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Redefining Their Roles:

WOMEN WORK TO BALANCE DEMANDS OF JOBS, FAMILY

By Tiffany Lee
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At 7 p.m., Dr. Nicola Dankelmann's day is coming to a close. Sitting down in her second-floor private practice in the southwest section of Germany's capital city, the 45-year-old gynecologist has had a long day. On top of seeing her patients, Dankelmann spent extra time catching up on paperwork, now strewn across her desk in uneven stacks. Her voice, though pleasant, hints at fatigue. Dankelmann, however, cannot call it a day just yet. After all, not everyone in the room is tired. For Paulie, it's as if the day is just beginning. Dankelmann's 5-year-old son gleefully bounds around the homey, yellow-and-white office, jabbering continuous streams of monologue, eager to make himself the center of attention. As Paulie begins to perform his signature antic of the night – cracking imaginary eggs over his mother's head – the doctor snaps into mommy mode: Gamely playing along, Dankelmann crinkles her face in disgust as she pulls the gooey "yolk" out of her hair. For her, making the transition from the world of reproductive health to a 5-year-old's fantasyland is all in a day's work. But Dankelmann is something of an anomaly in contemporary Germany – a land where walking the tightrope between motherhood and employment is made especially perilous by a legacy of fascist sexism, social pressure to be a stay-at-home mother and, most importantly, a dangerously weak day care system. For many women the challenge of juggling childrearing and employment is almost impossible.

Anna Held, a single, 31-year-old who works as executive manager of the Leo Baeck Summer University in Jewish Studies, said, "There is some sort of legacy that is hard to overcome, in terms of how people think that women should raise their children or how much time they should stay at home."

For women, the struggle to overcome such a deeply ingrained legacy is exacerbated by the confusing, multifaceted debate in Germany about the female role. Balancing work and family is extremely difficult because government policies encourage women to choose one or the other. Although women can take three years of maternity leave, they often get bumped out of good positions and shuffled into less desirable jobs when they return. Germany's ailing day care system has slots for fewer than 10 percent of the children under age 3, leaving many women with no other choice than to stay at home; few men do so because of the social stigma against full-time fatherhood.

In addition, poor female representation in the business and academic worlds as well as a wage gap between men and women reflect discrimination against females in the workforce.

Gradually, though, Chancellor Angela Merkel and Family Minister Ursula von der Leyen are leading the way toward new family policies in Germany, making it increasingly possible for women to have it all.

Part of the government's motive is economics: Germany's slumping birthrate – about 1.3 children per woman – is one of the lowest in Europe, and citizens are feeling the burn. Germany's dilemma is that it needs a higher birthrate – these children will replenish the workforce years down the road – but many women are reluctant to have children because they want to work themselves.

Germany has an aging population and a deficit of young people, which is causing a sluggish economy and promises future cuts in social benefits. This gloomy prospect is generating support for working mothers because they are necessary to bolster Germany's economy. Right or wrong, then, support for improved day cares and family policies is fueled more by economic woes than a spirit of gender equality.

"We need children," Dankelmann said. "That's a fact. And we need children in good families, so we have to do something."

Held said that although women are increasingly taking on the dual role of mother and careerist, the prevailing German attitude toward these do-it-all females is tepid approval at best and downright rejection at worst. Germans even developed a unique, derogatory word to hurl at working mothers: Rabenmutter – raven mother – a woman who flies away from home and hearth, neglecting her children.

"I get enraged when I even hear that term," Karoline Beck told Spiegel Online, a German news magazine, in September 2005. Beck, a 39-year-old single mother and self-made businesswoman, contin-

ued: "It shows me we really haven't emancipated ourselves from the Third Reich mentality where mothers were expected to stay home and bear the next generation. These days, no one has to stay home to do the wash. There are machines for that."

Statistically speaking, though, it's clear that washing machines are not doing the trick for most German women.

Particularly revealing are numbers from the business world, especially the top tiers of large companies. According to a report released in 2006 by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, women occupy just 24 percent of senior management positions in the private sector. Although the statistics from middle-management positions are more heartening – females hold 41 percent of those jobs – an undeniable glass ceiling exists for German women working in large companies.

