

East German Women and their Emancipation

Background and research motivation

My mother recently came across a book she read when she was my age: *Guten Morgen, du Schöne* (1981) by Maxie Wander. A book that she remembered very well, she had read it even three times. The book shares the stories of 19 women, and it reformed the way female subjectivity was represented in literature in East Germany. In the early and mid 1970s, Wander conducted interviews with the GDR women to create a collection of life writings. The women are of different ages and come from different backgrounds. The book comprises several chapters in the form of 19 monologues which discuss their life stories and their daily lives including struggles, desires, and opinions. Although all the narratives face personal matters, they touch upon systematical and societal issues these women faced in the GDR. The publishing of the book generated an unexpected level of excitement among the public and challenged the prevailing depiction of women in literature (Harbord, 1991). Reading this book and discussing it with my East German mother motivated my research interest in the role of women in the GDR and their emancipation.

In the media, the guiding principle of female representation in East Germany centers around the hard-working women and mother (Merkel, 1994), and the East German woman would often be called – or call herself – emancipated. Erich Honecker (1971), the General Secretary of the SED, the Socialist Unity Party of East German, lists the realization of women's equality, on a legal and personal level, as one of the greatest achievements of the GDR. From a legal point of view, the GDR introduced labor law measures as well as a financial security system that should encourage employment of women. Women obtained additional support at the workplace, they were protected against dismissal in case of motherhood, and those with several children were allowed to reduce working hours and get one day off to do household chores. Further, women with children received financial support, yet most financial aids were tied to employment (Schenk, 1990). Consequently, in the late 1980s, almost 90 percent of East German women were employed or in training (Statistisches Jahrbuch der DDR, 1989). Aside from this, the anti-baby pill was freely available from 1968 on, and women had free abortion rights since 1972 (Merkel, 1994).

However, despite the reduction of formal gender disparities, the introduction of these measurements strengthened traditional gender roles, and were motivated by discussions on the unwillingness to give birth of employed women rather than gender inequality (Merkel, 1994). Schenk (1990) discusses the character of the social security system that provided women – to a degree – with financial and legal independence and concludes that the policy measures prove strong features of conservative family policies. Professional structures continued to be polarized, with many jobs occupied by gender and systematically fewer women in leading positions, and women are generally seen as unstable and unreliable workers because of the one-sided attribution of social benefits. In consequence, as of 1989,

the GDR realized a gender pay gap of 30 percent. Furthermore, women carried out 75 percent of household chores, and their daily housekeeping time expenditure amounted to, on average, three times as much compared to men (Schenk, 1990). Likewise, Merkel (1994) finds that the socio-political measurements were accompanied by an offensive propaganda of a socialist small family, which rather enhanced traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Frohn (1972) supports this view and finds that women were often stuck in jobs not adequate to their qualification, and mainly studying historically female-dominated subjects at university. That is, these constitutional structures in the GDR kept women from forming and formulating their own political interests. When looking at the sole achievements for women's rights in the GDR, particularly in comparison to West Germany, they can be evaluated positively as important milestones for gender equality. Their classification within the complex life context of East German women, however, remains insufficient (Dölling, 1995).

Frohn (1972) further explores the question of female emancipation in the GDR and argues that the double burden as well as the discrimination at the workplace leads to withdrawal into household activities and childcare, and finally the solidification of existing gender roles, rather than rebellion. This process is accelerated through the implementation of family policies by the SED. Frohn (1972) concludes that thereby, the financial and legal measures to emancipate women expose as a barrier to female equality. This statement, as well as my personal connection, further stimulated my interest in the emancipation fight of East German women more profoundly. Did East German women themselves feel emancipated? And can emancipation only be achieved if the oppressed themselves fight for it? In order to approach these questions, I firstly utilized the life narratives of Wander (1981), and secondly, I conducted interviews with East German women.

Life writings of Maxie Wander as evidence for women's position in the GDR

The life writings of Maxie Wander's *Guten Morgen, du Schöne* (1981) are indicative of several systematic issues regarding female emancipation in the GDR. Throughout the book, the life narratives present evidence for the discrimination against women in the GDR and discuss persisting sexist attitudes, the double burden of job, household and childcare, and other issues within a social context.

