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COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET UNION: EFFECTS ON THE LIVES OF WOMEN IN KYRGYZSTAN

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Abstract

The collapse of the Soviet Union tremendously affected the lives of people in Central Asia. Transition from centrally planned economy to market economy has been a great challenge, especially for women. One could see many middle aged or mature women doing «suitcase business» with completely unknown people and in foreign regions at the very early years of independence. Some were able to successfully develop their businesses and others lost their homes, families and respect in the eyes of their societies. The article studies the effects of transitional period in the lives of women in Central Asia further focuses how new circumstances changed the status of women in Central Asian in general and Kyrgyzstan particular. The study answers the questions: to what extent the collapse of the Soviet Union changed the lives and status of women and what is the role of collapse on family structure in Kyrgyzstan. Primary sources such as interviews, statistical data and secondary sources such as published books, articles and dissertations are used in the study.

Keywords: collapse of Soviet Union, family structure, status of women, transitional economy, suitcase business

РАСПАД СОВЕТСКОГО СОЮЗА И ЕГО ВЛИЯНИЕ НА ЖИЗНЬ ЖЕНЩИН В КЫРГЫЗСТАНЕ

Аннотация

Распад Советского Союза сильно повлиял на жизнь людей в Центральной Азии. Переход от централизованной плановой экономики к рыночной экономике был большим вызовом, особенно для женщин. В первые годы независимости многие женщины среднего и зрелого возраста занимались «челночным бизнесом» с совершенно неизвестными людьми в зарубежных регионах. Некоторые из них смогли успешно развить свой бизнес, а другие потеряли свои дома, семьи и уважение в глазах своих обществ. В статье анализируется влияние переходного периода на жизнь женщин в Центральной Азии, где основное внимание уделяется тому, как новые обстоятельства меняют положение женщин в Кыргызстане и в Центральной Азии в целом. Исследование отвечает на вопросы: насколько распад Советского Союза изменил жизнь и статус женщин, также структуру семьи в Кыргызстане. В исследовании используются первичные источники, такие как интервью, статистические данные и вторичные источники, такие как опубликованные книги, статьи и диссертации.

Ключевые слова: распад Советского Союза, структура семьи, положение женщин, переходная экономика, челночный бизнес.

СОВЕТТЕР СОЮЗУНУН КУЛАШЫ ЖАНА АНЫН АЯЛДАРДЫН ЖАШООСУНА ТИЙГИЗГЕН ТААСИРИ

Советтер Союзунун кулашы Борбордук Азиядагы элдердин жашоосуна чоң таасир тийгизди. Борборлоштурулган пландык экономикадан базар экономикасына өтүү, айрыкча аялдар үчүн чоң сыноо болду. Эгемендүүлүктүн алгачкы жылдары орто жана олуттуу жаштагы аялдар чет өлкөлөрдө алып-сатуучулук менен эмгектенишкен. Кээ бирлеринин бизнеси жакшы өнүктү, башкалары үйлөрүнөн, үй-бүлөлөрүнөн, коом тарабынан көрсөтүлгөн сый-урматтан да ажырашты. Бул макалада өткөөл мезгилдин жалпы Борбордук Азиядагы жана Кыргызстанда аялдардын жашоосуна тийгизген таасири анализделет. Изилдөө төмөнкү суроолорго жооп берет: Советтер Союзунун кулашы канчалык аялдардын жашоосун, коомдогу статусун өзгөрттү жана анын үй-бүлөнүн структурасына кандайча таасири тийди? Изилдөөдө түрдүү маалымат булактары колдонулду, анын ичинде интервью, статистикалык маалыматтар, китептер, макалалар жана диссертациялар бар.

Ачкыч сөздөр: Советтер Союзунун кулашы, үй-бүлөнүн структурасы, аялдардын абалы, өткөөл мезгилдеги экономика, алып-сатуучулук.

Introduction

The status of women in the world generally, in Central Asia particularly is of great interest nowadays in newspapers, TV programs and scholarly books and articles (Acar & Guneş 2000; Buckley 1997; Kamp, 2006) The gender policies, equality of women and men in modern societies, violence in family and society towards women and children is filling the [newspaper covers daily. There are so many international-national, governmental and non-governmental organizations in the world dealing with these problems. All are trying to change the lives of women for «better» with significant success accompanied with support and detest of the factions in the strata of the societies in the regions based on their ideologies and perceptions. But no factor is more far reaching than transformative political changes such as collapse of the state systems and wars.

