

Unpaid work – new chances and dangers for women and men in Germany¹

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First of all, I would like to thank Beate Schöne, Paula Scott and Prof. Sousa Ferreira for the invitation to this very interesting Conference. Furthermore, I would like to thank Daniel Dahm who told the Wuppertal Institute about my research work and gave me the opportunity to be here today. I love Lisbon very much and I am very happy to be part of this project and having the chance of meeting all the people involved in it. I hope you can understand my English and I am very sorry that it is not as good as my German.

ABOUT ME

As it is written in the Programme, I am not only a social scientist but also a journalist. I am French but I moved to Berlin directly after my studies at the Ecole Normale Supérieure and in a journalist school in Paris. Since then – i.e. for the last 8 years, I have become a specialist in the so-called non-profit sector or third sector or third system – whatever you like... and one of my favourite subjects is feminism. I am also the speaker for the Federation of Women Journalists in Berlin – this is as a volunteer, i.e. unpaid work.

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SOURCES AND PUBLICATION

During the year 2000, I made an exploratory research for the Federal Ministry of Research and Education about unemployed people who want to work as volunteers, it means as unpaid workers. Most of the things that I will tell you now are not only the result of that research but also the result of thoughts and ideas which I developed during my journalistic work, specially during my collaboration in a project for an European Press Agency about the third system. It was a pilot-project of the GD5's programme: "Third system and employment". I would also like to say that many ideas included in this communication will be published in a discussion paper of the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin with the support of the Heinrich Böll Foundation in a few weeks' time.

INTRODUCTION

I would like to start with the present time in Germany. In this week's issue of *Der Spiegel*, there are about 20 portraits of unemployed people. They are, in general, portrayed as lazy, depressed, beer-drinking, stupid, very seldom funny or looking hard for a new job. Only in a few portraits, you can get the feeling that these people are happy, because they have developed a new way of living and a new kind of wealth. There is no portrait describing the important other jobs that these unemployed people are doing: emotional work/support for themselves, for their friends, for their husband or wife and, last but not least, for their children. As if this other work was of no value at all. As if they didn't exist. As if they didn't need time. And, as if this work could be done without having a minimum of financial security. Obviously, there is a political intention behind such an article, like the one in *Der Spiegel*: the aim of these examples is to show that these unemployed people don't do anything useful for the society and, therefore, the welfare state should cut the support they get.

That's why it is very important for me to stress here the big value of all the invisible work that unemployed people do and the fact that they need unemployment money to do these unpaid jobs. Most of the time, the unemployment money isn't enough, so that they have to work on the black market, if they have enough time and enough connections to do that. The biggest part of these unpaid jobs is the educational and emotional work that is still, mostly, done by women.

MY RESEARCH ABOUT VOLUNTEERS

I made several long interviews with 9 women and 2 men wanting to work as volunteers and looking for counselling in the Volunteer Agency *Treffpunkt Hilfsbereitschaft*, in Berlin. 7 of them were unemployed, one was a housewife with 4 children, one couldn't work anymore because of a heart disease, and 2 were employed people.

The gender proportion among the interviewed people corresponds approximately to the gender proportion among the people visiting the agency: about 75 % of them are women. The percentage of unemployed people visiting volunteer agencies is growing up. In the agency *Treffpunkt Hilfsbereitschaft*, in 1993, they were 13 per cent of the visitors coming for advise. Six years later, in 1999, they were 32 per cent. In the year 2000, unemployed people were still the biggest group of visitors to the volunteer agency.

During the interviews, I discovered all the activities that unemployed people do, even if they don't work as volunteers in an organisation: they heal a chronic disease, they do artistic work, they do therapy, they do philosophy, they build something with their hands, they take care of children, listen to them, play with them, they care for their emotional relations with friends and family partners, they practise their religion, they recover after the death of a parent and so on, they meditate, they take care of animals.

The unemployed people who come to such an agency because they look for volunteer work in an organisation, are often very active people that aren't suffering too much with the isolation due to unemployment. They have developed other kinds of activities who give them a good value of themselves. For women, this is mostly an emotional or educational work. With the search of volunteer work, women look for an activity that is outside their family or that could open the possibilities of qualification for a different kind of job.

Sometimes, it works out, that they develop self-confidence in their qualifications and that they dare to look for a paid job. Sometimes they get a paid job in the association in which they are working as volunteers. But these possibilities are very rare because the organisations they are working for, need volunteer workers precisely because they don't have money to finance normal paid jobs. After the counselling session in the volunteer agency, many unemployed people realise that they have a lot of opportunities to work as volunteer in their private area and that they don't need an organisation.

HOW TO FINANCE THE EDUCATIONAL AND EMOTIONAL WORK (THAT IS MOSTLY DONE BY WOMEN)

Among all the activities unemployed people can have, I would like to concentrate here on the educational work with children because that is a point where the gender issue is more visible.

After the interviews, I made a classification of the several ways women or sometimes (but still rarely) men organise the educational or the emotional work they have to do for their children or for their family partner or for themselves:

1st possibility:

To rely on the unemployment money and go to work for money only if you are forced to by the Social Services or by the fact that you sometimes need more

money to live on. It is the solution of a 51 years old woman who educated her daughter alone after the separation from her husband. She has worked very hard as a secretary in many dull jobs since she was 15 years old and she has tried to mix times of work with periods of unemployment, so that she had enough time for her daughter. For a few years now, she has been most of the time unemployed. Her husband still gives her some money, but only for the daughter. Nevertheless, his financial support and the state support enables the woman to have a nice apartment which she enjoys decorating and doing housework. She only goes to work when the Social Services forces her or if she can do little jobs that she is allowed to add to her unemployment money. She told me that she prefers to reduce her expenses and live very cheap than to do a work that makes her unhappy. She can cope with loneliness and exclusion from the working society because she is a Christian, as she told me. She told me that one of the most important things in her life was to give her daughter a good education so that she will have a better job than her mother.

