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THE NEW YORK TIMES

In Germany, a Tradition Falls, and Women Rise

By Katrin Bennhold
January 17, 2010

NEUÖTTING, Germany — Manuela Maier was branded a bad mother. A Rabenmutter, or raven mother, after the black bird that pushes chicks out of the nest. She was ostracized by other mothers, berated by neighbors and family, and screamed at in a local store.

Her crime? Signing up her 9-year-old son when the local primary school first offered lunch and afternoon classes last autumn — and returning to work.

"I was told: 'Why do you have children if you can't take care of them?'" said Ms. Maier, 47. By comparison, having a first son out of wedlock 21 years ago raised few eyebrows in this traditional Bavarian town, she said.

Ten years into the 21st century, most schools in Germany still end at lunchtime, a tradition that dates back nearly 250 years. That has powerfully sustained the housewife/mother image of German lore and was long credited with producing well-bred, well-read burghers.

Modern Germany may be run by a woman — Chancellor Angela Merkel, routinely called the world's most powerful female politician — but it seems no coincidence that she is childless.

Across the developed world, a combination of the effects of birth control, social change, political progress and economic necessity has produced a tipping point: numerically, women now match or overtake men in the work force and in education.

In the developing world, too, the striving of women and girls for schooling, small loans and status is part of another immense upheaval: the rise of nations in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

In both these worlds, women can remain trapped by tradition. Now, a social revolution — peaceful, but profound — is driving a search for new ways of combining family life and motherhood with a more powerful role for women.

Westerners are quick to denounce customs in, say, the Muslim world that they perceive as limiting women. But in Germany, despite its vaunted modernity, a traditional perception of motherhood lingers.

The half-day school system survived feudalism, the rise and demise of Hitler's mother cult, the women's movement of the 1970s and reunification with East Germany.

Now, in the face of economic necessity, it is crumbling: one of the lowest birthrates in the world, the specter of labor shortages and slipping education standards have prompted a rethink. Since 2003, nearly a fifth of Germany's 40,000 schools have phased in afternoon programs, and more plan to follow suit.

"This is a taboo we just can't afford anymore; the country needs women to be able to both work and have children," said Ursula von der Leyen, the German labor minister. A mother of seven and doctor-turned-politician, she baffles housewives and childless career women alike, not to mention many men in her Christian Democratic Union.

The spread of all-day schooling in Germany, a trend she considers "irreversible," is a sign of the times, Ms. von der Leyen said in an interview. "The 21st century belongs to women."

Women already form the majority of university graduates in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which groups 30 nations from Europe to the United States to Turkey and South Korea; this year, women will become the majority of the American work force.

Add to that an economic crisis that has hurt traditional male jobs in manufacturing harder than female ones in services — in Germany, only 10,000 of the 230,000 who have lost jobs in the slump were women — and the female factor emerges as stark.

Everywhere, women still earn less, are more likely to work part time and less likely to hold top jobs. But young female doctors, for instance, are rising in numbers, and women dominate middle management in major consumer companies. They could run the hospitals and corporations of tomorrow. Many will be family breadwinners; in Germany, every fifth household is already sustained by female income.

Working women seek not just a paycheck, but also fulfillment of ambitions, both personal and professional. "I love my son, and I love my work," said Manuela Schwesig, 35, the new deputy leader of the opposition Social Democrats, who is the mother of a 3-year-old. "I am a more fulfilled mother for working and a more motivated politician for having a child."

This trend turns the question of child care into one of economic

competitiveness, notes Karen Hagemann, professor of European and gender history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "High birthrates and female employment rates tend to move together," said Ms. Hagemann, an expert on the German care system. "Child care and a school system that covers the working day is key."

Why Germany is special

In 1763, Prussia was ahead of its time, the first country to make education compulsory for its lower classes. The half-day system evolved in a family economy that depended on child labor. By the time France and Britain set up all-day systems a century later, the German way — which survives in Austria and parts of Switzerland — had already grown deep roots.

Staunch defenders are not just socially conservative politicians or clerics. Germany's middle classes long believed that they, not the state, should round out children's general culture. No school, the thinking went, could improve on a mother.

