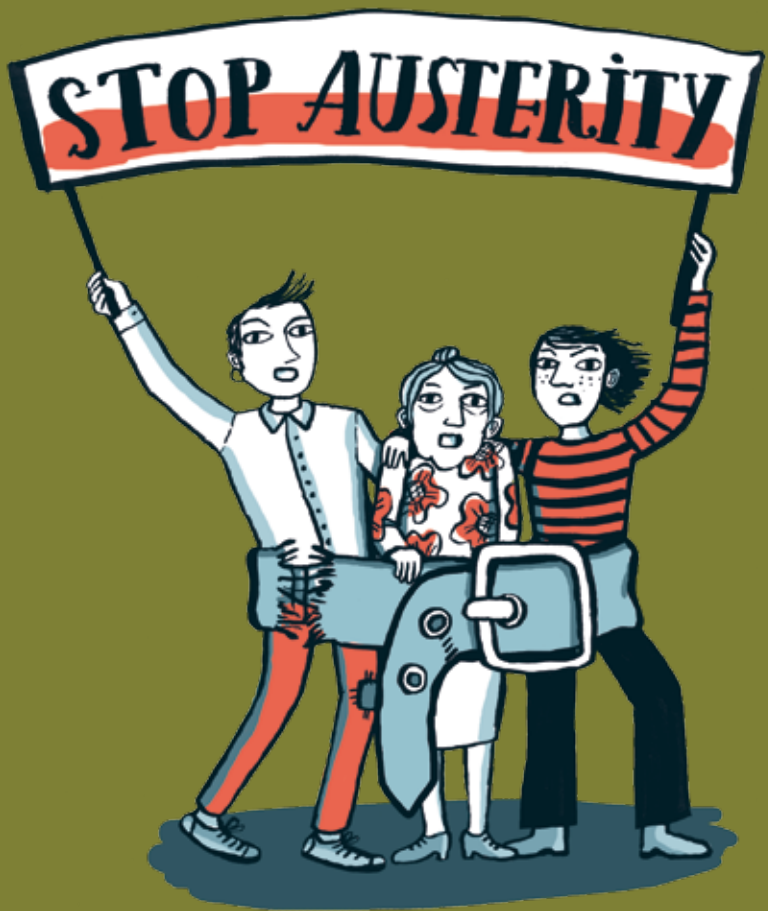
ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG

GERMANY

AUSTERITY, GENDER INEQUALITY AND FEMINISM AFTER THE CRISIS

Who profits from the crisis? The impact of neoliberal state restructuring and the political shift to the right on women's lives in Germany.

Alex Wischnewski



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"In the belly of the beast" – Germany emerges victorious from the crisis

Germany is widely considered to have been one of the winners to emerge from the financial crisis. This is partly due to the fact that, since the crisis began in 2009, Germany – in contrast to almost every other EU member state – has seen no rise in unemployment, has managed to increase its growth and exports again (to the extent that German companies have been able to chalk up record profits) and was able to bring its public debt, which spiralled out of control in 2009, back under control just two years later in 2011. The capital markets rewarded this positive development – during a period of extremely low interest rates – with good credit ratings and additional low interest rates, which allowed Germany to reduce its interest payments by more than EUR 280 billion between 2010 and 2015. Indeed, all the signs seem to suggest that Germany has come through the global financial crisis even stronger than before.

However, the drawback to this apparent resilience is not only growing social inequality that has taken on a distinctly gendered dimension – as this paper will explain – but its potential expansion throughout the European continent by exporting elements of the German "model for success".[1] This is because Germany's growth is down to an export surplus with two very specific causes: firstly, the labour

1 For more information on rising social inequality in Germany, see the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (Deutschland Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales – BMAS): Lebenslagen in Deutschland – Der Fünfte Armuts- und Reichtumsbericht der Bundesregierung, August 2017, available at: www.bmas.de/DE/Service/Medien/Publikationen/a306-5-armuts-und-reichtumsbericht.html.

market and welfare reforms implemented as part of Agenda 2010,[2] which were introduced at the beginning of the 2000s, led to considerably restrained wage growth in Germany.[3] This resulted in a drop in domestic demand and imports whilst German exports became more competitive. Secondly, other countries, who were paying higher wages and thus had higher domestic demand, were willing to accept a deficit in their own budget by importing more than they were exporting. In other words, the promise of German competitiveness materialised primarily due to the demand of consumers and markets in other countries. It was, in effect, "like an enormous stimulus package, amounting to more than four per cent of GDP, being implemented over several years".[4] By implication, the wage reduction and austerity policies pursued by other countries – for which pressure from the German government is partly to blame – can only be successful if creditors such as Germany agree to increase their economies' imports. This has yet to happen, and the consequence for many of Germany's European neighbours has been recession and social division.

2 'Agenda 2010' was a set of controversial labour market and welfare reforms introduced in 2003 by then-Chancellor Gerhard Schröder with the aim of reducing unemployment and boosting the German economy.

3 Dauderstädt, Michael/Dederke, Julian: Reformen und Wachstum. Die deutsche Agenda 2010 als Vorbild für Europa?, published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, WISO direkt, Bonn 2012.

