

WOMEN OF KYRGYZSTAN AND TAJIKISTAN:  
HISTORICAL LEGACIES IMPACTING CONTEMPORARY INVOLVEMENT

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THESIS

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research explores the development of the status of women in post-Soviet Central Asia. The research shows that women in Kyrgyzstan are more actively pursuing opportunities to contribute to civil society than what is found in Tajikistan, where the pressures for women to return to more traditional roles has resulted in considerably fewer opportunities for female involvement in the sphere beyond the home. This research aims to explain the reasons we see such different levels of female involvement in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, despite their shared history as Soviet republics and the similar economic problems the states experienced with the transformation of their societies in the decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Research concerning female involvement in non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the education system, and the problems related to rural life is utilized to explain the divergent paths of the two nations. It is concluded that a primary factor in the development of gender relations is due to the pre-Soviet traditions that have resurfaced in the post-Soviet era with the development of each individual state's national identity.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

It has been twenty years since the fall of the Soviet Union which resulted in an extensive transformation of Central Asia's economic, political, and social structures. The shift to a market economy and the creation of new institutions has had drastic impacts on life in the region. The five states of Central Asia include Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. They share a history as socialist republics that existed under the soviet communist ideology of the USSR. This experience has had important consequences on gender relations and the development of both formal and informal political institutions in the post-Soviet period.

Since the independence of Central Asian states and the subsequent revival of Islam, we have seen women return to more traditional social roles. The fall of the Soviet Union created difficulties for almost all citizens of post-Soviet Central Asia, but the economic problems that developed disproportionately affected women. After the collapse, women were the first to lose employment and the social programs that had assisted them, such as child care facilities and universal child allowances, could no longer be funded. Twenty years have passed since the dissolution of the USSR and the regions' economies have stabilized, which is useful for analyzing the development of gender relations in post-Soviet society.

In order to address the development of states in the region, I will analyze the problems and potential solutions for creating a more active and rich civil society. Due to the difficulty about making generalizations of all five states, I will focus primarily on the nations of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. I will prove that despite their similar economic levels and shared history, Kyrgyzstan has had significantly more success in creating a richer arena for female participation

in civil society than what can be found in Tajikistan. I argue that the Kyrgyz and the Tajik's pre-Soviet traditions have strongly influenced the post-Soviet national identities of the citizens in these states and this has had a direct impact on the opportunities made available for women. The Kyrgyz's nomadic traditions and relatively recent conversion to Islam in the last 200 years has created a unique political atmosphere in which women are more actively participating in civil society. This is in contrast to the ethnic Tajik people's history as a sedentary society with a long and deep history as a Muslim people, which has resulted in a post-Soviet society in which the pressures for women to maintain traditional roles have offered considerably fewer opportunities for females to participate beyond the home, as gender issues remain at the forefront of the Tajik consciousness.

There has been a substantial drop in female involvement in formal politics since the end of the Soviet era. Despite the fact that quotas were considered ineffective in creating real equality among men and women, the decline of female participation presents concerns about the status of women in post-Soviet society. A primary factor in the decline of women's involvement in formal political structures is due to the resurgence of traditionalism. The result has been greater female involvement in areas of civil society rather than formal political institutions. This is most clearly seen in the high level of female involvement with NGOs. Involvement in this sector is growing and I believe that it will continue to attract women as it allows women to balance their history of de jure equality that existed when they were citizens of the Soviet Union with their newly formed identities as Tajik or Kyrgyz Muslims.

In order to explain this, I rely on Clark, Roy, and Bloomqvist's understanding of the relationship between culture and empowerment in my analysis of the development of women in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (2008, 294). Empowerment, they argue, is based on the opportunities

provided by institutions found in society. Those institutions are largely based on the basic culture of that society. The basic culture, in turn, is shaped by social values and institutions, which include such things as religion and family that impact the daily lives of citizens. Along with the basic culture, institutions are strongly influenced by the national and regional economics which, in turn, affect the level of empowerment of the population.

The economic developments of the two nations have had critical impacts on the status of women in the region. This is, however, observed in both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan due to their similar economic levels and the shared economic problems that resulted from the collapse of the Soviet Union. Thus, in order to explain why we see greater Kyrgyz female involvement in civil society that what can be observed in Tajikistan, it is necessary to explore the basic culture making up these two states. There are some significant differences in the traditions, spiritual beliefs, and history of the Kyrgyz and the Tajiks that appear to be affecting contemporary society.

Their shared history as Soviet republics creates a foundation that will allow us to draw comparisons and understand the development of women in the post-Soviet era. Both states, like their Central Asian counterparts, are predominately Muslim. They have experienced a range of political regimes in their recent history, most of which have been authoritarian. The states have struggled economically following independence. Both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are relatively equal in economic terms. In 2004, for instance, 76.6% people in Kyrgyzstan and 76.9% of citizens in Tajikistan were living under three dollars a day (World Bank 2011). The GDP of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are about 4.5 and 4.9 billion US dollars, respectively (World Development Indicators). The similar economic situations in these two nations are very

important since the post-Soviet economic problems have had significant impacts on lives of women.

It is necessary to analyze the factors impacting women's empowerment in these two states. I suggest that the greatest potential for female empowerment is through educational institutions and NGOs. Factors hindering empowerment include the limited opportunities in rural areas, where the majority of women live, and the persistent economic problems that have negatively affected all sectors of the population. Therefore, in my exploration of issues facing women and their participation in informal political structures, I will discuss the issues of national identity, education, rural and urban life and how these factors have shaped the lives of women and the states of Central Asia.

I begin by discussing civil society in general. Next, I will review the competing legacy of secularism and Islam by exploring the history of the people in this region. I then proceed by investigating the development of national identities that arose following the independence of Central Asian states which reveals some aspects of the basic culture of each state. Finally, I will explore female involvement in NGOs, contemporary issues in education, and the varying experiences in urban and rural life.

## UNDERSTANDING CIVIL SOCIETY

Countless political scientists and philosophers have offered definitions and explanations in an attempt to define civil society. German philosopher Hegel perceived civil society as a stage in a state's development necessary to becoming a fully matured nation (Bealey 1999). Hegel further suggested that civil society is in the sphere between the family and the state and is characterized by "freedom, personal autonomy, individual rights, mutual respect and recognition,

satisfaction of needs, a system of exchange, and rational legal norms” (Parekh 2004, 16).

Political theorist Gramsci suggested that civil society is made up of the affiliations individuals have outside of formal state institutions and included family, social clubs, media, etc (Barker 2004). In recent years, scholars have preferred to look at Tocqueville’s account of civil society which stresses equality and the important role of voluntary associations (Parekh 2004, 19). Like a number of scholars (Parekh 2004, Deakin 2001, etc), I prefer Michael Walzer’s explanation of civil society, which he describes as the “the sphere of uncoerced human association and also the set of relational networks formed for the sake of family, faith, interest, and ideology that will fill this space” (Walzer 1995, 7).

Civil society is, in essence, the sphere of public involvement and activity outside of state sanctioned activities and beyond the market and can include things such as voluntary organizations, non-governmental organizations, social and political movements, and associations whose members share a common interest. I am primarily interested in NGOs and social movements as they relate to social change. In addition, these aspects of civil society offer women opportunities to more actively contribute to politics in a region whose political and economic climate offer few opportunities to women.

Although many scholars have argued that “civil society” is a Western term and should not be applied to regions of the globe outside of Europe, I see that a discussion of civil society in Central Asia is fruitful for understanding the divergent paths states and citizens have followed after independence. While I agree that although we cannot expect the same timeline for “modernization,” it is still valuable to analyze the development of civil society in Central Asia. Also, increased volunteerism and greater activity in the sphere between the family and the state adds to the development, discourse, and community of any state. Civil society, scholars argue,

creates a better governed and more stable political environment (Parekh 2004, 15). It is considered to be closely associated with democracy. We are interested in civil society because of its connection with openness and democracy. Civil society acts as a counterweight to the state and limits its power (Parekh 2004, 21). Thus, it is reasonable that a more active civil society be viewed as a positive aspect for a state.

## CHAPTER 2

### HISTORY

#### PRE-SOVIET PERIOD

The historical experiences and memory of the pre-Soviet era have significantly influenced the development of Central Asian states. Therefore, to understand the modern period, it is also necessary to review some of the characteristics and events that have contributed to the region's history.

Central Asia is a region with a rich and diverse history; it is an area made up of a multitude of ethnic groups and cultures. The region landscape ranges from fertile valleys, extensive mountain ranges, vast areas of steppe, to regions of extreme dry land. The diversity of the landscape is mirrored among the variety of the people that can be found there. More than eighty different nationalities make up Kyrgyzstan's population of nearly five million people (Kolpakov 2001, 2).

Central Asia's location between Europe and Asia has contributed to the diversity of the region. During the Roman Empire, the route connecting Europe and China known as the Silk Road developed in the southern region of Central Asia. This resulted in an increased interest in the people and the regions' resources as it grew commercially and culturally. A variety of groups competed to influence the region but it was the Arabs and Turks that brought the religion of Islam to the people of Central Asia (Curtis 1996, xxxii).

