

# FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS

## [1968]

On the whole, the difference between the sexes has nothing to do with the artificial differences between the social classes; it will therefore not disappear when social class disappears.

—Ernst Bloch

Capitalism may well produce wealth; it does not produce happiness or freedom for all.

—Herbert Marcuse

### 1. AN ATTEMPT TO CLARIFY CONCEPTS

They got the right to vote once no more social change could be wrought by the vote.

They were admitted to the universities when reason and analysis were being replaced by research methodologies such as “experience” and “understanding” (Dilthey) and even “loving understanding” (Bollnow) in the humanities, once an irrational worldview (*Weltanschauung*) superceded critical awareness as the educational goal. Georg Lukács describes this “particular philosophical atmosphere” of the turn of the last century as “the corruption of our trust in intellect and reason, the destruction of our belief in progress, a credulous stance in the face of irrationality, myth, and mysticism.” Once the “logic of the heart,” an attribute falsely ascribed to women, became one of the principles of science,

and "intuition" became the method for acquiring knowledge, girls' paths to the university led straight into the irrational thicket of the middle-class worldview. In fact, they further confirmed and anchored this worldview. The initiatives undertaken on behalf of women's liberation that were causally linked to those launched on behalf of the proletariat and had developed simultaneously, were disarmed when women were granted access to instruments of knowledge that were increasingly hostile to the emancipation of the working class, and therefore also hostile to women.

The demand for equal rights developed out of the demand for liberation. Liberation would bring emancipation through a series of changes in the social system: the abolition of the hierarchical social structure, the establishment of a democratic one, and melding of capital and labor so that production methods would be more social, and the master/slave relations that defined existing social structures would end.

Yet the demand for equal rights no longer puts into question the social conditions of inequality that exist between people. On the contrary, it merely wants inequality to be applied systematically. It demands equality within inequality: equality of the female worker with the male worker, of the female clerk with the male clerk, of the female civil servant with the male civil servant, of the female editor with the male editor, of the female member of parliament with the male member of parliament, of the businesswoman with the businessman. Such demands for equal rights are the focus of every women's union congress and every conference of businesswomen because so far equal rights only exist in law, not in practice. It seems that an unjust world is still having problems justly distributing its injustices.

The change from a socialist demand for liberation to a social democratic demand for equal rights has caused liberation to be confused with employment, as the title of the book, *Liberation and Marriage*, implies. The demand for liberation was directed at the state and the society, and very specifically, at the entrepreneur. It referred to the social status of the speaker and the addressee. The demand for equal rights, on the other hand, means a struggle directed against men in general. It is true that employment provides the woman with at least partial independence from the most important man in her life, in his role as such; at the very least it makes her independent of the housekeeping allowance he grants her. Why should the process of reification stop at marriage? It also lets her assume her role as an independent consumer. In a world where a person's value is measured by her income, this consumer independence is, of course, most important. From this perspective, then, it is right to consider an employed woman liberated. By fulfilling the economy's and the government's need for workers and at the same time doing her bit toward consuming products—in other words, by conforming to the system—she is doing things right. In brief, if liberation is a value and employment is correct behavior, then employment is liberation. Within this system, the term “equal rights” only refers to the need to catch up quantitatively, “all good things come in their own good time.”

This does not, however, clarify the extent to which women's issues are part of the social question: should the blessings of technical progress and industrialization benefit everyone—including women—or only a few? Should they be implemented to lessen people's burdens in acquiring the food and clothing they need for daily life or should they be deployed for the power, luxury, and

business deals of only a few? The fact that equal rights in themselves have very little to do with democracy, liberation, or social responsibility is evident when we consider that the progress made since 1949 in regard to equality, especially in civil law and in pay parity has contributed nothing at all to either the democratization or the politicization of women. They vote as conservatively as ever, even with the Emergency Laws as a distinct threat. When the debates and discussions around the woman question are reduced to equal rights slogans, they do not contribute to changing people's awareness, let alone the power relations that rule them.

