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Gender Studies in Ukraine: long way from 90s to today

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The fall of the Soviet Union marked the beginning of a new period in the history of all the countries of the former Communist bloc, including Ukraine, characterized by the ideological, political and economic turn towards the liberalization and the democratization of the society. This transition and redefinition of social and political norms also meant the emergence of new causes in public debate, as well as the emergence of new academic fields. Gender studies became one of the new fields that appeared in scientific circles in the beginning of the 90s, quickly gained recognition in the academic world throughout the 90s and developed into a fairly institutionalized field that it is today. **In Ukraine, as elsewhere in the countries of the former socialist bloc, during the decade 1990-2000, gender went "from the status of absolute theoretical novelty to that of a field of expertise established institutionally and recognized as much in academic circles as in those of political decision making"** (Cirstocea, 2019, p. 12).

How everything started: "lone warriors" from literature to sociology

Feminist topics came in post-Soviet Ukrainian Academia from the field of literary studies marking the beginning of what Lyudmyla Smolyar, historian and Director of the Odessa Scientific Center for Women's Studies, identified as the first out of two stages of development of women and gender studies in Ukraine. This stage (early 1990s - 1995) is characterized by the transformation of women's studies into independent research programs (Martsenyuk, 2018, p. 284). Solomiya Pavlychko (1958-1999), Doctor of Philology and Professor at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, was the pioneer of gender studies in Ukraine and an inspiration to a lot of the academic feminists of the first generation. In her article entitled "Is a feminist school necessary for Ukrainian literary studies?" (1991) she raised the question of the need to involve feminist methodology in social and humanitarian research in Ukraine. She was the first "to talk about feminism as a direction, as an ideology, as a methodology" (Gender in details, 2018c).

Tamara Hundorova, a fellow feminist and a literary critic, remembered in her recent interview: "In the early 1990s, as a researcher, I felt at a dead end, in a vacuum, because I really lacked any new approaches and methodologies. What had been achieved by that time did not suit me. I wanted to understand what the situation is like in the West: what is developing there, which directions, methodologies. [...] I worked in the same department as Solomiya Pavlychko, and she became the person who brought a new direction of gender criticism to Ukraine" (Gender in details, 2018c).

Solomiya Pavlychko together with Tamara Hundorova, Vira Ageyeva and Natalka Shumylo initiated the creation of the "Feminist seminar" - a group that was established in the Institute of Literature of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine in September, 1990 to develop a view of Ukrainian culture from the position of feminist analysis (Feminist seminar, 1991, p. 10). The aforementioned researchers then also created a special rubric "Feminist seminar" in the "Word and time" magazine (1991).



Throughout the 90s these few devoted scholars were working on establishing a new direction of literary studies and although their colleagues often treated them with scepticism, close-mindedness and even suspicion, the results of their intellectual development turned out to be quite fruitful. Among the examples of the authors' works are: the monograph "Women's Space: Feminist Discourse of Ukrainian Modernism" (2003) by Vira Ageyeva; "Femina Melancholica: Sex and Culture in Olga Kobylanska's Gender Utopia" (2002) by Tamara Hundorova and many others.

Around the second half of 90s (1995 - 2002) women's studies began to be integrated into the higher education system. That signified the second stage of development of women and gender studies in Ukraine according to Lyudmyla Smolyar (Martsenyuk, 2018, p. 284-285). Several gender research centers were established and many university courses created. Among the most influential gender research centers were: Kharkiv Center of Gender Studies - created in 1994 to popularize and introduce gender and women's studies in the post-Soviet higher education system and represented by Iryna and Sergiy Zherebkin; Odessa Scientific Center for Women's Studies created in 1994 by Lyudmyla Smolyar; All-Ukrainian Women's Center for Information and Socio-Economic Adaptation (1995); Kyiv Research and Gender Advisory Center (1996); Kyiv Center for Gender Studies at the Institute of Literature was formed in 1998 headed by Nila Zborovska; NGO Research Center "Woman and Society" (1999) in Lviv headed by the historian Oksana Kis. The latter also developed courses on gender studies and taught them in National University of Lviv for a short period of time.

By the end of 90s, the first study course on gender was also established at National University "Kyiv-Mohyla Academy". A course "Introduction to Gender Studies", first conducted in 1997-1998 by Svitlana Oksamytna at the Department of Sociology is still taught at the university every academic year (among many others).

