"Nothing about Us without Us": Sex Workers' Informal Political Practices in Ukraine

Dafna Rachok *PhD Student, Indiana University Bloomington*

Abstract: How do vulnerable populations engage with politics? And what does politics mean to them? Building on four months of ethnographic fieldwork and 15 semistructured interviews with sex workers in Kropyvnyts'kyi, Ukraine, I show how informal political practices are employed by marginalised groups like sex workers to promote their agenda of the normalisation of sex work. Examining sex workers' activism in Ukraine through empowerment strategies and resistance politics, I enquire about formal and informal political strategies that sex workers resort to, how these strategies are used, and whether informal political practices can lead to the community's empowerment. With a focus primarily on street sex workers who are engaged in community organisation, I show how a controversial topic such as sex can be utilised by sex workers to attract attention to their marginalised situation and politicise their activism. Complicating the discussion of politics and political participation by viewing it through the lens of feminist anthropology, this paper attempts to contribute to the discussion about women's empowerment and to expand the category of "political practice" and "political activism." This paper concludes that Kropyvnyts'kyi sex workers often resort to small-scale political tactics in order to probe the limits of political possibility.

Keywords: activism, community empowerment, informality, political participation, postsocialism, sex work, Ukraine

Résumé : Comment les populations vulnérables font-elles de la politique ? Et que signifie pour elles la politique ? En m'appuyant sur les résultats de quatre mois d'enquête de terrain et de quinze entrevues semi-structurées avec des travailleuses du sexe à Kropyvnyts'kyi, en Ukraine, je montre comment des groupes marginalisés de travailleuses du sexe recourent à des pratiques politiques informelles afin de promouvoir la normalisation du travail du sexe. J'étudie l'activisme des travailleuses du sexe en Ukraine à travers les stratégies d'autonomisation et les politiques de résistance, interrogeant les stratégies politiques formelles et informelles auxquelles recourent les travailleuses du sexe, la manière dont ces stratégies sont employées et la possibilité d'une autonomisation de la communauté par le biais de pratiques politiques informelles. En me focalisant principalement sur les travailleuses du sexe de rue engagées dans l'organisation communautaire, je montre comment un sujet controversé comme le sexe peut être mobilisé en pratique par les travailleuses du sexe pour attirer l'attention sur leur marginalisation et politiser leur activisme. Cet article complexifie le débat sur la politique et la participation politique en l'envisageant sous l'angle de l'anthropologie féministe, cherchant ainsi à contribuer aux discussions sur l'autonomisation des femmes et à élargir les catégories « pratique politique » et « activisme politique ». Il conclut que les travailleuses du sexe de Kropyvnyts'kyi emploient souvent des micro-tactiques politiques pour sonder les limites du possible politique.

Mots-clés : Activisme, autonomisation communautaire, informel, participation politique, post-socialisme, travail du sexe, Ukraine.

Setting the Scene

It is August 24, 2017, the Independence Day of Ukraine. Ukrainians usually celebrate this day by visiting friends or relatives, having large family meals, or attending free open-air concerts or other festivities, organised by local governments. However, despite the overall celebratory mood, two groups of protesters have gathered in Kyiv on Kontraktova Square, near the monument to Hryhorii Skovoroda, an eighteenth century philosopher and composer. This monument is a known meeting place and locals often agree to meet just *pod Skovorodoi*, under Skovoroda. Given that the philosopher's last name means "frying pan," locals, most probably, are aware of and enjoy this pun.

Both groups are women-only and both groups carry posters and banners with them. However, they came to Kontraktova Square with different and even opposing agendas. The first group is a radical feminist organisation that decided to organise a protest in support of the Nordic model. Pioneered by Sweden in 1999, the Nordic model criminalises paying for sex while "removing any sanctions against female sex workers as they are always considered victims" (Sanders, O'Neill and Pitcher 2009, 87). The second group consists of former sex workers from Kropyvnyts'kyi and Kryvyi Rih,[1] who decided to oppose the first group and to show up and have a small counter-protest. The sex workers who participated in my research

disapproved of the idea of implementing the Nordic model in Ukraine, fearing that criminalisation of clients would negatively affect their income and increase police presence, and that the clients, after being caught by the police, would not hesitate to retaliate against sex workers.

In Ukraine, sex work is considered an administrative offence. Article 181.1 of the Administrative Code of Ukraine specifies that "the activity of prostitution" is punishable by a warning or a fine. However, in Ukraine, it is a criminal offense to manage a brothel and to engage in *sutenerstvo* (procuring clients).[2] Articles 302 and 303 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine specify that these activities are punishable by a fine and/or imprisonment. Kropyvnyts'kyi and Kryvyi Rih sex workers claim that these articles preclude them from working together and hiring security, because both sex workers and security can be charged with *sutenerstvo* and/or managing a brothel. They want decriminalisation of sex work: to remove the above-mentioned articles from the Administrative and Criminal Codes.

