

# VI. Gendered Transitions: The Impact of the Post-Soviet Transition on Women in Central Asia and the Caucasus

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## ABSTRACT

In this chapter, I explore the impact of the post-Soviet political and socioeconomic transitions on women in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus. I review the impact of Soviet policies on gender roles and relations in order to contextualize post-Soviet developments. The central segment, which examines gender roles and relations after socialism, is divided into two sections. In the first section, I examine the impact of local political and socioeconomic transitions on gender relations and local responses to those transitions. In the second section, I discuss the impact of regional/global events and interactions on gender roles and relations. Throughout the chapter, I consider the similarities and differences of the transitions and the responses to those transitions in the post-Soviet republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus.

## Introduction

Scholars writing about the post-Soviet “transitions”<sup>1</sup> confront issues connected with the acceptance or rejection of new models. Research therefore has delved into the complex ways in which the past and present

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<sup>1</sup> The term “transition” has been problematized by various scholars, including Michael Burawoy, Katherine Vedery, and Barbara Einhorn, who argue that “transition” implies an evolutionary development that has a single, well-defined objective and trajectory.

get expressed in the creation of national ideologies, of new identities, social classes, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in these societies (Akiner 1997; Berdahl et al. 2000; Bridger and Pine 1998; Buckley 1997; Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Creed and Wedel 1997; Dawisha and Parrott 1997; Dudwick 1997; Funk 1993; Gal and Kligman 2000; Sampson 1996; Verdery 1996; Wedel 2001). Yet another major aspect of post-Soviet transitions that has increasingly gained salience is the “gendered” nature of the post-Soviet transitions (Gal and Kligman 2000). In the former Soviet states of Central Asia and the Caucasus, Soviet and pre-Soviet beliefs about the nature of the family, the state, political leaders, capitalism, and community/social life affect the transition to democracy, capitalism, and the development of civil society. In these societies, the category of women was and continues to be an ideological site for political, religious, and economic projects. In this article, I explore the impact of post-Soviet political and socio-economic transitions on women in Central Asia and the Caucasus. While I make generalizations about the lives of women in Central Asia and the Caucasus, gender as a variable is one among many, including ethnicity, age, education, geographic location, and religion, which determine and affect how individuals experience the transitions. Clearly, there are variations among women living in the societies of Central Asia and the Caucasus, but in this chapter, I will identify shared tendencies and patterns that cross national borders since the women living in post-Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus share a sufficient number of common experiences due in large part to the legacy of a shared Soviet past.

### **Gendered Transitions**

Gail Lapidus (2000) argues that virtually no one (from the West or East) anticipated, in the initial euphoria, that gender issues would prove to be one of the most problematic aspects of the transition, and indeed that political democratization and economic reforms might significantly increase rather than attenuate the gender asymmetries (P. 102). Yet this has become the case in the countries of the Soviet Union, where women have not only become the majority of the unemployed, but have also become depoliticized and are largely left out of the government, political parties, and the official public sphere.<sup>2</sup> While post-Soviet developments

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<sup>2</sup> In “Working at the Global/Local Nexus: Challenges Facing Women in Armenia’s NGOs Sector,” in *Women in Post-Communist Transitions*, edited by Carol Nechemias and Kathleen Kuehnast, Woodrow Wilson Center Press, forthcoming, I describe how Armenian women who were left out of the government, official public sphere, political parties and now make up the majority of NGO leaders and members.

in Central Asia and the Caucasus have not resulted in adequate legal, economic, and political rights yet, given women's universal literacy, the high rates of female participation in the labor force and the Communist Party and local governments during Soviet times, as well as the intervention of international NGOs and transnational feminist networks, many women in Central Asia and the Caucasus have found ways to resist and counter the adverse trends of post-Soviet developments.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, as Mary Buckley (1997) maintains, while the transitions have not been easy for women, it is problematic to consider women as being victims of the post-Soviet collapse. They are much more than victims; they are agents of change and reaction, who have inventively found ways of managing in the new and often difficult circumstances surrounding them (P. 7).

The editors of this volume, Mehdi Parvizi Amineh and Henk Houweling, urge us to consider how Central Eurasia is an important region that is both implicated in global processes and yet plays its own role in them. By examining how women in Central Asia and the Caucasus have been affected by the local socioeconomic and political developments and their activism in transnational movements (e.g., NGO networks), we can begin to understand how this region is implicated in global processes and how citizens of the region are responding to the changes brought about by the post-Soviet transition and the current period of globalization.

