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Gendered Disparities in the German Workforce: Development of Female Labor Union Participation and Current Challenges

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ABSTRACT

With an increasing global female presence in political and economic representation, the continuation of a gendered division of labor and the rise of market flexibility draws into question how historical policies and decision making influence sociocultural-value systems, mobility, and market access in Germany. This paper explores the German labor market through the critical lens of labor union formulation, the dynamics within a German-European Union relationship, and social policy reforms to uncover the reasoning and rationale behind the reinforcement of female labor as precarious. An inclusive discourse on correcting imbalances within the formal/public and informal/private spheres must include the devaluing and exploitation of domestic and feminized labor. For Germany, the consistent segregation of female labor into part-time work and social policies that emphasize motherhood and childrearing stress the historical socioeconomic disincentives to enter and retain work within the productive economy.

KEYWORDS

gendered division of labor, feminization, labor unions, Germany, feminist theory

INTRODUCTION

Although female participation in the labor force has risen across various European states, sociocultural exclusion from the decision-making process on policies and within labor relations has effectively excluded women from entering and remaining in economic markets. For Germany, the position of female labor is one of disproportionality coupled with a wave of global feminization of labor and a reproduction of historical family policy dictated on the breadwinner model. Despite extensive historical involvement in early labor movements, German women, specifically single, unmarried, and migrant women, face an indirect discrimination and thus, the labor market is defined by dichotomized labor stratification, overwhelmingly confined to part-time, domestic, or service-oriented employment. This paper examines the effects of the European debt crisis, welfare reforms, and the current employment market in order to shed light on, not just data compilations, but division of labor as a systemic manifestation influenced and constrained by historical and social policy dynamics. Taking into account the complexities of a conservative-centric welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 1990), German Unification, and post-World War II developments, European integration, and the rise of ordoliberalism, the necessary conditions for fostering an inclusive environment and equalized labor rights are absent. Participation remains stagnant, with 47% of women comprising the total formal workforce since 2008 (currently at 33.9% for full-time and 79.5% for part-time labor) and a high gender employment wage gap of 22% compared to the European Union (EU) average of 16% (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2013). Furthermore, the division of full-time and part-time positions underscores the entrenched traditional division of labor in the German economy, emphasized through a longstanding value system of gender-based dualism.

Access to the labor market can be represented through empirical data, i.e. total female participation in the workforce and the gender pay differentials, but beyond mere percentages, factors of part-time and informal markets signify a dependent patriarchal exploitation of labor (Mies, 1998) (Young, 1996). The existence of a gendered division of labor—the system of labor that segregates type of work and available market access by sex/gender—is not a singular occurrence or novel to political, economic, and cultural research (Peterson, 2012). It is a reflection of an overall decreasing trend of labor rights in a globalized market and an increasing influx of immigration and asylum seekers, simultaneous with higher rates of gender visibility and attention to inclusive social stability that indicates an omnipresent questioning of a state's role in economic growth (Ely, 2006) (Ong, 1991). This paper illustrates that when analyzing the persistent female responsibility for domestic production, “the cult of domesticity,” (Keister & Southgate, 2012, p. 228) and the disproportionality of labor markets, there must be a comprehensive discourse on the myriad of factors influencing gender-based labor division. The historical orientation of labor unions, the process of labor feminization, and masculinist public policies sustain a capitalist and patriarchal perspective of female labor as undervalued and unproductive, falling outside of most state regulation (Keister & Southgate, 2012). Starting in the context of European economic transition from feudal to capitalist and the introduction of labor commodification during the industrialization process, surveying the impact of the German welfare system on labor market access, and highlighting the recent reforms to family policy and market challenges during the past two decades, this analysis seeks to uncover the disparities in the German workforce as a historical legacy of policies and institutions that cement definitions of female labor participation as precarious.

DEVELOPMENT OF PARTICIPATION: THE GERMAN ECONOMIC MARKET AND FEMALE LABOR UNIONS

The historical perspective of female involvement in organized labor mirrors the current lopsided distribution of female participation, the prevalence of the gender pay gap, and the attractiveness of flexible labor markets for women. During the twentieth century, the political landscape of Europe witnessed a changing labor market, demanding labor rights and a reversal of social subordination based on class (Canning, 1996). In tandem with industrialization, gender-based movements for universal suffrage, and calls for deeper inclusion of women in labor, dialogues occurred that transformed the pre-World War I European gendered market (Mies, 1998) (Peterson, 2012).

