

Chernivtsi Railway Station,  
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# Masculinities and Transition in Ukraine: Country Brief

*“I don’t really know about [paternity leave] but a friend of mine did it, because his wife earns more than him, but to me that seemed kind of strange [‘dikovato’]... Before my wife got pregnant she earned more than me too... I just worked, worked, worked to get ahead of her... It’s inside me, it’s what my dad showed me.”*

(37-YEAR-OLD MALE DESPATCH MANAGER, CLOTHING FACTORY)

This brief is based on a larger study (Edström *et al.* 2019) (that also includes Egypt, Kazakhstan and Turkey), which explores how transition in different countries has been experienced by different groups of men, and its impacts on gender relations. It aims to assist the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and other stakeholders to consider ways of engaging men as agents of positive change for gender equality – alongside women and girls – as well as to complement women-focused projects and investments to enhance both the resilience of transitions and equality of opportunity.

As Ukraine has attempted to distance itself from the Soviet past and to establish a strong and independent self-identity, ideals of masculinity and femininity have emerged that have both nationalist and traditionalist overtones. In contrast to the Soviet emphasis on women’s ‘dual role’, constructions of femininity in contemporary Ukraine prioritise domesticity and motherhood. In material terms, this shift

in emphasis is epitomised by the redrawing of women’s relationship with the state and their new relationship with the market, as forms of Soviet welfare supporting women’s public role are removed. For men, although there is continuity in the patriotic relationship they share with the state, their more immediate roles have been transformed by the shift to a market economy, such that self-realisation should now also come through individual

success in the marketplace and, in turn, as a breadwinner for one's family.

The respective emphasis on women's domestic role and men's role as breadwinners reinforces stereotypes that permeate all spheres of life. These lie at the root of a series of gendered problems faced by women and men. Such problems have been exacerbated by the economic and social dislocations experienced periodically since the collapse of state socialism, and the current conflict with Russia. Women's disadvantage in the labour market is clearest in the gender pay gap. While it has narrowed – from 29.1 per cent to 23.7 per cent between 2000 and 2014 – the gap is still significantly larger than the EU27 average of 16.4 per cent, placing Ukraine 67th out of 142 countries ranked in the Gender Equality Index (UN 2015: 46). Such disadvantages stem primarily from horizontal and vertical labour market segregation, with women concentrated in lower-paid professions and in low and middle-ranked positions. This is further reflected in women's representation in politics, progressing only from 8.6 per cent to 13.6 per cent of Members of Parliament over the same period (*ibid.*: 43).

In what is a low-wage economy characterised by widespread income insecurity, one of the biggest problems facing men in Ukraine (particularly those in the lower echelons of the labour market) is meeting the expectations on them as providers for the family. This pressure elicits a range of responses from men, from the proactive (40 per cent of men usually work more than 40 hours per week) (UNFPA 2018: 29) to the reactive

(alcoholism is six to seven times more prevalent among Ukrainian men than women, and particularly in poor rural areas) (Bureychek 2013: 354). These responses to insecurity are harmful to men (with male life expectancy around 11 years lower than female life expectancy and the death rate for 20–45-year-old men more than three times higher than for women of the same age group) (Riabchuk 2013: 206–7); they are also harmful to women – 27 per cent of whom have experienced some form of gendered violence (Vološevych, Konoplytska and Kostiuchenko 2015).

## Policy context and study methods

The cultural embeddedness of gender stereotypes leads to the construction of the gender equality agenda as 'progressive Europeanism', which both undermines commitment and makes it sensitive to geopolitical developments. By turning Ukraine to the West, the war with Russia may help gender mainstreaming take root. On the other hand, it is difficult to see the government prioritising a 'foreign' agenda during a period of national crisis, when neo-traditionalist constructions of both masculinity and femininity are being heavily mobilised.

Current gender policy remains focused on women; gender issues affecting men are almost entirely absent, whether at government or civil society level. Notwithstanding recent legislative provisions for paternity leave, gender policy is developed within an equal opportunities framework that is focused on women's access to the public sphere, while men's public and private roles are left unchanged. A handful of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are addressing the latter, while a recent project has been able to generate new data on men's lives and the range of problems underpinning gender-based violence (UNFPA 2018). This documents the stress experienced by men as they try to live up to unachievable ideals of masculinity and the resulting tendencies towards overwork, alcohol abuse, morbidity and violence.

The position of many international financial institutions in Ukraine on gender equality issues echoes the national picture in many ways. Gender strategy is viewed as secondary to matters of national priority, including corruption, banking infrastructure and liquidity, green economy transition and energy independence. The majority of gender equality actions in the country are focused on supporting women in order to close the gap.

