

# **The Dilemmas of Civic Revival: Ukrainian Women since Independence**

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Motherhood, full-time work, and active citizenship—these were the three social roles the Soviet state officially expected women to perform. In practice, however, that state encouraged women in Ukraine to put motherhood above career advancement and permitted them to engage only in officially condoned civic causes. The late 1980s initiated a broad-based civic revival that provided many women opportunities to develop new political skills that enhanced their ability to contribute to their communities. However, the first ten years of Ukraine's post-Soviet existence profoundly challenged their capacity to ensure the carrying out of the political and social reforms women activists sought during glasnost. This article examines some of the ways in which Ukrainian women have altered their orientation to motherhood, work, and citizenship in response to the tumultuous changes of the last decade. I begin by exploring some of the broader problems that have led to declining women's health, socio-economic status, and political influence. I then evaluate in detail the causes of recent shifts in household composition and family structure. Next I analyze the factors that limit women's ability to improve their position in the labour force. I conclude by examining women's influence over politics and public life during the Soviet era and the first years of Ukraine's independence.

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## Introduction

Soviet women first began entering public life in large numbers during the political upheaval of the late 1980s. Small networks of Ukrainian women became involved in initiating movements for freedom of conscience, religious tolerance, and national rights. The first distinct women's groups to form—soldiers' mothers committees—protested military hazing, and helped organize a draft-resistance campaign that succeeded in profoundly weakening the Soviet armed forces. In the following years, a variety of federated grassroots women's organizations urged women to come together as mothers to pursue broad-based moral reform and cultural revival. At the local level, numerous small-scale mothers' groups were established to provide assistance to children, in particular, to young victims of the Chernobyl nuclear-power accident. Large numbers of women also participated actively in environmental protests and demonstrations in support of religious freedom. Most of these early public women's groups justified their civic involvement using a language that exalted women's capacity to mother and sought to extend the maternal values of care, nurturance, and morality to society as a whole.

What followed this important period of civic revival was a transition more dramatic and more wrenching than even the most radical of these maternalist women's groups had envisioned. Single-party rule, five-year plans, collective farms, and similar Soviet institutions have been abolished. Ukraine has been declared independent. In contrast to the past, women are not prohibited from openly expressing their views and pursuing their group interests even when these interests diverge from state policies. Control over the government lies with elected officials who have been chosen in relatively free elections. There are alternative sources of information to which citizens have access, including a wide variety of new women's advocacy groups, political associations, and policy-research centres.

Ukrainian independence raised hopes of continued increases in civic engagement. Instead, it was followed by a noticeable decline in public participation in grassroots women's federations and other large non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and an increasing professionalization of women's-rights work in the hands of a small, closed elite.<sup>1</sup> Foreign observers have presented a grim picture of growing gender inequality in the broader population. International human-rights organizations have reported that post-Soviet women workers have been treated as expendable and that women have accounted for over eighty percent of

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1. For discussions of the numerous political obstacles that have hindered civic engagement and slow Ukraine's progress toward democracy, see Adrian Karatnycky, "Meltdown in Ukraine," *Foreign Affairs*, May–June 2001, 1–14; and Nadia Diuk, "Sovereignty and Uncertainty in Ukraine," *Journal of Democracy* 12, no. 4 (2001): 57–64.

the unemployment created by economic restructuring.<sup>2</sup> Surveys of women's rights have found that violence against women has been increasing but has been unreported because authorities have failed to investigate rape and domestic-abuse complaints.<sup>3</sup> Examinations of sex trafficking have found that criminal networks have duped up to four hundred thousand Ukrainian women into working abroad as prostitutes.<sup>4</sup> These problems will only be addressed when newly established professional women's-rights advocates build coalitions with grassroots women's federations.

## Diagnosing Ukraine's Crisis

Discussions of women's issues in post-Soviet Ukraine have frequently cast women as victims of a conservative state that has robbed them of the economic, social-welfare, and reproductive rights they enjoyed under Soviet rule. Most of the discriminatory practices that are now represented as new sources of gender oppression originated decades ago in Soviet policies that were intended to increase the birth rate and encouraged politicians, employers, and husbands to treat women primarily as mothers who should be more committed to their families than to their work or civic responsibilities.<sup>5</sup> Soviet policies introduced a patriarchal division of labour that strengthened traditional gender roles while compelling women to shoulder many additional responsibilities, including full-time work. Arguably, it has been this conservative gender regime, not a new conservatism of the present transition, that has led politicians, legislators, and

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2. See, for example, Ralph E. Regan, *Russia: Neither Jobs nor Justice. State Discrimination against Women in Russia* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1995).

3. For examples of exposé-style discussions of rights violations, see Human Rights Watch Women's Rights Project, *Too Little, Too Late: State Response to Violence Against Women* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1997); and United States Department of State, *Ukraine Country Reports on Human Rights Practices—2000* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor of the United States Department of State, February 2001). International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, *Women 2000: An Investigation into the Status of Women's Rights in Central and South-Eastern Europe and the Newly Independent States* (Vienna: International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights and International Helsinki Federation Research Foundation, 2000) provides a more balanced discussion.

4. Policy experts agree that no reliable numbers on trafficking exist. See Melanie Ram, *Putting an End to Trafficking of Women in the NIS and CEE* (Washington, D.C.: International Research and Exchanges Board, 2000).

5. Although there are many other ways of conceiving of the status of women, discussions in post-Soviet societies have tended to focus primarily on the role women as mothers play in the life of the broader community. See Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism: A Comparative-Historical Essay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 15.

employers in Ukraine to make discriminatory decisions about how women should prioritize domestic duties, paid work, and public activity.

State efforts to reinforce traditional gender roles in Ukraine began many decades ago. Catastrophic population losses during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s led the Soviet state to introduce policies that both encouraged fertility and strengthened the nuclear family, in large part by restricting divorce and abortion. Soviet policies also reinforced traditional gender roles that excluded women from influence over public life and management of the state and the economy, and confined their authority to matters of private life and issues related to children and the family.<sup>6</sup> Although restrictions on abortion and divorce were relaxed after the Second World War, state ideology, disseminated through the media and educational literature, continued to treat childbearing and child rearing as a woman's primary mission in life.

Party ideologues consistently depicted the USSR as the first country to emancipate women from traditional forms of exploitation. Ironically, in practice the Soviet gender regime reinforced a division of social life into male and female spheres, a split that feminists and socialists have long considered to be a principle source of male hegemony. Men came to be seen as leaders of public activities and productive institutions (which became the focus of considerable state intervention), while women came to be seen as caretakers of the private world of family life shielded (or somewhat shielded) from the state and the Party. Nowhere was this gender hierarchy more evident than in the conservative family-planning policies the Soviet state developed.