Several women describe experiences indicating that men perceive them as subordinate and discriminate against women, especially within a family context. Lena K., for example, talks about her husband and mentions that his masculinity cannot tolerate her independence¹ and Erika D.'s husband thinks that she cannot live without a man². Ute G.'s husband does not want her to give birth to another child as it will change her body³, suggesting that women are

¹ Lena K.: „Seine Männlichkeit erträgt es einfach nicht, daß ich weitgehend unabhängig von ihm bin.“ (p. 25)

² Erika D.: „Mein Mann hat immer orakelt: Es wird dir nicht gelingen, ein Vierteljahr ohne Mann zu leben.“ (p. 88)

³ Ute G.: „Ralph saft: Wie du aussiehst, wenn du noch een Kind kriegst! Er is janz scharf uff ne jute Figur.“ (p. 36)

perceived as unautonomous human beings by men. Regarding her parents' relationship, Susanne T. says that her mother becomes very small once her father shows up.⁴ Rosi S. draws attention to the depiction of women in the media: mothers are regarded as soft and unintelligent, while fathers are seen as harsh and smart.⁵ Analogously, Angela N. notes that in her family, only the opinion of her father was valid⁶. In her marriage, Erika D. was not allowed to visit friends or any other events without her husband.⁷ Doris L. mentions moments of buying mania where she bought books and records to prove to her husband that she is someone⁸, and she recognizes her discrimination at the workplace, disclosing that appearance plays an important aspect in obtaining respect in a professional environment⁹. These narratives illustrate that, although women were independent from a legal point of view, this did not prevail in the private. Moreover, some other statements indicate the persisting sexist attitudes in a societal context. Ute G., for instance, did apply for an apartment as a single mother but did not receive one, although most married couple did.¹⁰

Furthermore, the double burden of East German women finds recognition in many narratives, as well as the woman's sole responsibility for household work. Ute G. mentions that when growing up, she and her sisters had to do household chores while their brothers did not.¹¹ Karoline O. reports similar experiences. She and her sisters were raised to never contradict their parents, in contradiction to her brothers¹². Barbara F. attributes difficulties with her mother to her overload of (household) work¹³ and Margot W. found herself in a similar

⁴ Susanne T.: „Ich seh doch, was Mami für ein Leben führt. Vor fünf Minuten hat sie noch groß gesprochen, was sie alles anstellen wird, und wenn Papa kommt, ist sie so klein.“ (p. 54)

⁵ Rosi S.: „Mütter sind weich und nachgiebig und ein wenig dumm; Väter sind hart, konsequent und klug, nicht?“ (pp. 68-69)

⁶ Angela N.: „Bei uns gibt es nur einen Standpunkt, und das ist der meines Vaters. Und der ist immer richtig.“ (p. 160)

⁷ Erika D.: „Nachdem wir zusammengefunden hatten, war er absolut Chef im Ring. Ich durfte nirgends mehr hingehen, zu keiner Schulveranstaltung, zu keiner Freundin.“ (p. 93)

⁸ Doris L.: „Dann gab's Momente von Kaufwut, wo ich einfach für zweihundert Mark Bücher und Schallplatten kaufte, um ihm zu beweisen: Ich bin wer!“ (p. 114)

⁹ Doris L.: „Wenn Frauen im Beruf was darstellen wollen, dann fängt das mit ganz primitiven Mitteln an, die beim Mann überhaupt keine Rolle spielen. Kleidung, Auftreten, Kosmetik, wir brauchen diese Mittel, um anerkannt zu werden.“ (p. 120)

¹⁰ Ute G.: „Vor vier Jahren hab ick mich für eine Wohnung angemeldet, weil es steht im Gesetzbuch, det ledige Mütter mit Kind als Familie gelten und eine angemessene Wohnung beanspruchen können. Obwohl sich viele Ehepaare später beworben haben als ick, haben die schon eine Wohnung, ick nich.“ (p. 39)

