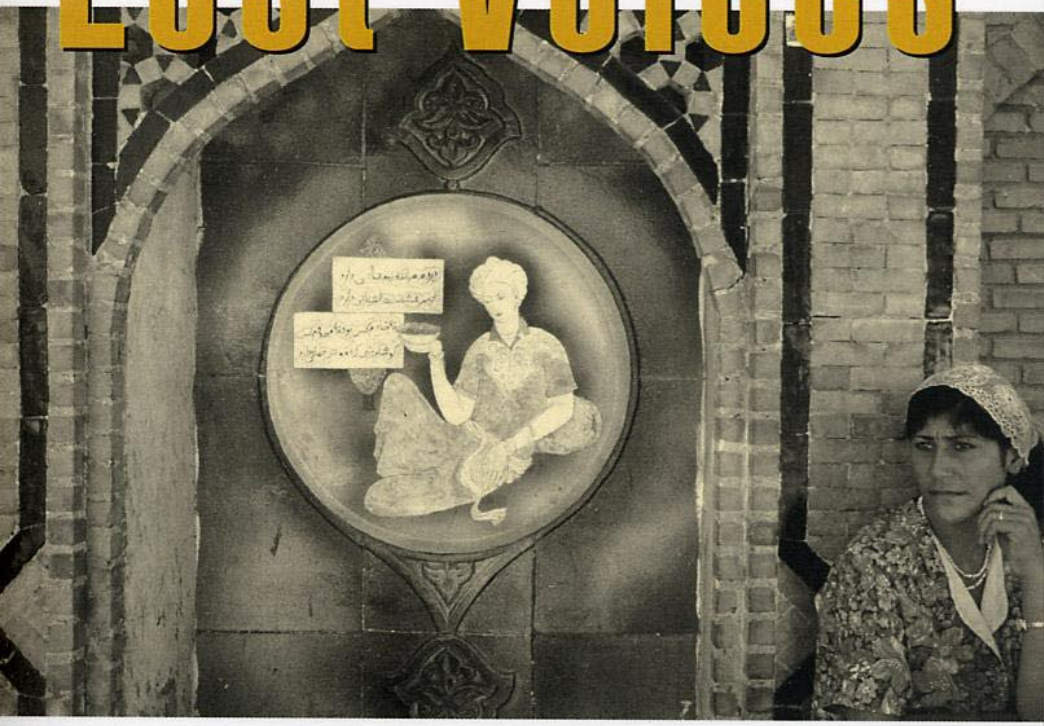
Yvonne Corcoran-Nantes

Lost Voices



CENTRAL ASIAN WOMEN

confronting transition

About the author

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YVONNE CORCORAN-NANTES

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Central Asian women confronting transition

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This book is dedicated to the memory of my father, James Corcoran, whose unfailing love and support will remain with me always.

Introduction

> We are very trapped. We're on a broken bridge between two different societies. We can't take pleasure in the new and we can't leave the old. I feel that some of the best parts of socialism we have lost. (Female journalist, Kyrgyzstan)

In 1991 the collapse of the Communist Party and the dissolution of the Soviet Union launched the republics of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan into an unexpected, self-declared independence and a precarious, uncertain future. Emerging from almost seventy-five years of Soviet tutelage, all three republics embarked on a process of radical change which included the restructuring of the national economy, the implementation of a new constitution and a systematic renationalization of indigenous society through a process of wide-ranging political, economic and social reforms. Independence was not merely an act of the creation of new states but one of reclaiming Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Kazakh national identity. The political system, including leaders and political representatives, remained virtually the same except that in government offices pictures of Lenin were replaced by those of the national president. All public vestiges of Soviet influence were removed; street names were changed and statues of Soviet heroes were replaced by those of national poets and important historical figures. The names of the capital cities of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were changed from Alma-Ata to Almaty and from Frunze to Bishkek, while the location of the Kazakh capital was moved to Akmola in 1997.[1] Yet for the majority of the Central Asian population, while the mask had changed the face remained the same.

The republics of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were part of what was once referred to as the 'Soviet Middle East' which, along with Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, formed a buffer zone between the heartland of the Soviet Union, now Russia, and the Islamic republics of the Middle East. The sovietization of Central Asia in the early 1920s was an attempt to 'modernize' Central Asian society, to eradicate local customs and mores and radically reduce or eliminate the influence of Islam among the indigenous population. Yet the ambivalence of Soviet policy towards Central Asian Muslims sustained rather than destroyed Islamic culture in the region. In fact what is most striking for visitors

to the region is how unsuccessful anti-Islamic Soviet policy was. Islam, the foundation stone of Central Asian society, is the socio-political glue that has held the region together. While the republics of Central Asia remain secular states there is a higher percentage of Muslims in all three republics than of any other social group. Moreover, Islamic culture and law remained a major consideration when new socio-economic policies were being drawn up, and the implementation of policy invariably involved Muslim organizations and community groups in the distribution of humanitarian aid and special-needs programmes. These groups and organizations continued to exist in one form or another pre-independence, but in the post-independence period their importance and political weight have increased. This was reflected in the immediate programme of mosque rebuilding throughout Central Asia, most noticeable in Uzbekistan, where a growing number of young males and females attend religious schools (*madrasahs*). These schools of Islamic theology, once closed down by the Soviet state, now have long waiting lists for admission. Yet in spite of this the governments of all three republics maintain as ambivalent a policy towards Islam as that pursued in the past by the Soviet Union, on the one hand maintaining a modicum of spiritual recognition of a predominantly Islamic population while on the other implementing draconian policies to curb the 'over-zealous'.

In the light of recent world events, however, and an increasing Islamophobia focused on the region, it is extremely difficult to subscribe to the concerns of the 'prophets of doom' and their predictions of a potential fundamentalist Islamic revival sweeping the region. Such a scenario would be totally unacceptable to the overwhelming majority of the Central Asian population of Sunni Muslims. Yet Islamic influence is palpable throughout the three republics, arguably no more or less so than before. It has become an option for those who wish to reinforce their Islamic roots rather than subvert a system that no longer had a clear call over the 'faithful'. For the most part, it represented the reinforcing of social bonds, which had continued to exist despite attempts to destroy them in the Soviet era. In the post-independence period, as we shall see, it is women who have been most affected by this process. Ironically, it is not militant or fundamentalist Islam which has posed the greatest threat to women but the reinstatement of cultural and religious norms within public life which has led to a rise in conservative attitudes towards women. Within the process of nation building following independence, the demands of ethnic solidarity and social belonging have superseded the defence of rights acquired by women under Soviet rule.

Within the vortex of socio-political change the indigenous population

of the Central Asian republics nurtured high expectations of improving their status and living standards, not least as a result of a gradual but progressive capitalization of the economy. Central Asian women were far less optimistic as they bore the brunt of socio-economic change. With the introduction of free market economics and a changing political environment, opportunities for women entered into rapid decline in terms of employment, education and socio-political status. Testimony to this phenomenon were the wide-ranging policies constructed and introduced over more than a decade by the governments of all three republics, which focused on the status of Central Asian women in successive, unsuccessful attempts to ameliorate the situation. Nevertheless, in the new political and economic climate of 'market forces' women were expected to assume new roles and/or compete with men on what was termed an 'equal footing'. Once the major beneficiaries of the sovietization of Central Asia in the 1920s, women were being effectively disempowered as the question of de facto gender inequality re-emerged in the face of difficult challenges faced by women in all of the Central Asian republics. This book offers an analysis of these challenges and considers the various ways in which women have been empowered and disempowered in the journey from socialism to democratization.

As someone once said, each journey begins with a single step, and the one leading to the conception and completion of this book is no different. In 1993, I was given the opportunity to undertake a Special Mission for the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) to the republics of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan in order to assess the status of Central Asian women post-independence.[2] Alone, with little knowledge of Russian and no command of the indigenous languages, I embarked on a voyage of discovery into the fascinating world of Central Asian culture and society. With the help of the offices of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in the three republics I was able to contract female interpreters who were not only trilingual but also demonstrated an enthusiasm for and interest in the research I was to undertake. The latter qualification was crucial to the success of the mission, and their support and assistance were invaluable. The mission itself, however, was fraught with difficulties, mostly of a practical nature, including a currency crisis in two of the republics, consistent petrol shortages, communication difficulties and the consistent lack of verifiable statistical data. But there was one 'crisis' worthy of note which almost curtailed the mission soon after it had begun.

Travel between the republics was initially to be undertaken by air, not

least owing to poor public transport facilities and, most important, the question of time. Two weeks after my arrival in Tashkent, a dispute between the respective governments of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan over a cholera epidemic led to the closing of the border between the two countries and the suspension of air travel. While private drivers may have been willing to undertake the long journeys required within the republics, few were interested in making the crossing between Tashkent and Almaty at any price. The trip required a reserve supply of petrol, considerable amounts of hard currency and strong nerves. If you managed to cross the border without being relieved of the petrol by the border guards, there was still the journey through the mountains and 'bandit' country as well as the need to pass through some fifteen military checkpoints where baggage, car and occupants would be frequently searched.[3] I was fortunate to find an interpreter and a driver whose 'sense of adventure' equalled my own and who were willing not only to take me to Almaty but also to go to Bishkek to pick me up when my work was finished and endure a repeat performance. It was this sense of spirit and enterprise of the Central Asian women and men I encountered which made the journey possible and has continued to inspire this work.

It was in the course of this particular journey that a large number of the interviews presented in this book were undertaken. Interviewees ranged from government ministers to leaders of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), from representatives of newly formed business organizations to leaders of cooperatives and from representatives of women's organizations to women from many different walks of life in the towns and rural villages. Since then, I have continued to maintain contact with women in the Central Asian republics who, over time, have given me considerable support, information and access to unpublished work. In 2002, follow-up discussions and interviews were undertaken in Tashkent, principally with women leaders of NGOs.[4] This material has been crucial to the disclosure of the situation of women both historically and in the present; furthermore the thoughts, hopes and aspirations of Central Asian men and women offer some insight into their specific experiences in a post-Soviet era.

Nevertheless, the research for this book has been haunted by the difficulties faced by those attempting to offer a perspicacious analysis of Central Asian women – a lack of historical material and the still-nascent gender-specific research in the region being undertaken by both Western and indigenous academics and research students, most of which remains unpublished. If Central Asia was generally considered to be the forgotten world of the Soviet Union then Central Asian women constitute

the 'lost people' in Soviet studies in general and those of Central Asia in particular. The single most important substantive text on Central Asian women remains Gregory Massell's *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategy in Soviet Central Asia, 1919–1929*, published in 1974. In 1996, a less widely known book focusing on the experience of Uzbek women and written by Uzbek academic Marfua Tokhtakhodjaeva, entitled *Between the Slogans of Communism and the Laws of Islam*, was published by Shirkat Gah.[5] Overall, texts published on the subject of Soviet women, with a few exceptions, both before and since the collapse of the Soviet Union, offer only a limited insight into the specificity of the experience of non-Russian women. Understandably, such texts have focused on the similarities of women's experience under the Soviet system and the failure of the initial promise of communism to institute de facto gender equality in all spheres of life. Unfortunately, and inevitably, this text is imbued with the same weaknesses.

The aim of this book, therefore, is to offer some insight into the experiences of Central Asian women in a Soviet and post-Soviet era and consider the ways in which women have been disempowered and empowered in the process of transition. Wherever possible, specific differences in the experience of Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Kazakh women are identified. Mindful of my position as an outsider, and all the encumbrances such a position entails, I make no attempt in this text to speak for or on behalf of Central Asian women, either individually or collectively. The task has been one of interweaving the observations, experiences and views of Central Asian women and men throughout the text to incorporate an insider perspective. Each chapter considers some of the important issues and problems confronting women in a post-Soviet era and the pathways of resistance and empowerment pursued by them. Most important for this author was to convey the inordinate sense of purpose, tenacity and creativity of the Central Asian women I met throughout the course of my research. In many ways this is a book not only about them but for them. It represents an ongoing journey, one in which I follow in the footsteps of those who went before and hope to accompany those who will follow. It is hoped that at some point in the journey Central Asian women will reclaim their own voices, write about their experiences, hopes and aspirations and be published in so doing. Perhaps we will not have long to wait for such an eventuality.

Notes

1 In the case of Kyrgyzstan the change was hardly a surprise owing to the fact that the capital had been named after Chief Marshal Frunze, who led the

Red Army defeat of the famous Central Asian Basmachi warriors which delayed the complete Soviet takeover of the region until the 1920s.

2 The mission was undertaken over a period of two months in September and October 1993 and led to the writing of a substantive report on the status of Central Asian women for the Beijing conference of 1995.

3 At this time, cars were frequently hijacked on the Kazakh mountain roads, leaving travellers to make their way to the nearest village on foot.

4 This could not have been achieved without the support and assistance of my friend and colleague Suzanne Brugger.

5 Shirkat Gah is a small publishing endeavour sponsored by the organization of Women Living under Muslim Laws, which publishes texts principally by and about Muslim women. A further text was published by Tokhtakhodjaeva through the organization, in conjunction with Kyrgyz writer Elena Turgumbekova, and offers transcriptions of interviews with Central Asian women under various subject headings.

1 | Seeing through Western eyes and the sound of Western voices: women, feminism and debate post-perestroika

After the implementation of perestroika in 1985 the Soviet Union opened up to greater intellectual and cultural exchange. The opportunity for women to meet and exchange experiences, research and information at conferences and during academic sabbaticals exceeded that for all forms of contact in the preceding sixty-one years. For the first time it was possible to ask the 'real' questions and receive 'honest' answers – or was it? This was a discourse emanating from the ideological rubrics of systems, liberalism *vis-à-vis* Marxism, essentially and equally economically driven, in which comparisons are seemingly ubiquitous. The language used, the medium of exchange, was inevitably sustained by a different understanding of basic terms such as equality, democracy, representation and civil society, shaped by the exchangees' socialization in very different value systems (Funk 1993: 3–4; Penn 1998: 50).[1] Moreover, one of the major disadvantages of the exchange itself is that it continues in the wake of the Soviet model in which women of the former Soviet Union and other post-communist states are disempowered in what will be a protracted transition period.

The fall of the Soviet Union led to the realignment of political and economic forces in what is now Russia and the former Soviet republics which would displace a centrally planned economy run on socialist principles with a managed transition to a free market economy based on capitalist ones, albeit in many different forms. Within this conjuncture a concomitant pressure has been exerted to change the political landscape of the region with international support, financial and otherwise, insisting on a requisite commitment to the democratization of the political system along Western lines.[2] This welcoming of post-communist states into the international fold was not merely a question of opening up new markets; implicit within it was an ideological conversion embarked upon with considerable fervour by international experts, development agencies, financial institutions and business consultants, which descended upon the former Soviet Union and its former republics after 1991.[3] The philosophy was the same as that promulgated in the 1960s with respect to the so-called Third World – that with the cultural diffusion of Western

economic and technological processes post-communist states would also experience a concomitant Westernization of social and cultural institutions. For the former Soviet republics of Central Asia this was anathema after almost sixty years of Soviet domination.[4]

Clearly post-communist states represent a different developmental phenomenon to the majority of developing countries in the southern hemisphere, but the prescription for economic development remains virtually the same. Kate Manzo likens this Eurocentric and ethnocentric approach to 'development' to that of a parent–child relationship. In the case in point the West would be the 'healthy adults' and the post-communist states the 'infants': 'recently released from the wombs of their colonial "mothers", these "children" must rely on the largesse of their beneficent "parents" to nurture, support and educate them until the day they are able to take their place in adult society. That the offspring will eventually resemble their parents in all aspects can of course be assumed for "normal" children generally do' (Manzo 1991: 14–15).

In this way, transitional economies are disempowered in the ongoing process of the globalization of Western experience. The claim that the 'failure' of the Soviet model of socialist development represents a conclusive and irreversible victory of liberalism over Marxism (Fukuyama 1992), although strongly contested,[5] merely confirms the influence of what Mohanty argued, some years previously, was an 'implicit assumption of the "west" (in all its complexities and contradictions) as the primary referent in theory and praxis' (Mohanty 1988). It is this assumption which exacerbates the unequal power relationship among women both nationally and internationally in the debate on the 'woman question' post-perestroika.

The problem remains that feminist intellectual debate on an international level continues to be dominated by American and European feminisms emanating from women's experience within stable liberal democracies. This has created considerable conflict and debate at every UN Conference for Women since 1975, and this was no less evident at the recent conference in 1995. Cultural and religious differences, while given greater consideration at these and other international conferences, remain the crux of disagreement on setting agendas and constructing a programme for action. In the past women from the communist states were, to a certain extent, empowered at these events. They could put hard statistics on the table, demonstrating the level of gender equality achieved in the communist bloc in the areas of work, education and health, which made so-called achievements under the Western political paradigm look less than adequate.[6] The response, in general, was twofold

– either that the 'evidence' was unreliable or that the price of 'gender equality' in the communist bloc was too high. At Beijing in 1995, after the break-up of the Soviet Union, the representatives of Russia and the former Soviet republics presented a very different agenda, highlighting the radical decline in the status of women in the transition period and underlining those problems that the previous system had failed to resolve. Bereft of the ideological framework that had shaped their debates and critiques within the former system, and searching for more appropriate analytical categories, many were still unable or unwilling to embrace a feminist paradigm that would be tantamount to acquiescing to the pressures of Western cultural imperialism and adopting the language of the privileged to explain the circumstances of women who had become dispossessed.

It is not merely the multifarious nature of feminist ideology which creates problems in the ongoing debate in international women's forums but the lack of convergence with respect to the prioritization of specific issues that will represent the interests of the majority of women. In the past the incongruity between the political agenda of Western feminism and that of women in the developing world has fractured communication and discourse between the two.[7] Nevertheless, there are few female academics, political representatives or women's organizations in the southern hemisphere who would deny the important role of Western feminism in consistently mainstreaming gender issues in international political and economic debate. This phenomenon, however, has in the past led to the hijacking of specific causes related to women's oppression in the developing world, leaving the women concerned disempowered in the course of international disclosure/denunciation. It has also undermined the struggle of endogenous women's organizations that seek to challenge the traditional and legal sanction of certain practices or forms of women's oppression (Amos and Parmar 1984). When Western women become the self-appointed spokespersons for and representatives of the interests of women of other cultures in the name of global sisterhood it is not an act of solidarity, however well intentioned, but another lost opportunity in the cause of presenting different female voices and perspectives to be listened to and considered.

Since the 1990s, with the opening up of contact and cultural exchange between Western feminists and women from the post-communist states, how much have we learned from the critiques made of such exchanges? Do we still lead the discourse or are we led? Can we put ourselves in 'listening mode' as Cockburn (1991) so aptly puts it or does such a mode merely supply information that we reinterpret from a particular

ideological standpoint, paraphrasing the words and political position of our peers in the post-communist states? All these questions can be answered in the affirmative and the negative.

The critique of Western feminists by women of the developing world – that we are selective in whom we speak to, whom we promote within and present to the Western intellectual community – is also being made by female politicians, women's organizations and women's NGOs in the post-communist states.[8] This creates a situation whereby the voices of one group of women are privileged over others, and it is often claimed that these voices have a far wider audience in the West than in their country of origin, where they have little or no grass-roots support (Adamson 1999: 21–2). Yet in America and Europe Western feminisms have never claimed to represent anything but a minority view, and it seemed natural, if not inevitable, that Western feminists should seek out their peers in the post-communist states, researchers and academics who, if not self-declared feminists, have been influenced by and engage with Western feminists' writings in their work on the situation of women. This influence is apparent in the way they reflect on the past and analyse the present. The net result of this is to make women who were once outsiders in the international feminist community insiders, but within their own country this status often creates a situation whereby they become outsiders in the growing representation of women in NGOs and social movements led by women.

The principal problem is that in the widening debate on the failure of the 'Soviet model' certain voices might be muted or excluded due to the fact that the perceived price of entrance, 'the knowledge', which is a feminist paradigm, might be one that some women object to or are unprepared to pay at this point in time. There is significant evidence available to show that since the 1970s Western feminist writing and ideologies have exerted an influence on small groups of Soviet women concerned with the 'woman question' within a communist system (Molyneux 1990; Waters 1993). Nevertheless, the majority of women remain cautious in the use of the word feminism and most especially reject any reification of Western feminist ideology and praxis as a measure of the advancement of women's political consciousness in the context of post-communist systems. This position has been far more noticeable among eastern European women than Russian women (Funk and Mueller 1993; Posadskaya 1994b). It is the divergence between the two positions which sets the parameters of the debate on the status of women in a post-Soviet era.

Considering this debate and its ramifications for analysing the situ-

ation of women in the post-Soviet era is important for the purposes of this book. The aim is to move away from more general presentations of women in the post-communist states and consider the cultural specificity of their experience and status before the break-up of the Soviet Union and now in the period of transition. In this way the debate can be developed to consider and understand the often very different ways in which women are disempowered in different systems and the ways in which they have empowered themselves in both. Moreover, often what is not stated in the writing on post-communist states is as illuminating as what is; for example, in the case of the former Soviet Union there is little focus on ethnicity or emphasis on regional difference. This is most pertinent when we consider that the spokespersons for Central Asian women, who are the subject of this book, have, in the past, been Russian women, and this perspective remains pertinent in the context of analysing the status of women in Central Asia.

Debating the 'woman question' post-perestroika

An important part of the process of debate at an international level has been the publication of edited collections and articles which 'showcase' the analyses and perspectives of women from eastern Europe and Russia.[9] This has been an important role that Western feminist academics have played in getting the work of non-Western women published in the mainstream academic press. Yet in this particular case it has, to a certain extent, shaped the analysis and argument of the writers. Written for a Western audience, the analysis of the situation of women under communism is almost overwhelmingly negative but offers a more perspicacious view of the present transition period.[10] To a certain extent this is entirely understandable and can be interpreted as an attempt to address the overwhelmingly positive view of women in communist states presented, in the past, by the respective governments. One author puts forward an effective argument that it is this image, and the uncritical acceptance of it in the past by some Western feminists, which is effectively responsible for sustaining an essentially false image of the situation of women at the present time (Toth 1993; Watson 2000). It could be argued that before there was any substantial contact between women of the East and West an equally erroneous image of the situation of Western women prevailed among women of the East. Existing preconceptions on both sides continue to colour the exchange between the two, and this has not been helped in many cases by the realization that women from both sides of what was the Iron Curtain have far less in common than either side anticipated (Cockburn 1991; Funk 1993).

For women from the post-communist states this intellectual exchange with Western feminists is part of a process of reflection and a search for an appropriate framework for a gender-centred analysis, be that feminist or 'womanist' (Walker 1990). Yet what followed was a powerful debate which, predicated on a critique of the communist system, offered an insight into the similarities and differences not only between women of the post-communist states themselves but also between them and Western feminists. There was a clear juxtaposition of the analyses offered by those who are influenced by Western feminist ideology and those who reject totally the adoption of 'alien' ready-made concepts to inform political debate and social analysis in the post-communist states. It is the analyses of the former which have tended to be synthesized by Western feminists whose principal concerns focus on the emergence of indigenous feminisms and the need of an 'independent' women's movement to demand greater gender equality in the post-Soviet era (Waters 1993; Molyneux 1991b). Seeking out and praising a nascent feminism developing in what was the communist bloc says more about our own values and ideological positions than those of women whose ideological socialization, values and cultural mores have entered a period of turmoil in the transition period (Watson 2000: 187–8). Comparisons have even been made between the emergence of second-wave feminism in the West and what is happening in the post-communist states; once again, in this uneven power relationship between West and East the former is in danger of colonizing the discourse of the latter (Mohanty 1988; Minh-ha 1997).

The intellectual exchange between self-declared feminists of East and West is without doubt paradoxical. This is nowhere more evident than in the case of Russia, where Anastasia Posadskaya and her colleagues at the Centre for Gender Studies have received considerable exposure in international forums and mainstream academic publications. Their powerful critique of the situation of women under Soviet communism and of the problems faced by women post-perestroika has clearly influenced Western feminist writing on the post-Soviet era and the congruency between both is interesting.[11] Offering an explicitly feminist analysis, Posadskaya and Konstantinova, for example, are at pains to point out that their aim is to construct an explicitly Russian feminism, one that can illuminate and articulate the principal issues facing Russian women in the transition period. Both were acutely aware of the problems of using the term feminism either in the title of the organizations of which they are members or in the debates generated within the independent women's forums that they have organized. The

use of the label feminist is still rejected by the majority of women active in women's independent organizations due to its association with the prevailing negative stereotypes of Western feminists and feminism in Russia (Sperling 1999: 59).[12] Nevertheless, the members of the Centre for Gender Studies, in their published work and interviews, have been most pragmatic in differentiating between themselves – the 'new' women – and the formal women's organizations and political representatives under communism – the 'old' women. In the analyses presented this manifests itself in a set of political dichotomies – manipulated/independent, ineffective/effective, totalitarian/democratic, unrepresentative/representative – which essentially condemn the political praxis of the old and commend that of the new.

Posadskaya has been the most strident critic of the Soviet Women's Council (CSW), which was reconstituted under Gorbachev, and its delegates and representatives within the Soviet political system. She describes them as 'obedient puppets' and 'iron ladies'[13] who not only could not represent all Russian women but also did little to represent women at all (1993: 174). In 1992 the renaming of the CSW as the Union of Women of Russia and the concomitant reappraisal of their political agenda failed to convince Posadskaya and her colleagues that any major change in the organization itself or its political agenda might be expected. In fact she was quite clear in an interview with Waters that the Centre for Gender Studies wanted nothing to do with the organization which they believed wished to resume a central political role as an umbrella organization for the nascent independent women's organizations. Posadskaya argued that after the emergence of a 'women's movement' the CSW had

> tried to bring it into its fold. And that's what we don't want. So there is something of a confrontation. Those of us who are involved in organizing the Dubna forum – the Center, Olga Lipovskaya – don't take part in the get togethers at the CSW. Valentina Konstantinova and I won't go to the CSW. Let the committee get on with its own work: inviting businesswomen, learning the new vocabulary of feminism, even sexism. That's fine by us. (interview cited in Waters 1993: 294)

Declarations of political apartheid such as these are symptomatic of a repositioning of gender politics in post-communist states which not only can respond to the new challenges to women that emerge in the transition but also constitute a formidable opposition force that is capable of resisting any attempt at incorporation into the state structure at any future point in time.[14]

Nevertheless, in its anxiety to demonstrate autonomy from the CSW, the Centre for Gender Studies was in danger of attempting to present a version of history that writes off women's political participation under the previous system as one of disempowerment and political stereotyping.[15] Even after the declaration in the Stalinist period that the woman question had been resolved, and the abolition of the Women's Bureau (*Zhenotdel*) and the women's councils (*zhensovety*) in 1930, the quota system remained, with women, on average, constituting one third of the deputies in the Supreme Soviet, 40 per cent of autonomous republic representatives in the State Duma and almost 50 per cent in the local soviets (Molyneux 1990: 35). Can we believe that it was necessary, within a patriarchal communist system, to have so many women involved in the political process as mere 'window dressing' (Nechemias 1994: 4)? From 1957, with the reinstatement of the *zhensovety* under Khrushchev, women's issues were once again brought to the forefront of debate, and evidence shows that these women's councils were far more heterogeneous in their political activities than those existing before 1930 – this is reflected in the autonomy and individual political agendas of the councils post-1990 (Buckley 1989: 155–6; Racioppi and See 1995: 830–1). Consequently, the reintroduction of a Soviet Women's Committee in 1985 as a central body with a national agenda, to which local *zhensovety* were affiliated, did not allow it to impose its authority in the way it had done in the past.

By 1990, the alignment between the state and formal women's structures was broken and they were no longer an integral part of the institutional political structure. As many independent women's organizations and social movements have appeared around them, the committee, as the largest women's network in Russia, have had to rethink their political agenda in order to respond to the concerns and issues that are important to their associates and members. Moreover, as the Union of Women of Russia their power and influence remain considerable, as was demonstrated by their success in putting up twenty-one successful candidates in the 1993 elections for the Duma. Their political platform directly rejected any association with a feminist agenda emphasizing social welfare issues such as health and education as well as the question of human rights (Rule and Noonan 1996; Racioppi and See 1995). In the light of all of this, one might argue that their political ostracism by the Centre for Gender Studies and the coalition of independent women's organizations is in some ways self-defeating. The long experience of many women in the Union of Women of Russia in the CSW as political representatives, members of the women's councils and delegates under

the communist system is an important resource that cannot be discounted in the construction of a new female political praxis and agenda. This is a story that has yet to be told, and in the present climate, in which the political past and its dominant ideology and praxis are out of favour, it will be an important contribution, absent from mainstream discourse and reflection among the so-called 'new' and 'old' women.

Posadskaya and her colleagues at the Centre for Gender Studies experienced considerable difficulties in the construction of a feminist agenda for Russian women. Feminism is still considered by most women to be a 'rich woman's philosophy', and its association with Western women in a struggle for rights that Russian women essentially enjoyed under the previous system make its relevance even more tenuous in the transition period. While the Union of Women of Russia and the Centre for Gender Studies have cultivated stronger international links than other independent women's organizations, the bases for these links have in many ways been different. The Centre for Gender Studies, from its inception, sought out Western academics and feminists in order to engage in a discourse that they had great difficulty in generating in Russia. It was in the international arena, Posadskaya is quoted as saying, that 'they are welcomed as partners in and contributors to a global discourse' (Penn 1998: 49). On an intellectual level, for feminist researchers and activists this is an important exchange for the evolution of a feminist ideology appropriate to the development of a specifically Russian feminism. The incorporation of women from the post-communist states into international forums is part of the global project of Western feminism for resolving the problems of all women at an international rather than a national level. For the majority of women in post-communist states this is anathema, owing to the fact that there is a strong belief that Western feminists still do not understand their experience of the past and its impact on an analysis of the present (Watson 2000: 180–92). Many women writers from these countries have argued that they are well aware of the effect this has had on the development of a strong women's movement in developing countries, and are especially keen that history should not repeat itself (Drakulic 1998; Lipovskaya 1994).

While Western feminist academics speak of the way in which Russian feminists are 'defining' the terms of the debate, a critique of the dialogue between East and West from the viewpoint of the majority of Russian women expresses considerable concern with respect to its influence. Larissa Lissyutkina is one such academic, who argues that there are serious contradictions related to the question of women's consciousness in the West and the former Soviet Union: 'Mutual under-

standing between Russian and Western women ends where discussion of the women's movement begins. To put it somewhat bluntly, Soviet women are convinced that Western women have no problems and therefore they participate in the women's movement, while Western women are bewildered that Soviet women have so many problems, but no movement' (1993: 274).

She argues that many of the issues that dominate a Western feminist political agenda are either contextually different or have little import for women in the former Soviet Union – issues such as free abortion, political quotas and the right to work.[16] Lissyutkina's writing is angry, critical of a communist past, the easy seduction of women and men by Western-style consumerism in the present, and the search for a new social identity by both. She argues that both men and women in Russia are in a state of anomie, and until this situation has changed the conflictual transition period will set the parameters of women's consciousness and the level of debate. In general terms her argument reflects the ideological position of many writers from the former communist bloc, which states that any rapprochement between Western feminism and Russian women cannot take place until the latter are sufficiently empowered in the context of a new political paradigm and with a secure individual and collective identity. As Lipovskaya proposes:

> In my opinion, the first step should be finding our own 'eastern bloc' identity. Feminist consciousness is only beginning to appear in the former socialist countries, and we are still searching for our version of women's liberation. After that, we will be able to engage in dialogue on a more balanced, more equal basis … We would like to switch from being studied and analysed objects to subjects of equal socio-cultural exchange. (Lipovskaya 1994: 275)

A search for 'an identity of one's own' permeates the analyses of women of the East in the post-perestroika debate irrespective of their different ideological perspectives.[17] The study undertaken by Racioppi and See of independent women's organizations in Russia demonstrates that despite their differences their political agenda and activities have more in common with one another than they are willing to acknowledge (1995: 847–8). The problem lies in the need to delineate the nature of past and present political participation. Such organizations not only wish to lay claim to their independence from the state but also to demonstrate it, and this certainly creates difficulties for the Union of Women of Russia, whose present activities are overshadowed by their past incorporation into the communist state (Sperling 1999: 180). Yet in

the search for a new identity to fuel a culturally specific political praxis women will look to both the recent and the distant past for a point of reference (Moghadam 1993). In the process of reflection what women believe to be true is as salient as what might be considered to be the 'truth' itself, rather than constituting what Molyneux has described as 'an expression of confused sentiment' (1990: 46). The heterogeneity of women's experience under the Soviet system informs the multifarious debates in a nascent women's movement. Nevertheless, the spectre of the past continues to influence the alliances made between the different women's coalitions, in which perceived differences frequently defined along the lines of 'traditional/old' and 'progressive/new' continue to inhibit the development of a women's movement that encompasses the different political praxis and agendas among heterogeneous women's organizations, associations and social movements.

Changing position: insiders and outsiders past and present

Most female writers concerned with the process of transition in the post-communist states agree that the impact of perestroika on women in particular has been a negative one in both the economic and the political spheres. In the process, the special rights and protections afforded women under the previous system came under attack, unemployment has become essentially a female problem and the removal of political quotas has radically reduced female representation in institutional politics (Molyneux 1991b; Moghadam 1993; Funk and Mueller 1993).[18] The speed with which these changes occurred was both unexpected and unprecedented – women were becoming the outsiders in a new ideological paradigm of Western orientation and operation.

The legacy of state paternalism had essentially nullified the political mobilization of women outside of the state-sponsored women's councils, and thus women had no experience of autonomous political organization or activism. By the late 1980s, academics, researchers and journalists were beginning to take advantage of a more favourable climate for debate by openly criticizing the patriarchal ethos of the state and its failure to consider women's issues when formulating policy (Buckley 1992: 216–17). At the same time, feminist groups and women's organizations and associations began to be formed, some with a single-issue agenda, others with a commitment to challenging the state on a wide range of issues pertinent to women in the transition period in an attempt to influence policy-making (Konstantinova 1996; Buckley 1992). A similar process occurred in all the post-communist states and was paralleled in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia.[19]

Up until 1991 the Soviet Women's Committee continued to be funded by the state and maintained its influence on policy-making bodies; at least one-fifth of the female deputies in the Supreme Soviets came from this organization (Nechemias 1994). Within this scenario, among the organizations and associations that were formed outside of institutional politics only the Centre for Gender Studies received a token level of funding from the state. After 1991, the difference in status between the Soviet Women's Committee and other women's organizations and associations essentially disappeared when the former was pushed out of institutional politics and thus became a private organization. In spite of its change of name, to the Union of Women of Russia, the underlying antagonism and suspicion between state-sponsored and independent political entities remained.

With the collapse of the Communist Party the changing political positioning of women's organization and representation created outsiders from insiders. Moreover, during perestroika the creation of women's non-institutional organizations and associations had already demarcated them as political outsiders. The need to appear different and autonomous, most especially in their efforts to impact on state policy-making, in contrast to the 'official' organization, the Soviet Women's Council, clearly demarcated relations between insiders and outsiders in that period. In the era of glasnost, the implicit political ostracism of the council by the state led to its subsequent restructuring. Nevertheless, the Union of Russian Women became an outsider not only in institutional politics but also in non-institutional politics, in which most of the new women's coalitions were determined to distance themselves from the political incorporation of women's issues of the past.[20]

It was a past that weighed heavily on the present. After the revolution of 1917 the Soviet Union was the first country in history to incorporate the principle of equal rights in its constitution; it implemented policy and law which removed men's preferential rights regarding property, marriage and the location of the home, as well as giving women the right to elect and be elected representatives in the state government (Klinova 1995: 47–8; Racciopi and See 1995: 821). The creation of the *Zhenotdel* (Soviet Women's Department) and the development of *zhensovety* (local women's councils) by the Communist Party, at that point, were essentially intended to educate and politicize women in order to increase their political participation and representation in the communist state. While the *zhensovety* were run by party activists, many of the participants were not members of the Communist Party. These councils often acted as pressure groups, leaning on local party and soviet com-

mittees both in the workplace and the community to defend women's interests, although this was still within the parameters of state objectives with respect to productivity, female employment and childcare (Browning 1987: 112–18).[21] By 1936 a new constitution had given women equal rights in all spheres of civic, economic, cultural and political life, the 'woman question' had been declared solved, and women's departments in the institutional organizations of the communist state replaced the *zhensovety*. Any public women's forum for debate outside of the party was now closed – only the Soviet Women's Committee survived as the official body for the dissemination of information about the situation of women in the Soviet Union internationally, holding a privileged position as female political 'representative' within the Communist Party. From this point women who were not members of the party were essentially political outsiders.

For the following twenty-six years, women's issues were inextricably tied to party objectives, and female party activists were incorporated into a political praxis that denied the existence of gender difference or inequality. It was not until 1956 that the *zhensovety* were reinstated and women's issues and concerns were once again brought to the fore. Although still essentially following party objectives, they put forward policy issues in the local soviets and once again they brought women together in a forum of their own, debating issues such as party policy, worker segregation and training opportunities for women (Buckley 1989: 148–52). Once again party and non-party activists came together in the *zhensovety*, which were created on the initiative of the local party or by local women themselves. These groups responded to local needs and problems raised by women and played an important community role. This lack of uniformity in both organization and praxis was the main reason for Gorbachev placing the *zhensovety* under the jurisdiction of the Soviet Women's Council. Nevertheless, the diversity of the *zhensovety* served them well post-perestroika, some of them emerging as formidable independent opposition groups in the workplace and in local politics. As a 'social organization' not incorporated into the party structure, the *zhensovety* enjoyed greater independence than the Soviet Women's Committee under the previous system – consequently they are not all directly identified with the 'formal' women's movement (Browning 1992; Racioppi and See 1995).

Organizations that were incorporated into the state structure or which have had an indirect relationship with it in the past have been the object of severe criticism by organizations attempting to create an independent women's movement in Russia. The basis of the critique is that the

Soviet Women's Committee was complicit in sustaining the image of an all-encompassing *de jure* gender equality in the Soviet Union which masked de facto gender inequality in many areas of women's lives. Moreover, the argument goes, these organizations failed to promote women's issues and defend women's interests under the previous system and continue to benefit, if not economically then certainly politically, from their previous association with the state (Posadskaya 1993; Konstantinova 1994). Consequently, the term independent women has held considerable sway in the women's coalitions outside of that associated with the Union of Women of Russia and, in view of its past, mistrust sustains a belief that such an organization is incapable of producing a 'new type of political woman' (Posadskaya 1994a: 169).

Insufficient research into the political praxis of the *Zhenotdel*, the Soviet Women's Committee, female representatives at all levels of the communist political system and the *zhensovety* makes it difficult to offer an informed opinion which might support or refute the claims made by the self-professed 'new' women activists in Russian non-institutional politics. What evidence is available does indicate, however, that the political activities of women at all levels of the political system and in party organizations were far more diverse, and in some cases challenging, than the writing of both Western and Russian women would attest to.[22] Furthermore, while some women who are now part of the post-Soviet women's organizations and associations may have been non-political there will be many more who have been active in or linked with either the Soviet Women's Committee or the *zhensovety*. The latter are women who would have much to offer in the development of a new political praxis in the transition period.[23] Even some members of the Centre for Gender Studies, foremost critics of the 'old order', can be linked with the Soviet Women's Committee in the past (Racioppi and See 1995: 839). It would seem, therefore, that the 'new' independent women are those who have chosen to dissociate themselves from the past and any links they may have had to the Soviet Women's Committee or the Communist Party. Thus, some political insiders under the previous system remain so within the independent women's movement in an era of non-institutional politics. In a period of transition, this is understandable, as opportunities to create new methods of political organization and practice expand, but in the development of women's coalitions as a precursor to a unified women's movement the past impinges on the present in the demarcation between political insiders and outsiders.

In the new political context in which all women's organizations and associations were political outsiders, the ability to put pressure on the

state and to influence state policy-making was paramount on the agenda of all these entities. The general belief was that the socio-economic dependence of both men and women on the state had to be broken if they were to offer any form of independent influence on the now diverse political forces operating in a post-Soviet era. This could only be achieved in the short term by reversing the operation of the insider/outsider principle. As Posadskaya argues, an independent democratic women's movement needed to move away from a political existence in which women had things done for them by the state towards one in which women did things for themselves (1993). For the Union of Women of Russia and the *zhensovety*, which continue to be associated with it, this also meant engaging in a process of reflection and change as well as accepting the antipathy expressed towards them by the women's organizations and associations that have emerged post-perestroika.[24] Yet in the transition period it has been difficult for organizations and female activists not to work with or through the state in order to address social issues and the question of women's rights and influence on policy-making in this area. As Racioppi and See argue, this has created an anomalous situation:

> The historical legacy, then, is a double edged sword for the building of a women's movement in Russia. Although groups (however reformed) that are identified too closely with the old regime and the state may be considered suspect by newer groups of activists, the historical legacy also compels a certain coherence. Women activists seem to have a clear understanding of the necessity of women's influencing government in the transition … there is a powerful sense among the women activists we interviewed that women's mobilisation in Russia must have as a primary goal the liberation of women from state control, as an experience distinct from but related to that of their male compatriots. It is a compelling motivator for movement building, but it is also fraught with insecurity. (1995: 845–6)

From 1990 onward the rapid expansion of women's organizations and associations was a response to the political and economic changes which not only challenged rights that women had enjoyed under the previous system, such as employment, childcare, social security provision and political representation, but also raised issues that had been obscured or 'unrecognized' such as violence against women, shared parenting, sexuality and reproductive rights. The former issues predominate on the agenda of the majority of women's organizations and associations that are not 'feminist'-oriented, while the latter are

included on that of a small number of 'feminist' groups. The agendas of both ideological perspectives are not mutually exclusive, however, and there is considerable overlap in the aims and objectives of individual organizations. For example, both the Union of Women of Russia and the new grass-roots organizations deal with issues related to domestic violence at a local level, although this may not occupy a central place on the political agenda of the organization. Overall it is the search for an ideological position befitting women's politics in a post-Soviet era which further complicates unification of *all* women's organizations and associations.

Since the 1930s feminism has been outlawed and reviled as an ideology in the Soviet Union, deemed to be subversive, anti-family and anti-male. Even the introduction of feminist debate in the 1970s by a small group of female academics through the publication of an almanac for women led to their eventual exile. Despite the political opening up of the system under perestroika, and the subsequent public debates led by women on the question of gender relations, this did not lead to a more tolerant attitude with respect to feminist concepts or ideas. Consequently, while the majority of female activists looked to the East for the basic tenets of an ideology that could support a changing political identity, a small group of academics and researchers turned to the West to gain an understanding of the basic premises of feminist thought to underpin their work on Russian women. In a political climate that continued to be antipathetic towards feminism the latter group remained in the minority and had little choice but to pursue their engagement with feminist questions and debate in the international arena (Molyneux 1991a; Lipovskaya 1994).

It is, to a certain extent, the dual role of feminist groups whose membership consists of journalists, academics and researchers which has complicated their political position with respect to other groups and associations. The Centre for Gender Studies, which heads the Independent Women's Forum, is a case in point whereby political activism is combined with the construction and theorization of a Russian feminism. With an extremely high profile in international women's forums and conferences, the members of the centre are now authoritative political insiders in the Western feminist community. It is precisely thanks to the lack of support for the application of explicitly feminist ideas to the problems that women face in the transition period that Russian feminists have turned to the international community to engage in global debates about gender inequality. Their relationship to other female activists, particularly at the level of ideology, further complicates the range of heterogeneous

relationships existent within and between specific organizations, associations and political coalitions. As Minh-ha argues:

> The moment the insider steps out from the inside she's no longer a mere insider. She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside. Not quite the same, not quite the other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out. Undercutting the inside/outside opposition her intervention is necessarily that of both not quite an insider and not quite an outsider. She is, in other words, this inappropriate 'other' or 'same' who moves about with always two gestures: that of affirming 'I am like you' while persisting in her difference and that of reminding 'I am different' while unsettling every other definition of otherness arrived at. (1997: 418)

The inside/outside opposition is revealed in the lacuna between theory and practice. Feminist groups at the cutting edge of the theorization of the woman question past and present find themselves in their political activism having to temper the explicit use of what is considered generally to be an 'outsider' philosophy. Olga Lipovskaya, one of the foremost Russian feminist writers, has expressed misgivings about the long-standing engagement with Western studies and feminist debates by non-Western feminists. She argues that they are at risk of 'moving too far ahead of their compatriots', and that issues that are debated on the outside hold little importance for the majority of women on the inside, whose priorities remain with their own survival and that of their families (Lipovskaya 1994: 275).

Establishing international connections has, for the majority of women activists, been less about the question of ideological 'enrichment' than the question of support for the practical objectives and survival of autonomous women's organizations post-perestroika. The financial disenfranchisement of all women's organizations and associations that received some form of subsidy or state support placed greater emphasis on the need to develop or reinforce links with international organizations. The Union of Women of Russia, with its national network, and the Centre for Gender Studies, with its connections with independent women's organizations, were the major recipients of external funding and grants in the transition period. Both have used funding to empower women through training, networking and assisting smaller organizations politically and financially. Nevertheless, some of the smaller independent women's organizations have also developed cultural, educational and political links with various American organizations (Racioppi and See 1995: 834–40). Single-issue organizations with no formal links to the

main women's 'coalitions' have also achieved an international profile and funding. The powerful Committee of Soldiers' Mothers (KSM), for example, received important financial and political support for their opposition to the war in Chechnya – this strengthened their political profile and influence with relation to the state (Caiazza 1998: 60). As Racioppi and See point out, 'access to foreigners was motivated not simply by a desire to acquire externally generated financial support but also by an interest in acquiring information, expertise, and, to some extent, political visibility both at home and abroad' (1995: 847)

Unfortunately, in the competition for sponsorship and the funding of projects and conferences there are many organizations that have been left out in the cold. This can cause tension between the different groups and organizations, which may have been able to maintain a certain level of autonomy in the past but might now feel pressed into a much closer association with or dependence on larger associations that have both the international contacts and the funding to assist them in their endeavours. Conversely, the considerable influence that organizations such as the Union of Women of Russia and the Centre for Gender Studies exercise at both national and international level can also have a negative effect on their ability to effect collaborative links with other women-only groups in post-communist states. The rapid development of such groups and organizations post-perestroika has produced over four hundred women's organizations, established to respond to a wide range of issues that affect women in the transition period (Chinyaeva 1998: 38). Few are willing to subsume their own development and autonomy to a central hierarchical structure representing women's interests similar to that which existed before. As Chinyaeva argues: 'women do not form a homogenous social group. So, to reach the Russian "sisterhood", which differs widely in terms of education, material independence, professional training and social aspirations, women's rights advocates must plan elaborate and flexible tactics' (ibid.: 39).

