

II. CHILDREN IN CENTRAL ASIA: GOOD PRECONDITIONS IN THE FAMILY AND SOCIETY

A. HISTORICAL TRADITION: "FIRST CALL" TO CHILDREN

A characteristic of Central Asian society has been to give the "first call" to children. In the home, even among poorer families, children (girls and boys equally) were given priority at the family table and in the use of family resources. Outside of the home, children were supported through the provisions of specific social infrastructure, such as schools and special legislation. The manner in which children are held in high-esteem by the family, society, and government is rooted both in the nomadic culture of Central Asia and in the socialist values of the former Soviet Union.

In the traditional Kazak and Kyrgyz societies, children enjoyed considerable individual freedom and mobility within the limits set by other social norms, such as respect for their elders. This freedom was particularly striking for girls in these Muslim societies. Young Kazak and Kyrgyz women were not veiled and they associated freely with young men in horse races, singing contests, and other such activities. Traditionally, short races between young men and young women were staged as tests of riding agility, with the women trying to elude the young man who sought to cut across her path. As traditional Kazaks and Kyrgyz lived in extended families (*auls*), there were virtually no orphaned children; every child had a place in a home.

As Central Asia came under Russian rule in the middle of the 19th century, its nomadic culture was altered. By the 1930s, under Soviet rule, the nomadic lifestyle was firmly suppressed.¹ Laws developed according to Soviet socialist considerations reduced the influence

¹ The formerly nomadic people increasingly became settled: apartments and single-family housing for a nuclear family replaced the traditional tents (*yurts*) clustered in extended family arrangements (*auls*).

Box 1: First Child for the Grandparents

In the traditional nomadic society of the Kazak and Kyrgyz peoples, children, regardless of gender, were highly valued by the family. The traditional family system in Central Asia was based on extended family ties, and included special relationships between grandparents and grandchildren. In the Kyrgyz Republic, the first child born to a couple, either girl or boy, was customarily given to the grandparents who then took the responsibility for raising the child. In return, the child, once grown, was expected to support the grandparents during their old age. Even today, in rural areas, elements of this system are still practiced.

of the family in matters such as child care and increased the role of the state. Reflecting the more European Russian culture, childhood was generally perceived as a phase of life that should be protected. Government and public institutions were given active roles in raising and caring for children.

Children in urban and rural areas were expected to develop their full potentials, including in the arts and sports. In many cases, Soviet norms reinforced those of the traditional societies. Soviet emphasis on full participation of women in the economy, for example, was consistent with indigenous cultures which placed few limitations on the mobility of adult women. This was reflected in relative freedom for girls who were generally not restricted in their activities outside the home.

As children were considered to be a vulnerable group in society, Soviet socialism assigned to them a special role and provided wide-ranging institutional support. The state provided a comprehensive social safety net including family support payments. It also subsidized the provision of social services such as education facilities including preschool, and health centers providing regular checkups and vaccinations. The standardized social services provided throughout the Soviet Union were complemented by a wide range of public or state-enterprise services for children. These included kindergartens, milk kitchens, holiday camps, and after-school care centers. Thus, in addition to the family, raising children became the responsibility of the governments and the large state-enterprises.

II. THE FOUNDATIONS OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT IN CENTRAL ASIA

As a result of this attention and institutional support, health and education indicators for child development were very high compared to other developing or even OECD countries. The comprehensive family and child-support system provided by the governments and state-enterprises also promoted social and economic freedom especially for women. Women were expected to participate in the workforce and their traditional family responsibilities were often shouldered by the state. The family support system showed little gender-bias with both boys and girls receiving similar education opportunities.¹

Photo 2: First Call to Children



The institutional support for children in Central Asia was an integral part of Soviet socialism and was maintained by an extensive system of subsidies, either explicitly through budgetary transfers or implicitly through administered prices. With the sudden breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 and independence for the new Central Asian Republics, these subsidies ended. The institutional breakdown of child support was equally quick. As discussed below, since independence, the situation of children in Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic has deteriorated tremendously. This weakening support for children greatly concerns the Governments and the international community.

