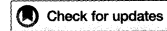


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Women of Maidan, directed by Olha Onyshko. Produced by Olha Onyshko (US) and Petro Didula (Ukraine). Ukrainian and Russian with English subtitles. Contact: Olha Onyshko, oliafilm@gmail.com. Webpage: <https://www.womenofmaidan.com>. Shown at the ASN 2017 World Convention.

The ethnographic film *Women of Maidan* by Olha Onyshko focuses on women's participation in the Maidan protests that erupted in Ukraine in November 2013. The protests began when the government backtracked on a decision to sign a free trade association agreement with the European Union, and they continued in response to police brutality unleashed against the protesters. The film seeks to increase the visibility of women in our understanding of the Maidan, and to show the importance of female contributions to the overall success of this grassroots mobilization. It includes snapshot interviews that give women an opportunity to voice reasons for their engagement. It also contains footage of female volunteer efforts, mapping various tasks undertaken by the Maidan women. Overall, the film highlights the strength, resourcefulness, and resilience of the women who joined the protests. It tells the story of unity, equality, and empowerment in the face of hardships. Although I have some issues with the film's point of view, I want to stress at the outset, first, how difficult it is to make independent films, second, that *Women of Maidan* is clearly a labor of love, and, third, Olha Onyshko is a wonderful filmmaker – consider, for example, her *Three Stories of Galicia* (shown at ASN 2011).

One prominent theme in the film is the solidarity among female and male protesters as they unite, albeit in different positions, to fight for a better future. There are no disagreements as to who should do what; women and men are shown to be naturally driven to certain tasks and responsibilities on Maidan, with women gravitating toward care and service and men leaning toward defense and barricades. We see women handing out tea, food and clothing, providing medical assistance, sorting out donations, cleaning the facilities occupied by protestors, singing, and creating art for those who came out to protest against injustice. The range of tasks performed by women is wide, yet we note that most belong to spheres traditionally seen as “women's responsibility.”

At the same time, there is a sense that men and women's differentiated engagement carries equal value for the overall success of the protests. The filmmaker emphasizes the unifying power of Maidan, where people speak with one voice, work toward the same goals, and share a similar vision of a future where the rule of law and justice prevail. However, the actual enactment of gender roles was more complex, contradictory, and contingent on the prevailing dynamics and ideologies than is suggested in the film. For instance, numerous posters called on women to help out at the kitchen or to do cleaning tasks and encouraged men to sign up and stand at the barricades. Women were excluded from the barricades and male-dominated spaces because of their “innate inaptitude” for fighting and defense. The self-defense units formed for the Maidan protests and the

decision-making within them were heavily masculinized and militarized; women were marginalized and their engagement was limited.

Given these dynamics, to what extent did the circulation of gender-charged representations of women as “*berehynias*” (female care-givers) and men as “revolutionaries” shape the processes of gender-differentiated participation? To what degree was the enactment of certain models of femininity centering on care and motherhood affected by the decision to restrict women’s access barricades and ban female fighting? To what level were gender differences reinforced by the male-driven decision-making on Maidan? These are all important questions – but none are addressed in the film. The film shows us some of the women’s contributions on Maidan, but tells us little about the power relations between men and women, the ways gender hierarchies were implicated in the grassroots mobilization, or the degree to which women were involved in decision-making, not just helping, on Maidan.

Another theme is the unity among women themselves, and again I have a few issues with the film’s focus. As we listen to the testimonies of women, we discover that many articulate the reasons for engagement in strikingly similar terms, talking of their maternal responsibility to “protest the beating of children;” to “give a future to their children,” to act as “mothers against violence.” The female-only initiatives depicted in the film draw heavily on traditional images of motherhood, with women organizing a march on Maidan, holding signs reading “mother” or “mothers of Ukraine,” and carrying icons of Saint Mary. Women’s self-representation as “mothers” and their readiness to erase other facets of identity show that many claim access to the public space and legitimize their presence using maternalist discourses. Unfortunately, the film does not critically engage with these representations, giving the general impression that any incidence of women’s activism on Maidan, or engagement in any capacity, amounts to women’s empowerment.

But to what extent can the appeals to motherhood be seen as claims for equality of participation and female empowerment? More tellingly, where are the women who do not fit the hegemonic narratives of women as mothers and care-givers? Numerous feminist initiatives on Maidan attempted to challenge the traditional understanding of women’s responsibilities and reimagine female roles differently. Multiple women’s brigades were established to resist discrimination against women and generate new narratives about nation-building and women’s role in it. Surprisingly, those women who did not subscribe to the hegemonic ideals and aspirations of the protesters do not appear in the film, and their contributions remain unacknowledged and unexplored. These representational omissions shape the ways we see the protests and construct a narrative that is too simplistic to capture the Maidan dynamics.

Generally speaking, the film increases the visibility of women on Maidan and emphasizes the hard work they did to sustain the protests. As women’s contributions in social movements often remain invisible and unacknowledged, the film represents an opportunity to listen to women’s stories and explore their engagement. However, the choice of the filmmaker to represent Maidan as a unifying space and the tendency to disregard difference and disagreements masks the complexities of Maidan’s struggles, reduces the variety of female voices and perspectives, and ultimately limits the lessons we can take away from it.

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