

Women's Movement and Feminism in Central Asia: From a Not Comforting Forecast to Efficient Strategies

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Members of our Affinity Group have been involved in women's socio-political movement since early 90s. After a decade of considerable gains and losses we came to the point where there was a need to analyze the logics of what we have been doing in the region for the past 10 to 15 years. With this goal in mind, two international conferences were organized:

1. *"Women's movement of Central Asia: from the experience of last decade to new prospective"* in October 2005 in Almaty, Kazakhstan, and
2. *"Modern women's movement: ideology, practices and prospective"* in September 2006 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

I would like to start with my reflection on the values and goals of Women's NGOs of our region.

Women's Movement in Central Asia: "not yet" or "already in the past"?

It is often assumed that in a strong state civil society is usually weak, calm and passive. In recent years, Kazakhstan confirmed the assumption.

Legitimacy of the Concept "civil society" in Central Asia

In terms of post-colonial criticism, the concept of civil society in the transition of Central Asian's countries and the ex-Third World to democracy, along with a set of the rhetoric of human rights, it is rather ambiguous. Civil society calls for active-educated citizens with the potential to oppose the nation-state and local elites, to support changes of political regime and the emergence of neo-liberal market economy and the dismantling of "traditional society".

For Kazakhstan some of the challenges have been met, but democracy remains an open question. It has been suggested in Central Asian countries' hopes for development of democratic rights and freedoms have not been met. Central Asia region gets the following diagnosis from Western Europe: "None of the five countries is a country of genuine democracy".

1. The issue around which we can build further discussion is following:
The development of civil society, the crystallization of women's movement by grants of international agencies, the promotion of the discipline 'Gender studies' and gender policy as a whole – are part of the larger political project in opposition between West and East; North and South; First and Third World, metropolis and colonies. Don't we play in our own field another game? And if so, what is a measure of freedom and improvisation?
2. The second issue begs the question: Doesn't women's movement of our countries support *orientalist* paradigm? Looking at what is happening in our region, we can say that there is a certain symptom of *Orientalism*. For example, at international women's networks we often speak as exotic Other for "diluting standards." Consequently, we have to appeal to the worst forms of discrimination and inequality of women in order to legitimize our activities, which we feel is a kind

of orientalist service to the West. Proliferation of the issues of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan, sex traffic of women in Central Asia, self-immolation by women in Uzbekistan, marriages arranged by parents in Tajikistan, sexual workers in Kazakhstan – aren't these typical orientalist clichés and stereotypes?

On the other hand, we have the reverse effect of *occidentalism*, looking at women's movement in the West as a model of authentic, Western feminism per se, and criticizing our own feminism for imitating nature.

3. Third sensitive point: Doesn't our Women's movement suffers together with global feminism an **identity crisis**?

It is globally recognized that since Beijing-95, global feminism is not a victorious movement. Gender mainstreaming in CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) ¹ countries goes slowly; the laws on equal rights and domestic violence had been adopted with big resistance. Instead of mainstreaming, the idea of "gender outstreaming" is being proposed.

The allure of conferences and seminars noticeably fade; studies and surveys give no visible dividends; mass campaigns in Kazakhstan are not popular. What is left? Networking, virtual activity, analysis of the status of women in the country to help international organizations; speaking at seminars locally, regionally and globally.

Networking and communication seems to be the most effective means to advance Women's socio-political movement. But still one could ask whether Net-working is not synonymous with Not-working?

The Feminist's Anti-Feminism

The Women's movement in our country never saw itself as a feminist subject. Moreover, represented by urban educated middle class women it is often met with suspicions of male journalistic community. They question the legitimacy of the movement on behalf of an homogeneous community of women as if such situation was possible in principle.

