

## **Netting Gender *inUkraine*<sup>1</sup>: Is Gender Conflict Deepening?**

### ***Introduction***

The country of focus in the present study is Ukraine, a former Soviet republic. The main research objectives are to conceptualize gender aspects of Internet communications at the formation of informational society in Ukraine and basing on these data depict a new gender relations model appearing within local context.

### ***Local background***

Ukraine is one of the largest countries in Eastern Europe with a population of approximately 45 million people currently (Internetworldstat 2010). Since the Soviet Union breakdown in 1991, Ukraine has been experienced tremendous political and economic hardships. They are particularly stressful for Ukrainian women (Goroshko 2009; Yakushko 2005, p.590).

There is a tendency observed over the all post-Soviet space that CIS's countries are still being governed by patriarchal ideology and conservative men whose politics on women, like those of their predecessors, are largely influenced by economic and demographic reasons and who, while rejecting some aspects of their communist past, are now able to articulate with impunity more extreme traditionalistic views (Ibid). Marsh asserts also that "they no longer have any reason even to pay lip-service to the idealistic Marxist notions of women's equality" (Marsh 1996, p.4) The equality in the public sphere that was officially guaranteed to Soviet women often did not cover the private life, which may have contributed to the worsening of women's position with the fall of the socialist system (Marsh 1998).

The Gender Gap Index ranks from 2006 to 2009 fix the deepening of gender gap in this country from the 47<sup>th</sup> position to the 61<sup>st</sup>. Relating to gender gap subindexes political empowerment indicators demonstrate the worst results showing the 117th position out of 134 countries worldwide (The Global Gender Gap Report 2009).

A World Bank study of Ukraine states that "... a wide-scale male unemployment has resulted in uncertainties in gender relations that are reflected in declining marriage and fertility rates, and increasing numbers of female-headed households...." (Gender Issues in Europe and Eurasia 2006, p.72). Men's response has resulted in sharp increases in alcoholism and suicide.

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<sup>1</sup> The spelling of these two words is stylized to *Netlingvo rules* as for the Internet people write.

Simultaneously region-wide research posits that “rising male unemployment has called into question the concept of the male as breadwinner. This has changed the power structure and bargaining power within the household and – in combination with more stable employment in the traditionally ‘feminized’ sectors – has introduced what was an unknown phenomenon a decade ago: women as prime earners.... [thus] eroding the male breadwinner model” (Ibid., p.49).

However there is little gender difference in the poverty rates among men and women in Ukraine, but one should consider non-economic factors that shed greater light on the gender dimension of poverty. These include such factors as “females report more illness, suffer more widely from domestic abuse, earn less money and suffer more discrimination on the labor market than do men in present-day Ukraine” (Ibid., p.115).

During the break up of the Soviet Union working women experienced an increase in "women unfriendly experiences," and they reported high work stress and low job satisfaction (Kauppinen-Toropainen & Gruber 1993, p.445). In fact, the disintegration of the Soviet system and ideology have impacted greatly the ideas about equality between sexes in post-Soviet Ukraine and repeatedly blamed on women's emancipation. Thus, women are told that they must return to their traditional place in the home, the domestic sphere, whereas men should become entrepreneurs, in order for the society to recover economically (Yakushko 2005; Kay 1997; Marsh 1996). Levant and colleagues also (2003) found that both post-Soviet men and women tended to endorse traditional masculinity ideology and that their gender role beliefs were more traditional and patriarchal than those of their American or European counterparts.

Thus one can trace the rapid development of gender model over post-Soviet space from the communist *ideologically gender-equal relations model* to *female breadwinner model* initiated by early post-Soviet economical hardships to contemporary traditionalistic and *profoundly sexist model* where patriarchal views on female *returning to Privacy* to be ideal *mother, house-keeper and wife*, the image of *Ukrainian beregin'ya* (heath-keeper) start dominant.