"They're not very strong in the business community," said Michael Cullen, a German historian and regular contributor to Germany's Der Tagesspiegel, a liberal newspaper based in Berlin.

The ceiling also extends into academia: Although 50 percent of university graduates are female, fewer than 10 percent of tenured professors are women. Such lopsided numbers do not reflect a lack of motivation, though. The German government's most recent statistics show that just 5 percent of women want to be housewives.

Despite the dismal figures, however, it's not all gloom and doom for Germany's women. Today, they are increasingly able to balance work and children. In large part, the country's heightened focus on gender equity comes from the very top tier of leadership. Chancellor Merkel, the first woman to head the German government, has subtly pushed women's issues up the political agenda.

"I think she's changed family politics," Held said. "That's something I really give her credit for."

Although Merkel rarely deals directly with women's issues, her pick for family minister, von der Leyen, certainly does. Von der Leyen, a mother of seven, is driving efforts to create a family-friendly Germany by promoting higher capacity day care centers and providing "parents' money" for Germans, which since Jan. 1 grants women up to 1,800 Euros, or about $2,400, per month to stay home with their newborns for a year. After the mother returns to work, the father can stay home for another two months and continue to receive the monthly benefit. In theory, the program will prod women to return to work faster than they would under Germany's generous maternity leave policy. Finally, some Germans say, the government is showing support for working mothers.

"This is a big, big step, which is definitely different from the Social Democratic government that we had before," said Katherine Walther, the deputy managing director of the European Academy for Women in Politics and Business, which promotes family-friendly policies. "And, I think, it is a message for the whole society that we have a female chancellor."

Von der Leyen told *The New York Times* in 2006 that her experience at Stanford University in Palo Alto, Calif., in the 1990s sparked her desire to improve Germany's treatment of women. In California, she said, her colleagues didn't blink an eye when they learned of her multiple children. But back in Germany, when her boss heard she was expecting a third child, he told her she would be too drained to work. Her experience reflects the difference between the two cultures' treatment of women. Although the situation is far from perfect in the United States, to some German women, it looks like American females have it easy.

"It's definitely harder in Germany than in the U.S.," Walther said.

The two sides of Germany's governing Grand Coalition have different takes on the role of women in society. While Germany's Social Democrats are fairly receptive to policies that make it easier for women to be part of the workforce, von der Leyen's agenda has drawn criticism from her party, the conservative Christian Democratic Union, which historically promoted a "traditional" family structure with a breadwinner father, a homemaker mother and well-groomed children. But no longer can Germany afford to virtually force women to choose between children and work, a situation that is one cause of the low birthrate. For this reason, policies that integrate women into the workforce are crucial.

The roots of gender inequality in Germany stretch back to the beginning of Adolf Hitler's reign in the 1930s. After gaining the right to vote in 1919, women flourished in the Weimar Republic, making advancements in the arts, education and politics during Germany's experiment with democracy. But as Hitler gradually consolidated power and eventually became chancellor and then *Führer* in 1933, German women saw their rights slowly contract.

Bit by bit, women were put in their place. Hitler's government tightened abortion laws, which had been liberalized during the Weimar Republic. Nazi leaders discouraged women from working outside the home by creating financial incentives and health care benefits for staying home. They deflated the feminist cause, calling for women to serve only as loving mothers and wives.

"During fascism, women were not allowed to work and had to be mothers," Walther said. "This was their achievement in life. Still now we try to overcome this, but it's still there."

Aware that such policies might anger the sophisticated Weimar women, Hitler and his aides sought to glorify the so-called female role. In a 1933 speech, Joseph Goebbels, Nazi propaganda minister, said, "The first, best and most suitable place for the woman is in the family, and her most glorious duty is to give children to her people and nation, children who can continue the line of generations and

who guarantee the immortality of the nation."

Always eager to promote a master race, Nazi leaders claimed that by choosing "pure" German husbands, women were serving their country. In 1933, Hitler launched the Law for the Encouragement of Marriage, which allowed newly married couples to obtain a government loan of 1,000 marks. For each child they had, the couple's loan debt decreased by 25 percent. That meant if a couple had four children, their debt to the government disappeared.

