

Report to San Diego State University Colleagues

Thanks and Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the Office of International Programs for awarding me a grant to develop collaborative research and teaching activities between San Diego State University and ENVILA Women's Nongovernmental Women's Institute. I am also grateful to Larisa Cherepanova, Rector of ENVILA; Galina Shaton, Vice President for International Programs at ENVILA; and Irina Tchikalova, Director of Minsk Center for Gender Studies, for securing a U.S. Speaker and Specialist Grant for me to keynote at ENVILA's International Conference, "Women, Education, Democracy" (December 8-9, 2000). I am honored that they continue to find my scholarship and activism in the field of Gender Studies to be of value to their programs, research initiatives, educational projects, and collaborative ventures with institutions of higher education and community agencies in Belarus and the United States.

There are so many others to thank for making our 10-day stay both productive and enjoyable, including U.S. Embassy staff in Minsk, ENVILA colleagues, community activists, and faculty and students at several other major universities in Minsk. I am especially grateful to my host, Larisa Khvostchevskaya, whom some of my SDSU colleagues met on her visit to San Diego in July 2000. Larisa and her family made me feel completely welcomed in their home and extended their entire household to me. I remain deeply grateful for their overwhelming generosity and for the warmth and hospitality they extended to me every minute of my stay with them.

From a cultural perspective, it was wonderful to have walking and riding tours of parks and other sites in Minsk. PAS and ENVILA colleagues made it possible for me to go the world-famous circus where I witnessed the skill and daring of performers from several post-Soviet countries (e.g., Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia), while Maria was accompanied to opera and ballet performances. All in all, however, one of the most valuable and enjoyable cultural events was spending evenings in the homes of various ENVILA colleagues or dining in restaurants that ENVILA colleagues identified as being especially known for one delicacy or the other.

Introduction

The ten days spent in Minsk with colleagues and students from ENVILA, Belarusian State University, The Center for Gender Studies, and other institutions of higher education were intensely rewarding educational and cultural experiences for both myself and my Chicana/o Studies colleague Maria Butler. We were privileged to be included in conference presentations and discussions, meetings with community and educational leaders, and community and cultural activities. All these occasions served to highlight the energy and commitment Belarusian scholars, students and activists are devoting to the transition to democracy in Belarus—a transition clearly informed by the realization that gender-equity must permeate formal and informal political actions if true democracy is to be achieved in the post-Soviet Union.

Summary of Reciprocal Benefits to be gained from a Collaboration between U.S. and Belarusian Feminist Scholars and Activists

The transition to democracy that has begun in the post-Soviet Union offers Belarusian citizens the promise of greater participation in the world economy, enhanced educational and employment opportunities, relief from poverty and isolationism, and greater access to technological innovations and other developments. However, the formal political leadership, mired in past ideologies and practices, threatens to undermine democratic reforms that are underway. Consequently, the possibilities for far-reaching positive social change may rest largely in the informal political actions of the citizens of Belarus.

Determined to be key players in the social, economic and political developments of their country, Belarusian women and men often look to the United States for role models, resources, and collaborative ventures that will accelerate the democratic reforms which promise a higher quality of life for larger segments of the population. Collaboration between educators and activists in Belarus (and other post-Soviet countries) and the United States offers a rich opportunity for the mutual growth and development of gender-equitable democratic theory and practice in our respective countries.

Despite the fact that Belarus is fiscally resource-poor, opportunities for social, political and educational growth between the U.S. and Belarus are reciprocal. For instance, the goal of true gender equity has not been realized at all levels of U.S. society even after more than thirty years of feminist research and activism within the U.S. Consequently, the burgeoning field of Gender Studies, as it is unfolding at institutions of higher education in Minsk, represents an undervalued and untapped opportunity for participant-observation and collaborative research and activism concerning women's rights in post-communist Belarus, as well as a unique opportunity for researchers on both sides of the collaboration to conduct short-and long-term comparative analyses of the efficacy of feminist theory and its practical application in the United States and the post-Soviet Union.

Overview of ENVILA Conference on “Women, Education, Democracy”

Issues of democracy and proactive implementation of democratic reforms within the personal and public lives of Belarusian women and men permeated nearly every aspect of the formal and informal discussions that occurred during our visit to ENVILA.

