

# Towards Gender Equality in the Ukrainian Society

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*Tamara Martsenyuk*

Gender equality has been one of the values of democratic societies for more than 50 years. Its declaration as a value implies the achievement of an equal position for both women and men in all spheres of life in society through the legal provision of equal rights and opportunities and the elimination of gender discrimination. It also infers an application of temporary special measures aimed at eliminating the imbalance in the opportunities of women and men in exercising equal rights.

These ideas should be put into practice by building sustainable institutional support for gender equality: the equal involvement of women and men in various spheres of public life, such as family, politics, security and defense; taking into account the needs of different categories of the population, such as women and men of different ages, marital status, region of origin, or states of health; counteracting gender stereotypes and gender violence; and expanding awareness-raising activities and a culture of gender equality.

In Ukraine, a lot has been done over the last 30 years to draw attention to the topic of gender equality and human rights in general. Firstly, a national mechanism for ensuring gender equality has been developed. Back in 2005, the Law of Ukraine “On ensuring equal rights and opportunities for women and men” was adopted. Ukraine also became the first post-Soviet country to adopt a law against domestic violence in 2001. The work of the executive authorities tasked with overseeing these policies is coordinated by the Government Commissioner for Gender Policy. These are all components of so-called “top-down” approach regarding the regulation of gender equality.

Secondly, bottom-up approach (grass root activism) is also important, especially through the work of women's feminist movements that fight for equal rights. This chapter will take a closer look at the process that has led to the formation of the women's movement in Ukraine and its role in ensuring gender equality in Ukrainian society.

## The Women's Movement in Ukraine: A Brief History of Visibility

Feminism as an organized women's movement and cultural tradition, emerged in Ukraine during the 1890s. *Tovarystvo russikh zhenshchin* [The Association of Ukrainian Women], founded in 1884 in Stanislav (now Ivano-Frankivsk) by the writer and feminist Natalia Kobrynska (1855–1920), is historically considered the first women's organization. In 1887, the first Ukrainian women's almanac *The First Wreath* was published by Kobrynska together with the Ukrainian publisher, writer, and civil activist Olena Pchilka. Additionally, through her *Women's Library* collection, Kobrynska also published other works for women, written by women. However, the largest women's organization in Halychyna (Galicia), and the Ukrainian lands in general, was the Union of Ukrainian Women. During the 1930s, this organization was headed by another well-known activist of the women's movement, the journalist and writer Milena Rudnytska (1892–1979).

“History Without Women” is the title of the introduction to Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak's book *Feminists despite themselves: women in Ukrainian community life, 1884–1939*. This work, is considered to be the first thorough study of the women's movement in Ukraine, particularly during the second half of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries. As the researcher indicates in an interview: “Women tried to do something practical everywhere. But women's work is very exhausting, and it turns out that you do what you have to do, and then there is neither energy nor desire to sit down and write: this is my concept, this is what I did.” Therefore, the researcher indicates that so-called “pragmatic feminism” was inherent to that period.

During Soviet times, the dominant position was occupied by the gender construct of the working mother. Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak indicates that the women's issue in the USSR remained a purely social and political issue in which soviet women were integrated into society through active participation in the economy. Bohachevsky-Chomiak points out that “woman's rights merge with the duties of a mother, and a woman does not exist as a self-contained unit. There is a woman in the service of the state, which she did not build.” At a time when nearly one hundred percent of women worked full-time, the state was responsible for raising children. Motherhood was considered almost the greatest duty to the state while the role of the father was marginalized.

A large number of women's non-governmental organizations have existed in Ukraine since the 1990s. According to data from the State Statistics Commit-

tee, as of 2000, there were about a thousand registered women's non-governmental organizations in Ukraine. However, these organizations have never become mainstream in terms of membership and women's participation in their activities, comprising only 4 per cent of all non-governmental organizations.

It is interesting to note, however, that even in the 1990s, along with more traditional women's organizations, such groups were still being established and were not afraid to include the word "feminism" in their titles. In particular, it is worth singling out the non-governmental organization "Progressive Women" Vinnytsia Feminist Society, which was founded in 1995 under the leadership of Natalia Kozlova and is still operating today.

