

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Klaus-JÖrg Ruhl. *Verordnete Unterordnung: BerufstÖtliche Frauen zwischen Wirtschaftswachstum und konservativer Ideologie in der Nachkriegszeit (1945-1963)*. Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1994. 355 pp. DM 148.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-486-56072-5.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Heineman (Harvard University)  
Published on H-German (November, 1995)



According to stereotype, the 1950s saw a “flight to domesticity” among West German women. After they were forced into the workplace to replace men called to war, and after they performed extraordinary feats to feed their families during the crisis years following the collapse, women retreated to the domestic sphere to keep house and raise children for their bread-winning husbands. Only in the 1970s and 1980s, as feminism created new opportunities for working women and as the economic slump made it more difficult for families to survive on the earnings of a male head-of-household, did women emerge from the household to become a significant presence in the labor force. A quick glance at the statistics reveals the inadequacy of this stereotype. Nearly two million women joined the West German work force between 1947 and 1955; by 1961, 48.9 percent of all women aged 15 to 60 performed paid work. In fact, the increase in women’s paid employment between 1950 and 1961 exceeded that of the following two decades combined –feminism and the oil crisis notwithstanding. Given the still-common misperceptions of women’s roles in the 1950s, Klaus-Joerg Ruhl’s *Verordnete Unterordnung* is a welcome exploration of forces shaping women’s employment between 1945 and 1963.

Despite women’s considerable presence in the workforce, and despite the dependence of the booming West German economy on female labor, women’s positions in the labor force remained unfavorable. Working women faced not only systematic, institutional discrimination, but also social derision and resentment. Rather than being rewarded for their role in West Germany’s recovery, they continued to be reserve workers, hired and fired according to the short-term needs of the economy and limited mainly to segregated, unskilled, and poorly-paid po-

sitions. Rather than gaining sympathy for being forced to juggle household, child-rearing, and workplace duties, they were accused of raising a generation of neglected, ill-adjusted children. Ruhl’s principle question is, quite simply, why? Why did employed women continue to suffer discrimination, despite their indispensability to the economy? And what efforts were made to change this state of affairs (p. 11)?

After 1945, improved status for West German women seemed likely. The old polity, ideology, and even aspects of the economic structure were discredited; there was great public awareness of women’s crucial role after the collapse; women themselves gained confidence as a result of this role; the Basic Law guaranteed equal rights regardless of sex; and employers desperately needed labor as the economic miracle got underway. Nevertheless, male privilege and discrimination against women were barely shaken in the Federal Republic. The Bundestag upheld paternal authority within the family and separate wage classifications according to sex. Although the Constitutional Court ruled both measures unconstitutional in the late 1950s, it suggested creating categories of “light” and “heavy” work to replace “women’s” and “men’s” work, thus changing nothing but the language of discrimination. Except in the case of pregnant women and nursing mothers, the government showed little interest in women’s working conditions. Child care and improved vocational training were practically non-issues; only women’s sections of the unions even articulated such needs. Reflecting on the promising start following the collapse of Nazi Germany and the institutionalized sexism of the 1950s, women’s historians have pondered the question of a “lost opportunity” for emancipation for West German women. Was there indeed such a possi-

bility? If so, why was it not realized? Although Ruhl neither uses this term nor fully grapples with previous considerations of the problem, his work fits squarely into this context.

*Verordnete Unterordnung* offers a useful two-part framework for understanding employed women's positions in West Germany during the 1950s. The economy (which demanded women's employment) triumphed over the conservative ideologues (who opposed it), but the conservative ideologues in turn triumphed over employed women in the arena of public relations (p. 13). Since employment was in the economic interest both of women and of their employers, women, including mothers of young children, worked in ever-greater numbers. But since the conservatives successfully dominated public discourse concerning working women, the latter never gained the recognition and rewards they deserved.

Ruhl develops this analysis on the foundation of detailed archival reconstruction. Before completing *Verordnete Unterordnung*, Ruhl published two volumes of documents concerning women in the postwar period, and his devotion to archival material is reflected in *Verordnete Unterordnung* as well. Drawing on materials held at the Bundesarchiv, the Archiv des Deutschen Gewerkschaftsbundes, and the Nordrhein-Westfaelisches Hauptstaatsarchiv as well as an extensive consideration of contemporary published literature, Ruhl covers such topics as the attempts to prevent the "women of the rubble" from permanently entering the construction industry; the disputes between unions and employment offices on labor protections for women in light of the unemployment following the currency reform; the consolidation of the conservative opposition to women's employment; the debates around the Equal Rights clause of the Basic Law; and the implications of the Equal Rights clause for family law and differential wage scales based on sex.