The development of new strategies and forms of collaboration may itself be imposed from the outside. The plethora of funding given to organizations in the immediate post-perestroika period has been reduced substantially, and international organizations are being selective not only with respect to the kind of projects/events that they will fund but also to which of the post-communist states will continue to receive financial assistance in this way (ibid.). The dearth of such funding may, in itself, pressure the more influential organizations to focus their attention on the development of a more collaborative and integrative indigenous female politics rather than invest their energies in an exogenous femin-

ist politics which, at this point in time, is marginal to the issues that can only be dealt with by the political strength of post-Soviet women themselves. Within this scenario the internal human resources and their cumulative expertise should take precedence over sustaining the political insider/outside principle in the development of a strong and independent women's movement. There are already many indications that these changes are under way as different Russian women's groups and organizations increasingly work together to combat the deleterious political and economic consequences of structural adjustment and democratization for women (Sperling 1999: 205–7)

Central Asian women – the lost voices

The terms of the debate both internationally and within post-communist states have followed a similar pattern. The experience of women of the former Soviet Union has received the greatest attention and coverage in the mainstream academic press and underlines many of the ideological conflicts that permeate gender politics in the transition period. Yet the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 allowed the intellectual focus to shift from 'Soviet' women to Russian women, and in doing so essentially ghettoized the experience of women in the former Soviet republics such as those of Central Asia. In the past, published work on women in the Soviet Union either ignored or peripheralized the experience of Central Asian women, and now, in the international debate on the status of women in post-communist states they constitute the 'lost voices'.[25] The term 'Soviet women' was monolithic and to a certain extent denied cultural and ethnic differences and the way they shaped the heterogeneous experience of women in the Soviet Union (Bystydzienski 1989).

Post-perestroika published work on women is still predicated on a repetition of past analyses in which Central Asian women are referred to obliquely as the exception that prove the rule,[26] most especially in the allusion to the persistence of 'traditional' practices related to marriage and the family in the Muslim region (Lapidus 1993). Yet traditional practices shape the lives of men and women in both the Western and non-Western world – they are what constitute difference and otherness and attribute identity. They are not immutable, rather they change over time, but when referred to in the context of Muslim Central Asia they seem to be equated with backwardness, a failure to move on and to change. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The annexation of Central Asia by Russia and the sovietization of the region from 1920 onward led to radical changes through which the meld between Islam and communism reconstructed traditional practices and the basis of

gender relations.[27] Central Asian women may have gained full political and civil rights as Soviet citizens but they remained first and foremost Muslim women. While other women in the post-communist states spoke of a search for identity, this was never a problem for the majority of women, or for that matter men, in Central Asia, whose ethnicity and Islamic identity had been nurtured and sustained, albeit occulted within their families and communities across the region. The final collapse of the Soviet Union removed the mask of sovietization, revealing strong Islamic communities that had maintained a sense of national identity, an enduring act of defiance in the face of a once powerful Soviet state.

The pre-revolutionary image of Central Asia as a traditional, patriarchal society that repressed women led to the dispatch of brigades of female political activists to the region in the 1920s to liberate them through politicization and mobilization. A pivotal role in this process was the installation of a Soviet Women's Committee; the creation of *zhensovety* across the region was most important in the process of sovietization, and these organizations remain at the forefront of the women's movement in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Russian feminists have argued that in the Soviet era women had things 'done for them' with respect to equal rights, but Central Asian women also had things 'done *to* them' by the 'Soviet sisterhood' and the state through a *Khudjum* (Offensive) against purdah and segregation in the name of liberation.[28] An intellectual and cultural apartheid separated them – Central Asian women were believed to be traditional/backward whereas Soviet women were secular/progressive, and the process of sovietization was supposed to turn the former into the latter. Those who made the transition, a secular intelligentsia, became outsiders in their own society because of their perceived complicity in the implementation of an alien ideology imposed by a colonizing nation (Tokhtakhodjaeva 1998: 61).

After sovietization the many thousands of women and men who joined the Communist Party and became active at all levels of the administration maintained an anomalous position, never truly equal as insiders of the Soviet system. As Muslims they were still considered to remain on the cusp of the 'traditional' and the 'secular'. Those who totally abandoned both cultural mores and religion in favour of the promise of freedom and equality in the new Soviet system were welcomed as true insiders, and by severing their links with the grass roots were mistrusted and reviled. This situation was indicative of the polarization of ideology and lifestyle within Central Asian society which was most apparent after independence. Tokhtakhodjaeva describes the process in the following way:

> The attributes of the civilisation which penetrated Central Asia gave birth to a social polarisation previously unheard of in that backward society: on one side the rulers and on the other those without rights; on one side the ruling elite's cultural orientation towards Russia, and on the other the conservation of elements of the Muslim way of life among the lower strata of society. The russification of lifestyles, education, upbringing and the adoption of new norms of social interaction spread, above all, among the educated segment of society … At the same time those lower on the social ladder regarded the superficial russification of the educated segment of society as an unpardonable breach of national traditions, and a betrayal of religious ethics and morals. (ibid.: 236)

Moreover, the imposition of the Russian language as the official medium of public communication merely exacerbated the situation whereby Central Asian women who wished to advance their careers in the professions and the party had to be bilingual. Thus for the majority of women in Central Asia the question of language immediately denied them a voice in public debate and as such they had their needs and interests 'represented' by those who had long ceased to be conversant with the lives and experiences of their compatriots.

The issue of representation was an important one in all the post-communist states and most particularly with respect to the official women's organizations that purportedly represented women's interests. Russian feminists have been most critical of the role of the Soviet Women's Committee both before and after perestroika, mostly with respect to the fact that it has spent more time pushing the party line than raising issues most pertinent to women at the level of the state. The critique of the Soviet Women's Committee in Moscow, to which its namesakes in the republics were subordinated, by Central Asian women was based on its cultural and political domination by Russian women. In this context, the question was not exclusively related to whose interests such a committee represented but to the fact that it replicated the situation in the Central Asian republics whereby indigenous women were disempowered *vis-à-vis* Russian women. As one Uzbek journalist argued:

> What most people do not understand is that we were a colonised nation and when Russian women came here they saw us as weak and repressed. Sadly it is an image that remains internationally but it was never true. Russian women had greater privileges and status than Uzbek women and so it was they who spoke for us yet they never really understood us. At the important UN conference in 1985 it was Valentina Tereshkova, the Russian cosmonaut and head of the Supreme Soviet Women's

> Committee, that represented Soviet women there. No one heard the voice of women of Uzbekistan or for that matter of any of the Central Asian republics. At Beijing, for the first time, we will speak for ourselves – that is the major victory of independence.

Nevertheless, post-perestroika the diversity of women's organizations and associations that were established followed a similar pattern to that of other post-communist states. Unlike the formal women's organizations in Russia, both the Soviet Women's Committee and the *zhensovety* have become a national network of women's committees which remain semi-official organizations in Central Asia, receiving limited government funding and still having an input into policy-making.[29] On the cusp of institutional and non-institutional politics, the members of the National Women's Committees maintain an anomalous position as both political insiders and outsiders. While the new independent women's organizations and associations are keen to underline their autonomy from the National Women's Committees in the Central Asian political context, the emphasis on continuity and stability post-independence makes it difficult for them to operate effectively. Consequently, a broad coalition between the semi-official women's committees and other women's organizations was necessary for the development of a united, albeit nascent, women's movement in which a wide range of important issues regarding the status of women post-perestroika are debated. The greater tolerance and cooperation that this involved stands in sharp contrast to the experience of their Russian counterparts. The rapidly declining political and economic status of Central Asian women in the transition period required a dual response: the need to create multiple forms of representation on the one hand and a unified political agenda on the other with which to influence state policy.[30]

Moreover, emphasis on unity within the Central Asian republics, especially with respect to women's organizations, is essentially a reaction to the past, in which the majority of women were political outsiders both within their own countries and in the Soviet Union. For those who were political insiders in the Soviet era, their experience as political outsiders on the periphery of decision-making in the Soviet state led to an understanding of the consequences of non-cooperation with independent organizations in the post-independence period. Bereft of international contacts and association before independence, Central Asian women were obliged to look inward at their own strengths and weaknesses, analyse the situation of women and consider their response. This process has been consolidated by the alliances and cooperation of

women's organizations from all the Central Asian republics, culminating in the formation of the Council of Central Asian Women in 1993. In this way Central Asian women prioritized the expansion of contacts and exchange of experiences with women in their own region, with whom they have far more in common. Contacts with the principal women's organizations and coalitions in Russia have been maintained, but now on the basis of equal standing whereby they attend conferences, exchange ideas and contribute to debate in the forums and congresses that bring together women of the post-communist states.

Owing to the fact that contact with Western feminists and involvement in international women's forums were mediated via Moscow, Central Asian women were at a considerable disadvantage in the international arena. Representatives of women's organizations and associations have eagerly sought such links in the post-independence period, and academics have taken the opportunity in recent years to spend sabbaticals overseas to initiate intellectual exchange. This has not resulted in a similar ideological juxtaposing of feminism in the work or political praxis of female academics and researchers to that which occurred in Russia, and their work has enjoyed little exposure in mainstream Western academic publishing in comparison to that of their contemporaries. Like the majority of women in the post-communist states Central Asian women find feminism anathema to their situation in the transition period, and as Muslim women believe that it has little to offer them. Moreover, colonized as they were by one ideology, communism, in the past, there is considerable resistance to internalizing another.

The development of a new political praxis among Central Asian women is predicated on the need to empower themselves in the face of the opposing forces of a re-Islamicization on the one hand and the capitalization of the economy on the other. Fears of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the region in the post-independence period were never realized, principally because this would be unacceptable to the majority of the population. Women's organizations and associations have, however, been extremely proactive in establishing dialogue with the Islamic hierarchy and within political parties to maintain a secular state. In the few districts where fundamentalism has taken hold they have directly intervened to ensure the maintenance of women's legal rights and independence.[31] Economic restructuring has, as in other post-communist states, been the principal source of female disempowerment through both implicit and explicit pressure for increased gender differentiation in both public and private sectors. In this process, both semi-official and independent women's organizations and associations, in

what is essentially an economically disadvantaged region, have become heavily dependent on external funding to ameliorate the problems faced by women. The bulk of such funding has come from development agencies that have designed programmes aimed at integrating women into the restructuring process while engaging women in the supervision of and participation in such programmes and projects. Central Asian women find themselves significantly disempowered in the face of what is essentially a Western agenda.[32] Once again women find themselves having 'things done to them' rather than having the autonomy to do things for themselves. Moreover, implicit within the political agenda of development institutions and international organizations is a concomitant Westernization, which is at odds with Islamic social and cultural institutions.

The complex social, political and economic pressures faced by Central Asian women post-perestroika have given rise to an equally complex response. The legacy of the past necessitated the development of multiple identities, as Muslim women, Soviet women and Uzbek, Kazakh and Kyrgyz women, being at one and the same time traditional/secular, insiders/outsiders and Muslim/atheist. Since independence their contacts with Westerners and Muslim women from other countries has, for Central Asian women, merely emphasized the cultural specificity of their experience. Thus the development of a new political praxis is predicated on difference rather than similarity, and the former takes precedence over the latter in their engagement with international outsiders. It is first and foremost to themselves that Central Asian women look for solutions, answers and strategies. In the development of a new political consciousness they may also have to look to the distant and recent past in which they utilized a complex amalgam of active and passive resistance, first during the long and bloody forced liberation of Central Asian women by the Soviet Union and latterly retaining their religion and ethnic identity in the process of sovietization.

Notes

1 See also Watson (2000).

2 See Luong and Weinthal (1999), Adamson (1999) and Fisher (1997).

3 The political ascendancy of Boris Yeltsin led to the fast-tracking of the principles of perestroika and the break-up of the Soviet Union.

4 See Hiro (1995), Rashid (1994), Banuazizi and Weiner (1994).

5 See, for example, Halliday (1992) and Anderson (1995).

6 Under the Soviet system there were many claims that Moscow manipulated statistics. This was certainly the case in the 1960s when statistics for infant

and maternal mortality were grossly exaggerated. In the post-Soviet period international agencies have confirmed the consistency of statistical information coming out of the Soviet Union.

7 See Amos and Parmar (1984), Mohanty (1988) and Baden and Goetz (1997).

8 This particular complaint was consistently made during my work and research in Central Asia and more recently in Mongolia.

9 See, for example, Koval (1995b), Moghadam (1993), Posadskaya (1994b) and Funk and Mueller (1993).

10 Nanette Funk in her introduction to the edited collection on post-communism is at pains to point out that the 'authors write explicitly for a Western audience' (1993: 3).

11 See Molyneux (1991b) and Waters (1993).

12 See also Molyneux (1990), Konstantinova (1994).

13 This description of female representatives under the quota system that existed in the Soviet system until 1989 is repeated in the Declaration of the Founder Members Meeting of the Independent Women's Democratic Initiative (NEZDHI). The following excerpt belies Posadskaya's central role in drafting the declaration: '"Puppet women" in representative organs of power and "iron ladies" in the director's chair, women elected by no one but appointed by one or other state institution, obedient to the will of the bosses and always ready to carry out any directive from on high … ' (translation in *Feminist Review*, 39, 1991).

14 See Chapter 6.

15 Ibid.

16 See Watson (2000).

17 See Chinyaeva (1998), Lipovskaya (1994) and Posadskaya (1994a).

18 See Chapters 3 and 6.

19 See Khassanova (2000), Tokhtakhodjaeva (1996) and Ergasheva (1997).

20 Konstantinova (1996) offers a personal perspective on this phenomenon and the juxtaposing of the different women's coalitions as members of the Centre for Gender Studies and the LOTOS group (Liberation from Social Stereotypes).

21 See Chapter 6.

22 See Buckley (1989), Browning (1987), Stites (1978), Hough (1977) and Lapidus (1993).

23 Anna Temkina, in her research on the 1994 elections in St Petersburg, found that members of the movement Women of St Petersburg accredited their sense of group solidarity to their 'joint work in the past, the importance of the network based on the system of women's soviets and communist party based organizations … ' (1996: 213). Of the respondents interviewed over half had been active members of the Communist Party.

24 See the interviews with the head of the Union of Women of Russia, Alevtina Fedulova, in Racioppi and See (1995).

25 I acknowledge that similar claims can be made about women of the Baltic states before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

26 A clear exception is the work of Mary Buckley and Genia Browning on Soviet women and Shirin Akiner and M. A. Tolmacheva specifically on Central Asia.

27 See Chapter 2.

28 Ibid.

29 This is principally in the form of funding a small core of full-time staff.

30 See Chapter 6.

31 Ibid.

32 See Luong and Weinthal (1999), Ikramova and McConnell (1999) and Adamson (1999).

2 | Gender, Islam and nationalism: subterfuge and resistance in the Soviet era

Becoming Soviet citizens was not a path of choice for Central Asian women or men. After the Russian conquest of the region by the nineteenth century, Central Asian peoples were the 'other', designated as aborigines (Becker 1994: 27); they were 'outsiders' from the beginning and thus became locked in a citizenship fraught with problems. The colonial government identified Islam as the enemy that separated this Muslim region from a civilized conception of being and any notion of constituting an integral part of first a Russian and later a Soviet identity. For a population with a strong cultural identity, the pressure to abandon or at least occult its social manifestations was never an option. The Bolshevik revolution ended the laissez-faire governance of the region, which had left traditional Central Asian society intact. The principal aim was to introduce radical social and economic change, and through a process of 'social engineering' attack the fundamental foundation of Central Asian culture – Islam (Blank 1994: 39). In the pre-revolutionary period both Russian and Western observers had consistently described women as the most oppressed members of Central Asian society, and in the post-revolutionary political project this image served to fuel the belief that women were the 'potential Fifth Column for the Sovietization of Central Asia' (Massell 1974: 147). Yet the idea that Central Asian women might wish to be part of such a project, and if so on what terms, was to become the undoing of the attempt itself.

Until 1926, when Stalin divided the region into five republics, the Central Asian region was known as Turkestan, of which the main centre was Tashkent.[1] It was from here that the early Russian colonizers conquered and later governed the region, and most certainly in the pre-Soviet period little attempt was made to mix with the indigenous community. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that, at this time, only a very small percentage of the population lived in the main urban centres, with only 10 per cent of Uzbeks and 1 per cent of Kazakh and Kyrgyz living outside of the rural areas. The geographical distribution of the population in the region remained discernibly demarcated up to independence, with Russians and other non-nationals forming the majority of the central urban population (Rakowska-Harmstone 1994:

1–5). Moreover, up until the Russian conquest there was a clearly recognizable division between the 'sedentary pursuits of the oasis and nomadic pastoralism of the steppes, deserts and high plateaus' (Massell 1974: 5). Again, there was an identifiable ethnic bipolarity in economic activity, the sedentary pursuits undertaken principally by Uzbeks with the nomadic activities dominated by Kazakh and Kyrgyz peoples. While there were few differences in social organization among nomadic and sedentary groups, the public manifestations of a perceived 'female inferiority' were shaped by the prevailing gender division of labour. Consequently, early impressions of Central Asian society, and most especially existing gender relations, were extremely superficial and based on limited contact with sedentary rather than nomadic communities (Chatterjee et al. 1997: 103–7; Chenoy 1997: 122–3).

The question of contact is important in any assessment of the influence of colonization on indigenous society and underlines the persistence, or otherwise, of traditional practices and cultural mores, as well as the level of resistance to change. An understanding of the social organization of the Central Asian population is crucial in identifying the problems for any concerted resistance to Russian conquest and later Soviet domination of the region. Whether engaged in nomadic or sedentary pursuits, Central Asians were members of self-sustaining communities organized along kinship lines. The political leadership of these communities, or clans as they are often referred to, was essentially based on heredity, most especially among the nomadic peoples. In sedentary groups, the possession of wealth, power and influence could override this precedent, although an indisputable correlation remains between the two. It was among urbanized and sedentary populations that the Russian administration first attempted to eradicate the traditional practices of clan politics whereby the leaders of these communities essentially came from the more powerful lineages or were elders who interpreted traditional law. Limited self-government, introduced after conquest, in which representatives were to be elected, failed to change the status quo. Even up to the present, if one surveys the historical linkages of the leaders of the Central Asian republics they are almost all linked to the most powerful clans, which have ruled Central Asia for centuries (Collins 2002: 142–3).[2]

Thus, colonial politics did little to change the political or social organization of the Central Asian population, and nomadic communities remained virtually unaffected by the colonial administration. Nevertheless, it was the socio-economic organization of Central Asian society which exacerbated the region's vulnerability to conquest and coloniza-

tion. The population were not only divided into micro-communities in which allegiance was based on kinship, clan and culture, but the divisions between the many clans were complicated by cultural difference, geographical location and language. This facilitated the divide-and-rule policy utilized first in the Russian and later in the Soviet conquest of the region. The most famous armed defence of the region came from the Basmachi warriors, led by elders, mullahs and ethnic elites who formed a formidable counter-revolutionary force against the Red Army between 1918 and 1924.[3] Even then, resistance came from the powerful theocratic states of the south and south-east, where the imposition of cotton monoculture had led to tenuous alliances between clans of the Uzbek and Tajik ethnic groups (Massell 1974: 7–9; Rashid 1994: 22–5). The legacy of the Basmachi revolt was the political and geographical division of Central Asia into five republics in an attempt to separate the principal ethnic groups.

The greatest challenge to the domination of Central Asia was Islam. The Islamic conversion of the population began in the seventh century among the settled populations of principally Uzbek ethnic origin, and by the sixteenth century encompassed the Kazakh and Kyrgyz nomadic communities. Thus, from that point onward not only traditional (*adat*) law but also religious (*shariat*) laws governed the lives of the Central Asian people. While the Russians in the colonial period had made some attempt to change the traditional structure of politics in the region, the policy of limited contact with the indigenous population had left the social and cultural organization virtually untouched. The economic activities of sedentary and nomadic communities determined the social manifestations of the class and gender difference in the pre-revolutionary period, but it was the latter which was most evident in public life. It was in the settled communities that a clearly demarcated gender division of labour was most apparent and from which non-Muslim 'outsiders' gleaned the early perceptions of female inferiority and oppression.

It was the public manifestations of a Muslim patriarchal society which essentially informed the outsiders' understanding of the region. The practices that exemplified the control of women by male kin, such as seclusion, the use of the veil (*parandja*),[4] arranged marriages, polygamy and the payment of bride price (*kalym*), were reported to be the hallmarks of a backward society which typified the zenith of an archaic female inferiority. The segregation of men and women was clearly imbued in *shariat* law as a means of 'protecting' women and maintaining their moral and spiritual superiority as mothers, wives and daughters. Most especially it was the most effective means of ensuring that family

honour, with its roots in female monogamy and sexual purity, remained untainted by the vagaries of formal and informal contact between the sexes in the public sphere (Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996: 25–37; Akiner 1997: 265–6). Thus the boundaries of formal and informal relations in both the public and private spheres were defined according to the geographical location of a community, the socio-economic status of the family group and the level of contact anticipated with 'strangers' and those outside the kinship network.

Clearly, for women in the settled communities such contact would be greater, and thus it was precisely in the urban centres, where Russian colonization and later Soviet occupation were concentrated, that purdah was strictly observed. Few women other than traders appeared in public without the *parandja*, and the majority were rarely seen outside their homes except for special occasions such as feast days, weddings and other family celebrations. The higher a woman's family status the greater the social constraints placed upon her and consequently the less she was seen in public. In nomadic communities organized around kinship networks, however, men and women worked alongside one another and veiling was rarely the custom. Nevertheless, the wearing of traditional headscarves in nomadic society was as much a religious act as wearing the veil. Women of the wealthy nomadic families, unlike their peers in sedentary communities, exercised considerable autonomy in both public and private spheres (Massell 1974: 6–7; Akiner 1997: 266; Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996: 37–8). Thus, not only the gender division of labour but also the social conditions under which gender segregation could be achieved influenced the extent and nature of purdah.

Custom dictated that the socialization of women focused on their primary and most important role as wives and mothers, and the cultural manifestations of female 'inferiority' were almost exclusively related to marriage. Arranged marriages were the norm, and neither men nor women had any definitive say in the process. Parents sought partners for their children from within their social class and ethnic group and individual suitability was less of a consideration.[5] Traditionally women never married non-Muslims and only rarely were men allowed to do so.[6] The high incidence of polygamy often commented on by Russian and Western observers was greatly exaggerated, principally because it was a practice of the privileged classes residing in the cities and was rarely seen among nomads. Irrespective of social class, the payment of the *kalym* was strictly enforced in both nomadic and sedentary communities and was usually paid in the form of goods rather than money. The higher the *kalym* set by the family the greater the value of the

woman concerned. For wealthy families this was often a mechanism by which they could discourage unsatisfactory 'suitors', but for the less well off a high *kalym* might defer the marriage of sons until a mature age, exacerbating the age difference on marriage of men and women. Tokhtakhodjaeva suggests that there were specific reasons for a pronounced age difference between marriage partners, and that they were 'usually due to the mercenary interests or ambitions of a bride's parents or when her family was financially weak or the bride did not have a father' (1996: 33). There are writers who argue that the practice of the *kalym* was adhered to principally to discourage divorce, because while women or men could institute divorce under *shariat* law it was usually men who did so (Eickelman 1998: 166). Thus, the payment of the *kalym* was considered an act of faith as well as one of commitment.

Clearly, many factors influenced the incidence and specific character of the traditional practices outlined above. In colonial Central Asia, Russian and European settlers accepted their existence as symbols of Muslim life, and the lack of contact between the two principal cultures – Muslim and non-Muslim – coupled with the indigenous customary restrictions on inter-marriage, severely limited the understanding of one by the other. Moreover, the process of economic restructuring, principally through a nascent industrialization and the expansion of cotton production, involved only a small proportion of the Central Asian population and as such had little impact on traditional social structures.[7] The indigenous population were 'outsiders' to the transition within which Russian settlers, as skilled labour and administrators, enjoyed an elevated social status.[8] At this time the question of cultural assimilation of Central Asians, including wealthy elites, into the Russian population as full citizens was never considered. It was neither a necessary nor a desirable condition of Russian control – the coexistence of two distinct cultures was effectively a means by which resistance to colonialism was radically reduced. The Bolshevik revolution, however, proffered a totally different philosophy in which the sovietization of the region was a prerequisite for the assimilation of Central Asian Muslims into the Russian population.

The revolution and the civil war that followed in Central Asia initiated dramatic social and economic changes in the region. The most radical ideology proffered by the Soviets was that of gender equality and female emancipation in direct contradistinction to existing Muslim customs. In the post-revolutionary period this was to be the linchpin of the assault on Central Asian society and on gender relations in particular. It was believed that transforming the gender division of labour

in the public sphere would significantly reduce Islamic influence in the region. Moreover, concentrating on the political mobilization of women, perceived to be the most oppressed members of Central Asian society, and inculcating their full incorporation into the labour force, would lead to the demise of some of the more 'archaic' Islamic practices that had persisted throughout the colonial period.

Thus, the emancipation of Central Asian women had far more to do with the implementation of the Soviet political and economic project than constituting an act of altruism. First and foremost it was to remove the main obstacle to sovietization – Islam – and second to fulfil the need for female labour in some of the principal economic activities in the region, such as cotton growing, silk production, textiles and food industries (Massell 1974: 165–6; Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996: 46–7; Akiner 1997: 268). Women, therefore, became the pawns of cultural confrontation in a post-revolutionary Central Asia. If they wished to take advantage of the opportunities for greater independence, both social and economic, that sovietization might offer, then this could directly conflict with their status as Islamic women. As Ergasheva argues, the entire premise of 'Soviet emancipation was a new method of making women ride, simultaneously, the backs of two horses. One to be mother and obey all unwritten laws of Islam and serve the husband's family, and the other, to get jobs outside of the home' (1997: 8). In colonial Central Asia this dual role was never a consideration, but in the post-revolutionary period it was expected.

To facilitate the process of cultural assimilation, of both women and men, the Soviet administration chose to directly challenge the legal and religious foundations of Muslim predominance in the region, first, by replicating Soviet legislation in Central Asia with respect to equal rights, civil marriage and divorce, and introducing a new judicial and legal system to enforce the legislation. This effectively constituted an all-out attack on *shariat* and *adat* law and the power of the mullahs to sustain the traditional segregation and inequality of the sexes. Second, and equally controversial, was the *Khudjum*, or the 'Offensive' against the use of the *parandja* by Muslim women. The ideology behind the campaign was that if the physical manifestation of a commitment to Islam were removed, then other forms of religious adherence would gradually disappear. Third, in order to reinforce the process of sovietization and implement the above policies successfully, the Communist Party imported high-ranking female cadres into Central Asia to educate and mobilize women through the introduction of the *Zhenotdel*. The fact that Muslim women might not welcome this 'emancipatory' process, led by

cultural 'outsiders', was never brought into question by over-enthusiastic party officials recently transferred to the region. Many women openly resisted any pressure placed upon them to abandon their cultural identity in exchange for the dubious rewards that a fully assimilated Soviet society might bring. For Muslim women, embracing sovietization and rebelling against the practices of segregation and purdah could lead at best to 'outsider' status, rejection by family and community, or at worst to violent abuse, even death. The majority of women and men chose subterfuge as their path of resistance, embracing Soviet culture and society in the public sphere while maintaining both religion and cultural identity in the private sphere.

The institutionalization of Soviet gender equality – the challenge to *shariat* and *adat* law in Central Asia

As in Russia, the Bolshevik revolution involved a prolonged civil war in Central Asia, where fighting continued until the 1920s, when the principal indigenous opposition force, the Basmachi, was defeated. In the aftermath, the physical elimination of all opposition in the region and the immediate implementation of a divide-and-rule policy in which the region was to become five 'autonomous' republics were early indications that the laissez-faire rule of the colonial period was at an end.[9] The process of sovietization of the region was to be unremitting and total, involving the imposition of a communist ideology that was diametrically opposed to that of a class-based Islamic culture. Moreover, while political and economic change could be enforced, a similar sociocultural revolution would be difficult if not impossible. The latter was to be achieved by the imposition of a Soviet ideology of gender equality through a campaign of women's liberation.

From the outset the Soviet position was that emancipation of Central Asian women should constitute the linchpin of first the repression and later the destruction of Islam in the region. Soviet policy advocating equal rights with respect to marriage, property, work, education, voting and political participation, from 1919 onward, was imbued in legislation and enforced throughout the Central Asian region. This was achieved through establishing the precedence of civil law over both *shariat* and *adat* law, which sustained religious and cultural practice among both sedentary and nomadic populations.[10] For the Soviet administration, women could not possibly enjoy full civil rights unless they were able to decide whom they might marry and when, as well as enjoying equal rights with men to end a marriage. Thus, in 1919 a Registry of Births, Marriage and Deaths was inaugurated in Turkestan which was responsible for

enforcing Soviet law with respect to marriage, divorce and the legal rights of children.[11] In this way certain principles were established, such as marriage by mutual consent, the right of either spouse to file for divorce, raising the age of marriage for both men and women, and awarding children born outside marriage legal rights. In 1924, within this new legal framework, polygamy and the payment of *kalym* became illegal. Thus, Soviet law overrode Islamic laws, at least in the eyes of the state, in some of the most important areas of the legal jurisdiction of traditional courts (Massell 1974: 199–201; Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996: 48–9; Keller 1998: 20).

Enforcing Soviet law in Central Asia, however, was to be a completely different matter. Legal principles governing marriage and the family for the indigenous Central Asian population came under the rubrics of personal law, and therefore were solely the concern of Islamic law. For this reason, and despite the official removal of these matters from the jurisdiction of the traditional courts, most families refused to recognize Soviet law in personal matters. The circumvention of the new laws occurred in every conceivable fashion and involved the complicity of both men and women (Keller 1998: 27–31; Northop 2001: 133).

The new Soviet laws made marriage under the age of fifteen illegal for girls, while under traditional law they were considered marriageable by the age of ten.[12] Moreover, payment of the *kalym*, arranged marriage and polygamy were no longer permissible, and under the new Soviet legal system constituted 'traditional' crimes that were punishable under civil law (Massell 1974; Akiner 1997; Keller 1998; Yakopov 1998).[13] This was in direct contradistinction to *shariat* law, which exerted considerable influence over traditional practices related to marriage. The institution of marriage was essentially a contract between one family and another; the *kalym* was a pledge that stated the value of the woman. The idea of the legal autonomy of women, as promulgated in Soviet law, was anathema to the cultural mores of the Central Asian population.

Various methods were used to enforce the new secular laws, which were consistently subverted at every turn. With respect to under-age marriage there was a legal requirement imposed in 1929 that for any marriage to be recognized by the civil registry prospective brides were to undergo a medical examination to confirm their age and sexual maturity.[14] This edict outraged Muslim men, who refused to allow such an examination of their daughters and prospective wives, let alone by male doctors at government clinics. This law was quite literally flouted by the majority, with local indigenous officials giving the necessary certification of health and age on request, without any medical examination having taken place,

in order that members of the local community could, on paper at least, comply with Soviet law (Massell 1974: 290; Keller 1998: 24). Women, as the principal matchmakers and preliminary negotiators in contracting a marriage for their children, were actively involved in circumventing the law against under-age marriage; for example, mothers or elder sisters would take the place of child brides in the official marriage ceremony (Massell 1974: 268). The only other means of contracting the marriage of an under-age person was with the permission of the local *Zhenotdel* which placed a red seal on the back of the hand of a young woman who had been granted permission to follow the dictates of *shariat* law (Ergasheva 1997: 7). Here indigenous women who were organizers of the local *Zhenotdel* could use their position to support those who wished to follow *shariat* law. There is certainly sufficient evidence available to show that the marriage of under-age girls was prevalent and continued even into the second half of the twentieth century (Keller 1998: 30–1).

While the Soviet authorities recognized only marriages enacted under civil law, the indigenous population would recognize only those marriages solemnized according to Islamic law. Thus, prospective spouses often underwent both religious and civil ceremonies, creating anomalies that facilitated the continued practice of polygamy. The legal status of the first wife would be sanctioned under both civil and Islamic law and that of subsequent wives under *shariat* law. Most writers agree that while local party officials may have, outwardly at least, supported the principles on which women's emancipation was based, privately they remained faithful to Islamic law and practice (Massell 1974; Keller 1998; Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996). In view of the fact that polygamy was most common among those with high social status, it was inevitable that a significant number of the officials themselves had more than one wife. Thus, tacit approval of the institution of polygamy remained among the most privileged as long as existing wives consented. Women were unlikely to challenge this 'rule' because those who did found themselves accused of entering an illegal relationship by local officials and forced to leave their marital home completely dispossessed (Massell 1974: 291).[15] As unhappy as some women may have been in a polygamous household, the alternative was no less undesirable – ostracized as women accused of being disloyal to Islam and their family.

Other traditional practices, despite constituting social crimes under the new laws, continued unabated. The payment of the *kalym* remained a part of marriage brokering between families, although it was banned under the criminal code in 1928. Under *shariat* law it was considered a pledge that remained under the control of women and was part of

their right to hold their own property. In the case of a divorce initiated by a woman, she would have to hand the *kalym* over to her husband, but if the divorce was initiated by the man then the woman retained it in full. The former instance was highly unlikely because it was difficult for a woman to obtain a divorce under Islamic law. Essentially the *kalym* was intended not merely to state the 'value' of a woman, giving her some form of financial security on leaving the family home, but was also aimed at discouraging divorce.[16] Outlawed under Soviet tutelage, the practice was simply occulted – the *kalym* was no longer paid in cash but in the form of 'wedding' gifts such as livestock, property and goods (Northop 2001: 127). Discretion in the negotiation and payment of the *kalym* was especially important in nomadic communities, where it was paid by the clan rather than an individual family and therefore the entire community could be liable to arrest and prosecution (Massell 1974: 268, 309; Tolmacheva 1993: 544).

Probably the most controversial secular law was that granting women the right to the same terms for divorce as those for men, and streamlining the legal processes to make divorce both quicker and easier to obtain. For the Muslim population divorce was something to be avoided rather than encouraged, and female-initiated divorce was difficult if not impossible to obtain.[17] The stigma attached to divorce was especially punishing for women, who lost their rights and status in traditional society. In all other areas the indigenous population had shunned the civil courts in personal matters, but new laws that bestowed legal autonomy especially to widowed and divorced women acted as the catalyst by which they were to be the first to utilize them. As unprecedented numbers of women began to initiate divorce in the civil courts, the mullahs and local officials appealed to Moscow to intervene on the grounds that Soviet divorce law constituted the 'moral murder of husbands' (Massell 1974: 296). Far from such a request being granted, in 1926 a law was passed which removed the jurisdiction of Islamic courts with respect to divorce (Keller 1998: 22). Nevertheless, the indigenous population, in its unwavering resistance to the imposition of Soviet law in its personal affairs, was able to place considerable social pressures on women. A divorce granted by the civil courts would not be recognized by the Muslim community, only those obtained under *shariat* law would, and thus these women would still be considered married to their previous partners and thereby only at liberty to remarry if their new husband was someone outside their own culture. In effect, divorced women became 'outsiders' in their own communities, shunned by their families and in some cases subject to violence and abuse (ibid.: 28–9). Thus, civil

divorce, while subject to claims of the 'moral murder' of men, signified the social and moral death of women.

The usurpation of the legal authority of Islamic clerics through the imposition of secular law was a clear attack on Islam and its influence in Central Asia. In the immediate post-revolutionary years, the traditional courts still maintained a certain legal jurisdiction, but with the abolition of private property and the confiscation of land that belonged to the Church the financial support on which the operation of the traditional courts depended dried up. By 1927, traditional courts were abolished, although many had ceased operation by that time. The Soviet administration invested considerable effort in training some women as people's assessors[18] and later as judges to give women an active role in the legal process. At this time, however, the idea of women passing legal judgment on men, for the indigenous population, was derisory. Nevertheless, the abolition of the traditional courts did not undermine the influence of the *kadis* (Islamic judges) who were employed in the Soviet courts. From this vantage point, they were able to subvert the Soviet legal system from the inside by dismissing cases as irrelevant, delaying judgment and on some occasions 'shelving cases indefinitely' (Keller 1998: 32). In this way, the legal attack on the social mores and traditional practices of the Central Asian population was thwarted for over a decade.

The 'Offensive': the imposition of *Khudjum*[19] and the unveiling of women

The attack on Islam and traditional practices in Central Asia intensified after 1926 as mosques and *madrasahs*[20] were either closed or destroyed owing to continued resistance to sovietization by local Muslim leaders. In 1927, the campaign for the liberation of Central Asian women moved to banish the physical manifestations of Muslim culture and practice – the unveiling of women. The main campaign centred on the settled communities of Uzbekistan in the cities and the Ferghana region, where the use of purdah was most entrenched.[21] At this time, the majority of Central Asians were nomadic and as such were virtually unaffected owing to the fact that most women had never used the veil. Uzbekistan was the most urbanized and economically developed republic of the region, and the undertaking of *Khudjum* in this context emphasized the economic dimension of the importance of unveiling in the principal cities. The incorporation of female labour into the economy was a central feature of Soviet policy in which female economic independence was believed to be the key to their social liberation. In the case of Central Asia, veiled women were especially restricted with respect

to the nature and extent of their participation in the labour force; for example, they were unable to operate certain kinds of machinery or engage in assembly-line work in the factories. Within this context, the unveiling of women was not only desirable but also an indispensable feature of the campaign to liberate women (Massell 1974: 231–2; Akiner 1997: 270; Ergasheva 1997: 4).

The *Khudjum*, moreover, represented a full-frontal assault on one of the more intimidating symbols of the population's adherence to Islam and traditional culture, and one that set Muslim women apart from their Soviet peers. As long as the use of the veil persisted it would be a constant reminder that the revolution and the imposition of Soviet legislation and values had failed in Central Asia. Of considerable concern to the Communist Party was that reform in neighbouring Islamic countries might outpace that of sovietization, as in the case of Atatürk's secular revolution in Turkey, 1925–27, and the abolition of polygamy and the *kalym* in Afghanistan (Massell 1974: 215–19). The campaign itself was based on Soviet preconceptions with respect to veiling which related it exclusively to a repressive misogynist Islamic culture that treated women as second-class citizens. Yet this was a gross underestimation of the social and cultural significance of veiling in sedentary Central Asian society, which was considered to be 'a protection against unwanted contact with strangers and also against the physical grime of the environment. It could be, too, a status symbol, indicating social standing. Most importantly of all, it was a statement about the fundamental ordering of society, the nature of gender relations, the division between the public and private space, the conventions of civility' (Akiner 1997: 271). Consequently, the backlash against *Khudjum* was far greater than any popular resistance that the Soviet authorities had encountered up to that point.

The campaign was spearheaded by the women's section of the Central Asian Communist Party, the *Zhenotdel*, which was established in the post-revolutionary period and run by young Russian female party activists who had little or no knowledge of Central Asian culture. By the first phase of *Khudjum*, they had already established women's clubs in many urban and rural areas encouraging a significant minority of women to become party members. It was in the male-dominated party meetings that the campaign for unveiling was introduced – local party activists and officials were exhorted to set an example by supporting the unveiling of family members, first and foremost their own wives. The reaction to this 'request' was palpable (Massell 1974: 237–8). What indigenous men and women were essentially being asked to do was to engage in an act of cultural heresy which could tip the fine balance that had, up to that

point, been sustained – that between adhering to traditional mores of their Islamic culture and being good communists. Whichever side the weight of circumstance fell, in the end they would be 'outsiders' either in their own communities or within the party (Northop 2000: 183).

The date set for the official unveiling of women was International Women's Day, 1927, and in the lead-up to the celebrations the Soviet authorities ran a political campaign in the newspapers, through popular theatre presentations and in party meetings. They even offered medical testimony, presented at a doctors' conference, to the effect that the use of the *parandja* was harmful to women's health, 'not only depriving them of sun and air but directly causing skin and other diseases' (Massell 1974: 239). From early discussions at party meetings it was clear that there could be little expectation of women unveiling individually without a similar commitment from female relatives and members of their community. Mass unveiling, therefore, was considered to be the most effective way of achieving the aims of *Khudjum* – the passage from traditional Muslim to 'modern' Soviet citizen.

On International Women's Day that year all party members, their wives and female relatives were ordered to appear in the public squares of the towns and cities to participate in celebrations. Women members of the *Zhenotdel*-sponsored clubs and organizations, who were not party members, were also in attendance, ostensibly invited by the leading members of the *Zhenotdel*. Large rostrums bedecked with flowers were set up, ceremonial bonfires were lit, bands played, banners and placards were waved and impassioned speeches made. Women who, in preparation for the special celebrations, had removed their veils the night before appeared on the rostrum wearing red headscarves and called on those present to do the same. In the heady atmosphere of this staged political theatre a small group of women filed on to the platform, removed their veils and threw them on to the bonfire (Massell 1974: 243–5, Keller 1998: 22).[22] According to reports at the time, thousands of women followed suit in the major cities of Uzbekistan that night. It was claimed that some ten thousand indigenous women tore off their veils on 8 March, and within a few months the official figure for the unveiling of women had risen to almost a hundred thousand (Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996: 59).[23] Nevertheless, in the days that followed the celebrations many women reveiled as the backlash against *Khudjum* began. As Nukhrat observed at the time:

> An Uzbek woman [for example] who for the first time in her life, [or at least] since childhood, ventures [outside her home] with an open face,

> feels as a European woman would feel if she found herself totally nude in the middle of a crowded [street]. She feels insulted and abused by every astonished stare, she walks with her head hung low … at once excited, terrified, and ashamed, and anxiety never ceases to gnaw at her; what awaits her at home? How will her family react to the news, to this 'disgrace'? (cited in Massell 1974: 331)

Tokhtakhodjaeva states that in the town of Margilan alone, of the 3,000 women who had removed their veils 2,000 returned to using the *parandja* once again (1996: 60). Within months the number of unveiled women was less than four hundred. As the Soviet 'outsiders' enthusiastically promoted the *Khudjum*, their ethnocentrism was, quite literally, 'condemning thousands of women to death' (Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996: 60; Massell 1974: 330; Northop 2001: 118–19).

Interestingly enough, no law was passed to prohibit veiling in Central Asia, but sufficient sanctions were put in place to ensure the cooperation of the indigenous population. For men, the unveiling of their wives became a condition of employment, and the veil was banned from the *Zhenotdel*, schools and the workplace. Women who wished to enter public life, gain an education or work found themselves with little choice but to compromise (Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996: 60). Thus, the women who abandoned the veil in the initial stages of the campaign were those who had the most to gain and who, in the past, had the least status in Central Asian society, such as widows, orphans, divorcees, wives of polygamists and women of the working poor (Massell 1974: 260–3). Yet for the majority of the indigenous sedentary population the veil had considerable significance. *Khudjum* represented the 'rape' of the Central Asian people and Muslim men accused the Soviet authorities of 'turning their women into harlots' (Akiner 1997: 271; Massell 1974: 276). The unveiled were now called *Khudjum* women, scorned as 'outsiders' and traitors and in many cases were ostracized by their families and communities. As a tide of unprecedented male violence was unleashed against *Khudjum* women they were forced to seek sanctuary and support from Soviet organizations and services (Northop 2001: 125).

In the light of a wide range of changes imposed on the indigenous population, *Khudjum* was considered to be a full-frontal attack on the beliefs and customs that were the social glue holding Central Asian society together. Most of all it brought into question the importance of family honour and social respect and was proof, if any were needed, that in public life at least a new Soviet culture would predominate. The challenge to *Khudjum* was manifestly aimed at women, rather than men,

who were willing to turn their backs on their own families and community, if necessary, to become full Soviet citizens. Massell's research demonstrates that the attacks on women began almost immediately after the mass unveilings as harassment turned to unprecedented violence against *Khudjum* women:

> All reports from the field agree that within days this harassment took an ominous turn. In some cities and villages, unveiled women were seized in the streets and raped by bands of youths. With growing frequency, these women were killed, not only by roving gangs but by their own kinsmen at home, as traitors and prostitutes. Young men reportedly murdered their sisters after swearing on the Koran to do so in defence of their family's honour; their own fathers in consultation with local mullahs apparently arranged the religious oath taking ceremonies. Some killings were perpetrated with extraordinary ferocity: pregnant women were murdered and then disembowelled, after having been violated by scores of men. (Massell 1974: 281)

In the two years that followed the mass unveiling of women, approximately 2,500 women were murdered in Uzbekistan alone, and many thousands of others violated and assaulted (Northop 2001: 125; Ergasheva 1997: 11). By 1929 the attacks widened to include indigenous men and women who were known communists. One of the most infamous murders was the lynching of Anna Dzhamal and Enne Kulieva, who were the first indigenous high officials of the *Zhenotdel* in Central Asia (Massell 1974: 283). Keller, who has researched the prosecution of crimes against women in the Soviet campaign for female emancipation in the region, demonstrates that the official figures for such crimes are extremely low owing to the reluctance of local courts to prosecute. Traditional law gave tacit approval to those who wished to personally prosecute infringements against the family honour, and many judges, mindful of this fact, gave such crimes low priority (Keller 1998: 32). Most commentators agree that the numbers of women, and men, who died between 1927 and 1929 could be in the tens of thousands.[24] Certainly the level of violence was such that in 1929 the 'offensive' against Islam for the liberation of women was 'called off' in favour of less confrontational methods of achieving Soviet objectives.

