

A Female Engineer Reports (1986)

Abstract

The practical implementation of gender equality also proved difficult in the GDR. This account by a female engineer in Bad Salzungen paints a realistic picture of the situation of East German women, who still struggled to overcome prejudices.

Source

Martina Daske, 27, Engineer, Head of a Youth Research Collective in the Bad Salzungen Cold Rolling Mill

We leave the house shortly after 5:30, I take my still-sleepy daughter to daycare, race to the factory, and after ten and a half hours we return. ... I know that women used to have to work twelve to fourteen hours in the factory. But nowadays we talk as though we young mothers, with our child allowance and our year of maternity leave, are already living in some kind of paradise—that's just half the truth. You can drink away the child allowance, and the factory you work in can either exploit or support you. Even today you only have equal rights to the extent that you make full use of your legal options. The most important thing is for the work you do to be satisfying. Your soul cannot constantly be shouting out an SOS in the plant. Otherwise, what sense would it make—except for the money—to race out of the apartment into the pitch-black night with your child every morning.

I was trained on the roller and got my college entrance certification [*Abitur*] in Henningsdorf; I rose from the ranks doing sheet metal profiling. I met my husband—he's from Halle—during my studies and we looked for a place where we could go together, with his mining skills and mine in rolling technology. We didn't care where, as long as we were together. He started at the potassium mine, and I reported here. The department head did not look very enthusiastic; he asked, "So, a woman?" As if he couldn't tell. I said, "Yes, a woman!" He asked: "With a child, too?" — "Yes," I said, "with a child, too ... and we need daycare and an apartment as well ... and I also get my day to do housekeeping each month and if anyone at the daycare center gets chicken pox then I'll have to stay home. ..."

And then he turned around without a word. I was probably so cocky because never before, neither in my apprenticeship nor in my studies, had I felt that a difference was ever made between the performance of a woman and that of a man.

I started here in September 1985. We got a space in daycare and an apartment; I was very happy and grateful. They didn't have any desks, so they had me stand along the mill train and said, "You studied engineering. Write down exactly when and where the strip kinks!" But there was already a technologist and someone from the Technical Control Organization (TKO), they also had nothing else to do but observe and write down when and where the strip kinked. So there were three of us.

[...]

I started the youth research collective for selfish purposes. Because either you stood there watching and writing down where the strip kinked, or you looked for some task that interested and challenged you. Nothing else was possible.

[...]

Source: Landolf Scherzer, *Der Erste. Eine Reportage aus der DDR*. Cologne, 1989, pp. 200-02.
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