Throughout the postwar era, Party leaders sought, with little success, to encourage population growth by appealing to women to view motherhood as their sacred patriotic obligation. While women who bore ten or more children were given mother-heroine awards and publicly lauded, maternity benefits were insufficient, and virtually no investment was made in family-planning programmes that provide scientific knowledge about birth control and reproduction and facilitate access to non-surgical contraception methods. Declining birth rates in Ukraine and other European republics led Party leaders to increase maternity benefits and build more kindergartens in this part of the USSR to encourage Slavic fertility, but they made no investment in primary reproductive health care that would reduce infertility and allow parents to plan families rationally.<sup>7</sup> Soviet

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6. For excellent discussions of Soviet policies toward women, see Mary Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989); Mary Buckley, ed., *Perestroika and Soviet Women* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Wendy Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917–1936* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

7. For a thorough discussion of relevant glasnost policy debates, see Buckley, ed.,

schoolchildren and students were encouraged by population-growth campaigns to marry young, but they never learned about contraception and reproduction, which continued to be treated as private matters. Abortion remained the only widely used method of birth control. Frequent abortions led to widespread infertility and physical and psychological stress.

Some of Gorbachev's "radical" reforms were also intended to encourage women to have more children. As Gorbachev put it, "many of our problems ... are partially caused by the weakening of family ties and a slack attitude to family responsibilities. This is a paradoxical result of our sincere and politically justified desire to make women equal with men in everything." It was time, he said, to curtail Soviet women's employment and public activity so as to "help make it possible for women to return to their purely womanly mission."<sup>8</sup> Such pronouncements led to public debates about what needed to be done to correct the "damage" done to the Soviet family by women's "overemancipation."

Gorbachev's deeply conservative population-growth campaign encouraged public discussion of the man-made famine, the Chernobyl accident, and Russification in the hope that women would do their share to prevent Ukrainian "ethnocide" by bearing more children. The Popular Movement of Ukraine for Restructuring (Rukh) strove to offer a more progressive solution: equal parental responsibility for child-raising. Its charter stated that Rukh supports *equal* parental responsibility for the family. Nonetheless, a more traditional, conservative approach to the family was brought up alongside this new doctrine of equal parental responsibility in the charter's section on ethics, which stated that "Rukh is cognizant of the important role of the family as a biological and social unit of society, in which the spirituality and future of the people are formed. Rukh upholds the comprehensive improvement of family life, equal parental responsibility for raising a morally healthy and nationally conscious generation, the rebirth of the traditional status of the Ukrainian family with mutual dignity and respect toward parents and toward the maternal role of women and their role in the creation and protection of the family hearth."<sup>9</sup> In keeping with longstanding Soviet gender ideology, no further concerns about women's status were expressed in the Rukh charter. Nothing at all was said about what role women should play outside the family or how Rukh might help women to better define their interests in the workplace.

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*Perestroika and Soviet Women.*

8. Mikhail S. Gorbachev, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 102.

9. The Popular Movement of Ukraine for Restructuring, *Programme and Charter* (Kyiv and Ellicott City, Md.: Smoloskyp, 1989), 32.

Since independence, conservative, Soviet-style discussions of the decline of motherhood and the crisis of the family have continued to dominate media discussions of women. Newspaper stories about *women* have tended to focus almost exclusively on abandoned *children* (for example, orphans and street children) and on the reasons why mothers abandon or neglect their children.<sup>10</sup> In interviews, prominent female politicians have been asked how they care for their children, and their policies and achievements have often been cast in a negative light. The media has rarely devoted serious attention to women in business.

In post-Soviet Ukraine, a conservative Soviet legacy also has continued to define the government's treatment of women's issues. Government leaders turn their attention to women twice a year— on International Women's Day and Mothers' Day, when they express gratitude to women as wives and mothers, *berehyni* who act as guardians of the hearth and of national values.<sup>11</sup> On such days, the president grants St. Olha medals to women who have given birth to many children or have worked with orphans. On other occasions, most politicians, like their Soviet predecessors, mention women only when they discussing measures to promote population growth.<sup>12</sup>

Women's NGOs have supported equal-rights legislation and broad-based state funding of reproductive health, with particular attention to rational family-planning methods and increased access to non-surgical contraception. The population-growth policies that both rightists and leftists have supported have provided meagre Soviet-style benefits to mothers (a practice that is still referred to as "supporting motherhood," even though families on subsidies often live well below the official poverty level).<sup>13</sup> A small minority of centrist politicians

10. Ukrainian Center for Independent Political Research, *Gender Monitor*, September 1997, no. 1: 2; and *Gender Monitor*, October 1997, no. 1: 3.

11. Marian Rubchak, "In Search of a Model: Evolution of a Feminist Consciousness in Ukraine and Russia," *The European Journal of Women's Studies* 8, no. 2 (May 2001): 151.

12. See, for instance, Tamara Melnyk, *Henderna polityka v Ukraini* (Kyiv: Logos, 1999); or V. S. Vlasenko, Z. D. Vinogradova, and I. V. Kalachova, eds., *Gender Statistics for Monitoring Progress in the Area of Equality between Men and Women* (Kyiv: V. M. Koretsky State and Law Institute of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, 2000).

13. There are some real differences between how rightists and leftists "support motherhood." Communist Party head Symonenko has referred to recent years of negative population growth as a period of "genocide," for which President Kuchma should be put on trial. He has blamed population losses on the influence of the West and its colonialist policies and supported a restoration of the Soviet Union. By contrast, rightists (who also have often said that they "support motherhood") have echoed glasnost-era discussions of women as the nation's *berehynia*, guardian of the hearth and mother of the nation. When rightists discuss women, they typically express concern about the role women play in transmitting Ukrainian culture.

affiliated with oligarch parties has given support to equal-rights legislation. However, parliamentarians, including prominent women deputies, have ridiculed this notion, claiming that women in Ukraine are already equal. Some have even continued to insist that women are overemancipated and need to devote themselves more to motherhood.<sup>14</sup>

As a result of these somewhat contradictory pressures, government policy-making has followed an ambiguous course that seems to respond to all of these recommendations but without strengthening the institutions through which social policies and programmes are implemented. Policy-makers have appeased leftists and some rightists by continuing Soviet-style maternity and child-welfare benefits. They have introduced fees for formerly free abortions and begun a national family-planning programme that is intended to promote population growth by reducing infant mortality rates and abortion-related health problems. Policy-makers have even responded to the women's-rights lobby by adding a guarantee of gender equality to the new Constitution of Ukraine, which now states that "equal rights of women and men are ensured ... providing for women equal opportunities with men."

