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The Soviet Legacy and Women’s Rights in Central Asia

MARIANNE KAMP

In Central Asia the past, literally, is another country. That country, the Soviet Union, emphasized women’s rights, communist-style. Vladimir Lenin believed men and women must equally share the rights, duties, and opportunities of the proletariat, and none could remain in chains. Communists thought that women’s participation in paid labor provided them with autonomy and forced men to treat them as equals. At the same time, they stressed the inherent differences between men and women, teaching that motherhood was a woman’s socialist duty and establishing workplace protections.

In the five Central Asian countries that once belonged to the USSR, Soviet legacies, international influences, ideologies calling for defense of the national culture, and extreme economic dislocations have produced widely varying conditions for women. Yet all five enshrine male-female equality in their constitutions and are signatories to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979.

In their quarter-century of independence since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian states have been a laboratory for comparative assessments of the gender implications of varying social policies. Comparisons among Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan show how women’s rights have been jostled by cross-currents of globalization, traditionalization, economic changes, and differing governmental attitudes.

In a region where women’s participation in the paid workforce was significantly lower than for

their male compatriots and for women in Europe, and where cultural traditions pushed women to marry at a relatively young age and bear many children, Soviet schemes to boost the status of women fell short, at least as measured against the utopian goal of full rights and equality for all. However, measured against conditions for women in neighboring Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China in the late 1980s, Central Asian women in the Soviet era were living the dream, with high literacy rates, universal education through middle-school levels, free basic health care, the same (limited) political rights as men, and high levels of participation in a state-directed workforce that received pensions, insurance, and maternity and child-care benefits.

ENTER THE BOLSHEVIKS

These conditions were not present when the Bolsheviks battled their way into Central Asia and brought lands formerly ruled by the Russian Empire under the control of the new Soviet regime. In a March 1917 declaration, Russia’s revolutionary leaders offered universal enfranchisement without regard to sex, nationality, or religion, excepting only those who had been in the tsar’s service. To be sure, the Bolsheviks regarded the feminist struggle for enfranchisement as a project that defended bourgeois interests, and not as the core of true male-female equality. Still, as the Red Army defeated local resistance groups, Central Asian Muslim women were made citizens of the Soviet state, with all of the benefits—and restrictions—of that new status.

In 1927, the communist leadership believed Central Asia was ripe for a cultural revolution. In Uzbekistan, this resulted in an unveiling campaign, called the *Hujum*. Members of the Uz-

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bek Communist Party and its Women's Division thought that if Muslim women removed their face veils and veiling robes, they would become modern members of the new Soviet polity, able to attend schools, take up paid work, and reject longstanding cultural and religious traditions. The campaign's initiators were shocked when newly unveiled Uzbek women came under violent attack and in some cases were murdered. Under Joseph Stalin's leadership, however, the Communist Party did not back down from radical initiatives (some of which had far bloodier and more destructive results than the *Hujum*). Party leaders depicted the unveiling campaign as a battle between progress and the dark forces of religion.

The communist government's cultural revolution preceded a thorough economic upheaval featuring the takeover of all aspects of the economy, rapid industrialization, and collectivization of agriculture. Collectivization was ruthless and brutal, and it thoroughly reordered rural populations, devastating the lifeways of many Central Asians who practiced nomadic herding, including Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Turkmens.

However, not all of the reordering was destructive. Collective farms opened primary schools, and local government representatives pressed families to enroll their daughters as well as their sons. Veils, which had not been legally banned, were forbidden in schools, and young Uzbek and Tajik girls grew up without them. By World War II, mass education produced a steep rise in both male and female literacy all across Central Asia, a phenomenon similar to what has been seen in Afghanistan in the past ten years. Collective farms, or *kolkhoz*, enrolled women as members, often over the objections of men in their families. Throughout the Soviet years, women *kolkhoz* members filled the ranks of unskilled farm labor, though only a few held skilled jobs, which were dominated by men. Starting in the 1960s, women and men who retired from the *kolkhoz* received pensions, just like factory workers.

