

# U.S. Civil Society Working Group on Women, Peace, and Security



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POLICYbrief

## Building Gender Equality in Ukraine

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**R**evolution and war often lead to women's empowerment as they take on new roles, and Ukraine is no exception.<sup>1</sup> Women played varied and active roles in protests against the Yanukovich government in Ukraine in 2013 and continued their civic engagement through Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2015 and the military operations in eastern Ukraine. In 2014, Ukraine adopted a National Action Plan (NAP) to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and to realize its provisions for ensuring women's involvement in peace and security. If fully supported, the NAP can play a far-reaching role in building peace and the capacity for conflict resolution in Ukraine.

The United States' initial response to Russia's aggressive policies and practices in Ukraine was to levy economic sanctions against Russian elites in order to encourage a withdrawal, or at least to deter a further territorial grab. At the same time, the United States sought to bolster Ukraine's position with development and military defensive assistance. Ukraine's NAP is a critical element of a democratization strategy: The plan seeks to further equal rights for all its citizens, enforce the rule of law to protect its most vulnerable, and incorporate conflict resolution methods into government institutions as a way to improve interactions with citizens. It can do even more: build capacity to lead conflict resolution from the bottom up, rather than leaving the peace process to elite leadership. A Ukraine that more actively pursues the NAP also will stand in stark contrast to Putin's Russia and be able to eradicate vestiges of Soviet and Putinist patriarchy.

### Civil Resistance on the Maidan

In November 2013, Ukrainian citizens gathered in Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) and in smaller protests in cities throughout Ukraine to protest then President Viktor Yanukovich's decision to yield to pressure from Moscow and suspend Ukraine's pursuit of an association agreement with the European Union. Moscow had threatened a trade embargo on Ukrainian goods if Kyiv proceeded, and it later added economic incentives to keep Ukraine in its sphere of influence.

The nationwide protests were to prove transformative for Ukrainian society. Several politicians emerged as the people's representatives in negotiations with the government.<sup>2</sup> Yet the civil resistance movement launched on the Maidan was essentially of and by the people. It was not led by any one leader or group, and protestors were not only Ukrainian but also Armenians, Georgians, and Belarusians. For many people living under corrupt, oppressive regimes of former Soviet states still dominated by the Kremlin, Maidan represented an insistence that citizens' voices be part of the equation.

Named the Revolution of Dignity months into the protest, the moniker speaks to the movement's effects. What began as a demonstration against the duplicity and opportunism of government policy became social renewal, with Ukraine's citizens united in their veneration of each other and for the groups that contributed to the movement.

This new social awareness extended to women and their contributions as organizers of logistics, journalists, security and medics, and cooks and cleaners on the Maidan. In the horrific following months, when Russia invaded and occupied first the Crimea and then eastern Ukraine (the Donbas), women covered the news from the front, served in the armed forces, fought in privately sponsored militias, organized supply and logistics for fighters, and took key government positions in the security ministries. It is unclear whether this challenge to entrenched gender inequalities in Ukraine will lead to enduring change.

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## Buffeted by Regime Change

In the decades since the breakup of the Soviet Union, the institutionalization of gender equality did not gain traction in Ukraine for several reasons:

- The myth persisted that gender equality had already been achieved in Ukraine under the Soviet regime. In reality, a robust patriarchal system buttressed the communist system, pressuring women to work and maintain high birth rates—essentially, a life of constant demands and exhaustion.<sup>3</sup>
- Following Ukraine’s independence, Soviet gender policies faced a backlash. With the revival of Berehynia—the hearth mother—as a cult symbol, Ukraine asserted a post-Soviet identity as an ancient, matrilineal nation while also rejecting the communists’ hypermasculinization of women. However, the Berehynia revival reinforced a neotraditional conception of women that was incompatible with equal rights activism.<sup>4</sup>
- In the initial postcommunist period and especially after the Chernobyl disaster, women’s grassroots activism in Ukraine focused on families and children, and this focus stemmed from the association of Ukrainian nationalism with maternalism. Yet Western aid organizations were predominately funding women-run professional NGOs that were compatible with Western conceptions of feminism but were alien to local grassroots organizations that saw strengthening the family as central to restoring the nation. This disconnect between women’s organizations in Ukraine, driven largely by competition for Western assistance, undermined local activism and altered Ukrainian conceptions of feminism in ways that have worked against popular support for gender equality in Ukraine.<sup>5</sup>

