GENDER IDENTITY AND THE UKRAINIAN NATION-STATE FORMATION: CLINGING TO THE PAST

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Presented at Gender and Power in the New Europe, the 5th European Feminist Research Conference
August 20-24, 2003 Lund University, Sweden

The Ukrainian Nation-state Formation and the Recovery of the Mythology of Ukrainian Matriarchy

Ukraine is the second largest country in Europe in terms of land area, and it ranks fifth in terms of population. The country gained its independence in 1991 after collapse of the Soviet Union. As any newly emerging state Ukraine began to rediscover its historical memory and reconstruct its identity by reviving the national myths and ancient rituals. And as ‘in any newly emerging state such a resurrection of tradition invariably accompanies the recovery of the traditional woman’ (Rubchak, 1996). Concerning this process Akhil Gupta writes: ‘One of the first things that new nation states do is write the history of the “nation”... stretching into the distant past’, where ‘women are generally recognised only in their role as producer of citizens and thus precariously positioned as subject of the nation’ (Gupta, 1992).

Recovering the historical memory of their society contemporary Ukrainians stress its matriarchal tradition. This mythology of Ukrainian matriarchy is embodied in a symbol of Berehynia – a pagan goddess, who is, as it is considered in contemporary Ukrainian society, the mother and guardian of the nation. This metasymbol is a cultural icon portraying a traditional, hence innately ideal Ukrainian woman as custodian of domestic fireplace, the national cultural values, who played an important role in national history. The image of Berehynia underlines “other”, different from both the Russian and the Western type of the Ukrainian political mentality in which a woman has never been hurt and always was hold in great respect in Ukrainian family.

High status of women in the ancient Ukrainian society is described by Marian Rubchak in the article “Christian Virgin or Pagan Goddess”. She writes that among the early Slavs who populated Kievan Rus’ (the ancestral home of modern Ukrainians), there is a strong evidence for a matrifocal order which accorded women considerable influence and prestige. The high esteem that females enjoyed in ancient Rus’ was particularly evident in the marriage rituals: no marriage could take place without the consent of the woman, and it was not unusual for young females to seize the initiative in courtship. This tradition persisted in Ukraine into the early modern period of the country’s history, at which time prospective brides still enjoyed considerable freedom of choice in husbands. In Ukraine Domostroi (Household regulation) does not seem to have been widely used as it was in Russia. Wife beating became a widely established practice throughout Moscovite Russian society but it was not a widely accepted custom in Ukraine. Moreover, Ukrainian women never experienced the seclusion of the terem (women’s quarters in elite households), in which Muscovite women were isolated. But after much of Ukraine passed to Muscovite control in the seventeenth century, and subsequently became part of the Russian Empire, Russian imperial culture began to exercise its power over the Ukrainians. The prolonged period of Muscovite Russian colonization of Ukraine caused a gradual patriarchalization of its society. Patriarchal Russian society to which Ukraine was joined in the second half of the seventeen century did impose a new cultural order within which the status of empowered Ukrainian woman began to change. Such changes should be regarded as symptomatic of the position of inferiority into which Ukrainian women were ultimately forced. This was both exacerbated and reinforced by the fact that Ukraine itself occupied a similarly inferior, peripheral position within the Russian Empire, as a result of which Ukrainian women became doubly marginalized (Rubchak, 1996).
At the contemporary period of transition and the Ukrainian nation-state formation the image of Berehynia - a “liberated” Ukrainian woman who was deprived of an opportunity to show their inherent national peculiarities while the Soviet totalitarian system is being actively pursued by Ukrainian nationalistic parties (Zherebkin, 1999). At the same time the nationalistic construction of the “new” woman remains to be enclosed within traditional women’s roles restricted to private sphere. As a consequence its economic and political relations within the society remain invariable and a field of activity for the “ideal” Ukrainian woman is paradoxically limited: she is preserver of the Ukrainian language, national domestic traditions, and Christian moral values being discharged from “big” politics. Being simulative such construction of woman’s subjectivity is a way of woman’s exclusion from politic and a form of substitution of a real woman’s political participation by symbolic (Zherebkin, 1999).