I begin the chapter with a brief overview of the impact of Soviet policies on women since these policies continue to influence gender relations and responses in the post-Soviet period. Following an overview of Soviet policies on the "woman question," I will discuss the impact of the post-Soviet transitions on women in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

### **"Breaking the Cake of Custom": Soviet Policies Regarding the "Woman Question"**

The leaders of the new Soviet state who came to power in the 1917 promised a radical reconstitution of society, which would fundamentally transform economic, social, and political institutions and relations. The few Communist Party leaders who had given some consideration to the role of women under socialism believed that the alteration of women's roles in society was a function of the economic and political reconstitution of the larger society (Lapidus 1978: 55). These leaders argued that as women took on larger roles in the economic, social, and political

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<sup>3</sup> Transnational advocacy networks, according to Keck and Sikkink (1998) are "Networks that are organized to promote causes, principled ideas, and norms, and they often involve individuals advocating policy changes that cannot be easily linked to a rationalist understanding of their 'interests'" (Pp. 8-9).

life of the Soviet Union, they would emerge from the confines of the household into the wider public arena. This entry into social production and political life would, they maintained, have profound consequences on male-female relationships (Lapidus 1978: 55). In order to stimulate this transformation, the Soviet government adopted legislation during the early 1920s, establishing civil marriage, easy divorce, abortion services, maternity pay, and childcare facilities. All restrictions on women's freedom of movement were abolished, while laws were adopted that gave women equal rights to hold land, to act as heads of households, to participate as full members in rural communes, and later to be paid as individuals rather than as part of a household for collective farm labor (Lapidus 1978: 60). Although the principles of equal pay for equal work were enshrined in law, new laws and policies were no guarantee that women would enjoy an increased role in social production (Buckley 1989: 19). Formal legal equality did not translate into real equality in gender relations in the private or public spheres as women, laboring under the "double burden," continued to be responsible for nearly all domestic chores in addition to working outside the home.

*The Zhenotdel and Women in Central Asia and the Caucasus*

In order to expand the influence of the party over a large number of working-class and peasant women, in 1919 the state created the *zhenskii ottdel* (abbreviated as Zhenotdel), Women's Department of the Central Committee Secretariat. Under the leadership of Inessa Armand and later Alexandra Kollontai, the Zhenotdel was charged with spreading the message of the Party to the unorganized women in factories and villages throughout the Soviet Union. Zhenotdel representatives were sent to the Central Asian and Caucasus republics to teach, mobilize, and politicize local women, to draw them into the Party, trade unions, cooperative organizations and the soviets, and to promote literacy (Lapidus 1978: 66). The peasant household, in particular, was seen as the very embodiment of tradition and backwardness and the bearer of counterrevolutionary values. According to Soviet ideology, Muslim women in Central Asia and the Caucasus endured a triple oppression of class, nationality, and family. The assimilation of the Muslim societies of Central Asia into the Soviet Union presented special difficulties as various Party organizations failed to penetrate or destroy traditional associational networks by a direct assault on local elites. Hence, to "break the cake of custom" (Matossian 1961: 61), Soviet social engineers developed numerous methods of agitation and recruitment in order to inform women of their new rights and responsibilities to the Party and the state.

Gregory Massell's (1975) study, *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919-1929*, illustrates the

process through which the Soviet government replaced social class with sex as the decisive lever for effecting social change in Central Asia. Massell argues that the Communist Party came to experiment with a number of approaches in drawing in the Central Asian republics into the fold of the system. One of these approaches was the “in depth” approach, which was aimed at undermining the traditional social order in order to destroy family structures and the kinship system. Soviet social engineers believed that this could most speedily be achieved through the mobilization of women. Massell explains, “It may be said, then, that Moslem women came to constitute in Soviet political imagination, a structural weak point in the traditional order: a potentially deviant and hence subversive stratum susceptible to militant appeal—in effect, a surrogate proletariat where no proletariat in the real Marxist sense existed” (1975: xxiii).

The authorities believed that, if they could engender conflict within the traditional family structures, this would provide them with leverage for the disintegration of those structures and their subsequent reconstitution. Throughout the Soviet republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus, local *Zhenotdels* established women’s clubs, workers’ clubs, tea-houses (*chaykhana*), workshops (*artel*), and evening schools for adult literacy or “illiteracy liquidation centers” (*likpunkty*) to integrate women into the Soviet system. The overarching goal of the Soviet state was not so much to liberate women, but to organize them as a political and economic force that would become workers in the industrialized economy.

One such club that was established during this period was the Ali Bayramov Club in Baku, Azerbaijan. This club was created by Dzheiran Bairmova in 1920. By year’s end, the club had 100 members. Its press organ, *Sharq Qadini* (Woman of the East), played an important role in the legal and political education of women in Azerbaijan. In Armenia, which is a Christian country, combating the influence of Islam was not the main concern of the Communist Party. Instead, the party in Armenia identified the traditional Armenian family as a “backward” institution and sought to transform it by dismantling family loyalties. To do this the Soviet leadership created the *Kinbazhin*, the Armenian chapter of the *Zhenotdel*. During the 1920s, *Kinbazhin* workers would select representatives (*delegatkii*) who would visit homes and give women “scientific” advice on how to raise children and on simple rules of hygiene. These *delegatkii* would also try to establish rapport with the children of the household and encourage them to report cases of child beating, wife beating, and forced marriages, which Mary Matossian (1961) argues, had “immense potentialities for disrupting traditional family patterns” (P. 66). In addition to *Kinbazhin*, the Commission for the Improvement of the Way of Life of Women (*Kanants Kentsaghe Barelavogh Hantznazhogove*) was created in 1923

to “advise government organs, conduct propaganda campaigns, offer legal advice to women, and provide an ‘inspection service’ to see that Soviet legislation regarding the family and traditional offenses was put into effect” (Matossian 1961: 67). These and other intrusive Soviet institutions and practices were resented and resisted throughout the Central Asian and Caucasian republics and they had the paradoxical effect of strengthening family and kinship networks. Opponents in some of the Central Asian republics even referred to the Zhenotdel as the *jivotdel* (the department of bad spirits) (Tadjbakhsh 1998: 169). Hence, in these societies, the cake of custom was only partially broken as the family became not only a mode of resistance to the state, but also remained as the primary means of identification, support, and advancement throughout the Soviet period.