Simultaneously with the deepening of traditionalistic views on Ukrainian woman as heath-keeper one can fix profoundly sexist attitudes on women as *whore* or *potential whore*. Hence there is rather discordant situation currently in Ukraine where a woman is being locked into the patriarchal images as a *hearth mother* from the one hand and as a *whore* (Pavlychko 1997, p.233), *Christian virgin* or *pagan goddess* (Rubchak 1996, p.315; Rubchak 2011) from the other. Yakushko points out that “new emphasis on domestication, nurturance, and reproduction may be succeeding in making women blind to gender stereotypes and causing them to embrace the conservative gender views” (Yakushko 2005, p.590-591). This phenomenon is explained by Yakushko through the system-justification perspective of Jost and Banaji (1994), which

explicates how subordinate groups integrate the inferiority ideology promoted by the dominant group in order to maintain a sense of group and personal dignity (Ibid., p.591).

Therefore a new gender model development over post-Soviet space including Ukraine is under way. It possesses a rather contradictory nature.

There are a lot of explanations concerning these contradictions in gender relations in post-Soviet states and why women have tended to embrace what could be considered sexist and stereotypical views of women's roles. It can be motivated by the fact that these women sought to reject the Soviet emphasis on the androgynous worker in order to return to the *essentially feminine*, the importance of femininity ideals for Slavic women as a means of achieving individualism to counter the uniformity that was enforced under communism (Drakulic 1992), the promotion of the feminine, which includes emphases on *beauty, thinness, fragility, and fashion*, seems to be one of the primary ways that women reject the Soviet communist past and embrace what is perceived as *Western* or *capitalist* (Sperling 1999; Yakushko 2005; Zdravomyslova 2008).

With the increase of Internet popularity and its impact on social development adequate and duly research of changes initiated by the Internet gains importance both locally and globally. The Internet generates a large variety of new phenomena of both social and psychological nature such as: *e-society, e-government, e-democracy, et cetera*. Its influence on society is positive and negative simultaneously. One can speak now about *digital divide, gender gap in ICT use and access, cyber-pornography, female cyber-trafficking, etc* (Goroshko 2009).

In that way the main research objectives are to trace the impact of new ICT including the rapid development of internet on gender model development in Ukraine and clarify the relations between offline and online gender models within the local context where a rapid informational society formation is under way.

### ***UaNet today***

According to the Internetworldstat Agency there are 15.300.000 internet-users in Ukraine currently. It indicates 33.7 % Internet penetration in this country (Internetworldstat 2010). At this moment Ukraine occupies the 9<sup>th</sup> place among Internet Top 10 Countries in Europe (Internet Top 10 Countries in Europe 2010). However, the broadband internet-connections are accessible only for 1 600 000 people. It means that only 3.2% Ukrainian population has an access to the broadband Internet and hence web 2.0 services since they can't function properly without this type of connection. There are 525,740 Facebook users on August 31/10 in Ukraine (Ukrainskaja auditorija Facebook prevysila 500 000 chelovek 2010).

One can take broader context and speak about the building of informational society (M. Castells) in Ukraine that the *Networked Readiness Index 2009–2010*<sup>2</sup> Ukraine rates 3.53 indicating the 82nd place occupied by this country among 133 countries in the world. It indirectly shows a rather deep digital gap in Ukraine currently (The Networked Readiness Index 2009-2010).

### ***Research design and methodology***

The research consists of six stages. Firstly the literary data analysis is performed. Secondly male and female perceptions of informational society realities (informants' responses to ICT and Internet lexis) obtained through free association tests (n (number of informants) = 432; 2008 (year of conduction)) are collected and examined. The third stage touches the study of male and female preferences and motivations in Internet use (data of web surveys (n = 936; 2007 – 2008)). Then gender peculiarities of Internet communication (data of offline surveys (n = 105; 2007)) and focus groups (n=6; 2007) are traced and depicted. The fifth stage is dealt with the Web parsing and content analyses data of 321 local and international online sources (web sites) (2009) in the area of femininity and masculinity manifestations on the UaNet (Ukrainian-speaking Internet), RuNet (Russian-speaking Internet) and E-net (English-speaking Internet). The last stage includes the study of male and female attitudes towards gender issues in Ukrainian society (data of offline questionnaire (n = 246, 2007)).