Since the 1990s, most Ukrainian women's organizations, with the exception of scientific or educational gender centers, have focused their activities on resolving social problems that are considered exclusive to women. These include the protection of motherhood and childhood, providing assistance to disabled children, and support for low-income single mothers. At the same time, several women's organizations within the Ukrainian diaspora that, in addition to traditional "women's issues", such as the preservation of the Ukrainian language and culture, seek to defend ideas such as the dignity and inviolability of women, compliance with international standards in the field of human rights, and adherence to the rule of law. Key to this was founding of the Toronto-based World Federation of Ukrainian Women's Organizations (WFUWO) in 1948, which unites 31 organizations from 21 countries on four continents. The activities of WFUWO, particularly in recent years, have also concerned the following topics as drawing attention to gender-based violence, involving women in peace-making processes, and the role of men in ensuring equal rights and opportunities.

Feminism as a theme in post-Soviet studies originated in the field of literary studies. Regarding the development of the topic of feminist discourse in literature, it is worth mentioning the figure of Solomiia Pavlychko (1958–1999), a professor at the University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy and one of the founding members of the feminist seminar at the Institute of Literature of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. The seminar had a rather informal format: in addition to Pavlychko, researchers interested in the topic included Tamara Hundorova, Vira Ageieva, and Nataliya Shumylo.

The results of this intellectual circle's research have proven to be quite fruitful. Examples of their more prominent works include the following: *Women's Space: Feminist Discourse of Ukrainian Modernism* (2003) by Vira Ageieva and *Femina Melancholica: Sex and Culture in Olha Kobylianska's Gender Utopia*

(2002) by Tamara Hundorova. Equally important is the work of the literary critic, writer, and director of the Center for Gender Studies Nila Zborovska (1962–2011), notably *Feminist Reflections. At the Carnival of Dead Kisses* (1999).

The writer Oksana Zabuzhko is another notable example, having authored one of the first feminist novels in Ukrainian literature, *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex* (1996), as well as *Notre Dame d'Ukraine: A Ukrainian Woman in the Conflict of Mythologies* (2007), which explores a female author working within a colonial culture. Similarly, in 2004, the writer Yevgeniya Kononenko published a feminist collection of short stories *Prostitutes Get Married, Too* (2004). The poetess, literary critic and journalist Liudmyla Taran is another prominent cultural figure who has published various interviews with Ukrainian feminists active during the 1990s, as well as editing the collection *Woman as a Text. Emma Andievská, Solomiia Pavlychko, Oksana Zabuzhko. Fragments of Creativity and Contexts* (2002).

In the 21st century, feminist topics are gradually overcoming certain fears that were once prevalent in Ukrainian society, resulting in greater visibility in the various spheres of social life such as language, art, educational institutions, and civic initiatives. Feminist initiatives are also becoming more diverse and face greater debate around a number of “classic” issues within the movement for equal rights and opportunities: prostitution and sex work, women’s labor rights in the military and the militarization of society, the involvement of transwomen in the feminist movement, the feminization of poverty and the financial hardships vulnerable groups of women often face, and women’s involvement in politics and gender quotas.

## **Ukraine’s International and National Obligations to Ensure Gender Equality**

Women’s feminist organizations have actively participated in the development of the policy of equal rights and opportunities, taking into account the best international practices. To date, Ukraine has ratified the main international treaties in the field of human rights and regulatory documents: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Optional Protocol to it; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which calls for comprehensive development and progress for women in order to guarantee them hu-

man rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with men, and various other UN Human Rights treaties. In addition, Ukraine also joined the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted and localized the UN Sustainable Development Goals for the period 2016 to 2030.

