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Rural Women in East German Society

(Bettina van Hoven-Iganski, *Made in the GDR. The Changing Geographies of Women in the Post-Socialist Rural Society in Mecklenburg-Westpomerania*, Koninklijk Nederlands Aardrijkskundig Genootschap, Faculteit der Ruimtelijke Wetenschappen, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, Utrecht/Groningen 2000)

The system transformation influenced many aspects of the daily life of the inhabitants of Central and Eastern Europe. Democracy and the free market imposed new principles of functioning at the macro-social (the state), the mezzo- and the micro-social levels (local communities, families). The new phenomena may be analysed from various points of view. As a point of reference the author of *The Changing Geographies of Women...* chose women inhabitants of the countryside (as a researched social group) as well as generally assuming their position in society and the profit resulting from that fact (power, privilege or prestige). She analyses the current position of women living in the German countryside in the context of the social roles they fulfil, their expectations as well as society's expectations. "This research critically analyses the impact of social transformation resulting from German unification on women in rural areas" (p. 15).

The research area selected by the author is not incidental. Mecklenburg-Pomerania was covered in the research, which is particularly significant for somebody interested in rural areas. This is a typically agricultural region, with a low population density, poor infrastructure, relatively poor soil, high unemployment (22% of women unemployed, compared with 8% in Western Germany in 1997). This region is perceived as being "redder" than the remaining regions of the former GDR and statistics portrayed by the author clearly indicate a "cool" evaluation of the unification process as well as

a positive attitude towards the former regime. Women's views on unification are decidedly more negative than men's. In national research carried out in 1993 43% of women as opposed to 64% of men stated they were "happy about unification" (p. 79). In the villages studied by the author changes were evaluated not only regarding its positive effects but also unemployment, alcoholism and socio-political apathy which spread among the inhabitants.

The data collected in this research is not representative of the agricultural areas of Eastern Germany, however Bettina van Hoven-Iganski's goals did not compel her to use hard, quantitative methods. For the author qualitative data, collected between 1996 and 1998 (including pilot research) was more important than quantitative data. The research is of a monographic nature (in this case concerning a community of women within the context of the place they live and work in).

Data was collected in various ways: by correspondence (the author made an announcement in the press, presenting the topic of her work and invited women who showed an interest to work with her), interviews with key informants, discussions with women, daily observation, incidental conversations. These are rounded off with an analysis of the documents, official statistics, press articles. The research method can be characterized by the "human coefficient" appearing in the applied method, as well as the author's very emotional involvement in the research process (proof of which is the very personal approach towards the researched women).

Bettina van Hoven-Iganski's considerations based on the collected data are well established in certain conceptual and theoretical assumptions. For the author a point of reference on the one hand, are feminist concepts, considering women as a marginalized group, functioning within social reality which is somewhat different to the one men function in and on the other, theoretical concepts confirming the importance of grounded theory, creating and verifying hypotheses using an empirical base.

The author places great importance on the past on the basis of which she presents women's present situation in Mecklenburg-Pomerania. Her work contains reliably presented basic facts which influenced the social position of women, not only in the past (during the period of the GDR) but also nowadays (during the time of adaptation of rural areas in Eastern Germany to EU standards, the market economy and democracy).

This study shows the great influence the process of the unification of Germany had on the daily lives of the inhabitants of the researched areas, evaluated by them rather more negatively than positively. The basic questions which the author answers concern women's feelings and experiences resulting from unification, the consequences of this process both in family and professional life as well as social activity and political involvement. The consequences connected with changes in agricultural structure and with the

dramatic winding up of the LPG,¹ the sale of land to former owners (described as *colonization*) and to people with large funds for doing business in the new conditions etc. are also of considerable significance. In addition, agricultural mechanization is causing a rise in unemployment in the researched area. Job loss brings about a deterioration of local communities. Women are far more affected by this marginalization than men. This problem is not only connected with unemployment since for women the LPG was not only their workplace, it was more than that, it was their village (p. 144).

The problem of rebuilding identity emerges here. It is all the more complicated since alternating together with the rationalization of managing agriculture (in economic terms — the free market, as well as the structure of farming), there is ideology, which in recent years influenced the creation of the identity of women living in the countryside. On the one hand, a woman was not only appreciated as a good mother, wife and “carer of the family hearth” but also as a good worker, a person earning an income (not supported by her husband), working for the community. This identity — of a woman combining family duties with professional work, independent and having an influence on socio-political life, was propagated and reinforced by the “system”: the media and so-called *Frauenpolitik*.

The author pointing to the unreality of that independence controlled by men and by the party, emphasizes the difficulties of accepting a new free-market identity, pushing women to the role of being only mothers and wives. In the past, the role of worker was aided by the social system — children’s and medical care, etc. Nowadays, women have to get more involved in housework than they did in the past. Institutions connected with health care, social security, schools, kindergartens often do not exist in the village but a dozen or several dozen kilometres away. Approximately 1/3 of the researched women did not have a car or driving licence and taking the poor public transport system into account, in addition to their mentality, another cause of women’s marginalization can here be identified. Although women are often better qualified for certain posts, they are the losers in the employment battle with men. The author attempts to reach the causes of this state of affairs and so also the reasons of women’s marginalization. “The respondents referred to male attributes such as greater confidence and flexibility rather than qualification which were predominantly equivalent to those of women” (p. 205).

The author pointed at the particular significance in the differences in the nature of work or looking at this in a wider sense — the functioning of women and men within the LPG in the local community: women — more collective, the creation of a specific network of social links (duties, formal

¹ LPG — Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaft (agricultural co-operative).

and informal contacts), men — working, generally individually, more mobile due to the nature of their jobs. This fact has rather a strong influence on women's current misfortunes on the job market as well as the formation of new identities, "constructed through relations with others rather than, as in the case with men, through the separation of self from others" (p. 205).

Describing many aspects of the daily lives of women in the countryside in the context of the process of the unification of Germany the author raises various issues — linking family and professional life, participation in political life, unemployment etc. which she analyses in relation to the past, the present, the domination of men, restructurization of agriculture etc. It is impossible to present them all here. The author's account of EU structural policy is worth taking into consideration — particularly the community initiative EQUAL, whose purpose is among others to provide men and women with equal opportunities on the labour market, doing away with the marginalization of certain social groups, including women. Being considered a "delayed" area (in comparison with the goals of structural policy), the women's milieu researched by the author may make use of EU development funds. Using concrete initiatives as an example, Bettina van Hoven-Iganski (without referring directly to EU policy) shows, amongst others, the difficulties of implementing certain programmes, how the expectations of civil servants and people acquiring assistance can differ, training, courses etc., the importance of recognizing local needs and potential as well as the expectations and predisposition of specific people.

The Changing Geographies of Women... may also be analysed from another viewpoint. It represents a good source for comparing the situation in the rural areas of Eastern Germany to the situation in other post-socialist countries such as Poland. In the summer of 1997 I took part in qualitative research commissioned by the World Bank about "Poverty in regions of high unemployment". The research was primarily aimed at women living in rural areas which were formerly dominated by state farms.² It so happens that there is a considerable similarity between problems in the rural areas of post-socialist countries. While reading Bettina van Hoven-Iganski's work I often had the impression that she was describing specific areas in Poland rather than a region in Germany.

Those who are not interested in feminist issues should not be put off from reading this book due to its "women's" aspect of analysing the present German countryside. The author does refer to the history of the process of nationalization of farms and the formation of the LPG as well as the current changes in the German countryside.

² Information on the research methodology, selected method, results and analyses are part of a report prepared for the World Bank. The report is available at the Institute of Sociology, Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń.