

CENTRAL AND EASTERN

EUROPEAN REVIEW

Volume 4, 2010

**RHETORIC VERSUS ACTIVISM:
AUTONOMOUS AND PARTY-AFFILIATED WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS
IN EAST GERMANY**

by

Susanne Kranz

Zayed University, Dubai.

Abstract

The paper traces the development of the women's movement in the GDR during its final decade. It explains the concerns and methods of organization used by East German women, it also explains the mixed was in which they reacted to the possibility of reunification. Discussion shows well how the movement changed its character in even a relatively short space of time.

ISSN 1752-7503

© 2010 CEER

First publication

**RHETORIC VERSUS ACTIVISM: AURONOMOUS AND PARTY-AFFILIATED
WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS IN EAST GERMANY.**

By

Susanne Kranz

Zayed University, Dubai.

The East German government saw the emancipation of women as completed. According to the theories of the socialist thinkers and the political leaders of the GDR, when the emancipation of society (i.e., of the working class) was realized, the liberation of women would be accomplished. The women's question was incorporated into the social question and the class struggle and not distinguished as an individual aspect of gender relations and therefore women's organizations were not seen as a necessity. The theories of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and August Bebel,¹ were essential to this perspective because they clarified the general attitude towards women in a socialist society. GDR leaders, such as Walter Ulbricht² and Erich Honecker,³ implemented these communist principles in the East German political, social, and cultural system. Partially due to repressive state policies and a well-structured security police, the Stasi (*Staatssicherheit*), women had fewer opportunities to organize in an independent women's movement. In addition, the state's policy toward women was mainly concerned with mothers rather than women as women. It is important to examine the changes in state policy during the existence of the GDR. These policies led to growing discontent with the system, even though there was never much official resistance among women until the 1980s. Women began to realize that emancipation and equality meant more than employment and economic independence. They started to organize themselves, discuss the idea of feminism and the

¹ August Bebel was one of the most important social democratic politicians in the 19th century.

Furthermore, he was a worker, a Marxist revolutionary, and an acknowledged publicist.

² Walter Ulbricht (1893–1973) was the political leader of the German Democratic Republic from 1953–1971, when he was replaced with Erich Honecker. Ulbricht was a member of the KPD and during the Second World War he emigrated to Paris. He returned to Germany in 1945 and became an active member of the SED which emerged through reunification of the KPD and SPD.

³ Erich Honecker (1912–1994) held the political leadership of East Germany from 1971–1989. He joined the communist party in 1926. Honecker was arrested by the Nazis in 1935 and sentenced to ten years in prison for communist activities. After the Second World War he became one of the first members of the SED.

Central and Eastern European Review

propagated ‘officially achieved’ emancipation in the GDR, all of which at this point in time was still illegal. During these years, the Ministry of State Security registered fourteen active women’s groups with approximately 150 women,⁴ and around 650 civil movements.⁵

The first German Women’s Congress was held from March 7th to 9th 1947 in Berlin,⁶ during which the DFD (*Demokratischer Frauenbund Deutschland*) was founded. According to Helen Frink, ‘the DFD officially represented women’s interests to unite in sisterly solidarity against fascism [and] to realize humanity’s longing for peace.’⁷ In September 1947 it already had 242,000 members. The DFD represented itself in the tradition of the progressive bourgeois and proletarian women’s movements yet it soon lost its influence in East Germany due to the communist party which governed the association and turned it into a party instrument.⁸ The SED (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschland*) increased its organizational monopoly and the DFD became a party organization.⁹ Because of this, there was no alternative for women to criticize the system and the pace of women’s emancipation. The DFD was used to implement party policies and the communist view of society in women’s minds. The targeted groups for the ideological education were unemployed women, women with children who stayed at home and those who were not politically organized. The Federation was a mass organization which did not really provide any alternative form of organization; only 1.4 million (15 percent) of women were members.¹⁰ Table one illustrates its numerical development.

⁴ Neubert, p. 710.

⁵ This number seems quite high compared with Manfred Behrend who states 2000 active members of the civil movements in 1989.

⁶ Bühler, p. 47.

⁷ Helen Frink, *Women after Communism. The East German Experience*. Lankam, 2001. p. 193.