The Soviet Union disestablished religion in every way, closing down mosques in Central Asia and arresting mullahs. Sharia law, which had previously guided family relations for Central Asia's Muslims, had no more legal validity. Soviet family laws defined marriage very differently than Sharia,

forbidding polygyny, establishing minimum ages for marriage (in Uzbekistan, for example, 16 for girls and 18 for boys), allowing both husbands and wives to file for divorce, and favoring mothers over fathers in child custody determinations. Still, entrenched cultural traditions continued: Central Asian Muslims disapproved of divorce, regardless of Soviet law; rural families rarely allowed daughters to leave home to pursue higher education; and parents remained deeply involved in choosing whom and when their children (both sons and daughters) would marry.

HUMAN COSTS

In the late 1980s, when Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* policy lifted restrictions on reporting, stories about Uzbek women committing suicide by self-immolation quickly gained national and international attention. These searing images demanded explanation. Why were Central Asian women so unhappy under Soviet rule that they would end their lives in such spectacular fashion?

During the Cold War, when addressing Third World audiences, the Soviet Union's diplomats touted the achievements of Central Asians—including universal literacy and primary education, modern mechanized agriculture, electric power in many rural communities, and equal rights for women—to demonstrate the advantages of socialist development. In the final decade of the USSR, none of those achievements disappeared, but questions were raised about the human and cultural costs of Soviet development. The apparent suicide wave inspired simplistic, politicized analyses positing that these Central Asian women were protesting harsh working conditions in cotton fields, although in interviews, survivors linked their desperation to domestic abuse.

After Gorbachev reversed decades of official atheism in 1989, Central Asian communities began to open mosques and welcomed a flood of Islamic literature and Muslim missionaries from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Trends that were ascendant in the Middle East, such as wearing the *hijab* (head and body coverings for women), arrived with this influx. Central Asians who desired meaningful engagement with long-suppressed Islam were inclined to accept doctrines and prac-

A high proportion of women work in casual and temporary jobs that come with no labor protections and no benefits.

tices that Muslims from the Middle East and South Asia deemed correct, even though they were often far more conservative and rigid than traditional Central Asian views of Islam.

SHOCKS OF INDEPENDENCE

The dissolution of the Soviet Union arrived with little warning. It allowed each Central Asian state to claim independence, bringing an end to a way of life that had been tightly controlled but also predictable and stable. Members of the Kazakh, Uzbek, and other Communist parties, as well as prominent intellectuals, scrambled to redefine themselves and chart a trajectory for their newly independent states in the face of myriad pressures. Mindful that they needed to gain acceptance on the world stage, the new states each followed international norms as they drafted constitutions. Each included an article declaring that men and women were to have equal rights—not so much because of international pressure, but because the Soviet system had normalized gender equality under the law and a host of egalitarian gender practices.

These changes occurred against a backdrop of economic turmoil. The abrupt demise of the Soviet era had shattered a socialist economy that was already severely weakened but at least had provided almost all citizens with the basic necessities of life. In the newly independent states of Central Asia in the early 1990s, inflation soared, factories closed, the ranks of unemployed men and women swelled, and lifetime savings were lost in a matter of months. In this atmosphere, international consultants encouraged new presidents (most of whom were the former chairmen of their respective Communist parties) to embrace political pluralism and neoliberal capitalism. At the same time, Islam was gaining popularity, with active encouragement from abroad.

Political leaders in each of the five new nations responded to this head-spinning concatenation of internal economic shocks and external pressures in ways that were shaped by their own tenuous hold on legitimacy, and by conflicting desires for freedom and stability. In Tajikistan, a civil war erupted between self-styled Islamist-Democrats and the inheritors of the Communist Party. Uzbekistan's president, Islam Karimov (who kept his grip on power until his death this September),

ended a brief opening for Islamic political activism by crushing the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which turned to violence and eventually joined the war in Afghanistan.

Kyrgyzstan opened up to competing political parties, to international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), to international loans in an effort to staunch economic decline, and to consultants' advice on liberalizing the economy and joining the World Trade Organization. Missionaries of all stripes, representing groups ranging from Hizb ut-Tahrir, which seeks to reestablish a caliphate, to Turkey's pro-business, evangelical-style Gülen movement, operated freely in Kyrgyzstan.

Kazakhstan, with its larger, more diverse, and more industrialized economy, faced the same downturn as other post-Soviet states. President Nursultan Nazarbayev (still in power today) sought remedies through foreign direct investment, international trade, a stated commitment to political pluralism, and investments in higher education. The wave of Islamic fervor arrived in

Kazakhstan later than in the other Central Asian states. Meanwhile, Turkmenistan's communist leader, Sarparmurat Niyazov, became its new president for life, imposed full-fledged Stalin-style controls over the nation, and

placed his faith in developing the country's natural gas resources.

