

Press Statement by Maria Weber, Main Department “Women in the DGB,” on the Working Woman and the Social Situation of the Family (August 30, 1960)

Abstract

The DGB [*Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund* or Confederation of German Trade Unions] pointed to several reasons for the rising ratio of working women in West Germany: they included the strong need for workers during the boom years of the “Economic Miracle,” shifts in the occupational structure toward the “more woman-friendly” service sector, and longer life expectancies, which allowed women additional phases of employment after they were done raising their children. Since all of these causes were long-term, the women organized in the DGB demanded that women’s work no longer be seen as a temporary stopgap measure, and that the discrepancies in training, pay, and the organization of the workplace that arose from this viewpoint be rapidly dismantled. At the same time, they call for socio-political measures to promote families, so that fewer women would be compelled to join the workforce out of economic necessity.

Source

The percentage of working women relative to the entire workforce is constantly growing. In September 1948, working women represented 28.5 percent of the workforce; today that figure has risen to 34 percent. Likewise, the percentage of married women in the workforce has grown as well.

This development was brought about by the economy’s constantly growing demand for more labor forces. After almost 100 percent of men of employable age had been employed in the workforce, the focus shifted primarily to women, and to housewives and mothers at that. Such women were lured in by promising descriptions of workplace conditions.

For this reason, the DGB feels compelled to express its views, once again, on the social problems of working women. In the coming months, the main department “Women in the DGB” will work together with the Women’s Secretariats of the DGB-state districts to organize twenty-nine central meetings for union women through federal territory.

In this, the DGB is operating under the conclusion that,

1. Women’s work is an indispensable contribution to the economy today and will remain so in the future;
2. women’s work is no longer a temporary situation;
3. despite increasing automation, the woman, as a worker, will be needed and
4. through the elevation of the standard of living and the extension of time off, the expansion of employment in non-producing areas will proceed, and this expansion will see an ever greater percentage of women in the workforce.

On top of this, today’s compulsory military service will remove a significant portion of employable young men from working life for a year. Women will take their place at work, and additionally, many women will be employed by the Bundeswehr itself.

Changes in Women's Life Trajectories

On the other hand, according to the union view, consideration must be given to the otherwise too little considered fact that, through longer life expectancies, decisive differences in a woman's life trajectory have arisen. Whereas around 1900, the average life expectancy was around 48 years, it is now 68 years. Therefore, the period in which the woman is occupied with raising children now accounts for only about one-third of the duration of her entire life. Thus, in general, now it is not only just the growing girl who participates in the workforce until she gets married or has a child; rather, women frequently reenter the workforce when their children are grown, when the mother no longer feels overburdened, and if the corresponding impetus to return to work exists.

Incorrect Assessment of Women's Gainful Employment

It follows from the aforementioned facts that gainful employment for women is not only a temporary situation. The incorrect assessment of women's gainful employment as a temporary situation is the cause of the clear discrimination against the woman that has existed up to now.

a) in occupational training:

This view is in many instances the reason why girls receive either no or insufficient occupational training, although they possess the necessary intellectual prerequisites for a qualified occupational training.

b) in pay:

Women's income is frequently viewed only as supplemental income, and this is frequently the reason for inequitable pay and lesser compensation for women's work;

c) in the physical aspects of the workplace:

In the construction of machines and work equipment, the physical constitution of women is given too little consideration.

The unions feel obliged to make sure that women are given the workplace that they deserve on the basis of their intellectual capabilities and handicraft skills, and not only in periods of emergency, not only in emergency service operations and in catastrophes. In these times, women have always proven that they are capable. Therefore, we assert a right to these workplaces in normal times and for the duration of the entire working life.

The Social Situation of the Family

For most women, however, the question is not whether she wants to work. She has to work and earn money,

a) because she is single

b) because she, through some special turn of fate, is the breadwinner for her family

c) because her husband's income is insufficient

d) because the children should have a good occupational training

The unions regret that many mothers with small children are forced to work on account of material need, for the care of children by the mother cannot be valued highly enough.

But the mother also suffers from this. On top of this, she often suffers health problems on account of the double burden. Such mothers are easily condemned by outsiders.

Single mothers are absolutely not the target of such generalizations. But in many families, the mothers are also forced to contribute to the support of the family because the family income falls within the range of welfare recipients. The findings of a memorandum by the federal minister for families and of an investigation by the main department "Women in the DGB," as well as other investigations, prove that it is untrue that – as is so often asserted – women work in order to buy luxury items.

Naturally, there are also women and mothers who work in factories and offices and who are not forced to do this out of material need. No outsider can pass judgment on why a woman works. It is doubtless very commendable when parents, for the sake of their children, voluntarily abstain from many things to which they also have a right. But there are also families where both parents work in order to give their children more. Therefore, they should not be subject to public defamation.

On the other hand, it is also desirable, if all organizations and institutions could make clear to the families, in the most compelling way and without any damaging assertions, how valuable having the mother at home is for the family and that material need should be the only compelling reason for mothers with small children to pursue gainful employment. However, by the same token, the Confederation of German Trade Unions must expect that all of these associations and institutions, which also feel responsible for women and families, should support their social-political demands, so that material need is no longer the reason why mothers with children pursue gainful employment.

Unions' Demands for Offering Families Greater Security

For a long time now, the unions have presented a large list of demands for offering families greater security, and, in their negotiations at all levels, the unions have tried repeatedly to implement these demands. They demand, among other things,

putting families on a better financial footing through sufficient wages and salaries,

apartments that are suitable for families at reasonable rents

freedom with regard to teaching and learning aids

sufficient child allowances

tax advantages for families

They demand further:

putting the employer and employee on an equal basis

and a social policy that corresponds to the principles of a socially-minded state under the rule of law and, in particular, to Article 6, of the Basic Law. This also includes:

the general protection of mother and child,

the particular protection of working mothers,

pregnant women and women who have recently delivered through a progressive maternity protection law,

a genuine health care program for those families that, for example, also have a legal right to home care,

shorter working hours, which will give working people more free time for life in and with their families.

These shorter working times are possible on the basis of technical progress, and, in consideration of the extraordinarily high degree of energy expenditure, are urgently needed.

The financial foundation of the family matters a lot and decides whether the entire family can live on the income of the father, or whether the mother or future mother can stay home with their children, as almost all of them want to do, or whether the family can afford to educate the children.

Therefore, in their fight to improve and ease the situation of working people and their families, the unions are concerned not only about material things and not only about day-to-day matters. By creating the appropriate material preconditions, they also want to take care that the individual and the family are in the position to develop themselves intellectually, as is in keeping with human dignity.

Source: Press Statement by Maria Weber, Main Department “Women in the DGB,” on the Working Woman and the Social Situation of the Family (August 30, 1960), in *Informationsdienst der Arbeitsgemeinschaft der katholischen deutschen Frauen*, no. 8 (1960), pp. 6–9; reprinted in Klaus-Jörg Ruhl, ed., *Frauen in der Nachkriegszeit 1945–1963*. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuchverlag, pp. 219–23.

Translation: Kelly McCullough

Recommended Citation: Press Statement by Maria Weber, Main Department “Women in the DGB,” on the Working Woman and the Social Situation of the Family (August 30, 1960), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/occupation-and-the-emergence-of-two-states-1945-1961/ghdi:document-4535>> [March 16, 2026].