Zhinocha Pratsia: Women's Activism in Independent Ukraine

by

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A Note on Language

I use the 2010 official state Ukrainian transliteration system for the native words in this thesis. All translations from Russian and Ukrainian are my own.
Introduction

In her essay collection *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*, the writer Slavenka Drakulić observes that, “Women’s lives, by no means spectacular, banal in fact, say as much about politics as no end of theoretical political analysis.”¹ Croatian herself, Drakulić formulates a credo that resonates across post-socialist societies. For the women living in the socialist world, 1991, the year in which Drakulić published her book, marks a peculiar point: the end of communism and the beginning of an unknowable future. For Ukrainian women in particular, the question of how they survived the transition from communism remains open. This thesis attempts to partially answer that question by looking at the women who are working to create a better future for themselves, for other Ukrainian women, and for their nation.² Though it relies on political theory, at its heart are women’s lives, by no means spectacular.

The central tensions of this thesis are womanhood and its many meanings; the nation and the uses of history to shape the present; the state and its responsibilities during transition; and Ukraine’s permanent position as a country caught between East and West. In order to understand how the dynamics of these often-contradictory elements affect activism and civil society, it is important to look at the different

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² The first two words of the title, *zhinocha pratsia*, mean “women’s work.” As in English, the Ukrainian phrase usually connotes trivial domestic housework or other work in the traditional feminine domains. In this thesis, I analyze how the concept of “women’s work” is expanding and transforming in Ukraine, and consider who is driving these changes. The title evokes the domestic setting most Ukrainian women participate in, but remains an open concept that accommodates the infinite forms of women’s labor.
intellectual and ideological narratives regarding women and gender that have developed since the early 1990s. This thesis analyzes the challenges that organizers and activists face in trying to carve a specifically Ukrainian theoretical framework of gender and gender equality, and then in implementing that framework. And, in order to gain insight into the broader dynamics of Ukraine’s democratic transition, this thesis uses the lens of gender equality and women’s rights activism, to examine Ukraine’s political transformation.

For the 25 years since the Ukrainian people voted to declare independence and to build a new nation, Ukraine has been in continuous transition, and its transformation into a sovereign nation-state has not been steady or predictable. Ukraine’s transformation since 1991 can be characterized as a “quadruple transition”: the country shifted from communism to democracy; from a planned economy to a free market; from being part of a union of states to independent statehood; and from having a suppressed national identity to experiencing a national revival (Kuzio, 2000). Each of these components presented, and continues to present, distinct yet interlocking challenges. A country born from a people’s independence movement (Rukh) in 1991, Ukraine experienced two additional revolutions in its nascent history. These revolutions produced swift changes in presidential leadership, social chaos, and uncertainty about Ukraine’s path or even destination. The only thing that remains consistent is the peoples’ willingness to agitate for the delivery of promises made to independent Ukraine, many of which have not been kept.
At the start of the transition years, every Ukrainian’s future was unknown, along with the country’s future as a whole. How would the rejection of communist values change public life? What kind of new identities would form, and which remnants of the Soviet system would die off? How would an entirely new group of people—indepedent Ukrainians—relate to one another and to their government? Women, whose social and political identities have gender-specific attributes, were asking themselves these questions as they witnessed rapid changes taking place. For some, the end of communism signaled the beginning of a bright new era filled with opportunities for individual expression, personal achievement and the embrace of liberal freedoms achieved over the course of the previous century by Western feminists. For other Ukrainian women, the loss of the Soviet Union was the loss of stable norms and a customary way of life. It was the end of their Soviet identities, both as workers and in in the home. And for a great many women, the chaos of the 1990s mostly meant struggling to survive rapidly worsening economic conditions—a time when a new “identity” did not buy their families a meal.

Whatever one’s outlook was, it is undeniable that the country’s radical transformation created possibilities for new social relationships, economic capabilities and political power. Unsatisfied with the old communist status quo, and with the transition’s unsteady status quo, both of which left women disadvantaged in terms of social and political power, some women seized on new possibilities, such as

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3 “In different historical contexts women and men may have (or not have) equal civil, political and social rights. Women may be put into a special category of citizens and granted ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ privileges, particularly social ones aimed at supporting motherhood. Women and men may act (or not act) in different ways to transform or to conserve society as a whole and gender relations in particular.” (Zdravomyslova and Temkina, 2005, p. 96)
joining community activist organizations or opening small businesses. The women’s movement that began in the late 1980s has continued to today, growing and changing to fit the needs of a still transitioning society.

While many of the demands that activist and organizational groups have are the same as in most women’s movements around the world—such as ending sexual violence and ensuring reproductive care—the challenges these groups face are often unique to the circumstances of a transitional political and social order. What were the goals of the Ukrainian women’s movement and how have these changed over time? What has it achieved, and what prevents it from meeting the goals it cannot? Who is being helped and who is being ignored? Has institutional power actually shifted to consider and center the demands of activists?

Alongside political and social crises, Ukraine has also faced a demographic crisis caused by a negative population growth rate, external migration and, currently, the casualties of armed conflict. Ukraine’s population has lost over 6 million people in 25 years—11.5% of the 1991 population is gone. The population size is projected to continue decreasing in the coming decades. When combined with economic degradation and political instability, it is clear that while the Ukrainian people have accomplished a great deal during their development as an independent nation, there are still staggering challenges ahead. Civil society organizations (made up of local and foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs)) are the locus for solving these

4 “A number of women’s groups and associations in one country or region which have arisen spontaneously, organized by women for women,” (Bull, Diamond and Marsh, 2000, p. 1-2). This includes, but is not limited to, explicitly “feminist” groups and actors.

issues because they addresses the gap between citizens’ needs and government capabilities.

Two sets of distinct but related challenges emerge from the “woman question:” the issue of sociopolitical gender equality, and “women’s issues.” The first refers to the gender imbalance in the labor market and representative politics. The second describes the material and social conditions that disproportionately and negatively affect women: inadequate or inaccessible health and childcare, the prevalence of high-risk sex work, sex trafficking and “mail-order bride” industries, domestic abuse and sexual assault, and negative gender stereotyping or portrayals in media. These two sets of issues are underpinned by a patriarchal social and cultural framework in which women and men are assumed to have specific roles. These roles are enforced materially and discursively at all levels of society, from the home to the Presidential cabinet.

Simply put, women are discriminated against in a variety of sectors, and this discrimination is based on assumptions about their roles as women. Acceptable roles for women are usually centered around domestic work, motherhood, and care work, while occupations that require physical strength or afford a higher degree of sociopolitical power are less available to them.⁶ Women are evaluated on their appearance more intensely than men are, and are expected to be traditionally feminine. Many Ukrainian women themselves are embracing the more overt patriarchal standards that Ukrainian society has adopted since the end of communism.

⁶ Women are in fact legally barred from having over 450 occupations, primarily those in the construction, on-site engineering, long-distance transportation and other potentially physically dangerous sectors (Human Rights Information Centre, 2017).
This can be explained by the fact that the maternalist state discourse, which emphasizes women’s roles as caretakers of children and the future of the nation, is succeeding. The internalization of conservative gender norms in the Ukrainian case also likely stems from a reflexive rejection of the androgynous Soviet model. Reclaiming individual femininity counters the “Soviet emphasis on a woman as a faceless worker” and incorporates the capitalist or Western standard of women as beautiful, thin, fragile and fashionable (Yakushko, 2005, 591-595).

**Nation, Woman and the West**

Each level of addressing gender inequality—political, economic, social—in Ukraine has happened simultaneously since 1991. From the beginning, these attempts have been heavily informed by foreign, and almost exclusively liberal Western, intellectual, legal and theoretical concepts. In the 1990s, the “subversive innovation” of Western-style feminism, and the funding that came with it, was entering Ukrainian political and civil society with increasing intensity. Whether or not it was subversive or an innovation, Western-style feminism was a critical factor in post-Soviet Ukrainian restructuring. The early development of independent Ukraine’s civil society landscape was heavily tied into Western structures economically and, by extension, ideologically. In the early post-Soviet period, carving out an independent Ukrainian identity in opposition to Russia made sense politically. However, this may have led to an over-reliance on Western support and ideology, leaving Ukrainian activists to navigate between the long-rejected Soviet and imperial Russian

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frameworks and a new liberal framework that does not translate perfectly to Ukraine’s political, social, and cultural context.

There is an asymmetry between the “universal” claims of Western liberalism and the particular circumstances of Ukraine’s political, social, and cultural history. Because of the impact that foreign NGOs have had on Ukraine’s nascent civil society landscape, many “universal” liberal values and structures have been incorporated into Ukraine’s legal system, and been used for consciousness shifting—opening Ukrainians’ eyes to the usefulness of “gender” as a political category, and showing why gender equality in Ukraine is necessary. This process, while effectively addressing certain problems over the course of the last 25 years, has left little room for “indigenous” Ukrainian conceptions of gender to be developed and utilized.

Furthermore, even as many activists operate within the structures and use the logics of Western feminism, they are skeptical of its applicability to Ukraine precisely because of its foreign origins, as well as the conditions of its imposition. This skepticism is amplified among the Ukrainian citizens who are not involved in activism. Several strains of gender-related thought are prominent in Ukraine, each of

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8 I use “universal” to draw attention to a defining characteristic of liberal Western values and human rights paradigms. Namely, that the success of these values (i.e. their use in legal and moral logics around the world) is predicated upon their appearing universally applicable. In recent years, some countries have pushed back against the liberal world order that had prevailed since the end of the Cold War. For an argument as to why these values seemed inevitable and universal (at the time), see Francis Fukuyama’s 1989 essay “The End of History.” “Illiberal” democracies are becoming more widespread as the argument for “universal human rights” is fracturing. While Ukraine is not an “illiberal” democracy, its interaction with Western values is complex. For more on how the development of “human rights” as a legal and moral imperative was a recent project, and not an eternal human truth, see Samuel Moyn’s The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History (Belknap Press, 2012).
which stems from a different outlook on women, the nation, and the relationship of both to the West.

**Typology**

*A Note on Definitions—*

Before examining feminist strains, I include a few working definitions for important terms. “Feminism,” in the broadest sense, is an ideology that includes a) the understanding that women and girls have a different and subordinate status to men in economic, political, and social categories and b) the belief that it is possible and necessary to make equal the status of women and men in these categories. For the purposes of understanding Ukrainian feminist thought in particular, “equal” is not interchangeable with “identical.” Certain schools of thought in Ukraine do not call for the dissolution of gender difference, but for the equality of men and women who still have separate and distinct social roles. Many Ukrainians reject “feminism” as an ideology, considering it to be too radical and viewing feminists as unfeminine, angry women who reject social norms, or they associate the ideology with “bourgeois” Western values that have no place in the Ukrainian context (Ghodsee, 2004).

I would also like to address how I use “woman” and “gender” for the purposes of this thesis. “Gender,” to draw on Judith Butler’s influential theory, is a constructed social performance that is always tied to a person’s cultural and historical context. Dominant discourse about gender in Ukraine, and elsewhere, ties it inextricably with “sex”—a person’s biological and genetic characteristics.⁹ This kind of essentialism

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⁹ “The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of ‘identities’ cannot ‘exist’—that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex” (Butler, 2006, p. 24).
defines “woman” as “female” and vice versa, which not only leaves Ukrainian transgender women, and gender non-conforming people, out of the popular conception of “womanhood,” but does a disservice to cis women as well. The assumption that there is a universal biological, or even social, experience of “womanhood” is a false one.

The presumed coherence of the category “woman” is also tied to the Western-led attempts to forge a universal feminist movement, which has been “widely criticized in recent years for its failure to account for the workings of gender oppression in those concrete cultural contexts in which it exists” (Butler, 2004, p. 5). Therefore, as I critique hegemonic feminism for its “failure to account” for the cultural specificity of Ukraine, I must acknowledge the breadth of experiential identities that Ukrainian women have within the country, and the flimsiness of “woman” as a classification. Ukrainian people whose gender identities or presentation deviate from culturally enforced norms for womanhood and manhood have their own unique set of challenges. Consequently, critiques of dominant gender identities, and queer feminisms, have been edging their way into the mainstream feminist conversation.

In this thesis, terms such as “woman,” “man,” “fatherhood” and “motherhood” are meant to connote the dominant cultural definition for these terms in Ukraine. They are regrettably vague and flat; each term merits a full exploration to understand who is included in these categories, who is excluded, and for what

10 The designator “cis” applies to people who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth.
political and cultural reasons? Unfortunately, these questions are outside the scope of this thesis, because it seeks to analyze the dominant political discourse around gender and womanhood, which almost always centers cis women and cis motherhood.

Varieties of "feminism"—

One of the first types of gender-oriented activism was unified by the ideology of “neo-traditional feminism,” which uses a mythical matriarchal trope. This perspective emphasizes the family as source of strength, power, and survival based on the myth of a supposed native “Ukrainian matriarchal culture” that was undermined by Russian imperialism. Ukraine’s independence and accompanying national revival ushered in the return, in the late 1980s, of the Berehynia in public discourse. The Berehynia is a mythical Ukrainian goddess, the nation’s “hearth mother” and protectress. The invocation of the Berehynia in Ukraine is meant to call to mind pre-colonial Ukraine’s alleged matriarchal order. However, as Marian J. Rubchak observes, this discourse is not unproblematic, since

“That topos [of ancient Ukrainian civilization] is currently being deployed as a rhetorical device to help validate Ukraine’s ancient lineage as a nation. It is also being manipulated to promote the fiction that Ukrainians have no need of any subversive innovation as Western-style feminism, insofar as the people have always been feminists (read ‘a matriarchal society’)” (Rubchak, 2009, p. 132).

As Rubchak shows, the myth of matriarchy impedes women’s material progress at the same time that it uses womanhood as the site for nationhood.

This ideology promotes motherhood within the family, and also as a national imperative, because women reproduce and care for the family and symbolically reproduce the nation. Some adherents of this “feminism” consider the nascent nation
to be a “new born child” that needs women’s care (Zhurzhenko, 2001, p. 4). In the term “neo-traditionalism,” “neo” modifies the “traditional” gender roles that existed within Ukraine before Russian imperialism. The activists who operate within this feminist framework do not seek women’s liberation from the patriarchal structure necessarily, but the strengthening of their material and social position as mothers and caretakers. “Neo-traditionalism” assumes that there is an inherent strength to womanhood that should be used to fortify the whole nation (Zhurzhenko, 2001).

A similar strain is “nationalist feminism,” which also relies heavily on the exaltation of Ukrainian nationhood and by extension, its women. For “nationalist feminists,” the stability and strength of the nation is the first priority, followed by the improvement of conditions for women. This strain can be difficult to parse out from other activism, because it is hard to distinguish “nationalist feminism” from simply nationalist activism being carried out by women. In their approach to gender and nation, “nationalist feminists” compare the geopolitical position of a subordinated Ukraine to the sociopolitical position of subordinated women (Zhurzhenko, 2001). “Nationalist feminism” can also embrace aggressive and militant tactics, a characteristic that other feminist thinkers have critiqued because it reproduces one of the most oppressive elements of patriarchy—violence. Indeed, this approach has been found to lack “a self-critique of its own nationalism” and is liable to subvert its own supposed feminist goals (Mayerchyk, 2015).

Ukraine’s independent statehood has not simply meant its bureaucratic exit from a union of republics, but a massive recalibration of what it means to be a nation,
and to be Ukrainian. The geopolitical division between the southeastern regions, the center, and the west have only intensified as a result of the reality that each person within Ukraine’s borders has to unify for a common national purpose. In fostering solidarity among women, some activists felt it was necessary to create a national—some would say nationalist—solidarity. However it soon became clear that woman and nation are not the same, and what best serves the project of nation-building is not necessarily what best serves women’s lives or the women’s movement as a whole. Finding an effective balance between women-centered activism and national progress has been and remains a challenge in Ukraine.

A major force in Ukrainian feminist thought is, of course, “liberal feminism.” This perspective is closely tied to Ukraine’s post-Soviet geopolitical alignment with the West and the European Union. In fact, the EU’s gender equality standards are major guidelines for how “liberal feminism” operates in Ukraine. This “liberal feminism” is predicated on the notion that women are all oppressed by patriarchy, and promises to secure their individual liberation through full and equal participation in liberal democracy. The paradigm of universal human rights plays a large role in the standards by which this liberation is measured, as do Western ideals of womanhood. Namely, there is an emphasis on being “liberated from the home” that stems from the second wave feminist theories of the 1960s. Of course, this is directly at odds with “neo-traditional feminism,” for which women’s position as caretakers is not

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problematic. Contemporary “liberal feminism,” on the other hand, calls for equality on the basis of deconstructing gender roles rather than returning to “traditional” ones. Unlike “neo-traditional” and “nationalist” feminisms, which oppose the Russian colonial imposition of gender roles, “liberal feminism” opposes traditional patriarchy in general.

The fourth ideological strain, and the focus of the second chapter of this thesis, is “indigenous feminism.” This refers to a feminism that opposes the imposition of Western “liberal feminist” ideology in Ukraine without necessarily embracing the concepts of “neo-traditional” or “nationalist feminism.” This school of thought traces Ukrainian “feminism” and “gender activism” through history to define Ukraine’s unique conception of gender, gender roles, feminism, etc. Part of this work is being done through scholarship: “Local efforts to develop indigenous feminism and institutionalize gender studies in academia have gained acceptance and are growing in popularity” (Hrycak and Rewakowicz, 2009, p. 314). “Indigenous feminism” is an attempt to carve out an approach to addressing women’s issues and gender inequality that is not automatically oriented towards the West or reflexively oriented away from Soviet or colonial history. It is also an approach that takes stock of the complex political and social nuances of Ukraine, instead of formulating ineffective catch-all policies.

The tension between “indigenous feminism” and “liberal feminism” is exacerbated by the nature of foreign funding during Ukraine’s transition from Soviet socialism to liberal democracy. In the early post-Soviet period, Ukrainian civil society
organizations relied on liberal Western frameworks and funding, and these became the foundation of contemporary organizations and structures. This historical dependence has ushered in critique of the universal applicability of liberal feminist ideology. Those who attempt to develop an “indigenous” Ukrainian model of gender critically assess liberal theories of gender and feminism to see how they may or may not fit to Ukraine’s unique landscape. As Kristen Ghodsee writes, “liberal feminism” had “piggybacked into Eastern Europe on the backs of Western scholars and activists riding a tidal wave of grants” (Ghodsee, 2004, p. 731).

This created the structures for Western feminists to import “the paradigm of ‘gender first’” since this analytical framework was perceived as “the hegemonic and commonsense way of thinking about women’s lives in times of great social, political, or economic upheaval” (Ghodsee, 2004, p. 730). It was only perceived as commonsense—in reality, many ordinary Ukrainian women do not consider their gender to be a primary source of oppression, and liberal logics may not resonate with them.\(^\text{13}\) Much of the feminist and gender-oriented work in Ukraine on the ground today affirms the importance of “gender” as a category of analysis, but must necessarily accommodate women who feel they are first and foremost struggling against other systems such as class-based oppression, ethnic erasure, or the state itself.

Finally, the relative importance and influence of these different strains within public discourse is mitigated by the financial resources and organizational structure of

\(^{13}\) This goes double for most Ukrainian men: one newly appointed local politician said that “gender is not a Ukrainian word and our reality is different” (Hankivsky and Salnykova, 2012, p. 415).
the groups that promote them. Therefore, because the ideology of “liberal feminism” has financial backing in Ukraine, its influence on policy may not be reflective of Ukrainian peoples’ belief in or understanding of core liberal values. This thesis is an analysis of that asymmetrical relationship.

Categories of Analysis

I will examine organizations and activists in Ukraine who focus on gender equality and addressing women’s issues. These organizations address these problems from different angles. Whereas some focus on improving material conditions, others focus on improving women’s access to and viability in electoral politics. Almost all devote part of their work to “consciousness shifting.” This thesis analyzes the state of Ukrainian gender equality today and how it has changed over time on three levels: The legal framework, practical and institutional implementation of policy, and changing social consciousness.

Ukraine has adopted the European Union’s, United Nations’ and other international legal frameworks to prevent workplace discrimination, address the needs of domestic abuse and assault victims, and (recently) to provide more opportunities for women entering electoral politics. The new legal framework rejected the Soviet quotas for women’s political participation, and many laws have been crafted with the use of foreign models (UN Millennium Development guidelines, EU accession contracts, etc). The legal framework for gender equality is analyzed in chapter one. However, there is much to suggest that the problem of gender inequality in Ukraine is not with its legal framework, which is rhetorically robust and covers most areas of
potential discrimination against or devaluation of women in society, but with the implementation of the legal concepts at an institutional and individual level.

While there is a legislative foundation for supporting gender equality, a breakdown begins with the practice of gender equality norms. The very existence of (and subsequent reliance on) foreign-funded civil society organizations reveals the gap between the state’s stated plans for gender equality work and their actual implementation. Rather than being institutionalized within state structures, upholding and promoting gender equality is carried out by discrete and often under-resourced non-governmental organizations. The challenges of Ukraine’s often inadequate justice system—one that fails to uphold existing laws against discrimination or competently manage issues of abuse—exacerbates this particular problem. At the level of practical implementation, activists and organizers express the frustration of continuously having to “re-train” politicians, civil servants, police, lawyers, and other cadres to be “sensitive to gender.”¹⁴

The final stage of ensuring gender equality in Ukraine, I argue, involves changing the citizenry’s assumptions about women and men’s roles and, more specifically, attitudes about the presumed inferiority of women. In fact, a large part of this work involves challenging the presumed inviolability of categories such as “man,” “woman,” “sex,” and “gender,” to foster social relationships that transcend gender stereotypes, and to reveal that gender-based subjugation is groundless and must end. In order for gender equality to become a political, social, and cultural norm,

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¹⁴ This sentiment was expressed by one of my interviewees, Iryna Golovashenko.
it must be socially reproducible. Changing and challenging existing patriarchal norms so that the importance of gender sensitivity is internalized is a key condition for creating enduring gender equality in Ukraine.

The underlying challenge at each of these levels is a theoretical one. If one assumes that there is a necessity for “organic” or internalized notions of gender equality, then there must be a coherent theoretical framework of Ukrainian conceptions of gender. At this theoretical level, there is a breakdown, and it needs to be addressed before the legal, institutional, and consciousness-shifting work can begin to be effective.

Structure

This thesis analyzes feminist strategies and approaches to addressing the tension between theories and practice, as well as the subsequent outcomes. I draw on the work of scholars such as Sarah Phillips, whose ethnographic exploration of Ukrainian women’s social organizations reveals why their work is critical for their communities and for the women themselves. Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak traces the lineage of Ukrainian community organizing from the 19th and early 20th centuries and the organizers’ accidental feminism. Her work significantly stimulates my thinking about “indigenous” feminist possibilities. Alexandra Hrycak’s sociological analyses of contemporary Ukrainian activism neatly classifies the complicated landscape of the women’s movement and its 20th century roots. Tatiana Zhurzhenko considers the identities of Ukrainian people in transition, and how this particularly affects women and feminist activism. Finally, Olesya Khromeychuk’s
study of the Maidan Revolution and the gendered memory politics of Ukrainian nationalism is instrumental to my own interpretation of the country’s current geopolitical crisis. My analysis builds on the work of these scholars, and others, to synthesize their findings and create a Ukrainian feminist taxonomy. I also contribute original research using interviews with Ukrainian organizers to understand the particular constraints on, and radical possibilities of, local activism. Finally, my work focuses on the contemporary and considers the powerful effect the last several years of conflict have had on Ukraine.

This thesis could have potentially been more narrowly focused—on a particular aspect of gender equality, on one organization, one piece of legislation, etc. But my aim with the breadth of this project was to convey, as much as possible, the scope of problems, contradictions and sources of conflict that affect the every day work of Ukrainian organizers. Dramatic politics of historical memory and national identity have just as intense an impact on women’s activism as the more mundane frustrations of inadequate funding or state attention. This thesis works toward addressing all issues that constitute the dense web of social and political reality in which activists operate.