¹¹ Ute G, 24, Facharbeiterin, ledig, ein Kind. Großfamilie: „Meine Eltern, fortschrittliche Menschen, wa, aber die Erziehung von uns Kindern – furchtbar! Die Mädchen mußten schufteln, die Jungs hatten 'n feinet Leben.“ (p. 33)

¹² Karoline O.: „Die Mädchen sind so erzogen worden, daß es keine Widerrede gab, Vater und Mutter nur mit Ihr angeredet.“ (p. 148)

¹³ Barbara F.: „Mit Mutti war's manchmal bisschen schwierig, wenn sie so kaputt nach Hause gekommen ist.“ (p. 48)

position.¹⁴ Rosi S. illustrates that she alone is responsible for child and elderly care as well as other official obligations.¹⁵

While many women criticize aspects of their own oppression, they do not necessarily connect it to a lack of emancipation. Barbara F., for example, finds that the problem of emancipation does not exist for her, and at the same time points out that her father played with the children while her mother took care of everything¹⁶. Similarly, Angela N. recognizes her subordinate role as a woman but calls the discussion on gender equality senseless as she holds the opinion that there is no gap between men and women¹⁷. Furthermore, some women also express thoughts that demonstrate aspects of internalized sexism. Lena K., for example, says she has never really like women because of their inferiority complexes, blaming them for their maltreatment.¹⁸ Barbara F. asks why some women do not want to be recognized, disregarding the oppressing system they live in.¹⁹ These narratives can be directly connected to Frohn's (1972) thesis. Although many women realize that they have a different position in East German society than men, they do not ascribe it to a lack of gender equality. Instead, they rather accept and do not question that their voice is not equal and that they have to work harder. Rosi S. even criticizes women's rights activists suggesting that they are too demanding.²⁰ Whether this can be attributed to either the illusion of equality created by socio-political measures or due to an overload of responsibility remains specific to the women's contexts.

Interviews

I conducted two semi-structured, qualitative interviews with women that grew up in the GDR. The interviewees were directed thematically but I encouraged them to freely describe their experiences and add details. During the interviews, I asked the interviewees to talk about their childhood, their school time, and their career path, focusing on their feelings and wishes,

¹⁴ Margot W.: „Und meine Mutter in ihrem Hausfrauendasein hat immer eine untergeordnete Rolle gespielt und sicherlich auch gelitten unter der starken Persönlichkeit meines Vaters.“ (p. 108)

¹⁵ Rosi S.: „Ich bade doch alles alleine aus, Elternbeirat, Gewerkschaft, betreue die Alten im Haus, erledige die Wege zu den Ämtern. Es ist nicht die Arbeit, die einen schafft, es ist die Verantwortung, die man alleine tragen muss.“ (p. 64)

¹⁶ Barbara F.: „Das Problem Emanzipation hat es für mich eigentlich nie gegeben, dazu kann ich nichts sagen. [...] Bei uns wars auch so, daß Vati die schönen Sachen machte, der war der ruhige Pol, wie das bei Männern so ist, und Mutti kümmerte sich um alles.“ (p. 49)

¹⁷ Angela N.: „Das Gerede von Gleichberechtigung ist blödsinnig. [...] Ich empfinde diese Kluft zwischen Männern und Frauen nicht, ich fühle mich in männlicher Gesellschaft sehr wohl. Männer sind ehrlicher und gerader als Mädchen.“ (p. 165)

¹⁸ Lena K.: „Ich muß dir sagen, ich habe Frauen nie besonders gemocht. Frauen leiden oft unter Minderwertigkeitskomplexen, sie wittern überall Fallen und können nicht objektiv sein.“ (p. 31)

¹⁹ Barbara F.: „Warum wollen manche Frauen nicht erkannt werden?“ (p. 44)

²⁰ Rosi S.: „Ich könnte es ja auch so wie gewisse Frauenrechtlerinnen machen, die wie die wilden schießen, weil man es ihnen erlaubt hat; die über ihre Männer schimpfen, weil sie ihnen den Abwasch nicht nehmen oder die Scheißwindeln von den Kindern. [...] Ohne Liebe bleiben die ganzen Emanzipationsversuche ein Krampf.“ (p. 67)

their relation to western Germany as well as their perception of the relationship between men and women. The interviews deliver insight into the lives of two East German women.