The laughter you hear whenever equal rights for women are on the agenda—at union meetings, for example—expresses uncertainty about the whole thing, but is also a tactless lack of solidarity in the face of women's experiences and feelings. At the same time, it is the justified laughter at Don Quixote's battle against the windmills. And it will continue to be so until women conceive of the equal rights issue as a strategic measure to be implemented in a systematic plan toward liberation.

## 2. A LITTLE CHAPTER ON EQUAL RIGHTS

Women today have the equal rights they can be granted without upsetting existing social structures. They have equal rights in regard to marriage, property, and divorce. They do not have equal rights in regard to earnings. Because this is the case for the majority of working women, and because the vast majority of men considers this the most important aspect of equal rights for working women, it is worth discussing here.

In 1964 the lowest hourly wage for men in all of the employ-

ment sectors was still higher than the highest hourly wage for women. The lowest hourly wage for men in 1964—3.54 DM—was paid in the lumber and woodworking industries. The highest basic wage for women was paid in the stone and earthwork industries, and was 3.17 DM. In 1964 the average hourly wage for women workers was 2.89 DM, while men earned 4.28 DM on average.<sup>1</sup> Women make up 33.8 percent of the workforce; they receive only 24.2 percent of the wages paid to all workers. Eighty percent of the workers in the clothing industry are women. The average wages of women in the clothing industry rank forty-second, the second lowest of all wages paid in the Federal Republic. The profits made by the clothing industry rank in ninth place.

In 1955, the Federal Labour Court made a decision that applied the principle of equal rights guaranteed by the Constitution to equal payment for equal work for women and men. Special wage categories for women and clauses on partial payment for women, which added up to between 20 and 30 percent lower wages for women doing equal work, were declared unconstitutional; they were ordered phased out and removed from the wage agreements. However, they were not completely deleted, which would have been the most obvious and legitimate solution. So new wage categories were devised, with new job descriptions, and the ones that paid the least were described in such a way that they could only apply to women; only women could relate to them. In the wage agreements they were called *Leichtlohngruppen* [light wage categories] or just lower wage categories, while in everyday praxis, and still today, the true term *Frauenlohngruppen* [women's wage categories] is used. For example, the wage agreement for workers in the metal industries in Hamburg and environs (*Lohnrahmentar-*

*ifvertrag für die gewerblichen Arbeitnehmer der Metallindustrie in Hamburg und Umgebung*), valid from January 1, 1966, specifies that wage groups 1–3 are engaged for “simple tasks that require little physical exertion.” Only for wage groups from 3b upward, the text reads, “simple tasks that require normal physical exertion.” Category 1 earns 2.45 DM per hour, while 3b earns 2.80 DM. Little physical exertion means women’s wages; normal physical exertion means men’s wages. Discrimination against women may have been formally removed from the wage agreements, but in practice, it is still there.

Olaf Radke and Wilhelm Rathert, two members of the board of the IG-Metal [Metalworkers Union] provide a realistic assessment of the union’s failure to negotiate women’s wage rights: “The unions did not succeed in completely deleting the clauses on partial payment or special wage categories for women from the wage agreements.” Radke/Rathert state that the deletion of these options would have given women a wage increase of up to 25 percent while “industry would have experienced a maximum increase of 5 percent in wage costs.”

In other words, it is impossible to push for the principle of equal pay for equal work without also making changes in the existing distribution of wealth; equal wages cannot be secured by the unions’ “indexed wage policies.” Wage policies that are oriented toward increases in productivity across the board and do not strive to “redistribute the revenues of the people and thus change the positions of power as well as the social order” can do nothing to push through women’s demands for equal rights. But such redistribution would increase the proportion of the total production costs paid out for wages and would thus represent a change both

in the “status quo of distribution,” and in the status quo of the social structures. Not a profound change, but perhaps an exemplary one.