Presenters at the ENVILA conference examined a broad range of topics, including the role of children’s books in perpetuating gender role expectations that subordinated the roles and talents of girls and women to those of boys and men, the need for the full inclusion of historians in gender studies initiatives, and the importance of developing entrepreneurial enterprises among women and creating strategies for linking professional and non-professional women. There were lively lectures and discussions concerning similarities and differences among women worldwide, including the need for reproductive services and education that would give women greater decision making authority and greater shared power with men in the area of reproduction; gender differences in educational attainment and career aspirations; informal and formal political participation among women; and various other political issues and concerns that must be addressed in order for the transition to democracy to proceed without placing undue burdens on the poor, the elderly, and the otherwise disadvantaged.

There were also discussions about the nature and impact of political stagnation (formal political initiatives that signal a desire on the part of some political leaders to unite Russia and Belarus, the problem of Belarusian dependency on Russia and other post-Soviet countries for staples, the necessity of relying on Russia for the means of production, etc.) and the hope for greater political transformation (enhanced dialogue and collaboration with U.S. colleagues, increased mobility, relaxed immigration policies, growth of international exchanges of goods and services, fair and open elections, growth of independent businesses and services, educational exchanges, etc.). Male and female conference participants were clearly engaged in gender studies from the vantage point of a people pursuing gender equity between boys and girls in cultural, educational, and economic arenas in ways that did not discount the shared oppression of Belarusian women and men or shared oppression of several other countries within the former Soviet Union (such as the Ukraine). Based on the conference presentations and question and answer periods that followed, it was abundantly clear that issues of gender, class, nationhood, business reforms, and political participation among Belarusian women and men are high on the agenda of Belarusian educators and community leaders.

Finally, participating in the ENVILA Women’s Non-Governmental Institute conference on “Women, Education, and Democracy” afforded me invaluable opportunities to present some of my own research concerning international perspectives on women’s struggles for local, national and international social, economic and political justice. The benefits of participating in the conference included opportunities for networking with other researchers and activists from a number of countries including Russia, the Ukraine and Belarus. Throughout the conference we were exposed to contemporary research and activism on issues that pertain to many areas of women’s lives across cultures and national boundaries—including women’s struggles for reproductive health, initiatives to free women from relationship violence, relief from cultural invisibility, global abuses to

Meetings With ENVILA Faculty and Students Regarding Faculty/Student Exchanges

One desired outcome of the visit to Minsk was the development of collaborative relationships between San Diego State University and institutions of higher education and community organizations in Minsk. Maria Butler, representing San Diego State University's Department of Chicana/o Studies and I (representing San Diego State University's Department of Women's Studies) participated in a number of meetings with ENVILA students, faculty, administrators and staff in order to discuss ways to develop and advance collaborations between SDSU and ENVILA. We explored courses that could be taught at both institutions, possibilities for funding, ways to integrate the Global Partnership Fund's initiatives to provide services to needy women and children into educational projects undertaken by both ENVILA and SDSU, as well as immigration issues and concerns. The least difficult aspect of faculty/student exchanges seems to be academic course development. The most difficult appears to be the travel and housing costs, as well as obtaining VISAS for students from ENVILA to travel to the United States. Despite these difficulties, I am most hopeful that our meetings and the signed agreements that resulted will soon lead to a concrete faculty-student exchange between San Diego State University and ENVILA Women's Nongovernmental Institute, as well as collaborations between San Diego State University and other institutions of higher education in Minsk—including, but not limited to, Belarusian State University and the Center for Gender Studies.

A number of other issues emerged as points of discussion during our various faculty development meetings with ENVILA faculty and administrators. For example, there is a keen interest in the history and application of the tenure system in U.S. institutions of higher education. There is also interest in the value placed on both the M.A. and Ph.D., as those degrees relate to gender, field of study, and status of the educational institution. Immigration practices and policies within the U.S., the presidential elections, and gender differences among U.S. voters, elected officials and political parties were frequent topics of discussion.

Meetings with PAS Staff and Faculty and Students At Other Educational Institutions

An important feature of our visit to Belarus was the opportunity to participate in discussions and meetings with faculty colleagues and students at several Belarusian educational institutions, including Belarusian State University, the Gender Studies Center at European Humanities University, Minsk State Linguistics University and Minsk State Pedagogical University. Each presentation and opportunity to dialogue with colleagues and students at institutions of higher education in Minsk reaffirmed the broad interest faculty and students have for comparative analyses of gender studies in the U.S. and Belarus and reinforced the value of cross-cultural communication and debates regarding manifestations of gender-laden social and political systems, as well as efforts to work

collaboratively to develop and advance social institutions that are sensitive to the interconnectedness of gender, class, race-ethnicity and age.

