

EDITORIAL

Gender Trends in Central Asia

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Central Asian states share a common Soviet past that provided them with a unique historic experience: within almost one generation, indigenous women, secluded and voiceless, gained universal literacy and access to higher education, generous social welfare, health services, employment, and top decision making. The changed image of "Eastern" women, who during the Soviet regime enjoyed far more freedom when compared to neighboring Muslim countries, was one of the principal trump cards of Soviet propaganda.

The Soviet state pursued policies to emancipate women and give them equal rights with men as an important part of the overall strategy to build a "new society." In these policies, liberation of "suppressed women of the East" was one of the strategic priorities and one of the most important political considerations of the central organs of the Communist Party in Moscow. The first Soviet Constitution (1918) and a series of subsequent decrees granted women equal political rights that gave them access to the civil service. In implementing these policies—considered advanced at that time—the Bolshevik Government made special provisions to ensure that Muslim women of ex-colonial Russian territories were involved in the process as a specific target group. Before that, participation of women in public office was not possible, especially in highly traditional and segregated societies, as ex-colonial Muslim territories of the Russian Empire used to be at that time.

Decades later, gender relations in Central Asia have gone through new turbulence. The transition from a centrally planned to a market economy in the 1990s affected gender roles of both women and men, but differently. High pressures were placed on men as "breadwinners" forcing them to migrate in search of better paid jobs. At the same time, women suffered from the disproportionate burden of domestic and community-based unpaid work. The biggest burden has been on women in rural areas where lack of facilities—such as gasification and safe water—and services such as healthcare, as well as bigger families, stronger traditional perceptions, and growing poverty, have made their lives particularly hard. More girls are dropping out of school according to recent statistics, and fewer of them have access to higher education institutes than before. The unemployment rate is higher among women, and their average wages are often lower than men's by almost two thirds. Women's representation at all levels of decision making across the region has also declined significantly compared to the past. Meanwhile, the trafficking of women has emerged over the past decade as a social phenomenon.

All governments of Central Asia have endorsed the Beijing Platform for Action¹ and ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Some governments are also taking due

steps to integrate gender concerns at the policy level. Laws on gender equality have been passed in the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan and in all other republics, except Turkmenistan, draft laws are being developed on equal rights and opportunities. The national governments of Central Asia have also established institutional mechanisms, adopted national plans of action, and are working toward further improvement of their national legal frameworks to support gender equality.

However, implementing these laws and policies is still an issue. There is little recognition and lack of understanding of the linkages that exist between gender equality and development that is pro-poor and people-centered. Women are largely associated with "social" issues or just "women and family" issues, and are often marginalized. The links between women's status and democratic and people-centered development are not explored in the general public discourse.

These issues should receive primary attention from both national policy makers and international actors. They should join their efforts and address gender issues in Central Asia in a more coordinated and persistent way, both through comprehensive gender-specific programs and by mainstreaming a gender perspective in all other work they do. If these efforts are underestimated and not adequately supported, there is a danger of losing the historic momentum. The opportunities to rectify the initial drawbacks that occurred at the early stages of transition might then be lost, making the whole process irreversible.

One of the promising region-specific examples of mainstreaming a gender perspective in national and regional policies is the Gender and Economy Initiative within the framework of the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia. A working group cochaired by ministers for women's affairs from Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan now meets as part of the regional forum of government decision makers and representatives of the business and research communities to contribute to discussions on strategic issues of regional cooperation, highlighting gender equality as an economic asset in establishing growth strategies and raising the awareness of line economic ministries to mobilize women's economic potential. Thus far, the working group has emphasized the need for gender-related training of staff in the ministries of economy, and for more projects to expand employment opportunities for rural women and to promote networking among women entrepreneurs. As this is one of the first attempts in Central Asia to integrate gender concerns in the development mainstream, it deserves to be studied and its practices instilled in other regional initiatives such as the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation initiative that the Asian Development Bank supports.

¹ The outcome document of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995.