IMPACT OF SOCIO-CULTURAL CHANGES ON WOMEN

Before Independence

In contemporary Russia and independent Central Asia women's empowerment and their freedom have become a debatable issue. In the Tsarist period women were generally suppressed in each and every sphere. Women were segregated and were denied access to social and educational opportunities and lived life without human dignity. It continued so till the great October Socialist Revolution of 1917. The Soviets favoured women empowerment through economic and social liberation. But this liberation could only be gained if what it called the old feudal structures was replaced with a new industrial and agricultural models destined to foster the creation of a Socialist state. And the purpose could not be fulfilled without the participation of women. In 1918, the adoption of the first Family Code of the RSFSR, which laid the foundation of women's legal equality and sanctioned the repeal of pre-revolutionary laws, which trampled upon women's dignity, restricted freedom of divorce and enforced women's unequal status in the family. The Code was published in the Turkestan Avtornomnaya Sovetskaya Sotsialisticheskaya Respublika (ASSR) in March 1918.¹

Therefore, a new set of codes and civil tribunals replaced the traditional code of Tsarist government. The civil law, equality before the law of all citizens, regardless of ethnic or national origin, gender or social status was proclaimed.

Women were given the right to vote and access to all positions of power on the basis of Article 64 of the Soviet constitution of 1918, and from 1921 onwards, religious marriage, kalyam (bride price) and polygamy were prohibited, while the legal age for marriage was fixed at 16 (instead of 9 years earlier) for girls and 18 instead of 16 for boys. In Central Asia, Soviet policy towards women was implemented in two steps:

- One was the secularisation of family law, starting in 1918.
- Another step was the campaign of emancipation called hujum (offensive), launched at the end of 1926. The main objective of hujum was to struggle against the veil and emancipate women by attacking other old traditional taboos.

The aim of these policies was to bring the indigenous women up to the level of the proletarian Russian women in all areas, to achieve equality among all workers, male and female, in the region. These initiatives taken by the Soviet state had a profound impact on the status of women. During the period of hujum the first women national cadres appeared, and the first women engineers, teachers, journalists, actresses had taken their part in public limelight. This was one of the two main features of Stalin’s policy concerning nationalities that created the necessary conditions for the promotion of Central Asian women. They welcomed the policies of empowerment, some of them openly and some silently.

---

3 Ibid.
Social Structure & Social Practices

The biggest social transformation was undertaken when female Communist organisers were appointed by Moscow to oversee the political education accompanied by female Tatar translators. These Communists visited homes and encouraged women to attend meetings of "Red clubs" (in urban areas), peasant women's houses (in rural areas) or travelling yurts (among nomadic peoples such as the Kazakh, Karakalpak, Kyrgyz and Turkmen). These women's groups (zhenotdely) were interlinked to the district and urban committees of the republican national communist party. They were supposed to exercise 'a cultural and civilizing influence on the indigenous women'. At the end of 1919, these women's groups spread to Turkestan, where in 1925, they were first introduced in the regions of Samarkand and Fergana. The first step of the clubs was to carry out educational and other cultural activities to integrate women into the country's new system of production.

Soviets tried to transform the age-old traditional and cultural aspects of human activities and improve the status of women in society. In order to establish socialist form of government, the Soviets had put an effort to develop political, economic and socio-cultural aspects of life including the development of women's position in the Central Asian region. They tried to make women conscious about their roles and position in the society. Therefore, the transformation from household to socially productive labour was one of the most essential condition for the emancipation of the women and all round development of their personality.

---

6 Ibid.
By late 1920s, a new series of campaigns appeared in Central Asia. *Hujum* as started earlier, was launched in an effort to encourage female emancipation. On the 8th of March 1929, in a great public ceremony in the Kyrgyz ASSR Osh canton, around 9,000 women removed and burnt their veils, and the same event happened in Uzbekistan within few months. As a result, the furious orthodox conservatives assassinated a number of female activists. The transition from orthodox Islam to progressive socialism proved tragic for women and was depicted in the media of those times.

The Soviet government used Mass media as one more medium to promulgate the upliftment of women in Central Asia. One of the best known women’s film *SS Veil*, taken from a drama of the same title and screened in the cinema halls of Baku, attained nation wide popularity. It became the most favourable medium to influence the Central Asian people, especially the women of the region. Majority of the women had come out from the veil and hundreds of women were murdered because of disregarding the veil. In 1926 about thirty women were murdered in the three districts of Central Asia. The story of Anna Jamal, an inhabitant of the Turkmen village of Yangolak, who was the first woman to join the Communist party, exemplifies the brutalities, which were encountered by women in the course of their emancipation. In the dead of the night the assassins cut the skin on the forehead of Anna Jamal.

Another foremost action of the Soviet government was to prohibit and punish the so-called *Byt-Crime*, which means the deviation from human relations. In

---

December 1920, the Central Executive Committee, declaring the abolition of Kalym issued a series of measures. It proclaimed the abolition of "dishonours" and the practice of humiliating women and making slaves of them. In April 1928 after thorough consultation with the leaders of the national republics and the Central Committee, marriage by purchase was legally prohibited. According to Paragraph 197 of the Constitution, "For bidding compulsory Marriage, the act of forcing a woman against her will to marry or to continue co-habitation with a man or continuing her with a view to marriages were punishable with imprisonment for a period of two years". Paragraph 198 of the constitution expressed "the prohibition of child marriage and declared that marriage with a person who has not reached puberty was punishable with imprisonment for a period of two years". 9