⁸ Ingeborg Nödinger. *Für Frieden und Gleichberechtigung* in Florence Herve (ed.), *Geschichte der deutschen Frauenbewegung*. Köln, 2001. p. 139.

⁹ Grit Bütow, *Mythos Gleichberechtigung in der DDR*. Frankfurt a.M.: Campus Verlag, 1997. p. 41.

¹⁰ Christiane Lemke, ‘Women and Politics in East Germany’ in *Socialist Review* 15, 1985, p. 130.

Central and Eastern European Review

Table 1 Members of the DFD¹¹

Year	Numbers of Members
1947	242,544
1950	1,012,983
1970	1,283,739
1980	1,427,349
1987	1,499,734

In 1961 the DFD enthusiastically supported the communiqué *Die Frau—der Frieden und der Sozialismus* [Women—Peace and Socialism] and praised the GDR leadership for its achievements for women. The organization followed the prevailing idea that the women's question was solved and a complete emancipation had been realized. Officially, the DFD had formal command over the only existing women's magazine in East Germany, *Für Dich* [For You], which was founded in 1962, and published by the *Zentralkomitee für Propaganda der SED*.¹² In this magazine, women were seldom shown working in the household. Most pictures showed them involved in public industry and the production process, so indicating women's 'value as productive labor.'¹³ Often the magazine profiled successful women in prominent positions and activities.¹⁴ It was not until 1989 that *Für Dich* began to change, publishing feminist articles. It was now possible to read about domestic violence, pornography, and sexual abuse that officially never existed. On October 7th 1989, the 40th anniversary of the GDR, the DFD was still convinced that emancipation had been achieved and women were accepted as equal members of socialist society. Inge Lange, chairwoman of the federation stated 'In our German Democratic Republic in which policies are deeply shaped according to the wishes and hopes of women, our lives have changed basically [...] our state is also the work of women.'¹⁵ Furthermore, it was declared that no necessity for other women's movements existed since the DFD accomplished all the requirements for the liberation and equality of women.

¹¹ Bundesvorstand des Demokratischen Frauenbund Deutschland (DFD), *Geschichte des Demokratischen Frauenbundes Deutschlands*. Leipzig: DFD, 1989. p. 378.

¹² Ulrike Helwerth and Gislinde Schwarz, *Von Muttis und Emanzen*. Frankfurt a.M., 1997. p. 219.

¹³ Frink, p. 32.

¹⁴ Irene Dölling, 'But the picture stay the same...' *The Image of Women in the Journal 'Für Dich' before and after the 'turning point'* in Nanette Funk (ed.), *Gender Politics and Post-Communism*. New York, 1993. p. 171.

¹⁵ Susanne Diemers, *Patriarchalismus in der DDR*. Opladen, 1994. p. 80.

Central and Eastern European Review

Nonetheless, women's groups began to emerge within the church containing three different trends: (1) non-religious women's groups, (2) religious women's groups, and (3) lesbian groups. Most of these non-religious groups existed within private friend's circles long before they became visible. Samirah Kenawi describes the developments as a 'decade of solidarity of the church with women.'¹⁶ Through these sympathies, a feminist discussion within the church and between the groups and the church was encouraged. One important non-religious women's groups was *Frauen für den Frieden* [Women for Peace] which came into existence in 1982. Many of these groups tried to win the Democratic Women's Federation of Germany as sponsor for their events and meetings, but failed. Even women within the DFD attempted to address feminist themes and hold discussions about feminist issues, but every attempt was rejected until 1989.¹⁷ The second tendency, the religious women's movement, developed from traditional women's work within the church; their topics were family and children, women in church and society, abortion, feminist theology, history, and tradition versus feminism. The religious groups had better opportunities to organize because they had access to rooms, technical equipment, and the chance to publish booklets and journals. The third group of women's movements within the Protestant Church, the lesbian movement, fought for acceptance of a homosexual way of life and they wanted to create public meeting places.