Objecting to the idea of the Nordic model, sex workers thus decided to voice their opinion in the public space by unexpectedly intervening at the feminist demonstration and staging a small protest of their own. According to Ukrainian legislation, to organise a protest, you simply have to let the city/town/village administration know about it by email, post or telegram. Moreover, there is no established norm regarding how long beforehand one must notify the authorities. As a rule, the organisers rely on unspoken norms and their sense of how dangerous a protest can be. Unlike the group of sex workers, the radical feminist group did everything by the book and notified the authorities in advance. The sex workers, however, decided to forgo the rules. According to them, they did not have time to follow the procedure, as they had to come from other cities all the way to the capital.[3] Their red umbrellas – an international symbol of the movement for sex workers' rights – were very noticeable and bright. Along with the umbrellas, they had a banner saying *Spasite nas ot spasatelei* (Save us from the saviours), indicating their opposition to the salvationist rhetoric that was employed by the radical feminists who organised the protest in the first place.

Such counterprotests, interventions by sex workers in the public space, are what the media often write about to showcase sex workers' politics and political engagement. However, these gestures are not representative of sex workers' political activism in Ukraine. Such interventions into public space require resources that not everyone has readily available to them. Building on her extensive research on sex work and civic engagement in the US, political scientist Samantha Majic (2014) notes that the activities that marginalised groups participate in "contrast sharply with those that more privileged groups … might engage in". She further points to the issue of legitimacy. Those groups that already possess legitimacy in the eyes of the public can easily focus on more formal approaches to political participation and political activism; however, those who do not possess it need, first and foremost, to establish themselves as such. Thus, it is no surprise that "a significant portion of their political engagement may involve informal, community-based activities to establish themselves as legitimate members of society" (Majic 2014, 91). In other words, much of their time is dedicated to the practices of crafting a common consciousness or coagulate politics (Hanchard 2006); small-scale political practices or infrapolitics (Scott 1985; 1990); and everyday practices of resistance (Scott 1985; 1990).

Building on the vast literature on political practices of the oppressed, this paper enquires about informal political practices of Kropyvnyts'kyi sex workers. Complicating the discussion of politics and political participation, I attempt to contribute to the anthropological discussion of how marginalised groups and vulnerable populations such as sex workers participate in politics by expanding the concepts of political activism and political engagement. Adopting the lens of feminist anthropology, I argue that Kropyvnyts'kyi sex workers often engage actively in politics. I describe the tactics of coagulate-politics and infrapolitics that sex workers use to promote the normalisation and decriminalisation of sex work and to symbolically rebel against authorities.

Methodology and Positionality

This paper is an outcome of four months of fieldwork (May–August 2016) in the city of Kropyvnyts'kyi in Ukraine. My data are from my fieldnotes and from 15 in-depth interviews with current and former sex workers from Kropyvnyts'kyi and Kryvyi Rih. I did most of the observation on two highways at the edge of the city, where local sex workers usually stand during the day. At night they often group at a gas station nearby instead, since the highway is poorly lit, and standing there is both dangerous and impractical – clients can barely see them. My second observation site was the office of a small organisation founded by a couple of former sex workers that aims to unite sex workers in the country, establish links and friendships with similar organisations abroad, and influence both regional and national policies on sex work. Run by former and current sex workers, the organisation also does some outreach work on the highways, secures free gynaecological check-ups for sex workers, organises events to promote literacy about sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and, most importantly, helps sex workers by providing legal aid if they are arrested by the police.

I was introduced to my research participants by Nataliia,[4] one of the founders of the organisation and a former sex worker herself, who is highly respected by many local sex workers because of her more than decade-long activism for sex workers' rights. Knowing Nataliia greatly contributed to my being accepted by my interlocutors. I was also a young woman and a native speaker of Russian and Ukrainian, which facilitated my acceptance into the community. Still, I knew that it would be naïve of me to assume that I could blend in smoothly and become unnoticeable. Initially, I was excluded from the advice networks of sex workers: advice about hairstyles, clothes, manicure and other appearance- and relationship-related topics. Nevertheless, about a month into my fieldwork, my participants seemed to be at ease with my presence and incorporated me into their advice networks, assuming a motherly attitude toward me and constantly providing me with suggestions on how to dress, put on make-up, behave in a romantic relationship, and raise children. For instance, I was continually cautioned that I should be wary of leaving my partner for so long in another country while doing research, because of the way men are. Ironically, I also received conflicting relationship advice. Once I was told to "not hurry with the marriage"[5] and "to live for myself for a bit," because after marriage I would be swamped with household duties. However, in a few weeks the very same woman told me to "not wait too long" and not to postpone marriage, because as I get older, fewer men will want to marry me.

