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The Social and Political Status of Kyrgyz Women: the Historical Heritage of the Soviet Union and Negative Tendencies in Post-Communist Kyrgyzstan¹⁾

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Kyrgyzstan

*The indigent and famished women were the first to be besieged. The indignation was followed up by practical advice. Algerian women were invited to play a functional, capital role in the transformation of their lot. They were pressed to say no to a centuries-old subjection. Lets win over the women and the rest will follow.*²⁾

Introduction

Since the Soviet Unions collapse, it has become popular to criticize everything at all associated with the Soviet regime: the Communist Party, state leaders, the policy pursued by Moscow, the dictatorship of the proletariat, etc. This paper, however, will argue another point of view: in dealing with the so-called womens question the authoritarian Soviet regime proved itself far more effective than the tendencies in the society of present-day Kyrgyzstan. It asserts that the relatively progressive status of women in Kyrgyzstan is very much the consequence of the Soviet Unions policy after the Great October Revolution. Altogether, Soviet Unions policy initiated significant changes in centuries-old traditions in Kyrgyz society, resulting if not in an actual gender equality, at least in a theoretical one.

Researchers in the field of gender studies acknowledge that the Soviet period in fact opened doors for most working-class women. In general, Soviet women participated in public life to a much greater degree than did women of the same generation in the West.³⁾ Almost all viewed work as socially valuable and as a source of their own self-realization. Women were also gratified by the support and recognition of their peers in the workplace.

One does not have to vindicate all, or even most, aspects of the Soviet society to acknowledge that the fifteen Union republics irrevocably gave up too much in exchange for their independence: they lost noticeably more than they acquired. Primarily regrettable is the loss of close inter-republican social and economic connections that made the former republics of the Soviet Union interdependent and mutually beneficial. Among another significant regressions the declining status of women is to be commented.

Historical Background

To evaluate properly the achievements of Soviet power in terms of Kyrgyz gender issues, one needs to illustrate the traditionally fixed social conditions of Kyrgyz women in pre-Soviet times. There was no such concept as the political role and significance of women in Turkestan (present-day Central Asia) until 1917. At the turn of the century, the overwhelming majority of Turkestans population was illiterate half-settled sheep herders and peasants unable even to sign their names.⁴⁾ The only purpose of womens existence was to perform their sexual and social (having children) functions as well as giving unconditional obedience to their husbands. One remarks that women acknowledged this condition of things to be absolutely fair and natural. No attempts to overcome existing social inequality were observed in that period of time.⁵⁾

Throughout the millenium-old year history of its existence, Kyrgyz society never experienced such an overwhelming influence on its centuries-old foundations and customs as it did in the twentieth century. In an extremely short period of time, Kyrgyz society passed from a traditional nomadic life to a settled one, simultaneously experiencing industrialization, collectivization and, most of all, female emancipation.

In this aspect, the desire of Soviet policy to demonstrate the marvels of the first Socialist state were followed by direct and drastic measures and served as a powerful spur for Turkestan women to see themselves not as free additions to the male part of the population, but as possessing equal rights as fully fledged members of the society.

Soviet Unions Achievements

From the very beginning, the Bolsheviks vision of social transformation included first of all the immediate emancipation of women as an oppressed class. How could the revolutionaries tolerate such a societal injustice in the Proletariat state? As a result, the Bolsheviks proposed to equalize the sexes by socializing domestic labor; that is, by

entrusting household tasks and childcare to paid workers, bringing women out of the home to become full and equal participants in socially useful, paid labor.⁶⁾ Once women were freed of the need to exchange domestic and sexual services for the financial support of the male population,⁷⁾ they would relate to men as equal members of the society. Eventually, the only purpose of the family itself would be to unite women and men solely for love. That was the ideal condition of things in Communist society in the opinion of the Bolshevik revolutionaries.

The Bolsheviks regarded the disfranchised status of women and the discrimination against them in the pre-Soviet times as an obstacle to the successful dissemination of Socialistic ideas. Consequently, they zealously began to put into practice direct measures immediately after the establishment of the Soviet power. In 1918 the Bolsheviks proclaimed a code that officially equalized women's status with men's and made divorce easily obtainable by either spouse; in 1920 abortion became legal if performed by a physician.⁸⁾

At that time in Central Asia, the campaign called Hoodjoom (Attack) was promoted primarily in the South of Kyrgyz ASSR, in order to enlist the female population on the side of the new power by releasing them from the noticeable influence of Islam. The widely distributed means utilized in this campaign were in general based on mass actions with public burning of the paranja.⁹⁾

In this case, the gender situation in Turkestan distinctly differed from that in the European part of the newly founded Socialist state. Emancipation became complicated by the fact that Islam was dominant among the local population. Frantz Fanon has suggested that the same tendencies in the society can be observed in colonial Algeria in early 1930s when the French government (like Soviet government in Central Asia) implemented the following tactic, Let's win over the women and the rest will follow.¹⁰⁾ In both cases, the new power fought Islam in the first instance by trying to occupy its place in the society.

