

Democratizing Journalistic Coverage of Ukraine's Economic Transition

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"Statistics testify that mainly women have gone to work in markets. They, deprived of their main work and salary, rushed to save their family flame. Perhaps it is natural, since a woman is first to react to confusion . . . Talking to women from this region during the [WIDTECH] seminar, I was convinced that the majority of them have not lost courage, they support reforms, they do not want to return to the Union, and showed not only entrepreneurial abilities but also true courage."

Ludmilla Nesterenko

WIDTECH workshop participant and host of UMREP radio program

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Although few expected that the economic transition to a market economy would be painless, the transition in Ukraine has been especially difficult. Now goods are available in greater variety, quantity, and quality, but the average person cannot afford them. Officially, unemployment is not very high, but many people hold jobs that entail neither work nor pay. The government pays family and pension benefits, but inflation has eroded their value to next to nothing. In contrast, some people in Ukraine have access to extraordinary amounts of money, and flaunt it—and organized crime is a growing threat.

Under these circumstances, average Ukrainian citizens are deeply cynical about the benefits of economic transition. To them, the privatization process seems to benefit a select few. Most people suspect that the politicians who advocate market reforms are guided more by personal than by public interest.

To respond to these perceptions, USAID has launched the Ukrainian Market Reform Education Project (UMREP). The project seeks to educate the public about the logic, mechanisms, and benefits of

market reform in order to encourage political support for reformers in the government.

In August 1997, the USAID Mission in Ukraine and USAID's Women in Development Office asked WIDTECH to review UMREP to identify ways in which an increased focus on Ukrainian women's contributions to the economy might improve the project's overall effectiveness.³ In October, to build awareness of women's economic activities and an ongoing capacity to report on them, WIDTECH trained journalists in the use of women's focus groups.

WIDTECH focused on three questions:

- **Is UMREP's public information reaching women? If not, why not?** Asking this question shifted attention from disseminating information to delivering it—that is, the investigation called into question whether putting information "out there" means that people receive it. It also challenged whether one-size-fits-all education for

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citizens may neglect particular segments of the population. If information fails to reach (most) women, then it misses half the population.

- **Does UMREP’s programming include success stories that feature women? If not, why not?** WIDTECH suggested that if definitions of “newsworthiness” or “success” direct the Ukrainian media’s attention to the most powerful in government or the wealthiest citizens, then the media will only rarely feature women. But if success extends to the ability of average citizens to work within a market economy to generate revenues that exceed expenses and to create new jobs, then women figure prominently. Further, it is information about such successes that offers hope to others that the economic transition may benefit them as well.
- **Are the media offering information that responds to women’s concerns? If not, why not?** In a newly democratic society, women and men rely on the media for information. Yet Ukrainian journalists tend to rely heavily on statements and releases from the government and from press clubs, which have long ignored the informational needs of the public and rarely mention women. In fact, however, journalists cannot answer the public’s questions without knowing what they are. WIDTECH recommended focus groups as one mechanism for listening to the public to identify their concerns.

INTRODUCING JOURNALISTS TO THEIR CUSTOMERS: THE FOCUS GROUP APPROACH

WIDTECH recommended focus group training to do the following:

- Raise awareness among journalists of the informational needs and interests of Ukrainian women.
- Introduce journalists to women’s roles and activities in the Ukrainian economy.
- Identify success stories featuring women contributing to the economic transition.

- Enhance journalists’ capacity to develop stories.
- Incorporate such stories into UMREP’s television, radio, or print media.

WIDTECH organized a focus group workshop in Lviv in October. During the training, journalist trainees learned to formulate effective questions, develop focus group guides, conduct focus groups, identify story topics, and feature real people and their words as a basis for reporting. At the beginning of the training, many journalists used a belligerent style of interviewing, one that might have been appropriate for confronting public officials or people caught in a lie, but would have intimidated ordinary people. By the time these journalists conducted their own focus groups, they had developed a more empathic yet objective style.

To prepare to run focus groups that would elicit information about women’s economic circumstances, participants worked in teams to develop focus group guides that asked about economics at the household level, including sources of household income, expenditures, and decision making within families. The participants then conducted eight focus groups—in Lviv, the town of Turka, and the small village of Ilenik nearby. With 8 to 10 in each group and six groups composed exclusively of women, workshop participants received information from and learned the perspective of more than 50 Ukrainian women.

One woman reported, “During the survey of the focus groups in Lviv, women proposed quite seriously a change—that is, to swap their places at markets for deputies’ seats in the [Parliament]. Women understand better the current problems and are willing to solve them as soon as possible. After such a proposal, the number of women in Parliament will definitely increase.”