Nonetheless, the government has consistently undermined not only Soviet-style efforts to improve maternal and child welfare through subsidies, but also newer Western-style programmes to promote family planning and gender equality. Just as in the past (when single mothers receiving maternity benefits often lived below the poverty line), state programmes to promote family and child welfare have remained underfinanced, and have been implemented through weak administrative channels run by patron-client networks that have never been accountable to the needy populations they are expected to serve.

A catastrophic decline in the living standards of needy families has resulted. In 1998, for example, when the official poverty level ranged from twenty to thirty-seven U.S. dollars per person, needy families received roughly nine to ten dollars per month in subsidies, while disabled children received roughly \$1.20 per month. In more recent years, women on maternity leave have received a subsidy of roughly five dollars per month, the equivalent of 10.9 percent of the average monthly wage of fifty-five dollars.

Today, budgets are probably the single greatest obstacle to administrative reform of state welfare programmes. Most state agencies receive less than fifty percent of their already meagre operating-budget funds. Developing a capable,

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14. For a balanced discussion of the politics of gender in Ukraine during glasnost and the first years of independence, see Solomea Pavlychko, "Between Feminism and Nationalism: New Women's Groups in the Ukraine," in *Perestroika and Soviet Women*, ed. Buckley, 82–96; and idem, "Feminism in Post-Communist Ukrainian Society," in *Women in Russia and Ukraine*, ed. Rosalind Marsh (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 305–14.

accountable government social-services agency out of a post-Soviet bureaucracy requires considerable resources for retraining personnel and making basic infrastructural improvements. Meanwhile, the 1998 state budget for the Family Planning Programme was roughly U.S.\$333,000. This was far less than was needed to run this programme using existing resources. Available funds that reached clinics and hospitals were rarely adequate to make basic improvements. The daily medicine budget per person at Kyiv Gynecological Hospital 25 was \$0.20, while many gynecological clinics elsewhere in the country received little or nothing to purchase medicine. Because of meagre clinic budgets and considerable wage arrears, many gynecologists and obstetricians have expected patients to buy their own medication and pay extortionate fees for medical treatment. As a result of the current economic crisis, most people of reproductive age still cannot afford to pay for non-surgical forms of contraception.

Budgetary shortfalls have also undermined programmes promoting economic opportunities. While the 1997 National Plan of Action Aimed at the Improvement of Women's Status was promised nearly a million dollars, little of this budget was in fact disbursed, and the state organization that was to implement the plan was dissolved in 1998. This and many other new programmes sought to devote government resources to eliminating older forms of gender discrimination by guaranteeing women long denied political and economic opportunities. However, because of decades of conservative Soviet gender policies, Ukraine's politicians have not yet decided to commit sufficient funds to make such progressive new programmes work and have continued to view women as *berehyni*, romanticized maternal figures without ordinary human needs.

## **Women and the Changing Structure of the Ukrainian Family**

For more than a decade, it has been argued that Ukraine's birth rate is declining because of "ethnocide" and that young people (women in particular) need to place greater priority on children in order to bring Ukraine out of a demographic crisis. Indeed, Ukraine has seen a considerable decline in population in the past decade. However, to a great extent, today's low birth rate is, in a broad sense, "normal" and represents a continuation of long-standing trends that began decades ago in nearly all industrialized countries in response to improvements in public health and education: a characteristic series of changes called the demographic transition that describes how the populations of and North America have arrived at near zero population growth.<sup>15</sup>

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15. The demographic transition has three main phases. Before the transition, both birth and death rates are high and the population growth rate is zero or close to it. In the second or transitional phase, the birth rate remains high while the death rate declines due



The population of Ukraine began the demographic transition prior to Soviet rule.<sup>16</sup> Population growth had been strong for several decades in the nineteenth century, despite very high infant mortality and very low life expectancy. At the time of the 1897 Russian imperial census, the Ukrainian provinces of the Russian Empire had one of the highest fertility rates in Europe—7.5 children per woman—and one of the lowest life expectancies at birth—thirty-six years for men and thirty-seven for women.<sup>17</sup> Low life expectancy, high levels of maternal, infant, and child mortality, and the added potential labour that came with each child compelled women to spend much of their life pregnant or nursing. Girls were rarely sent to school, and the literacy rate in 1897 was substantially lower among women (11.2 percent) than men (34.2 percent).

During Soviet rule, fertility and mortality declined and life expectancy and literacy increased. By the final decades of Soviet rule, Ukraine had completed the demographic transition by arriving at near zero population growth. Most parents now express a desire for two children, but delay a second child because they lack necessary resources, principally, adequate housing. According to the 1989 census, over half of families with children under the age of eighteen had only one child, fewer than forty percent had two, and roughly eight percent had more than two.<sup>18</sup> More than half of urban families and just under half of rural families had only one child.

Since independence Ukraine's low birth rate has often been spoken of as a crisis of the family, in particular, of motherhood. However, similar trends can be observed in Western countries, where the population is living longer and so the proportion of child-bearing adults is declining. Indeed, the size of the Ukrainian