4 Ibid.

2
Gradual restructuring instead of shock therapy

In spite of the overall positive trade balance that Germany recorded during and after the crisis, its government debt rose considerably in the wake of short-term stimulus packages. The response to this was rigid cost-cutting measures. However, the German government's austerity policy, which has been in place since 2010, only partially explains the social developments that are currently hindering the emancipation of women. Within this context, it is also important to mention the restructuring and dismantling of the welfare state that was introduced by a liberal-conservative government in the 1980s and which initially reached its peak with the 'Agenda reforms' presided over by the social democrat/green party coalition government between 2002 and 2005. According to Diana Auth, there is much that speaks "in favour of the argument that the welfare state significantly contributed to Germany's ability to weather the financial storm in 2009".[1] To paint a clear picture of the situation facing women in Germany today, and thus to subsequently develop strategies to achieve greater social equality between the sexes, we must first examine those structures that were at heart of 'Agenda 2010'.

The first central elements of the reforms began in 2002 with the liberalisation of temporary employment and the expansion of marginal employment (also known as 'mini jobs'), which considerably favoured the growth of atypical forms of work in the years that followed.

1 Auth, Diana: Auswirkungen der (Finanz- und Wirtschafts-)Krise auf den Wohlfahrtsstaat, in: Kurz-Scherf, Ingrid/Scheele, Alexandra (eds.): Macht oder ökonomisches Gesetz? Zum Zusammenhang von Krise und Geschlecht, Münster 2012, pp. 141–162, in this text p. 141.

These measures were accompanied by cutbacks to public services. As a result, unemployment benefits that had been tied to a recipient's previous income, and thus in essence designed to maintain a similar standard of living, were restricted and subsequently replaced by *Arbeitslosengeld II* (unemployment benefit II, a form of job seeker's allowance paid after the first 12–18 months of unemployment or Hartz IV). However, Hartz IV is only granted if the recipient has no assets and if the overall income within the newly created 'needs-based community' construct[2] is not too high. This is problematic, especially for many women who are now dependent on their partner or husband's earnings.

For the vast majority, Hartz IV therefore means a distinct social decline. The introduction of the policy not only impacted the unemployed; rather, to this day, it continues to be a looming punitive threat to those in employment. Moreover, newly introduced rules governing the type of work the long-term unemployed can reject state that employment can only be refused on moral grounds. Otherwise employment benefit claimants may be faced with a financial penalty. In such cases it is irrelevant whether a job seeker is significantly overqualified for the position in question or whether the terms of employment guarantee a living wage.

As a result, the ideology that 'any job is better than no job' became widely accepted, and whilst this did lead to rising employment, it also meant average wages in Germany began to stagnate in real terms. Even improved economic growth post-2004 did little to change this trend. A large-scale low-wage sector became a permanent fixture of the economy: to this day, the majority of those employed in this sector are women. As a consequence, in 2014 approx. 27 per cent of all female workers were earning low wages compared to 16 per cent of all men in employment.[3]

When the global financial crisis reached Germany and its booming economy collapsed at the end of 2008, the state intervened by

2 The 'needs-based community' construct is based on a policy decision stipulating that individuals who are very close or related to each other and who live in the same household should support each other materially when the need arises and are to be able to collectively cover their living costs.

3 German Federal Statistical Office (Destatis): Verdienste auf einen Blick, Wiesbaden 2017, available at: www.destatis.de/DE/Publikationen/Thematisch/VerdiensteArbeitskosten/Arbeitnehmerverdienste/BroschuereVerdiensteBlick0160013179004.pdf?__blob=-publicationFile, p. 8.

implementing short-term measures. With bank bailout packages, a scrappage premium for old cars and short-time working allowances, the government made up for the lost private demand with state-funded demand to mitigate the effects of the crisis.[4] Despite the fact that Germany had to take out loans to finance these measures, and thus increase its debt-to-GDP ratio, these initiatives prevented the country from sliding into a crisis-induced downward spiral, as was the case in other European countries. As a result, Germany was able to once again report strong growth figures as early as 2010. Birgit Sauer argues that these crisis management measures had a "male bias" right from the start.[5] For example, the majority of those working in sectors that received governmental support as they were deemed 'too big to fail' are disproportionately male. Women working in the service or the care sector, on the other hand, were not seen as systemically important and thus judged to be undeserving of state subsidies (or were offered far less support). Sauer goes on to argue that it is "traditional gender stereotypes, which continue to peddle the illusion that men are the ones feeding the family while women are taking care of children and the home, that thus result in state support being primarily focused on sectors that predominantly employ men".[6]

Although, from the outset, the crisis in Germany never quite reached extreme proportions, the German government decided to apply strict austerity measures at the federal, state and local level. The most far-reaching element of this policy was the 'debt brake', which was enshrined in Germany's Basic Law in 2009 (Articles 109, 116, 143d of the Basic Law). This stipulates that from 2016 onwards, the federal government may generate debt that is no higher than 0.35 per cent of the country's GDP; Germany's states may take on no additional debt

4 The 'cash-for-clunkers' scheme paid out a premium of EUR 2,500 when an old car (at least older than 9 years) was scrapped and replaced with a new car or one that was less than one year old. This helped boost the revenue of the automotive industry. 'Short-time working allowances' were designed to enable employers to temporarily reduce their employees' work hours due to a lack of orders. Some of the workers' lost income is then reimbursed by the state, thus preventing mass lay-offs.

5 Sauer, Birgit: Das Geschlecht der Finanz- und Wirtschaftskrise. Eine Intervention in aktuelle Krisendeutungen, in: Kurswechsel. Zeitschrift für gesellschafts- wirtschafts- und umweltpolitische Alternativen, 1/2010, pp. 38–46, in this text p. 42.