All of these groups kept themselves informed and updated through word of mouth and a network of private contacts. They were lacking technical equipment, essential to build up a well-organized and effective network. Consequently, it remained difficult for them to keep in touch and organize events.¹⁸ Some of the most influential women's organizations that were established in these years were the UFV; lilo (the *Fraueninitiative* 'lila offensive' [Women's Initiative 'purple offensive']); and SOFI (Sozialistische Fraueninitiative [Socialist Women's Initiative]).¹⁹ However, none of these groups wished the GDR to vanish or be annexed by the FRG. They merely intended to reform society and create a humane socialism with more individual rights and freedom.

¹⁶ Kenawi, p. 18.

¹⁷ Kenawi, p. 26.

¹⁸ Schenk and Schindler, p. 133.

¹⁹ Cordula Kahlau, *Aufbruch! Frauenbewegungen in der DDR*. München, 1990. p. 108.

Central and Eastern European Review

Most of these groups were only locally and regionally organized and had few opportunities to gain influence.

In February 1982, the West German group *Frauen für den Frieden* planned a peace march from Berlin through the territory of the GDR to Vienna, Austria to demonstrate under the motto: 'Disarmament in East and West—for a nuclear-free Europe.'²⁰ However, the East German government denied the women permission to march through the GDR and refused to allow participation by East German women. In March, East German women founded the group Women for Peace, a move which was illegal at the time. The women were able to establish and maintain contacts with members of the movement throughout Europe, cooperate with them, and coordinate common activities. The main topics were peace, disarmament, refusal of military service, the prevention of the realization of the NATO-*Doppelbeschluss* [NATO-Double Decision] and the stationing of SS-20-Missiles on the territory of the GDR. Another major reason for the establishment of Women for Peace was a new law about military service that was ratified on March 23rd 1982.²¹ The law stated that in case of a national emergency, women between the ages of eighteen and fifty would be drafted for military service. Several women submitted petitions to the government about the law. For the government the law was also an expression of the realization of equality that was laid down as a basic right in the constitution. For women on the other hand, 'military service for women was not an expression of equality, but a contradiction of them being women.'²² A woman's task was to protect life and not destroy it. They wrote in their petition: 'We are not willing to participate in military service and demand the right to refuse military service because the law is restricting our freedom of conscience.'²³ Women also collected signatures and several night prayers for peace took place. In December the open letter was published in the West German magazine *Der Spiegel*.

In January 1983 women issued another letter to the government because they were not given any response to their first petition. An open protest of *Frauen für den Frieden* occurred. In several cities they publicized their establishment. Subsequently, the

²⁰ *Dokumentation Frauen für den Frieden*, Zeittafel, Matthias Domaschk Archiv, Berlin.

²¹ Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship. Inside the GDR 1949–1989*. New York, 1995. p. 234.

²² Ehrhart Neubert, *Geschichte der Opposition in der DDR 1949–1989*. Berlin, 1997. p. 460.

²³ *Eingabe an Erich Honecker*, 12.October 1982, Matthias Domaschk Archiv.

Central and Eastern European Review

communist government 'recommended' that some of these women leave the GDR. On March 8th, Women's Day, West German Women for Peace organized the formation of a women's chain between the American and Russian consulates in West Berlin to deliver peace messages against hate and violence. Encouraged by these activities, the Eastern group arranged a picket with candles and built a human chain between the American and Russian embassies to promote communication between East and West. Approximately seventy people participated in this demonstration resulting in massive police engagement and growing repression. In October 1983, the group initiated the action, 'Denial in Black,' where fifty women dressed in black handed over their petitions refusing military service to the responsible military service offices. Again, massive engagement of the security forces occurred. The situation was further aggravated when the government, on October 25th 1983, announced the plan to station Russian short-range nuclear missiles on the territory of the GDR. The state security service imposed curfews, increased questioning, and refused further entry for West Germans into the GDR, in order to prevent common actions and increased communication between groups. The Stasi planted an informal employee into the movement to monitor any activities and meetings. One cause that later led to the breakdown of the group occurred when the *IM* Karin Lenz, known to the women as Monika Häger, revealed to the movement that she worked for the Stasi. The SED planned regular surveillance of the movement and faked an expulsion of Karin Lenz from the party which would allow her easy access to the organization.