When analysing the position in which contemporary Ukrainian women find themselves, it is important to understand that, as Michelle Rosaldo reminds us in a different context, ‘woman’s place in human social life is not in any direct sense a product on the things she does, or even less a function of what, biologically, she is. It is rather, the meaning her activities have acquired through concrete social interactions (Rosaldo, 1980). Various anthropologists have pointed out that all ‘notions of “motherhood” and “domesticity” are historical and ideological rather than “natural” construct’ (Mohanty, 1991). As to Ukraine, Marian Rubchak notes ‘the symbol of motherhood and the connection between women and the hearth … have remained in the foreground of the Ukrainian consciousness as a presumably a biologically driven phenomenon, which has nothing whatever to do with social constructs. This is so much the case, in fact, that the entire idea of renewing the nation, or building a young state – with its concomitant revival of ancient customs – has paradoxically been perceived by society as inseparable from the implicit reversal of the role of its women, as a way of getting back to the essence of what it means to be Ukrainian. Thus a direct connection is established between restrictions of female activity – such as holding high public office, for example – and the process of state-building’ (Rubchak, 1996).

It is worth emphasizing that with only a few exceptions Ukrainian women seem content to cling to gender-specific roles as exemplified in various configurations of symbols – in the image of Berehynia. ‘The Ukrainian society as a whole not only endorses the metasymbol of Berehynia and at the same time matriarchal myth, and an assumption of female superiority, but insists upon its applicability to the reinvention of a collective Ukrainian consciousness. Clinging to the matriarchal myth, women identify with an overdetermined past that fixes them in a given historical moment which finds no resonance in the real life of the country today (Rubchak, 1998). Contrary to the tradition based upon the ideational image of empowered matriarch, women in reality are relegated to the peripheries of power and influence. In this connection it is worth to cite some statistics.

**An Illusory Vision of Empowered Womanhood in the Contemporary Ukraine**

In the critical economic situation in which Ukraine finds itself now women are the first to be hurt and are hurt the most severely. The official registration of the unemployed revealed that more than 70 per cent of them are women. They also make up a majority of so-called latent unemployed.

Women continued to be concentrated in the low-paying, low-prestige sectors of economy with far fewer possibilities for promotion than men. The average woman’s salary amounts only 72 per cent of a man’s one. Such tendency takes place even in traditionally female fields as, for example, system of education is.

Women amount 54 per cent of all population of Ukraine and without their active participation to build democratic society is impossible, but recently there haven’t been essential changes in the level of women’s representation in the state structures. In 1997, for the first time in the history of the independent Ukrainian state, there were two women in the newly formed Cabinet of Ministers. In the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian parliament), a number of women-deputies of Ukraine consists of 12 per cent.
Inexorable statistic is evidence that state allowance of a woman on maternity leave consists of about 4 US dollars per month and an unemployed mother of a child is given about 2 US dollars allowance per month. Lack of normal food and systematic malnutrition negatively affect new-born children. According to the information provided by organization of public health, the number of new-born children having insufficient weight has increased. Only 4 per cent of new-born children are really healthy, the remaining part has various deviations.

And so, no wonder that economic difficulties were mentioned as the main reason for taking the risk of searching for happiness and financial stability abroad by the young women interviewed in 10 regions of Ukraine by the International Organization for Migration. Defining “economic difficulties” 25% of the respondents stated unemployment, 14% - poverty, 9% - absence of future perspective. The International Organization for Migration estimates there are 800,000 to 1,400,000 Ukrainian women between the ages 15 to 29 who belongs to the group of “most at risk” (or 25-45% of Ukrainian women, depending on the region), and since 1991 nearly 500,000 of Ukrainian women have been brought out from Ukraine to the West. One fifth of women who are smuggled are made to work in sex-trade. In a very short period of time Ukraine has become one of the main exporters of “live commodities” (Gorbunova, Shved, 1998).

Hence, the dominant discourse of separate but equal status for women, perpetuated throughout the nation’s history, presents an illusory vision of empowered Ukrainian womanhood. The Ukrainian patriarchally-structured society, with its ideational matriarchal image, victimizes its women by inducing them to accept the reinvented matriarchal paradigm as at once a genuine manifestation of Ukrainian cultural values and a true measure of contemporary reality. Seduced by the myth of female empowerment, Ukrainian women all too eagerly embrace their delusive superiority, and are deterred thereby from any independent program of action that might afford them authentic authority (Rubchak, 1998).

**Peculiarities of Women’s Movement in Ukraine**

Domination of the national priorities in the contemporary Ukrainian women’s movement, in which such a goal as ‘state building eclipses other special concerns such as feminism’ is a principal obstacle for its development. Beginning from “the first wave” of women’s movement in 1989 - middle of the 90s ideas of national rebirth were single alternative against the communist ideology, so “the first wave” of the Ukraine women’s movement was connected with forming of the Ukrainian collective identity and politics of Ukrainian nationalism (Zherebakina, 1997).