Chapter one tells the story of Ukraine’s three revolutions—the independence movement, the Orange Revolution, and the Revolution of Dignity—and how the phases between revolutions shaped feminist activism. It includes a history of the legal and institutional frameworks for gender equality that Ukraine has established, focusing on the presidential terms of Leonid Kuchma, Viktor Yushchenko, Viktor
Yanukovych and Petro Poroshenko. The goal of chapter one is to establish a baseline understanding of Ukraine’s particular civil society history and to identify the degree to which political structures and discourse around gender equality have been constructed by external forces.

Chapter two analyzes three particular gender-oriented organizations who have different approaches. The first is an “Open Society” non-profit that focuses on equal employment opportunities, affecting legislation, and training politicians and bureaucrats in gender sensitivity. The second is a university-affiliated gender resource center whose members focus on gender equality within higher education and on creating a Ukrainian intellectual basis for gender theory. The third is Ukraine’s first and only Museum of Gender, which aims to educate the public about women’s history as a corrective to male-oriented history, to teach the community about gender equality and to demonstrate the importance of gender as a historical and social category. In addition to examining the material challenges facing these organizations, I analyze their understanding of theoretical gender frameworks and ask whether their biggest problem is one of practical implementation, incoherent or non-indigenous theoretical bases, or a combination. Chapter two also includes an original theoretical exploration of what an “indigenous” Ukrainian feminism might look like.

Chapter three analyzes how each of these challenges has been affected and exacerbated following the 2014 Maidan Revolution, annexation of Crimea, and hybrid war in Eastern Ukraine. Considering the re-invigoration of nationalism following the crisis of 2014, I examine how the tension between the universal and the
particular has intensified in a time of political and existential crisis for Ukraine, and analyze its impact on the work of gender equality and feminist activists.

This project’s broadest, but central, question is ultimately: what will best serve Ukrainian women? What particular configuration of civil society activism, state intervention, international assistance, and national prospects, will provide Ukrainian women with the security and freedom to build the lives they want? This thesis attempts to answer this question by analyzing each of these structures and their interactions. I argue that in order for Ukrainian gender equality work to be successful and sustainable, its theoretical precepts must be internalized. In order for this to happen, there must be a careful (partial or total) divestment from foreign structures and ideology. This is complicated by the fact that civil society organizers and activists face many critical challenges, from inadequate funding and resources, to being low priorities for the state and society. But, they are also tasked with adapting and reconfiguring the universal for the particular. What follows is an investigation of how the two are entangled.
Chapter One—Revolution, Rinse, Repeat

Since it gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine has not had a sustained period of political stability. As a side effect of this tumult, Ukraine has also not had a sustained, unified women’s movement. Independent Ukraine’s political development began a few years before the official declaration of independence in 1991 with a people’s movement that challenged the Soviet status quo. The tumultuous and uncertain 1990s followed with a huge growth in the number of people and organizations invested in developing and maintaining Ukrainian democracy—the birth of a foundational civil society, ushered in by both Ukrainians and foreigners. In 2004, another upheaval—the Orange Revolution—swept the country, this time to challenge the corruption that had been eating away at the nascent and still fragile democratic system. Following the Orange Revolution, which “made manifest a new political approach to nation-building” (Hankivsky and Salnykova, 2012), Ukraine saw a decade of renewed investment in state building, new organizations and a deepening of its ties with Western values, funding and legal frameworks.

With some of the instability of the 1990s gone, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were finding it possible to begin having meaningful dialogue with state structures, though this dialogue only intermittently resulted in legislative and practiced gender equality measures. Additionally, foreign funding began slowly to leave the Ukrainian NGO sphere, leaving many organizations on shaky ground (Stewart, 2009). By 2014, a third revolution took place in which Ukrainians fought for their right to determine the political future of their country, reaffirming their
choice to orient towards Europe and the West. Now, Ukraine’s still relatively weak
civil society is met with the fresh challenges of a country engaged in armed conflict.
It is still unclear what this new era will bring.

This chapter tells the story of Ukraine’s political development from the early
1990s to today through the lens of “gender equality work.” That category
encompasses civic associations, activist groups, Ukrainian academic feminist thought,
as well as national legislation and gender equality discourse. The chapter is divided
into three intervals: from the independence movement to the Orange Revolution
(1989-2004), from the OR to the Maidan Revolution (2004-2014), and the post-
Maidan period (2014-present). Ukrainian gender-related policy and discourse
developed during each of these intervals, and this chapter details the ways that they
have changed over time. It also tracks the progress of Ukrainian civil society over the
course of these years in order to provide a clear view of how NGOs and community
organizations affect and are affected by the state’s gender-related legislation and
policies.

Independent Ukraine is a country in continuous transition, and this political
and historical reality is manifest in the everyday lives of Ukrainians as they continue
to work towards an uncertain future. I use these three revolutions as an organizing
principle for the chapter because they are useful signposts in independent Ukraine’s
history. Each “people’s movement” was a show of vocal dissatisfaction with the
status quo, and the leaders and administrations following each revolution attempted,
in different ways, to address the needs of the Ukrainian people. Additionally, as more
people became involved in meaningful democratic politics, these revolutions can serve as revealing gauges for women’s political involvement in particular. Ukraine’s flux has made it challenging for civil society to be sustainable and politically effective. However, the revolutions demonstrate the active engagement of the citizens with their social and political future, and serve as a reminder that most Ukrainians want a democratic and egalitarian society.

Several major approaches to gender developed in post-Soviet Ukraine. As the state adjusted to massive economic and political transformations, NGOs emerged to confront issues that the state did not or could not address. These included “women’s issues,” such as child care and intimate partner violence, and issues of general socioeconomic welfare, as well as the problem of gender inequality. Scholars, meanwhile, critiqued Soviet models of gender, mythologized ancient Ukrainian culture, and applied liberal Western ideologies to develop new ways of thinking about the new Ukrainian woman and her needs. Since independence, Ukrainian civil society has relied heavily on foreign funding and, because of the structure of said funding, on foreign ideological and sociological approaches.

The swell of post-independence nationalism has also meant a reflexive rejection of Soviet ideological precepts. Therefore, the civil society that has developed did so in a context that was first, marked by social, political and economic instability; and second, not conducive to a self-sustaining, reproducible Ukrainian feminist framework. I argue that the first set of complications is common for countries transitioning from socialism and poses challenges to civil society that, while
taxing, are unsurprising. These included lack of funding, low status among
government priorities, and too little institutional support. The second issue that has
negatively affected Ukrainian gender progress and stifled civil society organizations
is the imbalance of power between Western-funded and instituted NGOs and
Ukrainian actors. This imbalance is on a structural and financial level, but its most
profound impact has been ideological.

The structure of the foreign NGO-supported nascent civil society in Ukraine
sets the parameters for the critical work of the women’s movement: changing the
consciousness and gender-sensitivity of the population. The consequent application of
liberal feminist concepts of gender progress on the Ukrainian social and cultural
landscape has hindered the development of indigenous Ukrainian approaches to
gender. However, it is also impossible to deny the importance of foreign funding and
support in Ukraine during its transition period, when the country had limited
resources and civil society building was not a high priority for the state. However, it
is worth not exaggerating the role of foreign NGOs, and to take the more thorough
approach described by Alexandra Hrycak:

“Most analyses of post-Soviet democratic transitions...overstate the
achievements of foreign-funded projects. A focus on women’s activism
provides a corrective to such ‘top-down’ analyses and offers a better and more
complete understanding of the ongoing problems such democratic
breakthroughs leave unresolved for women both as activists and as ‘ordinary

In this thesis, I acknowledge the significant positive benefits of outside assistance in
Ukrainian state-building, even as I question the precise effects that this assistance has
had on gender issues in Ukraine.
This chapter provides both the top-down analysis of gender related political activity, and a corrective that examines local organizing and activism.¹⁵ What follows is an overview of independent Ukraine’s history of gender-related legislation, the approaches to gender under different presidential administrations, the development of Ukraine’s “NGO-graphy,” and a historicization of the different political frameworks to the gender question that were described in the introduction.¹⁶ The objective of this chapter is to narrate the historical progression of how Ukrainian intellectuals, politicians and organizers have conceptualized key issues related to gender, and how this has affected policy. Furthermore, this chapter pays particular attention to intervention and assistance from foreign (usually Western) states in the Ukrainian gender sphere,¹⁷ as well as the effect that Ukrainian association with the European Union has had in shaping Ukrainian discourse and policy on gender.

Ukrainian Independence and Women’s Movements

Beginning in 1989, thousands of informal organizations formed to agitate for Ukrainian statehood. Several of them coalesced to form the Popular Movement for Restructuring in Ukraine (Rukh), which became an integral part of the Ukrainian

¹⁵ See also, Sarah Phillips on this subject: “These critiques of ‘trickle down’ have influenced contemporary development strategies, which have become more focused on a ‘bottom up from the grassroots’ approach to change. Stimulating democratic style ‘participation’ among citizens, supporting NGOs as watchdogs for citizens vis a vis the state, and kindling ‘people power’ in general have been especially important foci for development initiatives in post socialist states such as Ukraine and Russia. In the post socialist context, a ‘healthy civil society,’ in the minds of many Wester politicians and scholars, is central to the processes of democratization.” (Phillips 2008, 68)


¹⁷ I use this phrase to encompass the NGOs, government organizations, academic centers and individual actors who theorize, organize, legislate and otherwise act on questions of gender and women’s issues.
independence movement, first rhetorically and later politically. In 1990, voters in Ukraine’s first relatively free elections delivered 90 out of 450 parliamentary seats to the Democratic Bloc (made up of Rukh, the Helsinki Watch Committee, and other informal groups). The Bloc’s first tangible success came in July of 1990 when they were able to officially declare Ukrainian sovereignty (Subtelny, 2009).

Women’s groups such as Zhinocha Hromada (Women’s Brigade) and Soiuz Ukrainiok (Union of Ukrainian Women) emerged during the Ukrainian independence movement in 1990. These groups took the names, respectively, of women’s groups that were created in the late 19th century and in 1917 that had been disbanded following the Bolshevik revolution (Phillips, 2008). Soiuz Ukrainiok’s platform was primarily concerned with the Ukrainian nation and its women, who were seen as caretakers and mothers of the nascent country. In practice, the group focused on providing aid for children, disabled people and the elderly, and supporting female entrepreneurs.\(^\text{18}\) They were also engaged in Ukrainian cultural and language revival (Hrycak, 2005). Rhetorically, the Soiuz emphasized motherhood and motherland with statements such as “before [I] and [my] Association sisters start liberating women, [we] must first liberate the nation” (Phillips, 2008, p. 73). The idea that the group’s members must first contribute to building the Ukrainian nation before they

\(^{18}\) Not only did these new organizations borrow the names of much earlier proto-civil-society predecessors, but they had many of the same functions. Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak writes that Ukrainians, as people whose history is one of nearly continuous domination by another group or nation, “almost never had a state capable and willing to support even rudimentary welfare programs, [and] Ukrainian communities devised a whole network of community cultural, economic, educational, and social organizations to address those needs” (Bohachevsky-Chomiak, 1994:21).
can address the problems of women as a social group was common in early Ukrainian activism.

Another prominent early women’s organization was the *Spilka Zhinok Ukrainy* (Union of Women of Ukraine) which began work in 1993 and was modeled on Gorbachev’s Soviet women’s councils (*zhinochi rady*). This group supported Ukrainian statehood (though not as fervently as other groups) and focused on women’s economic independence (Kichorowska Kebalo, 2007). It was also considered a “rubber-stamp” organization that was allied with the ruling party. Since it neither mobilize women as a political force nor affected meaningful change, it was not very popular (Hrycak, 2005).

Due to gatekeeping within the main Rukh organization, women had to create their own groups (Hrycak, 2007). The main offshoot was the Zhinocha Hromada (“Women’s Community”), which was formed in early 1990 as the women’s section of Rukh but became its own group two years later. Their interests echoed those of Soiuz Ukrainok: national liberation first, to be followed eventually by women’s liberation. In fact, some members of the organization believed that “women should be politically active only during the present state of unrest, but...when Ukraine is independent, women should return home to fulfill their primary maternal obligations” (Phillips, 2008, p. 74). Today, now that Ukraine’s sovereignty is more or less secure, the Hromada works on gender equality within elected office and on increasing political education and participation for women (Phillips, 2008).
The position of early women’s groups as “nation first, gender second” is consistent with how nationalism and womanhood tend to intersect. Nationalism is traditionally a masculine project, supported by women through the “symbolic, moral and biological reproduction” of the nation’s citizens and values (Mayer, 2012, p. 16). The Soiuz Ukrainok and Zhinocha Hromada’s politics, therefore, were in line with the articulation of Ukrainian women as protectresses of the nation. After all, there can be no women’s liberation if the state does not exist. As Ukrainian sovereignty became more assured and stable in the late 1990s, women’s groups shifted their attention more directly on women’s issues and gender equality rather than nation-building.

The development of women’s rights and gender equality related activism continued through the 1990s and early 2000s mainly in the form of academic centers and scholarship, as well as NGOs. Nationalism, and how it should relate to a women or gender-oriented movement, was a central topic of discussion among early women’s activists. Two schools of thought in Ukrainian gender activism emerged in the early 1990s, and were divided both in their opinions on nationalism, and into Ukrainian-speaking and Russian-speaking camps (Zhurzhenko, 2001). The first group—the Kyiv school—believed that Ukrainian nationalism—that is, the development of a strong independent state that embraces “traditional” and “primordial” Ukrainian cultural values or symbols—will pave the way for gender equality. The second school of thought, coming out of Kharkiv, critiqued this approach and argued for its inversion—gender had be considered before the nation.
Kyiv

The Kyiv school of feminist thought began in the early 1990s with the writing of Nina Zborovska and others (Zhurzhenko, 2001 and Hrycak & Rewakowicz, 2009). This concept is simplified, and it is important to consider the various viewpoints that contribute to it. First, there is the idea – articulated by a member of the All-Ukrainian Women’s Congress in 1998 – that “The normal position of women is possible only in a normal, stable state.” This view echoes the position of the Zhinocha Hromada (Zhurzhenko, 2001). From there, many believers in the “state first” mode of gender equality work began developing an “indigenous Ukrainian feminism” based on the “myth of the ‘strong’ Ukrainian woman and of the ‘matriarchal’ roots of Ukrainian culture” (Zhurzhenko, 2001). This view of an “indigenous feminism” draws on the “mythic pagan goddess Berehynia ,” who is believed to have guarded the hearth in traditional peasant homes and serves as a symbol for Ukrainian matriarchal myth-making (Hrycak and Rewkowicz, 2009).19

Ukrainian independence activists like those involved with Rukh are credited with inventing and using the Berehynia myth for political ends (Hrycak, 2007). The most prominent example of the Berehynia in public and political space is a sculpture of her atop the monument in Kyiv’s Independence Square (Maidan Nezalezhnosti), erected in 2001 under President Leonid Kuchma on the site of the Soviet-era statue of

19 This use of the term “indigenous” does not refer to an understanding of gender that takes into account the specifics of conditions for women and men in Ukraine or one that is rooted in classical Ukrainian philosophy/literature about gender. Instead it mythologizes a pre-colonial Ukraine and applies that context to the contemporary situation. Therefore I categorize it not as “indigenous” but “neo-traditional,” strongly overlapping with “nationalist.”
the “Father of the Soviet State,” Vladimir Lenin (Rubchak, 2009). The monument is the feminine embodiment of an independent Ukraine, fusing womanhood with nationhood.

Early feminist literary scholars such as Solomiya Pavlychko, however, criticized aspects of this myth-making discourse and argued for the careful use of feminist theoretical frameworks rather than dependence on invented indigeneity (Pavlychko, 1998). She has also criticized groups like the Zhinocha Hromada and Soiuz Ukrainok for their full embrace of nationalism, which Pavlychko felt was at the expense of a potentially woman-centered social movement. Pointing to feminist traditions that had emerged in Ukraine as early as the 1880s, Pavlychko urged her peers in 1996 to revive the country’s “mature feminist cultural tradition” rather than create a superficial female coalition that does not center women’s issues (Kichorowska Kebalo, 2007, p. 38).

This discourse is likewise problematic because “the presence of discrimination is denied in Ukraine, everyone keeps talking of the image of woman-Berehynia on a pedestal” (Hankivsky & Salnykova, 2012).

“Indigenous feminism” is also necessarily positioned in opposition to Russia, and claims that the natural, traditional Ukrainian way of gender equality was disrupted and lost due to “Russian cultural influence and political oppression” (Zhurzhenko, 2001). This has renewed salience in contemporary Ukraine, which is engaged in armed conflict with Russia, and whose sovereignty is once again precarious. Some

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20 For more on early Ukrainian women’s movements, see Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak’s *Feminists Despite Themselves: Women in Ukrainian Life 1884-1939* (1988)
people understand the opposition to Russia in terms of Ukraine’s “post-colonial” position, and instrumentalize the myth that because Ukrainian men and women once had equal societal standing, women “must continue to revive family traditions, and also help Ukrainian men to overcome their lingering inferiority complex that resulted from their superfluousness under colonial rule” (Hrycak, 2007). This framing can prevent people from recognizing the fact that women in contemporary Ukrainian society suffer from gender inequality, and it can lead them to believe that women are strong and do not need to improve their sociopolitical standing.

Kharkiv

The Kharkiv school has its origins in 1994, when Iryna Zherebkina founded and directed the Center for Gender Studies in Kharkiv. Zherebkina criticized the concept that Ukrainian nationhood should be put first, arguing that “the priority of women’s issues was sacrificed for the sake of the nation” (Zhurzhenko, 2001). In 1999, Zherebkina, citing academic Peggy Watson, wrote that

“because of the post-Soviet conditions, gendered indicators of democratization take on a new and specific political meaning: democratization in Eastern Europe is the construction of a ‘male world’ in which women have a marginalized (lit. “minoritarian”) identity” (Zherebkina, 1999, p. 42).

She also compared the situation of women in Russia and Ukraine, arguing that while Russian conditions are openly hostile to women and gender equality, Ukrainian politics attempt to mask women’s marginalization. Ukrainian women, she argued, were held to a “double standard” in which they are elevated and mythologized while at the same time suffering materially and socially because of their gender (Zherebkina, 1999, p. 46). Zherebkina considered herself “an interlocutor between
feminists in Russia and the West” (Hrycak and Rewkowicz, 2009). In the late 1990s, she and nine colleagues created an introductory book of gender studies, and began publishing *New Image: A Ukrainian Feminist Journal* (Bohachevsky-Chomiak, 1998). Zherebkina’s resistance to the idea of the primacy of Ukrainian nationhood and emphasis on the distinction of “Ukrainian feminism and Russian-speaking feminism in Ukraine” highlights an ever-present tension in Ukrainian feminism: nation and language (Zhurzhenko, 2001).

A similar dichotomy developed with the terms “Ukrainian women’s movement” and “women’s movement in Ukraine,” because the first emphasized an ethnic Ukrainian-centric movement and the latter was felt to be more inclusive for women of Eastern and Central Ukraine who remained distrustful of ethnic nationalism. Martha Kichorowska Kebalo writes that the concept of a broad “Ukrainian women’s movement” signified women’s participation in the nation-building project, rather than a widespread feminist campaign. “This narrow definition may have served during *perestroika* at the height of the Ukrainian *Rukh* Popular Movement […] but not so well later in the decade when there was less consensus on nation-hood” (Kichorowska Kebalo, 2007, p. 37).

**NGO Boom and the Introduction of Liberal Feminism**

More complicated is the early feminist activists’ relationship with the West. Western feminism, fundamentally, relies on the idea that women must be emancipated from existing patriarchy—one that manifests itself in familial, labor market, and political circumstances alike. Ukrainian feminist thinkers in the 1990s, on the other
hand, believed that in Ukraine women must experience an ideological return to traditional (if mythological) Ukrainian matriarchy (Zhurzhenko, 2001). Some embraced the indigenous Ukrainian feminist myth-making out of ambivalence towards Western feminism, which they viewed as being imported and applied without special attention to the Ukrainian context (Zhurzhenko, 2001).

The importance of family and motherhood as a site of women’s power is also stressed in Ukrainian feminism, distinguishing it from the Western feminist ideal that seeks to liberate women from traditional familial and maternal ties (Zhurzhenko, 2001; Phillips, 2008). Furthermore, “Local activists consider the main source of oppression in their lives to be the state and they view the family as the only site of resistance and source of support that is available to them” (Hrycak, 2009). This has been described as “neo-traditionalism” or, in the specific case of Ukraine, “neo-familism” (Zravomyslova and Temkina, 2005; Phillips, 2008). Justifiably, activists and women more generally, were skeptical of the state’s ability to care for them in post-socialist Ukraine, but the pivot to full free market capitalism that Western supporters were pushing for also proved to be misguided.

“The most salient (and potentially problematic) ideas embedded in the social enterprise strategy include the treatment of the radical free market as a natural solution to citizens’ problems, and a neoliberal vision of minimal state support for social service provision. These freeman’s dismiss certain important legacies of state socialism, particularly the hostile post-Soviet business climate, local definitions of citizenship and citizens’ needs and entitlements, and local gender formations. Overlooking such legacies may hurt Ukrainian NGO activists in the long run, and women especially” (Phillips 2008, 85).

Self-formed civil society organizations were not a high priority for the Ukrainian government in the early transition years. Therefore, the organizations that developed
into effectual and influential groups usually did so with the help of foreign funding and foreign interests that compromised a specifically Ukrainian approach to welfare, inequality, and community support.

What follows is an analysis of NGO development in Ukraine during the first wave of Ukrainian democratization (1991-2004) under the Presidential leadership of Leonid Kravchuk and Leonid Kuchma, and a critical examination of how foreign ideology has stunted the growth of Ukraine’s women’s movement. NGOs as a whole were instrumental in the development not just of early Ukrainian gender activism, but also of other activism in support of marginalized groups, and the further development of Ukrainian civil society. Much of the social activism done via NGOs was done by women who wanted to help people like themselves, such as multi-children families, the elderly, the economically disadvantaged, etc (Phillips, 2005, 2014). Women used social activism as a way to alleviate social and collective ills, and also as a way to heal their personal difficulties.

Sarah Phillips argues that the experiences of the individual and the collective were considered inextricable as a result of the Soviet “socio-centric conceptualization of the self” (Phillips, 2005). Many of the women who led the NGO activism “interpret their needs, interests and identities as civic actors primarily through a discourse of motherhood,” echoing the idea that Ukrainian women derive social and personal strength from their position as maternal caretakers of their nation (Phillips, 2005; Hrycak and Rewakowicz, 2009). Ultimately, most NGOs barely stayed afloat,
and while female leaders achieved some level of personal empowerment, the activism did not “instigate significant social or political change” (Phillips, 2005).

It has also been difficult for women’s rights groups in general to coalesce and form into a cogent political force. The transition from a socialist economy to a capitalist one was marked by “informal mechanisms of social control” as the main structure of political power. In other words, informal relationships, power that is passed from individual to individual, authoritarianism and elite control of administrative resources were and continue to be the norm (Hrycak, 2007). This prevented women, who did not have power in the structure to begin with, from gaining and consolidating it. Hrycak argues that the creation of formal institutions, such as those being implemented by Europeanization projects, will combat this structural issue that is “at the heart of most accounts of post-Soviet political failures” (Hrycak, 2007). It is not yet clear how to most effectively address the structural issue. Possibilities include more government agencies focused on women’s issues or on gender equality, a woman’s political caucus or simply more female representatives in high tiers of government, locally and federally.

Much of the challenge to successful coalition politics that Hrycak describes originates in in the perennial challenges of democratic transition, and, more specifically, the policies of President Kuchma in conjunction with the rise of foreign NGOs. Once Ukrainian independence was achieved, the central goal of many activist groups (Rukh, Hromada, Soiuz, etc.) was gone, and they struggled to channel their organizational power into new and effective political agitation in part because they no
longer had a cohesive mission. Furthermore, the rapid economic decline of the mid 1990s left many activists unable to devote time to the usually unpaid work of political organizing.