Edith Brunner, 41, is that German model mother. A qualified tax adviser and who has four children, she went part time after her first child and then gave up work altogether. She spends afternoons checking schoolwork and shuttling from flute and piano lessons to soccer training and gymnastics tournaments. Her husband is a well-paid physicist.

Ms. Brunner's example provides a strong argument for those opposing all-day school. But her type is increasingly rare.

Today, highly qualified women — and there are more of them than ever — tend to want to work, even if that means forgoing children; by their mid-40s, one in three German women live in childless households, the highest proportion in Europe along with Austria. At the same time, more and more women need to work, either as single mothers or because their partner cannot support a family alone.

Now, said Ms. Schwesig, who is also family minister in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, a northeastern state, the mothers who stay at home are increasingly those with less education and sometimes an immigrant background, those whose children would, in her view, "benefit the most from visiting a childcare facility all day."

In late 2001, an O.E.C.D. study of literacy skills of 15-year-olds stunned Germany by ranking it 21st out of 27 and among the last in terms of social mobility, even though it has Europe's largest economy. Two years later, the government, Social Democratic at the time, made available €4 billion, or $5.7 billion, to introduce all-day programs at 10,000 schools by 2009. In the end, some 7,200 schools took part, joining a small existing stock.

Intentionally or not, the mostly male establishment unleashed a long-incipient power: mothers chafing to work who needed longer school hours.

In the rectory next to Neuötting's 15th-century St. Nicolas Roman Catholic Church, the priest, Florian Wöss, reluctantly accepts the change. His parish runs two kindergartens for children over 3. More mothers have asked him to accept younger children. "I don't like the fact that more mothers feel they have to hand over their children and go to work," he said. "But it is a reality."

Local clergy debated whether to stall the trend by simply refusing, he said. "We came to the conclusion that the pressure is so overwhelming and so multilayered that we can't stop it."

Wolfgang Gruber of the Bavarian education authority concurs. He uses words like "flood" and "avalanche" to describe the demand for afternoon schooling. From 2006 to 2009, only 40 primary schools in Bavaria converted. This school year, the number of all-day programs shot to 150. The aim is to introduce afternoon classes in 540 of the 2,300 primary schools, Mr. Gruber said.

Even five years ago, all-day schooling in Neuötting seemed unthinkable, Mayor Peter Haugeneder said. There is a crucifix in his office, in every classroom of the Max Fellermeier school and even in the Spanish-themed restaurant run by the gay butcher.

For several mothers, their great-grandmothers' maxim, "Kinder, Küche, Kirche" — children, kitchen, church — holds true, even if, as Mr. Haugeneder says, "increasingly it is a way of life people can't afford."

A caregiver for the elderly, Ms. Maier works in a female-dominated growth sector in aging Germany. Without the €800 she contributes to the family income of €2,400 every month, the Maiers could not run the two cars they depend on in the countryside. She jumped at the chance of afternoon school.

Ms. Maier still frowns when recalling the day last October when she was choosing a new washing machine. The mother of one of her son's friends appeared from nowhere, shouting insults.

Soon, however, sneers turned to sheepish questions about her son's exciting afternoon activities. Several parents tried to sign up midterm — but the program was already oversubscribed. The school plans one extra all-day class a year through 2012, according to the deputy headmaster, Anton Schatz.

Even the angry mother from the store has become quite friendly, Ms. Maier says: "I wouldn't be surprised if she enrolls her own son next year."

An East-West divide

For four decades after World War II, Germany was divided into East and West, now rendering it a social laboratory to study how basics, like school hours, can help shape attitudes.

In the East, a Communist leadership losing male labor to the West set up free day care centers and all-day schools. Women drove

cranes and studied physics. Western wives, by contrast, until 1977 officially needed husbands' permission to work. By then, their Eastern peers had a year of paid maternity leave and shorter work hours if they nursed.

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, female employment in the East was near 90 percent, in the West 55 percent.

Today, 66 percent of German women work. But for those with children under 3, that figure plunges to 32 percent. Only 14 percent of women with one child resume full-time work and only 6 percent of those with two. One result: a birthrate of 1.38 children per woman.