Ensuring equal rights and opportunities for women and men is an important area of activity for the Council of Europe (CoE), of which Ukraine is a member. The CoE itself follows a number of basic documents concerning issues of the equal rights and opportunities: the *Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms* (adopted by the CoE in 1950 and ratified by Ukraine in 1997), the “Declaration of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on the Equality of Women and Men (1988)”, the “Convention of the Council of Europe on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (also known as the Istanbul Convention of 2011)”, and the “Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to member states on preventing and combating sexism (2019)”. In particular, the Declaration of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on the Equality of Women and Men states that “in modern society there is de jure and de facto inequality between women and men.” Therefore, member states of the CoE should work on developing their gender policies to change the situation. In addition, the CoE’s Gender Equality Strategy 2018–2023 has also been adopted, with its members expected to focus on achieving six goals. The Government of Ukraine is advancing in the fulfilment of these goals with the help of the State Social Program to ensure equal rights and opportunities. Moreover, in the summer of 2022, the 2011 Istanbul Convention, which is “the most comprehensive international instrument for combating violence against women and domestic violence in its many forms,” was finally ratified.

Equally important are Ukraine’s European integration intentions, especially those concerned with ensuring gender equality. Human rights, democracy, and the rule of law are declared as core values for the European Union. Regarding gender equality policy, the European Commission applies a so-called “dual approach”: implementing the policy of “gender mainstreaming” and initiating special measures. Gender mainstreaming involves the (re)organization, improvement, establishment, and evaluation of political processes in such a way that participants in the political decision-making process adopt a gender approach in all areas of politics and at all stages. Special measures in gender policy at the EU level include legislation, information and educational campaigns, and financial programs. The aim of these measures is to resolve particular problems, such as the gender pay gap and lack of representation of

women in certain areas of employment. Ukraine is also trying to apply this dual approach in its own gender policy.

Ukraine has also confirmed its commitments to promoting gender equality by joining the Global Partnership for the Promotion of Gender Equality, known as the *Biarritz Partnership*: an initiative of the G7 countries with the participation of UN Women that works to develop an action plan to implement the commitments of the Government of Ukraine within the framework of this international initiative. The UN Security Council's Resolution 1325 "Women, Peace, Security" is an important document for strengthening the involvement of women in the processes of achieving peace and post-conflict reconstruction. This resolution stipulates that UN member states should develop national action plans for its implementation. In 2020, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine approved the National Action Plan for the Implementation of the UN Security Council's Resolution 1325 "Women, Peace, Security" for the period up to 2025.

The international community constantly monitors the situation regarding the provision of equal rights and opportunities. The "Global Gender Gap Report", prepared by the World Economic Forum, measures the size of the gender gap in four important areas of inequality between men and women: economic participation, education level, political representation, and health care. In 2021, Ukraine took 74th place out of 156 studied countries. In the Ukrainian case, the country was recorded as performing especially poorly in regard to political representation, specifically women's participation in the decision-making process, for which it was ranked 97th. Accordingly, it is important to reduce these gender gaps, especially in the area of women's access to decision-making processes.

Since the declaration of independence in 1991, the idea of equal rights and opportunities for women and men has been increasingly viewed in Ukraine as a key priority. For example, according to Article 24 of the Constitution of Ukraine, "there shall be no privileges or restrictions based on race, colour of skin, political, religious and other beliefs, sex, ethnic and social origin, property status, place of residence, linguistic or other characteristics." The Law of Ukraine "On ensuring equal rights and opportunities for women and men" (2005) also includes definitions of concepts such as equal rights and opportunities for women and men, gender-based discrimination, positive action, and sexual harassment. Article 3 of the Law states:

State policy on ensuring equal rights and opportunities for women and men is aimed at establishing gender equality; prevention of gender-based dis-

crimination; application of positive actions; prevention and counteraction of gender-based violence, including all manifestations of violence against women; ensuring equal participation of women and men in making socially important decisions; ... protection of society from information aimed at discrimination on the basis of gender.

In order to implement the various international and national obligations aimed at ensuring equal rights and opportunities, Ukrainian civil society has become increasingly active, including women's feminist organizations. As an example, it is worth mentioning the activities of the Public Council on Equal Opportunities Caucus under the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (VRU). The mission of the Public Council is to promote ideas of gender equality and support the policy of ensuring equality for women and men through discussion, analysis of draft laws, development and presentation of expert opinions and proposals. It is also involved in advocacy and conducting informational events in order to establish an independent, democratic, Ukrainian state and a strong and independent civil society that can provide equal opportunities for each person for development and self-fulfilment.

