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Ukraine (finally) Treats Women's Activism Seriously

In the three decades of Ukraine's independence, women have actively participated in and been a driving force behind social and political changes in the country. In recent years we have seen women's active participation in the Maidan protests – Revolution of Dignity, servicewomen joining the Armed Forces of Ukraine and participating in the war in Eastern Ukraine, civilian women taking the lead in the volunteer movement, in human rights activism, gender equality campaigns and a range of other initiatives. Their numbers in the Verkhovna Rada have increased and the voices at least of individual women have become more prominent. Those in roles where women historically lacked visibility—such as in the military and volunteering – started to become more visible.

Gaining this visibility, however, often meant that women not only had to fight to voice their concerns as activists in their respective fields, but also for their very place in a public sphere that continues to silence and marginalize women. Women activists, therefore, face a twofold challenge: to be taken seriously as activists and to be taken seriously as women. Cynthia Enloe makes an important observation: “To be taken seriously does not mean to be liked or to be admired. Rather, to be taken seriously means to be listened to, to be carefully responded to, to have one's ideas and actions thoughtfully weighted. It means that what one does or thinks matters – that is, significant consequences flow from it.”¹

This article outlines some of the key areas of women's involvement in activism since Ukraine became independent, and, in particular, since the outbreak of the war in Eastern Ukraine, situates this activism in the wider regional context and highlights some of the key challenges that women activists continue to face. The authors do not aim to give a comprehensive overview of the whole period. This article is rather an invitation to celebrate the achievements to date and encourage further discussions of the topic.

Post-Soviet Regional Context

Ukraine's post-Soviet experience is unique; yet, at the same time, it is necessary to consider its position in regional and temporal contexts. In some ways, Ukrainian women's experiences of socialism was not dissimilar to that of their neighbors: women were promised certain kinds of equality – such as equal work and pay, and a collective attitude in childrearing – but in reality, they were more likely to experience a “double burden” of wage work and reproductive work.² Furthermore, women across the Soviet Union had distinctive experiences of state socialism, particularly depending on the time and place of their integra-

tion into the Soviet project. For example, Muslim women in Central Asia experienced forced unveiling as part of Soviet modernization and so-called “emancipation”;³ Crimean Tatar women experienced the building of state socialism differently than other Soviet women following their 1944 deportation from the Crimean peninsula under Stalin.⁴ Some Ukrainian women resisted the expansion of the Soviet Union alongside their male compatriots throughout the 1940s and 1950s, creating the space for women to have a strong national identity, especially in the far western regions.⁵

It is important to understand that there was no universal experiences of socialism for women if we are to also comprehend how their experiences have diverged since 1991. One significant continuity, however, has been the economic impact of the end of state socialism on women, which meant that women’s relationship with work changed, economic instability plagued almost everyone, and growing economic inequality changed how women viewed what was possible.⁶ How women responded to these economic shifts is different not only in each now-independent republic, but also among women in the same country of different economic and political statuses. In Ukraine, for example, a woman like Yulia Tymoshenko (Prime Minister of Ukraine Jan. 24-Sept. 8, 2005 and 2007-2010 – *ed.*) was able to emerge from the 1990s with political and economic power, while at the same time, we did not see a broad increase in access to economic and political power for women in Ukraine.

These different experiences have led to women participating in activism in different ways across the region. Women in Ukraine took part in the Euro-Maidan protests in various capacities; they were active participants, but largely only in certain kinds of spaces, such as in kitchens or other supporting roles. Feminist activists continually advocated for women to take up more diverse kinds of space, arguing that women should be allowed to choose what they did in the protests.⁷ In recent protests in Belarus, women have been framed as the key actors in organizing and motivating the protests against the Lukashenko regime. Polish women have been the drivers of mass mobilizations against several iterations of near-total abortion bans put forward by the ruling party. And women are protesting bride kidnappings in Kyrgyzstan⁸, participating in anti-Putin protests in Russia, and fighting for peace in the South Caucasus.⁹ While women’s experiences of post-socialism are different around the region, they share the experience of fighting for political agency and women’s rights.