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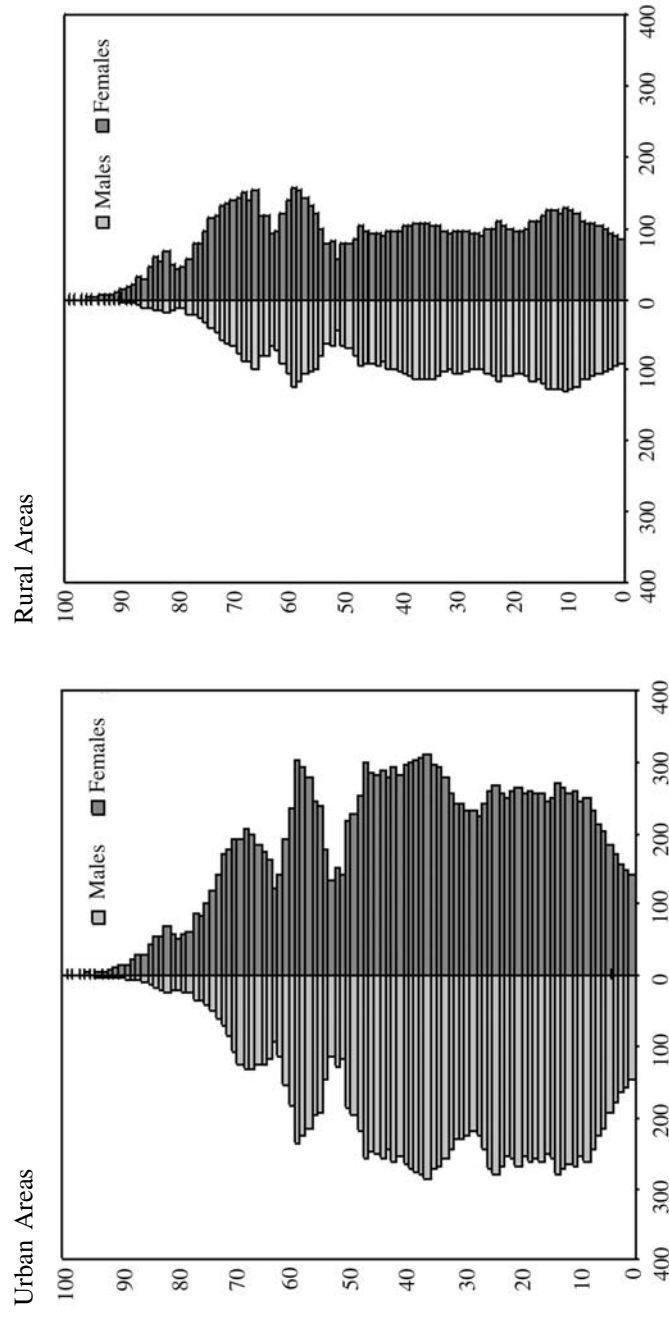
to better public health-measures, such as immunization and expanded food production because of improved agricultural methods. The decreased death rate at first leads to a high growth rate. But then, as the demographic transition progresses, the birth rate begins to decline thanks to better education, better family planning, more career options for women, and reduced infant mortality. Altogether this reduces the desire for large families. The population growth rate declines eventually to zero.

16. For the most complete discussions of demographic trends in Ukraine, see Ansley J. Coale, Barbara A. Anderson, and Erna Härm, *Human Fertility in Russia since the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); and Wolfgang Lutz, Sergei Scherbov, and Andrei Volkov, eds., *Demographic Trends and Patterns in the Soviet Union before 1991* (London: Routledge, 1994).

17. These figures on the pre-Soviet period are drawn from A. Perkovsky and S. Pirozhkov, "Population of Ukraine," in *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, ed. Danylo Husar Struk, vol. 4 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 149.

18. These and the following population statistics and discussion are drawn from "Health as a Factor in Providing for and Achieving Gender Equality," *Gender Analysis of Ukrainian Society* (Kyiv: United Nations Gender in Development Bureau, 1999), 1–31; and Vlasenko, Vinogradova, and Kalachova, eds., *Gender Statistics*, 36–7.

Figure 1. Gender and Age Ratio of the Population of Ukraine, 1998 (in thousands of persons)



Source: United Nations Gender in Development Bureau, *Gender Analysis of Ukrainian Society* (1999)

family has not changed in the past decade.<sup>19</sup> What, then, is the nature of Ukraine's current demographic crisis? Demographic trends suggest that since independence, young adults have delayed major transitions in their life course, such as marriage and parenthood, until economic conditions improve. Because of decisions to delay family formation, the overall marriage rate has continued to decline and the birth rate has fallen. The absolute number of births declined from 631,000 in 1991 to 389,000 in 1999. The birth rate fell from 12.1 to 7.8 during this period. Between 1990 and 1999 the marriage rate per one thousand persons fell from 9.3 to 6.9. The divorce rate has started to stabilize after several years of steady increases. Divorce rates rose from 3.7 in 1990 to 4.2 in 1993 before gradually declining to 3.5. Relative to the 1970s and 1980s, adults of child-bearing age now remain single somewhat longer, and their marriages produce fewer children and are somewhat more frequently dissolved through divorce.

As figure 1 shows, Ukraine's age structure itself has contributed significantly to lower birth rates. For several decades prior to independence, adults minimized the size of their families by delaying marriage, divorcing, or bearing fewer children than earlier generations did. Consequently, recent cohorts of adults aged twenty to thirty (the age when most Ukrainian women have their children) have been considerably smaller relative to older cohorts. As members of the all older cohorts age and their children mature and move away, the prevalence of childless and one-child families has increased, particularly, in urban areas. Steady increases in life expectancy throughout the post-war era has also contributed to increases in the prevalence of older households. All of these trends have resulted in decreased birth rates that have been consistent with demographic shifts that have occurred in other industrialized countries as public health improves.

Nevertheless, demographic trends in Ukraine have diverged from Western norms in certain alarming respects.<sup>20</sup> First, life expectancy has dropped since 1990 by almost five years for males and three years for females. Ukrainian male

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19. The average size of Ukrainian households has not changed significantly in recent decades. It has hovered near four persons for more than five decades. The age composition of households has shifted upward.

20. A more complicated question to answer is why Ukraine passed through the demographic transition without experiencing the "baby boom" that took place in the West. This was, of course, not simply because women were "emancipated." Catastrophic population losses during the Ukrainian-Soviet and Ukrainian-Polish wars of 1918–20, collectivization, the Stalinist Terror, and the Second World War amounted to many millions. The total population contracted in the 1930s and 1940s. Although the collectivization-related famine of 1932–33 and deportations to Soviet Asia affected entire families, mortality rates were disproportionately higher among men and created significant disparities between the number of adult men and women, which are still evident in older cohorts today (see figure 1).

and female life expectancy lags ten and fifteen years respectively behind that of Japan, the country with the highest average life expectancy, and has fallen to the level in developing countries such as Iran and Algeria. Secondly, rates of maternal and infant mortality remain among the highest in Eastern Europe. Although recent years have shown some improvements, public-health advocates aim to achieve further reduction in maternal and infant mortality rates through public-health campaigns, particularly, the Children of Ukraine National Programme and the National Plan of Action for the Period of 1997–2000 Concerning the Improvement of the Status of Women and Enhancement of Women's Roles in Society.<sup>21</sup> Thirdly, although abortion rates have declined (from eighty-three abortions per 1,000 women aged fifteen to forty-nine in 1990 to fifty-two in 1996), abortion has been much more prevalent and family planning services have been scarcer than in the West. Women and their children have experienced abortion-related health problems more frequently than their counterparts in industrialized countries. These problems have clearly resulted in large part from poor public-health and social-service sectors, which have deteriorated even further when government budgets were slashed after independence. Women's health problems have been exacerbated by the consequences of misguided Soviet era population-growth policies, an absence of domestic contraceptives, a need to rely on expensive foreign products, and prejudiced attitudes towards non-surgical contraceptives.

