Chuhan Zheng

Prof. Sabine Lang

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**The Intangible Wall:** Reasons Behind the Psychological Separation Between East and West Germans by Studying Problems that GDR Women Face Post-unification

**Introduction:**

After more than twenty years of reunification of Germany after fall of the wall, though the physical boundary have been removed between the East and the West, the psychological wall that separates East and West Germans seems still exist and will further exist for a long time. After cooling down from the excitement of reunion, people start to realize the differences between two sides in all fields, from more obvious aspects like economic structures, consuming habits, and living style, to more hidden aspects, like social responsibilities, educational background and self-fulfillment. East Germans still feel a distance from Wessis with their different living experience and growing memories from the past. What causes this intangible wall in head and what lead it staying so long and still not disappear after two decades?

In this paper, I reviewed the research paper, peer reviewed paper as well as bibliography books and look for problems and difficulties that women originally from East Germany are facing. From the similarities of all these problems, I found that the root reasons for these mental isolation and separation are: first, the dissolution and forever disappearance of GDR has lead the identity lost of East Germans for belonging of nowhere; and second, the different political regimes and social structures lead to different ideology that was emphasized in East and West, between “individualism” and “socialism”. I focus only on East German women because this is a group that suffered most when facing unemployment, economic reform, childcare policy change, and etc. after reunification. As Rosenberg concluded, they paid “the highest price for unification.” (Rosenberg, 1991) I believe their stories could reflect the most acute conflicts between East and West after re-unification, which the origins of the problems could be easier to see.

**Ambiguous Identity, Nowhere to return**

*“Nothing remains of our childhood country […] I’ve grown afraid that, by always looking forward and never glancing back, we no longer have any idea where we stand. I’d like to retrace where we come from, to rediscover lost memories and forgotten experiences. I only worry whether I’ll be able to find my way back.” – Jana Hensel, 2004*

Though women have different opinions and attitudes toward unification and evaluate their gains and lost differently according to many factors such as their characteristics and jobs, in general they all agree that they do not want to return to the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). (Dodds, 1998) Even not all experiences in the unified country are positive, women still acknowledged the new opportunities that the unification brought and more freedom they gained in the new environment under new policies and regimes. However, this does not mean the nostalgia of their growing land and memories from the childhood disappear. Instead, the experience of growing up in the East has become a part of them that they live with and different from the West Germans. And sometimes, this difference could give them a more objective ideas when looking at life or other things because comparing to people from the West who have only lived under one kind of life, they could have a comparison between different lives in past and present. (Dodds, 1998) Before unification, they thought everything in West German, from the school system to democracy, was better than what they had in the East. The West Germans were smarter and more knowledgeable as well because they had better access to knowledge and had more advanced technology. (Dodds, 1998) However, they found this was not true after living in the unified Germany for years. The democracy wasn’t function as the way they imagined that they were still outsiders of decision making process. Moreover, they could also perform work well even better than their colleagues from the West. Everything about the West might be idealized and exaggerated by them. They were facing even more difficulties of inequalities, discriminations and lack of stable economic support in the new society. They preferred to stay in their original living area where they were familiar with and had no need or willingness to go to the West. (Dodds, 1998) They suddenly realized that not everything from the place they were born was bad and intolerable.

However, there was no place for them to return. As Hensel mentioned she wanted to go back to the neighborhood that she grew up at but was reconstructed and gone, “I can’t help feeling a bit jealous when my West German friends go on about how much they love going home for visits with their folks.” (Hensel, 2004) The GDR was gone, not as a country, but as a territory that was invaded and occupied by Soviet Union and its evil socialism regimes. The unification was implemented under Article 23 of the West German Basic Law, regulating the accession of territory, instead of merging of countries after a equally negotiation between two countries. This has produced a widespread sense of discrimination and exclusion from political decision-making. (Rosenberg, 1996) The laws, regulations, educational system, social institutions, economic structures and more of East German were forced to change to ways of West. (Rosenberg, 1996) GDR was and still is a symbol of the inhuman and corrupted socialism that should be exempted from this democracy society under government’s propaganda. It is often a reason to be blamed for the unacceptable social problems nowadays. Comparing to men, women are usually more sensitive and sentimental to their identities and places of belongs. The disappear of GDR, of their childhood neighborhood, and of their nationalities had lead a insecure and unstable feeling of them. They feel inferior to the women from the West because they have nowhere to return. This loss of identity will still exist for longer period in current generation, which was born in GDR, but might be weakened in future. Descendants who listened to the stories and memories of the past will never have the same feelings like their parents. The gap of the missing identity could be gradually filled with the blurred differences between childhood in East and West.