Yet it was not only men who were prepared to defy the *Khudjum* and other manifestations of the Soviet campaign for the 'liberation of women'. Many women understood from the outset that the offensive itself would set them against their own culture, and this was something they were unwilling to subscribe to, despite the benefits, perceived or

otherwise, that full engagement in the Soviet system might offer. By the mid-1920s women were already beginning to leave the Communist Party in open defiance of Soviet strategies to undermine the indigenous way of life (Northop 2001: 138). At that point they could be either Soviet women or Muslim women, not both, and many made their choice. Some of the leading party activists tried to assert their rights as indigenous women by turning up for meetings fully veiled, while others who refused to unveil in their place of work were dismissed. Many *Khudjum* women who had been coerced into joining the Communist Party simply refused to 'undertake any assignments' or participate in local political activities (Buckley 1989: 79–80). Moreover, the majority of *Khudjum* women refused to break away from indigenous culture and tradition, engaging in a precarious balancing act to maintain a modicum of respect within both cultures. These women would frequently don the veil on entering traditional areas of the cities, at religious festivals and family celebrations to demonstrate their respect for and adherence to indigenous cultural mores. Others simply exchanged the veil for the use of large headscarves to denote their status as Muslim women. Thus, for most women, being Soviet citizens would not be at the expense of losing their status and identity as indigenous women.

Far from undermining Central Asian culture, *Khudjum* merely reinforced it as the mullahs began to offer more liberal interpretations of Muslim law and the Koran, particularly with respect to women's participation in the public sphere, to maintain their influence over the indigenous population. In their efforts to 'win back' women and Muslim youth they emphasized the similarities, rather than the differences, between Islam and socialism (Massell 1974: 270). The question of gender equality was consistently referred to in articles in religious newspapers and public speeches made by influential mullahs. Women were allowed to pray alongside men in some areas,[25] the rights of women to participate fully in public life were supported by more liberal sectors of the clergy, and a few openly supported unveiling as not requisite under Muslim law. Nevertheless, many local clerics held meetings with women in their homes, encouraging them to adhere to Muslim tradition and retake the veil as a symbol of resistance against sovietization (Keller 1998: 24–5). The initiative for a process of liberalization by the Muslim establishment, however, was one that had been forced upon them, thus the compromise between the teachings of Islam and communism was already taking shape by the end of the 1920s. The Muslim clergy needed to maintain their power and influence over the indigenous population, and in their doing so necessity became the mother of invention. Nevertheless, the

process of change was inevitably slow, especially when the initiative came not from the indigenous population but from 'outsiders', and therefore cultural pressure and popular resistance to Soviet social values were sustained for many years after *Khudjum*.

The public face of the population may have been changing by the 1930s, but just as Muslims do not need a church in which to practise their religion, so the use of the veil would, eventually, no longer be necessary as a symbol of religious belief or family honour. The unveiling of women may, for Moscow at least, have signified the acceptance of sovietization in public, but in the private sphere Muslim culture and tradition became more firmly entrenched. In effect, as Tokhtakhodjaeva argues, Central Asia would now have two religions whereby 'the internal religion of Islam became dressed in the outer communist religion and under such conditions could neither develop nor reform' (1996: 65).

Throwing down the gauntlet – the role of the *Zhenotdel* in female emancipation in Central Asia

The most important organization in the process of female emancipation right across the Soviet Union was the *Zhenotdel*, the Women's Department of the Central Secretariat, often referred to as the Women's Committee or the Women's Section.[26] The main aim of the institution was to politicize women workers in both rural and urban areas, to increase the numbers of women entering public life through membership of the Communist Party, trade unions and other organizations, and to promote the development of infrastructure to support women in this endeavour, such as nurseries and public dining facilities (Buckley 1989: 65–6). Of most interest to us here is that of the three principal spheres of operation one was specifically dedicated to work among the 'women of the east'. Thus Muslim women were considered not only to be a special case but also to be given significant priority in the work of the *Zhenotdel*.

The principal *Zhenotdel* in Central Asia was established in 1919 in Tashkent with the task of setting up local *Zhenotdel*s across the region. Owing to the dearth of indigenous Bolshevik activists, young female revolutionaries and educators were sent into the region to undertake the formidable task of 'emancipating' the 'oppressed' women of Central Asia. As Massell argues: 'It played (or tried to play) this role vigorously at all levels of command: in implementing revolutionary legalism as well as *khudzum*, in sponsoring divorces and general unveiling, in promoting political recruitment as well as cultural re-orientation and economic mobilization among women, in engineering overall consent and ferreting out

resistance to Soviet policies' (Massell 1974: 355). These women embarked on their work with Muslim women sustaining similar preconceptions to those of their colonial predecessors, and in some cases with enmity for a culture of which they had little understanding. This made early work among women in the region extremely difficult, not least owing to the fact that it was being undertaken under the auspices of an 'outsider' philosophy – Russian Marxism (Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996: 51–3). Moreover, the difficulties of language, the sheer geographical expanse of the region and the general hostility of the indigenous population towards them presented formidable obstacles to the political consciousness-raising and social liberation of women. Thus, the emphasis was on social activities and the formation of informal clubs and organizations that would attract the participation of Muslim women and conform to the cultural mores that predominated in Central Asian society.

The work of the *Zhenotdel* was inaugurated in the principal towns and cities, where educators needed to display considerable resourcefulness to speak to or have contact with indigenous women. Some would don the *parandja* to enter traditional areas of the cities in order to meet women, or visit them in their homes, something that was never condoned by the party but was extremely effective in establishing social relationships with their Muslim peers. In the schema of the conscientization of Central Asian women other innovative methods were used, such as 'group discussions in bath houses, the setting up of women's schools, liquidation of illiteracy centres, women's workshops, women's shops and tea houses' (Buckley 1989: 71). By establishing a wide range of organizations and services, the *Zhenotdel* laid the important groundwork for politicizing women, encouraging social and economic independence and actively supporting women entering social production, as well as encouraging their political participation (Stites 1978: 340; Massell 1974: 213; Ergasheva 1997: 4).

Despite the creation of gender-specific organizations, indigenous women were cautious in their contact and political engagement with the Soviet 'outsiders'. It was only in the mid-1920s that any real change was discernible in the number of Central Asian women joining the Communist Party and undertaking political work. It was at the 2nd International Conference of Communist Women in 1921 that the first delegation of Central Asian women appeared alongside Russian and European women. Judging by eyewitness accounts of the time the impact of that contact was stunning as the group of fully veiled Muslim women entered the auditorium and some came forward to make impassioned speeches in 'exotic languages'.

> Their presence packed such power not only because it was unprecedented, but because – as one eyewitness put it – it was so purely 'symbolic' in nature: an international meeting of revolutionary leaders was being addressed by those who '[might have been] harem girls' only yesterday, who were 'pioneers' in the literal sense of the term, emerging from 'grim, barbarian slavery' and from a land 'as distant as a fairy tale'. (Massell 1974: 135)

Excerpts from reported sentiments of the time above belie the powerful images presented on this occasion by Muslim women. Clearly, the preconceptions about Muslim society, first reported by Russian colonizers in the region, were merely reinforced among those who attended the conference and vowed to liberate Central Asian women.

While reports of non-Muslim activists who attended the conference are available, those of Muslim women are not (Kamp 2002: 268). Few if any of the women at the conference understood a word of the speeches made by Central Asian women, and there is no indication that the significance of these women appearing veiled at the conference might have been anything other than a demonstration of their repression in Muslim society. By all accounts it would be equally reasonable to offer a quite different interpretation – that this delegation appeared at the conference not simply as communist women but as Muslim communist women, and the fact that some of them removed their veils while they addressed the conference should perhaps be considered to be a sign of respect rather than as an act of rejecting their cultural identity. Moreover, without doubt some of these women would have been socially empowered individuals in their own society, whether on the basis of class or age, in an identifiable female hierarchy in Central Asian society (Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996; Ergasheva 1997; Akiner 1997). Nevertheless, the subjective assessment of the female congregation at this conference fired the commitment of the *Zhenotdel* to pursue a 'top down' campaign for the liberation of Muslim women, who were deemed unable to liberate themselves. The status of the proposed libertees was therefore already defined as inferior to that of the liberators.

One of the most important early tasks of the *Zhenotdel* was dealing with the question of literacy, most especially among indigenous women as the principal tool in political conscientization. Literacy levels in Central Asia for the population as a whole were low, a situation comparable with the rest of the Soviet Union, whereby only 7 per cent of men and 1 per cent of women were deemed to be literate (Rashid 1994: 66). Central Asian writers argue, however, that these claims were

exaggerated with respect to the urban population.[27] Most certainly all young women from the middle and upper classes received an education, usually in Koranic law, reading the classics and mathematics, and many of them could speak both Persian and Arabic; they usually received instruction in their homes rather than in formal institutions. Other women in rural and urban areas received primary education run by the mullahs in Islamic law and from elders in the communities on the importance of 'religious legends, ritual and practice' (Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996: 25; Ergasheva 1997: 2) Nevertheless, while the level of education of the population may be in dispute the aim was to achieve universal literacy, especially among women, in order to encourage them to enter education and the professions.

The question of literacy and political conscientization depended on the *Zhenotdel* setting up a comprehensive scheme for women in both urban and rural areas. In Uzbekistan, the most urbanized region in Central Asia, some 120 schools for literacy were established. This task was more difficult among the predominantly nomadic populations of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where *Zhenotdel* activists and women's club delegates encouraged many young women to move to the nearest settled community or town to receive an education. Women would stay from between two weeks and six months – the latter training period was essentially for potential political organizers – and embarked on literacy programmes, political education courses and training in women's and children's health. Those women who were trained as organizers returned to their villages to set up 'red corners' and literacy schools which would cater for local needs and act as a support centre for women. (Red corners were part of the Soviet system called 'clubs in miniature', a politically sponsored environment adapted to local conditions and culture with the aim of political consciousness-raising through 'directed' social activities, reading circles and literary classess – see Buckley 1989; Massell 1974; Browning 1987.) From this starting point the *Zhenotdel* activities were extended to serve the nomadic population through a system of travelling 'red tents', which spent between two and three months with each nomadic group (Buckley 1989: 83–90).[28] In this way *Zhenotdel* activists ventured into regions of Central Asia that had had little or no previous contact with other sectors of the indigenous population, let alone 'outsiders'. Moreover, by establishing women's clubs and red corners in some of the most isolated areas of Central Asia, with literacy as one of the pivotal activities, the *Zhenotdel* succeeded in drawing many women out of their isolation and introduced new possibilities, knowledges and futures.

The women's clubs, once established, offered an alternative to the traditionally circumscribed social life of women – from one based in their respective homes to one operating in the public domain, albeit in an equally segregated environment. In urban areas other 'women's' spaces were created, such as women's shops and tea houses, which became meeting places for women. Nevertheless, in the early 1920s very few women frequented the women's clubs and activists had to engage in a 'door to door' approach to encourage women to attend; in some rural areas it was men who were approached in the first instance to convince them that the activities of the clubs did not pose any threat.[29] Initially the social activities of the clubs focused on entertainment, such as showing films and putting on plays as well as health education and information sessions with invited speakers. All these activities were imbued with political messages, however, and constituted an important part of an overall strategy for the political education of women. Once the confidence of local women had been obtained, meetings would be held regularly and *Zhenotdel* activists would engage them in discussions and reading groups which focused on the 'goals, laws and policies of the Soviet state' (Buckley 1989: 90). From these beginnings the first indigenous female activists emerged, principally in the towns, where those considered most 'politically advanced' would go out to the rural areas to undertake political work with peasant women. Thus, strong links between urban and rural women's clubs and organizations were established.

The important educative role of the *Zhenotdel* was underlined by the fact that all forms of training for women were channelled through this organization, most especially once the New Economic Programme (NEP) was introduced in the early 1920s. Central Asian women already played an important role in the economy and engaged in a wide range of skilled artisanal and agricultural work. Under NEP the need to increase family income drew many women of the urban popular classes into the industrial labour force, but the shift from working within the home to engaging in productive work outside it was extremely slow. Thus, the *Zhenotdel* was the conduit for setting up women's *artels*, where women undertook 'outwork' for the factories that utilized the traditional skills of indigenous women, such as weaving, carpet-making and embroidery.[30] In the rural areas cooperatives were formed from the women's groups in the villages to produce handicrafts and process raw materials. In this way women were drawn into public production without confronting traditional mores whereby the majority of women undertook paid productive work only in a private segregated environment. Moreover,

owing to family obligations women preferred to work in the *artels* located in or near their homes rather than engage in heavy physical labour in the factories and farms. These cooperative ventures, which came out of the social organizations established by the *Zhenotdel*, were an important transitional phase in drawing women into the labour force (Akiner 1997: 274).

The principal role of the wide range of social clubs and organizations instituted by the *Zhenotdel* in Central Asia was the liberation of indigenous women, and especially the political development of female party activists. The network created particularly through *artels* and the sponsorship of education and training offered considerable scope for the political recruitment of women and their sponsorship as candidates in local elections. It was not until the first female graduates from Soviet girls' schools in urban areas appeared, however, that the numbers of women entering the party increased significantly. While these figures are generally disputed they remain small compared to those for men (Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996). Nevertheless, thousands of women participated in the organizations sponsored by the *Zhenotdel*, and young indigenous women who trained as party activists travelled to remote areas of the region to work with nomadic and peasant women as local teachers and political organizers. It was this contact which encouraged many young girls to leave the villages to join *artels* or pursue an education while other women joined the party to escape unhappy marriages or traditional influences (ibid.: 52–4). By the late 1920s there was a clear interdependent relationship between the wide range of indigenous women's organizations, the recruitment of party activists and the professional training and recruitment of women in the Central Asian labour market (Massell 1974: 378).[31]

Yet it is the role of the *Zhenotdel* with respect to the implementation of women's rights in Soviet law and the *Khudjum* campaign which has received both praise and approbation in both historical and contemporary writing. As the vanguard of the 'women's liberation' campaign it engaged in activities that can be described as political vigilantism undertaken for and on behalf of Central Asian women. In effect, an 'outsider' philosophy prevailed whereby the women of the *Zhenotdel* spelt out indigenous women's grievances as *they* saw them, and how far these diverged from or coincided with those of indigenous women themselves was open to debate or dispute. Irrespective of the gender specificity of the activities of the *Zhenotdel*, it was, to all intents and purposes, an organ of the Communist Party, and its principal task was that of sovietization. The conflict of cultures involved produced an

anomaly for indigenous women between the new opportunities the Soviet system offered and adhering to traditional values while maintaining their cultural identity. Each step taken towards the former would, according to Soviet thinking, take them farther away from the latter. Clearly, in practice, the situation was far more complex.

With the full imposition of a Soviet legal system in the mid-1920s the *Zhenotdel* played an important role in educating indigenous women regarding their rights under Soviet law, especially in relation to under-age marriage, *kalym*, polygamy, divorce, and property rights. The *Zhenotdel* offered a free legal aid service and acted as legal advocates and public defenders of indigenous women litigants. This work was to a certain extent inspired by the fact that it was Central Asian women who were the first to move away from the traditional courts to use the new Soviet court system. Yet the work of the *Zhenotdel* in this area cruised a very fine line between supporting women who wanted to end their marriages and encouraging them to do so; the question is, at what point does aid become abetment? The rising number of female-initiated divorces at that time resulted in an institutional backlash from leading Uzbek and Kazakh communists. This culminated in a regional executive ruling that, in defiance of acknowledged practice in Russia, divorces should be dealt with in the formal court system rather than the civil registry. Moreover, this ruling was made with the express intention of maintaining a firm hold over the process of divorce litigation while at the same time imposing a three-year jail sentence for those who 'forced or incited' Muslim women to seek a divorce. In this edict the executive referred not only to family members but especially to what it called 'outsiders'; the accusing finger here was clearly pointed at a single culprit – the *Zhenotdel* (Massell 1974: 297–8; Keller 1998: 25).

It was the work of the *Zhenotdel* as the vanguard of *Khudjum* in the late 1920s which was most revealing with respect to the political nature of the organization. The modus operandi of this campaign bore no resemblance to any of the activities that it had engaged in before. Cultural sensitivity and attempts at adaptation of political conscientization were thrown aside in a full-frontal assault against the veiling of indigenous women. *Zhenotdel* activists were responsible for the unveiling of thousands of Central Asian women both voluntarily and forcibly. *Khudjum* women, the unveiled, faced the wrath of indigenous communities right across the region as many thousands were assassinated and others left to face the ignominy of moral and social death. Under these tragic circumstances unprecedented numbers of indigenous women sought the protection and support of the *Zhenotdel* and the Communist

Party, as young women who had left their families and communities to seek an education or work had done before them; eventually demand outstripped the capacity of either to meet it (Keller 1998; Massell 1974; Buckley 1989; Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996).

In view of the backlash that followed *Khudjum*, thousands of women retook the veil within days or weeks of unveiling. The campaign, far from increasing the numbers of women making a political commitment to joining the party, prompted them to begin to leave en masse in protest. Moreover there were party members who simply refused to unveil, *Khudjum* women who refused to join the party, and those who felt coerced into becoming party members who refused to undertake any political work. It was clear that while women may have wanted to be part of the new opportunities and social changes that sovietization entailed, this would be on their own terms. For many indigenous women party membership was an act of cultural abandonment whereby 'outsiders' became insiders (Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996: 62). Consequently, as Ergasheva argues, full Soviet citizenship was granted on Soviet rather than Central Asian terms premised on the adoption of Soviet lifestyles and communist ideology, and as such this constituted a form of 'false liberation' whereby for the majority of women any option for self-inclusion could mean exclusion from membership of their families and communities (1997: 6).

While *Zhenotdel* activists may have been less successful than anticipated in their recruitment of female political activists and party members, those early indigenous pioneers who courageously crossed the cultural threshold of no return served as role models for the new generation of women who would be socialized within the Soviet system. Within the party these women were confronted by similar attitudes and treatment from indigenous males to those meted out by those outside the party structure to unveiled women. Even Muslim women who had risen to the highest echelons of the party in the region noted the 'conservatism' that prevailed even among the most politicized and intelligent members of the Communist Party. As the numbers of women in responsible positions in the party grew, albeit slowly, at local and regional levels 'native [*sic*] male functionaries were found to be willing and able to sabotage the means of tangible female participation in the promised new world' (Massell 1974: 302). It was these women who ran the gauntlet of harassment and discrimination within the party and social ostracism and even physical violence outside it. The words of Anna Nukhrat, one of the leading Soviet activists in Central Asia, at the beginning of the campaign for female emancipation, even if ethnocentric, were

prophetic in summing up the consequences of party membership for Muslim women:

> [it meant] … to throw down the gauntlet to all and everything: to terrible Allah himself; to his servants – the sharp clawed, grasping greedy mullahs and ishans; to the family elders; to all kinsmen; to the entire surrounding primordial style of life … The Eastern woman who enters the party breaks with the past forever; once she has thus crossed the threshold of a new life, there can be, for her, no way back (cited in ibid.: 145)

Thus, entering the Communist Party was the least attractive option for Muslim women in the 'brave new world', not least because they were in effect aligning themselves with the 'outsiders' as 'agents of Soviet power' (Buckley 1989: 62; Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996: 62). This distinction was to remain throughout the Soviet period and re-emerge as a political issue in the post-independence period.

Moving forward, looking back

By the beginning of the 1930s the sovietization of Central Asia, which centred on a campaign for the liberation of Muslim women, entered into a period of 'roll back' owing to the unprecedented social backlash against the Soviet regime and the persecution and assassination of *Khudjum* women.[32] Even the introduction of further articles in the criminal code to deem 'counter-revolutionary' activities, such as opposing the *Khudjum*, hindering the education of women or their participation in public life,[33] a criminal offence failed to curtail the open subversion of, and resistance to, the process of sovietization. While the indigenous population may have begun to pay lip service to the regime in actions and words there was no legislation that could dictate what went on in their hearts and minds (Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996: 64). For at this time traditional solidarities and cultural identity presided over the inner spiritual sanctum of individuals, and this was reflected in the shadowed private face of community action.

By the late 1920s leading Soviet activists in the region began to argue that the cultural shock of transition politics was having a negative effect on any further progress in the sovietization of the region. Moreover, in the bloody aftermath of *Khudjum* the party turned to a less aggressive and systematic programme of work with the Central Asian population, which offered considerable concessions to the traditional and cultural mores of the region. The courts were instructed to exercise greater restraint and discretion with respect to crimes based on custom, and

the party withdrew all official support for the sponsorship of divorce and unveiling.[34] These concessions expressly underlined the failure of the state to implement sociocultural change through legislation or party edict. The domination of the Soviet legal system by indigenous judges had permitted the subversion of Soviet legislation for female emancipation all over Central Asia, whereby the numbers of individuals prosecuted in comparison to the widespread legal infractions was minuscule (Keller 1998: 30–2). *Khudjum*, the apotheosis of the emancipation campaign, also failed to deliver – grossly exaggerated official claims of success in unveiling tens of thousands of Muslim women radically diminished as equally significant numbers of women retook the veil within days if not weeks of the prestigious *Khudjum* ceremonies. From this point onward, traditional practices were occulted rather than abandoned, only to publicly re-emerge in the post-Soviet period. The veil, the most visible sign of resistance to the imposition of Soviet cultural mores, remained in use in the more traditional areas of the region. It was only after the Second World War, when state-sponsored attacks against Islam increased once more and veil-burning ceremonies were reincarnated, that the 'last' veil was burned, in 1959 (Rashid 1994: 34).

It was the women's social clubs and organizations created by the *Zhenotdel* for the politicization of women which had the most enduring impact on women's lives in Central Asia. While they may have failed, in many ways, to radically increase the numbers of women party members, they were extremely successful in building the bridge that would take women out of their homes into the schools, universities, factories and professions. The nexus between the *Zhenotdel*'s gender-specific auxiliary organizations and labour and professional recruitment became apparent in later years as the concentration of female labour and specialisms directly replicated the patterns established in the 1920s.[35] Thus, indigenous women predominated in 'cotton growing, in rug, silk, textile and food production, and in health education and welfare orientated professions' (Massell 1974: 380). Nevertheless, they were still able to challenge the status quo through the selective formation and training of female professionals in areas hitherto closed to women. Consequently, in the 1930s the first generation of female prosecutors, high-level administrators and people's assessors emerged (Akiner 1997: 269).

Despite the success of the *Zhenotdel* right across the Soviet Union it was abolished in 1930 and replaced with women's sections (*Zhensektors*). This effectively demoted specialist women's organizations to the status of ancillary organizations, with many of their activities passed on to specific commissariats, such as those of health, education and social

security. In Central Asia the *Zhenotdel* had operated very differently, and despite its failings it remained the only party organization that, owing to the heterogeneity of its operations, had established a network that extended to the towns and villages all over the region. While some of its activities were devolved to central departments, its auxiliary gender-specific operations remained essentially untouched. In effect, owing to the culturally specific circumstances under which sovietization was taking place and the importance of women to the NEP objectives in the region, the *Zhenotdel/Zhensektor* was the only organization that could undertake 'special work' among women. As Massell argues, 'Indeed the party could not afford to be choosy: in many cases, these structures were literally the *sole foci* of political contact and influence that the party had in the Central Asian hinterland' (1974: 378). Nevertheless, the effective downgrading of gender-specific organizations in Central Asia slowed down even further the official 'quest' for the liberation of Muslim women.

The so-called modernization and secularization of Central Asia was achieved only in the shadow of an ever present traditional past: a coexisting tangible ideological flame which refused to be extinguished. It was Muslim women who were identified as the fulcrum of sociocultural change as the new workers and political pioneers in an unmistakable Soviet future. For this 'honour' thousands of women paid with their lives at the hands of members of their family and community whom they had the effrontery to 'dishonour'. A significant number of women crossed the cultural line into the communist 'fold' and were socialized, educated and trained away from the traditional influences that they had willingly or unwillingly abandoned. From this point onward, they became 'outsiders' separated from the rest of the indigenous population ideologically, materially and culturally, or at least that is how they were perceived. For the majority of women who lived outside the main urban centres, the process of change was much more protracted, and their full participation in a secular Soviet system was less predicated on the abandonment of their cultural and spiritual roots. Under these circumstances, greater gender equality was not in evidence until the 1960s, when a new generation of young women and men who were raised in the Soviet system took full advantage of the opportunities it offered. The debate over the costs and benefits of the Soviet revolution for the emancipation of Central Asian women was deferred until after independence, some sixty years later, when the question of nationalism and cultural identity re-emerged and 'outsiders' became 'insiders' once again.

Notes

1 Tashkent is now the capital of Uzbekistan.

2 See also Massell (1974), Becker (1994), Rakowska-Harmstone (1994) and Eickelman (1998).

3 Central Asian folklore claims that there were women warriors engaged in the Basmachi revolt. There is, as yet, no concrete empirical evidence available to support this.

4 The *parandja* was a heavy cloak used with a long veil, usually made of net and worn over it.

5 See Chapter 5.

6 Even when men entered marriage with non-Muslims, their partners were expected to adhere to Muslim customs and traditions.

7 See Chapter 3.

8 The higher social status of Russian nationals in the colonial period was sustained throughout the post-revolutionary period and was probably one of the most contentious national questions in Central Asia after independence.

9 While Turkestan was declared an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1918 the end of civil war in the region led to its division, with Uzbekistan achieving 'statehood' in 1924 and Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan in 1936. The division of Central Asia along ethno-linguistic lines was to inhibit any unified resistance to Soviet domination in the region. An excellent overview of the process can be found in Akiner (1983), Massell (1974) and Hiro (1995).

10 The extent of the influence of either was linked to the economic pursuits and geographical location of the community. *Shariat* law and adherence to Islamic practices were far more influential in the cities and urban settlements while *adat* law predominated elsewhere. The former was administered through proper courts by the mullahs while the latter was under the control of community elders, although the implementation of religious and customary law among sedentary and nomadic communities was, in practice, extremely complex. See Massell (1974), Akiner (1997) and Tolmacheva (1993).

11 The abolition of private property, which affected traditional land and water rights as well as the introduction of property rights for women, in theory at least, offered women greater economic freedom.

12 The age of marriage for boys was higher, thirteen, and under the new laws this difference remained, with the marriageable age for girls, in most cases, being sixteen and for boys eighteen.

13 Keller (1998) asserts that the Uzbek criminal code did not include polygamy as a crime but documents from the period, for example Yakopov (1998), demonstrate that from 1926 onward convictions were upheld in all the categories associated with 'traditional' crimes, including polygamy. Concomitant with this, Tokhtakhodjaeva states that polygamy was defined as a criminal act in 1924 by the Turkestan Central Executive Committee (1996: 51).

14 These medical examinations were based on fairly strict criteria laid down by the Soviet authorities (see Keller 1998).

15 Under customary law a woman who left the marital home had no right to either any possessions or her children, who remained under male tutelage.

16 Tokhtakhodjaeva argues that although under *shariat* law the *kalym* was never considered a bride price or purchase, in practice many families treated it as if they were actually buying the services of a woman (see Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996: 32–3).

17 The use of the *taliq* by men was common in some communities where the incantation declaring the dissolution of a marriage was sufficient to legalize a divorce. A woman wanting to initiate divorce, however, had no automatic right to do so, and thus indisputable reasons such as impotence would have to be put before the Sharia courts.

18 This is a position similar to that of a local magistrate.

19 Here I use the term 'Offensive'; other translated terms for *Khudjum* are 'assault' or 'attack'.

20 The *madrasahs* were religious schools that not only educated men and women in the four books but also trained the next generation of Muslim clerics.

21 The Ferghana Valley is still one of the most traditional and influential Muslim regions in Central Asia.

22 Massell notes that the first unveiling celebrations were more than likely stage managed by the *Zhenotdel* (1974: 244). See also Kamp (2002).

23 Most writers argue that these figures come from the official records of the Communist Party and that the actual numbers were much lower owing to the fact that local cadres were under enormous pressure to demonstrate that *Khudjum* was successful in the region.

24 Up to 1928 the majority of murders involved women, but by late 1928 some 45 per cent of those murdered in connection with *Khudjum* were men (Massell 1974: 282).

25 In Kyrgyzstan, women had always been able to pray alongside men, which set it apart from most Muslim societies.

26 The *Zhenotdel* directorate in Moscow was answerable to the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and its directors in the early years of its existence were such notable Bolshevik activists as Inessa Armand and Alexandra Kollontai.

27 A comprehensive education system was in place for the sedentary population which included *maktabs* (grammar schools) and *madrasahs* (religious schools) before early Russian colonization, although these were attended principally by members of the middle and upper classes. It was a system that was considered sufficiently sophisticated that the Russian colonizers decided not to institute any changes to it after conquest.

28 The first red tent was established in 1926 in Kazakhstan, and by 1930 over 150 had been established all over Central Asia. The staffing of the red tents depended on the size of the population they were to attend and the nature and range of services required in the areas to be visited. Minimum staffing consisted of a director and a medical worker, while the maximum included in addition a 'teacher, lawyer and agronomist' (Buckley 1989: 89).

29 Buckley (1989: 92) notes that in one region a female activist set up a literacy class for men first and then used men as intermediaries to encourage their wives and female relatives to attend.

30 These were skills that were passed down from mother to daughter and were an important part of the family economy in both rural and urban areas.

31 This system was specific to Central Asia because any work with Muslim women required some acquiescence to the cultural specificity of gender relations in the region.

32 Muslim men who were party members and had supported the *Khudjum* were also killed, albeit in far fewer numbers. See Keller (1998) and Massell (1974).

33 In 1929 these and other offences were deemed to be crimes against the state and subject to a penalty of between three and five years' solitary confinement. Moreover, the murder or attempted murder of female activists was punishable by death by firing squad. There were also checks on Muslim communist party members in terms of their 'ideological commitment' with respect to the implementation of *Khudjum* (Massell 1974: 315–17).

34 High-ranking party members, professionals and administrators were, however, expected to set an example with respect to the 'liberation' of female family members.

35 See Chapter 3.

3 | The private and public face of economic emancipation: gender, work and education

Past and future are coterminous in a period of transition, and hindsight does not necessarily exert a positive influence on the process of socio-economic change. The specificity of women's experience in the Central Asian region until its abrupt and unexpected dislocation from the Soviet Union in 1991 had in the past become submerged in the homogeneity of the Soviet system projected to the outside world. In the post-independence period analyses of the status of women in the region, while few in number, offer a retrospective view of the Soviet experience which is, on occasion, overshadowed by a restated national identity and the prospect of self-determination.[1] It is, however, precisely at this historical conjuncture that open and informed critique of the Soviet system and its claims about the liberation of Soviet women has been possible, especially with respect to the Central Asian experience. Ironically it takes place at a time when observers agree that we witness a decline in the status of women in the region in a less than seamless transition to a market economy and the implementation of political reform.[2]

Clearly, in the light of this many pertinent questions are raised, especially with respect to the nature and extent of female emancipation in the Soviet period. Was women's liberation Soviet-style constructed on such shaky foundations that it could collapse with positive ease in the post-independence period? Moreover, how far did the main rubrics of women's liberation, especially the principles of universal education and employment, offer women equal opportunities to participate not only in the Soviet economy but especially in the changing political economy of the post-independence period?

The Soviet commitment to gender equality rested almost entirely on the question of establishing female economic independence. It was believed that by removing women's economic dependence on men gender equality could be achieved by offering women greater opportunities for personal choice in both their public and private lives. While such a commitment may have been genuine, in retrospect it may be argued that it was essentially naive. It was clear even before the break-up of the Soviet Union that, while it was able to demonstrate greater gender equality in many areas of economic and political life than elsewhere in

the world, full gender equality had not been achieved. Women's full participation in the labour force did not provide the instant fix that was envisioned in socialist ideology. This was nowhere more apparent than in Central Asia, where social and cultural mores continued to shape gender relations in the region. As elsewhere in the Soviet Union, the socialist mirror had two faces, the public and the private, and the latter superimposed itself on the former. While sovietization may have changed what people did in society it could not change the way they thought, and this was nowhere more evident than in the post-independence period, when the backlash against the principle of gender equality revealed a long-held latent ideological resistance to it.

Yet even the most vociferous critics of the sovietization of Central Asia argue that it is in the area of education and the participation of women in the labour force that some of the most important advances in the status of women have been made (Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996). Under socialism the principle of universal education and employment had its greatest impact on women, thrusting them into social production and giving them a public presence in all areas of Central Asian society. This was not, however, a simple process in which 'housewives' were transformed into educated workers. Even before Russian colonization, women had played a pivotal role in the economic life of the region, engaged in paid and unpaid productive work which was undertaken in or near the home in the urban areas and alongside family members in the nomadic ethnic communities (Tolmacheva 1993: 636).[3] Moreover, from the eighteenth century a fairly comprehensive system of religious and cultural education had been established in urban areas, within which all young women from the upper and middle classes were educated.[4] This system was considered by the early Russian colonial administration to be sufficiently adequate that it remained unchanged and unchallenged until after the revolution (Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996: 26; Ergasheva 1997: 3). In the post-revolutionary period the process of industrialization and the sovietization of the education system reinforced the cultural attack on existing gender relations in Central Asian society in their modification of the gender division of labour and their fracturing of the notion of male and female space in the public sphere.[5]

From the outset, the development of the Central Asian economy through industrialization and the collectivization of agriculture went hand in hand with the institution of a comprehensive system of education. The latter was structured to serve the needs of the former. Within this process the incorporation of women into the labour force was absolutely fundamental to the economic development of Central

Asia. This was not simply a result of a Soviet expectation that all adult citizens should work but was as much a product of the restructuring of the regional economy to serve the interests of the Soviet Union as a whole. The predominance of agriculture and light industry in the region today is a direct result of the economic strategies implemented from 1928 onward. The centralization of the economy led to the elimination of private production as the early *artels*, which had given women the opportunity to work in or near the home, were incorporated into state enterprises, and this occurred in both rural and urban areas (Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996: 116–17; Akiner 1997: 274–5).[6] Moreover, the forced collectivization of agriculture induced the most radical changes, whereby in the lowlands of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan nomads became sedentary farmers and in Uzbekistan independent farms were appropriated as land was given over to cotton production (Rashid 1994: 52). Consequently the importance of cotton growing, silk production, textiles, clothing and food industries led the drive in the recruitment of female labour and the feminization of these sectors of the economy, replicating rather than changing an existing gender division of labour (Massell 1974: 166). It was only later, with the introduction of heavy industry and the expansion of white-collar employment, that women gained a significant presence in other areas of the economy.

In the 1920s the introduction of a broad-based system of universal education, rather than one that focused on the education of the upper and middle classes, gave both males and females the opportunity to become widely educated. The importance of education in the sovietization and economic restructuring of Central Asia was fundamentally underscored by the construction of a comprehensive system of educational establishments, from primary, secondary, technical and specialist schools to the foundation of several tertiary institutions, a state university and an academy of sciences in each of the republics (Rakowska-Harmstone 1994: 8). The implementation of the Soviet system of education, replacing that of religious education through the *madrasahs* and *maktabs*,[7] was not achieved without some resistance in Central Asia, although this was more apparent in Uzbekistan than in the other two republics. The main reason for this was twofold. First, education for Muslims was based on religious instruction and the secular Soviet system was believed by parents to be anti-education. Second, in general Muslim families were opposed to the principle of co-education. Thus, initially many families, especially in rural areas, refused to send their children to Soviet schools (Keller 1998: 35). In order to resolve the impasse the Soviet authorities acquiesced and maintained a system of separate

education for girls during their first seven years of schooling. It was only after 1930, when primary education was made compulsory for both boys and girls, that the principle of co-education was universally applied (Wheeler 1964: 200).

Education was the pathway for all Soviet citizens into specific sectors of the labour force. It was here that the principles of equality, albeit with respect to labour force participation and economic status, were reinforced. In this way the system of education was geared far more to encouraging the extensive participation of Central Asian women in the public sphere than to challenging the culturally specific inequalities that persisted in the private sphere.[8] Yet as Akiner notes, the education of women was significant in other ways:

> Central Asian girls were encouraged not only to study, but also to take part in physical training and team sports; in performing arts such as ballet, acting (on stage and in films) and singing; and in occupations requiring technical skills such as tractor driving. Perhaps nothing so vividly illustrates the changes taking place at this time as the appearance, in the 1930s, of the first female parachutists in a society in which only ten years previously women had been heavily veiled. (1997: 272)[9]

By the end of the 1930s the impact of women's education was already evident as the first generation of female lawyers, doctors, scientists and professors graduated from tertiary institutions. It was not until the Second World War, however, that women began to enter other 'male' fields of employment, especially heavy industry and construction, when the shortage of male workers necessitated the training of women in skilled trades and technical positions. Nevertheless, by the 1970s female employment across gender boundaries had been achieved to levels that were evident in the post-independence period. While the numbers of women working in traditionally male spheres fell short of those in the rest of the Soviet Union they were, and remain, unprecedented compared to other Islamic countries.

While the gender division of labour in the workplace allowed for the full incorporation of women into all areas of economic and intellectual activity, the Soviet state at no time challenged the prevailing gender division of labour in the private sphere. On the contrary, the 1936 constitution not only made a commitment to universal employment but also to legally reinforcing parental responsibility for the care and socialization of children.[10] In effect this left women's role in the family virtually untouched as their social responsibilities became legal ones, with the result that women officially carried what has been termed a

'double burden'. In recognition of this the Soviet state created special legislation for women workers, which attempted to ameliorate the disadvantages entailed. This legislation not only underlined the principle of equal pay for equal work and equal access to education and training, but also offered women employment protection and paid maternity leave. Moreover, laws that dealt with pregnancy and women's reproductive health led to a 'blanket' prohibition on women working in certain areas, such as dangerous occupations, underground or with chemicals, in continuous heavy lifting and night work (McAuley 1981: 166).

Protective legislation essentially represented a double-edged sword which served to both advantage and disadvantage women at one and the same time. Occupations from which women were banned were precisely those that offered higher pay and bonuses to their workers. Legislation was ignored in situations where the need for labour outstripped supply and there were women who actively sought to enter jobs that offered higher rates of pay. Conversely, protective legislation and its recognition of women's reproductive role led to the exclusion of women from many forms of training and therefore disqualified them from entering certain sectors of the labour force. It also reaffirmed preconceptions about the 'unreliability' of female labour which have plagued the advance of equal opportunities in the West.

A further commitment to state support of female workers was in the area of childcare provision, both in and near the place of work. The number of places available, while considerable, rarely met the level of demand and were far higher in urban than in rural areas. The provision of state childcare facilities was highly subsidized – the cost to families was based on income and did not exceed 5 per cent of the total cost. Nevertheless, in Central Asia, unlike in the rest of the Soviet Union, family size did not radically decrease with the full incorporation of women into the labour force. On the contrary, large families remained the norm up to and immediately following independence.[11] Consequently, the maintenance of extended family units was crucial to sustaining family income levels as Central Asian women confronted the duplicity of economic emancipation on the one hand and their traditional responsibility for the social and cultural welfare of the family on the other.

It was in the post-independence period that the anomalies that beset the Soviet system came home to roost. The radical changes in the political economy of Central Asia enhanced the system's weaknesses and undermined its strengths. It was Central Asian women, now with a prominent public profile as highly educated workers with a clear social position and status, who were to bear the brunt of the changes.

Educating women: a flawed opportunity

A commitment to a universal education system and high literacy rates was imbued in the constitution of the USSR and education was accessible to all citizens irrespective of gender. The policy of universal free education remained firmly in place in the post-independence period in all three republics with children attending primary school at seven and leaving secondary education at seventeen or eighteen years of age. What is unique about this system is the fact that, in principle at least, the length of compulsory education is equivalent to the time needed to graduate and qualify to sit the entrance examination for university or specialist tertiary education.[12] The idea was that the younger generation should receive a high level of education whether they intended to proceed from secondary education to employment or tertiary education. Claims of almost universal literacy on the part of the Soviet Union, at independence, could be confirmed in Central Asia, where 95–97 per cent of the population are literate. A continuous system of compulsory education that included primary school, general secondary school, special and professional colleges and higher education was probably the most important legacy of the Soviet period.

Soviet education was geared to the ideological and economic prerequisites of a socialist system. The aims of the compulsory period of education were to offer a broad education in the arts and sciences while at the same time invoking the principles of socialist ideology and practice. A commitment to full employment and gender equality in the public sphere was clearly reflected within the education system, with young women and men proceeding in equivalent numbers to higher education. Influences on the educational choices of all students came not from gender difference but geographical location, the needs of the regional economy and the range of employment opportunities available. Thus, there were different trends in the choice of continuing education – that is, specialist technical and vocational education versus university-based education – between rural and urban areas. Nevertheless, some interesting anomalies existed between the ideological emphasis on equality in the public sphere and the question of gender difference and inequality in the private lives of Central Asian women. Moreover, this was clearly apparent in the teaching materials used within the education system:

> As young girls we never felt any different from the boys in our class. Like other girls I had clear ideas of what I wanted to do and the boys would joke about how ambitious we were. Many of the books we used in social studies showed women performing all the household duties while men

> sat in the chair reading the newspaper. Very traditional images. This for many of us reflected how things were with our own families. While our mothers had important jobs and positions in their work and the community, at home they were expected to assume their duties as wives and mothers. We were never taught any different either at school or in our communities but at the same time it did not mean to say we were less ambitious or that we didn't want different lives from our parents. (Kazakh journalist)

In view of the fact that under sovietization the role of women in the family had been strengthened rather than weakened there was little incentive to challenge the structure of gender relations in the private sphere, and this was clearly reflected in aspects of Soviet education that were concerned with producing good Soviet citizens. The post-independence period saw no reversal of this trend; on the contrary, there has been a far greater emphasis placed on support for women as mothers rather than as workers.[13]

Throughout the Soviet period a strong state-financed education system was a priority and a high level of resources was dedicated to this sector. Significant support was given to families in the education of their children throughout the period of compulsory schooling in the form of free school meals, books, summer schools and special training and classes for those with 'special talents' in the arts. Moreover, subsidies were offered to low-income families with respect to uniform and transport where necessary. The level of funding dedicated to maintaining this system was never in question – it was the results, a highly educated labour force, which mattered most. Thus, small classes were the norm rather than the exception, and there were schools in every village. Clearly, in a market economy where the rationalization and, in some areas, privatization of certain services were to become the norm, many aspects of educational provision were under threat. Consequently, in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, while education was still given a high priority after independence, economic pressures severely reduced the ability of the state to maintain the same level of financial support.

It was in the area of pre-school education that privatization and the question of funding impacted most severely. In the Soviet period, the provision of crèches and kindergartens was an important part of the commitment to supporting working mothers and offering some educational preparation for children entering compulsory full-time education. Nevertheless, nowhere in the Soviet Union was pre-school education available for all children who needed it, and in Central Asia pre-school facilities

were unable to cater for more than half the number of eligible children. Pre-school provision was greater in urban than in rural areas, where the opportunity for women to combine childcare and work or depend on family support was greater. The standard of pre-school education varied from adequate to excellent, but all establishments offered guided play and learning activities, cultural instruction and some instruction in the arts.[14] Moreover, a full meals programme and primary health facilities, which supported the state immunization programmes, were an integral part of the service. Overall, Central Asian women had considerable praise for the Soviet pre-school education system, and foreign observers in the transition period have been equally generous in their assessment of the system. As one female Kyrgyz economist noted:

> When my children were young I had every support from the state. I would drop the youngest off at kindergarten, he would have breakfast there and all of his meals for the day and when I picked him up at 6.30 he had already been fed and bathed ready to go home with me. This meant that I could spend a little more time with him before bedtime playing and talking about his day. All of my children have had this opportunity and I believe they have been cared for as well, if not better, than I could have cared for them by staying at home. I think it also gave all of my children a really good preparation for starting school.

Nevertheless, pre-school education was not considered an integral part of the education system and therefore was not governed by the linear state-assessed curriculum evident in primary and secondary education. Preparation for full-time compulsory education, however, was always considered to be part of its purpose, and for those children able to attend this expectation was generally fulfilled (Kasymova 1999a: 70; Bauer et al. 1997a: 41 and 1997b: 54).

In 1993 the implementation of austerity measures in each of the three republics removed any expectations that state-funded pre-school education might be extended to meet demand. Government support for the privatization of certain sectors of the economy led to the introduction of private pre-school establishments that offered a high standard of education and care to those families who could afford a fee-paying service. Initially this expanded the range of facilities and choice, but it was almost exclusively available in the principal urban centres. Moreover, in a period when state funding for pre-school education was beginning to fall, and the salaries of kindergarten teachers were under threat, the private sector was able to 'poach' some of the best professionals from this sector by offering better salaries and conditions.