- The economic crisis that accompanied the Soviet Union’s fall affected women in particular—many of whom had been employed in the largely collapsed manufacturing sector—and it stripped them of specializations as they moved to low-skilled, nonprestigious jobs.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, economic stress prompted an increase in alcohol consumption among men, which resulted in a rise in domestic violence against women.<sup>7</sup>
- The 2004 Orange Revolution introduced a period of legislative activism under the Yushenko administration that addressed gender inequality and asserted executive authority through the Ministry for Family, Youth, and Sports, which was assigned the development of a gender strategy and its implementation.<sup>8</sup> It passed a series of legislative acts on gender equality and protections for women victims. While they were good first steps, the initiatives never led to systematic policy change—a half-done approach that characterized much of Yushenko’s administration. The Law on Ensuring Equal Rights to Men and Women, for example, contained no guidance on liability if discrimination occurred; courts then generally dismissed such cases.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, although Article 15 of the Law on the Prevention of Violence in the Family authorized criminal, civil, and administrative penalties, perpetrators received only administrative sanctions until 2009, when a correctional system for abusers was established.<sup>10</sup>
- The Yanukovich regime, beginning in 2010, rolled back government activism on behalf of women’s rights in keeping with its conservatism, equating gender equality with progressive European values, which it rejected.<sup>11</sup>

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## Break with the Past?

Women’s participation in the 2004 Orange Revolution differed markedly from that in the 2014 Revolution of Dignity. In 2004, women engaged in “activist mothering”—support roles such as feeding and nurturing men.<sup>12</sup> Women in 2014 played diverse roles—in defense squads and emergency medical response, as well as being cooks and cleaners. These visible roles encouraged thinking and debates on the role of women in the protest and in society in general that were highly productive.<sup>13</sup> A number of women civil society leaders in 2014 have since been incorporated into political party lists and now serve in parliament and the administration, many in positions that actively advance women’s rights.

The Poroshenko government's commitment to Europe and its dependence on Western assistance since the war motivated it to adopt international conventions on gender. Combined with a highly productive government–civil society partnership enhanced by women in powerful governmental positions, this commitment has moved women's equality beyond legislative acts to implementation and institutionalization within the national government, including its adoption on UNSCR 1325 and its efforts on the NAP.<sup>14</sup> National action plans are unique to each country. Ukraine's reflects that of a country at war and contains the following major goals:

- monitoring the impact of the war on institutions responsible for women's security, social service provision, and protection of human rights;
- building the capacity of Ukraine's institutions to implement the NAP, including conflict resolution, crisis prevention, protection, and rehabilitation for gender-based violence;
- increasing women's participation in peace processes at the international, national, and local levels and in the security forces;
- raising awareness of people in the conflict zone of ways to ensure their individual and collective security;
- establishment of a comprehensive system to support those affected by violent conflict; and
- a robust monitoring and evaluation system to measure implementation progress.

Responsibility for the implementation of gender equality in Ukraine has been elevated within the government and now falls under the authority of a vice prime minister—currently Ivanna Klimpush-Tsinsadze—where before it fell to a department minister. A parliamentary subcommittee has also been established to exercise oversight over NAP implementation within the executive and help coordinate the work of NGOs on gender.