6 Ibid, p. 43.

from 2020. However, Wolfgang Schäuble, Germany's former finance minister, was able to balance the books as early as 2014 and deliver a *schwarze Null* (a 'black zero', i.e. no new debt was incurred) and thus more than meet the requirements of the debt brake. The impact was twofold: firstly, since then, much of the needed investment in the public and social infrastructure has not been forthcoming. Those areas that are still receiving investment are doing so through the involvement of private enterprise as this is a way to circumvent the debt regulations for public authorities. This has far-reaching consequences for affordable access to public services, which inevitably hits socially marginalised groups the hardest. But even here, what we are witnessing is not so much a radical shift; this is an escalation and further entrenchment of the long-standing neoliberal restructuring of the welfare state.[7]

In mid-2010 the Bundestag approved an additional austerity package, which stipulated cost-cutting measures totalling more than EUR 80 billion by 2014, particularly in the public sector and in welfare services. Recipients of *Arbeitslosengeld II* were no longer entitled to pension contributions or parental allowance. A total of around 100,000 families were affected by the new provision. This represents a huge challenge, particularly for single parents, over 90 per cent of whom are women. Approximately 40 per cent of these single parents rely on Hartz IV.[8] Even those on middle incomes saw their parental allowance marginally reduced. It used to comprise 67 per cent of an individual's previous salary; this figure has now fallen to 65 per cent. However, the upper income threshold, which is used as a benchmark figure, remained at EUR 1,800, which means parents on high wages were not affected by these cost-saving measures.

Germany's use of austerity policies to counter the global financial crisis certainly did not mark a structural change; rather, it was a continuation of the neoliberalisation of the (welfare) state, which had considerable implications for the labour market and the social infrastructure. The social inequality that is thus becoming further en-

7 See Wiegand, Felix: It's the austerity, stupid!, in: LuXemburg 1/2016, available at: www.zeitschrift-luxemburg.de/its-the-austerity-stupid.

8 Federal Government of Germany: response to a minor interpellation by Bundestag Member Sabine Zimmermann et al. and DIE LINKE parliamentary group concerning 'The unique risk of poverty faced by women', parliamentary paper 18/11215, March 2017.

trenched as a result comes predominantly at the expense of women. I will illustrate this using four specific examples: gainful employment and income, care work and time. In order to gain a feminist perspective on changing the current situation, it is also important to examine the issue of women's political participation.

2.1 The face of precarity is female

The gender pay gap, i.e. the difference between the average hourly pay of all working women and men, is often interpreted as an indicator of women's status on the labour market. In Germany, this figure stands at around 21 per cent, which is poor in comparison to the rest of the EU (despite the fact that the EU average is 16 per cent and only Estonia (25 per cent) and the Czech Republic (22 per cent) lag behind Germany).[9] The fact that the gender pay gap has remained relatively stable over the last 15 years[10] says little about the opportunities women have to secure their own livelihood. To be able to adequately evaluate women's economic situation, we thus need to take additional factors into consideration.

One of the most important reasons for the pay gap is the different employment sectors and professions in which women and men work. In 2014, in jobs that are considered typical for women, i.e. professions where more than 70 per cent of workers are female, such as in health, social care and childcare, employees earned on average EUR 12 per hour; in jobs typically performed by men, this hourly rate stood at EUR 20. That amounts to a difference of almost 40 per cent.[11]

9 However, it should be noted that other factors need to be considered to enable a precise, substantive interpretation. For example, comparative studies have shown that in Europe a correlation exists between the number of women in employment and the size of the gender pay gap. See Boll, Christina/Rossen, Anja/Wolf, André: The EU Gender Earnings Gap: Job Segregation and Working Time as Driving Factors, IAB-Discussion Paper 36/2016, Nuremberg 2016. The income gap between the genders is larger in countries that have a higher employment rate amongst women, such as Germany.

10 See Federal Statistical Office (Destatis): Gender Pay Gap: Verdienstabstand zwischen Männern und Frauen in Deutschland von 1995 bis 2017, March 2018, available at: https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/3261/umfrage/gender-pay-gap-in-deutschland/.

11 See DIW Berlin: press release dated 11/3/2016, available at: www.diw.de/de/diw_01.c.528918.de/themen_nachrichten/brutto_stundenverdienste_in_typischen_frauenberufen_2014_im_schnitt_um_acht_euro_oder_39_prozent_niedriger_als_in_typischen_maennerberufen.html.

Another key factor that explains the gender pay gap is the fact that women often usually work part time or are underemployed (working so-called 'mini jobs').[12] Initially, the employment rate amongst women (i.e. the number of women in employment as a share of the total number of women) rose considerably from 65.0 per cent in 2006 to 74.5 per cent in 2016.[13] Although the economic crisis temporarily slowed this trend, it did not significantly impede its development. However, despite this increase, which is much higher than the employment rate rise amongst men, women remain far less likely to be employed than men (in 2016, the figure for male employment stood at 82.7 per cent). However, these figures reveal little about the actual distribution of employment between the genders nor do they give us any information on the type of positions held. In fact, women only occupy one third of all full-time posts but 80 per cent of part-time positions; two thirds of those working exclusively in a 'mini job' are women. The proliferation of atypical forms of employment (part-time, marginal and fixed-term employment, as well as temporary employment), which resulted from labour market deregulation as a means to manage the crisis, is thus a major contributing factor to the challenges facing women. As the average gross hourly wage of a part-time employee is considerably lower than that of a full-time employee (in 2014 the difference was 18 per cent[14]), the high percentage of women in such jobs is also reflected in the gender pay gap. This becomes even more striking when we examine gross annual earnings, which no longer takes into account the number of hours worked: here the average difference in earnings between men and women rises to 37 per cent.[15]

12 'Marginal employment' is classed as employment where an employee's regular wage does not exceed EUR 450 per month. In such cases, employees are not obliged to register for mandatory healthcare, social care and unemployment insurance.

