

# Women in the Ukraine

## *Trends and Tendencies in the Labour Market*

by Svetlana V. Kupryashkina

*À partir d'une recherche récente, l'auteure examine les tendances et les facteurs déterminants qui pourraient influencer les femmes sur le marché du travail.*

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Women remain the largest constituency of the population (54 per cent) in Ukraine and therefore, an adequate assessment of their economic, political, and social status is of interest not only to scholars and activists, but to policy planners and government bodies as well. Currently, women predominate in various branches of industry and agriculture, particularly in the state sector of the economy. Labour re-allocations, inevitable during the transition period to the market economy, are, however, affecting substantial numbers of women-workers. The exclusion of women from the most active part of the labour market or moving them to lower-paid positions is often a result of discriminatory standards applied to age, marital status, educational level, urban or rural origins, and other "non-conventional" job requirements.

### **Women at the labour market**

Employment rates are among the basic indicators of socio-economic position of women in a given society. During the last five years the position of the Ukrainian women in the labour market has undergone serious transformations. For one, the level of unemployment among women has increased substantially. Although this

figure differs somewhat from one age group to another, and from region to region, women now comprise up to 70 per cent of all unemployed (Ukrainian Centre for Women's Studies). Women, as a rule, are not hired for, and often pushed out of, the most coveted jobs with higher social and financial status. For the most part, they are in the low-paid state sector of the economy. The income level of

women workers is 30 per cent lower than that of men. Furthermore, since there are 25 per cent more women than men in the state sector of the economy, all the problems of the collapsing state economy reflect much more on women. At the same time, newly established firms and enterprises, private or co-operatively owned, are often unwilling to hire women. Most are neither able nor willing to provide the social benefits that the law provides for women (i.e. paid maternity leave, time off for sick children). There are, in fact, only 14.3 per cent of women working in private ventures in Ukraine compared to the 85.7 per cent of men. Women are also now competing for jobs with pensioners, students, and other women with small children who would not be working had they not been forced into the market by the deteriorating state of the economy. This situation has resulted in the marginalization of women's labour: they have lower qualifications, earn less, and are often subjected to harmful conditions of work.

### **Distribution of women in the labour market**

The present survey of 1500 women aged 18 and older was designed to be

a comprehensive, all-inclusive assessment of the position of Ukrainian women in the labour market. The survey was designed to incorporate elements of the women's own opinions of their economic status. This produced several important results which differed from state statistics. For example, about four per cent of women in the survey reported being unemployed compared to the 0.5 per cent in official statistics.

The age group from 18 to 55 years old was of a special interest as it represented the tendencies of the most productive age group in the labour market. The distribution of the respondents within this age category was as follows: 74 per cent working women; four per cent unemployed; five per cent students (full-time); 17 per cent unwaged.

The position of women in the labour market correlated with their marital status. The highest employment rate was found among the divorced women (83 per cent). The lowest employment rate occurred among the single women (64 per cent) or those living in an unregistered marriage (68 per cent). These correlations are of interest and need to be assessed by a separate study.

The survey also found considerable differences according to the women's ages. At the age of 18, 23 per cent of women were working. This is a realistic figure since many women of this age are busy completing their education. This is also the most vulnerable age in terms of qualification and professional experience. At the ages of 23 or 24, women working represent about 50 per cent of their age group. This is the most common age for maternity and sick children leaves (31.1 per cent of all respondents).

The highest employment figures were for the group between 35 and 49 years old (83 to 87 per cent of women are working). Women from

the older age groups continue to be engaged in the production sphere. There are 13 per cent of women aged 60-69 working, and four per cent of those aged 70 and more. This in itself is far from being a positive economic indicator of Ukrainian society which is unable to provide even basic subsistence levels for its elderly.

There was a correlation also established between female employment and the location of the job. The smallest number of employed women were in the capital city of Kyiv. There are several reasons for that. First, as the capital, Kyiv has the largest population of students, with many students coming from other cities and rural areas. In Kyiv the unemployment rate is also higher in general, including the unemployment rate of women in particular. Furthermore, a considerable number of people in Kyiv are engaged in "grey market" activities (i.e., non-registered private business and trades) and, according to the data obtained, about 8.5 per cent of those involved in this kind of activity are women. The highest percentage of women working in unregistered businesses are those between 19 and 22 years of age. It is an alarming tendency given the lack of legal protection in most of these kinds of jobs. Most women in this sphere are employed on a non-contract basis. It is not uncommon for enterprises of this kind to go bankrupt leaving employees with owed wages or shares.

