
WOMEN PROFESSIONALS IN THE "MARKETPLACE" IN POST-SOCIALIST UKRAINE: SOCIALIST – POST-SOCIALIST CONTINUUM AND GENDER CATEGORIES

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Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, scholars became increasingly tempted to employ "fuzzy" categories while discussing socialism and post-socialism, as if they are divided into distinct time periods. This paper demonstrates how ambiguous and blurred these categories could be. I focus on the experiences of Ukrainian women in order to show how they have adapted to the new challenges in professions such as medical care, finance, and private business in the years of economic and political transformation. I trace the factors that shape these experiences in the socialist - post-socialist continuum.

I apply an insider's perspective as being from a Ukrainian professional family, and as an anthropologist who received her training in the US, to assess the ethnographic observations that I made during a pilot research project. It was conducted in the western and central parts of Ukraine in the cities of Khmelnytsky and Kyiv in the summer of 2004.

This paper suggests that one must examine the systems of cultural knowledge and values that may contribute to what economic and political direction Ukraine may take in the near future. Specifically, I demonstrate that Ukrainian women have found themselves in a more disadvantageous economic and social condition in the post-socialist era than in the socialist one. To demonstrate this post-socialist circumstance in the sphere of employment, I discuss three professions: the medical field, banking and finance, and finally, private entrepreneurship.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and a more dynamic international discussion became possible, many scholars drew their attention to the social issues facing this vast region. As social scientists around the world began to focus not only on political-economic issues, such as marketization, decollectivization, and conflict-resolution, but also on socio-cultural issues, gender relations came to the forefront of these discussions. This interest arose from a marked contrast between gender discussions in post-socialist and Western societies. While Western women were struggling for women's rights and equality, the ideology of gender

equality looked like a wonder to "emancipated" socialist women with 100% employment, college degrees, and state guarantees in the reproductive sphere. Western feminist scholars, such as Watson and Funk, were among the first who have established a productive dialogue about varied gender issues among Western and Eastern academics. Western scholars were surprised, however, by the extensive double standards in post-socialist societies, especially by the apparent lack of interest in feminist discourse among many post-socialist women.

Women, in general, did not seem to view gender questions as important in their lives, especially when economic challenges were so overwhelming to many families. (Drakulic 1997) They simply chose to ignore the hidden and not so hidden gender inequalities in both the socialist and post-socialist eras. This finding was even more puzzling as scholars like Einhorn (2000), Lapidus (1993), Lazreg (2000), Lokar (2000) and others have continued to report that women especially lose their former socio-economic advantages in the race for the free market.

Gender categories are nearly non-existent in the Ukrainian public discourse; even the term "gender" is borrowed and transliterated from English, further distancing the Ukrainians from accepting gender as an issue of importance. This "preview" of weak gender polemics in Ukraine provides a useful insight into the explanation of employment patterns discussed in the following paragraphs.

Socioeconomic environment of the Ukrainian professional field. Socialist precursors and post-socialist realities

The change of the economic focus from heavy industry to the service sector, consistent with demands of the global market, raises an issue of how women, who have traditionally been concentrated in the service sector, would react to the sudden change of their social and economic influence.

Finance and banking, private entrepreneurship and medical professions are among the most prestigious and well-paid jobs in most of the Western societies, and they are mostly male-dominated. In the socialist context,

finance and health care professions also carried relatively high socio-economic status, but unlike in capitalist societies, they were highly feminized. These jobs were generally not well-paid due to the focus of the State on heavy industry and the cultural stereotype that women were naturally prone to caring and meticulous detail-oriented jobs, like finance. Therefore, these jobs were deemed easy for women, such that they do not require significant efforts on women's part (Wejnert 1996:5). While private business was outlawed in socialist Ukraine, it is now gaining momentum and has become a lucrative niche for those who are successful in their business pursuits. Since Ukraine's economic transition is driven by similar objectives as Western capitalist nations', it is plausible to assume that there is or will be a significant shift in accessibility and involvement of women in these professions. Some research on post-socialist professional fields (Lokar 2000) already suggests that women professionals are becoming increasingly disadvantaged in the post-socialist context. By assessing how women situate themselves in these professional positions that can be considered relatively lucrative, we can make conclusions about the degree of gender equality during the economic transformation in post-socialist Ukraine.

Employment in finance and banking, private entrepreneurship and medical professions has taken rather different paths in the post-socialist context. While finance, banking and private business are becoming increasingly prosperous sectors of the national economy, health care is lagging behind. The choice of exactly these three fields gives us a useful angle in understanding women's experience of economic transformation in such a heterogeneous environment.

