EXPERIENCING DEMOCRACY - WOMEN IN RURAL EAST GERMANY

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Abstract

This paper discusses the experiences of rural women in East Germany in light of the transformation from a socialist regime to a market-oriented democracy. Drawing on a study carried out in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania between 1996 and 1999, the paper details women's positive recollections of local politics in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) and contrasts them with the problems women face with their integration into political structures in the New Germany. The conclusion is that today’s lack of participation by women can be related to legacies from their socialist past as well as to narrow definitions of 'political' that offer few mechanisms and incentives for integrating rural women into local politics today.
Introduction

The exclusion of women from democratic citizenship at large has often been ascribed to the patriarchal nature of the democratic process. This has been observed by commentators of both Western (capitalist) (see Phillips, 1992; Watson, 1995) and Eastern (former communist) (see Graham and Regulska, 1997; Kamenista, 1997) societies. In addition, authors such as Eisenstein (1993) or Przeworski (1995) have argued that Western democratic concepts were accepted as a model for the East irrespective of the need to consider gender relations and the post-socialist context. This paper supports such criticisms in unravelling the problematic nature of transformation for women in rural East Germany.

German unification was a sudden and unexpected socio-political event for many East German women. Rather than developing a new political framework from within, like other post-communist states, East Germany acquired a ready-made democratic, market-oriented system. As this system was well established in the West, no evaluation of its appropriateness for the East German situation took place. The assumption that the market would "efficiently co-ordinate scarce resources" (Przeworski, 1995: p.14) did not materialise. Consequently, as transitions took place according to a West German political agenda, the full extent of the underlying problems in the GDR economy was ignored. No political measures were designed to absorb problems resulting from unification which meant that unification itself was overshadowed by a social and economic crisis.

The expectation was that the shift to a democratic system would produce equality and wealth but instead it caused widespread disillusionment and social
disparities amongst the 'new' German citizens. It transpired that instead of greater freedom and participatory democracy for all citizens, a significant feature of the 'democratic' transformation of East Germany was the increasing social differentiation by class and gender. For example, disparities developed between men and women as their new roles increasingly converged with the West German male breadwinner model (see Duncan, 1991). Furthermore, the political prioritisation of the market (Przeworski, 1995) and the proposal of blanket policies to alleviate immediate social problems neglected the need to empower groups which were socially, economically and politically marginalised, such as women. Thus rural women in particular became detached from public life and the political process. Emerging dichotomies such as employed/unemployed, mobile/immobile, integrated/excluded, public/private or masculine/feminine became significant denominators for who gained democratic citizenship and who did not. The following section outlines both traditional democratic concepts as well as aspects of the feminist critique adopted for this paper.

*About democratic citizenship*

According to some radical democratic theorists, democracy can empower people as they become more knowledgeable and aware of the needs of others and themselves (Warren, 1996). Most theorists maintain that politics should be concerned with universal rather than individual interests. Young (1989), however, argued that this point of view ignores the interests of marginalised or oppressed groups. Watson (1995), quoting Giddens, refers to the transformations in Eastern Europe and reinforces this claim:
"Modernity [...] produces difference, exclusion and marginalization. Holding out the possibility of emancipation, modern institutions at the same time create mechanisms of suppression, rather than actualisation of self" (p.485).

Eduards (1994) implied that women are marginalised because, as a "sex group" (p.183), they lack choices and control over their own lives and therefore become victims of patriarchal politics exercised within these 'modern institutions'. Graham and Regulska (1997) exemplified this in the case of Poland by arguing that the new political ideology facilitated the discrimination of women by men. Hence, they stated that "democracy's celebration of individual freedoms does not translate into liberation for women" (p.5).

Przeworski (1995) maintained that if individuals are to exercise their citizenship effectively, there are certain necessary social and economic prerequisites such as education, access to welfare services and material security. The extent to which these prerequisites are accessible leads to notions of social, economic and political equality, which in turn determine the functioning and sustainability of democracy.

Various authors have implied that the lack of educational opportunities to 'practice' democracy and the negligible impact of individual political activity upon 'big politics' has meant that there has been little in the way of meaningful political dialogue. Kamenista (1997), for example, suggested that women need to examine which barriers and, even more importantly, which opportunities affect their political
participation. They should realise that they need to act as a collective agency in order to get their own interests on to the political agenda. In the GDR, policies were in place which secured the presence of women in local politics whilst, at the same time, restricting their participation in politics at the highest ranks (Statistisches Jahrbuch der DDR, 1996; Dennis, 1991). Although women's political activities were generally highly esteemed by respondents, some raised doubts about the conflict between the pressure to fill local political positions and candidates’ qualifications. Nevertheless, the lack of female politicians post unification was regarded by a number of respondents as a loss of human capital.

Using the case of East Germany, this paper demonstrates that the experiences of women respondents there are indeed largely determined by the extent to which social and economic prerequisites are accessible to them. In addition, the extent to which women remember 'public powers' in the former GDR as positive or restrictive plays a key role in their participation in the new political structures. In this case, the perception of democracy becomes a significant part of its functioning. The following quotes illustrate this:

“Democracy does not work because people cannot understand that democracy not only entails rights but also duties.”(096)

“Democracy and a constitutional State are experienced in a very limited way by ordinary people. Fighting excessive bureaucracy and economic issues saps a lot of strength and time away from participation in democracy and a constitutional State. Most people feel they are at the
mercy of politicians rather than seeing opportunities for participation in this society. But I can only feel at home here if I am integrated. However in this society, I will probably remain in a state of internal migration as long as those who govern [this country] lack any trace whatsoever of social justice.” (063)

The women interviewed for this paper believed that they had fewer opportunities for participatory citizenship after unification than in their previous lives under the socialist regime. Herta, a focus group respondent, explained:

“As women, we made decisions, too. We were organised, not only in the collective […] We always had a say.”