The first interviewee, I call her Anni, was born in 1968 in Warnemünde. She grew up in Rostock and visited high school there. She was lucky to have adequate grades to be able to take the Abitur, although both of her parents were academics. When being asked about her dreams and aspirations for the future, she said she was not confident enough to express any desires. She was not questioning existing political structures or ideologic thoughts in the GDR, so she did not feel restricted. When applying for the Abitur, Anni had to state what she wanted to study after. She was unsure but decided on English and Russian because she liked foreign languages. However, after her graduation, her father told her to study business administration, and Anni complied as she trusted her father's decision. But she was unsatisfied and considered changing her studies and moving away. After all, she was fearful and decided against it. Today, she regrets not taking her own decisions.

Most of her professors were men, there was one woman only. When asking her about the role of women, she said that the GDR was proud of their achievements for women's rights. This was highlighted whenever possible, within scholastic, political and other contexts, often stressing the comparison to the position of women in West Germany. The female workforce was not only fully integrated into the national economy, but it was hardly possible for women to not work. Anni appreciated the legal and financial measurements that encouraged women's employment, stating that the GDR, from its viewpoint, did everything they could to support women with household work and childcare. Specifically, she mentioned easy access to child day care, the household day, and adaptable working hours for women with more than two children.

The second interviewee I call Jette, born 1964 in Wismar. She went to school there for 10 years, and applied to take the Abitur, but was denied, although she was top of the class. Her openly critical attitude towards the political system was deciding for her rejection. Moreover, her parents were academics, but mainly worker's children were accepted. In addition, boys were acquired more extensively, as they should become officers and professors. As she wanted to become a doctor, Jette was angry that she could not take the Abitur. Therefore, she went on to do an apprenticeship for nursing, which her mother assisted her to. She lived with her parents until the age of 20. In the GDR, marriage was a prerequisite for renting an apartment, so Jette moved out after she got married.

Jette indicated that gender equality was neither an issue for her nor for her surroundings, particularly when comparing the situation of women in the GDR to West Germany. She mentioned that they could easily gain access to the anti-baby pill, and they had abortion rights. Women were allowed to vote, and they could get divorced easily. Therefore, Jette did not question her rights. However, she criticized the preference for boys when applying to the

Abitur, as well as the male dominated political and leadership positions. In addition, Jette confirms the double burden that women had to endure.

Notably, both interviewees did not identify their role as a woman in East German society as oppressed, and when being asked if they felt emancipated, they mentioned that they did not reflect on the issue of gender equality enough to truly answer the question and that they personally did not feel discriminated. However, both interviewees were only in their early 20s during the reunification of Germany, and therefore did not experience the situation of full-time working mothers in the GDR.

What is striking in this context is that this relates to the thesis by Frohn (1972), stating that emancipation can only be accomplished by fighting for it. The GDR women do not recognize their own oppression hidden behind labor law measures and financial security. Both interviewees also noted that big celebrations were held on women's day, further strengthening the image of achieved emancipation. This illusion of gender equality might have kept them from engaging in their own fight. In addition, as the comparison to the position of women in West Germany was commonly consulted, this might have strengthened the view of the emancipated East German woman.

Conclusion

Both the life writings of Maxie Wander and the life narratives of two East German women support the statements formulated by Frohn (1972) and Dölling (1995) and show that the East German woman cannot be viewed as emancipated. Namely, Wander's book contains evidence for the double burden of women, for the persisting sexist attitudes in East German society, and the lack of recognition for their own discrimination. The interviews present similar insights. This reinforces the hypothesis that the socio-political measures rather enforced existing traditional gender roles and impeded the formation of a women's movement. In addition, women's rights activists were also restricted due to the difficulties of demonstrating in the GDR.

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