

Bilkis: A Ukrainian Feminist Organization

written by Yana Dotsenko, Tanya Vynska, Dan La Botz | March 27, 2025



Two members of the Ukrainian feminist organization Bilkis, Tania Vynska and Yana Dotsenko, were in New York for the 69th session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW69), the world's largest conference on women, that took place at UN Headquarters from March 10 to 21, 2025. The conference was focused on a review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted in 1995. You can find here an official statement on the situation of women in Ukraine posted on the CSW69 website.

The Bilkis logo is the vagina dentata or toothed vagina associated with a Ukrainian mythic figure ...



Tania and Yana had also come to meet feminists from other countries and to network with other NGOs and donors. Dan La Botz of *New Politics* took advantage of their visit to learn about their organization.

NP - Thanks for making the time to talk with me so that *New Politics* readers can learn about your organization and about the situation of women in Ukraine. Why did you originally found Bilkis?

Yana -We founded Bilkis in Kharkiv in 2019 because we didn't have any project or group like Bilkis

at that time. There were some feminist groups, but we didn't resonate with them, because they didn't have any left point of view in their agenda. We really wanted to create a group that would change social ideas about gender.

NP - What were those left ideas that you thought it important to have in a feminist group?

Yana - We wanted to include the ideas of class, the issue of poverty of women. Women are one of the main groups suffering from poverty. Often in Ukraine NGOs work in an upper- or middle-class milieu. The existing groups at that time worked with businesswomen, but I think only after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine did things change, because of the greater need in society. A lot of NGOs started to do humanitarian aid for people in need, but their discourse was still about women's leadership, becoming a businesswoman, and they never criticized institutional economic problems.

NP - What was your alternative to the other NGO's ideas?

Tania - The main issues of Bilkis are feminism and intersectionality, so we include different forms of combatting discrimination, for example, when thinking about helping people, we thought about groups such as young girls, women, and LGBTQ people. We acknowledge the fact that poor women could use more help than middle-class or upper-class women.

We have three principal share values. They are social equity, decoloniality, and horizontality. Regarding decoloniality, we are opposed to all imperial states and also for freeing the colonized nations. There is also economic colonialism. And colonial consciousness.

NP - So you are for "decolonization"...

Yana - We would use the word "decoloniality." Once countries were conquered and occupied, but today we still have economic colonialism and there are still colonial ideas. All of that means we have to think in terms of decoloniality. Take Russia, for example. The Russians behave in a very colonial way toward us. Also, in the cultural sphere, the Russians are very dominant. For example, actors until recently were expected to know Russian if they want to get good roles, even though you live in Ukraine. That has changed some since the full-scale invasion, but it was that way for a long time.

Tania - We still have this issue that Russian music is most popular, the idea that Russian culture is superior continues to exist in our country's consciousness.

We also believe in horizontality, that is we are against hierarchical organization. We based decision-making on consensus, which has worked for us for six years.

NP - And what sorts of projects or campaigns are you engaged in?

Tania - We had for a time a project called "space of things," a place where you can give away your clothes or other things, and you can take whatever you need. We continued this project for two years. Yana started space of things after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Women and children and poor people could go there and take what they needed.

NP - What are your projects today?

Tania - We do a lot of educational work and carry out social media campaigns about feminisms, gender, gender inequalities. I'm the creator of our YouTube video essay project, it's called "Dear Diary." It's mostly a queer feminist lens on society, films, and culture.

Yana - We also have a feminist film club in which we watch and discuss queer or feminist films. We

meet twice a month at our office and watch and talk about films about social inequalities.

We also had a campaign of sixteen days of activism against gender-based violence, from November 25 to December 10, and other organizations started from that campaign. We collected stories by women who had survived gender-based violence and posted them on our Instagram pages.

Tania - We also organized street actions during that period. We had a campaign against Drunk Cherry (Piana Vyshnya), an alcoholic beverage company, which had very sexist advertising, not only sexist images of women, but also suggesting in their text that men didn't have to hear a woman's "No." Our campaign pressured them to change their advertising, though it did not completely fix the problem. Also, we do a lot of media campaigns about consent-culture and why it's bad to have a rape culture and have gender-based violence against women.

NP - You haven't mentioned reproductive rights...

Tania - In Ukraine the question of abortion isn't really a central topic for political debate. Ukrainian women and girls have that right. Although, sometimes it may be difficult to exercise it due to impact of Christian beliefs, stigmatization of what women should do with their bodies, or fear of being judged in their communities, especially in rural communities.

There are also a lot of sex education campaigns that mostly done by bloggers or civil society organizations. Some of them even do lectures in public schools. So, children from a young age would know, for example, about the idea of body autonomy, and they would learn where someone could find contraception and why menstruation isn't something inherently bad.

Tania - We should also mention that some of our members have joined the military. Two members of Bilkis, Dasha and Ivanka, are fighting in the war right now.

DL - What is the future for women and feminism in Ukraine?

Yana - I honestly want to say that for me personally, I can't think about an end to the war. What I see in the world is that there is more tension between different countries. I don't have an optimistic outlook. Now we are in a war, and I don't think it will end in a year or two. There may be some kind of ceasefire, but I don't see that Russia will leave all of our land. And for me, talking about rebuilding doesn't make sense before withdraws from Crimea, Luhansk, Donestsky and all of our cities. For myself, I spent a really big part of my life thinking that I should join the army. I don't see any sense in civil life. Because if Russia occupies our territory, we're done. I think only this fighting on the front line is very important.

Tania - If Ukraine is defeated and Russia conquers Ukraine that would mean the end of civil society organizations, and especially of feminist LGBT groups. But if Ukraine is supported by the European Union with weapons and humanitarian aid, then that means that there is a future for women and for feminist organization, but there will be a lot of work to rebuild Ukraine and also return to normal life.

NP - Thanks to both of you for sharing your perspective.

Here is another discussion with Bilkis members.

And another article here.

And another here.

You can find Bilkis on Facebook here.