As has been noted above, it has not been uncommon for public discussions of Ukraine's population decline to question the devotion of young women to their children and family and accuse them of preferring a career instead. Such approaches have oversimplified or mischaracterized the many factors that contribute to the country's low birth rate. Arguably, it is men who have been the less committed parents. While women have devoted nearly as many hours to their family each week as they have to their jobs, research has shown that men have spent very little time on household tasks and have contributed to the family primarily as breadwinners. This role structure originated in Soviet policies that *challenged* traditional gender roles regarding mothers' participation in paid employment, but *reinforced* traditional gender roles regarding early motherhood and women's almost exclusive responsibility for the family. Women have adopted new economic responsibilities outside the home, but have continued to perform their responsibilities as mothers. Men, by contrast, have long had relatively few responsibilities as fathers and husbands. Perhaps as a result, predominantly male policy-makers and political commentators have failed to

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21. However, given the Soviet practice of registering infant deaths, infant mortality is in fact substantially higher than published statistics indicate. For a detailed analysis of recent demographic trends, see *Gender Analysis*.

make it a priority to invest in the kind of basic infrastructural improvements that would reduce infant and child mortality and prevent infertility. Instead they have reduced the question of population growth to a matter of women's devotion to their children.

## Women in the Transition Economy

Since independence, privatization has diminished economic opportunities for women in Ukraine and created pressures that, arguably, require not only a restructuring of household roles but also new kinds of government programmes to protect women from economic discrimination. Labour laws have established the legal equality of men and women, including equal pay for equal work. While this principle has generally been observed in the public sector, occupational segregation has long been pervasive and remains an unacknowledged source of considerable wage and income inequality.<sup>22</sup>

Because their heavy domestic responsibilities have coded them as unreliable workers, women have long been concentrated primarily in low-status, unskilled, low-paying jobs in manufacturing, agriculture, and retail. During the Soviet era men held nearly all managerial positions, even in these predominantly female occupations. Prior to independence, women, although generally better educated than men, received roughly twenty-five to forty percent less pay than men. Even educated, highly skilled women were concentrated in lower-status professions, such as education, culture, the public sector, and health care, which were lower-paying than predominantly male professions.

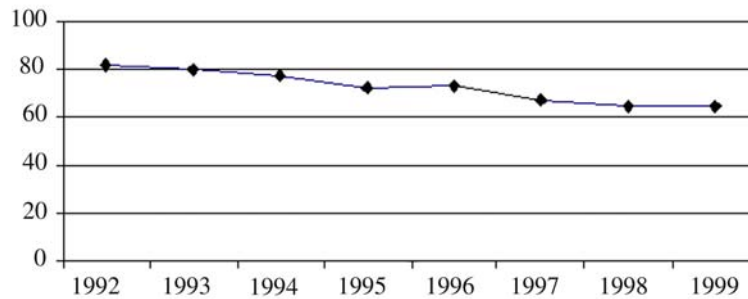
Recent structural changes in the economy have had a devastating effect on women, particularly, unskilled low-wage workers. The transition from a full employment economy has necessitated a considerable reduction in the number of unskilled workers at most large enterprises. Soon after Ukraine's independence, textile mills and light-manufacturing enterprises, which employed a predominantly female workforce, stopped paying wages, closed their doors altogether, or dismissed many of their workers. The prospects of privatization have also led many agricultural and retail enterprises to stop issuing wages and

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22. Studies have shown that employers have developed different expectations regarding the nature of men's and women's commitment to work, a practice that is also referred to as "statistical discrimination." Women, regardless of their marital or family status, have been automatically considered potential "working mothers" who would be discontinuously engaged in the labour force, and when working would give priority to their domestic duties. For a further analysis of occupational gender stratification in the USSR, see Gail Lapidus, *Women in Soviet Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); and Michael Paul Sacks, "Women, Work, and the Family in the Soviet Union," in *Understanding Soviet Society*, ed. Michael Paul Sacks and Jerry G. Pankhurst (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 71–96.

to dismiss many of their low-skilled workers, most of whom have been women. Highly educated women have also been affected, for instance, by the dismantling of Party-related research institutes, administrative units, and academic departments, but less dramatically than unskilled or low-status workers. Indeed, in some skilled occupations, since independence women have entered administrative and managerial positions vacated by men who have been dismissed or gone on to better-paying private-sector work.

**Figure 2. Percentage of Women among Unemployed Persons**



Source: United Nations Gender in Development Bureau, *Gender Analysis of Ukrainian Society* (1999)

New labour-market conditions have reduced the value of public-sector wages and increased the likelihood of unemployment and informal economic activity for all workers. They have pushed women—whom managers have always considered “mothers first” and hence “unreliable” workers—out of public-sector jobs into private or informal economic activity more quickly than men (see figure 2). As a result of the absence of economic opportunities for low-skilled workers in the private sector, many more women than men remain unemployed, cultivate private subsistence plots, and have difficulty finding new jobs. The percentage of women among the unemployed was highest just after independence, when it reached a peak of over eighty percent. Since 1992 it has decreased slowly. In 1995 seventy-three percent of those registered as unemployed were women. Since 1998 the percentage of women among the unemployed has remained stable at sixty-two percent. Inadequate unemployment benefits, which are roughly equivalent to twenty U.S. dollars per month (just above the official poverty line for one person), have placed unemployed women with dependents at great risk of poverty. Many women have had to devote more and more of their time to producing food for their family and have been unable to develop the skills needed to work in new, market-oriented enterprises.

**Table 1. Official Wages of Women and Men, 1997 (in hryvnias)**

<b>Branch of the economy</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Percent of women's wages to men's wages</b>
Manufacturing	130.64	202.54	64.50
Communications	178.57	249.72	71.51
Science	151.64	195.46	77.58
Trade	109.15	137.05	79.64
Culture	89.12	111.52	79.91
Management	183.25	228.32	80.30
Education	119.87	146.01	82.10
Construction	142.39	173.03	82.29
Public catering	66.92	79.93	83.72
Transportation	153.26	172.97	88.60
Retail	159.28	172.73	92.16
Forestry	105.38	113.80	92.60
Agriculture	95.59	101.98	93.73
Health	121.83	129.76	93.89
Average	131.83	181.94	72.47

Source: State Committee of Statistics of Ukraine, *Labor in Ukraine in 1997. Statistical Collection* (Kyiv, 1998), 183–4, cited in United Nations Gender in Development Bureau, *Gender Analysis of Ukrainian Society* (1999).