13 See Federal Statistical Office (Destatis): Erwerbstätigkeit von Frauen. Deutschland mit zweithöchster Quote in der EU, Wiesbaden 2007, available at: www.destatis.de/Europa/DE/Thema/BevoelkerungSoziales/Arbeitsmarkt/ArbeitsmarktFrauen.html.

14 See Federal Statistical Office (Destatis): Verdienste auf einen Blick, 2017, available at: www.destatis.de/DE/Publikationen/Thematisch/VerdiensteArbeitskosten/Arbeitnehmerverdienste/BroschuereVerdiensteBlick0160013179004.pdf?__blob=publicationFile, p 28, fn. 8.

15 See Federal Statistical Office (Destatis): Verdienste und Arbeitskosten, Arbeitnehmerverdienste 2017, special series No. 16, row 2.3, table 2.1, 2018, available at: www.destatis.de/DE/Publikationen/Thematisch/VerdiensteArbeitskosten/Arbeitnehmerverdienste/ArbeitnehmerverdiensteJ2160230177004.pdf?__blob=publicationFile.

The unique precarity faced by women increases throughout the life course. For example, the main reason women work part-time is family obligations (such as having to care for children or relatives). One in two women states that family duties are the reason they are in part-time employment. This is only the case for one in ten men. 19 per cent of men state that they work fewer hours due to taking part in training or further education compared to only four per cent of women.[16] These data suggest that for many men, temporarily reducing their working hours will ultimately increase their employment or career prospects, whilst this is not true for the majority of women. As a result, many women remain stuck in the part-time work 'trap': after having to reduce their hours due to family commitments, it is then harder for women to find full-time employment.

The fact that the German pension system is predominantly based on earned income means the gender pay gap becomes even wider, resulting in a gender pension gap of 42 per cent and 23 per cent in western in eastern Germany respectively.[17] Women are far more likely to claim basic state benefits in old age than men. In 2016 there were 308,726 women nationwide claiming basic state benefits compared to just 216,869 men, despite the fact that the number of welfare recipients, both male and female, continuously rose between 2005 and 2015.[18]

As a result, 21.2 per cent of women are affected by poverty and social exclusion compared with 18.1 per cent of men. If we examine the developments of the last decade, this does show a decrease, albeit one that has done nothing to address the gender imbalance. In 2006, 21.6 per cent of women and 18.5 per cent of men were living in poverty.

2.2 The crisis of social reproduction

As the percentage of women working part time shows, their precarious position on the job market is closely linked with the unpaid work they

16 See WSI Gender Data Portal: Arbeitszeiten. Gründe für Teilzeittätigkeit 2015, available at: www.boeckler.de/51973.htm.

17 See German Institute for Economic Research: Gender Pension Gap, DIW Weekly Report, 1/2/2017, available at: www.diw.de/documents/publikationen/73/diw_01.c.551601.de/17-5.pdf, p. 48.

18 See Institute of Economic and Social Research: Armut. Frauen und Männer mit Bezug von Grundsicherung im Alter 2005-2016, available at: www.boeckler.de/53605.htm.

perform at home and within the family. This is also due to the fact that increasing the number of women in employment and, simultaneously, the birth rate – both for the purpose of boosting economic growth – has been a stated aim of German family policy since at least the beginning of the 2000s;[19] however, in a neoliberal (welfare) state, there is still no way to ensure career and family can be successfully combined. While some family policies designed to promote the inclusion of women in the workplace are being expanded, other public service institutions are increasingly falling victim to cost-cutting measures and are being dismantled. The onus then falls on families and private households to make up for the shortfall.

An agreement was signed in 2007, which encouraged special measures to be taken to boost the number of childcare places available in the country. Since 2013, children aged between one and three are legally entitled to a place at a day-care centre, a step which has led to the further development of the childcare infrastructure. This measure resulted in the child care rate, i.e. the number of children enrolled at a day-care centre as a share of the respective demographic group, increasing from 15.5 per cent in 2007 to 33.1 per cent in 2017.[20] However, in many parts of the country residents still have to contend with inadequate childcare provision, which also entails an unresolved cost issue: whilst in some local authorities (e.g. Berlin and Dusseldorf) childcare is available free of charge, other cities (e.g. Nuremburg) charge parents monthly fees of EUR 115 per child. Although many municipalities take parent earnings into account, many low-income families struggle or are unable to afford a day-care place.

Even the new regulations concerning parental allowance and parental leave are not distributed in a socially just manner. Until 2007,

19 See Rürup, Bert/Gruescu, Sandra: Nachhaltige Familienpolitik im Interesse einer aktiven Bevölkerungsentwicklung. Report commissioned by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ), Berlin 2003, available at: www.bmfsfj.de/blob/93398/99ab881b95ba13503e19c5baa924a839/broschuere-nachhaltige-familienpolitik-ruerup-data.pdf.