In December, the political leadership finally ordered the arrests of Bärbel Bohley and Ulrike Poppe. West German women protested at Check Point Charlie in Berlin for the release of these women and other political prisoners of the GDR, an event which drew international attention. At the international meeting of peace movements in Stockholm at the CSCE conference (Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe) in January 1984, petitions were made to the leading politicians calling for the release of Bohley and Poppe. The British newspaper *The Guardian* wrote on January 12, 1984:

'How cruise missiles have claimed two East German victims! Two women see pacifism as the only viable strategy for the de-escalation of the arms race; opposition was addressed to both superpowers. The women's concern was purely to promote contact and understanding between women's peace groups through the

Central and Eastern European Review

exchange of feminist issues. Although the GDR's record on legal, social, and economic measures in favor of equality for women is impressive, the women with whom we have contact had begun to value talking and acting together as women for the first time.²⁴

The pressure on the GDR increased and led to the release of the women on January 24. Bohley continued her engagement in oppositional groups, but was finally expelled from the GDR in 1988 and was sent on a 'compulsory vacation' to Great Britain. The Stasi continued to create uncertainty within the organization through anonymous letters. Due to fear of further repression, the women decided to split the movement into regional factions which made it almost impossible to organize activities, co-ordinate meetings and communicate with each other. In June 1985, state security opened their program '*Wespen*' [Wasps]. Its mission was to corrode Women for Peace across the GDR. Eventually, in 1986 (the international year of peace), new groups and movements emerged from Women for Peace such as Doctors for Peace, third world groups, and other democratic organizations.

Over the course of time, the themes of the group changed and assumed new priorities. New topics, such as nuclear energy, education, and also women-specific subjects were included in the program. Reasons for this shift were the bad economic situation within the country, the decrease of the nuclear threat as well as the fact that women began to engage with gender equality. Furthermore, the reactor accident in Chernobyl on April 26th 1986, made the dangers of nuclear energy obvious and imposed new threats upon society. This incident increased environmental concerns and showed that atomic threats and dangers concerned everybody and did not stop at ideological boundaries. Education emerged as an additional concern. The educational system of the GDR promoted gender segregation, traditional gender roles, and military themes. From the early 1980s women submitted petitions to the Ministry of Education against military toys and militaristic school education. They founded a '*Kinderladen*' [Children's Shop] in 1980, which was seen as an alternative to the authoritarian education. It furthermore criticized the kindergarten and high school system of the GDR and the state's views on

²⁴ Barbara Einhorn, 'How cruise missiles have claimed two East German victims' in *The Guardian*, January 12th 1984.

Central and Eastern European Review

education with its militaristic elements. The *Kinderladen* was closed by state security in 1983 because the leaders perceived this concept of education as a threat. Through these newly added themes and concerns the participants increased in number and became more diverse. The new diversity led to disagreements and splits within the movement. Topics like genetic engineering, ethics, abortion, women's health concerns, family matters as well as gender roles in schoolbooks, the state's socio-political measures, and women as workers were incorporated into the program.²⁵ When the first nationwide women's meeting took place in 1988, Women for Peace had given up its original reasons for establishment and was dissolved into a network of various women's, peace, and civil groups whose main concern now was to reform the existing political system of the GDR into humane socialism with democratic features. The last official Women for Peace, meeting mentioned in the archival records, took place in December 1988.

The 'lila offensive' (lilo) was established on October 11th 1989, after women realized at a demonstration of opposition groups on that same day that women's issues were forgotten and totally left out of political discussion. None of the present opposition groups had women's specific themes and issues in their programs. According to Anna Hampele, 'at the beginning of October, after some calls and programs of opposition groups were distributed, we realized that the specific situation of women was not considered in the drafts for a more just and non-dictatorial society.'²⁶ Women saw that it was time to involve their interests in the ongoing arguments and in the upcoming process of social and political reforms. They organized the first public women's meeting on November 23rd 1989, and worked out some theoretical feminist critiques of the women's policy in the 'real existing socialism.' These were later included in the program of the UFV, which declared their position toward the emerging reform process in the GDR.²⁷

Lilo wanted to express its discontent with the results of forty years of SED women's policies. Their objective was a broad, open discussion of women's issues and

²⁵ Kenawi, 25.