Islam is the predominate religion in the region. The first people to be converted to Islam were those along the southern region of Central Asia due to high level of traffic along the Silk

Road. This area included present day Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Most of the people in the region, including the Tajiks and Uzbeks, converted to Islam almost a millennium ago. Islam became central to the identity and culture for many of the people in the region over a thousand years before the Russian Empire annexed the area and attempted to influence their spiritual practices.

Sharia law was the social compass that shaped and dominated social norms. It is thought that female seclusion, or the removal of women from public life, began as far back as the late sixteenth century (Tokhtakhodjaeva 1995, 21). Society was very patriarchal with women generally confined to the home and excluded from most activities including formal education. Men were expected to be the breadwinners while women were expected to carry out domestic labor (Harris 2006, 23). Women were not even included in some historical narratives. The few individuals who promoted women's activities in the public sphere were viewed as acting in opposition to Muslim law and were accused of being "infidels" (Tokhtakhodjaeva 1995, 43).

It took considerably longer for Islam to reach the steppe people in the north, including the Kyrgyz. The Kyrgyz converted to Islam only in the last two hundred years. This has resulted in much of the Kyrgyz's former beliefs to have maintained a high level of importance along with Islam. Much of the pre-Islamic traditions, such as the belief in the mountains, rivers, and sun, have penetrated the daily life and spiritualism of the Kyrgyz (Rashid 2001, 138). This is sometimes referred to as "folk Islam." Folk Islam does not play as large of a role in the spirituality of the Tajik people due to their considerably longer history with Islam (Hanks 2005, 362).

The Kazaks and Kyrgyz, primarily residing in the mountains and steppe of the north, were primarily nomadic herding people. In the north, the nomadic culture of the Kyrgyz resulted in women often having to work alongside men to shepherd their flocks. In addition, the high infant mortality rate resulted in small families making it necessary for women to take on roles that would traditionally be done by sons (Rashid 2001, 138). The Kyrgyz people have a somewhat unique historical relationship with Islam which has impacted the role of women today. The importance of their nomadic traditions has created an environment for women with greater freedom. This, I argue, has an important impact on women in the post-Soviet era.

The region's relationship with the Russian Empire began in the early eighteenth century when imperial Russia began to expand southward into the territory of the Kazakh people. Between 1864 and 1895, the Russian Empire defeated the khanates of Bukhara, Samarkand, and Khiva and expanded deeper into Central Asia (Hellie 2004, 86). The Tajiks and the Kyrgyz came under Russian control by 1876 and 1881, respectively (Olcott 1997, 112 and Atkin 1997, 210). Thus, Central Asia became part of Russia before the people in the region established their own national identity as nation-hood did not develop until after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Imperial Russia's decision to expand into Central Asia was based on a number of factors. Central Asia provided the Russian empire with valuable raw materials and more arable land that was capable of growing cotton, a commodity needed by Russia. Some have suggested that Imperial Russia's colonial endeavors were a way for the Russian empire to assert itself as an advanced and powerful state to the international community in a time when other powerful nations were also developing colonies abroad (Sahadeo 2007, 2). Central Asia became a symbol of the Russian empire's authority and would continue to be used as a symbol during the Soviet era but as a symbol of the supremacy of the Soviet system.

## SOVIET PERIOD

Lenin once said that Central Asian Muslim women in the Soviet Union “were the most oppressed of the oppressed and the most enslaved of the enslaved” (Kocaoglu 2009, 171). The Bolshevik ideology was largely based on the idea that the proletariat, who were predominately industrial workers, was being exploited by the ruling class and needed to be liberated in order for a true socialist state to develop. In predominately rural Central Asia, however, there were few industrial workers for whom the ideology could be directed towards. Instead, Russian observations of female seclusion and the strong patriarchal system, led the Soviet policy makers to adopt the project to liberate Central Asian Muslim women (Northrop 2004, 11). Historian Gregory Massell suggests that women became Central Asia’s “surrogate proletariat.” (Massell 1974, xxiii). The attempt to liberate Central Asian women from both men and their religion was very much in line with the overarching political ideology that was created by the Soviet system. Subsequently, much of the early Soviet period is characterized by the attempt of “liberate” women from their prescribed gender roles and to eliminate Islam from society.

The ensuing conflict between the Soviet powers and the people of Central Asia has had important impacts that can still be observed today. The Soviets worked towards destroying Islam’s fundamental hold on society as they established *de jure* equality for women. Although some of the population welcomed these changes in society, others resisted such forced modifications of the fundamentals of Central Asian life.

One of the first policies the Soviets directed towards Islam in Central Asia required that mosques in the region be shut down. Many of the mosques were then turned into factories. This policy was in line with two important tenets of the Marxist-Leninist ideology: atheism and

contributing to society through work. In 1917, there had been 20,000 mosques but nearly a decade later there were barely 4,000 still functioning and only 60 existed in Uzbekistan (Rashid 2001, 46). Islam was forced to exist almost exclusively in private.

One of Moscow's first decrees addressing females in Central Asia was concerned with the selling and paying for brides. By 1924, the practice of paying a bride price (*kalym*) was abolished and punishable by either hard labor or imprisonment. They also quickly addressed the issue of women being forced into unwanted marriages (including bride kidnapping) which was made punishable with up to two years of prison time (Halle 1938, 129). These policies, which opposed the historical and cultural practices of the people in the region, were often not fully understood by the citizens in Central Asia.

While the Soviet Union had slogans which promoted free thought, any public religiousness was repressed. The veil, worn by many devout women in the region, was a public display of spirituality and, therefore, condemned by the Soviet leadership. At one event, it is estimated that around 10,000 Uzbek women burned their veils (Ishkanian, 2004, 480) Both Muslim clerics and religious schools were considered enemies of the Soviet power (Northrop 2004, 109). Religious schools were closed and replaced with Soviet-run schools that were mandatory for youth of both sexes to attend.

Some scholars have suggested that the Soviets acted on strategic interests in their policy towards women in Central Asia. The Soviets benefited from the increased economic outputs that resulted from having females involved in the workforce (Ishkanian 2004, 479). Additionally, women were seen as a potentially powerful political force whose support of the Soviet regime would benefit the Soviet policy-makers (Tadjbakhsh 1998, 166). Moscow worked hard to paint a

picture of the suppressed Central Asian woman who needed to be freed as a way to promote the Soviet narrative as liberators attempting to bring freedom to these repressed women and “backward people” (Massell 1974, 123). This was used to create the Soviet identity by, simultaneously, drawing a picture of the Soviets as liberators which displayed the superiority of the socialist ideology to the international community.

The Soviet policies resulted in many opportunities for females to participate in society which had not been previously available. Women of the Soviet Union held jobs at some of the highest rates in the world with 90 percent of working age women either employed or students (Kuehnast and Nechemias 2004, 4). Government quotas ensured that women were part of the governing process. The opportunities for women to receive higher education and gain employment were utilized by a high percentage of women in the region (Abramson 2004, 68). Most women stopped wearing the veil and, over time, Islam’s public role in society nearly disappeared. Considerable strides in the area of women’s rights were made.

In an attempt to promote more female participation, various women’s organizations were created. Some of the organizations that were created included organizations exclusively for female workers, tea-houses, workshops, and even evening schools to promote adult literacy for women. Women, however, rarely took on large leadership roles (Tadjbakhsh 1998, 164). They were devised to help women integrate more fully into society.

By the end of the Soviet era, women’s participation in education and society no longer resembled the image of a secluded Muslim woman that had characterized the pre-Soviet era. The time period is distinguished by the Soviet attempt to provide women with equal opportunities as men. In many ways they were successful, yet in other ways they were not. Women were still paid

less than men and women who worked often still maintained the burden of raising the children and maintaining the home. While many women held jobs, very few had upper management jobs or positions that held much influence. While the Soviet period affected society in Central Asia in many ways, the Soviet project ultimately failed with the resurgence of traditionalism and Islam following the collapse of the Soviet Union. This has had a profound impact on the role of women in Central Asian society.

## CHAPTER 3

### POST-SOVIET PERIOD

#### TRANSITION

The unexpected collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was a difficult period for the states of Central Asia. Almost overnight, the Central Asian republics were forcibly given independence. States which had never existed independently had to be formed. Not surprisingly, the region lacked much of the needed infrastructure necessary to maintain its standards of living. The states were suddenly without an ideology or real national identity. The fall of the USSR impacted women in each state of the former Soviet Union but the most dramatic affects can be seen in the changing status of women in Central Asia with the resurgence of Islam and traditional beliefs.