In general, it seemed that my interlocutors regarded me as a person from a younger generation, despite the fact that sometimes our age difference was insignificant. They often referred to me as *malaia* (a small one). Presumably, sex workers thought of me as belonging to a younger generation because of the fact that I was still a student at that time, did not have children, and did not watch TV, preferring instead to spend my free time on the internet. Thus, they often assigned me to the same generation as their children, regarding me as someone who was more tech-savvy but still needed to be guided and educated about life. In other words, the "sociological age"[6] that I was ascribed by my participants greatly facilitated my research. And it was this motherly attitude that sex workers adopted toward me that contributed to my acceptance and inclusion in the inner circle.

Informal Political Practices of the Oppressed

People's relations with authorities are often ambiguous and full of equivocation. It is rare that an open conflict is sparked, and the authorities are unequivocally challenged. Instead, quite often those who are not fully content with an existing state of affairs resort to more ambiguous actions. The question of what strategies malcontents choose and why, along with the question of what resistance is and how it is made possible, has long been on social scientists' minds. These questions have also been central for scholars studying the issues of power, social order, hegemony, dominance and subalternity (Ortner 1995; Scott 1985; 1990; Wedeen 1999).

Feminist scholars prominently engaged with the topic of subalternity and resistance, inquiring about how different vulnerable and oppressed groups might possibly harbour their own understanding of the conditions and situation that they are in, despite existing hegemonic ideas (Spivak 1988). This is in no way to suggest that oppressed groups are unreceptive or insusceptible to hegemony or dominant discourses – on the contrary, feminist scholars have acknowledged the inherently ambiguous position that oppressed groups are in. On one hand, they are subjected to indoctrination and intense exposure to hegemonic ideas; on the other, they at least seem not to internalise them fully. Still, when trying to express their discontent, they might struggle with finding a suitable language in which to express it; in the words of Gayatri Spivak, "[t]he subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak 1988, 308). To document and define this ambiguity of oppressed groups, feminist standpoint theory scholars, borrowing from DuBois (1996 [1903]), came up with the notion of "double vision" (Brooks 2007). This concept suggests that, as a rule, members of oppressed groups tend to cultivate a double consciousness – "a heightened awareness not only of their own lives but of the lives of the dominant group" as well (Brooks 2007, 63).

Being able to understand both the perspective of fellow oppressed and that of the oppressor, then, benefits the subaltern subjects when they start to express their discontents. Scott's (1990) notions of "public" and "hidden" transcripts are useful here. Given that "open interaction between subordinated and those who dominate," that is, "public transcript" (2), is often insufficient to understand the power dynamics and "the whole story about power relations" (2), Scott proposes to supplement it with the concept of a "hidden transcript" – a "discourse that takes place 'offstage,' beyond direct observation by powerholders" (4). Hidden transcript consists of "those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript" (4–5). Moreover, the oppressed tend to come up with certain practices that softly challenge the powerholders. Scott calls this "unobtrusive realm of political struggle" (183) infrapolitics – various forms of resistance that "dare not speak in their own name" (19), such as different activities that test the limits of acceptability such as poaching and

squatting. Previously, he termed some of these practices "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1985).

Hanchard (2006), drawing on Scott's affirmation of everyday resistance and politics from below, proposes to expand theorisations of quotidian politics. To do this, he comes up with the concept of "coagulate politics" (31). According to Hanchard, "coagulate politics" fit in between the level of micro and macro politics and "straddle the boundaries of micro- and macropolitics" (31). Coagulate politics, he continues, "take place within public spheres and work sites in full view of superordinates but are largely contingent upon the encounters between subaltern members, divided by the conditions of labor (agent and consumer) but united by a perceived commonality of subordination" (34). Hanchard's concept of coagulate politics is quite useful in considering the efforts that my participants invest in self-organisation and discursive normalisation of sex work, despite being marginalised and vulnerable beings who are forced to compete among themselves for clients.

In this paper, then, drawing on feminist standpoint theory, Scott's concepts of "everyday resistance," "infrapolitics" and "weapons of the weak," and Hanchard's idea of "coagulate politics," I will attempt to complicate the discussion about politics and to expand the categories of "political practice" and "political activism" by drawing on the practices that Kropyvnyts'kyi sex workers employ to address the need to decriminalise sex work and attract attention to their marginalised situation. Not surprisingly, following Hanchard (2006, 30), I will employ a "rather prosaic but nonetheless accurate definition of politics as the art of the possible". By politics, then, I will be referring to a variety of behaviours and activities, including community building, participating in local community organisations, and HIV awareness work.

