

Gender Issues in Ukraine: Were the EuroMaidan Protests Patriarchal or Egalitarian?

The EuroMaidan protests that took place in Ukraine in 2013–2014 have greatly influenced public opinion, media, and politics. Women actively participated in these events – not just as «supporters» but also as «makers» of revolution. Still, the position of women in Ukrainian society is all but clear. Are there institutional mechanisms for gender equality that allow women to be publicly «visible» – as decision-makers and activists? How has the participation of women in the EuroMaidan protests been viewed? Are revolutions with nationalist themes necessarily patriarchal – or is it possible for women to participate on an equal footing?

Women in public discourse in Ukraine

The participation of women in EuroMaidan and how the media viewed it reflects the social position of women in Ukraine. The following is a brief overview of the current situation on women's right and gender equality in Ukraine (as of 2014).

Major achievements and obstacles regarding the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women in Ukraine were discussed in the National Review of Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), during the 23rd Special Session of the General Assembly (2000), and, in the context of the 20th anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Declaration (2015), in a report drafted by UN Women in April 2014.¹ Here, three major achievements are mentioned – the legislative framework on gender equality, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) active on gender equality and women's empowerment, and gender education. However, at the same time, there are unsolved problems such as the low level of women's representation in social and public life, the low level

1 Ukraine (2014). National review of Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) and the outcomes of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly (2000) in the context of the twentieth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women and the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (2015) / With the support of UN Women in Ukraine and Office of Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Ukraine, April 2014. Accessed on 18 September, 2014: www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/Gender/publication/NV111.07_att1_att2_att3_merged.pdf

of awareness of gender discrimination, and a lack of comprehensive strategies to promote the advancement of women. It is especially important that vulnerable women (who suffer double or triple discrimination, for example, Roma women, lesbian women, transgender women, women with disabilities, HIV-positive women, women in prison, and women drug users) are supported² in the fight against discrimination, as such marginalised women are mostly absent from the public discourse on women's rights.

An international comparison of the degree to which gender equality has been achieved in different countries is provided by the annual *Global Gender Gap Report* published by the World Economic Forum.³ Although Ukraine is above average when it comes to women in education, healthcare, and the labour market, the country is lagging far behind in women's political representation.⁴ According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union database on *Women in Parliaments*, Ukraine's ranks 127th of 190 countries regarding the number of women MPs.⁵ During its over twenty years of independence, women have never constituted more than 10% percent of MPs in the Verkhovna Rada (Ukraine's parliament).

Gender segregation (both vertical and horizontal) is a serious problem in Ukrainian politics and on the labour market. Women have less money and less extensive social networks, and the notion of politics as a dirty business further strengthens patriarchal notions of keeping them out of this sphere.⁶ Moreover, Ukrainian women are supposed to fulfil mainly two roles – «to be beautiful and to be mothers.»⁷ In this situation, it is hard to take on other roles – and even more so in times of trouble and conflict.

Gender, nation and revolution: some theoretical issues

In the process of nation-building there is a dilemma of how to reconcile national and gender identities – or feminism and nationalism. On this, there are a number of ongoing debates among feminist scholars and activists.

Gender roles are frequently defined along a scale stretching between the opposites of «private» and «public» – with the former traditionally viewed as the realm

2 Ibid., p. 43.

3 The Global Gender Gap Index was developed in 2006 partially to measure gender equality and a country's progress over time. Gender-based gaps in four fundamental categories (economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment) are recorded for 136 countries.

4 Ricardo Hausman et al. (2013). *Global Gender Gap Report* (Geneva: World Economic Forum).

5 Inter-Parliamentary Union (2014), «Women in National Parliaments (as of 1st August 2014)». last modified September 21, 2014. www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm

6 Tamara Martsenyuk (2012). «Ukraine's Other Half», *Post-Soviet Post*, online Stanford University journal, 27 March, accessed 21 September, 2014. <http://postsovietpost.stanford.edu/discussion/ukraines-other-half>

7 Kis, Oksana (2005) «Choosing Without Choice: Predominant Models of Femininity in Contemporary Ukraine» in I. A. Morell, H. Carlback at el. (eds.). *Gender Transitions in Russia and Eastern Europe*, Stockholm: Gondolin Publishers.

of women and the latter as that of men. In the so-called «grand narrative,» history is constructed as «his story» – that is major events connected with violence and battles – and revolutions are portrayed as glorified violence, excluding women and extolling brave men, willing to die for their nation, as the norm. The role of women in regard to the nation is thus mainly connected with reproduction, while men are perceived as protectors. Such gender roles are, what I call, *patriarchal* or *sexist* (that is, they are excluding most women and also certain groups of men).

