

# Businesswomen in Ukraine: Breaking Through the Glass Ceiling

As International Women's Day approaches, 11 successful businesswomen talk about the challenges of doing business in Ukraine's traditionally patriarchal society.

The idea that women are just as capable as men in the demanding world of business seems to have finally sunk home in the West. Regrettably, it is still truer in theory than in practice, but attitudes have changed considerably since the beginning of the Feminist movement. Doing business in Ukraine, women face the same trials and tribulations as any man. Women here have succeeded in their careers either by ignoring these barriers or overcoming them with their abilities. All of them are professionals. They are well-educated, skilled people in their fields who have decided to build a life and career in Ukraine. Some of them are expats, but others are local women. They are all helping to lead Ukraine's revival, either by working in larger corporations or opening small businesses that are the backbone of a healthy economy. In fact, one of our interviewees quoted Oleksandra Kuzhel, Ukraine's former Minister of Justice and now the country's top representative to the European Union, stating that nearly 80% of small businesses in Ukraine are run by women. At the same time, many if not most of these women still nurture families and run their households. So men, on March 8 as you are buying those flowers or cooking that dinner, consider what an enormous contribution women make to our lives.



**Nataliya Fesyun**  
General Manager,  
Pepsi-Cola Ukraine

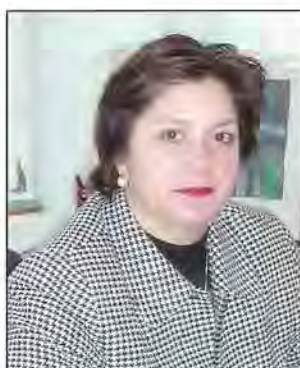
For me, being in business is so natural, I never even thought about why I became involved in it. It is like asking why you learned to read and write. Business is my way of life and I enjoy my work. I want to be a useful, well-developed person, and I am fortunate to have a job that interests me.

In terms of education, I am a specialist in food production technologies, and I work in my field developing the food sector. I studied at the university, and then I worked within the faculty at the institute. I also worked for the Small Business Association of Ukraine, which supports small businesses and trains

management specialists. This was a very interesting job because I gained experience in different areas of business. I acquired experience in production at the Zhytomyr Glass Factory, as well as knowledge of credits from the EBRD. The organizations I worked with gave me good experience in various forms of ownership. However, the situation changed, the economy in Ukraine began to develop in a market direction. I became involved in accounting, and my career with Pepsi started here.

My career here has been very interesting, because by working in different positions I have gained a complete picture of the business. Initially I was an accountant, then chief accountant, then financial director, and now director of PepsiCo in Ukraine. The idea of a glass ceiling is very interesting, but at Pepsi, I have never experienced anything like it. I think women sometimes create this glass ceiling themselves because they want to find an intelligent balance between their family and career. They have to decide for themselves what they want to do. Each person has situations where they have to choose. For nearly the last two years, I have developed an unhealthy habit. Every family celebration that comes up – birthdays, wedding anniversaries, etc., I am out of town on a working trip or have to resolve some issue. This is not really a very big problem, but sometimes you really want to be with your child on their birthday. My husband also works in business, and sometimes it is very hard to coordinate our business trips so there is someone

to take care of our child. As to how men respond to women in authority, I think that if she is a professional, an intelligent woman in a high position and treats her subordinates well, then there is no difference.



**Natalie A. Jaresko**  
President & CEO,  
Western NIS Fund

I am an economist by education, and first came to Ukraine in May 1992, as the chief of the economic section of the U.S. embassy. I served here for three years until 1995, when my post expired. As part of my work, I visited every single oblast, studying people and learning about the way they lived. It was a period of euphoria. Ukraine seemed to be a blank sheet, a brand new place for building a relationship from scratch, so when my position ended I decided to stay. My undergraduate degree attracted me to the business side of things. I joined the Western NIS Fund, and found it a perfect place from which

to begin solving socially and politically important problems in a practical and viable way. First of all, by investing into small and medium-sized private enterprises in Ukraine to aid the development of the economy.

Doing business in Ukraine has been a challenge, but an incredibly rewarding one that really gives a sense of achievement. At times, it can be frustrating but never boring. I feel lucky to have experienced all this. As a chief executive, I find that focusing on team development, and the increase of progress in people is essential. It is a challenge to identify places for creation and to realize values.

In my view, earlier it was more difficult for women to be involved in business in Ukraine because of the general absence of a business culture, but now more women take part at higher levels. Business is a challenge for women. There was and is a traditional hierarchy carried over from Soviet times that can be called patriarchal. However, it was in the USSR, especially after WWII, that women gained more equality with men, working shoulder to shoulder and doing much that was considered men's work. I believe they brought a unique strength with them from these times. Also, women listen more, which helps to build understanding, and they are more sympathetic to needs. Now, they have come to the understanding that they should not wait for something to remove the glass ceiling, but they should break it themselves. Still, there is a lot to do, especially in terms of women in government.

The strong feminist movement, when women wanted full equality with men in career opportunities, has made it normal to have women at top levels in the U.S. However, it still is not even 50/50. Maybe this is because women understood that they wanted to have everything, a good job, as well as a good family. Now they are looking for balance. Nevertheless, men and women are judged by different rules in respect to the different psychological and emotional perspectives. More and more women are breaking through these preconceptions, and there are more and more women who are ready to! With every generation it gets easier. Still, things will not change to a great extent until men come to the simple understanding: it's not what men think about women that has to change, but also what men think about men. Men should understand that their role in the family is as important as a woman's, and a woman's role in the life of society is as important as a man's.