In the post-socialist condition, finance and banking became one of the newly lucrative jobs after having undergone some structural changes necessitated by the free market economy. Private business re-emerged on the legal arena as a potentially extremely fruitful option to earn one's income. It became an outlet to test one's will to take responsibilities, risks and explore new opportunities. On the other hand, the health care system demonstrates difficulties in adapting to the realities of the market system.

Universally available health care provided by the state to all citizens is one of the constitutional rights in Ukraine. This hasty decision of the newly independent government to

carry on this insurmountable responsibility has caused many present problems. The Ukrainian government does not have enough funds to adequately cover medical expenses to the degree established by the current law, and the hospitals and health care providers are, in turn, trapped by the legislature in a way that they cannot undertake profound measures to make profits and independently invest them into their development. Systematic crisis in the health care system and low wages of medical professionals have triggered the emergence of an immense informal economy in medical care in Ukraine.

Thus, under-the-table payments given to the doctors have become a cultural routine to the degree that patients know the unofficial pricelist for all the treatments, services, and referrals. Doctors often combine their official jobs with unofficial treatment of the patients at their home premises and become unofficial distributors for different pharmaceutical companies. According to some research, under-the-table payments and gifts make up to 30% of the health care workers' income (Miller, Grodeland, Koshechkina 2000:305). Health care system continues to follow the socialist model while all other spheres of economic life have moved on to capitalistic relations of the market economy. Subsequently, the health care system is the least flexible and officially or legally profitable among the three professions presented in this paper.

Finance and banking

Finance and banking became one of the newly lucrative professions. Following the global trend of increasing financial activities, this field has shown quick progress in Ukraine in the past decade. It is privatized for the most part; in 2002, only 0.2 % of the finance professionals worked for the state. (DerzhKomStat 2003:213) It has the flexibility necessary for successful navigation of the free market offering competitive salary to its workers. That is why women's situation in finance field is very indicative of their overall position under the new economic circumstances. Past years showed slow but consistent decline in the number of women employed in finance and banking from 70.6% in 2000, 69.2% in 2001 and finally 68.8% in 2002 (DerzhKomStat 2003: 241). Furthermore, the gender income gap in this field has become the largest among all economic activities in Ukraine – women earn only 53.4% of men's salary (DerzhKomStat 2003:241). This statistic shows that women are definitely losing their ground in this field.

Under socialism women always had a higher education level than men; therefore, their decreasing involvement in finance and banking cannot be linked to their insufficient cultural capital. On the other hand, access to powerful networks is a plausible explanation, especially taking into consideration the pervasive informal economy in Ukraine. Decreasing involvement and employment of women in finance and banking demonstrates a gender inequality in post-socialist Ukraine and there are obviously multiple processes involved in it, which requires further investigation.

Private business

In the new field of private business, women do not demonstrate significant large-scale participation. In 2001, women managed three times fewer companies than men (UN report 2004:39). If we look at the size and character of business activities where women have a higher share, it becomes even clearer that women are not coming off as winners in private enterprises. While women control only about 15% of medium and large companies, which represent the most influential and prestigious leadership positions in private business, their share becomes bigger as the size of the company decreases – 25% in small companies and 38% in individual economic activities (UN Report 2004:40).

Another type of entrepreneurial activity in large part consists of different kinds of vending and petty trading at the local markets. Despite the fact that a significant share of petty traders often deal with the issues of poverty, it should not be blindly stated that petty trading necessarily means impoverishment and sub-existence. In the Ukrainian context, petty trade sometimes allows the entrepreneur to make a good living, and later she or he is able to invest in increasing business operations.

During the past ten years, I have been an active witness of such business endeavors of women and men in Khmelnytsky, my hometown and ethnographic site of this project, which is known as one of the large “bazaar” cities in Ukraine. Conveniently located near a major railroad, one of the local markets grew into an enormous business machine, with thousands of individual traders selling various products (clothing, shoes, jewelry, household items, etc.) at their privately owned or leased kiosks. One can witness a wide variety of people employed at the bazaar – from wealthy owners of entire sections of kiosks, to middle-income sellers traveling back and forth between China, Poland,

Turkey, Arab Emirates, India and other countries to buy and re-sell products in Khmelnytsky. The most marginal sellers without kiosks are the ones who walk along the market aisles with carts full of small products, like socks, shoelaces, tights, cleaning supplies, etc. Women constitute an easily-observable majority of this last category, and almost 100% of traders selling snacks and drinks from the carts. Women who are engaged in selling and buying these articles at bazaars are often associated with semi-legal activities, thus they do not declare their tax nor receive any social benefits. My ethnographic findings show that a large part of these semi-legal assistants are elderly women who need some supplementary income to support their pensions, or marginalized young and middle aged women downsized from the heavy industry factories and associated infrastructure in the area. As an especially unfortunate example of a woman in such a position, I recollect a widow in her early fifties who just lost her elder son to cancer. She had to search for additional support to the income that she earned as a cook in the kindergarten.

