

Speech by GDR Minister President Otto Grotewohl: “For the Happiness of Our Mothers and Children” (September 27, 1950)

Abstract

In 1950, GDR Minister President Otto Grotewohl laid out the basic principles of gender and family policy in East Germany. The GDR constitution, as he explained, enshrined the full legal equality of men and women, and a new family law repealed any legal regulations to the contrary (e.g. portions of the Civil Code on family law). Additionally, Grotewohl also made it clear that the SED viewed social and economic equality as one and the same. From this, it followed indirectly that women were obliged to work. The East German government hoped to raise the proportion of working women (without whom the targets of the planned economy could not be reached) and to increase women’s participation in public life through educational programs and various forms of state support.

Source

[...]

Our population policy serves peace.

When the Nazis believed back then that they could fill the German living space [*Lebensraum*] with more than one hundred million people through their calamitous policy of external conquest, they not only turned the entire world into enemies of the German people, but they also marched directly into battle against their own population policy goals. The Fascist population policy was intimately connected with the theory of living space – that is, with the conquest of foreign lands – and it meant war. Behind every birth there was already death. Every one of us knows how the insidious hunger affected everyone, right down to the smallest children, when the cold and criminal phrase “canons instead of butter” [“Kanonen statt Butter”] became the slogan of rearmament. This stands in stark contrast to our peaceful economic plans, our peaceful rebuilding, and the demand for the continuous improvement of the nourishment of our people [*Volk*], and thus the nourishment of mothers and children, on our own soil and through our own effort.

When §1 of the law thus proclaims that state subsidies must be granted to improve the material condition of large families and to promote greater numbers of children, herein lies the fundamental difference. There is no comparison between the population policy of Hitler and that of the German Democratic Republic. The Fascist population policy served the war and the downfall, our population policy serves peace and prosperity.

As we today and in the future invest many billions in our national economy, in the development of our industry, in the development of our agriculture, in the establishment of scientific institutes and numerous pedagogical institutions, I can think of no better way to make this development a vibrant one than to provide extensive funds from our state budget for the very best that we have in our nation: for our mothers, for our children, and for our youth. They are the bearers of the life of the nation, they are our future, and everything we do shall be done for them, to preserve peace and increase human prosperity.

Workers for the Five-Year Plan

The Five-Year Plan sets the number of those employed in the national economy at 7.6 million. The total number of those gainfully employed must increase by 890,000 over the 1950 figures. The great need for workers makes it necessary to increase the percentage of working women. According to the Five-Year Plan, the percentage of working women in the overall national economy will be raised from 37 to 42 percent, and in state-owned industry from 33.3 to 42 percent. In my welcoming address to the third federal congress of the DFD [*Demokratischer Frauenbund Deutschlands* or Democratic Women's League of Germany], I already declared, in principle, that all professions and jobs are open to women, and [I said] that when it comes to drawing up plans for the next generation of workers, there should be a stipulation about the preferential inclusion of women in skilled professions in the electronics industry, in optics and precision engineering, in machine building, in construction, in the graphics industry, and in the wood and furniture industry. This declaration was realized in §19 of the proposed bill. Likewise, the government, following my declaration at the third federal congress of the DFD, has created, in §20, the preconditions for allowing women to participate more strongly in the rebuilding and shaping of social life, also in the countryside. Today, building a new society is impossible without the active and thorough participation of broad segments of women.

The participation of women must become a matter of course in all areas of public life in the German Democratic Republic. Women must be trained not only for vocational participation in state-owned industry or in agriculture, but for all areas of governmental and administrative work.

At the moment, women are not participating to a sufficient extent in building up the German Democratic Republic, even though there are shining examples in many ministerial offices and in the administration. A woman is part of the top leadership in [the area of] planning. A number of women are running important major departments and divisions in the ministries of the German Democratic Republic and of the states; two women are members of the Directorate of the Provisional People's Chamber [*Präsidium der Provisorischen Volkskammer*]; fifty-one women are deputies of the Provisional People's Chamber; one woman is state secretary in the Ministry of Education [*Volksbildungsministerium*], one woman is vice-president of the Supreme Court [*Oberster Gerichtshof*].

In the five states of the German Democratic Republic, there are (as of March 1950)

276 female mayors,

43 female district councilors,

25 female city councilors, and

2 female lord mayors.

Women have demonstrated in all branches of the working world that they are capable of holding their own; they have already achieved important and outstanding accomplishments in the democratic rebuilding. [...]

A new family law is necessary!

Minister President Otto Grotewohl then addressed the individual provisions of the law, which we have published elsewhere verbatim. With respect to Section II of the law, "Marriage and Family," he stated:

With the provisions about the equality of men and women, the constitution of the German Democratic Republic has given women a level of legal status that they have never before enjoyed in Germany. For the constitution did not limit itself to proclaiming the principle of equality; rather, as with the other rights granted to citizens, it has [also] created real guarantees for its realization.

Initially, the principle of equality between men and women as established in the constitution ran counter to the Civil Code, which is based on the principle that the man is privileged. In order to immediately prevent the further application of the Civil Code and of other laws that contradict the principle of equality, the constitution, in Article 7 and Article 30, explicitly adopted the provision that all laws that contravene the equality of men and women are abolished. Thanks to this clear ruling by the constitution, it has no longer been possible, since the founding of the German Democratic Republic, to apply laws that disadvantage women in their legal status vis-à-vis men.