By 1926, the Soviet authorities realized that legislative reforms alone were insufficient. A more interventionist and aggressive campaign called *Hujum*, or intractable assault on customs and traditions was launched in Central Asia (Tadjbakhsh 1998: 169). Mass unveilings were part of this movement and women were encouraged to publicly shed and burn their veils. On March 8, 1927, the International Day of Women, women were ordered to appear in parades throughout the Soviet Union. That evening, a simultaneous mass “un-veiling” was ordered in the largest cities of Central Asia and apparently, on that day, over 10,000 women burned their veils in Uzbekistan alone. Shirin Akiner (1997) maintains that, through the Zhenotdel’s sustained efforts, traditional culture was either destroyed or rendered invisible, confined to the most intimate and private sphere, whereas in the public arena new identities were created and society was secularized (P. 261).

The Zhenotdel continued to operate until 1930 in spite of accusations that it had “feminist tendencies,” which “under the banner of improving the women’s way of life, actually could lead to the female contingent of the labor force breaking away from the common class struggle” (Lapidus 1978: 71). In 1930, with Stalin’s consolidation of power within the Party nearly complete, he ordered a general reorganization of the Central Committee. This led to the formal abolition of the Zhenotdel and to the declaration that the “woman question” had been solved.

### *The Woman Question Solved?*

After 1930, Zhenotdel activities were assigned to regular Party organizations and to the Commissions for the Improvement of the Working and Living Conditions of Women that were attached to local, provincial, and republic executive committees. This, Lapidus (1978) argues, was indicative of the growing predominance of views that were hostile to any further strain in family and communal relations; instead, under Stalin the status quo was to subordinate a broader definition of liberation to the need for so-

cial stability, control, and productivity for harnessing the energies of men and women alike to the common cause of socialist construction (P. 94). Over the next twenty years serious discussion about women's issues was largely silenced, and discourses about production and output displaced the earlier themes of liberation, equality, and domestic labor (Buckley 1989: 13). As a result of this shift in state ideology, in the 1930s and 1940s women were portrayed as virtuous, self-sacrificing *Stakhanovite*, shock workers, who overfilled production quotas as part of the Soviet project of constructing socialism. During and immediately after World War II, the state also began to encourage couples to have many children (four or more) and rewarded them with subsidies such as free milk, living stipends, and better homes. Women with ten or more children, besides all the economic benefits, were also awarded a medal of honor and given the title of Heroine Mother of the Soviet Union (Matossian 1961: 182).

This absence of debate about women's roles in society lasted until the mid-1950s, when, following Stalin's death in 1953, women's issues returned to public debate as part of the general thaw in Soviet society. During the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 1956, Khrushchev expressed regret for the relative absence of women from prominent positions in the state and Party. In his view, different groups had different needs and should be treated differently. Women constituted one such group in Khrushchev's view (Buckley 1989: 14). Because of this, he supported the creation of women's organizations called *zhenskii sovety* (abbreviated as *Zhensovety*), or women's councils to cater to the needs and interests of women. The political activities of the *Zhensovety* were aimed at developing the "New Communist Women," who were educated in the spirit of the "high moral principles needed for building communism" (Browning 1986: 87). As before, the *Zhensovety* delegates were charged with combating the influence of religion in the Muslim regions of Central Asia, but now, they were also responsible for monitoring the spread and popularity of religion in the Catholic regions of the Baltic republics and in the central Russian areas where the Orthodox Church retained a strong foothold. In general, the *Zhensovety* failed to produce female leaders in the Communist Party, even though they acted as autonomous consciousness raising groups among women (Tadjbakhsh 1998: 171).

### *Achievements and Failures*

On the surface, it appears that the women of the Soviet Union had accomplished an impressive level of emancipation by the late 1980s. Education is one area in particular in which the state socialism of the Soviet Union deserves undeniable credit (Tohidi 1998: 142). Free universal primary education was introduced in the 1930s, universal eight-year education in the 1950s, and universal secondary education in the 1970s.