Sometimes women end up “on the market” due to family circumstances, like divorce or alcoholism of a family member, which reduce the income of the family. For instance, a neighbor in the nine-story apartment building where I stayed started buying bulk plastic products so to resell them at the bazaar after her “on-and-off husband” succumbed to alcoholism. However, in other instances women chose to quit their dead-end, low paid jobs and try their luck as entrepreneurs. My family friend, an electric engineer from the plant that used to produce nuclear rocket parts during the Soviet times, left her workplace in order to make trips to neighboring Poland and bring back Polish textile products for sale at the Khmelnytsky bazaar. In seven years, her business grew to several kiosks and she even had to hire selling assistants. Thus, the arena of women’s individual economic activity is a highly heterogeneous place that becomes a place for financial opportunities for some, and desperate necessity for others, which requires further research.

In the Ukrainian context, success in private business is connected to the networks in the informal economy. While the issue of the informal economy that is so pervasive in Ukraine, has serious repercussions for Ukrainian women professionals in all fields, it is particularly pronounced in private business. Networks and connections play a paramount role, especially the higher one climbs the social

ladder. Women do not have the same access to the “old-boy” networks of people in power that are rooted in the Soviet past. The large industrial plants are owned by the former party leaders who had access to information and were able to privatize former state factories. Ukrainian public is acutely aware of this unfair redistribution of collective wealth, which can be seen in the ironic term people coined as privatization – “pryhvatyzatsiya.” In the Ukrainian language this ingenious play of words means “appropriation” or claiming something yours through illegal venues. Despite their relatively high socioeconomic status, only a small percentage of women have been a part of the top management and the party elite. Thus, they did not have as many opportunities to use privatization waves to their advantage to the same degree as men did. They continue to have less access to the information about credit, training opportunities, and finding business partners by nature of their exclusion from informal high-level connections (UNECE Secretariat 2002:7).

Medical profession

The medical sector demonstrates a tendency different from private entrepreneurship and opposite to finance, with gradual increase in the number of women from the Soviet average of around 70% in the late 1980s (Harden 2001: 188) to 80.2% in 2000, 81% in 2001 and 81.9% in 2002 (DerzhKomStat 2003: 241). While there is no verifiable gender-specific statistic for the Ukrainian average, rather than Soviet averages in the late 1980s or early 1990s, an increase in the number of women in medical profession is still clearly visible. There is still a gendered income gap, with women earning 86.1% of men’s wages, however it is about 30% closer to a male salary than in the field of finance (DerzhKomStat 2003:241). Despite the income gap, women in health care are doing better than in finance or in private business in terms of continuing dominance in a field that has relatively high social status. However, the absence of gender statistics in medical specialties is hiding deeper economic inequalities than the 14% income gap. By looking at the choice of data the state chooses to measure, we can tell what is on the agenda. It is obvious that despite proclamations, gender issues, especially in medicine that is traditionally viewed as the most successful field for women, are not addressed.

I was able to retrieve gender specific data on medical specialties in Khmelnytsky municipal health care institutions. My findings

show that the choice of medical specialization is highly gendered, with men dominating surgery at 93%, anesthesiology at 83.3%, orthopedics at 100% and endoscopy specialty at 100%. These specialties carry the highest social status as well as the highest formal and informal incomes. That is why it is extremely important to find out what causes women, who otherwise dominate the field, to have such a small participation in the most prestigious specialties. This specialization pattern corresponds with the paradigm among Western medical professionals. Some authors (Gjerberg 2003) argue that it is due to the priority women place on their families that makes them reluctant to opt for the long residency commitment and unpredictable work hours associated with surgical jobs. I argue that in Ukraine, cultural views on what is supposed to be the adequate job for each gender is the main reason for this sharp divide, rather than structural barriers, like inconvenient work hours or prolonged residency term. Cultural norms do not associate women with the bloody, intrusive and violent nature of surgery. Female medical students with whom I was in contact with at different times in my life were strongly advised by their parents and friends to choose a “feminine” specialty, which almost always meant “clean”, less intrusive and “dangerous,” like a general practitioner or a neuropathologist, instead of an infectious disease specialist or an oncologist. Women who opt for surgery careers in Ukraine do not face the same structural problems like their counterparts in the West. The Ukrainian hospital system is different and does not require such long residency or such unpredictable work hours as in the USA.

However, women face a lot of “unofficial” cultural pressure, intensified by pervasive corruption and need for a “hairy hand” in order to get a job. An acquaintance of mine, who dreamt about specializing in infectious diseases, was bluntly confronted by her parents who refused to pull the strings to get her into the residency program. She had to agree to the general practitioner track. Reliance on connections not only reduces the opportunity for independent choice, but also makes women more vulnerable to outside influences and stereotypes.

