THE DISAPPEARING SURPLUS: THE SPINSTER IN THE
POST-WAR DEBATE IN WEIMAR GERMANY, 1918-1920

Ingrid Sharp

The German military defeat in November 1918 precipitated a revolution that spread from sailors in the north to the cities and provinces of a war-weary Germany. On 9 November the Kaiser was forced to abdicate and Germany became a Republic. The first years of the Weimar Republic were characterised by extremes: political polarisation, social unrest, hyperinflation, poverty and deprivation, exacerbated in June 1919 by the terms of the Treaty of Versailles that left Germany burdened by war guilt and substantial reparations. Infighting on the left and open hostility from right-wing parties limited the state’s ability to recover from the war, much less implement a programme of social and political reforms. Yet German women gained political and civil rights in the course of the revolution, voting and standing for election for the first time in January 1919. Article 109 of the 1919 Weimar Constitution established the equality (“in principle”) of the sexes and at the same time, censorship was lifted, allowing much freer discussion of political and sexual matters in the press.

The concept of “surplus women” or Frauenüberschuss,¹ the demographic problem identified by the census of 1851, was absolutely central to the pre-war women’s movement in Germany. The ADF (Allgemeiner deutscher Frauenverein or General German Women’s Association), founded in 1865, with little room for manoeuvre within a rigid, hierarchical society and hemmed in by laws and conventions, used the plight of middle-class single women to argue for access to proper education and suitable middle-class professions.² At the time, marriage was the only respectable option for women of this class, and the figure of the spinster attracted pity and ridicule in equal measure, as the dependent poor relation or as the governess obliged to occupy an uncomfortable place in the household between family member and higher servant. In the nineteenth century, the movement aimed solely at increasing opportunities for those women not suited to, or not lucky

¹ I.e. the perception that there were more women than men of marriageable age.
enough to attain the state of marriage and in no way set out to challenge the dominant ideology. In fact it is clear that the women’s movement made use of the theories of gender difference current at the time to press their case: they argued that women should be attended by female doctors and taught by female teachers for moral reasons. Better teacher training and access to the medical profession for some women would therefore not shake the primacy of marriage, maternity and domesticity in women’s lives, but enhance it. By the turn of the century, the renewed perception of a surplus of women ensured that the women’s arguments again centred on single women. For many within the bourgeois women’s movement, the concept of motherliness applied to all women: while the influence of biological mothers was limited to the family sphere, childless women could extend their motherly qualities to embrace the whole of society and the policies of the moderate women’s movement began to be understood as “spiritual” or “organised” motherhood. This line of argument again allowed the women’s movement to make radical demands for greater political and social influence without overtly challenging the dominant ideology of female maternity and domesticity, gender polarity and separate spheres. As Ann Taylor Allen argues, far from representing a restriction of women’s role, the dynamic maternalism of nineteenth and early twentieth-century feminists formed the basis of women’s claim to dignity, equality, and a widened sphere of action in both the private and public domains.

It should be noted that this discourse did not reflect the attitude to single women prevalent in wider society, nor was it by any means the only one employed within an increasingly diverse women’s movement. By the end of the nineteenth century there was a minority of women within the movement who felt that women’s rights stemmed from their entitlement as human beings rather than their special nature as women, and who also felt keenly that women should avoid marriage as a rational political and personal choice, freeing up energies otherwise undermined by domestic drudgery and the debilitating health problems associated with sex and reproduction. Here the discourse of spinsterhood is very different and these women set out to

---

4 See Allen (1997) and (2008).