In 1949, four years after Germany's crushing defeat in World War II, the mounting Cold War split the country by ideology. Along with different economic theories came different ideas about the role of German women: In the democratic West, where capitalism flourished with the help of Marshall Plan money, many women retained their roles as homemakers. In the East, however, communist leaders tried to boost productivity by encouraging women to work outside the home. And it wasn't just empty talk – Eastern leaders followed through by building and supporting a strong, high-capacity day care network across their half of the country. Although many of these child care centers closed their doors after the Berlin Wall fell in November 1989, the eastern part of Germany still has a better day care system.

In East Germany even women with children commonly worked, Walther said. "That is still kind of a structure left from that time. There is still child care. Not enough, but still, there is this history."

After East and West united, the Eastern side's support for working mothers was eclipsed by a resurgent belief in stay-at-home mothers, and German women were left with little governmental or societal support. Even now, Walther said, the shadow of Nazi sexism looms large.

"It's a long way to change the mindset, of course."

In addition, many young Germans embrace traditional gender values. Rather than rebelling against stereotypes, up-and-coming Germans seem determined to follow conservative rules, experts say. Ulla Bock, a sociologist at the Free University in Berlin, told *Time Europe* magazine in March 2006, "There are these weird breaks in the emancipatory progress, and we are in one. There are more and more young people who want to live according to the old values."

A recent study commissioned by Germany's family ministry confirmed the conservative revolution: It found that even couples who believe in gender equality are likely to take on traditional gender roles when their first child is born. With this attitude prevailing, the road ahead for aspiring working mothers looks even rougher.

Many German women believe that it's the country's weak day care system that cripples their efforts to become working mothers. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development reported in 2001 that Germany's day cares have enough slots for fewer than 10 percent of the children up to age 3, compared to 64 percent in Denmark, 34 percent in Britain and 29 percent in France. Responding to the deficiency, the German government in April said it plans to triple the number of day care slots for children under 3 to 750,000 by 2013. Although the boost would be a massive improvement for Germany, it would only bring the country up to Europe's average child care capacity, which provides slots for 35 percent of young children.

The day care problem does not plague Germany evenly. In the former East and in urban areas such as Berlin, the problem is less pronounced. Dankelmann, the gynecologist, said Berlin's child care system is strong compared to what exists in Germany's less populous areas.

"In big cities, it's quite normal that women always work," she said. "And in other regions or smaller cities, many of the women stay at home."

The day care problem is compounded by the structure of Germany's half-day school system. Although the popularity of full-day schools is rising – partly because studies have shown that all-day schooling leads to higher test scores – school days ending at noon or 1 p.m. still dominate in Germany. Such scheduling complicates things for German parents, many of whom cannot afford a nanny and lack child care options. In many cases, a stay-at-home parent is a necessity.

Almost every time, it is the mother who takes on that role because a stigma exists against stay-at-home dads. Although von der Leyen has tirelessly pushed for fathers to become more involved in housework and childrearing, most German men cringe at the thought of domestication because they fear they will lose credibility at their jobs. Held, director of the Leo Baeck University, said society does not yet accept men as full-time fathers.

"Here, you would really be looked down upon," she said. "Someone would say, 'Oh, that's probably someone who's not really too interested in his career. He just wants to spend more time at home and reading.' They don't really see how much work it is to stay at home and take care of your children."

Marcia Moser, a graduate student in women's studies at the Free University of Berlin, agreed that German men are far from being integrated into childrearing.

"It's a problem of social respect," she said. "Many men who want to stay at home say they are not taken seriously from their colleagues."

Also controversial is Germany's maternity leave policy, which allows women to take three years of unpaid leave after having a child with the guarantee that they can return to work for the same employer. On its surface, the plan seems to offer women flexibility without the risk of losing their jobs. Dig deeper, though, and the plan's faults are

glaringly obvious. As Walther of the European Academy for Women put it, the policy is misleading: Although mothers are guaranteed a job when they return, they are not necessarily guaranteed the same job they left behind.

"Of course, no company can hold the position free for three years," Walther said, noting that women often do not realize they might be demoted as a result of taking maternity leave. "They are not aware that it is a total break for their careers."

Not only do many women lose high-status positions when they have children, they also lose respect. Before they have children, few German women report overt discrimination at work. After women start a family, it's a different story. Walther said women with children have to work twice as hard to prove themselves

They have to emphasize that they're still interested and ambitious," she said.