Informal Political Practices and Post/Socialism

Post-Soviet space is quite famous for varieties of resistance practices that were devised by different groups both during the Soviet Union and after its collapse. Consider, for instance, the practice of *samizdat*, "a specific textual culture" (Forsyth 2018, 350) that was maintained through the "production and circulation of texts outside of official institutional frameworks" (Forsyth 2018, 350). Similarly, there was also *magnitizdat*, that is, "the unofficial practice of (re-) recording uncensored music or speech onto cassette tapes" (Taylor 2018, 342) and distributing them through one's informal networks. Before *magnitizdat* there was *rock on bones* – the unofficial practice of reproducing officially forbidden music from LPs on X-ray film. Finally, a few years back in Russia there appeared the idea of a *monstration* – a public demonstration that is disguised as a public performance. *Monstrations* are known for deliberately nonsensical slogans such as "raccoons are people too" and "donate blood, save a vampire." Of course, post-Soviet resistance practices are not limited to the ones mentioned here. *Samizdat*, *magnitizdat*, *rock on bones*, and *monstrations* are only some better-known tokens of human ingenuity.

Analysing informal political practices of late socialism, Yurchak (2006) notes that it was common for people to create groups and milieus of those who shared similar values and to refer to them as *svoi* (us). However, he cautions, "*svoi* was not a concept within a binary opposition between 'us' (*svoi*, common people) and 'them' (the state). This public, *svoi*, related to authoritative discourse neither supporting nor opposing it. Its location vis-à-vis that discourse was deterritorialised" (131). Rather, Yurchak concludes, they were *vnye* – outside – of this discourse. Considering formal politics and authoritative discourse "uninteresting," they simply tuned out of it for the most part, though obediently performing what was necessary and what was demanded from them at the level of the form. Likewise, late socialism was also notorious for its ironic aesthetics and for *stiob* – a particular form of irony that was based on "such a degree of overidentification with the object, person, or idea at which this *stiob* was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two" (249–250). Not presented directly as political by those adhering to them, these various practices, nevertheless, carried political messages and can be analysed as a form of infrapolitics – not challenging the status quo directly and openly, they were rather testing the ground and mocking the status quo while maintaining a serious face.

Writing about women's movements in independent Ukraine, Marian Rubchak (2011, 16) suggests that Ukrainian women of a younger generation "appropriate the post-Soviet space" for their purposes and "respond to the new challenges by recoding older images of quintessential womanhood". However, their political tactics are often less equivocal and more direct than the tactics employed during Soviet times. For instance, Rubchak mentions the protest group FEMEN, which made use of "scandalous street theater" (17) to attract attention to their agenda.[7] Always protesting topless and writing slogans on their bare breasts, FEMEN quickly became a recognizable phenomenon. Emily Channell-Justice (2017) researched left and feminist activism in Ukraine during the Euromaidan – mass political protests that unfolded in the late autumn 2013, sparked by the decision of the president not to sign the Association Agreement between

Ukraine and the EU.[8] She notes that Ukrainian feminists occupy a marginal role in the society (Channell-Justice 2017). However, participating in a mass movement such as Euromaidan, feminists started to "vernacularize" their goals in order to "contribute to the broader protests" (718). Studying women's activism during Euromaidan, Sarah Phillips notes that even though many women activists found the general atmosphere to be nationalistic and exclusionary, they still "found ways to raise questions of emancipation and equality" (Phillips 2014, 421). Though recognising the limitations of framing feminist claims within patriarchal and nationalistic discourses, Philips (2014) shows that it was a successful strategy for Ukrainian feminists: they managed to legitimise their presence and contribute to the movement while not alienating less feminist friendly protesters.

"Nothing about Us without Us"

If Ukrainian feminists resort to disguising their feminist goals by vernacularising and couching them in a more familiar patriarchal discourse, Kropyvnyts'kyi sex workers often employ political practices that disguise their political meaning.

Enquiring about the ways sex workers interact with authorities and police officers, one can very well see how current informal political practices are inspired by those of late socialism: sex workers do not want to spark open conflict with the authorities. Instead, they often resort to infrapolitics and small-scale practices of resistance to convey their discontent. For instance, with regard to the police, one of the main techniques of everyday resistance is talking back to them. According to Nataliia, a former sex worker and one of the founders of the organisation for sex workers' rights in Kropyvnyts'kyi, police officers are not used to sex workers talking back to them, refusing to sign incriminating protocols, and demanding that they call a lawyer. Thus, police officers are taken aback by such behaviour and do not always know how to react. But frequent interactions with sex workers who were reluctant to sign the protocols and were indeed calling the organisation's hotline to ask for a lawyer to be dispatched taught police officers to be wary of some sex workers and to stay away from them.

Nina, who has been in sex work for a few years already, recounted how around a year ago she was getting off a minibus on a highway to start her working day, when her mother suddenly called her on a cell. Getting off a bus, with a phone near her ear and closing the bus door, Nina noticed a police car not far away from the bus. According to Nina, at the moment she was preparing for yet another encounter with the police. However, to her own astonishment, the car left. Being one of those sex workers who was often talking back to the officers and calling the organisation's hotline at the smallest sign of a trouble, Nina hypothesised that the police decided that she was on the phone with Nataliia (whom many officers strongly disliked for her activism regarding sex workers' rights) or somebody else from the organisation and, not ready to deal with Nina's resistance, left. Nina's hypothesis was confirmed some time after this incident, when the police officers suddenly appeared on the highway again and managed to catch sex workers off guard, so they had no time to call anyone. Police officers jokingly asked Nina whom she was talking to on the phone that day, and when she told them that it was her mother, they replied with irony and suspicion that they did not know Nataliia had already become her mother.