¹ There were, however, clear differences in the roles expected for men and women in society and also in occupational choices. See the publications of the Asian Development Bank [Bauer, Armin; Boschmann, Niña; and Green, David. *Women and Gender Relations in Kazakhstan. The Social Cost*, Manila: Asian Development Bank, 1997; and Bauer, Armin; Green, David; and Kuehnast, Kathleen. *Women and Gender Relations. The Kyrgyz Republic in Transition*. Manila: Asian Development Bank, 1997].

B. CHILDREN'S LEGAL STATUS

In the Central Asian Republics of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan persons below the age of 18 are described in legal terms as children. This includes infants (below the age of 1), children (generally between 1 and 14 years old) and youth or young people (depending on context, between 15 and 24, or 15 and 29 years of age). However, the differences between these groups of children should not be ignored. Health indicators, for example, deal separately with infants and children. Labor legislation distinguishes between young people legally allowed to work part-time or full-time and those who are not employable (based largely on age). Legally childhood ends at 18 but some support or protection continues for young people beyond that age.

The legal status of children in Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic is well developed relative to most other Asian countries. Children receive special attention in the respective Constitutions. Various articles in the Kazakhstan Constitution reserve special "development-related rights" for persons below 18, including the right to live and develop adequately. Education is compulsory up to grade 11 for boys and girls. Children under 16 are generally not allowed to enter the work force and child labor is unknown in the formal sector. Situations such as bonded labor are legally forbidden. Similarly, arranged marriages between children are socially and constitutionally unacceptable. Society and the Governments apply considerable energy in implementing the laws, decrees, and administrative orders dealing with children; no small task amid the public fiscal crises emerging since independence.

The signing of international conventions on the development of children emphasizes the priority given to children by the Kyrgyz and Kazak Governments. These conventions emphasize the human, civil, and related rights of children. The "International Convention of Child Rights", for example, is one of the international conventions referring to human rights which have been signed by Kazakhstan since independence. Similarly, the Kyrgyz Republic has made an impressive international commitment to protecting children.

However, as a legacy from conditions during Soviet times, there are gaps in the legal treatment of children. These are particularly noticeable as a result of the new economic and social conditions emerging after the breakup of the former Soviet Union. There is, for example, no developed legal base that addresses the needs of children

Box 2: Rights of Children in the 1989 UN Convention

Article 6 of the UN Convention on Child Rights speaks about the general rights of children to develop in their society. Articles 12 and 13 assert that children should be allowed to speak out and be heard in all areas where their interests are concerned. Article 24 calls for access to basic health-care services and health education for all children. Article 26 mentions children's needs for social security, including social insurance and adequate housing. In education, governments at the national and local levels are called upon to provide free compulsory primary education, to develop advanced education, and to promote the attendance at advanced education facilities according to children's abilities (Article 28). Article 31 seeks to guarantee children leisure time and participation in cultural activities and the arts. Article 40 promises adequate treatment, rehabilitation, and seclusion in special homes or prisons, if children have fallen into criminal activities.

who commit crimes. The same is true concerning parents who are not able or unwilling to care for their children. One particular problem concerns vagrant children who are sometimes detained in prison-like centers and dealt with through the criminal justice system.

Addressing legal lacunae is often difficult. In southern Kazakstan and in the Kyrgyz Republic, for example, children begging on city streets are generally referred to as "Tadjiks" or "Gypsies" notwithstanding their true origin. The children are thus designated as foreigners. Streetchildren were unknown in the Soviet era and there is an unwillingness to acknowledge the extent to which society and the family system have weakened. This undermines official attempts to deal with these children and limits social responsibility for helping them. (Chapter V.B.2.)

C. CHILDREN AND THE DEMOGRAPHY OF CENTRAL ASIA

In the Central Asian Republics of Kazakstan and Kyrgyzstan demographic characteristics are conditioned by the Soviet experience, including the extreme loss of life during World War II. More recently

demography has been influenced by the economic difficulties of the post-independence period, in which there has been considerable out-migration and a trend away from marriage and child bearing. As a result of these trends, among the older population there are many more women than men: a result of World War II and the often dangerous and debilitating working conditions for men in heavy industrial jobs.