There was universal literacy among women in the Soviet Union, and women were generally slightly better educated than men. In the late 1980s, women constituted 61% of specialists with higher or secondary specialized education and 54% of students in higher educational establishments (Pilkington 1992: 182). Although there was gender-based occupational segregation, women comprised 50.9% of workers in the Soviet economy and their wages were between 70 to 85% of men's wages (Pilkington 1992: 183). In spite of these educational and professional achievements, however, women continued to endure the dreaded double burden as they fulfilled quotas in the factories and farms and tended to their families and homes. In Central Asia in particular, the double burden was more onerous owing to the prevalence of large families, relatively low provisions of communal amenities such as crèches, canteens, and laundries, and outside the main cities, the chronic scarcity of labor-saving devices such as washing machines and vacuum cleaners (Akiner 1997: 281).

In terms of health, women's life expectancy was nearly ten years longer (73.9) than men's life expectancy (64.8), and the level of primary health care and the overall health status of people, including that of women and children, seemed to be comparable to that of many developed countries. The reality of women's health, however, given the unreliability of Soviet statistics, was less encouraging. In Central Asia, as throughout the Soviet Union, the state's pro-natal policy, the lack of family planning, and the minimal access to contraceptives rendered abortion the primary means of birth control (Tohidi 1998: 142). The prevalence of abortion was a major health care issue that was neglected by Soviet authorities.

In the realm of politics, a quota system was instituted by the authorities to maintain a proportional level of "representation" at all levels of state and Party governance. Women, however, rarely appeared in the leadership positions in the higher echelons of power. The contrived nature of this system of representation became quite clear following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the nearly absolute withdrawal of women from political life throughout the former Soviet states. This decline in women's representation began during the period of *perestroika* (restructuring) as women lost their one-third representation in the local soviets and the Parliament and intensified immediately following independence (Posadskaya 1993: 163).

### **Women in Central Asia and the Caucasus after Socialism: Between Tradition and Modernity**

#### *Socio-Economic Developments*

Women in the former Soviet Union had entered the working world in vast numbers after Sovietization and enjoyed the benefits of a socioeconomic safety net. In the post-Soviet period, they have suffered

most from the difficult economic transition. The transition to a market economy has been costly in terms of real income and output decline, disproportional unemployment and underemployment among women, widespread impoverishment, a rapid deterioration of living standards and social safety nets, the loss of maternal and childcare benefits, deepening gender inequalities, and the decreasing presence of women in the government and formal political parties. In 2002, ten years after independence, all of the former Soviet republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus are listed in the “Medium Human Development” category on the United Nations Development Program Human Development Index (HDI). As such, these countries are considered “developing” countries. Only the Baltic states of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia are included in the “High Human Development” category on the HDI, ranking 42<sup>nd</sup>, 49<sup>th</sup>, and 53<sup>rd</sup>, respectively. This “de-development,” de-modernization, or reprimativization, as it has been variously called, has created a great deal of anxiety, anger, and frustration for the citizens of the former Soviet Union (Bridger and Pine 1998; Burawoy and Verdery 1998; Creed and Wedel 1997; Ishkanian 2000; Platz 2000; Wedel 2001). International aid and development agencies, including the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the World Bank, among others, have begun to address the de-development in the former socialist states, and their policies and rhetoric have shifted, moving from helping these countries to make or effect the transition from communism to capitalism/democracy to helping them make the transition from poverty to sustainable development. This shift is evident in the types of publications that are released by these agencies and the grants that are apportioned.

In 2000, the World Bank published a report on poverty in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS): *Making Transition Work for Everyone: Poverty and Inequality in Europe and Central Asia*. According to this report, in 1998 an estimated one out of every five person in the transition countries of the Europe and Central Asia survived on less than \$2.15 USD a day (2000: 1). The World Bank authors acknowledge the fact that the transitions have brought new economic opportunities for some, but for many others, it has meant unaccustomed material hardship and loss of security, including loss of jobs, prolonged non-payment of salaries, hyperinflation and loss of savings, and the drastic erosion of accustomed supports such as low-cost or free social services and subsidies. The high rates of absolute poverty, the lack of economic growth, growing social polarization, and crumbling infrastructure have had a serious impact at the micro-level where people have lost their jobs and status in society, and are faced with harsh material conditions. As Valentine Moghadam (2000) argues,

From a gender perspective, the market reforms that have been adopted in Central Asia and the Caucasus, prescribed and underwritten by the international financial institutions, and endorsed by neoliberal thinkers and policy makers in Western countries have been deeply flawed. The social costs of the transition have been far higher than expected, and the burden borne by women has been especially onerous. (P. 32)

She asks, “Why should women be more vulnerable than men?” Moghadam maintains that the reasons for the gender-differentiated impact of the market reforms in the former Soviet republics are both cultural and economic (P. 31). They are cultural in the sense that traditional gender ideology regarding men’s and women’s roles shapes the types of work that men and women can engage in, and it is economic in the sense that the nature of the reforms themselves and the assumptions in the neoliberal economic thinking that inform them are not gender-neutral. Neoliberal economic policies privilege the operation of a free market unencumbered by state interventions and tend to favor the accumulation of capital over and above the well-being of labor. This does not mean that social safety nets or policies targeted at poor households are not considered; indeed, as Moghadam points out, the neoliberal approach to welfare has a preference for means-tested and targeted programs rather than universal programs based on notions of solidarity and equality. According to neoliberal policymakers and the agencies such as the World Bank that push such reforms, the pains of adjustment are both transitory and necessary to achieve macroeconomic stabilization and respectable rates of growth. In the post-Soviet states, however, these adjustments and reforms have been long in coming, and millions of people continue to live in abject poverty with little hope for a better future. While poverty affects all citizens, women have tended to suffer more from these adjustment policies that eliminate subsidies for food, utilities, transportation, childcare, and other necessities.<sup>4</sup>