Professor Butler and I had numerous opportunities to facilitate in-depth discussions concerning a broad range of topics during classroom lectures and discussions with faculty and students at various educational institutions. For example, our visit to the Center for Gender Studies resulted in a lively debate about how gender equity in the United States has created “powerful” women and “emasculated” men. Professor Butler and I were able to defuse this depiction of U.S. women and men by discussing the work of such scholars and activists as bell hooks, Angela Davis, Catherine Mackinnon, Suzanne Pharr, Elizabeth Martinez and others whose work is largely grounded in the theory of intersectionality—that is, the theory that race, gender, sexuality and class are variables that intersect to determine access to wealth and power in the United States. By happenstance, I was also familiar with the work of several additional scholars referenced in the Center’s course pack for their current course on Gender and Sexuality and could speak to that work as well. It was a rich discussion that led to a preliminary conversation about my possibly coming back to the Gender Studies Center in May to teach a short, intensive graduate course that would be offered to SDSU and ENVILA students.

Professor Butler and I taught three classes (12-11-2000) at Belarusian State University for second-year law students who were very interested in U.S. immigration laws and policies, as well as linguistic, cultural, political and historical differences among people of Mexican descent. In fact, one highlight of these sessions was being able to explore the ways in which Belarusians and Mexicans in the U.S. have common struggles as a people with a shared sense of identity and history. For example, we discussed the ways that Belarusians—like people of Mexican descent in the U.S.—struggle for educational attainment, encounter barriers to free mobility from nation to nation, and face ongoing struggles to retain their language (Belarusian versus Russian) and their sense of history and culture in the face of a possible conjoining of Russia and Belarus. And, while the gist of the Belarusian student concerns seemed to revolve around understanding the educational structure in the United States, many of their questions and comments also reflected a curiosity about U.S. definitions of citizenship and the possibility of increasing international student exchanges between Belarus and the U.S. Regarding San Diego State in particular, there was a good deal of interest about the demographics of the student body, gender and race relations among students, and extracurricular activities among students.

Professor Butler and I also spent one afternoon at the PAS office meeting with university professionals, students and PAS staff (12-13-2000). This opportunity to meet and talk in an informal, but skillfully facilitated, discussion setting with Belarusian colleagues, community activists, and Public Affairs Services staff was invaluable. It was an opportunity to examine our current approaches to local, national, and international collaborative work involving gender studies and political participation, as well as to discuss how to further the exchange of human and material resources, develop successful grant applications for collaborative work, address some of the challenges inherent in cross-cultural communications (such as the use of outdated or value-laden terminology),

and explore how that our work together can make valuable contributions to democratic reforms in Belarus. In particular, we examined the viability of working together to develop new agendas and goals for future conferences, Internet collaborations and research projects.

Debriefing with PAO David M. Reinert

I am delighted Maria and I had an opportunity to meet and talk with Mr. David Reinert. The debriefing with Mr. Reinert was instructive for several reasons. First, it was an important opportunity for understanding the budgetary and political limitations confronting the Public Affairs Office in terms of their capacity to help further these collaborative ventures between San Diego State University and Belarusian institutions of higher education. At the same time, staff shared Internet resource information on funding opportunities that are available through other agencies.

Mr. Reinert impressed me as someone who was fully aware of the challenges confronting Belarusian citizens in the transition to democracy, even as he also recognized that it is the citizens themselves who must engineer the transition to democracy. I welcomed the way he was able to put our experiences of the previous ten days into a single sentiment, because ENVILA is seeking to accomplish precisely what Mr. Reinert states must happen. ENVILA is attempting to serve as the catalyst for international exchange of scholarly and activist endeavors between post-Soviet countries and democratic nations in order to promote democratic ideals.

Ongoing Efforts for Future Collaborative Work

Within the past week, I have written letters of support for a former ENVILA student to attend an international women's conference in New Jersey (scheduled for June 2001). In the next few days, I hope to submit a written draft of my conference presentation to ENVILA colleagues for their review. I will also be forwarding books and articles, as well as copies of photographs of conference proceedings and related activities. I will continue to periodically send gender studies books and other printed resources to colleagues at The Center for Gender Studies and ENVILA, as well as some audiovisual materials to other Belarusian educational institutions. In addition, I will continue to work closely with San Diego State University and ENVILA colleagues to develop a faculty-student exchange program between our institutions and to extend the formal collaboration arrangements to other institutions of higher education in Minsk. ENVILA colleagues and I are in the preliminary stages of planning for a September visit from SDSU faculty and students which will include SDSU faculty teaching courses at ENVILA, Belarusian State University and The Center for Gender Studies. I will also seek a Fullbright Scholarship to conduct a year (or semester) of teaching and research in Belarus.