ORGANIZED LABOR AND EMPLOYMENT

The German state and labor unions are linked together through institutionalized means of collective action and bargaining, i.e. wage negotiations, billable hours per week, and parental leave. The organization of female labor and striving for employee rights have carved a history parallel to the masculinist labor and socialist movements of the early-twentieth century. The gendered element of evolving regime ideology is critical in generating an in-depth idea of modern workforce dynamics and class divisions (Ely, 2006). During the mass industrialization, the labor market began to form stringent barriers, restricting women to the home and instilling a separation of male–female/public–private opposition (Canning, 1996). Moreover, the exclusion of women from fully mobilizing consequently fortified the capitalist exploitation of domestic labor. Female workers were unable to fully enter and gain access to the rights afforded to the male–dominated and productive, paid economy (Peterson, 2012).

These general trends in the feminization of labor—a preference for cheap female reproductive labor of caring for the household and preserving human life—were met with opposition. Bands of socialists and feminists called for a new social order that moved away from the idealized concept of workers as skilled and male (Canning, 1996) (Mies, 1998). Clara Zetkin and members of the German Socialist Women’s Movement organized political motives of female liberation around grassroots economic activism via writing, pamphlet distribution, and mass protests, campaigning for legalized political and economic labor protection afforded to the male workforce. The feminist organization was closely linked to the masculinist-centric Social Democratic Party (SPD), relying on party resources and support in the production of activism. In turn, issues of domestic labor and standardized family dynamics were minimized inside the party platform, yet sects of feminists pushed for an uprooting of the internalized heteronormative private structure (Canning, 1996).

In line with [German feminists’] uncritical attitude toward women’s place in the family, socialist women tended to idealize monogamous marriage and the conventional female roles of housewife and mother. Apart from Emma Ihrer’s protest against portraying motherhood as women’s highest goal, Lily Braun’s criticisms of monogamous marriage, and Johanna Löwenherz’s defense of lesbian love, few voices were raised in the socialist camp against the propagation of conventional views of motherhood, marriage, or love. (Honeycutt, 1979, p. 38)

Clinging to the idea of a future socialist regime, the dominant feminist movement in Germany disregarded the importance of shifting gender roles and correcting the exploitation of

female labor in the home/private sphere through structural change. Therefore, the legacy of female accountability to precarious labor and sociocultural demands of upholding the family endured and allowed for a continuous accumulation of a gendered division of labor.

Still, waves of female radicalization in factory markets, e.g. textile production, defied gender roles within labor sectors, and the male-led socialist reforms railed against the transition of male industrial labor to female-dominated. The fight to maintain a masculine-controlled industry, supported through formal organizing in Christian-based unions like the Social Democratic Textile Union (DTAV) and other craft guilds (*Innung*), governed German social policy from the late-nineteenth century through the First World War, aiming to define the place and position of women in the formal workforce. The feminization of the textile industry resulted in women “[shaping] the world behind the mill gate as they steeped into the contested domain of the factory and sought to render compatible the two spheres of labor (domestic and industrial) they now inhabited” (Canning, 1996, p. 217). Despite the absence of property rights or suffrage, women began to form communal objectives through organized protests and assemblies urging the state for a reversal of patriarchal labor and social structures; factions of socialist feminists in Germany and throughout Europe strove to stress, “the gendered specificity of class by broadening the lens of analysis beyond the ‘shop floor’ and the waged economy to include the family and private sphere as domains of labor and domestic relations as class relations” (Freeman, 2014, p. 23). The introduction of women into the formal workforce and the warring between mainstream labor unions and counter-organizations of female labor during the era of industrialization places the current market disproportions into an overarching scheme connecting the twenty-first century struggle of balancing reproductive and productive labor (Peterson, 2012) into a historical context, explaining prolonged levels of uneven participation, access, and mobility of female labor.

THE GERMAN SOCIAL WELFARE SYSTEM

Collectively with dominant views of heteronormative supremacy within socialist and feminist movements, state institutions narrowed the access and security prospects of female labor. The gendered power division between public and private work, formal and informal, remains a barrier to complete market mobility for women. State institutions are comprised of “systematic gendered arrangements of [patriarchal] power and privilege” (Beckwith, 2005, p. 583) that isolate women from political representation or influence (Poloni-Staudinger & Ortvals, 2011). The welfare system conducted by the German state is a mix of liberal and interventional, interconnected with the social market economy and ordoliberalism. A strong dedication to correcting market disparities, coupled with a pervasive conservative implementation of family policy, subjects women to conflicting demands. Although the part-time workforce in Germany does not suffer in legal-benefit terms, the funneling of female labor into certain jobs denotes a larger problem in the division of labor: the factor of gender in employment, based on state economic policy and cultural bias, curtails women from joining certain sectors of the labor market and bolsters the trope of maternal necessity (Lane, 2005) (Young, 1996). Overall, women remain recipients of welfare and men active in policy creation and decision making that, in turn, shapes the amount of traditionalism and gender equality legislation. Despite improvements to employment opportunities, women are still subordinate in, not only achieving access to full-time jobs in a variety of markets, but also the sociopolitical position produced by the unpaid division of labor: the occupational structure of domesticity (Ferree, 2010).

