



## Lobbying for Women's Political Rights: Strategies in Poland and Ukraine

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Throughout the world, women's issues are often not viewed as part of broader social and economic concerns and are largely absent from legislative agendas. As a result, organizations representing women's interests are not treated as equal players in the decision-making process. In Eastern Europe and Eurasia—contrary to other aspects of the post-Communist, democratic transition sweeping through the region—women's access to political power has not increased. In both Poland and Ukraine, the current political climate excludes many potentially active women from influencing the policies that affect their daily lives, including in such areas as childcare, reproductive health and rights, domestic violence, education, unemployment, and workplace discrimination and harassment.

Consequently, governmental structures are less accountable to and representative of women than is desirable. Strengthening civic participation on the local level is a crucial step toward both consolidating emerging democracies and fostering women's full participation in national development. For this reason, from 1996-98, the Center for Russian, Central and East European Studies at Rutgers University initiated and developed a collaborative project with the National Information Center on Women's Organizations and Initiatives (OSKA) in Poland and the Kharkiv Center for Women's Studies (KCWS) in Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> Together, the three organizations trained women activists and leaders of women's nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in order to heighten awareness of the role of gender in decisionmaking and to increase political participation by and for women in local communities.

### Objectives

The project aimed to build the capacities of women's groups in Poland and Ukraine to organize, articulate, and advocate for their policy-related interests. Specific objectives were to:

- ▶ Strengthen the leadership and advocacy skills of women NGO leaders;
- ▶ Increase the effective participation of women's NGOs in local and national policymaking;
- ▶ Develop constructive partnerships between NGOs and decisionmakers in local and national institutions;
- ▶ Form regional networks and alliances among women.

### Project Design

The project was based on two processes: the development and transfer of information and skills; and the immediate application of new knowledge. Using an advocacy and

training module developed by Rutgers, the project identified various skills and knowledge that women should have to successfully work together on local, regional, and

national levels. Skills included communication, team-building, strategic planning, coalition-building, public relations, fundraising, and conflict resolution. Issues

<sup>1</sup>OSKA is a collaborative effort of leading Polish women's NGOs aiming to provide access to information, a forum to share experiences and initiate joint projects, and strategies to educate the public and policymakers on the vital role of women in a democratic society. KCWS is an association of lawyers, journalists, sociologists, and historians committed to implementing integrated programs to foster women's social, economic, and political development.

included gender analysis of public policy, women's human rights, opportunities and barriers to the participation of women in public life, and the capacity of Ukrainian and Polish NGOs to influence public policy.

Over the course of two years, an advocacy planning and training model was implemented through workshops and local projects. Between each workshop, participants returned to their communities

and, with the support of local coordinators, worked to practice what they had learned. Nineteen NGOs and more than 40 individuals developed strategies to define community needs and initiated related advocacy projects such as establishing health centers and youth clubs; supporting women-owned businesses; teaching job, interview, and resume skills; assisting needy women and families; and encouraging women to run for public office.

In addition, coalition-building among diverse women activists from both Poland and Ukraine laid a foundation for collective action and encouraged contact across borders. Participants in the program were carefully selected in collaboration with local project coordinators, with each NGO required to commit at least three staff members from their organization for the duration of the project. Involving multiple staff members ensured collective learning and institutional strengthening.

## Results

### *Improving Skills*

A total of nine three-day advocacy and leadership training workshops were conducted (five in Poland and four in Ukraine). More than 40 women participated in and contributed to each workshop, representing 19 NGOs and 13 communities. Sessions included problem identification and prioritization, strategic planning, fundraising, public relations, leadership, and working with government officials. Gender analysis was an integral component of each of the sessions. For example, one session taught how to view public policies (such as those pertaining to employment) from a gender perspective. At each location, an in-country coordinator provided ongoing technical assistance.

The workshops taught participants how to organize for political action, to develop coalitions, to share support and resources, and to understand the role of gender in public policy decisionmaking. Several local advocacy initiatives were undertaken:

- ▶ Local NGOs conducted an initiative to increase knowledge about women's rights in local

schools throughout Poland. In Ukraine, Journalists for Women's Rights produced a newsletter featuring women candidates and campaigned on their behalf in local elections. In Poland, the Women's International Foundation concentrated its efforts on formulating platforms for women running in local elections that focused on reproductive rights and women's employment and social security.

- ▶ The Union of Women of Poltava in Ukraine conducted numerous workshops and education seminars on women and political leadership. The Union also campaigned for eight women candidates in the 1998 city council election, resulting in the election of two.
- ▶ Women attended local public policy deliberations and visited with town administrators, mayors, and local officials. Some groups also lobbied government officials on the *oblast* (regional) and national level for the inclusion of women's issues on policy agendas, including reproductive rights and funding for health services and education.