From this perspective, Radke and Rathert’s assertion that “the employers are opposed in principle to abolishing discriminatory wage categories for women” only appears to be a furious, aggressive attack. In reality, it is an admission that union policies, quite independent of the employers, have been sacrificed along with any intention to change and humanize social conditions. Olaf Radke needs to answer the question he himself posed elsewhere: “Can such union policies endure, given the citizen’s constitutional right to look after their own interests as an integral aspect of human dignity and development of the personality, which the Constitution prioritizes over reasons of state?”

Wage differentials are the clearest indicator that equal rights cannot be had without a struggle for liberation; demands for liberation that are changed into a campaign for equal rights will only provide a few formal privileges and only for women of the less dependent classes. Basically, this adds up to waiving all claims to equal rights.

The lower pay scales for women reflect the low regard for their work and their productivity. This disdain, audible in such praise as “hard-working woman” or “intelligent woman” or “courageous woman,” which are used to mark a departure from the norm, must be diagnosed as both the cause and the effect of lower wages. Already in 1889 Clara Zetkin blamed women’s low wages on the low regard for housework: “The cause was the low regard that was and had to be assigned to a woman’s unpaid labor since, compared to mechanically produced industrial products, the work she pro-

duced represented only a tiny percentage of the average social production, which led to the false conclusion that women are less productive." This contempt for women's work was reflected in the wage scales and has been maintained to the present. But it does not stand up to factual, comparative descriptions of comparable work by women and men. For instance, in a car plant, the women who polish the doors earn less than the men who polish the roofs. The employers' justification: roof-polishing requires different pressure than door polishing. In a foundry, the men who paint core elements are paid at level 4 because women who would be paid at level 2 or 3 for the same work are simply not employed in foundries. The employers' justification: men can, after all, not be paid according to women's pay scales. These somewhat extreme examples violate the principle of equal pay for equal work. It would be easy to use documentary film and analyses of work situations to prove that countless jobs require no more strength or skill from men than is expected of women, although they command a higher wage. This is not necessarily because the wage agreements are being violated; it is because of the one-sided job descriptions within the wage agreements themselves.

The situation has severe consequences. Low wages for women justified by contempt for women's work have led to contempt for women themselves and skewed what might be considered humanly reasonable for men and women. Millions of women today labor at industrial work stations where the timing is broken down into seconds or fractions of seconds. Their activity is reduced to the continual repetition of a few tiny movements of the hand, or fine hand and foot controls. Claims are made that women are much less sensitive to monotony than men, and that this is "a psy-



chological trait of women," just like their passivity, their tendency to daydream, to focus on others, to let things happen. (To understand how cynical the comment is that they let things happen, you only need to see how production pieces on a rhythmically controlled assembly line are jerked out of women's hands if they don't work fast enough.) This kind of monotonous and often high-pressure work leaves its mark. The work is stupifying, deadening; it causes nervous tension and illness. At the women's conference of the German Unions Association in 1955, someone said, "Women who work on an assembly line for ten years are no longer worth marrying." Since that date the lines have not got any slower, and the exploitation of the workers has grown more intense.

Such conditions are considered reasonable, although specialists have stated that a production activity should last no less than one minute, otherwise, the worker's soul and health are endangered.<sup>2</sup> Such conditions are considered reasonable because women are seen as inferior—less sensitive to monotony<sup>3</sup>—because they are paid less, because the consequences for women—their simple-mindedness—are written off as part of women's nature. Helga Läge rightly points out that "if there is little intellectual stimulus during women's leisure hours, as is often the case, such people can grow quite dull; their capacity for new experiences decreases to such an extent they no longer feel how monotonous their work is."

All this is considered reasonable. My writing about it here will not change anything, because the lower wages paid to women provide their employers with far-reaching benefits. The work stations are usually highly mechanized, on the brink of automation. They have not been automated for economic reasons, because a woman can be more quickly adjusted than a machine, or turned off—i.e.

dismissed—if sales falter or new models come onto the market. Women are cheaper than machines. One of the reasons they are cheaper than machines is because they are paid less than men, and do not have equal rights. (The job loss caused by automation could surely be compensated by shorter working hours, once the right decisions have been made and proper conditions established for a production that serves humans rather than a production where humans serve productivity.)