Long-standing economic disparities, in particular, lower wages for predominantly female occupations, such as health (seventy-nine percent female), retail (seventy-four percent), education (seventy-three percent), and culture (seventy-two percent), have continued to put women at a considerable disadvantage in the workplace. In the public sector, women workers have earned on average roughly twenty-five percent less than men (see table 1). Gender-based wage disparities have been greatest in high-paying and predominantly male occupations. In communications, the ratio of women's to men's wages is 72:100. In manufacturing, the wage ratio is 65:100. Wage disparities have often been smallest in low-paying, predominantly female occupations where all workers receive below-average wages. In health and education, for example, the average wage in 1997 was almost ten percent below the cross-occupational average for all women and nearly thirty-three percent below the average wage for all men. Women workers have earned less whether they work in "male" or "female" jobs.

Even though most Ukrainian politicians have asserted that there is no need for further equal-rights legislation, gender- and occupation-based wage disparities in the public sector have been significant and systematic. Gender-based wage

**Table 2. Ratio of Women's to Men's Real Income**

Age	Percentage
15–19	63.4
20–24	60.8
25–29	50.0
30–34	80.0
35–39	61.3
40–44	81.4
45–49	57.9
50–54	108.3
55–59	61.2
60–64	48.4
65–69	83.2
70–74	64.5
75+	60.0

Source: Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, cited in United Nations Gender in Development Bureau, *Gender Analysis of Ukrainian Society* (1999).

disparities, largely unacknowledged among a population that grew up believing that women and men had achieved equality under Soviet rule, have been evident in both “male-dominated” and “female-dominated” occupations. Women working in communications in 1998 received an average monthly wage of 179 hryvnias, roughly equivalent to fifty-four U.S. dollars. Meanwhile, men working in communications received on average about seventy-five dollars per month. Although women and men working in agriculture earned similar average wages, twenty-nine to thirty dollars, this was not that far above the official poverty level for one individual.

As a result of these gender-based wage differentials, gainfully employed women with children or other dependents have faced difficulties in buying basic necessities such as milk and eggs. A single mother with two children employed in the relatively high-wage communications or management sector of the economy fell below the official poverty level in 1998 even if she received an average family welfare subsidy of nine to ten dollars. The same was true for a single mother who worked in agriculture if she had only one child.

Although most people have been unaware of the extent of discriminatory practices, women's socio-economic status has lagged behind men's at almost every stage in life. Women have tended to receive not only lower wages but also lower pensions. Moreover, when enterprises have reduced staff, women have been released without a pension more often than men (eighty percent of women but only twenty percent of men). Low official wages and pensions, together with



the rising cost of living, have compelled nearly all adults to supplement their earnings through private plots and other forms of economic activity in the private sector. Women, particularly if they are older than thirty, seem to have been at an even greater disadvantage in the private sector than in the public sector. They have been substantially less likely to be hired by new private firms, except as poorly paid secretaries.<sup>23</sup> Women in the private sector have tended to be self-employed petty traders who work in open-air markets. Although in the first years of the transition such petty traders were able to earn considerably more than they would have earned at public-sector jobs, in recent years their profits have declined as larger-scale retail enterprises have edged them out.

In general, men seem to enjoy significant socio-economic advantages over women in the second economy. Studies of real income have demonstrated considerably greater gender disparities than state statistics on official public-sector wages (see table 2). Women have reported substantially lower incomes than their male counterparts at all ages except for the first years of their retirement at age fifty. This suggests that pensions are briefly able to equalize gender disparities, but that other government subsidies fail to do so and that men's higher pensions recreate gender-based economic disparities that began with wage discrimination. Moreover, the low income reported by women in their twenties (the age when children are likely to be born) suggests that single-parent families with small children have been at a substantially greater risk of poverty than multiple-income families. In a low-wage transition the welfare of the entire family is in jeopardy when even one of the parents earns an inadequate wage.

Since independence, unacknowledged stereotypes that have long coded women as mothers first and workers second have exacted a tremendous toll on families. Women have been more likely than men to remain unemployed or receive inadequate wages when working full-time. As a result, women have been more likely than men to leave their families for economic opportunities abroad. Once abroad, they have often worked in poorly paid menial jobs that native women shun. This has been not only a great waste of human capital. It may also have long-term demographic consequences. Although women have gone abroad temporarily, mainly to send cash home, many undoubtedly will not return, particularly, if opportunities in Ukraine fail to improve or if long absence removes these women from the career ladders that typically lead to better jobs. What is more, women who have left behind young children to be raised by relatives, as well as young women suspected of working as prostitutes, are likely to face reintegration problems upon their return. Although they have worked

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23. See Tatiana Zhurzhenko, "Ukrainian Women in the Transitional Economy," *Labour Focus on Eastern Europe*, no. 60 (November 1998): 55–68; and International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, *Women 2000*.

abroad primarily because they have had no other way to support their families, their friends and families may reject them, forcing them to go abroad again and remain there permanently.

Programmes to improve economic opportunities for women in Ukraine are likely to influence migrants' decisions. But they are not enough. Heavy household responsibilities have long been and, in the new market economy, continue to be significant obstacles to women's occupational advancement. The patriarchal family role structure inherited from Soviet years has also led to continuing romanticization of the family and the neglect of its real problems. If men and women shared domestic duties more evenly, perhaps serious attention would be paid to the material conditions of the family and also to the public-health and social-service infrastructure.

## Women in Politics

Policies to create economic opportunities for women and improve social services depend on changing policy-makers' and voters' perceptions of both women's and men's roles and priorities. Challenging gender discrimination in Ukraine will require considerable work.

Women are at a serious disadvantage in politics. During the Soviet period they rarely occupied positions of real political influence. In the early years of Soviet rule, the Zhenotdel (Ukrainian: Zhinviddil), the Women's Department of the Communist Party, became a channel for women to influence policy and enter positions of leadership. But in 1930, after women led a series of local revolts against collectivization, the Zhenotdel was abolished.<sup>24</sup> While continuing to claim that women's rights were an important state goal, Party functionaries gradually created a large administrative apparatus devoted primarily to increasing population growth and encouraging women's participation in low-wage, low-prestige jobs. Relatively few women advanced in the Party. Those who did were excluded from most decision-making and agenda-setting positions, and were put in charge of maternal and child welfare, the only policy sphere that Party leaders considered relevant to women.