Allaine Cerwonka, in her article «Traveling Feminist Thought: Difference and Transculturation in Central and Eastern European Feminism,»⁸ writes about the problem of transferring Western theories to a different cultural environment such as Eastern Europe. The underlying assumption that Eastern Europe still differs from Western Europe, is explained by Cerwonka with the different political systems and experiences. Cerwonka describes Western feminist theory as hegemonic and powerful and contrasts it with Eastern feminism, which she views as marginalised. Nevertheless, Cerwonka discovers *agency* in the subordinated group's ability to choose from a set of theories and methods those that best suit their needs.

I would like to argue that the same agency may be found in women's activism during revolutions or in times of conflict, when there is a possibility to act out and discuss ideas that, previously, had been off limits. Such situations, I think, present openings for women to enter masculine space and, further down, we will discuss some examples. Feminism, I believe, is first of all about *inclusivity* – thus we shouldn't be discussing this in terms of «true» and «false» protests. During the Orange Revolution women were seen as «helpers» of men who were driving the revolution; during EuroMaidan, however, women (and men) were both in the driver's seat. Such inclusivity and the chance for women to chose their roles I call *egalitarian* or *emancipatory*.

Before we continue, one caveat – my definition is referring to an ideal type, which, in reality and on the ground, may prove difficult to find.

Women and the EuroMaidan protests: patriarchal notions

According to a survey conducted when the protests began (7–8 December, 2013),⁹ almost half of all protesters were women (44%). Later, when EuroMaidan became paramilitary (with barricades and protesters divided into squadrons), the number of women living in the square decreased to as low as 12% (according to a survey conducted in early February 2014).¹⁰

8 Allaine Cerwonka (2008). «Traveling Feminist Thought: Difference and Transculturation in Central and Eastern European Feminism.» *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 33 (4): p. 809–832.

9 Maidan 2013: Who is standing, why and for what? accessed 21 September, 2014. <http://kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=216&page=7>

10 From Maidan-Camp to Maidan-Sich: What did change? accessed 21 September, 2014. <http://kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=226&page=6>

The patriotism on EuroMaidan contained aspects of gender segregation. Olesya Khromeychuk writes in her study «Gender and Nationalism on the Maidan»¹¹:

A major city square became a space for public revolutionary activity, patriotism, and heroism. There, the actors often performed differently, depending on their gender, and public perception of the protesters was informed by traditional notions of gender.

One poster read, «[t]he nation exists as long as there are men ready to fight for it.» This is fairly typical for the mainstream perception of EuroMaidan – barricades, Molotov cocktails, fights, burning tires, and the death of heroes, or, in other words, the revolution as a glorification of violence.

Patriarchal discourse views women's role in EuroMaidan as *mothers* (cares and helpers) or *beautiful objects* (to inspire heroism). Some prominent female politicians or public figures may be perceived as a version of the «Mother of the Nation» (Ruslana, Dr. Olga Bogomolets). There are clear examples that women were *invisible* (or less visible) in public discourse. Olesya Khromeychuk, in her essay «Where are the Women of Ukraine?», mentions that «the news that Michelle Obama gave Ruslana Lyzhychko, a Ukrainian pop singer and the icon of the Maidan protests, the Women of Courage award received almost no publicity.»¹²

Women were among those who, first of all, provided so-called reproductive labour – cleaning, caring and cooking. As women receive little recognition for their work in the private sphere, they also received scant recognition for what they did in Maidan. This is also enshrined in language. The popular EuroMaidan greetings «Glory to Ukraine» (*Slava Ukraini*) and its response «Glory to Heroes» (*Geroyam Slava*) refer to male heroes only, ignoring women's contribution. During the violent period of EuroMaidan, it was very difficult for women to enter the barricades and important buildings around them. In patriarchal discourse this means women are not allowed to «die on the barricades.»

Militarism and the danger of violence resulted in women's exclusion. When the protests became violent, men turned women away from the barricades «for their own safety.» On the one hand, this was «concern for women,» on the other, women were perceived as being unable to make their own decisions and choices.¹³

11 Olesya Khromeychuk (2014). «Gender and Nationalism on the Maidan» in David Marples (ed), *EuroMaidan*, Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag; New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming.