The German workforce is treacherous even for women without any children. For starters, the wage gap between men and women is one of the biggest in Europe. On average, German women working full time are paid 23 percent less than their male counterparts. Among European countries, only Germany, Britain, Slovakia and Estonia have wage disparities greater than 20 percent. In the United States, the difference is about 23.5 percent.

To offset corporate discrimination, German women are formulating alternative plans for making money while raising children, the most popular of which is part-time work. Women hold 85 percent of all part-time jobs, and one-third of all employed women work part time. Walther said research done by the European Academy indicates that both women and men who have young children prefer that the woman work part time, the man full time.

"The majority of people, and men, do want women who have a profession and work," she said. "But a lot of them think that it's better that she does this only part time. The (number) of men who say, 'No, I want my wife to stay at home when we're having children' is declining."

Another option is self-employment, which has increased among German women by 60 percent over the past decade, twice the rate of European women as a whole. One such self-employed woman is Dankelmann, the gynecologist in Berlin. In some ways, her experience showcases the benefits of self-employment. She has no male boss to answer to and no colleagues to compete with. Through medical school and years of private practice, she said, she has never felt slighted because of her gender. Had she chosen a different path, though, she said the situation may have been different.

"I never felt any discrimination," Dankelmann said. "But I was never thinking about getting a chief position in the hospital. In other areas, it's harder."

In some ways, Merkel's position as chancellor reflects how deeply conflicted Germans are about the role of women in society. Although Merkel is a shrewd politician, the media coverage early in her term centered on her clothes, makeup and haircut.

"There was, of course, that unpleasant debate in the press about Angela Merkel's personal appearance," said Geertje Huendorf, a public affairs representative at the U.S. Embassy in Berlin. "However, it seems like this is not an issue the press plays with any longer."

Why the change? Reportedly, Merkel spruced up her haircut and freshened her makeup to blunt the criticism. That her appearance was even an issue, though, shows that some Germans still do not take working women seriously, just as some Americans prefer to chat about U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's designer clothes rather than her policies.

"That's a sign of macho society," Held said. "It's totally ridiculous."

Merkel even struggles to gain the support of her fellow German women. For her, there has never been such a thing as female solidarity. During Merkel's run for the chancellery, Alice Schwarzer, Germany's most prominent contemporary feminist, gave Merkel a warning face-to-face: "Dear Ms. Merkel, show us women that you too are a woman. Of course, you're welcome to wear pantsuits and play the male lead in the party. But please don't forget about our concerns." One way Merkel responded to this was by appointing five women to her 15-person cabinet.

Schwarzer's concerns mirrored those of many German women who wondered if Merkel, a childless former scientist, could really empathize with the struggle to balance work and family. One of Merkel's biggest critics was Doris Schröder-Kopf, the wife of her rival for the chancellery, incumbent Gerhard Schröder. Before the election, Schröder-Kopf griped that "Frau Merkel doesn't represent most women's experiences." To some German women, this observation rings true.

"I do not relate to her," said Cordula Von Hinuber, a 28-year-old event planner in Berlin, commenting that as a woman who hopes to marry and raise children someday, she doesn't see Merkel as the ideal female leader.

On the flip side, though, many German women credit Merkel with putting the debate out into the open. Moser, the graduate student, said the Schröder-Merkel race thrust family politics into the spotlight.

"I think the fact that it's discussed so much shows how much the people need to reflect on that," she said.

Gender politics seep into other facets of German life, including military policy, which holds that all men are required to serve while women are not. Even though the rule is a holdover from the Nazi era, officials from the Center for the Transformation of the

Bundeswehr said that women are excused from service because it is the "gentlemanly" thing to do. Capt. Friedhelm Stappen, the center's commander, said that women make up just 5 percent of the professional military, and most of them work in medical services. Even Germany's strongest feminists, though, aren't fighting tooth and nail for the chance to serve in the military.

Moser said, "My opinion is this regulation is a clear (positive) privilege for women." She added that instead of discussing whether women should be required to serve, the national debate centers around whether the army should become volunteer-only.

