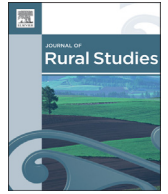




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# She leaves, he stays? Sex-selective migration in rural East Germany

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## ABSTRACT

Rural regions in East Germany have been characterized by strong age- and sex-selective outmigration since 1990, which has resulted in unbalanced sex ratios in the age group 18–35 with pronounced surpluses of men. The East German countryside is unique in Europe in two respects: (1) the spatial and numerical extent of the overrepresentation of young men and (2) the missing equalization of sex ratio imbalances for groups in the age of forming a family. An analysis of statistical data shows that structural conditions, especially the situation on the labor market are important determinants of unbalanced sex ratios and sex-selective migration. However, in order to understand why rural East Germany stands out with an especially high surplus of young men, it is necessary to take the specific historical context – the legacy of the German Democratic Republic and the gendered and economic consequences of unification into account, notably the continuously high work orientation of East German women in an economically difficult environment.

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## 1. Introduction

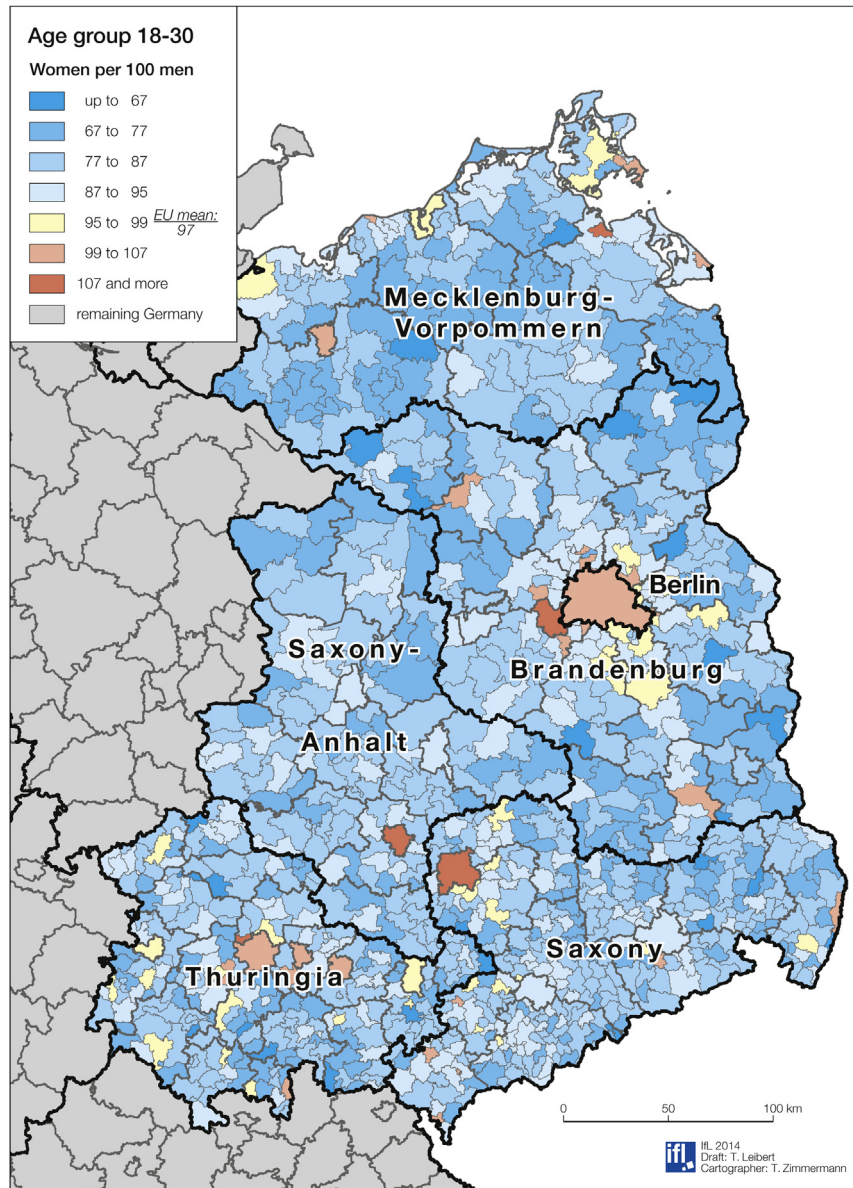
An innkeeper in a small village in Saxony had the idea to organize a speed-dating event for local singles in his pub. A high number of registrations indicated a strong demand for this way of finding a romantic partner. The event had however to be canceled: all interested persons were men (Kositz, 2014). This little anecdote illustrates a demographic phenomenon in rural East Germany that has received considerable media attention in recent years: an imbalanced sex structure of the young adult population with a pronounced shortage of young women. Sex-selective migration is the chief cause of this ‘masculinization’ of the countryside which is supposedly unique in Europe, even compared to regions with a very long tradition of female out-migration (Kröhnert and Klingholz, 2007). The extent of unbalanced sex ratios in the age group 18–30 is depicted in Fig. 1. It becomes clear that more or less pronounced surpluses of young men are an area-wide phenomenon. Women outnumber men only in major cities, university towns, selected regional centers, as well as in a small number of suburban municipalities and tourist destinations. These strongly unbalanced sex-ratio structures are mostly a result of the unification process<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Unbalanced sex-ratios in rural regions as a result of sex-selective migration did already exist in the GDR. Significant surpluses of young adult men were, however, not an area-wide phenomenon, but restricted to small agricultural municipalities in very sparsely populated regions in present-day Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (Weiß, 2006; Weiß et al., 2013).

