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Negotiating equal rights in everyday life: expectations and experiences of rural women

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ABSTRACT

This article presents insights from research conducted on the importance of socialist agriculture for rural women's emancipation in the GDR. It is based on ethnographic data collected between 2016 and 2018, including interviews with members of former agricultural production cooperatives and archival research centring on the Oderbruch region (Brandenburg). The author analyses the realities of life and work for women in the socialist village between expectations, opportunities, and realities. The tension between media discourses on the 'new' socialist woman, institutional politics, social expectations and village communal practices is drawn out. Within this frame, this text highlights the numerous ways in which rural women actively designed their relationship to broader transitions in the rural economy, such as the socialist land reform and collectivisation. It narrates how women embraced opportunities and met challenges to realise their own interests. The strategic management of social difference, gender expectations and policy resulted in support for the economic success of cooperative, at least since the 1970s. On the one hand, women's readiness to work in low-paid jobs that offered family compatible working hours and social security was used to improve the financial performance of the cooperative. On the other hand, specific instruments of gender policies were used to improve the economic performance of the cooperative. Women were installed as leading committee members and division managers – against the explicit wish of many male workers. The expertise of young academic females was strategically employed to incite a process of innovation within changing economic policies and demands.

KEYWORDS

women; land reform; rural modernity; everyday life; GDR

This text assesses the place of the everyday activities of women in the continuing transformation of rural eastern Germany. In doing so, it investigates the connection between profound changes in economic and labour policy in the rural areas of the GDR and specific features of policies towards women. Its empirical base is a study of the room for manoeuvre available to actors under state socialism in and around the very successful Golzow LPG in the Oderbruch region, and, among other things, the way women operated in the context of a socialist rural modernity in the GDR. The focus is on key points for the analysis of rural women's narratives about emancipation which demonstrate that it is

inadequate to interpret them simply in terms of conclusions such as, “there was no emancipation in the GDR”.¹ Empirical studies of gender roles and policies reveal that changes in rural everyday life after 1945 in the GDR were primarily linked to the ways in which collective production on the land developed as a part of the modernization of the rural economy. The collectivization of rural labour moulded the framework from which the expectations of GDR women grew and against which they measured themselves, in terms of the improvement of their living conditions, the changing relations between the sexes and the emergence of a new rural culture that Bettina van Hoven-Iganski (2000) characterized forcefully as “AgriCulture”.

Analysis of societal changes in rural areas makes it clear that the “village” needs to be understood more as a zone of transition, as an often precarious and provisional field of experimentation for social life, and less as a closed, static community (PG Umsiedlerin 2015). In this manner, women and the changed situation of their lives become an important litmus test for the socialist model of society. In them are united the education and family-policy endeavours of the new state, based as they were on social policy theories and models of the nineteenth century and the Weimar Republic which had yet to be tested in practice. Regional specificities also require examination, as do their consequences for the shaping of post-war rural societies. The extent of the destruction of economic structures and productive resources was extremely significant; this was especially the case in relation to the property and production relations before and after 1945. An essential role was also played by the migrations that took place at the end of the war. Knowledge-transfer on the part of local actors influenced the emerging industrialized agriculture of the early GDR. The forms in which east German women in rural areas were able to make actual use of their legally enshrined equal rights was decided to a large degree by contemporary knowledge that was specific, situated and often unexpressed, inscribed in bodies and manifest in everyday practice, customs and rituals. This was not just another manifestation of the inherent tension between political intention and everyday implementation; it was much more a question of tracing an exemplary path through the amalgam of state policy, rules and everyday practice in response to them.

Scene: an underdeveloped rural area

In 1961, Golzow in Oderbruch was chosen as the location for a documentary film which took as its theme the everyday lives and experiences of thirteen children over a period of over forty years.² One of the reasons why the village was selected for the project was the extent of its “underdevelopment” due to the war. The socialist state’s experiment had to prove itself here in conditions unfavourable to its success.³ Reconstruction was difficult in any case and was hindered dramatically by massive devastation – tens of thousands of dead, up to 90 per cent of rural infrastructure destroyed. The land reform of 1945, which sought to dissolve the traditional rural property structure in favour of the propertyless population, especially refugees, was unable to accelerate recultivation. The mining of fields and their general destruction delayed the allocation of land.⁴ The situation of desolation also resulted in former Golzow inhabitants not returning home and introduced new actors to the local stage.

