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The collapse of the Soviet Union gave the unexpected gift of independence in 1991 to five new states in Central Asia-Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. In common with other post-socialist countries, these states are currently going through a transition period characterized by serious and worsening social and economic problems. The 55 million people who live in the region are facing problems of overpopulation, a chronic decline in living standards, and ecological crisis. There has also been a revival of patriarchal traditions and a reversal of female emancipation: The combination of Soviet and Muslim components has led to an uncommon environment of gender discrimination, which has been accentuated by the economic and social crisis and by crude portrayals of femininity from the West.

During Soviet times, the Communist Party emphasized the importance of women as mothers and workers, and it is undeniable that great progress was made in many aspects of women's life-healthcare, paid maternity leave, and numerous kindergartens all testify to this. There are other examples, too. In a break from tradition and Islamic norms, women gained custody of their children after divorce. Greatly improved healthcare meant that, for the first time, women made up more than 50 percent of the population. The literacy rate among women was almost 100 percent, and the majority of doctors, chemists, and biologists in Central Asia were women-a feature unusual even in developed countries. The high level of women's employment was proclaimed as a supreme achievement of "developed socialism."

However, there is also a darker side to the story. The employment of women in manual and heavy jobs—there seems no sense in women working in mines and heavy industry—the scant social benefits for mothers, the poor development of the social sphere, and the burden of housework, which remained a female preserve, put excessive pressure on women. Under the Soviet system, women were burdened with the triple roles of full-time employment, full-time mothering, and full-time domestic responsibilities. This trap was tightened by the tradition in Central Asia to sanctify hard work and the wringing of sweat, and to grant these almost ennobling qualities.

Tradition upholds that household chores are the sole preserve of women, and that women are responsible for the care of children, husband, and parents. Under the Soviet model, the housewife's status was extremely low and she lacked opportunities and privileges. In the post-Soviet era, the burden of household labor—lowly[IKN1], unpaid, and unrecognized—has become even greater. The Soviet system of social welfare has fallen into decline, placing responsibility for the care of children, the sick, and the elderly mainly on the shoulders of women and girls. The number of day-care centers has decreased precipitously: in Kyrgyzstan alone, the number fell by 75 percent from 1990 to 1994. According to surveys, only 27 percent of women with preschool children now make use of day-care centers; 45 percent simply cannot afford them. Many women, especially in rural areas, are compelled to leave their children without supervision.

And there are other kinds of labor discrimination against women in Central Asia. For example, the Soviet romanticization of the use of female and child labor in agriculture has led to a new stereotype taking hold, that only women should work in the fields. As a consequence, the traveler in post-Soviet Central Asia will still see only women's and children's backs in the fields. The Soviet authorities and their successors transformed the region into a machine for cotton production, and in doing so not only created an environmental crisis but also sacrificed the health and dignity of millions of girls and women.

The Impact of Ethnic Traditions

The traditional cultural values of Central Asia survived throughout the Soviet era, despite the many advances that were otherwise made in science, culture, healthcare, and politics. Women from Central Asian national groups were expected to lead a life of double standards: as productive, equal workers according to the Soviet system, and as obedient, second-class citizens according to their ethnic traditions.

The cult of fertility. Ethnic traditions play a very important role in the lives of all the indigenous groups of Central Asia. One of these traditions is the cult of fertility, which is based on the widespread belief that children bring good luck and are pleasing to God. The desire to produce many sons has also been rooted for thousands of years in more tangible social, economic, and environmental[1] reasons, including high infant mortality and the need to maintain large families to support the natural economy and to wage war.

A woman's fertility or barrenness determined her status in traditional society in Central Asia. In the past, a barren woman among the Kyrgyz was derogatorily called kuu bash—"dried-up skull." Even today, women who have not borne children can be treated with scorn. The traditional preference for sons also remains strong, and examples of the custom of continuing to bear children until a boy has appeared are found all over Central Asia. Many women who have only daughters keep bearing until the birth of a son, often not only under the pressure of the husband and relatives but also because of custom. When a girl is born instead of the desired boy, she may be given a special name in the superstitious hope that this will make the next child male.