Such views must be kept in mind when drawing parallels with previous research, such as that conducted by Sperling (1999) in Russia. She observed that "as though making up for lost time, women began to protest against the economic and political discrimination that seemed to intensify as the transition period wore on" (p.15). This protest soon developed into "a spectrum of women's activism" (p.15). The East German study shows that respondents there reacted to the transitions in an entirely different way. One of the key differences between Sperling's respondents and the women included in this research is that the latter lived in remote and rural areas, and remained largely untouched by feminism and other women's movements in the bigger cities in East Germany. Another is that women found themselves in a new political context virtually overnight, unlike women in other post-socialist countries. Hence, one problem which was never addressed was that of breaking into old socialist
networks on their own terms in order to negotiate a balance between those socialist policies that benefited and those that suppressed women. Instead, these networks were swiftly replaced by Western structures. Since all socialist policies had a political stigma attached, they were abandoned in favour of West German policies which left little room for negotiation. Policy negotiations between the transitional GDR government and the FRG initially included a proposal for establishing local democratic decision making. However these negotiations collapsed with the implementation of a 'single Germany' programme. This meant that no new constitution was adopted by referendum with elected representatives from both the East and the West (Conradt, 1996). Instead, unification took place "swiftly and with responsibility for the entire GDR" on the basis of Article 23 of the Basic Law which does not require approval by referendum (Mazière quoted in: Wollmann, 1995: p.502). Unification was therefore characterised by the West ‘colonising’ the former GDR in terms of both legal frameworks and key political actors (see Wollmann, 1995). The respondents in this research noted it too:

“West Germany annexed a small enclave [the GDR] which essentially comes down to a kind of colonisation.” (004)

“I’d rather have a better GDR that this colonisation” (037)

Based on a case study conducted between 1996 and 1999 in rural Mecklenburg-West Pomerania in the former GDR, this paper will illustrate women's experiences of the implementation of Western democracy. The paper draws on data from correspondence with forty women, interviews with 55 key informants and focus
groups in six remotely situated villages near the border with Poland. The key informants in this study were chairpersons of NGOs, pastors, mayors, regional planners, directors of employment agencies, equal opportunity officers, women's representatives of all political parties and representatives from the Ministries of Planning and Agriculture. The experts in this research were local women who contributed to the research by correspondence or by being interviewed in focus groups. The correspondents were recruited through an advertisement in local newspapers and received a topic guide upon first contact. The themes included 'yourself', 'experiences since unification', 'views on contemporary developments' (including politics) and 'support obtained after unification'. The focus groups also covered these topics. However, due to the influence the respondents exerted over the course of the interview, the discussion largely evolved around experiences in the GDR such as work, the community and integration into communal (political) life. The majority of women were between 40 and 65 years old. It is important to note that the respondents in this research were not part of social movements and political activities that led to German unification (such as in Miethe's research (1999)). Indeed, these women were so absorbed in the socialist system, that they celebrated the 'Day of the Republic' until just before unification.

The paper first outlines how the level of social integration of rural women in the GDR was perceived as creating more participation in local politics and the community. In the next section, the discussion centres on women's participation in the public/political sphere after unification. The paper then illustrates the presence of four 'activity types' of women in the research area before discussing opportunities and barriers for women's socio-political engagement. The conclusion is that women's lack
of participation is largely a result of estrangement from the local community, both socially and politically.

**Remembering social and political integration**

A key mechanism for the social, political and economic integration of rural women in the GDR was the agricultural co-operative (hereafter LPG) and within this, the working collective. Due to the gender-segmentation of work tasks, more women than men were employed in manual labour-intensive and group-based labour. Work in the animal sheds raising piglets or milking cows, or work in the fields were common female tasks. Men were far more likely to be involved in individualised mechanised labour operating heavy machines or tractors. Therefore, they shared less time and space with colleagues in the workplace than the women. Consequently in rural areas the collective had much more social relevance to women's everyday lives than to men’s (van Hoven-Iganski, 2000; Iganski, 2000).

_Frauenpolitik_

Women's integration into the working collective was facilitated through the implementation of _Frauenpolitik_. _Frauenpolitik_ was a set of political measures devised in the late 1940s to stimulate the integration of women into full employment whilst maintaining the significance of their roles as mothers and wives. Various feminist and non-feminist scholars (Einhorn, 1989; Rueschemeyer and Szelény, 1989; Nickel, 1990; Penrose, 1990; Dölling, 1991; Rosenberg, 1991; Marx-Ferree, 1993; Kolinsky, 1996) contended that _Frauenpolitik_ did not lead to the emancipation of women. They argued that women enjoyed increased participation in the workplace, but still bore the burden of domestic responsibilities. In contrast to these points of
view, the respondents in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania predominantly discussed the benefits of Frauenpolitik. Due to the level of personal acquaintance with leaders in rural villages and the extent of social control, rural women felt they were able to influence local Frauenpolitik according to their own needs. One respondent noted:

"The unity within the [rural] collective was very, very strong… Everyone was sort of on the same level, if you like […] today there is a division between employers and employees." (102)