Shortage of seeds, machinery, animals and local knowledge, but, above all else, the absence of local networks led new farmers to abandon farming, because they could not

operate their farms successfully, let alone meet the compulsory deliveries that were imposed on them to improve food supply in the towns (Bauerkämper 2002). The Machine and Tractor Stations founded in 1946 were not in a position to make up for such constraints. Abandoned land was leased to established farmers and farmed together with their holdings.⁵ At the same time, successful established and individual farmers were pushed towards “fleeing the republic” by restrictive GDR agrarian policies aimed at removing their privileges; their estates – termed “devastated farms” – were passed over to be farmed by newly established LPGs and local renters.⁶

Women and rural change since 1945

The difficult post-war situation prompted moves towards collectivization. Where the obstacles to production did not lead to the total abandonment of farms, they resulted in forms of economic association, regarded initially with suspicion by the political authorities, whose purpose was the communal management of scarce resources. In the context of this upheaval in rural working relations, five types of women crystallized out of my research; they formulated different claims on the new rural society in terms of how to run their lives. First were women who hoped for a way out of poverty by involving themselves with the LPG. This group included refugee women who, with their children, needed help in farming land redistributed by the land reform. Another was one of five local women who were children of landless former estate workers. Initially trained as a seamstress, after school she gained the necessary qualification for work in the administration of the newly founded LPG. She became the financial director of the Golzow LPG with hundreds of employees and a turnover of many millions. In similar fashion, Lieschen Kurzweg,⁷ a simple cook in the LPG, was enabled by state-initiated measures to challenge patriarchal power structures and seize the opportunity to become a self-confident actor on the stage of local politics (Junge 1984).

Next came Golzow women with extensive knowledge of farming who, despite the precarious situation, were able to operate middle-sized peasant farms successfully with their families. These women were not prepared to join the LPG, despite the fact that, directly after overcoming the consequences of the war, the Oderbruch region suffered a flooding catastrophe of historic dimensions in 1947, which returned to nothing all the efforts of the first years. They feared loss of their independence and their status as self-confident farm managers. Moreover, the democratization of decision-making in the LPG increased their scepticism towards cooperatives. Frustration at everyone having a say persuaded some to leave: “there, every good-for-nothing can have their say.”⁸ From their perspective, the LPG was a union of have-nots and know-nothings. At a time characterized by shortage of seeds, draft animals, machinery and labour, and when middle-peasants in particular were burdened with high levels of compulsory deliveries, the majority of them were not willing to share their reduced means with “Johnny-come-latelies”. Instead, they contented themselves with cultivating the fields that they were entitled to for subsistence production. They were categorized officially as “housewives.” There was good reason for the Democratic Women’s Association of Germany (DFD) to increase its efforts at the end of the 1950s to mobilize for the employment of women by, for example, the formation of “Housewife brigades”. These

were implemented in Golzow too, where, in the archives, they were praised for increasing production.⁹

A third group was represented by the wives of tradesmen and small businessmen in the village. They profited from the land reform with land for self-subsistence and so were able to improve their status within the family itself. They were unaffected by collectivization and under no public pressure. Mrs Niess, the wife of a shop-owner, told about moments when she, as a business person, even took a stand against the local policy of the LPG. Her "existence in the shadows" provided her with room to manoeuvre. This prevented, for example, her house and shop being demolished in order to build multi-occupant dwellings as part of the local housing programme promoted by the village council and the LPG in the 1970s. She farmed the fields that she had received in the land reform throughout the whole GDR period, while owners of neighbouring fields gradually handed their land over to the LPG.

Work on private fields and in gardens and greenhouses soon became a source of income. Individual agricultural production became indispensable for ensuring the state supply of foodstuffs. Until the end of the GDR, many of the consumer desires of the rural population were financed by the high purchase prices for such goods. Farming their own gardens and fields made good financial sense for housewives. Here state price policy collided directly with the impetus of women's policy for equal rights through changing working conditions. With the increasing economic success of the LPG in Golzow and the many privileges that arose from working there, some subsistence housewives also took up employment in the LPG, like Ilse Schmidt; given their level of knowledge, they were often appointed as instructors. It was clear from interviews that this resulted in resentment on the part of the LPG members who had joined earlier in order to escape their often traditionally lower social status by helping set up the LPG. Several referred to conflicts over the condescending demeanour of the former village elite. The proclaimed equality of all LPG members was seen to be a utopian goal, if not unfounded propaganda.