“‘The second wave’” that began in the middle of the 90s, more and more connects the objectives of women’s movement with the feminist goals of development of the woman’s self-identity, individuality and self-fulfillment in the modern world. That is why “‘the second wave’” of the women’s movement in Ukraine is more oriented on the ideals of the independent women’s movement, developing in the form of non-governmental, non-state women’s groups and organizations. But at the same time, the revolutionary feminist pathos of women’s individuality and self-identity development in the former Soviet Union excluded political and cultural tradition, and today still remains relevant for the Ukrainian women’s movement.

**Theorizing gender and feminism**

Insufficient feminist awareness, and the absence of developed feminist traditions have caused paradoxical situation in the contemporary Ukrainian women’s movement: a tendency to reject feminism and to substitute notion “feminism” for gender. In this connection Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak, an American researcher of the Ukrainian women’s movement, wrote: ‘Most Ukrainians, men and women alike, distrust feminism. Some identify it with the seeming equality of the sexes in the USSR that placed a triple burden on women - work, home, children. Others see it as a subversive Western import aimed at eradicating the traditional family structure. The five hundred women representatives of various women’s organizations who met in Kyiv in May, 1998, passed a resolution rejecting feminism. Instead they accepted the notion of gender parity and gender equality’ (Bohachevsky-Chomiak, 1998).
There is an epistemological paradox: on the one hand, the notion of “gender” is more and more being applied in the official political discourse – it inserts in the lexicon of political parties, state documents and names of official “women’s” structures and so on; but on the other hand – it is completely ignored that the notion of “gender” is defined as a social construct, which unlike biological sex, is not a natural phenomenon, but is produced by different political, cultural and other social means. It is ignored as well that introduction of the notion of gender in the western feminist tradition was provoked by recognition of differences in the structure of woman’s subjectivity and by denial of a single female essence determined by its “natural” characteristics, in other words it was caused by problems with using the very category of “woman”. As it is well known the category of “woman”, “woman’s oppression” and “woman’s experience” were challenged by politically active feminists and by scholars for its intellectual limitations about twenty years ago when in the United States and Britain, women of colour and lesbians argued that the experience of being white or black, straight or lesbian, were far from identical and perhaps not even analogous (Carby, 1982; Robinson, 1993). The “woman” postulated in much feminist writing and politics, they argued, was a white, straight woman. This political critique was soon echoed by intellectual criticisms. As research was done on the past and present of women’s lives, as attempts were made to theorise women’s domination, as scholars expanded their research across the globe, it became clear that the category of “woman”, or even of “women” in the plural, obscured important differences (Auslannder, 1993) and so taking “women” unmodified as the unit of analysis came to seem increasingly unworkable (Busia, 1993). Another challenge came from research that focused on women’s struggles for economic and political rights. It became obvious that new ways of thinking were needed to apprehend discrimination against women in the workplace, violence against women, control over reproduction, and forms of political exclusion and inclusion. Scholars needed to better understand abstractions like capitalism, democracy if we were effectively to analyse the gendered division of labour, women’s exclusion from the vote, or women’s use of power (Acker, 1989). There was a turn, therefore, to work on gender as a relational system and on no account as opposition to feminism.

Other situation has emerged in the official Ukrainian women’s movement. Feminism is interpreted as outdated conflict ideology opposed to the principles of parity democracy, gender equality and social partnership of men and women. In such context as it was proclaimed at the All-Ukrainian Women’s Congress in 1998 ideology of new genderism, basing on social partnership, has come to take place of feminism – an obsolescent conflict ideology opposing one sex to another” (Khrisanova, 1998, p.131). This quotation from a report of the All-Ukrainian Women’s Congress in 1998 is quite enough to show a tendency for a considerable ignorance of what gender and feminism really are. “Feminist unawareness” of the Ukrainian women’s movement fails realizing its true aim and tasks, prevents Ukrainian women from identifying themselves as a specific social group (women) and their interests separately from the interests of their families. They do not feel the presence of gender inequality in society as a fact of social life, and that is, evidently, the main distinction of the post-soviet women from the Western ones. And that’s not the point that the last live better. They simply are able ‘to state the problem of discrimination on the basis of sex and patriarchal dominance, trying to resist them’ (Zherebkin, 1999). And as long as they choose to make state building their only priority, instead of recognizing that the two objectives - a national state and women’s emancipation - represent important but separate struggles, each deserving support, but in different contexts, women of Ukraine are destined to remain trapped in their socially constructed gender-specific roles, perpetuating their self-imposed marginal status (Rubchak, 1998).

Feminists have pointed out that a starting point for a movement to destroy women’s oppression is recognition of their own oppression. These words are especially urgent for the Ukrainian women. They must begin with themselves to create a critical subjectivity because ‘as women ground themselves in their own subjective experiences and question accepted definitions of gender in a fundamental way, they challenge men to recognize their own gendered position of power in relation to women and the ways in which their own thought reflects male hegemony through “male stream thought.”’ (Weiler, 1988).