The Central Asian family was an obstacle for an ideal Soviet society. The Central Asian indigenous family system remained nearly stagnant, even after 70 years of pressure imposed by the Soviets in the hope of decreasing the traditionalism in family system, and weakening its feudal and patriarchal nature. The effort made by the Soviet government to eradicate centuries old traditions never fully succeeded. The marriage of underage girls, polygamy, the tendency for marriageable girls to quit school, arranged marriage, the practice of Kalym, the separation of sexes in some homes (with the ichkari for women and the tashkari for men) all these practices remained unchanged. 10 Soviet governmental laws, however, were not enough to emancipate Central Asian women as their lives were enclosed within the women's half of the house the ichkari and hidden behind the black thick horse-veil

---

called *paranja*. The position of women in Central Asian republics were determined by traditional conservatism, a factor that seemed to be different among the nomadic people and among those who were settled in the regions from other parts. Even Islam could not bridge the difference, but seems to have inserted many Islamic customs which could carry the Central Asian cultures according to the expectation of the laws of Islam, called *Shariat*. Accordingly, there were some varieties of enslavement of women, which were carried out with nomadic life, the strict isolation and veiling system required by the *Shariat* laws of Islam. The written common law, the *Shariat*, and the local customs of Islamic people, the *Adats*, were subsequently clothed with a higher sanction.11

In traditional Central Asia the original nomadic life assigned women equal responsibility with men. Having duties such as milking as well as child rearing and the preparation and storage of food, overall, women played a major role in the nomadic economy in Central Asia. But centuries old cultures of Mongol and traditional civil society disappeared and were replaced with traditional orthodox Islam as Central Asian culture.

Central Asian women were caught between the tradition they inherited from their traditional society on one hand and the Soviet modernity, which was supposed to replace the old ways on the other hand. However, the progress was slow and hesitant at first, but as the educational reforms began to take effect, women started to play an active role in public life in a broad range of professions as well as in the Communist Party organisation. Majority of women continued to follow the modified

Soviet model, which became more advantageous and provided dignity to the Central Asian women.

Education

The female interest in education was impressive. By 1920, the Soviet government in pre-Central Asia passed a decree on eliminating illiteracy. An extraordinary commission was set up under the guidance of party and Soviet organisations to eradicate illiteracy especially among women. As a result of which, in 1931-32 academic year, almost 5,400 peasant women finished ABC schools in Andizhan district alone. By the end of 1938 women constituted 52.1 percent of those attending higher types of schools.\(^{12}\) By 1939, around four-fifths of women under the age of fifty in the Russian Republics were literate. In Central Asia, over an eight-year period to 1935, the proportion of girls at school rose from 10 percent to 38 percent. But less than 4 percent of Soviet rural women had received secondary education by 1939.\(^{13}\) The Soviet policy expanded the educational opportunities for the women of Central Asia. As a result, number of Central Asian women became professionally skilled. Since 1940s, following the Second World War and the loss of manpower there has been an imbalance in the sex ratio, (notably 19 million more women than men). At the beginning of 1976 women accounted for 53.6 percent of the country’s population. Simultaneously, to fill up the vacuum of labour power,

\(^{12}\) Ajay Patnaik, op.cit., 1989, p.23-24

women were engaged in heavy unskilled labour. In 1945, 56 percent of women among all workers, in 1950, 47 percent and in 1975 it was 55 percent.\textsuperscript{14}

### Agriculture

In the rural areas, the disastrous loss of life in World War Two meant that in meantime the burden of work was fall on women. At the end of the war women made up more than two-thirds of all collective farmers in the entire country.\textsuperscript{15} The Soviet government could not overlook the essence of women's participation in agricultural sector. The percentage of women's participation in agricultural sector was quite high compared to other sectors, because most of the agricultural jobs require unskilled labour. The Central Asian women were not worried to come out from house to be professionally qualified. For years their conservative culture confined them within the household or to the collective farms. Therefore, for rural Central Asian women agriculture became the easiest alternative job apart from housework. Since agriculture attracted women into social production, the collective farms employed more than the required labour force in spite of increasing mechanization in agriculture.\textsuperscript{16} The participation of women in non-agricultural sector was growing slowly. The Soviet policy had assisted the continuous and faster increase of female labour force through continuous industrialisation and increasing demand of labour. As a result, between 1959-70, the number of women in the blue

---


\textsuperscript{16} Ajay Patnaik, op.cit., 1989, p.59.
and white-collar jobs increased 1.5 times in the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (RSFSR), whereas the increase was more than double in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan. However, the percentage of women labour force in industry, in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan was less than half in the RSFSR, and the proportion of women labour force in agriculture was 2.5-3 times higher in Central Asia than in the RSFSR.\textsuperscript{17} According to Kostakov, the variation in the distribution pattern of female labour force between rural and urban areas was because:

- The seasonal labour required in agriculture was often part time, and mostly manual.

- Up season women labour was diverted from blue and white-collar jobs, which was easiest way without or low educational ability or any skill and professional qualifications required.

- All the industrial set ups were in urban areas, that made difficult for rural women labour to go and join it.

Work in agriculture means to live in rural areas with rural communities, where life is less dynamic and more custom bound, and where the old family traditions and customs prevail.\textsuperscript{18}

Following table presents the percentage of women worked in collective farms between 1970-1984:

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, p.119.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, p.119-20.
Table: 15


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uzbekistan</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyrgyzstan</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tajikistan</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkmenistan</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Gender Equality

Since the beginnings of the Soviet power the basic socio-economic principle was a de jure and de facto equality of women in all the spheres of life such as social, political, and economical. Under Soviet Socialism, women had been given economic independence, the opportunity for self-assertion, personality development and overcoming the de facto inequality in their daily life. The Soviet government initiated a series of steps in order to promote the gender equality:

- Full employment of women in socially useful activity.
- Equal pay for equal work by men and women
- Female education and occupational training.¹⁹

However, the impact of gender equality among Soviet women in general had influenced the Central Asian women to some extent. As a result, the Central Asian women also tried to come out from the confined culture and joined the workforce.