Another important reason why the Soviet government gave thought to the women's question was the historical susceptibility of women to the influence of power. Turkestan women, liberated from the dependence of the male population, at once found themselves much more dependent on the state. It was profitable in every way because the Soviet Union needed to have a strong internal power and some kind of basis for the state economy, social development (culture, education, public health and realization of the ideological principles of socialism) and, especially in Central Asia, for agriculture.

Therefore, female emancipation in Central Asia had a much higher tempo and was more purposeful even than in the European part of the Soviet Union.¹¹⁾ However, the

relentless and forcible disruption of national traditions and foundations provoked hardened resistance from the local population. This, in its turn, was interpreted by the Soviet power as class opposition and was suppressed with suitable brutality. To draw a parallel between colonialist Algeria and Socialist Turkestan, the Fanonian vision of French political doctrine is appropriate: If we want to destroy the structure of Algerian society, its capacity for resistance, we must first of all conquer the women.¹²⁾ Nevertheless, the Bolsheviks were the first in the history of Kyrgyz society to try to emancipate women, and in 1936, Stalins constitution officially proclaimed the achievement of the complete equality of the sexes.¹³⁾

Now the horizons of highly developed democratic countries have gleamed in the distance and the people have blamed Soviet socialism for the political and economic failures of contemporary Kyrgyz society. At the same time, they have forgotten all the advantages and benefits of the command economy as well. Because of the current desire to achieve Western standards there is a need to sacrifice something, the post-Soviet society at once gave up its perceptible privileges in exchange for the distant ideals of the social, political and economic system of the highly developed Western countries.

Contemporary Phenomena in Kyrgyz Society

Hence, suddenly appeared a free market economy in certain ways had have shaken the customary fixed foundations of the civil society and this condition of things has affected the most socially insecure parts of society, including women. Basically, described below Kyrgyz contemporary phenomena are peculiar to the overwhelming majority of the post-communist states. Altogether, transitional period by and large has had negative character for all this, the actual equality between genders not only was not consolidated, but on the contrary deteriorated. Since the early-1990s, there has been no concrete power to protect and administer social life. The consequences of this transformation have been extremely harsh.

Independent experts acknowledge that the average Kyrgyz woman is undergoing serious economic and psychological risks in the transitional period for a number of reasons. Only five years ago eighty-three percent of all women were in the labor force, but today women form the majority of the unemployed in Kyrgyzstan. This is connected to the recent elimination of many positions in the sphere of service and ideological activities and from reduction in social support. Traditionally, these positions were occupied mainly by women.¹⁴⁾

Thus, one can definitely establish a fact that the creation of independent Kyrgyz society has systematically aggravated women's stable social level of living. For instance, according to estimates, from 1993–1994 unemployment rate among Kyrgyz women was registered between 5–10 percent, while during 1991–1992 it was about 3 percent.¹⁵⁾

Rural Areas

The comparatively recent abolition of collective farms (kolkhozes and sovkhozes) has been at the base of mass unemployment among women in the rural areas of Kyrgyzstan. The situation has taken a turn for the worse since the unemployed in rural areas are the least informed about employment opportunities and related allowances. Although privatization has been conducted, private farms do not seem very prosperous, as the new owners have no definite idea as to how to deal with them.

Many village women became attached to the kolkhozes, which were the overall source for satisfaction of their every day needs. Through the kolkhozes, they received not only monthly wages, but also natural support in the form of free foodstuffs and fuel supplies. The majority of these women noticed that when they worked on the collective farms it was really hard labor, but on the other hand, the kolkhozes solved many of their daily chores and household problems.¹⁶⁾ Women always sensed that there was some comprehensive power over the society that took care of them, controlled them, told them what to do and how to live. Today this overall dependence seems to them much more beneficial than the democratic rights and freedoms that are so popular now.

Giving preference to the collective model of agriculture, these women remark that under the new system only a few can work and earn enough whereas the owners do not take care of their workers any more.¹⁷⁾ In the same time, the regions where kolkhozes have not yet been privatized have generally been better able to manage the economic and social crisis.