If policies on equal rights do not include demands for liberation, or the intention to recognize and remove the causes of the inequities found in capitalist modes of production, then this means having constantly to provide evidence of exactly the kind of equality that demands for equal rights are based on. It means countering the facile thesis that women are different, different from men, which underlies the ideology of profit. (Of course women are different, but not in regard to their productivity in industries whose technical progress is so advanced that physical strength is not an issue.) Besides, no evidence can be brought, at least not in any convincing or clear manner, as long as the living and working conditions that cause women to become stupid have not been eliminated, or at least resisted. The few talented women one gets to know do not count; they are simply exceptions, and they are aware of this.

Almost ten million women in the Federal Republic work outside the home. Seventy percent of them earn wages: three million are salaried white-collar workers, and three and a half million are blue-collar laborers. Sixty percent of the laborers are paid for piecework. Forty-five percent of all women laborers are unskilled; forty-six percent have some skills; nine percent are skilled. These

figures give some idea of how many are affected by the situation described above.

### 3. FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS

Why do the women laborers and the white-collar workers who are affected by the increasing mechanization of offices not resist if their situation is so inhumane and so obviously un-egalitarian? Where are the protests—if not by the deadened and worn-out workers, then by the unions and perhaps the educated and informed women. Where are the actions of solidarity?

Second question: Does the situation of women laborers have anything to do with the inferiority complexes the educated and middle-class women suffer from, or with the often astoundingly narrow-minded views held by wives of politicians and others of social status who hold leading positions in administration and business? I shall try to find some answers.

Women are basically caught in a trap, a trap between employment and family, or more precisely, children—existing children, planned children, grown-up children.

The change in women's status and position, a topic that has been discussed to death, is due to industrialization, technical and scientific advancement, as everyone from Klein and Myrdal<sup>4</sup> to Elisabeth Pfeil would agree. In the rich, industrialized parts of the world, life expectancy has approximately doubled over the past 150 years, and, in contrast to poor countries, problems such as mother/infant mortality (in Persia, 50 percent) have been virtually solved. Over the same period, the social position of the housewife changed.

Clara Zetkin wrote in 1889, “The recognition the housewife enjoyed in spite of the fact that she had no status in public law can be explained from the point of view of economics, and was fully justified. This recognition, however, had nothing to do with the individual woman; it derived from the outstanding and vital work she did in the family, work that produced goods that could not be produced by others at that time. The modest role of the housewife of yesteryear was legitimated by the economic conditions of life, while the role of housewife today has long become an economic anachronism that has no justification.” (The opposition and uneasiness that arise in regard to plans to pay women for their housework and qualify their activity as a job can be traced back to Clara Zetkin’s observations from over seventy years ago. Housework is not productive work; it does not create added value, but simply reproduces what has been used or used up—it is reproductive work. Further, the mechanization that allows housework to be done in a fraction of the time today has turned it into part-time work. The fact that new burdens have been created for the housewife through artificially created needs in order to foster production is a chapter in itself.)

Housekeeping means isolation: “The decisions about the meat you do not have are not made in the kitchen” (Brecht). Housework done at home no longer has any relationship to social processes; it is done by women, but determined by the industrialized production of everyday consumer products.

This is how housework and childcare have become incompatible. Given the present state of industrialization, women are a necessary part of the workforce. Yet childcare remains a completely unsolved problem. And there can be no honest discussion about

whether it is possible to combine employment outside the home with the care of small children. It is impossible. Grandmothers and friendly female neighbors are inadequate alternatives to the mother as the one person a child relates to most closely, as countless research projects and publications have shown. It is a waste of time to argue over this point. The problem is so thorny that we can only repeat the solutions that have been suggested, hardly any of which have been tested. Once solutions are actually put in place, quite different points of view may well develop. Obviously, what is needed for mothers of small children is the following: exemption from employment outside the home for a few years; kindergartens; part-time work for the transition, even though this is not completely desirable, since it promotes discrimination against women and not respect; neighborhood support, and help in making the transition. These kinds of topics are being addressed, but too little is being done; it is not clear who is responsible, nor are the various interrelations being discussed.