Despite the fact that gender studies in Ukraine has begun to be rapidly institutionalized through academic courses and research centers, researchers themselves often still lacked knowledge on gender issues. As there were very few possibilities for them to acquire any knowledge through formal education in Ukraine, more informal learning opportunities were introduced. **One of the most prominent places to get an up to date knowledge in the gender studies field and communicate and exchange with your peers were summer schools on gender studies in Foros, Crimea organized by the Kharkiv Center of Gender Studies from 1997 up to 2009** (Kharkiv Center of Gender Studies, 2020). Historian Oksana Kis, one of the participants of the first summer schools, remembered: "At these schools we were also equipped with a kind of "readers" - photocopies of the basic works of Western feminist thought, which were otherwise simply inaccessible. And in the case of Foros, we also received a package of books on gender issues, including several issues of the journal "Gender Studies". It was a huge treasure at the time. [...] It was very significant at the time. Researchers from post-Soviet countries came together, and it was very important for all of us to feel that our common environment existed, because in fact, each and every one of us who was developing feminist or gender studies were lone warriors in our institutions" (Gender in details, 2019c).



Role of foreign education & scholarship, Ukrainian diaspora and international donors

When talking about gender studies in Ukraine, one has to keep in mind the three factors that played and are still playing a significant role in it: Western education of the researchers that developed women's studies, the influence of the diaspora and the support of international donors. The opportunity to study abroad gave Ukrainian researchers a chance for academic growth in the gender studies field and an access to a lot of books that have not yet been translated into Ukrainian. For example, Tamara Hundorova remembers (Gender in details, 2018c) that Solomiya Pavlychko was doing an internship in Canada around 1990 where she got to know academic feminism and from where she brought a lot of books. Tamara Hundorova was doing a lot of internships abroad herself and had a Fulbright scholarship in 1997 (and then in 2009). The sociologist Svitlana Oksamytna did an internship in the US while finishing her PhD in 1991 and, as she put it, gained access to a lot of "foreign sociological literature, including on gender topics" (Gender in details, 2018b).

A lot of the researchers from the 90s and until now converted to academic feminism through their "international socialization". Studying abroad has given them the chance to get acquainted with current literature on gender issues in their respective fields, and then try to adapt these novelties to Ukrainian context, creating something truly modern and revolutionary for Ukrainian academic field. The lack of formal specialization in gender studies in Ukrainian universities makes this algorithm as relevant today as it was in the 90s, even after almost 30 years of hard work by dedicated scholars.

In the 90s, the influence of researchers from Ukrainian diaspora in the US or Canada was also very significant. Such researchers as Marta Bohachevska-Homiak and Mariana Rubchak published books that were widely read by women in Academia. For many of them those books were not only the first feminist books available in Ukrainian, but also the first books that focused on Ukrainian context: studying women in Ukrainian history, examining and explaining female activism of the 90s, analyzing feminism and matriarchal traditions in Ukrainian culture. Besides bringing the knowledge on Ukrainian women's history and activism to their Western universities, the researchers from Ukrainian diaspora also invested their efforts into strengthening gender studies in Ukraine. Both Mariana Rubchak and Marta Bohachevska-Homiak were lecturers at Summer schools in Foros. They were close friends with the first generation of feminists and showed their support not only in the academic field, but also in the political field (Gender in details, 2018a).

Due to the weak research and publishing capacities of Ukrainian universities and low public interest in gender studies, it is often researchers from diaspora that are the editors of the anthologies (Gender in details, 2019a) that cover various gender issues in Ukraine and give a possibility to Ukrainian contributors representing modern gender studies in Ukraine a chance to present their work to the international community. Among them, we can cite the first Western publication on gender and politics in Ukraine published in 2012 in Canada entitled "Gender, politics and society in Ukraine" (edited by Olena Hankivsky and Anastasiya Salnykova) and the most recent, published in 2015 in the United States, "New imaginary: juvenile reinvention of the cultural paradigm of Ukraine" (edited by Marian J. Rubchak).

The other important factor to keep in mind while analyzing gender studies in Ukraine is the donors' support. The dissemination of gender studies was and still is largely funded by international donors. To give a couple of examples: summer schools in Foros were funded by MacArthur Foundation; NGO Research Center "Woman and Society" in Lviv was supported by the small grant from Renaissance Foundation; interdisciplinary master's program in culturology and sociology of Ivan Franko National University of Lviv (2003-2007) - by Open Society Foundation. Recent examples include the creation of a so-called Lecture school on Women's Studies at the Ukrainian Catholic University in 2012, funded by the Ukrainian National Women's League of America (UNWLA). In 2018, the Lecture school was transformed into the UNWLA Center for Women's Studies (UNWLA Center for Women's Studies, 2020).