²⁶ Anne Hampele, *Der Unabhängige Frauenverband. Ein frauenpolitisches Experiment im deutschen Vereinigungsprozess*. Berlin, 1996. p. 67.

²⁷ Helwerth and Schwarz, p. 242.

Central and Eastern European Review

the effective creation of a society that was just to women.²⁸ The under-representation of women, the lack of respect for women, and the absence of an independent women's organization were issues included in their program for a better socialism. They argued that the DFD and the factory promotional plans were only used as front organizations and served to legitimize SED politics.²⁹ Furthermore, they demanded a change of existing gender roles. Women should not be limited to housework and the bringing up of children. Girls and boys were to be educated without typical gender-biased thinking. The women of lilo prepared a catalog of demands and requirements for a society which would be kinder toward women. The catalog contained different spheres such as professional life, individual reproduction and political decision-making, law, and socialization. The field of professional life included aspects of real economic equality of men and women, friendlier support for parents such as the improved promotion of compatibility of motherhood, fatherhood and the professions, and the same prospects for professional development, according to professional knowledge and performance rather than gender. The individual production was determined by the state with the claim that men and women have to share household work and that they have equal responsibilities for their families. They advocated a 50% quota system in representative bodies and political decision-making. The revision of the criminal code was promoted with the goal of achieving a strict and consistent prosecution and punishment of every kind of violence toward women. The last part of the catalogue, the social sphere, acknowledged the necessity of the reduction of gender stereotypical thinking, behavior, and education. It called for public consciousness of the gender question and opportunities for women to communicate.

Lilo women called for a demonstration for freedom of the press and opinion on November 4th 1989 in Berlin. This demonstration was the biggest non-SED demonstration in the history of the GDR. Women carried banners with slogans such as 'DFD: Dienstbar—Folgsam—Dumm' (DFD: Service—Obedient—Dumb).³⁰ The motto

²⁸ 'Gesprächseinstieg zur 1. Öffentlichen Veranstaltung der "lila offensive" am 23.11.'89' in *Gesammelte Flugschriften DDR '90*. Berlin, 1990. pp. 18–21.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Anne Hampele, *Der Unabhängige Frauenverband*. in Helmut Müller-Enzbergs, Marianna Schulz, and Jan Wielgohls(eds.), *Von der Illegalität ins Parlament. Werdegang und Konzepte der neuen Bürgerbewegung*. Berlin, 1992. p. 234.

Central and Eastern European Review

significant for their agenda. Pornography and prostitution were forbidden and did not exist officially in East Germany. Women were incredibly concerned about the flood of these sources of women's degradation after the opening of the Berlin Wall on November 9th 1989, and with it came fear of violence, further discrimination, and the exploitation of women's bodies. For them, it was high time that the women's problem entered public awareness because the situation of women's consciousness was catastrophic. According to the lilo movement, the demagogy of accomplished equality was there to silence women with their specific interests and experiences. Furthermore, it was time that women's policy was made by women. Despite this, lilo was against unification with West Germany. They participated, already as part of the UFV, in an anti-reunification demonstration on December 19th 1989. Women feared that unification would leave women again out of the political process and take away their right to participate in social changes. They argued that the annexation of East Germany by the FRG would lead to social changes which would primarily affect women; basic rights such as the right to work would be in danger, and the right of abortion would be questioned again. Their rights would be exchanged for a place at home, economic dependence and prostitution. Lilo women struggled for the establishment of a socially just, ecological, and emancipated society.³²

Their self-understanding was that they were feminists. Feminism for them was the perception and representation of the interests of women. It was a way to look at social conditions and the way women were identified in different spheres of society. It also meant to include the gender question as a fundamental aspect of the understanding of society. Furthermore, feminism was a policy that looked specifically at women's interests. For these women, feminism did not mean the exclusion of men; to achieve equality men also needed to change their self-perception vis-à-vis to women, and they also needed to adjust to the new conditions. In this way, the emancipation of the entire society would be accomplished.³³ For them feminism was a matter of interest-perception and interest-representation for women.³⁴

³² Katrin Rohnstock, *Frauen in die Offensive: Texte und Arbeitspapiere der Gruppe 'Lila Offensive.'* Berlin, 1990. pp. 31–33.