Initiatives implemented by the Public Council in recent years have included the campaign to "Uncover the truth about violence" in support of the Istanbul Convention, the online marathon "Time of Women's Leadership", together with the public alliance "Political Action of Women", an educational campaign and monitoring project "#vyborybezsexyzmu [electionsWITHOUTsexism]". This focused on preventing discrimination against female candidates and allowing for fair contests during the local elections of 2020 that were free of sexism, threats, bullying, and institutional pressure (appeals to political parties were published). In collaboration with various women's non-governmental organizations, the "#KvotyZamistKvity [QuotasInsteadofFlowers]" campaign to support gender quotas in legislation during the women's march (held on March 8, 2019), while also campaigning under VRU to support gender quotas in electoral legislation, termed "Women in power – women in the Rada".

## **Successes of the Ukrainian Women's Feminist Movement in Building Gender Equality**

Over the past few years, many feminist academic and grassroots events, particularly the annual March for Women's Rights held on March 8, have taken

place in various cities across Ukraine encompassing different generations and different types of women's organizations and public male feminists. International organizations actively support these initiatives, for example, UN Women and the *HeforShe* campaign. It is worth noting the visibility and activity of women at EuroMaidan in 2013 and 2014. In addition to the barricades, this included a large number of activities, in which women were actively involved. These included care work, distributing information, logistics (such as running the Euromaidan-SOS hotlines), as well as providing legal aid, medical and psychological assistance, safe transportation, working with mass media, and educational provision through schemes such as Maidan Open University and Maidan library. Women were also active in security roles such as *Automaidan*, *Varta v likarni* [Guard in the hospital], *Varta shvydkoyi dopomogy* [Ambulance Guard], and as community guards alongside fundraising for victims and volunteer support schemes. Moreover, the end of the protests did not lead to the end of this support work. Nadia Parfan's online initiative *Half the Maidan: Women's Voice of Protest*, for example, continued to attract attention, and was accompanied by a number of campaigns on the Maidan and elsewhere. The journalist Kristina Berdinskykh also launched the project *There are people. Warm stories from the Maidan* to talk about the "ordinary" people of the protest space while journalist and human rights activist Iryna Vyratosu was responsible for compiling *Maidan. Women's Affairs* a published collection of interviews with 17 heroines from the protests and descriptions of the dozens of women's initiatives that took place. Through this, it can be seen that women "made the revolution" on an equal footing with men, rather than merely "helped" them make it.

The "Invisible Battalion" campaign provided an opportunity to recognize the role of women in the war, resulting in the granting of labor rights to women working in the Armed Forces of Ukraine (ZSU). As a result of the joint efforts of the women's veteran movement, women's groups based within Ukrainian military formations and female parliamentary deputies, the campaign led to the adoption of Law No. 2523 "On amendments to certain legislative acts of Ukraine on ensuring equal rights and opportunities for women and men in the Armed Forces of Ukraine and other military formations". In 2016, women gained access to nearly 100 combat military positions that were previously available only to men. In November 2017, the campaign's activities were brought to wider public through the documentary *Invisible Battalion*. In other words, recent years have seen greater attention being paid to the issue of gender equality in the military and the role of women in the ZSU itself. There has

also been a gradual increase in the number of women in the ZSU and military institutions of higher education. As of July 2022, about 57,000 women serve in the armed forces together with volunteers from territorial communities, of whom about 32,000 are engaged in active war zones. Overall, the number of servicewomen in the ZSU has effectively doubled since 2015 with women also gaining greater access to military education.

The role of women in Ukrainian national history has also received increasing recognition. This has been especially well documented by the unique Gender Museum in Kharkiv, the Museum of the Women's Movement in Lviv, and the Ukrainian Association for Researchers in Women's History.