One thing is certain. The problems caused by the change in women's status, which affect families and children, cannot be solved by women alone. These are issues that confront all of society and the public sphere. So far there has been no response. According to the federal report on women the number of kindergartens alone needs to be increased by 30 percent—a figure that probably represents only the tip of the iceberg, only a fraction of the need—while the countless emergency solutions that mothers have found are not counted as part of that need.

Instead of women receiving help to solve the problem, they have been criticized for over a hundred years. "Working mother" is both a keyword and a term of abuse. Society has compensated for

its own failure by attacking mothers; it has refused to recognize their needs and simply handed it back to them.

It is a two-pronged attack. First, the most unbelievable slander has been spread about women who go to work: it has been alleged that the Federal Republic has three million latchkey children, but we know that at most 3 to 4 percent of the children under ten whose mothers go to work have insufficient supervision. It has been alleged that increases in delinquent youth are due to mothers working, but statistics show that the children of working mothers are no more likely than others to commit crimes. It has been alleged that marriages suffer when women work, but evidence shows that fewer couples divorce when the wife works outside the home. It has been alleged that the establishment of more kindergartens will just allow more women to go to work, but the federal government's report on women denies this. It has been alleged that women only work in order to buy luxuries, but the DGB has recently released reports that the husbands of most working mothers earn less than the minimum for subsistence.

The slanderous allegations have been disproven, but surveys show that many of these ideas remain in place. The great majority of the population disapproves of married women and mothers working because of the children.<sup>5</sup> The women are blackmailed with their children, and this is what makes them so human—the fact that they allow themselves to be blackmailed with their children, and accept the demands that they should devote themselves first and foremost to their children. But the churches, the political parties, the parliamentarians—all those who constantly reproach women and lecture them, ostensibly because of their concern for small children, are the ones whose behavior is con-

tradictory. The society they represent, that claims to be so concerned with the welfare of children, has still not managed to set up enough kindergartens. Its homes for children are cold, lonesome institutions; its schools have insufficient supplies; children from socially marginal families are not even registered in school kindergartens but sent to schools for backward kids when it is already too late; there are not enough playgrounds; maternity benefits are worse than skimpy. The viciousness of the attacks on working mothers—some even want to make it illegal for mothers to work—contrasts sharply with the amenities provided for children. The chronically guilty conscience that has been forced on the working mothers who struggle to make a living for their children would be much better applied to the state and the society, the political parties, churches and parliamentarians than to women.

Second, astounding efforts have been made to prove that a woman's essence is defined by her potential for motherhood, which is presented as her highest goal, the fulfillment of her life, the true content of her life. With the exception of works by Betty Friedan, Simone de Beauvoir, and a few others, virtually every piece of current literature on women includes the assertion that—in the words of the report on women—"a woman's physical and psychological/intellectual qualities are specially suited for her role as mother." Alexander Mitscherlich says, "The idealization of the mother's role as a part of social taboos is an indicator that the mother/child relationship must be tightly secured through social rules to ensure the survival of the race. Moreover, it reveals that these measures are often insufficient and their shortcomings are concealed by the ideal."<sup>6</sup>

The real difficulties faced by working women are made worse by this ideologized view of their roles as mothers. Most working women deal with this issue by planning their lives in the same unrealistic way: they see their work as temporary, limited; they claim and are certain that the only reason they work is for the family, for the children. This applies equally to unmarried and married women; divorced women are the exception.<sup>7</sup> Elisabeth Pfeil has shown, however, that this family motive for going to work undergoes certain changes: first, women go to work to buy furniture for their apartments, then to furnish a home, then to educate the children. In other words, their plans do not pan out, and women's work goes on for many more years than was originally planned. In actual fact, women adapt the extent of their working lives to the employment needs of industry. They think they are working for their families and do not realize they are following quite different sets of rules.