It is also important to consider some infrapolitical tactics that sex workers employ when interacting with the police. An unwritten code of rules exists among sex workers, and the code specifies that when talking to the police or taken to the police station, one has to remain strong and show no weakness. If the code is broken by one of them, sex workers will not hesitate to violently enforce the rules and punish the "offender." During one of my visits to the highway, Nelia, who is often referred to by others as a veteran of sex work because of her more than decade-long experience, told me that not long before my arrival, police officers took all sex workers to the police station. Everybody was acting cool except one girl, who was crying and begging the officers to let her go because she had a child at home. The police did not answer her plea and instead held the sex workers at the station longer than usual. Because of this, the girl who cried and begged was beaten by other sex workers after everyone was released from the station.

Studying thieves' subculture in post-Soviet Russia, Caroline Humphrey (2002, 104–105) mentions that thieves had their own set of rules and that it was important for the subculture that members adhere to the rules and live "according to the understandings" (*zhit' po poniatiyam*). This is somewhat similar to the situation with sex workers: there is an unwritten set of rules and if you want to be a member of this (however ad hoc) community, you had better follow them. One of the rules is not to beg the police to let you go and not to cry, because if you beg them for a favour, you confirm their higher status and acknowledge their power. Acknowledging their power is disapproved of, since in Russian (and Ukrainian), the police are often referred to either as *menty* or as *musora* – both are slang words, and both have negative connotations.

The word *ment* allegedly comes from the criminal slang of the early twentieth century; it came to Ukrainian and Russian through Polish criminal slang, where it was

used to refer to prison guards (Zhiganets 1999). However, even if this etymology is true, the meaning of "prison guard" was lost long ago, and now *ment* functions as a self-explanatory derogatory term to denote police officers. The meaning of the latter word, *musor*, literally means garbage, trash. However, the word originated in the 1920s in Moscow, when the Moscow Criminal Investigation Department was created. The name of this institution in Russian was Moskovskii Ugolovnyi Sysk; thus the abbreviation MUS and the word *musor*. Still, it is very doubtful that people who use the word *musor* today know its etymology. Even if the similarity between the words "police officer" and "garbage" was incidental at first, I suggest that, for those who use the word now, this pun is important per se not only because it conveys disdain and contempt for the police but also for the state, on whose behalf the police operate.

This discursive practice of expressing contempt to the police by using derogatory slang words to refer to them is close to another informal political practice popular in the Soviet and post-Soviet times, namely to the practice of *materit'sya* – using obscene language for the purposes of resistance and/or self-expression. Anastasia Shekshnya (2018, 354) mentions that *mat*, obscene language, is also frequently used to ensure "the effectiveness of communication" and that *mat* is "instrumental in crisis communication". Explaining the significance of obscene language for the culture and politics of socialism and postsocialism, she emphasises that *mat* "can play an important role in politics precisely since it can act as an instrument of bonding, becoming the language of 'insiders' but also adding veracity and authenticity to what the speaker is saying" (Sheksnya 2018, 357). Discursive practices of *mat* and of using *musor/ment* to refer to the police are similar because they reclaim "linguistic or cultural patterns widely rejected as vulgar" (Zusi 2018, 338) and violate established norms and rules; by pretending to be rather cultural than political, these practices disguise their political message. As Peter Zusi (2018, 336) succinctly argues, "Resistance does not simply confront the structures of power head on, but may seek paths or detours around those structures, often seeping into the cracks and fissures in the barriers, or inhabiting spaces that have been deemed outside of or irrelevant to the shape of the discourse".

Among other political practices, it seems important to mention the discursive normalisation of sex work. This practice goes hand in hand with other small-scale, or rather coagulate political practices of community-building, raising HIV awareness, and advocating sex workers' rights. Overall, sex workers' grassroots efforts (however small-scale and insignificant at first glance) aim to challenge existing power relations by engaging with the political through everyday resistance practices. They attempt to repoliticise the issue of sex work from the ground up.

Sex work is, as a rule, an already politicised issue. In case of Ukraine, sex work is still known under the term "prostitution" and discussions of it are attached to the questions of religion (especially of so-called "traditional" – meaning Christian – values), and thus sex work is framed with references to morality, sin, and the need to salvage the women in prostitution. Alternatively, sex work in Ukrainian formal political discourse is often framed through the concept of "European values" and a linear narrative of Ukraine's progress from the Soviet past to the bright European/Western future. According to this narrative, sex work has to be legalised. When sex workers oppose these positions, they attempt to challenge both narratives. As quoted in the title of the article, according to sex workers, ideally, politicians and journalists should not discuss the matter of sex work without prior consultation with the members of the community, hence "nothing about us without us."