The fourth group was made up of women who were the beneficiaries of plans to promote women and the training programmes that they entailed in the form of special classes in technology schools and attendance at university. It was through these that a slow but long-lasting change took place in the distribution of responsibilities and competences in rural enterprises. They made it possible that between 1963 and 1970 alone, the number of female graduates with skilled worker certificates within the framework of a single LPG increased fivefold (Projektgruppe Umsiedlerin 2015, 32). From the 1970s onwards, a squad of highly qualified and self-confident women, from all over the republic, armed with the latest knowledge, came to work on the land. They transformed the picture of rural inhabitants and LPG staff. What attracted them was the great economic strength of the LPG and the exemplary level of village development: its offer of cultural and social services, organized overwhelmingly by the LPG, was no less than that of most towns.¹⁰ In order to add an intellectual dimension to economic success, this next generation of women was strategically deployed at the second level of administration, for example, as crop quality control or training managers. This often happened against the will of many men in the enterprise; it transformed the long-standing patriarchal composition of the management group and the political membership of committees and commissions in the village.

Finally, the image of the attractive rural woman at the wheel of a tractor or combine harvester fed the collective fantasy of socialism. This became manifest in students and workers who, at peak periods, came to give support for the harvest. In Golzow, these encounters were made possible through various contracts of friendship and cooperation with, amongst others, a big cable factory in Berlin, an institute of the Humboldt University in Berlin and the Centrum department store in Alexander Platz, Berlin. As a consequence, hundreds of female students and town employees came to the region. A professor, a former student at Humboldt University who researched there at the beginning of the 1960s, remembered that it was above all these women who gave expression and visibility to the changing image of the sexes.

Rising expectations

Women tended not to reflect consciously on systematic inequalities between the sexes in their everyday lives. Unlike in feminist research and politics, they did not compare the postulated ideal of GDR women's policy with the realities of their everyday lives, rather they oriented themselves to the living conditions of their mothers and grandmothers. According to Christel Panzig (1997), they referred to the constantly improving working conditions in the LPG, which were directly addressed to them, and welcomed the new image of the woman with regard to gaining qualifications, working conditions and partnership. My research findings support this as being fundamentally significant for narratives of lives and everyday activities in and around the LPG. The good economic base of Golzow LPG was decisive in this in multiple respects, for it made possible a considerable amount of independence from state directives. The LPG management revealed a great interest in operating within the contours of the continued development of the socialist agrarian economy, policy and regulation, but, at the same time, it was in a position to subvert planning decisions, either openly or covertly: "we can afford to say, no".¹¹

The good economic performance of the LPG stood its working women in good stead through, for example, the accelerated construction of housing, the provision of good medical services and high-quality childcare. Since women were particular beneficiaries of this development in their triple role as household managers, mothers and workers, these improvements clearly informed their positive view of their own situation as women, not least in the light of a comparison with the immediate post-war situation. At the same time, the economic and political significance of the LPG limited the development of a more coherent policy towards women. Measures to improve qualifications (to take part in training courses and being delegated to such activities) had to be subordinated to enterprise structures¹² and were shifted to timeslots when women were no longer needed as labour to meet planning targets.¹³ The enterprise did not fear being sanctioned. The LPG was influential enough to avoid any penalties that might be imposed. This sort of clever, self-interested negotiation of the local coordinates of policies supporting women is only one example of the general measures in the cooperative to harmonize the diverse and often conflicting obligations between expectations of economic success and policies to support women.