Soviet constitution of 1936 and further the 1977 amended constitution guaranteed that men and women have equal rights and that women have equal access to education and training, employment, promotions, remuneration and participation in social, cultural and political activities. In 1936 constitution of Soviet Union the primary importance was given to sexual equality. Article 33 of the constitution of 1977, which said that uniform federal citizenship is established for the USSR, made every citizen of a Union republic a citizen of the USSR. Article 34 of the same constitution said that citizens of the USSR were equal before the law, without distinction of origin, social or property status, race or nationality, language, domicile or other status and that the equal rights of the citizens of the USSR are guaranteed in all fields of economic, political, social and cultural life.\(^\text{20}\)

The Soviet government provided special medical facilities to women. In 1980s, the women were provided 112 days of maternity leave with full pay. When that allowance ended a woman could take as much as one year of additional leave without pay, without losing her position. Employer discrimination against pregnant and nursing women was prohibited and mothers with small children had the right to work part-time.\(^\text{21}\)


However, all these measures undertaken by Soviet government must be taken into account while assessing the present developing situation of women in Central Asia. The effort of Soviet government and sacrifice of Central Asian women did not go in vain. Slowly and steadily radical changes came in the life of Central Asian women and on the soil of the Central Asia a girl child took birth with smile and opened her eyes without a veil.

AFTER INDEPENDENCE

After getting independence, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan faced an uncertain and difficult transitional process. The transition to a market based economy brought offered new challenges for these republics. Both republics witnessed increased inflation rate and a lowering of the living standards of the people. The economic transition and the changes and crisis aftermath put the burden more on women rather than on men. The post-Soviet problems of women can be viewed against the backdrop of cultural revival in Central Asia. The states in the region were traditionally Islamic and society was patriarchal. During the Soviet era the communist leaders suppressed the religious activity and maintained rigid control over it. State provided women equal opportunities in education and jobs along with men. However, after independence in 1991, the republics and its leaders promoted the revival of Islamic values. As a result many achievements women possessed in the Soviet era have eroded and they are hit at its worst by the economic transition.

The high level of unemployment among women, segregation in the labour market, the increasing salary gap between women and men, the lack of women representatives at the decision-making level, increasing violence against women,
the high level of maternal and infant mortality shows the effect of socio-economic crisis among the Central Asian women.

Economic Changes And Women's Position

As part of transition from centrally planned economy to market economy, countries of this region participated in the process of global integration and pursued the liberalisation, privatisation, stabilisation and free market policies. Its impact on women has been quite profound.

Unemployment

At the beginning of independence, in Kyrgyzstan around 43 percent of women were working in harmful conditions because of economic crisis and high cost of living that resulted from Gobachev's Perestroika. Few jobs provide milk or other foodstuffs free of charge, extra leave days and higher wages. In 1993 the number of women employed in jobs with unfavourable working conditions exceeded 12,000. Around 4,000 women work in excessively noisy condition and 6,000 in dust and gas polluted air that exceeds maximum allowable standards. In the food processing industry and in textile industry, women accounted for one third of total number of people engaged in heavy physical labour.22

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>69.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health protection</td>
<td>66.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>64.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade and catering</td>
<td>57.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science, Science Service</td>
<td>48.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing, communal services</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>44.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management bodies</td>
<td>43.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White/blue collar industry</td>
<td>41.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>38.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material/technical supplies</td>
<td>30.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General commercial works</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geology and related services</td>
<td>28.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchasing</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Female unemployment in Kyrgyzstan is rapidly growing. Around 70 percent of the total numbers of officially registered unemployed people are women. Taking into account the unregistered, women accounted for 75.9 percent to 79.7 percent of the total unemployed.\textsuperscript{23} Rural women are not properly informed about the employment service offices and unemployment benefit. So the percentage of unemployed indigenous women in rural areas must be much higher. Lack of job or

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
opportunities in rural areas has resulted in increased number of unemployment. Considerably high level of lay offs following privatisation of kolkhoz property, the disbanding of kolkhozes and the closure of social and cultural institutions have contributed to the process. Central Asian women, who are the least mobile and possess a relatively lower skill level, are mostly attracted to light and food industries. Around 44.9 percent of white and blue collar workers in the Kyrgyzstan are women.\textsuperscript{24}

At the end of their working lives women account for majority of pensioners in Kyrgyzstan. In early 1994, the maximum consumer budget was 265 Som but the average amount of pensions paid to women was only 54 Som. Even though the pension increased a bit in the middle of 1994, it was still only 25 percent of the minimum consumer budget.\textsuperscript{25} Most of agriculture in Kyrgyzstan belongs to cotton production. After disintegration, when the republic stopped getting subsidies from Moscow, the staple production of cotton no longer fetched a subsistence income. Since independence the price of cotton has fallen by more than half. It seems that local middlemen, who are making vast profits on the international markets at their expense, are swindling the local cotton growers.\textsuperscript{26} Overall, since independence, the Central Asia women became the first victim of the period.

The level of skilled labour is very poor among the women, especially in rural areas, because of the existence of early marriage and traditional attitudes. People are unaware about the value of literacy and modernisation. All these reasons force them

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
to drop out before getting the secondary or sometimes primary education. Having children from an early age and a large number later limits their potential for participation in economic activities. As a result the percentage of women employment keep decreasing. The social and occupational mobility of women and their participation in economic activities are caused by demographic and cultural factors and vice-versa.

However, the Kyrgyz government is recently focussing on economic policies to implement the programmes, which emphasise on women's issues to empower them. After independence, because of transitional period, even though women are well represented in the workforce, they are affected more than men, by the liquidation and privatisation of many state enterprises. As other job prospects are diminished, the women of the republic have moved into bazaar, the oriental informal sector, which has been contributing as unofficial economy. In order to understand why the position of women in Kyrgyzstan is quite dynamic, it is necessary to look at various factors including history, current education levels, the present political atmosphere and activities in informal sector. During Soviet period ideological programmes were implemented to encourage the equality between men and women and enhance the status of women within their society. Collectivisation and industrialisation helped to diminish the gap between men and women in Kyrgyzstan. More women are appointed as workers in the various fields and less as skilled and trained personnel. Majority of women are channelled into fields, which have less importance and require non-skilled workers such as food services, health and social welfare as well as culture and the arts. But some women, who improved themselves
and acquired positions in fields of national level, have become the ideals and inspiration for others.