Despite the national government's renewed commitment to gender equality, progress remains uneven. Due to opposition by religious leaders, parliament failed in November 2016 to ratify the Istanbul Convention on preventing violence against women despite having signed it five years earlier.<sup>15</sup> As part of its reform efforts, Ukraine is devolving governance responsibilities and budgeting to local governments. These efforts have had a deleterious impact on NAP implementation, especially in conflict regions.

## Successes and Struggles

On the one hand, the Ukraine government has taken many actions to drive gender equality, and public perceptions on women's roles have shifted. On the other hand, still-limited gender consciousness, lack of resources, ongoing military conflict, and the devolution of power to local governments with limited capacity all work against progress on gender equality in Ukraine.

### *The National Government of Ukraine*

A convergence of international actors (UN Women, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and USAID), the Ukrainian government, and civil society organizations led to implementation of the NAP. Women leaders have been catalysts for change. They hold top government and parliamentary positions in Ukraine: as vice prime minister of European integration, co-chairs of the parliamentary Subcommittee on Promotion of Gender Equality, and deputy ministers of security ministries. The Ministry of the Interior is the most advanced in its implementation of UNSCR 1325. It has incorporated it in police modernization efforts from the local to the national level. The Ministry of Defense is also implementing aspects of 1325, and the Ministry of Justice is moving ahead with training for judges and prosecutors on domestic violence and trafficking cases.

### *Public Perceptions*

Emerging from the Revolution of Dignity, public sentiment on the potential of women in politics shifted. Women get high marks in polling as trustworthy leaders and as antidotes to corrupt government for many reasons. Because women work primarily in the social and public sectors, they generally have no ties to the political-business nexus of corruption. Their political power base is with voters. Finally, women coming to politics from civil society have highly developed competencies in leadership, programming, and project implementation.

These perceptions of women as catalysts for social and political change are reinforced by the positive images of women in new roles during the revolution and at the frontlines of the war. Overall, media representations of women are still highly discriminatory. Yet the story of Nadia Savchenko in particular captured the Ukrainian imagination. The first woman graduate of Ukraine's prestigious military aviation academy in Kharkiv, Savchenko served in the Army as a lieutenant flying Mi-24 attack helicopters and was deployed to Iraq. When Russia initiated the war in the Donbas, Savchenko joined the volunteer militia, Aidar Infantry, was captured by Russia, held as a prisoner of war, and tried in Moscow for the murder of two Russian journalists, which many considered to be trumped-up charges. She was released in 2016 in a prisoner exchange and returned to Ukraine as a war hero and a symbol for women's advancement.

### *Gender Consciousness*

Struggling with misconceptions of Soviet gender policies, Ukrainian society is considered largely ignorant of gender issues. Women do not understand their fundamental rights under the law, and men tend not to be conscious that gender discrimination exists.<sup>16</sup> For many, gender equality is considered a European value rather than a fundamental human right, a view that makes efforts to promote gender equality vulnerable to changes in administration and to religious opposition.

### *Funding, Resources, and Data*

Although it is mandated to implement the bulk of programming on gender awareness and discrimination, as well as prevention and recovery from domestic violence and sex trafficking, the Ministry of Social Policy is seriously underfunded. Additionally, the lack of gender-specific data undermines efforts to improve gender equality and address trafficking and violence against women. The Justice Department tracks incidents of domestic violence but does not disaggregate data according to gender or type of abuse. Employment data also include few gender categories, making it difficult to document inequities in hiring and wages. As a result, Ukraine's commitments to gender equality under the law and in compliance with international conventions are mostly not implemented, and, if implemented, a lack of baseline data makes progress difficult to monitor and to determine.<sup>17</sup>

### *The War*

Russia's violent occupation of Crimea and Donbas and the continuation of a hot war in eastern Ukraine have exacerbated societal vulnerabilities that often play out differently with regard to gender. For example, internally displaced persons (IDPs) who are women often integrate more rapidly than men into new communities while men suffer a triple displacement—loss of status in the family, unemployment, and discrimination by the host community for not fighting while their sons are on the frontlines. The rise in alcoholism among veterans and male IDPs contributes to a rise in domestic violence against women. The loss of social protections has forced many women into prostitution and made them vulnerable to trafficking. Awareness of these gendered impacts of violence is minimal in Ukraine.