The transition from communism to a market economy disproportionately impacted the lives of women in the region. Women were the first ones to lose their employment status, and living standards disintegrated. Many of the government assistance programs which benefitted both mothers and children were cut back due to budget constraints (Ishkanian 2003, 483). The economic problems decreased the state's ability to provide child and maternity allowances. Medical care and education had once been free, but were no longer with independence (Akiner 1997, 288). The cost of education has become a large obstacle for female attendance. The Soviet period's policies, including gender quotas, which had assisted women in the public sphere were quickly disbanded.

The economic problems in post-Soviet Central Asia had direct impacts on the daily lives of all citizens in Central Asia. In Tajikistan, more than eighty percent of a family's income was

put toward food in 2000 compared to just around fifty percent in 1991 (Harris 2006, 33). These economic problems have had significant impacts on society as poverty rates became very high. In 2004, sixty-four percent of Tajik people were considered to be living in poverty. These problems have persisted. Since 2003, however, there have been some small drops in the poverty level, particularly in rural areas of Tajikistan (World Bank 2005, vii). The market economy has created an environment considerably worse for most of the population than that which existed during the Soviet era.

Some factors contributing to the economic problems are a result of Soviet era planning. A fundamental aspect of a nation state is based on that state's borders. Central Asian states did not develop independently based on ethnic or linguistic groups in the region, but instead the region was divided up by the lines that Stalin arbitrarily created. Subsequently, these artificial borders did not correspond to the ethnic groups in the region. This resulted in populations with high levels of intermingling of ethnic groups. For instance, Kyrgyzstan has a substantial minority of Uzbek people (Olcott 1997, 126). This has resulted in a high level of interethnic tensions.

Although the states in Central Asia have a similar historical experience to that of the post-Soviet states that are now making up Eastern Europe, there is a strong influence from the Middle East, China, and Turkey that did not exist prior to the collapse (Kuehnast and Nechemias 2004, 2). During the Soviet period, the region's inclusion in the Soviet Union made them European but, today, one can observe various forces attempting to compete for influence and resources in the region, which is reflected in the way the states have developed.

## TWENTY YEARS AFTER INDEPENDENCE

In order to understand the situation twenty years after independence, it is helpful to try to understand the general concerns and problems of the people in this region. This draws a picture of what life is like for citizens and assists in understanding the development of gender relations and civil society. Certain public opinion polls have been utilized to offer insight to the general concerns of the citizens in these two nations. Upon reviewing public opinion polls in each state, it becomes very apparent that the primary concerns for the people in these states are economic issues.

In 2010, a public opinion poll by the International Foundation of Electoral Systems revealed that almost fifty percent of individuals polled in Tajikistan were dissatisfied with the government's respect of freedom of speech and human rights (International Foundation for Electoral Systems). Despite this, people were primarily concerned about the issues that affect their daily lives including things like employment, job creation, corruption, and being provided with natural gas and electricity (Youell 2010).

The situation in Kyrgyzstan is similar. The main issues of concern tend to be issues relating to employment and the economy. War and political crises which would cause instability are the top non-economic concerns that citizens have recognized. This is similar to the situation we observe in Russia where stability is often revered more than democracy or political transparency. This could be a result of the Soviet experience. In a May 2010 poll by the International Republic Institute, which is represented in Figure 1 in the following section, reveals that the main concerns of Kyrgyz citizens are unemployment, security, and economic developments (2010, 15).

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan's economic development has dropped substantially since the fall of the Soviet Union. The per capita GDPs of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have dropped to \$420 and \$305, respectively (National Accounts Estimates of Main Aggregates). These Central Asian states have the lowest per capita GDPs of all former Soviet states, not just of the states of Central Asia. It makes sense that economic issues are at the forefront of concerns for Tajik and Kyrgyz people.

In 2010, in a poll concerning whether individuals perceived gender inequality in Tajik society, forty-four percent responded "yes" while forty-eight percent responded "no," and the remaining were unsure (International Foundation for Electoral Systems 2010). There appears to be a split in gender perceptions. Interestingly, the perceptions of where inequality exists are relatively equal between men and women with women recognizing slightly more inequality in the areas of job access, household responsibility, domestic responsibilities, and political involvement. Figure 2, located in the following section, reveals the results of this 2010 opinion poll conducted by the International Foundation of Electoral Systems (International Foundation for Electoral Systems 2010).

These results are interesting in light of what we know about women's involvement in educational institutions and the salary gap. The gap in salaries between men and women is around 54% (Aziatskii Bank Razvitiya 2006, 63). This is a significant gap. There is also a large gap in the amount of women pursuing higher education compared to men in Tajikistan which will be discussed in more length later in this paper. Women make up only about 30% of the population of post-secondary students in Tajikistan and the previous poll suggests that women do not view inequality in educational opportunities, which may point to the fact that women in Tajikistan are generally not very concerned with education. The previous public opinion poll

(Figure 2) also reaffirms that economic issues continue to be a prime concern of the people in the region as it is the biggest area in which gender inequality is evident to the people of Tajikistan.

It is apparent that economic problems persist and continue to affect the daily lives of citizens in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The introduction of contemporary Western political institutions and economic relationships has not been simple solutions to solve the inherent problems that exist in the current system we see in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (Niyazi 1999, 191). The problems that exist are deeper and more interconnected than western liberalism can solve. The Tajik civil war was an example of the collapse of social structures following independence and is a symbol of the wider implications that the fall of the Soviet Union has had on Central Asian states.

POST-SOVIET FIGURES

Figure 1: Public Opinion Poll Concerning Issues Facing the Kyrgyz People

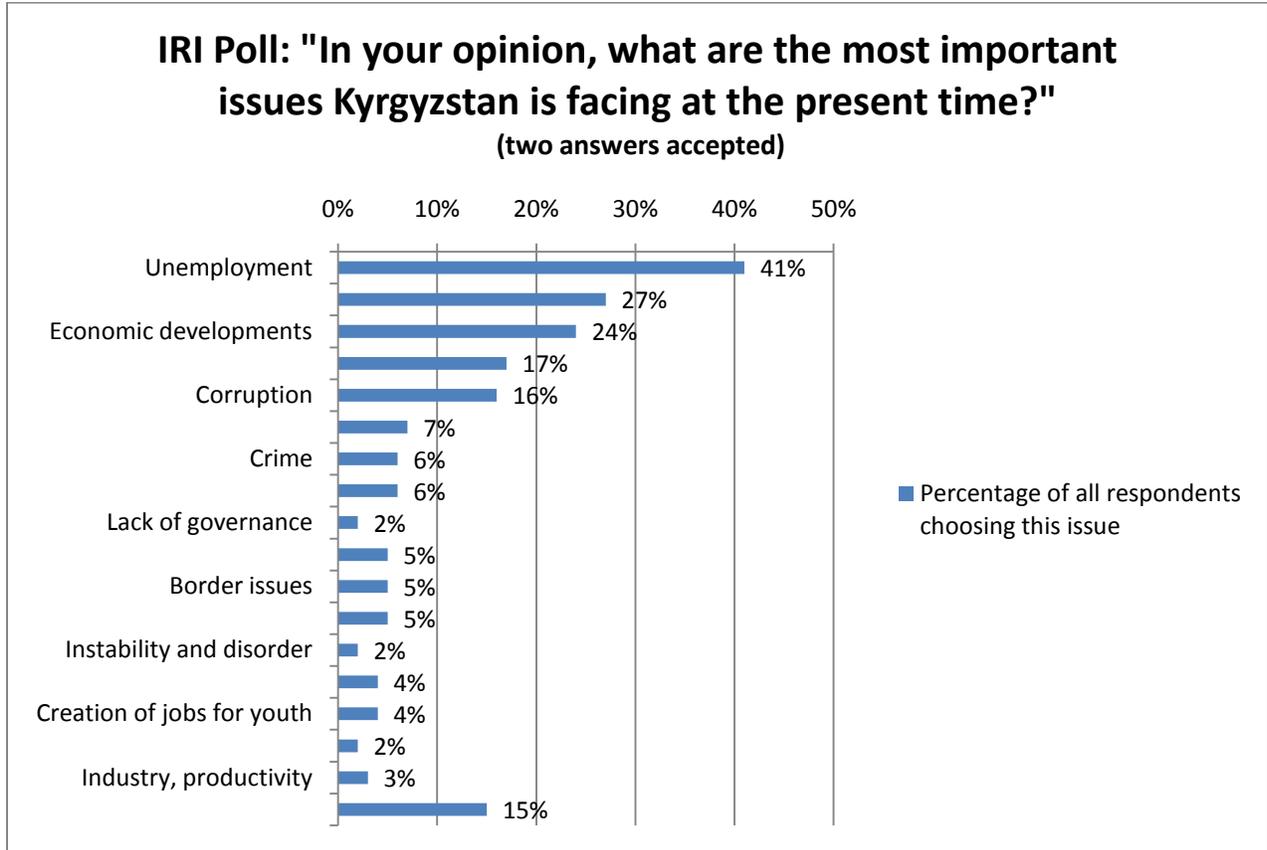
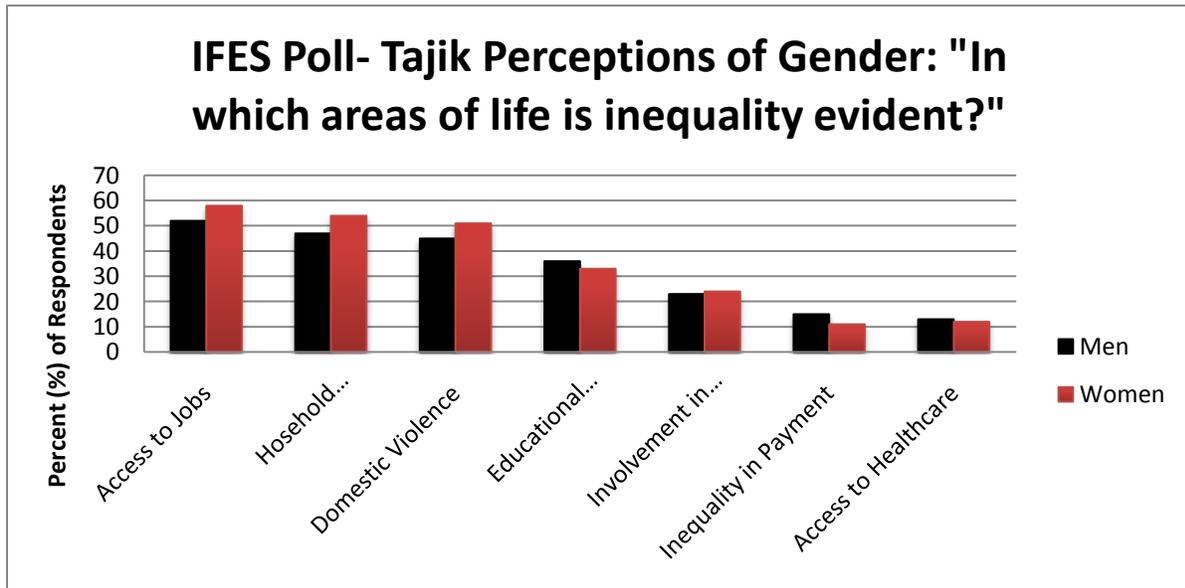