The transition to a market economy has not only, in many instances, failed to remove the disadvantages for women in the Soviet system, but in most cases it has actually intensified the gender asymmetry and inequalities. Simultaneously, prior advantages and benefits that women enjoyed have been jeopardized. Unlike many developing countries, however, gender gaps in literacy and educational attainment are not wide in the post-Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus states (Moghadam 2000: 26). Women had relatively easy access to education and employment, but the

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<sup>4</sup> There is a well-known formula that is frequently referred to by development workers. According to this formula, women are one-half of the world’s population, they perform two-thirds of the world’s work, and market over three-fifths of the world’s food. Yet, they represent three-fifths of the world’s illiterate, receive one-tenth of the world’s income, and own less than one-hundredth of the world’s property.

deterioration in wages and other social benefits has meant that they now endure worsening working conditions in the new market economies and that they are less likely to set up their own businesses. Throughout the former Soviet republics, a very small proportion of women's businesses have been able to survive the vicissitudes of the market system and the challenges associated with doing business in circumstances that involve paying "tributes" (Humphrey 2002: 144) to both racketeers and corrupt public officials. For these reasons, most women in Central Asia and the Caucasus have tended to work in the less profitable and less high profile sectors of the market economy, including working as small-scale shuttle traders or as merchants in local markets and open-air bazaars (*yarmarka*). Throughout the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus, "suitcase" or shuttle trading is booming and, as Seteney Shami (2000) argues, it is the sole province of women (P. 326). Women from these countries travel to Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Poland, and other destinations to bring back clothing, shoes, and various household items that they then sell in local bazaars for varying margins of profit.

Cynthia Werner (2001) discusses the emergence of a New Silk Road in Central Asia and argues that one of the more striking aspects of this trade is the predominance of women in the marketplace. In particular, Werner claims, women dominate the exchange of cloth and clothing that are exchanged as gifts, and food products that are used to feed families and honor guests. As Werner observes, "The high visibility of merchant women, including Muslim women, stands in contrast to popular stereotypes of secluded Muslim women. Not only do these Muslim women work in public places, they also travel to markets in distant towns where their activities are less likely to be observed by kinsmen and neighbors" (P. 2). Werner further argues that women's active participation in the markets is due to the growing unemployment and the factors that constrain women's opportunities to work (P. 4).

In several of the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus, including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Tajikistan, the problems of the "gendered" nature of the transition have also been exacerbated by civil strife and conflict. Of these countries, Tajikistan has fared the worst; even during the Soviet period, Tajikistan was among the most rural and least developed of the republics. The civil war that plagued the country from 1992-1993 ruined the social and physical infrastructure and has had adverse effects on women, children, and the elderly (Moghadam 2000: 27). There, the fear of abduction and rape, particularly of girls and young women, is strong enough to affect their freedom of movement. In Azerbaijan, women again constitute the majority of the unemployed and

experience insecurity in an evermore-violent social atmosphere (Tohidi 1998: 144).

### **Religion**

During the Soviet period, Islam was a matter of private life that was preserved and practiced by women. Increasingly, however, it is becoming politicized in the hands of men at the national and regional levels where it is being manipulated in accordance with or in reaction to new capitalist realities or the old gender arrangements (Tohidi 1998: 157). In Tajikistan, Collette Harris (2000) argues that the Islamization has not been without conflict. She explains how during the coalition Government of National Recovery (May-November 1992), pressure was put on urban girls and women to abandon their European clothes in favor of native costumes, or in other words to “desovietize” themselves. This, she explains, was experienced by many as incipient Islamization and as the first step towards the reestablishment of pre-Soviet gender identities. As such, it became a major factor producing support for the communists (Harris 2000: 212). Since the opposition’s return from exile, it is now seen as entirely possible that there may be a serious attempt in the near future to establish strongly Islamized gender identities. This, Harris contends, is seen as undesirable by women at all levels of society and influences attitudes towards Islam, which after the suppression of the Soviet years, has once more come into the open (P. 212). Akiner (1997) claims that, although most Central Asians welcomed the reintroduction of Islam into the public space, the majority do not want it to assume a regulative function, adding, “they still feel strongly that religion and the state should be separate” (P. 285). Paula Michaels (1998) identifies a similar position among Kazak women who continue to play high profile roles in the public sphere, such as entering new university departments and creating and joining NGOs. Michaels writes,

Economically, socially, and politically, Kazak women’s lives lie at a crossroads. Pre-Soviet and Soviet influences have given rise to the multi-faceted roles women play in present day Kazak society. For now, the renewed interest in Islam seems to play only a modest role, and other factors, such as the rise of the market economy, show signs of exerting a more dominant influence on the position of women. (P. 199)

Public veiling is also not increasing significantly in many of these former Soviet Muslim republics. While unveilings were politicized during the early Soviet years, the return to the veil is currently regarded as a symbol of personal commitment to Islam. It has not, as Akiner (1997) maintains, become politicized, as has been the case elsewhere (P. 286).

