

Defining Rights, Finding a Voice

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With meaningful political influence a distant dream, the social consequences of effective disenfranchisement are dire.

Women in Central Asia had good reason this year to look with hope on developments in Kyrgyzstan.

The so-called Tulip Revolution was in many ways driven by the thousands of women who took to the streets in February and March in protest at government corruption, high unemployment, poor income and housing, human rights abuses and lack of infrastructure.

Not only was it an unprecedented political statement, it was a powerfully effective one, driving President Askar Akaev from office.

But if women were hoping their efforts would be repaid with political representation in the new administration, they were to be disappointed. In October, the country's conservative parliament rejected all three female cabinet nominees, leaving the new government without one female voice.

"There is not a single person, not a single deputy, who can understand the problems of women and protect their rights," said Toktotan Borombaeva, one of the nominees. (1)

Throughout Central Asia, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan and the North Caucasus, her comments will have sounded depressingly familiar.

In these republics, women comprise half the electorate and many are taxpayers, yet they have a limited role in politics. For the vast majority, meaningful political influence is a distant dream. The social consequences of effective disenfranchisement is poverty, poor education, physical and psychological abuse, drug addiction and prostitution.

In May 2005, the Institute of War and Peace Reporting, IWPR, launched the Women's Reporting and Dialogue Programme, aimed at giving women in the region a new voice amid the conflict, revolution and political transition of the Central Asian and Caucasian region.

Primarily through training and dialogue activities, IWPR has sought to strengthen the capacity of female journalists and activists to engage in the struggle to define new rights in changing times.

Despite widespread legal commitments - every government in the region has ratified the UN Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women - the picture that has emerged is not encouraging.

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought certain freedoms for most people. However, collapsing economies and welfare systems made the situation of women more precarious.

Women's groups are becoming increasingly vocal in the region. The goal of the IWPR programme is to help ensure that their voice can be heard.

According to Raya Kadyrova, president of Kyrgyzstan's Foundation for International Tolerance and a prominent civil society activist, discrimination against women in the political arena exists for two reasons. (2)

First the glass ceiling. Women may never be formally barred from fully-fledged political participation, but in reality they can never scale the same heights as men. Second, political life is still conditioned by the "rudiments" of Soviet thinking, which glorified women as symbols of motherhood and productivity, but removed much of their power.

As IWPR reported in July (3), only one woman's name appeared on the ballot for president of Kyrgyzstan. When the election results came in on July 10, Toktaim Umetalieva received only 0.5 per cent of the vote. The result highlighted another problem indicated by Kadyrova. Attitudes are so entrenched that even women do not vote for other women.

Lack of financial backing is crucial. "To conduct an electoral campaign, considerable funds are needed, and our women are poor," said Umetalieva. "Men control all the finances in our country."

Even the Soviets practised a quota system for women in power, in line with their official commitment to gender equality, which was abolished in 1989, leading to a sharp decline in female representation. In 1960, some 27 per cent of the Supreme Soviet was made up women, up to 41 per cent in district councils of People's Deputies. Now it is almost three times lower across the region. (4)

In Azerbaijan, for instance, just 15 out of 124 deputies are women - 12 per cent against 39 per cent under the Soviets. Rights activists say they received extensive reports of violations of election rules in the run-up to the November 6 polls and remain pessimistic about any increase in female representation. (5)

"[Women politicians] can make statements, but they cannot change anything in the social and political life of the country," said Bahar Muradova, one of the few female parliamentary deputies and a senior official in the governing party, Yeni Azerbaijan (New Azerbaijan). (6)

As Muradova points out, actual legislation governing women's rights is rarely the problem. The State Committee on Women's Problems was founded in Azerbaijan in January 1998. The same year, the president issued a decree that women should have a bigger role in society, and that policies towards them should improve.

"The problem is that laws do not function in Azerbaijan, so it is difficult to talk about free political activity," said Leila Yunus, director of the Institute of Peace and Democracy.