Feminist Activism and Art

In recent years, the occupation of Crimea and the war in Donbas had a profound effect on women’s activism. In spite of the difficulties, or, possibly because of them, women’s and LGBTQ movements in Ukraine continue to grow. For example, the March 8, 2020, Women’s March and Kyiv Pride March now each draw more than 2,000 participants annually, compared with a few dozen when they began a decade ago.¹⁰ Recent gains include the signing of an Anti-Discrimination Law adopted in 2012 and amended in 2014. The law was again revisited in 2016, after the Maidan Revolution of Dignity, in the context of the UN OHCHR.¹¹ The law was expanded and included schedules for implementing a future National Human Rights Strategy. This led to some progress toward plu-

ralizing Ukrainian society, but new challenges appeared including in the form of disinformation campaigns, many stemming from the Russian Federation, as well as online organizing of “anti-gender” and “anti-feminist” campaigns by far-right groups in Ukraine, the EU, and globally.¹²

On April 14, 2021, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy enacted the aforementioned National Human Rights Strategy (Decree No. 119/2021). The law includes “prevention and countering discrimination” and “ensuring equal rights and opportunities for women and men,” along with military veterans and internally displaced peoples.¹³ The law aims to uphold treaties within the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement in order to “contribute to the implementation of Ukraine’s UN Sustainable Development Goals until 2030, and improve the position of Ukraine in international human rights rankings.”¹⁴ Since 2010 international human rights monitoring groups have traced a regression in the implementation and reinforcement of laws protecting women by measuring, among other indicators, rising rates of domestic violence in Ukraine.¹⁵ The severity of this problem has been made more acute in recent years due to more than 1.5 million displaced from the Ukraine-Russia conflict zone and separatist-occupied territories.

Arts and media production in Ukraine have become an important resource for discussions concerned with a range of social issues from the #ЯнеБоюсьСказати / #IaNeBoiusSkazaty (I’m not afraid to say)¹⁶ campaign against domestic violence (a counterpart to the #MeToo movement), to wikis, blogs, and publishing portals. Human rights discourse in education, communications, and civic inclusion aim to counter social stigmas in wider society, including where false attitudes toward women and other gender minorities as vulnerable subjects serves to marginalize. Recent feminist art initiatives in Ukraine converge with these efforts. For example, a large retrospective exhibit in 2018, in Kyiv, called “A Space of One’s Own,” in reference to Virginia Woolf. Spanning the 20-21st centuries and co-curated by Tatiana Kochubinska and Tetiana Zhmurko, the exhibit featured works by hundreds of women artists past and present. The public program included scholars and an anthology of contemporary texts and images by and about women artists and authors, edited by Kateryna Iakovlenko, titled, Чому в українському мистецтві є великі художниці / Chomu v ukrains’komu mystetstvi ie velyki khudozhnytsi (Why There are Such Great Artists in Ukrainian Art).¹⁷

Museums and other exhibit spaces provide rare opportunities for researchers and the public to engage difficult and controversial subjects, such as the war. An example is “At the Front Line: Ukrainian Art 2013-2019,” curated by Svitlana Biedarieva and Ania Deikun, exhibited in 2019 in Mexico City and in 2020 in Winnipeg, Canada, which included seminars, talks, guided tours, and an academic anthology.¹⁸ Participants addressed the role of art exchanges in the face of war, and how to protect the voices and works of artists in exile from the occupied territories.¹⁹ Other examples of solidarity-building among feminist and gender activists include authors who publish in both Ukrainian and Russian; individuals who exhibit with members of the Russian, Belarusian and Polish opposition; and Ukrainian professionals who boycott funding or invitations from Russian state-backed museums, including the prestigious Garage Museum, of which its partnerships include institutions based in the West.

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It is clear that Ukraine's activists who identify as women and/or feminists do not ascribe to a single unified strand of feminism, and are as highly diverse and talented as are its creative communities. Ukrainian art has gained wide visibility both domestically and abroad since the Maidan Revolution of Dignity in 2013-14. More projects that bring together artists, activists, and scholars dedicated to cultivating critical perspectives on women's lived experiences can help to shed light on Ukraine's dual challenges of securing women's rights while restoring sovereignty in Donbas and Crimea.

Women's Activism in Times of War

The war in Donbas brought a contradictory impact on women's gender roles.²⁰ On the one hand, the threat of violence makes women more vulnerable to the socio-economic hardships. Women are the majority among internally displaced persons from Eastern Ukraine responsible for children, the elderly, and disabled relatives.²¹ The war locks volunteers in very traditional gendered roles.²² The activism of soldiers' mothers' groups, as well as discourses and media representations of this activism, constructs ideas about women's traditional gender roles as mothers.²³ On the other hand, women have managed to challenge traditional gender roles (as caregivers and victims of conflict) and reclaimed visibility and recognition as revolutionaries and volunteers.²⁴