This period also ushered in “quasi-governmental groups that purported to be non-governmental organizations but were in reality clients of well-placed patrons” who competed with the women’s organizations that came out of the independence movement. These quasi-governmental groups were allied with centrist pro-presidential parties and mainly operated during elections. Their objective was to “co-opt or divide grassroots networks of women activists” to prevent reform that the government did not favor the establishment (Hrycak 2005, 72). Additionally, foreign funding created new groups at the expense of existing organizations.21

As Hrycak argues:

“This funding bias created pressure to abandon local causes in favor of issues Western donors raised, encouraged the formation of a stratum of local women’s NGOs that viewed other local groups as their clients, and in turn deepened divisions among local organizations and prevented from from developing common agendas” (Hrycak, 2007, p. 218).

The result was that foreign funding increased the overall number of NGOs, but created a hierarchy wherein groups that were funded from outside of Ukraine used the structure and ideology of non-Ukrainian activists, while groups that had emerged out of Rukh and the broader independence movement struggled to remain afloat (Hrycak, 2005).

21 The number of women’s NGOs doubled between 1997 and 2001, although their overall efficacy has been disputed. Additionally, women’s groups make up only 4.1% of Ukrainian NGOs (Phillips, 2008).
Moreover, these “NGO development efforts” centered around teaching activists and organizers how to run an NGO, not necessarily how to most effectively mobilize and bring about the changes their communities and regions need (Phillips, 2008, p. 69). Much of this organizational training was in the form of seminars, lectures and meetings.\textsuperscript{22} Echoing what Hrycak observes about local issues coming at the expense of donor-specified issues, Phillips writes that those “who were tapping into foreign grant sources for their NGO work found themselves scrambling to keep up with donors’ changing priorities, and to reconcile the ‘hot topics’ with their own mission statements,” (Phillips, 2008, p. 69). The challenge of maintaining a clear set of priorities in a rapidly changing political landscape exists in many civil society contexts, especially in transitioning countries. But the specific challenge for Ukraine is the asymmetry between international funding and infrastructure on the one hand, and local issues on the other.

The Kuchma administration and government in general during this period were dismissive of “women’s issues” and the political structure was both highly divisive along party lines and left little room for women to meaningfully participate in politics, either as legislators or as an interest group. Additionally, the Kuchma administration took up the language of the \textit{Berehynia} myth to appeal to women on a superficial level without actually addressing the demands of activists—neither of liberal feminists, nor of those who advocated for the protection of women’s rights as

\textsuperscript{22} Phillips writes “many NGO leaders have become employees of international foundations as trainers and even trainers of trainers,” (Phillips, 2008, p. 69). The women I spoke with, whose experiences I discuss in the second chapter, also described the prevalence and importance of \textit{trenning} (the Ukrainianized pronunciation of ‘training’) now and especially in their early days at their organizations.
mothers (Hrycak, 2005). Many activists felt that the political parties simply pandered to them for votes without the intention of seriously considering the issues they raised, and subsequently parties were not seen as significant vehicles for political change in the eyes of many NGO organizers (Morford, 2007).

There were, however, key legislative markers that did occur during this time period, which provided for the legal protection of many of the rights that activists agitated for—the right to equal economic opportunities, accessible gynecological-obstetric healthcare and political inclusion. But, the challenges of implementation and institutionalization for these legal rights still remain. The Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was ratified by Ukraine in 1980. The United Nations Development Project brought Ukraine into its fold officially in 1999, and in the following year Kuchma signed the UN Millennium Declaration, revealing a 15 year plan for Ukraine’s development goals—the third goal stated was “promoting gender equality and empowering women.” The UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) had two other objectives that I categorize as “women’s issues”—reduction of infant and child mortality, and the improvement of maternal health (goals four and five, respectively).

The Law of Ukraine on the Prevention of Violence in the Family was ratified in 2001, though it was criticized as problematic because it codified the idea that a victim’s “provocative behavior” is what leads to abuse. In 2004, the Parliament passed a decree establishing cooperation in efforts to expand gender equality

23 The 2005 “Gender Equality Law” requires the Cabinet of Ministers to establish a report on the execution of this Convention.
throughout various governmental institutions, and that year also saw the Parliament hold the conference “The Status of Women in Ukraine: Reality and Perspectives.” The discussion at this conference had similar rhetoric to 1995 parliamentary hearings about women’s issues, namely a focus on motherhood, creating an environment in which “women can be women,” and the idea that women are the weaker half and need protection. While this legislative advancement looks promising on paper, the implementation for the policies was not a priority and was underfunded (Morford, 2007). Most Ukrainians, moreover, were unaware of these legislative changes, nor were they aware of decrees signed by President Kuchma that detail the existence of gender inequality in the country.

The UN Millennium Goals are a potent example of (mis)applied imported policy. The goal regarding the promotion of “gender equality” is explicitly part of the effort to improve political and economic parity between men and women, while two other goals address crucial issues that disproportionately affect women, biologically and socially. The appearance of a dichotomy between “political-economic” and “social-biological” is a false one, I argue, and many gender activists also try to push for the population to see the connection between the two. In other words, legislation and institutions that attempt to address only one of these without understanding its relationship to the other one, in the specific Ukrainian context, are likely to be unsuccessful.

24 As I touched on in the introduction, cis women’s social identity (“woman”) is frequently conflated with their biological attributes (“female”). This conflation is not and should not be inevitable, but it is commonplace in Ukraine and elsewhere, so I operate with the belief that “social-biological” is a coherent category of analysis.
The feminization of poverty, for example, is explicitly related to the sociobiological roles that women inhabit in Ukraine: mother, domestic worker, caretaker. Sarah Phillips observes that “donor organizations in Ukraine have devalued the maternalist orientation of the majority of women’s groups […] Donors appear to have a working assumption that a “motherist” or mothers’ rights platform is incompatible with a woman’s rights platform,” which ignores the significant, powerful role that motherhood has in the Ukrainian nation and for individual women (Phillips, 2008, p. 80). This is partially why, I suggest, neoliberal models of feminist “liberation” are logically inadequate or only proximate to the reality in Ukraine. Programs that aim for women to progress only as political-economic subjects (who have a voice in government and a stable income) must also consider the powerful social-biological imperatives that many Ukrainian women have.

**Markers of Inequality**

Before continuing to look at Ukraine’s revolutionary cycles, I include here a discussion of the actual political-economic and social-biological circumstances that Ukrainian women face today. While Ukraine was a Soviet state, women and men were considered citizens of equal social and political standing *a priori*. Of course, they were relegated to different spheres and had different assumed social roles, but

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25 (continuation of the quote) “This view overlooks the political potential of maternalist claims, and the fact that social activism centered on motherhood and a ‘feminine consciousness’ allows women to extend their influence beyond the private life of their families into the economic and political spheres—organizations for Soldiers’ Mothers are a good example of this possibility.”

26 A useful definition for neoliberalism here, is that it “rests on a theory of political economy which promotes markets, enterprise and private property…reduces the role of the public sector and welfare…[and] it is predicated on a rejection of ‘society’ and on a promotion of the individual—most particularly, the entrepreneurial self” (Smith, et al., 2010, p. 2).
they ostensibly had the same rights and opportunities within the communist framework. The normative role assigned to Soviet women was that of mother, worker and active member of society (Zdravomyslova and Temkina, 2005). Ukraine’s quadruple transition from communism to liberal democracy has affected women’s roles profoundly.

Economic liberalization, on its face, created new possibilities for women to participate in the workforce and to have more financial freedom than they did in the Soviet era. In reality, Ukraine experienced a “feminization of poverty,” manifesting itself in growing employment and earnings gaps between men and women. In addition, there is an imbalance between the employment sectors men and women participate in, with women being more likely to work in low-prestige, lower wage occupations and traditionally female-dominated fields such as education, healthcare, social services and unpaid domestic work (World Bank, 2016).27

While these characteristics also applied to Soviet Ukraine, socialism’s end meant “the abandonment of state paternalism and the collapse of the system of social protection,” leaving women vulnerable to the gendered aspects of an already unstable economy (Zhurzhenko 2001, 29). In the post-Soviet period, Ukrainian women experienced segregation in the labor market and gender-based discrimination, both of

27 Wage and employment gaps can be explained in part by women’s choice to stay at home with children, for example, which limits their employment options and wage earning over their lifetimes. However, these gaps are not due to gender disparities in educational achievement, which are negligible in Ukraine (World Bank Report, 2016).
which contributed to feminized poverty\textsuperscript{28} (Grushetsky and Kharchenko, 2009). The resulting economic inequality between men and women was not caused by significant differences in education level (UNICEF Country Profile, 2008). This suggests that the disparity between men and women in the job market is not so much due to systemic inequality of opportunities, but to gender-based discrimination.\textsuperscript{29}

The transition to democracy has similarly ushered in unexpected challenges and even more inequality in the political arena. Soviet policy required at least 30% of parliamentarians to be women, but since the lifting of the quota the number of women in Ukrainian parliament dropped dramatically. In 1990, only 3% of elected parliament members were women and that percentage has not increased above 13% since (UWF Strategy Paper, 2011). Though an official quota for local elections requires 30% of each gender to be on the party ballot lists, it is never enforced and very few regions actually meet this requirement. Female council members are similarly underrepresented at the regional, city and district level. Only settlement and village councils have approximately equal numbers of male and female representatives, echoing the pattern seen in the private sector—the less responsibility and decision-making power a sector has, the more women one will find working in it.

\textsuperscript{28} It is difficult to calculate the statistical disparity between male and female poverty, because the relevant data in Ukraine is collected by household not individual. Looking at households headed by a single person, however, shows that slightly more single-mother homes are below the poverty line than those with single fathers. The biggest discrepancy is between single male pensioners (17.5\%) and single female pensioners (21.3\%) who live in poverty (Gerasymenko, 2008).

\textsuperscript{29} For more on how the economic transition has negatively and uniquely affected men, see Anastasiya Riabchuk’s “Homeless Men and the Crisis of Masculinity in Contemporary Ukraine,” in \textit{Gender, Politics, and Society in Ukraine} (U. of Toronto Press, 2012).
Gender inequality in the categories of labor, governance, and the market are accompanied by the disadvantages women have because of their social and biological roles. Indeed, it is unsurprising that having fewer women in decision-making positions is closely related to the material conditions affecting women not being prioritized. At the same time, the challenges that disproportionately affect women are roadblocks to gaining a decision-making role. These include access to reproductive health and child care, abuse of women and girls, human trafficking, and any other vulnerabilities stemming from women’s status as mothers and the “weaker sex.” Broadly, these fall under the umbrella term “women’s issues,” implying that these are problems women have as a result of what womanhood means in contemporary Ukraine.\(^\text{30}\)

Reproductive health, which covers sexual health, fertility, pregnancy and childbirth, has been steadily improving since the 1990s.\(^\text{31}\) Since 1990, the maternal mortality rate in Ukraine has decreased from 46 to 24 per 100,000 live births.\(^\text{32}\) The rate of unwanted pregnancies and abortions has declined by nearly 70% between 2000 and 2014. Ukraine’s abortion rate remains high—13.9% of pregnancies end in abortion—in comparison with other European nations in part because of Soviet-era

\(^\text{30}\) Another critical element of gender imbalance in Ukraine, that I categorize as being a “women’s issue,” is negative stereotyping in mass media. The shaping of public attitudes towards women plays an important role in how women fare economically, politically and personally. However, the bulk of this thesis focuses on the material reality of women in Ukraine, and a full analysis of public media discourse is outside of its scope.

\(^\text{31}\) Gender discrepancies in healthcare outcomes affect men most notably in the ten year gap between male and female life expectancies (66 and 76, respectively, as of 2013). This is caused by a variety of factors including a higher propensity for alcohol and tobacco consumption among men, higher work-related stress levels due to men’s “breadwinner” roles in the family, and more risk-prone behavior (World Bank, 2016).

\(^\text{32}\) Compare with the EU’s average of 7 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births (World Bank, 2016).
abortion policy (World Bank, 2016). While the improvement of these indicators is a good sign, pregnant women’s healthcare still needs pressing attention: disease and anemia during pregnancy, infertility, and newborn healthcare are critical issues. The improvements in reproductive health can be partially attributed to the State Program on the Reproductive Health of the Nation until 2015. Through this program, 98 percent of pregnant women were covered with antenatal care in Ukraine (MoH Center of Medical Statistics, 2014).

Violence against women and children, a term which usually refers to domestic abuse and trafficking but now extends to mean the violence of Ukraine’s eastern war zone, remains a serious problem in contemporary Ukraine. Laws against the abuse of women and children are codified in two international agreements: The Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (2010) and the Convention of Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, otherwise known as the Istanbul Convention (2011, not yet ratified) (Koriukalov, 2014). Domestically, Ukraine was the first post-Soviet state to pass a “Law on Prevention of Violence” (2001), which has since been developed to provide support for survivors of abuse through governmental safety nets and NGO assistance (World Bank, 2016).

While violence has an impact on both men and women, women are disproportionately affected, especially in situations of intimate partner abuse. Women make up 90.6% of survivors of rape, 73.5% of domestic violence survivors and 76.5% of human trafficking victims (World Bank, 2016). Of the different types of
violence against women, domestic abuse by a husband or partner is the most prevalent with 24.4% of women who had been or are married reported emotional, physical, or sexual abuse according to a 2014 survey. The rates of spousal abuse have decreased since 2007, except for physical violence in particular, which has increased (UNFPA Report, 2014).

Women’s status in society and stereotypes about women’s role in the family contribute to the prevalence of violence against women, especially because domestic abuse is considered by many to be an “in the family” issue, rather than a problem that requires public or governmental intervention. Furthermore, survivors of abuse are stigmatized and frequently blamed for “provoking” their abusers. This societal attitude makes many women (and men) unlikely to report abuse or seek help. And, even when they decide to seek government assistance, they unfortunately find inadequate institutions that cannot effectively address their needs (“Gender-based violence” report, 2015)

Human trafficking for labor and sexual exploitation is another major issue, and is connected to Ukraine’s economic instability. The vulnerabilities that women face in the labor market in general make them more susceptible to trafficking. This issue has only been exacerbated by the conflict in the Donbas, as the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) grows, making more people vulnerable. The Ukrainian government does not meet minimum standards for combating trafficking, according to the U.S. Department of State, but it is making structural changes to how it addresses the problem (World Bank, 2016).
In Ukraine, women’s issues, particularly healthcare and occupational or political gender equality, are inextricable from one another. Ukrainian policy is generous with maternity leave, guaranteeing a minimum of 70 days’ paid leave before birth and 56 days after. A parent can also take up to three years’ leave with the assurance that they will be reinstated in an equivalent position upon their return to work (World Bank, 2016). In practice however, employers may be unlikely to hire young women out of the belief that they will soon become pregnant and become a financial drain for the company (despite laws prohibiting this type of discrimination). A woman’s career advancement can stall or halt completely after a period of maternity leave, especially in industries that are rapidly changing. And social attitudes held by men and women dictate that women should stay in the home to care for children (‘Women’s participation in labor’ report, 2012).

It is undeniable that a mother’s close care is incredibly beneficial for a child. It is also the case that many companies, especially smaller businesses, cannot afford to pay for the maternity leave of many employees and therefore choose to hire fewer young women and fewer women overall. As elsewhere, many women in Ukraine find it difficult to balance the financial benefits and personal satisfaction that come from a career with the desire to raise children. While there is no simple solution for this perennial complexity in women’s lives, any political or social effort to address this issue must take into account the specific attributes of Ukraine today—a negative birth rate, feminized poverty, positive social attitudes towards motherhood, and the vulnerability of women and children in general. The relationship between bearing
children and remaining in the work force reveals a larger pattern of women continuously making sacrifices in order to fully participate in Ukrainian political, economic, and social life.

**The Orange Revolution and the Yushchenko Presidency (2004-2010)**

President Viktor Yushchenko was inaugurated in January of 2005, following months of protests in Ukraine’s capital, Kyiv. For the people, Yushchenko symbolized a fresh start for Ukraine, one that would be slightly less mired by political favoritism and illegitimate authority (Demes and Forbrig, 2006). The people had stood up to corruption, voter intimidation and the illegitimate election of Yushchenko’s opponent, Viktor Yanukovych.

Women played an important role in the Orange Revolution but their status was mainly relegated to “caretakers” and Berehyni of the men who acted upon their civic and political agency and protested (Hrycak, 2007). Yushchenko praised women for their supporting role and his campaign promises reflected this attitude. They were not explicitly in the service of women’s rights, nor did they recognize that women’s position in society is one of subjugation. Rather, Yushchenko promised simply to raise the standard of living for all Ukrainians. At the same time, his work on European integration dating back to his first term as Prime Minister (1999) paved the way for important women’s rights work. Yushchenko’s efforts to begin fulfilling European requirements for gender equality allowed women’s groups to leverage the political process for their needs and goals. More generally, there is a correlation
between a country’s desire to adopt Western European norms and increased women’s representation in politics (Hrycak, 2007).

The Orange Revolution, even if it did not have an explicit feminist agenda, nevertheless marked a new era in Ukrainian history. It was the “culmination of a period of political experimentation” (Hrycak, 2007), in which nascent democratic Ukrainian political parties were discovering how best to coalesce and mobilize support. The Orange Revolution was also “an event that made manifest a new political approach to nation-building” (Zhurzhenko, 2012). This rhetoric was also used during the 2004 Orange Revolution, in which women engaged in “relational feminism” by “mothering those who formed the vanguard of the protests” (Hrycak, 2007). Gender expert Mariya Dmitriyeva noted that this led to the lack of recognition because women are not thanked for the “service work they do in...the domestic sphere” and so their contributions to the Maidan were taken for granted (Phillips, 2014).

The discourse around the Orange Revolution and Yushchenko’s early presidency used metaphors such as the “birth of the Ukrainian nation” and Yushchenko’s familial aura (as the father of three children) made their way into political rhetoric and symbolism. The president encouraged women to have children by promising state supported child care and improvements in education, without going beyond a superficial understanding of other women’s issues such as domestic violence and economic insecurity (Zhurzhenko, 2012). His rhetoric rested on appeals to a traditional Ukrainian family structure and values, neatly combining nationalism...
with neo-traditionalism. In general, Yushchenko’s policies were “liberal regarding the reproductive rights of women” but did not help women combine career and child-rearing or alleviate economic instability (Zhurzhenko, 2012).

Yushchenko can be described as a neo-traditionalist in terms of his approach to women’s roles, but nevertheless a number of significant laws and policies were passed in the name of gender equality during his tenure as president. In 2005, the Verkhovna Rada (Parliament) approved the “Law of Ukraine on Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities of Women and Men” (Ukr. Women’s Fund Strategy Paper, 2011). Among other rights, this law stipulates that electoral blocs “shall provide for the representation of women and men,” though it does not describe how parties should ensure this, nor does it provide for legal enforcement of any quota. The Verkhovna Rada also passed amendments meant to improve the Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence (2001) in 2008, as well as the State Program on Strengthening Gender Equality in Ukrainian Society Until 2010 in 2006.

The “Law on Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men” (Gender Equality Law) created the provisions for fundamental equality of rights for men and women. It also stipulated that Ukrainian law will contain “temporary measures” aimed at improving the gender imbalance regarding social, economic and political opportunities. It also codifies the fact that if Ukrainian Parliament approves of Ukraine’s participation in an international treaty, the laws of said treaty would override the Gender Equality Law (Article 2). The law vests the following institutions with the authority to enforce gender equality efforts: the
Ukrainian Parliament, the Commissioner of Human Rights, the Cabinet of Ministers, a specially authorized executive body dedicated to carrying out the provisions of this law, individual executive bodies and local authorities, and associations of citizens. Other organizations, such as NGOs, enterprises and others are not responsible for enforcement but for the “facilitation” of the law (Article 7). While it is admirable that the legislators sought to include as many different groups as possible in the effort to enforce this law, I argue that it has created a situation in which everyone assumes the others are taking responsibility. One example of this is that in 2009, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women recommended that the text of CEDAW be distributed, as part of the State Program on Ensuring Gender Equality in Ukrainian Society, but it never was. It is unknown who, in particular, was responsible for the text’s dissemination but the incident reveals the “shortage of political will or little attention paid” to the practical implementation of gender legislation and its provisions (Koriukalov, 2014, p. 37).

Despite significant legislative advances in the name of gender equality and women’s rights, much of the progress remains in name only. There is a legal and normative basis for the prevention of gender discrimination and for representation of women in political office, but there are few institutional provisions for the implementation and enforcement of these ideals (Strategy Paper, 2011). The number of women in political parties and who hold political office is only one dimension of national gender equality, but analyzing it can offer insight into general trends in
Ukraine. It is especially salient considering political representation is an important marker for European Union standards of gender equality.

Historically, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic had a quota of 30% for female deputies in the Verkhovna Rada. In the first election in 1990, only 3% of deputies were women. Since then the proportion has risen marginally though steadily, and has never gone above 12.1%—in 2012 (World Bank, 2016). Ukraine is 115th out of 137 countries in terms of the percentage of female parliament members. As of 2011, Ukraine had no women as heads of regional councils, regional capital city councils, regional administration, or among chairpersons in the Verkhovna Rada or in the Cabinet of Ministers. However, in 2016 a woman was appointed to be the Deputy Minister of the Interior (Sularz, 2017).

The lower the status of the public office, the higher the proportion of women working in that sector. Women make up the majority of the civil service, especially at lower levels, and make up a large portion of lower levels of government such as township, village and city councils (Strategy Paper, 2011). What explains the gap between the legal promise of representation and the lack of actual women in office and on party tickets? The prevailing attitude is that “positions are given to the most qualified candidates,” though both men and women support having more women in office. Additionally, there is not a clear path through the ranks from lower-status political office to more prestigious, national roles. Women, even when qualified, slip through the cracks. Finally, “women’s representation in elected office is currently not considered a high priority for reforms in the field of political parties and
elections” (Strategy Paper, pg. 12). Targeting corruption and experimenting with political process have been priorities of Ukrainian political parties, and women’s representation has not been a main concern.

**Yanukovych Returns (2010-2014)**

Yushchenko’s ascent to the seat of presidential power was fueled by popular support and legitimacy. His successor, Viktor Yanukovych, would eventually exit the office on opposite terms. But the beginning of Yanukovych’s presidential term was free of controversy or protest. From the start, it was clear that his general understanding of Ukraine and its future were substantially different from his predecessor’s. In a statement in January 2010, Yanukovych said that Ukraine should be “a neutral state” (Kyiv Post, 2010), by which he meant the continued pursuit of European integration, but at the same time considering strategic alliances with Russia.

Taras Kuzio characterizes Yanukovych as “eastern Slavic” in his political orientation and view of Ukraine (in contrast to Yushchenko being “ethnic Ukrainian”). The “eastern Slavic” politician’s ideas are strongly rooted in patrimonial paternalism and are correlated with lower support for democratic and market economic reforms, all of which can be read as vestiges of the Soviet system. These values are borne out in Yanukovych’s reversal and marginalization of parts of Yushchenko’s political legacy. Yanukovych was strongly concerned with increasing the Russian language’s importance, downplaying the Holodomor (Ukrainian genocide), narrativizing World War II as the Great Patriotic War, diminishing the significance of the Orange Revolution, and reviving Soviet-style anti-nationalism and
anti-Americanism (Kuzio, 2012, p. 30). Because of the strong relationship in Ukraine between the desire to join the European Union and efforts in gender policy reform, the fact that Yanukovych was ambivalent about the EU indicates a likely ambivalence about the political pursuit of gender equality.

Indeed, whereas Yushchenko can be criticized for making too much of women in supporting roles during the Orange Revolution and failing to recognize them as a substantial political force, Yanukovych’s attitudes towards women are dismissive at best and disrespectful at worst. Yanukovych has stated that one of Ukraine’s most pressing issues in terms of the Millennium Development Goals is to fix the gender wage gap (RBC Ukraine, 2013). However, when his opponent for the presidential race Yulia Tymoshenko requested to hold a debate, he refused with the argument that she should “fulfill her feminine whims not in office, but in the kitchen” (Radio Svoboda, 2010). And, when touting the benefits of investing in Ukraine to foreign developers, he reportedly said that “You should see Ukraine with your own eyes. When the weather gets warmer, and trees are blooming, and women start undressing —you’ll see real beauty, it’s lovely” (UNIAN, 2011). There was intense backlash for both of these statements, especially from women’s rights activists. Even if the President of Ukraine thought they were appropriate, the political climate was such that the remarks were considered outside the norm.