Some correspondents also described how for example, through their involvement in the working collectives or local groups, shop opening hours were extended to accommodate women's working hours, or women could leave a shopping list and bag at the shop and collect their orders after work to avoid queuing. In some cases, the shops took goods to the workplace to enable women to shop in their lunch breaks. For greater flexibility in the provision of childcare, similar agreements were reached. A correspondent describes her engagement in local women's committees:

"In every LPG there was a committee for women's issues. The regional chairpersons organised various gatherings with a focus on political themes as well as on topics of direct interest to women. To name but a few: childcare in crèches, kindergarten, after-school supervision, holiday programmes, questions on consumer goods and foodstuff […], how to fill in breaks and questions of providing food for women workers in their breaks, working clothes […], a cultural programme […] Many women were active in such committees and managed to organise a lot in the
villages [...] There was a large school canteen that also catered for pensioners who could meet for a chat and get a cheap meal [...] For women this meant a great relief in their home duties as well. The local shop further supported this [...] during the summer harvest season most women were fully involved in work on the fields and they often neglected their daily shopping. During that time, however, women could leave their shopping bags at the local shop in the morning with a shopping list attached to it. In the evening, they could pick up the filled bags again. Whenever there was something special, or rationed (such as fruit, vegetables, or sausages in a jar), one would make sure that this product was distributed evenly between all families. Sometimes, the goods were taken directly to the field and women could shop there."

When comparing their current lives with the past, the respondents especially regretted the loss of many services that were associated with Frauenpolitik. Various provisions were made available through the co-operative such as comprehensive childcare, certain means of alleviating household duties, free medical services and subsidised foodstuffs. In addition, various local services such as shops, libraries, local surgeries and hairdressers were established. The LPG also provided detailed plans for socio-cultural activities. Some LPG leaders, mayors or local groups also organised smaller events within the collectives. The preparation of these events was mostly carried out by women in addition to their usual responsibilities. Carrying out such 'socially useful work' was a consequence, in part, of political and social pressure (Autorenkollektiv, 1984; Edwards, 1985). Those who were exceptionally active or productive in the village or the workplace obtained awards such as 'Hero of Labour',
or 'Activist of Socialist Labour' (Shaffer, 1981). Awards could be given to individuals in the collective, such as 'Best Milking Woman', or to the entire collective, such as the 'Collective of Socialist Work' (Autorenkollektiv, 1984).

**Participation**

The above description implies that the State exerted a high level of influence through the medium of the collectives but nevertheless also pursued a political agenda which sought to provide a satisfying work environment. Reflecting on this, respondents admitted that individual initiatives were rarely accepted in the collective context if it contradicted the socialist mainstream in the village. The research nonetheless demonstrates that women adapted to these pressures and found strategies within the collectives to cope with them. A focus-group respondent remembered:

"When I got on my bike in the mornings to go to work and meet the other women, all my sorrows [at home] were forgotten" (112).

A number of respondents used the term 'family' to describe the feelings of integrity, purpose and reward in the collective. The collective was not thought of as an "instrument of paternalistic manipulation" (Rueschemeyer, 1981: 379) since, respondents (both in focus groups and correspondents) reported active participation in planning and gaining support from the collective. One woman described feelings of empowerment through the collective:
“We also had monthly discussions in the collective about the work progress. They were really vigorous sometimes. But we had a say and we contributed to the decisions being made” (123).

The arrangements for shopping and childcare outlined above were equally a result of women's input into local committees. Although women claimed it was important for them to know they could have been elected as a local politician or mayor in the GDR, few actually expressed a desire to have filled such a function because they had enough responsibilities already. Instead, the women indicated that in their opinion, it was their social integration and recognition in the village that determined the functioning of the local democracy, and not the level of formal political power. The existence of State policies such as Frauenpolitik and the availability of socialist services were viewed as essential elements for women's quality of life.

Apart from arrangements regarding local social services, a key component for the integration of women was their relative financial independence. Even though women's earnings were lower than men's on average, their contribution to the household budget was significant (Marx-Ferree, 1993). Most co-operative farming households also included a private farming plot, for which women were largely responsible. The earnings from this informal labour could amount to the equivalent of six months of income from their employment at the LPG. Women therefore had the impression that they not only 'got by', but had a reasonable disposable income. Women were consequently "used to being economically independent [and] standing on [their] own two feet" (039). In fact, many felt proud of coping with the multiple
burden of employment, private farming, family duties and voluntary activities. They felt emancipated rather than oppressed.

It must be borne in mind that the statements above and people’s positive recollections of past events may be coloured by their present negative experiences (as will be discussed below) and *vice versa*. Nonetheless, such recollections do have validity because they allow us to interpret some of the current attitudes toward unification as well as the gender gap in support for unification in 1990. Schlegel (1993), in a survey carried out in 1990, revealed that women as a group appear to have had greater reservations with regard to unification than men. In August 1990, 51% of women opposed unification compared with 35% of men. It is also interesting to note that a survey in 1983 showed that more women (56%) than men (45%) felt "proud to be GDR citizens" and, shortly after unification, more women (51%) than men (37%) agreed with the statement that they still felt "more like a GDR citizen". In 1992, Schlegel (1993) showed that only a minority of 43% of women as opposed to 64% of men strongly agreed with the statement that they felt "happy about unification". The evidence from respondents’ statements enables us to view their attitude towards unification as the product of social and political estrangement from their community and a memory of their central role in the collective.

Democracy and Equality?