In 2015, a sociological study titled "Invisible Battalion: women's participation in ATO military operation" was conducted. This research aimed to clarify the peculiarities of the status of women veterans of the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) or Joint Forces Operation (JFO) (since April 30, 2018) and to identify both possible successes and the problems with reintegration of servicewomen into civilian life. The research found that the Armed Forces of Ukraine, just like the job market in general, manifest vertical and horizontal gender segregation.²⁵ The results of the empirical study – a survey of 42 women who fought in the ATO – revealed some major issues, faced by almost all respondents: problems with their ability to make decisions in the army. The infrastructure of the Armed Forces of Ukraine is equipped for the needs of men only, and excludes women with their specific needs. Moreover, there are problems of gender stereotypes, gender discrimination and sexual harassment. The study became a driving force behind a larger advocacy campaign fighting for the rights of servicewomen and

women veterans in the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

In general, the topic of women's access to the Armed Forces has become part of the political agenda. The Equal Opportunities Inter-factional Caucus is one of the agents advancing it. On September 6, 2018, the Law of Ukraine "On Amendments to some laws of Ukraine on providing equal rights and opportunities of women and men during active service in the Armed Forces of Ukraine and other military institutions" was adopted. In February of 2016, Ukraine adopted the National Action Plan for implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 "Women, peace, security" up to 2020. It emphasizes the importance of viewing women not only in the role of victims of conflicts, but also as participants of resolving conflicts and peacebuilding activities on a par with men.

Among the achievements of campaigning for gender equality in the military are the following: further development and ensuring of the policy of equal rights and opportunities of women and men in the Armed Forces; drawing attention to women's status in the Armed Forces of Ukraine in general and specifically at war, advocating for the rights of servicewomen at the socio-political level; engaging women into the security and defense sector as actors for change.²⁶ There are also some challenges of women's integration in the military sphere of Ukraine. Women are largely excluded from the formal peace process in Ukraine.²⁷ Other problems include a lack of political will to implement the policy of equal rights and opportunities of women and men in general, and in the Armed Forces in particular; gender stereotypes concerning the roles of women and men, including those related to war; sexual harassment in the military sphere and obstacles to recognize and solve this problem.²⁸

As this article has demonstrated, activism in Ukraine continues to involve a large number of women and their contribution is becoming increasingly visible even in roles that have traditionally been reserved for men (such as the military) or have been perceived as auxiliary (such as volunteering). The increased visibility of women in Ukraine may be a sign of societal recognition of the part women play in bringing about political and social changes, but it does not necessarily translate into the betterment of their rights, and so there is much need for continued women's activism and for scholarly attention to it. *UQ*

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FOOTNOTES

¹ Cynthia Enloe, *Seriously! Investigating Crashes and Crises as if Women Mattered* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013, p. 5.) Emphasis as in original.

² See Julia Mickenberg, *American Girls in Red Russia: Chasing the Soviet Dream* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); on the "double burden," see Sarah Ashwin, *Gender, State, and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia* (London: Routledge, 2000) and Chris Corrin, *Superwomen and the Double Burden: Women's Experience of Change in Central and Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 1992).

³ See Nargis Kassenova and Svetlana Rukhman, "The Thorny Road to Emancipation: Women in Soviet Central Asia", Davis Center, 2019. <https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/insights/thorny-road-emancipation-women-soviet-central-asia>

⁴ Greta Uehling, *Beyond Memory: The Crimean Tatars' Deportation and Return* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

⁵ See Oksana Kis, "National Femininity Used and Contested: Women's Participation in the Nationalist Underground in Western Ukraine during the 1940s-50s", *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 2(2), (2015):53-82.

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¹¹ OHCHR, "Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination the report of Ukraine", 12 August 2016, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20370&LangID=E>. The Anti-Discrimination Law prohibits the disadvantaging of individuals for race, class, gender, or religious reasons.

¹² See Atlantic Council Annual Report for 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Atlantic-Council-Annual-Report-2018%E2%80%932019.pdf>; Human Rights Watch World Report 2019 and 2020: Ukraine, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/ukraine>; Amnesty International Annual Report 2019: Eastern Europe and Central Asia, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2020/04/air2019-eeca/>; Jessica Zychowicz "Ukraine Hosts Most Successful LGBTQ Event in the Nation's History, but New Challenges Appear," *Wilson Center. Kennan Institute. Ukraine Focus Blog*, 2 August 2019, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/ukraine-hosts-most-successful-lgbtq-event-the-nations-history-new-challenges-appear>.

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¹⁷ Kateryna Iakovlenko, Ed. *Чому в українському мистецтві є великі художники* [Why There are Such Great Artists in Ukrainian Art], (Ukraine: PinchukArtCentre, 2019).

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²¹ See Martsenyuk, “Ukrainian Women at War”.

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²³ See Olena Strelnyk, “Gendered Protests: Mothers’ Civic Activism and the War in Ukraine”, *Laboratorium*, 11(2) (2019): 103-124.

²⁴ See Martsenyuk, “Ukrainian Women at War”; Shukan, “Gender Roles in the Rear of the War in Donbas”.

²⁵ See “Invisible Battalion”, 2015.

²⁶ “Invisible Battalion 2.0”, 2019, p. 35

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