Urban Areas

In urban areas, overall unemployment has affected most sharply young women between the ages of 17 and 30, who frequently do not have yet enough experience and connections to get fixed up in a job.¹⁸⁾ In the Soviet times, when such conceptions as assignment of young specialists and state order were prevailing, the state successfully placed graduates and specialists from the state educational institutions in jobs. Nowadays, there is a sufficient disproportion between the available jobs and the actual

number of graduates as to provoke a serious anxiety for future job placement. Primarily, this affects women, as the percentage of female students in Kyrgyz educational institutions is about sixty percent on average.¹⁹⁾

As stated in the Annual Statistic Report 1999, in recent years, there has been a substantial increase in childbirth by young unmarried women (15-17 years old).²⁰⁾ High maternity and infant death rates are recorded throughout the republic, especially in the rural areas of Kyrgyzstan. A stable increase of narcotic use and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) among young women provokes a particular anxiety for the health of the future generations. Thus, in 1997, the level of narcotic abuse among women exceeded the one of 1992 by 12.2 times, alcohol psychosis increased 6.5 times and syphilis cases escalated right on to 54 times compared to 1991.²¹⁾ Indisputably, these phenomena are conditioned by the degradation of the moral values in the society during the last several years.

But the more dramatic changes for the worse were registered in the quotas of women in the upper echelons of the state power. According to data from the Central Electoral Commission of the Kyrgyz Republic, in 1992 the Jogorku Kenesh (the parliament of the Kyrgyz Republic) consisted of 127 female-deputies or 36,3 percent from the common number of deputies.²²⁾ In the elections of 1994 only 27 women or 8 percent became deputies, while in 1996 the number was cut down to 5 women or 4,1 percent.²³⁾ The number had continued to decrease and in 1998 only 4 women or 3,9 percent were presented as the deputies in the Jogorku Kenesh of the Kyrgyz Republic.²⁴⁾ There is thus a substantial disparity between women's quota in the total population of Kyrgyzstan (about 51 percent) and their actual participation in political progress.

According to a survey conducted by the World Bank in 1997, the overwhelming majority of female respondents asserted that they had never heard about any support organizations for women, although almost 200 non-governmental parties, organizations and associations have been officially registered in Kyrgyzstan since 1991.²⁵⁾ Meanwhile, so-called Jenviet (former department for the affairs of women under the Communist Party) is considered by those women as the most optimal active organization in dealing with the problems of an average woman.²⁶⁾

Taking into account the above-cited information, it must be noted that the years 1992-1994 were both the most crucial in the transition to democracy and the most painful and harmful throughout the entire transitional period in Kyrgyzstan. During that period of time, a universal deterioration in all aspects of the social, economic and state life could be definitely observed.

Conclusion

In conclusion to all mentioned above, one could summarize the negative factors in the contemporary position of Kyrgyz women:

- ⇒ More and more women are becoming poor;
- ⇒ High maternity and infant death rates;
- ⇒ The weakness of womens non-state social organizations;
- ⇒ A general trend towards reduction of the percentage of women in authority of the state structures;
- ⇒ A decline in moral values among the younger generation.

Nowadays, the status of women is a sufficiently vital and urgent problem that it needs to be focused on and recognized as an obstacle to the democratization of the Kyrgyz society. It is completely clear that the current status of women and the recent so-called democratization of Kyrgyzstan are closely associated and the connections between them have a contradictory and interrelated character.

In theory, it is evident that democracy provides the nation as a whole and women in particular with decidedly more human rights and freedoms than the authoritarian regime or communist dictatorship ever did. But at the same time, the reality in the form of statistics clearly shows us that obtained independence, glasnost, constitutional rights and freedoms, multi-party system do not seem very progressively and effectively if they have so negatively affected such a socially important part of the population.

Nowadays, it is widely acceptable to consider communist dictatorship and democracy as totally opposite things, as black and white, as absolute evil and total good. Today, our country tries to be or, at least, to seem as much democratic as it possible as well as to forget the dark sides of its history as its history is totalitarianism and autocracy.

Hence, it is obviously seen in terms of Soviet womens question that this problem could be effectively controlled and regulated by state and law; ideological and propagandistic support is needed for effective results and the real and effective participation of women in social and political life should be secured by the state.

Fortunately, even 9 years after its collapse, the Soviet Unions influence is still appreciable in social and political aspects of the womens societal life in Kyrgyzstan. And Kyrgyz society uses this heritage toward the achievement of real democracy and healthy capitalism. But this condition of things cannot go on forever it is already evident that recent 9 years have shaken the social, political and economic status of

Kyrgyz women instead of consolidating it and completing the social transformation, which was begun by the Soviet Union.

Therefore, the main problem of Kyrgyz society today is the prolonged transitional period itself. It is quite obvious that Kyrgyzstan has no definite state system at all it could be officially called a democratic state, not being such in reality. That's why the tendencies of Kyrgyz democratization are in some ways bringing to naught the achievements of Soviet power in Soviet Kyrgyzia. My absolute certainty in this gives me the right to establish a concluding statement: in dealing with women's question the authoritarian regime and communist dictatorship proved itself more effective and progressive than post-Communist Kyrgyzstan, officially called democratic state.

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