³³ 'Standortbestimmung der Fraueninitiative lila offensive' in *Gesammelte Flugschriften DDR '90.*

Central and Eastern European Review

SOFI (*Sozialistische Fraueninitiative* [Socialist Women's Initiative]), another women's group that emerged in 1989, had similar principles to lilo. It was generally about making women's voices more intensive and effective in the society and in the war against discrimination. SOFI was also established in October 1989 at the *Berliner Fachhochschule für Ökonomie* (Berlin College of Economy).³⁵ SOFI was a member of the UFV and had approximately thirty active members. SOFI tried to promote the free development of women within the society. Women needed more time to participate in social and intellectual processes, and men should give more support to women to enable them to participate. Their motto was: 'half of the house to the men and half of the world to the women.'³⁶ They also feared that the emerging capitalistic mechanism would lead to economic insecurity and social decline, especially for women. Moreover, their program included the safeguarding of peace, disarmament, the assurance of human rights, non-violence and an intact environment. Biological differences should not lead to social injustice.³⁷ Like all other groups and movements SOFI was also against a fast reunification process. The 'Lila offensive' and SOFI were of prime importance to the emergence of the UFV, even though not all lilo women supported the UFV. Some left the women's organization because not all of their interests were represented by the new association. Most women from the 'lila offensive' and SOFI separated from the association when the UFV decided to become a registered association and not a political party in 1991. They said goodbye to the UFV while publishing an obituary in the *taz—Die Tageszeitung* [*The Daily Paper*): 'After long and hard searching, our beloved child or the UFV died, at the redemption congress at Weimar, because of anaemia and thoughtlessness, forename UFV, relieved lila offensive.'³⁸

Of all these small opposition groups the UFV marked a 'turning point in state-imposed policy on women.'³⁹ In May 1989, two hundred women from diverse local

Berlin, 1990. pp. 10–13.

³⁴ Bärbel Klässner, 'Beobachtungen im Zusammenhang mit einem Wort' in Cordula Kahlau (ed.), *Aufbruch! Die Frauenbewegung in der DDR*. München, 1990. p. 47.

³⁵ Hampele (1996), p. 68.

³⁶ Flugblatt SOFI, Matthias Domaschk Archiv, Berlin.

³⁷ Programm SOFI, Matthias Domaschk Archiv, Berlin.

³⁸ Lila offensive, Chronik, 26.10.91, Matthias Domaschk Archiv, Berlin.

³⁹ Tatiana Böhm, 'The Women's Question as a Democratic Question' in Nanette Funk(ed.), *Gender Politics and Post-Communism*. New York, 1993. p. 152.

Central and Eastern European Review

groups met in Jena to discuss feminism, real emancipation rather than that regulated by the political leaders, the state's imposed equality and the future of GDR socialism.⁴⁰ 'The women's claim for participation and the intention to reform were aimed at a state that guaranteed equality and women's promotion in the constitution, but that did not involve women in politics and did not allow an independent women's movement.'⁴¹ At this time, movements were still illegal and subject to the state's control and persecution. The emerging feminist consciousness led to actions and meetings of women's groups nationwide. It became clear that women needed an independent women's movement that would express their issues and criticize the pseudo-emancipation policies of the SED.

The establishment of the UFV meant a new chapter in the East German women's movement. According to Samirah Kenawi, the Independent Women's Association marked a 'concluding and final point for the GDR women's movement and a transition to the women's movement of the new East German federal states.'⁴² The UFV was not an institutional continuation of the GDR movements; it represented something new because its foundation was initiated by non-governmental women's groups and also by women who were members of the Communist party. Most of the women's groups opposed the inclusion of party-women in their movements because of their experiences with the suppressive policies of the SED. Moreover, the women just started to build up a women's network to improve co-operation between the groups and intensify their demands for reforms. The groups were mainly active regionally, and thought that an umbrella association in Berlin would only lead to the representation of Berlin-focused politics and interests which would officially occur 'in the name of all women in the GDR,' but would not really represent all women's interests.⁴³ For this reason only a small number of GDR women's movements participated in the congress which called for the foundation of the UFV on December 3rd 1989, and at the actual foundation congress of the UFV on February 17th 1990 in Berlin.

