



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

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Young Women at Risk: Sexuality at a Time of Transition in Ukraine

Topic of research

My research focuses on describing and assessing the micro-level (family, peers, school, workplace, community environment) and macro-level (economic, social, political) cultural contexts of young women's lives and the identification of and analysis of the impact of social, economic and cultural factors on the health risk behavior (particularly sexual risk) of young women in Uzhhorod, Ukraine.

Relevance and contribution to the field

This research and the findings resulting from this research are relevant to both the field of anthropology and to policy. First, the study will provide an ethnographic description of life of young women (age 18-28) living in a small city in Ukraine which will add to the growing anthropological literature on Ukraine as well as to the topical literature on young women's sexuality. Second, because of its applied anthropological focus, this study is directed at gaining valid knowledge in an effort to meet a recognized need and help in the solution of human problems, in this case, the improvement of the health and social status of young women. Finally, the information collected will be shared with government leaders, practitioners, directors of women's and health NGO's both in Uzhhorod and in other Ukrainian cities (especially Kyiv) to inform them of the situation

of young women in Uzhhorod and to assist them in the development of appropriate public health, economic and social policy focusing on young women.

Approach and research methodology including a list of research sites

The first part of this research project utilized qualitative anthropological methods to begin to become familiar with the cultural contexts of young women's lives in Uzhhorod. The four months of IREX-sponsored research were spent conducting a review of archival materials, participant observation, social mapping exercises, key informant interviews and group interviews. This time period was also used to settle into and become familiar with life in Uzhhorod.

Archival materials: I subscribed to several newspaper publications that focused on the current economic and political system in Ukraine and on topics of women, health, or social issues. These newspapers included both local Uzhhorod newspapers (*Uzhhorod, RIO, Sribna Zemlia, Novyna Zakarpattya*) and national Ukrainian newspapers and journals (*Vechirnyj Kyiv, Den-The Day, Postup, Zdorovja Zhinka na Ukraini*). I also obtained privileges at both the University Library and the City Library. The university library located at vul. Kapitulna 9, next door to the Greek-Catholic Church on the hill and at the local city public library located in the passage between Teatralna Ploshcha and vul. Voloshyna. The library facilities in Uzhhorod are limited and the card catalogs I have encountered are still in handwritten form. It is a good source for general background information on topics related to Uzhhorod and the Zakarpattia region. I have also reviewed materials in the Social Work department (located at vul. Kapitulna in the Law Faculty building across from the Uzhhorod Castle) and in the Institute for Public Administration and Regional Development located at the Economics Faculty.

I have also had the opportunity to meet with representatives from the Oblasna (Regional) and City Government departments focusing on Youth and Family Issues and the Social Services for Youth departments who have provided me with publications, reports and statistical data and information on services available for young women. In addition, I traveled to the city of Lviv to meet with representatives and obtain information from the Women-to-Women Center which is involved in developing programs focused on empowering women in Ukraine and preventing the trafficking of women from Ukraine.

Participant observation and social mapping: Each day in the field can be considered participant observation since I am becoming familiar with the day-to-day activities of young women in the city. I have spent time at the university, in bars and cafes, in parks, in shops and at the bazaar and have attended activities (KVN comedy hours, sporting activities, special programs) where young people gather and have been able to observe the behavior of young women and men. I asked several of the young women whom I met through the university to sit with me and draw me a map of Uzhhorod and describe the city, its neighborhoods, educational and business institutions and places where young women gather and spend time. I was also able to conduct walking tours of the city with some of the young women during which I have been showed the location of educational institutions, university dormitories and the popular nightclubs and gathering

places in the city (Ekipage, Armageddon, Acropolis). Participation in these types of activities has introduced me to various groups of young women and allowed young women in the city to become familiar with me and my project. Also, I have gained access to young women whom I have approached to participate in group and individual interviews.

Key informant interviews: During the first four months of my research, I met with and conducted key informant interviews with individuals in Uzhhorod involved in establishing policy for youth and women and individuals either working on projects focused on women and health or who could provide access to different groups of young women (students, working women, unemployed women, economically and socially disadvantaged women) needed for both the interview stage and survey stage of my research. Key informant interviews were conducted at the following sites:

1. Oblasna (Regional) Administration:
 - a. Upravlinya Spravy Simyi ta Molodi (Administration of Family and Youth Issues)
 - b. Social Services for Youth Department
2. City Unemployment Services
3. University of Uzhhorod Social Work department
4. Women's Reproductive Health Center at the Oblast Hospital
5. "New Family" Charitable Organization for Disadvantaged and Orphaned Youth
6. Coalition for the Prevention of Domestic Violence (NGO)

In addition, key informant interviews were conducted with a variety of individuals in the city including teachers from the local school system involved in developing a healthy lifestyle curriculum, gynecologists from the city women's clinic, and with representatives from the University student center.