(Leibert and Wiest, 2010), more precisely the large-scale and highly selective migration to West Germany which has been dominated by young women since 1991 (Kröhnert and Klingholz, 2007).

Unbalanced sex ratios and sex-selective migration threaten the socio-economic and demographic development of rural communities. The out-migration of young women reinforces aging and depopulation, undermines social cohesion and leads to a shortage of skilled labor (Leibert, 2012). Negative effects for the remaining population, especially the male stayers, include a feeling of being rejected and the “*entrapment in a personal reproduction crisis*” which can lead to depression, substance abuse, delinquency and even suicide (Kaberis and Koutsouris, 2012: 88). This seems to be especially true for young men with a low educational level, who are disadvantaged both on the labor and the partner market (Kröhnert and Klingholz, 2007). It seems that the individual problems of underprivileged young men lead to serious social problems. Weiß (2006: 486) argues that “*shortages of women are shortages of culture which can lead to a transformation of the social climate*”. This is, according to Weiß et al. (2013), the case in regions with a 20% men surplus: “*Values, norms and guiding principles change in areas with a surplus of men of more than 20%. Unhealthy lifestyles are rampant, a radicalization of social behavior takes place as well as a political polarization which leads to the development of groups with extremist political attitudes*” (Weiß et al., 2013: 56). Unbalanced sex ratios have been linked to electoral successes of the far-right NPD in regional elections in East Germany both in daily press (e.g. Schirmacher, 2006) and scientific publications



**Fig. 1.** East Germany: number of women per 100 men in the age group 18–30 at the LAU-1 level 2011. Own calculations, data source: [Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder \(2014\)](#).

(e.g. [Kröhnert and Klingholz, 2007](#); [Kröhnert and Vollmer, 2012](#)).

Germany may be a single economic, linguistic and institutional space, the country is nevertheless characterized by significant socio-economic East–West and urban-rural disparities. These disparities are especially pronounced with respect to unemployment and the wage level. The unemployment rate has been almost twice as high as in the West since the early 1990s. Unemployment is particularly high in sparsely populated peripheral regions of the East, unlike in West Germany, where joblessness is largely an urban problem ([Blien et al., 2010](#)). For years, entering the labor market has been difficult in East Germany, because there were few vacancies due to early retirement schemes and the fact that the age-structure of the workforce in many companies and government agencies was still relatively young in the early 1990s ([Ketzmerick, 2009](#)). The consequence was a pronounced mismatch between a relatively low number of older workers on the verge of retirement and a rather high number of school-leavers entering the labor and vocational

training market ([Lutz, 2010](#)). Under these conditions, out-migration to West Germany was often the only solution in order to avoid long-term unemployment. And those who do have a job earn considerably less than their counterparts in the western *Länder*. In 2013, the monthly average gross income for full-time employees amounted to 75% of the wage level in the West. The level of income is even lower in rural areas ([BfA, 2014](#)).

The demographic, historical and economic context outlined so far suggests that the transformation from state socialism to market capitalism and the German unification may have resulted in the emergence of very specific migration patterns. The deep economic crisis after unification might have provided the initial spark, which has turned itself into a self-enhancing migration regime due to the “*transformation of the social climate*” predicted by [Weiß \(2006: 486\)](#) and which may have resulted in such societal structures that women are pushed away from ‘male peripheries’ ([Dahlström, 1996](#)). But it is also possible that, on the other hand, sex-

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