The idea of dualism—balancing childrearing and employment—is ingrained into the German social welfare system. Issues of the double shift in labor participation and of motherhood reflect the archetypal orientation of longstanding family policies formed via a historical emphasis on the domestication of women and the syphoning of all female labor into part-time domestic or feminized labor (Chin, 2010). The combination of relatively unchanged legislation grounded in the breadwinner model and low full-time employment underpins the institutionalized gender regime of the German economic market, compounded by masculinist power politics (Young, 1996). The subjecting extent of the social welfare system affects subcategories of women, i.e. married/unmarried, amount of children, women of color, socioeconomic class, and citizenship status, unequally. While mothers are faced with discontinuous employment and obstacles of child/home/work dynamics, single women do not receive the same amount of welfare (Daly, 2000). Migrant women are concentrated in domestic sectors; jobs are highly feminized (devalued labor), and unregulated, bringing to light intersectional issues of political identity/citizenship and access to economic opportunity (Donato, Piya, & Jacobs, 2014) (Gutiérrez, 2010) (Peterson, 2012). The key facet of the welfare system in Germany is the amount of socio-normative standards it both triggers and sustains (Emmenegger, 2012).

To equalize the welfare system and increase the entry and longevity of female employment, post-unification East Germany and, to a lesser extent, West Germany, went through broad economic and social policy restructuring through market liberalization and increased privatization, resulting in an intensified demand for flexible labor and increased internalization of governmentality (Hardt & Negri, 2000). “Market reforms magnified existing, or created new, social inequalities to do with socio-economic positions, age, and care responsibilities” (Fotaki, Böhm, & Hassard, 2010, p. 646). Even still, the benefits of playing into the traditional motherhood role—specifically, maternity leave, childcare, child stipends, and education—come with a cost. The institutionalized network of fostering motherhood in the German welfare system creates a normative idea of women as a passive actors in economic, political, and social markets. As Gangl and Ziefle (2009) explain,

Even though parental leave policy is clearly effective in limiting involuntary employer change and other adverse direct effects of lengthy work interruptions, a more worrisome side effect of Germany’s extensive entitlements may be that traditional gender roles are reinforced, which then also indirectly weakens mothers’ position[s] in the labor market through reinforcing respective employer expectations. (p. 364)

The position of women in the German labor market is confined by the sedated growth in progressive and diverse social policy, but relative advancements for certain groups of women are visible. The Act on the Protection of Working Mothers/Maternity Protection Act (*Gesetz zum Schutze der erwerbstätigen Mutter/Mutterschutzgesetz*) (2002), Public Child-care Expansion (*Kinderförderungsgesetz*) (2008), Maternity Benefits (*Mutterschaftsgeld*) (which includes maternity leave, health care in-hospital or in-home, and family assistance), Federal Child Benefit Act (*Bundeskindergeldgesetz*) (amended in 2013), the Advance Payment of Maintenance Act (*Unterhaltsvorschussgesetz*) (2010), and Parental Allowance and Leave (*Bundeselternzeitgesetz*) (BEEG) (amended in 2013) have structured issues of female responsibility for childcare to a more gender-neutral ideology and expanded the protection/security of single-parent households (European Commission, 2015). Nevertheless, the highly intertwined social welfare system and the employment market uphold the irregular levels of female labor participation through restricting access to state benefits based on adherence to a conservative model of the family.

