

Women's Liberation Gaining Ground (April 22, 1977)

Abstract

Despite prevailing policies and social norms, West Germany continued to see a trend towards single lifestyles and a decline in birthrates. According to the author, both phenomena reflected women's growing desire to pursue independent paths.

Source

Lysistrata on the Move: The Birth Rate Is Not Falling because of the Pill. Women's Emancipation is What's Causing Fear within Society

Civil society is becoming introspective. It has to deliberate for a while, because what's happening within its own ranks is against the rules of the game. Lonesome twosome: this word pair in its original meaning is starting to lose its significance. What's supposed to have a negative connotation, and what's supposed to have a positive one, are being turned around. The bond for life, the institution of the family, seems to be less and less attractive to people. Although society and the state are doing all that they can to make it as uncomfortable and as difficult as possible for bachelors to do their own thing—while giving tax bonuses to families—more and more people would rather stay single than tie the knot. And those who do tie the knot are increasingly untying it and becoming single again.

It is women, in particular, who are declaring their independence, throwing in the dishtowel and leaving the reservation known as matrimony. Or they avoid it in the first place. "We no longer want to be there just for society," which to them means having and raising children. At least they don't want that right away. Society was, for a moment, speechless. And then it calculated what that meant: If this trend continues, then the population of today's Federal Republic—its 57.9 million citizens—will decline to about 22 million by approximately the end of the twenty-first century. Whether or not this is tragic—in light of overpopulation in other countries—is beside the point. What politicians are worriedly asking themselves, however, is who will be working for our pensions in forty or fifty years? And not only for those presently in the workforce, but also for the pensions of the mothers now pushing their way into the workforce, whether divorced or single, and those women who unequivocally refuse to get married and produce children in the Federal Republic?

After all, bachelor life is not all that rosy. A state that bases the feasibility of its system on the family cannot afford to pay for all the loners, the roughly 1,226,000 unmarried men over thirty and the approximately 8,172,000 single, divorced, or widowed women twenty and older. Bachelors have no lobby. As demographic duds, they face more disadvantages than advantages with regard to income tax and social security contributions. They pay less into the pension funds than married people, but neither do they leave behind widows, widowers, or orphans for the state to take care of. The same thing is true for their health and unemployment insurances.

Children – Why all the fuss?

On top of all that, women are also facing discrimination in the working world. The labor market has space for them mostly in the textile and clothing industries and in the service sector and health care. Seventy-seven percent of gainfully employed women work in just sixteen occupations. Although the Institute for Labor Market and Vocational Research at the Federal Agency for Labor in Nuremberg has recently determined that women could very well take on more than one-third of all jobs presently held

by men, roughly 480,000 women are unemployed. Not only do they lack “appropriate qualifications,” as managers have divulged to the vocational research institute, but they are also prematurely jettisoned out of the labor force by mutual agreement of works councils and employers.

Employers and employee representatives invented the notion of an “employment agreement” that women can retire as early as age sixty. Consequently, working women who turn sixty are frequently forced out of their jobs. Exceptions are made only for hardship cases, and what is considered a hardship case is again decided by the works councils and employers.

This generation of single women has a bad deal anyway. During the war and in the postwar years, they usually had to temporarily abandon their careers to raise the postwar generation and do reconstruction work for society. The state did not give them credit in their pension funds for these years since they were neither soldiers nor prisoners of war. The situation of young mothers is similar. In its *109 Tips for the Woman*, the federal government generously assured in April 1976 that: “A woman can also give notice following the motherhood protection period^[1] in order to devote more attention to her child.” If a woman follows this advice, then she loses all entitlement to her former position—something that is guaranteed, for example, to soldiers released to serve in the army—but the politicians in the coalition government failed to mention that in the informational brochure issued in advance of the federal election campaign.

Working women have to put up with even more disadvantages. They continue to dream of equal pay for equal work, of greater responsibility and less subordinate positions. Their taking refuge in the household is usually the result of bad experiences in professional life. In this sense, the findings of the family ministry must be viewed as ambiguous: of the roughly 550,000 working mothers with at least one child under the age of three, two-thirds would be willing to give up their jobs if they received a parental leave allowance. However, this does not necessarily mean that they would also be willing to give up their jobs, and certainly not forever.

Meanwhile a new consciousness is becoming widespread. Women of marriageable age are undermining “child production.” The German population is not being threatened by a plunge resulting from the pill. More likely, a creeping Lysistrata movement is beginning to emerge.

