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In the Home and On the Streets:

Belarusian Women and Women's Organizations, 2001-06

During the March 2006 events, it was estimated that at least half of those demonstrating on the Square were women. Female participants included those of all ages. Together with the men, they remained in the tent city despite the terrible cold, organized a kitchen there, and smuggled food and warm clothing to other protesters. For many women it was the first time in which they had participated in protests; others were experienced supporters of the democratic movement. During the crackdown, hundreds were insulted, abused, imprisoned, fired from jobs, and expelled from universities.

But during those dramatic days, the majority of Belarusian women remained silent and passive. Most women in Belarus do not yet openly oppose the regime. For many it is because they represent one of the least protected social groups, are paid less than men and are frequently discriminated against, and make up the majority of occupations with the lowest salaries, including health care, education, and culture.

Often the primary parent, sole provider or head of household, women value the stability and minimum living standards guaranteed by Łukašenka. It should not be surprising that public opinion polls show that many core supporters of the regime are women, especially those who are older, less educated and rural dwellers.

Nevertheless, there are a number of pro-democratic women leaders in civil society. One opposition political party, Nadzieja (Hope), is led by a woman. In Belarus' third sector, women head up the Executive Bureau of the Assembly of Belarusian Pro-Democratic NGOs, Belarusian Association of Journalists, and Belarusian Students' Association, as well as important human rights groups, NGO resource centers, and minority organizations. Yet women's organizations per se are scarce and weak. In a survey of 678 registered NGOs conducted in January-February 2006, only 17 national, regional or local organizations indicated that working with women was their core activity and were carry-

ing out one or more women's programs. Of the 204 members of the Assembly of Pro-Democratic NGOs (including both registered NGOs and informal groups), which were re-registered in 2004, only 27 organizations (13 percent) work with women. And this figure also includes the regional branches of national women's organizations.

Since 2001, the number and type of women's initiatives have significantly decreased due to the regime's policy of repressing all independent organizations and activities. Nadzieja, which at one time claimed to be the largest political party in Belarus, has, for example, lost most of its membership and regional structures. Many local women's NGOs disappeared after failing to pass a re-registration process imposed by the regime in 1999, or had their registration taken away due to their independent behavior. Others ceased their activities because of pressure from local authorities, especially after the 2001 presidential elections. In Smarhon, for example, practically all of the women's initiatives which existed in 2000-01 have been destroyed.

Women activists are easy targets for the regime because of the current job contract system. Since the state is the

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country's largest employer, workers are forced to sign annual job contracts which can easily be terminated following activities considered to be dangerous by the regime. Women are especially vulnerable to this pressure because they tend to work more in professions controlled by the state, such as schools and hospitals. The results have been devastating. In 2001, it was usually possible to gather 200 to 300 women for conferences on women's or general socio-political issues in the country's regional centers. But today, most women are scared to participate in any independent event, including educational seminars or even informal meetings. The regime's strategy of "divide and conquer" has meant that many promising women's projects—from social assistance to international exchanges—have been blocked. To limit the threat of independent efforts, the state tends to permit only those projects supported by weak and apolitical women's NGOs.

While independent women's organizations are struggling for survival, the state-supported and controlled Belarusian Union of Women reports that it has 170,000 members and more than 3,000 local branches (<http://belunionofwomen.at.tut.by>). A typical Soviet-style mass organization, the Union implements programs within the bounds of the state's social, political and economic policies. The Union and other ephemeral "voluntary organizations" serve the interests of the regime and foster the illusion of the participation of ordinary women in public life.

In such difficult conditions, the women's organizations that remain active are trying to figure out how to reach out to broader circles of the female population and motivate women to become more civically active. Sociological data indicates that women in Belarus are more concerned with daily quality of life problems and rarely concentrate on gender equality. In focus groups, conducted in January 2006 in different regions, women made it clear that they are especially worried about low incomes, unemployment, poor healthcare, hous-

ing problems, spousal alcoholism, self-realization challenges, and a lack of information (<http://widm.iatp.by/widm/index.phtml>). These problems are similar to those facing the rest of the population, and women's NGOs need to decide whether to focus on specific gender issues (equality, discrimination, domestic violence, reproductive health, etc.) or to try to activate women around major social and political challenges. On these issues, the four largest pro-democratic national women's organizations take different approaches.

In 2006, the Belarusian Organization of Working Women (BOWW) celebrated its 10th anniversary. BOWW emerged from Belarus' independent trade union movement of the 1990s; today it is one of the largest and most influential women's NGOs. It includes over 300 active and about 2,000 associate members, has a network of 16 active regional structures and publishes one national and eight regional bulletins. Despite all the difficulties caused by the authorities, BOWW appears to be successful in its mission, which is to assist women in the realization of their civic initiatives.