In recent history as well as the old one, due to wars and systemic changes in international arena, the lives of women, much more than men, have tremendously changed. Second World War opened the doors of factories and offices for women in the world,

especially in the west. Previously unimaginable positions opened for women causing deep rooted social change from conduct of behavior to clothing. As Second World War opened the doors of offices and factories, the collapse of the Soviet Union has opened the borders to do business for women of Central Asia. Women proved to be more adaptive to changing conditions than men and it seems a pattern rather than a coincidence. The issue needs conceptualization to understand the phenomenon.

This article focuses on the effects of the collapse of the Soviet Union on the lives of women in Central Asia, particularly in Kyrgyzstan. Data gathered from face to face interviews with twenty-five women scholars and businesswomen. Statistical data, scholarly journal articles, newspaper articles and radio and TV programs on the issue is used as content analysis. The article answers the question; to what extent the transitional period affected the lives of women in business, family, society and garment.

The turning points in history have always provided opportunities as well as challenges to some or all parts of societies in the world. Sharing difficulties and hard-

ships have opened the way for privileges for those who did not have them before. As independence and civil wars of the US has jar opened the equality for African Americans, and the second world war laid the way to accept women working in different sphere of workplace in the west and the US, the collapse of the Soviet Union and economic dissolution forcefully pushed the women of Central Asia into unprecedented business entrepreneurs coined as *shuttle business* or *suitcase business*, for some as an opportunity for others disaster for traditional family structure and social norms.

One could see many a woman with bigger piles of bags than themselves at the borders and airports throughout the region. In early nineties the shuttle business revived so did the status of women with new gained identities contrary to prior stereotypes from women of the house, mother of the children to income provider and family feeder. The new phenomenon enforces one to ask why women rather masculine part of the society had become active in this business. When historical reality is taken into consideration especially for Central Asian women, an evincible conceptualization is needed to answer the question at hand.

When the post-second world war period as well as post-Soviet period is taken into account it seems so that women are easily adopt new circumstances than men do. Provided they feel the urgency to save the family especially wellbeing of their children. The case proved to be true for Central Asian women just after the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to Kudaibergen Bazarbaev, minister of social development, men fell victim to depression during the first years of independence due to change whereas women saved the nation easily adopting to new environment (Bazarbaev K., 22 April 2015). Many women immediately started either to do business or additional jobs along with their other duties. Respondents verified Mr. Bazarbaev's view. «Just after the independence we could not

get our salary for eleven months and we immediately built a small shop (kamok) with whatever we found. We did not have money in reserve, as all others, so I had to sell my jewelry to start the business.» says a doctor. She was working at the hospital and in the shop at the same time. Later on, she started going Tajikistan and Pamir to sell and buy products, usually during winter months. Her husband continued his regular job and stayed at home with children.

Following the demise and consequently collapse of the Soviet Union, fifteen new republics emerged as the Soviet states declared independence one by one. The centrally planned and executed economy seized to function. Dire economic crises followed making majority of the workers redundant. Even though government works continued, the salaries could not be paid on time and/or was not sufficient to maintain the domestic economies. The time of euphoria due to independence in the capital cities had its cost. The burden fell on the ordinary people causing frustration and anxiety for future. The challenge and hardship felt in Central Asia more than anywhere else. As a matter of fact people had money in banks and in their homes, but not only the state collapsed but also the value of the money. It was time for new beginnings for the states of Central Asia and people who resided in these newly emerged countries. Transitional period from socialist to capitalist economy demanded to reorganize the social structure and working habits. In this period of change women became the vanguards of family saving and income providing tasks.

What changed?

During Soviet period according to respondents, the women had regular and accustomed life styles. In cities educated women worked at schools, hospitals, government offices and factories, in rural areas in plantations, schools and other governmental jobs. They felt more protected in their daily and ordinary lives. At work place they had prolonged and paid – up to three

years- maternity leave provided by worker unions. Stability provided a sense of security and women lived free of anxiety. In the post-Soviet period this secure and stable environment left itself to uncertainty, anxiety, and frustration and need to rebuild a new environment, income to sustain the family and care the children. Men had difficulty to adapt to new circumstances mostly they continued their regular jobs or failed easily in new dealings, especially doing trade.

The only available income which could be attained was by selling whatever they had not used at home. In bazaars and streets most women started selling their old clothing, utensils etc. Flea markets had become the tries to do business and experimental grounds for transitional market economy. One can claim that, as later coined, the old communists became the best capitalists which was rooted in flea markets in early 1990s. As the means of income has changed, so the lifestyles and clothing in a changing social environment.