Some of the customs and traditions that grew up around the issue of a woman's fertility have proven harmful and counterproductive. The custom for extremely early marriages for women, for example, often led to premature sterility and contributed to the early death of women and prolonged lactation. The effect on the birth rate was obviously negative. The difference in spouses' ages, especially in polygamous marriages, similarly suppressed the birth rate. In pre-Soviet times, therefore, and despite the frequency of births, families often had a very small number of children because of the high newborn and infant mortality rates.

In the more favorable Soviet conditions, when child mortality was sharply reduced, tradition steadfastly continued to identify a woman's good fortune with her ability to produce many children. The combination of the traditional desire for large families and falling mortality rates—the result of better Soviet medicine and healthcare—produced an unprecedented increase in the population of Central Asia, creating a multitude of other problems.

Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have the highest birth rates in Central Asia. In Uzbekistan, an average of 4.1 children are born to every woman of childbearing age, and approximately 700,000 children are born every year. The average birth spacing is 1.5 years, with 12 percent of women

giving birth twice during one year and 80 percent twice during two years. This frequency of reproduction puts mothers and children at high risk—within the CIS, it is Central Asian mothers, mainly Muslim, who are most likely to bury their children. Tajikistan is the most vulnerable to infant mortality.

Substantial variations of fertility can be observed among the different ethnic groups of the Central Asian states. In the Kyrgyz Republic in 1996, the fertility rate for Kyrgyz and Uzbek women of childbearing age was 26 infants per 1,000 women; for Kazakh women, it was 17 infants per 1,000; for German, 18; and for Belorussian, Ukrainian, Russian, and Tartar women, 7-9 infants. Intergroup fluctuations are affected by many factors, including the level of education: women with a higher level of education, as a rule, have fewer children.[2]

Abortion. Independence brought with it to the leadership of the Central Asian republics a desire to increase their ethnic group's population and thereby their power, both within the state and within Central Asia as a whole. This political motivation to increase the population combined with the societal fertility cult have a huge negative impact on women in the region. For example, there is a chronic lack of access to contraceptives, to the point where abortion is the major form of contraception in the cities of Central Asia. In Tajikistan, abortion is the third most important cause of both maternal and infant deaths, despite the number of cases falling from 255.8 abortions per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 197.6 per 1,000 in 1996.[3] These high rates of abortion do not correspond to higher levels of choice or independence for women-in most cases, abortion is the only option available.

This tragedy is compounded by the fact that in rural areas of Central Asia, abortion, like all contraception, is seen as sinful. According to both Soviet and Central Asian traditions, the woman bears sole responsibility for the prevention of an unwanted pregnancy: pregnancy is not considered to be a man's concern. Abortions are thus easily condemned as a violation of tradition, with little attention paid to the potential harm they can do to the mother's health. In the Kyrgyz Republic, for example, newspaper articles have labeled women undergoing abortion as child killers. In Uzbekistan, post-independence authorities quickly stilled a debate that began in 1988 between writers, journalists, and social scientists about issues of childbirth and reproductive rights for women. The authorities apparently saw the debate as potentially having a negative effect on the desired rapid population growth.

Early marriage. Throughout Central Asia, there is a tacit understanding that girls should marry early—in rural areas, traditionally at 16–17 years of age. A single woman over 20 is considered to have been sitting around too long and is derided as an "old maid," with the result that many parents will rush to give their daughters away out of fear of not finding a suitable husband later. In certain rural areas of Central Asia it is considered that after the age of 20 an unmarried woman will only marry a widower, a divorced man, or an undesirable suitor. Even her bride price will be lower, such that a woman with a university degree will frequently have a lower bride price than a younger woman who has not completed secondary education. In the struggling economies of Central Asia, poverty is thus becoming a significant contributing factor to underage marriages.

Early marriages also increase childbearing. According to recent sociological research in Uzbekistan, 47 percent of women marry before turning 20, and the majority of women have children in the first year of marriage. The interval between marriage and the birth of the first child is usually very short. Among married women under 20 years of age, 37.5 percent have children, including 17.2 percent who have two children or more.

