NGOS IN UKRAINE: THE MAKINGS OF A "WOMEN'S SPACE?"

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Introduction

As part of a larger dissertation project that examines the experiences of women directors of grassroots organizations in Kyiv, Ukraine, this paper seeks to problematize the complicated social space that NGOs (non-governmental organizations) occupy in Ukraine today. Ethnographic research methods allow us to interrogate the lived experiences and narratives of persons in order to better understand the broader social forces and discourses that occupy a particular space (Bruner 1990; Ries 1997). To examine some of the discourses and social forces at work in Ukraine's non-governmental sector, this paper will draw on the narratives of twelve middle-aged women who serve as the directors of young social organizations. My project focuses on a particular segment of Ukraine's non-governmental sphere, namely small city-based grassroots organizations in Kyiv (1). Many of these organizations are charities that were founded as a means to compensate for the lack of adequate social services in post-Soviet Ukraine. Their small size and close-knit fixed membership distinguish these organizations from many of the larger and more powerful NGOs in Ukraine.

Key cultural consultants for the project include twelve women who have taken up leadership roles in social organizations in the years since *perestroika*. The women range in age from 40 to 68, with the majority of informants being in their 40s. Half of the women are currently married, and half are either divorced or widowed. All but one has at least one child. All of the women have some form of higher education. The majority of my informants came to the non-governmental sector from jobs in science, engineering, and education.

During 1999, for a period of one year, I observed naturalistic discourse as I conducted participant observation with these women by sharing in the activities of their organizations. I also recorded semi-formal interviews during which I encouraged the women to speak about their experiences and ideas concerning social activism, work, womanhood, and health. I conducted life history interviews with each woman, a method that allowed me both to situate each woman's "NGO career narrative" in the context of her past and also to compare and contrast informants' life experiences.

In this paper I am especially interested in considering some ways in which the non-governmental sector in Ukraine has become "feminized" and what this means for women who work in the small grassroots NGOs that I have described. When we examine the personal narratives of women leaders of Ukrainian NGOs, the intricate ways in which social activism, work, and gender intersect in this sphere are brought into relief. By scrutinizing narratives through which women carve out a space for themselves in Ukraine's non-governmental sphere, we can explore three seemingly incompatible yet inextricable dimensions of the space of local NGOs in Ukraine. Namely, this paper will focus on some of the gendered, economic, and personal-psychological dimensions of working in social organizations.

The following narrative, related to me by Marina, the director of a charitable organization for children with cancer and their families, introduces these three dimensions. Marina said:

"During one meeting a group of us were discussing how each of us came to do this work. And someone asked how many of us have a personal interest--that is, as an invalid, or as a mother of a sick child, or a father or brother, and it turned out that almost all of us in the invalid movement came to it with our own double interest. Either a person's own interest, or, for example, having solved one's own problem... like me, I solved [my daughter's] problem, and I can help other parents live, and give them a consultation how to solve their problems, having gone through that myself. That's one path...Someone proposed [another] path--that [social activism] is a 'hobby' for some people. But we rejected that idea, because among us there was no one who could afford to do social work as a hobby; maybe the wife of the President can...But real citizens have financial problems, and through their organization they are obliged to solve their personal problems. That is, through helping others, a person helps oneself."

From Marina, we learn that many directors of NGOs in Ukraine, and particularly women directors, have a personal stake in the work they do. Marina, for example, became the director of an association for families of children with cancer after her daughter was diagnosed with cancer and was given the status "child invalid of Chernobyl." I found that seven of the twelve key informants had founded their social organizations as a way to address personal and family crises. For example, one woman created a charitable support group for persons with spinal cord injuries when her son became paralyzed after a diving accident. Two "mothers of many children" (Ukr. *bahatoditni*; Rus. *mnogodetnie*), when faced with post-*perestroika* economic crises, became co-directors of a charity organization for "families with many children." It is significant that women in post-Soviet countries such as Ukraine are often obliged to solve personal and family problems through their activism and leadership roles in NGOs. Social organizations are

often perceived as a "natural" space for women, and social activism is frequently construed as dovetailing with the "mother role."

Marina's narrative also reveals that women who engage in NGO activism occupy a problematic economic space. Because of their age--most are middle aged--and their status as mothers, the majority of the women in my study have found it impossible to enter the workforce through traditional channels. The emerging non-governmental or "third sector," as it is called in Ukraine, seems to these women to be the only sphere that offers them the opportunity to engage in relatively prestigious work and eke out a meager living. At the same time, through "helping others" the women derive a great deal of personal satisfaction from the work they do, in spite of the vulnerable position in which they often find themselves.