The line Yanukovych crossed which proved unforgivable was refusing to sign an association agreement between Ukraine and the European Union in November 2013. A wave of protests formed into the Euromaidan movement and months of
intense, sometimes fatal, activism resulted in Yanukovych fleeing from office and an agitation of the Ukrainian political system even more transformative than the Orange Revolution.

The role of women in the Euromaidan movement will be examined in detail in chapters two and three, but for the present moment, it is worth noting that women took active leadership roles and participated in nearly every aspect of the movement, even if their involvement was underreported (Martsenyuk, 2015). Additionally, both men and women cited a desire for better quality of life and the feeling that their civic rights had been abused by the Yanukovych administration as their primary reasons for joining the movement (Martsenyuk and Onuch, 2014). The Euromaidan signified that Yanukovych’s turn away from EU integration was unacceptable to a critical mass of Ukrainians.

**The Maidan Revolution and the Poroshenko Period (2014-present)**

The rhetoric of activism as motherhood was seen most recently in the Maidan movement of 2014. Though not a feminist movement, women actively supported and participated in the protests. Even though they contributed significantly, both in traditionally maternal or feminine ways such as cooking and sheltering protestors, but also by building, fighting, and performing other masculine tasks, they were not thanked or recognized (Phillips, 2014). The discourse of “women as mothers who symbolically and biologically reproduce the nation” existed during the protests (Phillips, 2014).
The Maidan protests also produced several women’s militias, such as the Olha Kobylianska Women’s Squad. Leader of the OKWS, Olena Shevchenko, commented that while many Ukrainian women still feel alienated from “feminism,” participation in the protests led them to feel that they will not be passive observers in the revolution, and that they cannot abide by the gendered unfairness they experience (Phillips, 2014). Women took active leadership roles and participated in nearly every aspect of the movement, even if their involvement was underreported (Martsenyuk, 2015). Additionally, both men and women cited a desire for better quality of life and the feeling that their civic rights had been abused by the Yanukovych administration as their primary reasons for joining the movement (Martsenyuk & Onuch, 2014). The Euromaidan—proliferated with language about “European values”—signified that Yanukovych’s turn away from EU integration was unacceptable to a critical mass of Ukrainians (Channell-Justice, 2017).

Petro Poroshenko inherited the Ukrainian presidency when it was arguably in its lowest state. Following Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the emergence of a war in Ukraine’s eastern Donbas region, Poroshenko was sworn in on May 25, 2014. Unlike any previous Ukrainian president, Poroshenko’s political priorities are starkly clear: end a war and unite the country. Naturally, issues of gender inequality seem to fall away. As Kharkiv activist Anna Sharygina said:

“Here is our constant hierarchy. Something always has to be first, and then the rest, and still the ‘first’ issue doesn’t get solved. There was an economic crisis—women’s issues—not the time for them, presidents changed—not the time, the first, second revolution, war—there is always a reason to push away important questions.”

However, in keeping with Poroshenko’s pro-European attitudes, some legislation has
been passed towards improving the status of women in politics and society. During a speech to the UN General Assembly, Poroshenko stated that Ukraine is working towards the fulfillment of the Millennium Development goals, one of which is improved gender equality.

In 2015, a report was issued by the UNDP with the assistance of over 200 Ukrainian experts in various fields that detailed the degree to which the country met these goals.\textsuperscript{33} As discussed earlier in this chapter, the MDGs had three objectives that I include in my analysis of gender and women’s issues. The first of these is the goal of promoting gender equality, and the report identifies two targets for Ukraine: ensure a gender ratio of no less than 30-70 in representative bodies, and decrease the gender wage gap by half. These are further broken down and the report explains the markers by which statisticians have been monitoring the achievement of these goals. In the last 15 years, both of these gender equality targets have increased steadily,\textsuperscript{34} albeit with a low level of improvement overall. The most improved sub-target was the ratio of women to men in higher-level civil service positions.

Goals four and five, reducing infant mortality and improving maternal health, have also been improving steadily, though not to the degree envisioned in the MDGs as they were set down in 2000. While it is crucial to understand and improve the institutions around these specific women’s health issues, I will focus on the report’s analysis of political-economic gender equality. This is only because many of the


\textsuperscript{34} Except for the gender wage disparity, which actually worsened down to 68.6% during the early 2000s before improving over the next decade. In 2014, women made an average of 76.3% of men’s average salary (World Bank, 2016).
healthcare provisions in Ukraine that fail women and children fail men as well, and women happen to be more vulnerable to the systemic inadequacy of the healthcare system. However, the dynamics that explain why the efforts to improve equality in representation and remuneration have underperformed are more instructive for understanding a broad spectrum of gender-related issues in Ukraine.

The report’s findings provide insight into which challenges in the realm of gender equality have been consistent since the early 1990s, and which challenges have cropped up more recently as the Ukrainian political landscape shifts. The report identifies the following obstacles to economic-political gender equality: the political transformations regarding gender are “unsustainable,” statistical approaches need to be more regularly revised to address changing knowledge of how gender inequality functions, the insufficient level of “gender culture” in broader Ukrainian society, the lack of official support for those who work while having family responsibilities and, closely related, the “decline of the social welfare infrastructure.”

The status of Ukraine’s civil society is explicitly addressed as the authors explain why this decade and a half of political transformation has been unsustainable: The “implementation of the necessary measures depends heavily on support from international donors, whereas practical implementation of gender initiatives greatly relies on NGOs and civil society activists” but “the level of involvement of civil society representatives in the development of gender policy remains rather low” (MDG Report, 2015, p. 49). In other words, the network of institutions and organizations that has developed to address issues of gender inequality and women’s
rights is in a precarious position due to its reliance on foreign funding. The members of this network are also prevented from being as effective as they could be by their absence from political decision-making.

As I argue, while the influx of foreign funding and foreign infrastructure in Ukraine’s NGO-sphere has been significant and necessary, it has also resulted in the asymmetrical development of gender-related activist organizations, political or legislative considerations of gender, and the broader public’s conceptualization of gender. Ukraine is thus left with a potentially robust and contextually specific civil society that has been stymied by, on the one hand, a foreign funding structure and its accompanying agendas, and on the other hand, a government that does not have the channels through which civil society can be effectual on a policy level. The gender-oriented civil society is frequently irrelevant to the public for whom the organizers’ approaches are not always coherent, and frequently irrelevant to politics because they are a low priority.

The report’s suggestions for tackling such challenges are mostly pragmatic but they emphasize the importance of changing the population’s gender consciousness and, more importantly, cultivate women’s sense of themselves as political subjects with rights and agency. The authors propose “fostering a responsible civic stance; overcoming a general paternalistic mindset in society; realizing women’s own rights and opportunities; bolstering their self-esteem; building their confidence in the labour market; and widening the choice of life strategies in society,” (MDG Report, 2015, p. 62)

35 The term “network” here is being used somewhat interchangeably with a women’s “movement.” However, “network” has a more narrower definition that is limited to NGOs (local and foreign), government institutions, and scholars, scientists and statistical experts.
Rhetorically, these points are in line with the general approach of Western liberal feminism that centers individual women and the validity of their choices.

In working with the EU, Ukraine has a number of ongoing projects that are to be developed between 2014 and 2017. None of them explicitly center women’s equality groups, but there are projects geared toward helping young mothers, the development of child support centers, and more broad language describing support for “vulnerable” groups, which could, ostensibly, include women. However, the European Union’s political and legal mandates are not always applied correctly in Ukrainian law, often to the detriment of gender equality efforts.

A good example is the EU’s requirement of a legal provision (in a directive from 2000), which stipulates that in cases of discrimination, when there is enough evidence to suggest that discrimination directly or indirectly took place, the burden of proof is on the respondent (or defendant) to prove that the discrimination did not take place (Malyuta, 2016). This is in line with contemporary Western discourse, especially in discrimination and sexual assault cases because of their associated inherent power imbalance. The EU’s approach takes into consideration this imbalance and believes that a trial or proceeding would be more fair if the defendant were tasked with proving themselves innocent.  

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36 This particular discourse has the same tone and logic as the legislative wording of the law on the 2001 Prevention of Violence in the Family (mentioned earlier). Namely, both laws assert that the victims of abuse and discrimination should be subject to the same kind of judicial and social interrogation as the defendant. Furthermore, I argue that this approach reflects a general attitude towards survivors of abuse (who are usually women both statistically and in common conceptions of abuse), which is that they are likely lying, likely exaggerating and that they somehow have something to gain from making an accusation.
When implementing this legal framework in May 2014, Ukrainian Parliament changed the wording to be: "[i]n discrimination cases the plaintiff must bring actual data confirming that discrimination took place. If such data are brought, the burden to prove their absence lies with the defendant" (Malyuta, 2016). This amendment, in almost direct contradiction to the EU directive, puts the burden of proof on plaintiff to show that discrimination happened. Giving a defendant the “burden to prove the absence” of evidence is a strange and unworkable formulation, in my view. More importantly, the requirement that a plaintiff provide actual data before a conflict moves to mediation or trial makes it much more difficult to make a case. The EU responded plainly, saying that this legislation is “against directives.” Ultimately, the Parliament members’ choice to include their wording means that the final law “lacks normative value” and its contradiction to EU standards makes Ukrainian law less coherent and robust, even if the issue involved is quite small.

In December 2010, under Yushchenko, the Ministry for Family, Youth and Sport was reorganized and the “Family” was dropped with the goal of streamlining administration. Now there is no single state institution in charge of family and gender policy (Ukr. Women’s Fund Strategy Paper, 2011). “Gender Policy” and “Gender Research” are overseen by the Ministry of Social Policy, which is in charge of over 30 other government programs and policy umbrellas. As discussed previously, issues of gender equality tend to be overlooked and inadequately dealt with when there is not enough institutional support. In November 2015, an official order declared the need to solidify the Interagency Council on Questions of Family, Gender Equality,
Demographic Development, Prevention of Domestic Abuse and Human Trafficking. The task for carrying out this order was delegated to the head of the Ministry on European Integration.

In August of 2016, the government published an Explanatory Note “On Approval of the Conception of the State Program of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Men and Women for the Period Until 2021.” This note focuses on Ukraine’s Goals of Sustainable Development, which is part of UN General Assembly policy, and outlines 17 goals and 169 concrete tasks. Some of these goals include battling with stereotypes, domestic abuse and violence against women, improving women’s access to legal justice, and improving gender equality at all levels of government.

Legislation requiring a 30 percent minimum of female candidates on party lists was passed after “a long-lasting campaign” and has been in place for one election (MDG Report, 2015). The law, which applies to local elections in cities with over 90,000 people, was in place for the October 2015 elections. The quota is not mandatory, nor are there provisions for its enforcement or implementation. Therefore, no parties had 30% of female candidates and those that fared best had roughly half of that minimum, but this is still an improvement over earlier levels of female participation.37

Finally, the Ukrainian government’s Action Plan for 2016 (public on government website) includes no mention of women or gender equality in its 260 pages. “Gender” is used once to note policy regarding gender-based violence in war.

The document is fairly comprehensive but does not address “women” as a political and social group once. Though there are plans in place for issues that involve women, such as disability rights, working wages, education and pensions, there are no proposals for dealing with gender inequality in a systemic way.

**Conclusion**

It is undeniable the the Ukrainian government, through all of its revolutionary turns, has been committed to establishing itself as a just modern state when it comes to gender equality and sensitivity to women’s needs. Unfortunately, the transition from that ideal—and its legislative formulation—to its actual practice has only been partially successful. This chapter has provided the context in which gender-oriented NGOs in Ukraine developed, and the ambivalent history of foreign intervention that accompanied that process. Ukraine has undergone constant political re-configuration, following popular uprising after popular uprising, against the backdrop of a 26 year, and counting, transition to liberal democracy. The social and political flux has made it challenging for women’s organizations to remain a priority for the state. However, Ukraine’s rather distinct tradition of cyclical upheaval presents radical opportunities for feminist activists, because whenever a democratic movement arises in an attempt to steer the country in a particular direction, they can make their voices a part of the conversation.
Chapter Two—“A System of Values”

Introduction

This chapter is an analysis of three specific organizations (Vinnytsia’s “Open Society,” VNTU Gender Center, and the Kharkiv Gender Museum). I conducted interviews with a representative of each organization in the summer of 2016. Here, I explore my conversations with the women who are immersed in the work of theorizing, executing, and re-imagining Ukrainian gender activism. The chapter begins, however, with a discussion of what an “indigenous” or autochthonous Ukrainian “feminism” or women’s movement might look like. I pair this discussion with my interview material because the former is the most theoretical component of this thesis, and the latter reveals a messy and complicated reality—they complement each other well.

In my interview evaluation, I consider several questions: what challenges do Ukrainian gender equality activists face? How do they navigate these challenges? What are their approaches to “gender equality” and what frameworks (legal, 

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38 I submitted my interview proposal to Wesleyan’s Internal Review Board in the Spring of 2016, and it was approved without the need for a full IRB evaluation.

39 I use “indigenous” throughout the thesis, not as a reference to Ukrainian ethnicity, but as a category of Ukrainian history, culture, philosophy and political development. Ukraine’s history is undoubtedly complex and intertwines with the histories of the Polish, Crimean Tatar, Russian, Jewish, and other ethnic groups who lived and live on Ukrainian territory. The intricacies grow when one considers the immense diversity of “ethnic Ukrainian” groups as well. For this reason it is an imperfect term. “Autochthony” is another possibility, and it refers to “the proclaimed ‘original’ link between individual, territory and group,” as a mode of legitimacy for self-determined rule (Zenker, 2011). For the purposes of my analysis, it is important that the definition for “indigenous” or “autochthonous” centers the people actively participating in Ukrainian democracy today—in the revolutions, at the voting booth, and in contributing to their communities. This places Ukrainian “indigeneity” apart from ethnicity, and in opposition to the way Western intervention operates (through financial investment that sometimes ignores local contexts and dominates organizations) and in opposition to the way Soviet rule operated (by creating and controlling discourse and policy, sometimes ignoring local contexts).
institutional, theoretical) do they rely on? I also try to interpret the relationship
between “imported” ideology and “indigenous” ideology—where do these activists
draw their understanding of gender from? What theories or conceptualizations do they
draw on, and how do they apply them to the practical work they do? Furthermore,
how have these theories developed from the previous generation of civil society
organizations and feminist types?

Finally, because theoretical progress does not always translate to material
circumstances, I consider the efficacy of the groups’ work. Which actions are
effective? Are they effective because of funding and resources, the precise
applicability of the theoretical precepts, or some other reason? Are the challenges
primarily practical or theoretical? I argue that while many of the roadblocks that these
organizations have are funding and resource issues, the most fundamental challenge is
changing Ukrainian sociopolitical consciousness. I analyze how these organizations
incorporate imported foreign gender equality theories into their work and whether or
not it results in effective policy and activism.

I am interested in the tension between the “universal” and the “particular”—
concepts that at times oppose each other, and at times align perfectly. In this context,
“universal” is in reference to the promotion of the dominant liberal human rights
paradigm as “universally applicable.” Building from that, I interpret the proliferation
of specific liberal values and norms (i.e. gender policy and discourse) as also being
marketed as “universal.” The “particular,” then, refers to the specificities of Ukraine’s
culture, history, and political imagination. While sometimes the Ukrainian context
and the global discourse agree (such as on the need to close the gender wage gap),
other times there is friction (between the austerity measures conditional to IMF loans
and the Ukrainian people’s historical dependence on social spending and welfare, for
example (Channell-Justice, 2017)). I consider the oscillation between the “universal”
and the “particular” at the theoretical, political and personal levels in this chapter.

**Conjecture on the Limits of “Universality”**

*Europe’s Role in the Normative Construction of Ukrainian Gender Policy—*

This section explains the theoretical basis of “liberal Western feminism,”
especially the ways in which it underpins the EU legislation and UN Millennium
Development Goals that Ukraine has adopted, and the ideology used by foreign-
 funded NGOs in Ukraine. Then, I explore the possibilities of a potential “indigenous
Ukrainian feminism” by using Ukrainian scholars’ work and my own theoretical
consideration.

Liberal feminism is based on individuality and the idea that if women are
given the freedom of choice, they will be able to act in their own best interests.
Society’s formal and informal restrictions on women’s choices prevent them from
participating fully in politics and society. When these restrictions are lifted, through
legal, political and social change, women will be liberated. Liberal feminism
considers female liberation and gender equality to be the natural outcome of free
choice for women.

Critiques of liberal feminism generally center on the fact that the focus on one
system of oppression (patriarchy) prevents a focus on other oppressive systems such
as capitalism, racism, colonialism, etc. Essentially, liberal feminism pushes for women to be able to make decisions about, and participate in their sociopolitical worlds to the same degree that men do, without necessarily dismantling oppressive power structures. Before considering alternatives, one must understand how liberal feminism theoretically justifies the policies of the EU-Ukraine association agreement requirements, UN Development goals, and foreign-funded NGO policy. Here I discuss the relationship between liberal feminism and EU gender policy, and hypothesize about the effect that the EU’s understanding of gender and women’s issues has had on Ukrainian politics.

The EU’s discourse and policy have shifted over the decades from a “Women in Development” (WID) approach to a “Gender and Development” (GAD) approach. The former treated “women’s issues” with separately targeted programs and was criticized for not addressing gender inequality in a systemic way (Debusscher, 2011). However, the European Union also reinforces a “Europeanness” in their gender policies that ties the needs of their internal agenda with their external policy demands (Debusscher, 2011). The current dominant gender policy designation is “gender mainstreaming,” which, according to the Council of Europe, means the “(re)organization, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy-making,” (Debusscher, 2011, p. 39).

40 Severe critiques of liberal feminism, such as this one, exist in the West as well. Liberal feminism has been rightly condemned for its focus on white, middle class, heterosexual women and for its inability to accommodate the intersections of oppression that women of color, impoverished women and members of the LGBTQ community face (Tong, 2009).
The EU has been criticized for developing “gender mainstreaming” policies only when it is economically beneficial—in other words, for viewing women as untapped human capital. For example, gender is not a priority in EU education and employment programs aimed at the Eastern European Neighborhood because the equality between men and women in these sectors nearly matches the markers in the EU. However, upon closer inspection the picture in Eastern Europe shows “merely a formal equality and not a substantial one,” (Debusscher, 2011). The European policy is market-oriented and therefore a high female participation rate in the job market is seen as a net good, while the “significant vertical and horizontal segregation” by gender in the Eastern European labor market is ignored (Debusscher, 2011).

The European Union has also been criticized for using its liberal gender policy as a way to reinforce its “image in the world as a force for goodness in international society,” (Debusscher, 2011). The association of liberal European values with moral “goodness” creates tension when these values’ “universality” does not map onto a specific cultural circumstance. Is a state or organization “bad” when it does not follow a guideline laid out by hegemonic Western European discourse? The question is not a trivial one.

An important locus of tension between the “universal” and the “particular” in Ukraine is motherhood and its associated care work, burdens and career complications. Greek scholar Marta Stratigaki argues that, within the European context, the concept of “reconciling work and family” shifted from being a feminist, labor-sharing goal to a “market oriented objective” that focuses on creating flexible
employment options, adequate maternity leave etc. This “reconciliation” can go two ways, essentially: it can be a framework for genuinely interrogating the gendered social relations that make up the matrix of “family, state, and market,” and for completely re-configuring these relations; or it can produce surface-level solutions that keep the burden of “reconciliation” on women, and still stress getting women into the workforce because it is economically beneficial.

Stratigaki describes the gradual shift from the former to the latter as a “cooptation” of this concept’s original intentions and meaning to make it useful for the EU’s current political and economic agenda (Stratigaki, 2004).

"Cooptation undermines gender equality in two ways. First, transforming the meanings of a concept allows for a gradual and largely unnoticed deterioration of its policy impact on producing gender equality. Second, cooptation works against mobilization and pressure by interested parties and individuals by using the original as well as the transformed concept as an alibi. It is difficult to mobilize against a claim that appears to be one’s ‘own’ even if it is no longer used to mean what one intended” (Stratigaki, 2004, p. 36)

Had the “reconciliation of work and family” been approached in a more radical way from the very beginning, Ukrainian policy makers and people might have been able to genuinely interrogate the relationships between gender, the labor market and domestic work and childcare. From there, it is possible to reconfigure these relationships in a way that is more fair, and improves conditions for women. Today’s formulation of the EU policy is a market-oriented strategy that does not perfectly map onto Ukraine’s specific history of communal labor, the existence of an informal
market, as well as the country’s demographic crisis and the urgency of motherhood. Furthermore, it has lost its bite as a policy that should interrogate, at a foundational level, the inequalities in male-female spousal or domestic relationships.

Furthermore, Stratigaki’s definition of cooptation in the context of internal EU politics is an effective analogy for how “feminist” concepts from EU policy have affected Ukrainian activism. It is indeed a challenge for Ukrainian organizers, activists and scholars to criticize or question Ukrainian gender policy when the government seems to be following the liberal feminist EU guidelines on paper. However, the transformative potential of the original feminist concept is watered down during the EU cooptation process that Stratigaki outlines, and further disintegrates when the Ukrainian policies it guides are not implemented or enforced. Ukrainian activists are left with a mis-matched policy whose execution is patchy, and a government whose defense is “this is the legislation you wanted.” The EU’s slow, bureaucratic and consensus-based politics means that by the time certain legislation begins to affect states on its outskirts, like Ukraine, the concepts that the laws are based in either no longer correctly apply, or never did. Yet as Stratigaki points out, activists may feel forced to interpret this legislation as their “own,” and to help implement it even if they critique its suitability for Ukraine.

“Gender mainstreaming,” while imperfect, is a thoughtful approach that acknowledges that the cultures within the EU’s purview have varying conceptions of the differences between men and women. In order to address this variability in a

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41 The informal or “gray” market included the trade of goods and services outside of the formal economy during stretches of the Soviet and post-Soviet period when the official currency was not a viable way to purchase many items.
single approach, “mainstreaming policies are those which respect and respond to
differences, rather than seeking to assist women to fit into male institutions and
cultures by becoming more like men,” (Crespi, 2009, p. 171). No matter what a
society’s exact categorization of male and female attributes are, gender
mainstreaming is meant to accept that there are differences between men and women
and proceed from there to equality. The reality of how gender mainstreaming is
implemented, however, is understandably inconsistent.

Italian scholar Isabella Crespi describes “three conceptualizations of equal
opportunity: tinkering, tailoring, and transforming,” (Crespi, 2009). “Tinkering”
is “providing a sound legal base with adequate resources to ensure law enforcement,”
which can be limited in its effectiveness but does influence policy and actual
circumstances. “Tailoring” is supplementing legislation with special programs and
other measures that help with the specific “women’s issues” that prevent women from
accessing economic and political opportunities (i.e. child care policies, the
neoliberal “family and work reconciliation” discussed previously, etc.)
“Transforming...involves a paradigm shift” that is argues that access to educational,
employment, and other opportunities “should not be enhanced or restricted by
membership of one group or another," (Crespi, 2009).

It is evident, from the history provided in Chapter One, that Ukraine has made
progress in terms of “tinkering” and “tailoring,” as Crespi puts it, the country’s
approach to gender. Certainly there is a solid, liberal framework for gender equality in
Ukraine’s statutes, and there are affirmative programs that address the material and

social hurdles women face. Where possible, NGOs and local groups supplement the
government in implementing policy or educating the community, as an additional way
of “tailoring” Ukraine’s gender politics.

But, I argue, the “transformative” potential of gender policy and discourse in
Ukraine has been somewhat thwarted. Of course, the pattern of choosing patchwork
solutions over more comprehensive, transformative ones applies to much of how the
Ukrainian state has addressed the problems ushered in by the transition from single-
party state socialism to a democratic market economy. Polish scholar Sebastian
Plociennik’s assessment is that “Ukraine has squandered a lot of time since 1989 on
inefficient experiments, re-making its economic system into a patchwork of neoliberal
market institutions amid a Soviet-like state apparatus” (Plociennik, 2015, p. 3).