20 See Federal Statistical Office (Destatis): press conference held on 6/11/2012 (Statement from Director Karl Müller), available at: www.destatis.de/DE/PresseService/Presse/Pressekonferenzen/2012/kindertagesbetreuung/statement_mueller_kindertagesbetr_PDF.pdf?__blob=publicationFile; Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis): Press release dated 27/7/2017, available at: www.destatis.de/DE/PresseService/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/2017/07/PD17_255_225.html.

every parent whose main occupation was raising their child and who did not work more than 30 hours a week was entitled to a monthly child benefit payment of EUR 300 over a two-year period. This model was then replaced with the 'parental allowance', a benefit payment offered in the place of a wage paid by an employer. High-earning parents can now claim up to EUR 1,800 a month, whilst parents with no income (because they are unemployed, students or stay-at-home parents) receive a basic parental allowance of just EUR 300. The austerity measures passed by the German government in 2010 included a provision that prevented Hartz IV claimants from accessing this allowance (see above). The parental allowance can be claimed for up to 14 months, although the final two months are only guaranteed if both parents – either taking turns or simultaneously – decide to take extended leave or reduce their working hours to a maximum of 30 hours a week. Single parents can claim the parental allowance for up to 14 months; however, almost 40 per cent is paid in the form of transfer payments. This approach was continued with the introduction of 'parental allowance PLUS' in 2015. Now parents can decide whether to claim just half of their parental allowance every month but double the period over which they can access the benefit to 24 months. If both parents work between 25 and 30 hours a week, they can take advantage of a partner bonus that is paid over four months. Single parents can also claim this bonus allowance.

Equally, wage-earning parents effectively have the right to take extended leave from their job or reduce their working hours until their child's third birthday. However, they only have until the end of their parental leave period to return to their full working hours. As children will continue to need – at times, substantial – care beyond this period, the parental leave model does not resolve the part-time 'trap' issue.

Although the gender balance with regard to claiming parental allowance is slowly changing, it remains extremely imbalanced. Of the total number of parental allowance claimants in 2016, 77.8 per cent were women and 22.2 per cent were men (in 2009, these figures stood at 81.4 per cent and 18.6 per cent respectively).[21] Whilst one in five

21 See Federal Statistical Office (Destatis): press release dated 27/6/2017, available at: www.destatis.de/DE/PresseService/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/2017/06/PD17_213_22922.

mothers (20.1 per cent) took advantage of the parental leave PLUS payments – i.e. opted for a more rapid transition to part-time work – the same was only true for fewer than one in ten fathers (8.2 per cent). A more just distribution is also almost certainly being hindered by the fact that women often earn a lower wage. The joint household income is therefore higher when the female partner claims the parental allowance. For many families, it is then either a luxury or impossible for the father to also take parental leave.

Subsequently, women still carry out the lion's share of unpaid work in the home. According to a study conducted in 2012/13 that analysed time use, women spend 16:9 hours per week in gainful employment and 29:29 hours performing unpaid work.[22] Men, on the other hand, spend 25:13 hours per week in gainful employment and just 19:21 hours performing unpaid work – more than ten hours less than women. These results show only a minor shift in comparison to the results of the preceding study conducted in 2001/02, during which it was shown that men performed 20:41 hours of unpaid work to women's 32:56 hours, i.e. roughly twelve hours more.

Overall, women currently work one hour more than men every week (45:38 compared to 44:34) but receive a much lower wage and a much smaller pension in exchange. The 1992 Pension Reform Act and the creation of the '*Mütterrente*' (mothers' pension) in 2014 saw the introduction of three credit points for children born after 1992 and two credit points for children born before 1992 that are added to the statutory pension scheme for mothers. One credit point is the equivalent to the pension contribution acquired, on average, each year by an individual in employment. As positive as this step may be, it does not make up for the wages women lose over the course of their working lives.

html; and Federal Statistical Office (Destatis): Beendete Leistungsbezüge nach Bundesländern, available at: www.destatis.de/DE/ZahlenFakten/GesellschaftStaat/Soziales/Sozialleistungen/Elterngeld/Tabellen/Tabellen_ElterngeldBeendeteLeistungsbezuegeGeburtenJahr.html.

22 Unpaid work includes household chores such as cooking, washing, shopping and maintaining the garden as well as caring for children and other household members. Additional tasks include voluntary work and offering support to relatives, friends or community members outside of the home. For the results of the study, see Federal Statistical Office (Destatis): Wie die Zeit vergeht. Ergebnisse zur Zeitverwendung in Deutschland 2012/2013, Wiesbaden 2015, available at: www.destatis.de/DE/PresseService/Presse/Pressekonferenzen/2015/zeitverwendung/Pressebroschuere_zeitverwendung.pdf?__blob=publicationFile.

These important developments in family policy have been accompanied by rising pressure in other areas resulting from the neoliberal restructuring of the (welfare) state. For example, Germany introduced a market-based instrument into a public sector institution in the early 2000s with a new hospital classification system for healthcare reimbursement: diagnosis-related groups (DRGs); the main aim of this new model was cost reduction. By transforming the way hospital services are paid for (moving from a daily rate to a fixed rate per product), surpluses can only be produced if the hospital's primary costs exceed their fixed allowance. This can be done, for example, by shortening the length of inpatient/outpatient visits, reducing the number of beds or through organisational cost-saving measures or cutting staff numbers.[23] One of the many impacts this shift has had on employees is a sharp rise in workload as a result of reduced staff numbers and a simultaneous rise in patient numbers.[24] Another consequence is patients being frequently released early, which means the burden of aftercare is often placed on the patient's relatives.[25]

Women are doubly impacted by this change: firstly, the health and social care sector predominantly employs women (roughly 85 per cent of workers in the care sector are female[26]); secondly, it is still primarily women who take responsibility for unpaid care work at home.

This is also the case with regard to long-term care, mainly of elderly relatives. The long-term care insurance scheme (*Pflegever-*

23 See Gerlinger, Thomas/Mosebach, Kai: Die Ökonomisierung des deutschen Gesundheitswesens. Ursachen, Ziele und Wirkungen wettbewerbsbasierter Kostendämpfungspolitik, in: Böhlke, Nils/Gerlinger, Thomas/Mosebach, Kai/Schmucker, Ralf/Schulten, Thorsten (eds.): Privatisierung von Krankenhäusern. Erfahrungen und Perspektiven aus Sicht der Beschäftigten, Hamburg 2009, pp. 10–40, in this text p. 29.