It might come as a surprise to some that sex workers oppose legalisation; however, this has its inner logic. The way it is discussed in Ukraine, legalisation presupposes that sex workers will register as private entrepreneurs and pay a certain monthly tax. Since for some it is rather a part-time activity, they are reluctant to register as entrepreneurs (thus disclosing their identity and profession) to pay taxes. Ironically, though, many Ukrainian sex workers seem to want decriminalisation and express sympathies for New Zealand's model of decriminalisation, even though New Zealand's sex workers pay taxes.[9] This seems to be a discrepancy in the demands of Ukrainian sex workers: on one hand, as I show further, they want sex work to be treated as just another service job; on the other, they seem reluctant to pay taxes. This reluctance to pay taxes, however, is not unique to sex workers: Ukrainian society in general is characterised by high levels of economic informality, including various ways of not paying taxes (Polese 2014; 2016). The attitude to taxes in Ukraine can be best explained by the idea proposed by Williams and Martínez (2014, 11): "[t]he greater the social expenditure per capita . . . the higher the level of tax morality". Given high inequality and low social expenditures in Ukraine, it is no surprise that people are disinclined to pay taxes, because they feel they do not receive anything from the state in return (Polese 2014; Williams and Martínez 2014).

When talking about their experience of sex work, Ukrainian sex workers usually attempt to frame sex work first and foremost as work – as a means to earn

money – and to stress that their working identities and activities are drastically different from what they do and who they are in private. For instance, Nataliia, when talking to the media about her experience of sex work and her activism, often reiterates the phrases "We do not sell our bodies, we offer services" and "Singers work with their throats, dancers work with their legs, we work with … other parts of our bodies." Possibly, the last statement is intended to balance on the verge of obscene and thus to add humour and work as an ice-breaker, humanising sex workers and rendering them less strange and exotic in the eyes of the public. Similarly, Arina, when I asked her about the purpose of their organisation, told me that they aim to "make sex work a usual work … like a hairdresser's job … Or a manicurist. Or a salesman. Well, we want it to be treated as job and to put an end to discrimination." Based on other interviews and conversations as well, it seems that comparing sex work with other service or entertainment jobs is a political strategy for sex workers: they insist that what they do is offering services and that there is no need to discriminate against this kind of job.

Another important political strategy is raising HIV awareness. According to Asya, it has been an eye-opener for her to learn that many people in her native city think that HIV can be transmitted by sharing a cup or a spoon with an infected person. Shocked by public ignorance with regard to such questions, she told me that she plans to go to the local department of education and ask that she and her fellow colleagues be allowed to organise public lectures in schools and colleges to counter popular myths and misunderstandings about such diseases as HIV, hepatitis, and HPV. "For instance, in my school, where my children go, people trust me. So, if Aunt Asya comes and explains everything …" She did not feel the need to finish the sentence; the way she was talking about it conveyed quite a degree of certainty that school officials trust her and that she will face no obstacles in organising these talks in the school her children go to. However, in her public activities, Asya does not ever mention that she was a sex worker herself and now works in the organisation that advocates sex workers' rights. Instead, she tells outsiders that she works for a human rights organisation. In this way, Asya safeguards her children and herself from being targeted with negative stereotypes and from being bullied and establishes herself as a legitimate subject in the eyes of the public. Working in the sphere of human rights is considered to be prestigious and important, unlike working for the organisation advocating sex workers' rights.

According to Asya, it is not only sex workers who need to be educated about STI but the general public as well. However, a lot of sex workers' political activism is focused first and foremost on educating their fellow sex workers. This happens predominantly due to two reasons. First, because of the nature of their work, sex workers are at a greater risk of having STI if they do not know how to protect themselves. Second, they are easier to reach, and they seem genuinely interested in learning how to protect themselves. Educational initiatives, such as raising HIV awareness, negotiating with friendly gynaecologists for check-ups, and organising lectures by gynaecologists about reproductive health, all serve to make sex workers more knowledgeable about the risks they face, raise awareness about activism and to recruit new members. As Hanchard (2006, 30) noted, coagulate politics often involves people "who are in conflict and competition over goods, services and resources". Sex workers' activism thus aims to reduce competition among sex workers and to help them develop some common ground, a shared standpoint that can be, in case of need, transformed into an explicit political position that can be easily communicated to the public.