How is a working woman supposed to fight for better wages and working conditions when she sees her work as a transgression of her true vocation, and considers it temporary? When she can hardly expect to benefit from any forthcoming improvements? And when, besides being humiliated by lower wages, she is also accused of betraying her true self, her true essence, her social self? She is caught in a trap. At home, which is where she belongs, she cannot fight; on the job, where she should fight, she's in the wrong place. The children are at home, or on the way, and when she's at work, she works. What else can she do but struggle? "In the mellow evenings they are too exhausted to think about where they have come from or where they are going" (Brecht).

How are unions supposed to bring about change when, in line with social democracy, they have exchanged their demands regard-



ing the liberation of men and women for demands for formal equal rights? How can more solidarity for women be put into practice within the unions when the unions no longer set the goal of changing social conditions, liberating the workers from the slave/master mechanisms, or abolishing the difference between capital and labor, without which equal rights are impossible? when the oppression of women is no longer seen as part and parcel of universal oppression or their achieving equal rights as a step toward the liberation of all?

Women with an education and more status are both affected and not affected by this problem. In a way, they are the victims of equal rights. Since the social struggle for liberation is over and has been distorted into a struggle between the sexes, they have automatically ended up on the side of the oppressed. Although they have a higher social status, they have also become targets in the attacks against working mothers, in the ideology of motherhood, and the education of girls as housewives and mothers. The crisis comes when they have children of their own: motherhood knows no social difference. The educated woman has the same resources as the working class woman when it comes to defining her new role; she is just as likely to be suspected of not wanting to devote her life to motherhood; she experiences the same psychological pressure and often the same practical difficulties due to the shortage of kindergartens and the lack of help. She gets caught in the same trap, though it can be more temporary as she normally has more ways and means to solve her problems. Her largely non-rational university education has deprived her of socio-critical awareness and does not let her see that her situation is part of a larger complex of problems that only have little to do with her as

an individual. Her imagination, emotional intelligence, and experience are rarely broad enough to let her imagine the situation of the other women who work in industry and business; nor are her morality or socio-political knowledge sufficient for her to develop political solidarity with them.

The discrimination of women—all women—must continue so that the establishment of equal rights for working women is undermined, and the liberation of the working population prevented. The slander against all working mothers must go on, as must the ideology that all women are destined to become housewives and mothers; otherwise the criticisms directed against society and the ruling class for refusing to help find solutions for the problems encountered in raising children while working outside the home would have to be addressed. This is the direction that may lead toward understanding the causes of the feminine mystique that we can describe in much more differentiated ways than Betty Friedan did, once we are aware of these complexities.

It is high time to protest. But there is no protest. Protest is not only triggered by studying the methods and means of oppression. It is set off by the final product: millions of dumb, deadened, apolitical, struggling women, who adore Farah Diba and Soraya, who mean well but get it all wrong, and then beat their kids. And that is the majority.

## NOTES

1. In the '60s, \$1 US was approximately 4 DM (obsolete currency replaced by Euro); thus most women earned well under \$1 per hour.
2. This is the opinion of someone we consider an absolute specialist and whom we may quote on the condition that he not be named. It does not fit with union policies that have given up demanding change. [UM]

3. Helga Läge, p. 119, "Both the literature and the praxis concur that women are generally less sensitive to monotony than men and therefore tolerate monotonous work more easily." [UM]
4. Viola Klein and Alvar Myrdal were key contributors to the late 1950s debate on the "double-role of women."
5. According to *ifas-report: Frau und Öffentlichkeit*, Bad Godesberg, April 1965, 72 percent of the polled men and 68 percent of the polled women did not consider it normal that women should work outside the home. Eighty-eight to 92 percent of the polled women (working and non-working women, working and non-working mothers) felt that mothers should stop working. [UM]
6. Alexander Mitscherlich (1908–1982) was a physician, psychoanalyst, and author.
7. At a chemical plant in Hamburg, we were told very bluntly that a divorced thirty-year-old woman with a child is the ideal employee. She is grateful to have a job and behaves accordingly. There is no danger that she might quit. [UM]