Women as Caretakers Writ Large in the Post-Socialist Era

Many social organizations in Ukraine defend women, children, and families, and their work is often viewed as an extension of the "maternal role" (2). Women directors of such groups are frequently characterized as caretakers writ large. Such narrative lines reproduce conservative notions about women's attributes and capabilities: their function as solvers of social problems is figured as an extension of "natural" roles as mothers and guardians of the home and nation. Many women directors themselves employed this maternalist discourse in their explanations of why certain types of social organizations in Ukraine have a "woman's face." In so doing, the women defined themselves in largely traditional terms and construed "social work" as one of the "female caring professions" alongside teaching and nursing. This trend confirms Marian Rubchak's observations that frequently "once they begin to play a public role, no matter how impressive, Ukrainian women themselves move into a public agenda that allegedly corresponds to their so-called 'natural' (read 'feminine') inclinations. This, in turn, has the effect of 'feminizing' their public undertakings..." (1996:317). Consider the following narrative told to me by Ivana, the founder and director of a charitable organization for troubled teenagers:

"All of these problems that we solve, they involve those problems that probably somehow touch the emotional sphere more. These are the kinds of problems that women can see better, and how to solve them. A man is more rational. Sometimes he thinks that these problems can be solved only in a pragmatic fashion. And a woman-- she can solve these problems just by talking to a person--a psychological effect. With some of her own more...emotional methods. And men, to be honest, often think that these problems don't need to be addressed, that they will solve themselves. And they occupy themselves with more practical things, really. And since men don't attempt to solve such problems, namely drug abuse, alcoholism and so on--this means they think that specialists--specially prepared persons---must solve these problems. But in this case--myself, for example--these problems can be solved by having turned it into a kind of dedication. My husband thinks that it is all nonsense; [he believes that only] specialists can solve those kinds of problems...

A woman knows how to solve these problems, in what way they can be solved better, and more simply. Somehow you must say to the girls...What is their problem? Listen to them. One must have patience to hear out these girls who have such problems. To listen and give some kind of advice, probably. To come to a solution of these problems and this kind of patience--it is up to women of course. To mothers, most often."

Oftentimes, discourses that glorify the "maternal role" of women and romanticize women's values attempt to separate the public and the private, and locate the woman firmly in the home. Although their narratives were peppered with phrases referring to the feminine nature of "woman" and the centrality of motherhood to women's lives, most of my informants asserted that women have a place both at home and in the workplace. In assuming administrative positions in NGOs, these women see themselves as engaging in a type of work that suits them as women and mothers.

In informants' narratives, tropes about a woman's emotional nature, her vulnerability, and her "natural" role as a mother were often coupled with allusions to the strength of Ukrainian women. Men in positions of power were frequently portrayed as merely figureheads, while women were seen as doing all the "real work." Several informants expressed their belief that, even though oftentimes a man might be named the acting director of an NGO, his role is usually nominal, and it is really still "woman's work." A number of the women used a powerful metaphor to illustrate their assertions: "A man is the head," they said, "but the woman is the neck." The women explained that, as "the neck," a woman has the power to direct a man's gaze, to point him in the right direction.

Western Feminism: Making Inroads?

Given my informants' tendencies to refer to "femininity" and maternalism in their narratives of work and social activism, I was interested to explore their experiences of and reactions to western feminism. Five of the women had been introduced to elements of a western feminist discourse through seminars on gender, women's rights and women in leadership that were sponsored by an international organization in Ukraine, the NIS-US Women's Consortium. Of these five women, only two were directors of organizations that were created to address women's issues specifically. According to one informant, these seminars emphasized a woman's right and indeed obligation to extend her responsibilities and goals beyond the boundaries of her family. These ideas were not new ones to the women in my