12 Olesya Khromeychuk (2014). «Where are the Women of Ukraine?» in *Current Politics in Ukraine*. accessed 21 September, 2014. <http://ukraineanalysis.wordpress.com/2014/03/07/where-are-the-women-of-ukraine>

13 Anastasiya Melnychenko (2014). Why does Ukraine need a Female Squadron? [in Ukrainian] 25 March, 2014, accessed 21 September, 2014. <http://ua.boell.org/uk/2014/03/25/navishcho-ukrayini-zhinocha-sotnya>

Maria Mayerchyk, a researcher on gender and queer issues, wrote on her blog: «Maidan has been turned into a parade of masculinity and everyday misogyny,»¹⁴ and she gave some examples:

It peaked in the sandwich kitchens, in the jokes about women on the Maidan's stage, in the widespread ridicule and the rhetoric of «real Cossacks who do not stay at home like women,» and in announcements such as: «Wanted: Young women to create a positive atmosphere for the EuroMaidan Cossacks.»

Another clear example of patriarchal attitudes were notices put up in the kitchens such as «Dear women, if you see garbage – clean it up, [the male] revolutionary will be pleased.» This and other examples of sexism were heavily criticised by female activists on EuroMaidan.

A number of posters about the difficult relationship between Ukraine and Russia used female imagery. For example, the Ukrainian nation was portrayed as a *female victim* with slogans such as «Russia, hands of Ukraine» or «Leave me alone, big country.» Other posters show crying (or even bleeding) women suffering for their nation.

Ukrainian women active on Maidan were called «muses of the revolution,» and in a number of contexts their beauty was emphasised as the most important aspect of femininity. An article about the involvement of women in EuroMaidan was titled «The Very Beautiful Girls of Maidan Bolster the Spirit of the Revolution.»¹⁵ A female participant of EuroMaidan who was interviewed for named article said:

*Women have a better sense for risks and tend to oppose aggression and violence. Thanks to the ladies the atmosphere on Maidan is festive. Women are like «muses» lending the events a sense of joy and release.»*¹⁶

Women were beautifying Maidan by painting barricades in bright colours and dancing ballet on the barricades. There are pictures taken during violent clashes, showing women wearing pink or other bright clothes and carrying wreaths and flowers to make the revolution more loving and peaceful. A so-called «Angel Squadron» [Angel's'ka Sotnya] tried to transform violent confrontation into communication. Some women were seen holding posters addressed to the police with the slogan «protect me,» and a young girl held up a banner saying «I will marry the policeman who will come over to the side of the people.» At the same time, there

¹⁴ Maria Mayerchyk (2014). Seizing the Logic / A World Without Women in *Krytyka*, accessed 21 September, 2014. <http://krytyka.com/ua/community/blogs/zakhoplennya-lohik-svit-bez-zhinok>

¹⁵ The original Ukrainian title is «Найкрасивіші дівчата Євромайдану запалюють дух революції», accessed 21 September, 2014. http://gazeta.ua/articles/politics/_najkrasivishi-divchata-evromajdanu-zapalyuyut-duh-revoluciyi/533352

¹⁶ Ibid.

were debates whether such actions by women were patriarchal or egalitarian in character. Possibly they represent a bit of both, as non-violent action is an alternative to patriarchal militarism and exclusion.

Women and EuroMaidan protests: egalitarian notions

I would like to argue that EuroMaidan was not a homogenous phenomenon. During different periods very diverse grass-root initiatives were involved, proving that revolution does not only take place on the barricades (as patriarchal discourse would have). EuroMaidan was a «Revolution of Dignity» and it created the space for citizens to articulate their rights.

Besides cooking, cleaning, and entertaining, women were fighting on the barricades, they were involved in negotiations and peacekeeping, they provided medical support, information, logistics, and education for protesters. Women also tried to make their contribution more visible – especially compared to the Orange Revolution, where women's active involvement is not remembered. To a large extent this became possible via social networks (particularly *Facebook*) and online media. Today one can find a plethora of empirical material about EuroMaidan including blogs, pictures, video, posters, and speeches online.