The reason why Ukrainian gender policies, in particular, have not been
revolutionary is that “tinkering” and “tailoring” are the easiest and fastest to do when
there are more urgent issues to focus on. On the list of Ukrainian political priorities, it
seems like women’s issues and gender inequality have ranked far below national
security, economic stagnation, corruption, national unity, and the primary goal of
remaining a democratic, sovereign Ukrainian nation throughout three revolutions in
only a quarter century.42

Cast in this light, one can understand why a cosmetic approach to addressing
gender inequality for now has been pragmatic. There is nothing inherently wrong

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42 One can argue that legitimate threats to Ukrainian sovereignty and democracy have been
overstated, but it is important to keep in mind how much political currency the crisis narrative
—that Ukraine is subject to existential danger—has had, and how much it has guided politics
since 1991.
with “tinkering” and “tailoring” during periods of national instability and intense transition—these approaches are sometimes the only options, and can prevent deeper gender inequality from developing. But, given the extraordinary transformation that Ukrainian politics and society have been undergoing for the last 25 years, it is curious that a more fundamentally transformative approach to the gender question has not gained purchase. I argue that the EU's centrist, market-oriented, liberal feminist gender policies become more and more ingrained in the mainstream Ukrainian political imagination as the country moves farther away from the thrust of revolution. Consequently, a radical discourse—one that questions the structures that form the family, market, and political system—moves to the margins.

Crespi notes that “‘Gender is often used as shorthand for ‘women,’” and points to the fact that “gender equality” policy addresses “women’s issues,” while “men’s issues” are nearly absent from the discourse. The gender question then becomes primarily associated with women, which reinforces the idea that women bear the problems of, and must implement the solutions to, gender inequality. This lopsidedness is detrimental because it can make achieving gender equality look like a series of boxes to check (maternal healthcare, child care, having more women in business and Parliament, etc.), rather than a careful reassessment of how men and women interact with themselves, with each other, and with their political, social and economic worlds. It prevents a reconfiguration of the relationship between men and women, one that would emphasize true equality, not the (occasional) equity afforded by current policies.
Alternative Approaches to Gender, Culture and Community—

What might an “indigenous Ukrainian feminism” look like? Does it have to be “feminist” or just “gender” oriented? What is the difference? What kind of history can it draw on, both for potent and energizing symbols and for actual strategic guidance?

“Neo-traditional” and “nationalist” feminisms are one possibility. They certainly center the history and dominant culture of Ukraine in their approach to gender and politics. But are they, or have they been, effective in improving women’s material and social circumstances? Are these feminisms placed in opposition to Soviet values and history in a way that undermines their potential political efficacy for the challenges facing Ukraine today and in the future? For example, the attainment and maintenance of independent nationhood taking precedence over women’s issues, or the nationalist matriarchal pre-colonial myth not reflecting the future that many Ukrainian women want for themselves. On the other hand, the potency of the Berehynia myth, for example, has spurred some women into participating in political discussions and has “helped them to stop viewing feminism as an ‘imported, Western-centered’ phenomenon and allowed them to begin constructing a ‘Ukrainian feminism’ that has local relevance” (Hrycak, 2007). Perhaps some elements of “neo-traditionalism” are salvageable and can be incorporated into an “indigenous” feminism.

While “nationalist” feminism reflexively opposes communist values being incorporated into gender policy, socialist or collectivist feminism embraces Ukraine’s history of communality. It has its roots in Marxism and the Marxist critique of liberal
feminism—namely, that patriarchy is not the primary source of women’s oppression but the system of capitalism is (Tong, 2009). Liberal feminism may not take root as successfully in a society that is collective rather than individualistic. This is not to say that the entire Ukrainian mindset is oriented toward the collective, but the history of communist socialization has its vestiges today. And, ironically, the failures of the Soviet system to deliver on its socioeconomic promises may have led Soviet Ukrainians to rely more on each other and their community to supplement the benefits they were not getting from the state. The historical roots of a collectivist Ukrainian women’s movement are traced in Marta Bohachevsky-Chomiak’s “Feminists Despite Themselves: Women in Ukrainian Community Life, 1884-1939.” She describes how Ukrainian women formed an indigenous “women’s movement” by working to help their immediate communities. Contemporary examples of this kind of organizing include the grassroots social welfare organizations described by Phillips, and the volunteer-oriented organizations from my field research.

Potential prospects for “indigenous” gender concepts can be found in Ukrainian philosophical and literary works. The work of Solomea Pavlychko (a literary critic who used Western literary traditions as well as forged new Ukrainian ones) and Oksana Zabuzhko’s “Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex” are literary and theoretical explorations of what it means to be a woman in post-Soviet Ukraine. These works depict and consider the texture of everyday life, which can help develop a culturally-specific understanding of gender.
The “Main Gender Theories” source book, given to me by my VNTU interviewee Iryna Golovashenko, is a compilation of contemporary sociological and philosophical approaches to gender as a field of study and a political locus. The “Evolution of Gender Theory” by Golovashenko lays out a particular philosophical approach to gender in which she also questions, and challenges the essentialism and assumed universality of women’s experiences (Golovashenko and Skoryk, ed., 2004, p. 79). “Gender in Politics” by T.M. Mel’nyk describes different political approaches to gender inequality and an assessment of how Ukrainian attempts to create gender equality do or do not work. The essay argues that “gender politics is optimal when it is formulated and implemented in conditions of national gender education” (Mel’nyk and Skoryk, ed., 2004, 263). Indeed, any successful indigenous Ukrainian feminist movement will include the socialization of young people to be “gender sensitive.”

This sourcebook, as well as similar compilations created by Ukrainian scholars, are fruitful resources for understanding contemporary, on-the-ground discussions and having insight into Ukrainian conceptions of gender and feminist activism.

What are the actual cultural and historical contingencies that require Ukraine to have a tailor-made approach to gender policy? First, the demographic crisis in Ukraine (and other post-socialist countries) has led to a population decline and a sustained negative population growth rate. The liberal feminist rhetoric that focuses on “getting women out of the house,” advancing personal careers, and “self-actualization” may not have political salience in a country where many people want the security to have more children, the resources to adequately care for them, and to
provide for them financially. The liberal approach tends to ignore the fact that Ukrainian women are having fewer children because of economic insecurity, and not because of a rejection of patriarchal expectations.

The collectivist or communal tendency of Ukrainian society is a response to the history of living in a state where institutions often fail to adequately provide for the needs of citizens. When state structures let people and issues fall through the cracks, community building and support develops (Ledeneva, 2006). Liberal feminism’s focus on the individually liberated woman is likely to not resonate in a more collectivist society, especially one whose market transition is still in flux. For example, female “entrepreneurial spirits” that are rewarded by robust neoliberal markets, even where the wage gap and “glass ceiling” still exist, might not fare so well in Ukraine, where business practices are much more difficult to navigate. Furthermore, the rhetoric of “empowering” individual women can have the reverse effect of perpetuating the stereotype that women are powerless: “In other words, the concentration of Western resources and academic research on the problems of women may perpetuate or actually create real barriers to women who must now fight against new stereotypes that women are less adaptable to the market economy.” (Ghodsee, 2004).

Finally, the geopolitical division between East and West is an essential component of Ukrainian historical legacy. The reliance on EU paradigms and frameworks for gender policy comes, in part, from Ukraine’s stated political goal to join the European Union. People who do not identify with a Europe-centric vision of
Ukraine’s future may be alienated by this and subsequently alienated by the liberal feminist ideology. This includes primarily people in heavily Russian-speaking regions (the East, Crimea) and political critics of Ukraine-EU relations. A fully inclusive Ukrainian feminism would incorporate the concerns and needs of the Russian-speaking and non-Europe-oriented segments of the population, perhaps by focusing on material security and freedom of opportunity without necessarily shouting “Ukraine is Europe.”

**Interviews**

*Introduction—*

Gender equality activism in Ukraine operates within a set of circumstances that are unique to the country, while also navigating the common possibilities and obstacles of general civil society activist work. The crisis that began in 2014 with a revolution and now manifests as an armed conflict in the East has had a profound effect on members of gender equality oriented organizations, both as activists and as Ukrainians. But, in some ways, the present political and military conflict is an intensification of tensions that have been present in Ukraine since the beginning of its independent nationhood in 1991. Geopolitical division between the East and West, government corruption, economic hardship, inadequate leadership, and the challenges inherent to nation-building have been a part of Ukraine’s political and civic climate for two and a half decades.

How have gender equality activists understood and managed these issues as they relate to their work? How has the current crisis sharpened the focus on what the
country’s priorities are, and where do gender equality organizations stand? To begin
answering these questions, I analyze three civic organizations and their responses to
Ukraine’s political and social flux. The civil organization “Open Society,” and the
Vinnytsia Gender Studies Center, both based in Vinnytsia, as well as the Gender
Museum in the city of Kharkiv constitute my case study.

Each of these is a different main type of gender-oriented organization: a civil
organization, a center that is based in a university and, the first of its kind in Ukraine,
a museum or local information resource center specifically devoted to understanding
gender. I chose the first two because they are representative of the feminist civil
society sector. In the case of the Museum, it is the only one of its kind and therefore
worth incorporating into my original research. In identifying these organizations’
goals, challenges and accomplishments, as well as analyzing their specific approaches
to their activism, answers to key questions will emerge.

I use publicly available information about these organizations, as well as
interviews with a representative from each center, to map out their contribution to
Ukraine’s civil society in the sphere of gender activism. In-person interviews were
conducted in the summer of 2016 and via correspondence a few months later. In this
chapter, I give a broad description of the state of civil organizations and university
centers in Ukraine that focus on gender equality activism. Then I detail the histories
of the three institutions I focus on, followed by a comparative analysis of their goals,
challenges and strategies. I argue that, while these organizations have made great
strides in accomplishing their goals, their most prominent obstacles remain the banal
but crucial issue of financial instability, the more fundamental issue that gender
equality is not a high priority in the Ukrainian national consciousness, and the
complex challenges of operating within imported paradigms.

General Information on Gender Equality Organizations—

There is a variety of civil society organizations in Ukraine that address gender
equality work as a whole, or specific aspects of gendered sociopolitical issues. Some
were established to create national networks of gender equality activists, and
encompass a broad range of interests and sub-organizations. The Ukrainian Women’s
Fund, for example, was founded in 2000 and provides financial and information
resources to civil society organizations in Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus.43 One of
their core goals is to consolidate the women’s movement as an inseparable part of
civil society activism, but ultimately they are concerned with improving civil
engagement in general. A similar organization, known was the Ukrainian Women’s
Consortium and created in 2001, fosters collaborations between different women’s
rights organizations in Ukraine, and with the Ukrainian government.44 Their goals
include the protection of equal rights for men and women, and ensuring the safety and
well-being of children. They partner with over 25 different gender oriented civil
groups and 15 oblast centers.45 Both of these organizations are funded by a variety of
domestic and foreign sponsors, including typical ones such as the “International

45 An oblast is an administrative region of Ukraine. There are 24 oblasts in total.
Renaissance Foundation”—part of George Soros’ “Open Society” network—the UN Democracy Fund, and a United States Democracy Grant.

Certain organizations are issue-specific, such as “La Strada,” whose Ukrainian branch was founded in 1997. Members of “La Strada” focus on the prevention of human trafficking, domestic violence against women and children, and children’s rights.46 The organization “Positive Women” is dedicated to helping women affected by HIV/AIDS in Ukraine.47 Founded in 2011, this center seeks to increase the presence of women in leadership roles, to foster community for women who test positive, and to improve the access to resources and information regarding HIV/AIDS in Ukraine. These are two examples of organizations who fall under the category of gender-oriented activism but who focus on a specific issue that affects Ukrainian women.

In addition to expansive national network organizations, there are smaller centers throughout the country that focus on local issues and collaborate with other organizations of a similar type. These fall into roughly two categories: civil society organizations, and university centers. Civil society organizations are approximately evenly dispersed across the country. They concentrate on various issues such as the prevention of sex trafficking; issues of women’s healthcare quality and access; motherhood (state support for parents and single mothers, maternity and paternity leave); violence against women; business and legal help for women, education policy;

46 This organization also exists in other Central and Eastern European countries, such as Poland, Bulgaria and most of the countries of former Yugoslavia. *La Strada*. [http://www.la-strada.org.ua/](http://www.la-strada.org.ua/). April 17

and achieving EU compliance. In order to achieve their goals, members of these centers work on educating the populace, producing policy and informational briefs, training community members to engage in activism, and holding discussion groups, among other strategies.

University centers have different goals and mechanisms of action from those of civil society organizations. While not every university in Ukraine has an affiliated gender center, there are over 30 well-established university centers for gender studies and resources across the country. The oldest centers were established in the 1990s and early 2000s out of prominent universities in major cities such as Kharkiv, Kyiv, L’viv and Odessa (Morford, 2007). University gender centers focus primarily on the development of curricula around the topic of gender from historical, sociological, philosophical, and literary perspectives. The intended audience for their educational programs are students and faculty of the university, as well as other members of the community and country who are not affiliated with the school. They also work towards the achievement of government standards for gender equality in institutions of higher education. Finally, they offer educational and informational resources for people who want to learn more about the topic of gender in Ukraine.48

Broad Challenges—

48 An emerging sector of gender equality and women’s rights organizations that cannot be ignored is online. Web pages, forums, Facebook and VKontakte groups are developing quickly and have significant membership. They provide an opportunity for people to engage in gender equality work and education without necessarily being part of a physical organization, and to collaborate with people across city and even national borders. Because this thesis examines gender equality civil society activism as it has developed over the last two decades, social media activism is outside of the scope of my analysis. But it is a growing avenue for activism and gender equality engagement, and thus deserves thoughtful attention elsewhere.
Gender equality organizations are largely funded by a combination of international funding (i.e. from discrete countries and their embassies in Ukraine), EU program funding, UN funding and the Ukrainian government. Often, the organizations themselves and the projects they carry out rely on grant money that is neither predictably nor easily available (Hrycak, 2007). While some organizations are large and well established enough to offer full salaries to their employees, many operate heavily on the basis of volunteer work—even among top tiers of the organizations’ leadership structure (Phillips, 2008).

Reliance on erratic funding and volunteer dedication leads to one of the biggest challenges that Ukrainian civil society groups face in general: their status as precarious organizations. In times of increased sociopolitical turmoil and tension, priorities shift. Governments are less willing to spend money on civil society organizations and projects, and people are less willing to take on extra responsibilities that do not have an associated income. Gender centers at universities are less at risk because they are incorporated into the larger university infrastructure, though they also suffer from decreased university and state funding. Unaffiliated community and city centers are the most likely to have their future as existing organizations in question when national priorities shift.

These challenges reveal a larger issue in the landscape of Ukrainian gender equality and other human rights activism in general. Namely, there is a legal basis for many of the issues that gender equality activists agitate for—political party quotas for women, maternity leave, non-discrimination—but not an institutional or normative
one. This is the core issue expressed by the organizers interviewed in this chapter. Ukraine has the legal and regulatory measures in place to provide equal rights and opportunities for men and women across many sectors, but these measures cannot be effectively or sustainably enforced without institutions. Civil society and university organizations who do the work of practical implementation of gender equality norms and education are constantly challenged by the instability of their future and current plans. Finally, I argue that the most crucial yet challenging aspect of gender equality activism is changing normative values and perceptions of gender in Ukrainian society as a whole. In order to do that, there must be consensus about what these norms should be, and the tensions between “universal” liberal policy and Ukrainian circumstances reveal themselves in these interviews.

“Open Society”

The civil society organization “Open Society” is based in Ukraine’s central-western city Vinnytsia and operates within the larger Vinnytsia oblast as well. Founded in 2006, the organization focuses on assisting the growth of democracy, increasing citizens’ participation in civil society and civic decision-making, and the achievement of gender equality. Their main methods include educational-training sessions for the local public, government officials (at village, city, and national levels), the dissemination of information, and sociological studies of gender and civil society issues. Their funding is provided by various international, Ukrainian and supranational bodies such as: the World Bank, the American Embassy, Freedom
House, the UN Development Fund, the Kyiv Institute of Gender Studies and the oblast Ministry of Family and Youth, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

I spoke with the director of “Open Society,” Svitlana Khodakova, about the organization’s priorities, methods and the obstacles they face. For Khodakova, the main way in which priorities for the center have changed over time is a shift from intellectual and informational work to the practical implementation of the ideas they developed earlier. “We need to include a gender component in all programs at the local level and the city level—and we need people who understand what this ‘gender component’ is,” she explained. Khodakova described the early stages of gender as a category of analysis in Ukrainian civil society as she experienced it: first there was the idea of a “woman in development,” in academic circles, and then there was an understanding of “gender in development.” Theories formed, then, from the critical engagement of scholars and activists with the category of gender and what it means in the Ukrainian context, and what the relationship is between gender and national development.

Khodakova describes her work and the work of the organization as happening in small, planned increments. For example, she recently started the “Deputy’s Group: Equal Opportunities” with a female deputy in Vinnytsia’s Rada. This group will focus on the issue of women’s representation in local political office and, according to Khodakova, will hopefully become part of a larger network of other, similar groups in

49 “Deputy” is the word for a member of a legislative body in Ukraine. It refers to officials in local councils, regional legislatures and the national Parliament.

50 “Rada” refers to a legislative body such as a local council, regional legislature or the national Parliament.
surrounding Radas. “Maybe [the groups] won’t even be necessary eventually, when it is the norm. But for now, when it’s not the norm, we have to make an effort and draw the attention of the public and the government,” she explains, echoing the strategy of other groups. The normalization of equal political representation among men and women is possible, but only through institutions whose purpose it is to make that happen.

She addresses the problems inherent to having a large base of volunteers as the workforce of “Open Society,” again reinforcing the notion that civil society organizations are precarious. Khodakova explains how the organization is able to function: “the people who work in a civil society organization have to work 24/7, because they’re motivated. It does not matter how much time the work takes you, or how much energy or resources it requires. What matters are the results you achieve.” This approach allows volunteers to continue contributing to the organization, provided they are able to budget their time and energy well. But it leaves the organization vulnerable to the issues of an unpredictable work force, and does not provide the kind of steady resources that foster sustained achievement of their goals.

For example, in the context of domestic abuse, which Khodakova considers to be one of the country’s highest gendered priorities, the organization has not been able to devote themselves to this issue due to a lack of resources. The organization does not have the mechanisms, she explains, to punish perpetrators of domestic violence or to provide security for victims. These issues are part of a broader societal problem—the lack of understanding of the mechanics of domestic violence. This issue is more
intense now than ever, Khodakova notes, because of the Eastern conflict and its ramifications for the psychology of the nation.

How domestic violence is handled is a salient illustration of the distance that exists between legal formalities and practical implementation—between “tinkering” and “tailoring.” Khodakova explains that she was pleased with the framework laid out by the 2014 Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention). Ukraine has signed on to the convention but has yet to ratify it, which frustrates Khodakova. She explains that the Istanbul Convention centers the victims of domestic violence in its framework, not the perpetrators.

For example, it requires that a perpetrator has to leave the victim for a period of 10 days, and where they go is their issue. However, when discussing this potential regulation with local police officials in Ukraine, Khodakova explains that they ask immediately “Where will he go?”—a question, she says, they do not ask when a woman leaves an abusive situation. In fact, they not only refrain from asking where she might go, but they ask “which municipal district is she from?” Khodakova explains that the police officials are concerned with passing off the issue to someone else’s jurisdiction. “It’s not our problem,” is the subtext behind how this issue is handled, she says. And it is this underlying mindset in the population at large that presents a crucial challenge to the organization’s work of changing norms and perceptions of gender. So it is not only a problem of “tailoring” and creating domestic abuse shelters where women can go for their security, for example. There is potential,
here, for a more “transformative” discourse that interrogates the power dynamics between men and women (and between law enforcement officials and vulnerable members of the public).

While “Open Society” has had successful initiatives, it still struggles with finding stable funding. The Ukrainian government does not provide funding for “Open Society” as a civil society organization in and of itself, but it does fund proposed programs that it wants to support. However, Khodakova names two examples of government funding that was promised but never delivered. The organization created a training for the leaders of gender politics committees in oblast Radas, and the Ukrainian government offered to fund it, but did not. Additionally, in the last year, “Open Society” organized a comprehensive program: the Academy of Female Political Leadership, which they developed themselves. It was financed primarily by the Netherlands Embassy’s Fund of Human Rights who believed that it was a great program. Through the training program, 12 women who participated ran for office in the following elections. Only one was elected, but the rest planned to run again. Despite the success of this program, the Ukrainian government’s promise to finance another round of the training, there has been no money.

In order to understand the reason for Khodakova’s dedication to “Open Society,” I asked how she came to be a participant in gender equality activism. During the 1990s, she experienced the sudden illness and death of her mother while she was on maternity leave with two small children. She describes feeling like she was in a sort of prison, in a “closed circle” that did not allow for growth. It was
Khodakova, who has a medical degree, did not find work that compelled her amid the chaotic yet rigid job market of the 1990s in Ukraine. Unexpectedly, she saw an opportunity to apply to participate in a “training program” run by a Harvard professor. Khodakova applied and was accepted; the training took place over four weeks, separated in the middle by a month long break.

Khodakova’s hopelessness ended after the training session, and her whole consciousness shifted. “A crisis is not always a crisis, it can be an opportunity,” she says. She and nine other people were “trainers” who underwent a program that gave them the tools to teach 30-40 people who were also participating. Between sessions of teaching the rest of the people, Khodakova and her counterparts discussed mistakes they made and strategies for future teaching. She explains that the central emphasis of this training program was: a system of values, and strategic planning. Her university education, she recalls, had been very rigid and pragmatic. The paradigm shifted, for her, during this training session to the centering of values rather than rigid rules. It opened her imagination to different possibilities for the future. The radical power of uncovering new political imaginaries is crucial to the future of Ukrainian feminism, and will be touched on in the next chapter.

Another aspect of the training session, and Khodakova notes that this happens to others when she leads training sessions now, is that she realized consciously for the first time that she has been discriminated against. She explains that when she asks most women whether or not they had suffered discrimination, they say no. But when
asked specific questions such as “have you ever been fired for getting pregnant?” or “have you been denied a job because you’re over 30 or because you recently returned from the workforce from maternity leave?” most women will realize how gender inequality affects them in concrete ways. This happens with everyone from members of the public to government officials who go into training sessions skeptical of the program. Khodakova quotes one of the training session leaders, Susanne: “Life does not change when your circumstances change, it changes when you open your eyes and change your viewpoint.”

**Vinnytsia Gender Studies Center**

The position of a university affiliated gender studies center is different from a civil society organization in crucial ways. Here, I examine the goals and methods of the Gender Studies Center of Vinnytsia’s National Technical University. I spoke with Iryna Golovashenko, Docent of the Philosophy Department at VNTU and the director of the Vinnytsia Gender Studies Center. She has held this post for over 12 years, since the creation of the Center in 2004. The directives of the Center include improving the level of gender studies across all grades, the coordination of humanities specialists for the implementation of equal opportunity principles, promotion of gender studies and the protection of rights of women, men and children.

While organizations like “Open Society” have informational programs, education is the central focus of university centers such as the VGSC. Golovashenko explains that, during the beginning stages of gender equality activism in Ukraine, the emerging ideas were populist—in other words, they were popular but ad hoc at best,
and not particularly thought out. She, and other members of the center, felt that “if we wanted to do something adequate, we will have to start with the academy.” From there, the development of gender studies began at the university with the translation of European philosophical works about gender into Ukrainian. At the same time, Golovashenko and her colleagues began to develop different possible curricula of gender studies—these were the foundations of the center’s work today.

Gender research and studies in Ukraine, according to Golovashenko, requires the latest methodological practices. For that reason, she and her colleagues in the philosophy, sociology and humanities departments continuously work to develop and innovate their gender studies curricula. In addition to this, Golovashenko and the Center lead training sessions similar to those led by the “Open Society,” but with more of a focus on the intellectual foundations of “gender” as a category of analysis in Ukraine. Golovashenko describes a few training sessions she has led, and their outcomes.

One, which she described as provocatively named “Casus Gender: How to Survive in a Tolerant Society,” was held for government officials in local and oblast Radas, as well as for military and police officials. There were three sessions over the course of the year, and Golovashenko says that the people who participated were ignorant of the issues she was teaching about to the point that she had to create a small dictionary of basic terms. “At first I thought I had to teach people, then I realized that I had to wake them up to have even the slightest bit of sensitivity to
gender, to an understanding of transgressions and gender discrimination—not in
terms of trivial acts, but the larger picture of gender in Ukraine,” she elaborates.

