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UKRAINIAN GENDERMUSEUM:
INNOVATIONS IN GENDER EDUCATION
IN TIMES OF WAR AND BEYOND

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UKRAINIAN GENDERMUSEUM: INNOVATIONS IN GENDER EDUCATION IN TIMES OF WAR AND BEYOND

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Abstract

This field note shares the work of Gendermuseum (Museum of Women's and Gender History Museum), the only interactive non-governmental museum in Ukraine and post-soviet Eastern Europe. We trace its antecedents and feminist adult education aims and practices. Framed through the lens of feminist adult education, we discuss how it uses exhibitions and objects as creative learning tools and spaces. In particular, we focus on an exhibition titled HerStory of the War and how this gives visibility to the different/additional impact of war on women and, equally importantly, women's critical, albeit often overlooked, contributions to war efforts.

Résumé

Cette note de terrain présente le travail du Gendermuseum (Museum of Women's and Gender History Museum), le seul musée interactif en Ukraine et dans les pays postsoviétiques de l'Europe de l'Est n'étant pas géré par le gouvernement. Nous traçons ses antécédents et ses buts et pratiques pour l'éducation féministe des adultes. À travers la lentille de l'éducation féministe des adultes, nous discutons des façons dont le musée utilise ses expositions et ses objets comme outils et espaces d'apprentissage créatif. Nous examinons de près une exposition intitulée « HerStory of the War » et explorons comment elle rend visible les répercussions différentes ou additionnelles de la guerre sur les femmes. D'une importance égale, l'exposition met aussi en évidence les contributions essentielles et souvent oubliées des femmes aux efforts de guerre.

Keywords

Gendermuseum, HerStory, feminist adult education, war, exhibitions

Mots clés

Gendermuseum, HerStory, éducation féministe des adultes, guerre, expositions

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The aim of this field note is to discuss some of the feminist adult education work of Gender-museum (Museum of Women's and Gender History), the only interactive non-governmental museum in Ukraine and post-soviet Eastern Europe. Gendermuseum was founded in 2008–2009 in Kharkiv with the support of the Ukrainian Women's Fund, the Programme of Equal Opportunities and Women's Rights in Ukraine, the Department for Family and Youth Affairs of the Kharkiv Regional State Administration, and the Global Fund for Women. Gendermuseum also partners with both Ukrainian and other international gender and feminist non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including the International Association of Women's Museums, to fulfil our educative-activist goals of not just preserving but also popularizing women's histories in Ukraine. Through a variety of activities, including public programming, exhibitions, and online work, Gendermuseum fills a critical knowledge gap and provides a unique opportunity to learn about the little-known, excluded lives and experiences of women and their contributions to Ukrainian culture and society in times of both peace and war.

Ukrainian Context and Gendermuseum

As Bohachevsky-Chomiak (1982) has reminded us, women historically in Ukraine, like others across the globe, have struggled with political and social systems that relegated them to subordinate positions. Feminists and the women's movement have fought for visibility, recognition, "liberty, equal opportunity, and the right to individual autonomy" (p. 18). Similar to other countries, Ukraine has acute problems of gender inequity and inequality. Issues and challenges range from the under-representation of women at all levels of decision making to limited access to financial and other types of resources; from receiving lower salaries and pensions than men to experiencing high levels of domestic violence. There are also persistent stereotypes about the roles of women (inferior) and men (superior) that have pervaded public consciousness and continue to impede gender justice and democracy. According to a study by BBC Media Action (2023), gender stereotypes and prejudices persist at all levels and in all sectors of Ukrainian society. Yet there is no state programming for gender education, and it is left to NGOs, which are often able to provide only sporadic training programs or events—and of course right now can provide almost nothing. Through the Gendermuseum, however, gender education is being provided much more consistently and creatively. We provide examples of this work shortly.

There were two catalysts to the creation of the Gendermuseum. In 2008, a group of activists who were part of a Kharkiv NGO began to explore initiatives in Sweden to improve gender equality. Then Poland began to create "immersive museums," described by Jin et al. (2024) as virtual environments of experiential learning, which include "authentic tasks [that] play a crucial role in 'inviting' users into an active process of sense-making" (p. 1). Based on these, Gendermuseum developed a number of immersive experiences that are both virtual and physical. The museum is also activist. By this we mean it specifically places its emphasis on engaging in activities that promote gender justice. Gender education is, of course, the central aim and goal of all the activities. The museum's target audiences include everyone from schoolteachers, university professors, civil servants, government officials, and NGOs to the employed and unemployed, Ukrainian and foreign researchers, and social and gender justice activists.