Women involved in EuroMaidan tried not just to criticise sexist tendencies, they also proposed alternatives by way of their own activism. Many female volunteers supported other protesters under very dangerous conditions. One well-known example is 21-year-old Olesya Zhukovska, who was hit in the neck by a bullet and tweeted, «I am dying.»¹⁷ Olesya survived and became known for the dangers she had braved.

Women and men were building the barricades together, with women providing many scarce resources such as used tyres and wood, which, in some cases, they brought to Maidan by metro (continuing the Soviet legacy of being able to get hold of scarce resources). Also, women like the 76-year-old Hanna Gogol from Ivano-Frankivsk imbued the protesters in the square with their presence and optimism.

One example for *emancipatory practices* – although, this too, is a matter of debate – may be the creation of squadrons consisting mainly of women as an alternative to purely military squadrons. *Elle* published an article titled «Women Stand at the Frontlines of the Euromaidan Protest in Kiev» (February 2014), illustrated with pictures of women fighters and explaining:

17 Peter Beaumont (2014). «I am dying,» young volunteer medic tweets after being shot in Kiev,» accessed 21 September, 2014. www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/20/i-am-dying-volunteer-tweet-shot-kiev-ukraine

*In the increasingly violent Euromaidan protest between anti-government advocates and riot police, women are donning gas masks and padded vests to fight alongside men.*¹⁸

Among the initiatives organised by women were the 1st Women's Squadron (officially the 39th Squadron of EuroMaidan Self-Defence),¹⁹ the women's platoon [*Zhinocha Chota*] of the 16th Squadron, the Women's Squadron of Zaporizhzhya,²⁰ the Sisterhood Squadron,²¹ and the Olga Kobylanska Women's Squadron.²²

The Women's Squadrons attracted the attention of the media, as did self-defence classes for women (there was a publication, «EuroMaidan women warriors eager to fight injustice, sex discrimination»²³). It is interesting that this title contains, on the one hand, military patriarchal rhetoric («warriors») and, on the other, feminist terminology («injustice,» «sex discrimination»).

There have been different responses to such women's initiatives. For example, Maidan commandant Andriy Parubiy said that women should support the defence of Maidan:

*[...] they provide first aid, help the defence volunteers, and some are even part of the self-defence units. We will never send these platoons to the front lines, where there is fighting, but they will find other ways to help the defence of the Maidan movement.*²⁴

EuroMaidan saw a number of feminist projects. For example, in her project «women's voices» feminist journalist and human rights activist Olha Vesnianka told the stories of different female activists. In an Open University, feminist blogger Maria Dmytrieva gave lectures on the history of the women's movement worldwide and in Ukraine. There was also the Facebook group «Half of Maidan: Women's Voice of Protest» (*Polovyna Maidanu: Zhinochy Golos Protestu*),²⁵ the Night of Women's Solidarity, during which women marched through Maidan playing rhythm instruments and chanting «Freedom, Equality, Women's Solidarity!», and the Olga

18 Rebecca Moss (2014). «Women Stand at the Frontlines of the Euromaidan Protest in Kiev» in *Elle*, 21 February, 2014. accessed 21 September, 2014. www.elle.com/news/culture/womens-opposition-euromaidan-protest-kiev

19 Facebook page, accessed 21 September, 2014. www.facebook.com/39sotnya

20 City in the Southern part of Ukraine.

21 In Dnipropetrovsk. Facebook page, accessed 21 September, 2014. www.facebook.com/groups/sestrynska.sotnya

22 Facebook page, accessed 21 September, 2014. www.facebook.com/zhinocha.sotnya

23 Nataliya Trach (2014). «EuroMaidan women warriors eager to fight injustice, sex discrimination», 12 February, 2014, accessed 21 September, 2014. www.kyivpost.com/guide/people/euromaidan-women-warriors-eager-to-fight-injustice-sex-discrimination-336806.html

24 A female squadron forms for EuroMaidan, *EuroMaidan Press*, accessed 21 September, 2014. <http://euromaidanpr.wordpress.com/2014/02/05/a-female-squadron-forms-for-euromaidan>

25 Facebook page, accessed 21 September, 2014. www.facebook.com/groups/255422234633303

Kobylianska Women's Squadron, a group of EuroMaidan activists promoting human rights, human dignity, freedom, equality, and non-discrimination.²⁶

The Olga Kobylianska Women's Squadron has a non-hierarchical structure, with every participant having the right to speak on its behalf. It supports education (for example with the photo exhibition «Women of Maidan»), non-violent resistance, and self-defence (through self-defence classes for women).