In the media and in the public space, *feminism* continues to be associated primarily with *radical feminism*. Women's problems are shown mainly in the context of scarcity, deprivation, vulnerability. Feminism and women's movement are evaluated as a negative problem. The logical circle closes: feminism appeals to crucial areas of life. The vulnerable population is an object of social policy and justice, an issue that is difficult to deal with and is not consistent with the logic of competition and personal achievements. Women's movement should bracket economic success and social acceptance. Hence, feminist means marginal. Women who are successful in business, politics and the arts are not feminists by definition.

It is a catch 22 situation: feminists's personal success cannot be based on identification with the women's collective entity. Daily victimization of women, preserving the status of the victim, is reproduced in by the media and lumped together with issues of unemployment, poverty, childlessness, violence, fixing a marginal image of women and of women's movement.

On the other hand, women's movements in Central Asia are not inclined to act on the principles of autonomy. There is no ideological foundation for this, neither in the form of anarchism nor of cultural radical feminism. Ultimately, the goal of feminism is hard to achieve in either version through out the pursuit of equality with men, and by emphasizing women's otherness.

Brief SWOT-Analysis of Women's Movement in Kazakhstan

Strengths:

Some of the strengths are:

- Knowledge of own subjectivity in the public arena.
- Ideological loyalty, constancy of the core of women's movement, established leaders of NGOs.
- Communication with institutional mechanism for the advancement of women.
- Understanding and cooperation with international organizations to build partnership.
- Expertise, professionalism, competence of core women's movement.

Weaknesses:

Some of the weaknesses are:

- Loss of energy, stagnation in women's movement, along with the stagnation of the political sphere of Kazakhstan.
- Low number of women in NGOS.
- Absence of youth.
- Financial instability.
- Weak awareness of feminist background: lack of references, "the women's movement, women's or feminist collective subject."
- Weak interest in politics, etc.

Opportunities:

- Support of international organizations, agencies, foundations.
- Obligations of Kazakh government to promote gender equality.

Threats:

The main threats are non-legitimate changes of political regime, authoritarian power, shrinking of democratic freedoms, violation of the freedom of speech, persecution of political opponents, potential removal of international agencies from the country, etc.

Leaders of women's movement are engaged in theorizing gender policy and strategies of the movement.

Famous sociologist and women's movement activist from Kyrgyzstan Gulnara Ibraeva believes: "Claims for democratic changes in the region of post-Soviet countries, are oblivious to the fact that development does not change the essence of political and public patriarchy. We lived and still live in a political environment that is unfriendly to the idea of gender equality and democratic parity."

According to another gender expert from Kyrgyzstan, Anara Moldosheva, the ideological goals of women's movement are the following:

- Combating the invisibility of women;
- Overcoming of gender biases (stereotypes);
- Trespassing of traditional social boundaries and norms through the creation of new practices and identities, which does not blend with these boundaries;
- Challenge to current system of power.

The typology of women's organizations as proposed by A. Moldosheva is interesting: *gender mainstreaming* (of all those who work against violence, unemployment, promote woman's political

leadership, etc.) paying special attention to those strata whose problems are not well integrated into the general women's mainstreaming movement (for example, Muslim women, disabled women, etc.) and of *new groups emerging from the uprising and protest of March, 2005*.

Mainstream organizations are exploiting the image of Dyuimovochka Thumbelina, a girl one inch tall, heroine of the fairy tale written by Hans Christian Andersen (1835). She is a weak victim of circumstances who waits for her prince (i.e. social protection, state paternalism, men's patronage). In contrast to NGOs such mainstreaming does not see the boundaries between "advocates" and "aliens." Hence it is very difficult to define our own collective subject and to develop the new operational models ever changing conditions. However, alternative movements gain their strength in terms of personal interactions (face-to-face) and often (e.g. lesbian groups) prefers to solidarize with global and not local supporting networks. In regard of new women's groups formed after March 2005, we can see that they act on behalf of people, function on community level and can quickly mobilize women for participation in protest actions. The appearance of new members at the bases of women's movement, caused certain disarray among mainstream movement. The final idea of Anara Moldosheva's presentation put a certain moral and ethic focus to her entire speech: "It is not necessary to stand for the interests of *all* women but for the interests of our *own group interests*, therefore, a unified subject of "a woman" is simply impossible and unnecessary. We are for such women's movement system which will ensure that different women's groups do not feel that they are being excluded".

