

Lost Voices: Central Asian Women Confronting Transition

Yvonne Corcoran-Nantes

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Yvonne Corcoran-Nantes' *Lost Voices: Central Asian Women Confronting Transition* examines how the Soviets empowered and disempowered Central Asian women before, during, and after the communist regime. To date, this book is the most in-depth study of the revolutionary transformations experienced by these women during the twentieth century. Combining her western academic background and sensitivity for the local context, she reaches beyond the mainstream conceptualization of gender issues vis-à-vis the Soviet regime to examine Central Asian and western literature on gender themes across disciplines, from anthropology to political science.

The book opens with a sophisticated analysis of the relation between western feminist paradigms and the Soviet policy of gender equality. Both existed in parallel, yet were interactive. Although western feminist ideas impacted women from the Soviet space, they represented rather marginal views among Soviet feminists. Corcoran-Nantes explains that while the Soviet regime was empowering Central Asian women by liberating them from traditional religious values and setting quotas in public structures, these radical shifts in daily life inevitably complicated their identities in various social situations. The Soviet model provided some institutional framework for the independence period, yet was largely inadequate in the new free market system. As a result, Central Asian women faced greater problems in shaping their feminist agendas when compared to Russian women.

Chapter 2 discusses why this forceful emancipation, which involved *khujun* (unveiling), replacing Islamic law with Soviet legislation, and establishing *zhensovets* (women councils) in the 1920-30s, was controversial. She argues that women were expected to follow the changes, yet still had to play important social roles in their families. In addition, this empowerment provoked domestic and social violence against women. Such phenomena as *khujun* also engendered intra-personal conflict and hesitation among the first generation of Soviet-ruled Central Asian women. Corcoran-Nantes states that 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" (p. 38).

Chapter 3 argues that this emancipation did not lead to women having a choice in their public and private lives (p. 63). While the first generation of

female doctors, lawyers, and scientists was already appearing in the late 1930s, women were banned from higher-paying positions. They were also exposed – often without their knowledge – to dangerous working conditions. Moreover, their employment in agriculture and factories considerably undermined fertility rates. However, despite its flaws, this policy of emancipation was unprecedented in the Islamic world and its legacy continues.

The book's second part analyzes the effects on women's health. The Soviet economy, which became heavily dependent on female workers, provided an array of subsidized social services for women and children, liberal abortion laws, and family planning programs to raise a "healthy generation." Chapter 5 focuses on the reemergence of Islamic traditions in the post-independence period. Corcoran-Nantes observes that "the nexus between Islam and national identity remained unbroken throughout seventy years of Soviet rule" (p. 137). Women's status in families and local communities began to shift in the early 1990s. Family and community values reemerged along with traditional marriage practices banned by the Soviet regime (e.g., *kalyam* [bride price], arranged marriages, bride kidnapping, and polygamy). In fact, the Soviet regime strengthened traditional sentiments by constructing administrative units based on pre-Soviet cultural divisions. Islam's reemergence and increased poverty due to the economic crisis disempowered women: domestic violence is on the rise, while women's social status has declined rapidly.

The final chapter analyzes the post-independence pro-western "democratic" presence that preserved the "zero tolerance ... of the better aspects of the Soviet system" (p. 160). Women were pushed out of the political process after the Soviet government and parliament quota system for gender representation was cancelled. There was, however, a trend to voice their concerns by founding women NGOs (WNGOs). Although western-funded WNGOs were important in this process, foreign involvement also provoked controversy as WNGOs began to compete for donor attention by aligning their agendas with externally imposed guidelines. Thus, are today's WNGOs genuinely independent?

Her conclusion that the Soviet framework for female emancipation and international funds became the key elements in Central Asian women's ability to retain power in society, politics, and economy in the post-independence period is thought-provoking. However, although she offers a comprehensive analysis of the pre-Soviet and the Soviet periods, she makes too many generalizations about developments in the post-Soviet era.

In addition, this book contains several weaknesses. First, as regards its empirical content, the author displays a perpetual difficulty when making

inter-state and inter-cultural comparisons between Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek women. She elaborates the general trends, and yet overlooks the various paths they have undertaken in the post-Soviet context. This leads to some factual misinterpretations. For example, the author generalizes that *mahallas* (a cultural division among sedentary societies) were important in the post-independence period throughout the region. Similarly, she largely ignores such intra-groups differences as urban/rural divisions, sedentary/nomadic cultures, and wealthy/poor households.

Second, she underestimates the salient differences in the states' post-independence political systems. More than a decade after independence, the difference between the agenda-setting processes by Uzbek, Kazakh, and Kyrgyz WNGOs are striking. While Uzbekistan's WNGOs are still struggling to establish contacts with the western community, their counterparts in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are promoting such liberal values as the rights of sexual minorities and paid sex workers.

Finally, the author overlooks the role of women in times of conflict. Although Central Asia arguably remained relatively calm after the Soviet collapse, the region saw some new phenomena, such as female suicide bombers in Uzbekistan and the manipulation of women's organizations by opposition and government forces.

On the example of Soviet emancipation policies, Corcoran-Nantes manages to trace the formation of Soviet institutes in general by explaining their rationale and effects on Islamic society. In essence, her portrayal of the transformation of Central Asian women provides an analysis of the USSR's establishment, continuity, and decline. Her language is rich, expressive, and harmonious. The book is a valuable contribution to Central Asian and post-Soviet studies, as well as to theories of feminism vis-à-vis Islam.

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