In Turkmenistan the number of workers and employees fell to 41 percent in 1994 from 43 percent in 1990. About 40 percent of total women population are looking for jobs and are registered in employment offices. Of these only 32 percent have found employment. 27 According to the constitution, female workers, employees and collective farmers have the right to retire five years earlier than men (at the age of 55) or after 20 years of service (compared to 25 years for men). Women who have five or more children have the right to retire at the age of 50 years or after 15 years of service. In addition, the state provides material assistance for women to provide for and raise their children. Because of transitional economic crisis, the level of benefits is not sufficient but the notion of equality between men and women is there. In Turkmenistan 41 percent of blue and white-collar women workers were contributing their shares in the national economy in 1994 compared to 39.5 percent in 1970. In the republic women comprise 43 percent of industrial workers, and 46 percent in sales and public catering. Women comprise 62.0 percent, of the total number of collective-farmers. Each year women make up a greater percent of scientific researchers; currently 42 percent of scientific researchers are women.28

Of course, one cannot deny that women had a wide range of opportunities in the Soviet period. Those included opportunity to obtain education, engage in scientific work, improve social status and take an active part in all sphere of public

28 Ibid.
life. After disintegration the broad range of opportunities women had, during Soviet period, have been affected, which has a bearing over present women’s position. In Soviet period women enjoyed equal rights with men and even performed heavy physical labour including work in mines and heavy machinery and equipment operation.29

Highly skilled and trained women were the Russians, who migrated to Central Asian region and fulfilled the vacancies of highly paid posts that were located in the cities. After independence the psychological atmosphere of uncertainty and economic crisis forced thousands of Russians including Russian women to leave the republics. From Kyrgyzstan around 3 percent and from Turkmenistan 4 percent Russians left the region. Agriculture faces a large and growing manpower surplus and very low labour productivity. Labour surplus in agriculture is more pronounced among women, who comprise a large proportion of unskilled farmers. Women were basically employed seasonally. After disintegration, due to economic crisis and shortage of raw materials, agriculture is unable to meet the seasonal demand of the employment of Central Asian women. There is little chance of majority rural women migrating to non-agricultural occupations in the urban areas.30

SOCIAL CHANGES

In Kyrgyzstan some changes in social sector have come after independence. During the Soviet period, in order to counter the influence of religion importance was given to emancipation of women. The extent of *yashmak* (Veil) wearing was less widespread among Kyrgyz women than among women in the other Central Asian republics. In the north of Kyrgyzstan women never wore the *yashmak*, rather some even became the heads of clans and governed territories. The extensive rights given to women, the level of their involvement in production, social and political activities, the de-Islamisation and finally the increase in general literacy and technological progress, all drew the region closer to modernisation.

Of course, persisting traditions formed by patriarchal systems limit to a certain extent the freedom of women to choose their own course of life independently. Economically, most women of the republic have experienced the taste of emancipation, but socially women are still bound to follow a traditional code of conduct, which sometimes limit their opportunities for educational and cultural advance.

Women have equal rights with regards to their children, property and in divorce. The state defends the interest of the mother and the child, provides assistance to families with many children and single mothers. A system of maternity houses, kindergartens and other institutions for children exist to protect the health of women and children.\(^{31}\)

\[^{31}\text{UNDP, Turkmenistan, op.cit., 1996.}\]
In Turkmenistan workingwomen are granted maternity leave of 140 days, for which the salary has to be paid. Women receive special state maternity benefit equal to one-month salary after the birth of a child. Another set of benefits for women to improve the conditions for raising children includes the introduction of partially paid leave for up to 3 years. In this way, women maintain both responsibilities in working place and at home. These policies are beneficial for the children who grow up with the close attention of their mothers. At the same time, the state provides workingwomen with leave to take care of sick children. For children younger than 15 years old, the mothers are given up to 14 days of paid leave during the school vacation period of the year, to spend time with the children.\(^{32}\)

**Education**

During Soviet period, in Kyrgyzstan, the initiatives were taken to expand the educational system on a nation wide level. One of the major achievements was an almost universal level of literacy and 70 percent of secondary school students graduating, which was not a small feat. During that period, in Kyrgyzstan, education played an important role, received the largest proportion of public budgetary expenditure.

In the republic, the national budget on education after independence has decreased to such a level that the government is unable to maintain a standard educational system. As a result the, number of highly educated students and professionals is declining. In Kyrgyzstan the level of literacy among women aged 15 years and above is 98.5 percent.

\(^{32}\) Ibid.
### Table: 17

Students of Secondary Specialized Educational Institutions at the Commencement of the 2000/2001 Academic Year, by Category of Specialisation in Kyrgyzstan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Specialisation</th>
<th>As Percentage of total</th>
<th>Proportion in percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics and planning</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law and document management</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care</td>
<td>39.9</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture and the arts</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecology and protection of the environment</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mining engineering</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power engineering</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanical engineering and metal-working</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aviation technology</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automotive and tractor engineering</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operation, servicing and repair of machinery and equipment</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrument engineering and operation of instruments and</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>apparatus</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control engineering and operation of automation equipment</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer technology and automated systems</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio engineering and communications</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport operation</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forest exploitation and wood processing</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food technology</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer goods technology</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architecture and construction</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geodesics and cartography</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture and forestry</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commodity research and sales organization</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metrology, standardization and quality control</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial activity</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The majority of girls in higher educational institutions traditionally choose an occupation in the field of education and health care (where they make up 80.4
percent and 62.1 percent of students respectively). The Girls of Kyrgyzstan account for 68.6 percent of humanities students and 60.9 percent of those studying mathematical sciences. This shows enrolment of girls is in those areas, which may not benefit them for highly skilled jobs. This also shows gender difference in the field of education, resulting from social attitudes.