Gender-based violence is one of the main topics in the women's struggle for equal rights. A recent example was the *#IAmNotAfraidToSayIt* campaign, which was initiated by the feminist activist Nastya Melnychenko, and drew special attention to the issue of sexual violence with a flash mob organized under *#IAmNotAfraidToSayIt* taking place offline. In Kyiv and other cities, particularly Dnipro, Lviv, Chernivtsi, and Zaporizhzhia, other public events were held under the *#IAmNotAfraidToDoIt*. Similarly, Anastasia Salnykova, an activist for the human rights organization *Natural Rights of Ukraine*, that deals with issues relating to motherhood, and a public health researcher, organized a flash mob under the *#ItIsTimeToSayIt* against obstetric violence as part of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women during which women shared their stories and examples of problem resolving.

In recent years, much has also been done in Ukraine to combat gender inequality in education and to spread best practices for ensuring equal rights and opportunities for women and men. The community of responsible teachers *Ed-Camp* has been particularly proactive in organizing meetings and events on the topic of combating discrimination and ensuring gender equality. In Kharkiv, the NGO *Krona* implemented a gender educational experiment. The *HeForShe* solidarity movement for gender equality developed by UN Women, launched a student project to combat stereotypes and discrimination, *HeForShe* University Tour. These are just a few examples of successful practices for spreading the value of gender equality in education.

Professional critical human rights education is especially important for promoting gender equality. The master's program in Gender Studies, Gender Studies Courses, a Network of Gender Education Centers, countering gender stereotypes and sexual harassment at the university level, the relevant policy at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy are all examples of achievements in this area.

Within the political sphere, gender quotas were introduced to overcome the barriers and stereotypes faced by women in, or seeking, public office. During the last local elections of 2020, the project *Elections Without Sexism* was launched and resulted in several lawsuits. Consequently, by 2022, the share of women in the Verkhovna Rada reached 20 per cent.

Mass media is no less important area in the struggle for equal rights and opportunities. *Povaha* [Respect] is a campaign against sexism against women that focuses on the media, public and political communications. Its work includes the website *povaha.org.ua*, public events, the development of the women's expert database *Ask a Woman*, and a number of video blogs distributed via social media. It has also advocated for greater discussion on sexism in Ukraine via open letters, responses to the appeals of female readers, and providing instance commentary on current news and events. Contributors to *povaha.org.ua* website itself include various professional female researchers, journalists, bloggers, and authors.

It is worth noting the following challenges of ensuring gender equality. These include a continuing culture of sexism among politicians and public figures and the fact that security and defense sector does not always perceive women as specialists. There is also an ongoing lack of success stories regarding rights violations lawsuits, such as the sexual harassment case brought against the military by Valeria Sikal. Gender equality in the labor market represents another important challenge in the fight for equal rights that requires greater attention alongside the sustainability of international projects and the successful cooperation of different generations of activists.

However, the greatest challenge remains, unsurprisingly, the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War and its consequences for both women and men. As of May 30, 2022, the number of Ukrainian refugees reached 6,801,987 with 83 per cent of forced migrants being women. According to the UN Women report:

With the closure of schools and the high demand for volunteer work and the absence of men, the burden of unpaid work that women are forced to do, has significantly increased. The departure from the principles of gender equality is already evident in the conditions of a long crisis. The war increases unemployment among the entire population, which is likely to push women into unprotected informal sectors of the economy and lead to increased poverty.

Humanitarian aid will be needed to meet the needs of women, men, girls and boys who find themselves in vulnerable situations and belong to vari-

ous marginalized groups, especially members of the Roma community, the elderly, and people with disabilities. It is necessary to support women-led organizations and organizations that protect the rights of women and have been involved in the response, by providing financial resources and strengthening their voice on national and international platforms.

Experts point to the importance of providing displaced women and men with vocational training and livelihood opportunities, taking into account changing gender roles, as well as reducing the burden of home schooling by encouraging families to redistribute care work. Despite the war, the issue of gender equality is always timely. And women's feminist organizations in Ukraine are doing much to achieve it.

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