Old ideas about marriage linger as well, said Marcus Heithecker of Germany's *Die Welt*, a moderately conservative newspaper. Just as an American woman is said to have "married up" if she exchanges vows with a man from a higher socioeconomic class, German women from the East "marry up" if they marry men from the West, Heithecker said. Ideas like these perpetuate the notion that women acquire social mobility through men rather than through their careers, whereas men generally gain status through their jobs.

One of the ugliest gender issues involves Germany's 2.2 million Turkish immigrants. The role of women in the tight, insular Turkish communities differs significantly from the role of so-called "German-German" women. Even more than non-Turkish German women, Turkish women are expected to stay home and care for the children. Some say the sexism is worse among Turks; others believe that Turkish women are more honored and revered for their domestic role than are German women.

Recent violence against Turkish women, however, has raised concerns that the rules for Turkish women are too rigid. During a span of four months in 2005, six Muslim women from Berlin were murdered in "honor killings" carried out by family members to restore the family's honor, which these women allegedly tainted by adapting lifestyles too Western.

One of the victims was Hatin Surucu, a 23-year-old Turkish mother who abandoned her Islamic head scarf and took classes at a technical school. After she began dating German men, her family decided that her way of life was simply too corrupt, and police believe that her three brothers shot her to death at a bus stop in Berlin. Papatya, a Turkish women's group in Berlin, has on record 40 similar "honor killings" in Germany since 1996.

Officials and citizens remain concerned that these murders represent an out-of-control, abusive patriarchal outlook that goes unquestioned in the Turkish community. *Spiegel Online* reported that a 14-year-old Turkish boy responded to the killing of Surucu by saying, "She deserved what she got. The whore lived like a German."

Frightened that such comments reflect the broader mentality of Turkish men, European Union officials have mandated that if Turkey is ever to join the union, it must improve its treatment of women. Cullen, the historian, said he believes such political pressure will improve day-to-day life for Turkish women in Germany.

"They'll have to come up to snuff," he said. "The Turkish men are very macho, and women are kept very, well, in the dark."

Walther, of the European Academy, isn't so quick to point fingers. True, she said, some Turkish women are treated poorly, but German women don't escape these problems, either.

"We also have a lot of German women who are treated badly by their men," she said.

Because Germany's aging population has led to a demand for young workers, the integration of women into the workforce is no longer a question of "if," it's a matter of "how." Without a doubt, the biggest question is how Germans will overcome the old adage of the "three K's" – *Kinder*, *Küche*, *Kirche* (children, kitchen, church) – that traditionally defined the role of women. Academics and everyday women alike want to see family politics taken more seriously.

In addition to taking gender inequity more seriously, Cullen suggests there is more than one way to look at the issue. Although it's nearly universally agreed upon that working women in Germany face a bumpy road, the situation is not wholly the result of sexism, he said. Perhaps women don't want to spend their lives climbing the corporate ladder.

"In Germany, it's a middle-of-the-road kind of thing," Cullen said. "Maybe they don't want to be the chairman of the board or chief executive officer. Maybe they don't strive for that kind of job because you never have the chance to breathe, or read, or go for a walk."

True, not every woman wants to be a CEO, but many German women do hope for the chance to be like Dankelmann, who maintains a successful career and a strong bond with her son. With the new "parents' money" policy, Dankelmann said, more German women will be able to have it all.

"I think with this new regulation more and more women may think about having a child" – even if the balancing act between career and motherhood could be a challenge.

Lee, Tiffany. (2007). Redefining Their Roles: Women work to balance demands of Jobs, family. In *Renovating the Republic: Unified Germany Confronts its History.* University of Nebraska at Lincoln.

QUESTIONS

Directions: Answer the questions after reading the article above. Be prepared to share your findings in class.

1. Why is "walking the tightrope between motherhood and employment" so perilous?

2. List the details of child care support including day care.

3. Why is a birthrate of 1.3 children per woman a serious concern for the country?

4. Explain the use of the derogatory term, Rabenmutter.

5. List the statistics for women in the business and academic world.

6. What effort is the government putting forth to deal directly with women's issues?

7. Discuss a woman's role during the Nazi period.

8. After 1945 how did a woman's role compare between East and West Germany?

9. What are the values prevailing among young Germans?

10. How do stay-at-home fathers factor in?

11. How is the role of a female German Turk similar and/or different?