This impacted on pre-school education in two ways. First, it created a bipartite system of pre-school facilities in which the ability to pay was the principal criterion influencing the standard of education and care available in these establishments. Second, it accelerated the defunding of state pre-school education overall, and a significant proportion of state facilities were closed down. For working mothers this represented a withdrawal of state support and placed even greater stress on them and their families:

> The situation for me now, and many other mothers, is really difficult. The local kindergarten has closed and now I have to travel farther to get my daughter to care before I come to work. The best teachers have been poached by the private kindergartens who can offer them good salaries and every facility. Most of us just can't afford the fees. The state kindergartens are now little more than a childminding service and the standards have dropped. When I come to work now I worry about my child all day, especially since I found out that she had been smacked last week. That would never have happened under the old system … I am seriously thinking about changing my job or giving up work because I no longer have any confidence in the system. (Uzbek university lecturer)[15]

By 1995 the contraction of the state pre-school sector was virtually complete and led to a radical decline in the number of children attending pre-school institutions, whereby, across all three republics, the number of eligible children attending pre-school dropped from an average of 50 per cent to a maximum of 30 per cent (Kasymova 1999a: 70; Bauer et al. 1997a: 41 and 1997b: 53). This had the greatest impact on women in urban areas, who relied more heavily on pre-school provision than women in rural areas, where pre-school provision was lower and family and community support for child care was greater. In Kyrgyzstan there were indications that this was affecting not only the overall numbers of children attending pre-school but most especially the number of girls entering these facilities – on the grounds of cost benefits, parents were prioritizing the pre-school education of boys (Bauer et al. 1997a: 41). There is no reason to presume that similar trends might not be evident in both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. This is probably the most serious outcome of the reduction in the quality and accessibility of pre-school education in Central Asia. Clearly many working women, given the increasing social and financial burden of childcare, were faced with making changes in their career choices and in some cases withdrawing from the labour force for longer periods to care for their young families. The long-term consequences of this are bound to filter down through

the education system, creating further disadvantages for women in the future.

The period of compulsory education from primary to secondary level offered complete preparation for both work and further education in the Soviet system. In the Central Asian republics equal numbers of boys and girls attended school up to the age of fifteen, or ninth grade, which was classified as incomplete secondary education. It is here that the educational pathways and choices for each gender were notably different. This was most especially the case with respect to entry into specialist secondary and vocational training institutions, in which the number of places was often determined by the number of jobs available. In certain areas priority was given to boys owing to protective legislation that restricted female access to the occupations considered to involve heavy or dangerous work, or skilled occupations in pivotal areas of the economy in which the career breaks required by women given their family commitments were considered to be disadvantageous (McAuley 1981: 152). Thus, at this point in the education process the numbers of young women remaining in formal education were higher than those of young men, while on average they constituted little more than 30 per cent of the total student population in specialist technical education (Kasymova 1999a: 71; Bauer et al. 1997a: 42 and 1997b: 54).[16] On graduating from these institutions both girls and boys compete for entry into higher education or professional institutions. Clearly the pathways taken in the latter years of secondary education will set the parameters of specialist subject choices from this point onward. In the transition period, while the curriculum and specialist education establishments are undergoing revision owing to the changing requirements of a market economy, there has been little identifiable change in educational outcomes.[17]

During the years of compulsory education both families and the state gave a high priority to the education of both boys and girls. Non-attendance was not an option. The only evidence of non-attendance can be found in rural areas, where it is not uncommon for both boys and girls to be released from classes during the weeks of harvesting to assist field workers. Given the importance of agriculture to the Central Asian economy, most especially in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, this was unavoidable, and children would be expected to make up for the loss of schooling in this period at other times in the school year. The question of attendance in the transition period related far more to the length of time that students remained within the system, in which choices beyond the ninth grade were also influenced by social and economic factors.

In all the republics austerity measures and the shift to a market

economy were creating considerable problems in general education. The proportion of state resources allocated to education in the transition period remained relatively high, but there was insufficient funding available to maintain the extensive financing of the education system as it stood. Moreover, subsidies that had been given to a large proportion of families for uniforms and meals were increasingly allocated to the most needy. This left a not insignificant proportion of the Central Asian population, in a period of shrinking incomes, trying to find the money to finance items that had previously been provided by the government.[18] A further problem was the availability of textbooks and other teaching resources in all areas of education. Under the previous system teaching materials had been supplied by Moscow at minimal cost, but in the post-independence period the governments of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were required to pay for them in hard currency, which was in short supply. This placed even greater pressure on parents to compensate for the shortfall (Weber and Watson 2000: 237, 495).

Thus, in the transition period compulsory education in Central Asia has placed considerable economic pressure on families at a time when there is a need to increase or at least maintain family income levels. Job prospects, therefore, began to exert greater influence over educational choices, and by 1995 it was apparent that boys were leaving education earlier than girls to enter the labour force. This trend was far more evident in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and in rural rather than urban areas, where boys would leave school to work on family or collective farms (Bauer et al. 1997a: 42 and 1997b: 55). On the contrary, in Uzbekistan it was girls who were choosing not to proceed to vocational or higher education in greater numbers, and this was due to both social and economic factors. The strong Islamic influences in this republic maintained the tradition of early marriage, most especially in rural areas where economic pressures exacerbate the situation (Kasymova 1999a: 71–2; Weber and Watson 2000: 495). The repercussions of these trends in the long term are greater for women than men. In both the rural and urban labour force the opportunities for young men to receive specialist training or employer sponsorship to attend specialist or tertiary education are high, thus leaving education earlier has less impact on their careers. For young women, however, the picture is quite different – marriage and children inevitably impact on both the opportunity and ability to return to education at a later date. In the case of Uzbekistan, this can only impact negatively on the economic status of women in the future.

A further factor which was most influential on the educational and career choices of both women and men was the question of language.

From the inception of compulsory education in the Soviet period there was a strong commitment to the teaching of Russian as a second language in all schools, and this represented an additional educational burden to the Central Asian population. No such exigency to learn Uzbek, Kazakh or Kyrgyz was present in the Russian schools providing education for the Russian population located in the main urban centres across Central Asia. In the public sector Russian was the lingua franca in Central Asia, and this advantaged Russians in all areas of the economy and in politics. For Central Asians, it was the passport to upward social mobility, necessary for entrance to tertiary education and essential in many of the professions, including law and medicine. The standard of language teaching in primary and secondary schools was at best uneven and at worst non-existent. In rural areas both boys and girls were less advantaged than their peers in urban areas owing to the lower standard of language teachers and the patchy availability of Russian textbooks. In many cases in these areas children left school without being able to speak the language (Rakowska-Harmstone 1994: 9–10). Only in Kazakhstan did children maintain a competitive edge with respect to language, because the overwhelming majority of children attended Russian schools owing to their minority status. Since 1995, however, the prioritization of the indigenous language in all three republics has led to a shift in emphasis in the educational system, and the eventual phasing out of the use of Russian in both the public and private sectors could enhance opportunities for both genders in the future.

In the Soviet period the role of higher education was to train students for professional and technical employment. Access to higher education was competitive and the selection process, in principle at least, was designed to identify the most academically able students. Thus, students wishing to proceed to tertiary education did not gain automatic entry on the basis of their grades on graduation; on the contrary, a secondary school certificate merely entitled them to sit the entrance examination for university and specialist tertiary institutes.[19] There was no formal gender discrimination in access to higher education, evidenced by the high representation of women in the student population and latterly in professional and technical employment. Nevertheless, gender difference was notable in the chosen areas of study and in the numbers of young men and women proceeding to postgraduate study. In the post-independence period changing social and economic factors had both positive and negative consequences for both genders wishing to enter higher education.

As in other areas of education, funding for higher education was

severely cut back after independence, and this impacted negatively on the question of equal access. Scholarships and allowances, which had enabled even the most socially disadvantaged who qualified for entry to pursue a tertiary education, were the principal form of funding affected. This intensified the competition for entry to tertiary education to a point where parents who could afford it were hiring private tutors to ensure that their children passed the entrance examination.[20] Those most disadvantaged in the process were orphans and those living in rural areas who depended on state allowances and boarding facilities in taking up an offer of a tertiary entry. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, tuition and boarding costs were considered to be prohibitive (Bauer et al. 1997a: 43). This has led to a systematic decline in student numbers at a time when the number of tertiary institutes increased, particularly in the private sector. In both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan this has resulted in a net decrease in the student population of approximately 40 per cent and 30 per cent respectively, while in Kyrgyzstan the number of students remained constant despite an increase in the number of places available. Furthermore, a decline in the number of specialist tertiary institutions in Central Asia has led to a commensurate drop in the student population, and these students are not transferring to the university sector (ibid. and Bauer et al. 1997b: 55; Kasymova 1999a: 73).

Nevertheless, the transition to a market economy, economic rationalist policies and the downsizing and privatization of state enterprises and institutions have, in at least two of the republics, produced an upturn in the number of female students entering higher education. In both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan the percentage of female students entering tertiary education increased to over half of the total number of students in continuing education, and by 1995 in Kyrgyzstan that figure had reached 60 per cent (Bauer et al. 1997a: 43 and 1997b: 51–2). These changes are occurring precisely at a time when family incomes are declining and supporting children in higher education has become a much greater burden than under the previous system. In a period of changing labour market needs, this trend has been accelerated by the decline in employment opportunities for women overall and the need to increase their education and skills in order for them to compete with men for professional and technical employment, especially in areas of changing expertise such as economics, business and law. Despite similar economic conditions prevailing in Uzbekistan, the numbers of women entering tertiary education have declined. It is here that social factors have played a more influential role owing to increasing traditional and religious pressures on gender relations since independence. The legal

age of marriage, for example, directly coincides with that of tertiary entry, while the economic constraints of the transition period have led to the prioritization of the education of sons over daughters (Kasymova 1999a: 73). This is most noticeable among rural families, where professional opportunities are fewer for highly educated women than in urban areas. In these circumstances, the cost benefits of education and the rationalization of family resources weigh heavily in decision-making with respect to the education of children along gender lines.[21]

While there is clearly no formal gender discrimination in qualifying for entry into university or specialist vocational institutes there is a clear gender bias in terms of the courses taken by students. In all three republics trends are similar. Women tend to predominate in the arts and humanities, medicine and education, where they constitute between 60 and 75 per cent of the student population. In direct contradistinction men predominate in economics, law, science and technology, where women constitute between 30 and 40 per cent of the total student numbers (Bauer et al. 1997a: 43 and 1997b: 43; Tokhtakhodjaeva 1998: 11). Despite ongoing changes to the content and scope of particular university courses, the gender distribution of students remains similar across the specific disciplines. Moreover, this reflects the gender division of labour across the labour market and is exacerbated by a continuing tendency in universities, especially, to train professional and technical workers for the Central Asian economy rather than in the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake.

It is at the level of postgraduate education that gender difference is most apparent and where social rather than economic factors are most influential – fewer women than men are enrolled as postgraduate students across all disciplines. On average only one-third of postgraduates in Central Asian universities and scientific institutions are female, and only in Kyrgyzstan did the percentage of female postgraduates reach 45 per cent (Bauer et al. 1997a: 43 and 1997b: 51; Kasymova 1999a: 74). Nevertheless, in Uzbekistan, where women tend to marry earlier than in the other two republics, women constitute 31 per cent of the postgraduate population, and this remains an impressive figure, not least because a large proportion of postgraduate women have taken time off from higher education to raise a family, and thus the majority of them are effectively returnees (Kasymova 1999a: 75). It is clear, therefore, that, with the increasing competition in the labour market for admission to the prestigious professions, women, despite social and economic pressures, continue to enter higher education and proceed on to postgraduate courses in significant numbers.

In the post-independence period, therefore, the importance of education in forming the next generation of workers at all levels remained a priority for both the state and individuals. Cutbacks in government spending in all three republics had their most significant impact on tertiary education, where overall student numbers have declined significantly. In the transition period, financial hardship and the value of gaining employment sooner rather than later have affected the educational choices of both men and women. Yet it is here that gender difference comes into play, because men are able to continue to receive training and educational opportunities sponsored by their employers while women are less favoured owing to the career breaks that they will inevitably take once they are married and start a family. This situation has been exacerbated by the advent of a market economy. Where possible women deferred marriage in order to complete their education and enter their chosen profession, because the opportunities of being able to do so diminished considerably once their personal circumstances changed. For Uzbek women prevailing social mores determined otherwise, and they required considerable effort and commitment to enter postgraduate study. Nevertheless, as in the past, education is no indicator of either pay or status in the labour market, and in the post-independence period it was the latter which was eroded as gender preference and gender difference emerged as the principal defining factors of social and economic position.

The demise of the 'surrogate proletariat': women, work and de facto inequality

An important legacy of the Soviet period has been the high level of female participation in the labour force, which remains significant even in the post-independence period. Nevertheless, the full incorporation of women into the Soviet economy took far longer to achieve in Central Asia than elsewhere in the Soviet Union. The Soviet ideology of women's liberation was principally, if not exclusively, linked to their unencumbered participation in the labour force and the question of economic independence. The latter represented a far more significant change than the former. For what was and still is in many ways a primarily agricultural economy, the full participation of all members of Central Asian society in the economy was essential, and women's work in agricultural production and in the physical reproduction of the family pivotal. It was the disaggregation of women's productive work and the 'market' in the new Soviet economy which would create most conflict between the cultural mores of the region and the aims of a

'foreign' political system. Thus: 'In a poor country, in which there was a declared priority of the mass over the individual, employment occupied a large place in the life of almost every woman; it was supposed that work alone was the main vehicle of self realization, a notion which came into conflict with the cultural environment of the Islamic milieu' (Tokhtakhodjaeva and Turgumbekova 1996: 153). Moreover, the attack on female segregation through *Khudjum* in order to pave the way for women's full participation in all aspects of society did little to relieve the ongoing tension between the social and economic liberation of women – one that was essentially never resolved.

The ideological shift that was necessary for the effective sovietization of Central Asian society was not one that was entirely alien to the Muslim community. In essence it required a shift of individual social and economic obligations to kin, clan and community, which was an essential part of Muslim life, to a much broader and larger social canvas – Soviet state and society.[22] What was much more difficult yet crucial in the modernization of the Central Asian economy was the mobilization of women as workers in their own right. This involved a much more radical concept, the separation of home and work and the entry of, in the first instance, young Muslim women into public life. It was here that Soviet ideology entered into direct conflict with the indigenous cultural mores of gender segregation (especially in the urban areas), the influence and control of elders and the question of family honour. Universal proletarianization, the main rubric of Soviet economic policy, created considerable conflict in the 1920s and early 1930s – industrialization and the collectivization of agriculture not only signalled the demise of economic freedom but also threatened family and kinship ties.

Consequently, the process of the full incorporation of women into the labour force took a different route in Central Asia to that followed in the rest of the Soviet Union. One important factor that drove the process was the need to increase family income. It was in the mid-1930s, when there was a fall in the level of real wages, that the number of women engaged in the urban labour force increased substantially right across the Soviet Union (McAuley 1981: 44). In Central Asia these economic pressures led to a similar change, although the question of gender segregation needed to be negotiated in both urban and rural areas. Thus the absorption of female labour into the production process was achieved through the formation of women's *artels* in the urban areas and special women's collective farms in the rural areas. The former were engaged in weaving, carpet-making and embroidery while the latter involved market gardening, silk production and animal husbandry.[23]

The small gender-specific productive units were designed essentially to assuage cultural opposition to the integration of women into economic production in ways that challenged ideas of purdah and the social standing of female family members. Gradually female labour was absorbed into factories and state farms as women graduated from the education system with important skills and an 'understanding' of the aims and expectations of a Soviet system, and as a new generation of young women and men began to take on the challenges and seek the 'rewards' offered, in theory at least, in a Soviet Central Asia (Massell 1974: 30; Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996: 54–6).

It was Russian women of the *Zhenotdel* who supervised the economic mobilization of Central Asian women as an integral part of the process of the political conscientization of the indigenous population. Moreover, in the early years of industrialization, Russian specialists and skilled personnel, both male and female, were relocated to the region in order to fill the existing lacuna in the labour force. These immigrants would dominate the important administrative and supervisory positions in both the political and economic spheres. Despite the emergence of highly trained women, by the mid- to late 1930s the pecuniary advantage of ethnic Russians would never be superseded and their disproportionate representation in the higher echelons of the Soviet system would be maintained.

The incorporation of women into the labour force was facilitated by the nature of industrialization, which certainly in the first two decades focused on the establishment of light industry such as textiles, food processing and services that had, in pre-Soviet Russia, been traditionally areas of female employment. Concomitantly, the important role of women in the rural sector both in family farms and nomadic communities was harnessed rather than challenged in the collectivization process. Initially, at least, the prevailing gender division of labour remained unchallenged. As in many other countries, the Second World War led to the incorporation of women into non-traditional sectors of the economy in much larger numbers than had previously been the case.[24] This was most evident in heavy industry, mining and construction where women were trained to undertake skilled and semi-skilled work and where through government policy there was a conscious expansion of employment for women in what had up to that time been considered exclusively male jobs. It required the suspension of protective legislation that excluded women from heavy manual labour, owing to lifting restrictions, and from work considered to be dangerous, such as mining and some chemical industries, as well as night work.[25]

Moreover, in view of the fact that this legislation had, up to that point, severely restricted the entry of women into specialist technical training, this led to an expansion of in-house and on-the-job training undertaken by these industries (McAuley 1981: 150–1). Economic necessity and the dearth of available male workers essentially paved the way for women to establish a significant presence in areas of the economy that had up to that point been considered male and which offered higher incomes than either professional or white-collar employment.

In the post-war period, in spite of the reimposition of protective legislation for women, the pressure of demographics and the continued demand for female workers in certain industrial sectors led to open subversion of the law. This was possible owing to the invocation of the special-needs clause in the legislation, which was liberally used and abused. As one Uzbek woman put it:

> If I could identify an important moment when women made their mark as workers in heavy industry it was during the war period. Once they had experienced the economic benefits of engaging in work which was considered *unsuitable* for women there was no turning back. There were ways around all legislation. Young women were actively choosing to enter technical training over professional academic study in order to enter highly paid blue-collar employment. These pioneers undertook some of the most physically punishing and dangerous work in what was considered to be male employment. I don't believe for one moment that these women gave a single thought to the long-term damage this might do to their physical health in the future. For Central Asian women it has been a heavy price to pay. (former factory director)[26]

In the 1960s and 1970s economic expansion and successive government economic plans led to an increase in demand for female labour in industry, and young women were for the first time being actively encouraged to undertake skilled training, especially in the mechanical trades. Nevertheless, in so far as the number of places in vocational training institutes was directly related to available employment opportunities in the relevant economic sectors, more men than women entered skilled training at a ratio of two to one. Thus, prevailing attitudes to women with respect to their reliability given their continued heavy family responsibilities in the domestic sphere, protective legislation and laws relating to maternity continued to weigh heavily against them.

The introduction of technology and the extensive mechanization of industry and agriculture in the 1970s led to an increase in the number of women truck drivers, tractor drivers and combine harvester opera-

tors. Soviet images of women using and operating machinery gave the impression of large numbers of women in these categories of employment. The reality fell far short of the acclaimed 50 per cent quotas for drivers and operators in Soviet propaganda (McAuley 1981: 113–15; Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996: 118). Nevertheless, the number of female tractor drivers, for example, must have been significant enough to warrant special legislation which required that women be transferred to other duties during menstruation (Illic 1994).[27] Even so, the nexus between men and machinery remained, not least owing to the fact that both industrial and agricultural equipment and machinery were designed with men rather than women in mind. The question of strength and physical stature often disadvantaged women who wished to work in certain sectors of the economy. Tokhtakhodjaeva presents an image of women as young as sixteen drafted into heavy industry in the war period to operate unwieldy machinery, some even made to stand on boxes in order to reach the controls (1996: 119). It was not until the late 1960s that the question of ergonomics was raised with respect to the design of new equipment and machinery, and where possible managers were obliged to offer women the opportunity to work with the most modern machinery and equipment. With a commitment to full employment and a large available industrial labour force, however, there was little impetus for the introduction of new technology and machinery (Koval 1995a: 27). This was most apparent in the post-independence period, when it was clear that there had been no significant technological upgrade in the industrial sector for over twenty years.

It was in the 1980s that the pattern of female employment was most evident in the advent of intensive economic expansion in the region. While some challenges were made to the gender division of labour in agriculture and industry in the Soviet period, it was in white-collar employment and the professions that women principally made their mark. Women outnumbered men in medicine, education, research and finance, and equalled their numbers in science and the civil service. This was a direct result of the drive in the 1930s and 1940s for women to enter tertiary education and the professions on the one hand and the restricted entry for women in technical and skilled training leading to blue-collar employment on the other. The effect was to feminize certain professions that offered women higher social status but lower economic rewards (ibid.: 22–4). In the inextricable nexus between education and labour market demand this created a gender division of labour, which remained up to independence and has continued in the transition period.

Although the full incorporation of women into the labour force took far longer to achieve in Central Asia than in the rest of the Soviet Union, by the 1980s it had reached similar levels to elsewhere in the union, and was unprecedented in the Islamic world. Yet the distribution of women across different employment sectors reveals only part of the story, whereby differentials in pay and status were well established during the Soviet period and, post-independence, set precedents in all areas of the economy. Guarantees within the legislation with respect to equal access to employment and equal pay were interpreted in many different ways. In the absence of class differences, as we know them, status, skill and responsibility and the overall importance of certain economic sectors were the main indicators of wage levels. In the early years of the transition period all three republics continued to use the official Soviet twenty-eight-point wage scale in which women predominated among those occupying the bottom fourteen points of the wage scale while men formed the majority of those receiving salaries in the top fourteen grades. In a speech given to a conference of Eurasian women in 1993, Altynshash Dzhaganova stated that on average women's salaries were a third less than those of men in Kazakhstan.[28] Similar wage differentials could be found in both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. In the transition period the shift to a mixed market economy offered little incentive to challenge or substantially change the status quo.

Table 3.1 offers a direct comparison of the distribution of women as a percentage of the labour force by sector for each of the three republics, made possible by the continued use of Soviet sectoral categories, which continued to be used at that time.[29] By considering the different categories of employment we can identify the nature of women's participation in different sectors while identifying some of the principal problems that they face in the transition period.

In industrial and manufacturing employment women constituted approximately 50 per cent of the labour force in Central Asia. In 1993, only in Kazakhstan did the level of female employment in this sector drop below this average owing to economic restructuring and the loss of female jobs in this sector – a drop of approximately 6 per cent less than three years following independence (Bauer et al. 1997b: 24). Nevertheless, there was a clear gender division of labour both within and between industries in this sector. In all three republics women on average constituted 70 per cent of the workforce in light industry with a similar percentage of men working in heavy industry, such as metallurgy and mining. In the textile and clothing industries 90 per cent of the labour force was female while in the food processing industries the number of female employees

TABLE 3.1 Women as a percentage of the labour force by sector (%)

Sector	Uzbekistan	Kyrgyzstan	Kazakhstan
Industry	51	53	43
Agriculture	39	41	33
Transport	26	12	23
Communication	48	64	65
Construction	12	16	26
Project research/Design	62	59	79
Food trade and processing	49	61	68
Health, physical culture and social security	73	76	77
Education and culture	61	67	69
Science and scientific services	44	44	45
State insurance, credit and banking	59	76	75
Civil service	36	53	51

Source: Ministry of Labour

fluctuated between 63 and 65 per cent of the total.[30] In light industry women were usually engaged in assembly-line production and work that was categorized as semi-skilled or unskilled. The numbers of women working in the construction industry were low, and only in Kazakhstan did the proportion of women in the industry reach one-quarter of the total, whereas in both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan the numbers were less than half that figure. Here the majority of women worked as painters and plasterers, with very few women engaged in heavy construction work. Women formed a significant minority of workers engaged in highly skilled work in heavy industry and in the mechanical trades, as well as in unskilled manual work.[31] Moreover, women working in this sector were either highly educated or had specialist skill qualifications; those who undertook unskilled manual work were similarly highly educated. In all sectors of industry women were more likely to be over-qualified for the work they undertook than men, irrespective of skill grades or the nature of the work itself.

Overall, wages in the industrial sector were higher than in other areas of the economy owing to its economic importance, although within this category 'skilled grades' and those working in heavy or dangerous work were awarded higher rates of pay. This system favoured workers in metallurgy and mining, for example, rather than those in light industry such as textiles and food processing, and thus overall favoured those

sectors in which men predominated. Under these circumstances it is hardly surprising that a significant number of women chose to enter heavy industry, because the financial incentives for doing so were high. Nevertheless, wage differentials between men and women in heavy industry and construction remained because salaries were performance based and tied to production quotas. Thus, as McAuley noted in the 1980s: 'In so far as manual jobs in Soviet industry (and other sectors like construction) often require physical strength as well as manual dexterity and in so far as tools and other equipment are usually suited ergonomically to men than to women; it is to be expected that men will find it easier to fulfil their production norms than women' (1984: 15). Moreover, these factors affected not only wage differentials but also promotion chances – men were placed in a more advantageous position *vis-à-vis* women. Furthermore, on entering the labour force women were less likely to be given or take advantage of the opportunity to undertake further training in order to upgrade their skills owing to the added burden of family responsibilities (Weber and Watson 2000: 239).[32] Thus, the number of men in supervisory and management positions in industry far outweighed that of women, even in those industries in which women formed the majority of the labour force. All these factors would seriously disadvantage women in the process of downsizing the industrial sector, which most observers argued suffered from over-employment of personnel.

One question that is of particular importance to the industrial sector is that of the categorization of certain types of work as heavy or dangerous. In view of the fact that this often determined the awarding of certain bonuses or more advantageous salaries, it seemed to apply far more to the work of men rather than to that of women. Moreover, the elasticity of protective legislation in enforcing certain rules to 'protect' the physical well-being of women exacerbated the situation (ibid.: 223, 497). An excellent example could be found in the independence period which illustrates this problem – the case of the mining industry. In all the literature there has been a consistent assertion, supported by information from official sources, that women did not work in mining owing to the dangerous working conditions. While this position accords with existing legislation the rule was never fully enforced, even in Central Asia. In the post-independence period there was sufficient evidence available to confirm that in both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan women were working in the mining sector and had done so for many years.[33] While the numbers were small, they were significant enough for the sector to offer good infrastructure for women and children, including

nursery facilities. Admittedly, the lack of alternative employment in many mining villages and the higher rates of pay were the principal reasons for women seeking employment in this sector. In one Uzbek mining village one employee spoke of her experience in the industry where she continues to work:

> I have worked in the mines for thirty-seven years. I used to be involved in the heavy work but I operate the cages now. I have never worked underground but some fifteen to twenty years ago there were women that did, but mostly women have worked above ground. When I first started as a young woman we worked in the cold rooms and the women would get ill. We worked with acids washing the uranium but when we were pregnant we would be moved to other work. Now we have new machinery and the conditions are much better. The mine has always been a good employer and the nursery facilities have always been so good that it was easy for me to go straight back to work after I had each of my children.

In the mines in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan many women were involved in cleaning the uranium and working with acids, which by any criteria is both dangerous and harmful to women's reproductive health.[34] A smaller proportion of women worked as lift operators and clerical workers. This is only one example of the work undertaken by women in heavy industry and mining, but it is clear that the principal incentive for women was the high levels of remuneration that they could receive compared to that offered by other forms of employment.

In the post-independence period there was a vigorous campaign in all three republics to convince women to leave forms of employment that were considered deleterious to their reproductive health. Protective legislation was once again tightened and reinforced owing to the reluctance of women to make the voluntary shift across the occupational spectrum to jobs considered more suitable for them. In Uzbekistan, in all identifiable areas of employment, women were taken off work considered heavy or difficult all over the country, and night work, which had been most helpful to women with younger children, was now prohibited for women. Similar strategies were used in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where women were no longer allowed to work in 'difficult' or 'severe' working conditions. These proactive measures in favour of improving the conditions of female employment were, in what were rapidly becoming mixed economies, proving to be detrimental to the future employment prospects of women. Restricting women's choices with respect to the nature and terms of employment and replacing women with men in certain sectors, in all three republics, created a situation in which women

are over-represented among the unemployed and the principal target for government 're-training programs' (ibid.: 223, 238, 496).

Yet concerns about women undertaking heavy, dangerous or arduous work seem to have focused on sectors in which men predominated, when in fact similar work and conditions could be found in 'feminized' sectors. Throughout the industrial sector women were faced with operating archaic machinery, undertaking arduous work in precarious and often dangerous working conditions. Moreover, most of the manual work and lifting was undertaken by women at a level that contravened existing legislation. Some of the worst working conditions could be found in the textile industries of cotton, wool and silk, in which harmful chemicals were used to process the raw fibres (ibid.: 237). In Kazakhstan one informant stated that the levels of air and noise pollution in industries that predominantly employed women failed to meet international standards, and this was an area of concern. There was sufficient pressure to improve the conditions of work for all women in industry in all three republics to indicate that such problems were common to all sectors of industry.

Nevertheless, all these concerns in terms of proactive change were focused on sectors associated with male employment. What this created was a situation whereby for the first time the principle of equal access to all employment sectors for women was being essentially denied. In a period of economic restructuring and downsizing, either directly or indirectly, there was a prioritization of male over female employment (ibid.: 222, 497). As one member of the Women's Committee of Kyrgyzstan argued:

> All over the country women are being taken off hard work such as the mechanical trades and now these jobs are done by men. They used to do heavy manual work because they could earn a lot of money even though it was harmful for their health. There are no women in heavy work now. The policy of this committee is to teach women to take up easier jobs and leave heavy work and try to make this shift without losing money.

There were, however, few opportunities for women to make such a shift without losing pay and status. Consequently, there was little support from women themselves for the idea of doing so, particularly if it meant that they would move from lucrative skilled work to less skilled categories in which wages were potentially lower. In both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan there was a recognition that a voluntary shift would not take place under these circumstance, and it was only in industries that were making a proportion of their labour force redundant that this

move was successful. A concomitant reduction in a top-heavy supervisory and managerial structure in the industrial sector also tended to target women rather than men. This was especially the case in those industries that had been privatized and where the shift had been a radical one. A Kazakh woman who is now running her own business, but had previously been employed as a senior manager in industry, summed the situation up as follows: 'The new laws relating to women and work are creating a situation of hidden discrimination. In the past, under the old system, it was not unusual to see women directors of plants or factories but now these women have disappeared. In the last two years they are only men.' In Kyrgyzstan, for example, while women occupied over one-third of the 'upper level positions' in industry in 1996, the actual numbers of women in senior management and decision-making positions had reduced significantly (Bauer et al. 1997a: 59). Thus, economic restructuring was essentially placing women in a further disadvantaged position with respect to maintaining levels of representation in this area – the proportion of males to females in all areas of management was decreasing and setting a precedent for the recruitment of women in similar positions, particularly in the growing private sector.

Furthermore, it was precisely those areas of industry in which women predominate that were hardest hit in the post-independence period. The drop in demand for many processed items and the irregular deliveries of raw materials from Russia led to the short-term closure of many of these industries. Petrol shortages and the lack of foreign exchange and immediate alternative demand sources exacerbated an already precarious situation. The process of privatization has been slow owing to the need for high capital investment in this sector, which made many industries unattractive to potential investors. This did little to enhance the status of women in this sector, and under the circumstances new employment opportunities for women in industry were being eroded.

In all three republics, agriculture continues to play an important economic role. Moreover, in Central Asia, where out-migration from rural areas has been far less significant than in other areas of the Soviet Union, it remains a significant employment sector for both men and women. In Kazakhstan, approximately one-third of the labour force is female, while in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan approximately 40 per cent of the labour force is female. Collectivization under Soviet rule consolidated close kin and community relationships in the countryside as clans and specific ethnic groups in existing villages became the basis of economic organization in state farms and collectives. State and collective farms were, in most cases, self-contained units offering health

services, primary and secondary education, a library and a social club (Wheeler 1964: 168). Moreover, in Central Asia agricultural workers maintained a certain level of autonomy, and the private ownership of livestock, albeit limited, was permitted. Within this relatively closed socio-economic environment the gender division of labour was for the most part circumscribed, influenced by pre-Soviet tradition in which the role of women's subsistence production, so crucial to the agricultural economy in the past, was reinforced (Ergasheva 2001: 5).

The sovietization of Central Asian agriculture and the process of mechanization that followed resulted in limited challenges to the gender division of labour. Quotas were set for the recruitment of female tractor drivers, mechanics and truck drivers, and it was these categories in which women could receive preferential treatment, higher pay and other incentives.[35] By all accounts the take-up was much lower than the 50 per cent quota envisioned in the 1930s (Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996: 118). For the most part the work of men, such as clearing the fields, harvesting and the transportation of the harvest for sorting and processing, was mechanized, while the work of women remained labour intensive. Thus, women undertook some of the most heavy physical work involved in cotton and tobacco growing, where they were usually involved in the planting, weeding and harvesting as well as sorting, packing and cleaning produce. Women also worked in the greenhouses and in milk production, which was the only work area in which they predominated where women operated machinery. Consequently, much of the work that women undertook on all farms was classified as unskilled and waged accordingly. Needless to say it was mechanics and tractor drivers who received the highest rates of pay. In view of the fact that both state and collective farms worked to production quotas, operating a bonus system and a range of incentives, pay differentials between men and women fluctuated depending on whether the farm was 'rich' or 'poor'. On the successful farms all workers would receive high salaries, but for less successful ones the change in economic status led to women losing out in the calculation of pay differentials. In the post-independence period the progressive privatization of agriculture has merely exacerbated the situation of women – the less successful farms have been those divided into family farms in which the increase in individual workloads has not always been matched by an increase in financial return.

The tightening of 'protective' legislation with respect to the use of female labour in dangerous and heavy work had a negative impact on the gender division of labour in agriculture. Once again the definition of what constituted heavy or dangerous work seemed to apply exclusively

to the operation of machinery and the use of female labour in more highly paid and skilled employment. Thus, the process of privatization and the restructuring of the labour force within collective farms led to the removal of women from specialized work that they had performed in the past. Moreover, on many of the farms women were no longer mechanics or tractor drivers and they did not operate machinery except for milking. In agriculture as in industry the definition of 'heavy' work was arbitrary. Women had always undertaken the physically demanding tasks. Little has changed on farms across Central Asia because one can still see men in the fields driving the tractors and harvesters as women walk or crouch behind them doing the back-breaking work of harvesting or planting. As one Uzbek agricultural worker stated:

> It's hard to say what difference the new rules have made to women members of the collective. We have always done the more physical jobs so for most of us it hasn't made life easier. On this collective we now have no women mechanics or tractor drivers. These jobs were given over to the men and the women who did them really resented the change because it was easier than the work they are engaged in now. This is a rich farm so the difference in pay is only small but for some women in the poorer farms in this district that small difference has hit the family income hard.

There are other factors that have created serious problems for women in agriculture in all three republics. The liberal use of agro-chemicals and defoliants in all areas of agriculture, especially in the cotton- and tobacco-growing regions, was responsible for serious long-term damage to the health of the population. It was women, owing to the nature of the work they undertook, who were most affected, because they spent a larger proportion of their working time in the fields than men. Under the Soviet system chemicals such as the extremely toxic defoliant Butifus would be sprayed from the air by plane or helicopter, and this practice was discontinued only in 1987.[36] Children would be removed from the field but women continued to work during spraying. Most women were completely unaware of the kind of risks they were taking or the implications for their future health.[37] One Uzbek woman who had worked on a state farm for over twenty years stated:

> Yes, we used agro-chemicals for many years but for the last few years we haven't used them at all. We've been told that it is bad for women but I can't say that it has affected me. If someone sneezed during the spraying that created respiratory problems. The use of defoliants didn't affect the

children because on those days children would be forbidden to go outside so they stayed at home.

Only in the transition period did the Ministry of Health in all three republics begin to assess and deal with the damage to public health, and especially the effect on the reproductive health of women. There are indications, however, that other, arguably less dangerous agro-chemicals have simply replaced the use of more dangerous ones. A government official in Kyrgyzstan expressed a certain cynicism and argued that women in agriculture continued to be at risk.

> Most women grow tobacco, collect the harvest and do the heavy manual work. They do this because they can earn a lot of money even though it is harmful to their health. Those women involved in cotton growing using agro-chemicals are also damaging their health. Now we have banned the use of defoliants and other dangerous chemicals in agriculture. In general you can argue that all chemicals are the same, so the percentage of people with serious diseases is still high in these regions.

Collective and state farms were run along democratic lines, with a clear division of labour both within and between the different sectors. Each farm was split into administrative sections, up to four, and each section could contain between four and six brigades, which were individually responsible for certain agricultural specialisms. Its members chose the chief of a brigade and they in turn would form part of the administration of the farm. There were very few female chiefs of brigade, even among those governing areas of work in which women predominated. Those women who were part of the central administrative structure were usually engaged in accounting or administrative work rather than agricultural workers. For example, in one large collective farm in Uzbekistan there had only ever been one female chief of brigade. As one female community leader stated:

> Each brigade chooses its chief. There has only ever been one woman chief of brigade, ever, in this collective and she has now retired. You could ask any woman here whether they would like to be chief and they would tell you that they are definitely not interested. No woman wants the job, especially in spring and autumn, during planting and harvesting, which is a hard time for women. They have a triple burden anyway, so they refuse.

While there is significant anecdotal evidence for the numbers of women in senior managerial and administrative positions in agricultural enter-

prises, comparative figures for all the republics are not available. One study undertaken in Kyrgyzstan, however, showed that in spite of the significant contribution of women in the agricultural sector the number of women in upper-level management had decreased from 20 per cent in 1993 to 14 per cent in less than one year (Bauer et al. 1997a: 61–2).[38] This was precisely at a time when restructuring and privatization in the agricultural sector were already under way, consolidating the position of men in the organization and control of agricultural enterprise. There were, however, other factors which militated against women investing time in participating in the decision-making hierarchies in the agricultural sector.

In Central Asia, unlike in the rest of the Soviet Union, the collectivization of agriculture was premised on the maintenance of subsistence agriculture, and it was this sector which consistently met the shortfall in food production as land was given over to the production of cotton and tobacco. Thus, most families maintained small plots and a few animals, which might provide up to 50 per cent of meat, milk and vegetables consumed by them (Rashid 1994: 64; McAuley 1981: 107–8). Subsistence agriculture is undertaken, almost exclusively, by women and children, and this further extends their working day. In the post-independence period, the state is no longer able to underwrite the generous food subsidies once funded by Moscow, and this has led to a growing concern to increase the level of food production in Central Asia. Rising prices and the concomitant fall in relative wage values have further exacerbated the already considerable burdens for rural women, who are now spending an increasing proportion of their unpaid labour time working their own plots and trading produce at local and regional markets (Weber and Watson 2000: 239; Ergasheva 2001).[39]

In the early years of the transition the restructuring of the agricultural economy led to a fall in food production and a reduction in the size of animal herds. Even urban workers were being encouraged to make up for food shortages through private production, and in many urban communities market gardens were created to grow fruit and vegetables to distribute to the more vulnerable sectors of the community, especially the elderly. Many city dwellers already had plots in nearby rural areas and it was not unusual for families to leave the cities at weekends in order to tend their land and take produce back to their homes in the city. In Uzbekistan, for example, measures were undertaken in 1992 to protect women, children and the elderly in the recession and 700,000 hectares of land were given over to the people of the republic in order to increase food production by individuals, especially women. All those who wanted

land could receive 1 hectare, and it was this strategy which helped maintain living standards in the recession. Along with the changes in the division of labour in agriculture, the pressure on women to become involved in private production made greater demands on their time when they were already the most vulnerable members of the labour force. Women who were engaged in seasonal or heavy work in agriculture were making strategic decisions with respect to where and when they would undertake work on local farms. In the face of declining agricultural wages in some areas women were refusing to undertake work on local farms because it was far more cost effective to concentrate on maintaining family subsistence levels through the sale of produce and preserves than to take on extra agricultural work (Ergasheva 2001).

In the transition period, therefore, subsistence production was making up for the shortfall in family income and food production. In all three republics it was agriculture which was able to absorb surplus female labour by offering paid productive work and the opportunity to engage in subsistence production. For city dwellers the opportunity to maintain private plots also compensated for growing infrastructural problems and the deterioration in public transport, which was affecting the quantity and quality of food supplies. Moreover, the development of family farming systems in the process of privatization and the division of large state farms were affecting the status of women as agricultural workers, as a greater proportion of women's time was spent on subsistence activities. This will become even more problematic as men, who are considered to be the legal heads of household, are those who exercise ownership and control of land, agricultural equipment, animals and income.

It was in white-collar employment and the professions that the representation of women was, on the surface at least, most impressive. From the 1930s onward Central Asian women began to graduate from tertiary institutions and entered the professions, by the 1960s constituting at least one-half of the specialists in all the major fields, such as law, economics, medicine, science and education. Women constituted the majority of employees in all sectors of white-collar employment, such as administration, financial services and communications. The anomalies of this phenomenon have been the general status and position of women in white-collar work and the professions. While it is not possible to offer a detailed account of women's participation across all these spheres of work, a closer look at the professions in which women predominate offers some insight to the status of women in this area. In the transition period it was highly educated women in these areas of employment who were reconsidering their position and future in the labour market.

Certainly by the 1970s more young women were remaining in formal education, not least owing to the difficulties in entering specialist training for highly paid blue-collar employment. At this time, right across the Soviet Union, women were beginning to predominate in white-collar employment and most professional fields. In spite of the level of education required to enter many of these fields of employment and the social status of the professions, for the majority of workers pay rates were lower than those offered by industry. In spite of the impressive numbers of women employed in this area they were over-represented in the lower echelons of the professions and in lower and middle management. As one former Kazakh scientist argued:

> Women were actively encouraged to enter all of the professional fields and the numbers of women now employed in all areas is evidence of this. Yet even in areas where we outnumber men, women are under-represented in higher management and decision-making positions. Even then most women have to have higher qualifications than men in order to make the grade and to be paid the same salaries as men. They want our expertise and our creative abilities but men remain proud and are reluctant to have too many women in positions of power over them. There has always been an invisible line that very few women have been allowed to cross.

This phenomenon was identifiable across all the professions. Tokhtakhodjaeva and Turgumbekova argue that it was precisely in the 1970s, when the number of women in the professions had significantly increased, that both status and pay began to decline rapidly. Moreover, in the transition period the introduction of a market economy has created a new entrepreneurial class which outranks all other sectors of society in both status and pay (1996: 153). Under these circumstances many professional men and women began to exploit their skills and education by using them on either a part-time or a full-time basis in the commercial economy.

It is the fields of health and education, in which women have the highest participation rates, which are most indicative of the problems facing women in the professions. In the three republics between 70 and 80 per cent of all medical personnel are women, and on average 50 per cent of all doctors are female. Yet women are more likely to be found in the lower and middle ranks of the medical profession, while male personnel predominate at the rank of chief surgeon and professor (Weber and Watson 2000: 496). Moreover, the specialisms of men and women were also clearly demarcated – female specialists

were principally to be found in the area of obstetrics, paediatrics and gynaecology, whereas the high-status specialisms such as neurosurgery, cardiology and endocrinology were overwhelmingly a male preserve. In spite of the fact that women outnumbered men in the profession, in health management and administration the chiefs of staff of hospitals and medical institutes were almost exclusively male.

Education demonstrated a similar profile with respect to where the greatest numbers of women were employed. For public education as a whole, between 61 and 69 per cent of educational staff were women. Yet, as in medicine, the distribution of women across the different sectors was significant – women constituted two-thirds of the teaching staff in primary and nursery education while a similar proportion of men dominated academic and administrative posts in educational management and tertiary education. As in medicine, therefore, women predominate in the lower-status and lower-pay levels of the teaching hierarchy.

It was especially in the areas of medicine and education that women seemed most discontented with the changes that had been implemented since independence. Teachers, for example, argued that under the Soviet system they rarely lacked the resources to undertake their work; now students were obliged to supply their own books, and this was creating considerable hardship in many families. Shift systems, initially introduced to lower teacher–pupil ratios, had intensified, and teachers were working longer hours and were demoralized by the pressure placed upon them. Moreover, the erosion of teaching salaries due to the economic crisis had led to a loss of teachers in most areas of education.

The working conditions of medical personnel had also changed in the post-independence period and, like teachers, they were suffering from cuts in funding – there is a serious lack of both medication and equipment at all levels of the health system in all three republics. Female medical staff, in particular, spoke of a perceived loss of pay and status in the post-Soviet period. In Kazakhstan, for example, one senior medical officer spoke of the deliberate under-funding of medical services whereby the government guaranteed payment of only three-quarters of the running costs of the hospitals while doctors and other medical personnel were required to engage in fund-raising to compensate for the shortfall. Nevertheless, for the majority of professional health workers, despite problems faced by the health system, they had no intention of abandoning their profession; most argued that what they lacked in resources they simply made up for in personal care.

In the area of science and scientific services the number of women employed was just below one-half of the total labour force, while in

project research and design over 60 per cent of the labour force were women, with Kazakhstan having the highest proportion of women at 79 per cent of the total.[40] Women scientists and scientific workers faced different problems which brought into question their status in the profession during the Soviet period. At that time research was considered a most prestigious and important field of work but this was not necessarily reflected in the resources made available to the sector. Yet researchers were permitted a considerable degree of intellectual latitude within particular areas of research, and what they lacked in resources they more than compensated for in ingenuity. In this area Central Asian women had a high record of achievement and were at the cutting edge of research in all specialisms. Nevertheless, few women gained recognition for the work they did, whether individually or collectively. It was women scientists who formed an important part of research teams, which in almost all cases were headed by men. As a Kyrgyz former micro-biologist stated:

> On many of the research teams Central Asian women are in the majority but under the Soviet system all scientific discoveries and breakthroughs belonged to the team leader, who was always male, and ultimately the state. Most team leaders are not actively involved in the research itself and on more than one occasion I have known women scientists who have come up with the most important piece of the scientific puzzle. Yet it has been the head of research who has always taken undue credit for the work of female scientists under their charge and in some cases received both national and international recognition for important scientific achievements. So in this field our hard work is often stolen from us and we are expected to be grateful if our names are mentioned at all as co-authors of scientific papers. After independence many good women have left or have been squeezed out of scientific institutions, including myself, and I think that is what you would call a brain drain.[41]

In spite of significant representation in the sciences, once again women found themselves at the intellectual coalface but with little representation in the more influential and prestigious decision-making positions. As cutbacks in state funding have limited the breadth of scientific research undertaken in all the three republics, and salaries have eroded, many young women are finding it a far less attractive option.