Changes in gender studies of the 21st century in Ukraine

Comparing gender studies in the 90s and today, the most prominent difference is a certain level of maturity that characterizes the field nowadays. **If in the 90s, as Oksana Kis put it, "the researchers mastered the achievements of Western feminist studies in express mode" (Gender in details, 2019c), now the gender study research is already up to date with the Western feminist thought and can afford to not only catch up, but develop in parallel with the international ideas and concepts.** Tamara Hundorova also has noticed the diversity of the issues on which gender research focuses compared to the 90s. She notes that the attention is being paid to queer research, to the study of masculinity etc. (Gender in details, 2018c).



One of the most prominent examples is the East European Journal of Feminist and Queer Studies “Feminist critique” (Feminist Critique, 2020), published since 2018 and curated by its editors-in-chief and Ukrainian researchers Maria Mayerchuk and Olga Plakhotnik. This journal discusses the issues related to the East European region, taking into consideration its common history and often similar trends due to the Soviet past.

Gender studies is an interdisciplinary academic field that integrates such disciplines as literary studies, sociology, history, anthropology and many others. In the 90s, researchers were often working on gender issues within their disciplines without having a clear profile and boundaries of the said discipline in mind. For example, Oksana Kis remembers that “the 1990s and 2000s were a period when everyone was involved in everything. There was a universal encyclopedic version of researchers from gender studies, when in fact those who studied women’s history simultaneously dealt with some sociological issues, and political science, and activism, and everything imaginable” (Gender in details, 2019c). Today there is a clear distinction between the fields and the way gender research is conducted within each of them.

The progress is evident also when analyzing the institutionalization process of genders studies in universities. Since 2010 the departments of Gender Studies have been established in five universities: the National University of Ostroh Academy, National Pedagogical Dragomanov University, Ternopil National Pedagogical University, Sumy State Pedagogical University and the University of Educational Management. Donor support has played a major role in this great endeavor, as the departments have been funded by the European Union. In addition, three educational centers have been established: at the Mariupol State University of Humanities, the Kyiv National Economic University, and the Precarpathian National University (Gender in details, 2019b). We have already mentioned the Center of Women’s Studies in the Ukrainian Catholic University established in 2012 and renamed in 2018. In 2012 the representative of the Kharkiv Regional Gender Resource Center in partnership with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Ukraine initiated the creation of the All-Ukrainian Network of Gender Education Centers. Its main focus is the modernization of higher education system and the fight against the discrimination in higher education practices (Gender in details, 2017).

In 2017 the first master’s “Gender studies” program (MA program “Gender Studies”, 2020) was opened at the Faculty of Sociology of the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. The program is established in cooperation with the University of Lund (Sweden) providing the possibility for a double diploma from Sweden and Ukraine. Meanwhile, only Swedish diploma offers a degree in social studies of gender. The Ukrainian diploma is actually in sociology.

Because of the lack of state’s support for science and research in general, and the gender studies field in particular, many abovementioned achievements actually became possible thanks to the individual initiative of the resolute scholars. Although it may seem that gender studies are widely recognized as an academic field, in reality they still struggle to be institutionalized at all levels. Despite the fact that the number of researchers working in the gender studies field is constantly growing, there is currently no department related to gender sociology at the Institute of sociology and only one professional association of women researchers - the Ukrainian Association for Research in Women’s History, a non-governmental organization of professional historians, conceived in 2010 and headed by Oksana Kis (JARWH, 2020). This association includes both younger and older generations of researchers of women’s history. Several gender research centers that were established in the end of the 90s still exist but are less influential and more locally oriented.

Conclusions and further issues to develop

Overall, gender studies in Ukraine have evolved from a complete academic novelty that was of interest to only a few researchers, into a partially institutionalized academic field that became an integral part of such disciplines as sociology, history, literary studies etc. and many universities’ curricula. Much effort has already been made by the academic community to establish gender studies as a separate field.

In the meantime, there is still a long way to go to gain full institutionalisation and recognition. Gender studies are not very visible for the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine. Students can’t get Bachelor’s, Master’s or PhD degrees in gender studies. Moreover, in some Universities there is scholarship on antigender topics and promotion of sex-role theory. In general, the status of gender studies in Academia is supported mainly by devoted scholars like mentioned above who propose courses, conduct research and write books on gender topics.



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