The museum works with both women and men because the education of both is critical to uprooting the embedded patriarchal beliefs in Ukraine. The focus on men is about how

their authorities of knowledge and action have fostered mindsets of superiority. This practice responds to feminist adult educators Ostrouch-Kaminska and Vieira's (2015) call to make masculinizing practices that encode gender behaviour visible. Once it is visible, it can be challenged and unlearned. Museum staff see this work as identity and agency work because it encourages a new historical knowledge of the past and also an empowered and possible future (Manicom & Walters, 2012).

Over the past 15 years, Gendermuseum has gone through different stages of organizational development. It began as a "museum in a suitcase," with exhibits moving from place to place, until it became established as a museum in a private flat for three years through the support of Spanish and other feminists across the globe. Today, Gendermuseum is a full-fledged museum and the educational arm of the Centre for Gender Culture. The museum is unique because its collection of objects was donated by thousands of people, mostly women, from across Ukraine and the world. "Teaching" objects include artworks, books, children's toys, posters, pictures, and personal items. These objects are critical, as feminist adult educator Gough (2020) reminded us, because they tell us stories and tangibly represent memories and life experiences. In addition to providing objects, many people also provided organizational and financial support and continue to offer inspiring ideas for exhibitions and programming in a spirit of cooperation.

Feminist Adult Education Objectives and Activities

The work of the museum is grounded in feminist adult education and its aim for a more gender just and healthy world. As characterized by Manicom and Walters (2012), feminist adult education is a facilitated process "of collective learning and knowledge production that enable[s] and provoke[s] self and social transformation toward the realization of contextually determined feminist goals" (p. 3).

Feminist adult education in Gendermuseum is a political process of teaching and learning that includes methods and strategies that begin with women's lives and their experiences of oppression, silencing, and marginalization (Clover et al, 2020). The museum is also grounded in the ideas of Turkish feminist adult educators Yayina Hazirlayanlar, Merral Akkent, and Nehir Kovar (2019), who speak of feminist adult education as

a gender-based tool that accepts multiple identity characteristics of the individual and aims at individual and social transformation. This tool provides an opportunity to discuss multiple oppression and discrimination processes, to make them visible, to enable learners and [educators] to be aware of authoritarian [patriarchal] tendencies, to emphasize the emotional dimension of learning, [and] to gain skills to produce and apply alternatives (p. 3).

Feminist adult education is also, as alluded to above, about making the abstract concrete and visible, which means making visible things that have been embedded as common sense or simply "the way things are" when, as Clover (2021) notes, they are nothing of the sort. "The way things are" is socially constructed, and when things are built, they are built for a purpose. Just what that purpose is, who benefits from that purpose, and its impact are central to new knowledge creation. Returning to Gough's ideas about objects, another way to think about the museum's work is what Griffin (2017) called "usable past-making." That is the creative

mobilization of material forms of “histories from below”—those that have been marginalized or forgotten—to inform a radical democratic politics of the present for the future.

Through extensive research, a diversity of educational activities, and immersive physical and online exhibitions, Gendermuseum seeks to answer questions related to gender, feminism, and women’s and gendered histories in the Ukraine but also beyond, given gender discrimination is never simply a local or national issue. The museum offers a space to learn about the social processes that construct and manipulate gender in society and their impacts, as well as the roles women have played in the struggle for their rights in Ukraine and beyond.

Exhibitions tell stories that can be read and experienced; objects also tell stories and can be read and experienced. Like the exhibition described by Clover (2021), Gendermuseum uses exhibitions and objects to teach how gender is manufactured and to experience that manufacturing. For example, young male visitors try on high-heeled shoes to understand the challenge of walking in them and discuss the damage they have done to women’s feet over the decades. Not only women wear high heels, so these objects can also be a way to discuss homophobia and LGBTQ rights in the Ukraine. As Toren (2024) noted, “The war in Ukraine, it’s not just a war between Russia and Ukraine . . . It’s a war between homophobia and LGBT rights.” Visitors can also carry “women’s grocery bags,” which raises the question of why and how they have come to be associated with women in Ukraine when men also shop and eat. This may seem deceptively simple, but it is a term that is used constantly, embedded in consciousness, and seldom if ever interrogated. Gendermuseum is a space for dialogue, to question the assumptions that maintain the “social and gender inequalities that affect women” and to instill a different consciousness of gender and of equality as a universal value (e.g., Valls-Carol, 2014, p. 909). Staff know that their educational efforts work when they hear comments from visitors such as “I had never thought about the things that were discussed during the tour before.”

The physical museum is complemented by interactive online learning and virtual exhibitions. Titles of the online exhibitions include *Something about Gender* (gendermuseum.com/something-about-gender/), *Women in Defense of Peace and Security* (gendermuseum.com/women-in-defense-of-peace-and-security/), and *About Sexism* (gendermuseum.com/expositions/about-sexism/). The online exhibitions have become especially important since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, particularly the exhibition titled *HerStory of the War* (gendermuseum.com/herstory-of-the-war/).