Another example of someone relying on unemployment money is a 42 years old woman living with her friend for ten years and without children. They don't officially live together, because she wouldn't get unemployment money anymore from the state, since her man would have theoretically enough money to support her.

Thanks to unemployment money, this woman has the possibility to stay financially independent from her friend and has time to cope with her depressive problems, to care for the emotional side of her relationship and to care for the many friends she has.

2nd possibility:

To finance educational or emotional work: to have a typical paid job and to do the educational work at the same time. This is the solution that most feminists defend because they defend that women can stay financially independent and still make as good careers as men. I am also a convinced feminist, but I am wondering

if it is really possible to have a normal job (at least 40 hours a week) and to have enough time and strength left to really do the emotional work with children. If you pay people to take care of your children, the emotional part of this caring work is very different. The deep motivation, the personal involvement and the feelings that are included in unpaid education are very likely to disappear when the educational work is paid and done by someone else than the mother or the father. Children need the quality of the unpaid attention to grow up properly and with a secure feeling of being accepted as they are.

3rd possibility:

To finance educational or emotional work: to rely on the money of the husband. This is the solution that most women had to chose until the middle of the 20th century. It is the solution of a housewife, 56 years old and mother of 4 children, I spoke with. She told me, that she can not imagine both working for money and doing all the educational work properly. "You can not communicate properly with your children, if you come back home in the evening, and you still have to hang up the clothes, cook and so on. You don't have enough time left to really listen to them and to their needs". But this women stressed the fact, that it was very bad for the quality of her relationship to be financially dependant from her husband.

THE EMERGING PATTERNS OF WORK REQUIRE A BASIC INCOME FOR EVERY CITIZEN. IF NOT, THERE IS A BIG DANGER FOR THE EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN AND MEN.

As a feminist, it is very difficult to defend the need for free time and the special quality of unpaid educational work because you are very quickly put in the area of the conservative people who want that women always stay at home and don't have money.

Of course THAT is not my intention. My intention is to recognise the very important qualities of unpaid work done in families. To give importance to work in the family doesn't mean to make big speeches about it, but to give women or men the financial possibility to do this work without being financially dependant from their partner, or from the unreliable unemployment money and still to be able to keep a decent standard of living.

This family work needs real payment, as the German association *Verband der Familienfrauen und Männer* (Federation of family women and men) asks. This association changed its name last year. Before, it was called, The Houswives Trade Union (Hausfrauengewerkschaft). With this name change, they show, that it is a gender question also concerning the quality of life of men. They ask for a monthly income of 4500 DM (2250 Euro) for houswives or "househusbands", so that women and men can really choose between family work or to have an outside paid job.

I would like to go further than the "Federation of family women and men". A basic income should be given by the welfare state for every citizen, as André Gorz discribed it. The possibility to chose one's activity with total freedom is the only possibility to keep alive the special values of volunteer work (motivation, involvement, love, availability – even if these all are notions that are not easy to describe from a scientific point of view). If every citizen had the right to a basic income, which should be high enough to live on, there would be the possibility to finance every activity. For example, a father wouldn't need anymore to pretend he takes care of the children but in fact he writes his new book and doesn't really spend time speaking or playing with children. A mother could chose how much time she wants to spend with her children and how much time she wants to do something creative for herself or to earn some more money over the basic income. (If the basic income is given to every citizen, whatever he or she does, the justified or unjustified fear that people have babies only to get the money will disappear because they wouldn't need to pretend anything to get the basic income.)

Actually, German policies concentrate mainly on classical paid work or on volunteer work in organisations. There is a survey commission about the future of citizen engagements (*Enquete Kommission Zukunft des bürgerschaftlichen Engagements*) which will produce some results for the government at the beginning of next year. In its definition of citizen work, the commission excludes educational work and emotional work on oneself or with relatives. So it is logical that the government wants to put unemployed people in any kind of jobs, because it doesn't realise all the other important tasks that unemployed people do. The problem is, of course, that the unemployment money is given to people, exclusively, to look for a new paid job and not to develop one's personality or the quality of one's emotional relationships. Officially, if an unemployed person works for more than 15 hours a week as a volunteer or if it is registered as a parent wanting to stay at home, it is not allowed to get the unemployment money. To solve this problem, it would be necessary to recognise that educational or emotional work enables the development of qualifications (self-confidence, communication skills, creativity, self-responsibility) which are all very useful for a timely search of a paid job, even if this kind of qualifications sometimes need several months or several years to be developed.

CONCLUSION

To realise the wealth produced by doing unpaid jobs is a chance for women, because politicians recognise the invisible values that women have been working for, for centuries. But it is a big danger if politicians defend these values without giving the unpaid workers an honourable financial security to do these unpaid jobs, without the need to be dependent from their relatives. Sometimes, I personally think that the danger is bigger than the chance, because the general political trend is rather to cut the welfare state than to expand it.

So I am aware that the exigency of a basic income for every citizen is, probably, an utopia and that politicians try to abuse the engagement in voluntary work of women and men in order to diminish the problem of the financial crisis of state budgets. That is one more reason to stress the destructive power of global economy on society and on human beings and, finally, to denounce the power of economics over politics. Politicians don't dare anymore to develop sustainable visions for human beings in the society.

There is an urgent need for other models. The success of an author like Viviane Forrester in France and Germany shows it. There is enough money in Europe to support new models of wealth based on the recognition – it means financing – of emerging patterns of work. These are very often not new ones but ancestral ones.

I would find it very exciting to research on the good and bad effects that the introduction of a basic income could have on the development of new forms of work.