in academia and local women's groups saw reform as most possible by working in and with the PDS, which was emerging as a representative of the claim that the GDR had made progress worth preserving on some issues.<sup>11</sup>

After the many disappointments of this moment of East-West encounter, painfully felt on all sides as these two essays still reveal, feminists on both sides turned away from movement-style politics. The insider politics that the EU and UN facilitated in the late 1990s did not require either grassroots movement-like mobilization or loyalty to any particular party, since it is more expert-driven than popularly-based. Even today it is difficult to see any social movement that could be called "gesamtdeutsch" feminism. The women's movements have melted away from both sides of the former wall, replaced with gender political strategizing that engages German actors in EU and global networking.

Within the new Germany, there have been institutional convergences, but always from very different starting places. Reproductive rights are a good example, since the unification treaty itself was nearly derailed by the debate over abortion. The legal right to abortion in the first trimester that the GDR had offered since 1972, both men and women felt had been exercised responsibly and they were loath to lose it. For women in the West, who had been shocked by the prosecutions of women and doctors for "legally unjustified" abortions in the Bavarian town of Memmingen in 1988, a legal reform was seen as essential so that judges would no longer have the last word over women's decisions. The resolution of the two legal systems in this one case was deferred to the post-unification parliament to decide. The resultant law allowed "criminal but

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<sup>11</sup> Anne Hampele Ulrich, 2000. *Der Unabhängige Frauenverband: Ein Frauenpolitisches Experiment im Deutschen Vereinigungsprozeß*. Berlin: Berliner Debatte, Wiss.-Verlag.

unprosecuted” abortions in the first trimester after “pro-life-oriented, but outcome open” counseling. This was a gain for the women in the West, even though a step backwards for women in the former GDR.

The expansion of “gender equality offices” in local, state and national ministries and agencies also provided an institutional foothold for feminists in both new and old federal states. The understanding of what such offices should do, however, was sharply different since in the West, these were viewed as advocates for women, while in the East the feminists considered them as working for gender equality, a concern for both women and men. This latter goal is closer to the “gender mainstreaming” mandate that the EU has placed upon member states to consider the implications of all policy for both women and men. Thus the perceived conflict now between gender mainstreaming and women’s advocacy is more acute in the West, another instance of the convergence between EU goals and feminist hopes brought from the GDR.

Finally, the family reforms that the Grand Coalition introduced in 2006 also began to move FRG gender policy more in the direction that the EU encouraged and that the GDR had made familiar. A real “baby year” of income-replacing parental leave replaced the three year long and badly paid “parental vacation” and was complemented by a funded commitment to the expansion of childcare places. This was an imitation of the rapidly diffusing “Swedish model,” which had pioneered “daddy leave” (months of extra paid time when the father took some) as well as the flexibility of leave, a plan that made months off available to be taken anytime up to the child’s eighth birthday, both of which were now officially encouraged by the EU. The EU also directed its members to increase women’s labor force participation and to provide childcare for all. While women

raised in the West continue to be anxious about being labeled “Rabbenmütter,” and are thus less likely to take advantage of these provisions, the return to a state policy of support for both women and men as workers – and now, for the first time, men as fathers too – was change in the direction GDR feminists had sought.

Thus, in the end, the change that has emerged in German gender politics since unification was more toward supporting GDR norms than anyone on either side ever expected. But it was not because the East had left an influential legacy of its own at the federal level.<sup>12</sup> Instead, the EU set in motion a variety of modernization projects – activation of women in the labor force, investments in early childhood, and gender mainstreaming – whose momentum was on the side of the working mothers of the GDR<sup>13</sup>. The downside of the dominance of the EU for women continues to be its focus on business competition and individual self sufficiency. Women are more likely to fall through the holes emerging in the national safety net, since women are still more likely to be caretakers for dependents (the elderly as well as children and the ill), more likely to earn too little in jobs that are too unstable, and more often poor, elderly and victims of violence. The extent to which the EU embrace of both a neo-liberal agenda of privatization and a feminist agenda of gender equality measures actually are compatible is currently a focus of feminist debate throughout Europe.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> There were and are influential legacies of GDR feminism at the local level, however. See Katja Guenther, 2010. *Places of resistance: Feminism after socialism in eastern Germany*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

<sup>13</sup> Jensen, Jane. 2008. “Writing Women Out, Folding Gender in: The European Union ‘Modernizes’ Social Policy.” *Social Politics* 15(2): 131-153.

<sup>14</sup> For the more optimistic view of the EU, see Sylvia Walby, 2009, *Globalization and inequalities: Complexity and contested modernities*. London: Sage. For the more pessimistic perspective see Jane Jensen, 2008 (note 13) or Maria Stratigaki, 2004. (2004). The cooptation of gender concepts in EU policies: The case of ‘reconciliation of work and family.’ *Social Politics*, 11, 30 – 56.



