



## Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

### Research Report

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**Gender Politics in Central Asia at Crossroads: Integrating International Obligations with Renascent Islamic Orientations**

**Topic of research:**

In the 1990s, all Central Asian republics created, within their central governments, special women's policy agencies (WPAs) to study women's status and to advance women's rights in society. In subsequent years the policy success of these agencies varied: some were able to advocate the importance of gender and design potentially efficient national policies and programs in cooperation with the civil society, while others were marginalized within their governmental structures. By examining the cases of Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan, I demonstrate the influence of both international factors (democratization, gender activism of international organizations) and domestic factors (gender policy legacies, commitment to women's equality, comparative strength of women's movements, current reconfigurations, and influence of Islam and nomadic customary laws) on the creation and functioning of WPAs, with the goal to understand why gender is taken more seriously in some republics than in others.

**Relevance and contribution to the field:**

*Theoretical perspective*

My study is multi-disciplinary and gives a historical perspective of the cultural parameters circumscribing women's status in Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan.

By disaggregating “culture” into pre-Soviet patriarchal nomadic practices, Soviet egalitarianism and post-independence norms for gender equality, I attempt to shed light on how women’s status is shaped in an environment permeated by progressive international norms that co-exist with patriarchal trends based on customs and particular interpretation of the Islamic heritage.

Further, my study is the first to apply the concept of “socialization”, as developed by Finnemore (1996)- a course by which international norms are internalized and implemented by any given state- to gender policy-making in Central Asia to draw new conclusions on the ability of international norms to stimulate local change.

My study draws on theories of gender and the state, with a focus on the changing character of the post-socialist states to investigate if the state can be an effective tool for bringing about alterations of gender relations. I argue that in conditions of national consolidation efforts like those undertaken in all the Central Asian republics, dissecting the state mechanism lends itself to striking findings related both to opportunities for political action and obstacles to change.

The empirical work on gender policy in Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan is a contribution to development studies, and aims to generate intellectually fruitful policy-oriented research that narrows the breach between academic researchers and development practitioners.

### *Policy perspective*

The study of gender policy captures the tensions between the intersections of progressive development based on respect for human rights supported by United Nations and subtle revival of certain conservative Islamic elements and nomadic customary laws, the main ingredients of the current national consolidation in Central Asia. The picture is complicated by the long-standing Soviet legacy of equality politics, which considered the issue of women’s equality as solved. The study of gender policy and the environment in which it is currently produced gives an enhanced understanding of the challenges in spreading democratization in Central Asia and the strategies adopted in the region for dealing with international pressure.

### **Approach and methodology:**

My study is based on a qualitative methodology. I conducted around 70 structured and semi-structured interviews between Fall 2003-Spring 2004. My respondents were government officials responsible for developing national and local gender programs, including former heads of the WPAs, women’s NGOs, researchers, and representatives of international organizations working to facilitate policy-making in Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. The interviews are supplemented by a large-scale literature review on history, culture, ethnography, and anthropology related to women’s status in Central Asia, with special emphasis on Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan. The history of women’s status has been reconstituted through an in-depth analysis of appropriate parts of the unwritten customary law, *adat*, that regulated the life

of nomadic and semi-sedentary populations from Central Asia and the *shariat*, or the Islamic written law that appears with the conquest of the region by Arabs. I also focused on the Tsarist presence in the region and the Soviet power, in particular the October revolution of 1917 and its unprecedented consequences for women's life of the Soviet East. The role of international factors in introducing the concept of "gender equality" as different from the Soviet understanding of social equality, completes my analysis. Capitalizing on the impact of these legacies in the present political milieu, the analysis discloses the roots of the competing discourses on the role of women and men in the new nation states of Central Asia: ancient customs, Islam, and progressive gender policies.

### **Findings and preliminary conclusions:**

Integration of gender within the development framework of Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan is crucially related to the transition to democracy. The current economic transition has broken down the traditional gender stereotypes, which required men to keep up the role of the main bread-winner. In the new conditions the number of women undertaking the role of bread-winner has increased and creates unprecedented tensions in society and family. The transition to a democratic society, on the other hand, has affected the equality of opportunities of women in the political arena, once the quota system was eradicated. In such conditions, the political arena and decision-making remains the men's domain. The state's opening a space for old traditions and religious norms that regulate women's life receives close scrutiny in my study and more conclusions will be available once I complete my analysis. The analysis of transition from a gender perspective offers a glimpse into the otherwise invisible social tensions that have a great potential for generating instability in the longer run.