24 See Schulten, Thorsten/Böhlke, Nils: Die Privatisierung von Krankenhäusern in Deutschland und ihre Auswirkungen auf Beschäftigte und Patienten, in: Böhlke, Nils/Gerlinger, Thomas/Mosebach, Kai/Schmucker, Ralf/Schulten, Thorsten (eds.): Privatisierung von Krankenhäusern. Erfahrungen und Perspektiven aus Sicht der Beschäftigten, Hamburg 2009, pp. 97–123, in this text p. 100.

25 Despite the catastrophic impact this had on the quality of care, the German Federal Ministry of Health has been heavily involved in implementing the DRG system in Greece since 2011 as part of a package of austerity measures.

26 See Federal Statistical Office (Destatis): healthcare personnel, available at: www.destatis.de/DE/ZahlenFakten/GesellschaftStaat/Gesundheit/Gesundheitspersonal/Tabellen/Einrichtungen.html;jsessionid=5ECEFA6C6FA331BC69E733O1073FDCD8.InternetLive1.

sicherung), which came into effect in 1995/96, only offers partial cover when care is required. In effect, this means insurance coverage is not designed to meet the actual needs of the care recipient but stipulates certain cost thresholds that cannot be exceeded. In order to keep costs as low as possible, care provided by relatives is also included in calculations. Any additional costs must be covered by the caregiver. However, many are not in a position to pay for institutional or professional at-home care. This could explain why, in 2015, roughly three quarters (73 per cent) of those in need of care were treated at home. Roughly 67 per cent were treated solely by relatives and this trend has intensified in recent years.[27]

Just under two thirds (64.9 per cent) of caregiving relatives are women; one third (35.1 per cent) are men. The individual receiving care at home can claim a care allowance to partially cover the cost of employing a carer. Alternatively, they can pay this allowance to a caregiving relative. Depending on the level of care required, this sum is between EUR 316 and 901, i.e. not sufficient to cover living costs.[28] At the same time, many caregivers have to reduce the number of hours worked in gainful employment or give up a paid job entirely and apply for Hartz IV. In such cases, caring for a relative at home is tied to the risk of poverty, but accurate data in this area is still lacking.[29]

In some cases, this care allowance and any additional financial resources are used to employ home care assistants who are almost always women and more often than not migrants. As the state does little to monitor this nascent sector, there are neither reliable figures nor are their substantial rights or decent working conditions for the women employed in the sector. It is estimated that up to 300,000 eastern European women travel to Germany as 'circular migrants' for periods

27 See Federal Statistical Office (Destatis): Pflegestatistik 2015. Pflege im Rahmen der Pflegeversicherung. Deutschlandergebnisse, Wiesbaden 2017, available at: www.destatis.de/DE/Publikationen/Thematisch/Gesundheit/Pflege/PflegeDeutschlandergebnisse5224001159004.pdf?__blob=publicationFile.

28 See German Centre for the Processing of Medical Data: Pflegegeld nach Pflegegraden für 2018, available at: www.dmrz.de/pflegegeld-pflegesachleistung-2017-2018-pflegegrad-pflege-neuausrichtungs-gesetz-psg.html.

29 See Wir pflegen: Zahlen und Fakten zum Thema pflegende Angehörige, available at: www.wir-pflegen.net/wp-content/medien/wir-pflegen-e.V.-Fakten-pflegende-Angeh%C3%B6rige.pdf.

lasting several months, where they work as live-in carers in private homes offering round-the-clock care. Such arrangements engender a certain type of dependency. The risk of extreme exploitation is just as high as the risk of an emotional bond between patient and carer being abused. In spite of this, the government has little interest in subjecting such working arrangements to stricter regulation as this form of employment helps ease the pressure on the German care system.

Efforts to increase the number of women in employment seemingly go hand in hand with cost-cutting measures and the burden of caregiving responsibilities being placed back on the family – in the majority of cases, at the expense of women – and paints a paradoxical picture. However, a social imbalance with a distinctly gendered dimension clearly persists. High-earning individuals receive greater benefits whilst those on the lowest incomes are unable to gain the same access to privatised services as those on higher wages. It is in light of the increasingly challenging situation faced by those trying to ensure decent quality care for themselves and for others that Gabriele Winker speaks of a "crisis of social reproduction",[30] which she posits is the culmination of a crisis of overaccumulation that has been ongoing since the 1970s and which can also be seen as the root of the global financial crisis.

2.3 The social and political shift to the right

In light of the dramatic political changes currently taking place in Germany and Europe, we are unlikely to see any action being taken to address these issues. As is so often the case, those who benefit most from financial crises are right-wing extremist political parties as a loss of faith in the elite and economic recession create fertile ground for right-wing propaganda.[31] Germany also saw the emergence of a right-wing populist party (Alternative for Germany or the AfD) during the euro crisis – albeit slightly later than its European neighbours – that helped drive a general shift to the right both in society and the political landscape.

30 Winker, Gabriele: Care Revolution. Schritte in eine solidarische Gesellschaft, Bielefeld 2015.

31 This is the result of a study conducted by three German economists, who examined the political impact of financial crises in 20 states from 1870 onwards.