Figure 2: Poll Concerning Gender Inequality in Tajikistan



## CHAPTER 3

### NATIONAL IDENTITY

The Soviet Union's secularization of the public sphere contributed to the Soviet identity of Muslim Central Asians as modern and even European peoples. This identity, however, was shaken after the fall of the Soviet Union. Independence meant that many fundamental aspects of a nation state had to be either reestablished or created. The previous all-encompassing ideology of the Soviet regime needed to be replaced with a new construction of national identity upon which state and society could be based.

Akiner has argued that there are three elements that have largely contributed to the current gender situation in contemporary Central Asia: the restoration of Islamic values, the revival of pre-Soviet institutions, and the reinstatement of the patriarchal authority (Akiner 1997, 284). Each of these elements are significantly tied to the attempt to create a new historical narrative and national identity for states that have only existed for two decades. The leadership in the respective nations have played an important role in shaping the direction of their nation state.

The Soviet identity had been pervasive in the ideology and structures of the former regime. This had to be replaced after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the nations of the region looked to their pre-Soviet past to form their new identity. The result has been a resurgence of Islam and traditionalism. This trend has been referred to by some scholars as "re-traditionalism" or the "revival of masculinity" in the region (Graney 2004, 45). It is the establishment of more masculine and patriarchal societies that resemble the gender relations of the pre-Soviet period.

With the fall of the Soviet Union, the leadership in the region could no longer govern using the ideas of communism. High government officials of the former regime tended to

maintain power when statehood was achieved. For instance, the first-elected Tajik president Rohmon Navievich Nabiyev was the former First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Tajik SSR. The post-Soviet political situation became precarious due to the various identities competing for public support. Rakhman Nabiyev won the presidential election as communist candidate with a platform opposed to both democracy and Islam (Abazov 1993). It was his unwillingness to relinquish his Communist ideology and acknowledge the importance of nationalism in creating a new state which led to his removal from office less than a year after he was elected (Abazov 1993). The leaders of Central Asian states had to balance their previous actions as political actors who had supported the atheistic model under the Soviet regime with the revival of Islam that developed upon gaining independence.

Creating an overarching national identity is significant in gaining public support when a state is in transition. Nationalism was a way that Communist party members could rally public support and maintain their power after 1991; it gave them a sense of legitimacy. One way states have chosen to distance themselves from their previous Soviet identity is by removing vestiges of the Soviet regime. For instance, places which had been given a Soviet or Russian name were often renamed to represent a local hero (Abramson 2004, 68). In Tajikistan, there were strong movements to exclude Russian words that had entered into the local language and a renewed interest in teaching and learning their former Arabic script that had been Latinized under the Soviet regime (Khalid 2007, 126). This anti-Russian sentiment and revival of pre-Soviet traditions is an important aspect of post-Soviet life. One can see a trend of former communist leaders turning to nationalism as the driving force for gaining public support.

One concern, across the states of Central Asia, is that Islamic extremist groups will develop, which is why the region's leadership has avoided using Islam to legitimize the authority

of the state, and all new constitutions have included the provision that there shall be a separation of state and religion (Khalid 2007, 131). Too much of an emphasis on Islam could create instability and potentially result in violence. This concern is in part based on the Tajik civil war in which Islam played a role in the conflict's development and because of the Taliban's violent regime in nearby Afghanistan (Khalid 2007, 132). This has led to political elites implementing policies to strongly discourage this development. So while the states in the region adopt measures to reassert their Islamic traditions, they also combat Islamic extremism. The contradictory or competing nature of these policies and beliefs are impacting the confusing way in which women are viewed.

Ideas concerning women have also had to be rethought, which have been reflected in the changing images of women. Women, under the Soviet period, were often displayed as egalitarian workers dedicated to the cause of socialism. This, of course, needed to be reimagined. Graney notes that in the symbolism of post-Soviet states we have seen women imagined as the biological and cultural reproducers of the state (2004, 49). Zhurzhenko suggests that this symbolism stems from the idea that women represent the traditions of the nation state while also symbolizing the future of the state due to their childbearing capabilities (2004, 29) This image idealizes women as crucial members of society with inextricable ties to tradition as well as the future of the state. Although one would assume that this would result in an elevated and respected place for females in society, the reality is that this is a male-created construct which has resulted in the male leadership seeking to protect the females. This protection, although it may be unnecessary and even unwelcome, results in male political leaders giving instructions about the specific parameters of the proper sphere and behavior for women (Graney 2004, 48). Thus, female participation in politics has lessened in the last two decades as more patriarchal societies have

seemingly developed. This is a trend that is observed not just in Central Asian post-Communist states but also in Belarus, Ukraine, Russia, Hungary, Poland, and the former Yugoslavia (Graney 2004, 48-49).

Ayşe Güneş-Ayata argues there are two ways in which states have developed in the post-Soviet period. The nations of Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan have sought to move away from the West and their Soviet past by adopting traditionalism, which has led gender to become a fundamental issue concerning identity. By contrast, she argues that the nations of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are not anti-Soviet or anti-West and gender has not resulted in a core identity problem (2009, 211) I suggest that Tajikistan follows the Uzbek and Azeri model in which gender has developed as a formidable issue for its citizens.

## CHAPTER 4

### NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are important expressions of civil society that get considerable foreign support. Some consider civil society organizations to be better at addressing social problems and providing social services than even the state (Tusalem 2007, 362). It should be noted, however, that these organizations do have the ability to promote undemocratic principles as much as they can be used to further democratic goals. Nevertheless, many scholars have noted the positive impact that these organizations have on promoting democracy.

In contemporary Central Asia, one observable trend concerning NGOs is that a high percentage of them are staffed by women and focus on women's issues (Buxton 2009, 44-45). The declining participation of women in formal political institutions of the post-Soviet era has resulted in increased participation in informal political structures. Participation in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) allows women to balance the resurgence of traditionalism in which they are encouraged to focus on their duties as wives and mothers with the legacy of de jure equality they experienced under the Soviet era. NGOs provide women with a voice as they work to resolve many of the fundamental issues affecting women's role in society including poverty, democratic reforms, and other social problems.

In order to understand what sort of associations are considered NGOs, the United Nations definition is helpful for understanding these groups:

A nongovernmental organization (NGO) is any non-profit, voluntary citizens' group which is organized on a local, national or international level. Task-oriented and driven by

people with a common interest, NGOs perform a variety of services and humanitarian functions, bring citizens' concerns to governments, monitor policies and encourage political participation on a community level. They provide analysis and expertise, serve as early warning mechanisms and help monitor and implement international agreements. (United Nations Press Release 2003)

NGOs are useful for navigating the sphere between the individual and the state. They are associations that people choose to join based on common interests.