Jana Seipold was an 18-year-old East Berliner when the wall fell. Her mother always worked and put her into day care at eight weeks. When Ms. Seipold's company was swallowed by a Western rival, she met West German women for the first time. "When they had children, they would just disappear," Ms. Seipold, a 38-year-old computer technician, recalls.

Her daughters, Nele, 6, and Ella, 9, attend the Sonnenblumen Grundschule in Treptow, a district in eastern Berlin. Beyond school hours, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., the school offers child care from 6 a.m. until 6 p.m. Monday to Friday and care during school holidays. Berlin is the only city in Germany where every primary school offers afternoon schooling.

In general, the child care infrastructure remains much more developed in the former East: 37 percent of under-3-year-olds have nursery places, compared with 3 percent in the former West.

Such amenities lure Western families like Urte Dally and her husband, Ortwin, who moved to eastern Berlin in 1994 and found it "liberating." Their daughters also attend the Treptow school.

Ms. Dally could afford not to work. Her husband is general secretary of the German Archaeological Institute. But like him, she has a Ph.D. and loves her job at a museum in Saxony. When they travel or work late, they have a nanny, Günther.

"When the girls come home the homework is done, they've had their music lessons and they've done their practice," Ms. Dally said. "That leaves quality time for the family."

What policy can fashion

For too long, says Ms. von der Leyen, social policy in West Germany was hampered by ideology. "Day care and all-day schools were long synonymous with communism," she said. "But other countries tell the same story."

In Europe, Nordic countries have the biggest share of women in the labor market and also, with France, high birthrates. All offer a continuum of support for parents with young children from subsidized care and paid parental leave to all-day schools with off-hour programs, Willem Adema of the O.E.C.D. said.

American mothers do not have the same subsidized child care options, and must cope with the long U.S. summer school break. But they face less discrimination at work and more pressure to earn money to finance private health care and education for their offspring.

As family minister in Ms. Merkel's first term, Ms. von der Leyen introduced tax credits for private child care, more nursery places and her signature measure, "parent money." Mothers and fathers can share up to 14 months of generously paid parental leave. If the father does not take at least two months, the government pays for only 12.

Her aim was to give incentive to women to forgo part of the permitted, barely paid three-year maternity leave, often seen as an impediment to a career, and to encourage men to share in child care.

Before the parent money was introduced in 2007, only about 3 percent of fathers took parental leave. By last year, that had surged to 21 percent — although some 60 percent took only the minimum two months.

What business can do

At Siemens, the 163-year-old industrial symbol of Germany Inc., it was long unknown for a man to take time off for children. Then in 2008, 638 employees took the "father months." Last year, 964 followed suit.

Jill Lee, the company's first chief diversity officer, cares about fathers. She thinks if career breaks become less of a female exception, it helps women.

Ms. Lee, 46, grew up in Singapore and has worked with American, Chinese and Japanese companies. She has never seen anything like what German mothers face. "Some of the same parents who encourage their daughters to go to university then expect them to leave work to care for her child," she said.

Having women — now more than half of German university graduates — out of the work force is beginning to hurt. By 2017, demographers predict a shortfall of 200,000 engineers in Germany, Ms. Lee says.

So Siemens is courting women, and mothers. It has 400 places for employees' children in day care centers near production sites and plans to double that figure by next year. It has a high school science camp for bright female mathematics and physics students and mentors female undergraduates. In Germany, 21 percent of Siemens's staff is female; among new recruits, 34 percent.

What remains hazy is how many women will make it to the top echelons, and how fast. In Germany, only 13 percent of university professors are women. Siemens is the only one of the top 30 German companies with a woman on its eight-person management board: Barbara Kux, 55, who is unmarried and childless. Only 2 percent of

those running Fortune 500 companies are women.

And, if women's advancement to date has been accepted by men, might conflict loom as calls for next steps — boardroom quotas or mandatory paternity leave — grow louder?

"Many obstacles remain, and a backlash is always possible," said Ms. Hagemann, the history professor in North Carolina. But, in Germany and elsewhere, once unthinkable notions are now being entertained. "All change," she said, requires "a change in the head."

Source:

Bennhold, Katrin (2010, January 17). *In Germany, a Tradition Falls, and Women Rise*. Retrieved from *The New York Times*.

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