BOWW encourages its local leaders to come up with their own activi-

ties. For example, an ecological safety program was developed after several local branches raised concerns about the quality of local drinking water and suggested that BOWW should address this problem. BOWW is actively involved in researching and gathering information on women's issues. The Central Office sees its main role as helping local activists to become leaders and providing them with needed information, materials and training. The organization's bulletin, *Women's Care*, plays an important role in the BOWW network. The publication's content includes information about BOWW members, programs, and achievements; methodological and analytical articles on issues which BOWW addresses; and general educational materials. The bulletin also helps BOWW to promote itself and reach out to women who are not members.

BOWW's flagship programs center on developing associations of homeowners and fighting the job contract system. Associations of homeowners, allowed under Belarusian law, provide some possibilities for promoting self-governance at the grassroots level, cultivating independent thinking and activities, and liberating homeowners from



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Union of Poles of Belarus activists protest against the UPB buildings confiscation by the authorities. Andželika Borys (in the center) is a leader of the Polish minority.

their total dependency on local authorities. The job contract system is one of the regime's most powerful tools to impose control and repress independent initiatives. Both of BOWW's programs appeal to women. Females are usually heads of households and therefore are most aware of the everyday economic and other shortcomings of the state communal system, under which they have no decision making authority. This system can be quite different with active homeowners' associations. At the same time, women are often the first, most vulnerable and greatest number of victims of the job contract system. Knowing that it cannot take on these major challenges by itself, BOWW often initiates and enters into coalitions with other organizations. Thus, BOWW works to activate women by addressing issues of concern to different social groups and aims to change certain fundamental elements of the current system, while still devoting some attention to some specific women's issues, such as domestic violence.

The Women's Independent Democratic Movement (WIDM) focuses more on developing and training women political leaders. It was, for example, active in preparing women candidates for the 2004 parliamentary elections. Six months prior to the 2006 presidential elections, the Movement conducted political training seminars for about 100 women. WIDM also organized roundtables on the gender-related aspects of election campaigns for women candidates and their teams, as well as for journalists, many of whom are women. WIDM also focuses on working with businesswomen and helping them to develop small businesses, promoting gender equality, and fostering women's political participation. In May 2004, for example, it organized the first Forum of Belarusian Businesswomen. WIDM is run by a very professional Minsk-based team which is able to attract financial resources from foreign donors, organize educational seminars and topical roundtables, and produce quality reports on gender issues. On a positive note, it has



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During the March 2006 events, female participants organized a kitchen at the tent town, smuggled food and warm clothing to other protesters.

clearly defined target groups and designs its programs to focus on these categories of women. But the organization is limited by its heavy focus on gender issues, which remain incomprehensible or not a priority for the majority of Belarusian women, who are struggling with quality of life issues on a daily basis. This misguided focus makes it difficult for WIDM to reach out to broader circles of women. Soon after the March 2006 crackdown, WIDM published a special issue of its newsletter *We are Women* featuring different women participants in the demonstrations and offering a women's point of view on the events. The print run of this very interesting special issue was confiscated by the authorities, but an electronic version is available online (<http://widm.iatp.by/widm/index.phtml?page=7501&l=e>).

The Belarusian Women's League (BWL), which originated as the women's wing of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party-Narodnaja Hramada in 2002-03, mainly organizes educational seminars and exhibitions dedicated to Stalinist crimes in Belarus and the role of Belarusian women in the struggle against the Soviet regime. The BWL is the most political of the four nation-

al women's organizations, but does not appear to have well-developed structures. In years past, the BWL had taken part in voter mobilization efforts, but in a post-election interview its leader noted that in the 2006 campaign there was no separate women's political initiative. Despite this shortcoming, there were many new female faces on the Square after the election.

The Belarusian Association of Young Christian Women (BAYCW) is an organization which focuses mainly on social work with women. It was founded as the national chapter of the World Movement of Young Christian Women, registered in 1996, and re-registered in 1999. Today, the BAYCW has about 100 active members and a broad network of volunteers. The BAYCW's current projects include: "La Strada Belarus: Preventing Trafficking in Central and Eastern Europe," a Belarusian-Swedish exchange program for women leaders, "HIV/AIDS Education among Belarusian Youth," and "Early Detection of Breast Cancer." Avoiding any political activities, the BAYCW is well-known in the regions and has made an impact by developing independent women leaders. In collaboration with BOWW, the

Association has organized educational events for women on reproductive health, human trafficking, and domestic violence.

These organizations, which employ different strategies in working with women, have one thing in common – each is too small to have a real impact on women and the social, political and economic situation in the country. Like the political opposition, they are not only fighting with the regime, but also find it very difficult to work together. Personal ambitions, conflicts and competition have trumped cooperation and common goals, seriously weakening the women's movement. Only in 2006, 15 years after independence, did leading organizations come together to create a Women's Network. The Network was established before the March presidential election with the goal to educate and mobilize women voters, research women's issues, and introduce them as a part of the electoral platform of the United Democratic Forces. During the campaign, the Network proved to be timely and effective. But after the election, it seems to have lost its focus and has failed to define new goals for further cooperation or agree on the future responsibilities of its partners. As is true for the democratic forces in general, it is crucial for women's organizations to remain united and continue working together if they expect to have any real impact and the possibility of altering the situation in the country.