Young women find that “the world has become hostile to mothers and children,” and their arguments range from the patriarchal man to nuclear power plants. They see politicians’ panic over the decline in birthrates as nothing more than “national vanity.” “They should be happy,” announce non-mothers of childbearing age, “unemployment, overcrowded university lecture halls, job cutbacks in the interest of rationalization, costly social policies, insufficient daycare, no positions for teachers—why all the fuss?”

Thirty-two percent of men recently polled by the women’s magazine *Brigitte* thought little of equal rights and found good reasons for their view, such as: “Men don’t want women with backs like lumberjacks and paws like construction workers,” or “women are too emotional to hold top positions,” and “as soon as they become mothers, I prefer to see women devote themselves entirely to their children.” The men were almost 100% united in one tendency: Regretful nodding of heads, but only one half of humanity can hold the reins. The logical consequence of that: The other half wants to prove the opposite in order to be given their due.

Marriage counseling centers in the Federal Republic are increasingly seeing that the conflicts that break up marriages emerge from women’s will and desire for independence. Even young mothers with small children are filing for custody of their kids and are determined to try to make it on their own. Seventy-two percent of divorces are filed not by men but by their “better halves.” That single mothers are willing to face the hard struggle for survival testifies to how serious they are. In view of this development, one is tempted to claim that the number of male bachelors is growing only because the women are tired of

providing unpaid services in the household.

Swinging singles

Of course, people still do get married. But wherever existing families can create a new consciousness for young people through more open-minded child-rearing, marriage is at least postponed, delayed. As an alternative to family, shared households are often mentioned as a way of avoiding isolation or loneliness. Under certain circumstances, this social form of living together or alongside one another can definitely be recommended. On the free housing market, one- and two-room apartments are relatively expensive as compared with apartments for a larger family. And based on the consumer principle in which everything is cheaper by the dozen, loners certainly cannot profit. With respect to food alone, not only do they pay more for small amounts, but part of it also always ends up going bad and landing in the garbage.

So what speaks for refusing to offer the state its blessing of children to guarantee the pensions? Women are seeking financial independence and self-affirmation in a career. They are avoiding the stress of double and triple burdens of being housewife, mother, and employee. They enjoy their freedom. “You come home in the evening, drop your things, and put up your feet.” A glance at the personal ads, under the category “Marriage and Partnerships,” under “Miscellaneous,” however, would seem to suggest that, in the long run, putting their feet up is not enough for women and men starting around 35.

[...]

In the Federal Republic, politicians and experts from the Ministry of the Interior can think of nothing better than to point, somewhat dismayingly, at women’s changing sense of gender roles, according to which the maternal role is no longer women’s main desire but is instead being pushed aside by professional plans. And now they are considering what to do about it.

It is clear that motherhood has to be valorized. We need parental leave allowances, housewife pensions, and loans to start a family. Nannies are back in the picture. There are plans to promote part-time work. Yet that is a promise that can only come from someone who stubbornly and apparently naïvely ignores the labor market situation and the wishes of employers. And now help is finally being offered to assist women in overcoming their role conflicts—with increased propaganda. The federal government will once again distribute information, and this time the opposition probably won’t disparage the anticipated new edition of *Tips for Women in the Household* as party propaganda. For what is at stake is to bring women who are making it on their own in the working world back onto the straight and narrow—to the delivery room.

There was a “marriage loan” once before, “if the future wife gives up her employed position at the time of marriage at the latest.” People were already tricked by this one in June 1933 in an effort “to lower unemployment.”

The fact that women are increasingly forming groups out of solidarity means they are better able to appraise their situation more realistically. They can also seek their own paths, which can and should guarantee them a more satisfying lifestyle compared with the sphere that society intended for them. It seems likelier that women’s interests will be advanced through the women’s movement than by having women continue to wait patiently to see what the 479 men in the Bonn parliament will offer them as the ideal combination role between mother and working woman.

NOTES

[1] According to Germany’s *Mutterschutz* regulations, employed women cannot be forced to work from 6 weeks before delivery to 8 weeks after and are protected from job termination for four

months after they give birth—trans.

Source: Viola Roggenkamp, “Lysistrata geht um. Kein Pillenknick, sondern die Emanzipation der Frau lehrt die Gesellschaft das Fürchten,” *Die Zeit*, no. 18, April 22, 1977. Reproduced with author permission.

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