The late Soviet economy's crisis generated a burgeoning set of problems for each newly independent state. As industries closed and salaries in state organizations—inadequate to begin with in the face of galloping inflation—went unpaid, the unemployed turned to casual labor and small-scale entrepreneurship to support their families. In the 1990s, many women took up petty trade in clothing, household goods, or home-produced foods, and broke with tradition by traveling independently.

MIGRATION EFFECTS

By 2000, the chaos of economic transition had subsided. Oil and natural gas production created wealth for both Kazakhstan's neoliberal economy and Turkmenistan's pseudo-communist system. Russia's economic resurgence at the time attracted enormous numbers of labor migrants from impoverished Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and also from Uzbekistan, where pressure on workers to hand-

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pick cotton to meet government-imposed quotas provoked rural discontent.

Most of the workers who went abroad were men, imposing new stresses on family life in Central Asia. Remittances raised living standards for a great many households, reflected in new houses that began popping up in communities throughout the region. But in many other cases, men who went abroad for work did not send any of their earnings home, and sometimes abandoned their Central Asian wives and children, remarried, and set up new households in Russia. Divorce rates rose, as did polygyny, as some abandoned wives became the second wives of prosperous men in order to defend their own social reputations and support their children.

Eventually, Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Uzbek women also joined the labor migration flow, with their spouses or by themselves. That gave them newfound economic independence and helped them assume more control over their own destinies, but it incited a wave of governmental and social concern in each country that “our women” were forgetting national values. In every country in the region, school textbooks and government-sponsored television programs featured images of women in ethnic dress and in roles as mothers, homemakers, and performers of national styles of dance and music far more often than they portrayed women as doctors, businesspeople, workers, and government officials.

HERO MOTHERS

Currently, although more than 97 percent of girls complete primary education in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, they are less likely than their counterparts in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan to enter higher education. In Tajikistan females make up 30 percent, and in Uzbekistan 40 percent, of students in universities and other academic institutes. (For perspective, this is similar to the United States' 1950s gender disparity in higher education, when the GI Bill and social attitudes combined to privilege male enrollment.) Young women are more likely to take jobs as teachers or health-care providers than to enter other professions, and they are far less likely than men to be hired for full-time positions in business and government. A high proportion of women work outside the home for pay in casual and temporary jobs that come with no labor protections and no benefits but may be flexible enough to mesh with family duties.

In Kazakhstan, support for women's rights in education and the workplace is coupled with an emphasis on women's role as the nation's mothers. With oil wealth facilitating growth across many sectors of the economy, Kazakhstan diverged significantly from the other Central Asian states in social development. Kazakh women, who enroll in higher education at higher rates than Kazakh men, are far more likely to be employed in formal positions that carry benefits than in casual labor.

However, concerned that the country's sparsely populated territory and long borders will tempt the neighboring giants Russia and China to move in, the Kazakh government has sought to increase the population with a pro-natalist policy that is a direct descendent of a Soviet program, and with offers of resettlement support to ethnic Kazakhs in China. As in the USSR, and Russia today, Kazakhstan offers lump-sum payments for the birth of children, with an increasing amount for each additional child. A woman who gives birth to a seventh child earns a gold medal and the designation Hero Mother, and the state makes monthly support payments for children up to age 18.

However, in recent decades Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan have all had higher fertility rates than Kazakhstan, though the rates have declined from more than five children per woman in the late Soviet years to between two and four today. None of them shares Kazakhstan's concern that the nation's main ethnic group could be overwhelmed by outsiders, and none pursues an active pro-natalist program. Support payments for children are aimed at families below the poverty line, and all have active family-planning programs promoting contraceptive use. Uzbekistan encourages women to agree to sterilization after a number of births—a practice that might be seen as sexist, implying that men's virility should not be threatened through vasectomy—though it may simply reflect the fact that a mother giving birth, unlike a new father, is available for health-care interventions.

Turkmenistan's social conditions are quite opaque, given that the closed state permits barely any social research. While using natural gas revenues to subsidize housing and food, the state has imposed Soviet-style controls over its citizens' movements. Any analysis of the fact that the state practically requires women to dress in traditional, ankle-length embroidered dresses inevitably lacks context. However, it is safe to say, at the very least,

that Turkmen women are encouraged to embody traditional national culture.