Group interviews: During the last month of my IREX-sponsored research, I was able to start to conduct group interviews with young women, primarily students at the university. Faculty members at the university helped to organize groups of students. Since these group interviews were conducted at the beginning of my research, they were still exploratory in nature and were based on freelist exercises and discussion about the major issues and major health issues facing young women in Uzhhorod today. The young women were very open and the group sessions tended to run about 2-3 hours with many of the young women wanting to arrange meetings on an individual basis to discuss their personal experiences.

The remaining ten months of my research will focus on conducting in-depth guided interviews with young women representing a cross-section of women in Uzhhorod (students, working women, unemployed women, economically and socially disadvantaged women, young single mothers and/or divorced women) and the administration of a structured, survey instrument which will be developed based on information obtained from the observation and interview data.

Summary of research findings and preliminary conclusions

My research findings to date are very preliminary since I still have ten months of research to conduct. To date, I have found that the major issue facing young women is the inability to realize themselves and lack of opportunities for economic independence. Financial constraints seem to be at the root of many of the problems mentioned by young women. There is a strong reliance on family support and social networks for gaining entry into university and for finding employment. Young women indicate that it is difficult for them to find employment and that there is a level of discrimination against young women since employers do not want to hire young women assuming that they will marry, have children and go on maternity leave for three years.

I have noticed that young women are very concerned about their exterior appearance and image. Much time and money are spent on clothing and beauty services. Many young women dress in a provocative manner with short skirts, transparent and low-cut blouses and dresses, and high heels, even if just meeting friends for coffee. I have noted that there still exists a sexist attitude towards women. Men seem to be interested in the exterior appearance of a woman instead of focusing on her education and talents and respecting her for who she is. Some of the women I have interviewed have also noted that there is a general tendency for men to treat women in a disrespectful manner. Men believe that women should stay home and raise children and not strive to occupy high-level positions in business or politics. As noted by one young woman, *"Most married women whom I know are underappreciated and humiliated by men. Young, unmarried women must deal with many men treating them as a body and exploiting them. In order to achieve something in life, the most practical way is to sleep with men who have money and who can assist you. In a way, this is a woman's strength (positive attribute) but it is not correct."* Other young women have also indicated that it is difficult for them to develop an individual identity and many lack confidence in their abilities, and have low self-esteem.

Regarding health, there is a lack of prevention activities. As noted by one young woman, *"Ukrainians are not used to spending money on their health needs"* and *"are more concerned with making money for food"* and will often not attend to their health problems until it has reached a critical stage. Most of the young women I spoke with do not visit a gynecologist unless there is a problem.

Finally, a major issue facing young people that I have noted from observation and discussions is the lack of clubs and activities to occupy their time and fulfill their interests and needs. When asked what they do in their free time, most young people say they spend time on the streets, in cafes and bars, public parks and disco/night clubs. The schools and university do not offer any special-interest clubs or sports clubs due to a lack of appropriate sporting facilities and equipment. The easy access to alcohol (I have watched children as young as 11-12 purchase alcohol) and availability of drugs (marijuana, ecstasy) pose a big risk for young people.

Suggestions for future research agendas and Recommendations for the U.S. Policy community

In my opinion, Ukraine is in serious need of research in all areas of education, health and social services.

Some suggestions for future research agendas and recommendations for the U.S. policy community include the access to and utilization of health care services and health care reform; alcohol and drug use by youth; and employment practices/discrimination in hiring. One important topic for research should be in the area of mental health services. As a result of the difficult economic situation and lack of social service programs, many citizens of Ukraine (men, women, youth, senior citizens) are suffering from mental health problems or are victims of domestic violence. Although programs in psychology and social work have been started in Uzhhorod, there is a need to further develop these programs and train more individuals who can assist with the mental health needs of the people. In addition, the people themselves need to get beyond the stigma of requesting help for mental health problems. These areas are also important for the U.S. policy community.