Although his introduction lists several factors shaping women's employment, the main characters in Ruhl's text are the occupation authorities and employment offices (in the first section), governmental bodies, and organized Catholicism. The debates among these players on labor protections, equal rights, family law, and equal pay form the backbone of the book and are related in tremendous detail. The book includes lengthy sections on subjects not directly related to women's employment, such as money-for-children (almost always attached to men's wages), fathers' authority over their children, and husbands' authority over their wives. In including this material, Ruhl does more than remind us that discussions

of women's employment always occurred in the larger context of efforts to restore a "normative" family characterized by a bread-winning father, a housewife, children, and patriarchal authority over wife and children. He also provides a great deal of material on crucial aspects of women's history between 1945 and 1963 well beyond the issue of employment. Scholars concerned with the postwar family or conservative Catholicism, for example, will find much of interest here – even aside from the arenas in which family issues and Catholicism intersected with the question of women's employment.

Ruhl's characterization of organized Catholicism and of Adenauer's coalition government deserves some attention. Whether the differences between postwar organized Catholicism's *family* politics and National Socialism's *population* politics outweighed the similarities has long been the subject of both popular and scholarly debate. This is no trifling matter, since not only was organized Catholicism extremely influential in the CDU/CSU's family policy, but Franz-Josef Wuermeling, the Federal Republic's first Family Minister, emerged from this tradition and remained closely committed to it. Ruhl is careful to distinguish between the National Socialist and the organized Catholic approaches to the family (p. 159). He is cautiously sympathetic to organized Catholicism and to Wuermeling, describing the latter as a "tragic figure" who "versuchte, sich mit dem katholisch-restaurativen Gedankengut des 19. Jahrhunderts gegen eine unaufhaltsam fortschreitende Gesellschafts- und Wirtschaftsentwicklung zu stemmen – und wurde einfach zur Seite geschoben" (p. 153).

Ruhl is more critical in his evaluation of the CDU/CSU, especially its members' decision to support the Equal Rights clause of the Basic Law and their subsequent reluctance to revise family law in a way that reflected equal rights. He describes the CDU/CSU's switch to a stand supportive of equal rights in the Parliamentary Council as a purely cynical maneuver, made with the upcoming elections in mind and with no intention whatsoever of actually ending legal discrimination (217). The CDU/CSU's later resistance to making wives the legal equals of their husbands was the natural outcome of this cynicism – and not a wrenching conflict of conscience among parliamentarians suddenly confronted with an understanding of the full implications of equal rights for women (p. 227). Nevertheless, Ruhl does not characterize the Adenauer government as unanimously committed to the cause of patriarchal authority. Thomas Dehler (FDP), whose Justice Ministry was responsible for drafting the revised family law, strongly opposed husbands'

authority over their wives (partly because, as a conservative Protestant, he was irritated by organized Catholicism's meddling) – although he still supported paternal decision-making in matters concerning the children (p. 237).

Given the centrality of the Equal Rights clause and the subsequent discriminatory family legislation to the question of women's "lost opportunity" for emancipation, Ruhl's evaluation of these subjects is a significant contribution to the historiography. Most important, it challenges the image of a uniformly conservative Adenauer government and calls into question Wuermeling's influence (see, for example, Delille and Grohn below) – without, however, denying the government's fundamental opposition to genuine equal rights for women. Specialists will want to consult Ruhl's chapters on these themes in conjunction with Robert Moeller's work on the same subjects.

The exhaustive detail with which Ruhl treats these subjects, however, comes at a price. While it is essential to recall the context in which debates concerning women's employment occurred, the need for the amount of space Ruhl devotes to such "contextual" themes as the establishment of the *Familien-Verbaende* is not always clear, and women's employment per se seems short-changed. Thirty-five pages on the revision of family law, for example, are followed by only eighteen on the debates concerning sex-specific wage scales (pp. 225-79). Other topics directly relating to women's employment are covered only fleetingly or not at all. These themes include pension law, programs for the integration of war widows and refugee women into the labor market, the applicability of money-for-children to women's employment, education, and vocational training. Ironically, although Ruhl states that the center of his analysis lies in the period 1948-57/58, his discussion of the era of occupation is more clearly focused on women's employment per se. His detailed reconstruction of official discussions of women's employment during this period provides a much-needed supplement to the literature on women's experiences before and immediately following currency reform (see esp. Meyer and Schulze below). In addition to considering additional themes relevant to women's employment, future scholars may be able to expand on Ruhl's work by looking more deeply at actors other than organized Catholicism and state institutions. Ruhl makes clear in his introduction that working women's experiences are not the focus of his study, but even at the level of policy making and public debate, there is much yet to be done. Ruhl devotes pages to Catholic organi-