The most significant and effective training she led, Golovashenko explains,
was a large session on the topic of the historical-philosophical foundation of gender
in Europe and how to incorporate that knowledge into the Ukrainian context. She
assumed the training session would be boring for the officials undergoing it, but they
were both interested and enthusiastic about what she was teaching. The training, she
explains, outlined the main philosophical questions regarding gender and human
rights in Europe—whether one is born with human rights or gains them in life, if man
is supposed to be one’s sole ruler, or the King or God. The participants were
compelled by the idea that there already exists a long historical tradition and
foundation for gender and human rights in Europe. Unfortunately, there has not been
a continuation of this kind of training, though Golovashenko and her colleagues
support repeating it.

Another method of inquiry into issues of gender in Ukraine used by the VGSC
has been participating in a “gender audit” initiated by the Gender Research Center in
Sumy. It began with a “gender audit” of VNTU, which attempted to create a full
picture of gender-related statistics to help the administration with questions of who is
admitted to the school, what departments do they join, and how to better distribute the
budget. Then they expanded into pilot research program that would conduct a “gender
audit” of a larger sector of the population, answering questions such as where do men
and women live, do they have children, how many men and women go to school and
work, what are their problems, do they experience discrimination, etc. In terms of practical applications, Golovashenko explains, these statistics can help oblast and state legislatures make decisions to deal with the reality of gender discrimination. Additionally, during the course of questioning for the “gender audit,” many people realized that they had suffered discrimination when they had not realized this before.

While training and informational sessions can be effective, a more fundamental project for Golovashenko is the development of a uniquely Ukrainian understanding of gender, with a philosophical and literary basis. Due to budget cuts that have badly affected the humanities in the last two years, she has not had the opportunity to teach the courses on gender studies that she has planned out. There is, however, student interest for this work—Golovashenko explains that when she teaches a unit on gender studies in her general philosophy course, without fail she has to shorten the units that follow because her students want to learn more about philosophical conceptions of gender.

While this is important for Golovashenko, she explains that she does not want to import European or Western gender analysis and apply it to Ukraine. “Gender philosophy cannot be borrowed or adapted or transferred from someone else’s scenario. We have our own cultural foundation, our own political and cultural intellect, our ethnic and national specificities,” she explains. This echoes Stratigaki’s critique of EU policy cooptation—“Words matter. Words should be understood in 11 different languages, as well as in 15 different national gender traditions. Cooptation of gender concepts becomes, therefore, all too likely. Alas, the concept of gender
equality can be easily sunk to the use of ‘she’ and ‘he’ in the EU official acts,” (Stratigaki, 2004, p. 51). Ukraine’s “national gender tradition” must be taken into consideration at the policy level.

Golovashenko argues that there is a legal and human rights basis for gender equality in Ukraine but, echoing Khodakova, it is not being implemented. People in power do not understand many basic precepts of gender in Ukraine, which undermines the effective implementation and enforcement of legal rights. Ukraine is undergoing many political processes right now, Golovashenko notes, and this flux requires constant analysis and continuous humanitarian and sociological studies to understand what the issues are.

Many of the challenges that exist for “Open Society” also pose a threat to the VGSC. Funding and a volunteer-based workforce lead to instability that prevents the Center from achieving all of its goals in the most effective way. Golovashenko points out the challenges of not having a consistent paid staff, but also says that “volunteering’s not been cancelled!” She finds that volunteering, which is how most actions at the Center are done, is a legitimate power. And, it is a force that seems to have become an important part of Ukrainian societal consciousness within the last few years. Participation in important civil society activism, and the opportunity to work with other volunteering colleagues on interdisciplinary projects are why Golovashenko says she continues to do the work she does.

The work, however, is difficult and is becoming more challenging with further budget constraints, such as the cuts made to humanities. Golovashenko explains that
the Center receives funding from outside sources such as the EU and international embassies, such as the Finnish Embassy’s financing of the Center’s “gender audit.” The UN Development Fund contributes, as it does to the work of “Open Society.” To the extent that it can, the oblast Ministry of Family and Youth contributes funding as well, for example for the creation of the Center’s website. These challenges are serious, which Golovashenko acknowledges. But she also believes that a certain “movement of gender” has formed and she hopes that it will somehow be able to shift the Ukrainian consciousness.

**Ukrainian Gender Museum**

The Ukrainian Gender Museum is the first, and only, of its kind in Ukraine, and is therefore worth examining and comparing to traditional gender equality activist organizations. Stemming from the Kharkiv Oblast Gender Resource Center, the Museum was created in 2008. It has been funded by the Ukrainian Women’s Fund, the Global Fund for Women, and the European Endowment for Democracy. Built in Kharkiv, an eastern city just north of the Donbas region, the Museum is another step forward in the city’s tradition of gender activism and scholarship. Museum director Tetyana Isaeiva explains that the starting point of this museum was the project “Let’s make a museum about us!” which sought to reassert the place of women in Ukrainian history, and carve out the history of the gender equality and women’s movement.52

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51 Specifically, the Vinnytsia Regional Information Center of the EU.
This project and the museum that emerged from it want to expose the missing element of women from global and Ukrainian histories, use museum resources to illustrate gender issues in an accessible way, and reveal the ways in which gender is constructed in Ukraine. All of which contributes to making gender equality and feminist movements more understood and appreciated by Ukrainian citizens. The Museum has also developed into an online museum in 2010, and a Center of Gender Culture that has many of the same aims but offers different resources from the museum. Isaeiva also does not draw a distinction between the idea of a gender movement and feminism, arguing that feminist movements have placed an emphasis on gender as a category of analysis and revealed sociopolitical challenges that women face. It is important, however, that the Museum take into account the gendered issues that men have as well. The way forward, for Isaeiva, is gender mainstreaming—improving the political and social equality between men and women with the understanding that they are distinct groups.

I interviewed Yulia Bashuk, a community outreach specialist for the Ukrainian Gender Museum, has been working with the institution for several years. In addition to her work in communications, she proposes initiatives, educates and consults, participates in training sessions as a leader, and participates in writing or carrying out project proposals. Bashuk explains that her organization works to systematically introduce and maintain knowledge about gender equality at all levels—schools, government organizations, civil society organizations and social media—for all people regardless of age, gender, or national origin. Because the audience is diverse,
Bashuk explains, so are their methods. These include training sessions and seminars for educators and professionals, interactive activities for children and parents, and expert consulting for local government institutions and international projects.

The Gender Museum and Center of Gender Culture’s priorities are similar to those of “Open Society” and the VGSC: prevention and intervention in cases of gendered abuse, pushing for female leadership and political decision making, fighting workforce discrimination and examining the role of women in politics and peacekeeping. One of their main aims is to create a “culture of equality” that encompasses equal rights and equal opportunities, as well as every person understanding the rights that they have in society. Bashuk explains that one of the more effective ways they have been able to do this is through educating and mobilizing the community by supporting women’s and gender-based projects. The combination of these two means that people who become “gender sensitive” pass it on and educate the people in their circles, and having the platform of an active civil society means that they can become “leaders of public opinion” in their respective communities.

The Museum and Center’s most important challenge is financial. Bashuk explains that she and her fellow organizers knew that the Center would begin as a start-up and that it would need consistent funding. For the time being, especially since the conflict began, they have not been able to find adequate financial support. The Museum is kept alive with the support of Spanish artist Maria Sanchez Garcia and her feminist organization—Garcia Sanchez started a campaign to save the Gender Museum by raising money and awareness. Bashuk says that the future of the Center
relies on outside funding because it is probably “impossible to make money off the topic of gender in Ukraine, or in the world.”

While the Museum and Center are not obstructed in any way by the local government, they are also not particularly supported. There are even individual political officials who neither understand the issues nor want to have a dialogue. However, there are those individuals, Bashuk says, who seek her organization out on their own and want to find out more about it. When asked “why do these issues and activities matter to you?” Bashuk replies that, for her, “gender culture”\textsuperscript{53} is a way of life and a value system—it is “natural to be equal in all the richness of diversity.”

**Conclusion**

The women I spoke with about their experience theorizing, explaining, and implementing gender oriented activism are profoundly committed to their work. Considering the common theme of volunteer work, they truly must be committed in order to spend so much time and energy doing work that can often be frustrating, thankless, and precarious. What my analysis of the Ukrainian reality, via these interviews, reveals about the theoretical first half of this chapter is that the future of an indigenous feminist movement is bright. While the pockets of activism in today’s Ukraine may be marginal in the public consciousness, they are, themselves, robust and influential in their local communities. What was perhaps not conveyed about my interlocutors in the typed-out interviews, is the observable passion and tenacity they have for the work of gender equality. And while enthusiasm is not a sufficient

\textsuperscript{53} In Ukrainian, the word for “culture” can also mean the “process of acculturation” and “cultivation.”
condition for successful feminist activism, it is certainly a necessary one, and an excellent foundation for the difficult work ahead.
Chapter Three—Unexpected Chaos

Introduction

Contemporary Ukraine has experienced revolution after revolution, but few were as radical as the Maidan Revolution and its associated geopolitical crises. Radical in the political leanings of the revolutionaries (on the left and the right), and radical because Ukrainian history seemed to come upon a vital turning point. Actions outside of the Kyiv activists’ control—Russia’s annexation of Crimea and a hybrid conflict in Eastern Ukraine—cemented the feeling that political paradigms had fundamentally changed. Sometimes a moment of social upheaval ends, but the society still has the option to return to the status quo because the uprising was short-lived or did not fundamentally change sociopolitical paradigms. Ukraine’s now three year crisis has left many feeling like there is not an equilibrium to return to, especially in long-term Russo-Ukrainian relations. Revolution and conflict have also fundamentally transformed Ukrainian society and communities, not just regional geopolitics. First of all, sustaining a social movement through a Ukrainian winter requires many committed people, and Ukrainian citizens found themselves participating in civic action in ways they never had before. More fundamentally, each citizen could examine their relationship to their nation and their community.

Revolution expands people’s political imagination. The Maidan Revolution and subsequent political reshuffle were opportunities for Ukrainians to articulate the kind of future they wanted for themselves, their children and Ukraine. The dominant slogans and revolutionary ideals were centered around Ukraine becoming more
European, Western, and liberal (Olszanski, 2015, p. 6). There was no monopoly on the revolution’s meaning, however, and “anti-liberal” groups such as the Right Sector and Svoboda (“freedom”) saw the social movement as an opportunity to articulate their particular vision of Ukraine’s prospects. Nationalism surged, whether it was the civic pluralistic nationalism of Maidan’s mainstream or the ethnic, traditional nationalism of far right groups and every shade in between. The degree of participants’ radicalism—their commitment to overthrow institutions and transform Ukrainian society—also differed from person to person.

Women participated in the Maidan (and the Eastern conflict) just as much as their male counterparts did, though they have had to navigate revolutionary space and wartime in a different way. The Maidan was dangerous and dynamic, and women had to not only maintain their safety and the safety of their fellow revolutionaries, but had to consistently assert their right to be there. There was disagreement about the role women should play in the revolution, and about how Ukraine’s political and social future should address gender. On the one hand, the pro-European attitude of many revolutionaries indicated the desire for a liberal mode of gender equality. But the discrimination is always in the details—real accounts from the ground on the Maidan and on the front lines in the Donbas show that patriarchy and gender stereotypes still shape Ukrainian attitudes and actions. Protesters with explicitly feminist signs or slogans were told that “such questions are untimely” for the “Revolution of Dignity,” (Khromeychuk, 2016, p. 36). Whose “dignity” was fought for is still an open question.
The previous two chapters of this thesis have outlined Ukrainian women’s participation in civic activism, as well as their roles in the independence movement and the Orange Revolution. The focus has mostly been on the challenges facing activists during peacetime, but this chapter examines how activists have continued with their agendas while the country is in the middle of armed conflict. Undoubtedly, these agendas, priorities and methods have changed. The crisis in Ukraine that began in 2014 has politicized citizens in new ways and there has been a “significant radicalization of society’s attitudes,” (Olszanski, 2015, p. 1). For better or worse, citizens have been forced to make clear their loyalties and political orientation in these charged times.

Women who participated in the Maidan, women who are community activists, women who send supplies to soldiers on the front, women who are fighting the war themselves, and even the abstracted ‘women and children’ invoked in the name of protecting the nation are now more than ever part of Ukraine’s efforts to secure the nation (from internal and external fractures) and build a bright, stable future. While this chapter analyzes what has happened to civil society and NGO activists in general, and my interviewees specifically, it has a broader goal. My aim for the chapter is to look at a three year slice of Ukrainian history whose dynamics are changing and being reevaluated in real time. The narrative and “true meaning” of these years for Ukraine’s future is yet to be determined, and I plan to examine how women have contributed to creating, understanding and subverting this narrative. This analysis
will, hopefully, add to the conversation about where this pivot in the young nation’s history is headed.

Unmistakably, the Ukrainian crisis has made the question of “who is a Ukrainian citizen?” a more pointed one. Old fractures along linguistic, confessional and ethnic lines have re-complicated the category of “citizen,” especially among right-leaning nationalists whose ideas of Ukrainian statehood are exclusive to Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainsii. The category is muddied further when an entire region of “citizens” is annexed and the “citizens” of another region, to some extent, reject allegiance to the state. But “citizen” also breaks down by gender, especially in wartime. The narrative of a country at war is one of heroes, out in public, protecting their homeland from the external enemy. The parallel narrative is one of heroes’ wives and mothers, in the home, embodying the homeland that is being protected. Of course, women are not being denied legal rights—this concept of “citizen” is a more abstract one.

Speaking theoretically still, one can consider what happens when women, like the rebels in Eastern Ukraine, do not find that their needs are being heard by the state and reject allegiance? A symbolic revocation of citizenship might look like a rejection of state support and turning to community organizations. Eastern Ukraine’s regional secession reads very clearly as a rejection of the state’s legitimacy and authority, but subversive actions of Ukrainian women are rarely seen in this light. A woman who joins the armed forces for example (prior to 2016), even though she has registered as a cook and will receive fewer wages and privileges, can be interpreted as rejecting the
constraints of the state to fight for her community and nation (Shevchenko, 2016). Men are readily allowed to have an ambivalent relationship with the nation and the state, perhaps choosing loyalty to the former at the expense of the latter, but women are rarely afforded such nuance. I argue that it is crucial to consider women’s actions in this framework, and to take note of the ways they express rejecting the state’s legitimacy or authority.

If public space, public acts of heroism and nation-building are in the domain of men, in the popular imagination, then what place is there for women in constructing Ukraine? In contributing to the Ukrainian political and civic community? Women, as it is doubtless clear by now, take active part in their communities, the state, and Ukrainian civil society as a whole. They have participated, as much as they have been allowed to and going beyond those limits as well, in every revolution, war, and crisis in Ukrainian history. But women’s participation has been undersold and taken for granted. When a group of people are marginalized in the political imagination, in a country’s narrative, there are significant barriers to their being considered full citizens who can contribute to the country’s future, and whose voices deserve to be heard. And an account of the Ukrainian crisis that flattens people’s contributions along gendered lines does a disservice to every person, man and woman, who each has a complicated relationship with history, with the political community, and with their own part in creating both.

This chapter briefly narrates the Maidan and its aftershocks, paying particular attention to women’s participation in revolution and war (this participation includes
the often overlooked domestic and care work that primarily women do). In this chapter I also analyze how the meaning of the Maidan was crafted as it happened, and who was allowed to shape the narrative. This chapter also briefly compares the events of 2014-2017 with Ukraine’s war of independence in 1917-1920 to reveal that political gender dynamics have changed relatively little in the century that passed. I also look at the effects of war on the population, especially on women. I return to my interviews and analyze how the Ukrainian crisis has changed activists’ goals and outlook.

Throughout the chapter, I consider Ukraine’s practical and symbolic relationship with Europe and how it has been affected by the crisis. This is part of a broader set of considerations about Ukraine’s national self-image and nationalism, whose relationship to women is even more complex in wartime. Finally, the central question of my analysis of Ukraine’s women’s movement is: what might an indigenous Ukrainian feminism look like? The analogous main question for this chapter, then, is what does a truly independent Ukraine look like? Over twenty five years have passed since independence and Ukraine is still not secure from external or internal subversion. What kind of political culture must the state and citizens cultivate to build a stable, prosperous Ukrainian future?

**Public History and Private Quarters**

*The Context of Crisis—*

The mass protests that became the “Revolution of Dignity,” “EuroMaidan” or simply “Maidan” began in late November of 2013, when President Viktor
Yanukovych rejected an important agreement with the European Union, one that Ukrainian citizens had been expecting him to sign (Wilson, 2014, p. 1).\(^{54}\) The protests began by rallying around common themes like “authenticity and self validation,” (Wilson, 2014, p. 68). Activists, especially younger ones who had come of age in the era following the Orange Revolution, called for a “systemic ‘reboot’” of the corrupt and uninspiring political culture (Wilson, 2014, p. 130). By February of 2014, just a few months later, violent clashes between protesters and riot police or *titushki*\(^{55}\) were common. The former protected themselves with guerrilla classics like Molotov cocktails and stones, while the latter had riot gear, tear gas and sniper rifles (Wilson, 2014). Both sides had access to firearms and by the end of the protests’ violence, over 100 activists and 18 officers had been killed.\(^{56}\)

The uptick in violence was partially caused by the Yanukovych administration passing what came to be known as the “dictatorship laws”—“With no logic or attempt at credibility, the authorities sought to criminalize everything the opposition had been doing over the past two months,” (Wilson, 2014, p. 81). The desperate government’s attempt at controlling the public with a legislative crackdown was unsuccessful because they had lost legitimacy. The protesters’ use of violence, by contrast, became legitimate (for those who supported the cause) in the face of the state’s crisis of

\(^{54}\) Scholar Andrew Wilson points out that Maidan activists “ended up convinced that they had sacrificed blood for ‘European values,’ while EU states would not sacrifice treasure for the same cause.” Dissatisfaction or disaffection with the European project and its wavering support of Ukraine shape the post-Maidan narrative; if the Maidan was about achieving EU values but Ukraine ends up left behind by Europe, what does that mean for the revolution’s success?

\(^{55}\) *Titushki* were paid thugs, who were usually from outside of Kyiv and bussed into the city. They joined the riot police in anti-Maidan violence.

authority, and in the face of the state sanctioned violence as well. By the end of February, President Yanukovych had been ousted and had fled from Ukraine. In March, the Russian Federation annexed the peninsula of Crimea, where ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers make up the majority. The maneuver was cemented with a dubious referendum that ignored the Ukrainian state’s right to territorial integrity and the Crimean Tatar semi-autonomous Mejlis governing body’s right to self-determination.

In June of 2014, the new President Petro Poroshenko finally signed Ukraine’s Association Agreement with the EU, fulfilling one of the Maidan protesters’ main demands. Between March and June, a separatist conflict had embattled the eastern cities of Donetsk and Luhansk, in the Donbas region. The Ukrainian army began what is still officially described as an “Anti-Terrorist Operation” (ATO) and tried to quell the armed seizure of state institutions in these cities (Wilson, 2014). Come August, Russian military officials and supplies had flowed into Eastern Ukraine and quickly eliminated the Ukrainian state’s chance to stop the rebellion (Kudelia, 2016). What began as a civil war soon became a “hybrid conflict,” with internal and external threats adding to the unpredictability of the situation.

Scholars Matthew Rojansky and Michael Kofman point out that the term “hybrid war” is misleading because it implies something new or unusual about the Russian state’s use of a combination of warfare, when hybrid strategies in conflict are commonplace in military history. They also argue that, rather than being a specific pre-planned campaign, Russia’s actions in Ukraine fit into the broader pattern of
Russian covert foreign policy (including information and media manipulation, controlling political players in neighboring states, etc.) (Rojansky and Kofman, 2015). Scholar Serhiy Kudelia believes it is important not to discount the conflict’s internal causes and suggests the term “international civil war” (Kudelia, 2016).

**Consequences of War—**

Between April 2014 and, most recently, 12 March, 2017, nearly 10,000 people have died in the conflict. Over 23,000 people have been injured, according to a conservative estimate.\(^{57}\) As of summer 2016, 1.8 million Ukrainians had been internally displaced (though some of them relocated to neighboring countries, Russia included) (Sasse, 2017). The psychological toll is more difficult to quantify, but Ukrainian psychologists and international observers conclude that it is significant, and likely to have long-lasting effects. Symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are common, especially among those most intensely affected by the fighting and children.\(^{58}\) Not only are people suffering from trauma, but the stigma of mental illness and a legacy of poor mental health services keep many Ukrainians from seeking professional or even informal help.

The violence of war beyond the front lines is pervasive and has a profound effect on the vulnerable members of the population—women and children. Out of the 1.8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Ukraine, 62% are women. Many of them have children or are pregnant, putting them in an especially precarious situation.

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IDPs are underserved by the poorly funded and resourced Ukrainian health care infrastructure, and many of the internally displaced children died in the course of the conflict due to preventable disease and not warfare. IDPs also report significant psychological distress (Nidzvetska et al., 2017). Displaced women are also uniquely susceptible to gender based violence (GBV), especially near the checkpoints marking the boundaries of separatist regions (GBV in Conflict, 2015).

Unlike the ubiquitous GBV women endure, which is usually intimate partner violence (IPV) or perpetrated by someone the victim knows, the violence against female IDPs have been caused by groups of people unknown to the survivors and has often been life-threatening. Because GBV and IPV are normalized and justified in mainstream Ukrainian society, survivors are frequently stigmatized. They have few resources and many are distrustful or skeptical of official law enforcement, often turning to their communities and sometimes local NGOs for support (GBV in Conflict, 2015). Sexual assaults have also been reported in the conflict area—internally displaced women are also particularly vulnerable to sexual violence, and often have little recourse if they decide to report it. Fortunately, however, “there are no grounds to believe that sexual violence has been used for strategic or tactical ends” by any of the sides in the conflict in the Donbas or in Crimea.59

Each of my interviewees expressed concern about the psychological stress on the nation, and the repercussions for societal relations and individual relationships.

My own informal observations over the course of summers spent in Ukraine during

the years of the crisis lead me to agree—Ukrainian society is under immense strain and can see no immediate end to the internal and external threats. The Ukrainian people have become militarized, even if they are not directly involved in the armed fighting. When a person cannot watch the news or talk with a neighbor without discussion of war, or when a person constantly fears their own or their partner’s army conscription, or feels called upon to offer whatever they can in the name of defending their country, they have been mobilized—pulled into the larger geopolitical process of Ukraine’s militarization and war effort.\footnote{“The inextricable connections of gender and war create a situation in which the relation of women to war is always already inherently political—whether or not individual women consciously see themselves as political actors. Women are politically positioned by war discourses, and their actions politicized….” (Cohn and Jacobson, 2013; 104)} A nation in crisis is a nation on edge, and mobilization means that people are prepared to take action quickly as the situation shifts. With a violent and unstable backdrop, the mundanity of everyday life begins to hold more weight; people feel more urgency to affirm their values and relationships. How people, especially women, have treated these values and relationships is a central question in this chapter. Civil society, and all of society, is formed on the basis of shared values and relationships, so it is worthwhile to examine these sociopolitical atoms as they are profoundly affected by the pressures of war.

**Ukraine(s), Europe(s), and Russia(s)**

Before dissecting the gendered contradictions of the Maidan, it is necessary to get a sense of where geopolitics met history in Kyiv. Multiple nationalisms were articulated during the revolution, with the mainstream and the far-right versions garnering the most attention. What terms like “Ukraine,” “Europe,” and “Russia”
meant to people, and how they made them feel, varied widely. If the idea of Europe meant hope to a college student on the Maidan, it also signified the reviled “demoliberalizm” of European values to a Right Sector member. Similarly, the strength of the Ukrainian nation, for some, lay in its pluralistic society and robust civic community. For others, brandishing perhaps OUN/UPA insignia or a Cossack symbol, “Ukraine dlya Ukraintsiiv.”