At the other end of the spectrum, about 30 percent of the population is younger than 15. This is more typical of industrialized countries than developing countries. Among the population younger than 30, a little less than 50 percent are women and girls. Since 1991, the social and economic problems encountered during transition have reduced birthrates and resulted in increasing child and infant mortality rates. As a result there is a tendency in the region for the demographic structure to become older¹ (Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic Indicators

(Beginning of the year, million)	1990	1993	1995	1996	1997
Kazakstan; population^a	16.46	16.44	16.15	15.98	15.86
Women	8.60	8.69	8.50	8.46	8.40
Children	5.25		5.10		
0-4 years	1.94		1.57		
5-15 years	3.31		3.53		
Youth (16-24)	2.79		2.65		
Working Age (25-54)	6.32		6.53		
Kyrgyz Republic; population	4.34	4.46	4.48	4.55	
Women	2.18	2.20	2.21	2.23	
Children	2.08	2.11	2.12	2.15	
0-9 years	1.18	1.19	1.17	1.19	
10-19 years	0.90	0.92	0.95	0.96	
Youth (19-29)	0.73	0.72	0.72	0.72	
Working Age (30-59)	1.21	1.23	1.25	1.26	

a The demographic statistics in Kazakstan have been revised since 1996. There are no age-disaggregated data available since then.

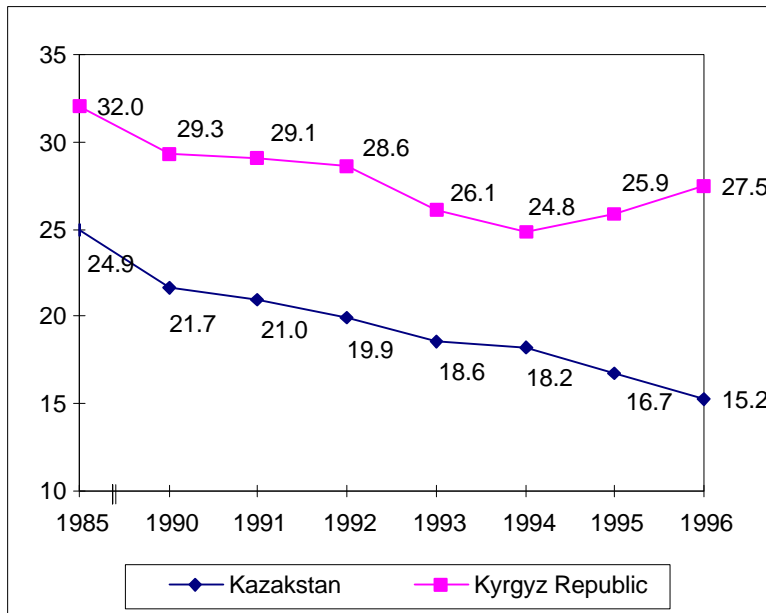
Sources: National Statistical Committees

1 With less emigration and a larger rural population (with higher birth rates), the age structure in the Kyrgyz Republic is more balanced between the generations than in Kazakstan.

1. Decreasing Birth Rates

Since 1991, the population in both countries has changed little. But there is a considerable decrease in the number of children younger than 5. Reflecting the extremely difficult economic and social conditions described below during this transitional period, birthrates have been falling in both relative and absolute terms.¹ In Kazakhstan, the number of births per 1,000 population decreased from 24.3 in 1989 to 15.2 in 1996 (Graph 2). The total number of births decreased from more than 380,000 in 1989 to about 278,000 in 1995. The Kyrgyz Republic shows a similar development, although here the data are less consistent.