Another women's activist from Bishkek Zulfia Kochorbaeva thinks that, "women's movement should be rather a *network* of relations than an organization. Even if some actions of women's movement agents do not achieve a desirable or expected outcome, there is an ongoing process of perceiving themselves as a specific social group having their own interests and strategies". The basic strategies of the women's movement are the following: a) seizure of powerful authorities, b) promoting gender strategic needs (promotion of certain special measures policies and positive actions, gender expertise of legislation, gender mainstreaming), c) policy of quick reaction to everyday political needs of women (campaign aimed at protection of a right to make an abortion, work with picketers, etc.).

Mainstreaming: To Get Incorporated to the Stream or to Get Lost Irrevocably?

Lately one can hear expressions of concern about the policy of gender mainstreaming in many countries. It should be acknowledged that after Beijing there were no noticeable victories, the policy of gender mainstreaming is pursued in CIS countries casually and with great delays. The legislation concerning the equal rights and family violence are adopted very slowly and with great resistance and many gender animators worked out badly articulated but clearly idiosyncratic attitude towards the personnel, style and methods as used by relevant national agencies engaged in promoting woman's rights. Nowadays we can hear voices about uselessness and inefficiency of gender mainstreaming instead of which the concept of "gender outstreaming" is proposed.

According to the prominent gender mainstreaming promoter, NGO trainer and genders studies researcher Mira Karybaeva "political rhetoric related to the readiness to include gender aspects to state programs is hardly implemented in practice. One can observe "the effect of evaporation" when every new edition of the document, gender amendments are reduced and lose their force. Experts made a cruel joke in regard of this topic saying: "if you want a certain direction not to be implemented, call it a mainstreaming one".

It turns out that mainstreaming is a violent river in which a thin stream of gender policy is irrevocably lost while it should add additional color to the whole stream as well as an additional sense?!!

Summarizing the speeches of many participants we obtain the following picture:

- Despite the adoption of the law on equal rights the woman's movement of Tajikistan has no opportunity to voice them politically (Alla Kuvatova, Tajikistan).
- In women's movement, reflections always follows the process and it is critical to comprehend which style of communication with donors you choose, whose interests (donors' or women's movement) have priority (Nurgul Djanaeva, Kyrgyzstan).
- Women's movement should follow the *sandwich principle*: powerful women's NGOs support the state reforms from the bottom, while the state must implement the interests of the women's movement from the top (Mira Karybaeva, Kyrgyzstan).
- In Kazakhstan the state financial support for NGOs through the social order amounted in 2005 to \$1 million, in 2006 – \$4 million (Zulfiya Baisakova, Kazakhstan).
- Psychologist from Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, Nina Bagdasarova expressed more radical view saying that "nowadays there are no former gender identities of women and men which used to be the basis for building the women's movement ideology. A civilizational shift took place: the roles changed. However the old clichés and stereotypes are still entrenched in gender theory. A search for new forms of interaction, solidarity, new forms of intimacy, new opportunities to have children and bring them up – this is the field to launch a critique, filled with positive content and debates on the need to deconstruct the old gender arrangements
- "Incorporation of the gender equality prospective should not be artificially imposed from outside. It should be exercised in line with the needs of every cultural group, its realities and a situation as related to gender, class, ethnos and culture with a preservation of local philosophy, background and identities. Inequality and privileges, neo-colonial and patriarchal speculations should be always doubted – at least because there is no unified opinion in this respect", said Alexandra Sorokopud, philosopher and women's activist from Lviv, West Ukraine).

¹) Consisting of eleven former Soviet Republics: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. Turkmenistan discontinued permanent membership as of August 26, 2005, and is now an associate member.