During the Soviet period, funds for social assistance were planned for and provided by the central government and applied to the state as a whole (Bauer, Green, and Kuehnast 1997, 77). Although the civil society and NGOs that we observe today did not exist during the Soviet period, some groups began to form during the Glasnost era. The first groups that were permitted to organize tended to focus on environmental issues since environmentalists' agendas were not considered a threat to the political powers of the period (Carley 1995, 305). The criticism of the Soviet system's treatment of the environment was a risky endeavor considering any sort of criticism of the Soviet regime was unheard of. In the second half of the 1980s, groups began to form in defense of indigenous Central Asian people. For instance, in Kyrgyzstan a group called *Erkin* worked to protect oppressed indigenous people and the Tajik movement called *Rastokhez* (Renaissance) which promoted the cultural and historical heritage of the Tajik people (Carley 1995, 306). Aspects of civil society appear at the end of the Soviet era, despite the fact that nongovernmental initiatives were illegal during this time. The groups that were created were primarily a response to the Soviet system and did not progress much into actual criticism of the political or social situation or call for many changes. Thus, NGOs are a relatively new arena for addressing social problems in both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Information concerning exactly how many NGOs are functioning in each state is unclear. In 2007, there were more than 15,000 registered non-profit organizations in Kyrgyzstan (USAID 2009, 129). The number of NGOs registered in Tajikistan is considerably fewer at only 2,300 in 2009. This, however, is a considerable increase from only 1,700 registered NGOs in 2008 (USAID 2009, 205). Many NGOs focus on issues of gender which helps promote the status of women. Many other NGOs do not focus on gender issues but, in recent years, gender related activities have become popular or even fashionable among non-governmental organizations (Güneş-Ayata and Ergun, 225). Therefore, while a majority of NGOs do not have as a mission to assist women, many do contribute to the improvement of the states of women.

In Kyrgyzstan, NGOs receive support from a variety of international organizations including the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Bank, and United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Assistance from foreign development agencies have been particularly influential in the development of more women's organizations in the region. NGOs in the region tend to be the source for furthering gender research. Additionally, NGOs tend to be the sources for the development of conferences and seminars that focus on women's issues and they often provide support for social groups including single mothers, mothers of many children, students, and the unemployed (Bauer, Green, and Kuehnast 1997, 77). These NGOs are often classified as "neoliberal," since so many of them receive financial assistance from Western organizations and many work on promoting economic policies that are closely aligned with the World Bank (Buxton 2009, 45). NGOs are a way in which Western states and Western organizations have been able to influence the region.

An example of an NGO that empowers women in Kyrgyzstan is the *Association of Women's Artists and Art Critics Support*. In 2000, this organization consisted of only sixty members, but they worked to support female artists, the elderly, and women with large families by selling female artists' artwork, which helps to fund the program (Bauer, Green, Kuehnast, 1997, 78). An organization such as this aids struggling women and empowers female artists to live off of their artistic creations. Due to financial reasons or social pressures, many women are unable or unwilling to get divorces because they have no means to support their family. This organization, even though not political, promotes female empowerment, since it provides a way by which women can earn a living. Another NGO that supports women is the *Nasyat International Association of Women*. This organization works to provide civic education to women in Kyrgyzstan and mobilize women for the democratic restructuring of society (Bauer, Green, and Kuehnast 1997, 80). Civic education is critical for developing a politically responsible populace.

In Kyrgyzstan, one particularly effective organization is called *InterBilim* and it works to support regional NGOs. *InterBilim* provides information and training to organizations, including non-profits and NGOs, which address poverty, health, environmental, educational and human rights issues (United Nations 2001, 50). In 2010, *InterBilim* began a two year program to encourage females in leadership positions in Kyrgyzstan. Around ninety women from NGOs are given leadership training in both the United States and Kyrgyzstan and provided with \$1,000 grants to promote their organization's cause (InterBilim). The project gets funding from the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. State Department and is a notable way in which women have been able to actively participate in political and social structures. Furthermore, *InterBilim's* support of NGOs in the state provides a foundational piece that

supports female participation in non-governmental organizations. Those are a few examples of organizations that assist women in Kyrgyzstan.

A 2010 International Republic Institute public opinion poll asked Kyrgyz citizens to evaluate twelve institutions ranging from branches of the government to the education system to religious institutions. The institution that had the least amount of negative responses from the public was NGOs (Kyrgyzstan National Opinion Poll 2010, 50). Since 1991, NGOs have gained considerable support from both the public and the government.

Despite the economic and social developments that have hurt the status of women as a result of the transition, many women have become active members in the transformation of society. (United Nations 2001, 51). NGOs provide support for women that, often, government programs fail to provide due to the plethora of problems facing a nation and with the competing ideas concerning the proper sphere for female activism.

In Tajikistan, women led thirty-five percent of all NGOs in 1999 compared to making up only three percent of parliamentarians (Falkingham 2000, 28). Many of the NGOs that exist in Tajikistan address gender-related issues. Despite the commitment women's NGOs have shown to addressing gender issues, there are many factors impeding the ability for these organizations to be fully effective in Tajikistan.

NGOs in Tajikistan have struggled due to a lack of understanding of their purpose from citizens and the government. They are sometimes thought to be a threat to the local and central political parties (United Nations 2001, 56). It appears that government leaders sometimes misunderstand "non-governmental" to mean "anti-governmental" which has created some level of government mistrust of NGOs. At times, this government distrust has resulted in organizations

being forced to disband. For instance, one NGO that dealt with women and elections was forced to disband and their seminars were stopped because it was thought to be interfering with official political matters (United Nations 2001, 57). This is affecting women and their ability to impact politics in the region and has created an atmosphere in which it is difficult for civil society to grow.

NGOs have had additional problems due to certain aspects of Tajik legislation. For instance, organizations must register with the government and pay a fee that may be as much as \$500 and for a country whose GDP per capita is \$732 this is a high sum (United Nations 2001, 56 and International Monetary Fund). These issues need to be addressed to elites who fear that NGOs are a threat to their power. In recent years, NGOs have had more success as the government has become more accepting of the idea that greater civil society will encourage peace. This is particularly important in Tajikistan in light of the instability and civil war that developed after independence.

One area of success for Tajik NGOs is the Women in Development (WID) Bureau. It is a quasi-governmental body which gets funding from the UNDP (United Nations Development Program) which actively promotes Tajik women's involvement in civil society. It assists local NGOs in developing women's projects and acts as a liaison between local and international organizations (Falkingham 2000, 29). It has been one of the more successful ways of fostering women's involvement in civil society. One effective way the organization has aided in the empowerment of women is by using credit schemes to allow women to establish small enterprises that otherwise would be difficult for them to do.

The global economic crisis has affected NGOs in the region, as considerable cuts in funding have been made. Additionally, the economic problems in the region have impacted the region's ability to fully utilize its NGOs, as funding is often tight. A UN study polled women NGO leaders in Central Asia concerning factors that limited their ability to expand and further their organization's cause and common problems were that women either did not have the financial means of getting certain technologies or they were untrained and therefore unable to use the technologies available to them (2001, 81). Although increased telecommunications and greater access to technologies, such as the internet, would be beneficial for female organizations in the regions, there are still some important issues that need to be resolved. The survey also suggested that NGOs could benefit from a number of resources but, unfortunately, many of them are in English and a majority of the women's limited knowledge of English was problematic. Finally, women suggested that increased foreign donations and investment in women's organizations in the region would play a significant role in addressing the problems that these non-governmental organizations face so that their organization can be more effective at meeting its goals.

An INTRAC study has noted that the emphasis on nationalism has resulted in very little regional cooperation (Buxton 2009, 56). If women's organizations could cooperate beyond their nations' borders, this would encourage greater participation of women in political processes across post-Soviet Central Asia. This could be particularly useful, if states with a strong foundation of female NGOs and more activism from females in civil society as we observe in places like Kazakhstan, could partner with similarly oriented organizations in the region to share resources.

Another critical problem for women in both nations is their general lack of understanding of women's rights. A UNESCO study reported that of their sample of Tajik women in higher education, ninety-four percent could not name a single international law or international document which addressed the rights of women and only twenty-two percent were familiar with any of their rights granted by either the Constitution or by national laws on women's rights (Falkingham 2000, 30). Education is a critical aspect to creating a powerful civil society and equality among men and women. In this region, one can observe a high level of discrimination towards women, despite the treaties and laws that these states have passed proclaiming the equality of women. Women have unequal access to jobs and receive unequal pay. There are significant problems with violence towards women which can be observed across the region. One of the first steps for combating these issues is by developing an educated and knowledgeable female population who can contribute to civil society by ensuring that women are granted the same access as men.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **EDUCATION**

Prior to becoming citizens of the Soviet Union, many Central Asian people had little access to education. For the Kyrgyz, this was partly due to their nomadic lifestyle before the twentieth century. The Soviet system had a profound impact on the education system of Central Asians. The free and compulsory education resulted in near universal literacy which has continued today. In Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, an impressive 99.9% of women between the ages of 15-24 are considered literate (UNESCO Literacy). This has been a positive result of the Soviet system on education.