In Turkmenistan, women have the right to choose their profession and have access to same education programmes as men do and are granted equal stipends. In Turkmenistan, in 1920s women had a considerably low level of education compared to that of men. Since then the level of education among women has been increasing.

In Turkmenistan considerable progress has been achieved in providing education to women. 98 percent of women have education, including 41 percent of women with higher education. Access to education is open because it is free. As private property and entrepreneurship take root in the country it becomes necessary to teach women the basics of business, new technologies and alternative forms of education. For this purpose numerous business schools and education courses have opened, including computer classes. UNDP and National Women Development Bureau are providing considerable help in this sphere.

The following shows the status of women in Post Soviet Turkmenistan.

---

34 Ibid.
Table: 18

Women's Status in Turkmenistan, (1995-98)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Life expectancy at birth (yrs)</th>
<th>Literacy rate (for 15 to 24 yrs of ages %)</th>
<th>Science &amp; tech (% of women in the branch of industry)</th>
<th>Administration &amp; management (% total)</th>
<th>Women employed in harmful condition (% total)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>67.5</td>
<td>99.8</td>
<td>42.3</td>
<td>39.6</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>44.7</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>67.5</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>37.0</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In Turkmenistan the level of literacy among women between the ages 9 - 49 is 99.8 percent according to Human Development Reports of 1995. In 1994, women comprised 53 percent of the students in secondary specialised students, 38 percent of students in higher education and 29 percent of students in professional schools; and the number of women employed in production who had secondary special education is nearly equal to that of men according to Human Development Report of 1996. There has been a decline in female enrolments in higher educational institutions from 41 percent in 1990 - 91 to 39 percent in 1996 according to Human Development Report of 1997. On the other hand female enrolments for Secondary Specialised education increased because of the need for more skilled workers as a result of restructuring of the economy and orientation towards processing industry. Secondary Specialised Institutions are conveniently located throughout the country,
hence girls need not go far from their homes; and since the programmes are comparatively shorter, students can acquire skills in less time.\textsuperscript{36}

Health

In Kyrgyzstan, the ‘Healthy Nation’ programme, which aims to improve women’s health by reducing maternal and infant mortality through family planning, was introduced after independence. Under this policy, the Ministry of Health provides family planning services throughout the country. The main goals of the family planning policy are to ensure low-risk pregnancies and good maternal health, to reduce complications due to inadequately spaced pregnancies, and to reduce incidence and prevalence of pregnancy complications and extra-genital diseases among women of reproductive age. In accordance with the ICPD goals, the Ministry of Health of the Kyrgyz Republic developed a strategic plan on reproductive health, which will be in place by 2005. Presentation of the new Law of the Kyrgyz Republic on Reproductive Rights took place on 28 October 2000.\textsuperscript{37}

However, health care financing has sharply reduced. This resulted in the impossibility of access to medical care and facilities for the poor, especially women, and among other things, in an increase of STD/HIV incidence. It is related to various factors, such as poverty, unemployment, prostitution, polygamy and unsafe sex practices, less access to medical care. Although an increase of maternity and infant


mortality rates has not been observed, the levels remain unacceptably high. Following table present the health system of Kyrgyzstan in 1998-1999.

**Table: 19**

**Health Indicators of Kyrgyzstan Women, (1998-1999)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1998</th>
<th>1999</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Births per 1,000 women</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of births assisted by skilled attendants</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life expectancy at birth by sex (%)</td>
<td>Male-63.1</td>
<td>Male-63.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female-71.2</td>
<td>Female-71.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal mortality ratio (%)</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infant mortality ratio (%)</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual population growth (%)</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of women parliamentarians</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fertility rate</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contraceptive prevalence rate</td>
<td>33.9</td>
<td>40.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortions per 1,000 women</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Within the Reproductive Health sub-programme, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) procured contraceptives for Kyrgyzstan and built a sustainable system of contraceptive delivery, distribution and registration at country levels. Contraceptives were ordered for 10.25 percent of the overall country needs. Vehicles were provided to Oblast Family Planning Centres to facilitate the timely delivery and distribution of contraceptives and Information, Education and Communication
(IEC) materials. A working group, consisting of representatives of the Ministry of Health, obstetricians/gynaecologists, Heads of Family Group Practitioners and the Head of the Medical Statistical Centre of the Ministry of Health was established to design paper and electronic logistics forms. After consultations with the Ministry of Health the group issued an order to legally support Logistics Management Information System (LMIS). Logistics forms were prepared according to the draft developed at a seminar in December 1999. The purpose of the seminar was to develop contraceptive logistics forms in cooperation with medical specialists and medical statisticians from each oblast. During the seminar, fourteen logistics managers and medical statisticians from each oblast learned how to use a new computer programme on contraceptive logistics. An additional seminar on familiarisation with the developed contraceptive logistics programme was organised for 20 oblast specialists.38

Financial and technical support was provided to the Social Patronage System (SPS) workers. Currently, 380 SPS workers in the south are supported by UNFPA. Special training sessions for SPS workers and Family Group Practitioners (FGPs) were organised all over the country. Training for 56 SPS workers in Naryn oblast and for 34 in Issyk-Kul oblast was conducted by a group of professional trainers appointed by the Ministry of Health with assistance of United Nations Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF). Social Patronage System workers were trained on modern methods of contraception and childcare issues.39