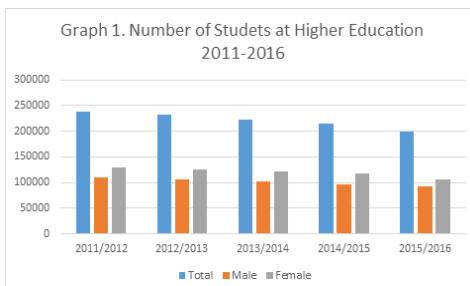
Gaining independence meant different thing to different people in the region. There have been debates on what course to take in establishing the new states and ideologies. Though the course in economy was market economy for all states in Central Asia, the nation building was debated whether return to Turkestan period and emphasize more similarities than differences between the states within Central Asia or focus on nation state building and emphasize differences. Second generation elites; writers, poets were pro-similarity while third generation elites were for pure nation state building. Third generation elites gained the upper hand over the second generation and nation state building processes were underway. In time the new course of the nations led to new trends in societies.

Traditional family formation and women and men, mother and father statuses interpreted according to new and diversifying norms. The accepted norms started to shape the women's position in the society. Today,

from clothing to conduct of behavior one could observe diversity in Central Asia, especially in Kyrgyzstan; clothing verifying from burka to miniskirt in the streets. The role of religion has gained influence in shaping the roles of women in society. In Kyrgyzstan, especially in higher education the ratio of female students is slightly higher than male students in recent years.

Women in Higher Education in Kyrgyzstan

Compared with other states of Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan invest significantly more in education than other states. In Kyrgyzstan, the number of female students in higher education is considerably more than male students. Last fifteen years, the female-male ratio is higher in advantage of females and margin is increasing year by year. In 2000-2001 educational year out of 188820 total number of students at higher educational institutions 95734 were female and 93086 were male students. So far the ratio has increased; for instance, in 2015-2016 educational year out of 199505 total number of students at higher educational institutions 106700 female, 92805 male students study (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic). In Graph 1, last five years' data is provided the rest can be seen in the official web site of Kyrgyz Statistical Institution.



Source: National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic

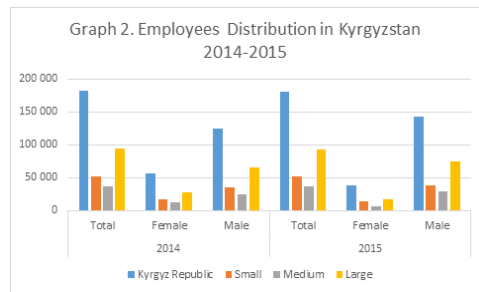
From 2011 to 2015 there is gradual decrease in total number of students at higher educational institutions. There were total

230379 students in 2011 and the number fell to 199505 in 2016. This may be due to Kyrgyz government's policy to limit the number of universities and departments in the country to increase the quality by galvanizing competition between universities via raising the threshold score in General Entrance Exam. Even though total number of students decreased, the number of female students increased compared with male students. In 2011, 123769 female students out of 230379 and in 2015, 106700 female students out of 199505 studied at higher institutions. High level of female students studying in higher institutions indicates higher status of women in Kyrgyzstan in terms of educational rights. Higher education yields results in workplace though not as much as expected.

Women in Workplace

Though the ratio of female students is higher in higher educational institutions, women are employed considerably less than men do in business according to 2014 and 2015 statistical data of Kyrgyz Statistical Center. As can be seen from graph 2 the number of female workers is not even half of the male workers. There may be different reasons which needs to be studied but presumably cultural, emigrational factors play the role. As obvious employers prefer male workers due to permanency of employees. Also culturally, women as housewives stay at home to take care of the children. Emigrational factor is also important to see the whole picture but emigrant female and male employees exceeds the scope of this study. If emigrated workers were into consideration the data may change in female's advantage.

The number of female employees was 57107 out of 182287 total number whereas that of male employees was 125189. In 2015 number of female employees decreased but that of male employees increased significantly; female employees constituted 37751 out of 180996 while the number of male employees was 143245. It seems that the more men got jobs in 2015 the more



Source: National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic

women lose their jobs according to raw statistics which needs to be studied in detail. Women tends to be working mostly in small and large businesses rather than in medium ones but in all three categories of businesses male workers exceed the female workers in terms of numbers (Women entrepreneurs in Kyrgyzstan). Most female employees, especially with higher degrees, work in schools, hospitals in rural areas, thus number of the university graduates employed in rural areas is higher than that of urban areas in Kyrgyzstan (Hornbeck, 2012, 9). Even though less women than men in workplace according to statistical data, women in Kyrgyzstan are more active in politics than other republics in Central Asia.