The legacy of Soviet emancipation and the politicization of Islam today has meant that for most, women in Central Asia are caught between

competing impulses. Some, as Akiner argues, feel the need to return to their “authentic” roots, while others wish to continue along the road to greater personal independence and freedom of choice (P. 263). The situation remains in flux and will be shaped by national, regional, and global political, economic, and cultural developments in the coming years.

### **Politics**

Scholars of nationalism have demonstrated the gendered nature of nation-state building and nationalism (Jayawardena 1986; Pateman 1988; Chatterjee 1993). In the current post-Soviet period, nation-state building processes in each of the former republics have led to the elimination of certain previously held rights as women have lost representation in local and national governments. Although women had been crucial in the independence movements, immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, women in all of the former Soviet states found themselves excluded from the new governments. In Armenia, for example, the removal of the quota system led to a significant decrease in political representation among women: in 1985, 121 of 219 members of parliament were women, while the number of female parliamentarians dropped to 8 following the 1991 National Assembly elections. Removal of the quota system of representation used in the Soviet Union, however, can explain only part of the decline in female representation. Other factors, including the strain of the double burden, gender role socialization, the commonly shared belief that politics is “men’s work” and is inherently corrupt and dirty have contributed to the small number of women in public office and to the low levels of women’s participation in political parties in all of the former Soviet republics.

Women’s inadequate representation and small share in political power is a worldwide problem and not unique to the post-Soviet states of Central Asia and the Caucasus. However, given the Soviet legacy of egalitarian laws and rhetoric, the post-Soviet political activism of women in national-liberation movements, universal literacy, and women’s high level of economic participation, one would expect a much stronger representation of women in political power. While there has been a decline in women’s representation at the formal (national and local) government levels and in political parties, there is an unprecedented increase in women’s participation in NGOs, as I will explain in the next section. By choosing NGOs, women reaffirm the ascribed gender roles and gender-based divisions of labor and avoid the criticisms that they would face if they enter political parties or government, but are still able to work in and through the public sector to achieve their personal and community objectives.

## **Women after Socialism Part II: Regional and Global Developments**

### *NGOs, Donors, and Transnational Advocacy Networks*

World politics currently involves, alongside states, many non-state actors, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that interact with each other, with states, and with international organizations (Keck and Sikkink 1998: 1). Whether NGOs are seen as latter-day evangelists or as manifestations of grassroots democracy, it is clear that in the last twenty years there has been tremendous growth in their number and influence.<sup>5</sup> This is the result of many factors, including Western donors' disillusion with the national governments of developing countries, their belief that civil society is an important part of democratization, and the idea that a "global civil society" will promote more equitable and just economic development and progress.

In spite of the problems of defining and locating civil society in the West, in the 1990s the idea became a central part of Western aid programs to Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. US agencies and other first world donors embraced the idea of civil society development as critical to democratization and "successful transition." This became a new mantra in both aid and diplomatic circles (Ottaway and Carothers 1998: 6), as the West readily made funding available to the former Soviet states and countries of Eastern Europe. Policymakers and international development organizations hailed NGOs as "stakeholders in the transition and development of these [post-socialist] countries" (World Bank 2001) and the "connective tissue of democratic political culture" (Wedel, cited in Hann 1996: 1). While the link between civil society, democratization, and NGOs is a late twentieth-century phenomenon and one that should be understood in the context of deregulated and increasingly globalized economies, it is very significant because it has led to the phenomenal growth in the number of NGOs in the countries of the former Soviet

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<sup>5</sup> NGOs can be charitable, religious, research, human rights, and environmental organizations, and they can range from loosely organized groups with a few unpaid staff members to organizations with multimillion-dollar budgets, employing hundreds of people all over the world. By this definition, a local bird-watching society, the Ku Klux Klan, and Amnesty International are all NGOs. The only agreement most scholars have about NGOs is that they (ideally) exist outside both the state (hence, non-governmental) and the market. Sometimes they are called "third sector organizations," the third sector being that which lies between the first (governmental) and second (market) sectors. Some NGOs are voluntary groups with no governmental affiliation or support; others are created and maintained by, and loosely linked to, governments. This has led to a proliferation of acronyms, for example GONGOS (governmental non-governmental organization) and QUANGOS (quasi-governmental NGOs).

Union where democratization and a vibrant civil society have been directly linked to the presence of NGOs (Hann 1996: 7). One of the largest donors of NGOs in the former Soviet Union, the Eurasia Foundation, describes NGO development as “help[ing] build democracy by providing citizens with a formula for collectively voicing their views and lessen[ing] the pain of economic transformation by providing alternative vehicles for the delivery of critical social services” (Eurasia Foundation 1998: 2).