Education is a crucial aspect to developing gender equality and creating a richer civil society with female participants. Scholars have suggested that development depends on empowerment and empowerment depends, first and foremost, on education (Clark, Roy, and Blomqvist 2008, 293). In addition, better education for women creates more opportunities for women to have greater roles in the economy which can promote economic growth, development, and female empowerment (Carbone and Lister 2006, 3). Education can only have a positive impact on women in society as it is a foundational piece of creating a rich civil society.

The quality of education was strongly impacted by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Today, a variety of problems continue to face the educational systems in the region. The economic issues that have plagued the post-Soviet region have made funding education difficult. Some schools have such financial problems that they do not have the most basic of amenities, such as heat in the winter (Hanks 2005, 371). Thus, it is even more difficult to outfit such

schools with things like computers or internet which is critical for students to gain the skills necessary to compete in a global market.

Another factor that is negatively impacting education includes that resurgence of nationalistic feelings towards language (Hanks 2005, 369). This has resulted in the desire of youth to be taught in their ethnic language rather than in Russian. There are very few educational texts that are in the vernacular languages, which has resulted in shortages of texts or texts that are very dated. Additionally, many of the Soviet teachers have immigrated back to Russia because they lack the ability to teach in the vernacular languages of the newly independent states. Thus, there has been a shortage of teachers in many regions.

In Kyrgyzstan, children must complete eleven years of primary and secondary education. A student may then choose either to pursue higher education at a university, an institute, or a technical school (Hanks 2005, 370). There are around forty institutes of higher learning in Kyrgyzstan and, surprisingly, a majority of students who attend universities are women. This is a particularly interesting trend and in direct contrast to what we see in Tajikistan.

Tajik children between the ages of 7 and 15 must attend school. The gender gap in Tajik education tends to begin after primary school. In 1998, there were only 89 girls per 100 boys enrolled in lower secondary school (Falkingham 2000, 58). It is after secondary education that the gap between male and female enrollment truly grows. Figure 3, which is displayed in the following section, reveals the worrisome trends in Tajik higher education. There are substantially fewer women pursuing higher education in Tajikistan than in Kyrgyzstan.

The chart shows the number of women enrolled in tertiary education in both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan between the years of 1999 and 2009 (UNESCO, Tertiary Education). It is

important to note that Kyrgyzstan's population is at around 5.3 million compared to Tajikistan's 6.9 million (CIA Factbook). The fact that Kyrgyzstan's population is smaller than Tajikistan's population suggests that the gap between women in higher education between the two nations is even larger than this graph represents.

Furthermore, Figure 3 reveals that Kyrgyz women are enrolling in tertiary education at a higher rate than those in Tajikistan. Tajikistan has over one and a half million people more than Kyrgyzstan. The number of women in Tajikistan receiving a post-secondary education is very small. In that ten year period, there has been an increase in Kyrgyz women pursuing education of around 100,000 compared to just 25,000 in Tajikistan.

As we have already seen, women are not pursuing education at a very high level in Tajikistan and proportionally they are also not doing well compared to their male counterparts. Figure 4, which is located following this section, displays the proportion of women in higher education from 1999-2009 in both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (UNESCO, Tertiary Education). Women in Kyrgyzstan are actually pursuing education at a higher rate than even men, as women are in the majority at Kyrgyz institutions. They make up more than fifty percent of the total population of students pursuing higher education. The only state in Central Asia that can rival this is Kazakhstan, in which women, in 2009, made up 58.3% of its population in higher education. Although we lack data for Turkmenistan, from what we do know Tajikistan's females are the least likely of any women in Central Asia to pursue tertiary education. At only 29% percent, a significant portion of Tajik women are going without any form of post-secondary learning.

Poor or limited education restricts one's ability to move in society. Women without education lack many of the skills necessary for gaining desirable employment. Women who lack education may be constrained due to financial burdens or a lack of knowledge of rights that they have. We see, in other post-Soviet states, that women with little education are more likely to be exploited and are often the prime victims of criminals, including traffickers. An uneducated society affects the economic output of the state and will make it increasingly more difficult for the state to compete in a globalized world.

One observable trend affecting the likelihood that a woman will attend an institution of higher learning is based on the marriage age. In 2005, it was reported that approximately fifteen percent of women in Kyrgyzstan were married before the age of nineteen which, according to the United Nations, is considered a child marriage and a human right violation. Only seven percent of those women went on to post-secondary education (UNICEF, Early Marriage, 11, 16). As it becomes increasingly more normal for women to attend post-secondary education, it may decrease the need or desire for youth to marry young.

In one of Harris' interviews with a Tajik man, he expressed the popular sentiment about sending women to universities, "It was not a problem during Soviet times, when education was free, but it is a waste to spend good money on girls. They will only marry and then belong to another family" (2006, 132). He is referencing the fact that women marry and then join the household of her husband's family. Generally, the woman will marry and live in the same household as her husband's parents along with her husband and she is expected to fulfill domestic services according to the mother-in-law's wishes. Harris explains her observations concerning the relationship between mother and daughter-in-laws which reveals how the most fundamental of social relationships are impacting females pursuing education:

“Mothers-in-law...usually refuse to allow their *kelins* (daughter-in-laws) to enter the workforce, as they need their labor at home. This is one reason they prefer uneducated girls, who supposedly will have little interest in getting a job. Moreover, it is feared that a women with a high level of education, or one who is financially independent, might decide to challenge the system whereby young women are subordinated to their families This explains why many Tajik parents prefer not to educate their daughters, and why Tajikistan has the lowest female employment levels of any former Soviet republic.” (Harris 2006, 97).

The deep traditions that have resurfaced in Tajikistan are having direct impacts on women and their roles in society. This is reflected in the very low numbers of women in the education system and the low numbers of female employment. The basic culture of the Tajik people is based on familial relations, and the traditional role of wives makes education an actual liability for marriage. Education is then considered to be a waste of money for someone who is simply going to get married and become a mother in another family’s household. The result is that women are being pressured to marry at a young age, provide domestic services, and have children without really participating in society beyond the family. These traditions are another reason we see fewer activities from females in the civil society sector in Tajikistan.

The education of Kyrgyz females is contributing to their increased participation in civil society. The same traditionalism that is affecting Tajik women does not, to the same extent, appear to be affecting Kyrgyz women. The pre-Soviet traditions and the nomadic culture of the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs have resulted in the greatest educational opportunities for women in post-Soviet Central Asia. Education is the foundation for empowerment and significant progress has been made for women in Kyrgyzstan.

## EDUCATION TABLES AND FIGURES

Figure 3: Female Enrollment in Higher Education in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan

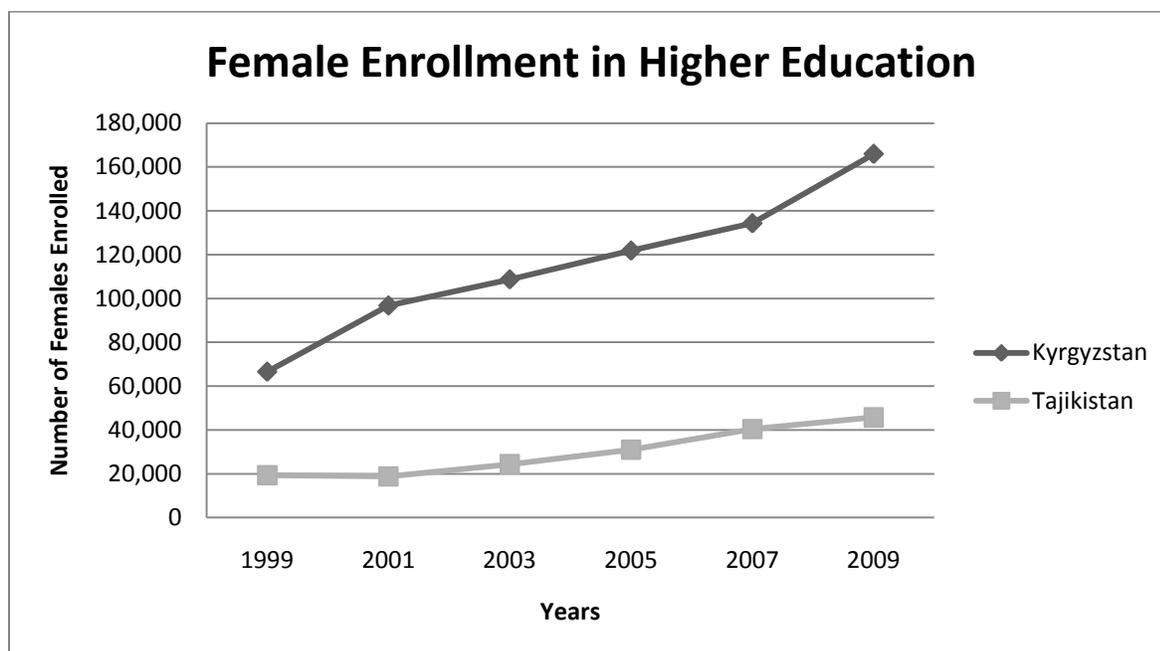


Figure 4: Percentage of Women in Higher Education in Central Asia

Year	Percentage of Females in Higher Education (%) <sup>1</sup>			
	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Uzbekistan
<b>1999</b>	53.4	50.8	25.4	44.6
<b>2001</b>	54.2	50.8	23.8	44.3
<b>2003</b>	56.6	54.1	25.0	43.2
<b>2005</b>	58.1	55.3	25.9	40.7
<b>2007</b>	58.1	56.1	27.4	41.0
<b>2009</b>	58.3	56.4	29.0	40.5

<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, data cannot be found for Uzbekistan

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **URBAN AND RURAL DIFFERENCES**

There are important differences in the experiences of women from urban areas compared to rural areas. These differences have impacted the status of women and the female experience in these states. The lives of women in rural areas offer considerably fewer opportunities to be involved in civil society. Additionally, there are fewer opportunities for women to gain employment or to be well educated in rural regions. Rural families tend to be poorer than urban families. Finally, rural areas were less impacted by the Soviet regime and its policies promoting egalitarianism which has resulted in even more traditional views on gender relations that contribute to the declining role of women in these regions.

