

Feminism Meets Resistance (1975)

Abstract

This article from the weekly magazine *Der Spiegel* describes opposition to and disillusionment with feminism both in the United States and West Germany. The article's authors recount the beginnings of the feminist movement and ponder the reasons behind the attitudinal shift. Mostly, however, they call for greater differentiation in assessments of women's status in society: the experience of no one woman is definitive; rather, women's experiences and interests are manifold and divergent.

Source

Woman '75: "Great Erotic Mother"

Has the liberation of women from traditional shackles and prejudices come to an end? Has the tide turned, is there a trend reversal here, too? Are traditional values, is motherhood in vogue again? Do women prefer to be feminine rather than feminist? Observations in the U.S. and in the Federal Republic indicate: a trend back to femininity is unmistakable, but emancipation is creeping ahead inexorably.

The "Kom(m)ödchen" in Düsseldorf integrated the issue of the season into a cabaret. In the middle of the Year of the Woman, hundreds of thousands of television viewers witnessed the following scene: slave women, clapped in chains, are working the oars in the belly of a galley—until they suddenly discover that their chains are not locked. A brief discussion, then the womenfolk bend their backs again. "After all," one of them says, "we are so used to it."

What today is militantly understood as the women's movement began, as it did earlier in the U.S., almost simultaneously with the protests of rebellious students. It was a protest within the protest. The women of the SDS (Socialist German Student League) in Berlin were sick and tired of always making sandwiches in the kitchen while their male comrades strutted about like political bigshots outside.

At the SDS conference in Hannover in November 1968, 15 female SDS members seized the microphone and distributed flyers. These depicted a naked woman with a hatchet, stretched out on a sofa, above her the male genitalia of six prominent comrades, identified by name, and lined up on the wall like deer antlers in a hunter's lodge. The image was accompanied by the slogan: "Free the socialist eminences of their bourgeois dicks."

At the University of Frankfurt, Apo girls [girls who were part of the extra-parliamentary opposition] pelted their authoritarian comrades with tomatoes. Since then, additionally politicized by the long struggle to reform Paragraph 218 ("My belly belongs to me"), a feminist movement has existed in the Federal Republic as well.

By now the number of its members, spread among groups, small groups, coteries, associations, and forums, is estimated at about 20,000. One in every thousand of the twenty million females between the ages of 17 and 70 in the Federal Republic identifies as an active feminist.

If it were only about the numbers, one could be content with an article about a sectarian movement, like the Maoists and anarchists. What unites the movement is not so much organizational forms as the final goals: the elimination of gender-specific roles and the abolition of patriarchy, the rule of men in society and politics.

The two groups of women in the Federal Republic who would have the most reason to feel disadvantaged, assembly line workers and women with many children, have the least interest in feminism. But, here again, it is neither new nor surprising that the oppressed themselves are not leading the protest against their own oppression, but rather eloquent privileged individuals. Alice Schwarzer, for example, currently the best-known West German feminist, does not exactly fit her own description of Germany's women: "Slaves in a male society."

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After all, according to a SPIEGEL poll, 53% of West German women still believe that their equality is "only written on paper."

Leading feminists of 1995, the ominous Year of the Woman, were therefore all the more astonished when they noted a kind of trend reversal: away from the model of the woman who was independent also from her husband, toward the feminine woman who accepts her role. Not only disenchantment has arisen, but plain and simple headwind. Or to quote Gloria Steinem, the archetype of an attractive feminist: "There have been a lot of setbacks." As Rita Mae Brown from the American "Women's Lib" movement has noted: we are dealing not with setbacks, but with a veritable "counteroffensive." Alice Schwarzer agrees: "The counterrevolution is on the march."

Schwarzer notes with consternation that lately even criticism of the double burden on working mothers—surely not a "fashionable" topic of the women's movement to date—is having an effect that is "more sleep-inducing than alarming." The model of the *Heimchen am Herd* [literally homemaker at the stove; pejorative term for housewives] of years gone by seems to be coming back, to be "in vogue" again.

Not a feminist, but the Schwarzer-scold Esther Vilar, a physician and mother, is selling a lot of books in Germany, and she sees man in a "one-sided dependence on women."

Three years ago, a novel like *Die Mutter* [*The Mother*] by Karin Struck would have been barely thinkable: it deals with the yearning to be "fruitful like a field," and praises pregnancies as stations on the path to freedom, to the "Great Erotic Mother."

On his latest LP record, Hamburg's Udo Lindenberg sings about the dreary lot of a [male] marriage slave who is toiling away for the lazy "old lady at home": "In the morning she was already in front of the tube / with curlers in her hair. / When he came home, worn out from the drudgery / she was still sitting there."

The man has to work, the woman does not have to bear children. The "pill" [oral contraceptives] confers sole responsibility on her. "We have a strike," claims the Bremen social pedagogue Gunnar Heinsohn, "which is working even though it wasn't even called for—a birthing strike."

Masculinists counter: every third marriage is "accelerated" by a devious pregnancy or at least one not mutually agreed upon. There are mail stickers circulating that ask the question spread by anonymous authors: "Should we continue to allow ourselves to be blackmailed?"

Hans-Jürgen Müller, a writer for the *Hamburger Abendblatt*, used the occasion of the Year of the Woman to remember those "poor devils" who "toil their whole lives for their family to make sure that the life expectancy of women, higher by six years, is also financially secured."

He was answered, even if not directly, by the American writer Susan Sontag, who equates the struggle for the liberation of women with the "struggle against fascism." Are women then worse fascists and better human beings?