“Europe starts with you” was a popular slogan on the Maidan, calling the Ukrainian people to themselves cultivate a path to Europe and its values (Khromeychuk, 2016, p. 12). “Europe,” in this case, meant both the literal European political project and its more abstract associated values. Rallying around “Europe,” then, was unifying precisely because it allowed for people to understand Europe in their own way. Of course, part of “establishing Ukraine as European...meant that Ukraine was not Russia”—this was a deliberate construction to pivot the Ukrainian people away from the Soviet past and Russian present (Channell-Justice, 2017). The “European” values were part of the Maidan’s broader normative claims. And, while the revolution may have begun out of the need to “defend Ukraine’s right to choose ‘European values,’” it turned into “a ‘revolution of dignity’ for Ukrainians themselves,” (Khromeychuk, 2015, p. 141).

The flexibility of “Europe” also facilitated far-right views. Activist Anna Dovgopol noted that “the Maidan has activated the nationalist

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61 Artem Skoropadskiy, the press officer for Praviy Sektor (Right Sector), included “abortion and same-sex marriages” in his discussion of “demoliberalizm,” and described them as “overtly Satanic and unacceptable.” (Khromeychuk, 2015, p. 136).

62 “Ukraine is for Ukrainians.” This phrase has its origins in a pamphlet from 1900 that was written and circulated by nationalist Mykola Mikhnovsky (Lindheim, 1996, p. 215).
movement,” (Khromeychuk, 2015, p. 142). While far right parties did not dominate the protests and political sphere, their presence nevertheless radicalizes Ukrainian politics. Right Sector’s Skoropadskiy explained his party’s relationship to Europe by railing against dominant liberal Western European values, adding “But there are also countries like Poland, where the influence of the Catholic Church is strongly felt and abortions are banned. This kind of Europe is closer to us, no doubt,” (Khromeychuk, 2015, p. 143). What does it mean for the Maidan revolutionaries who were fighting for “Europe,” that a conservative nationalist can fight alongside them for a different “kind of Europe”? As for the nationalists, the fact that their “rhetoric [of Ukrainian national primacy] goes against the much-supported European values does not seem to raise much concern,” (Khromeychuk, 2015, p. 142). This makes sense because, for nationalists, the idea of the Ukrainian nation supersedes the desires and political will of the Ukrainian people (especially those who disagree with them). In fact, many right-leaning nationalists support Ukraine’s membership in NATO and the EU for geopolitical reasons, even while they reject the normative values associated with joining “the West” (Olszanski, 2015, p. 8).

The mainstream articulation of nationalism on the Maidan, however, was very different from the marginal far-right one. This nationalism is centered on “civic identity” and the promotion of ethnic, linguistic and religious pluralism (Olszanski, 2015, p. 9). Solidarity was fostered among “everyone who fought for Ukraine and supported this fight,” (Olszanski, 2015, p. 6). There has been a shift, therefore, in people’s allegiance being with the Ukrainian civic state where it used to be with the
ethnic Ukrainian nation or local community. However, the mainstream nationalism, or patriotism, of the Maidan was expressed in ways that reveal a considerable amount about how many Ukrainians imagine the nation, and what historical narratives they accept. Some activists used the symbols of the OUN and UPA, not to express support for these groups’ controversial actions but to harken back to the most recent time Ukrainians fought against Moscow’s aggression in WWII.

Thinking back even further to the 16th century, activists were inspired by Ukrainian Zaporizhzhyan Cossacks and the Sich Riflemen when choosing the organizing structure for the Maidan’s self-defense unit (samooborona). It was made up of sotnyas—brigades of one hundred people (Wilson, 2014). In general, “much of the rhetoric of the Maidan...centered around the militarized symbolism of the ‘national liberation movement,’ a concept firmly connected to the state-building attempts of Ukrainians in the first half of the twentieth century,” (Khromeychuk, 2015, p. 127).

But, unlike in the 16th century, 1917-1921, or the 1940s, Ukraine is not now tasked with forging independent nationhood—it is a modern sovereign state. The Maidan revolution was not about creating a new nation but about forging new possibilities for the existing nation’s future, and defending the legitimacy of Ukraine’s right to self-determine its political path. The current generation “takes the Ukrainian state for granted” (Olszanski, 2016, p. 1). While Ukraine’s borders and security are

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63 The OUN (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists) and its military structure, the UPA (Ukrainian Insurgent Army), were active partisan groups fighting for Ukrainian independence a decade before and during WWII. Their place in Ukrainian historical memory is controversial because they are exemplary Ukrainian independence fighters to some, and irredeemable fascists to others.
precarious, its fundamental statehood is not. The difference is subtle but significant, because a wider variety of voices can and should participate in constructing Ukraine’s future when they are not shut out by urgent existential threat.

**Women’s Work and Women’s Place**

The participation of women on the Maidan and in the Eastern conflict is multi-faceted—“the variety of tasks that women performed on the Maidan correspond to the variety of women who joined the protests,” (Khromeychuk, 2015, p. 15). Politically active and radical activists purposefully used the revolutionary space to subvert gender norms and broaden “the base of Ukrainian feminism, introducing women’s rights principles to segments of the population previously reluctant to embrace feminism,” (Phillips, 2014). Other women continued their work in local activism and community organizations, such as my interviewees.

Some women came to the Maidan to embrace doing traditionally feminine tasks—cooking, cleaning, sanitation work and medical care—to assist the revolutionary efforts that way. Others came intending to fight on the barricades and were forced to join the kitchen; many ended up on the barricades anyway. There were, of course, women in the rightist groups as well, as well as women who simply looked down on or did not identify with the Maidan movement. Regardless of their exact roles in the revolution, women made up 42.8% of the protesters initially (Khromeychuk, 2015, p.124). This proportion decreased when the protests grew increasingly violent. Most women on the Maidan:

“received and sorted donated clothes, food, medication; delivered food and medical supplies to the barricades and to the frontline; worked in medical stations, kept watch
in hospitals, preventing abductions of the wounded patients; responded to Automaidan calls; organized hotlines and coordinated the transportation of the wounded for treatment abroad, etc.,” (Khromeychuk, 2015; 124).

**Women’s Brigades—**

Several women self-organized female-only *sotnyas*, three notable ones being the Olha Kobylianska Women’s *Sotnya* (OKS), the 39th Women’s *Sotnya*, and the 16th Women’s *Sotnya*.

The members of the latter two organizations made various contributions to the Maidan effort, including taking active part in the violent days of late February, when protesters clashed with police and over one hundred people died. Only three of the identified “Heavenly Hundred” departed were women, despite the fact that, as mentioned, over 40% of the original Maidan protesters were women. This is because women revolutionaries were routinely forced out of dangerous situations and away from the front lines of clashes with riot police. This is part of the phenomenon of men asserting their masculinity by protecting “individual women from other men’s

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64 Anna Kovalenko, founder of the women’s 39th, believes an Israeli model of conscription for men and women would be the right one for the Ukrainian military, which is consistent with the views of other members of the *sotnyas* (but not all), (Khromeychuk, 2015, p. 140). This is unlikely as Ukraine’s Armed Forces are traditionally the “most conservative social institution” when it comes to women’s participation, though now up to 10% of the military is made up of women (Martsenyk et al., 2016; 175). That is still a long way from half, and Ukraine’s prevailing social attitude that women need to be protected suggests that the Israeli model will be adopted any time soon.

violence,” whether women want to be defended or not (Sperling, 2015: 138). One protester explained that her grievance lay mostly in “being deprived of the right to [make the choice to participate in the clashes] independently” (Khromeychuk, 2016a, p. 28). The female sotnyas’ most meaningful function was to legitimize their members’ rights to be participating in all manner of revolutionary activity.

Each of these brigades have explained their reason for existence in terms of creating an official structure for women’s presence on the Maidan. Kateryna Chepura, the director of the women’s 16th, said that they created the sotnya to “formalize our presence on the maidan...[to say] I have the right to be here,” (Khromeychuk, 2015, p. 140). The leaders of the OKS noted that “It became clear that this sort of structure was necessary...because women felt marginalized in the public space, in which their only opportunity was to go to the kitchen to make sandwiches,” (Khromeychuk, 2015, p. 128). Not only does the women’s brigades’ formal registration67 with the samooborona unit cement their right to be in the space of the Maidan, but their existence as physical blocs of women serve as an important visual reminder that women are citizens and agents of political change.

66 The obligatory defense of women happens literally and symbolically in war time, as “women” and “nation” are increasingly conflated. During the protests, “the female body was synonymous with the motherland, Ukraine, violated by enemies and in need of protection...The woman here served to represent not the female protesters, but the nation attacked and violated” (Khromeychuk, 2016; 19). This rhetoric is not unique to Ukraine nor to this moment by any means, but it is valuable to think about what the concept of “nation” is consolidated to during Ukraine’s hybrid/civil war, and which women are therefore protected in its name. Women and children caught in conflict zones are inextricable from the ambiguous secessionist status of the Donbas— their relationship to the nation is unclear and therefore their safety is literally and symbolically quite precarious.

67 The OKS did not actually officially register, and its activists were “happy to stay outside the highly patriarchal structure in control of the Maidan,” (Khromeychuk, 2015, p. 128).
Women, in the *sotnyas* and other volunteers, were able to “challenge traditional gender roles (as carers of others and victims of conflict) and reclaim visibility, recognition, and respect as revolutionaries and volunteers” (Martsenyuk et al., 2015, p. 172). Not only were their contributions validated in the moment, but for posterity as well—“in memory politics ‘ordinary’ women are almost absent as ‘makers’ of revolution,” (Martsneyuk et al., 2016, p. 172). Membership in a *sotnya* was beyond the “ordinary” female tasks done on the Maidan, and a more formal way to get folded in to the story that is told about those winter months. The neglected contributions of ordinary women, who work outside of official structures or away from public spaces, will be explored later in this chapter.

One *sotnya* was solidifying its place in the future narrative of the Maidan while explicitly evoking women’s history. The namesake of the OKS, Olha Kobylianska, was an early 20th century writer and feminist thinker. The founders of the *sotnya* decided on her “primarily because she was a feminist,” though the group explicitly did not describe itself as feminist “for strategic reasons,” (Khromeychuk, 2015, p. 127-8). Organizations that are feminist in practice or intention, but not necessarily labeled that way, have a historical precedent in Ukraine. The OKS takes its inspiration directly from Kobylianska and more symbolically or structurally from the women’s community organizations of 19th and 20th century Ukraine. Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak, who has studied these organizations extensively, writes that their members

“sought to expand the role of women within existing institutions, making women part of a broader liberation struggle. They did not focus either upon the rights of women
or on their independence, but rather upon the importance of women and the need to expand opportunities for them” (Bohachevsky-Chomiak, 1988, p. xxii)

While some members of the OKS and other female Maidan protesters certainly intended to focus on women’s rights, all of the women who participated in the “Revolution of Dignity” were carving out a space for women to join Ukraine’s “broader liberation struggle” and the female sotnyas were an expansion within the existing samooborona structure.

Kobylianska herself believed that the “liberation of women had to be an individual effort,” as did many members of early “feminist” organizations who “tended to focus on concrete activities, which were self-help rather than philanthropic” and directed “toward developing effective self-help organizations” (Bohachevsky-Chomiak, 1988, pp. 109, xxii). Anna Kovalenko, of the women’s 39th, explained that the first thing they did with volunteers in the sotnya was to train them in “martial arts, first aid, and gas mask training, as well as legal and psychology briefings, to inform them how to react in certain situations” (Khromeychuk, 2015, p. 138). Swift grassroots training was commonplace on the Maidan as people were navigating a revolution in real time. The sotnyas taught women valuable skills, turning them into revolutionaries and empowering them as individuals.

Observers on the Maidan saw that, through their participation, women were transformed on a “very personal level” and felt more confident about their power and potential (Phillips, 2014, p. 8). In my conversations with women who organize in the civil society sector, I learned that they also experienced a positive, affective change as
they grew more comfortable in their roles as community leaders and activists. The creation of a legitimating organization or structure gives women the possibility to develop themselves as *fakhivtsi*\(^68\) or revolutionaries and then to use their new skills and self-esteem to give back to the collective.

When Olha Kobylianska posited that the liberation of women must be “individual,” she did not mean “alone.” Her words can be interpreted to mean that true liberation for Ukrainian women must necessarily include a personal transformation, and a reevaluation of oneself as a complex human being worthy of participation in public, political life. In 1928, early feminist Sofia Rusova thanked Kobylianska for her writing that “created an authentic revolution in human lives,” in Rusova’s words (Bohachevsky-Chomiak, 1988, p. 108). For many of the women on the Maidan, the revolution was two-fold—the Ukrainian nation rebelled against a corrupt history repeating itself, and the female revolutionaries established space for themselves as people who have a stake and a say in the nation’s future.

**Imagined Communities, Traditional Roles**

The gender ideology of the Maidan’s right wing groups, and the activism of feminists and the Zhinocha sotnyas represent opposing interpretations of the relationship between gender and nationalism. But of course, most people and their respective ideologies fell somewhere between the two. How did the mainstream members of the Maidan, who were imagining the future, post-revolutionary Ukrainian political community, envision women fitting in? Whether the nationalism is far right

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\(^68\) *Fakhivets’* (singular) roughly means “expert” or “specialist,” and in my interviews this word was used with great admiration for scholars, community organizers and activists who had impact in their line of work.
or the kind that is more widely embraced, “this sort of ideology fixed definitions of masculinity and femininity” on the Maidan (Khromeychuk, 2015, p. 143).

Nationalism in Ukraine evokes the cultural and political symbols of Ukrainian history and frequently has a patriarchal tone. In imagining a new future for the Ukrainian nation, the position of women is still based on the past. In the way that importing a framework of liberal feminism to Ukraine’s specific cultural context is thorny, recreating historical social structures to deal with contemporary issues without critical assessment does no one any particular favors. Even the expressions of nationalism that seek to uplift women by recalling the Berehynia or ancient Ukrainian matriarchy do little to advance, and can undermine, the gender equality agenda.

The Maidan revolution was a radical moment in Ukrainian history, and underlined the choice between “the well-trodden route of traditionalism together with its strictly prescribed roles for men and women [and rebooting] truly the whole system” (Khromeychuk, 2015, p. 143). Popular nationalism draws on the desire for sovereignty and self-determination—for their citizenship to mean something. As already briefly mentioned, the label “citizen” can be less meaningful applied to a woman than to a man, because public and political spaces are constructed to limit women’s participation.

Maria Berlinska, participant in the Maidan and volunteer with the Ukrainian Armed Forces asserted that she and every woman is entitled to participate in

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nation-building: “If an adult, rights-bearing person consciously decides to go to the center of the action to fight for her people—that is her holy, sacred right” (Phillips, 2014, p. 1). When the men on the Maidan physically prevented women from joining the “center of the action,” they were not only protecting vulnerable counterparts, as they saw it, but preventing their fellow citizens from exercising their “holy rights.” Berlinska’s phrasing itself provides a useful formulation of nationalism: a sentiment that imbues political rights with the sacred. Nationalism requires a belief in the national community’s transcendence—only then is someone willing to fight and die “for her people.”

Some women, such as Berlinska, asserted their place by acting on their right to participate in the Ukrainian crisis. Others felt responsibility: “The duty of every citizen is to defend the territorial integrity of the state” (Martsenyuk et al., 2016, p. 180). The anonymous female activist who justified her role in the Maidan this way links her citizenship to that which she owes the state, the nation, and her community. Berlinska, on the other hand, associates citizenship with what is owed to her—the freedom to fight. Rights and duties are the two pillars of citizenship, and should theoretically be balanced. As discussed, however, some Ukrainian women feel that they have devoted themselves to local and national duty while their rights are constrained. Milena Rudnystka, a Ukrainian intellectual, early feminist, and ten year president of the original Soiuz Ukrainok (Union of Ukrainian Women), wrote in her 1934 address to the first Ukrainian Women’s Congress that “We have always placed duties before rights” (Lindheim, 1996, p. 285). Nearly a century later, Ukrainian
women continue to bear responsibility for the nation without being afforded, in practice, the rights that men exercise freely.

As a result, Ukrainian women have a kind of lopsided citizenship, which is exacerbated by a political crisis that requires sacrifice from everyone. As activists continue their work, the relationship between Ukrainian women and their nation-state must be evaluated and perhaps reconsidered. What kind of new, robust political demands can women make if they succeed in asserting themselves as rights-bearing persons and not just mourning mothers or feminine symbols?

A nationalism that could secure a more meaningful citizenship for women—one that acknowledges the significance of civic contributions and community building—is potentially on the rise in Ukraine. Among the younger members of the Maidan, there was “an increased willingness...to identify with the state” and not along regional or linguistic terms (Olszanski, 2015, p. 7). Furthermore, “the Ukrainian version of nationalism has turned out to be inclusive, democratic, and ‘horizontal’ in essence (i.e. intolerant of hierarchical structure)” (Wynnyckyj, 2017). However, even as Ukrainian people are becoming more open to civic loyalty, the military conflict has changed the terms of nationalism and fostered rhetoric that frames men and women in traditionally nationalist terms.

For example, Pavlo Podobed, of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, said that “a nation without heroes is a nation without defenders,” putting national loyalty and contribution in military terms. Ukrainian scholar Olesya Khromeychuk criticizes the way this statement “distorts” how women actually participate in a
society in crisis because “there is no space for them in the traditional heroic perception of ‘defenders’” (Khromeychuk, 2016b). Because “hero” usually implies male fighter, and the “hero” is elevated to such a high status, an entire array of civilian and non-male contributions are left out of the national narrative—and the requisite benefits that come with “defending” the nation in the official sense.

The material consequences of ignoring women’s participation in the ATO include women generally being relegated to service and care work, which is paid less, and being inadequately supplied, especially when it comes to gynecological services (Martsenyuk, 2016). Sometimes, women actively fighting in volunteer military positions are officially registered as being in service work and therefore do not have legitimate combatant status and do not get veterans’ entitlements—“the legal invisibility of women leads to infrastructural invisibility” (Martsenyuk, 2016, p. 179). It also makes women invisible in the political imagination of war and militaristic nationalism. A civic national community allows more flexibility with gender roles than traditional or conservative nationalism, and it could potentially “unite Ukrainians around a peaceful civic identity” that acknowledges civilian contributions to the conflict.

**Women in the Military**

The challenges of being a soldier at war are only intensified when the soldier is a woman. In recognition of women’s unique status in the military, in 2016 the

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70 Men also suffer when a society expects them to do something heroic and to be militaristic count as members of the community. Maidan participant Daria Popova said, “men have the choice of two roles: heroes or cowards,” and the men who did not join the Maidan were given the special term of ridicule “the sofa unit” (Khromeychuk, 2016, p. 41).
Ukrainian government adopted the National Action Plan to implement the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR 1325) on Women’s Peace and Security (WPS), which was created by the UNSC in 2000. The plan aims to address the issues of female soldiers and to foster the participation of women in peace-making and conflict resolution processes, providing a framework for state organizations and NGOs at national and local levels (Martsenyuk, 2016, p. 182). The plan is part of the Ukrainian Armed Forces’ recent policy of gender mainstreaming in military life—a formulation that shapes many areas of Ukrainian national gender policy—and is meant to “[harmonize] the security and defense standards and principles with NATO and EU membership standards” (Martsenyuk, 2016, p. 182).

The resolution’s main thrust is to eliminate the “cultural barriers” that prevent women from fully participating in peacekeeping, conflict prevention, and other matters of national security. To pair with the gender equality (or “gender mainstreaming”) aspect of the policy, there is a focus on the “women’s issues” that are exacerbated or caused by the conflict. The resolution explicitly aims to protect women and girls affected by violence and dislocation, especially victims of military or domestic abuse.71 In the year since the NAP was implemented, the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense has opened more military positions to women, assessed their needs in the Armed Forces and, most significantly, has instituted gender-sensitivity training (Martsenyuk, 2016, p. 182).

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There are two critiques of the well-intentioned UNSC resolution to consider. The first is an anti-military, anti-war critique that says increased women’s participation in warfare is not productive because the military industrial complex reproduces violence and patriarchal hierarchy. Classic liberal feminism suggests that women engaging in military service “is an important part of equal rights and, ultimately, leads to obtaining full citizenship in their countries” whereas radical feminism views “women’s service as a reification of martial citizenship” and cooperation with a notoriously misogynist and violent state sector (Martsenyuk, 2016, p. 174). The UNSC resolution is clearly operating in the liberal Western framework, not only because it requires “harmonizing” Ukraine with NATO and the EU. As previously discussed, fostering easier access to the Armed Forces is an acknowledgement of women’s right to serve. However, this still ties the concept of military heroism with national loyalty and, by extension, with citizenship. This particular critique has far less salience now that Ukraine is actively engaged in conflict, and a reevaluation or reduction of the entire military infrastructure (not just of women’s roles) is not an available option.

A second criticism of the resolution is that it stresses women’s roles as peace-builders or peace-keepers on the assumption that they are naturally more peaceful or more adept at conflict resolution than men.72 Aside from being an essentialist and

72 American feminist scholar Sara Ruddick concisely explains the reality that undermines this assumption: “Women’s peacefulness is at least as mythical as men’s violence...women usually justify their militarism as men do, in terms of loyalty, patriotism and the right...Like some men, some women are fierce and enthusiastic militarists; others, also like some men, see war as a natural catastrophe but collude with it...Most women, like most men, believe that violence must be met by violence and that the virtue of a cause justifies the horrors done in its name” (Ruddick, 1995, p. 154).
therefore not very helpful scheme, it reinforces the idea that men are inevitably violent and conflict-prone, absolving them of responsibility for working towards peace and putting that onus on women. At the same time, the National Action Plan calls for women to participate in “peace processes,” but not to be integrated into decision-making positions in state political institutions, revealing that the plan for Women’s Peace and Security likely has more symbolic than actual political consequences. The UN Security Council in particular, and others like it, has paid more attention “to the women-as-victim element and less to the demand for women’s greater participation [in governing bodies]” (Cohn and Jacobson, 2013, p. 117). The imposed protection of women, physically at the barricades and in legislation, reinforces their subordinate status.

Maidens, Heroes and Gatekeeping

Nationalism and national myth-making creates a divide between the public and the private. History and heroism happen in public—what happens at home plays a minimal role in either. Being prevented from participating in public, civic life (especially during a revolution) or one’s participation being written out of the narrative means being excluded from the history of the nation. There are a few issues with this paradigm. Primarily, the fact that women’s participation in pivotal Ukrainian history does not make its way into the nation’s political imagination, does not mean that they did not participate.

73 The rhetoric that women are naturally peaceful (and therefore should be protected and excluded from violent protests) also abounded on the Maidan (Khromeychuk, 2015, p. 133)
In her description of the movement beginning in 1917, Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak writes that “the nation provided the heroes; the plight of the people justified the cause. Women contributed to the struggle, but remained peripheral in its identification,” (Bohachevsky-Chomiak, 1988, p. xix). This describes both the memorialization of the early 20th century Ukrainian movement and its erasure of women, and the periphery women on the Maidan and in the Donbas find themselves in one hundred years later. The Orange Revolution, a much more recent historical precedent for Maidan revolutionaries, had a similar issue in that “women’s organizations played a limited role in [the Orange Revolution], even though women as activists and protesters were crucial to its success” (Hrycak, 2007, p. 208). In 2004, unlike in 1917, there were explicitly feminist organizations in Ukraine, but most of the women who participated in the revolution were not protesting with specifically feminist goals. On the Maidan, there actually are women’s rights activists but, once again, their contributions and their vision for the future of the nation do not get incorporated into the Revolution of Dignity’s “identification.”

In some ways, the contemporary crisis is more aptly compared to 1917-1921 than it is to the Orange Revolution. In both periods, there was significant social turmoil and militarization of society. The respective crises affect the entire nation and certain individuals’ lives dramatically. During such moments, people are called upon to do things they would never do as peacetime civilians in the name of their nation and community. Men, women and children reevaluate their own roles, abilities and values during such unstable periods. Between 1914 and 1922, Ukrainian women were
“thrust into conditions over which they had no control. Compared to war and diplomacy, the problems facing women seemed minor—food, shelter, care—but were concrete...The men fought for their ideals while the women tried to feed the children, till the land and save life itself” (Bohachevsky-Chomiak, 1989, p. 126). While things have changed significantly for women as political and social subjects in the last century, this fundamental discrepancy exists in one form or another today.