Building and strengthening sex workers' community is the primary aim for many. They believe that their strength lies partly in numbers and that by showing how many people are in sex work now, they will be able to push for at least minor changes, such as repealing article 181.1 of the Administrative Code, the one that defines punishment for the "activity of prostitution." However, one of the main challenges that these activists face is that many sex workers are reluctant to actively participate and especially to talk to media because of the fear of being identified. One of the founders of the organisation, Inna, faced such a situation around a year ago. After a sex workers' protest, she gave a short commentary about her experience of sex work to journalists. In the interview, Inna left her face uncovered, assuming the journalist would do as expected and anonymise her identity by blurring her face. The journalist failed to do so, however, and her identity was revealed. The story gained unexpectedly wide coverage, and many neighbours and relatives stopped talking to her after seeing it on TV, ostracising Inna and her family. To make the matter worse, Inna's daughter came from school one day and told her that "everybody in the school says that my mum is a prostitute." This fear of being identified and exposed is one of the reasons sex workers rarely resort to more formal political practices such as organising protests, demonstrations and openly lobbying for one's cause, preferring instead to operate informally.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I demonstrate that though the scope of political practices and techniques available to sex workers is quite limited, they nevertheless manage to be politically active. However, their political activism exists on another scale than the usual political activism. Sex workers mainly resort to infrapolitics, represented by practices of everyday resistance such as talking back to the police, employing derogatory terms when referring to police officers, and expressing contempt for the police by refusing to symbolically acknowledge their power and the inherently asymmetrical relationship between sex workers and police officers. These infrapolitical practices are supplemented by practices of coagulate politics: community building and raising HIV awareness. In general, sex workers' political practices aim to probe what is possible and to widen the limits of what is deemed possible.

One question that seems to arise out of the discussion of informal politics is whether constant use of informal political practices can lead to community empowerment; I would suggest that it does not. First, it should be mentioned that while in the last few decades the concept of empowerment has become trendy, this popularity has led to its blurriness and elasticity (Chris Clark in McLaughlin 2016, 63). Thus, empowerment can involve not only liberatory but also regulatory measures. Moreover, it can happen that while pretending to be liberatory, empowerment also "operate[s] as a form of social control" (Martin C. Calder quoted in McLaughlin 2016, 62), since the power of those in need of empowerment and those ready to assist with it is unequal. In this way, empowerment can be used to justify powerholders' preferred methods of amending a situation. Second, scholars working in non-Western contexts point to the potential ethnocentrism and rigidity of this concept. They argue that empowerment, being a Western idea, is unsuitable for non-Western contexts (Bar-On 1999; Graham 1999).

Finally, as Laura Maria Agustín (2007, 158) highlights, empowerment is "a word used by those who view themselves as fighters for social justice" and "empower is a transitive verb whose subject is the person doing the empowering, a technology aimed at 'constituting active and participatory citizens' and simultaneously linking subjects with their own subjection" (158). She suggests that empowerment seeks to produce normal legitimate rights-bearing citizens who are able to be involved with the realm of formal politics. Her discussion unveils the taken-for-granted normality and legitimacy of an "empowered" political subject and the fact that some oppressed groups or individuals might never become such subjects and might not have a possibility of becoming empowered. However, this is bad news only if one subscribes to a narrow definition of politics and political practice.

Feminist anthropologists have long argued for a more inclusive definition of politics, emphasising that politics has not only been the realm of men but at the same time acknowledging that women universally have less political influence (Ortner 1972; Rosaldo 1980; Strathern 2016). Following in their footsteps, it is our task, then, not only to document existing political strategies that women use but also, to quote from Michelle Rosaldo, to link "the particulars of women's lives, activities, and goals to inequalities wherever they exist" (Rosaldo 1980, 417).

Dafna Rachok, *PhD Student and Associate Instructor, Department of Anthropology, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, USA. Email: darachok@iu.edu.*

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank three anonymous reviewers who helped to make this manuscript better for their extensive feedback on and enthusiasm for this publication. I also extend my gratitude to Sonja Luehrmann for her patience and editorial advice. Finally, I would like to thank the Department of Anthropology at the University of Alberta for a Bryan/Gruhn Research Award that aided me in carrying out this research and the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies for their generous Stasiuk Master's Research Fellowship, which allowed me to finish my MA thesis, which was the precursor to this article.

Notes

1 Kropyvnyts'kyi (Kirovohrad before 2016) is a city and the capital of the Kirovohrad region in Central Ukraine. Kryvyi Rih is a city in the Dnipropetrovs'k region, around 100 km from Kropyvnyts'kyi. Both heavily industrial cities with dozens of plants under the USSR, they have faced continuous deindustrialisation since the 1990s.

2 In Ukrainian and Russian, *sutenerstvo* means procuring clients for sex workers in exchange for a percentage of their earnings. Though an analogous term in English appears to have racial connotations, the reader should keep in mind that Ukraine is not an ethnically diverse country and that in Ukrainian the word *sutener* does not elicit racial connotations, though it has gendered connotations (*sutener* is usually assumed to be male) and is often used in a derogatory way.

3 When it comes to organising demonstrations, Ukrainian legislation is quite lenient. There thus were no repercussions for not notifying the authorities.