The dissolution of the Zhenotdel, the only sanctioned Soviet organization devoted to women's political advancement, made it hard for women to mobilize as a group. The Soviet state's promotion of its "pro-women's rights" agenda also obscured the nature of women's grievances. There were no alternative sources of information accessible to Soviet citizens that might help them determine the extent and nature of gender (in)equality. They could see that women were integrated into a wide variety of official associations, such as the Komsomol, the

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24. Mary Buckley, ed., *Soviet Social Scientists Talking: An Official Debate about Women* (London: Macmillan, 1986); and Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution*.

Communist Party, and unions. Even if women rarely became leaders, the percentage of Party members in local organizations who were women rose very gradually to one quarter by the late 1970s. Quotas also ensured that by the 1980s women held about one half of the seats in Ukraine's local and oblast soviets and a third of the seats in the republic's Supreme Soviet. Official claims that Soviet women had attained full political equality with men were exaggerated, but Party quotas and its monopoly on the exchange of information made it difficult to represent women as an aggrieved or excluded group. Nonetheless, the absence of women from positions of real influence and the lack of an organizational centre for women's-rights activists made it difficult to mobilize women and continued to hamper women's influence on public policy.

Because of their long-standing exclusion from genuine political authority, women in post-Soviet Ukraine have also had little political power. Relatively few women have entered national politics. In 1990, after the demise of gender quotas, the percentage of women in the Supreme Council declined from one-third to 2.9 percent. Subsequently, it has increased slightly to 4.6 percent in 1994 and eight percent in 1998. More women have been elected officials in local politics. Women deputies constitute up to a third of the members of oblast and city councils and the majority in village councils. However, at present local councils still have little real power. Most legislation is introduced at the centre by the president. Nearly all taxes are sent to Kyiv, and local councils receive virtually no resources.

Women play a minor, but not insignificant, role in political parties. Several parties have a sizeable female membership. In 1999 women comprised forty percent of the Popular Movement of Ukraine and the Liberal Party of Ukraine, forty-five percent of the Socialist Party of Ukraine and the Green Party of Ukraine, and nearly fifty percent of the Communist Party of Ukraine. Women also head oblast party organizations (for example, the Lviv oblast Sobor). At the national level, women have led eight of Ukraine's one hundred and thirty political parties. Three of these—the All-Ukrainian Party of Women's Initiatives, the Women of Ukraine party, and the All-Ukrainian Union for the Future of Women—are politically insignificant women's parties with no parliamentary representation. The other five parties, however, are of considerable political significance: the Agrarian Party of Ukraine (formerly led by Kateryna Vashchuk), the Democratic Party of Ukraine (led by Hanna Antonieva), the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists (led by Iaroslava Stetsko), the Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine (led by Nataliia Vitrenko), and the Fatherland party (led by Iuliia Tymoshenko).

By assuming leadership of opposition parties, several women politicians rose in the late 1990s to positions of national importance and engaged in high-profile duels with President Kuchma. Nataliia Vitrenko received considerable popular support when she ran against Kuchma in the 1999 presidential election. Iuliia

Tymoshenko, as a key member of Viktor Yushchenko's Cabinet, successfully took control of the energy sector away from Kuchma's cronies. After her dismissal, she became a leader of the anti-presidential National Salvation Forum and formed an electoral bloc. In an effort to discredit or disqualify her in advance of the March 2002 parliamentary elections, supporters of President Kuchma brought fraud and bribery charges against Tymoshenko in both Ukraine and Russia, had her repeatedly imprisoned, and subjected her to smear campaigns in the media.

Although individual women have begun assuming greater authority as opposition leaders within Parliament and the party system, women's issues have remained marginal to the concerns of leading politicians. Political parties have rarely defined any explicit policies that would advance women's economic or social rights. The Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists (led by the émigré Iaroslava Stetsko), has been the only party to state explicitly that it "strives to have laws and state social programmes adopted that will guarantee that women and men receive equal pay for equal work." Vitrenko's and Tymoshenko's parties, however, have made no explicit proposals regarding women's economic rights, even though both Vitrenko and Tymoshenko have privately expressed support for increased attention to such questions. The Liberals' and the Agrarians' platforms state that these parties oppose gender discrimination, but they do not indicate what concrete measures will be taken to promote equal opportunity. The Agrarian Party's platform, for example, simply indicates that the party supports state policies "promoting child-bearing."

Several attempts to establish women's parties have been made, but their election efforts have failed, as have their campaigns to attract public support to gender issues, such as legislation that would protect women from discrimination in the workplace. Increases in the number of women parliamentary deputies have not created effective support for gender-equality legislation or even for more adequate maternity- and child-welfare benefits. Unfortunately, with the notable exception of Vitrenko and Tymoshenko, women parliamentary deputies tend to be treated as they were in the past. Just as in the Soviet era, they have been put in charge of underfinanced, low-profile government structures associated with the family or children. Severe budget constraints have limited the effectiveness of such programmes, and those associated with them have been powerless to make effective changes on their own. As Tymoshenko's example suggests, women develop greater agenda-setting power only when they control significant state resources.

Recent attempts to protect women against employment discrimination have also faltered, because Ukraine has inherited a weak state that is ill-equipped to challenge new business interests. Relative to the Soviet era, women's-rights organizations now have better information regarding the extent and nature of gender discrimination. However, they have had few allies in positions of

authority, in part because so many policy-makers have continued to believe Soviet-era claims that women and men have long been equal, and in part because there have been no parliamentary committees or state offices concerned with women's labour or civil rights. As a result, there has been relatively little institutional support for women's occupational advancement. Gender-based discrimination cases cannot be actively pursued through the state because, while the state guarantees gender equality, it has provided no means for prosecuting infractions. It is no exaggeration to say that considerable legislative and judicial reform will be required before existing labour legislation inherited from the Soviet period becomes a usable tool to defend women's economic and social rights. Furthermore, because there has been considerable corruption in the court system, business interests are, at present, perceived as unbeatable. Reforms will only come when the wider public comes to see these problems as ones to be solved.

### Women in Associational Life

In time women's associations may become important channels for persuading the broader public that women's economic rights deserve serious government attention. However, Ukraine's women's organizations remain weak as well as divided on whether the government's treatment of women needs to be challenged.