Unification came as a shock to the majority of women in the study area. If anything, a common expectation of becoming part of the "Golden West" (078) was greater material wealth. Instead, the so-called *Wende* led to the end of *Frauenpolitik*, the introduction of wide-scale privatisation of former socialist services, and vast
increases in unemployment. Such restructuring was particularly severe in the agricultural industry with the reorganisation of collective farming. The loss of work was most significant for women, who comprised up to 68% of the unemployed (Boje et al., 1992). In many small and remote villages, this figure was even higher. Although men and women were similarly affected by farming rationalisation, men were twice as likely to be reemployed in other sectors (Schumann and Jahn, 1991). In addition, most social institutions maintained by the LPGs, such as childcare, canteens and local shops were discontinued. Men as a group were generally less affected by such losses and were more likely to enjoy new economic opportunities associated with liberal democracy. However, women were not only deprived of economic security but also of their social context, because this was largely expressed through work-related activities. Therefore, many rural women experienced a sense of uselessness and withdrew to the private sphere "whether they wished to be there or not" (Rosenberg, 1991: p.133) and perceived village life in a 'vacuum' (DeSoto and Panzig, 1994). Such experiences provided a sharp contrast to their recollections of social inclusion and economic benefits enjoyed under the socialist regime. Some respondents therefore strongly criticised the economic focus of the political process:

"We said goodbye to Ludwig Erhardt's social market economy long ago. We are now approaching the free market economy and that means that it is no longer desirable to think that people should be socially secure. People as individuals don't count, only maximum profits. Money, money, money" (079).
Such accounts revealed that women respondents judged the value of Western democracy largely by the level of personal comfort achieved compared with their lives in the GDR. The underlying ideologies of the new democracy within the Western value system were, of course, unfamiliar to many East German women. Features of Western democracy had been suppressed by socialist ideologies whilst the West was portrayed as the capitalist enemy. Having been allocated, at least superficially, a prominent role in public life in the GDR by the State, rural women had not developed an awareness of \textit{claiming} anything, in particular the need for their own space in the political process. Nonetheless, at the time of the research women had a clear perception of what West German democracy had \textit{not} offered them.

Women's experience of democracy was strongly influenced by the experience of social difference, where supposed equality and freedom of choice were two particularly critical factors determining women's attitude toward democracy and West Germany. Women expected material proof of democracy based on their experiences in the GDR rather than philosophical explorations and what they called "empty phrases" by politicians. Increases in extreme-right and domestic violence, as well as the emergence of a new social order marked by social difference, were regarded as proof that Western democracy was not functioning. For example:

“I always say that the quality of life of a human being does not only consist of freedom. That is important, too […] But instead, what also belongs to quality of life is security in one's environment, in the village and to feel safe. That has changed for a lot of us here in this region.”(117)
The respondents raised four key criticisms in this context: (1) The availability of consumer products and travel were restricted by women's incomes; (2) The choice of women's living environments was jeopardised by the outcomes of property restitution; (3) 'Free speech' was limited as women feared they could lose their job as a result for voicing open criticisms; (4) Becoming a mother was subject to conservative West German laws, while motherhood, especially as a single mother, was likely to incur discrimination on the labour market. Overall, the attainment of freedom and democracy was a disappointing experience.

The restricted benefits of economic development and freedom outlined above are not themselves determinants of the lack of women's socio-political participation. There is evidence from other studies that social marginalisation can instead lead to increasing political involvement, in particular through local initiatives and self-help groups (MacKenzie, 1994; Sachs, 1994; Teather, 1994; 1996; Alston and Wilkinson, 1998). However in the research in East Germany, a notion of helplessness and indifference did prevail amongst women. In part, this may be seen as a legacy of communism (Graham and Regulska, 1997), although the current political framework has also established significant barriers preventing the articulation and mobilisation of women's issues (Kamenista, 1997). In this research, the extent to which women remained active was often determined by their previous qualifications and current integration into the labour market. Initiatives taken by rural women were hindered by qualification and employment as well as political socialisation and personal disposition. Four different types of women (activity types) emerged from the analysis of data in this study.
**Activity types - participation**

The vast majority of rural women interviewed had been involved in some way in local 'community' activities in the GDR. With the removal of socialist policies in the New Germany, participation became voluntary and obstructed by the lack of resources. Many women did not continue their social activities after unification. Few were active in the local council, and in only one village a women's group was founded to be concerned formally with policy issues. Complementing earlier research findings (Ackermann et al., 1993; Glade and Bartmann, 1996), the analysis of respondents' accounts suggests four 'activity types' of women according to the level of previous and contemporary engagement in public life, and women's qualification and employment status (see figure 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Activity in GDR</th>
<th>Activity since the 'Wende'</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Qualification and employment status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>'Moving Spirits'</td>
<td>Mostly active</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Take responsibility for events; group leadership; motivate other women</td>
<td>Key positions in the GDR; mostly higher qualifications; today mostly employed, or pensioners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Safe players'</td>
<td>'Off-and-on' active-mostly active</td>
<td>'Off-and-on' active</td>
<td>Join in events already organised; or participate in organisation when 'pushed' by moving</td>
<td>Mostly lower or medium-level qualifications; today often short-term government funded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Betrayed'</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Passive</td>
<td>Ceased activity as result of village conflict or political disillusionment</td>
<td>Often key positions in the GDR; medium or higher qualifications; today often retrained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Removed observers'</td>
<td>Passive</td>
<td>Passive</td>
<td>Critical of everything both before and since unification; or endure personal discomfort in silence, at risk of becoming depressed</td>
<td>Mainly lower qualifications; today mostly unemployed, some ABM</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Activity types of women in studied area

It is important to note that women are not represented in equal numbers within the four groups. Instead, the majority of women respondents belonged to the group of 'safe players' who were previously employed in working collectives within the LPG. Most of them belonged to social or political groups and were thus always informed about activities and accessible to local leaders. Some women were involved in organising and running events, whilst others did not invest much time in preparations and were simply present at celebrations. Although they may still be mobilised today, these women have become difficult to access because of 'self-inflicted' isolation. As the political impetus to provide means and space for social events, for example
through the working collective, is now less evident, the previous culture of almost continuous social involvement has dwindled significantly.