Polygamy. Discussions advocating the benefits of polygamy are becoming more common in Central Asia. Polygamy has been proposed as a solution for women who have difficulty finding a husband, as a means of alleviating poverty for widows and their children, and as a way to curb prostitution and the trafficking of women. Some politicians have also suggested that it may provide a way to achieve their important goal of increasing their indigenous population.

The national parliaments of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have seriously debated polygamy. In Tajikistan, where civil war has left tens of thousands of women widowed and where there are numerous cases of polygamy, the calls are especially strong. Human rights and the quality of life of women have not featured in these discussions.

Kidnapping of brides. The subject of the kidnapping of brides has been sensationalized in some sections of the Western media. The phenomenon needs to be taken more seriously. In Central Asia, as in the Caucasus, two types of bride kidnapping traditionally exist. The first of these occurs without the agreement of the bride and her family; the second, also against the will of the family, but with the consent of the bride. A third type also occurs, although it is barely deserving of the term kidnapping: that is, when all parties agree to a staged abduction in order to avoid the extremely expensive traditional wedding ceremony.

Bride kidnappings are especially common among former nomadic peoples such as the Turkmen, Kyrgyz, and Kazakh. In the past, the custom was explained by socioeconomic factors. The bride was typically sold by her parents in a business transaction, and to avoid being sold into an unwelcome marriage some young women would agree to elope with their lovers. This type of consensual kidnapping could only take place if the groom's relatives were sufficiently influential and willing to support him. The more heinous type of kidnapping, and one which is a quintessential form of gender discrimination, is the kidnapping of unwilling brides. During Soviet times, the frequency of this crime actually increased, despite the many laws that were passed to prevent it. It is still practiced in some former nomadic societies.

In post-Soviet times, the third type of kidnapping, the staged abduction, has become quite common. This can be considered a form of protest against the expense of traditional marriages, but also as a protest against the tradition that daughters should be obedient.

There has been very little research into the subject of bride kidnapping in the region. The real scale of kidnapping without the consent of the bride, especially in remote rural areas, is unclear. There are no programs to eliminate this practice, and discussion of it remains a taboo.

Levirate. A closely related problem among traditionally nomadic societies is that of levirate—the obligation of a widow to marry a brother or close relative of her dead husband. This practice was also forbidden in Soviet times, although it still occurred in remote areas. With the new vulnerability of women in the post-Soviet era, it seems the custom of levirate is continuing. It is rarer than kidnapping, but still exists as an under-researched problem.

Revival of Islam

As can be seen, some of the ethnic traditions of Central Asia are at least part-contributors to the violence against women that continues to thrive in the region. How these traditions also contribute to other forms of gender harassment is little understood.

In addition to the ethnic traditions discussed here, Islamic traditions are a growing influence on the lives of women in the region. The revival of Islam, as evidenced by the rapid construction of new mosques, is a major feature of present-day Central Asia.

Veiled women have begun to appear on the streets of the cities of Central Asia. Most of these women are young and from rural areas, and are strongly influenced by missionaries from the Middle East and Pakistan. While the restoration of pre-Soviet Islam may be seen as an affirmation of ethnic identity, the forms of Islam that are taught by the foreign missionaries tend to be extremely patriarchal, and at odds with the Soviet understanding of equality of the sexes. The result is increasing social conflict.

During the Soviet era, Islam's intellectuals were repressed, and most progressive Muslim leaders were silenced or annihilated. The Jadidits, who tried to adapt Islamic principles to conform to the forces of modernization at the beginning of the 20th century, were rooted out.[4] Central Asia was isolated from progressive Muslim thought, and the religion survived mainly in its ritual and traditional forms.