⁴⁰ Ferree. 'The Rise and the Fall of "Mommy Politics"', p. 98.

⁴¹ Hampele (1993), p. 35.

⁴² Kenawi, p. 43.

⁴³ Kenawi, p. 43.

Central and Eastern European Review

At the outset the movement had a broad range of participants.⁴⁴ The UFV viewed itself as an association where women from all spheres of life could come together without looking at philosophical, political, social, age, sexual, national, and religious boundaries.⁴⁵ Included were mainly intellectuals—women from academic circles, scientists, university professors, teachers, students—and also ordinary middle-class women.⁴⁶ Most of the women who participated in the movement had obtained a university degree or were skilled workers. According to Anne Hampele, nurses, hairdressers, secretaries, librarians, and doctors were represented in the organization, which secured broad interests and also demands. The ages of women varied between twenty and the mid-forties. Most ordinary working-class women, however, had no time, between paid labor, raising children and household duties, to demonstrate and fight for equal rights and political participation. Women came from quite different GDR backgrounds that equipped them with diverse perceptions about the state and made differences between the women visible throughout the existence of the organization. According to Siemers, ‘with the foundation of the UFV, women participated for the first time in the history of the German Democratic Republic independently and not under the dictate of the SED or the DFD.’⁴⁷ After the first nationwide women’s meeting took place on November 23rd 1989, a second meeting was organized for December 2nd in Erfurt. These meetings were intended to create an improved network and cooperation between the groups. Due to the turbulent times and quickly changing circumstances, the women’s group in Berlin had already prepared a meeting for the founding of an independent women’s group on December 3rd 1989. The regional group from Erfurt felt overlooked and ignored leading to discontent within the movement from the very beginning.

The initiative committee for the foundation of an autonomous women’s association of the GDR (*Initiativkomitee zur Gründung eines autonomen Frauenverbandes der DDR*) appealed to all women with the ‘*Aufruf an alle Frauen!*’ [Call to all Women] to come together.

⁴⁴ No research has been done to determine what social backgrounds most of the women came from who participated actively in the UFV.

⁴⁵ UFV. *Programm des UVF*. Berlin: Grauzone, 1990. p. 2.

⁴⁶ Dodds and Allen-Thompson, p. 25.

⁴⁷ Siemers, p. 186.

Central and Eastern European Review

Call to all Women!

In the present situation of social changes, the interests of women play a subordinated role.

We fear:

- a further deterioration of the social situation of women
- a renewed exclusion of women from important political and economic decisions.

But neither a public consciousness nor a political interest's representation of women exists.

Let's take the initiative because of that!

Women, let's organize!

Let's create our own interests representation!

Our suggestion:

We establish a women's association in which all

- independent women's association and initiatives
- women's associations and commissions
- women's fractions of the party and mass organizations
- and every single woman

assemble to represent our own political interests, without losing our own identity.

Initiative Committee for the foundation of an autonomous women's association of the GDR.⁴⁸

This call led to a meeting of approximately 1,200 women who represented roughly sixty women's groups and initiatives in Berlin on December 3rd 1989; at this assembly women formally decided to establish the UFV.⁴⁹ The main purposes at the congress were to create publicity for women through women, to initiate activities of women's groups and to encourage women to enter politics. The motto of the UFV originated from Ina Merkel's '*Manifest für eine autonome Frauenbewegung*' [Manifesto for an Autonomous Women's Association], which was '*Ohne Frauen ist kein Staat zu machen*'⁵⁰ [Without Women You Can't Make a State]. The program stated that the interests of women were subordinated in times of social changes, which is why women need to take the initiative to fight for women's rights in the form of an independent organization to bring the

⁴⁸ Initiativkomitee zur Gründung eines autonomen Frauenverbandes der DDR. *Aufruf an alle Frauen!* Berlin: Grauzone, 1989.

⁴⁹ Claudia Richter, 'Frauen wollen nicht mehr verwaltet werden' in *Berliner Zeitung*, 19.2.1990.