An approach to the national narrative that excludes domestic work and other women’s work done privately in the name of the cause, is an approach that ignores the mechanisms that keep a revolution and a nation alive. Feminists since the 1960s have argued that “the personal is political,” “refusing to accept the western liberal tradition’s construction of social life as divided into two spheres—the public, masculinized, ‘political’ realm of governance and ‘private,’ domestic, feminized, ‘nonpolitical’ sphere of home and family,” (Cohn and Jacobson, 2013, p. 103). As previously discussed, women’s lives in Ukraine since 2014 have been already politicized. Now it is necessary to account for how this politicization will potentially affect future activism, social relationships, and women’s self-conceptions.

Some of the broadest aims of any feminist or women-centered activism are about re-evaluating and claiming space for women in history, in a nation’s narrative, as political beings or at least as autonomous individuals who shaped the nation’s political and social configuration. Part of this process necessarily includes re-evaluating concepts like “hero,” “mother,” “warrior,” and “peacemaker.” Upon closer
inspection of historic and contemporary realities, the assumptions that go into these concepts fall apart, unsupportable.

The contradictions and misconstructions of ideas such as “hero” and “peacemaker” have already been touched on, but the concept of “motherhood,” as it shifts to serve various political interests during the crisis, deserves special attention. Maternalist discourse, tied to Ukraine’s population decline and socially traditional mainstream, had been a part of the country’s politics for years before the crisis. Today, motherhood is being used by the state as a justification for violence and military action as part of the mechanism of forced protection. Symbolic invocations of the “motherland” and the “hearth-mother” Berehynia serve political nationalism to compel sons to fight for the cause.

Motherhood motivates women themselves for various forms of political participation. Some female activists commented that they felt they were “pseudo mothering” male activists by making sure their needs were met, while many actual mothers were unable to participate in the protests because of child care responsibilities (Martsenyuk and Onuch, 2014). Typically, the male partners of the mothers who stayed home were on the Maidan, reinforcing the idea that men are not restricted to private quarters while women are. Furthermore, motherhood is associated with being caring and helpful but not usually with being assertive or a leader. This categorization undermined women’s ability to claim “making” the revolution, not just sweetly helping it along.
The leverage of motherhood can work in either direction, however, and some mothers have found that “framing their actions as based in their concerns as mothers” has been somewhat effective for making political demands (Cohn and Jacobson, 2013, p. 107). Some Maidan activists tied their motherhood to their political aspirations, such as the desire “for their children to grow up in a ‘safe’ and ‘democratic’ society” (Martsenyuk and Onuch, 2014, p. 13). “Motherhood,” for all of its symbolic value and literal importance, is a politically fraught category. Sara Ruddick argued in 1989, that motherhood “is not necessarily confined to biological mothers or even to women, and anyone who takes on the task, male or female, can adopt this position” (Cohn and Jacobson, 2013, p. 108). But, the biologically essentialist definition has much more purchase, and rather than being a co-parent of equal standing with their male partner, women frequently take up the mantle of “motherhood” with all of its requisite sacrifices and political marginalization.

“Women were allowed to speak out…as ‘victims and martyrs—usually to preface their own death.’ They can also 'legitimately rise up to speak—to defend their homes, their children, their husbands or the interests of other women,’” (Khromeychuk, 2015, p. 125). Women also were prepared to die for their children, to sacrifice themselves for their motherland. What does it mean for this kind of sacrifice to not get folded into the narrative of heroism? A hero might be defined as a person willing to die for their nation—a martyr is one who has died already. Plenty

74 A Russian maternalist organization, the “Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia,” began their organization in mournful protest of the war in Afghanistan and eventually focused on more general anti-military activism. For more, see: Elkner, Julie: *Dedovshchina and the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers under Gorbachev* The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies, (2004). Web.
of women, mothers or not, are prepared to, and do, die for Ukraine. Yet somehow, their femininity can turn what is considered a brave or noble act into a tragedy or pity, and their motherhood undermines their valor in the national imagination.75

One of the most striking and succinct quotes from the Maidan came from Olha Vesnyanka, a human rights activist and journalist, and co-organizer of the OKS. “We are absolutely equal participants of all events in Ukraine; good or bad,” (Khromeychuk, 2015, p. 144). It is a simple request for subjectivity, for the ability to hold the weight of history together with their male counterparts. And Ukraine has a heavy, complex history—all the more reason to uncover and understand the people who have been left out of its accounts.

History records only the brightest moments—there is no space in the story for the banality of everyday life. Popular imaginings of war and revolution make them seem exciting and consistently galvanizing, which neatly conceals the uninspiring majority of time spent by revolutionaries and soldiers feeling anxious, drained, and performing rote tasks. That is not a rousing narrative—“by no means spectacular, banal in fact.” Slavenka Drakulić’s words, which open my thesis, remain central to my thinking about social movements and especially women’s activism. Exploring mundane moments reveals a considerable amount about the complex texture of life during moments of national crisis.

75 That the act of dying is gendered at all is strange, especially considering the conditions of modern war and warfare. Whatever physical advantages that men may have in hand to hand combat certainly do not make them more impervious to sniper fire, bombs and other arms that were used on the Maidan and in the war.
Maria Berlinska referred to being denied from certain Maidan spaces as a “banal injustice,” which is an excellent expression of women’s sociopolitical subordination in general. Constant restrictions, and political and social gatekeeping, happen so frequently as to become almost boring. The ubiquity of injustice makes it challenging to maintain the momentum of feminist activism, and a similar challenge presented itself to the Maidan revolutionaries and to generations of Ukrainian revolutionaries before them. How does a democratic, equality-minded movement sustain itself when it is no longer time for passionate speeches and prayers, or Molotov cocktails, but for civic organizing, compromise, and the unglamorous work of creating and governing communities? As Anna Dovgopol beautifully put it, “We want to emphasize that the making of sandwiches does not mean supporting the revolution, it means making the revolution happen,” (Khromeychuk, 2015, p. 129).

**Eastern Conflict Effects on Interviewees**

Each of the three organizations has been affected by the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine, and each of them agree that it is still crucial, if not even more so now, to push for gender equality and women’s rights during this tumultuous time.

Khodakova of “Open Society,” echoes the concerns of the other two organizers: abuse, assault and violence against women has increased as a result of the conflict, which she refers to as a “hybrid war.” While her organization’s financial standing was not affected, Khodakova says that it has definitely influenced their work. For her part, she explains that she felt she really needed to help with the conflict in the beginning, then she felt alienated and did not want to be involved, and
later again wanted to help. It comes in waves, Khodakova explains. And, though the organization is not in a financially precarious position, the government has withdrawn some money “to fund the army, the ATO, etc.”

The elections that followed President Yanukovych being removed from power brought in a new set of political officials who were not versed in gender sensitivity. “It felt like we had to start from the beginning,” Khodakova says, and to speak with people who retorted that “now [Ukraine] has all these issues, and you’re talking nonsense.” She goes on to give examples of the “nonsense”—women in the East who join the fight, but register as cooks and cleaning ladies, or the countless who are abused and assaulted during wartime conditions. And the struggle is not limited to the streets of the Donbas. Khodakova explains that she predicts there will be a post-war syndrome, a wave of aggression and fragility to accompany the depression and despair of the current moment. This aggression will likely manifest itself, in one way, within the home where violence towards women is prevalent.

Golovashenko, of the VGSC is of a similar mind because she believes that Ukrainian society is undergoing intense psychological pressure that affects interpersonal relationships. The domestic and sexual abuse that she feels is on the rise “cannot be dealt with through activism only, or viral campaigns. This issue has a serious societal foundation.” Because of that, she explains, it is necessary and a high priority to ensure that Ukrainians understand that they have basic rights and move forward from there.
In general she feels we must understand Ukrainian society and what people need before moving ahead with actions. “Ukraine is undergoing many processes right now, and it’s important to constantly determine, determine, determine—to continuously do humanitarian studies to understand what is happening.” This is accomplished easily enough, were it not for the massive cuts to funding in the humanities studies, Golovashenko explains. “I would be speaking a lot more optimistically if we had the resources for this, for systemic educational activity.”

Golovashenko goes on to say that Ukraine’s public image—for the world and for itself—has changed dramatically, but that Vinnytsia did not waver for a second in its clear understanding of the conflict and how it affects human relationships. She has friends and colleagues from the Donetsk oblast, and she has come to understand what it means to come from that region and to be in that situation. Similarly to Khodakova, Golovashenko also expresses concern for the “battalion of refusers,” the women who sign up as cooks and cleaners but go fight in the war.

As has been the case for much of Ukrainian gender equality activism, Golovashenko and her organization have been told that they are a “second order priority.” She explains that government officials have been prioritizing other issues first. “We have to discuss economic issues, we have to fix [...] in times of war,” Golovashenko quotes an official. “One might think that I’m on Mars, and not also in a time of war!” she replies. Coming from a philosophical perspective, she quotes her colleague who said “Albert Camus could sit in a café in 1942 and stare at the black
ceiling, discussing rights with Jean Paul Sartre, and people treat us like we’re playing with jewelry.”

Golovashenko believes that giving Ukrainians the instruments and tools to understand gender and discrimination at the individual and systemic levels is key. And, she warns against “the strong temptation to fall to nationalism. We cannot say ‘we’re the best!’ Why the best? Because we were born on Friday.” She believes not in the arbitrary “greatness” of the Ukrainian national concept, but in a realistic assessment of the country and its people—for better or worse. Golovashenko also explains that they have the ideas to arm Ukrainians with gender sensitivity, but without resources she is not sure how they will accomplish their goals.

The Gender Museum and Center for Gender Studies have similar urgent concerns and challenges. As mentioned, their financial situation is unstable, making it even more difficult to focus on the work that they do. The safety of women in the Donbas, as well as the lack of women in leadership roles in Ukraine have become key issues for the Museum and Center. Bashuk mentions UN Resolution 1325, discussed earlier in the chapter, which is meant to “underline the importance of ensuring equal, full and active participation of women in conflict prevention and resolution, peace-building and peacekeeping.” Compliance with this resolution includes creating more opportunities for women to hold political office and the ability to work at the decision-making level. Though Ukraine passed this resolution, Bashuk notes, it must still be monitored and carried out fully.
Currently, the Center is working on a project called “IDPs and Host Communities: Building Tolerance through Dialogue,” which is a direct response to a problem that has come about because of the conflict. Bashuk explains that obtaining funding to help repair the consequences of the conflict is a high priority right now, as well as attending to the needs of those most affected by the conflict. The Ukrainian government and international donors have, as is the case with other organizations, been less giving towards activism that involves peace-building processes and women’s initiatives for ending the conflict. “Without systemic support, our actions will not succeed,” Bashuk explains.

Conclusion

As the hybrid conflict continues in Ukraine, with no actionable peace plan or negotiations in sight, it is easy for Ukrainian people to grow weary and cynical. The conditions on war, even when limited to a separatist region, take a profound toll on Ukrainian citizens. The condition of women’s lives too easily recedes in times of conflict, even though women suffer from and contribute to the political and military struggle. Space for a future-facing activism becomes marginalized because the nation must face its present reality. But, though it feels impossible today to envision a hopeful and just future, it is critical to extend the political imagination to new possibilities and radical futures.
Conclusion

Before I offer concluding remarks about the content of this thesis—Ukrainian women’s activism—I would like to discuss a few points about this thesis as a work of political scholarship, and as an inquiry in progress.

Implications for Comparative Analysis

My analysis of Ukrainian women’s activism yields two potentially fruitful directions for comparative research. First, it would be valuable to compare the Ukrainian case with the conditions of women’s organizations in other nations that are prone to popular uprisings. Second, it is worth putting my work in conversation with analyses of civil societies that are heavily influenced by foreign funding in other former Soviet countries. How do the issues present in Ukraine—spotty institutionalization of gender laws and asymmetrical ideological influences—manifest themselves in other non-Western countries? This kind of comparison can provide answers to theoretical questions, such as: what conditions are necessary for a social movement to be successful? And by what standards should success be evaluated?

Televised Revolution

If the choice of uprising is limited to the last decade, the Arab Spring (2011-2013) makes an excellent comparison to Ukraine. Beginning as a series of protests in Tunisia, late December of 2010, the revolutions that came to be known as the Arab Spring spread across Egypt, Morocco, and Algeria, and eventually covered nearly the whole of North Africa and the Middle East (Khalil, 2014, p. 131). Each
country and region’s history of those years is different, and feature widely varying circumstances, cultures and outcomes.

However, a few illustrative examples run parallel with Ukraine’s revolutionary experience. Most of the Arab Spring movements can be characterized as a struggle for “political reform, dignity for citizens, freedom of regime control, and economic opportunities for youth” (Kharroub, 2016). Broadly speaking, the Revolution of Dignity was centered around these goals as well, though the Ukrainian state is less authoritarian than many of the governments shaken by the Arab uprisings.\textsuperscript{76} The gendered aspect of these revolutions also echoes the Ukrainian case — “serious discussions about gender equity have been sidelined by louder and ongoing complications of transitional democracy...and protracted questions of transitional justice” in North Africa and the Middle East (Khalil, 2014, p. 131). The existential and logistical questions that arise after a revolution are usually unaccommodating to “details” like feminist demands.

The mechanisms for addressing women’s issues before the uprisings were quite different as well. Broadly speaking, how the “woman question” would be dealt with, in North Africa especially, was decided by political bodies in the countries’ authoritarian governments as part of their “secular modernization”\textsuperscript{77} reforms and Western-supported neoliberal market transition (Kharroub, 2016). In Egypt, for


\textsuperscript{77} Another critical difference between Ukraine and the nations of the Arab Spring is that Ukraine has a mainly Christian cultural history, while the Middle East and North Africa are majority Muslim regions and have historically been a part of the Islamic world. Approaches to gender are necessarily informed by the dominant religion in these places, to the degree that religion plays a role in policy and social practices, and must be analyzed with this context in mind.
example, the women’s rights agenda was set and carried out by the National Council for Women, run by the former first lady, Suzanne Mubarak. Meanwhile, independent local organizations were intensely limited by strict freedom of association laws (Pratt, 2015).

And, though Egyptian women enjoyed a new variety of activism accessible to them during the revolution itself, the new regime has returned to embracing gender activism as part of a “patriarchal bargain”—female activism that remains loyal to the state is sanctioned, while more radical feminist or anti-authoritarian grievances are treated as political threats. The women who voice these complaints in public protests are not considered worthy of government protection and are even subjected to violence and sexual assault at the hands of Egyptian state security (Pratt, 2015).

In Ukraine, centralized de jure “gender equality” was the domain of the Soviet state, which is the closest approximation to the Middle East and North African pre-Arab Spring model. But, as this thesis describes, for the last 25 years in Ukraine the actual work of addressing women’s issues has been done at the local and grassroots level, with minimal helpful government intervention. Furthermore, the deficiencies of Ukraine’s civil society were mainly due to inadequate financial and institutional support, not active repression. So, the pre-Maidan structural conditions in Ukraine differed from those in the pre-revolutionary Arab world and led to different post-revolutionary outcomes.

Another critical divergence in these stories is the use of violence, particularly sexual violence, as a tool of state repression. Unfortunately, the Arab Spring protests
included the degradation of women into political submission—the infamous “blue bra” incident on Egypt’s Tahrir Square, in which a woman was partially stripped, dragged and beaten by soldiers, is just one example. Others include group sexual assaults in the squares that held the revolutions, and “virginity tests” forced on female protesters by soldiers of the Egyptian Armed Forces (Pratt, 2015). During Ukraine’s Maidan Revolution there were no widely known sexual abuses,\(^{78}\) and while state security clashed with protesters violently, sexual brutality or humiliation was not an instrument of government control.

An enduring similarity between Ukraine and the Arab world with regard to gender activism is that the “association between the corrupt elite oppressive regimes and women’s rights” is not an association that will ultimately serve vulnerable, underserved women in these nations—it will serve the elites (Kharroub, 2016). The development of a robust and financially secure civil society, in both parts of the world, is crucial for the kind of grassroots activism that can empower and support women according to their needs.

**Comparisons Across the Former Soviet Union**

There are several points of comparison that are worthy of analysis between Ukraine and other former Soviet Socialist Republics. A line of inquiry that is particularly relevant in today’s political climate is about the limits of liberalism, or more specifically of liberal intervention. In the Russian case, things do not appear to

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\(^{78}\) One woman reported being sexually assaulted in the Maidan’s “tent city” to the Kyiv police in late December of 2013. The police later reported that the medical results did not confirm that the woman had been assaulted, and she withdrew her complaint. Regardless of what actually took place that urged the woman to turn to the police, this was not an incident that gained attention or was rallied around (TSN.ua, 2014).
differ significantly from Ukraine. As scholar Julie Hemment argues in her analysis of provincial women’s groups, Russia’s “third sector is a professionalized realm of NGOs, inaccessible to most local groups and compromised by its links to a neoliberal version of development” (Hemment, 2004). Of course, Russian civil society does not have an armed conflict on its territory to navigate, but it is potentially under threat from the state. The description of Russia’s “third sector” applies to Ukraine’s civil society quite accurately.

Venturing to Central Europe, one finds that Hungary, for example, is struggling with a similar challenge. Katalin Fábián find that while the exposure to international funding and ideology has had some positive effects on Hungarian activism, “women’s movements have also been constrained by the underlying norms and implementation of neoliberalism” (Fábián, 2014). The influence of foreign feminism has resulted in a toned-down, narrower feminist agenda but one that resonates transnationally, garnering Hungarian women more support but not necessarily for issues that are local priorities. The imposition of neoliberal frameworks has been accompanied by a shift from concerns over economic security and state assistance to concern for individual rights. This transition can be observed in Ukraine as well. Liberal rights discourse can, and does, empower individual women but weakens the potential of a larger women’s movement.

The pattern of NGO policy agendas being a mismatch for local priorities can be found in Central Asian countries as well. In Kyrgyzstan, considered one of the

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79 In 2015, Russia passed legislation that gives the government authority to fine or close down international organizations if they are deemed “foreign agents” (WSJ, 2015).
most progressive former Soviet countries in Central Asia, foreign approaches have even been seen as potentially subversive. In 2014 the legislature tried to pass a law similar to Russia’s to suppress NGOs operating as “foreign agents,” but the law was struck down in 2016. Critics of Kyrgyzstan’s civil society, aside from the anxious government, argue that the women’s rights NGO sector is made up of a cadre of educated, Russian (and sometimes English) speaking, “professional” activists. They typically focus on issues that they can obtain grants for, not on “the needs and interests of the people their organizations are supposed to be helping” (Hoare, 2016). These criticisms ring true for Ukrainian civil society activism, especially in its early years.

What does it mean for the liberal project if foreign-funded NGOs have a controlling interest, so to speak, in post-Soviet civil society but they are being met with resistance and reluctance by the people who live in these places? What does this common characteristic of post-Soviet women’s activism imply about the “universal” in “universal human rights”? Comparing the conditions of Ukraine’s transitioning, revolutionary women’s movement to those of other nations can suggest answers to these questions and illuminate broader discussions about social activism and democracy.

Ukrainian Identity and the Future of a Movement

There cannot be an “indigenous feminism” in Ukraine that is funded from abroad. The hegemonic ideological constraints that are tied to Western money

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effectively prevent the development of a robust, culture-specific gender equality
movement. The noble ideals of the liberal feminist framework do not fail (or succeed
only intermittently) because no one believes they are worth striving for. It is just the
opposite—if one asked Ukrainian people if they believe in equal rights and equal
opportunities for individual men and women, most would say they do. But the liberal
framework insists on somehow eventually liberating the collective by virtue of
individual freedoms, not on freeing the individual by way of addressing women as a
political and social bloc.

Even without the complications of foreign funding, “indigeneity” in Ukraine
is incredibly complex—the term may have to always stay in quotation marks.
Contemporary national identities range from civic-oriented, pluralistic conceptions of
what it means to be Ukrainian, to the staunchly dichotomous identities of Soviet-
nostalgic Russian-speaking people, on the one hand, and ethnic nationalists, on the
other. The political divisions between Eastern and Western Ukraine, while
exaggerated for political maneuvers, are also based in different experiences with
sovereignty and occupation; different historical regime types and political cultures;
divergent religions; and, of course, distinct linguistic backgrounds (Korostelina, 2013,
p. 293).

Furthermore, popular discourse about this variety of identity types mostly
emphasizes a Russo-Ukrainian spectrum, critically omitting the other ethnic and
cultural identities of those who live on Ukrainian territory. Tatars (the indigenous
people of Crimea), Ruthenians (a distinct ethnocultural group in the Carpathian
Mountains), Poles, Lithuanians, Jews, Moldovans, etc. have all lived on (and off) Ukrainian land as borders shifted, and neighboring peoples migrated, during the last several centuries.

“Indigeneity,” if held to a strictly ethnic definition, loses coherence in the Ukrainian case. That which is usually deployed to unite a multi-ethnic national community—shared history—also cannot be used effectively in Ukraine. It is a nation where two people can interpret a shared history to reach opposite conclusions.

Women are by no means exempt from the intricate tangle of culture, ethnicity, region and history. It is ill-advised to assume that the identity of “womanhood” will overpower the other cultural markers, values, and affinities that Ukrainian women have.

When I left my interview with Svitlana Khodakova, I could not stop thinking about how her eyes lit up when she spoke of her first introduction to feminist work—a training session at which she learned about creating a value system for yourself. I did not understand what she meant at first. Was she somehow living without any guiding values before that session? Certainly not. She described being “pragmatic” before that day, and stuck in an endless, dreary cycle. What I now understand is that for Svitlana, and many others, the cynicism and hopelessness of Ukraine’s early transition years left her feeling unattached to any positive principles. Shifting her thinking to a worldview in which things mattered again, in which her community was critical to her and she felt connected to it, changed her political perspective and gave her purpose.
In trying to make sense of Ukrainian national identity and womanhood, and the care that must go into sustaining both, I have found that a robust, shared system of values can be the force that drives a movement. A civic national identity is of course, is based not on fixed ethnic characteristics, but on a shared investment in a set of positive beliefs about the people of Ukraine and the country’s future. There is almost a poetry to the Ukrainian phrase for “shared values”—спільні цінності—that elevates the concept. These values may very well incorporate the liberal ideals of equality, pluralism, individual expression and autonomy. The problem is not with the ideals themselves, but with their forced imposition.

Fostering one value system across an entire (fractured) nation is challenging, of course. It may even be impossible. But one can start at the smallest civic level—the community. Community must be embraced, in practice and in theory. Whatever orientation an “indigenous” Ukrainian feminism has, to be successful it must address local needs. The “universal” may try to intervene but Ukrainian feminism must remain dedicated to the particular. “Women’s work” in Ukraine has been and will continue to be the work of building and supporting communities. Providing women with infrastructural and financial security, and crucially, autonomy, to sustain and empower those they are closest to and understand the most, is not only worthwhile but imperative.
Appendix—

Interview Questions (the interviews were conducted in Ukrainian):

1. What is your name?
2. What is your occupation?
3. What activist activities are you involved in/what organizations are you a member of?
4. What is your occupation within your organization?
   a. What are you day-to-day tasks? How much time do you devote to your membership duties?
   b. How did you come to be a member of this organization? How long have you been a part of it?
5. What does your organization specialize in/prioritize? Why are these specific issues important to you?
   a. What methods do you/your organization use in your activism?
   b. Have any methods been more successful than others?
6. Where does your organization get funding?
   a. Does the Ukrainian government recognize your organization?
   b. Does the government assist you in any way? Has it ever tried to prevent your activist efforts or hamper them in any way?
7. Could you describe, generally, the members of your organization?
   a. What proportion are women? What proportion have a higher education?
   b. Are there any other characteristics you can think of that are prevalent in the members of your organization?
8. Has the Eastern conflict affected the work you/your organization does?
   a. In a material way? E.g. affected funding, number of hours you/other people are working?
   b. In an ideological way? E.g. your goals, activities, or methods?
9. What are the biggest challenges that Ukraine faces in terms of gender equality today?
   a. Have these changed over time?
10. Is there anything else you’d like to discuss, or that you feel is important for me to know?
Bibliography—