EUROPEAN UNION

The history of German labor and gender composition is incomplete without a focus on European Union integration and policy generation. Cooperation and convergence between EU-level actors and Member States cultivates normative practices that promote the collection of social and cultural standards for gender-based policy construction. Article Thirty-Three of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union states, “To reconcile family and professional life, everyone shall have the right to protection from dismissal for a reason connected with maternity and the right to paid maternity leave and to parental leave following the birth or adoption of a child” (European Parliament, 2000, p. 16). The introduction of EU-level equal opportunity legislation illustrates an additional factor for interpreting the role of female labor and extent of availability to markets in a more regionalized milieu (Garcia & Monk, 1996) (Lombardo & Meier, 2006). Germany and other Member States face compliance to social policies or directives of gender equality, in combination with the balancing of state sovereignty and policy preferences. With the introduction of the Strategy for Equality between Women and Men (2010–2015) and the European Pact for Gender Equality (2011–2020), the European Union reaffirmed the necessity of building diverse and inclusive representation in the labor market and in areas of political participation in Member State governments and EU-level positions (Council of the European Union, 2011) (European Commission, 2010) (Lombardo & Meier, 2006). The role of the European Union on German institutional and social structures directly affects the extent of transformation of gender hierarchies of power. The inconsistencies of gender inclusion within the EU Member States are a reflection of uneven political and economic growth, leaving residual consequences of regime transition (Garcia & Monk, 1996) (Rubery, Smith, & Fagan, 1999).

The explicit gendered creation of a family-policy framework at the European Union-level demonstrates a partial encapsulation of labor within a feminist discourse, but does not extend to the full array of gender-based political or economic complexities. The equality agenda of the EU fails to address the issues of class, gender, and race intersectionality, i.e. policies are framed around political/institutional representation and structural problems of labor access, but do not confront the domination-subordination power gap in elite continuation. Objectives are outlined as quantitative goals, and not a radical upheaval of systematic divisions of all sexes/genders.

To ‘encourage women’ is an ambiguous message, which provides women with resources for entering politics, but reveals a patronizing idea that women need support, while men do not need training and information on the causes of male domination in politics, its effects on women or the development of more gender-equal attitudes. (Lombardo & Meier, 2006, p. 157)

Even though this process of Europeanized social policies of increasing gender equality are produced as nonbinding measures, understanding power relations as surface level molds the sociocultural-value systems in Member States through policies aiming to aid women in balancing domestic obligations and full-time employment. This does not solve the underlying issue of normative and patriarchal gender standards. Instead, these reforms shift focus on women and lack an intricate picture of traditional gender roles. Solutions to market disparities at both the German and EU-level focus on female labor participation and not on a reexamination of masculinist political power or male roles in domestic labor/childcare, and thus, deepen the gendered division of labor.

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES FOR GERMAN FEMALE LABOR: THE EUROPEAN DEBT CRISES AND BEYOND

Labor opportunities and the social construction of gendered expectations are built by merging factors of historical organization and legal protection, interactions between workers and state via policy on a domestic and multinational stage, and the impact of welfare and entitlement programs on shaping identity and gender roles. Female labor can, in many ways, be established as a flexible but stable part of the German economy (Ferree, 2010). External shocks to monetary and fiscal policy, e.g. the European debt crises, have negatively altered the progression of equalized employment, which has been exacerbated by historical disproportionality of the gender regime in systems of social and economic ideology.

EUROPEAN DEBT CRISES

The present marginalization of female labor has immediate connections to the fluctuating economic stability throughout Europe and the subsequent status change of Germany's role in EU-level policy formulation. The European debt crises contracted employment and production, and furthermore, the concurrent changes to social policies in response to stricter, liberalized economic authority asymmetrically hindered the ability of female labor participation in Germany. The platform for family and social policy under the Grand Coalition (2005–2009) of the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) and the SPD outlined a strong emphasis on poverty alleviation, increasing the birth rate, and strengthening of the family–work functionality vis-à-vis an increased dual-earner model and greater benefits for single-parent households (Ferree, 2010). The instability of the political economy exaggerated enduring and recurrent gender labor divisions.

As the financial crisis escalated, unemployment settled at around 8% in 2009, and the German state instituted short-time work schemes to encourage reduced hours instead of massive layoffs, i.e. “preserving jobs” (OECD, 2009, p. 2) (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2015). Additionally, social insurance payments decreased and new, temporary subsidies were introduced to further protect workers in times of economic downturn. In “Employment Outlook 2009: How does Germany compare?,” the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) pinpoints the problematic side of short-time work schemes: “A more general concern is that many low-paid workers, including those taking up a new low-wage or part-time jobs, do not benefit from generous short-time work schemes” (p. 2). At the onset of the European debt crisis, women occupied 80% (down from the 2000 rate of 85%) of part-time employment (International Labour Office, 2010). This extensive period of economic instability resulted in a decreased parental allowance and a promotion of flexible labor (Emmenegger, 2012) (Fotaki, Böhm, & Hassard, 2010). The European debt crisis forced extensive restructuring of the German social welfare system, curbing distribution and reallocating resources towards combating unemployment. Since a majority of female labor remains limited to low-mobility and high-turnover employment, the economic recession only aggravated the already vulnerable feminized markets of care, public, and service-based sectors. With responses of monetary and fiscal policy targeting full-time employment losses in male-dominated sectors and simultaneous decreasing of public spending and welfare expenditures, female workers suffered from diminishing socioeconomic benefits (European Commission, 2009).