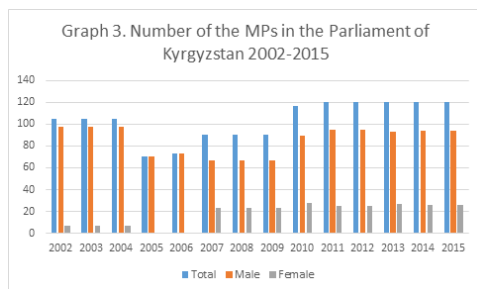
Women in high political offices in Kyrgyzstan

The role of women in politics is increasing in Kyrgyzstan though not as much as expected taking into consideration educational level of the women. Kyrgyzstan is the only country which had female president in the region. Roza Otunbaeva served as short-term president from 7 April 2010 to 1 December 2011. As Graph 3 indicates women hold less seats in the parliament than man do, but the number is increasing though with small pace.

There are considerable women working in high state and government offices such as Supreme Court judges, state prosecutor, ministers but this study will provide information on seats occupied by female depu-

ties in the Kyrgyz Parliament in the years 2002 and 2015.

Between from 2002 to 2004, 7 out of 105 female deputies occupied the seats in parliament (see Graph 3). In 2005 and 2006 no seats occupied by female deputies. From 2007 to 2009, 23 seats out of 90 were occupied by female members. Though the number of the total seats decreased in the parliament, there was significant increase in the number of female deputies. From 2010 on, 25 to 26 out of 120 seats have been occupied by female deputies in the Kyrgyz Parliament.



Source: National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic

In today's Kyrgyzstan, more and more women are working in various businesses and government offices such as police force, army, hospitals, and schools and in private businesses. When increasing female higher education enrollments taken into account, women role in private and public sector may naturally increase in terms of numbers and quality. The trend is changing the family structure, perceived as patriarchal in traditional Kyrgyz family.

Swap of roles in Kyrgyz Family

In early days of independence, as stated earlier, women took the first steps to do shuttle business across the borders. Almost all the respondents replied the question why women rather than men while expected contrary dealt with trade with overseas, that for man it was very difficult to deal with corrupt custom officers in the borders. The men were more pressured more in borders

and bazaars and they lacked to tolerate the inconvenient situations. Many women in suitcase business developed their business and nowadays own their own firms and companies. Others who were not so successful and even failed in so called businesses, considerably lost face in their environment. The examples set by early women entrepreneurs have opened the way for the following generation of women in doing trade. In some of these families, husbands take care of the children. Reportedly in 35% percent of the families in the outskirts of Bishkek, there is swap of roles; husbands taking care of children and household duties and wives maintaining the family income. Meanwhile, this trend of change in family structure has ignited furious debate in society.

Debates on Family Structure and the Role of women

Globalization, emigration and other far reaching factors are changing the traditionally perceived Kyrgyz society. The trend is to some extent irreversible, financial needs, contemporary demand are necessitating women take more active roles in private and public sphere. On TV and radio programs, newspaper articles and in family gatherings people are discussing the change (Duishelieva, 2015; Mamarimov, 2007; veiled girls, 2016). Some are against the increasing role of the women in society from traditional point of view, others from religious point. Some such as liberals and egalitarians backed by NGOs argue the need to raise the status of women. 23 respondents out of 25 states that even though they work outside home, they are concerned about the upbringing of their children.

When asked about gender policy issues, they say that is useful to some extent but part of it should be taken without damaging the traditional values and family structure in Kyrgyz society.

Conclusion

The collapse of the Soviet Union gave way to tremendous changes in post-Soviet states including Central Asian states and

societies. Financial crises forced the women of Kyrgyzstan enter into business and trade. The hardships opened the way for women to appear much in business and public spheres. Women proved to be more adaptive to new life situations than men in the case of Kyrgyzstan. In last ten years, there have been more female students studying in higher educational institutions and the number is increasing compared with male students. The trend indicates that women's status may increase in society in the coming decades. Though there is no correlation between the education and employment at this stage, as there are less female employee than male employee in work place according to available statistical data.

Though limited, there are significant number of women working in high public offices and in Kyrgyz Parliament as deputies. There is observable swap of roles in families especially in the outskirts of urban areas. The trend is causing furious debates on the traditional family structure and status of women in society. The changing trend seems to be irreversible but many men as well as women are concerned about the traditional family structure and thus supports the limited gender policy compatible with the values of the nation.

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