**Mother or Worker? Individualism vs. Socialism**

The frequent mentioned aspects that women valued above everything else in the unified country is the freedom of travel and less limitation and intervention from the government on their personal life. (Dodds, 1998) For women who are very active in the public events, more traveling allow them to see the world more and enable them to have broader ideas on different issues. Moreover, the chances of free speaking without strict censorship or the possibility of monitoring by Stasi made them feel having more rights of expressing their ideas. (Dodds, 1998)

The biggest problem that most East German women were facing after unification is the different expectation of roles that women should take in a society between former East and the current West regimes they are now living in. (Rosenberg, 1996) This difference was lead by historical reason and has lead to series problems like the inequality and discrimination of women in employment, and the lost of childbirth support. After World War II, comparing to the allies that invested numerous money on the West Germany, the Soviet Union was not able to spend much money on the reconstruction of East Germany since its country was badly damaged during war as well. Thus under the circumstance that the country was extremely lack of the labor force, it was necessary for women to take over as much work as the men did. There were basically no different between girls and boys in school’s education. As Hensel recalled her life in primary school, “[…] we were always prepared to take on responsibility. We had important roles to play. […] I was determined to be a reliable member of the community.” (Hensel, 2004) Girls were assigned same work, like painting the school’s benches or carry the coal up from the cellar, and they also had same opportunities to join the competition and win the prize just like boys did.

However, in the new society after unification, the ideology of West society that women should stay in kitchen and take care of kids has heavily influenced the policy making and brought many frustrations to East women. Women in GDR were encouraged to combine career and motherhood. The combination of career and parenthood was never considered because due to the workload women had to take over, most children were taken care by their grandparents or babysitter. (Beyer, 1992) Due to this ideology difference, fewer women from the East were willing to give birth because of the feeling of unstable and the reduction on the supportive policies such as the paid period and paid amount for maternity leave. Between 1989 and the first half of 1993, the East German birth rate fell by 60% to a level of fertility without recorded precedent even under conditions of war. (Rosenberg, 1996) Moreover, after unification, few women were found on courses in commercial and technological fields such as skilled factory, manual and technical workers. Women could be forced to accept jobs which no pension entitlements, or jobs in peripheral and thus low-paid sectors of industrial production, or of the caring, advisory and supervisory sectors. (Beyer, 1992) A big number of women were either unemployed or underemployed. There was a significant reduction of women’s involvement in political life as well. (Beyer, 1992)

The origin of this different expectation on women and all the following problems, is the different ideology planted in people’s head that the East and West emphasized on under different system and social regimes, “socialism” and “individualism”. As Rosenberg mentioned, “the systems in which they lived, defined in many ways in opposition to one another, shaped their underlying and analytical approaches. […] East and West German feminists proceed from fundamentally different understandings of the relationships among individuals and between the individual and the state and/society.” (Rosenberg, 1996) The GDR, ruling by Soviet Union, had socialism as its social structure and political regime. It emphasized the equality among people and the power of group working. Thus people have unified customs and were always working together under a control of a local union. This identity of being in a group and work as a group member with everybody else is especially obvious on women comparing to men. As McDowell’s assertion that “women’s identity is constructed through relations with others rather than, as is the case with men, through the separation of self from others.” (Hoven, 2001) GDR officially subscribed to an ideology of egalitarianism and the subordination of individual interests to those of the collective. However, the West reliance upon the liberal individualist model, which regards individuals as free to make choices, but also as individually responsible for the consequences of those choices. (Rosenberg, 1996) This difference in ideology is rooted in mind and is leading East and West women having different attitudes toward issue, such as abortion and the relationship between family and career. It is derived from women’s real living experiences in systems and has lived with them for their entire life as a way of thinking and decision-making. It is very hard to be changed in a short period of time.

**Conclusion**

The intangible wall still exist and will exist longer in future because the different identity, as well as the different ideology that people from East and West have. In order to tear this wall down, future generation from the East and West family background needs to give up their stereotype of the other side and start to understand the real circumstances throughmore cooperation and communication. Based on the respect to different cultures and thoughts, the policies and the education system should be gradually changed. Instead of leading by the single side of regimes and ways of working, people from the East should have opportunities to speak up and get involved into the decision-making process, just like what is happening now under the leading of Mrs. Merkel. When there is a real cooperation between East and West, the intangible wall in mind will disappear thereafter.

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