In Tajikistan, where only 11 out of 63 deputies are women, a law has been passed guaranteeing equal rights for women, but analysts say little has changed. Female candidates are treated with suspicion by voters, often with the harshest criticism coming from other women. (7)

If legal infrastructure lacks teeth in the post-Soviet era, the same cannot be said for cultural and religious dogma. The collapse of communism in the region created an ideological vacuum rapidly filled by nationalist revivals and governments doing all they could to limit the influence of Islam.

Conservative agendas have also dominated. In Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, for instance, the authorities have restored community institutions such as the mahalla - a traditional form of self-government - and the court of elders. Conservative male institutions such as this can have a dramatically damaging effect on women's rights. (8)

Mahalla committees have sweeping powers to decide who will receive funds for social assistance, giving them significant leverage over families within their neighbourhood. With mahalla committees sometimes using this to pressure families, usually women and children. One consequence of this is that women with political ambitions sometimes lose state benefits. (9)

While many of the region's post-communist regimes espouse secular tolerance, the socio-political shift since the end of the Cold War has resurrected traditional customs such as bride kidnapping throughout the region.

Though some kidnappings are consensual, many are not. These women are taken against their will, and some are sexually assaulted. Under Kazak tradition, once a girl has been away from home for even one night she cannot be accepted back into her family again.

The role of Islam in suppressing or liberating women in the region is hotly debated among local civil society groups.

The issue came up in July at an IWPR round-table discussion in Makhachkala, Dagestan, on reporting women's rights and gender issues - which gathered together a diverse group of journalists and NGO activists. (10)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, several participants felt that religion, or the way that it was used to promote other agendas, was stifling women's aspirations and placing ever more controls and restrictions on their lives. Conversely, others felt that Islamic influences had led to greater respect and freedoms for women. It made them happier, they said.

A complex discussion of gender roles revealed that while many women campaign for political freedoms and participation, some still question whether women should try and behave just like men or "be more womanly and not take on a role that is not theirs by birth".

Observers say that many women in the region have at times resented attempted interventions by western feminists, who they say have often applied culturally inappropriate assumptions about the type of empowerment that many women in the region actually want.

The Dagestan round table raised many of these issues, including comments on the barriers that women can erect themselves in a traditional society, such as reluctance to find out what their rights are, as well as fear of speaking out and uniting to struggle for those rights.

There are few countries in the region, though, where the interplay of religion, tradition and women's rights is more complex and dramatic than in Afghanistan.

The Taleban's brutal misogyny, backed by their hardline version of Islamic Sharia law, became the focus of global campaigns to raise awareness of the desperate plight of women in the country. Much has changed since then, notably the removal of laws barring women from standing in elections.

One of the first winning candidates to be named after September's parliamentary polls was women's rights activist Malalai Joya, who rose to prominence for denouncing warlords at a constitutional forum two years ago. (11)

Of 5,800 candidates for the 249-seat National Assembly, or Wolesi Jirga (Lower House), more than 600 were women. Electoral law had also established a minimum quota of 68 of those seats for women, together with 25 per cent of all Provincial Council seats. (12)

Yet while progress has been undeniable, Afghan women speaking to IWPR have talked of numerous threats of violence and intimidation on the campaign trail.

"My family is afraid that I'm risking my life, and also that I am putting their lives in danger too," wrote journalist and parliamentary candidate Malalai Shinwari. "But in spite of everything, I decided to run [in the elections]." (13)

In a comment piece written for the IWPR Women's Reporting Programme, Shinwari took issue with ostensibly Islamic interpretations of the role of women in society and politics, "I see the influence of the conservatives as the main problem facing Afghan women. The things they say and do are not Islam - in fact, they are against Islamic law."

Too often, however, women with political aspirations are faced with an impossible choice.

"Frequently, women who are educated and have the right work experience and leadership capabilities face a choice presented by their husband, and sometimes the entire family - career or family," said Dilorom Haidarova, who works in Tajikistan for the Centre for Gender Issues at the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, OSCE. (14)

"And in these situations, the woman almost always chooses family," she told IWPR.

Struggling to achieve political influence, many women in the region opt for what is often the next best thing, the non-governmental, NGO, sector.