⁵⁰ Ina Merkel, *Ohne Frauen ist kein Staat zu machen. Manifest für eine autonome Frauenbewegung* Berlin: Grauzone, 3.12.1989. p. 1.

Central and Eastern European Review

deterioration of the social situation of women to an end.⁵¹ Moreover, the UFV wanted to free the term feminism from prejudices. For them feminism was simply the representation of women's interests and perception and had nothing to do with anti-male thinking.⁵²

On December 3rd, Ina Merkel read the manifesto to the women present, stating that women were there when the social changes in the GDR took place and now they were again in danger of being left out of the renewal of socialist society. The women's question needed to be included in the politics of the emerging society because it was not a fringe problem but an essential problem of society. She was opposed to exchanging the patriarchy of the GDR for the patriarchy of the FRG: 'reunification would mean going three steps back in the women's question, it would mean: women back to the stove, another fight for the right to work, and a fight for a space in childcare facilities. It would mean giving up many things that were achieved with difficulty.'⁵³ Furthermore, the manifesto proclaimed 'Only when women are equally represented can they articulate more than their interests as a fringe group and take care of all societal questions. Women make up half of the population. Because of this they need to be able to use their veto for all human questions.' Ina Merkel called for: (1) modern socialism; (2) ecological reorganization of the economy; (3) democracy, self-government and freedom of the press; (4) multi-cultural society; and (5) solidarity between all social groups. The manifesto was thought of as a basis for discussion within the various groups in order to be able to decide on a universal program for the foundation of an independent women's movement in the GDR. During the coming three months women sought to collect information and commit themselves to common ideas and a common program. The program was signed with the remark 'For a Cheerful Revolution of Women with Political Consequences.'⁵⁴ Women perceived themselves as an alternative to the DFD.

Activist women submitted a letter to Hans Modrow, minister president of the GDR from 1989 until 1990, on January 15th 1990. The letter contained thoughts about the gender question. The UFV pressured the government to include these important themes

⁵¹ *Aufruf an alle Frauen!* in *Gesammelte Flugschriften der DDR '90*. Berlin, 1990.

⁵² Program des UFV. Berlin: Grauzone, Februar 1990.

⁵³ Merkel, p. 3.

⁵⁴ UFV. *Programm*. Berlin: Grauzone, 1990. p. 11.

Central and Eastern European Review

in politics, and Hans Modrow did so. The UFV believed that without the solution of the women's question no equal, humane, progressive society could emerge.⁵⁵ The primary ideas were to achieve equal pay for equal work, a reduction of the gender-typical divisions of labor, shared household work and the reduction of sexist behavior and thinking. The most important aspect of the letter was the establishment of an institution that was supposed to create active equality policies. Due to this engagement women were able to gain a seat in the government and one UFV woman was employed as Minister without Portfolio by Modrow.

The UFV was an umbrella organization for all autonomous women's groups, initiatives, commissions, and single women, from all levels of society, to represent women's interests yet individual groups remained independent and self-governing. The number of groups that participated in the UFV always fluctuated. The association's principles were 'grass-roots democracy, friendly toward women, free of hierarchy, consensus-oriented, and as regards contents determined by the will of the women and their groups.'⁵⁶ The development of women's own political perspectives and the reform of the GDR were further goals. To realize their new goals, the UFV started to organize self-help groups for women, women's centers, and special projects, and it got involved in elections and in parliamentary activities. Domestic violence, for instance, was made an issue for the first time. Christina Schenk characterized the UFV as an 'experiment.' Women were confronted with the difficult task with which they had never dealt before; women needed to be included in politics to make politics for women. They wanted no political party; the UFV was thought of as an organization that combined many independent women's groups and initiatives. Activists truly perceived themselves as an alternative to the DFD.

About the author

Susanne Kranz gained her PhD from Leeds University for a study of the women's movement in India. She has taught History at the University of Bradford and has just accepted an academic post in Dubai. Her email address is susikranz@hotmail.com

⁵⁵ UFV. *Brief an Hans Modrow*, 15.1.1990. Berlin: Grauzone.

⁵⁶ Kuhrig in Herve, p. 246.