study; Soviet ideology, of course, also encouraged paid employment and participation in social life for women. Soviet state ideology did not, however, often question "traditional" gender roles and the notion that women were responsible for the domestic sphere (Berdahl 1999:189). Informants said that attending these seminars encouraged them to rethink their positions as wives, mothers, and members of society, and to question gendered roles that they heretofore may have construed as "natural." The women in my study who had been exposed to such ideas during the seminars were generally receptive to them. One woman emphasized the boost in self-confidence that she enjoyed after attending the sessions. Several informants began to incorporate notions of gender (a foreign word and concept to most people in Ukraine) into their narratives and to debate notions of "traditional roles" for men and women. In Ukraine, feminism is a generally mystifying concept for most, and often evokes negative reactions among men and women alike (Lissyutkina 1993:274; Pavlychko 1996:306). Feminism is distrusted for two reasons: it is associated with the Soviet project of "emancipation" that resulted in a double burden for women, and it is seen as a threat to the traditional family structure (Bohachevsky-Chomiak 1998:8). Despite these obstacles, it seems that the NIS-US Women's Consortium in Kyiv has been successful in engaging women Ukrainian NGO leaders in a dialogue about notions of "gender" and women and men's roles in the family and society. It remains to be seen whether or not a feminist (or feminist-like) consciousness will take root in Ukraine's non-governmental sector, and whether or not these efforts will contribute to the future empowerment of women (3).

I found that, as the women in my study took up elements of the western feminist discourse to which they were introduced, they localized this discourse and reproduced it in culturally specific ways. In the context of Ukraine's "non-governmental" sector, the maternalist and feminist discourses often converge to help mold this sector into a space for women. The discourse on "femininity" does so as it construes social work as one of the female caring professions. And the feminist discourse, as conveyed to women through NGO-related seminars, encourages women to rethink "traditional" gender roles and to become socially and politically active. This braided discourse, then, has the potential to provide women with a double justification of their right, and indeed obligation, to realize themselves as actors in Ukraine's "non-governmental sphere."

The Socioeconomic Contexts of Activism

In Ukraine, women venture into social activism within a context of extreme social and economic crisis. According to the United Nations Human Development Report, in 1997 the real GDP per capita in Ukraine was $2,190; the real GDP per capita for women, however, was only $1,691 (1999:135, 143). Since Ukrainian independence, women have constituted the majority of the country's unemployed, representing 67% of the unemployed in Ukraine in 1997 (Romaniuk 1998:50). Significantly, the majority of women activists in my study were considered "unemployed" by the Ukrainian state. Informants often alluded to the irony of this label by emphasizing the long hours that they worked every day for their organizations without official recompense. Several of the women opted to refer to themselves as "social workers," and felt frustrated when others called their social activism a "hobby." Since as "unemployed" persons they do not receive a formal salary for their work, the women are ineligible to contribute to a pension (social security) fund, and risk being left without pension benefits when they reach retirement age. It is estimated that, of persons in Ukraine who expect to receive no pension benefits upon reaching retirement, 80% are women (Romaniuk 1998:50). These problems highlight the very vulnerable position in which many post-Soviet women find themselves.

Frequently informants' narratives included savvy critiques of an economic system that they feel shuts them out (4). Many of my informants were middle-aged divorced or widowed mothers struggling to provide for themselves and their children, often without support from any family members. Many women who founded social organizations were disillusioned with their low-paying or even non-paying jobs in other spheres such as science, engineering, and education, and have been unsuccessful at finding jobs in the business sector. Indeed, many of the women in my study cited age and gender discrimination in the business sphere as one of the main reasons they were drawn to work in social organizations. In addition to their experiences of gender discrimination at the workplace, the women in my study also reported encounters with age discrimination. Svetlana, a mother of three children, has a degree in both typography and accounting. Here she describes why she finally abandoned her search for a job in the business sector:

"Right now, [I] don't interest any firm, not one employer. If you go, and you have a diploma and everything, but you are already 40 years old...you won't go put a mini-skirt on, will you? You have three children. You utter the magic phrase '40 years old and three children,' and, even if you are a genius, no one needs you. Because you can't hire a governess, and if one of your children is ill, you won't be at work...you become a burden. They don't even want to take a woman who has only one child."

Svetlana eventually became the director of an organization for families with many children. Svetlana and women like her defy some of the ways that we normally break up the world as they blur the boundaries between activism and gainful employment. The result is a kind of non-salaried shadow employment through which these women nonetheless manage to derive an income. Although most NGO leadership positions held by the women in my study are officially unsalaried "volunteer" positions, all of them have devised some system whereby the work is at least marginally economically beneficial to them. Those who depend on grants to sustain their organization's activities often include a

salary for themselves, either officially or unofficially, in the grant's budget. Other benefits manifest themselves in the form of goods and services. Directors whose work entails eliciting humanitarian aid for organization members, for example, might allot themselves "double rations" of these donations. Such charitable donations were often acquired in the form of food baskets, medicines, school supplies, equipment, clothing, and special "holidays." Usually combining these gains with small government benefits, most are able to survive, albeit barely, on the goods and/or money that they procure in this somewhat underbellied fashion.