In Armenia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and in many of the other states of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, NGOs are overwhelmingly led by Soviet era elites, either intellectuals or former Communist Party apparatchiks who were quick to recognize the potentials offered by NGO sector participation and to make the transition from state or Communist Party structures into NGOs (Abramson 1999; Ishkanian 2000; Hemment 2000; Phillips 2000; Sampson 1996). For example, in Armenia the Soviet era Women’s Council (*zhensovet*) became the Women’s Republican Council in the post-Soviet period with its leader and hierarchical structures intact. Few working-class people or rural residents, or even intellectuals who were not part of the former structures of power, were able to make this transition. These Soviet elites, in addition to possessing the organizing and language skills, also had an advantage of belonging to social networks that put them in contact with the Westerners who control or influence the distribution of grants.

Another similarity shared by NGOs operating in post-socialist countries is that women overwhelmingly run them. Various scholars have examined the reasons for this feminization of the NGO sector in the post-Soviet countries and have identified several factors contributing to this feminization, including 1) women’s exclusion from the spheres of government and business; 2) women’s networking and linguistic skills, particularly important in establishing ties with foreign donors; 3) women’s traditional interest in and responsibility for social problems, including disabilities, health, and children’s issues; 4) women’s desire to avoid the taint of corruption, a problem more associated with the formal political arena than the new informal, civic arena; 5) women’s secondary status, a situation that leaves avenues of participation that lack monetary award or “prospects” open to women due to men’s lack of interest and their preference for the worlds of business and formal politics; and finally and most importantly, 6) a preference among donors in supporting women’s initiatives and empowerment.

The number of women’s organizations particularly grew after the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (Berg forthcoming; Ishkanian forthcoming; Olson 2001). Although international conferences, such as the Beijing conference, have not necessarily led to the creation of women’s networks or NGOs, they have legitimized the issues addressed by

women's NGOs, and they have brought together unprecedented numbers of women around the world (Keck and Sikkink 1998: 169). The Beijing conference in particular not only provided women in the former Soviet states with an introduction to the international world of NGOs (i.e., global civil society) but also stimulated greater funding and interest in the role of women in development. Donors began to claim that women were more "cost-effective" as beneficiaries of development and civil society aid (Buvinic et al. 1996: 13). The Beijing conference was the defining moment in the development of women's NGOs in Armenia because the women who attended it, either as members of the government delegation or as NGO members, returned to Armenia informed and educated about global gender discourses, issues, and concerns, which they proceeded to translate into the local Armenian context.<sup>6</sup>

Donors' focus on women began in the 1970s when international development agencies began to make "women" visible as a category in development and research policy (Kabeer 1994: xi). This came to be known as the Women in Development (WID) approach. The thinking went, if policymakers, donors, and planners could be made to see women's concrete and valuable contributions to their economies, then women would no longer be marginalized in the development process. This trend grew in the 1990s and continues today as many of the largest donors, including the World Bank, US Agency for International Development (USAID), and various UN agencies, all have departments focused on gender issues intended to promote gender equality in development or GID (gender in development). Women's NGOs in Central Asia and the Caucasus recognize the ascendancy of the GID approach and have become quite adept at employing the appropriate discourses. "Talking gender" has become an important factor in winning grants.

In Azerbaijan, a new civil society is emerging, Tohidi (1998) claims, with an increasing number of informal and non-governmental women's organizations. Whether the women who are involved in NGOs will have

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<sup>6</sup> Scholars working in Asia and Latin America have also documented the impact of UN conferences on local women's organizing and discourses. For instance, according to Mary Fainsod Katzenstein, anticipation of the 1975 UN conference in Mexico City on women played a "catalytic role in the emergence of the contemporary women's movement in India" (Katzenstein, Mary Fainsod cited in Narayan 1997: 91). Sonia E. Alvarez (1998) describes the Beijing conference as an effusive celebration of "global sisterhood," adding that it was the site where professionalized, thematically specialized, and transnationalized feminist NGOs focused their energies on influencing the International Platform for Action and in helping articulate the "global women's lobby." Alvarez refers to this professionalization and specialization of women's groups as the "NGOization" of the Latin American women's movements (Pp. 293-296).

greater opportunities than previously to engage in decision making as free agents of change with genuine representation is not yet clear, however (Tohidi 1998: 144). In Tajikistan, a network of women's organizations has also been established whose members regularly meet in Dushanbe and exchange information and build strategies for mutual cooperation (Harris 2000: 224). In addition to national networks created by local NGOs operating in the post-Soviet sphere, there are transnational advocacy networks that have been created to coordinate the efforts of NGOs in the various Central Asian and Caucasian republics. An example of such a transnational advocacy network is the "Working Together—Networking Women in the Caucasus," which is sponsored by the Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe (IDEE).<sup>7</sup> Created with funding from the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the US Department of State, "Working Together" is a program for women leaders in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. In 1999, IDEE launched the "Working Together" project "in response to the needs of women NGO activists for greater cross-border networking and NGO development in a historically and ethnically divided region, and to the need for promoting and advancing women in societies where men have traditionally played dominant roles in the community" (<http://www.idee.org/>). Building on the success of the Caucasus program, IDEE launched a similar program in Central Asia, titled "Civic Bridges—Networking Women in Central Asia" for women leaders in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Through a range of training, civic education, NGO development, and cross-border networking activities, the IDEE programs attempt to enhance the leadership abilities and capacity of women leaders and their NGOs, to advance women's participation in public life, and to create a strong regional network of women's organizations with ties to NGOs in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. During the first phase of the Caucasus program, several issues common to the entire region were identified, including, civic education, reconciliation, working with refugees