Researchers and activists have widely differing attitudes towards this women's squadron. US researcher Sarah Phillips wrote:

*Their creative responses to the challenges of the protests have potentially paved the way for broadening the base of Ukrainian feminism, introducing women's rights principles to segments of the population previously reluctant to embrace feminism.*²⁷

Mariya Mayerchyk, on the other hand, criticised the Olga Kobylianska Squadron for employing militaristic discourse:

*Inspired by the ideas of justice and equality, these activists wanted to show that women are of equal importance at the Maidan. However, according to the rules of the genre, their actions took a turn towards right-wing discursive logic. The Women's Company used in its very name military language, announced its right to fight on the barricades, and began teaching self-defence classes. The organisation's Facebook page is generously «garnished» with images of women in military gear.*²⁸

As a feminist scholar and activist and someone who participated in the protests, I wrote a reply to Maria's blog post.²⁹ Feminist activist and women in general cannot ignore the overall political and social developments. I think there is more than one way to fight for women's rights and against patriarchy and, in times of global militarism and war, we cannot completely distance ourselves from patriarchal methods of geopolitics. It is important to criticise certain discourses, often however practice and reality differ substantially from theory. In order to change this reality, one has to fight long and hard – one step at a time. With different «frontlines» and with solidarity between them, the struggle will become much easier.

26 The Squadron was named after Olga Kobylianska (1863–1942), a Ukrainian modernist writer and feminist.

27 Sarah D. Phillips (2014). «The Women's Squad in Ukraine's protests: Feminism, nationalism, and militarism on the Maidan» in *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 41, No. 3, pp. 414–426.

28 Maria Mayerchyk (2014). On the Occasion of March 8th /Recasting of Meanings, accessed 21 September, 2014. <http://krytyka.com/ua/community/blogs/do-8-bereznya-pro-pereplavku-smysliv>

29 Tamara Martsenyuk (2014). On occasion of March 8th /The Women's Squadron, or the Right to Meanings (A Response to Mariya Mayerchyk's Article), accessed 21 September, 2014. <http://krytyka.com/ua/community/blogs/do-8-bereznya-zhinocha-sotnya-abo-pravona-smysly-vidpovid-na-stattju-mariyi>

I agree with feminist scholar and activist Oksana Kis, who wrote that we should «use dominant discourses in the way we consider necessary, possible, and appropriate in the given circumstances, and to fill the old concepts with new meanings through common practice of solidarity.» Feminist activism does not mean choosing only the «proper» strategies and forms of struggle. It means «Liberty. Equality. Women's solidarity!»

In this context, I would like to mention some grassroots EuroMaidan initiatives lead by women or with their substantial participation: «Hospitals guard» [Varta v likarni],³⁰ «Safety transportation» or «Initiative E +»,³¹ EuroMaidan SOS or EuroMaidan SOS Europe and other hotlines, AutoMaidan,³² the education project «Free University,» the student centre, the civic sector of Maidan, Єлюди – maidaners (stories about people from Maidan),³³ and others.

Conclusions

EuroMaidan was a heterogeneous space comprising many initiatives and a complicated mix of national and gender discourses (exclusive and inclusive spaces). As Ukrainian society is dominated by patriarchal views on the role of women – as mothers and beautiful objects – and as women lack access to decision-making processes, it is difficult for Ukrainian women to break out of traditional gender roles. However, women are not «helpers» but «makers» of revolution.

The actual practices and discourses during EuroMaidan were a mixture of patriarchal (excluding women through militarisation and nationalistic hero worship) and egalitarian (inclusive) ones, and the latter gave women the possibility to question militarism, deconstruct traditional perception of protests, and participate in the movement on different levels.

30 Support for people injured during EuroMaidan. *Facebook* group, accessed 21 September, 2014. www.facebook.com/groups/599765216758120

31 This group was founded on 21 January 2014 to assist the sick and wounded. See *Facebook*, accessed 21 September, 2014. www.facebook.com/helpEplus

32 A movement demanding the resignation of President Viktor Yanukovich. It consisted mainly of motorists who protected the protest camps and blockades, accessed 21 September, 2014. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AutoMaidan>

33 *Facebook* page, accessed 21 September, 2014. www.facebook.com/maidaners