As in most countries around the world, that main burden of raising children lies squarely on the shoulders of women. Baby-sitting is practically non-existent. The daycare system is disintegrating and/or becoming too expensive for many families to afford. Even if women would like to stay home with their children, the hard economic conditions currently prevalent in Ukraine often forces them to work because their input into the family budget is necessary.

The conclusion that can be drawn from the survey is that many women would be interested in working part-time as a way of maintaining some social status while still having time with their children.

Of all the women questioned, only one per cent worked part-time willingly. Three per cent (three times more women) were obliged to work part-time because of the economic circumstances of their own businesses which seriously reduced their income. These workers in particular would more correctly fall under the category of "hidden" or "covered" unemployment. It should be noted that in Soviet society being unemployed was considered both a stigma and a criminal offence. Many would not admit to it unless it became critical. Because we based the survey results mostly on the self-evaluation and self-identification of the women respondents, the actual rates for both "covered" and "uncovered" unemployment are likely higher.

Currently, Ukrainian women have a very tough alternative. They must either work full-time and, therefore, dedicate less time to the upbringing of their children, or leave their jobs to

own professional status, the health status of her child/children, the availability of assistance from relatives, etc. At present, as a result of the current economic difficulties, many women are choosing work over family.

The standard of living has considerably decreased in Ukraine during the last years. Those on pensions are in the most vulnerable age category. Many have been forced back into work. Among female pensioners, the level of employment is in correlation with type of population unit (city, small town, village). The largest numbers of working "retired" women are found in regional centers (cities that have populations from 200,000 to one million)—27 per cent. The higher cost of living in big cities explains the economic necessity of work. Nevertheless, in Kyiv, the capital city, our survey showed only six per cent of "retired" women working. Possibly, many of the retired people living in Kyiv maintain ties with relatives from rural areas who provide them with additional sources of income and/or food. Only one per cent of "retired" women work in rural areas. In this case, the formal absence of officially registered work

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stay at home with their children. Among women with children under three years of age, 35 per cent are working. In other words, more than a third of women entitled to legal benefits (maternity leave in Ukraine is up to three years) are not using them and go to work. Many factors influence a woman's decision-making: the economic status of the family, the woman's

cannot be interpreted easily. Many rural inhabitants are engaged in their own farming and are selling the surplus at market.

#### **Female unemployment in Ukraine**

Unemployment in Ukraine is generally a very recent phenomenon and

needs further examination. However, it is already possible to see higher numbers of unemployment for women, a situation that has been described as "unemployment with a woman's face." Seventy per cent of unemployed are women with university or technical college degrees (Human Development Report).

The level of unemployment for women 18 years of age was eleven per

cent on a part-time basis is one per cent of all respondents. Within the age group of 23 to 24 years, the figure is 2.3 per cent. The largest numbers of women working part-time are in small cities—1.9 per cent. Among women with one child, the number is one per cent for part-time workers; for women with two children the figure is 0.3 per cent; and for women with three children, three per cent.

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cent. Among all the age groups it is the highest. In the age group between 19 and 49 years old, the general percentage of unemployed lies between three and five per cent of the respondents of that age. Official statistics, however, give the figure of 0.3 per cent for this age group. Among all respondents, the highest number of unemployed women is found in the capital city Kyiv—12 per cent.

#### **Additional forms of employment**

The survey confirmed the fact that the average salary for an "official" job is not sufficient to provide for the basic necessities. Many other forms of employment are becoming common as a "secondary" employment is necessary to supplement one's income. Twelve per cent of all women are engaged in secondary employment. In the age group of 18 to 35 years, this figure is 30 per cent. It means that on the average, besides their main job and their normal "housework," one out of three Ukrainian women has another job to provide an additional source of income.

#### **Part-time workers**

The total number of women work-

#### **Women in the production sphere.**

The kinds of employment the respondents are engaged in are as follows: managers 3.8 per cent; special-

ists with higher education 13.1 per cent; specialists with technical education 23.0 per cent; general labourers 23.0 per cent; agricultural workers 1.1 per cent; university/institute student 1.1 per cent; students of technical schools 2.0 per cent; entrepreneurs 0.2 per cent; office employees 5.3 per cent; retired 22.1 per cent. Of all respondents, 55.9 per cent of women are working in predominantly female collectives; 7.4 per cent are working in predominantly male collectives; 12.4 per cent of women work in mixed collectives; and 1.5 per cent of women are self-employed.