One of the impacts of this shift has been that women's political representation has fallen sharply. At the time of writing (June 2018), the percentage of women in the German Parliament stood at just 30.7, which is as low as around 20 years ago. As women make up just 10.6 per cent of its members, the AfD is also partially responsible for this lack of representation. Apart from wanting to understand the mechanisms that disadvantage women during the recruitment process from an equality policy perspective, this overall trend means the likelihood of women's interests being fairly represented has certainly not increased. Even the wording of the coalition deal between Germany's conservatives and the ever weaker social democrats, which was renewed at the beginning of 2018, does not address – and in some cases, even helps advance – the social dislocations and their impact in terms of gender.

However, it is not only women's social problems that remain unresolved; adequate steps are not being taken to address violence against women. There is very little literature available on gender-specific violence. Comprehensive studies are scarce, and it is difficult to conduct comparative research.[32] The sole starting point for data evaluation is the figures published by the German Federal Criminal Police Office on violence committed by current and former partners, which have only recently been compiled in this form. According to this data, the number of recorded acts of violence in couples has risen from 120,758 in 2012 to 133,080 in 2016.[33] In 2016, 81.9 per cent of victims were female. We can only presume the extent to which growing social disparities – affecting both perpetrators and victims – have contributed to this

32 Two studies are cited repeatedly: in 2014 the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights published what was at the time the most comprehensive survey on violence against women (Violence against women: an EU-wide survey, 2014), which stated that 35 per cent of women in Germany had experienced physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15. This was preceded by a study conducted in 2004 by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (Study on the Living Situation, Safety and Health of Women in Germany, 2004), which stated that as many as approximately 40 per cent of women living in Germany had experienced physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 16. However, it should be noted that neither survey commented on how the trend has developed.

33 Data was collected on murder and manslaughter, assault, rape, sexual assault, intimidation and stalking. See Federal Criminal Police Office (Bundeskriminalamt – BKA): Partnerschaftsgewalt. Kriminalstatistische Auswertung. Berichtsjahr 2016, 24/11/2017, available at: www.bka.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Publikationen/JahresberichteUndLagebilder/Partnerschaftsgewalt/Partnerschaftsgewalt_2016.html.

increase. It is evident that having the ability to become financially independent can help victims to escape a violent relationship. The fact of the matter is, however, that the government's steps to develop a needs-based support network and to secure the relevant funding, as well as to earmark funds for the necessary prevention efforts, remain insufficient.

A vital reform of the penal code for sexual offences, which feminists have long been calling for and which is essential to meet the requirements of the Istanbul Convention (an agreement against violence against women and domestic violence drafted by the Council of Europe and signed by Germany) was only able to gain the necessary majority in parliament following the events of New Year's Eve 2015 when mass sexual assaults took place in Cologne and other German cities. In the aftermath of the attacks, there was a debate concerning the cultural background of the perpetrators and the German government's refugee policy. The reform, which was passed in July 2016 and should, in principle, strengthen women's right to self-determination, was subsequently tied to measures to facilitate the expulsion of asylum seekers. At the same time, the issue of protecting refugee women against violence, particularly in large refugee housing centres, was almost entirely ignored.

A further aspect of the social shift to the right has been a mobilisation of activists under the banner of 'anti-genderism' and driven by an unprecedented alliance of conservative Catholics, evangelicals, masculinists, neo-Nazis and right-wing parties and movements.[34] Originally condemned by the Vatican in 2000 as "gender ideology", the debate has gained traction in Germany since 2006 largely thanks to the right-wing extremist newspaper *Junge Freiheit*. However, many of the arguments put forward by the movement have now entered mainstream political discourse, and the AfD and sections of the conservative camp are raising the issue in parliamentary debate. The movement is based on the conspiratorial view that government institutions are imposing concepts such as gender mainstreaming to completely minimise the differences between the genders and to abolish the bastion

34 See Redecker, Eva: Anti-Genderismus and right-wing hegemony, in: Radical Philosophy 198, July/August 2016, available at: www.radicalphilosophy.com/commentary/anti-genderismus-and-right%e2%80%91wing-hegemony.

of the nuclear family. Gender research, equality politics and progressive sex education initiatives are perceived as being anti-democratic and exaggerated political correctness, and are thus criticised and attacked. Christine Wimbauer, Mona Motakef and Julia Teschlade consider the anti-genderism debate to be an attempt to come to terms with the experience of precarity. They view it as a reaction "to complex insecurities, beginning with the proliferation of atypical employment, which is increasingly even becoming a reality for those who used to have secure jobs, the mantra of individual responsibility within the welfare state, and the fact that certainties are being called into doubt, initiated by emancipatory movements and sections of the gender research community with close ties to such movements".[35] Instead of raising the issue of social concerns, it is the government's gender equality policy that bears the brunt of the blame for the perceived loss of control and security. The three sociologists are therefore calling for progressive answers to anti-genderism to be developed within a broader context.

It is, of course, also vital to mention the German Bundestag's decision in June 2017 to finally legalise same-sex marriage. Homosexual couples in Germany had been able to enter into a 'civil partnership', which offered some of the same rights as marriage, since 2001. This included the right to split income tax, i.e. a very high tax break (under certain circumstances) for spouses, regardless of whether they have children. However, discrimination persisted, particularly when it came to laws on adoption. Tireless campaigning and lobbying finally led to same-sex marriage becoming a key issue during the 2017 general election campaign. The decision to vote on the subject as a 'matter of conscience' and thus to allow each member of the Bundestag to cast their vote in a plenary sitting independent of their parliamentary group or coalition could be interpreted as a tactical move by the Chancellor initiated to settle the matter quickly.