In Tajikistan - and across the region - women are leading the NGO movement, drawn in by the prospect of higher wages and more satisfying work dealing with social issues like poverty, drug addiction, illiteracy and homelessness.

About 160 women's NGOs have sprung up in Tajikistan in recent years, led by an impressive group of female scientists, doctors, teachers and journalists. (15)

Despite comments by President Imomali Rahmonov two years ago that “NGOs have become a recognised force which must be taken into consideration”, criticism persists that they have no real influence on government policy.

And presidential support comes at a price. Critics accuse the women-led NGOs of being too close to the government and of blaming Tajikistan’s myriad social problems on the collapse of the Soviet Union and the civil war rather than standing up to the current regime and laying blame where it belongs.

So not only are women effectively barred from entering politics, they are also heavily criticised for not engaging with the political establishment when they seek other forms of social activism.

Even working for peace, it seems, can be viewed as a political threat.

In Uzbekistan, some of the ten women recently nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize have been threatened with criminal prosecution or the closure of their NGOs. (16)

“Why was the project perceived as a threat or a danger?” said Marina Pikulina, the regional coordinator of the international 1,000 Women for the Nobel Peace Prize campaign. “We did not create any political organisations here, and we’re not the opposition or an underground group.”

Though traditionally tolerant of women’s groups, the Karimov regime has been cracking down since violence in Andijan in May when security forces killed hundreds of people during an attack witnessed by IWPR’s Galima Bukharbaeva, who saw troops firing on unarmed protesters. In this tense atmosphere, a civil servant who asked to remain anonymous, said the presence of human rights activists on the Nobel list caused the authorities to regard all the nominees “in the same negative light”.

Nominee Sahiba Ergasha, the head of the Association of Businesswomen in Kokand, was forbidden from holding a conference celebrating the nominations at a large hotel.

Another nominee, activist Durmon Sultanova, was detained by police and accused of being an Islamic fundamentalist.

“Why were our women, who the country should be so proud of, humiliated in this way,” Ergasha said in an interview with IWPR.

While in no way underestimating the struggles of the Uzbek Nobel nominees, their hardships are those - in relative terms - of a female elite. Some belong to state structures, and all have the benefit of enough education and empowerment to launch successful careers.

For countless women across the North Caucasus, Central Asia and Afghanistan, desperate and deteriorating social circumstances make any idea of political participation – even on an NGO level – a distant fantasy.

“My husband is jobless. I have been sick for a long time, but we don’t have money for treatment. I don’t know what to do,” said Muslema, 22, a member of Afghanistan’s nomadic Kuchi community, many of whom have been displaced by conflict and now seek refuge in Kabul.

“Our president - I don’t even know his name - hasn’t done anything to help us. Aren’t we Afghans too? The government is just helping those who live in the city and have homes,” she told IWPR. (17)

Aside from plain poverty, poor health care is taking a devastating toll on women across the region. In Chechnya, for example, a chronic lack of pediatricians and gynaecological clinics combined with low standards of living and poor nutrition has caused soaring rates of illness among new-born babies. Experts say most Chechen women are anaemic. (18)

Where there is poverty and ill health, there is almost always addiction. According to Kyrgyz political analyst, Nur Omarov, the collapse of the social structures that existed under Soviet rule has driven many women, quite literally, to drink.

“I truly sympathise with our women, as in recent years enormous problems have lain on their shoulders. Our women have virtually become men. They are forced to feed their families and earn money,” he said.

“Accordingly, along with male skills they have begun to acquire male vices. Women are driven to alcoholism by the existing inequality in our society.” (19)

For many women, either by choice or by force, vice is the only way they will ever make a living.

“Like all prostitutes who work unhindered in the village of Khamza, every Monday I hand over [some] of my earnings to the Altyaryk police department,” said Dilfuza Juraeva, who plies her trade in the Uzbek city of Fergana. (20)

Juraeva and her fellow “working girls” live a precarious existence, paying protection money to local police, who then deploy them to defame wealthy but “troublesome” individuals.