There has been an increasing loss or under-utilization of professional female expertise in a wide range of specialist areas in the transition period, and little or no effort by the state to encourage the retention of

women in key professions. Consequently, in all three republics teachers, as well as other professional women, have been leaving their jobs and entering into trade and commerce as self-employed workers, whereby they can triple or quadruple their salaries. Those who maintain a secure professional job are obliged to 'moonlight', undertaking a second job in order to supplement their devalued incomes. Many women realized that they could earn American dollars offering private tuition or medical consultations to the children of the nouveau riche, or by working as translators or interpreters. As one Uzbek schoolteacher sadly remarked:

> Under the Soviet system we had a lot of status and took pride in our work. Some women I know just couldn't continue to work under these conditions. In the end it is the children who lose out. I love my job but I have to freelance, usually for businessmen, either interpreting or translating material for them. It is mainly teachers who can speak English well and we are in high demand with foreigners visiting our country all the time. At the moment I work seven days a week. It's hard on my children but I'm just hoping that things will improve.

Certainly the loss of education professionals was most acute at the level of pre-school education (kindergarten). In all three republics the shift to a free market or mixed economy had led to a rapid increase in the number of private kindergartens, particularly in the cities. This coincided with the closing of many kindergartens owing to lack of funding. The fees of state kindergartens were based on an ability to pay, while factories and other enterprises often provided these facilities at the workplace and often at no cost to the female workers themselves. Professional women, in particular, were heavily dependent on an efficient kindergarten structure located away from the workplace. It was precisely at these centres that many of the most talented teachers and nurses were 'poached', attracted by higher salaries and better working conditions in the private sector. Working mothers who were unable to afford private fees complained bitterly about the reduction in the standard of state kindergarten care – centres were becoming virtual babysitting services run by disgruntled staff lacking the resources to maintain previous standards. This placed even greater pressure on women to restructure their lives as workers and mothers, and for some this meant moving into other areas of the economy which offered better financial rewards in order to resolve the conflict between their commitment to their profession and fulfilling their role as mothers.[42]

Yet there is one area of the economy that has been stimulated and has

expanded in the transition period, offering a wide range of opportunities, both formal and informal, in which women are clearly in the forefront – trade, commerce and specialist services. Under the Soviet system the region's 'bazaar economy' continued to function, albeit in a limited fashion, but playing an important unofficial role in the provision of low-cost goods and services usually between individuals and conducted on the basis of either cash or barter. Officially Central Asian women constituted the majority of workers involved in trade as early as 1993, and the numbers since then have steadily increased (Weber and Watson 2000: 223, 496). Moreover, women administer more than half of the small cooperatives and businesses set up since independence. Yet it is the unofficial and often unregistered commercial activities of all kinds which have attracted both men and women who hope at some point to trade their official employment for either more secure jobs in the private sector or self-employment. In all three republics women outnumber men in buying and selling goods in the cities and rural areas. Many of these goods are hand-made linen, knitted garments and rugs that require low capital input for a reasonable economic return. Trading in second-hand goods, especially second-hand electrical equipment and appliances, car parts and clothing, is an expanding market as escalating prices place many basic items out of the reach of most households. Most items found in the home can be sold to the right buyer for a high price. It is the principal means by which men and women supplement their increasingly devalued wages and pensions. The boom in the 'bazaar economy' in the post-Soviet period was such that government officials were concerned that Central Asia was fast becoming a region of 'buyers and sellers rather than producers'.

Inter-regional trade has been one area in which women have predominated, earning significant incomes and gaining economic independence. In the early years of the transition this trade was conducted within Central Asia and across the border to China. Initially the main trade was in ready-made clothing, which was sold for hard currency at highly inflated prices, and although the quality of the goods was considered by most people to be inferior to those sold in local stores, the main attraction for buyers was the style and variety that foreign goods had to offer. Women regularly travel overland across the Tien Shan Mountains to buy clothing and other goods to trade on the streets and in the markets. Since the national airlines embarked on full operation with discounted fares, women have travelled much farther afield, to Turkey, Italy, Iran and India, in search of bilateral trade (Bauer et al. 1997a: 67–9 and 1997b: 35; Thomas 2000).[43] Nevertheless, few men engage in this

form of trading due to the precarious and often dangerous nature of the business. Women are less likely to be robbed, searched at customs or have their goods confiscated. Consequently, many men both encourage and support female members of their family engaging in this form of trade. Yet as one Kyrgyz journalist pointed out, women endure considerable hardship as traders.

> Women are now the main movers in enterprise. They are crossing the borders buying and selling and here in Kyrgyzstan they are the main traders. You can see women traders, legal and illegal, passing out at borders and airports through fear and fatigue. They have to bribe officials and are constantly harassed. The sad part of it all is that talented scholars and professionals are leaving their jobs to become traders because they can earn more money.[44]

Entrepreneurial initiatives undertaken by women are visible in all three republics. In the early years of the transition period independent organizations of businesswomen began to emerge in order to protect the rights of women and lobby for credit and other forms of support. Owing to expanding commercial opportunities many women were engaging in some form of business activity, either full time or part time, because of the high financial rewards available in comparison to mainstream employment (Bauer et al. 1997a: 67–8 and 1997b: 35–6). One of the principal problems faced by women was credit or loans to support cooperatives or small enterprise initiatives. This was not necessarily due to the existence of gender-specific discriminatory conditions on the part of lending institutions or government-sponsored schemes; the same conditions applied to both men and women, but in most cases some form of security was required in order to guarantee the loan and men were more likely to meet this requirement because they tended to be better off financially and had larger savings or personal funds to draw on when starting up. Thus women's business organizations in all three republics campaigned for special funding provisions for women's enterprise initiatives.[45]

In recent years, a wide range of micro credit schemes have emerged, sponsored principally by international agencies such as the Foundation for International Community Assistance (FINCA), Mercy Corps International, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank, although most of these schemes are in cooperation either with the government or established financial institutions (Bauer et al. 1997a: 69–70). Credit unions and credit schemes have been a direct response to the predominance of women in the commercial sector and

their success in establishing successful small enterprises and cooperatives. Almost all of them offer small loans over short periods of time, usually between three and six months, at low interest rates. Moreover, the extremely low rate of default has encouraged many private lenders to favour credit applications from women working in this sector. Nevertheless, a large proportion of women still borrow money or receive financial support from family and friends owing to the importance of this sector to family subsistence in the transition period.

The continued engagement of women in the labour market remains predicated on the difficulties of combining family responsibilities with paid employment. In Central Asia, where large families remain the norm, this has created much greater problems than elsewhere in the Soviet Union. This weighs heavily against women in the transition period because preconceptions that have hindered women's professional progress were evident in significant areas of the economy and were exacerbated by the contraction of employment opportunities and the downsizing and privatization of the state sector. Moreover, the reduction of state support for childcare inhibited the early return of young mothers to the labour market and led to a reappraisal of both where and when women might seek employment. Most of all it was the spectre of unemployment which weighed most heavily on women's occupational choices and labour market opportunities (Weber and Watson 2000: 222, 238, 496).

Facing the change: female unemployment, training and opportunity in the transition period

Political independence and the shift to a market economy present many ideological challenges to the governance and fiscal policy of the Central Asian republics, particularly in terms of the long-standing Soviet ideology of full employment. Women especially had been socialized into an expectation and, for the most part, the reality of a full and productive working life in the paid labour force. Even when they took advantage of generous maternity leave entitlements, the state did not consider women to be unemployed but rather employed in 'useful productive labour' and therefore economically active or 'busy'. Without doubt hidden unemployment was a feature of the Soviet system, although generally the numbers were small and thus the extent of unemployment both before and after independence has been difficult to calculate. The wave of unemployment that followed independence included a large number of women who were on 'leave' and considered to be looking after small children rather than seeking employment. Up to the present time all three republics have declared an unemployment rate

in single figures when, according to most observers and statements by officials 'off the record', the true unemployment rate can be placed in double figures. Nevertheless, by 1995 government sources were already expressing considerable concern that the majority of the unemployed were women, who constituted approximately three-quarters of the total number of people seeking employment.[46]

Economic restructuring and the advent of a mixed economy first and foremost affected female employment. Certainly, since 1991 the disintegration of supplies from the former Soviet Union to many industries seriously affected the main areas of female industrial employment. Yet it was the rationalization of the labour market structure, especially in professions where women predominated, which hit hardest owing to a discriminatory 'women first, men last' labour displacement policy. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, one minister stated that the construction industry was the first to be affected, followed by the Institute of Economics and the Ministry of Water Resources, which all reduced their workforce by 40 per cent. Most of those affected by the labour downsizing were women with university degrees. Economic restructuring in Kazakhstan centred on male-dominated sectors such as heavy manufacturing, oil, copper and metallurgical industries, while in Uzbekistan plans to expand employment for women in traditional areas such as the textile industry in the production of ready-made clothes proved problematic. The plan to introduce new technology to light industry, in which large numbers of women are employed, brought the question of skills and the need for retraining to the fore, and it was clear that the level of investment required would be out of the reach of state resources alone. Furthermore, in the transition period the implicit priorities remain for maintaining male employment levels while, simultaneously, sustaining a commitment to resolving female unemployment remain. Essentially this was the anomaly that fuelled the competition between men and women for places in the labour market as economic restructuring and unemployment began to take a firmer grip (ibid.: 222, 239, 496).

All these factors place considerable pressure on the 'special privileges' and affirmative action policies for women in the labour market under the Soviet system, and further extended in the transition period in all three republics. These include generous maternity leave, extended leave to care for sick children, shorter working hours and the opportunity to work part time at any career point with no loss of pension or other entitlements.[47] Moreover, new employment laws and the extension of protective legislation designed to improve women's working conditions have had an adverse effect on the retention rates of female labour in

industry and women's employment opportunities in a mixed economy (Alimukhamedov 1999: 45; Bauer et al. 1997b: 42). Such legislation has made female labour much more expensive to retain or employ than that of men, and this has seriously restricted women's choices and flexibility in the transition period. Rather than favouring women's employment in the rapidly expanding private sector, the gender-specific labour legislation was considered to be a major disincentive.

In the light of the level of female unemployment in all three republics, various schemes were put in place to promote female employment – the respective governments offered some funding to contribute to the wages of new female employees for a short period of time.[48] Nevertheless, the private sector virtually ignored these schemes and generally demonstrated little interest in tying themselves to government plans or new laws by creating new jobs for women. The principal reason was special labour legislation pertaining to women, such as maternity leave and special paid leave. In many cases the private sector has chosen to steer a circuitous route around employment law by using a contract system to employ women. In exchange for higher rates of pay women are expected to enter into restrictive employment contracts in which they effectively sign away their rights – for example, if a woman should exercise her right to take time off work to look after a sick child she can be dismissed. Moreover, private companies, for the most part, do not use government employment services to hire personnel, and therefore there is less scrutiny of hiring practices in this sector. In the transition period, therefore, the reduced bargaining power of women in the labour market, combined with economic necessity, has led to the subversion of important legislation designed to protect their interests (Weber and Watson 2000: 222, 238, 496). One of the most significant features of privatization has been the loss of state control over the labour market and its inability to enforce labour legislation.

In Central Asia, a fairly comprehensive system of social protection has remained virtually intact, and the registered unemployed receive unemployment pay tied to previous earnings. Thus women, for the most part, receive lower levels of assistance than men, and this places considerable economic pressure on women to re-enter the labour market. In the short term, this has led to women entering the informal sector in the hope that self-employment might resolve their immediate problems. By so doing, women essentially drop out of the social safety net and as unregistered labour receive few if any benefits from within the state system. While this strategy has proved to be a lucrative one for some, it places a significant proportion of women on the margins of subsistence.

Embarrassed by the stigma of unemployment, women who wish to be seen as effective economic agents in a changing economy prefer this option. The strong motivation for women to be productive members of society instilled under the previous system may in this instance adversely affect the interests of women in the long term.

Evidence shows that in the changing Central Asian economies women are keen to undertake training or reskilling programmes to enable them to seek employment in new or restructured industries and enterprises. By 1995, enterprise schemes and employment training had been implemented in all three republics by Labour Service departments. All government training is geared to the labour market, and especially to current job vacancies, which for the most part favour men. Government retraining and enterprise schemes, therefore, were not designed to challenge the existing division of labour. Consequently, they have been less successful in favouring the re-employment of women, as the largest proportion of the unemployed, as opposed to men (ibid.: 223, 239).

Probably the most vociferous critics of government training programmes have been women themselves. Since independence, the growth of non-government organizations has been dominated by various social groups promoting the interests of women in a changing political and economic climate. Women from non-government organizations all over Central Asia have been exceptionally critical of the efficacy and scope of government initiatives in this area. As one leader of a women's NGO in Kazakhstan argued:

> The one thing that we Central Asian women all have in common is that we are losing ground. All advantages in a free market economy for women have been seriously eroded. For example, women are a vulnerable group in government training programmes because the number of women in the labour force has been radically reduced in order to reinforce the work activity of men. Women in Central Asia are forming organizations and self-help groups in the last few years and this has been a successful strategy. What we women need to do is to work harder than men because it is our responsibility to take our rightful place in society again.

Without doubt women's NGOs play an important role as the conduits of training schemes and funding initiatives for supporting the expansion of women's employment opportunities in the transition period. International organizations are the principal funding bodies for a wide range of schemes developed to support and enhance women's role in the economy. While some of these schemes focus on re-skilling and

upgrading women's skills, most particularly in areas such as computer literacy, communications and the production of goods and services, the majority focus on women's entrepreneurship and small business initiatives (Bauer et al. 1997a: 60, 68). Certainly, training in new technology has been important in giving many women the edge in applying for jobs in some of the new sectors of the economy, but the continued emphasis on small businesses and micro credit may be self-defeating in the long term. The ability of Central Asian economies to continue to accommodate a growing number of small businesses is hardly infinite, and there are already signs that a significant number of established small enterprises are beginning to flounder. Under these circumstances women's small business initiatives may at best constitute an important short-term strategy for women who, as a result of family commitments or unemployment, need to engage in income-generating activities while they are out of the formal labour market.

What is at stake in the transition process is a further decline in the status of women in the economy. The strong links between education and the economy established under the Soviet system remain and will certainly affect the career choices of young women. There is clear evidence of the relationship between employment opportunities and educational choice operating on a gender basis. Young men are leaving education earlier in order to take advantage of employment opportunities that invariably favour men, in the knowledge, in many cases, that both state enterprises, as in the past, and private enterprise will sponsor further education and training at a later date. Conversely, young women are remaining in education longer in an effort to increase their chances of gaining professional employment on leaving tertiary education. Women now, as in the past, need to complete their studies before entering into marriage and having children owing to the fact that there will be few chances to return to education at a later date, and certainly less chance of enterprise sponsorship for further education or training. This gender bias, established under the Soviet system, is further exacerbated in a market economy. Moreover, the restructuring of education, albeit still in progress, has witnessed a concomitant shift in young women's professional choices whereby business studies, economics, law and languages are increasingly popular among female students.[49] Whether or not this generation of young women can maintain their presence in areas such as medicine, education, economic management and the legal profession while making a significant incursion into business management and administration remains to be seen. More importantly, the increasing burden of the cost of education to individual families will certainly impact

on the sponsorship of female members in higher education if there is little hope of compensatory outcomes in terms of women's employment opportunities. Ironically the introduction of a market economy permeates the private sphere, and it is within the family that the tenets of economic rationalization finally come home to roost.

In the post-independence period, however, the question of language skills has become important in many new sectors of the economy, and this has, up to now, favoured the employment of women. The shift from Russian as the principal language of communication in the public sphere to Kyrgyz, Kazakh and Uzbek has placed a premium on multi-lingual employees in international organizations and foreign companies. In view of the prioritization of the Russian language in tertiary education the majority of professional women speak at least two languages, with English or German as a third language (Bauer et al. 1997a: 60). This is also due to the high numbers of female students studying languages at tertiary level. Moreover, this shift has for the first time favoured indigenous women as opposed to Russian women as was the case under the previous system.[50] Such women are able to find lucrative employment with international agencies and organizations and are later actively sought by the private sector with its improved status and financial rewards.[51] This has been most important to the maintenance of women's status in the labour market, especially in middle management. Whether or not this will advantage women in their pursuit of upper management and decision-making positions in the future remains to be seen. Most certainly it has created an added incentive for young women to study languages at tertiary level, while the demand for language courses among women who are unemployed is high.[52]

Even in the early years of economic transition, at the very highest levels of government it was recognized that market reforms had created significant difficulties for women in the area of employment. In each of the republics the introduction of National Action Plans to improve the status of women is in itself a tacit recognition that the principle of equality and opportunities for women in a post-Soviet Central Asia has been substantially undermined. Without doubt a considerable amount of funding, both by the government and international agencies, is being invested in gender-specific programmes to create new employment opportunities for women and enhance their status in the labour market. Central Asian women have also been extremely proactive both in defending women's interests and through their involvement in the design and execution of gender-specific programmes. Nevertheless, it could be argued that this offers an agenda for the recuperation of a

status in the labour market that has been lost, and that this has to be achieved before substantial efforts can be channelled into further advancing women's position in Central Asian society.

Central Asian women are the most highly educated women in the Islamic world, and their achievements in maintaining a formidable presence in all areas of the economy, and especially in those sectors that elsewhere have traditionally and almost exclusively employed men, were made under a policy of full employment. Now, in the transition to a market economy, the premise on which the full inclusion of women in the labour market was based no longer has primacy. Even under the previous system a gender bias was apparent, especially with respect to education and training, and this clearly affected the numbers of women who were able to occupy pivotal positions in the administration and decision-making hierarchies across all sectors of the economy. The location of the 'invisible line', which many women argued was difficult to cross, has certainly moved. As one Uzbek women's leader stated:

> The removal of quotas has seriously affected our ability to be present in the key areas of decision-making. In these difficult times, if the government has any real commitment to maintaining women's status in our society then they will need to be reimposed and expanded. Men will not defend our position while theirs is still unsecured. Under these circumstances, we can only expect to lose further ground, and the more ground we lose the more difficult it will be for us to get it back.

In Central Asia there is at present no shortage of female role models, and this represents a most important marker for the next generation of young women who wish to enter the labour force as skilled workers and professionals. Their success in maintaining a high profile in the 'new economies' rests on the inherited anomalies of the previous system, in which the principles of equal opportunity and gender equality remained competing rather than complementary ideologies in which the promise of opportunity was only partially fulfilled.

Notes

1 See Tokhtakhodjaeva (1996), Akiner (1997), Buckley (1997b) and Tolmacheva (1993).

2 See Chapter 6.

3 Nomadic communities usually consisted of extended kin networks.

4 An Islamic tradition of learning and educational instruction had existed in Central Asia since the ninth century. See, for example, Geoffrey Wheeler, *The Modern History of Soviet Central Asia,* Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1964.

5 See Chapter 2.

6 Ibid.

7 *Madrasahs* are religious schools which remain the principal source of religious education in Central Asia, and *maktabs* were the specialist grammar schools of the pre-Soviet period.

8 This was also the case in the rest of the Soviet Union.

9 It is important to note, however, that Central Asian women who chose to become actors or performers in the early years of sovietization flew in the face of tradition and were considered no better than prostitutes. Some paid for their choice with their lives; others were shunned by their families and community. See, for example, Massell (1974), Tokhtakhodjaeva (1996).

10 This situation remained unchanged in spite of amendments to the constitution both up to and after independence.

11 This factor was to have serious repercussions for women's health. See Chapter 4.

12 The policy of complete secondary education was introduced in the 1970s and was compulsory for all students. See, for example, J. J. Tomiak (ed.), *Soviet Education in the 1980s*, Croom Helm, London, 1983, and Horst Herlemann (ed.), *Quality of Life in the Soviet Union*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO and London, 1987.

13 See Chapters 4 and 5.

14 The acquisition of other skills such as foreign languages was available in establishments in some of the major urban centres but these were usually those attended by the children of high-ranking professionals and officials who were able to afford the special fees demanded.

15 A report on the status of women in Uzbekistan undertaken in 1999 confirmed the sentiments of this interviewee – a large proportion of women interviewed expressed concern about the quality of pre-school facilities, the standard of childcare available and the rising cost of the service. Gulyamova et al. (1999).

16 Clear evidence of this phenomenon is most apparent in Uzbekistan, where enterprises often sponsor the specialist training of students. In general students who receive this form of sponsorship are overwhelmingly male owing to a continuing belief that investing in the training of female students is 'high risk'.

17 There are no statistics available on the levels of achievement of students in the educational system and insufficient data to make clear gender comparisons in any of the Central Asian republics in question at this point in time.

18 In 1993 newly formed charity organizations were finding themselves inundated with requests for assistance.

19 In 1987, Kuebart noted that since 1978 even the gold and silver medallists with exceptionally high grades in their secondary certificates were no longer guaranteed a place in higher education institutions. See Frederich Kuebart, 'Aspects of Soviet Secondary Education: School Performance and Teacher Accountability', in Herlemann (ed.), op cit.

20 In all three republics this became an important source of secondary income for teachers who were able to coach the children of the 'nouveau riche' in exchange for American dollars.

21 See Weber and Watson (2000).

22 The separation of Central Asia into five republics, which split ethnic groups and created distinct linguistic communities, facilitated the transition.

23 In the tradition of outwork the authorities would deliver materials to the *artels* and then collect the finished products at the end of each week.

24 During the Second World War many industries were moved to Central Asia, which also created many new employment opportunities for women. See Hiro (1995).

25 The lifting restrictions for women were based on weight-bearing capacity and limited to a maximum of 20 kilos, free lifting, or 115 kilos using a barrow. Most commentators agree that these restrictions were frequently ignored, especially when women undertook most of the loading and unloading work in industry and agriculture. See McAuley (1981).

26 See Chapter 4.

27 The transfer was to be for a maximum of three days. Whether this legislation was enforced throughout the Soviet Union, and for our purposes here in Central Asia, is not clear.

28 Altynash Dzhaganova at that time was chair of the Parliamentary Committee on Women's Affairs and a People's Deputy of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The speech was given to the Conference of Central Asian Women, Almaty, Kazakhstan.

29 Similar direct comparisons are not possible after 1993 when the statistical analysis and collation changed, particularly with respect to gender, in all three republics.

30 Figures quoted were obtained from the Ministry of Labour and government statistical agencies in each of the republics. For a more detailed statistical breakdown, see Bauer et al. 1997a, and 1997b and Tokhtakhodjaeva, 1998.

31 While concrete figures are not available for the breakdown of male/female ratios in this sector, officials in all three republics confirmed that at no time had the number of women exceeded one-fifth of the total labour force in heavy industry.

32 See McAuley (1981).

33 See Illic (1996).

34 See Chapter 4. The recognition of the health risks of working with acids and uranium for pregnant women remains interesting, but women would be placed back in the cold room after having their children and while they were breast-feeding. The risks of passing toxic substances to infants through breast milk remain speculative.

35 This included preferential treatment in the allocation of housing, an extra six days' holiday a year and the opportunity to retire after fifteen years with a full pension. See McAuley (1981).

36 See Rashid (1994).

37 See Chapter 4.

38 See also McAuley (1981) and Buckley (1989).

39 This has been especially important for widows and retired women whose

government pensions have been significantly devalued in the transition period.

40 The category of science and scientific services includes such activities as meteorological research and weather forecasting services.

41 See also Tokhtakhodjaeva (1996: 126–9).

42 See Chapter 5.

43 Thomas discusses the extraordinary trade of Uzbek women in pedigree dogs to India.

44 Government officials tour local bazaars and trading areas checking the papers of traders in an attempt to drive out what they call 'speculators'.

45 See Chapter 6.

46 This figure does not include women who are looking after small children or those on 'official' maternity leave.

47 In Uzbekistan, for example, maternity leave provisions were extended from six months to one year on half-pay, and a woman's job would be kept open for three years rather than two. Nevertheless, most informants argue that this continued to benefit women who could afford to take extended leave while those who had a larger family would, as in the past, return to work sooner for economic reasons.

48 The imposition of employment quotas to ameliorate the difficulties of certain sectors of the unemployed, including working mothers and female heads of household, has faced similar difficulties, owing principally to the fact that these did not apply to smaller businesses, and large companies in the throes of restructuring were able to invoke the hardship clause.

49 Both law and economics were also popular choices among female students in the Soviet era, and women on average outnumber men in the legal profession; in the past a significant number of women have been economists. What is important here is that these are also areas that have undergone a significant curricular change in response to changes in the economic and legal system. Here, therefore, women are taking active steps to maintain their presence in these professions.

50 In Kazakhstan, for example, for the first time in over seventy years it was Kazakh women who were the preferred employees as translators for foreign companies owing to the fact that Russian was no longer the official language of preference.

51 Certainly early on in the transition period it was not unusual for women working for international organizations to be head-hunted by the private sector and offered a wide range of financial and other incentives to change their employment.

52 As early as 1991 over two-thirds of the candidates applying for a place in language schools in Kazakhstan were female.

4 | A healthy generation: women, environment and reproductive health

One of the most important achievements of the Soviet system was its provision of a comprehensive system of social services that were free and universally applicable. The implementation of a socialist healthcare system soon after the revolution throughout the Soviet Union offered a model of healthcare that received international acclaim and was emulated in principle by many countries, both capitalist and socialist, around the world. Within this system, all citizens were entitled to free healthcare, which was established to provide a full and comprehensive service. In Central Asia, as elsewhere in the Soviet Union, the efficacy of the system was reflected in a dramatic improvement in life expectancy, and especially in infant and maternal mortality rates. The latter was the result of a special focus on maternal healthcare and childbirth practices whereby a range of medical facilities were developed for women as a means of demonstrating the commitment of the Soviet state to the 'protection of motherhood' by giving priority to women's reproductive health while at the same time enabling women to combine participation in social production with motherhood. Ironically, after independence, maternal and infant mortality rates were the principal indicators of the breakdown of the socialist healthcare system. This was not due simply to fiscal crisis and the inability to sustain health expenditure in the transition period. It was proof, if any were needed, that a high standard of available medical care could not compensate for a policy of rapid development in which poor working conditions and environmentally dangerous economic planning demonstrated a flagrant disregard for the health and well-being of the population. Moreover, women had become the major casualties in the situation.

In Central Asia, the healthcare system that had been installed under Soviet administration was a comprehensive pyramid structure uniformly applied in all three republics from village paramedic stations and local gynaecological centres to regional and district hospitals and specialist institutes and hospitals in the capital cities of Tashkent, Almaty and Bishkek.[1] Most observers agree that the system worked well – all citizens had access to basic medical care and emergency treatment even in remote regions. Doctor-to-patient ratios were high, as were the number of

hospital beds per capita, and medication was free. Moreover, medical services were also provided for state employees of large state enterprises and collective farms, although the range and level of provision depended on the size of the entity and its importance (Klugman and Schieber 1996: 21).[2] Essentially the provision of medical services focused on curative rather than preventive medicine, although a clear shift was occurring even before independence as concerns were raised about the deteriorating health of women and children across the Soviet Union.

In the post-independence period the system opened up to closer scrutiny by international experts and advisers as the question of health reform was given priority by the Central Asian governments in the face of declining national income in the transition period. Nevertheless, critiques of the system focused primarily on its largesse rather than on the overall standard of healthcare delivery. Thus, it was argued, for example, that there were too many doctors and specialists, an excessive number of hospital beds and a high utilization of in-patient care on the part of the population (ibid.: 16-17; Chen et al. 1992: 1,465). In terms of in-patient care, extravagant use was being made of medical resources whereby patients with minor ailments such as gastritis, viruses, minor respiratory problems and hypertension would be admitted to hospital on a short-stay basis.[3] One important aspect of the use of in-patient care was that the majority of patients were women. As one Kazakh health professional argued, it was an important service:

> We don't have the facilities to take in a large number of patients on a short-stay basis but certain patients do have access to this kind of care. Women work extremely hard in our society and if they fall ill it is difficult for them to recover quickly at home, where the demands on them are high. For this reason we give priority to working women and women with many children because it is important that they have some rest and can recuperate quickly if they come on the ward, even if only for a day or two. That way members of the family help with the domestic chores and the childminding until they are discharged.

Unfortunately, this facility was one of the first to be closed down as cuts in health funding began to take hold in 1994 (Bauer et al. 1997a: 59). Another feature of the Soviet health system considered to be problematic was the centralization of resources and the under-utilization of local primary care facilities. Local doctors would consistently refer patients up the system to medical specialists who monopolized the use of diagnostic equipment and prescription drugs (Borowitz and O'Dougherty 1997: 16; Klugman and Schieber 1996: 21), thus creating a certain level of expecta-

tion among patients, who viewed local primary care facilities as referral posts rather than treatment centres. Dealing with the preconceptions and expectations of both health professionals and patients would influence the process of health reform, which focused on decentralization and increased efficiency while, for the first time, introducing consumer choice. Most controversial would be the introduction of a 'user pays' system and the expansion of private healthcare.

In the post-independence period, the lack of hard currency and a fall in national income placed considerable limitations on public spending in all three republics. Consequently, in this economic climate, cuts in health spending were inevitable, in spite of efforts in the initial years of independence to protect the service, as medical personnel faced difficulties in obtaining medicines, vaccines, medical equipment and spare parts, as well as general pharmaceutical supplies (Veenema 2000: 301).[4] By 1995, health spending had dropped from 6 to 3 per cent of GNP, and medical personnel, disillusioned by a loss of status and the deteriorating work conditions, began to abandon the profession (Borowitz and O'Dougherty 1997: 16; Almagambetova 1999: 313).[5] In these circumstances, financial assistance and advice from international organizations and consultants drove the reform process in which the ability of the Central Asian republics to maintain a large health infrastructure was threatened.

On advice from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank, all three republics embarked on a process of decentralization in which resources were distributed to poorer regions, local management of resources was increased, and both organizations gave funding for specialist programmes. An important part of these changes has been the increased funding and training of staff in rural health posts to offer a range of family and general practitioner services. The increase in primary care services effectively reduced the level of hospital admissions by 25 per cent in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and 15 per cent in Uzbekistan. Other changes in health service delivery, however, were much less successful. The introduction of private healthcare after independence, for example, failed to reduce demand on or the level of state funding to the public health service. Deteriorating socio-economic conditions, especially increasing unemployment and poverty, meant that private healthcare was far too expensive for most households. Under these circumstances, any attempt to introduce a 'user pays' system in the early years of the transition was doomed to fail. In Kazakhstan, for example, the implementation of a health insurance system collapsed soon after its introduction in 1996, and by 1998 it had been withdrawn (Almagambetova 1999: 313). The greatest obstacle to such schemes was

the level of public feeling opposed to the concept of a 'user pays' system. The Central Asian population, long accustomed to a comprehensive 'free' system, believed that any changes in entitlement constituted a loss of their rights as citizens in the transition period.[6] Consequently, this has delayed the introduction of medical insurance schemes in all three republics.

The importance of health reform in facilitating the introduction of significant preventive healthcare programmes to ameliorate the deteriorating condition of women's and children's health cannot be over-stated. Nevertheless, the real gains and improvements in the general health of the population under the Soviet system were multi-factorial and dependent as much on improvements in the socio-economic conditions of the Central Asian population, in terms of nutrition, housing, and income, as on healthcare provision. In the post-independence period, a rapid deterioration in the socio-economic conditions of the population, and the failure of the state to maintain and upgrade housing, water and sanitation systems, was beginning to take its toll, as previously eradicated communicable diseases such as cholera and tuberculosis began to re-emerge (Bauer et al. 1997a: 31 and 1997b: 59). Most important was the disclosure of high maternal and infant mortality rates, which brought into question the official statistics provided by the Soviet Union and revealed a long-standing battle in Central Asia since the 1960s to resolve this question:

> The disclosure of health statistics was highly problematic across Central Asia in the Soviet period. In 1960, Moscow was declaring an infant mortality rate of 30 per 1,000 for the region when the figure for the whole of the Soviet Union was 48 per 1,000. To give you some idea, at that time the figure given by the United States was 36 per 1,000. These data were obtained through incorrect statistical calculation. As a result we decided to collect data and come up with some real statistics, and by 1963 we were able to demonstrate that the real figure was 80 per 1,000 in urban areas and as high as 100 per 1,000 in rural areas, and we informed the government of the results. When they saw them they supported and helped set up a clear structure in the medical system to resolve the problem. From that point on, using preventive measures, the figures were reduced. By 1970 it was 50 per 1,000, by 1980 40 per 1,000 and in the 1990s it is 29 per 1,000. Clearly, the mortality rate reflects the standard of living in our society. (medical administrator, Kyrgyzstan)

Soviet protocols for the collation and calculation of statistical data were designed to enhance rather than detract from the achievements of the

socialist system. Up to independence, national data for the Central Asian republics were officially produced by Moscow and, as we can see above, often conflicted with the actual evidence available within the regions themselves. Nevertheless, after independence, all three republics continued to use the same protocols for the production of official statistics, and these conflicted with estimates made by international organizations such as the WHO.[7] Consequently, up to the present time, even Central Asian academics, specialists and professionals remain both sceptical and critical of the use of official statistics to support research outcomes.

What is clear in the transition period is that the Central Asian republics have been faced with a serious health crisis exacerbated by deteriorating socio-economic indicators. In the immediate years after independence the Kazakh, Uzbek and Kyrgyz governments expressed concern about the socially impaired populations of the region, and especially the state of women's health. Special programmes and facilities that had been introduced in the past failed to arrest rising maternal and infant mortality rates in the post-independence era. The situation was such that the Central Asian governments dedicated a large proportion of scarce health funding to programmes to improve women's health, as medical experts in the region began to argue that health statistics on fertile women were beginning to resemble aggregates of the 'sick and lame'. While there are many factors in the transition period which have exacerbated the poor status of women's health, it is the extent of environmental harm created by the grandiose development plans and defence policy of the previous Soviet administration which has created serious long-term damage to the health of the rural population and those living in regions bordering the Aral Sea and nuclear testing sites. The extent of the environmental crisis and the threat to future generations were fully apparent only after independence. The poor reproductive health of women was one of the principal indicators of the levels of environmental risk involved. Since 1991 considerable energy and funding have been expended in order to avert a greater catastrophe in human terms, on the principle that healthy mothers produce healthy children.

After the fallout: women and the environmental crisis

In 1986 one of the worst nuclear accidents in history occurred at Chernobyl in the Ukraine, one of the 'autonomous' republics of the then Soviet Union, which essentially exposed the Soviet state to far greater scrutiny than it had ever experienced as the radiation fallout spread beyond its political and environmental jurisdiction. By 1991, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was clear that economic development

had been achieved not through the introduction of modern technology and a respect for the natural environment but with outdated equipment, labour-intensive production methods and environmentally dangerous economic planning. This was nowhere more evident than in the Central Asian states of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, which were resource rich, subject to economic experimentation and now faced with the prospect of resolving some of the worst environmental problems in the world.[8] Economic planning took place within the Central Committee in Moscow, with no input from the regions or populations concerned, and was then imposed on the local administration. Much less was there any input from women, who were significantly under-represented politically at this level yet were the most damaged of the adult population by the effects of environmental degradation, such as air pollution, radiation and pesticide poisoning.

The Soviet nuclear programme with respect to energy and weaponry was pursued rigorously from the 1950s onward. The principal regions of implementation and experimentation were not in Russia but in the republics of the Ukraine and Kazakhstan. The nuclear energy programme was important to Soviet economic planning owing to the lack or expense of alternative energy supplies to assist in the expansion of industrial production, while the nuclear weapons programme was part of its cold war offensive in the arms race with the West. Both programmes were pursued with a reckless disregard for the men, women and children whose health might be affected by radiation leakage or fallout. These considerations were all the more important when economic conditions militated against population mobility.

While the explosion of the Chernobyl reactor in 1986 drew attention to the lack of safety in the nuclear power industry, the situation in Kazakhstan remained undisclosed until after independence.[9] As the previously hidden consequences of nuclear testing emerged, international experts assessing the damage commented that the impact of radioactive fallout in the region was a hundred times worse than from Chernobyl and a thousand times worse than the impact of the Hiroshima bomb (Lloyd-Roberts 1999). Over a period of more than forty years in the region of Semipalatinsk, where nuclear testing was secretly carried out,[10] over 470 nuclear bombs were exploded between 1949 and 1989, with approximately 150 explosions occurring above ground in the years preceding 1963 (Martin 1998: 1).[11] The population of the region, principally indigenous Muslim nomadic and farming communities, was neither protected from the nuclear blasts nor evacuated to a safer location.[12] By the 1980s the effects of nuclear testing were indisputable when it was calculated that

over 1.2 million people had been exposed to radiation poisoning, while the steppes of Semipalatinsk were contaminated with radiation dust. The government's own statistics show that one in three children were born in Semipalatinsk with some congenital defect. Deaths from various forms of cancer were seven times the national average and over half the adult population suffers from damaged immune systems (ibid.: 2). The facility was officially closed down in 1991, but only after mass public protest as the full extent of radiation poisoning and radioactive contamination was disclosed.[13] At the same time the government expressed a commitment to compensate all victims of nuclear testing, but because of the fiscal crisis in the transition period it has been unable to allocate sufficient resources to do so, or even to offer adequate levels of care to those affected by the fallout. The long-term effects of the Soviet nuclear programme have still to be accounted for in the future generations of the Kazakh population. As one observer stated, women are born with the number of ova that they will expend in their lifetime, thus the reproductive health of women will be the principal indicator of the long-term repercussions of radiation poisoning (Bertell 1999: 4,708).

Most tragic has been the 'fallout' in human terms, especially in terms of the reproductive health of Islamic men and women, for whom family and children remain an important measure of their individual and collective social value.[14] Reported levels of suicide in the region are especially high, not least among the terminally ill. As a Kazakh government official stated:

> The main diseases in that region are oncological such as skin cancer and leukaemia as well as a high rate of gynaecological problems and high maternal mortality. Sadly, there is also a very high suicide rate – young people who are sterile or those who have terminal cancer. The rate of suicide is closely linked to the incidence of serious diseases – in our culture impotence is a major tragedy for young people. (Committee for Women's Affairs)

Moreover, women who, in Muslim culture, derived status from their primary role in the physical welfare and spiritual education of children were especially affected by the repercussions of radiation poisoning. Some, on discovering that they were responsible for exacerbating the debilitating and fatal illnesses suffered by their children by passing on radionuclides through their breast milk, avenged themselves by resorting to a traditional form of suicide used by Central Asian women – self-immolation (Cullen 1994).[15]

In successive economic plans implemented by the Soviet state, the

intensive development of industry and agriculture has also culminated in deleterious effects on the natural environment and the health of its citizens. Women have been most vulnerable in the process, as protective labour legislation for women, instituted in the 1920s, has for the most part been ignored in certain sectors of the economy.[16] By the 1970s, the number of women in the labour market had reached almost 90 per cent of the total female population, although this figure was approximately 10 per cent lower in the Muslim republics of Central Asia (although the choice of employment for women was often confined to opportunities in their own economic region). Nevertheless, in industry women formed a high proportion of the blue-collar workforce, irrespective of training or their level of education, owing to the lower wage scales offered by white-collar employment. Here higher pay rates and bonuses for working in poor or dangerous conditions led to women working in jobs with high levels of air and noise pollution as well as those from which they were legally excluded, such as underground work in mines and in heavy industry. Until the 1980s, when new legislation was introduced, the physically debilitating nature of the work in some sectors took its toll on women's health, forcing them to abandon this work for lower-paid employment elsewhere (Shapiro 1992: 29–30; Illic 1996: 1,400).

In Central Asia, where a large proportion of heavy polluting industry was located, the ramifications of women's blue-collar employment were disclosed in the post-independence period when the state of women's reproductive health was blamed on the predominance of female labour in jobs with the poorest working conditions. In Uzbekistan, for example, while women did not engage in underground work in the uranium mines, they were still employed in the dangerous task of washing the uranium with acid. This work was undertaken in a closed environment with few safety regulations in operation.[17] Uranium mining in Kazakhstan offered similar conditions of work for women, the repercussions of which shocked people in the cities as they witnessed victims of uranium poisoning arriving for treatment:

> In the past, we never knew too much about what was happening outside of our city, town or village. Only now do we speak of paying attention to the natural environment that has been damaged by pollution … What was a shock to our organization was when forty or fifty women came to Almaty from the Kighel region, where their health had been severely damaged by their involvement in uranium production. It was just dreadful. Some of them had no hair. If you believe as we do that the fate of the nation is in the hands of mothers, then for us it was just incredible

that anyone could have allowed such a thing to happen to the mothers and future mothers of our society. (Union of Muslim Women, Kazakhstan)

Despite the revelation of poor health and safety records in Central Asian industry and its impact on the health of workers, the task of ameliorating work environments and unsafe work practices was difficult to achieve in the short term. Moreover, attempts to encourage women to abandon jobs that were deleterious to their health in the post-independence period were strongly resisted owing to the lack of alternative highly paid employment, rising inflation and the spectre of rising female unemployment. A further impediment to change has been the introduction of a mixed economy whereby the impact of labour laws introduced in the 1980s has been substantially reduced owing to a continued subversion of protective labour legislation by a growing private sector.[18]

The impact of agricultural development has been no less damaging. Again it is a sector that has depended heavily on female employment. The Soviet Union was one of the largest producers of cotton fibre, around which the economy of Central Asia revolved. The pursuit of ever increasing production levels destroyed entire forests and permanently damaged the eco-system of the region. This occurred in two ways. First, liberal use of carcinogenic defoliants and pesticides polluted the water table and radically reduced soil fertility. Second, grandiose Soviet irrigation schemes to service cotton production led to the gradual depletion of over 66 per cent of water in the Aral Sea, which was the fourth-largest inland water mass in the world (Rashid 1994: 61; Brandt 1992: 22). Women, as the principal labour force in this area of agriculture, were engaged in most of the back-breaking work of weeding and harvesting of the crop. During crop spraying children would be sent indoors while women continued to work in the fields as planes flew overhead discharging a toxic defoliant similar to Agent Orange.[19] This practice continued until 1987, and its legacy on women's health includes high levels of anaemia, hepatitis and cancer.

The devastation of the Aral Sea in support of cotton production is considered one of the largest environmental catastrophes of its kind to have affected the populations of both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The desertification of the region has destroyed the once thriving fishing industry and created sandstorms of salt and chemical fertilizers, which are carried for thousands of kilometres.[20] It has been argued that this 'cocktail' of 'toxic salts and minerals, including sodium chloride,

sodium sulphate and magnesium chloride, now constitute[s] the greatest danger from the Aral sea catastrophe' (Grabish 1999: 39). This mixture of chemicals contaminates food crops in the surrounding area while further problems have been created by hazardous agricultural practices, such as fertilizer run-off into the waterways, which has exacerbated the pollution of the water supply. For the 4 million people living in the region, the consequences of air and water pollution have led to similar health problems to those of agricultural workers, as well as high rates of infant and maternal mortality, cancer, respiratory diseases and typhoid. The continued heavy dependence of the region on cotton production in the post-Soviet era has done little to stem environmental degradation, although the depletion of the Aral Sea has substantially reduced overall production.

Illustrative of the extent of the damage to women's reproductive health due to their participation in Soviet agricultural development was a study undertaken in Kyrgyzstan among women workers engaged in tobacco production. The study found that over 3 per cent of the total number of women engaged in this area of agricultural production were severely damaged by practices in the industry – 12 per cent were infertile and the pre-natal mortality rate was 50 per cent higher among tobacco growers than in other sectors of the population. Moreover, tobacco dust was found in the reproductive tracts of 91.5 per cent of women, while over one-third presented with problems in 'reproductive function, inflammation of the genitalia or retarded sexual development' (Tabyshalieva 1997: 55). In a society in which women continue to be judged by their ability to have children, especially male children, the social repercussions of a system of economic development that sacrificed women and children's health in this way are far reaching.

By the mid-1980s many of the more dangerous practices in agriculture, which contributed to the degradation of the physical and natural environment, especially the use of carcinogenic pesticides and over-irrigation, had been reduced or discontinued. Moreover, the closing down of the nuclear facility in Kazakhstan and a clean-up operation in the area had managed to reduce radiation levels to 'normal' levels by the mid-1990s. Nevertheless, the cost of economic development in human terms could be resolved only by immediate action focusing on the reproductive health of women if the health of the next generation of Central Asian workers was not to be further compromised.

A right to choose?: women, reproduction and health

Concern for the health of women and children has been long standing and not simply a phenomenon of the post-independence period. Since the early years of sovietization, pro-natalist policies and the expectation that women would play a full and active role in the labour force required that the Soviet state prioritize 'the protection of motherhood'. In Central Asia, where the birth rate was three times higher than the national average, the question of women's reproductive health was far more critical. Thus, frequent pregnancies, a heavy work commitment and poor access to contraceptives were already beginning to take their toll on women's health by the 1970s (Chen et al. 1992: 1,465). It was in this period that an extremely high but undisclosed maternal and infant mortality rate throughout the Soviet Union led to an increasing focus on the health of women and children within the health system. Consequently, by 1979 a Scientific Centre for Mother and Child Health was established to investigate some of the problems in this area. In 1980 the first of three five-year plans was put into place, establishing women's clinics, paediatric institutes and specialist hospitals throughout the Soviet Union. Research, at this stage, revealed that poor reproductive health among women was due to harsh working conditions, dietary deficiencies and the difficulties for women of combining work with motherhood.