In order to explore the Ukrainian context, three sectors were chosen for study because they are key for the EBRD's operations in terms of volume of investment and because of their (potential) direct and indirect impact on gender issues. These were: (1) agri-business, (2) municipal projects, and (3) the Women in Business programme. In all three cases, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with key informants from relevant areas.



Man and boy swimming, Lviv, Ukraine. CC BY-SA 2.0  
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## Findings

### **Gender strategies meet gendered realities: stereotypes of ‘equal but different’**

Traditional stereotypes rendering women responsible for unpaid domestic care work persist, while men’s work–life balance remains skewed towards work. Men are at risk from the effects of overwork and more harmful, reactive responses to stress, while childcare continues to be a responsibility shared between mothers and grandmothers, with only 2 per cent of men taking parental leave since 2010, when legislation was introduced to allow this. The notion of women as ‘equal but different’ was widespread, underpinning forms of

horizontal occupational segregation common in the Soviet workplace. The new business sector also fitted this framework. Male and female respondents alike agreed that women could succeed in what was now seen as a very open business environment, but also believed that women tended to choose ‘passion projects’ that they treated as ‘an extension of their family’, and for that reason were more limited in their career potential.

### **Positive indirect impacts (1): anti-corruption as a gendered agenda**

While the prevalence of traditional attitudes towards gender roles has nullified some attempts at direct gender interventions, this study suggests that aspects of other interventions have had some positive indirect impacts on gender issues. As some respondents noted, tackling corruption can be seen as targeting a problem that undermines not only legal, economic and democratic objectives, but also gender equality. Corruption in multiple contexts has been identified as predominantly the abuse of power by men, with women more likely to suffer as a result of corrupt practices, thus exacerbating gender inequalities (Transparency International 2014). By supporting companies with a strong anti-corruption stance, institutions such as EBRD are helping to reverse



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an endemic problem that threatens to undermine transition in multiple ways, not least in relation to progress on gender equality.

### **Positive indirect impacts (2): community-level inclusion targets men, women and children**

EBRD’s support for companies with social inclusion programmes that do not explicitly target gender issues similarly has a number of indirect and positive gendered outcomes. The agricultural holding company examined in this study devotes enormous efforts and resources towards its ‘social work’ programmes, whose purpose is both to reward the communities in which it operates and to ensure its future recruitment and retention. In some branches, such programmes cover school refurbishment, maintenance of wells, road construction, computer literacy classes, and comprehensive ‘social packages’ for employees (paid sick leave, free accommodation and meals, etc). The community cohesion fostered by these programmes will help to stem a range of gendered problems connected with the degradation of rural areas witnessed since the beginning of the post-Soviet period. The consequences of this include (among others) damaging levels of men’s out-migration, women’s turn to subsistence, and hazardous male alcohol consumption linked to marginalisation.

## Strategic implications and recommendations

Many of Ukraine's gender-related problems are rooted not only in its neo-traditionalist gender order, but in dysfunctional economic contexts (at work and in managing households), which encourage men and women to revert to traditional gender scripts. As such, formalising and normalising the economy have strong gendered benefits that should be recognised and encouraged. In addition, gender inclusion strategies need to be more broadly conceived, moving from a focus on women only to one on women, men and communities. A strategic focus on the following should be developed:

- **Investments:** Continue to tackle corruption by investing in partners committed to the anti-corruption agenda, thereby stemming the growth of gender inequality resulting from the abuse of patriarchal power by men.
- **Policy dialogue:** Work to develop and normalise the banking infrastructure, so that both businesses and

individuals seeking finance (loans, mortgages, etc) may do so without resorting to strategies where men work excessive hours and women face a 'second shift' alone.

- **Technical advice:** Encourage and facilitate the development of gender strategies targeting men's health problems (including stress, overwork, depression and anxiety). These have been slow to develop domestically, but will be better received within gender strategies than the promotion of aspirational gender norms that are easily externalised as 'Western'.
- **Internal capacity:** Recognise the 'gender and inclusion' potential in good practices of companies focusing on community development to support and build upon these – in more relational, gendered terms – to positively engage men alongside women and children.

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### Recommended citation

Walker, C. with Babenko, S. and Greig, A. (2019) *Masculinities and Transition in Ukraine: Country Brief*, Brighton: IDS


### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), which made this study possible through positive practical and material support. We would also like to express our sincere gratitude to the TaiwanBusiness EBRD TC Fund for financing this study.

Conclusions and opinions expressed in this brief and study are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or official positions of either IDS or EBRD.

This brief is based on a study on Ukraine under the EBRD-funded project 'Masculinities and Transition: Enduring Privilege?' available at <https://menandboys.ids.ac.uk/>

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ISBN: 978-1-78118-525-4



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