In light of the new-found desire to return to traditional notions of gender and family, the 'pro-life movement', that was long thought to have vanished from German society, felt emboldened to return to

35 Wimbauer, Christine/Motakef, Mona/Teschlade, Julia: Prekäre Selbstverständlichkeiten, in: Hark, Sabine/Vila, Paula-Irene (eds.): Anti-Genderismus, Bielefeld 2015, pp. 41–57, in this text p. 52.

the fray. Their objective is mainly to limit or prevent the practice of abortion. Elke Sanders, Kirsten Achtelik and Ulli Jentsch have reported an increase in their activities over the last decade. This includes annual demonstrations in Berlin that grow in size year upon year, a higher number of local and legal confrontations between 'pro-lifers' and counselling service providers and doctors as well as attempts to exert moral pressure on medical professionals to deter them from taking part in abortions on the grounds of conscience.[36] The law as it stands cannot prevent these practices. In 1995, a major compromise on the matter was reached between opposing factions, who agreed to the introduction of clauses that would allow an abortion to take place within the first twelve weeks of pregnancy under certain conditions, but would still effectively treat the procedure as illegal. Hence the clauses continued inclusion in the penal code. Paradoxical regulations, such as a ban preventing doctors from openly informing their patients about abortion services offered in their practice, although they are legally obliged to do so, are a way for 'pro-lifers' to disrupt the provision of abortion services, and they are using these available channels with ever greater frequency. The feminist movement has responded to the 'pro-lifers' tactics by successfully pushing to have this ban on the disclosure of information debated in parliament. However, calls to abolish this restriction continue to be met with powerful opposition within the governing conservative party, which means it is difficult to predict the outcome of this debate.

36 Sanders, Eike/Achtelik, Kirsten/Jentsch, Ulli: Kulturkampf und Gewissen. Medizinethische Strategien der «Lebensschutz»-Bewegung, Berlin 2018, p. 6.

3
Left-wing actors in the crisis

In light of how the long-term neoliberal restructuring of both the labour market and the welfare state is impacting women, as well as the associated boost it has given to right-wing conservatives, the debate that has been ongoing within left-wing civil society circles (unions, social movements, members of the left-wing parties, and various left-wing groups) over the past year regarding excessive 'identity politics' seems incomprehensible. The most prominent accusation targeted at the Left is that they have been too focused on projects that matter to the elite, such as feminism, and on marginalised groups, e.g. migrants and the LGBTI community, and thus have neglected the core social concerns of the working class. In most cases, these accusers point to a form of middle-class feminism, which does indeed feature heavily on the government's agenda, often at the expense of social issues. As crucial as it is to break through 'glass ceilings' in the world of work, the debate over the introduction of women's quotas (*die Frauenquote*) in the boardrooms of just a handful of companies has overshadowed many other issues in the public sphere – not because it is the main project being pursued by feminist activists but because it is the initiative that is most compatible with the neoliberal project.

If we look at the manifesto and the work carried out by the Left Party (DIE LINKE), this argument chastising a glut of identity politics is unfounded. Of course, there are some within the party and the parliamentary group who are concerned with ensuring that women's policies are consistently linked to issues relevant to employment, distribution and welfare state restructuring. This view, however, is not shared by all sections of the party.

This can be illustrated using a number of recent cases. One prime example is industrial disputes within the hospital care sector. An increasing workload as a result of staff reduction measures (see above) has led more and more employees to call for the fixed allocation of staff on hospital wards, underlining their demands with strike action. In the care professions, where employees know that individuals are directly dependent upon them, such strikes are extremely rare. Here the Left Party has been a credible and reliable partner to the striking workers by repeatedly raising the issue in parliament. However, there is room for improvement, e.g. by using more gender-sensitive language as well as framing the discussion within a feminist narrative. The purpose of this is not just to offer a more accurate reflection of the reality facing workers but to highlight major failings and present perspectives that go beyond the individual conflicts. Hospital care workers are not only striking for better working conditions; their aim is also to encourage us to re-evaluate the status we as a society afford those people (mainly women) who provide the care we need and to point out the obstacles that exist within the capitalist system that prevent us from valuing this profession more. There are a number of issues that can be connected up or combined in this way, such as the situation faced by single parents, atypical forms of employment and new working-time models.

Other feminist groups have been increasingly underlining the link between feminism and cuts to social services, especially since the crisis began and since there has been a general resurgence in left-wing theory. One such group is the Care Revolution network, which uses the analysis of the 'Crisis of social reproduction' (see above) as a basis for connecting various struggles in the care sector. Here their perspective is focused on creating a society that puts care work at its heart.

Presumably, it is precisely because the impacts of the global financial crisis and austerity policy in Germany differ to those being felt in other European countries that the political movements and debates surrounding these impacts seem to have died down or at least vanished from view. It is hoped that, in the run-up to the European parliamentary elections in 2019, the issue will once again be brought to the fore. At national level, there are a series of left-wing demands and debates that could and should be more frequently discussed within

the European context. Containing the low-wage sector and increasing wages and pension payments would not only benefit the vast majority of the population in Germany, it would also help ease the situation in many crisis-ridden countries as it would boost competition. At present, Germany carries a great deal of responsibility for the economic recessions in other countries, which have been particularly damaging to women and marginalised groups. The country studies published by the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung outline these implications in detail. Left-wing and feminist movements in Germany should thus always keep this broader context, and the country's accountability, in mind when developing their strategies and policies.

Biography

Alex Wischnewski is advisor on feminist politics for DIE LINKE in the German parliament. She is active in the network «Care Revolution» and co-author of a monthly column in the newspaper *neues deutschland* on topics of Marxist feminism.

AUSTERITY, GENDER INEQUALITY AND FEMINISM AFTER THE CRISIS

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