38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
A joint mission to assess the Social Patronage System was undertaken by UNFPA, The Association for Voluntary Surgical Contraception (AVSC) International (in March 2001, formally changed its name into EngenderHealth) and UNICEF in Osh, Issyk-Kul and Naryn oblasts. A crucial need for SPS was revealed, especially in remote areas. One of the most important recommendations of the mission was to improve the quality of SPS workers' work and to strengthen activities for youth and males on reproductive health issues and HIV/AIDS. The final product of the assessment took into consideration the recommendations of the Ministry of Health. Materials on the results of Social Patronage System assessment were printed and disseminated to the Ministry of Health and Oblast Family Planning Centres. UNFPA also supported the printing of a medico-social passport for high-risk families and journals for contraceptive distribution and registration (the main documents used by SPS workers). The country office developed and disseminated Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials for Reproductive Health (RH) services. The materials addressed the major issues with respect to reproductive health and were distributed among the target audience in the country.40

UNFPA organised a presentation of the new Law on Reproductive Rights of the Kyrgyz Republic. Representatives of the Ministry of Health, the Legislative Assembly of the Kyrgyz Parliament, international organisations, NGOs and the mass media took an active part in the presentation. Publication of the new law was supported by UNFPA. The same month the country office initiated a round-table meeting for journalists and representatives of international organisations and UN agencies to advocate UNFPA activities in the country and discuss national

40 Ibid.
problems. UNFPA made a contribution of US $5,150 to the AIDS centre to support its activities such as organisation of a seminar on HIV prevention activities for Family Group Practitioners and publication of brochures and calendars on HIV/AIDS issues. All planned activities were completed successfully.41

The state system of public health in Kyrgyzstan, financed almost entirely from the country's budget ensures implementation of the majority of programs comprising all aspects of women's health. They are the State Health Program, programs for protection of motherhood and children, joint programs with UNDP, UNICEF and UNFPA aimed at promoting a healthy way of life, prevention of diseases, breast-feeding and reproductive health.42

In Turkmenistan, the health of females was basically affected by social and biological factor, like the high number of deliveries and short gap between deliveries and improper care during pregnancy. Therefore maternal mortality was very high about 81.9 percent per 100,000 live births recorded in 1997. The health of infants was affected by the health of the mother and complications were found during pregnancy and delivery.43

Therefore, the government of Turkmenistan has developed Health Care Reform Programme, adopted by the President of the republic in July 1995. The “State Health Programme of the President” (PHP) highlighted certain changes in the areas of health management, finance, primary health care, hospital services, pharmaceutical, human resources, health care infrastructure, medical research and

41 Ibid.
legislation. By giving importance to the protection of women and child health, the
government has stressed on “National programme for Maternal and Child Health
Protection.” The main objective of the programme was to bring down by the year
2001, the maternal mortality rate by 30 percent and infant mortality rate by 10
percent and prenatal and neonatal mortality by 10 percent. The aim was to achieve
substantial improvement in the health status of about to be and new born babies,
children, adolescents, and women of reproductive age.”44 Following measures were
included in the programme:

- Ensuring that felshers, midwives, family nurses and physicians at all
  levels in the health system should have enough knowledge and skills
  to manage normal pregnancies and deliveries, to detect, manage and
  refer to specialist if any high risk cases and complications are found.

- All pregnant women will have access to basic maternity care,
  comprising antenatal care.

- Availability of and accessibility to adequate family planning
  information and services will be ensured in order to reduce the
  number of high risk and unwanted pregnancies and to achieve a
  consequent reduction in maternal deaths.

- Adolescent girls and boys will be educated on issues related to
  reproduction, human sexuality and the inadvisability of early
  marriage and pregnancy.

---

44 Ibid
A major IEC strategy will be developed, focussing on birth spacing and birth timing as important health measures for mother and child. 45

After the introduction of Family Practice System in 1996, to be practised by Family Physicians, the rules for pregnant woman has to follow the advice of obstetrician-gynaecologist in co-operation with the family physician and midwife. A register with reference to infant and maternal mortality rates in Turkmenistan, all births have to be in the hospital. In case of home delivery, the obstetrician, family physician or a trained midwife should attend them. 46

In Turkmenistan, the Centre for Health prevention and Aids Control, MOHMI seems to be given responsibility to promote health education with the support of Ministry of Health. Initiatives to improve health system have been taken by promoting healthy lifestyle with the co-operation of doctors, and other medical personnel. To publicize health education, a government decree has made it mandatory for every doctor to spend 4 hours a month on health propaganda. For this purpose, the state programme has an extensive healthy lifestyle medical propaganda plan through following measures:

- Introduction of a mandatory course on healthy lifestyle in the school curriculum.
- Introduction of health for all into all mass information system (newspapers, journals, periodicals, radio and television programme).
- Ban on advertising of harmful substances such as alcohol, and tobacco.

46 Ibid
• Ban on smoking in public place
• Mass distribution of popular and scientific publications, visual and other information on healthy lifestyle.\textsuperscript{47}

All these measures will help in bringing awareness about health system among women. A number of NGOs have supported towards extra curricular activities for youth. Such organisations as Women’s Organisation of Turkmenistan, Youth League of Turkmenistan, \textit{Gengeshi} (on religious affairs) and National Organisation of Red Cross, have sponsored various competitions for children and young people on “My Family” and “My World” etc. to promote a healthy life style. Women NGOs are the main agencies to advocate productive health rights and improvement in the status of women.\textsuperscript{48}

\textbf{Political Changes}

After the break up of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian republics also began to move towards creating liberal democratic polities. However, the percentage of women’s representation has not been satisfactory, despite their legal equality. Though they initiated some democratic change, the political leadership still remained authoritarian and patriarchal.