Thus, the state was obliged to introduce social and legal measures to ameliorate contributing factors to women's worsening health profile. By 1985 a range of special privileges had been implemented for women in the labour force, and the first of many decrees was passed to remove women from some of the more dangerous areas of employment and certain types of work. Women were awarded a longer period of maternity leave, special breaks to breast-feed their children during the working day and, for those most at risk, special food supplements and rations both during and after pregnancy, paid for by the state (Buckley 1989: 168–9; McAuley 1981: 177–8). All these measures and others were a means of demonstrating the commitment of the Soviet state to the 'protection of motherhood', although the main target group was working mothers. At this point there was no official recognition of the impact of economic development or proactive measures taken to resolve the rapidly emerging health problems among the population in areas of high environmental risks or environmental degradation.

Early programmes to improve women's health had, by 1990, provided a full network of gynaecological centres throughout the Central Asian republics which worked alongside emergency consulting clinics in rural

and urban areas. In each republic there was a major research institute dedicated to the improvement of women's and children's health, as well as a gynaecological institute where women most at risk could be taken for specialist treatment. In many cases women would be flown into the capital city by plane or helicopter to receive treatment. The infrastructure established under previous programmes was important to the success of the new programmes established in the Central Asian republics immediately after independence.

Since 1991, similar specialist programmes concerned with women's health have been established in each of the republics, all with identical aims. In Uzbekistan this was called Healthy Generation, in Kazakhstan the Programme for Maternity and Childhood and in Kyrgyzstan the Programme for the Protection of Mothers and Children. These programmes were reactive and developed to deal with a wide range of serious health problems experienced by women. Early investigation revealed some of the worst health statistics in the former Soviet Union. In all three republics between 70 and 85 per cent of women were anaemic, and a significant percentage were also suffering from a range of non-gynaecological illnesses such as respiratory problems, heart disease, stomach ailments and hepatitis. Moreover, the incidence of all these ailments was much higher among women than men. In the late 1980s, research had shown that women working in agriculture where agrochemicals and defoliants had been used presented the highest incidence of serious health problems. The status of women's health was especially poor in areas of ecological disasters such as the Aral Sea, which affects the border populations of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, and the Semipalatinsk nuclear testing complex in the Obralinski region of Kazakhstan. Thus, the programmes focused on women in these high-risk categories and acknowledged, for the first time, the question of regional difference and the impact of environmental degradation.

The programmes introduced in the Central Asian republics to reduce maternal and infant mortality involved similar strategies. The principal task was to offer a wider range of antenatal care in women's clinics, especially in the early stages of pregnancy, and identify those women in high-risk categories who required specialist treatment. Each republic had a gynaecological institute that offered specialist care, where women at risk could be transferred to receive treatment. The system of hospital births established under the Soviet system was maintained,[21] although women living in areas of environmental degradation were admitted up to a month before giving birth in order to offer optimum conditions for a safe delivery.[22] Within each programme the long-term project was

to improve infant and maternal mortality rates by dealing with non-gynaecological illnesses before conception in order to ensure safe and healthy pregnancies. This involved the prioritization of 'family planning' in order to increase birth spacing from an average of eighteen months to three years. In this way, doctors would be able to treat women with gynaecological and non-gynaecological illnesses and raise the levels of reproductive health of women of fertile age through a national pre-natal programme. The question of family planning, however, was an extremely controversial issue in Central Asia for both governments and the population in general. Thus, these programmes had serious obstacles to overcome in order to be effective.

An important factor, which created many problems in the implementation of these programmes, was the propensity of women in all three republics to have large families – the average gap between pregnancies was less than eighteen months. Many women would return to work within six weeks of giving birth, and this, it was argued, contributed to the deterioration in women's reproductive health. Thus, the main aim of programmes from 1985 onward was to encourage women to use some form of contraception to increase birth spacing or to defer pregnancy until non-gynaecological illnesses could be successfully treated. In a predominantly Islamic region this strategy was controversial, because both men and women believed that they should have however many children Allah chose to give them. Moreover, under the pro-natalist policies of the Soviet period women were actively encouraged to have children and were rewarded for doing so, receiving extensive social benefits and medals as 'hero mothers'.[23] Consequently, any programme framed on a concept of family planning or birth control would be doomed to failure.

Probably one of the most fundamental problems in introducing health programmes of this kind was that few women in the Central Asian republics had used contraception as such. Under the Soviet system abortion was almost exclusively the only form of 'contraception' used by women. Since 1955 abortion has been legal as long as it is undertaken by professional medical staff.[24] Termination procedures undertaken outside these parameters are considered a criminal offence. While abortion rates were generally lower in Central Asia than elsewhere in the Soviet Union, they were still extremely high. In the early 1990s almost one-third of pregnancies were terminated in Uzbekistan, over half in Kyrgyzstan and in Kazakhstan abortions actually outnumbered live births (Kasymova 1999b: 62; Bauer et al. 1997a: 35 and 1997b: 61).[25] One of the aims of the their health programmes was to educate women on the use of alternative

forms of contraception in order to radically reduce women's dependence on abortion. In Kazakhstan, there was justifiable concern with respect to the possibility of reducing the abortion rate in the short term:

> The rate of abortion in our country is shameful. Women are used to using it as a form of contraception because in the past there were few reliable ways of avoiding pregnancy. There is certainly a higher incidence of abortion in the North where the majority of women are ethnic Russians than in the South, and twice as many abortions in the cities than in rural areas where women want larger families. Our programme has to take account of all these factors but it will take time to convince women that other methods are reliable and less harmful. (health administrator, Kazakhstan)

Similar differences between abortion rates in urban and rural areas could be found in both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Nevertheless, the main concern in the post-independence period was the question of renewed Islamic influences that condemned the practice of abortion and birth control.[26]

Fundamental to the success of the programmes was the way in which they would be presented to Central Asian men and women. For Muslims, the very idea of birth control contravened Islamic teaching, and therefore using contraception with the specific purpose of reducing maternity would not be considered by women or sanctioned by men. The effectiveness of the programmes introduced in the early 1990s by the newly independent Central Asian governments would depend on learning from the mistakes of the Soviet family planning programmes of the 1980s. In Uzbekistan, for example, one of the coordinators of the new programme admitted that the programme introduced in 1985 was a 'fiasco'. Women openly resisted the term 'family planning' and simply refused to participate. As one female agricultural cooperative leader argued, 'there were queues for bread, there were queues for milk but I never saw any big queues at the hospital for IUDs'. The new programme used educators and medical teams who placed greater emphasis on the question of women's health, and this approach was far more successful:

> The problem was that women resisted the term family planning; it was too authoritarian. This time we didn't do that. We gave lectures about contraception and some NGOs and Islamic leaders helped us. We told them that we didn't want to reduce the birth rate but we did want healthy children and to do that we needed healthy mothers. We

> explained to them that the children they had should not die and we gave examples to the women such as 140 out of every thousand children are ill, six per cent are underweight and twelve per cent have inherited diseases. We even used examples from the Koran to show that Islam is not against women controlling their fertility, and to this end we used quotations from the Koran. This time we had results. (deputy minister for health)

In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan there was similar resistance to the idea of family planning, not least from the governments themselves. Neither republic intended to use women's health programmes as a means of reducing the birth rate. The Kazakh government has, since independence, actively pursued a pro-natalist policy owing to the fact that for most of the Soviet period ethnic Kazakhs constituted a minority, around 40 per cent of the total population, and the aim therefore was to redress this imbalance.[27] For similar reasons, the Kyrgyz government has encouraged large families among the population.[28] Nevertheless, increasing birth spacing to an optimum figure of three years, which is the aim in all three republics, would automatically reduce the number of children that fertile women are able to conceive.

All the programmes led the shift towards a decentralization of medical services, increasing medical inputs at the local level with a concentrated effort on delivering much-needed diagnosis and treatment to the most remote regions of the republics. It was in these rural areas and environmental disaster zones that some of the worst indicators of women's health could be found. Medical teams consisting of gynaecologists, doctors, therapists and paediatricians went from village to village in specially equipped vehicles giving educational lectures and attending women and children referred to them by local doctors. These mobile specialist teams were also responsible for training local medical personnel in the detection and early treatment of life-threatening illnesses in infants and children. Governments closely monitored the situation by maintaining a three-monthly cycle of medical check-ups to assess the outcomes. For the first time, detailed medical records were kept to follow the impact of the programmes on birth spacing, abortion rates, contraceptive use and maternal and infant mortality rates.

Notwithstanding the efforts of the respective governments to improve women's and children's health through special programmes, their efficacy would depend on the capacity of the respective governments to deal with the impact of the prevailing economic crisis within the region. Consequently, deteriorating socio-economic conditions were

also compensated for within the programme, with important voluntary work being carried out by community organizations and NGOs.[29] For example, under the Soviet system special food rations had been supplied to children and pregnant women in all the republics, and this was continued through the incorporation of supplementary nutrition plans. In Uzbekistan, two government-sponsored organizations in particular have made vital and important contributions to the success of the programme. The Soglom Avlod Uchun[30] Foundation, a charity organization, has supported monitoring programmes for obstetric and health welfare, raised money for specialist medical equipment and sponsored a programme for the production of baby food in the country. The environmental organization Ecosan has been prominent in raising levels of awareness among the population with respect to environmental risks and their links to the deteriorating health of women and children (Kasymova 1999b: 60–5). Most importantly, since 1993 it has raised funding from international sources to send special trains equipped with diagnostic equipment and even an operating theatre to environmental disaster zones, principally the area surrounding the Aral Sea, to examine and treat those affected by the crisis. All these efforts have made a major contribution to the success of government programmes.

By the mid-1990s, in all three republics there was evidence of positive outcomes whereby infant and maternal mortality rates had been reduced by approximately 50 per cent (Veenema 2000: 302). The most surprising results were obtained through the birth spacing programme, even though the means by which they were obtained and the conspicuous involvement of international agencies in this aspect of the programme remains controversial. By 1997, the birth rate had declined in all three republics, and this was achieved through a substantive increase in the use of contraception (Bauer et al. 1997a: 34–5 and 1997b: 62–3; Kuzibaeva 2001: 4). In Central Asia this was an important social change, because before the programmes were initiated in the republics less than 10 per cent of women were using some form of birth control. Of this number the majority were located in urban areas, where the desire for large families was less prevalent than among rural women. After independence economic pressures and the reduction of state support for large families and working mothers were already exerting considerable pressure on couples to engage in some form of family planning. In 1996 there was clear evidence in all three republics that birth control was being practised by three-quarters to two-thirds of the female population, and social surveys indicated that the fertility rate had declined by between 30 and 50 per cent.[31] Important to this change has been the increased availability

of modern contraceptives in the republics since independence, primarily funded through the government health programmes.

Certainly health programmes of this magnitude can be extremely costly. The lack of hard currency in all three republics in the early 1990s meant that all three governments were highly dependent for assistance on international organizations such as WHO, UNFPRA, UNDP and UNICEF. Consequently, the question of 'choice' in the range of modern contraceptives that could be used came down to efficiency and cost-effectiveness. For example, it is simpler and more cost-effective to fit an intrauterine device (IUD) than to offer alternatives such as the contraceptive pill. The latter is far more expensive and requires much closer monitoring by medical personnel. In all three republics birth spacing was achieved almost exclusively through the use of IUDs, the acquisition of which, for the most part, was through direct donations or funding from international organizations. In the early 1990s Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan were in the process of testing injectable contraceptives for WHO, principally Deprovera, and using these primarily on women in high-risk categories. Other forms of contraception were unobtainable, not widely available or considered to be unsuitable. Bearing in mind that these programmes had been established to improve the generally low levels of reproductive health among women in all three republics, a heavy dependence on such a limited range of contraception could only augment the risk of side effects experienced by women in the programme.

By the late 1990s, surveys in all three republics showed that the majority of couples practising birth control were dependent on the use of IUDs. Moreover, early concerns about the quality of IUDs received in the programme were borne out by the rate of complications experienced by women using this form of birth control. In Uzbekistan, for example, one study found that 37 per cent of women using this form of birth control experienced complications (Veenema 2000: 305). In a field report, Balfour (2000) argues that in Uzbekistan this involves both serious health risks and, in some cases, an infringement of women's reproductive rights: 'The "coils" fitted routinely these days after childbirth with or without a woman's permission are uncomfortable, frequently unreliable and sometimes downright dangerous. Left unchecked for years, they breed infection, cause considerable pain and even death.'

Only a small percentage of women use other forms of contraception such as oral contraceptives owing to limited availability, and thus principally urban rather than rural women use them. Injectable contraceptives continue to be distributed and used among a small but

significant minority of women, although concerns continue with respect to the long-term effects of this form of birth control on women's health (Bauer et al. 1997b: 63).[32] Such disquiet, however, did not deter the recent adoption of Norplant in the Uzbek family planning programme (Kuzibaeva 2001: 8). Moreover, while undeniably impressive, government statistics demonstrating an increase in the use of birth control among the Central Asian population continue to include abortion. By all accounts the number of official abortions has decreased since 1991 as the use of other forms of birth control has increased, but some studies suggest that in the light of changing attitudes towards abortion there has been a substantive rise in 'artificial and unreported' abortions in some regions (Bauer et al. 1997a: 35; Kuzibaeva 2001: 8).[33] In view of the limited choice of contraception available in Central Asia and a rising incidence of negative experience among a significant proportion of women, a return to the use of abortion as a 'reliable' and familiar form of birth control may prove to be inevitable in the future.

The positive outcomes of the early health programmes led to a second phase of national programmes launched from 1997 onward in the Central Asian republics, again focusing on the protection of women's and children's health but with a much clearer focus on family planning and public education with respect to birth control. With the decentralization of public health services established, and more effective primary health facilities at the local level, the new programmes have been able to better target limited resources to provinces where women have the poorest reproductive health profile and in which fertility remains high. Thus they will in effect target some of the most traditional and conservative communities in Central Asian society, in which women and men are already suspicious of using any form of fertility control. Moreover, women are less likely to remain in the programme if they experience further health problems as a consequence of using a specific form of contraception. The continued success of these programmes will, therefore, rely on the question of choice – being able to offer the safest forms of contraception to match the needs of individual women.

Towards a healthy generation?

The reform of the health system in all three Central Asian republics has been undertaken in response to the radical decline in national health budgets since independence. Part and parcel of this process has been an attempt to develop a more efficient delivery of health services and the introduction of national health programmes targeting women and children and socially impaired populations in regions of environmental

devastation. Yet the downsizing of the system and the rationalization of health provision through a process of decentralization in the transitional period have failed to stem the decline in the general health of the population. Without the introduction of a comprehensive 'user pays' system that continues to offer free healthcare for the most vulnerable sectors of society, sustaining the level of healthcare in the Central Asian republics will not be possible. Moreover, other factors unrelated to funding levels exacerbate this situation, not least poverty and unemployment. It is significant to note that since independence all three republics have witnessed a drop in their world ranking in the human development index; in the case of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan this has meant a drop of almost thirty places from 68th to 97th and 69th to 92nd respectively (Human Development Report 1999).[34] Clearly this change is sufficiently serious to roll back any gains in the general health of the population achieved in the 1990s.

Nevertheless, the success of the national women's and children's health programmes in all three republics has been due in large part not only to the financial sponsorship of the respective governments but also to the contribution of international organizations, as well as substantial input from environmental organizations and indigenous NGOs. This coalition of forces has been a necessary part of the process of change in the republics, especially with respect to raising the awareness of the population of environmental questions and the education of men and women concerning the question of reproductive health and family planning, as well as compensating for the diminishing government financial and human resource inputs into the health system.

The launch of new programmes focusing on women's and children's health since 1997 in the Central Asian republics is testimony to the continued high incidence of disease among women and children. These, however, have been scaled down to focus on the population in regions that have the poorest health indicators, as the question of funding once again determines the range and scope of improvements in health services. Most important has been the movement of environmental issues up the political agenda, with all governments making a commitment to improving the social and physical environment in order to improve the general health of the population in the long term. The role of NGOs in supporting these programmemes has been fundamental to many of the improvements that have occurred over the last decade.

In the early years of independence, the Central Asian republics received substantial aid in instituting health reform and implementing the programmes for improving the reproductive health of women and the

health of children (Veenema 2000: 301). In recent years this assistance has been substantially reduced – funding and sponsorship have been channelled into specific projects and therefore are far more selective. Consequently, family planning projects have been scaled down as the capacity of the government to subsidize the purchase of increasingly expensive contraceptive supplies has diminished. Thus, only women considered most at risk receive free contraceptives, principally in rural areas where fertility remains high, while the rest of the population is confronted with the limited availability of contraceptives and high prices (Weber and Watson 2000). This may in the long term exacerbate the question of choice, most especially outside the major cities.

One important development since 1996 has been the establishment of a field office of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) in Central Asia, which has sought to collaborate with indigenous NGOs already involved in supporting programmes for improving the reproductive health of women. Community organizations such as the Mahalla and Women's Committees, once government sponsored, have played an important role in the implementation of health programmes in Central Asia, assuming responsibility for the education of women and young girls with respect to reproductive behaviour, birth spacing and maternal health.[35] In response to the concerns of these organizations, and their experience and involvement in previous programmes the IPPF has acted as a conduit for the NGO networks in the individual republics in the advocacy of women's reproductive rights. This has included creating alliances between rural and urban NGOs, women's groups, youth associations, human rights groups and health associations. The aim is to establish independent family planning associations (FPAs) in the Central Asian republics which can defend the interests and rights of women while maintaining an educative function in the dissemination of information about reproductive health services, sex education and gender issues. With this end in mind, the IPPF has funded various initiatives for the improvement of gender-specific health services in Central Asia, as well as sponsoring the development of a new curriculum for the education of medical and health professionals in reproductive health (Shamsutdinova 2000).[36] It is not clear, however, whether the planned FPAs will be driven by international values and norms with respect to family planning and reproductive health as opposed to Central Asian cultural values and norms, which have predominated and contributed to the success of earlier programmes.

The NGO sector has also been an important source of top-up funding and has engaged in collaborative projects to increase the coverage

of government health programmes in the 1990s. In Uzbekistan, for example, the Soglom Avlod Uchun Foundation has made a substantive contribution to supporting national programmes for the improvement of women's health. Established with some funding from the government, it has raised a considerable amount of money from domestic and international sponsors for expanding facilities and healthcare provision, especially in rural areas.[37] One of the most important initiatives of the foundation has been its financial sponsorship of the mobile medical teams that travel to remote and inaccessible areas of the country as part of the government's Healthy Generation programme. It has also set up women's dispensaries, funded the purchase of medical equipment and is now involved in the production of baby food and dry breakfasts for schoolchildren (Kasymova 1999b: 64–5). While NGOs in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are involved in supporting government health programmes in specific areas, there is no other NGO of comparable size or resources in the region. Nevertheless, given the foundation's close links with the government and the Ministry of Health, its status as an NGO, in the true sense of the word, remains questionable.

While the introduction of proactive medical care and programmes to improve the general health of women and children in the region represents an important initiative, the root causes of damage to the health of the Central Asian population are yet to be resolved. In this endeavour, a plethora of environmental NGOs has emerged since independence. The first environmental NGO established in the region, the Nevada-Semipalatinsk movement of Kazakhstan, mobilized the local population and was successful in suspending nuclear testing and closing down the facility in Semey. Along with other similar organizations across the region, its principal activities have been to raise awareness about the effects of nuclear fallout in the region and initiate investigations into the damage to the health of the local population. Probably the largest and most effective environmental organization in the region is Ecosan, whose principal work focuses on the Aral Sea environmental crisis, which affects all three republics. It has raised millions of dollars to fund health trains to the areas affected by the ecological disaster, examining and treating over 45,000 people, the majority of whom were women and children. More recently efforts have been channelled into raising funding to provide access to potable water in the region, owing to the pollution of traditional water sources which has exacerbated the already deteriorating health indicators in the areas that border a desiccated Aral Sea (Kasymova 1999b: 66). Yet the amount of humanitarian aid that has reached Central Asia to assist in one of the most famous and

over-investigated ecological crises has been negligible.[38] Furthermore, Central Asian governments are unable to divert the amount of funding needed to address the environmental crisis without international support. Consequently, local communities must do what they can, and in the case of the Aral Sea region this includes a significant number of female heads of households.[39] Self-help has become an important byword whereby, bereft of government assistance, people are setting up small projects with the limited funding offered by international organizations and assisted by the scope of a barter economy now re-established in the region (Grabish 1999: 39–40).

The work of NGOs in assisting the state in maintaining universal healthcare provision in the face of considerable economic difficulties has failed to prevent the breakdown of what was once a free universal healthcare system. The question of the supply of important pharmaceuticals at popular prices has become a major issue in the region. Increasingly patients have been expected to pay for medication in situations, such as in-patient treatment, when previously they would have been provided free of charge (Asian 2001; Borowitz and O'Dougherty 1997: 36; Klugman and Schieber 1996: 20). Moreover, there has been an increase in the out-of-pocket expenses that patients are expected to meet, both officially and unofficially, in their search for better medical treatment in an under-funded health system with poorly paid health professionals. This has occurred at a time when average incomes have declined and unemployment and poverty have increased in the region. It is the rural population which has been severely affected by these changes (Weber and Watson 2000). In the past, government programmes and NGO projects have specifically targeted rural areas, less well served by the socialist healthcare system than the urban population, focusing on primary healthcare provision and education. Nevertheless, for rural dwellers this remains too little too late as they increasingly turn to traditional healers and folk medicine for the treatment of common ailments. Since independence, alternative medicine has flourished and expanded as a reliable, low-cost option to an increasingly estranged and expensive state health service.[40]

By the end of the 1990s the crisis in the healthcare system has led to radically reduced funding for the new women's and children's health programmes initiated by all three republics after 1997. This has led to the targeting of the most vulnerable populations in rural areas, leaving a large proportion of women without specialist medical services provided under the previous programme. By all accounts the availability of contraceptives has substantially diminished, threatening the efficacy

of the family planning programmes supported by the government and NGOs. In effect what remains is a limited range of high-cost contraceptives available to an increasingly cynical female population. Under these circumstances any suggestion of choice or reproductive rights is derisory as more women are faced with the health consequences of inappropriate contraception. Past programmes have favoured contraception, which places the question of choice and control in the hands of health professionals rather than individual women. This seems to have occurred on the grounds of expediency and 'effectiveness'. The success of previous programmes, abetted by declining socio-economic conditions, has been to effect a change in social attitudes to the control of fertility and a desire for smaller families, even in rural areas where previously large families were the norm (Kuzibaeva 2001; Veenema 2000; Balfour 2000). The indications are that in the light of limited options women are once again turning to traditional birth control methods and abortion to achieve these aims. This may have the effect of reversing the short-term gains of government programmes based on improving women's health by reducing maternal and infant mortality through family planning. Under such circumstances the aims and ideals of producing a Healthy Generation remain unfulfilled.

Notes

1 In 1997 the capital of Kazakhstan was moved from the southern city of Almaty to the northern central city of Astana, previously known as Akmola.

2 There has been a continued attempt in the transition period to encourage employer provision of medical services, which has been most successful in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

3 There were usually special outpatient wards at local hospitals allocated for this purpose. A patient's stay could last between one and three days. Normal hospital admissions in Central Asia were on average for a period of fourteen days.

4 Overall throughout the Soviet Union medical spending remained on average 6 per cent of total GNP, but within five years of independence that figure had dropped to approximately 3 per cent.

5 See Chapter 3. The figure of 6 per cent was the average expenditure on health in the Soviet Union.

6 The idea of a free health service was something of an anomaly because taxes and other less visible inputs and levies already funded the system. See M. Field, 'Medical Care in the Soviet Union', in Horst Herlemann (ed.), *Quality of Life in the Soviet Union*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, and London, 1987.

7 Kuzibaeva (2001: 6) argues that the differences between international and national estimates with respect to health indicators are principally due to the methods of calculation used and the definitions governing what, for example, constitutes a live birth.

8 See Rumer (1989) and Malik (1994).

9 The Polygon in Semipalatinsk constituted the largest nuclear testing facility in the world, and its existence was never acknowledged by the Soviet Union throughout its period of operation.

10 Now known as Semey.

11 See also Kazakhstan Human Development Report, 1995.

12 The Nevada-Semipalatinsk environmental group claim that nomad Kazakhs were also used as human guinea pigs. See Martin (1998: 2).

13 The site was completely closed only in July 2000 when the complex was destroyed in a final detonation with assistance and financing from the US Defense Department.

14 See Chapter 5.

15 Ibid.

16 See Chapter 3.

17 Women would be removed from this work area only during pregnancy but not during the period of lactation, which put nursing infants at risk.

18 See Chapter 3.

19 Ibid.

20 The toxic airborne cocktail of chemicals coming from the Aral Sea is being found as far away as Turkmenistan, creating a rate of respiratory illness equal to that of the border regions of the Aral Sea. Other more recent reports have located airborne deposits along the Arctic shore of the former Soviet Union, in the Himalayas and the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans (Grabish 1999: 39).

21 Home births were discouraged under the Soviet system and except in the case of emergencies women were admitted to hospital to give birth.

22 This was undertaken also to offer women complete rest and a high vitamin diet in order to improve their general standard of health. This was most important to women who suffered from serious non-gynaecological illnesses.

23 See Kuzibaeva (2001), Hoffman (2000) and Tabyshalieva (1997).

24 Under Stalin's pro-natalist policies, a woman's right to abortion, which had been in force since 1918, was withdrawn and made illegal in 1936. This was repealed only in 1955 when the number of maternal deaths from illegal abortions reached unprecedented levels throughout the Soviet Union.

25 Kazakhstan is the only republic in which large families have been far less prevalent than elsewhere in Central Asia.

26 At least one study in the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan revealed that this has contributed to an increase in the number of unregistered abortions being carried out (Bauer et al. 1997a: 35).

27 The purges of the Kazakh population from the 1930s onward by Stalin and the mass immigration of Russians effectively reduced the size of the indigenous population as a proportion of the total.

28 Kyrgyzstan is the smallest republic of the three, with a total population of some 4.5 million people, of which ethnic Kyrgyz constituted 2.8 million at independence. The government at that time argued that because the total

number of Kyrgyz people worldwide numbered 4 million there was every reason to encourage population growth.

29 This was most evident in Uzbekistan, where a complete system of support was constructed in offering dietary supplements, special foods for women and children most at risk.

30 Roughly translated, this means – 'for a healthy generation'.

31 The number of children born per woman of reproductive age.

32 These concerns relate to the use of injectable contraceptives on women in high-risk categories, the question of side effects and the length of time that the body takes to eliminate the hormones after discontinuing treatment.

33 In Kazakhstan, which had the highest abortion rate in Central Asia (until 1994 abortions outnumbered births); it is significant that the principal cause of maternal mortality is abortion, which, in recent years, accounted for 32.4 per cent of all maternal deaths (WHO 1999: 16).

34 The HDI ranking is out of a total of 174.

35 See Chapter 6.

36 This initiative involved the Johns Hopkins University Program for International Education in Reproductive Health.

37 There is often considerable difficulty with many NGOs and charity foundations in establishing where government sponsorship begins and ends. How far one might describe some of these initiatives as NGOs is questionable because some were created to qualify for aid and financial support for government programmes. See Chapter 6.

38 See Small et al. (2001).

39 In areas of ecological crisis, such as the Aral Sea regions and Semey in Kazakhstan, employment opportunities have been decimated by the shutdown of operations and the collapse of local infrastructure, and therefore men migrate to find work, leaving women to deal with the question of day-to-day survival and family welfare.

40 A recent field report from Uzbekistan stated that owing to the crisis in the health system one of the most popular publications is a book produced by an NGO called *Where There is No Doctor*, which identifies generic medicines at popular prices and has a section on herbal medicines and their usage. See Asian (2001).

5 | Faith, community and fire: women, Islam and the family

Probably one of the most interesting phenomena in the post-independence period has been the re-emergence of Islamic tradition and practice into public life in Central Asia. In the early 1990s this stimulated fears in the Western world that the region could go the way of Iran and Afghanistan and invoke the demise of the secular state in the region. Claims that the 'Islamic revival' in Central Asia would lead to a rise of fundamentalism that would sweep the region were grossly exaggerated. The fact was that the Soviet project to suppress traditional society through 'social engineering' and the destruction of Islam had failed. The flame of Islam had not been put out by sovietization but had smouldered clandestinely throughout the Soviet period. The virulent anti-Islamic campaign in the 1920s, *Khudjum*,[1] which focused on women, may have succeeded in removing the external trappings of a Muslim society – the veil – but, as Marfua Tokhtakhodjaeva has demonstrated, you cannot tell people how to think and feel.[2] As in the past, Islam remains the foundation stone of Central Asian society and is the socio-political glue that has held the region together.

By the ninth century, when the Arab conquest of the region was complete, Central Asia had become one of the cultural pillars of the Muslim world, and it remains second only to the holy sites of Mecca and Medina in importance (Bennigsen and Wimbush 1985: 6; Rashid 2001: 46). The majority of Central Asian Muslims are Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi school of law and are both liberal and tolerant in the practice of Islam. Shiism is practised by a minority of Central Asian Muslims, principally organized into smaller groups and sects located in the Ferghana region and the principal holy sites. It is important to acknowledge, however, that various Islamic groups and sects form an important part of the development of Islam in the region – both reformist, Jadidism,[3] and, since independence, more militant forms of Islam, such as Wahhabism, which have been 'imported' from Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Iran.[4] While various forms of Islam were sustained throughout the Soviet period, it is Sufism, often referred to as folk Islam or Islamic mysticism, which has been most influential in the expansion of Islam and the fight against the de-Islamicization of the region since the twelfth century (Bennigsen and Wimbush 1985: 7).[5]

Sufism, following Sunni Muslim tradition, was not church-bound in its practice of Islam; noted for its tolerance of other religions, it focused on the importance of private prayer rather than the mosque. The main emphasis within Sufism is on individual self-improvement through direct communication with God, and the preservation and expansion of the Muslim faith and its traditions. The growing influence of Sufism throughout the Soviet period was a direct result of its social flexibility, doctrinal liberalism and an emphasis on the role of tradition in the process of modernization. Many Sufi orders fought against the Bolsheviks and afterwards went 'underground', returning to the urban and rural communities to sustain Islamic tradition and practice in clandestinity. Consequently, from 1928 onward the destruction of mosques and the anti-Islamic campaign orchestrated by the Soviets failed to destroy the religious base in the community (Rashid 2001: 47). In this environment, Sufi orders that had always operated in the private realm of people's lives thrived.

The instrumental and partial rehabilitation of Islam by Stalin in 1943 was an acknowledgement that the virulent anti-Islamic campaigns had failed to eradicate Islam in the Soviet Central Asian territories.[6] Four Spiritual Boards were set up in the region with the Central Asian Spiritual Directorate of Muslims established in Tashkent. The principal aim was to reconcile socialism and Islam, and to control the Muslim population and the practice of Islam within Central Asia. Mullahs who supported the regime were allowed to register, but the practice of Islam was severely restricted to conducting prayers in the few remaining official working mosques and the celebration of religious rites such as weddings and funerals. Thus, by 1960, official Islam was established and unregistered clerics practising outside the official system were arrested and imprisoned. By resolving the 'Islamic problem' in this way the Soviet state sought to demonstrate its 'reconciliation' with Islam and rebuild relations with neighbouring Islamic countries (Rashid 2001: 47; Ro'I 1990: 50–1).

Given the limited legal parameters within which official Islam operated, the Muslim population had little choice but to turn to parallel or unofficial Islam in order to sustain their faith and maintain a sense of identity within an imposed Soviet culture. In this context it was Sufism which became the more powerful religious force, sustaining the influence and importance of Islam in the region.

> Unregistered mosques flourished clandestinely. People ran madrassas in their homes, gathered to pray and perform religious ceremonies at

> night, and continued to visit shrines and tombs in large numbers – ostensibly to celebrate communist holidays. Itinerant mullahs carried out religious rites, surviving through donations from the community[7] … The Sufi secret societies contributed enormously to sustaining Islam during this period. (Rashid 2001: 47)

Sufi Islam was for the most part antagonistic to Soviet rule and opposed the official Islamic establishment which, for its part, consistently refused to publicly condemn parallel Islam. Without doubt they were interdependent religious forces – one could not survive without the other in the face of Soviet ambivalence towards Islam, which fluctuated between reconciliation and religious purges up until independence.

What was most distinctive about Sufism within parallel Islam, moreover, was the large number of female adepts participating in the *tariqa* (Sufi brotherhoods). Their role was not merely that of followers but that of unofficial clerics who taught the Koran, officiated at life-cycle rituals such as births, weddings and funerals and supervised Islamic traditions. The fact that women were pivotal to the preservation of Islamic culture and traditions was not lost on the Bolsheviks in the process of sovietization (Massell 1974: 87). The attack against Islam, from the outset, targeted women through forced unveiling and politicization that faced covert and overt resistance.[8] Throughout the virulent anti-Islamic campaigns, which peaked in the 1980s, reinvigorated by events in Iran and Afghanistan, Soviet officials bemoaned the fact that the *tariqa* was far more successful in mobilizing women than the anti-religious movement (Bennigsen and Wimbush 1985: 20). In the Soviet project women were the key to supplanting religious ideology with political ideology in the belief that the latter rather than the former would empower women in a new Soviet Central Asia. Yet for the Central Asian population, and most especially women, it was never a simple either/or situation whereby finding one's place in the new social order required an abandonment of one's sense of identity.

> My mother was an important *otine* [female cleric] in our community; she could read Arabic and taught young women the Koran. These activities were illegal. She never believed that there was any conflict in being a good communist and a good Muslim and always looked for the similarities between the two. We were taught that the Soviet system had a lot to offer women and my mother told us we should take advantage of this but that we were Uzbek Muslims first and last. Even now, I cannot separate being an Uzbek and a Muslim. For me it is exactly the same thing. (retired pharmacist)

Thus, the nexus between Islam and national identity remained unbroken throughout seventy years of Soviet rule. The pivotal role of women in sustaining the faith within the family and community, however, contrasted sharply with the expanding opportunities for women in public life. This in effect underlined the ambivalence of women's existence within the Soviet system.

The roll-back of the principle of gender equality in the post-independence period is testimony to the failure of sovietization. Parallel Islam was, without doubt, the major obstacle to the meaningful transformation of gender relations in Central Asian society and the assimilation of Muslims into the Russian population. In each ethnic community, no matter how loosely the symbiosis between culture, national identity and religion manifested itself, the majority of the Central Asian population maintained some semblance of an Islamic lifestyle. Irrespective of the opportunities that women had in Soviet society, in terms of career, education and social or political status, they continued to assume their traditional role in the family and community. As Tokhtakhodjaeva argues: 'the Soviet model envisaged creating a rather fantastic creature of an educated woman which in reality resulted in a kind of split personality, for they looked modern on the one hand but had to look back to their families and local community on the other' (1998: 3). Here social relations were governed by age, gender and cultural ethical values, which were the crucible of women's empowerment and disempowerment in a changing Central Asian society. In the post-independence period a reaffirmation of national identity, effectively denied throughout the Soviet period, brought the relationship between culture and religion to the fore. It was in the negotiation of past, present and future that women faced the ambiguity of their existence, and the spectre of lost opportunity and status provided considerable incentive to challenge a reimposition of historic truths in the face of forgotten facts.

Otines – women as guardians of the faith

The preservation of Islam in all its different forms in Central Asia would not have been possible without the active participation of women. As the principal targets of the early Soviet anti-religious campaigns, women maintained their faith and social status within their families and communities through their support of a parallel Islam. The belief that the eradication of Islamic dress signalled the modernization and secularization of Central Asian society in the Soviet period was as mistaken as that which links the re-emergence of religious dress in some parts of Central Asia to a rise of Islamic fundamentalism in

the post-independence period. The maintenance of national identity, Islamic practice or traditional culture needed neither the mosque nor the *parandja*. Islam, for the majority of the Central Asian population, remained an integral part of their national identity. Even those comfortably ensconced within Soviet culture and who considered themselves to be lapsed Muslims or non-believers continued to participate in major feast days and life-cycle rituals.[9] Not to have done so would have made them ostracized as outsiders within their local community.[10]

Even before the spread of Islam in the early twentieth century the practice of shamanism, incorporating ancient beliefs and practices, was widespread within Central Asia. Once Islam was established as the predominant religion, shamanist practices continued to coexist with those of the Muslim faith, especially among nomadic groups in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, where they remain an equally important and integral part of the local culture and beliefs. Among the adherents of shamanism women were mystics, priests and traditional healers with a recognized status and power in the community.[11] Tolmacheva argues that such practices and beliefs in all their complexity continue to hold an important place in the lives of women:

> The prevalence of beliefs in female spirits (fertility, ancestor and hearth spirits) and female saints (Ambar-ona, Bibi-Seshambe etc), in combination with women's recourse to amulets, pilgrimages to holy places, women's vigils and so on, quite aside from Islam-perceived sexual segregation and women-focused social norm, has created the perception of 'women's religion' in Central Asia. (1993: 533)

Study of religion and especially Islam in Central Asia has rarely geared itself to gaining an understanding of the spirituality of women, not least owing to the fact that they suffer from an androcentric bias (ibid.: 533–4). Nevertheless, the few insights that do exist into women's religious role in pre-Islamic Central Asia clearly underwrite the nature and extent of women's participation in the Muslim faith.

Within Islam, gender segregation, especially with respect to prayer and religious education, empowered women. In the past, the social ritualization of gender segregation was far more apparent in urban than in rural areas and among some ethnic groups rather than others. Within Islam this was most apparent with respect to the saying of prayers, whereby among the Kyrgyz, most unusually, women prayed alongside men, while among other ethnic groups this was not the case and special mosques were set aside for women (Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996: 24; Rashid 1994: 153).[12] Moreover, young middle- and upper-class women

in urban areas received an education in Koranic law and the classics, and in some cases they were taught Persian and mathematics. Other women in rural and urban areas attended primary schools run by the mullahs and were taught Islamic law, while elders in the communities transmitted to women the importance of 'religious legends and ritual practice'. Through this education the spiritual energy of women grew, and many became spiritual healers and soothsayers with their own following and were leaders among women (Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996: 25–7, Tolmacheva 1993: 532–3).

Traditionally certain women held honorary positions within Islam as *otines*, at the same level as mullahs, whose task was to preach the faith. Their principal role was to provide religious education to women from birth to adulthood. The role was hereditary; thus, in the past, *otines*[13] were women who came from 'religious dynasties' (Sirojiddinov 1999: 2; Fathi 1997: 29–31). Over time their role expanded from an educational to a religious one, whereby they were responsible not only for religious education but also for directing religious ceremonies and rituals and disseminating the faith. *Otines* selected apprentices from their neighbourhood or community, and the backgrounds of young women were scrutinized to ensure that they came from good 'pious' families. Apprentices were educated by their mentor, and at the age of twenty they were allowed to participate in religious rites. It was not until the age of forty, an age that holds specific importance in Islam, that they had the right to dispense knowledge (Tolmacheva 1993: 537).[14] Despite Soviet religious repression, the role of *otines* in Islam survived, playing an important role in the preservation of the faith (Fathi 1997: 29–35).

After the revolution, when religious education was permitted only for a very few, those who knew Arabic and could sing the Koranic verses, both men and women, gained considerable status in parallel Islam. *Otines* who held real authority within the urban and rural communities continued their activities in clandestinity. It was Sufism with its social flexibility and doctrinal liberalism which actively recruited women as sheikhs and clerics, especially after the Second World War, when the numbers of men with the requisite skills to educate the young and administer the faith declined. While there is no accurate record of the actual numbers of male and female Sufis, anecdotal evidence suggests that the Sufi sects were extremely successful in attracting large numbers of women into their ranks (Ro'I 1990: 52; Bennigsen and Wimbush 1985: 22). Moreover, Sufi mullahs and muftis were ensconced within the community and protected and supported by it. The home became the unofficial *madrasah* and the illegal mosque, while female sheikhs

led special women's groups as well as engaging in the practice of traditional medicine (Saktanber and Ozatas-Baykal 2000: 345–6). Within the clandestine world of parallel Islam the status and authority of the *otines* were considerably enhanced.

Among women, *otines* held a revered and special position, not merely as members of the community of elders but also as female experts in religion and ritual (Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996: 27). Thus, they held considerable power within the community, reminding women and the young of their obligations, such as 'respect of elders, refusal of mixed marriages, observance of religious practices and the need to make pilgrimages to holy places' (Fathi 1997: 37; Tolmacheva 1993: 541). *Otines* did not receive money for their work but would be given traditional gifts by individuals for special prayers and blessings. They also led female pilgrimages to holy places in Central Asia, where they would assist in paying homage to the saints, recite the prayers and preach to women.[15] In the Soviet period the majority of pilgrims were women who, by pledging their faith, hoped to resolve problems of fertility, to pray for the birth of a son or a cure for illness (Fathi 1997: 37; Koroteyeva and Makarova 1998: 593). All these activities were conducted outside official Islam, and like other Muslim clerics women were often accused by the state of being false mullahs and sorcerers and, if caught, could be imprisoned.

Yet in spite of the purges and other political strategies aimed at ridding Central Asia of the 'Islamic problem', the Soviet state consistently underestimated the power of Islam within the region. The façade of the modernization of Central Asian society hid a resilient traditional Islamic lifestyle supported by unofficial clerics and community elders. Even the young who were educated under the Soviet system did not reject traditional religious and folk practices within their respective communities but embraced them, albeit in some cases partially, in order to maintain their links with the past and their ethnic identity in the present. Moreover, the persistence of Islam owed much to the active subversion of Soviet attempts to destroy it. For example, some *otines* were full card-carrying members of the Communist Party, and Muslims infiltrated and dominated anti-religious agitprop using counter-propaganda and subterfuge to subvert the anti-Islamic campaigns (Fathi 1997: 36; Bennigsen 1984: 43–4). Without doubt parallel Islam presented a formidable obstacle to the sovietization of Central Asia as traditional practices, rather than being destroyed, became firmly entrenched in an exogenous Soviet model.

In the years preceding independence, a liberalization of government policy with respect to religion led to the 'coming out' of Islam as

mosques began to open once again and feast days were celebrated openly. After independence, as the number of working mosques rapidly increased and *madrasahs*, religious schools, were reopened, the opportunity to openly practise and be reacquainted with their religion led to increasing numbers of parents sending their daughters to the female *madrasahs*. This was especially the case in the Fergana region, which had a strong tradition of the practice of Shia Islam. For women who were to become *otines* this was of particular importance owing to the fact that from the 1970s onward, thanks to Soviet purges, most practising *otines* were unable to cite the Koran in Arabic because of the lack of copies in the original (Fathi 1997: 35, Sirojiddinov 1999: 22).[16] Now, with the liberation of Islamic practice and education, the reintroduction of religious education in Arabic enabled future clerics and female preachers to use the universal language of Islam. Some young women, after attending the *madrasahs*, became *otines*, while established *otines* turned to them as 'pupils' in order to learn the Koran in Arabic. Moreover, the Muslim boards of the newly independent republics gave official recognition to some *otines*, who were permitted to teach women in small mosques and Islamic centres.

Since independence, the influence of Islam has substantially increased in the Central Asian region; it is recognized by the state and taken into account in government policy-making. The reaffirmation of Muslim values was an important part of the reconstruction of national identity in the wake of a Soviet cultural ideology. *Otines*, rather than losing their influence in the post-Soviet period, became a crucial element in the strengthening of Islam and its practice in their communities. Yet the resurgence of Islam and the liberalization of the practice of religion also increased the support and influence of Christianity and fundamentalist forms of Islam from Europe and neighbouring Islamic states. Of particular concern has been the education of young men and women in *madrasahs* which, rather than focusing on the traditional teachings of the Hannafi Sunni school of Islam, adhere to stricter fundamentalist forms of Islam which have been labelled 'Wahhabi'.[17] This has occurred in some of the southern parts of Kazakhstan, but especially in the sacred heartland of Central Asia, the Fergana region, which spans eastern Uzbekistan and western Kyrgyzstan. Young *otines* graduating from these *madrasahs* have dedicated themselves to teaching women a much stricter adherence to Islam. Consequently, in some areas young women have chosen to reject Western-style clothing in favour of traditional Islamic dress, using the hijab, white veils or the chador to identify themselves as strict Muslims (Koroteyeva and Makarova 1998: 594; Fathi 1997: 39; Sirojiddinov 1999:

22). Moreover, young men adhering to 'non-traditional' Sunni forms of Islam have also chosen to adhere to Islamic-style clothing and the use of beards as a symbol of their faith. In most cases, this has occurred both with and without family and community support. For example, since 1997 some twenty-eight students have been expelled from schools and universities in Uzbekistan alone for refusing to abandon the use of the hijab or beards (Human Rights Watch 1999: 4). This has led to significant limitations on the operation of 'exogenous' religions in all three republics while reinforcing state support for the principal traditional religions of the region of Orthodox Christianity and Islam of the Hannafi Sunni school.[18]

Nevertheless, it is Sunni Muslim traditional practices which predominate in Central Asia, and the role of women in sustaining regional ethnic and religious identity has been fundamental to its recognized predominance in a post-Soviet era. Ironically, it is not militant or fundamentalist Islam which has posed the greatest threat to women but the reinstatement within public life of cultural and religious norms that have led to a rise in conservative attitudes towards women. Women as guardians of the faith and the principal socializing force within Central Asian society have, by inference, been complicit in the process of the creation of a new duality impacting on gender relations in the region. Within the process of nation-building following independence, the demands of ethnic solidarity and social belonging have superseded the defence of rights acquired by women under Soviet rule (Saktanber and Ozatas-Baykal 2000), thus producing considerable internal conflicts for women between the preservation of the former and the retention of the latter.