In post-Soviet Ukraine, in many ways the non-governmental sphere represents an economic niche in which women can earn a living. Finding themselves pushed out of the "official" or salaried economy, the women in my study see social activism in charity organizations and support groups as the only way to address social injustices, solve personal problems and eke out a meager living. Several of the women are considering possibilities for expanding the activities of their organizations in a way that will ease their dependence on state benefits, allow them to continue their work in a self-sustaining way, and provide them with a salary. Specifically, they expressed interest in founding "small businesses" in conjunction with their social organizations. Several foreign donor organizations in Ukraine are encouraging this move to self-sustainability by providing grants to NGOs for the creation of "small businesses" (5). Such initiatives have the potential to empower both NGO directors and their fledgling organizations by facilitating women's involvement in higher levels of the market economy. This is significant in today's Ukraine, where "business" is widely viewed as a "male sphere" and where women's participation in the market economy is largely limited to buying and selling goods at the lower levels of the private sector.

It is interesting to note that informants indicated their wishes to start what they call a "women's business" (*zhinochyi biznes*) such as a sewing enterprise or an enterprise manufacturing Ukrainian souvenirs or toys. This demarcation between "women's business" and "men's business" is indicative of further gender divisions in Ukraine's new market economy (Romaniuk 1998:52-55; Pavlychko 1996:312-313). Small businesses in the garment industry, medicine, education (e.g. private tutoring) and certain services (e.g. hair and cosmetic salons, schools for governesses, and bakeries) are all considered to represent "women's business" (Romaniuk 1998:53). One informant who is considering founding a small business alongside her social organization believes that women feel more comfortable starting out in one of the "female specialties" to get their feet wet. Then, she said, women will be able "to go further" in business endeavors. NGO-related small businesses have the potential to empower organizations by making them more financially self-dependent, and they could also empower women in Ukraine by providing them with a niche in the new market economy. One wonders, however, about the consequences of marrying non-governmental, non-profit civic and charitable organizations to "businesses." What changes in group agendas might such shifts bring about, and what would be the implications for successful collective action?

Personal-Psychological Dimensions of Social Activism

The women directors of NGOs in my study, and others like them, clearly face great challenges as they struggle to remain afloat financially and address certain personal and family problems through their activism. In light of these obstacles, I was surprised to see how satisfied the women in my study appeared to be in their new careers in the social sphere. Even as the women discussed at length their impoverishment, broken marriages, troubled children, and poor health, almost all of them indicated that, in a career sense, they have never been happier. Independent of the "cause" that brought them to leadership positions in NGOs, the women in my study portrayed this work as making their daily lives more fulfilling, interesting and meaningful. By examining the women's narratives, we see how social organizations in Ukraine today serve as fora that may allow persons, and especially the women who direct them, to feel that they can reconstitute their "selves" and heal their bruised psyches. Many of them came to this work during a time of personal psychological and economic crisis and feel that they have accomplished much in their positions and have proven themselves as capable, active women.

Ivana, who heads a charity organization for troubled teenagers, described how attending several seminars on NGOs and women's issues, and serving as the director of her own organization, boosted her self-image and self-confidence:

"I began to look differently at some problems--life positions and so on--after those seminars. For me it was one of those turning points in my life...I had many complexes (*byla zakompleksovannaia*) for a long time...and after those seminars I felt more confident, more literate professionally, in order to socialize with people on a certain level...Earlier I was unable to pick up the receiver and speak with a stranger. Now it is the easiest thing for me. In front of any rank of person, no matter who it is...I can speak on the same level as they and feel absolutely competent in those problems that I want to share or discuss and so on. That is proof that I have become adequately confident in myself..."

Ivana continues:

"I am glad, after all, that my life isn't gray; my days are not gray, rather they are full. Sometimes I have days that are planned down to the minute...I see that people around me, who surround me--they get charged with my enthusiasm...I'm very happy, truly, that I gained some confidence...Earlier I walked around like this, [crouched down], and now I walk with a raised head. That is, I can look people in the eyes. Earlier I couldn't look people

in the eyes, because I thought that I was a freak (*urodka*), that I was...in short, I had a mass of complexes that I developed in childhood, and which my husband supported for a while. And now I know that I can do...things that not every third, fourth, or fifth [person can do]. So these are the things that have happened to me recently-- good events, good changes, you could say."