Each year, thousands of mostly young and under-age women fall victim to human trafficking and sexual exploitation. The problem is compounded by a lack of statistics and poor cooperation between governments. Most involved in the sex industry are either too afraid or too ashamed to face their exploiters in court.

A 26-year-old prostitute in southern Kazakstan told IWPR that lack of official action on the sexual abuse of women in the region is largely due to the fact that the saunas where they work often belong to leading city and regional officials. “We bring enormous earnings to our bosses,” she said. (21)

It is apparent that western-style feminism has not been taken up with any enthusiasm in the North Caucasus, Central Asia and Afghanistan. While women are excluded from political power at almost every level of society, they have not as yet chosen to adopt the rhetoric or methods of activists who launched the women’s movement in the West.

Yet the IWPR Women's Reporting and Dialogue Programme points to one compelling similarity between current women's activism in Central Asia and that of the 1960s in the United States and Europe.

As women increasingly form their own groups, as they meet to discuss their situations in fora such the IWPR round tables, they discover that their feelings of exclusion and exploitation are not uniquely individual but, in fact, shared.

Solidarity is promoted by finding or creating platforms that raise consciousness to the point where women can see how much they have in common with each other. The details may often be personal, but the act of sharing them is, in its own right, political.

Although men occupy the top positions in the mainstream media of all countries in the region, it is striking how many journalists are women. By collectively addressing the systemic injustices that they face in society, they are discovering that the possibility of change becomes less distant.

"Female journalists have an important role to play in educating other women about their situation," Kyrgyz reporter Gulnura Toralieva told the IWPR regional conference in Baku in May. (22)

Matanat Azizova of the Women's Crisis Centre in Baku was in no doubt as to the vital role that journalists played in her work. "It would be impossible for our centre to exist if we did not work closely with the media," she said.

Participants at another IWPR round table in Kabul in Afghanistan in March said the stories they were writing were making women aware of what other women were experiencing. Furthermore, they were attracting the attention of those (notably in the government) who were in a position to do something about it.

The political obstacles that women face in the region are daunting, but as IWPR has discovered, the creation of open platforms upon which they can be analysed and discussed reclaims the debate from the margins of the region's societies, paving a concrete path towards change.

Footnotes

- (1) Kyrgyzstan: Forgotten Revolutionaries (WP No. 11, 06-Oct-05)
- (2) IWPR Round Table on Women and Politics in Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek, April 2005
- (3) Kyrgyz Politics a Men-Only Club (WP No.5, 14-Jul-05)
- (4) www.newscentralasia.com
- (5) www.womensenews.org
- (6) Azerbaijan: Bid for Political Influence (WP No.5, 14-Jul-05)
- (7) Tajikistan: Family Before Politics (WP No.5, 14-Jul-05)
- (8) A Shared Suffering (WP No.1, 20-May-2005)

(9) Human Rights Watch

(10) IWPR Round Table: Reporting on Issues Relating to Women in Dagestan, Makhachkala, Dagestan, July 2005

(11) BBC News Online

(12) www.opendemocracy.net

(13) Dangers of Running for Office in Afghanistan (WP No.5, 14-Jul-05)

(14) Families Before Politics (WP No. 5, 14-Jul-05)

(15) Tajik NGOs Flourish But Lack Political Bite (WP No 12, 20-Oct-05)

(16) Uzbek Nobel Nominees Get Cold Shoulder (WP No. 10, 22-Sep-05)

(17) Kuchis Struggling to Survive (WP No. 8, 25-Aug-05)

(18) Sick Babies Add to Checen Woes (WP No. 12, 20-Oct-05)

(19) Depressed Kyrgyz Seek Solace in the Bottle (WP No. 10, 22-Sep-05)

(20) Uzbekistan: Police and Prostitutes in Unholy Alliance (WP No. 6, 29-July-05)

(21) Kazak Women Sold as Sex Slaves (WP No. 2, 02-Jun-05)

(22) IWPR Regional Conference, Baku, Azerbaijan, May 2005

Location: [Caucasus](#)
[Central Asia](#)
[Uzbekistan](#)
[Turkmenistan](#)

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