CURRENT ISSUES IN FEMALE LABOR PARTICIPATION

Women are effectively isolated into occupations at the bottom end of employment hierarchies: female labor is concentrated within the service sector of the economy. Two-thirds of service-industry employees are women; 66% of women occupy clerical support jobs compared to the 29% of women employed in management positions, as legislators or senior officials (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2013). However, this number will soon rise significantly in light of gender-based corporate boardroom quota legislation: 30% of all supervisory boards in Germany must be comprised of women, echoing similar targets set in Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain (Smale & Miller, 2015). Regardless of these quotas, the majority of jobs held by women and the opportunities for advancement are limited in range. The segregation of occupation has a significant ramification for labor-union membership. Around 55% of all German workers are covered by collective bargaining agreements, with high proportions representing manual labor, craft, industrial, and agricultural sectors where women have historically low levels of employment participation. The largest umbrella organization, the Confederation of German Trade Unions (DGB), represents more than six million workers, 32.97% of whom are women (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2010). Compared to the EU average female unemployment rate of 10.3%, the German female labor market (4.6% unemployment) maintains high levels of continual employment from the pool of regularly active workers (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2015). Even with baseline data of European and German female labor participation, the repercussions of historical exclusion, the debt crisis, and external turmoil do not touch upon the divisions within the dichotomized gendered market (the underrepresentation of migrant women and gender nonconforming individuals in statistical research) add another layer to confront and correct current solutions to labor imbalances.

With high employment and a rebounding economy, issues surrounding gender disparities are systematically minimized. The evolution to an accumulative gender-neutral family policy puts female workers in a position of security and opportunity more so than in decades past, but the German market's relationship with female labor can be understood, not by the absence of state capacity or intervention, but through prescriptive gendered terms within policies surrounding labor and social benefits. The reforms to the social welfare state do not stray away from heteronormative ideas of family and social hierarchies. The female labor market is defined by a lack of mobility, an erosion of access to a whole host of formal economic opportunities, and compounded pressures of family and domestic labor. Coupled with a low incentive to enter full-time employment, the German female labor market suffers from the "inactivity trap" (financial disincentives) and "low-wage trap" (rate of tax increases in correlation with worker productivity) (European Commission, 2013, p. 7). The grasp of German gender inequality in the labor market is summarized through a historical concentration of women in domestic labor and the relatively unaltered traditional/conservative family policy. The depoliticizing and disintegration of labor, especially female labor, mirrors the fragmented identity of civil society in a wave of globalization (Ferree, 2010) (Fotaki, Böhm, & Hassard, 2010). Although a transition from the breadwinner model to a more equalized, gender-neutral system occurred, the family and social-policy reconstruction is sluggish and continues to enforce a domestic labor role for mothers and fosters an incentive for childbearing, a disconcerting trend harkening back to the industrialization era of the feminized textile markets and the relatively unquestioned aims of motherhood and marriage (Mätzke & Ostner, 2010).

CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates that the analysis of systematic labor division is more than a group of indicators for effective participation or representation of women in the German workforce. The question of why a gendered division of labor persists falls into the realm of understanding the female labor market as a combination of social values dictated into policy and decision making through a historical culmination of anticipating or reacting to economic fluctuations. A thorough discourse on the current German labor market must begin with the wave of industrialization and the rise of labor organizations, developments to the German social welfare system, and the integration of the European Union, moving towards the European debt crisis and changing employment markets. Female participation in the labor force is relatively high in Germany and throughout the EU, but a more nuanced analysis reveals that most women are employed part-time and compensated less than their male counterparts with equal qualifications. The concentration of policy frameworks on representation and structural adjustments creates an illusion of gender equality where quantitative data is seen as an end point versus a start point, thus masking the historical capitalist perpetration of female labor exploitation and the upholding of Eurocentric interpretations of gender roles. Moreover, types of labor and pay inequalities are amplified by the longstanding, embedded ideals of female household responsibility. Traditional explanations for feminization of labor hinge on the rise of neoliberalism highlighted in the absence of state involvement in regulated economic equality, forcing a decline in civil organization. However, the German economic model diverges, underscoring the importance of illustrating the institutionalized framework of labor-market division. A full conclusion on the problematic notions of a gendered division of labor must extend beyond quotas or percentages of representation to a discourse on domestic-labor exploitation on the foundation of gender identity.

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