Gender policy frameworks have been adopted in both Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan as a result of international factors, mainly gender activism of the United Nations in Central Asia, starting from the Beijing Conference in 1995. After 1995, both governments have endorsed a number of international Conventions related to gender equality and developed National Action Plans to strengthen and improve the status of women in their respective countries.

In the case of Kyrgyzstan there are more coherent efforts to develop and implement a gender policy than in Turkmenistan. Much of the results are not moving beyond the declarative mode, due to a weak rule of law. The women's policy agencies in Kyrgyzstan have been established in the wake of the Beijing Conference and have been well accommodated in the governmental structure. But the performance of such agencies is limited by lack of funding, frequent staff turnover, and inability to integrate a gender policy in the general development strategy of Kyrgyzstan. Starting from the understanding that gender means women's issues and is a matter relevant to the social sector, the Kyrgyz government is now trying to move to a more explicit gender agenda, as the new National Action Plan illustrates. In addition, the institutional mosaic consists not only of a high level WPA but also a vibrant non-governmental sector, which ultimately has been able to sustain part of the policy commitments for gender equality.

In the case of Turkmenistan development of a gender policy is strictly associated with the availability of funding from international organizations. The women's policy agency has not been accommodated by the state structure, and the only institution that has been stable since independence is the Women's Union, a Soviet structure. Currently, Turkmenistan is undergoing a "hybrid" period, within which the UN influenced institutions and short term assistance to advance women's status were not sustainable. However, the "socialization" of gender in Turkmenistan by international organizations can address its interest to accrue more presence in the global forums and move towards consolidating a more positive international image.

Islamic influences are subordinated to the current political agenda in Central Asia. The strongest influence of Islamic culture nowadays is on the personal and public life of women. In my view, these subtle tendencies to regulate women's personal and public life under a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam is an important matter that needs to be researched further. The role of international donors, particularly Islamic countries, in promoting Islam through a focus on women's cultural role was suggested by my interviews, especially in Kyrgyzstan.

**Future research agenda:**

- Undertake similar research in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan to study the mixed political culture of region, highlighting gender politics.
- Research on the role of international factors in shaping domestic policies in Central Asia would be very useful for developing appropriate future foreign assistance programs and to learn from those already running in the field.
- Studies that re-evaluate the role of Islam in Central Asia, the competing international influences in promoting Islamic values and between different religious sects (Wahhabi, Shia, Sunni, etc.) introduced in the region on the grounds of post communism, to understand their different political implications.

**Suggestions for the US policy community:**

Develop an authentic, long-term, participatory assistance programme targeting gender equality. This can be done by incorporating gender equality in the promotion of a healthy democratic transition in Central Asia. Short term assistance is already conceived as opportunistic in the region, and it would not reach its goal. My research accounts for many "informal" abuses of women's personal rights due to emphasis on traditions and a particular interpretation of Islamic norms that regulate women's place in family and society and the dramatic lack of opportunities for women in the political arena, against a background of deep poverty. Long-term assistance programs designed by the local population, to create various life style alternatives so that women can step out of their traditional roles if they choose to do so, are needed in the area. Special programs that will equally involve men and which through awareness raising on gender equality coupled with economic opportunities will ensure the success of such programs. In other words, democratization needs to focus on the people not only on the governments.

Develop a consistent cultural policy involving US scholars, scholars from Central Asia, and policy makers from the region. This would be very fruitful. Organizing annual symposiums on mainstream policy issues, highlighting gender issues would be extremely beneficial for an in-depth understanding of the mixed political culture of the area.

Adopt a policy of focussed, homogenous, and long-term development assistance towards each country, moving beyond Cold War assistance patterns, to ensure stability in the region. Humanitarian and international organizations need to undergo a “paradigm shift” in as much as it is taken for granted that countries with the most democratic outlook should get the bulk of funding. However, international assistance targeting changes in the local political culture in Central Asia is mostly needed in the countries that seem most authoritarian. Therefore it is imperative to focus on the individual needs of these countries. Development models are negotiated locally, and each of the Central Asian countries have very different interests (oil, gas, development of new trading routes), and are at different development stages (open versus closed economies). With adequate support towards the host countries (long-term committed programming, skilfully orchestrated advocacy strategies on issues related to transition, work at national and local level, positive promotion of cultural exchanges) can achieve better results than a policy of containment would.