As this study examines the implication of on-line and off-line perceptions, stereotypes, motives, images and communicative behavior, gendered communication styles as cultural phenomena on the Internet a grounding theory is exploited, emphasizing generation of theory from data in the process of conducting study. Qualitative methods utilizing a feminist perspective are used to ensure that the women and men participating in the study would have the opportunity to relate what they experienced on-and off-line, their voices would be privileged. The researcher's voice emerges through the interpretation of their words, both individually and collectively. The researcher is able to discover patterns in the data and explore explanations of those patterns. This permits the experiences of the participants to emerge as grounded theory.

Grounded theory comes from the data, and ultimately, the experiences of the participants. This is in contrast to a quantitative approach, which starts with a theory and then is either supported or

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<sup>2</sup> The *World Economic Forum's Networked Readiness Index* (NRI) measures the propensity for countries to exploit the opportunities offered by information and communications technology. It is published annually. The NRI seeks to better comprehend the impact of ICT on the competitiveness of nations. The NRI is a composite of three components: the environment for ICT offered by a given country or community, the readiness of the community's key stakeholders (individuals, businesses, and governments) to use ICT, and finally the usage of ICT amongst these stakeholders (The Networked Readiness Index 2009-2010, 12).

disproved. Grounded theory permits the unexpected to emerge, exposing what is seen rather than what is expected to be seen (Brown 1998).

### ***Theoretical background***

There are three dominant approaches surrounding gender issues on the Net: *The demographic agora*, the *male mystique*, and *the female frontier*. Thus, Monteith argues that research data concerning the impact of gender on the Internet to date, can be divided into three major theories:

- The first theory maintains that the Internet is gender neutral, and that women and men can use or participate online on equal bases;
- The second theory considers the virtual realm as a reflection of the offline world where men and women operate on unequal terms, and men dominate (Monteith 2002; King 2000, p.2);
- The third theory suggests that the Internet may be seen as a female domain less as a superhighway and more as a *cozy village square*, where people meet, talk, and learn, a *meeting point*, a *place* “where women are making and moving into a digital lifestyle that was previously perceived as a *men’s club*” (Spender 2000; Monteith 2002, p.16).

A review of the literature concerning gender and internet testifies that men’s and women’s communications differ but it is not the mirror of Face-to-Face differences (Peddle 1997; Brown 1998).

**However our main research task is not only to verify the existent models of gender behavior on the Net but to reveal a link between online and offline gender models and their interconnection if it exists at all.**

### ***Results and discussion***

An analysis of the works in ICT and gender studies area and our own research data about perceptions of ICT by men and women show a considerable shift in the dynamics of male and female perceptions and attitudes towards maleness and femaleness on the Net. Thus, men change their views drastically about the women on the Net from very negative viewing to rather positive. For women female cyber-images are rendered consistently positive, regardless of the period of Internet development.

As for gender peculiarities in Internet access and use our research indicates a gender gap towards an access to the Net in Ukraine since only 27% women are among the local internet-users. Also women are experienced more difficulties not only in access to technologies but in special trainings how to work with them. Their level of certainty in ICT use and knowledge is lower than

the male's one. There is neither state nor regional program in Ukraine providing additional educational services namely for women in this area.

The study of male and female motivations in use of Internet demonstrates that men prefer to use the Net mainly for relaxation and information-seeking. For women the primary goal is to use internet for communicating, networking and socializing.

The study reveals that the Internet is more common phenomenon of everyday life for men not for women: Men are better informed about ICT and Internet issues in general.