Women are barely represented in government and politics. In Kyrgyzstan, only 6.7 percent of women deputies are in the \textit{Zhogorku Kenesh} (Parliament). In 2001, only 2 of the 12 ministers in Kyrgyzstan were women. There were no women regional governors. The only senior female executive official is the Minister of

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid
 Justice and a woman heads the Constitutional Court. According to 2001 data, women in senior government posts accounted for 14.7 percent of the heads of administrative bodies. About 24.7 percent of the heads of subdivisional organizations departments, and administration are women.\textsuperscript{49} Despite the state laws and the ratification of UN conventions protecting women’s rights, women in Kyrgyzstan continue to occupy a subordinate position in almost all aspects of life. Not only are there few women deputies in the parliament, women representation at the oblast (Province) level is only 32.6 percent and 32.8 percent at the village level.\textsuperscript{50} This shows that in the upper echelons of power, women’s representation is abysmally low and re-entry is difficult. However, at the grass root level women’s representation is relatively better compared to higher levels. The reason can be persistence of gender discrimination at the cultural, social, political level, though formally they are given equal rights.

Laws of Turkmenistan guarantee women equal opportunities for realising their aspirations in running the affairs of the state as well as public and economic matters. In Turkmenistan, item 2 of Article 17 of the Constitution guarantees equality of the rights and freedom irrespective of nationality, origin, property and official rule, residence, language, relation to religion, political conviction, party belonging. Article 18 states that men and women in Turkmenistan have equal civil rights. The infringement of equality in relation to sex attracts punishment under the law. According to these rules, legislations should be based on absence of discrimination in relation to gender.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{49} UN, CEDAW, op.cit., 2002, p.5  
\textsuperscript{50} UNFPA, Annual Report, op.cit., 2000.  
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
According to the 4th World Conference on Women Status held in Beijing in September 1995, Turkmenistan has joined the Convention On Eliminating Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention for Equal Remuneration for Men and Women Workers For Work of Equal Value, as also the ILO Convention on Discrimination based on Labour and Employment. With the support of UNDP, the government of Turkmenistan opened the National Women In Development/Gender In Development (WID/GID) Bureau aimed at strengthening women’s role at all level of social life. The Bureau works in coordinating the information on gender issues among governmental agencies, international organisations, NGOs and society as a whole. The Bureau assists the government in designing the National Action Plan based on the recommendations of the 4th World Conference on Women’s status. The government of Turkmenistan has created a special department on social protection of women called Gurbansoltan-edge that plays major role in the protection of the rights of women and promotion of their participation in economic and social spheres.

The 1998 elections to Majlis (Parliament) of Turkmenistan and local organs of power showed some improvement in women’s representation. In Turkmenistan, in 1998, about 39 percent of the total number of people involved in administrative and governmental bodies were women. About 18 percent women representatives were in Turkmen Majlis, women accounted for 26 percent of all elected officials.

---

52 Ibid.
53 Ibid, p.3
### Table: 20

**Gender Empowerment Measures in Turkmenistan, 1999**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indexes</th>
<th>1998</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Index of female parliamentary representatives</td>
<td>0.588</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index of female parliamentary representations in</td>
<td>0.9035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>administrative managerial, professional and technical positions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index of equality distributed income</td>
<td>0.069</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender empowerment measure-GEM</td>
<td>0.520</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In order to calculate the development index considering the gender factor Gender Development Index (GDI), the same indicators and components are used for calculating the Human Development Index (HDI).

The table reflects the degree to which certain progress was achieved in various areas. At the same time, Turkmenistan is yet to ratify other conventions such as the Convention about the Political Rights of Women, (1952), about Citizenship of the Married Women 1957 and Declaration about the Eradication of Violence Against Women (1993), etc. In December 1995 Turkmenistan adopted the Declaration on International Obligations in the Field of Human Rights and Freedoms and brought its legislation in line with the international acts by ratifying and acceding to the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination

---

55 Ibid.
against Women, Convention on the Political Rights of Women and others. The system of standards ensuring the legal status of women is based on the democratic principle of the rule of law. This key principle of a democratic society forms an indispensable element of equality of all citizens regardless of their gender.\(^{56}\)

**Violence Against Women**

In Kyrgyzstan, societal discrimination against women persists. Violence against women is a problem that authorities often ignore, and trafficking in women and girls for the purpose of forced prostitution also is a persistent problem. Governmental authorities always ignore violence against women as a social problem. Trafficking in women and girls for the purpose of forced prostitution is also persisting.\(^{57}\)

In Kyrgyzstan, trafficking in women and girls continues, mostly to Turkey and the United Arab Emirates, for the purpose of forced prostitution. The officials may receive bribes in exchange for forged travel documents for women. Russian border guards operating on the Tajik border also allegedly are complicit in trafficking.\(^{58}\) Government statistics indicate that annually there are 400 to 450 crimes against women, but law enforcement officials never report many crimes due to pressures, cultural restrictions, and apathy. The Government has not devised a

---


program to deal with this problem, and the number of shelters for battered women is quite limited to meet the need. 59

In Kyrgyzstan, the law gives equal status to women, and they are well represented in the work force, in the professions, and in institutions of higher learning. Women are prominent in law, medicine, accounting, and banking. They also play an active role in the rapidly growing nongovernmental sector. Nonetheless, recently deteriorating economic conditions have had a severe effect on women, who are more likely than men to lose their jobs. It is estimated that women account for 53.3 percent of the unemployed. Women make up the majority of pensioners, who have felt the negative effects of the country's economic downturn as inflation has eroded pensions, which often are paid late. Women’s groups express general concern about the situation of rural women. 60

By the end of 1996, Kyrgyzstan had ratified principal UN Conventions on Women's Rights, but so far not amended the domestic legislation to bring it in line with the country’s international commitments. At the executive level, the State Commission on Women's Issues has been established, but it has not achieved any significant improvements to date.

The year 1996 was proclaimed a Women's Year in Kyrgyzstan. In recognition of this, President Akayev on 8 March - International Women's Day - granted amnesties to a considerable number of female prisoners. However, growing domestic violence against women and unemployment were the main concerns. Local

women activists expressed the fear that corruption among state controlled school administrators, who illegally demand fees for tuition, could lead to a sharp increase in the number of uneducated children, particularly girls.  