### *Strengthening Local Institutions*

Local NGOs identified women's needs in their communities and devised strategies to resolve them. For example, community groups formed coalitions to promote the appointment and election of women to public office, and organized political campaigns. In addition, dialogues were initiated with local government officials, youth organizations were founded to study women's human rights in schools, and community foundations and centers have been established to assist in the development of women's businesses and NGOs. Workshops were conducted in villages with the goal of enhancing the status and effectiveness of local organizations. This aspect of institutional strengthening yielded various results, as follows:

- ▶ Through the workshop sessions and discussions on their work, many groups improved the clarity and precision of their missions and goals. For example, one organization that had initially stated its goal as "to improve the lives of women," changed it to read "to provide women with the knowledge and skills to find employment."

- ▶ One organization in Poland, *Lidzbark-Warmiński*, taught English to facilitate employment opportunities for numerous community residents who had completed a program for unemployed women. The group also created a resource center for women with family problems and conducted meetings with lawyers in order to raise awareness about domestic violence.
- ▶ The credibility of groups increased through the project. Women reported that the questions, requests, and proposals that they presented to community officials were taken more seriously because they represented organizations that had participated in a professionally organized course of leadership training.
- ▶ Participants initiated fundraising campaigns to gain financial support from businesses and government agencies, often securing money for local initiatives. These efforts ensured the continuity of programs and enhanced community investment and ownership at a variety of levels. For example, in Leczna, Poland, the Women's Circle ran a fundraising campaign to ensure that the coming year's budget requirements could be met.

### Building Coalitions

One of the most significant accomplishments of the project was coalition-building among participants and local, national, and international organizations. In Ukraine, for example, an Eastern region women's coalition and the Kharkiv Center for Women's Studies collaborated to encourage women to run for political office. Many

women gained the confidence to act both within and outside their communities and to increasingly take advantage of existing networks of activists to implement community development and regional and international advocacy projects.

As a result, project participants now recognize the value of other women's organizations within their own communities and the importance of working together to achieve shared goals. NGOs reach out and cooperate with each other on an ongoing basis. For example, two Polish groups, *Olsztyn* and *Gorsk*, developed a coalition to foster collaboration on women's issues with regional and local governments.

### Enhancing Gender Awareness

The gender awareness of public policy among project participants was enhanced through an analysis of national laws and policies that affect the legal, social, and political status of women in Poland and Ukraine. International laws and conventions used to monitor and protect the human rights of women were also reviewed, as well as written materials from national and international

organizations that are available to women. The project collaborators emphasized to the participants the importance of using data that is disaggregated by gender, as well as analyzing and using statistics to propose local policy alternatives that are beneficial to women. Sharing and disseminating the data among women's organizations nationally is an important component of building networks among women's organizations in each country.

### Published Materials

The guidebooks *How to be Active in Public Life* in Poland and *Community Initiatives of Women's Organizations Involved in the Political Process* in Ukraine describe the training experiences of participants, highlight examples of lessons learned, and provide national and international resources for potential activists, NGOs, and policymakers interested in women's issues. One thousand copies were distributed to women's and other organizations and government officials in both Poland and Ukraine. The availability of information facilitated the transfer and maintenance of the knowledge and skills acquired through the project.



Project participants meet at an advocacy workshop for NGOs in Ukraine

## Conclusions

The project presented many opportunities for women and organizations to share ideas and experiences related to influencing the public policy process. The knowledge and skills they acquired sparked activity

on coalition-building and understanding of women's human rights locally, nationally, and internationally. Developing clear missions, goals, and strategies of how to maximize local potential and successfully interact with policy-

makers was a crucial first step toward gaining a wider understanding of women's long-term strategic needs. Local engagement also made an immediate difference in the places where women live, work, and raise their families.

## Recommendations and Lessons Learned

The following recommendations can guide future applications of the advocacy and training process:

► **Support national and regional coalitions.** An important element of continuing the training and education of women participants is the development of national and regional coalitions of women's NGOs. Coalitions sustain the sharing of information, ideas, and resources across communities and borders. In order to be fully effective, local and regional networks should include organizations in urban areas that have greater access to information and policymakers, in particular in capital cities (i.e., Warsaw and Kiev).

► **Encourage participation.** The project offered opportunities for women to choose the issues on policymakers' agendas with which they want to become involved, and

then to focus on the best strategies to achieve established goals. Integrating workshops that build skills with the implementation of community development projects enabled the women to put their knowledge into practice and to transfer experiences to colleagues.

The following lessons emerged:

► **Nascent women's movements need support.** The lack of a cohesive women's movement that is independent of the major political parties in both Poland and Ukraine impeded advocacy for and by women. Similarly, a lack of gender-sensitive training programs and qualified trainers hampered gender awareness and action and contributed to the emphasis by policymakers on traditional roles for women. The three project organizers quickly realized the imperative of

continuing to bring diverse organizations together and fostering networks in order to hone the organizing skills of participants and move toward the achievement of more significant public roles for women.

► **With foundation, NGOs can influence policy.** Both Poland and Ukraine lack clear policies and guidelines on the legal basis of cooperation between NGOs and local governments, a problem that restricts the activities of NGOs (especially in Ukraine). Furthermore, some people do not trust in the ability of NGOs to affect policy change, a trend that also hampers progress toward the political involvement of women. Despite these constraints, however, women can quickly learn that their involvement in NGOs is a legitimate political activity and that they have the power and the right to influence what happens in their communities.

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