We also state that the Internet enhances the dynamics in gender stereotyping: Gender stereotypes are changing much quicker online than offline. It can potentially impact the gender relations development in the future

The conducted web content analysis testifies a number of peculiarities. There is a strong blurring of social boundaries between public and private on the Net, this tendency is stronger in "female segment" of the Net. The boundary between private and public, personal and professional is rather unstable and unclear. Sometimes the private and personal becomes an alternative sphere for the public. This we find to be typical on websites presented themselves like *for women*. We also trace the opposite tendency whereby the social, public cyberspace breaks into the personal, intimate zone. This tendency, however, is expressed not as strongly or intensively.

The analysis also reveals that the development of research methodology and selective criteria for the formalization and description of web-resources remains relevant for both gender theory, and for social practices associated with the elimination of gender inequality world-wide. These basic criteria used for this classification must consider usability, navigability, accessibility, and visibility of the web-site to ordinary internet-user.

Analysis of gender resource located in English-speaking and Ukrainian and Russian-speaking segments of the Net shows that the concept of *gender digital divide* can be attributed not only to the level of accessibility and ICT development in the country, but also to the organization of web content and the ability of web resources to use as communicative interactive tools providing highly efficient links between site-visitors and site-creators.

The study also demonstrates that the English-speaking segment of the network currently is made more professionally and more focused on its target audience in contrast to Russian and Ukrainian gender portals operating as more amateurish than professional web projects.

However, it is necessary to stress that the existence of web-resources in itself devoted to gender issues, their popularity and accessibility to ordinary internet-users in CIS's countries, the immense growth of this sector narrow partly gender digital divide providing educational, organizational and communicative possibilities for women organizations in consolidating women's movements on the whole. Thus the study of gender resources located on the Internet

demonstrates that with the help of virtual offices and virtual presentations on the web women and non-governmental organizations allow not only to obtain the necessary information, but also to receive unique (and almost free) communicative tools needed for the expansion and consolidation of any social movement, including movement for gender equality. Gradually, the Internet becomes precisely that media that can not only extend and strengthen the power and influence of non-governmental organizations but provides (due to its non-censorship and cheapness) a unique platform for debate on the hottest issues of public concern. It is critically important for developing countries building currently the open society.

The study of web-content shows the influence of three components on this content development: Who generates (produces) this content on the Net, who is the owner of the web-site where this content located, as well as what is its core audience, where the content is targeted at. Our research demonstrates that site-developers as *a priori* possess a predetermined scheme, what information must be selected and how it must be presented on the web. Under the influence of their assumptions, settings, and stereotypes (often profoundly sexist) the design and content solution of the site is developed. For future research about gender-equity issues on the web this factor must be considered obligatory.

The study identifies the impact of technological factors on the formation and functioning of gender model on the Net. The constant developments of Internet technologies, and especially the emergence of broadband Internet, web 2.0, web 3.0, Skype-programs, streaming video impact and transform the model of gender relations on the Net. Thus, the propagation of Skype technologies, providing virtually free video decreases the level of anonymity in internet-communication. It may become an obstacle for experiments with gender-switching on the Net and prevent the co-existence of a few genders simultaneously. The intensive development of web 2.0 technologies and social media promotes networking and consolidating social movements on- and offline.

We emphasize that all these trends are developing on virtual reality much faster than in everyday life, and partly due to the so-called *effect of CNN*. Due to its impact the illusion that everything is happening right here and now appears at once. The power of the Internet as any other media (with no space-time localization) enhances this effect greatly. It provides a constant possibility to manipulate with all social practices on the Net (including the gendered) significantly transforming the perception and evaluation of everyday reality. Namely the use of Internet demonstrates clearly the contradictoriness of all new media. The Internet being a powerful communicative tool and presenting an environment for the implementation of any gender practices and schemes, impacts gender relations in society on several aspects. On the one hand it makes gender model more flexible and multivariate, introducing completely different gender