4 Some of the names were changed as requested by the participants.

5 These quotations are reconstructed from my field notes, because I did not record informal conversations. However,

I strove to write them down in the notes as soon as possible and in as much detail as possible.

6 I am grateful to Marko Zivkovic for this suggestion and this particular wording.

7 First and foremost, FEMEN are known because of their firm antiprostitution stance and their protests against sex tourism to Ukraine. Arguing in favour of the Nordic model and not being sex workers themselves, FEMEN did not secure a lot of sympathy from local sex workers.

8 The protests faded in spring 2014, after then President Viktor Yanukovych fled the country and new elections were held.

9 Sex workers in New Zealand do not have to undergo any specific registration: they are considered either self-employed or employees. If they are self-employed, they have to report their earnings at the end of the year by filing an individual tax return.

References

Agustín, Laura María. 2007. *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry*. London: Zed Books.

Bar-On, Arnon. 1999. "Social Work and the 'Missionary Zeal to Whip the Heathen along the Path of Righteousness.'" *The British Journal of Social Work* 29(1): 5–26. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.bjsw.a011440.

Brooks, Abigail. 2007. "Feminist Standpoint Epistemology: Building Knowledge and Empowerment through Women's Lived Experience." In *Feminist Research Practice*, edited by S. N. Hesse-Biber and P. L. Leavy, 53–82. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Channell-Justice, Emily S. 2017. "'We're Not Just Sandwiches': Europe, Nation, and Feminist (Im)possibilities on Ukraine's Maidan." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42(3): 717–741. https://doi.org/10.1086/689639.

Du Bois, W. E. B. 1996 [1903]. *The Souls of Black Folk.* New York: Modern Library.

Forsyth, Jillian. 2018. "Samizdat (USSR)." In *The Global Encyclopedia of Informality*, edited by A. Ledeneva, 350–353. London: UCL Press.

Graham, Mekada. J. 1999. "The African-Centred Worldview: Developing a Paradigm for Social Work." *British Journal of Social Work* 29(2): 251–267. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.bjsw.a011445.

Hanchard, Michael George. 2006. *Party/Politics: Horizons in Black Political Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Humphrey, Caroline. 2002. *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies after Socialism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Majic, Samantha. 2014. "Participation despite the Odds: Examining Sex Workers' Political Engagement." *New Political Science* 36(1): 76–95. https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2013.859901.

McLaughlin, Kenneth. 2016. *Empowerment: A Critique*. London: Routledge.

Ortner, Sherry B. 1972. "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" *Feminist Studies* 1(2): 5–31. https://doi.org/10.2307/3177638.

———. 1995. "Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37(1): 173– 193. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0010417500019587.

Phillips, Sarah D. 2014. "The Women's Squad in Ukraine's Protests: Feminism, Nationalism, and Militarism on the Maidan." *American Ethnologist* 41(3): 414–426. https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12093.

Polese, Abel. 2014. "Informal Payments in Ukrainian Hospitals: On the Boundary between Informal Payments, Gifts, and Bribes." *Anthropological Forum* 24(4): 381–395. https://doi.org/10.1080/00664677.2014.953445.

———. 2016. *Limits of a Post-Soviet State: How Informality Replaces, Renegotiates, and Reshapes Governance in Post-Soviet Ukraine*. Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag.

Rosaldo, Michelle Z. 1980. "The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-Cultural Understanding." *Signs* 5(3): 389–417. https://doi.org/10.1086/493727.

Rubchak, Marian J. 2011. *Mapping Difference: The Many Faces of Women in Contemporary Ukraine*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Sanders, Teela, Maggie O'Neill, and Jane Pitcher. 2009. *Prostitution: Sex Work, Policy and Politics*. London: Sage.

Scott, James C. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

———. 1990. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Sheksnya, Anastasia. 2018. "Materit'sya." In *The Global Encyclopedia of Informality*, edited by A. Ledeneva, 353–357. London: UCL Press.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, 271–313. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Strathern, Marilyn. 2016. *Before and after Gender: Sexual Mythologies of Everyday Life*. Chicago: Hau Books.

Taylor, James. 2018. "Magnitizdat." In *The Global Encyclopedia of Informality*, edited by A. Ledeneva, 342–346. London: UCL Press.

Wedeen, Lisa. 1999. *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Williams, Colin, and Álvaro Martínez. 2014. "Explaining Cross-National Variations in Tax Morality in the European Union: An Exploratory Analysis." *Studies of Transition States and Societies* 6(1): 5–18.

Yurchak, Alexei. 2006. *Everything Was Forever, Until it Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Zhiganets, Fima. 1999. *Zhemchuzhiny bosiatskoi rechi* [Pearls of the Tramp's Speech]. Rostov-na-Donu: Feniks.

Zusi, Peter. 2018. "The Unlocking Power of Non-conformity: Cultural Resistance vs Political Opposition." In *The Global Encyclopedia of Informality*, edited by A. Ledeneva, 336–339. London: UCL Press.