The groups termed as 'moving spirits' and 'betrayed' are composed of women who held medium or high-level positions of leadership in the GDR. After unification, the 'moving spirits' in this study became mayors, chairs of local or regional organisations, or women in influential positions within communal administrations. A key characteristic is that the 'moving spirits' experience increasing employment demands, leaving little time to encourage social developments amongst the villagers. Indeed for many 'moving spirits' unification created opportunities associated with a democratic system. They were more integrated in the new political structures and had more knowledge of how West German politics worked. A number of women had already occupied influential positions in the GDR and did so once more in the New Germany. The fact that they were known and trusted by male political actors in the community and were capable of adapting to the new system, facilitated their upward mobility. Although the involvement of these women in the new labour market often left little energy for local organisations, their involvement remained a personal priority. They believed that in general the democratic system would improve the situation of rural areas in the long run. However to observe such improvements, explicit guidance for those rural areas is needed, and particularly for women in these areas. Activities within the community or region as outlined below provided a starting point.

'Betrayed' women are those who truly and continuously believed in socialist (Marxist) values. During unification, some were active in promoting change that
would preserve these values whilst departing from the strict mechanisms of political control experienced under the socialist regime. Many respondents in this category were teachers or held positions of leadership in the LPGs. After unification their socialist ideology was criticised by Western reformers and people who had been highly visible political actors in the GDR lost their job and social status. At village level, the stigmas attached to former political actors were less dramatic but it did sometimes happen that politically active women became the focus of village gossip. Some women ceased their activities and withdrew to the isolation of their homes as a result of political indifference or village criticism.

**Activity types - qualification**

Key informants, such as chairs of regional groups or women political representatives, generally believed that passivity amongst rural women was a legacy of socialism. The lack of qualification constituted a major constraint to participation. Earlier studies support this claim. For instance, Dahms *et al.* (1996) demonstrated that women who were previously occupied in agriculture did not benefit much from retraining schemes. Furthermore, the majority of women who did participate in retraining did not obtain regular employment. The local employment agency also stated that women from an agricultural background were commonly less motivated than those from other professions to engage in vocational training, such as administration, information technology, or as entrepreneurs. These highly qualified women were, as Ackermann *et al.* (1993) indicated, more likely to be reemployed, have a good income and be a member of an interest group. In addition, villagers who were employed also tended to be more mobile. Glade and Bartmann (1996) suggest that working women were *more* active in voluntary activities and more perceptive of
new opportunities to diversify their lives. These findings are reflected in this study as they can be related to the biographies of the ‘moving spirits’.

As noted above, the ‘moving spirits’ have indeed benefited from their previous experience as professionals in the GDR, for example, they supplied essential skills for establishing new local groups. It is notable that a number of respondents in this group were pensioners. These women were often members of the Volkssolidarität, a group that had survived unification largely unchanged. They were generally financially secure because they obtained relatively good pensions. As they were no longer active in the labour market, they were not confronted with the same feelings of inadequacy and uselessness as the younger unemployed. Lastly, they rarely had dependent children and were therefore less constrained by childcare requirements or facilities. The lack of these constraints which prevented many younger women from becoming active (see below) explains these women’s current mobility at a local level.

However Ackerman et al. (1993) noted that many women were less mobile. Particularly those over forty who had no driving licence became ‘house-bound’ and were restricted to local events. Through lack of choice they were forced to join whatever programme was offered, or none. In this study, these women belonged to the group of ‘safe players’ or ‘removed observers’. At the time of unification, they had not received adequate training and compared to West Germans, they were regarded as under-qualified despite having obtained formal qualifications from the GDR.
Research respondents claimed that the more passive, unemployed women (the majority in the study area) who were unused to developing and pursuing their own interests, were often left behind. In general, there were no human or financial resources to devote towards convincing this sub-group of the value of their public participation. Instead, and unlike in the GDR, women needed to look through the press themselves for dates and times of events. One key informant addressed this problem:

"Those [women] who work develop themselves further and they should assume certain functions in the village. But women who have stayed home for some years cannot do that anymore. Their mental mobility has decreased ... People's thinking is restricted to the house, the garden, that's it!" (026).

Some key informants criticised the lack of strategies for solving such problems and the lack of opportunities for intellectual engagement offered to women by local groups. Home-craft activities organised through government schemes such as knitting and crochet-work, implicitly degraded women because these activities did not mobilise them socially or politically. The research indicates that the nature of and support for women’s activities has changed since unification. Respondents also suggest that most of the women who were active in the GDR were still active today whilst those who were passive have not changed either.