Solidarity, tradition and belonging: women, family and community

In the post-independence period the re-emergence of traditional practices and customs in the public sphere demonstrates that the principles of family and community remained strong throughout the Soviet period. The status of women in Central Asian society, irrespective of their social or professional standing in the Soviet system, continued to rest on their devotion to family and their duties within the community. Thus, the positive influences on women's lives through sovietization whereby women were encouraged to enter public life, pursue careers and enter higher education contrasted sharply with the continuity of Islamic and ethnic traditions and practice in their private lives (Sirojiddinov 1999: 22). Nevertheless, the strong emphasis on women's dual role in Soviet society, while difficult, was less conflictual than in the early years of the

transition period, when state support for the family and child-rearing and protectionist legislation dissipated within the rubrics of a nascent market economy. This reinforced the principles of family and community as post-independence propaganda began to support traditional images of women (Tokhtakhodjaeva 1998: 1).

In the pre-Soviet period the *mahalla* or neighbourhood community was the principal form of social and political organization, and one which created a sense of belonging and mutual obligation. A local 'council' of elders would be elected by the community itself and the *ishan* and would be responsible for the imposition of *adat* law with respect to the question of residency, social interaction and life-cycle events. In rural areas conditions of membership were governed by genealogical links and set the boundaries for solidarity and political affiliation. As urban settlement grew, many of these linkages and customs were lost (Geiss 2001: 98–100). Probably most important is the fact that under the Soviet system the *mahalla*, especially in urban areas, rather than being destroyed, was utilized by the Soviet administration.

> The Soviet administration reshaped this local institution to fit its ideological program. Its official recognition as a controlling body made the *mahalla* the social unit of the city. Hence the functions of the *mahalla* were legalized. The Soviet administration preserved the *mahalla* structure in the old parts of cities and built high rise apartment buildings in the new areas, with the hope of introducing new settlement patterns, but was unable to prevent the persistence of *mahalla* organization. (Saktanber and Ozatas-Baykal 2000: 231)

In rural areas too, collectivization occurred along community lines – entire clans and families continued to coexist within the new economic structure of state and collective farms. While additional duties were given to the community councils in the 'service' of the state, and the traditional leader of the council was appointed by the local party committee rather than elected by the community, overall sovietization changed the nature rather than the context of mutual obligation (Koroteyeva and Makarova 1998: 591).

Thus, the *mahalla* remained the symbol of tradition, representing the 'collective memory' and maintaining traditional values. It was here that women retained an important role in the socialization of the young, the maintenance of cultural mores and ethnic identity. Knowledge was passed down from one generation to the next, sustained through popular and oral tradition (Fathi 1997: 33). Nevertheless, women were under-represented on the *mahalla* councils, and this has continued to be

the case in the post-independence period. Yet the creation of women's committees in the Soviet period reinforced the role of women elders in the community – they continued to assume responsibility for the organization of life-cycle events, were part of the neighbourhood structure for the arbitration of inter- and intra-family disputes, and organized community support for the elderly and the disadvantaged. In effect, the *mahalla* operated like a large family with a gender division of labour which was equally patriarchal and within which women's power and status grew with age. Consequently, while a predominantly male council focused on the administration of the community and representing the interests of its members outside it, women undertook the tasks related to the duty of care imbued within the ideology of the *mahalla* and the persistence of cultural and religious mores that governed it.

In the post-independence period the *mahalla* and rural community networks gained greater autonomy in the Central Asian republics. Moreover, their importance increased as unemployment and poverty exerted greater pressures on the lives of community members as a consequence of the economic transition within which governments struggled to maintain the social safety nets that had marked the Soviet period. In Uzbekistan, for example, the government officially supported the *mahalla* system and utilized it to administer specific welfare projects. It was the women's committee and female elders which were most involved in community care activities, visiting families, compiling lists of those most in need and those who qualified for the receipt of government benefits and humanitarian aid. Where possible in urban areas community vegetable gardens were created and the produce distributed to the elderly and the poor, whereas in rural communities individual households would donate produce and dairy products from household production for the same purpose.

Deteriorating socio-economic conditions in the transition period have increased the level of community obligations undertaken by women, who have also come under increasing pressure to reduce their commitment to the paid labour force. Moreover, the popular press has increasingly promoted traditional images of women and their status in Central Asian society relating to respect for male family heads and the prioritization of women's role as wives and mothers (Tokhtakhodjaeva 2002). In the present climate, where women's unemployment is high and the social pressures on women have substantially increased, more women are considering their options, where possible, with respect to where and when they work outside the home. As one Kazakh woman argued:

> Under the Soviet system emancipation was a self-defeating concept for women; we got caught in the middle between what we feel are our obligations as Muslim women and the economic goals of the state. We work a full shift, as it were, and then we come back home to start another shift. Some of us never had the choice of receiving pleasure from being mothers; work became the overwhelming priority and nurturing became the role of the state. I regret that when I look at my grandchildren. If I could turn the clock back I would have liked to have spent more time with my children.

Bearing in mind the past conflicts faced by women and the double burden that they were obliged to undertake under the previous system, for some it has been less of a choice and more a necessity. In rural communities especially, more women are engaged in increasing household production in activities such as bread-making, growing vegetables and tending small animals, which, in the transition period, constitutes a major contribution to maintaining family subsistence levels (Werner 1998: 599).[19] Thus, women are primarily engaged in undertaking unpaid productive work to support the physical reproduction of the family and engaging in paid agricultural work only at harvest time (Kandiyoti 1999: 513–14). In effect, the roll-back of state support for the family led to an increasing proportion of women's time dedicated to family and community obligations in both urban and rural areas.

A system of mutual obligation predominated in the *mahalla* that governed social and community life. All members of the community participated in and contributed to the celebration of life-cycle events such as birth, marriage and death, including those who were not practising Muslims. Contributions before independence took the form of gifts and food, but since the mid-1990s these have been replaced, to a certain extent, by money (Koroteyeva and Makarova 1998: 590).[20] Irrespective of the nature of the contribution it was an investment in similar future events to be celebrated by individual households within the community.[21] While men were traditionally responsible for 'funding' the contribution, it was women, and especially female elders within the community, who helped plan and organize family occasions and important events. Apart from the more practical aspects of assisting in the preparations for such events, such as bread-making, food preparation and the making of special clothes, it is women who sustain the knowledge and practice of ethnic and religious traditions. On these occasions, family and community members consult the *otine* and the most learned female elders with respect to the execution of custom and ritual associated with the

event in question, especially as regards rites associated with children, marriage and burial (Tolmacheva 1993: 540–3, Alimova and Azimova 2000: 310–13).[22] Thus, mutual obligation was a process of social and cultural insurance, which constituted on the one hand the exchange of gifts and favours and on the other the transmission of specialist knowledge across the generations.

In the transition period, the importance of social networks and mutual indebtedness within the *mahalla* and neighbourhood communities has increased rather than decreased. This is most noticeable in rural communities, where the break-up of state farms substantively reduced household incomes and led to a dearth of cash and credit. Here the coincidence between kinship and community is greater and the system of mutual obligation stronger. The need to generate income from sources other than agricultural work has led to greater cooperation between families with respect to smallholdings and peasant farms and a greater dependence on intra-household networks in cooperative ventures, usually with respect to trade. Thus, a wide range of survival strategies were implemented in order to obtain goods and services to maintain the subsistence levels of rural communities.

The work of Kandiyoti (1998) and Werner (1998) in rural communities in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan offers an insight into other strategies to ameliorate socio-economic difficulties in the transition period. The institution of rotating savings associations or 'gaps', for example, has been most important in alleviating the pressure on households caused by a lack of credit and ready cash. Of specific interest is the formation of these associations by women in the form of social events held on a regular basis.[23] Each member of the group would take it in turns to host the meeting, to which the women would contribute an agreed sum of money.[24] Food would be prepared by the host, the cost of which would be deducted from the money allocated for the event, and the rest would be given to the host. The money was often used for large purchases for the household or to help fund expensive life-cycle events. The gap also acted as a social support group – poorer members of the community could still attend the gatherings, and when individual members had significant problems the gap would offer assistance. Thus, in rotation, each contributing member would benefit from the association (Kandiyoti 1998: 570–2; Werner 1998: 609). Gaps provided a system of social support in which the inter-dependence of households or social networks formed the basis for the redistribution of available ready cash without the pressures involved in individual indebtedness.

In the rural and urban *mahalla* the strength and importance of social

networks offered other advantages to members of the community. In the Soviet period, these networks could improve the life chances of individuals and families and offer access to certain goods and services. For example, important social contacts would be used to gain access to certain specialist university courses, better career prospects, preferential medical treatment and housing. The use of household and social networks in this way has gained even greater importance as job opportunities and the government funding of education and health have radically declined.

Thus, family and community values have been strengthened in the post-independence period, offering considerable socio-economic support in difficult times while developing and reinforcing ethnic and national identity in a period of transition. Nevertheless, the primacy of tradition and cultural practice supported a social conservatism that severely limited any liberalization of gender relations. This was exacerbated by the effect of economic crisis on families and communities, and the infiltration of Western influence, which threatened a renewed sense of community and national pride seriously undermined throughout the Soviet period. Within the prevailing gender division of labour in public and private life, it was women who were expected to defend individual and collective cultural and ethnic identity in an independent Central Asia, a situation reinforced by the emergence of family problems, alcoholism, use of drugs, the expansion of criminal activity and the escalation of social problems among juveniles. As a member of the Women's Committee of Kazakhstan explained:

> Our young people are under considerable threat. Missionaries come from abroad and give hard currency to our children to convert to Buddhism or Hare Krishna.[25] Americans want to open casinos here and young people now use alcohol. We used to have a no alcohol rule except for special occasions or the use of fermented mare's milk and this is in direct contradiction to the traditional mentality. Now we are facing American ideological expansion whereas before it was Russian. In all of this our children are confused and we need to teach them a sense of dignity, discipline and respect. Women must take control of their families again.

Exogenous cultural pressures, therefore, placed even greater burdens on women in the family and community with respect to the socialization of the young. The reimposition of national culture and tradition was believed to be an important defence against the breakdown of the social order and the destruction of the Central Asian way of life. Rural and urban *mahalla* retained a social vigilance that had been so

important throughout the Soviet period. Members of the community who failed to conform to perceived social norms and codes of behaviour could be ostracized or even expelled from the community (Saktanber and Ozatas-Baykal 2000: 232–3). The result was an increase in social conservatism in the post-independence period, especially with respect to gender relations with traditional conservative images of women being promoted in the official media and popular press (Tokhtakhodjaeva 2002). Moreover, under these circumstances the support for a renewed social conservatism was greater than any challenge to gender stereotypes that went against the principle of equality and an improved social status for women in public and private life.

Facing the backlash – tradition, marriage and the spectre of domestic violence

The institution of marriage and the family remains pivotal in the lives of Central Asian women. It is principally through marriage and the birth of children, especially male children, that the status of women increases exponentially. The traditions that surround marriage and which were criticized and condemned by the Soviet state, such as the *kalym* (bride price), arranged marriages, bride kidnapping, polygamy and seclusion, were either maintained in some form throughout the Soviet period or re-emerged after independence. During the Soviet period, all these practices were declared illegal and subject to criminal prosecution as the laws on gender equality were imposed with respect to marriage and the family, supporting equal rights for both men and women within marriage, including reproductive rights and property rights (CCCP 1985: 32–3).[26] Nevertheless, to all intents and purposes in all three republics Islamic custom and traditional practice with respect to marriage and the family took precedence over Soviet law.

In Central Asia, 'arranged' marriages, of one form or another, are the norm rather than the exception in so far as both family and female elders in the local community usually have some input into the choice of a partner (Werner 1998: 606; Tabyshalieva 1997: 52; Sirojiddinov 1999: 23). While potential spouses are now rarely imposed on each other there remains a certain obligation to accede to parental preference in the choice of a future partner.[27] Even mothers who considered themselves to be 'modern' in outlook and who supported the rights of women still expected be involved in the choice of a partner for their children. As one member of a Kyrgyz women's NGO argued:

> Westerners believe that arranged marriages deny young women and

men a say in the choice of a marriage partner. This is not the case. What it is, is matchmaking, looking for suitable partners for our children and helping them make the right choice … It would be wrong of me to say that in some areas of my country, especially rural areas, young women and men are always involved in choosing a marriage partner. In more than a few cases this is just not true … I expect to be involved in the choice of a partner for my daughter but I would never expect her to marry someone she didn't like. When I got married I had been introduced socially to many different men by my family and respected women in the community. In the end I made the final choice of whom I wanted to marry and I expect my daughter to do the same.

It is certainly the case that in regions where fundamentalist Muslim practices have taken hold, such as Fergana, and in many rural areas where the choice of partner is limited, both women and men are under greater pressure to accept partners chosen for them. Nevertheless, the question of choosing a spouse is a fairly complex procedure. Women are the principal matchmakers in courtship and marriage, a system that is most successful in Muslim communities. Young women and men are expected to marry partners of a similar background and social standing, and thus the families of potential partners are frequently known to one another. Muslim women argue that such marriages are far more successful than those that begin from a more emotional bond. As one Uzbek female elder argued: 'In our society divorce is still a shameful thing. When we marry we expect it to be for life, a true commitment to a life together to confront the good and the bad. A marriage based on social compatibility and mutual respect is more enduring than one based on passion. We want our children to be happy and passion, however pleasing, has a limited shelf life.' In spite of parental attempts at matchmaking, many young women and men can and do choose whom they will eventually marry.

Under Soviet rule only civil marriages were legally recognized and this continues to be the case in all three republics. In the past, traditional marriages would be solemnized by local mullahs late at night or at dawn to avoid any reprisals, and in the post-independence period they are still favoured by a majority of the Central Asian population and are usually undertaken after a civil ceremony. Traditional marriages, however, are lavish and expensive and involve the support of the extended family and the local community. The practice of the payment of a bride price continues in all three republics despite being outlawed in the Soviet period. The form of the bride price has changed, to a certain extent,

and offsets some of the bride's family's obligations with respect to the wedding itself and the provision of goods, money and property for the young couple to start life together (Tolmacheva 2002: 214). In the post-independence period gifts of animals, jewellery and household goods have taken the place of the cash transaction. The form of the *kalym* is agreed by the two families and is commensurate with their socio-economic standing. Chastity is still highly valued and expected from young brides in most Central Asian communities, and traditionally the *kalym* is given only after the wedding night when this is 'confirmed' by the husband.[28] For the most part the *kalym* and what it represents in Central Asian society is little different to financial arrangements and gift exchange practices in the West.

There are, however, practices that have re-emerged and created controversy in the Central Asian republics, such as polygamy and bride kidnapping, both of which were made illegal in the Soviet period and remain so up to the present time (Tabyshalieva 1999a: 54). In the past polygamy was practised among the wealthy classes of Central Asian society and was in itself a reflection of a person's wealth and social standing. In circumstances where the first wife was unable to have children, polygamy was a means of resolving this problem without dishonouring or abandoning the first wife. Polygamous relationships were possible under the Soviet system as well as in the post-independence period owing to the absence of official recognition of religious marriage. Thus, those men wishing to take second wives were able to do so by not undergoing a civil ceremony, which offers women and children no legal status or protection in law.[29] There has been pressure in the transition period to have polygamy legalized, especially in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, which are considered to be secular rather than Muslim states (Bauer et al. 1997a: 23). For the most part, pressure has come from men, especially of the nouveau riche, who believe it to be an affirmation of their status.[30] Ironically, moves within the Kyrgyz parliament to have polygamy legalized in 1993 received considerable support from unmarried career women who wanted the opportunity to marry and have a family.[31] The Women's Committee of Kyrgyzstan organized a campaign against the motion, using the media to support their protest. While the motion was defeated, a statement by the chairperson of the committee reflects the outrage of women at that time:

> Professional women who were unmarried raised the question of polygamy. I know this type of woman and we had a strike during the political session. They wanted to have children and a husband. They appealed to

> parliament and the matter started to be discussed in society as a whole. It was ten voices in total but they couldn't get sufficient support. According to Kyrgyz tradition a rich man had many wives. This group of women appealed to parliament – modern women, civilized women – on the grounds that there were more women than men … We managed to clarify the fact that the key to this application was wealth for these women. If we had agreed to such a proposal there would be many cases where women get divorced and the number of single parents would grow so we published articles and used the media to inform people about the campaign.

While this particular motion was defeated by a narrow margin, the issue of polygamy remains in the public domain and on the political agenda in all three republics. Nevertheless, evidence of the rise of polygamy among a significant minority of the population in the region, although anecdotal, could sustain the pressure for its legal sanction in the foreseeable future.[32]

Bride kidnapping, in the past, was a custom practised among nomadic groups and mountain people, principally in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In some communities it was a symbolic act in the negotiations between the bride's family and the bridegroom's clansmen contracting the marriage, but in others it was a means of forcing alliances between feuding nomadic clans (Massell 1974: 114). It has also been a means of avoiding paying a high *kalym*, especially among less affluent families. The importance of family honour was the key to the success of the practice because once the relationship had been consummated the 'bride's' family would be forced to accede to the abductor's right to marry their daughter. In the post-independence period bride kidnapping has re-emerged as a means of gaining family consent to marriage (Tabyshalieva 1999a: 54). Yet it has, for the most part, taken on a different connotation as many young women have become complicit in the process. Thus, young women will arrange to be 'kidnapped' by their future partners in order to speed up the marriage process, or when parents are less likely to offer their consent. Under these circumstances, it is considered a 'romantic' endeavour and a means whereby young women are able to empower themselves with respect to their choice of partner and the timing of their marriage (ibid.: 54; Werner 1998: 606). Nevertheless, in many rural areas the impoverishment of the population in the transition period has created considerable difficulties for many families in the traditional payment of the *kalym*, and consequently the abduction and rape of prospective young brides has occurred with greater frequency. In these

circumstances, the question of family honour outweighs the question of legality and most cases go unreported as the affected families reach an agreement with respect to the 'forced' marriage of their daughter (Bauer et al. 1997: 21; Shukorov 1995: 35). For the most part, this form of violence against women, in view of the tacit acceptance of the custom in many rural communities, remains under-reported and therefore goes unpunished.[33]

For the majority of women marriage, however contracted, signifies an important watershed in their lives. Owing to the shortage of housing, the tradition of a bride leaving her natal home to move in with her husband's family was maintained throughout the Soviet period and has continued since independence. Only in the cities are some young couples able to set up home and establish a nuclear household, but this is possible only for a minority. For the most part, on marriage women leave their families to start a new life within an extended family household where their personal lives come under the scrutiny, if not the jurisdiction, of their husband and in-laws. In rural areas these households usually consist of the husband's parents, his brothers and their wives and children (Tokhtakhodjaeva 1999: 22). New wives have the lowest status in the household, where the mother-in-law organizes unpaid productive work in or near the home, allocates household chores, supervises the conduct of family members and often acts as family treasurer (Tolmacheva 2002: 201; Kandiyoti 1998: 572–3). On entering their new family environment young brides are expected to show deference and respect to their husbands and older family members and conform to expectations and practices that govern family life. Only with age and the birth of her children can a woman's status and influence within the family increase. In the meantime, young women are expected to put the welfare of their husbands and their new family above their own. For some, this represents a direct conflict with their rights and opportunities in the public sphere, but resistance and non-compliance in this social milieu reap their own 'rewards'.

Thus, in spite of the existence of legislation that underlined gender equality within marriage, it was traditional cultural and religious practices which governed gender relations in the private sphere. The rights and obligation of women with respect to their families imbued within these practices persisted in contradistinction to Soviet law. With independence such practices, once occulted, were reinstated within the public realm, where they are subject to little serious challenge either by the state or its legal apparatus. As Tokhtakhodjaeva states with reference to Uzbekistan:

> … in Soviet times for Uzbek women equal rights and employment outside the home were combined with traditional obedience in a family. The desire of women for independence was supported by the state but suppressed by family and community for the sake of the preservation of national and cultural identification … With independence, the process of national revival has started getting its force [*sic*] which along with genuine national values revived traditions of Islam and Shariat which put women in a secondary role in a family and society. (1999: 22)[34]

An increasing conservatism, which accompanied independence, led to a decline in the social status of women. By the late 1990s, in response to this dilemma, the Family Code was revised in each of the three republics in order to strengthen and extend women's rights within marriage. Yet, as in the past, what was written in the statute books competed openly with the continuing predominance of *adat* or customary law, which frequently contradicted civil law. Under such circumstances, women were often unable to avail themselves of the protection afforded them under state law without suffering ostracism or retribution within their communities and families.

Probably one of the most pertinent examples of this enigma has been the official recognition of a rise in domestic violence in the post-independence period.[35] While there are no official statistics available from the Soviet period to support this claim, in view of the greater social control and sanctions used against persistent wife abuse, of which the most severe was the loss of employment, it would be reasonable to suggest that there were far fewer official complaints registered. Nevertheless, in the submissions made to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in the year 2000, the governments of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan singled out domestic violence as the single most important problem facing women.[36] The representatives of all three republics assured the committee that measures were being taken to ameliorate the situation. Unfortunately these measures did not focus on the question of law enforcement but rather on government support for activities organized by official women's committees and NGOs in the area of prevention and education.[37]

In Uzbekistan, for example, domestic violence was considered to be such a serious problem that it led to an investigation by Human Rights Watch, culminating in the publication of a report in 2001 entitled *Sacrificing Women to Save the Family?*[38] This report underlined the strong cultural constraints operating within local communities and families on placing domestic problems in the public sphere. Legal redress of marital disputes

or spousal abuse, such as divorce or civil prosecution, would be avoided at all costs. It was the *mahalla*, community elders and members of the local women's committee who mediated in domestic disputes. Women were expected to appeal to the leaders of the *mahalla* for help, in the first instance, but should women make a complaint to the local police this would be immediately referred back to community elders. The emphasis was on reconciliation and tolerance, and all efforts were focused on maintaining the family unit at all costs. A low divorce rate and the social stigma attached to marital separation continued to support traditional practices of resolving private problems 'in house' (Tansykbayeva 1999: 32). Thus, under-reporting occulted the nature and extent of violence experienced by women in the home, and few incidences were referred to the police or ever reached the courts. Nevertheless, the report demonstrated, for example, that in one region alone in the first five months of 2000 over a thousand appeals for assistance were received by the local women's committee (Human Rights Watch 2001: 21–4).

Consequently, in the transition period an increasing conservatism and the growing influence of traditional practice in public matters, both legal and political, served to disempower women. The obligation of women to preserve and protect family life was reinforced by their inability to obtain legal redress even in the most extreme circumstances. The question of a woman's personal safety, emotional stability and well-being, as in all other things, came second. Moreover, this situation favoured the perpetrators of violence and has served to support the level of domestic violence evident within the Central Asian republics. Women's NGOs in all three republics have been most concerned to disclose the extent of violence against women and offer assistance and support to victims of violence through establishing refuges, counselling and legal support. One of the few studies undertaken within Central Asia with respect to violence against women was carried out in 1997 by the Feminist League in Kazakhstan. This survey disclosed that 29 per cent of respondents experienced domestic violence while a further 17 per cent 'were unable to find the strength to indicate whether or not there was any violence in their homes' (Feminist League 1997: 6). Few women retaliated, took legal action or instituted divorce as a result of violence in the home; for the most part it was considered shameful and was therefore hidden. For some there was only one way to escape, and as a final act of rebellion they committed suicide (ibid.; Human Rights Watch 2001).

The consequences of a growing tension between legal equality, opportunities for female advancement and the increasing imposition of traditional cultural practice and family values were evident as early as

the late 1980s with the introduction of perestroika. The liberalization of religious practice and the emergence of greater control over women, particularly in the Fergana region where fundamentalist practices were swiftly reimposed, led to a public backlash on the part of some women, who resorted to self-immolation as a means of escaping difficult family relationships and domestic abuse. Between 1986 and 1987 over 270 cases of self-immolation by women were reported in Uzbekistan, leading to a public outcry and international rebuke (Olcott 1991: 244–6; Patnaik 1995: 161).[39] While the Western media denounced the acts as 'barbaric', Muslim women from all over Uzbekistan were concerned that the situation might escalate. Consequently, members of the women's councils of the *mahalla* and prominent members of the Supreme Soviet Council of Women were called in to help and travelled from Tashkent to the Fergana region to investigate and try to defuse the situation. One member of the council described both what they discovered and their attempts to resolve the situation:

> When we received the dreadful news of what was happening in the region we were all shocked but we never anticipated the awful situation we discovered there. The few women who had survived were so disfigured, young women who had once been so beautiful. We questioned the women and in almost all cases the protests were a result of bad [*sic*] relations with the husband or his family. Some of the women had suffered considerable violence and humiliation and confessed that it was the only course of action that they could take. We decided there and then to make a film about the suicides to educate other women and show them the consequences of their actions … The film was called *Flame* and we travelled around showing it to women in the local communities, gave talks and offered support. Sadly the film had the opposite effect and it resulted in more women deciding to use this form of suicide as a protest. So we decided that we needed to take action in order to protect our women and punish those who had caused such pain and misery.[40]

Consequently, the women's councils of the *mahalla* put pressure on the government and police authorities to enforce existing laws against violence to protect women. From that point, it was agreed that each incident of female suicide had to be investigated by the police and a special file lodged with the government. Furthermore, the women's councils insisted that husbands should be prosecuted for abuse leading to a woman's suicide. The law, as it stands, states that if accusations of abuse are proven a man can go to prison for a period of five to eight years. Sadly the Human Rights Watch report confirmed that it was often

only in such circumstances that charges were actually brought against men who abused their wives (2001: 41). This underlines the ambivalence of existing law, not only in Uzbekistan but also in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, which fails to criminalize domestic violence and therefore does not define it as a punishable offence within the criminal statute.

In view of community and family pressures on women to resolve marital problems privately rather than seeking some form of legal redress, women who are victims of abuse become disempowered in their private lives. For rural women such pressures are much greater, and the opportunity to seek help from NGOs is rare. Thus, in Uzbekistan, for example, the incidence of self-immolation is far higher in rural than in urban areas.[41] It is important to note, however, that the tradition of self-immolation among Central Asian women is prevalent only in the republics of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, where Islamic influences and traditional religious and cultural practices have exerted considerable pressure with respect to the nature of gender relations in these societies.[42] Nevertheless, the act of self-immolation serves as a radical example of female protest in the face of inadequate social and legal protection, questionable family and community support and the lack of alternatives. By committing suicide in this way, women thrust the issue of their suffering and abuse into the public arena, exposing the husband and his family, who are deemed responsible for the welfare of the young wife who has been placed under their 'protection'.

The institution of marriage in Central Asia is one that defines a radical turning point in women's lives. While marriage, age and motherhood will, over time, increase women's status in the private sphere, this often occurs at the expense of female independence and the opportunity to pursue further education and career opportunities, which might be deferred either temporarily or permanently. The public rehabilitation of Islam in the transition period, in the process of forging national identity and cultural specificity within the Central Asian republics, has served to place even greater emphasis on women's role and status in the socialization and spiritual leadership of the next generation of citizens. The irony remains that by defending historical and cultural mores women were complicit in reinforcing traditional gender relations in the private sphere which proved immutable in a changing public sphere. By reinforcing the past, women were compromising their future. As one Uzbek journalist stated: 'As women we have had an important role to play in the transition period. As a nation in finding ourselves, we have lost ourselves. Women must regain their political strength. It seems that we will do so against formidable odds.'

Notes

1 See Chapter 2.

2 See Tokhtakhodjaeva (1995).

3 Jadidism emerged in the nineteenth century and offered a reformist interpretation of Islam based on modernizing principles; it was viewed as progressive with respect to its Western-influenced perspectives. Most notable was its support for the full integration of women into public life. This movement split over the issues of opposing Russian colonization and the sovietization of Central Asia and failed to gain any widespread support from the general population. See Bennigsen and Wimbush (1985), Rashid (2001) and Alimova and Azimova (2000).

4 It is this latter group which has fuelled the formation of radical Islamic movements within Central Asia, probably the most important of which is Hizb-ut-Tahrir al Islami (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan), which has no legal status as a political organization in the region. It operates clandestinely but is committed to the non-violent reunification of the Central Asian states and rejects the dilution of Islamic principles by the more tolerant forms of Islam that predominate in the region. See Rashid (2002).

5 The importance of Central Asia as a holy site for Muslims is due to the fact that many Sufi saints are buried there.

6 The principal reason that the state chose to recognize Islam within the region was to solicit the support for and participation of the population in the Second World War.

7 The Soviet authorities, in establishing official Islam and paying official clerics, had banned the paying of alms tax, *zakat*, and as such unregistered mullahs depended on voluntary contributions, *sadaka*, from the community to survive. See Bennigsen and Wimbush (1985).

8 It was not until the 1950s that the official purges against the wearing of the veil ended, when Khrushchev declared the last veil had been burned in 1959. See Chapter 2.

9 In Islam even those who lapse in their participation in religious practice are still considered to be believers within the faith.

10 In the post-independence period those who turn their back on the faith and become Christians or adepts of other Western religions are looked down upon.

11 See Basilov (1992).

12 Before its break into ethnic and linguistic republics the region as a whole was called Turkestan and Tashkent was the regional capital. It was here that special mosques for women were established. After the religious purges the majority of mosques were turned into 'museums of atheism'.

13 In the Islamic vocabulary the definition of *otine* is gender specific and there is no male equivalent. See Fathi (1997).

14 This was the age of the prophet Muhammad when he received the revelation.

15 Pilgrimages to Mecca were forbidden in the Soviet period, thus most pilgrimages were to the shrines of, predominantly, Sufi saints.

16 Some *otines* had managed to keep their copies of the original texts, but most had to use the official copies of the Koran in Cyrillic script.

17 There is some disagreement about the actual schools of Islam to which these sects belong. They have been labelled Wahhabis, which is a form of Islam exclusive to Saudi Arabia but had an influence in Central Asia in the past. The Taliban in Afghanistan embrace this strict form of Islam. Quite simply the use of the word Wahhabi is equated with Islamic fundamentalism and is consistently condemned by the Central Asian governments.

18 This situation has been exacerbated by the incursion of Central Asian Islamic militant groups into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan from their base of operation in northern Afghanistan with a political agenda of installing an Islamic state in the republics. Mindful of past political events in Iran and Afghanistan the Central Asian states, fearful of a rise of Islamic fundamentalism within their borders, have begun to repress all forms of religion beyond that supported by the state. See Rashid (2001).

19 In some of the poorer rural areas of Uzbekistan women were even refusing to help at harvest time because the low pay did not compensate for the time lost to household production on private plots.

20 In all three republics this change occurred with the end of food rationing.

21 Family members and kin would be expected to make a much larger contribution to life-cycle events than other members of the community, including donations of money, household goods and clothing.

22 Special rites associated with children were occasions such as name-giving, the first haircut and male circumcision.

23 These associations took different forms based on kinship or household networks and could constitute mixed or gender-specific gaps.

24 In Uzbekistan the sum of money agreed upon was based on the price of meat. See Kandiyoti (1998).

25 The rapid expansion of missionary activity by what is termed non-traditional religions has led to a change in the laws governing the freedom of religious expression in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. These new laws defend the freedom to practise traditional religions such as Orthodox Christianity and Islam while severely restricting the activities of all other forms of religion. This has led to the expulsion of many Western missionaries, the revoking of temporary residence visas and the imposition of severe restrictions on the entry of religious leaders and supplicants into the country.

26 Under Soviet law women and men had the same rights and duties in marriage, could freely choose their spouse and had the freedom in marriage to choose where they worked or their place of residence. Women had the right to refuse to give birth and have an abortion or be sterilized without their partner's consent. Property accumulated during the marriage was considered joint property and property that belonged to either partner before the marriage remained separate. See also Massell (1974).

27 In the Soviet period there were much greater pressures on women to marry partners of their family's choosing owing to concern about inter-ethnic marriage – most especially marriage to Russians and non-Muslims – which

might 'dilute the cultural heritage and identity of national ethnic groups'. Those who chose so to marry would be cut off from their family and the Muslim community.

28 In some communities the practice of 'checking' the bridal bed is still commonplace, although it is extremely rare for a woman to be rejected or denounced by her husband after the wedding night.

29 This situation is further complicated by the repercussion for women of reporting polygamous marriages, whereby their husband can abandon them without any financial or material support.

30 See *The Economist* (US), 29 November 1997, 345 (8,045), p. 44.

31 These women were between the ages of thirty and thirty-five and in Kyrgyz society would be considered to be 'on the shelf' with little chance of marrying at this stage of their lives.

32 Recent moves within the Uzbek parliament to consider giving religious marriage the same legal status as civil marriage would only place further restraints on polygamous relationships as long as they remained illegal.

33 One unofficial estimate states that one in five marriages among ethnic Kyrgyz are contracted in this way. See *The Economist*, 23 November 1996.

34 See also Tabyshalieva (1999a).

35 The reasons given for an increase in domestic violence in the transition period include the increasing pauperization of the Central Asian population, unemployment and a rise in drug and alcohol abuse.

36 See <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw>.

37 See Chapter 6.

38 This followed a report entitled *Domestic Violence in Uzbekistan* issued by the Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights in 2000.

39 The phenomenon was first reported by *Pravda* and then released to the international press. President Karimov expelled *Pravda* from Uzbekistan in retaliation.

40 See also Chatterjee et al. (1997).

41 Consequently, incidences of self-immolation have increased rather than decreased in the transition period – between 1995 and 1998 the number of recorded suicides rose from 1,327 to 1,560. These figures do not include female suicide by other means and also exclude unreported suicide or incidents classified as 'accidents'. There are no official figures available after 1998.

42 See Dunn (1988–89), Massell (1974) and Olcott (1991).

6 | Climbing the political mountain – female empowerment and disempowerment in a post-Soviet era

In the face of the radical socio-economic change that swept Central Asia in the decade following independence, and its disproportionate negative impact on women's status, the question of female political representation and participation is one of considerable importance. Under the previous system, the commitment to a politics of gender equality, however partial or incomplete, maintained a 'critical mass' of female representation at all levels of the polity.[1] In Central Asia, as in the rest of the former Soviet Union, this substantive female political presence dissipated in the quicksand of transitional politics. By 1992, the level of female representation, most especially at national level, dropped to a level equal to that of most European countries.[2] This disappearance of women en masse from the face of institutional politics stimulated considerable debate both within and outside the former Soviet Union, most of which constituted a vitriolic critique of a system that had failed to deliver on its promise of substantive and meaningful gender equality. Without doubt, in the post-Soviet era women had suffered most from the change in socio-economic conditions affecting the majority of the population, as well as a loss of social support from the state. Moreover, the alienation of women from politics, decision-making and participation in institutional politics led to the predominance of women in non-institutional political spheres in an effort to gain a place and a voice in a changing civil society.

In the political and ideological shift that followed independence, there was an immediate distancing from the recent Soviet past and a move towards a hopeful 'democratic' present. For the most part, the shift from Communist Party membership to membership of the new democratic parties in all the Central Asian states, renamed but not necessarily reconstructed, was virtually seamless. With unseemly haste Western financial support and international organizations came into the region, with anti-communist, pro-Western 'liberal democratic' principles and zero tolerance of any suggestion that some of the better aspects of the Soviet system, such as universal state social support and affirmative actions policies, be retained. In this there was considerable

support from male politicians and government ministers, who began to speak out publicly, expressing a long-held but once considered 'politically incorrect' belief that women should resume their rightful place within the home and relinquish the 'privileges' they had enjoyed under the previous system. As one Uzbek government minister frankly stated:

> Under the previous system there were no laws which discriminated against women, in fact they were given many privileges and in this way men were disadvantaged. Even single men did not get the same privileges as single women. Now this has to stop. We are now a democracy and women will have to compete equally with men for their place in society, politics and the labour force, just like the West. If they do not compete well, if they are unable to achieve similar positions to men, then it will be because they do not have merit.

The question of merit was one that was also consistently referred to by women with respect to career advancement and political representation under the previous system. The quotas and affirmative action policies put in place by the Soviet government to ensure *de jure* equality were believed to be part of a system that had favoured party allegiance over personal merit. As in Russia, Central Asian female activists were most vocal with respect to female political representatives, who were described as 'uneducated puppets' rubber-stamping party decisions in the repression of Central Asian society (Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996: 63).[3] Consequently, Central Asian women's voices were muted, in the early years of independence, with respect to the reinstitution of political quotas for women.

In the political discourse of disassociation the self-designated 'new' men and women associated themselves with a set of loosely defined principles of democracy, representation and participation. In the process, an underlying question remained as to how far the region was exchanging one form of political and financial dependence, Soviet, for another, Western. In the 'political coming out' of alternative, and some not so alternative, voices one form of political correctness was replaced by another. For those who believed in the Soviet system, albeit critical of its excesses and failures, and who continued to support the ideological principles on which it rested, the act of being silenced was complete.

Unfortunately, there has been no substantive work produced by a Central Asian woman, or man for that matter, which offers an insider view of the previous system – one offering some insight into the way in which those who were politically active were empowered and disempowered, how they viewed their participation and what they feel

they might have achieved. The work of Marianne Kamp in depicting the life story/ies of Saodat Shamieva, an active member of the Uzbek Communist Party between 1933 and 1991, is indicative of some of the problems of 'disclosure' in the new social and political climate. She considers three different versions of Saodat's life story as her subject at different historical junctures. As Kamp argues, Saodat's agency 'is seen in her ability to interpret her experience and to re-cast her identity as new politics and new narratives enable and constrain her choices' (2001: 21). Perhaps, under the changing political circumstances of Central Asia, such oral history is important not simply for what is said but most especially for what is not said.

The question remains, however, as to whether we can accept the almost universal image of female political cadres, at all levels of the political system, as ineffective and self-serving political actors who failed to represent the interests of not only the Central Asian population in general but most especially those of women. As Carol Nechemias infers, can we accept an argument that such women were mere 'window dressing' when they were present in such large numbers? (1994: 4). The answer to that question must surely be no. Even within retrospective, and for the most part negative, appraisals of women's political participation in the Soviet system there is an underlying ambivalence.[4]

Tokhtakhodjaeva, one of the foremost Central Asian women writers, in her critical appraisal of women in the senior ranks of party and state structures, points out many of the problems that such women faced, the compromises they were forced to make and their abandonment of personal ideals. Moreover, she identifies a not insignificant number of women who acted as mentors to lower-ranking female political cadres and who would protect them in the various purges following changes in the Soviet leadership.[5] In some cases this was at the expense of protecting themselves (Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996: 137–51). Galiya Khassanova, a feminist Kazakh writer, offers her impressions of women active in local politics when she was a child and raises questions about the nature of gender equality in the previous system:

> The activity of women-leaders in places of business – in district committees and city committees of the Party, as well as in executive committees – was quite noticeable. Although they did not have the top positions in the Party's ranks, women worked with youth, children and old people. And to me, still a child then, it seemed that all the authority came from the hands of these tirelessly active, women workers … Much has changed since those days. Now I look back and wonder if we were really equal, or

> if we were simply satisfied with our status. I also wonder how much we have lost by giving our status to men without a struggle. (2000: 385)

By all accounts female political contributions under the previous system were far more substantive at a local level than in the upper echelons of power, and this remains the case in the post-independence era. In Central Asia the work of such women was extremely important, most especially in the *zhensovety* (women's councils), in the amelioration of social problems, the support of women and their families and, to a certain extent, the advocacy and implementation of gender-specific legal rights at the level of the community and the workplace. The work of many thousands of Central Asian women in the women's councils was highly praised in the late 1980s and was generally believed to be far more effective than it had been in the past (Browning 1992: 100). This timely apotheosis of female activism in the run-up to independence could not have failed to influence those women who now lead and participate in the plethora of women's NGOs which have been established right across Central Asia in the transition period.

It is the continuity of women's political activities at local and national level which belies some of the more negative accounts of women's political participation in the past. Moreover, women led some of the first political protests against the newly installed governments in the post-independence period when the non-payment of social allowances and pensions impacted on family subsistence.[6] This is especially important in the transitional politics of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where opposition politics of every genre continues to be severely curtailed. Overall, grass-roots protest has not been the favoured modus operandi within the post-independence politics of any sector of Central Asian society, owing not least to the limited political space available for such action. Probably most important in the reconstruction of relations between the state and civil society is the rapid growth of the NGO sector across the region, and most especially the predominance of women in both broad-perspective and gender-specific organizations. In general, these NGOs were established to deal with urgent social issues such as environmental degradation and human rights on the one hand and to defend the interests of vulnerable sectors of the population such as the disabled and single-parent families on the other. Women's NGOs were for the most part extremely broad based, continuing the debate with respect to the 'woman question' within a new political reality and engaging in practical interim self-help solutions to a wide range of gender-specific problems, such as unemployment, legal literacy,

violence against women and the question of female political leadership. It is here that some of the most influential non-institutional political work has been undertaken. Politically marginalized women have taken their political activism, leadership and advocacy into the civil sector in an attempt to, in the long term, institute a crucial female presence in the decision-making process. The question remains, however, as to how successful this has been and what limitations exist with respect to Central Asian women achieving their goal.

Finding a way through – political representation in Soviet and post-Soviet politics

The idea of effective representation has been one that has been questioned at all levels of the Soviet system but most especially for the non-Russian population. With respect to Central Asia, neither male nor female representatives were to be found in the Politburo or the Secretariat of the Communist Party for most of the Soviet period. Irrespective of their commitment to the Communist Party and the Soviet system itself, they remained political if not social outsiders in the main arenas of policy-making. Thus the highest positions they could aspire to remained within the regional boundaries of their respective republics. While the Supreme Soviets of the 'autonomous' republics and the local soviets remained on the periphery of power, the deputies and political representatives were responsible for the defence of the Soviet state and the implementation of its policies at local level. In the political memory of the Central Asian population, at no other time was this more contentious than in the implementation of *Khudjum*, the forced unveiling of women, and the atrocities committed against women in its early years.[7] This period represented a political watershed for Central Asians who were political cadres or members of the nomenclature, underlining their anomalous position in the political and social life of the region. They faced, on the one hand, political ostracism or expulsion for failing to actively support Soviet policy aimed at undermining if not eradicating Central Asian social and cultural mores, and on the other social ostracism within their families or communities for their complicity (Northop 2001: 117; Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996: 61–3). While some were happy to embrace not only Soviet politics but also Russian social and cultural mores, the modus operandi of the majority was to live and work on the cusp of a bifurcated social and political existence. Nevertheless, as political 'insiders', all members of the nomenclature system either willingly or unwillingly maintained a certain distance from the rest of the population.

Tokhtakhodjaeva has been most critical of the hypocrisy of male indigenous Communist Party members who supported the Soviet state on the one hand while sustaining Islamic customs and cultural mores on the other. In this way, she argues, Central Asian men were able to obtain a certain level of power in the Soviet system while maintaining their traditional power and privileges within the existing system of gender relations in Central Asian society (1996: 61). Yet women, too, were similarly reluctant to challenge the status quo, but for very different reasons. Irrespective of women's political status in the Soviet system their true social status was influenced by their commitment to family and community, and most especially their defence and preservation of their culture through the socialization and spiritual leadership of the next generation. While *de jure* gender equality encouraged women to enter public life, to pursue careers, enter higher education and be politically active, there were few incentives to pursue a nebulous de facto equality, most especially in their private lives. To challenge existing gender relations, for Central Asian women, was tantamount to challenging and undermining themselves – an act equivalent to social suicide.[8] Moreover, in view of the fact that throughout the Soviet period the state sought to consistently suppress and subvert the specificity of Central Asian culture, both men and women were equally committed to defending and sustaining traditional social structures.

Probably one of the most important features of the Soviet system was the establishing of legal equality, from 1920 onward, most especially with respect to political representation. The system guaranteed a minimum quota of 30 per cent of elected positions for women at all levels of the political system, except for the most important decision-making body, the Central Committee of the CPSU, which remained male dominated until the collapse of the Soviet Union. This formed part of a wider quota system that applied to direct elections based on gender, age, profession and social composition in order to correspond with the profile of the population of the Soviet Union. Viewed in this context, however, the gender-specific quota could be deemed less than generous given that women constituted over half of the total population. Nevertheless, as Nechemias points out, the system and its principles 'promoted the appearance, though not the substance, of substantial representation for various groups, including women'. Certainly by 1984 it could be argued that, in terms of gender, the political system was far more representative than parliaments in the West (Nechemias 1994: 3). Yet this situation represented the apotheosis of a protracted struggle to fill women's political quotas since the inception of the Soviet Union,

whereby the over-representation of men and structural inequality consistently thwarted 'idealistic' party directives.[9]

From the early years of sovietization, Central Asia was believed to offer the greatest challenge to the institution of gender equality and the full participation of women in the economic and political life of the Soviet Union. This, it was argued, was due to existing gender relations in which male behaviour was criticized as self-serving and archaic (Buckley 1989: 48–9). Thus, one of the principal tasks of the *Zhenotdel* (the Women's Bureau), until its abolition in 1930, was the politicization of women right across the Soviet Union, but most especially in the Soviet East. The drafting of Russian women activists into Central Asia to work with women at the grass roots, to increase their political mobilization and participation in political organizations, the party and the trade unions, was part and parcel of this process.[10] If this task was considered difficult in this region it was nevertheless no easy matter in the rest of the Soviet Union. There was almost universal covert resistance to women undertaking any more than a peripheral role in party politics owing to their perceived inexperience and unsuitability for a more prominent political profile. In many areas of the Soviet Union, in a deliberate act to subvert state policy, local party organizations shut down the *Zhenotdel* and its duties were taken over by the party organization. In these circumstances female activists were obliged to openly challenge the local party decision in order to reinstate the local *Zhenotdel*, and this was often the case in Central Asia. Moreover, women argued that the *Zhenotdel* was officially part of the party structure with specific tasks to perform, and therefore played a legitimate and important role in the achievement of the political and economic aims of the CPSU (ibid.: 98–9).