Similarly, the vision of a conflict between village development and the success of the LPG can be nuanced by looking closely at how the local council and the agricultural

enterprise worked together in relation, for example, to housing. The farm management would postpone its contribution to such investments in favour of promoting enterprise matters: “I must get the farm operating profitably before I can develop the village”, said the LPG president to the mayor.¹⁴ Nevertheless house-building projects that served the interests of the LPG members were usually implemented immediately. A suitable modern dwelling was a primary motivation for working in the LPG and an index of improving individual living conditions. If this desire could not be met, there was a danger that young families would not come. The allocation of housing often turned into a complicated exchange process involving many families.¹⁵ Besides improving the local infrastructure, the agricultural cooperatives increasingly participated in building houses of culture. The supply of medical services reached urban levels; the daily provision of foodstuffs improved. It is hardly surprising that all of the women interviewed who took up work after 1975 stressed that, as far as its social and culture offer was concerned, Golzow “was like a town”.

These observations permit a number of conclusions from a gender perspective about the development of the LPG. At first the underdevelopment caused by the war helped emancipation efforts in the framework of the collectivization process. Women above all profited from this process when countering the negative consequences of the 1945 land reform. The resilient productive basis of the LPG, the resources it offered for participating in the informal exchange economy as well as the political interconnectedness and negotiation skills of its management were decisive factors for improving the living conditions of village women as well as general village development. In addition, the increasing significance of individual plots as a second leg to stand on for family incomes cannot be underestimated. They permitted women to negotiate self-confidently sex roles in agriculture and to demand solutions for women-specific everyday needs.

The strategic management of social difference and women-specific expectations through the LPG also supported the economic success of the enterprise, especially from the 1970s. On the one hand, women often accepted low salaries in return for which they could expect family-friendly workplaces and continuity, prompting the conclusion that insisting on a traditional, conservative division of labour roles among the rural families of the LPG could be used for their economic success. On the other hand, it is clear that specific instruments of GDR women’s policy as applied to the LPG were introduced (and earlier than elsewhere) to strengthen further, through innovative potential, the good economic results of the cooperative and to take forward its lead in production.

Abbreviations

AFG : Archiv Filmmuseum Golzow (Film Museum Archive Golzow)

AAG : Archiv Amt Golzow (Municipal Archive Golzow)

KAS : Kreisarchiv Seelow (District Archive Seelow)

Notes

1. Interview with A. Kaminsky, Director of the Federal Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship, MOZ online, 9.9.2017.
2. The documentary film "Die Kinder von Golzow" (The Children of Golzow) begins with children in the first class of a newly built village school based on the socialist model. It is allegedly the longest documentary in the history of cinema. It thus became the most influential contemporary document for the depiction and discussion of everyday life and identity formation in East Germany.
3. AFG, INT R. Ramm: Warum Golzow?
4. INT H. Hulitschke, Dorfmuseum Friedrichsaue, 22.02.2017.
5. AAG, Ordner 2051, Bodenreform. The rotation of small plots created in the land reform continued for various reasons throughout the 1950s and 1960s in the GDR (cf. Projektgruppe Umsiedlerin 2015).
AAG, Ordner 2051, Bodenreform. The rotation of small plots created in the land reform continued for various reasons throughout the 1950s and 1960s in the GDR (cf. Projektgruppe Umsiedlerin 2015).
6. AAG, Ordner 2053, devastierte Betriebe.
7. Names of individuals have been changed where necessary.
8. KAS, Ordner Neuentempel, Bl. 12.
9. KAS, Ordner Golzow 1, Bl. RdK, 1957.
10. In contrast to the general labour shortage in agriculture, this LPG could choose from a large number of applicants (INT Just, 27.7.2017).
11. INT H. Oestreich, Leiter Feldbau (Arable farming manager) 3.05.2017.
12. KAS, RdG 26/2/1963. This was true for the whole of the GDR (Roeder 1975).
13. INT F. Just, Leiterin Ausbildung (Training Manager), 27.7.2017.
14. INT H. Riedel I, DDR-Bürgermeister Golzow (GDR mayor of Golzow), 24.05.2017.
15. KAS, RdG 26/2/1963, "Kollege Cromann will mit Frau seßhaft werden ..."

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributor

Maria Hetzer is a trained social anthropologist and performance researcher, received her PhD from the University of Warwick, UK. Her academic expertise derives from studying the history of everyday life in post/socialist contexts in relation to emancipation; rural conflicts and land reforms; tourism and sustainability issues. She is particularly interested to apply and develop practice-led research methods. Her current work base is Berlin.

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