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In Germany, a tradition falls, and women rise [1]

Female Factor Series
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Source: International Herald Tribune (New York Times)
Format: Article
Publication Date: 17 Jan 2010

AVAILABILITY
The Female Factor is a yearlong series of articles, columns and multimedia reports examining where women stand in the early 21st century.
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EXCERPTS
Manuela Maier was branded a bad mother. A Rabenmutter, or raven mother, after the black bird that pushes chicks out of the nest. She was ostracized by other mothers, berated by neighbors and family, and screamed at in a local store.

Her crime? Signing up her 9-year-old son when the local primary school first offered lunch and afternoon classes last autumn - and returning to work.

"I was told: 'Why do you have children if you can't take care of them?"' said Ms. Maier, 47. By comparison, having a first son out of wedlock 21 years ago raised few eyebrows in this traditional Bavarian town, she said.

Ten years into the 21st century, most schools in Germany still end at lunchtime, a tradition that dates back nearly 250 years. That has powerfully sustained the housewife/mother image of German lore and was long credited with producing well-bred, well-read burghers. Modern Germany may be run by a woman - Chancellor Angela Merkel, routinely called the world's most powerful female politician - but it seems no coincidence that she is childless.

Across the developed world, a combination of the effects of birth control, social change, political progress and economic necessity has produced a tipping point: numerically, women now match or overtake men in the work force and in education.
In the developing world, too, the striving of women and girls for schooling, small loans and status is part of another immense upheaval: the rise of nations in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

In both these worlds, women can remain trapped by tradition. Now, a social revolution - peaceful, but profound - is driving a search for new ways of combining family life and motherhood with a more powerful role for women.

Westerners are quick to denounce customs in, say, the Muslim world that they perceive as limiting women. But in Germany, despite its vaunted modernity, a traditional perception of motherhood lingers.

The half-day school system survived feudalism, the rise and demise of Hitler's mother cult, the women's movement of the 1970s and reunification with East Germany.
Now, in the face of economic necessity, it is crumbling: one of the lowest birthrates in the world, the specter of labor shortages and slipping education standards have prompted a rethink. Since 2003, nearly a fifth of Germany's 40,000 schools have phased in afternoon programs, and more plan to follow suit.

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In 1763, Prussia was ahead of its time, the first country to make education compulsory for its lower classes. The half-day system evolved in a family economy that depended on child labor. By the time France and Britain set up all-day systems a century later, the German way - which survives in Austria and parts of Switzerland - had already grown deep roots.

Staunch defenders are not just socially conservative politicians or clerics. Germany's middle classes long believed that they, not the state, should round out children's general culture. No school, the thinking went, could improve on a mother.

Edith Brunner, 41, is that German model mother. A qualified tax adviser and who has four children, she went part time after her first child and then gave up work altogether. She spends afternoons checking schoolwork and shuttling from flute and piano lessons to soccer training and gymnastics tournaments. Her husband is a well-paid physicist.

Ms. Brunner's example provides a strong argument for those opposing all-day school. But her type is increasingly rare.

Today, highly qualified women - and there are more of them than ever - tend to want to work, even if that means forgoing children; by their mid-40s, one in three German women live in childless households, the highest proportion in Europe along with Austria. At the same time,

more and more women need to work, either as single mothers or because their partner cannot support a family alone.

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Wolfgang Gruber of the Bavarian education authority concurs. He uses words like "flood" and "avalanche" to describe the demand for afternoon schooling. From 2006 to 2009, only 40 primary schools in Bavaria converted. This school year, the number of all-day programs shot to 150. The aim is to introduce afternoon classes in 540 of the 2,300 primary schools, Mr. Gruber said.

Even five years ago, all-day schooling in Neuötting seemed unthinkable, Mayor Peter Haugeneder said. There is a crucifix in his office, in every classroom of the Max Fellermeier school and even in the Spanish-themed restaurant run by the gay butcher.

For several mothers, their great-grandmothers' maxim, "Kinder, Küche, Kirche" - children, kitchen, church - holds true, even if, as Mr. Haugeneder says, "increasingly it is a way of life people can't afford."

A caregiver for the elderly, Ms. Maier works in a female-dominated growth sector in aging Germany. Without the €800 she contributes to the family income of €2,400 every month, the Maiers could not run the two cars they depend on in the countryside. She jumped at the chance of afternoon school.

Ms. Maier still frowns when recalling the day last October when she was choosing a new washing machine. The mother of one of her son's friends appeared from nowhere, shouting insults.

Soon, however, sneers turned to sheepish questions about her son's exciting afternoon activities. Several parents tried to sign up midterm - but the program was already oversubscribed. The school plans one extra all-day class a year through 2012, according to the deputy headmaster, Anton Schatz.

Even the angry mother from the store has become quite friendly, Ms. Maier says: "I wouldn't be surprised if she enrolls her own son next year."

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- reprinted from the International Herald Tribune
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