**Constance Uzwyshyn**  
Director,  
ARTEast Gallery

Women all over the world experience the glass ceiling and in some cases, the glass is replaced with brick and mortar. How many female parliamentarians are there in Ukraine compared to the percentage of women? Then again, how many women are there in Ukraine who are CEOs and ambassadors? Personally I have found there not to be a huge schism in how men respond to women in positions of authority, but it comes down to a woman's position as well as her personality.



**Beate Schober**  
Country Manager,  
Austrian Airlines

I learned a lot from them and they learned a lot from me. I developed many new talents. Then I was offered the position of country manager for Ukraine, and moved to Kyiv.

I am astonished by how well I am treated here. I am admired, and sometimes I even feel that I am treated like a star, but I feel just like a normal working woman. Maybe I am a little bit special in the sense that I'm a foreigner, and not too many foreign women are working here independently. I also receive a lot of admiration from young Ukrainian women. I think I am some kind of example that a woman can be independent, married, and successful in her job.

Of course, there have been some difficulties, but I always manage to work with the people surrounding me to find a solution. I have never faced any discrimination in my career at Austrian Airlines. On the contrary, I felt a lot of admiration. The men and women at Austrian Airlines receive equal pay. In the Eastern European division of Austrian Airlines, we have more females in managerial positions than men. I have never had the sense of a glass ceiling. Whatever position I asked for I received. I never felt that I could not go higher. I am country manager now, and I think I could go higher if I wanted.

In terms of treatment by men, when I first came to Dnipropetrovsk it was kind of the reverse. If you are a male boss or manager, then a man knows how to handle him. You go out drinking, and all those male routines. With a woman, it is a little bit different. You don't simply take her out and get her drunk. I would say they looked at our professionalism instead. I would also say its becoming easier for women to go into business here. Many Western companies offer possibilities. I visit a lot of them and find women in leading positions, and I would say the possibilities will increase. For women, it's not just a target to find a husband. I

I came to Ukraine to do research for my Ph.D. in Art History from the University of Edinburgh. Ukraine had just become independent and as a result Western companies, embassies and foreigners were arriving in mass. It was an extremely exciting time and the country was booming with business opportunities. Due to the optimistic mood in Ukraine at that time, it made no sense to return to Scotland. So I stayed here and worked in companies which I would not have had the opportunity to in the West. My first job was with 3M. In all, doing business in Ukraine is a constant roller coaster.

have a wonderful one, but you need something apart from the husband and the family. Especially in this country, where practically all women work. In fact, I am convinced that this country would not be where it is without women. Someone else might not say this, but it is like some other countries – fictitiously male dominated. Certainly, in some positions, there are still a lot of men, but we have this in the West. Without women, however, the men could not be where they are. And local women are very wise. I would say they are working women, and although they are less emancipated than in the West, they enjoy being women.



**Jaroslawa Johnson**  
Director,  
Altheimer & Gray

I was already an experienced lawyer in the United States. I started working in Poland in 1990 because of the new opportunities in this part of the world. In 1991, I took my business to Ukraine when it became clear that it was becoming independent. My law firm encouraged me to open an office here, which I did in 1993. Doing business in Ukraine has been a roller coaster ride. We primarily represent Western companies that want to work here; big companies that are looking at the Ukrainian market as an opportunity to gain consumers or manufacture something.

In terms of being a woman, I do not know if that helped or hurt my business. I think what helped more is my Ukrainian ancestry. I think it also made it easier to break some of the barriers between a non-Ukrainian and a Ukrainian. As for women, there is at least one other woman here in Kyiv who runs a law firm here and there are several who are in business. Obviously, Ukraine represents good opportunities. Most of us are small businesspeople; we are not Philip Morris for example.

I think the legacy of the Soviet years was that women could rise pretty high in the State enterprises. I have met many women who are general directors of food processing plants and the like. Women in Ukraine could reach relatively high levels in business. Where the unfairness entered is that although women had these high posts, they still had to do all the housework. This is where it is different in the United States. There is a glass ceiling in the big corporations in the United States, but women at home have a slightly easier life. I know a woman who is the general director of a big bakery right here in town. It is a big, big operation so she works many hours a week, but she still has to go to the market and buy food everyday, do laundry, and take care of the children. In reality, she has maybe three or four jobs. It is a limitation on her ability to grow as a professional.

This is an issue, because if you want to have a family, and you want make sure it is well provided for, the role of men in Ukraine is such that they don't participate in that aspect. I think if Ukrainian men shared household responsibilities, it would free women to go higher. I do expect to see more women in the Verkhovna Rada, in high government posts and a woman Prime Minister.

In terms of doing business, I think women have less ego involved in their work. Women also organize work patterns in an office or business differently. It is easier for a woman to bring a collective together and to have them work and decide. Sometimes they are more emotional, but at times, that level of emotion makes people feel more comfortable. I think that is a good quality. Businesses thrive when they find that workers are comfortable, and have a rapport with the leadership.

I also believe the younger generation of Ukrainian women sees opportunities that their mothers did not see. Women in their 20's and 30's, those that have gone to some of the fine schools here or studied abroad, come back with new ideas. How many new businesses are advertising in your magazine, or any other magazine? Five years ago most of those businesses didn't even exist. Ukraine is developing a service industry, a computer industry, and a clothing industry. There are many female designers that were not there five years ago. All kinds of other things are available from simple everyday services to very complicated services like the specialized medical clinics that have appeared. Women head many of them because they had an opportunity to earn some money and then invested it. Or else, they went abroad, learned about business and said – "Hmm, Ukraine needs one of these. I'll open up in Kyiv and see what happens." And if it is a good idea, it usually finds a market for itself.