Social Activities
Although many of the women interviewed ('safe players'/'removed observers') complained that community life had disintegrated, everyday village life appeared to offer a variety of opportunities to participate at different levels. Respondents reported that in general since unification women were still more visible than men with regards to the organisation of social events in the village. Key reasons for this were: (1) activities such as preparing food or organising programmes traditionally female roles and men were embarrassed to offer this form of help; (2) many women generally felt more responsible for the family and ascribed greater importance to conducting activities that benefited the family; (3) women were more often present in the villages throughout the day, because of their higher unemployment; and (4) many activities offered by unemployment organisations in the village were home-craft activities and, consequently, less attractive to men. Although many NGOs agreed with this, they pointed out that most formally organised local groups, such as the fire brigade, fishing, hunting and the rifle association, were for men. However, it was noted that many unemployed men also had alcohol problems and abstained from group participation altogether (see discussion below).

Whilst local activities were welcomed by many women, not all of them participated. In addition, the active group of women consisted largely of pensioners. Younger women, especially those with children, either found the activities inappropriate to their needs, or were prevented from participation because of lack of transport or access to childcare facilities. In addition, a considerable number of women still felt ashamed to admit their unemployment and shunned the public sphere.

Renate described her feelings:
"One cannot really talk about the whole thing either… one has to cope with most of it on one's own, cope within, and nonetheless deal with all the rest […] In the beginning, I always ran away from the house… into the garden and I cried […] I just couldn't cope."

**Resistance to the West**

Despite the aforementioned criticism, key informants believed that local group initiatives were essential for re-creating social networks, encouraging communication and exercising democratic skills. A focus group of younger women (25-35 year old) expressed negative views towards what they regarded as the 'exclusiveness' of interest groups, and felt it was difficult to join the group casually, because they had to become paying members. As discussed above, local groups in the GDR were subsumed to the LPG and the vast majority of LPG members were active members of these groups. Women recalled that, whenever festivities were organised, former members who were retired were also invited, therefore strengthening the sense of equality amongst villagers. The growing variety of clubs, such as different sports and hobby groups introduced from the West after the *Wende*, had a dissecting and differentiating effect on the previous LPG community. The establishment and continuity of such groups largely moved to the private or voluntary sector. The majority of women respondents felt they found membership of such groups too expensive. In addition, they contended that meetings of regional groups were often held in towns to which they had limited access because of poor public transport. The changing nature of local activities was interpreted by many as 'Western' cultural colonialism.
The above discussion indicates that the barriers to participation experienced by rural women were partly a result of their adherence to pre-unification patterns of everyday life. It further appears that many women revert to memories from the past precisely because they feel ostracised by the new society. Rather than providing support mechanisms for rural women, official institutions have not provided a clear indication that women still play an important role in the New Germany.

**Participation in formal politics**

Various authors have commented on women's participation in and exclusion from party politics in eastern Europe (see, for example, Glade and Bartmann, 1996; Graham and Regulsk, 1997; Kamenista, 1997; Kolinsky, 1996; Miethe, 1999; Gal and Kligman, 2000; Rueschemeyer, 1994), although Kamenista (1997) and Smith (2000) do suggest that East German women in urban areas actively participated in political activities after unification. The discussion above illustrates that women in rural areas have been reluctant to become involved. Few political parties focused on needs in rural areas and rural organisations, such as the Rural Women's Association, were directed almost exclusively at developing women's job skills rather than mediating between 'small' (informal) and 'big' (party) politics.

However, there are different formal (West German) programmes for the revitalisation of rural areas which are similar to Smith's (2000) observations on political developments in Leipzig. Although some form of public participation is commonly desired, it is not always achieved. Women respondents claimed unfamiliarity with the programme and its opportunities for participation. In the study
area, the focus of official planning and availability of financial and human resources was on improving the built environment rather than strengthening the social context of villages, which is a great contrast with other regions (most notably North-Rhine Westphalia in West Germany).

Structural problems were prioritised as ‘universal problems’, while villagers’ comprehensive participation in the planning process was largely "a waste of time and money" (023). It was further believed that social developments should take place as local voluntary activities, effectively downgrading them to issues of 'individual interest'. Although the need for development from 'within' was acknowledged, financial resources to encourage this were rarely forthcoming. In particular, the creation of meeting places was often ignored.

Some respondents believed that official support for people's involvement at a local level would reward those who were already active and would encourage laggards. But many also believed that nobody was prepared to reward their work in the village, especially socio-cultural work. This was a concern particularly for the unemployed, for whom voluntary activities were a disproportionate financial burden because of travel expenses, membership fees and other costs incurred (see also Altmann, 1997). One woman concluded that, since everyday costs were rising, people could simply not participate. "A positive attitude alone is not enough" (017). One key informant from a regional women’s organisation suggested that women should be credited for the amount of their voluntary work and that this should contribute toward their pensions. A respondent from an organisation for rural development added that
"Women need more support irrespective of future elections or bad [employment] statistics because they are a continuous resource. It has to be a constant task and not sporadic as though they were the fire brigade” (060).

Despite support from NGOs however, there was scant evidence of initiatives at local or regional levels. One respondent said: "You can search for the active [people] with a magnifying glass" (014). Many of the women were simply not interested in current politics. They feared not being taken seriously or being overpowered by men in official positions. Although this may also have been the case in the GDR, it can be seen from the discussion above that the women interviewed disputed this. Their view was that discussions amongst women were facilitated by the co-operative in the GDR, whereas after the Wende such spaces ceased to exist. It appeared for example that participation in the social committee of the local council was largely restricted by (male) 'gate keepers'. The inclusion of women into the council was only possible if they were nominated by a political party. Only few women were willing to become party members, indicating resistance against such 'male rules' and the restricted interpretation of 'the political' that excluded social interests. One key informant inferred this, stating that "women are actively pushed outside the decision-making circles [by the men inside]. They always welcome our ideas and our voluntary and social engagement. But that is as far as it goes. At the political level, we are not wanted” (007).
A minority of women respondents in this research, the ‘moving spirits’, were involved in local politics (see discussion above) and some respondents indicated that such women in more powerful positions had been regarded as 'Mannsweib' since the days of the GDR. This suggests that many of their behavioural characteristics resembled those of men.