In Tajikistan, only twenty-six percent of the population lives in urban areas compared with thirty-five percent of the population in Kyrgyzstan (CIA Factbook). Both of the states are predominately rural, even when compared to their neighboring states. In the remaining three Central Asian states, 48 percent of the population is urbanized putting Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan significantly below the average for urbanization.

Urban centers tend to be the first areas to modernize. Harris notes in her research of Dushanbe that urban families that have only recently moved to the city (perhaps just a couple generations prior) tend to replicate rural Tajik culture and maintain more traditional norms that are found in rural areas (2004, 18). Families who have lived in urban centers tend to have more family members who have attended institutions of higher learning which have provided opportunities to have more contact with the international community. These families tend to have more modernistic leanings and be more open to women seeking roles beyond the home.

Rural areas were more likely to continue traditions that the Soviet powers had attempted to stop including such things like polygamy. The resurgence of traditionalism has resulted in certain behaviors becoming socially acceptable, despite their formal illegal status as defined by the state. One example of this is polygamy. Although polygamy is illegal across Central Asia, the practice can still be found in rural regions. Women's groups have actually called for its legalization so that the state can protect junior wives who have no formal legal rights (Khalid 2007, 135). Although it appears that there is less civil society activity in rural regions, we do observe instances like these where women are organizing in order to promote social change.

Additionally, rural areas tend to be less diverse. Ethnic Russians in Kyrgyzstan tend to reside in the urban centers (Kolpakov 2001, 3). Thus, rural life tends to offer fewer connections to people with diverse backgrounds or divergent belief systems. This increases the likelihood of traditionalism which often results in pressure for women to marry young and settle in more traditional roles.

The economic problems that developed following independence disproportionately affected rural people. The newly formed governments could not maintain the same services that had existed under the Soviet regime. One of those services was day care and pre-school education. The opportunities for pre-school education have fallen considerably since 1991, particularly in rural areas. Figure 5, which is located in the following section, shows the drastic drops in the amount of urban and rural area pre-school institutions in Kyrgyzstan. This is primarily due to the state's inability to continue to fund these institutions. These institutions were valuable tools for mothers who sought employment and they ensured that even the youngest of children were getting an education but a majority has been closed with the economic problems that followed independence.

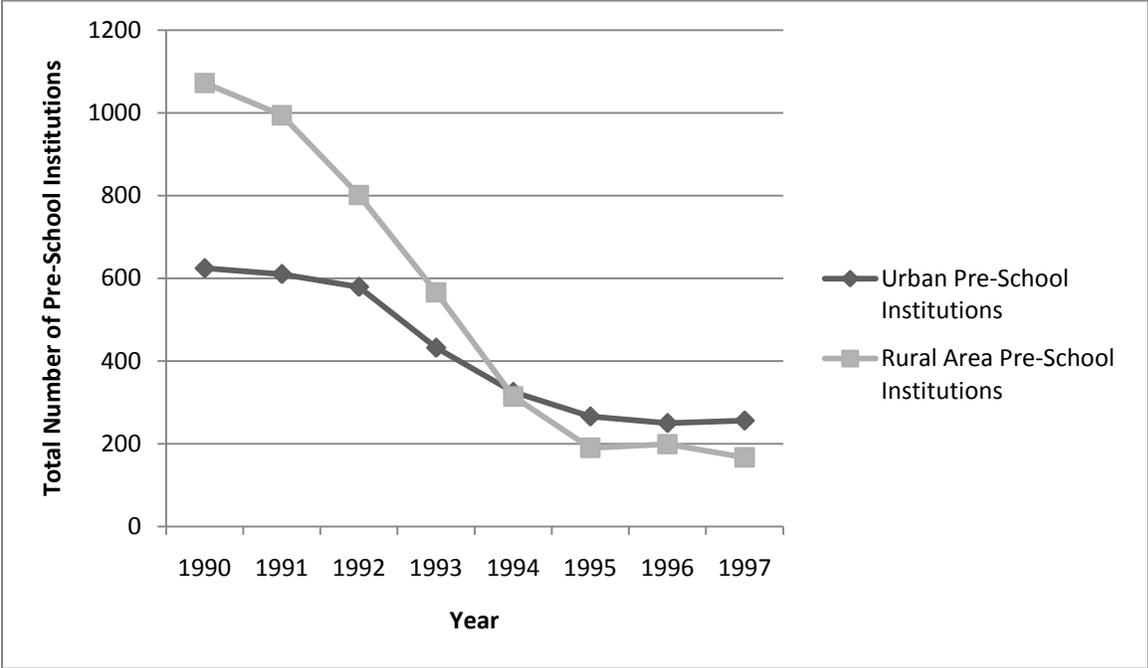
As Figure 5 reveals, children in rural areas, despite the fact that approximately 75% of youth live in rural regions, have fewer opportunities to attend pre-school than their urban counterparts (CIA Factbook). This is drastically different than the situation in the final years of the Soviet regime. In 1990, ninety- eight thousand children in rural areas had access to pre-school facilities while only thirteen thousand had that same opportunity in 1997.

Although pre-school education is not necessarily directly affecting the role of women in society, it is an indicator of post-Soviet societal problems that has disproportionately affected both people of rural regions and women. The limited public funds for such things as pre-school and day care creates problems for women who need to work in order to provide for their families.

Although both states are predominately rural, ten percent more of the Kyrgyz population is living in urban centers than the Tajik population. Tajik people are urbanizing at a rate of approximately 2.2% compared to only 1.3% of Kyrgyz people. This suggests that in a few generations from now, we should see greater proportion of people living in Dushanbe and other cities. Additionally, as the economies increase and foreign investment of NGOs increases, we may well see greater investment in organizations to promote the status of women in rural areas, since the majority of women do not live in urban areas.

RURAL AND URBAN FIGURE

Figure 5: Pre-School Attendance in Urban and Rural Areas



## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

The people of Central Asia have a unique understanding of gender due to the fact that the region is predominately Muslim and it also experienced seventy years of secular governance as part of the Soviet Union. The post-Soviet period is difficult to characterize due to the conflicting tensions that compete for the identity of Central Asians which include ideas of secular vs. religious, democratic vs. autocratic, capitalist vs. socialist, rural v. urban, European vs. Asian, and individualistic vs. communal values (Freizer 130). These competing tensions have an effect the development of national identities that play a significant role in the understanding of contemporary gender relations.

The fall of the Soviet Union created many difficulties for the newly independent states of Central Asia. The economic, political, and social issues that arose with the democratization and transition to a free market generated an environment that was particularly difficult for women in the region. During the Soviet period, women had de jure equality with men and formal policies existed to ensure female participation in education, the workforce, politics, and society. The fall of the Soviet Union impacted much of the de jure equality that had been observed under the Soviet system. We have seen a considerable drop in female participation in formal political institutions since these republics were granted independence in 1991. There are a number of factors that have led to the decline of female involvement which include the economic atmosphere and the resurgence of both traditionalism and Islam.

According to Clark, Roy, and Bloomqvist, institutions are shaped by the basic culture of society which is based on things such as religion and family (2008, 294). I argue that the reason

we see such substantial differences in each nation state is due to the beliefs that make up the basic culture. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the forced independence of the Central Asian republics, these states had to create all new institutions and form entirely new social, economic, and political structures. Along with creating these new institutions to replace the Soviet institutions, a new identity for the people in these states needed to be created to replace the communist ideology that had entered Central Asian life during the seventy years that Central Asians lived under the Soviet umbrella. We observe that the inner content of the pre-Soviet culture, including spiritual beliefs, continued through the Soviet period while the outer forms of spirituality (veiling, attending of mosques, female exclusion, etc) ended. Those inner beliefs date back to the pre-Soviet era and have continued to shape the historical identity of the people and post-Soviet gender relations.