zations' positions on the Equal Rights clause but only two paragraphs to the women's organizations that orchestrated the letter-writing campaign that eventually forced the CDU/CSU to give up their opposition to the clause (pp. 213-14). We learn about the *Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund's* Division for Women and its leaders only on page 297; the *Deutsche Angestelltengesellschaft*, whose Women's Division leaders were quite vocal, does not appear at all. To be sure, the union archives are not as extensive as the federal government's, but reference to the union's and the SPD's women's magazines might have provided a greater sense of labor's and feminism's voice in the debates. The voice of these contemporary experts on women's work is most sorely missed in Ruhl's discussion of women's employment-related health problems. Here, the author uncritically adopts the analysis of 1950s observers who were generally hostile to women's work, or at least to the notion that the employer and the state might have to incur some expense in order to improve conditions for women. Thus in Ruhl's analysis, for example, women more than men suffered psychological symptoms such as insomnia and headaches because of their "im ganzen labileren Nervensystems" (p. 316), and not, as many contemporaries insisted, because they had to endure demeaning treatment at the workplace and perform a "second shift" at home.

Despite certain gaps, *Verordnete Unterordnung* will prove a useful work for historians of West German women and social policy. Ruhl's detailed analysis of conservative ideology and legislative developments should be taken into consideration in any further investigations of women in the Federal Republic. It is a welcome addition to the still-young (and scantily populated) field of postwar German women's history.

#### SELECTED RELATED READINGS

Delille, Angela, and Andrea Grohn. *Blick zurueck aufs Glueck: Frauenleben und Familienpolitik in den 50er Jahren*. Berlin: Elefant Press, 1985.

Drohse, Petra. *Die Lohndiskriminierung der Frauen: Eine Studie ueber Lohn und Lohndiskriminierung von erwerbstaetigen Frauen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1945-1984*. Marburg: SP-Verlag, 1986.

Kolinsky, Eva. *Women in Contemporary Germany: Life, Work and Politics*. Providence: Berg, 1989.

Kuhn, Annette. "Die vergessene Frauenarbeit in der deutschen Nachkriegszeit." In "Das Schicksal Deutschlands liegt in der Hand seiner Frauen": *Frauen in der*

*deutschen Nachkriegsgeschichte*, edited by Anna- Elisabeth Freier and Annette Kuhn. Duesseldorf: Schwann, 1984.

Meyer, Sibylle and Eva Schulze. *Von Liebe sprach damals keiner: Familienalltag in der Nachkriegszeit*. Munich: Beck, 1985.

--. *Wie wir das alles geschafft haben: Alleinstehende Frauen berichten ueber ihr Leben nach 1945*. Munich: Beck, 1984.

Moeller, Robert G. *Protecting Motherhood: Women and the Family in the Politics of Postwar West Germany*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

Ruhl, Klaus-Joerg (ed.). *Frauen in der Nachkriegszeit 1945-1963*. Munich: DTV, 1988.

-- (ed.). *Unsere verlorenen Jahre: Frauenalltag in Kriegs- und Nachkriegszeit 1939-1949*. Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1985.

Schmidt, Margot. "Im Vorzimmer: Arbeitsverhaelt-nisse von Sekretaerinnen u. Sachbearbeiterinnen bei Thyssen nach dem Kriege." In *Hinterher merkt man, dass es richtig war, dass es schiefgegangen ist: Nachkriegser-fahrungen im Ruhrgebiet*, edited by Lutz Niethammer. Bonn: Dietz, 1983.

Schubert, Doris. *Frauen in der deutschen Nachkriegszeit*. Vol. 1: *Frauenarbeit 1945-1949*. Dues-seldorf: Schwann, 1984.

Copyright (c) 1995 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Elizabeth Heineman. Review of Ruhl, Klaus-Joerg, *Verordnete Unterordnung: Berufstötige Frauen zwischen Wirtschaftswachstum und konservativer Ideologie in der Nachkriegszeit (1945-1963)*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. November, 1995.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=208>

Copyright © 1995 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).