In this respect, discussions with women activists and representatives of women's organizations have highlighted the following ideas and suggestions for future work in this field. In "Europe's last dictatorship," it is important to understand that not all women are ready to actively participate in civil society. For many, to attend a NGO meeting or to sign a petition is an act of courage and a form of civic resistance. Women's organizations therefore must diversify their programs in order to reach out to as many women as possible. But at the same time, they should be realis-

tic about how many women are ready to participate in various forms of protest, including demonstrations. Every program should include a component which will help women participants to overcome their fear of the regime and local authorities.

At the same time, there is a need for more programs which require active problem solving rather than only the passive acceptance of some type of assistance. Programs which only provide women with free legal aid or collect signatures for petitions tend to cultivate the idea that somebody else will solve their problems. Experts report that women participating in such programs rarely appreciate the assistance they receive for free, often require additional help, and, if their problems were not resolved, often express their dissatisfaction and frustration with the organizations trying to help them, not the regime that is the primary cause of the problem. It is also hard to link such programs to larger social, political or economic issues in the country. Therefore, programs should be aimed at helping women to identify the real source of problems, encouraging them to take the initiative into their own hands, and providing them with the necessary training and support mechanisms to address issues.

In order to become stronger, more sustainable and have a greater impact, it is crucial that women's organizations develop women leaders at the local level. These women leaders better understand local problems and more effectively play the role of opinion makers in their communities, but they also often have "tunnel vision," the lack of a firm understanding of the scope and essence of problems, the "big picture." The role of national women's organizations should be to provide local activists with the information they need, teach them how to think strategically, and network them with other leaders dealing with similar problems. Practical legal education is also crucial for working with women activists. Women join different initiatives more willingly when they

know that what they are advocating for or taking part in falls within Belarusian law. Such education also complicates the life of the authorities, especially those at the local level, who find it harder to ignore or impede the work of women activists who understand and act within their rights and appeal to existing laws and regulations.

Over the years, experience has shown that women's organizations must employ active and creative methods in their work. The regime is strong, experienced, well-prepared and effective at suppressing traditional forms of protest. But the regime's reaction is delayed and less confident when it is surprised by innovative actions. In spring 2006, young people were able to successfully organize a number of flash mobs before the authorities figured out how to counter them. In the fall, a group of women, the wives of "New Life" Church members on a hunger strike for religious freedom, unexpectedly visited the Ministry of Health and the Minsk Municipal Administration to demand immediate action to resolve the conflict. The responsible officials panicked and could find no better course of action other than to run away from their offices in the face of the desperate but peaceful protesters. The women remained in the Administration Building until security guards kicked them out, which was captured and reported on by the independent media. The day before, "New Life" Church members and their supporters organized a non-stop stream of telephone calls to state agencies involved in the conflict, requesting updates on the situation regarding the legal standing of the Church's building. Such absolutely legal, but unusual, methods demoralized and practically paralyzed the work of a number of state agencies, as well as resonated in the capital's citizenry.

Despite all the impediments and repression, a number of women's organizations have managed to survive and continue their work. They have adjusted to worsening conditions and found new ways to connect with ordinary women.

A new generation of female civil society leaders has emerged since 2001, played a leading role during the 2006 election related events, and is working for a better future. The wives of disappeared opponents of the regime – Iryna Krasouskaja and Sviatlana Zavadzkaja – have become international symbols of the fight for justice and truth in the name of their missing husbands and the entire Belarusian democratic movement. Inna Kulej, a well-known NGO activist, stood side by side with her husband, Alaksandr Milinkievič, throughout his presidential campaign. In response to the post-election crackdown, she founded and heads up the Committee in Defense of the Repressed “Solidarity,” which has assisted hundreds of women and men who have suffered for their political convictions at the hands of the regime. Iryna Kazulina has become an effective advocate for another former presidential can-

didate, her husband Alaksandr Kazulin, who is serving a long prison sentence for protesting against the falsified election results in 2006.

The women who took part in the March 2006 demonstrations had differing motivations, but each of them made a conscious choice to call for greater freedom. What is striking about those who were interviewed afterwards is that these women believe normal life can only begin after the situation in the country changes. Other surveys indicate that this view is also shared by a majority of the women in Belarus. But those who took to the streets chose to fight for more democracy and a better future, while the majority decided to stay home and tacitly support the status quo. Women leaders and women’s organizations must continue inspiring more women around the country to be active so that real change will be possible.