Despite being very similar in economic terms, we have seen women in Kyrgyzstan take a much more active role in civil society than women in Tajikistan. The adoption of pre-Soviet norms was an important aspect of forming the national identity of these people. The pre-Soviet traditions of the Kyrgyz and Tajiks have substantial differences that have affected gender roles in this post-Soviet space. The nomadic nature of the Kyrgyz people resulted in men and women working together to herd flocks for hundreds of years prior to the introduction of either Islam or the Soviet ideology. Thus, respect for the work women could do created an environment of greater mutual respect than was found in many neighboring regions. The Kyrgyz people were converted to Islam only within the last 200 years or so while also spending seventy of those years living in a secular state that weakened the Islamic faith. Additionally, many of the indigenous beliefs can still be found in some areas of the contemporary Kyrgyz belief system. Today, unlike almost all other Muslim societies, Kyrgyz women are able to pray alongside men

in mosques. This is symbolic of how a more modern understanding of gender relations has developed alongside Islam in Kyrgyzstan.

The Tajik people, however, were converted to Islam almost a millennium ago. The pressure for Tajik women to return to more traditional roles is considerably stronger due to the Tajik people's deeper history with the Muslim faith and the norms that were so strong in the pre-Soviet period and included such things as female seclusion. This has created a post-Soviet society that is somewhat more traditional than what we observe in Kyrgyzstan. These factors have a direct affect on the opportunities for women in society.

The collapse of the Soviet Union liberated the ethnic Kyrgyz and Tajik and their traditions, culture, and interests were adopted in the post-Soviet political scene. For the first time, the states in Central Asia could create institutions to reflect their own national mindset rather than have their institutions shaped by Moscow's decisions. The fall of communism resulted in people wanting a group identity and community which is closely tied to the development of national identities in the post-Soviet era (Narozhna 2004, 300). The idea of community was an integral part of the communist ideology but following the collapse it was be replaced with nationalism. This vestige of the Soviet ideology is an important aspect that can be built upon for political mobilization.

Scholars of democratization suggest that a strong civil society acts as a check on government power. That has been observed in Kyrgyzstan. In the last decade, civil society in Kyrgyzstan has been particularly enthusiastic about asserting itself when society feels that its government has overstepped its power. In Kyrgyzstan we have seen successful organized protests result in a change of leadership. Kyrgyz citizens protested the 2005 parliamentary

election because of perceived voter fraud. It eventually forced President Akayev to resign and Bakiyev was later voted in as president in a fair election (Hess 2010, 31). Then in 2010, thousands protested the autocratic leadership that developed with the Bakiyev presidency. After days of protesting, forty deaths, and 400 wounded, Bakiyev was forced to resign (Levy 2010). Roza Otunbayeva, a woman, resumed the presidency and has promised to adopt democratic measures for her country.

A woman in the highest public office in the state is a reflection of the positive gender relations that have developed in Kyrgyzstan. Otunbayeva's role as president promotes the status of women in her state, since it gives women a prominent figure to look up to as she has been successful in gaining positions in a sphere that is generally dominated by men. The fact that she is a woman sets her apart from the other Central Asian leaders but she has also declared herself to be agnostic (Bukasheva 2010). This shows the nation's flexibility concerning religious matters and the state.

While we have seen greater political activities among women in Kyrgyzstan, we also observe greater female involvement in institutions of higher learning. In Kyrgyzstan, we see women entering tertiary education at a high rate. Women hold fifty-six percent of the seats in higher education which means that women even outnumber men in the pursuit of higher degrees. Education is critical for empowering women and developing a strong civil society and this has contributed to the high level of female involvement in things like NGOs in Kyrgyzstan.

The lack of educational opportunities for women in Tajikistan is one of the most alarming issues affecting women. The gender gap in education is higher in Tajikistan than in any other Central Asian state (although we lack data for Turkmenistan). A lack of education limits the

ability of women to move in society. It hurts the economy and offers little opportunities for change.

It is difficult to change behaviors that are so fundamental to a society. The reason we see so few women enter education is, in part, due to the young marriage age and what appears to be a stigma attached to educated women. For many, a higher level of education results in increased difficulties in finding a husband which makes education a real liability for many women and their families. Problems like these, which are so inherent to society and how it functions, are particularly difficult to solve. Over time, however, perhaps with greater NGO involvement, more individuals pursuing education and greater interactions with the outside world will result in changes in this worldview. It is to the benefit of the state and the international community to educate and empower women in Tajikistan where only around one-third of the female population is getting a post-secondary education.

A positive sign for change in Tajikistan is the recent governmental interest in educating rural women. A quota system called The President's Quota planned to enroll 4,275 individuals from rural areas in 2000-2004 in institutes of higher learning, but only 3,109 were enrolled in that time period (Brunner and Tillett, 142). It is not clear if the goal was not met because there was simply not enough interest from rural students or because of funding constraints. That averages out to 777.25 students each year and a majority of those students were females. Although this is not a very high number, it shows progress. The government is concerned about the situation of women in education in rural areas.

Women in rural areas are under increased pressure to return to traditional roles. The marriage age for rural women is considerably younger than the marriage age for women in urban

areas. Rural families tend to be poorer and are less likely to be able to afford to send daughters to institutions of higher learning. The state's economic problems have resulted in the inability for the state to continue social programs that one greatly benefited women.

Although the resurgence of traditionalism and the reestablishment of Islam have played a role in the pressure for women to return to traditional roles as wives and mothers, this is also based on the fact that there are simply not enough jobs or economic opportunities. These problems are apparent in opinion polls in both states. In order to create more active participation in politics and greater civil society, economic issues need to be addressed.

Economic issues appear to be the prime concern of the people in the region. It is estimated that the 2004 production levels of the Tajiks is less than half of what it was in 1991 (Kangas 2004, 1515). Access to employment appears to be the most pressing. Public opinion polls consistently reveal that jobs creation and economic issues are considered to be the most pressing issues among the general population. Not until the economic issues of the region are addressed will we see real strength come from civil society.

Civil society cannot flourish without some assistance from the government. The government must at least allow for the organizations to form and exist and allow some level of free speech and the right to organize. Many NGOs that the government feels are a threat to the regime are oppressed, forced to disband, or are met with arbitrary policies that can result in delays or other problems (Ergun 2005, 115). Consequently, some level of government support must exist. This has been increasingly observed with the growing number of NGOs in recent years.

Non-governmental organizations offer the greatest opportunities for women in the region. They empower women by providing important functions such as assisting women in finding jobs, teaching about women's rights, providing training, and fighting the discrimination and sexism that is so often observed in the region. International bodies that fund NGOs tend to provide grants to projects that focus on domestic violence, women's participation in politics, trafficking of women and children and reproductive health (Güneş-Ayata and Ergun 2009, 226). In recent years, we have seen an increase in the number of NGOs in the region and as organizations are in need of grants, it is likely that organizations will continue to focus on those issues.

Working in NGOs allows women to balance their roles as wives and mothers. Many NGOs work locally which allows women to stay close to home where they can resume their traditional roles before and after the workday. The status of an NGO job is not very high and therefore not perceived as a threat to the patriarchal systems that we observe in contemporary Central Asia (Güneş-Ayata and Ergun 2009, 227). If a woman was a prominent politician or had a well respected government job this could threaten this male dominance in the husband-wife relationship. Politics is a male dominated sphere, and it has been a difficult arena for women to enter in the post-Soviet period. Women, instead, are encouraged to maintain in the private sphere. Men, the ones who often define women's roles in society, have begun to consider female involvement in civil society to be acceptable since civil society is seen as, largely, unimportant (Güneş-Ayata and Ergun 2009, 227). Formal political institutions are considered the proper sphere for men. This, however, may be changing with the recent election of a female head of state in Kyrgyzstan.

Understanding why we see greater female activity in some parts of the world compared to others is beneficial for addressing problems in development. Understanding the distinct route women have taken in both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan reveals that the traditions of a culture are not easily forgotten and that the national identity of a people is a significant factor in the way society functions. International organizations and agencies, if they want to address female empowerment, must recognize this issue and be strategic with their funding and activities. It is important to recognize that NGOs which focus on women's issues are actively impacting women in society and, thus, it is beneficial to continue to fund these organizations. We know that job creation needs to be a top priority as these states' economic problems are having profound impacts on all areas of life. Opportunities for women in rural regions need to be addressed. Incentives for families to send their children to school and for women to seek higher education need to be developed.

The greatest benefit that resulted from the Soviet period was the profound impact that the Soviets had on the education system in Central Asia. The literacy rates in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are better than many other areas on the globe. Literacy and education is a foundational piece to an active civil society and politically engaged populace. Luckily, the foundations for greater female empowerment and involvement exist, and it is likely that women will continue to be active in civil society as it grows in Central Asia and as NGOs continue to address the important issues affecting Central Asian women.

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