Graph 2: Declining Birth Rates in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (per 1,000 population)



Source: National Statistical Committees, Ministries of Health

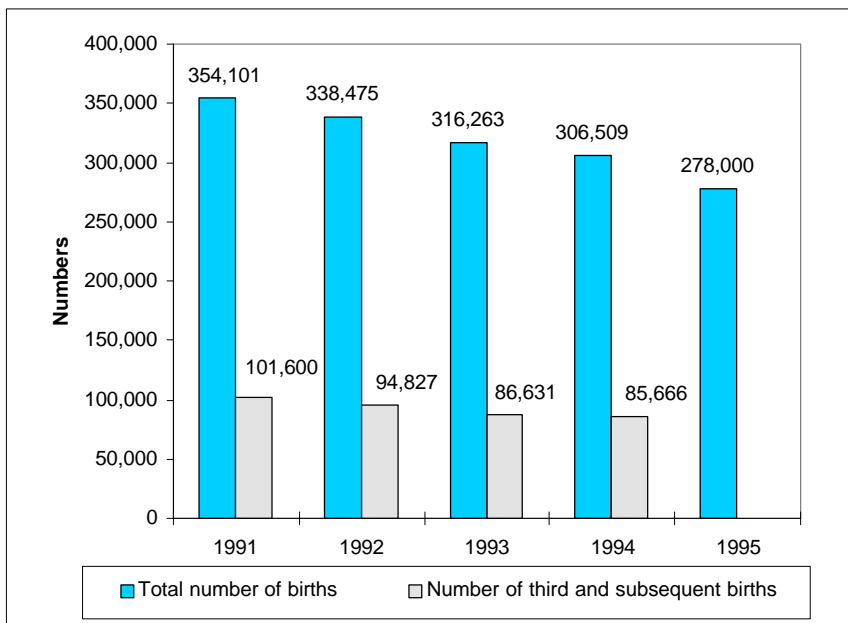
1 Declining birth rates were evident during the late 1980s. The transition period has accelerated this decline.

The proportional decline in young people in the population has considerable implications for the country. In particular, it calls for a change in the mix of social services and highlights the need for addressing some problems, such as pension reform, in which resource transfers to the elderly must come from the young.

Accompanying the declining birthrate, the number of children per family and the number of large families is decreasing. For example, in 1989 Kazakhstan's women had an average of 2.9 children during their childbearing years, but in 1995 women were bearing on average only 2.4 children. As result of this sharp decline in fertility, family size is shrinking. The number of big families with four or more children decreased from 196,300 in 1989 to an estimated 160,000 in 1996 (Graph 3). About one third of the children in large families live in families with more than six children.

There are considerable regional and ethnic differences with respect to fertility. In Kazakhstan, since 1995, on average urban women give birth to 1.8 children during their childbearing years but rural

Graph 3: Fewer Children and Smaller Families in Kazakhstan



Source: National Statistical Committee

Photo 3: Rural School Teacher with Four of her Eight Children



women bear an average of 2.8. In both rural and urban areas there is a clear trend toward fewer children. Ethnic lines also show differences in childbearing habits. In general the indigenous cultures, Kazak or Kyrgyz, tend to have higher fertility rates than their Slavic compatriots. Across ethnic lines, however, there are clear declines in fertility. In Kazakstan, for example, more than 60 percent of all children are born to ethnic Kazak women with fertility rates, which decreased from 3.6 to 3.1 from 1989 to 1995. Ethnic Russians as well as most women in urban areas limit themselves to one to two children (2.2 in 1989 versus 1.7 in 1995). A similar feature can be observed in the Kyrgyz Republic, where ethnic Kyrgyz have much larger families than ethnic Russians.

2. Migration

Immediately after independence, responding to the more open borders and increased political and economic uncertainty many people

(especially those with European ethnic backgrounds) emigrated from Central Asia. Large numbers of ethnic Russian and ethnic Germans migrated especially to the Russian Federation and Germany. Between 1989 and 1995 more than 530,000 people emigrated from Kyrgyzstan and more than 2 million from Kazakstan. High rates of emigration, along with other demographic trends have occasioned major changes in population structure. In particular, the proportion of ethnic Kyrgyz and Kazak populations is rapidly expanding. In Kazakstan, for example, the proportion of ethnic Kazaks in the total population increased from 39.7 percent in 1989 to 48.1 percent in 1996, whereas the proportion of ethnic Russian declined from 37.8 percent to 34.1 percent. As one result, the relative importance of the indigenous languages (Kazak and Kyrgyz) is growing at the expense of the Russian language.