

On the Occupational Situation of Women after 1945 (1949)

Abstract

This statistical overview demonstrates that, after World War II, German women were not employed evenly in all sectors of the economy, but worked mostly in domestic services. In social occupations that were typically female there was, on the one hand, a lack of training opportunities, and, on the other hand, a lack of skilled workers. Women were strongly underrepresented in politics, science, and unions, whereby their ratio in the Western zones was even lower than in the Soviet occupation zone.

Source

About 85% of all women were employed in the household. This activity was recognized as a full-fledged profession in the postwar constitutions. However, the labor offices had trouble finding enough women and girls to work as housemaids. In Stuttgart, alone, there was a shortage of around 4,000 housemaids at the beginning of 1948, with only families with many children and other important households (doctors) being considered. By contrast, many women signed up to work as housemaids abroad; however, the military government did not issue any exit permits. Tailors, plaster makers, milliners were in great demand. During the war very few young women had been trained in these occupations, since they were needed in war-critical factories. After 1945, skilled workers usually preferred to become independent and to work for customers who were in a position to pay at least partly in kind. The run on apprenticeships in the trades was greater than in the prewar period, probably on the assumption that trades would guarantee a fairly secure existence also after the currency reform. However, only a small number of the job-seekers could be accommodated. One of the previous training sites for social vocations (social workers, kindergarten teachers, and so on) was reopened in the first years after the war. Many female students had to be turned away, even though there was a shortage of trained and experienced workers in these professions at the same time. Better training possibilities existed for care workers (hospital nurses, children's nurses, and infant's nurses), since there was less demand among younger workers for training in these areas.

The number of women active in intellectual professions was small. In the Western zones, there were only very few female professors, mayors, senators, and so on, even though there were no legal or constitutional obstacles to filling these positions with women. To be sure, after 1945 a number of women reached leading positions here [in the Western zones], took over ministerial posts and other state offices. However, the displacement of women from public life after 1933 was still showing its effect. Women were more prominent in public and state life in the Soviet Zone and in Berlin. One should mention the deputy mayor of Berlin, Mrs. Luise Schröder, but [it also bears mentioning that] at universities and in other leading posts, as well, the percentage of women was higher than in the West.

Once again, there was discussion of reintroducing an obligatory training year that young girls would have to complete in a different household or in a factory before entering into a profession. Some labor offices would welcome the reintroduction of the obligatory year, since this would hold young girls back for a year and benefit older job-seekers, for example, war widows. Others opposed such a measure as unfair exploitation.

The principle laid down in the new constitution, "Equal pay for equal performance," had been introduced in most professions, also in industry; first in the Soviet Zone, even though it was not

enshrined in the constitution there. Relatively few women were members of unions. They complained that unions, with few exceptions, were entirely run by men, a fact that women could, of course, eliminate through stronger participation in the work of the unions. The unions showed a growing interest in female members. Among other things, in many sectors of industry, they had secured the allowance of one free afternoon a week to married women.

As a result of the early blocking of all bank accounts in the Soviet Zone, many women there were forced to pursue paid work in addition to their household duties. By taking on heavy labor they received better food ration cards; housewives, on the other hand, fell into the lowest group of card recipients. That is why one could find many women who were engaged in heavy physical labor. In Berlin, 70,000 women were working in decidedly male professions, 12,000 of them in the construction industry. In Thuringia, 1,793 female craftsmen signed up for the master's exam in 1946 and 1,498 passed it.

Source: K. Mehnert and H. Schulte, eds., *Deutschland-Jahrbuch 1949*. Essen: West-Verlag, 1949, p. 272; reprinted in Christoph Kleßmann, *Die doppelte Staatsgründung. Deutsche Geschichte 1945–1955*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986, pp. 366–67.

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