ISLAMIC TRADITIONS

Trends in Islam vary across Central Asia, both because Islam was traditionally quite diverse and because widely divergent sects have spread their own brands of the religion by sending missionaries, opening schools, and encouraging pious youth to enter Islamic institutions abroad. Drawing on teachings spread by new Islamic movements in the region, popular religious teachers of both sexes differentiate women's and men's roles, designate them as complementary rather than as equal, and laud motherhood and staying at home to raise children as a woman's sacred duty. Over the past two decades, forms of the hijab that resemble styles worn by women in Muslim countries of the Middle East have increased in popularity, signifying women's self-identification as devout Muslims.

Uzbekistan's government has remained suspicious of these religious trends, and has used various forms of pressure to tamp them down, from forbidding hijab-wearing at universities to controlling mosques and preachers, and promoting national clothing styles for women that make use of traditional textiles. Kyrgyzstan's government, by contrast, has allowed nonviolent Muslim missionary organizations and preachers to operate with little constraint, and the number of women who don the hijab and articulate new Muslim teachings about gender has risen rapidly.

In Tajikistan, which has a secular constitution, the president's secular party has dominated the parliament since the end of the civil war in 1997. But an Islamist opposition party has been allowed to operate, and parliamentarians frequently use Sharia-inspired logic in their debates when discussing issues such as virginity tests that would control the nation's women. Tajikistan's parliament did not include virginity tests in new marriage laws, but parents often demand the tests when arranging marriages.

While many citizens in Central Asia appreciate that independence has paved the way to integrating faith fully into their lives, governments fear that devout Muslims are susceptible to radicalization, and that Islam may give rise to serious political opposition. Those fears often mean that devout, mosque-attending men fall under surveillance. There is less official attention to pious Muslim women; in most places, women have not taken

up mosque attendance but instead meet, as they traditionally did, in women-only, women-led religious gatherings.

GLOBAL INFLUENCES

Independence brought a variety of new influences besides international Islam into Central Asian countries. In the 1990s, governments sought aid and advice from a vast array of international organizations that offered their expertise on everything from legal codes, banking, and agriculture to education, health care, and women's rights. Among the NGOs that formed in Central Asian states with funding and support from international donors, many made women's rights or gender issues central to their mission. In fact, NGOs introduced the term "gender" (locally pronounced with a hard g) and encouraged governments to incorporate gender awareness and gender equity in their plans and programs.

NGOs offered very attractive employment opportunities to a small number of well-educated and multilingual Central Asian women, but often had difficulty designing programs that addressed the real needs of ordinary women whose countries were in the throes of economic crisis. Programs to encourage equality on the job seemed irrelevant when formal workplaces were collapsing. Microlending projects, advertised as empowering women, could help to raise individual women's entrepreneurial earnings, but were not designed to construct a new and more viable economic system.

Still, NGOs linked the internal policy sphere in each country to international "best practices," and activist women began to raise old issues using new language. Thus, "domestic violence" entered the lexicon in place of a vaguer phrase that had previously been commonplace: "belittling of women." NGOs also offered new strategies to address those issues.

In the Soviet period, Central Asians generally would not have thought of going to court to seek remedies for family violence. Wife-abusers whose actions seemed excessive could face punishment through party censure or workplace sanctions, or they might be dressed down before an informal council of the wife's male relatives or neighborhood elders. NGOs have carried out surveys demonstrating that domestic violence is prevalent throughout Central Asia, and that women are generally blamed by both males and females, reflecting the societal view that they must have done something to merit physical punishment.

As elsewhere in the world, NGOs have promoted solutions including trying to change attitudes, providing hotlines and shelters for abused women, offering legal advice for court cases against abusers, training police, and promoting legislation to punish offenders.

Political leaders in Central Asian states have not been eager to embrace this cause. Still, numerous women's shelters have been set up in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, and the groups that run them have worked to strengthen legislation against domestic violence. During a period of instability in 2005, Uzbekistan forced most foreign-sponsored NGOs to close, including those that were addressing domestic violence. Uzbekistan now urges women facing abuse to turn to traditional interventions, or to seek help from neighborhood committees or family members.