The contradictions of the women's movement erupted first where it originated, in the U.S. By now they

are also being noticed in Germany. Whether against men or merely without men, whether against institutions or in the competing long march through the institutions as “assistants” of male society, as it were; whether for equality or for a principled otherness; whether patriarchy is the chief enemy or capitalism/fascism of the male variety; whether or not to have children, whether only lesbian or simply also lesbian—there is no agreement about this in practice, let alone in theory. Gesine Strempel from the Berlin women’s group “Bread and Roses”: women must “realize their utopia step by step in a hostile environment.” Which utopia?

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Although the new trend against women’s emancipation is undeniable, there is disagreement about the reasons behind it. The Hamburg writer Lottemi Doormann sees a “diffuse process of opinion formation.” The explanation is easiest for the Marxists: it is clear, after all, that economic crises hit the economically weak—i.e. women—the hardest and set them back the furthest. A strengthening of the housewife ideology is then supposedly the inevitable result.

That is probably true, but it alone is not enough. For in the Federal Republic neither men nor women are slaves, as Marxism and women’s ideology assert. Nor can one seriously claim that things have gone “only downhill” for women since this state has existed, as one feminist slogan would have it—as though a reform of marriage and family law were not under way at this time in Bonn, as though nearly all of the legal barriers restrictive to women had not been practically abolished already. [...]

That “all women” are being oppressed by “all men”—this supposed insight, a crude transfer of the Marxist class concept to the genders, is essentially just as illuminating and as meaningless as the assertion that “the locus of the great division of humanity is between the legs.” In understandable exaggeration, the neo-feminists proceeded and proceed from the notion that the existence of two genders is the chief contradiction of the present—as though the sexual boundaries are not overlaid, as they always have been, by conflicts between social strata and interests.

Where, amidst the twenty-four million West German women, the dividing line actually runs between the disadvantaged and the advantaged—this core question is, generally speaking, not even asked; most still prefer to argue about *the woman* as such, who evidently does not exist at all.

It is obvious that upper-class women, possibly childless and aided by staff, are by no means among the toilsome and burdened in this land. It is no less clear that female workers, for example, who after work must still labor in the household—without support from their husbands—are anything but women of luxury. Many of them, as the family doctor Maria Helmrich reported in the union paper *Welt der Arbeit*, are “used up and worn out within a few years”; the life expectancy of *working* women has by now declined to 68.5 years—it is still higher than that of working men.

But it is open to question whether the responsibility for the double burden on working mothers lies mostly with fathers, although 80% of them, according to an older DGB [*German Trade Union Federation*] survey, affirm an equal division of housework, but only 20% actually practice it.

For there are some indications that barriers of female consciousness also stand in the way of a fair division of housework between working spouses. For example, in its study of women, the DGB quotes a working mother who, in the same breath, complains about her double burden and bursts out in response to the suggestion that her husband could help out at home: “A simpleton like that lives right next door.”

Still: as in the case of the upper-class woman, the social position of the doubly burdened working woman can be readily identified. However, between these two benchmarks, the contours become fuzzy—especially when it comes to assessing the largest group of women in the country: the nearly 15 million who do not work.

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But how these women live, what they think, say—to date all of this has been the subject of speculation: some still or once again see the life of a housewife as the “true happiness of women” (*Bild* [popular German tabloid]); for others, who think of themselves as more enlightened, housework remains tantamount to backwardness and narrowness.

Somewhat useful numbers about the German housewife, whose work is being assessed in such contradictory terms, became available only after the Gießen sociology professor Helge Pross published the results of a study about non-working wives between the ages of 18 and 54. One finding of this study made immediate headlines: the professor, funded by the Hamburg women’s magazine *Brigitte*, discovered that “general contentment” prevailed among housewives, according to their own testimony.

Feminists promptly denounced the sociologist as an “enemy of women.” Some of these arguments carry weight. For example, the Berlin psychologist Renate Stefan has argued that when housewives themselves put “contentment” on record, this was “simply a sign of the degree to which the hopeless-seeming conditions compel women to endorse their own subjection and exploitation.”

However, a multitude of facts that Helge Pross has unearthed makes clear that one cannot quite speak of subjection and exploitation in the home of the German housewife. To be sure, the average German housewife works about 60 hours a week; “normally,” however, the tasks can be accomplished “without great wear and tear” and without “physically ruinous work.”

The majority of households in which full-time housewives are working are by now equipped with central heating, washing machines, refrigerators, vacuum cleaners, and freezers. And Helge Pross notes that most housewives enjoy a clear preferential position vis-à-vis working women: “Their working hours are not as thoroughly structured as those of women working full time. They are not subject to the same kind of rigid division as work in the factory, the office, or the shop.”

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No less false than the stereotype about isolation seems to be the notion that the West German housewife is still dependent on her husband in money matters. By now, changes have taken place in marital financial matters that constitute “almost a revolution,” according to the researcher: only four percent of men are still the sole account holders; in one out of every two marriages, decisions about spending are made jointly, in one out of every three by the woman alone, and only in one out of every four by the breadwinner alone.

And most of the housewives who do not work outside the home also regard the division of labor in the house and outside of it as fair. Those surveyed consistently agreed with the notion “that the man with his work during the day has done enough for the family and should not be additionally burdened.”

The housewife’s sixty hours per week, which, by her own testimony, are “not an excessive burden,” stand against the husband’s average of forty-five hours per week, which are “probably more taxing” and “more strongly standardized and controlled”; added to this are various male contributions in the evening and on weekends in the house, the garden, and the garage. The result, according to Helge Pross: in terms of the total working hours, the average housewife and her average husband “are essentially on a par.”

It therefore comes as no surprise that most German housewives are by no means angry with their husbands (three-quarters call their marriage “good” or “very good”) and report that they are “satisfied” with their life (also three-quarters).

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