HerStory of the War

On February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. This invasion has affected the lives of all Ukrainians, without exception, within and beyond the country’s borders. It has divided people’s lives into “before” and “after” the war. Like all wars, this one has affected women and girls disproportionately. A study by BBC Media Action (2023) showed, for example, the increased pressure on Ukrainian women who have found themselves as sole heads of household and carers for children. The report went on to say that “women generally feel supported to participate in the war in whatever way they wish, such as by joining the military or volunteering, and in whether they choose to leave or stay in Ukraine.” Yet conservative gender attitudes are evident, and women are still seen as “berehynia,” or guardians of the home. Women are understood to be “either taking the children and fleeing or remaining to lead the household—while men are portrayed as fearless defenders of the country.” In other

words, what women do is seen as having less value and thus is given less respect than what men do, even though many women are part of the armed struggle. The study suggested that “showcasing women contributing to the war effort in roles traditionally dominated by men, and demonstrating leadership, resourcefulness and decision-making, can help counter narratives which risk entrenching gender stereotypes.” These counter-narratives are at the heart of Gendermuseum. Through *HerStory*, the museum has reached out to women to tell their stories of how the war has invaded and shaped their experiences. Many women have responded and shared their diaries, photos, drawings, poems, chronicles, narratives, and stories. More than 100 written and oral stories have been gathered to date, with the support of the Ukrainian Women’s Fund, in an anthology in both Ukrainian and English (see <https://gendermuseum.com/herstory-of-the-war/anthology-of-war/>). Each participant decided the form of her participation in *HerStory*. The contributions come from women of diverse ages and parts of Ukraine but are united by one wish: Victory for Ukraine and peace for the future.

At the beginning of the invasion, peace activists from different countries appealed to their governments not to provide Ukraine or Russia with weapons. However, through projects like *HerStory*, people from around the world have learned the depth and impact of this cruel, unjust war that has destroyed buildings, livelihoods, and lives. As the stories show, many, from mothers to teenagers to the elderly, have nowhere to go and are finding it difficult to cope with the reality. Many have fled to Poland, Germany, Romania, Austria, and Italy. But they still do not feel safe, as this quotation from journalist Anna Gin’s contribution, “I Love You Mum” (gendermuseum.com/i-love-you-mom/), shows:

I confess, this feeling was constantly changing. Fear, despair, faith in the victory. Pride for our fearless fighters, joy that the enemy is running out of patience and ammunition. Then again, helplessness and despair. The feeling that we have been abandoned. And again faith. In waves.

Natalia Chermoshentseva, author and civil activist in gender education, shares how utterly unimaginable this situation is in a story titled “We are like one big heart” (gendermuseum.com/we-are-like-one-big-heart/):

Those who were not under occupation will not be able to fully understand those who were there. Those who have become IDPs [internally displaced persons] will not be able to fully understand those who stayed to live through the horrors of war in their homes. Those who have a place to return to will not be able to fully understand those who have lost everything . . . We may not really be able to fully understand, but we feel everything as one big heart.

This exhibition is also a memorial, as noted in one of the stories, to those “who cannot tell their own stories . . . They could have studied, worked, created, given birth and raised children, traveled, loved their families, their country . . . They could have lived! But they were killed.” Gendermuseum has curated *HerStory* in museums in Austria, Germany, and Taiwan to ensure the war’s impact on women is seen and heard more broadly.

140th Anniversary of the Ukrainian Women’s Movement

The year 2024 marked the 140th anniversary of the Ukrainian women’s movement. The idea to celebrate this significant time amidst the chaos of war and for the first time in the years

of independence came from the Gendermuseum. The struggle for an ordinary human life, which every person deserves regardless of gender, is ongoing. But what Ukrainian women have already achieved encourages us to go further, to keep going despite the difficulties that delay progress on this path. A central project of the 2024 anniversary was an exhibition called *The Incredible* (gendermuseum.com/nejmovirni/). In both physical and online formats, this exhibition illustrates for audiences around the world the roles played by Ukrainian women as public, cultural, scientific, and military figures; the history of the Ukrainian women's movement (1884–2024); and how the women and the movement have influenced and shaped the development of not just Ukrainian society, but also European and world history. The exhibition features 74 artworks by contemporary Ukrainian artists, 10 of which are dedicated to the heroines who fought and fight for freedom and independence for Ukraine.

Gendermuseum fills a need in the Ukraine to learn about feminist issues, concerns, and framings, and the roles women have played in the past and today, especially in times of war. Its work responds to what we see as a growing public interest in women's rights and their experiences of war and conflict. Every year Gendermuseum expands its teaching and learning activities, reaching audiences in the Ukraine but also worldwide through online work. Staff at the museum continue, despite the war, to network and collaborate with activists in the women's movement and in women's and gender museums. Through dialogue, immersion, storytelling, and co-creation they are making women's lives visible and knowable. They believe that if we can see it, we can learn to change it.

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