SOCIALIST EMANCIPATION:  
THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN THE  
GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC*

SOCIALIST EMANCIPATION VS. FEMINISM:  
THE FRAME OF REFERENCE

Of course I could carry on like some feminists, letting fly like wild things just because they're allowed to swear at their husbands for not doing the washing-up for them or changing the kids' nappies. They're running amok, they'll never come to any understanding with their husbands. You have to learn to notice little changes in the other person, and above all to change yourself. Without love, all these attempts at emancipation are just a pain. What's the use of women liberating themselves against their partner? I see a lot which is destructive. . . . I believe you can only go from compromise to compromise. . . . I just heard them say on T.V. which qualities are supposedly typical of us women, according to Western scientists: passivity, dependence, conformism, timidity, nervousness, obedience. I must be a man then, only without a prick. Or else I'm in a different world, one in which you're allowed to develop other qualities.1

A contradictory attitude towards feminism is implicit in this excerpt from *Guten Morgen, Du Schöne*, a volume of first-person testimony by GDR women of varying ages, occupations and family status. It is indicative of wider contradictions confronting women

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in the GDR on an everyday basis. Rosi, the speaker, appears to condemn as extreme feminist demands for a shift in the domestic division of labour; her plea for compromise suggests support for the status quo. This contrasts not only with her strongly negative reaction to the Western television programme, but also with an earlier remark about how depressing and discouraging it is when one's partner's conservatism inhibits change in situations one finds unacceptable. Rosi appears on the one hand to reject what she regards as extremist feminism from a position of strength and yet she feels powerless to alter her own domestic situation.

Similar contradictions are inherent in the very situation of women in the GDR, a situation which is in many ways enviable. As Rosi's reaction to Western stereotyping indirectly implies, the economic, social, and legal situation of women in the GDR has created for them possibilities for the development of personality and self-expression which are structurally negated for women in the West, both by such theoretical stereotypes and by the structure of gender relations within which they are confined. This article will discuss the nature of the contradictions affecting the situation of women in the GDR today and the role of the DFD (the official and only women's organisation) in relation to the achievements as well as to the outstanding problems.

The GDR has had a policy of combating sex discrimination, indeed of positive discrimination towards women, throughout the forty years since the end of World War II. This means that independence, forthrightness, initiative, career ambition, and confidence in one's right as an equal member of society are taken for granted by women as well as by men. The contradictions originate in the fact that these gains have been made largely in the field of paid labour. The level of women's qualifications has been raised immeasurably; equal pay for equal work has been implemented since 1946; and women have made substantial inroads into many formerly male-dominated occupations and sectors of the economy. The converse, however, is not true: there has been no marked shift of men into traditionally female occupations. As Rosi's views above imply (and as will be exemplified in a subsequent section of this article) there is very little awareness in the GDR of gender-defined behaviour patterns as they affect social relations, particularly at the level of personal/domestic life. The feminist concept that the personal is political, which has filtered through to many fields of public life in the West, is virtually unknown in