In spite of being largely excluded from formal politics, women respondents indicated there was virtually no resistance to this exclusion amongst village women. Although most women struggled with changes brought about by the Wende, they did not actively demand alternative political structures that included their own agenda. They believed that, as with the GDR, contemporary political actors would "do what they want anyway" with the key difference that the socialist services were absent. The political in the New Germany was associated exclusively with party politics and 'big politics'. Women respondents did not feel adequately knowledgeable or motivated to participate in the 'dirty' game of politics (see also Graham and Regulska, 1997). For rural women in particular, the spaces where they interacted at the local level had become a socio-political void. In the group discussions, the issue of 'big politics' was therefore largely neglected in favour of recollections of social activities in the GDR. Overall, most rural women have adopted a political 'wait-and-see' attitude. Being deprived of the social structures in the GDR, women retreated to the isolation of the home.

A gendered response?

Thus far it has been suggested that women, as a group, have faced more negative consequences than men from unification. This view is supported in figures
published in 1992 by the Deutscher Bundestag, which indicate that 75% of jobs lost since the Wende had been women’s jobs. In Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, unemployment was twice as high for women as for men. When seeking employment, discrimination against women with children, or those over 40 years old was commonly reported. Early retirement could be granted to workers between 55 and 65 years old. However, 70% of women took early retirement, compared with 50% of men. An increasing number of young women under the age of 25, in particular single mothers, rely on social security benefits (Statistisches Landesamt Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, 1995). Younger women have also responded by changing their reproductive behaviour. Between 1989 and 1994 birth rates dropped by 60.4% and, although they have recovered slightly since then, the figures remain 50% below the 1989 birth rate (Statistisches Bundesamt, 1997). Overall, rural women's responses have largely been muted, rather than active, disillusionment.

In spite of the relative advantages for the male population in the former GDR, key informants also alluded to significant social problems amongst unemployed men. Without gainful employment and under pressure to conform to new social norms (as male breadwinners), they have found it difficult to establish a new identity. Although there are local clubs and organisations that target the interests of disadvantaged men, such as the Blaues Kreuz (an organisation for people with alcohol problems), key informants from regional NGOs reported an increasing number of men in need of professional help. In addition, the increased popularity of extreme right movements amongst young men is also indicative of a male identity crisis and problems amongst men, which are themselves worthy of study.
A differentiation should be considered by gender, as well as by employment status and perhaps future socio-economic prospects, with regard to the impact of unification upon East German citizens. It is likely that different groups are affected in similar ways. However with regards to group-specific responses, research indicates that the women's response is indeed more solitary and silent than that of men.

Conclusion

Commentators on the gendered transition in East and Central European countries suggested that women had challenged patriarchal structures and become active both in formal and informal politics, even if not always equally successfully. In contrast to such findings, this research indicates that rural women became passive and the majority have not participated in any activities. An important reason for their passivity was the experience of 'uselessness' and socio-economic marginalisation today. The accounts suggest that their roles at work and in the socialist services had facilitated women's integration into the political sphere, while their financial independence gave them the impression they were equal citizens in the GDR. Many women in fact believed that their opinions were integral to the running of the LPG community.

After the Wende, many women lost their jobs and economic independence. Simultaneously, the dissolution of the LPGs swept away many socialist services, with their comprehensive social network. Women began to experience a social 'vacuum' in their villages and withdrew into domestic isolation. Although some better-educated and more mobile women ('moving spirits') continued to be active, the majority ('safe players' and 'removed observers') became detached from socio-political engagement.
Contrary to traditional views, these women viewed the individual freedoms offered by the Western system as freedom to establish inequalities and as a threat to the identity of rural women as active workers in their communities. A combination of past legacies and present barriers have led to profound experiences of disempowerment amongst many women in rural East Germany. As a result of the dramatic economic and political changes in East Germany, many rural women were marginalised within the democratic process, not only by gender but also by their employment status and peripheral location in relation to cities where, initially, more women were politically active\footnote{17}.

Although women were also poorly represented in formal politics in the GDR, particularly at higher levels, the key difference here is that many of what are now considered to be 'private concerns' in the New Germany were significant elements of the official political programme in the GDR. Thus previously the social and political spheres were integrated. Today however, women's concerns and input into contemporary politics have come to be regarded as of less consequence than structural problems and are therefore treated as 'private' problems which can be addressed at a voluntary level (see also Yuval-Davis, 1997).

Mirroring Warren's (1996) discussion, the political process was regarded by women as demanding and unattractive, making 'sitting back' a more desirable short-term option. Nonetheless, there are some forms of silent protest: those women who refuse to be entirely restricted to their domestic roles. Many women have expressed their protest tacitly by, for example, remaining registered as 'seeking employment' and by delaying motherhood (a possible indication of how they valued their employment...
status). Political procedures since the Wende have apparently consolidated and reinforced patriarchal structures in which predominantly male interests are pursued. However, women themselves also appear to have contributed to reproducing gender divisions in politics.