UNACKNOWLEDGED LEGACY

Research on women in the independent states of Central Asia tends to be problem-driven. Studies funded by international donors seek to address and remediate problems, as do NGOs. They do not have the intention of exploring or praising state successes, or women's own successes in addressing issues or improving conditions. A researcher who tries to learn about what has become of women's rights in post-Soviet Central Asian countries will find plenty of information about domestic violence everywhere, nonconsensual bride-kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, the rising rates of marriage for minor girls in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, women's unemployment and the wage gap, and so forth.

Central Asian governments and their associated Women's Committees usually tell a different story, focusing on the fact that all of these countries provide universal education for girls as well as boys, enshrine equality in the law, and are making efforts to improve maternal health, reduce infant mortality rates, and increase young women's enrollment in higher education. All governments point to the fact that women hold nearly 20 percent of parliamentary seats (except for Turkmenistan, where it is 26 percent), occupy high positions in business and government, are respected as mothers and shapers of the nation, and have rights to paid maternity leave if they hold formal, salaried jobs.

*Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Uzbek
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Women who hold high positions in government occasionally acknowledge that the laws on the books are not entirely effective, mechanisms for making legal equality a reality are lacking, and social attitudes limiting women's ambitions persist. But those same highly placed women might also draw an observer's attention to the many creative ways in which Central Asian women confront the challenges they face. They promote microlending to women entrepreneurs, as well as celebrate women who take prominent roles in business and in local and national government, and, of course, women in the performing arts and other cultural fields. Notably, one Central Asian nation, Kyrgyzstan, has had a woman president, Roza Otunbayeva, whose experience in international diplomacy proved valuable when she was tapped as interim leader between that nation's 2010 revolution and national elections the following year. She stepped down in the nation's first peaceful transfer of power.

In the Central Asian laboratory of nation-states, Kazakhstan's engagement with globalization, prosperity in the 2000s, and governmental and social attitudes supportive of women's rights combined to make gender equality something close to a reality. Kyrgyzstan has been more politically open to all ideas—global, Islamic, and nationalist—sparking wide debate about women's rights and roles. However, its fragile economy means that activism on social issues, while permitted by the government and supported by foreign donors, takes a backseat to more pressing concerns.

Uzbekistan maintains state ownership or control of many core resources, and uses some of the revenue to support selected women-friendly policies such as providing health care and boosting the number of women in higher education. Because of the government's closure of NGOs, state-run agencies are the only advocates for women, much as was the case in the Soviet period. Tajikistan, after ending its civil war, combined very limited political pluralism with heavy dependence on international loans and investment, and remittances from migrant laborers, to support a very fragile economy. Women's interests, under attack in the parliament, have found important but inconsistent support from external donor organizations and from a few bold Tajik feminist voices.

Although all Central Asian states place some limitations on speech and on the kinds of par-

ties that are allowed to participate in politics, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan permit a wider scope for such freedoms than the other three. Issues such as LGBT rights are raised somewhat openly in those two countries, but while human rights organizations encourage governments to adopt international norms, advocates face an uphill climb. Those who publically criticize illegal but widespread practices such as polygyny, marriage of minor girls, and bride-kidnapping, or call for openness to sexualities outside of heterosexual norms, often elicit defensive, nationalistic responses.

Central Asia's new Islamic movements preach gender complementarity (the assumption that women's roles are different than men's roles, and each should perform his or her God-given gender role) rather than gender equality. But Islamic organizations are often condemned as foreign influences, and only in Tajikistan has an Islamic party been able to participate in parliament, where it was instrumental in banning women from attending prayer in mosques, a traditionally masculine practice in Central Asia. In Kyrgyzstan,

activists succeeded in getting the parliament to strengthen legal penalties for bride-kidnapping, but in Kazakhstan parliamentarians who regard that practice as a national tradition have resisted restrictions on it. When any sort of challenge to the gender order can be dismissed as the result of foreign influence, it is hardly surprising that women who make their voices heard through government positions or in NGOs choose to focus their energy on less controversial women's rights initiatives in areas such as education and health care.

None of the Central Asian states embraces its Soviet heritage: they view the USSR as an empire that destroyed lives, crushed nations, stripped away freedoms, and allowed no dissent. Each Central Asian state defines itself through positive associations with its deeper ethnic past, and its leadership's chosen path to development and prosperity. Nonetheless, while Soviet efforts to promote gender equality are not openly celebrated, the idea planted in the region during that now-disdained era—that men and women should be equal under the law—is still holding fast. ■