In this narrative Ivana drew upon particular discourses through which she was able to remake her "self." Most notably, Ivana drew upon a western feminist discourse that was introduced to her during the seminars she described, seminars that were sponsored by the NIS-US Women's Consortium in Ukraine. Through this self-transformation narrative Ivana was enacting her potential and realizing herself as an agent. Many of the women in my study related narratives similar to Ivana's. Several likened their social activism to psychotherapy and said that work in these organizations serves as a barrier against and a therapy for loneliness. Almost all of my informants mentioned a heightened sense of self-confidence and agency, and an improved self-image, as a result of their work. Working in social organizations has afforded them access to resources such as seminars, workshops, and conferences. For these middle-aged women, many of whom feel marginalized as women and mothers, gaining access to NGO-related networks is especially important. The fact that these women, many of who say they were practically forced into social activism as a means for survival, find their work in the non-governmental sphere so rewarding deserves further investigation. The non-governmental sphere in Ukraine has become a space where women are able, and indeed often compelled, to understand their "selves" in new ways.

The goal of this paper has been to address elements of a certain "feminization" of Ukraine's "third" or non-governmental sector and therefore to problematize the space that new grassroots social organizations in Ukraine occupy. In carving out a space for themselves in Ukraine's public sphere, the twelve women in this study and others like them have engaged in debates about what a woman's role should be in both private and public spheres and, more broadly, what role NGOs are to play in Ukrainian society. Women directors of NGOs in Ukraine, by politicizing so-called "private" or "domestic" issues, and by taking up active leadership roles in civic organizations, are subverting the "masculine" nature of "civil society" that has been documented in Eastern Europe (Watson 1993:72; Gal 1996:34). Participating in public organizations and lobbying for social causes are potential ways for women to become historical agents and to create a "space of their own" in Ukraine's public sphere (Yang 1999). The experiences of women directors of social organizations thus deserve our scrutiny. As actors in this space of NGOs, these women are offered up myriad discourses of democratization, self-help, feminism, and others. How they react to these discourses, that is, how they understand, appropriate, and/or reject them, has implications for the shape that Ukraine's non-governmental sector will take in the future. Further excavation of Ukraine's "third sector" should include an examination of such discourses and the social forces that they mediate, and an inquiry into the ways in which women in Ukraine's non-governmental sphere become (or do not become) agents of particular discourses.

Notes

1. In 1999, 4,482 non-governmental organizations were registered in Ukraine, 14% of them in Kyiv (Sydorenko 2000). My study focused on eleven "social" (Ukr. *hromads'ki*; Rus. *obshchestvennie*) organizations. The majority of these groups are charitable organizations, also called "mutual aid associations." These organizations simultaneously act as both a support group and a humanitarian (charity) organization; they have a fixed membership made up of individuals and families with common concerns. Examples in my study include an organization for large (Ukr.--*bahatoditni*; Rus.--*mnogodetnie*) families, an organization for lonely or single pensioners, and two organizations for the families of children with cancer. Four of the organizations were more broadly based charity or service organizations with no fixed membership. My study also included one non-profit cultural organization that works to instill a sense of patriotic pride in Ukrainian youth through dramatic performances. Two of the organizations were founded on a specifically women's platform: an organization for disabled women, and an organization for women pensioners.

4. In May 2000, for example, an event called "Kyiv Civic Organization Day" was held by Kyiv's Innovation and Development Centre to introduce citizens to the various social organizations in the city. Of the 150 civic and charitable organizations represented at the exhibition, 40% were formed to protect the interests of children, families and women. Of the organizations with such an orientation, 68% were directed by women (Innovation and Development Centre, May 2000).

3. See Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak (1998), Solomea Pavlychko (1996) and Marian Rubchak (1996) for considerations of feminism and women's groups in Ukraine, past and present. See also Valerie Sperling (1999) for discussions of feminism and the women's movement in contemporary Russia.

4. Almost all of the women complained about the "miserly" pensions that they or their children received from the state. The retirees in my study received a pension of less than $20/month. Depending on the children's ages, "families with many children" were given between $1 and $5 per month for each child. Students in Kyiv currently receive a stipend of $3.50/month. Subsidies for rent, for "families with many children," for example, were difficult to acquire. While many entitlements existed for informants on paper, limits were placed on these benefits. One woman's teenage son, for example, had progressive cancer and was entitled to buy medicines in state pharmacies for half-price. In practice however, this discount only applied to purchases under $2.

5. Some of the major foreign organizations that have taken part in financing local NGOs in Ukraine include the following: NIS-US Women's Consortium, USAID, Counterpart Alliance, The Soros Foundation's Open Society Institute and the International Renaissance Foundation, TACIS, the Eurasia Foundation, UNDP, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, and the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs.

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