Measures by Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs)

NGOs are a new phenomenon in Turkmenistan. It is mandatory for NGOs to be registered but many do not register, due to the slow and cumbersome process, and thus operate as "NGOs without a legal status". In the past, due to lack of donor support NGOs were forced to rely on their own income-generating activities. The lack of a strong legal framework has been identified as the main obstacle to NGO development in Turkmenistan especially of a clearly defined and applicable registration mechanism. In December 1997, UNDP and Counterpart Consortium organised the first Conference on Civil Society jointly. Twenty-eight NGOs from all Turkmenistan attended and it marked an important beginning in helping to clarify the institutional and legal status of NGOs. There are other constraints that have hampered NGO development: NGOs lack experience, exposure to NGOs in other countries and expertise other than welfare assistance. There is approximately 100 women's advocacy NGOs operating in the country with 20 located in rural areas.

With the end of communism, traditional attitudes toward women are reasserting themselves strongly in the countryside, where women are relegated to the role of wife and mother, and educational opportunities are curtailed. Data indicate that women are becoming less healthy, more abused, less represented in

---

government, less able to work outside the home, and less able to dispose of their earnings independently. While the Kyrgyz government has made efforts to make the public aware of women's issues, the government has yet to fully address the needs of women. Lacking political power (women currently comprise only about six percent of the Jogorku Kenesh, (Parliament) as compared to the worldwide average of eleven percent), women have taken to grassroots efforts and NGOs to provide services where the government has failed to organize. Over 70 women-oriented NGOs had been established and officially registered with the government as of October 1997. Many of these NGOs focus on social protection and poverty alleviation. Some offer much needed training, support writing and business management classes, and dispense advice regarding ever-changing tax codes, laws and regulations.63

Not all registered NGOs are successfully implementing programs. There are many reasons why NGOs fail, including inability to create sustainable projects, lack of funding or necessary equipment (computers, fax machines, copy machines, etc.), and difficulties in reaching the public. It takes a large effort on the part of NGO participants to establish and effectively implement projects. One very effective NGO is the social organisation Diamond, founded by academic women in June 1994. Members of Diamond conduct sociological research regarding women and other vulnerable members of society (invalids, children, immigrants) and how issues such as unemployment, violence and access to credit affect them. The research findings are then disseminated to the public through books, pamphlets, and conferences. In order to address the increasing level of violence against women, Diamond has

established one of the first crisis centres in Kyrgyzstan. Located in the capital, Bishkek, this centre, appropriately named Chance, opened in July 1997 and addresses the physical, psychological and sexual problems facing women and children. Consultations can be held in person or over the phone, providing women the opportunity to receive psychological help, legal advice and assistance in finding safe shelter. Over the next two years Diamond hopes to open centres in other cities based on the Bishkek model.64

Another NGO that has been successful in providing assistance to women is located outside Bishkek, in the village of Jerkazar. Founded by a small group of women in 1995, Alga (Kyrgyz for forward, or in the future) offers a variety of programs to women in rural areas where economic conditions are more depressed. The initial goal of Alga was to join village women together to bring their needs to the attention of the Jorgoku Kenesh (parliament). Twenty women lobbied the Parliament and the Committee of Women, Family and Children and were successful in obtaining land for agricultural use. Their success helped this small town of 5,000 to realise that a united front commanded attention and brought positive results. Now Alga has approximately 75 members of all ages. Programmes have been created that inform women about micro credit loans and how to access such credit. In addition, members train other women on how to implement successful business plans once credit has been obtained. Since Alga won a grant from an international donor to buy a computer and Xerox machine, it has begun teaching computer skills to other women. English is now being taught by the first Peace Corps volunteers to be based in the village.

64 Ibid
New Prospects for Women’s Empowerment

Such skills are all the more important now that it is increasingly difficult for women to find employment in the official economy. Women have found new alternatives for participation in the informal economy, becoming more active in the economy surrounding the bazaar. Petty vending ranges from the sale of fruits and vegetables to soaps and shampoos, Snickers bars and Pepsi. Many women can be seen selling homemade dishes like manti (dumplings filled with meat, onions and pumpkin), blini (Russian pancakes) and various salads. The growth in petty vending and trading as an alternative income-generating process has led to a demand among women for access to credit. In turn, several international organisations as well as locally based institutions have established programmes to provide small loans to women. Foundation For International Community Assistance (FINCA), a US’s NGO that operates a micro credit project, has set up a village banking system that provides hundreds of women with credit. In the city of Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan, several FINCA village bank members use their loans to buy butter from outlying rural areas and then sell the butter at the Osh bazaar. Women in the city of Tokmok, an hour east of Bishkek, have used their loans to purchase various products, including batteries, cosmetics, hair clips, toothpaste, chewing gum and pens, which are then sold by women at higher prices at the local bazaar.65

When travelling through Kyrgyzstan, it is not uncommon to see numerous different food stops along the roadsides carried by women. One woman in the

Suusamyr valley in central Kyrgyzstan offers various dishes for those dining with her, including *kymyz* (mare's milk) and *pilau* (a rice dish) with horsemeat.\(^6\)

Many women are also taking advantage of a phenomenon known as shop tours. This business is predominated by women, who are known as *chelnoki* (Russian for one who shuttles). These women travel to such countries as Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Indonesia and India for weeks at a time, returning home loaded with consumer goods. The *chelnoki* usually hire an assistant to watch their kiosks while travelling, helping to create employment for others. The work of a *chelnok* is intensive and physically demanding, but the benefits include substantially higher profits than those of the average petty vendor, as well as the previously impossible opportunity to travel.\(^7\)

\(^6\) Ibid
\(^7\) Ibid