Means for encouraging women’s participation in local-level politics (see Bourke and Louloff, 1997) have been largely neglected by both men and women. The division established between men and women in the political process is also present with regards to unemployment and mobility. In addition, the establishment of local activity groups further reinforced differentiation. Women feared 'difference' and regarded it as creating inequality rather than an expression of individuality. The establishment of local networks facilitating communication amongst women was therefore inhibited.

In order to challenge the association of particular social and political activity spaces as gender- and/or class-specific, a softening of these divisions should be made a more explicit policy goal. Greater political attention is therefore needed to transform the legal rights of women (and other marginalised groups) into more obviously egalitarian social and economic outcomes (Regulska, 1994, 1998). Initially, women's political empowerment could include the opportunity of developing rhetorical skills as well as knowledge of rules, laws, operating procedures and power dynamics. This also needs to relate specifically to women's emotional "rootedness" (p.7) within the community (Altmann, 1997) and their focus on social issues stemming from everyday activities, such as housing, education, safety and the environment. In so doing, women may feel empowered by greater 'proof' of the functioning of local democratic processes. As well as activities at a local level, initiatives should be directed at raising
the status of 'women's' issues in relation to 'universal' interests within (male Western) politics (Eduards, 1994; MacKenzie, 1994; Meyer and Loboa, 1994; Sachs, 1994; Pettersen and Solbakken, 1998). If this can be achieved, women may be more strongly encouraged to "try to influence the course of events as much as possible, rather than sit back and suffer changes" (Eduards, 1994: 181). Although not included within this research, respondents suggested that similar support mechanisms are needed for specific marginalised male groups. If anything, their behaviour in coping seems more destructive than that of women, in terms of alcohol abuse or association with extreme political factions. Nonetheless, their inclusion in local political structures is equally jeopardised.

Notes

1 I would like to express my special thanks to Ian Bailey for his contribution to this paper. I would also like to thank Mary Daly. Detailed comments from three anonymous reviewers and from Barbara Hobson were an invaluable stimulus to improving the paper towards its final form.

2 This is also illustrated in a recently completed project on various aspects of 'gender after socialism' in East Central Europe, through cases such as Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and the former Yugoslavia (Gal and Kligman, 2000a) published in two books by Gal and Kligman (2000 a, b).

3 See also contributions in part three of Gal and Kligman (2000a).

4 The relevance of perception and experience also features in a more recent discussion in Myra Marx Ferree (2000). Her paper illustrates ideological conflicts within, or rather between the two Germanies thus emphasising that collective identity is "an actively constructed interpretation of shared history" (p.157). Ferree described the political frameworks in former East and West Germany and how these have contributed to the establishment of regional
forms of patriarchy and feminism. Experiences in each political system have influenced the
way in which women construct politics as well as their own roles within it and their
expectations. Liberation, empowerment and challenging patriarchal structures therefore have
different meanings for those women who share an East German history compared with those
in the West. Whilst on this topic, it is worthy of examination on a much smaller scale, by
contrasting experiences in urban and remote, rural areas in eastern Germany such as in the
research conducted for this paper.

5 In the research for this paper, numbers were used for respondents in order to ensure
confidential treatment of accounts.

6 An earlier study by Miethe (1999) also offered insights into the issue of women's exclusion
from the democratic process. However, expert interviews were with women in influential
positions rather than marginalised ones.

7 For full discussion of research methodology refer to van Hoven-Iganski (2000).

8 Frauenpolitik= literally Politics for Women

9 For a more in-depth discussion of how GDR citizens looked upon their involvement in the
working collectives see also Rueschemeyer (1981; 1982); Iganski (2000); van Hoven-Iganski
(2000).

10 The 'Report on Women in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania' (Schröter et al., 1997)
demonstrated that many unemployed women were indeed at risk of falling into poverty and
therefore suffered both economic and social distress.

11 For legal implications of the restitution of property refer to Blacksell 1995; Blacksell et al.,
1996; Born, 1997. Experiential accounts in the context of this research can also be found in
van Hoven-Iganski (2000).

12 Women predominantly discussed the impact of abortion laws (see also Conradt, 1996;
Rueschemeyer, 1994). In addition, they claimed the West German state was far less child
friendly than the former GDR which influenced the choice for or against motherhood.
NGOs interviewed in the study region included the Arbeitslosenverband (an organisation dealing with unemployment issues), the Bauernverband (Farmer's Association), Blaues Kreuz (which provides support for people with alcohol problems), Demokratischer Frauenbund (an organisation for women’s issues, an successor of the former socialist women’s organisation in the GDR), the Volkssolidarität (People's Solidarity) and the Landfrauenverband (Rural Women's Association). It is important to note that these NGOs operated regionally and rarely had direct representation in small villages.

However, pensioners and those who had retired early who were not already members of a local group did not wish to socialise and claimed to be content at home. After up to 40 years of intensive manual work, activities around the home were often welcomed.

Women were referred to as a 'Mannsweib' to indicate that they acted like a man, i.e. they were more decisive and dominant.

However, Kolinsky (1996) describes how urban women were also pushed out of the political process soon after unification.
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Comment [ALM7]: Page: 32
NB This comment refers to Footnote 1 (since comments cannot be inserted in footnotes!)
do you want to thank IB more than MB? IF so, then he should be named first:
EG I would like to express my special thanks to Ian Bailey for his contribution to this paper. I would also like to thank Mary Daly for her contribution.
Or, you want to thank both of them by name equally, in which case (perhaps alphabetically): I would like to thank Ian Bailey and Mary Daly for their contributions to this paper.