This, too, makes clear the difference between the constitution of the German Democratic Republic, which does in fact guarantee the democratic rights of citizens, and the pseudo-democratic constitution of the Weimar Republic. The constitution of 1919 also proclaimed the principle of the equality of the sexes, but it was limited, though, to civic rights. In fact, all the laws that restricted women in their rights continued to be applied, and only the founding of the German Democratic Republic put an end to this situation.

The so-called Basic Law of the Bonn puppet state also claims that men and women are equal. But the reality is different. Women are already discriminated against because they do not have the same job training opportunities, and because they do not receive the same pay as men. Moreover, the Bonn colonial regime also denies women the equality under family law to which they are entitled. While the so-called Basic Law solemnly proclaims equality in its first articles (Article 3), in its concluding provisions (Article 117), it explicitly states that contrary laws can remain in force until March 31, 1953, and they are therefore still applied today. Thus, the conditions in West Germany once again confirm August Bebel's statement that the liberation of women is possible only in a true democracy.

With the founding of the German Democratic Republic, a completely new situation was created in this part of Germany, especially in the area of family law. It is therefore necessary to enact a new family law. The present Law on the Protection of Mothers and Children and the Rights of Women, in Article 18, charges the Ministry of Justice with this task. That ministry is to accelerate its work so that the government will be able to submit the bill to the People's Chamber this very same year.

All professions are open!

With regard to Section III, "Women in manufacturing and the protection of their work," I repeat what I have already stated. Without the incorporation of women into economic life on the basis of equality, there is no social equality. This gives millions of women the possibility to shape their lives in accordance with their own desires and will, and to use work to achieve a position of their own within society. In principle, all professions and jobs should be made accessible to women. The prejudices against women's employment that still exist in many instances must be vigorously counteracted.

If we look at the conditions in the capitalist states or in West Germany and West Berlin, which are occupied by these capitalist states, we can see that, despite formal gender equality, large disparities in pay still exist. Women receive much lower wages for the same work. For example, in West Germany, the average wage for men in March 1950 was 134.0 Pfennigs per hour, while the average wage for women was only 86.1 Pfennigs. That is only 66 percent of the normal wage.

With the slogan "Women belong in the home," women are prevented from being trained as skilled workers and are thus excluded from leading positions in the state and the economy. The same slogan is used in response to the question of "double earners," and women are thereby denigrated as men's maids.

But as long as women do not have the option of acquiring the theoretical and practical knowledge needed to occupy leading positions in the state and the economy, political and economic equality is out

of the question.

The government of the German Democratic Republic has therefore decreed that when it comes to drawing up plans for the next generation, the preferential incorporation and training of women in all skilled professions should be established. State-owned enterprises must provide on-the-job training for women in accordance with the plan, and they must train them to become skilled specialists. Through instruction by uniquely qualified specialists and trainers, through courses and work counseling, women are to be trained to carry out tasks ranging from the simple to the complicated all on their own. Scholarship funds to enable attendance at professional courses and technical schools must be made available to women to a much greater extent than they have been [up to now]. The appointment of proven, democratically-minded women to leading positions must be undertaken more boldly and to a much broader extent. The accomplishments of women entrusted with tasks of responsibility – I am thinking here of our female mayors, directors in enterprises, and female functionaries in organizations and administrations – have demonstrated that women certainly have the requisite ability, and that they grow along with the magnitude of their tasks.

The concern of the government of the German Democratic Republic also extends to our women in the countryside. Through systematic schooling, they must become prepared to participate in the democratic rebuilding of our administration and in social life to a significantly greater extent than they have thus far. It is therefore necessary to appoint more women to the leadership of state-owned farms and machine loan stations, and to entrust them with responsible tasks. The many single women farmers also deserve our help and support. In their work accomplishments, they by no means lag behind men, and the success they have achieved is proof of their professional and human abilities.

The law therefore stipulates that communal institutions, such as laundry facilities, sewing rooms, and day-care facilities for children, must be established to relieve the burden on female agricultural workers and women farmers.

Single women farmers with many children, on whose farm no additional persons capable of working are present, enjoy special privileges. To that end, the relevant directives will be passed by the Ministry for Agriculture and Forestry within one month. The government believes that the best way to express its gratitude for the great accomplishments achieved to date in securing our nation's food supply is to increase its support for female agricultural workers and women farmers to the highest justifiable level.

In realizing the equality of women, the participation of women in productive work is decisive. The work of women, too, is the prerequisite for the prosperity and happiness of humankind. It is the prerequisite for a better life, and is thus also part of the struggle to establish the unity of Germany and consolidate peace.

Women are increasingly stepping out of the narrow household of their families. The personal household becomes the household of the state; the household of the state becomes the economic plan and its fulfillment.

All obstacles that have previously impeded the development of the powers of women will be eliminated. Only through economic freedom can women achieve political freedom and become equal members of society. This law gives German women this possibility. May they learn to use it to the blessing of their children, their families, their nation, and all of peace-loving humanity.

Source: *Neues Deutschland*, no. 227, September 28, 1950, pp. 1–3; reprinted in Dierk Hoffmann and Michael Schwartz, eds., *Geschichte der Sozialpolitik in Deutschland seit 1945*. Bd. 8: 1949–1961:

Deutsche Demokratische Republik. Im Zeichen des Aufbaus des Sozialismus. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2004, no. 8/42.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

Recommended Citation: Speech by GDR Minister President Otto Grotewohl: “For the Happiness of Our Mothers and Children” (September 27, 1950), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/occupation-and-the-emergence-of-two-states-1945-1961/ghdi:document-4511>> [May 13, 2024].