The need to modernize Islam in the post-Soviet republics is now more than obvious. Muslim leaders in the Central Asian states have rigidly ignored the Russified—or Westernized—Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Uzbeks, as well as women. Raised in an environment of equal rights among the sexes, according to the Soviet model, the women of Central Asia are facing a return to pre-Soviet Islamic norms of family life. Politicians and other leaders have called for a restoration of polygamy and restriction of women's rights. They have found support, too, from an unexpected quarter: Many newly emergent women's groups—for example, the League of Muslim Women, Association Fatima, and Movement Rifakh in Kazakhstan—want a return to the patriarchal values of the traditional society.[5]

Other women in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, searching for religious identity and finding only a male-dominated form of Islam, have converted to Protestant Christianity, Ba'haism, and other religions that lack a traditional foundation in the region. In a male-dominated Muslim environment, the result, inevitably, is friction.

The Discrimination Trap

Central Asia's women are today caught up in three rings of discrimination, influenced by traditions of patriarchy, Soviet ideals, and images from the West. The patriarchal system says it is shameful for women to stray away from traditions of obedience and seclusion. Values from Soviet times say that women make up half of the labor force, and should therefore work full-time—as well as do their household duties. And Western consumerism, to many in the region, portrays women as commodities or sex objects. Together, these influences condemn women to a lowly status in society.

Under the Soviet system, the women of Central Asia were granted broad political rights that left the women of many other Asian countries far behind. These political rights were weakly supported, however, both economically and socially, and were also undermined by the Soviet sanction and sanctification of a consumerist attitude toward women. Constrained also by the Central Asian tradition of patriarchal relations, women were unable to take advantage of the hypothetical opportunities that the Soviet system gave to them. Most now find themselves in an ambiguous situation: politically emancipated, but ethnically constrained, with child bearing, caring for husband and children, and keeping house traditionally their only roles. A desire to break free from these constraints brings its own stresses: today's Central Asian society would regard a retreat from tradition as a manifestation of despised Russification or Westernization, and as a loss of ethnic identity.

Redressing the Balance

The net result of the revival of ethnic and religious traditions in post-Soviet Central Asia has, as can be seen, led to a reversal of female emancipation in the region. Efforts are being made on many levels to address this. For example, the nascent NGO sector in the region has a large and active gender component. In the Kyrgyz Republic, there are more than 70 women's NGOs, and there is also an active women's movement in Kazakhstan.

There are four types of women's organizations in the region. The first group comprises the successors to the Soviet women's committees, which follow Soviet working methods. The second group comprises women's rights organizations, which tend to be city-based, and the third comprises women's business groups, which encourage entrepreneurship. Fourth, and most powerful, are the organizations led by the First Ladies of the five republics.

These are early days for the movement, however, and problems are manifold. Turkmenistan, for example, has only one women's organization, which is state-run and named after the president's mother. There is also a lack of cohesion and coordination among the different NGOs, and there are very few umbrella organizations. More importantly, they are almost all concentrated in capital cities and there is very little awareness in rural areas of women's issues.

A strategy clearly needs to be developed to halt the decline in the status of women. There are many positive features to the revival of ethnic traditions, but the reappearance of prejudices and customs against women do not number among them. The search for ethnic identity has also manifested itself in the pretext of a struggle against outside influence and in self-glorification, and has caused many to reject the successes of the Soviet era. Many politicians have chosen to frame their policies on the image of medieval heroes, and appear keen to recreate medieval gender relations rather than forward-looking ones that respect the rights of women. In all Central Asian states, women are poorly involved in policy- and decision-making processes.

Within the Central Asian states, a legislative foundation is needed that provides for the coexistence of different ideologies and that does not contradict women's rights. International guidelines on human and women's rights should be adopted and followed.

Externally, international organizations must be sensitive in their advocacy of change in the region. The need to support indigenous efforts is extremely urgent, but great care should be taken to understand the peculiar combination of Soviet and traditional patterns of gender relations that determine the status of Central Asia's women today. Much can be learned from the experience of working with advocacy groups in other developing countries.

Gender equity in the region can only be achieved on the back of successful social and economic reform. The population is well-educated and skilled, but the obvious lack of long-term, cooperative projects has been a serious drawback in the first years of independence in the region. The Central Asian civil societies must work closely together in the 21st century to achieve their desired reforms, and will require international help if they are to develop the women's movement in a comprehensive, coherent and well-coordinated manner. Institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF, the UNDP, and others will also have an important role to play in this landlocked region.

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