#### **Women's satisfaction with their work**

In conditions where most salaries are not enough to satisfy even minimum living requirements, the degree of satisfaction women feel in their work may be considered a reflection of the level of social stability in the society as a whole and of women's social status in particular. The majority of the respondents are not satisfied with the financial side of their work: 58 per cent claimed to be "not satisfied" and "rather not satisfied." Only three per cent of women said they were satisfied with their work.

Every third respondent had an unclear standing of this question since they either gave no answer or fell within the "hard to say" category.

At the same time, however, the level of professional satisfaction with their work was notably different. Despite material hardships, women's general professional satisfaction with their work is considerable. Every fifth respondent is fully satisfied with the professional side of her work, every sixth "to a great extent." This speaks to the great professional potential of Ukrainian women. If the necessary structural and economic changes were made, women could contribute substantially to the revival of national economy.

#### **Professional career of women**

The questionnaire examined the reasons and factors influencing the respondents' career choices and posed the question: "what is preventing you from pursuing your career and earning more money." Every fourth respondent (24 per cent) remarked that the need to dedicate a lot of time to their families was an obstacle. Every fifth respondent (19 per cent) stated the absence of necessary education was a problem. For 13 per cent of respondents, health was a decisive factor in their career choices. Every fifth respondent, however, stated there were nothing obstructing her career.

#### **Conclusion**

Most well-paid jobs lie in the private sector, which does not want to employ women because it does not want to provide benefits. The laws concerning maternity and other benefits mostly apply to the state sector and thus do not reflect the economic reality for most women in Ukraine. There are as yet no laws on provision of benefits by private employers, and no anti-discrimination laws regarding hiring, firing, promotion and the like in the private sector. The process of legal reform in Ukraine is taking a "reverse" direction with regard to

women, moving away from Soviet-style, protectionist legislation toward what is considered by reformers a "westernized" approach. For the time being, the old Constitution remains in effect, guaranteeing full equality regardless of sex. However, the new Constitution may not contain explicit prohibitions against sex discrimination. The concern is that, is the absence of a strong women's movement and fully articulated civil society—both are still in their embryonic forms—there will be no accountability by government for violation of women's rights in employment and other spheres.

*This article has been partially extracted from a larger survey on women in Ukraine undertaken by the Ukrainian Center for Women's Studies in collaboration with the Social Monitoring Center of the Ukrainian Institute for Strategic Studies and funded by the Canadian Embassy in Kyiv. It represents the first survey of its kind done by an independent research center and we hope it will become part of a systematic assessment of various indicators of women's status.*

*Svetlana Kupryashkina is a feminist translator and educator who established the Ukrainian Center for Women's Studies in 1992. She acts as a consultant for international agencies on gender issues in the Ukraine, and is currently working on the project of constitutional reform in Ukraine and women's rights.*

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## CHARLENE D. JONES

### housewife

This woman, in polyester slacks, flowered blouse,  
a string of ugly beads at her neck

smokes cigarettes, watches soap operas  
screams at the kids to "shut the door, will ya?"  
pours another cup of coffee  
into a mug grabbed from the dishes  
which stack, cold and greasy  
next to the clutter of ashtrays, unpaid bills, plastic jewelry  
old newspapers, safety pins, rubber bands, pennies, scotch  
tape,  
and yesterday's lunch  
which lie on the kitchen counter.

She is thirty-five.  
Some nights, when she can sleep  
she dreams she is walking on a beach  
in Barbados, in a bikini  
carelessly caressing the sand  
with a delicate toe whose nail is smooth and polished  
like the tiny seashells she gathers.

Then the camera pans,  
and the announcer's voice says "only a few hours away."

She turns in her sleep.

In the morning the kitchen sink is clogged  
her last child loses her first tooth  
welfare informs her of a decrease in her payments  
the electric company sends a nasty demand for money  
her ex-husband calls  
he won't be able to take the kids this weekend he's going  
hunting.

She turns on her t.v.

*Charlene D. Jones has had poems published in Atlantis, Prairie Schooner, The Muse Journal, and Canadian Woman Studies. She has also performed, with her partners as Uncritical Mass, at several events in Toronto.*