Official Soviet women's organizations were toothless and limited their activity to traditional women's causes. During the Second World War Soviet women were mobilized into anti-Fascist committees that directed relief work among orphans and wounded soldiers. These became the basis for the Women's Soviet, a centralized federated women's organization which came to be called by its Russian abbreviation, Zhensovet. The Zhensovet continued to exist on and off after the war, but it was politically insignificant in Ukraine. In 1987 Gorbachev authorized the Zhensovet to be revived, but the rapid expansion of the organization was conducted in a formalistic "top-down" manner typical of Soviet mass-mobilization campaigns. After Gorbachev's speech reviving the Zhensovet, a directive was issued stating that women in every major workplace had to join.<sup>25</sup> By year's end, official announcements claimed that nearly half a million women belonged to Ukraine's women's councils, organizations that existed mostly on paper, had no budget, and were never heard from again.<sup>26</sup>

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25. Pavlychko, "Between Feminism and Nationalism," 90.

26. Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak, *Political Communities and Gendered Ideologies in Contemporary Ukraine*, Harvard Papers in Ukrainian Studies (Cambridge, Mass.: Ukrainian Research Institute, Harvard University, 1994), 20–1.

Since 1990 a variety of women's associations has formed. Most of them have been concerned with women in their capacity as mothers. The Union of Ukrainian Women, a patriotic federation founded in 1991, lobbied for Mothers' Day to be declared an official holiday and assists orphans and gifted children. The Organization of Soldiers' Mothers of Ukraine is another federated association that represents the interests of mothers of conscripts and has chapters throughout Ukraine. Mothers and Sisters for Soldiers of Ukraine, a federation of theatre performers and artists founded in 1992, was concerned with inculcating national consciousness among servicemen and worked actively in army units during Kravchuk's presidency. The Olena Teliha Society, a patriotic federation formed in 1994, is also concerned with national revival. It has three thousand members organized into a network of local chapters that organize children's camps, competitions for gifted children, and concerts devoted to Olena Teliha's poetry and the work of other women writers. Mother 86, formed in Kyiv in 1990, is a small but active group of women environmentalists concerned with shielding children from the after-effects of the Chernobyl nuclear accident. It now has branches in several other cities and a total of fifty members.

A women's-rights orientation has been adopted by the Association of Women, the successor to the official Soviet women's organizations, and by the Women's Hromada, a federated organization that originated as the women's section of Rukh and split off in 1992. These two organizations have different political allies and have operated with somewhat different understandings of women's rights. The Association of Women, in keeping with the socialist tradition, has been primarily interested in improving women's employment opportunities. The Women's Hromada, by contrast, has been concerned more broadly with increasing women's political representation and raising their political awareness. Dozens of small women's associations that espouse feminism and support equal rights have also formed, primarily in response to Western assistance programmes. Unfortunately, they remain dependent on foreign grants, and many have pursued causes that are of little public resonance. In contrast to the maternalist groups that formed after independence, most new women's-rights NGOs have tended to be active only when they have grant support.

The women's-rights lobby has been a small and relatively new public interest group.<sup>27</sup> It has sought to promote a broader gender-equality policy that

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27. Melnyk, *Henderna polityka v Ukraini*. For a good discussion of the equal rights campaign, see the proceedings of a 2000 conference devoted to equal rights that was sponsored by the UN Gender Bureau: Svitlana Kuzmina, ed., *Rivnist zhinok i cholovikiv v Ukraini* (Kyiv: United Nations Gender in Development Bureau, 2001). On the rise of women's associations and the contradictory nature of different conceptions of women's rights, see Pavlychko's three articles: "Between Feminism and Nationalism," "Feminism in Post-Communist Ukrainian Society," and "Progress on Hold: The Conservative Faces

would compel employers and the state to treat men and women as equally responsible for children. So far these efforts have failed despite considerable foreign support. Part of the reason for their failure is that the lobby has not yet built effective coalitions with other women's groups that have adopted more traditional causes. This is to the detriment of both types of groups. Traditional women's groups, which seek to help children and families, have had public legitimacy but have been woefully underfunded because their causes have not appealed to foreign assistance programmes. If both types of women's groups could unite, their coalition might begin winning public confidence in programmes that would advance broader women's rights.

Women in the general public have not yet recognized the nature and extent of gender discrimination. But they have not been categorically opposed to women's rights, and in time they might be convinced to support equal rights legislation. Indeed, although politicians like to thumb their noses at women's rights, studies have shown that over half of the women who turn to women's NGOs have sought help in protecting personal, work, or family rights.<sup>28</sup> At present, however, relatively few women's activists deal with such problems. Nationalist organizations, for example, have been concerned primarily with the patriotic upbringing of children, while the feminist groups that depend on foreign grants have focused on the priorities of their foreign donors. One such priority has been trafficking in women. The best-funded Ukrainian NGOs have in recent years focused on trafficking prevention to the exclusion of the problems that have compelled Ukrainian women to go abroad. Trafficking prevention is a valid cause, but donors should also support programmes focused on more basic issues.

## Conclusion

Foreign and domestic observers have talked largely past one another when they have tried to help Ukrainian women cope with the transition. While foreign observers and foreign-financed groups have drawn attention to abuses of women's rights, the media and politicians seem concerned exclusively with promoting motherhood. As a result, women in the general public have failed to see their own economic and social welfare and their reproductive rights as real issues.

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of Women in Ukraine," in *Post-Soviet Women: From the Baltic to Central Asia*, ed. Mary Buckley (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 219–34.

28. Olexandra Rudneva, "Ukraine Country Report," *The First CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) Impact Study* (Toronto: York University Centre for Feminist Research and the International Women's Rights Project, with the guidance of the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women and UNIFEM, 2000), 215–32.

The public understanding not only of women's rights but also of men's family responsibilities has to be changed. Declining public health and considerable gender differentials in unemployment rates, wages, and pensions prove not only that women in Ukraine today do not compete on an equal footing with men, but also that insufficient attention has been given to the state's responsibilities for family welfare. In the past, frequent official campaigns "promoting motherhood" engendered widespread stereotypes that population growth depended on women's devotion to housekeeping and maternal responsibilities over career advancement. This belief, of course, proved to be a significant obstacle to women's occupational advancement in the Soviet period, and today it continues to discourage women from defending their rights in the workplace and in public life. It has also perpetuated the problematic distinction between a private, predominantly female sphere of family relations, which does not call for high budget priority, and a public, predominantly male sphere of political and economic affairs, which is of greater policy concern.

The collapse of the Soviet state and the prospect of greater freedom of association has provided women's-rights activists with an opportunity to challenge the Soviet gender regime and fight for true equality and improvements in Ukraine's public-health and social-service infrastructure. At present, the women's-rights community is small and has yet to build effective coalitions with traditional women's groups that have greater public visibility and mobilize around family issues. Until such alliances develop, most authorities will probably continue to treat women in much the same way as they have in the past—as a politically insignificant group that makes no claims, receives symbolic recognition on holidays, and is easily ignored the rest of the time.