The “east-west” encounter between German women with different experiences of freedom and repression, equality and domination, autonomy and solidarity is in some important ways a microcosm of the many encounters among women from diverse social locations. These differences have come to be theorized more generally as the *intersectionality* of gender, that is, the inability to disentangle gender relations from the other processes that generate social inequalities, such as class, race/ethnicity, age and sexuality.<sup>15</sup> Intersectionality has informed studies of gender in at least three ways, across the main levels of social analysis: individual, interactional and institutional.<sup>16</sup>

First, paying attention to gender intersectionality directs attention to the incommensurable interactions of inequalities at the level of individual experience and biography. For example, although both Gerhard and Miethe stress differences in the meaning of unification by generation, the current and future East-West generational transitions carry different meaning for each of them, not only because of their initial position on opposite sides of the Wall, but because of their different generational location in relation to 1968 and 1989. Moreover, their concrete biographical situations – Gerhard as a renowned feminist scholar in Frankfurt and Miethe as a peace activist and dissertation-writing student in Berlin in 1989 – offered a different vantage point on the challenges of that moment of feminist encounter and continue to shape their reading of the changes since.

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<sup>15</sup> Two important analyses of the origins and meaning of intersectionality are Leslie McCall, 2005. “The Complexity of Intersectionality.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30(3): 1771-1800, and Ange-Marie Hancock, 2007. “When Multiplication Doesn’t Equal Quick Addition: Examining Intersectionality as a Research Paradigm.” *Perspectives on Politics* 5(1): 63-79.

<sup>16</sup> For the elaboration of this typology see Hae Yeon Choo and Myra Marx Ferree, 2010. “Practicing Intersectionality in Sociological Research: A Critical Analysis of Inclusions, Interactions and Institutions in the Study of Inequalities.” *Sociological Theory*, 2010, 28 (2): 29-49.

On the one hand, feminists in the West, like Gerhard, have long been using the EU's formal commitments to gender equality as a lever to challenge German gender policy. For example, the Bundestag's first prohibition of gender discrimination in hiring came in 1982 in the form of the "EU Conformity Law," which the European Court of Justice ruled inadequate, and the 2006 Equal Treatment Law was a late and grudging concession to an EU Directive to all its member states. Gerhard's point of view highlights the transformations of social policy in (West) women's family/work lives and feminist incorporation into conventional politics. Credit for these changes goes to the successful mobilization of feminist activists for which the opportunity structure provided by the EU is a valued tool.

On the other hand, feminists in the states of the former GDR, like Miethe, are relatively new to the mechanisms of EU policy making, but are pleased to recognize allies outside the relatively narrow scope of FRG party politics. From her perspective, the EU is useful primarily as a lever to change consciousness on both sides of the former wall. Making the experiences of gender relations in the "old" FRG more obviously exceptional in even the western European context and bringing in new member states who also share experiences with state socialism and regime transition that had been used to frame East German women as "different" are both important ways that the EU empowered women in the East.

At a second level, intersectionality is not just about the different social locations of gendered people but about the social forces acting upon them. Intersectionality as a theory points to the contexts in which multiple inequalities are being generated together, not merely colliding in particular locations in different configurations. Thus the process

of unification was itself one defined not merely by the dominance of West German political elites over the efficacious self-mobilization of dissident groups in the East, but also by the dominance of male elites in the West and their longer-term displacement of the participatory democratic ideals of the 68ers into institutionalized party politics. Both Miethe and Gerhard express a sense of lingering disappointment in how they were marginalized at the time. The idealistic political mobilizations in which they were engaged – Gerhard in organizing alternative visions of constitutional reform and Miethe in dissident peace politics – became sidelined by the juggernaut of party-led unification. While the way unification happened was not explicitly designed to exclude women or feminist ideas, both authors present a strong case for seeing that exclusion as intrinsic to the process as it actually occurred.

Finally, intersectionality offers a design for feminist practice, an argument that gender politics will only advance the interests of women collectively under certain conditions. As intersectionality emerged as theory, it also made a demand for reflexive practice on feminist organizers and organizations. Reflexivity is also characteristic of both essays in the way that feminist theorists suggest it should be.<sup>17</sup> Both Miethe and Gerhard address their efforts to making *visible* the divergent positions and interests among women rather than using gender to advance a totalizing view of women's essential similarity. Additionally, both are *choosing priorities* politically with an eye toward inclusive solidarity as a goal, intentionally seeking common ground against the background of these acknowledged differences. Finally, they assume the continued existence of *organizational variability* in the strategies and priorities that feminists

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<sup>17</sup> This typology is developed in Christina Ewig and Myra Marx Ferree, (2011, expected). "Feminist Organizing: What's old, what's new? History, Trends and Issues." *Oxford Handbook on Gender and Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

embrace, not privileging either the autonomous women's movements that were once the harbingers of cultural change in the West nor the reliance on state policy or gender mixed political dissidence that mattered most in creating and upending the GDR gender regime.

The broader context to which both Gerhard and Miethe address themselves is therefore one in which intersectionality has become much more appreciated as a principle of feminist politics than it was twenty years ago. In this regard, no less that in the commonality of EU impact on German national gender policy and practices, the two varieties of feminism that they articulate have grown together while remaining distinct. Divided not only by their position in East or West initially but also by generation, Miethe and Gerhard still do not agree on what the process of unification brought for women. From a vantage point in which intersectionality is valued rather than decried, this is a gain in perspective and an opportunity to better represent the real variety of women's needs in feminist politics. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that Miethe harks back to the words of Louise Otto-Peters, a giant of the feminist movement in 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany, whose works Gerhard previously edited. Otto-Peters articulated the intersection of class and gender politics as inclusive and mutually reinforcing claims for both economic justice and participatory democracy for women and men. Even though today there is no feminist movement on the streets in any part of Germany, feminist organizing continues in Germany, in the EU and beyond.