Without doubt, the *Zhenotdel* was extremely successful not only in the political mobilization of women at grass-roots level but also in encouraging women to enter the labour force in large numbers, and this was especially important in Central Asia, where the participation of women in the formal labour force had historically been extremely low. While it is argued that the *Zhenotdel* exerted far less influence within the party structure than envisaged, with respect to its influence on policy, the organization was most successful in both enforcing party policy and campaigning within the party with respect to issues such as abortion rights, the rights of women workers, the campaign against prostitution and mother and child protection (ibid.: 102). In view of the resistance to gender-specific policy at local level, the *Zhenotdel* set certain precedents in creating an active women's pressure group within the party to ensure that affirmative action policies and gender-specific

rights were both recognized and enforced (Chatterjee et al. 1997: 109). The subsequent women's sections and women's councils that replaced the *Zhenotdel* in later years maintained this task.[11] Probably the most important achievement of the *Zhenotdel* in Central Asia was the formation of women's clubs, principally in urban areas, which brought women together to discuss their problems and became an important nexus of self-help and mutual support for women and their families throughout the Soviet period (Browning 1992: 102).

Membership of the Communist Party was a pre-condition for professional and political advancement within Soviet society, and as such is considered the principal indicator of the status of women. Party recruitment was premised 'on the idea that the party represents the cream of the population, the most dedicated and the most able, who wish to serve the country to their best of their ability' (Sakwa 1989: 125). Thus, party membership was based on 'merit' and by invitation only. Nevertheless merit, as in all things, can be a nebulous concept, not subject to general approbation but dependent on who determines what constitutes merit. In that men were the principal gatekeepers and beneficiaries of the system, a gender-specific criterion was clearly applied (Browning 1987: 24–5). If a male model of political activism, leadership, education and experience was applied, then it was one to which many women would fail to measure up. This situation was further compounded by persistent male prejudice with respect to women's political maturity, the immutability of gender inequality, most especially in private relationships, and the overwhelming burden for women of combining paid work with unpaid productive work in the home; thus, the poor representation of women in the CPSU through the Soviet period became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

For Central Asian women, and men, there was a further impediment to political advancement. Ethnic Russians formed the majority of party members and even by the 1980s, when state policy encouraged a more representative polity, they constituted 59.1 per cent of CPSU members (Sakwa 1989: 129).[12] Thus, Central Asian women not only had to compete with men for political office but also with Russian women, who were invariably given preference even within the Central Asian political structure (Chatterjee et al. 1997: 112). In the early years of sovietization *Khudjum*, the assault on Islam and Central Asian culture, led to an exodus from the Communist Party of a significant number of women and perpetuated the stigma attached to female party membership. This consolidated serious opposition to the politicization of Central Asian women and led to consistently low female membership of the party in the region,

compared to that in the rest of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, there was sufficient evidence to show that when women were encouraged to join the party then numbers increased substantially. During the Second World War, for example, when men were conscripted into the armed forces, women were asked to fill positions vacated by men and the female party membership increased from 13 per cent in Kazakhstan and 17 per cent in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to 39 per cent in Kazakhstan, 33 per cent in Kyrgyzstan and 31 per cent in Uzbekistan (Mickiewicz 1977: 442). Needless to say, women were expected to vacate their positions in favour of men in the post-war period. Clearly, women were not averse to joining the party when encouraged or permitted to do so.

The pyramidal Soviet polity was indicative of the limitations on women's political status whereby the further up the structure one looks the fewer women are represented. If we consider the Politburo, the pivotal decision-making body, only three women have ever been given posts, one in the 1950s and the other two under Gorbachev between 1988 and 1991. Moreover, up until the last years of Soviet rule less than 4 per cent of the total members of the Central Committee were women, and they took their places as token rather than full members.[13] It was in the lower echelons of the system that women's proportional representation was high owing to the operation of a generous quota system whereby the lower the representative body the higher the quota. Thus, women constituted over one-third of the deputies in the Supreme Soviets at national and republican level and approximately one-half of the representatives within the local soviets. In view of the low party membership among women, non-party members filled these quotas owing to the fact that they were essentially on the periphery of the power structure. Nechemias demonstrates not only that 72 per cent of the non-party element in these structures were women and young deputies but also that there was consistent rotation and a high turnover of representatives (1994: 4). Consequently, the majority of women were effectively excluded from power.

There were some Central Asian women, however, who achieved high office in their respective republics as well as in the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union. Several women served as chairperson of the presidiums of the Supreme Soviets, two Kyrgyz women serving as acting heads between 1937 and 1938 and one Kazakh woman for two years between 1960 and 1961; the most famous was an Uzbek, Yadar S. Nasriddinova, who served in this position from 1959 to 1970.[14] In the Kyrgyz Republic alone there were four serving female foreign ministers between 1953 and 1991.[15] This does not take account of the number of women who

served as ministers or deputy ministers of departments such as social affairs, justice and culture. These women served as role models for others who aspired to political careers; some defended the interests of women within the polity while others supported and protected women outside it. Even Tokhtakhodjaeva, who has spared little criticism of women of the Soviet nomenclature in the post-Soviet period, concedes that those who survived within the cut-throat world of Soviet politics demonstrated singular acts of faith and courage (1996: 137–51). Women, more so than men, were extremely vulnerable with respect to the longevity of their political careers. A change of Soviet leadership could lead to a 'fall from grace', as in the case of Nasriddinova, for example, who was removed from her position soon after the fall of Khrushchev.[16] Politics, then as now, was considered to be a 'dirty business', and Central Asian women of the nomenclature were often estranged from their families and communities – social outsiders – and as such there was little sympathy for those who failed to survive.

From insiders to outsiders – female representation in a post-Soviet era

In the post-independence period there has been a vociferous critique both in academic writing and from Russian and Central Asian women themselves of the nature and legitimacy of female representation in the Soviet period. Women who participated in and were appointed to positions in the institutional political structure were invariably described as impotent 'yes' women who failed to challenge the status quo either collectively or individually.[17] Surprisingly such critics offer no substantive qualitative evidence of their claims other than 'outsiders' impressions of the system and its 'failures'. Moreover, it was common practice in the early years of the transition period for women who were politically active to emphatically divorce themselves from those who were part of the previous system. As one member of the Kyrgyz Women's Congress argued:

> We formed this organization in the hope that it would contribute to solving women's problems and I think we can now discuss those problems in a more global sense. Under the Soviet system women were career politicians and you had to be a member of the party to get anywhere. They were puppets, I don't think they really represented anybody, not even themselves. We are the new women, independent from the state, and with thirty different women's organizations as part of the organization I think we have the power to change things.

Equally, the climate of criticism and rebuke in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet system effectively silenced many who would be able to offer an insider's appraisal. Those who were part of the previous system and who speak out usually offer a critical revisionist version of their support and participation. Some are now leading members of NGOs and research centres in Russia and Central Asia which offer an important critique of women's loss of status in the post-Soviet era and have contributed to the development of a political agenda to disclose and challenge the disempowerment of women. Nevertheless there are others who, after independence, have chosen to remain outside both institutional and non-institutional politics, either unable or unwilling to embrace the new socio-political milieu in which they live. As one Uzbek ex-party secretary explained:

> I joined the party as a young woman. The Soviet system offered women more opportunities than we had ever had before. There was such promise and excitement but the realities were that even those things we gained in law were challenged at a local level, often by our own men. You see, we were Central Asians in a Soviet system, which often challenged our beliefs and our culture. Myself and other women, not all women in the party of course, fought to make sure that the women's rights at work were upheld. We worked with the women's councils to get childcare facilities set up for women workers and to support other benefits for women … Nobody speaks about what we did any more but what we didn't do. Even those who were members of the party and know. I have no regrets, there were a lot of things wrong with the system but there were many good things too and that's something you cannot say any more … They call themselves the new women, but many of them are not new. They struggle now to get back the things that we have lost rather than build on what we had. I won't deny myself and what I believe in to be part of that so you can say I have retired and I wish them luck.

There is substantive evidence to support some of the claims made here. Party directives were not implemented uniformly across the Soviet Union, and in Central Asia there was sustained resistance to the implementation of women's rights under Soviet law, particularly when they were in contradistinction to Central Asian culture and traditional gender relations.[18] Yet the process by which insiders became outsiders in the post-independence period was neither self-fulfilling nor predictable. It was clearly understandable that both Central Asian women and men wished to divorce themselves from a system in which they had been

disempowered *vis-à-vis* the ruling Russian ethnic elite. Yet the divorce was more a question of ethnic separation than any substantive reconstruction and opening up of the political system. In the changes that followed, women found themselves out in the cold as quotas, which had supported women's political participation and representation within the previous system, were abandoned.

The nascent democratic structures that were formed in the transition period depended heavily on a previous modus operandi in which those who held positions in politics and in the bureaucracy have remained, for the most part, unchanged (Tokhtakhodjaeva 1995: 13). In spite of the development of a multi-party system, power remains in the hands of the executive in which men have consolidated their position as gatekeepers of the system. This was apparent in the first elections in the republics after independence, when the number of elected female deputies to the national parliament dropped from over one-third to less than 10 per cent of the total number of deputies. While there have been fluctuations in this figure since, it has not risen to over 12 per cent in any of the Central Asian republics. Women have, however, had greater success in being elected to local government, where they constitute between 25 and 30 per cent of local deputies (Fajih and Foy 1999: 93–108). Nevertheless, there remains a trend for women to be effectively excluded from important decision-making positions in government. With little prospect of devolution of power to regional and local government structures, where the proportion of women representatives is substantively higher, their impact in the decision-making process will continue to be minimal.

Owing to the low representation of women in the national parliaments the percentage of Central Asian women holding ministerial positions has rarely exceeded 10 per cent. As ministers they have occupied positions principally in the areas of education, health and culture, and as under the Soviet system their tenure is usually short and therefore the turnover of female ministers is high. There are, however, notable exceptions with respect to the general ministerial responsibilities given to women. Since independence, for example, there have been two female ministers of justice in Kyrgyzstan, while in Kazakhstan the first female was appointed as vice-minister of defence in 2001 and there are three female ambassadors.[19] If one takes into account the number of female deputy ministers then the number of women in ministerial positions exceeds the proportion of women in the parliament. Yet there are indications that women in this position can be extremely influential with respect to policy-making, as one assistant to the Uzbek deputy minister for labour and social protection stated:

> As you can see, most of the ministerial work is carried out here. In the past women as deputy ministers would undertake not only their own work but also that of the minister, which often included writing his speeches. Here we put together all the information necessary for formulating new policies and we draft the policy document. That gives the deputy minister a lot of leverage when the final document is produced. In this way we were able to have real influence over the new labour laws when we disclosed the dreadful conditions under which women worked in industry and agriculture. By doing our own research we were able to prove that previous legislation had consistently been ignored and that changes in legislation were needed if we were to protect women in the labour force.

Thus, with far fewer female representatives at national level, it was indirect rather than direct influence which underlined the nature of women's participation in the decision-making process. In all three republics women have formed a women's political caucus in the parliaments in order to scrutinize new legislation introduced in the transition period. The role of these caucuses was probably most important in the early years of independence when the volume of such legislation and the pressure for immediate change were greater. As one Kazakh people's deputy stated:

> I have been fortunate in being re-elected but we have lost many good women since independence. Now we have to do what we can with what we have. We have a women's caucus that reviews all legislation before it goes before the parliament. This has been most important in the laws for social protection and labour legislation where we could point out the main benefits and losses for women in these areas. Some of our criticisms were taken on board which we feel is some achievement. In my experience it has been more difficult to have real impact at this level than it was under the previous system. However we might want to see it, fewer women means less influence.

Whatever the extent of women's influence is in the process of transition, or was under the previous system, it has been imperceptible to the overwhelming majority of women in the Central Asian republics.[20] This has been most apparent in the post-independence period, when the status of women in the Central Asian republics entered into rapid decline.

Central Asian governments have consistently expressed concern with respect to the situation of women in the process of economic and politi-

cal transition. After the Beijing Conference of 1995 all three republics introduced National Action Plans to improve the status of women, but this has not resulted in any substantive change. A strong traditional patriarchal system has exerted considerable pressure on women to prioritize their role in the family, the socialization of children and the strengthening of cultural values. This has had considerable impact on attitudes to women's political participation, and most especially on support for their political and social advancement. While governments may pay lip service to the need for increased female representation in the political sphere, political parties, in spite of, in some cases, the large proportion of women who make up their membership, have failed to place women's issues on their political agenda or offer even tacit support for increasing the number of female candidates. Moreover, there has been little incentive for them to do so. For the most part there have been two major obstacles to increasing the number of women in the transition period. First, the substantial opposition to women entering institutional politics from both family and the general community, and second, the lack of financial and political patronage to enable them to do so.

The failure of the Central Asian governments to resolve the severe economic problems confronting the republics in the transition period has led to a particularly hostile attitude towards governments and politicians. Democracy is equated with corruption, and politicians are believed to be far more interested in improving their own lives than those of the population they are supposed to serve (Rifkatovna 2001). Politics remains a 'dirty business', and women who wish to engage in it are considered to be aberrant.[21] Thus, few women are willing to pursue a career in politics without family support, and in rural areas especially, where more traditional lifestyles and attitudes prevail, this is much less likely. Moreover, with the removal of quotas women are less likely to receive political support from political parties in their registration as candidates or in political campaigns. Now women are faced with an often obstructive bureaucracy unwilling to assist in the administrative procedures that pre-empt the acceptance of candidature. Furthermore, as a result of economic reforms women have tended to suffer most with respect to employment and access to the necessary financial backing to stand for election. Chytyrbaeva, for example, points out that in Kyrgyzstan a prospective candidate requires a sum of $650 to register, a prohibitive amount when one considers that the average salary is only $21 per month (2000).[22] In view of the fact that it is women who have been most disadvantaged economically within the process of economic restructuring, under such circumstances it has been difficult for a critical

mass of women to emerge as candidates within the present electoral system.

For the most part, Central Asian women are disillusioned with institutional politics and a process of democratization that has clearly excluded them either implicitly or explicitly. As Rifkatovna found in her research:

> Reports of corruption towards women are often linked to descriptions of the psychological consequences: humiliation, intimidation and insults have a significant effect on the extent to which women participate in government elections. Negotiating a way through the corruption and rude treatment with some sort of underthinkings [*sic*] about women who wish to participate in the activity of state bodies involved in politics leaves women feeling powerless, voiceless and excluded. (2001)

Perhaps the task is not one of trying to understand why women are less likely to participate in institutional politics but why, under these circumstances, they might wish to participate at all:

It is significant that in the 2000 elections for the national parliament in Kazakhstan 30 per cent of female voters did not turn out to vote. A survey undertaken in the post-election period revealed that this was a direct result of women's disaffection with politics (Khassanova 2001: 15). A similar situation emerged in the elections of the same year in Kyrgyzstan – far fewer women were willing to be nominated as candidates than in the previous elections owing to their negative experience of standing and campaigning within a less than democratic environment hostile to women (Chytyrbaeva 2000). Research undertaken by the Diamond Association in Kyrgyzstan in 1999 underlined women's attitudes to politics. While a majority of women were unhappy with women's political status they expressed indifference with respect to a power structure controlled by men. Over 60 per cent of the respondents claimed that they were not interested in working within the political structure and gave lack of time and experience as the main reason for this, although one in ten women stated that they had turned down posts owing to opposition from family and relatives. Clearly, the support of family and community was believed to be imperative if women were to increase their political representation (Tabyshalieva 1999b: 3–4). Moreover, with few institutional structures offering active support to improve the level of women's representation in institutional politics, and all three governments strongly resisting calls for the reintroduction of quotas for women, the situation is unlikely to change in the short term.

As before, women have been more successful in maintaining some

influence through a higher level of representation in local and regional politics and in organizations that essentially remain on the periphery of political decision-making. For many women this has been a position of choice, whereby practical solutions to the overwhelming burdens on women in the transition period are addressed and ameliorated through their political activism in the wide range of NGOs and professional associations created for women by women in the post-independence period. It is here that women have exerted considerable political influence by disclosing the situation of women in a post-Soviet era while actively seeking to institute practical solutions at grass-roots level.

Making the change: from government organizations to non-government organizations

Probably the most significant political development in Central Asian politics following independence was the rapid emergence of a large broad-based NGO sector. The loss of substantive female representation in the realm of institutional politics fuelled women's role as the principal protagonists in what has been termed the 'quiet' revolution,[23] as leaders of and participants in NGOs, but especially in establishing women's NGOs. This development was a direct response not only to the political but also to the economic dispossession of women in the transition period. They formed the majority of the unemployed and suffered most from the state's inability to maintain the wide-ranging welfare and social services that supported family and community in the Soviet period. Moreover, in a changing socio-political environment the question of de facto gender inequality re-emerged as the position of women rapidly deteriorated in all the Central Asian republics.[24] Women's NGOs, therefore, were concerned not only with constructing practical solutions to specific problems facing women but also with informing and influencing the decision-making process monopolized by institutional politics.

The formation of women's NGOs emerged from a long-standing tradition of the institution of women's organizations, albeit initiated by the Soviet state. The reinstitution of a Soviet Women's Committee after the Second World War provided the impetus for the expansion of women's organizations. This drive by the CPSU to mobilize women was essentially aimed at raising the political consciousness of women in order to increase their participation in the labour force and in institutional politics.[25] Initially, *zhensovety* (women's councils) were set up under the auspices of the Soviet Women's Committee at republic, regional and local level, but later the formation and activism of the *zhensovety* took

on a life of their own. While the impetus for the expansion of *zhensovety* came through CPSU policy, and some were established by the party, others were set up on the initiative of local women. Browning argues that most sources tend to focus on the political role of these organizations, but the range of activities undertaken by the *zhensovety* was much broader and covered many sectors, such as 'political work, production, daily life, culture, work with children and social work' (Browning 1987: 60, 87 and 1992: 98).[26] The importance of the *zhensovety* lay in the way they brought women together, creating an associational culture within which they responded to local issues and concerns that directly affected women.

One important feature of the *zhensovety*, as opposed to other state-sponsored organizations, was the predominance of non-party women within the organization. Moreover, while they were essentially linked to the Soviet Women's Committee there was no national coordinating body for the *zhensovety*, which permitted greater autonomy and diversity in their modes of organization and 'political' practice. Initially an urban phenomenon, *zhensovety* were later established in rural towns and villages, although they were far fewer in number. The importance of the expansion of the *zhensovety* lay in the ability to prioritize local issues and needs, some of which were raised by local delegates at Women's Congresses held in the republics. At the 2nd Congress of Uzbek Women in the early 1960s the question of the status of rural women was firmly on the agenda and there was a call to 'prepare women systematically in the Kolkhozes' for leadership positions and posts within the workplace (Browning 1987: 92). In Kyrgyzstan, for example, local priorities set the agenda for the activities of the *zhensovety* in the Uzgenskii region, where the *zhensovety* argued that there could be 'no culture without books' and to this end fought to provide every block of flats with its own library (ibid.: 102). Khassanova speaks with admiration of the 'tirelessly active women workers' of her childhood attempting to improve the quality of women's lives within their communities (2000: 385). Despite the lack of substantive information about the heterogeneous activities of the *zhensovety* in Central Asia, it is clear that they played an important socio-political role in the region up to independence. So much so that in the late 1980s, the Central Asian states were praised for the activities of the *zhensovety* and their creative initiatives (Browning 1992: 100).

After the demise of the Soviet Union, a negative appraisal of the previous structure of female representation and state-sponsored women's organizations was immediate and damning. The *zhensovety* were also singled out for criticism as ineffective organizations that existed, for the

most part, in name only. Available evidence suggests that this was not the case, and Browning argues that such criticism needs to be tempered in the light of 'their achievements, by the support they provide women, by the extent to which they operate as a pressure group, and by the new consciousness some *zhensovety* are generating' (ibid.: 102). Yet criticism of the previous structure, in the post-independence period, was essentially fuelled by the blatant rehash of the Soviet Women's Committee and the *zhensovety* under government tutelage as NGOs.

In the newly independent states, the 'official' women's organizations were sidelined out of institutional politics and renamed National Women's Committees, maintaining a similar pyramidal structure with regional and local branches. While the government continued to pay salaries to support a small permanent staff, these organizations were now expected to operate as semi-autonomous structures. There was no longer any support for operating costs or government money to fund programmes. It could be argued that any funding given by government to the Women's Committee, in all three republics, was in fact a partial payment for continuing to administer government welfare programmes and social services as they had done before. Nevertheless, whatever influence such women's organizations may have had under the previous system was effectively curtailed after independence. The Women's Committees of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan were, therefore, forced to adapt to new circumstances and to redefine their role: as government-organized NGOs (GONGOs).

One of the important features of the development of the NGO sector since independence is that certain key areas of state responsibility have been supplemented or replaced by the formation of GONGOs operating outside the state structure. Owing to the ensuing socio-economic crisis that has prevailed in the transition period the state has been unable to continue its funding of many welfare and social services. Consequently, GONGOs were established, often in the form of charities or foundations, dealing principally with issues related to women and children as well as the environment. Often well resourced and networked, they have been able to attract humanitarian assistance and funding for programmes that have supplemented, if not replaced, important government assistance in many areas. In view of the fact that international funding, in all its forms, needs to demonstrate outcomes over a broad area, it is GONGOs, with their superior resourcing and structure, which have had the fewest problems in sustaining their operations over time. Without doubt this has created considerable animosity among the majority of independent NGOs, which often compete against GONGOs for funding and support

(Handrahan 1999). This has especially been the case with respect to women's NGOs in Central Asia.

Some of the first women's NGOs were established in the early 1990s in response to the problems facing women in the transition period. These organizations were formed around a wide range of issues, such as women and small business, disabled women, the environment, single parents and the elderly, as well as in tandem with professional associations. Initially many of these organizations were self-funded and operated, for the most part, with volunteers. In the lead-up to the Fourth World Women's Conference held in Beijing in 1995 there were approximately twenty women's NGOs (WNGOs) in operation in each of the three republics. At this point the predominance of the Women's Committees gave them a leading role in the coordination of official preparations for the conference, and in effect they became the principal representatives at the conference itself. In contrast to Russia, where some two hundred representatives of NGOs were able to obtain funding or support to attend the conference,[27] less than one-third of that number attended on behalf of women's NGOs from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, the conference was a watershed in the development of Central Asian women's organizations through the international contacts made there, the exchange of ideas and the political agendas that emerged. Irrespective of the question of representation, the conference was a monumental occasion for women of Central Asia, where for the first time ever women in both an official and an unofficial capacity were able to speak for themselves and publicly question the status of women in transitional societies.

In the lead-up to the Beijing conference further important links were made not only between women of the Central Asian republics but also women of the CIS countries. Following independence, early WNGOs held National Women's Congresses which set up committees and networks across the republics, culminating in the organization of the first International Congress of Euro-Asian Women in Almaty, Kazakhstan, in September 1993. This congress brought together women from Europe, Central Asia and the CIS with the intention of creating a single political platform through which to exert pressure on the governments of the former Soviet republics to defend the status of women in society and legislate for change in all areas of public and private life. Many of the issues raised at the congress were put forward at the Beijing conference. Moreover, at the congress a Council of Central Asian Women was formed to coordinate the political activities of women in the republics. Since then there have been only a few similar congresses of this magni-

tude, which have brought together a broad cross-section of women leaders and WNGO activists in the region, owing mostly to lack of funding. Yet the original congress formed the basis for intercommunication, collaboration and intellectual exchange between Central Asian women on an individual and collective basis that has been maintained in one form or another up to the present time.

Most significant was the work undertaken by the governments of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in producing gender-disaggregated statistics in preparation for the official presentations to be made at the Beijing conference with respect to the status of women in the post-independence period. At no time previously had such a comprehensive gender-specific analysis been undertaken, and the results were a damning indictment of the rapidly deteriorating situation of women in Central Asia in the areas of politics, employment, health and social well-being. As one Kazakh people's deputy remarked at the time:

> The results of the statistical analysis, the first of its kind in our country, were a shock even to women such as myself who have strongly advocated government support for women at this time. Some male colleagues suggested that the evidence was manipulated to exaggerate the problems of women and others felt that we couldn't possibly present such a bad image of our country in an international forum. In my view it is important that we are honest if we are looking for international support to help us improve the situation. Beijing will be a wonderful opportunity for us to do that.

Concern about the question of image and government commitment to improving the status of women in Central Asia were palpable in the lead-up to and the aftermath of the Beijing conference. In Uzbekistan, for example, a presidential decree aimed at improving women's role in the state and decision-making, in the months leading up to the conference, constituted a pre-emptive strike in an attempt to ameliorate the radical decline in women's representation in the highest, as well as local, decision-making positions. Through this decree the chairperson of the Women's Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan was appointed to the position of deputy prime minister, while the chairpersons of the regional and local branches of the committee were appointed deputy mayors (Sirojiddinov 1999: 25; Mee 2001: 12–13). Rather than representing an advance in the political influence of women, this merely replicated the system that had existed previously, leaving the new independent WNGOs in an inferior position to that of a rehabilitated National Women's Committee. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan the respective governments

made no similar move, although national programmes for women's development were introduced in the years that followed the Beijing conference (Khassanova 2000: 391; Ikramova and McConnell 1999: 205). In spite of successive programmes of this kind being introduced up to the present time, there has been no radical change in either the status of women or their political representation in any of the republics.

Since 1995, the number of WNGOs has more than doubled in all three republics as international funding to the region increased exponentially. Many of these NGOs have focused principally on social protection and poverty alleviation, which has involved setting up self-help programmes and activities to assist women in the transition period. Organizations which, for example, support single parents or disabled women with children have been important in highlighting problems that had been private rather than public issues under the previous system. One specific area of concern to women, which had been brought into public view in the transition period, was that of violence against women. Women's groups and legal and crisis centres have been important in not only supporting women but in pressuring government to offer legal protection and greater social support for victims of abuse.[28] Of the single-issue gender-specific NGOs, those that focus on the question of violence against women, owing to its ranking as a priority issue for international human rights and women's organizations, have received strong long-term financial support from a wide range of national and international sources. Others, such as those that support single parents and disabled women, have been less fortunate, relying for the most part on short-term funding and individual initiatives with respect to fund-raising. In recent times, for example, Bib Anna, an NGO for disabled single mothers in Kazakhstan, has struggled to survive financially, turning to small business activities to support the organization and its work (Yermukanov 2000).[29] Many small single-issue NGOs have been far less successful in sustaining their activities over time and exist in name only, have been disbanded or function on a part-time voluntary basis.

In view of the fact that women have borne the brunt of the economic hardship faced by the Central Asian population in the transition period, and form the majority of unemployed, it is important to note that WNGOs that deal with female entrepreneurship and small business have been some of the most active and successful. One of the first NGOs to be established in Central Asia was the Association of Business Women of Uzbekistan, which was formed in 1991. This organization grew from a small women's cooperative making handicrafts with a commitment to support other women in small business activities to an organization

with branches in all the main regions and districts of Uzbekistan. From the outset the modus operandi of the association, bereft of government support or any form of financial sponsorship, was geared to it becoming a fully independent WNGO both economically and politically. It now has over three thousand female entrepreneurs as members, whose financial subscriptions and skill inputs have made it one of the most successful self-funded organizations in Central Asia. Leading members of the association have been members of government advisory bodies on small business, and it is the main conduit for internationally funded programmes aimed at small business training, micro-credit and skills training in Uzbekistan. After 1995, Associations of Businesswomen were established in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan which were organized along similar lines and which have established a strong presence in the NGO community. While the activities of these associations have expanded to include legal and social issues, the core activity of promoting and supporting women's small business initiatives remains their contribution and strength. In the light of a growing Central Asian market economy in which women have been disproportionately sidelined from mainstream employment, the Associations of Businesswomen in all three republics have acted as leading advocates of women's rights and leadership within the small business community.

Nevertheless, some of the strongest WNGOs established from 1995 onward have been those headed by professional and highly educated women, with an extremely broad range of objectives which focus on improving the socio-economic, legal and political status of Central Asian women. Among the leading WNGOs are the Women's Resource Centre (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan), the Diamond Association (Kyrgyzstan), the Centre for Women Leaders (Uzbekistan) and the Feminist League (Kazakhstan). These groups have been strongly influenced by the Western feminist movement and the agenda of international agreements, such as the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and have been at the forefront of the push to establish an effective women's movement both nationally and regionally (Ikramova and McConnell 1999: 201–4). It is important to note that a significant number of women leaders of these NGOs, owing to their individual skills and academic standing, have been successful in gaining sponsorship and grants to participate in academic and cultural exchange programmes overseas (Adamson 1999: 27). This has, without doubt, shaped their vision and perspective on gender-specific issues and influenced the socio-political agenda of their organizations. Few of the WNGOs, however, define themselves as feminist or believe the term to

be appropriate in the sociocultural context of Central Asian society. As one WNGO leader argued:

> I think as a woman I would call myself a feminist and I support many of the ideas of Western feminism. It is not a word I would use openly or that we associate with what we do in our organization. We would lose a lot of support especially from women if we did that. The word itself is not popular in my country, it is Western and associated with a very different kind of woman and a different kind of experience. Our history, our experience and our problems have come out of a different past and a different reality. We have an Eastern philosophy and our future will be as marked by that as our past.

Nevertheless, the lines of communication and contact developed by these organizations with international organizations, women's forums and academic institutions have widened the range of 'global' and regional intercommunication previously monopolized by the Soviet Women's Committee and latterly by the National Women's Committees.

In 1996 it was the UNDP initiative in establishing Gender and Development (GAD) bureaus in each of the three republics which offered important early sponsorship and support for the formation of these organizations, some of which were initially ad hoc groups of professional women, artists and academics with a broad agenda to promote gender equity in all spheres of life and increase women's presence and representation in political decision-making at the highest levels (Sirojiddinov 1999: 26; Handrahan 1999: 9; Khassanova 2000: 388). Thus, the aforementioned WNGOs have developed similarly broad agendas which include supporting education and training, legal advocacy and legal literacy, independent research and study, development of leadership skills and raising public awareness of women's issues. An important aspect of their work has been the contribution to knowledge about women's status in Central Asia through independent research initiatives and investigations into issues such as women and politics, violence against women, the situation of rural women and gender stereotypes in traditional society (Ikramova and McConnell 1999: 205–6; Luong and Weinthal 1999: 1,271). The Diamond Association of Kyrgyzstan, for example, has been most prolific in carrying out research and the dissemination of their findings across a broad area (Tabyshalieva 1999b: 2; Lee Pawlowski 2000: 4). It is in this field that WNGOs, individually and collectively, have been most influential, informing government policy and contributing to the drafting of new laws. It was principally the work of these women which formed the basis of some of the first national

reports on the status of women produced by the GAD bureaus in all three republics at the end of the 1990s.

Most important in the civil engagement of WNGOs has been their work in constructing a united front in the struggle for greater political representation for women in institutional politics. To this end the most active WNGOs have undertaken a leadership role in the formation of National Women's Congresses to formulate political strategies and put forward candidates to compete for political office. Subsequently, women's political parties have been established in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan to place gender-specific issues on the political agenda and increase women's political representation in the National Legislative Assembly. The first was the Women's Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan, registered in 1996, which in the 2000 elections received 12.6 per cent of the vote. While this did not translate into a large number of seats, it still positioned this party among the leading six in the republic (Osorova 2000).[30] In Kazakhstan the first women's political party was formed in 1999 with the provisional title of the Political Alliance of Women's Organizations of Kazakhstan; it was later renamed the Democratic Party of Kazakh Women. Although its registration was finalized too late for it to compete in the 1999 elections, with over three thousand members it constitutes the beginning of an important move to increase women's chances of election (Khassanova 2001: 3–4; Shakirova and Seitova 2002: 120). A similar initiative was effectively thwarted in Uzbekistan owing to the presidential decree that re-embedded the National Women's Committee in the institutional political structure at all levels of government. Thus the appointment of leading members of the committee to the position of deputy in the prime ministerial office and as deputy mayors in regional government has effectively made them the official spokespersons for women in the government.

Up to the present time, a coalition of forces from the WNGO community, in creating a support structure for the development of women leaders and active involvement in recent electoral campaigns for the National Legislative Assemblies, has been fraught with difficulties. Registering as a candidate is still beyond the means of most women and even the organizations that might support them. Even where they are able to stand as candidates there is still an overwhelming reluctance on the part of women to do so. For those women who enter the fray, aggressive campaigning styles and dirty-tricks campaigns supported by men have left them reeling from the experience and in some cases undermined in the face of their family and community. Chytyrbaeva's interviews with leading female politicians and members of the most influential WNGOs

in Kyrgyzstan after the 2000 election found that some had, owing to the negative experience of previous elections, quite deliberately withdrawn. Some simply refused to engage in political practices that were inequitable and unacceptable (2000). In view of the problems faced by women in all three republics in achieving political office at the highest level, the energies of WNGOs both individually and collectively have been focused on women's representation at local level, where they are present in larger numbers and have been more successful in gaining office. Moreover, the WNGO coalitions, in conjunction with the National Women's Committees, have, in all three republics, consistently pressed for a change in legislation to reinstitute a quota system for women. All requests and submissions to parliament with respect to quotas have, up to the present time, been consistently rejected.

It is important to note, however, that the political systems in which Central Asian women are attempting to gain a foothold have, despite initial claims of democratization, become increasingly authoritarian and restrictive. In all three republics the parameters for political action or any form of confrontational politics or protest are severely limited for all citizens, and within this context the work of the NGO community as a whole has been an important sphere of civic education and political activity. Nevertheless, NGOs are registered as social and philanthropic rather than political entities, and as such can be subject to legal sanctions if they choose to operate outside their specified jurisdiction (Luong and Weinthal 1999: 1,276; Horton and Kazakna 1999: 41). WNGOs have frequently straddled the line between the two and have been obliged to temper their political involvement for fear of being deregistered.[31]

Moreover, the official restoration of the National Women's Committees as essentially government WNGOs in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, and the reincorporation of the National Women's Committee as a state institution in the case of Uzbekistan, have effectively maintained their insider status with respect to informing and implementing government policy. While leading members of WNGOs have been invited to act in an advisory capacity in these areas, the National Women's Committees have been essentially sustained as a buffer zone between the state and independent women's organizations. This has on occasion created serious political divisions between the two, with independent WNGOs accusing the Women's Committees of failing to utilize their privileged position to challenge the status quo and exert pressure for the recognition and support of women's important role in the economy and in public life (Ikramova and McConnell 1999: 207). Without doubt the official Women's Committees have supported successive government

programmes that, without exception, have focused on improving the situation of women *and* children, thus prioritizing women's traditional role as wives and mothers. This has been in direct contradistinction to the political agenda of leading WNGOs, which have sought to pressure governments to adhere to their obligations as signatories to the CEDAW convention. At an inter-regional conference on the role of NGOs in Uzbekistan, Marfua Tokhtakhodjaeva, director of the Women's Resource Centre, offered in her presentation a scathing attack of the role of the Women's Committee, and the media,[32] in failing to support the recommendations of the CEDAW committee, in doing so undermining the status of women in Uzbek society through the promotion of traditional stereotypes:

> … Thus, at the initiative of the Women's Committee, Channel III of the Uzbek TV regularly promotes the role of mother as [the] principal person for raising children and the role of the father as the only head of family (which is in contradiction with the Convention). One can feel an intention to control what women wear and also to limit their role to performing only family duties. The newspaper *Oila va Jamiyat* in its every issue educates women on how they should meet their husbands, serve and entertain them … It is time that Women's Committees should stop praising large families and mothers, who serve all members of families. And it is time to recognise the social role of mothers who raise citizens of a modern state and women, who actively participate in the development processes, in reforming the society and its enlightenment. As a distinguished Uzbek scholar, Abdurauf Fitrat, said, 'A slave woman raises a slave child'. (2001)

Despite disagreements between the Women's Committees and the independent WNGO community, since 1995 they have consistently striven to engage in positive exchange of information and cooperation in their activities, because to do otherwise severely weakens the position of both. Nevertheless, the independent WNGOs consistently identify the differences between them, that of insider and outsider organizations, the question of a conflict of interest in the case of the Women's Committees, and their questionable claims to representativity. Yet the question of representativity also plagues the independent WNGO community. The overwhelming majority are urban based and, unlike the Women's Committees, do not have the resources to establish a comprehensive structure of outreach branches in rural areas, where the majority of Central Asian women continue to live and work.[33] Moreover they are led, for the most part, by professional women considered to constitute a new political

elite who, it is argued, work 'for' women rather than 'with' them (Hunt 2001: 8–9). In a critical look at the NGO community and civil society in Uzbekistan, David Abramson raises a further pertinent question with respect to these organizations, namely 'how non-governmental can they be when funded by international or foreign national organizations which are in turn funded by foreign governments?' (1999: 242).

Without doubt WNGOs are the strongest NGOs in Central Asia and are the greatest recipients of international financial support (ibid.: 13). Since 1995, millions of dollars have been channelled into gender-specific projects and programmes by organizations such as USAID, Counterpart Consortium, UNDP, the Soros Foundation and the Eurasia Foundation among others. Funding has been diverse but generally focused on building civil society through leadership and civic education programmes, legal literacy and advocacy through the training and publishing of educational materials, and supporting private initiatives and enterprise through micro credit and a plethora of skills training programmes. Thus, the socio-political agendas of the donors rather than those of the recipients drive grants and funding opportunities. For the most part, therefore, WNGOs could be seen as administering the programmes of international donors, which may not be analogous with the central aims of the organizations or local needs (ibid.: 17–19). WNGOs also compete against one another to obtain such funding, and it is those organizations with leaders possessing the requisite skills which are most successful in maintaining a consistent flow of funding – highly educated and professional women with the capacity to speak Russian and/or English, who have become conversant with the necessary Western-friendly strategies and formulae to obtain consistent funding and maintain a prominent position in what has become a highly competitive funding environment. Observers have argued that this has effectively reduced rather than enhanced cooperation between WNGOs (Henderson 2002: 143–4). This, however, belies a lack of understanding of the survival strategies long honed under the auspices of the Soviet system and now applied in the shadow of Western influence by Central Asian women, whereby the ability of so-called elite women to repackage their skills in the pursuit of foreign funding and grants has been essential to the survival of an omnipresent independent WNGO community in Central Asia.

The strength of WNGOs in Central Asia does not merely rest with their ability to obtain international funding, although this is crucial to their continued socio-political activities in the face of a lack of funding on the part of their respective governments and a developing business community. Most important have been the consistent efforts of the stronger

organizations to support and incorporate the weaker members of the community. The majority of WNGOs are small, with few resources and with personnel who do not have the requisite skills to obtain anything other than short-term funding. For example, the leaders of these organizations remain excluded from the training programmes offered by international NGOs, which are offered only to those who speak Russian or English.[34] Within this scenario, those organizations which have been consistently successful in building a substantial funding base have been able to develop an effective infrastructure, which includes computers, Internet access and office space. Access to the Internet, for example, is crucial in maintaining contact with similar organizations overseas, as well as academic institutions and funding bodies, while radically increasing access to information and resources. They have also established small reference libraries on their premises and engaged in desktop publishing to produce reports, educational materials and information bulletins. All these resources are pooled, offering smaller WNGOs access to these facilities, and they are frequently assisted by the larger organizations in their endeavours to obtain funding through on the one hand assistance in writing project applications and on the other being subcontracted to undertake some aspects of larger projects. Moreover, there are other ways in which the larger WNGOs have been able to assist and support the efforts of NGOs and projects in the local community. The Diamond Association in Kyrgyzstan, for example, helped establish one of the first women's crisis centres in Bishkek, while the Centre for Women's Leadership in Uzbekistan set up a radio programme for women and sponsors local community activities. Without doubt a strong symbiotic relationship exists between the various WNGOs in which the most economically successful are able to support and encourage those less fortunate. This relationship is fundamental to sustaining the multifarious activities, agendas and aspirations of the independent WNGO community as a whole. Perhaps one might argue that it is both its greatest strength and its weakness.

In the evolution of the polity in all three republics, independent WNGOs, and the NGO community as a whole, have been important to the development of a non-institutional politics that supports, supplements and, at the same time, challenges the policy and representativity of Central Asian institutional politics. Tabyshalieva describes WNGOs as 'incubators for new leaders', and in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan WNGOs have engaged in substantive efforts to identify potential women leaders in their midst and seek support from political organizations and politicians to recognize and promote them (1999b: 2).

Yet concerted efforts to substantively increase the number of women in national parliaments continue to be obstructed both explicitly and implicitly in all the Central Asian republics. Cultural traditions remain strong in the region, and politics is still believed to be an unseemly 'occupation' for women. Ironically, women's predominance in the NGO community and the nature of the activities undertaken therein are seen as entirely appropriate, representing a continuation of the sociocultural role undertaken by women historically and harnessed under the previous Soviet system. In effect, the activities of the NGO community are deemed to be gender specific and identified as 'women's business'. This has effectively created a form of political apartheid whereby institutional politics remains dominated by men while the non-institutional political structure is supported by women.

Within this scenario the nexus between the state and the National Women's Committees on the one hand and the National Women's Committees and independent WNGOs on the other remains a crucial one. However much the relationship is maligned within the 'women's movement', it is understood as one that needs to be developed and maintained. In the wake of recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, international funding in the region has begun to decrease. At present, independent WNGOs are expressing increasing concern for their own survival and are engaging in various business activities as a means of maintaining base-line funding to ensure their survival and decrease their vulnerability in the long term. The independent WNGO community, despite its weaknesses, plays an important role in raising women's social and political status in Central Asia. It has given women an opportunity to represent themselves, to define the terms of their political engagement and to place women's issues firmly on the political agenda. The past has taught them the importance of speaking for themselves and struggling for their political future within the context of the cultural values and mores that make Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Uzbek society distinct and unique. As in the past, this will depend on the work of 'tirelessly active women workers' in defending their rights and status as full and equal citizens in an independent Central Asia.

Notes

1 A critical mass, certainly in Western-speak, is acknowledged as one-third of the total number of political representatives.

2 Ironically this coincided with efforts of women in the non-communist world to institute effective quota systems to improve female representation in institutional politics.

3 A similar description of women advantaged under the Soviet political quotas in Russia was proffered by Anastasia Posadskaya (1993: 174).

4 See, for example, Posadskaya (1993), Funk and Mueller (1993) and Tokhtakhodjaeva (1996).

5 Significant in so far as the numbers of women in the senior ranks of the political system, in Central Asia especially, were relatively small.

6 One of the more recent protests was in 2001, when women from southern Kazakhstan picketed the parliament in Astana for the payment of overdue social allowances that had not been forthcoming since 1996. See *Kazakh News*, 17 and 18 April 2001.

7 See Chapter 2.

8 Ibid.

9 See Buckley (1989).

10 See Chapter 1.

11 See Buckley (1989) and Browning (1987).

12 According to Sakwa this represented a decline in the proportional representation of Russians from a figure of over 66 per cent in the 1960s, as the pace of party recruitment of non-Russians in the autonomous republics increased.

13 Under Gorbachev there were substantive changes to make the Central Committee more representative of the population, and thus for the first time women's representation doubled to 8 per cent of the total membership. Moreover, for the first time there was an increase in the number of Central Asian men and women elected to the Central Committee. Nevertheless, the subsequent fall of the Soviet system meant that these changes were short lived. See Clark (1991), Lentini (1993) and Mawdsley (1991).

14 These positions were essentially heads of state of the Soviet republics. See 'Women Leaders in the Former Soviet Union' at <http://www.guide2womenleaders.com/former_ussr.htm>.

15 Ibid.

16 Yadgar Nasriddinova was considered to be one of Khrushchev's protégées, and it was in 1974, when she was president of the Council of Nationalities of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, that false claims of corruption were made against her in order to effect her removal from power. See Tokhtakhodjaeva (1996: 140–2).

17 See especially, Buckley (1997a), Molyneux (1981), Racioppi and O'Sullivan (1995) and Tokhtakhodjaeva (1996).

18 See Keller (1998), Schlesinger (1998), Mickiewicz (1977) and Chatterjee et al. (1997).

19 In all three republics women in the past constituted approximately one-third of the members of the judiciary. It is interesting to note that these appointments were made in Kyrgyzstan at a time when there was a radical drop to 8 per cent in female representation in the judiciary. The appointment of Zhanat Ertiselova as vice-minister of defence represented the first time in the history of the country that a woman had been given a top military post.

20 A similar observation could be made with respect to women's influence in the previous system.

21 This is not much different from the situation under the Soviet system, whereby women would often become estranged from their family and communities to pursue a political career.

22 See also Khassanova (2001). The fact that many people accuse politicians of 'buying' their way into politics rather than gaining their position on merit is understandable under such circumstances.

23 See Fisher (1997).

24 In the transition period legal equality became virtually unenforceable. See, for example, Chapter 4.

25 This was due to a recognition by Khrushchev, and those who followed him, that the 'woman question' had not been resolved – the reason given for the abolition of the *Zhenotdel* in 1930.

26 The work of Browning remains one of the most substantive and definitive investigations into the work of the *zhensovety* in the Soviet period.

27 See Sperling (1999).

28 See Human Rights Watch (2001), Fajih and Foy (1999) and Weber and Watson (2000).

29 These activities include running a small shop and managing a parking lot. For a discussion of the need for NGOs to turn to small business activities to survive, see Ikramova and McConnell (1999).

30 In Kyrgyzstan a political party needs to obtain 5 per cent of the vote to get a seat in parliament whereas in Kazakhstan the figure is 7 per cent.

31 Unregistered NGOs are considered to be illegal entities in all the republics.

32 See also Tokhtakhodjaeva (2002).

33 There have been very few independent WNGOs established in the rural areas. Alga, an organization formed by rural women in Kyrgyzstan, is one exception; its aim is to bring the problems of rural women to the attention of the government. It has been fairly successful in gaining funding for training and access to micro-credit loans to support rural women's enterprise initiatives.

34 See Abramson (1999), Fisher (1997) and Henderson (2002).

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