practices, which cannot exist at all in everyday reality (instant gender-switching or co-existence of a few personal genders). It facilitates in realization of these gender practices, promoting gender awareness in all social discourses from academia to public sector. Parallel to this, it effectively disseminates and promulgates any ideas and views, including the patriarchal. Under this double-faced influence a gradual transformation of gender relations model takes place in informational society. On the one hand it destroys the structure of "classic patriarchy" initiating the changes in the life strategies for women and strengthening the growth of egalitarian trends - autonomy and independence of women, fight for their rights and the acquisition of real power in society on an equal basis with men. On the other hand, we observe the strengthening of cultural patriarchy – *androcentrism* that causes the development of other strategies - the return of women to privacy, to traditionalistic way of life exclusively concentrated on privacy.

However these gender model transformations must be viewed and analyzed through the local context or where, in what type of society and in what time these changes occur. Namely the viewing of these changes through local context presents the greatest challenge for gender studies development today (Goroshko 2009). And here it is extremely important to understand that the post-Soviet "context" of transforming society, society being in transition phase from socialism to capitalism - cannot but affect the relationships between the sexes. The current changes in this area occurring over post-Soviet space, essentially transforms existing gender model in the USSR, which led to the promotion of egalitarian ideas and independent female careers, life-paths, etc. At the same time in the post-Soviet society one can trace a clear tendency to the direction of privacy, a return to traditional family values, when only they remain basic. Within post-soviet evaluation scheme a woman is rendered primarily as a mother, homemaker, and family keeper, *deserving everything* as popular post-Soviet ad asserts. All of these trends running simultaneously destroy the traditional attitudes towards partnership and equality between the sexes and deepen a gender conflict in Ukraine.

### ***Summary***

In general, the development of gender relations in the space of Internet communications goes to four directions or approaches: *the patriarchy approach* connected with the accentuation of inborn differences between males and females; *the androgenic approach* characterized by the balance between masculinity and femininity in society providing the partnership relations between the sexes; *the unisex approach* linked with the idea of female and male embodiment initiating the negation or levelling of differences between the sexes and *gender switching* or *gender diversity approach* generated exclusively by the internet technologies.

The emergence of these new gender practices initiated by the Net leads to the reconsideration of gender relations in post-soviet society. One can argue about the ruin of social-economic patriarchy and the intensification of cultural patriarchy – *androcentrism* where all females are marked, subjected and marginalized. As for *the demographic agora*, *the male mystique*, and *the female frontier* all these models can be traced on the Net locally and globally exposing only the inconsistency of modern media and unpredictability of its development.

All these tendencies on the web add the ambiguity and contradiction to the current gender model circulation deepening the potential gender conflict in the emerging informational society in Ukraine. The measures to narrow deepening gender gap in Ukrainian society including gender digital divide must be developed and provided urgently.

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## BIO

Olena Goroshko is Professor of Linguistics and Sociology of Communication, Chairperson of Cross-Cultural Communication and Modern Languages Department at National Technical University 'Kharkiv Polytechnic Institute' (NTU 'KhPI') (Kharkiv, Ukraine). Goroshko's professional interests cover psycho-sociolinguistics, Gender and Internet studies, CMC, e-learning 2.0. She is the author of many articles and four books on sociolinguistics, gender and computer-mediated communication. Goroshko's works appeared in *The Handbook of Research on Virtual Workplaces and the New Nature of Business Practices*, *Russian Cyberspace Journal*, [Yezyk@multimedia](mailto:Yezyk@multimedia), *Linguistica Computazionale*, *Gendered Transformations: Theory and Practices on Gender and Media* and *the Wiener Slawistischer Almanach*, among others.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

Olena Ih. Goroshko

Home address: #28-7/9 Chervonopraporna ST., Kharkiv, Ukraine, 61002

tel: (380) 057-7076170;

fax: (380) 057-7063623;

e-mail: [elegorosh@yandex.ru](mailto:elegorosh@yandex.ru)