The inability to achieve a military ceasefire has forced Kyiv to reject political tenets of the Minsk II accord, which was struck in early 2015. These tenets addressed economic ties, social benefits, and blanket amnesty. Furthermore, local elections, called for in Minsk II, will not occur until Russia withdraws and security is achieved. The hollowing out of the peace accord leaves local actors without a framework for local peace processes, ensuring that major aspects of 1325 that support conflict resolution will not be implemented.

Ukraine's strategy to force Russia to commit economic resources to the Donbas by suspending economic trade and social benefits has resulted in an almost complete abandonment of its citizens in the east. Pushing Kyiv to honor its commitment to UNSCR 1325 on social protection of the local population and defense of their human rights would improve Kyiv's position in conflict areas while also weakening Russia's.

### *Devolution*

NAP implementation is occurring only at the national level. Power in Ukraine is devolving to local governments, which are also required to implement the plan. However, local governments have neither the capacity nor interest in doing so, and they cite other priorities such as health care and education reform for their failure to take it up. This gap significantly undermines Ukraine's commitments to NAP and leaves entrenched gender inequalities in place. For *oblasts* on the frontlines that are already suffering from war, the devolution of power has severely hampered their ability to provide NAP-mandated social services and citizen protections. Without federal support, they lack the capacity, knowledge, and resources. In addition, as a result of decades of underfunding of women's grassroots organizations, very limited civil society capacity exists to support *oblast* efforts.



## Recommendations for the U.S. and Other International Donors

- Engage men and women in implementation of the National Action Plan, and do not focus only on women's empowerment. The acquisition of equal rights in Ukraine will require significant changes in men's thinking and behavior. International donors and the Ukrainian government must fund and mandate programming for men.
- Recognize the efforts of the national government in its successful implementation of the NAP in the security forces and demand equal resources, time, and attention to the Ministry of Social Policy to fulfill a complete implementation at the national level, including prevention and protection for victims, execution of Ukraine's laws on equality, and social support for victims of the war.
- Prioritize funding to enhance data collection on critical gender issues, such as employment, domestic violence, trafficking, IDPs, and violence in war zones to provide the basis for gender advocacy, guiding and prioritizing programming, and sound monitoring and evaluation.
- Leverage donor support for devolution and local governments to demand incorporation of gender-sensitive approaches for budgeting and policies at the *oblast*, *raion*, and municipal levels.

While the international community has significant leverage with Kyiv, it must push for UNSCR 1325 policies and efforts that do more to support eastern Ukraine and Crimea:

- State the need to protect their human rights and protest gender-based violence against women and men.
- Acquire data on human rights abuses, including rape, prostitution, and torture with the intent to hold perpetrators accountable (now that Kyiv has abandoned the amnesty provisions of Minsk II).
- Push national government agencies tasked with assisting IDPs to develop programming and funding to further their integration into local communities and insist that the programming be sensitive to the different challenges men and women IDPs face. Such programming would reinforce devolution and strengthen social cohesion and reconciliation at the local level.
- Provide funding for peace education programs for civil society, activists, IDPs, and at universities that incorporate gender in order to implement provisions of NAP focused on local-level conflict resolution and integration of IDPs.
- Supplement humanitarian relief with development assistance efforts to support women and men victims of rape, torture, and displacement.
- Develop a men's peace and security agenda that complements the women, peace, and security agenda and emphasizes peaceful masculinity, men as peacebuilders, and gender respect.

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Established in 2010, The U.S. Civil Society Working Group on Women, Peace, and Security (U.S. CSWG) is a network of civil society organizations with years of experience working on issues involving women, war, and peace. The U.S. CSWG informs, promotes, facilitates, and monitors the meaningful implementation of the U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security.