Time has evidenced that gender stereotypes cannot be overcome by formal legislation improvement. Ukraine ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women.
The 24th article of the Constitution of Ukraine guarantees equal rights for men and women in all spheres of life. But in reality such equality is much more proclaimed than protected. To achieve essential results in promoting gender equality at all levels and in all spheres of social life is necessary to develop different initiatives providing women’s critical consciousness-raising, because today as never before it is obvious that conservatism regarding women’s emancipation in Ukraine has firm psychological basis. An enormous potential to force women to interrogate their own common sense view of the world and to move toward critical consciousness of their relationships and position in society has gender studies courses.

**Gender Studies and Reconstruction of Gender Culture in Ukraine**

Gender studies is a new but developing area of research, teaching, and institutionalization in higher education in Ukraine. Investigations in gender studies are usually carried out by individual scholars with some attempt to integrate their work into large bodies (centers, research groups), sometimes in cooperation with colleagues from abroad and mainly in three cities: Kyiv, Kharkov, and Odessa.

Centers and research groups on gender studies focus on research, teaching, publishing, and co-operation with NGOs. In the field of research they make complex analysis of various aspects of gender issues in Ukraine and abroad, and embrace wide range of disciplines: political science, sociology, philosophy, history, psychology. In 1996 a first textbook for students entitled “Theory and History of Feminism” was published.

The teaching goal of the gender studies centers is to introduce gender and women’s studies courses into the Ukrainian university curriculum. A number of them were developed and some have already been introduced into university practice as optional or compulsory courses, for example: “Ecological responsibility: gender approach”; “Gender and Woman: deconstruction of gender stereotypes”; “Introduction to gender sociology”; “Economic theory and economic policy: gender approach”; “Feminism and Artistic Interpretation” and others. The most developed gender-oriented courses, in both teaching and research, are in philosophy and sociology. Gender perspective is also taught in the field of pedagogy, linguistic, literary and textual sciences. No one university has graduate program in the area. There has been no attempt, so far, to establish it. The main reason for this has been the very limited financial resources needed to maintain an additional program at the universities, lack of specialized literature even in English and, where it does exist, difficulty in accessing it because of poor language skills. Since there are no university professorial posts in gender studies and no departments of gender studies. This fact makes the production of research doctorates especially difficult, although topics that might be included under gender studies are sometimes produced in the traditional disciplines.

A new important steps in the development of gender studies in Ukraine was the Ukrainian Summer School on Gender Studies which since 1997 is organized every year by the Kharkov Center for Gender Studies within the Higher Education Support Program of the Open Society Institute. The problems of modern policies of identity difference and the development of feminism in countries of the former USSR and Eastern Europe as well as feminist methodology in social sciences are focused view during the Summer Schools courses. The Ukrainian Summer School has already greatly contributed to the working out of regional university programs on gender studies and to the improvement of qualification of gender studies teachers.

In 1999 scholars from the Pedagogic Sciences Academy of Ukraine involved in gender studies joined their efforts and created the non-governmental organization “Kyiv Research and Educational Gender Center” aimed at mainstreaming ideas of gender equality into all levels of education. Taking into account that educational specialists are in general insensitive to gender issues in their teaching and implementation of programs and that gender analysis is not used as teaching and planning tools, the Center intends to strengthen capacity of university lecturers, school teachers and educational decision-makers to integrate gender concerns into their professional work and to equip students of pedagogical institutions with knowledge enabling them to implement gender sensitive education in their pedagogic work.

**Conclusion**
Summarizing this brief review of the development of gender studies in higher education in Ukraine, it is necessary to emphasize that, although they have not had strong effect on the education yet they have already entered international discourse on feminism and gender issues on many levels, set up national and international network and contributed to the visualization of women’s issues and the women’s movement. The university gender studies courses for the first time in the Ukrainian educational realm has made an attempt to transform the relations between women and knowledge i.e. to change what is known about women by posing new questions and seeking answers to them. Due to feminist oriented academics pictures of Ukrainian women’s reality have possessed new clarity, greater depth, more visions, and voices. The proclaimed in the Ukrainian society official dogma and the ancient matriarchal myth of separate but equal status for women, perpetuated throughout the nation’s history, has been challenged. The gender study courses translate academic expertise into public knowledge, engaging students as active learners and encouraging them to rethink everything including the meaning of their own experience. And therefore further development of the gender studies courses in higher education is important task, progress of which could help to equip women with the tools to fight the present discriminatory practice, to reshape the patriarchal grounds, and to construct a positive environment for gender equality challenges in Ukraine.

References


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