This observation is supported by the national survey conducted in 2002 by the Ukrainian Institute of Social Research and Canadian-Ukrainian Gender Fund. Most of the respondents identified kindness and physical appearance to be the most important for “an ideal woman.” Although intellect took third place, it was followed by such characteristics as

politeness, good taste and modesty. "An ideal man," on the other hand, was supposed to demonstrate skills in earning money, intellect, energy, responsibility for the family and being able to defend his interests. These data clearly demonstrate persistency of patriarchal expectations of male and female roles in Ukraine, despite still high, although limited in some important aspects, involvement of women in high status jobs.

Socialist – Post-Socialist continuum and gender categories

Tetiana Zhurzhenko (2001) argues that these gender expectations in Ukraine are further intensified by the resurgence of nationalistic discourse that advertises the identity of mother-housewife. In the face of demographic crisis, Ukrainian state leaders, including powerful women's movements that are often politically dependent on the government, invoke the myth of mother-protector represented by the image of Berehynia (Ukrainian pagan goddess). According to this myth, Slavic women have always occupied respectable social roles and enjoyed status that was different from men's, but equal in its value. This discourse advocates that motherhood and family should be a priority for every woman. On the other hand, Zhurzhenko states, adoption of open market ideology offers women another myth, that of a successful woman entrepreneur. This image is promulgated in mass media that is often too quick to adopt flashy Western ideas without consideration of their applicability to the Ukrainian context. Zhurzhenko's main argument is that women's choice of professional identity is essentially limited to two mutually exclusive categories of housewife-Berehynia or businesswoman. Based on this model, we can see that the current gender situation in Ukraine is not a new creation of post-socialist order that in some intrinsic way disadvantages women. It is not a change per se, but rather an epitomizing on the already existing socialist categories in the realm of gender taking them to the extreme. Indeed, motherhood has always been articulated by the socialist state as inherently female responsibility. This socialist motherhood role, however, was to be combined with meaningful profession. The image of working-mother was promulgated as a social norm to ensure the sufficient labor force that the industrializing country desperately needed. According to Zhurzhenko, post-socialist reality brought these two images to their extreme, creating the dichotomous options of housewife versus businesswoman without the apparent

option of combining family and work. Linking Zhurzhenko's theory to the issues faced by the Ukrainian women professionals discussed in this paper, we can argue that there is continuity between the socialist gender discourse and post-socialist gender situation. It is not a rupture of the former social order replacing it with new social categories, but rather a super-imposition of gender concepts that came with the market system, such as a "businesswoman" and a "housewife", on the already existing social fabric.

Theoretical repercussions and conclusions.

If we say that women in medicine, finance and private business are disadvantaged in the transition because of the change to the capitalistic mode of production and adoption of similar patterns of professional discrimination as their colleagues in the Western countries, we will have to agree with the economic determinism as an explanatory paradigm. However, I argue that this paradigm does not hold true in the Ukrainian case. It is not intrinsic in the capitalistic system that women should be discriminated. However, it is one of the guiding principles of the market economy to try to get the best deal and maximize one's profits through competition. We know that in socialism as well as post-socialism women have had an education even better than men have held; however, they are not employed as readily as men in the most prestigious professions in post-socialism. We have seen a huge income gap and decreasing involvement of women in finance, small representation of women in large and medium businesses, coupled with less obvious but, nevertheless, existing disadvantages in the medical profession. In this way, the emerging Ukrainian market system is hurting itself by ignoring a great human resource of educated women. I argue that the reasons for this are cultural: social stereotypes viewing women as void of leadership capabilities, prescribing power and authority as male qualities, viewing family and children as the priority for women over their careers, are connected to this exclusion of women from powerful ranks in the informal economy. In addition, we can see what Western feminists have pointed out – post-socialist women often come to internalize this discourse and reproduce it in their professional lives. Women often do not view gender as an issue because their priority list is skewed towards family, and they often do not believe that career will complete their happiness to the same degree as family will. Most people do not even realize the shape that political and socio-economic

transformations took for women. The 2002 Ukrainian national survey shows that the majority of men and women believe that women and men both benefited from market transformations to an equal degree. Of course, it depends on what the respondents defined as a benefit – wellbeing of family as a whole, freedom of speech, or availability of consumer goods. We, therefore, can see that at least in the gender realm, there is no simple division into socialist and post-socialist era, because gender categories and gender discourses from the socialist and pre-socialist cultures are flowing into post-socialist culture.

It is extremely important for gender education and increased gender polemics to enter the Ukrainian academic discourse. Although it may raise ethical issues – who is in charge of telling Ukrainian women what to do with their own lives? - I would still like to claim, as a Ukrainian woman, that if the massive loss of the official representation and lack of strong social movement persists, women will find it increasingly hard to secure their wellbeing.

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