THE WORKSHOP’S SUCCESSES

The workshop was well received and produced the following results:

- It focused journalists on the importance (and fun!) of listening to women to know their concerns and information needs, and it provided examples of how women are contributing to the bottom-up, person-by-person transition to a market economy.
- It generated story ideas relating to women in the economy. After the first focus group interviews, one radio and print journalist with at least 10 years of experience gushed that she was amazed by how much she had learned from the focus group participants, and said her head was filled with new story ideas. On the last day of the workshop, participants began writing actual stories. Thus far, there have been at least five stories about women's economic contributions published or broadcast as a direct result of the focus group workshop.

STORIES GENERATED BY THE WORKSHOP

- Immediately following the workshop, the senior journalist in the training did a radio piece on older women's proactive attitudes and business initiatives.
- A journalist from Chernovitsi wrote a success story about a woman executive for the UMREP *Privatization Courier*, which is sent to more than 725 Ukrainian newspapers for possible reprinting.
- A journalist for Kyiv's Vikna TV did a televised piece on the workshop.
- Outside of his UMREP job, a journalist did a story about the woman director of a sugar refinery joint venture for the television program "Agro World."

- It brought together a core group of journalists who have benefited from meeting one another and expressed interest in starting an association of women journalists.
- It shifted attention from stories delivered by government representatives to stories investigated and developed through contact with average citizens, and based on local incidents,

activities, and accomplishments. Typically, journalists attend official sessions at which a government spokesperson talks about government policies and prognostications. The workshop offered an alternative.

BENEFITS OF INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

Relying on such government sessions is problematic because policies on paper do not mean effective implementation, predictions and promises are only that, and the government's view of reality is often limited to the view from the top.

The advantages of investigative journalism are that, by digging, journalists have opportunities to check or verify the official view. Journalists and their readers often discover that the real, incremental, hopeful steps toward a publicly beneficial market economy are made by ordinary people—including many impressive women.

- It added another technique journalists can use—that is, focus groups—to break their reliance on government positions, press releases, and individual interviews.
- It opened workshop participants' eyes to the importance of listening to real people and to the possibility of developing stories or programs based on the concerns and accomplishments of average Ukrainians—particularly women.

WOMEN AND THE ECONOMIC TRANSITION

- Women tend to get information from friends and contacts, not from newspapers.
- Women support themselves creatively, including through work abroad, private lessons, kitchen gardens, and pooling extended family resources.
- Women encounter gender discrimination when they apply for employment.

- It contributed to improving the quality of reporting by
 - Demonstrating the need to report various perspectives on a topic, rather than relying on the position of one official or one entrepreneur, and to challenge information rather than accepting it as true;
 - Emphasizing the importance of featuring real people who have direct, personal experience relating to the issue reported;
 - Encouraging reporting about real business ventures, which are the building blocks of a free-market economy (although participants expressed concern that if they mention the name of a business more than once, readers will think the business paid to have the article written); and
 - Encouraging the use of direct quotations.
- It enhanced public understanding of the economic transition by reporting about the economic initiatives of the 54 percent of Ukrainians who are women.

The objective of the Market Reform Education Project is to educate the Ukrainian people about market reforms by responding to their needs for information, and reporting on progress toward a free-market system. WIDTECH's women's focus group training enhanced the UMREP approach while building new capacity among Ukrainian journalists.

SAMPLE SUCCESS STORIES

- One woman from Turka took initiative when she and her husband were both unemployed. Because they had a big orchard, she began to sell apples, pears and plums. Then they began to deal in cattle and deliver it to meat-packing plants. And that led to opening a shop. She has earned enough money to send her son to study at an institute and to hire workers. In her view, "Success!"
- A woman in the village of Ilynk saw an opportunity to supply basic goods for her neighbors and to make some money: "I saw there was one shop in the village that was situated not far from my place, and it was state-owned. And there were almost no goods on sale . . . I used to say to the saleswoman: Why don't you privatize it? So I asked my husband to find some money. First we had no money, so we leased it. And little by little we supplied goods. Now we have more goods at the shop."
- A mother started a business to help her son: "My son finished specialized high school and there was no work for him. He found some work in a neighboring village, but the buses stopped running, and a deep depression began . . . He wanted to start something of his own, but there was no money in the family. So I said to my son: 'Let's go trade.' . . . My son didn't join a gang, and he didn't steal. I gave him the job!"

WIDTECH supports innovative approaches to technical assistance and training that take into account women's roles and contributions and enhance the effectiveness of USAID's development assistance.

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