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<sup>7</sup> The Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe (IDEE) is a not-for-profit tax-exempt corporation begun in 1986 to support the growing opposition movements in Eastern Europe, seeking democratic change and an end to communism. Since 1989, IDEE has helped democrats in the region to overcome communism's harsh and oppressive legacy and to rebuild—or build anew—institutions of a democratic political system and a plural and open society. IDEE has administered over \$10 million in assistance, training, internship, exchange and education programs to more than 2,500 publications, civic and human rights organizations, political groups and opposition movements in the following countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Chechnya, Crimea, Croatia, Cuba, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Mongolia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. Retrieved August 20, 2002 (<http://www.idee.org/>).

and internally displaced persons, and gender-based violence, that could be more effectively addressed by a regional coalition. In the program's second phase, which culminated in an advanced training seminar and regional NGO assembly, sixty participants from the region came together to share experiences and make new contacts, suggest solutions to common problems, plan joint projects, and evaluate the program's second year.

In 2002, the "Working Together" NGOs from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia published four NGO newsletters highlighting their activities, achievements, and plans. The newsletter is distributed primarily by e-mail and is posted in Armenian, Azeri, Georgian, and Russian on the Internet. Print copies are also available in the regional languages and are distributed free of charge to those without Internet access. In addition to the trainings and publications, IDEE has provided financial and material assistance to NGOs for projects promoting greater cooperation among participants and the transfer of skills and knowledge to their communities. The expanded small grants competition for 2001-2002 allocated money projects that promote cross-border or cross-regional cooperation (<http://www.idee.org/>).

NGOs in the Central Asia and the Caucasus countries are constantly working between the local, regional, and global levels. As intermediaries, NGO members benefit from the Western aid because it provides them with increased leverage and autonomy at the local level and an ability to continue working in respectable jobs instead of having to do menial, humiliating (by local standards) work. Aid, however is a double-edged sword, and while it provides NGOs with funding and support, it also exposes them to foreign direction and control. This dependency of local NGOs on the "uncertain largess of donors," as William Fisher (1995) calls it, has direct and indirect effects. He describes these as, a) redirecting the accountability toward funders and away from the group's grassroots constituencies and, b) transforming NGOs into contractors, constituencies into customers, and members into clients (P. 454). This criticism exposes NGOs to attacks within their own countries, raising questions about whether they truly represent their constituents and is one of the most difficult challenges facing NGOs in Central Asia and the Caucasus if they hope to win legitimacy from among their own populations. If they sacrifice the local for the global, then they are betraying their mission as local organizations. If they ignore the needs and wants of international donors, they risk losing funding that is critical to their survival and success.

In the post-Soviet period, many of the former republics are now identified as "developing" countries; women in these countries have had "development encounters" of their own with Western development workers, consultants, and "experts." The implications of the asymmetrical relations between the global and local actors engaged in development encounters can-

not be overlooked, given that the power inequalities inherent in these encounters affect the production of knowledge, the circulation of information, decision-making, and the outcomes of development or transition projects.<sup>8</sup>

### Conclusion

In this article, I have addressed the impact of Soviet policies on women in Central Asia and the Caucasus. In writing about the “gendered transitions” of the post-Soviet period, I discussed the shared tendencies and patterns that cross national borders. Women’s lives in these countries have been adversely affected by the economic and political developments of the transition, but it is also true that women have taken an active part in promoting social change in their societies. The legacy of a shared Soviet past and the current widespread impoverishment have meant that women in Central Asia and the Caucasus often face similar dilemmas and that, at times, they have found similar coping and survival strategies. For instance, through their participation in NGOs, women have not only been able to maintain a modest existence, but more importantly, they have gained the knowledge, skills, and social connections needed to promote progressive developments in their countries. Yet participation in NGOs and transnational advocacy networks is not without struggles and problems. On the contrary, most women in Central Asia and the Caucasus have very high levels of literacy, professional experience and training, and knowledge of the world, and they resent the patronizing attitude of Western consultants who propose programs that have little relevance to local conditions, culture, history, and traditions. While it remains to be seen how future developments will impact gender relations and roles, it is clear that women are not simply the “victims” of the transition. On the contrary, they are agents of change who adapt, resist, manipulate, and accommodate the developments of the transition period and globalization in their lives.

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<sup>8</sup> I discuss these issues in greater detail in “Importing Civil Society?: The Emergence of Armenia’s NGO Sector and the Impact of Western Aid on Its Development,” in *Armenian Forum: A Journal of Contemporary Affairs*, forthcoming.

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