

The position of women in Kyrgyzstan and in Central Asian countries

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After the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991 new countries appeared on the map of Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan is one of the new formed Central Asian countries. These countries stepped in the direction of democratization. New democratic changes were accompanied with social instability, economic crisis, deep and long crisis in cultural life of the country. It was obvious that the further democratic reforms and the building of civic society greatly depended on active female participation in executive bodies, political parties and mass media.

The domination of men in political structures, a low level of gender consciousness, a lack of support from the side of political parties, mass media and the absence of corresponding links with different non-governmental organizations created huge obstacles for promotion of women into politics.

In comparison with other Muslim countries women in Central Asian countries of former USSR have more rights and opportunities that they had in the beginning of the century. However, it is obvious that women have less opportunity than men to realize these rights. This problem became very acute when Kyrgyzstan gained its independence. The process of democratization was very controversial and inconsistent. On one hand it gave many opportunities, but on the other hand it put under the threat social achievements that created uncertain status of women in the society.

Gender status quo in Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan has a high level of women employment. In 2006 43,2 % of working places belonged to women. More then 506 000 women had jobs.¹ The

¹ Report of National Council on female, gender and family issue

biggest part of women is busy in education, medical sphere, culture. The salary in these spheres is not high. Women earn 63,1% of what men earn in Kyrgyzstan.

The status of women in society was influenced by the Islam revival in Central Asia, cultural crisis and return to old Kyrgyz traditions. Central Asian countries are not developed equally in economic, social and political spheres. It influences women's lives in these countries. Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are more democratized and women here suffer less than in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

All these changes we can reveal in the sphere of women's leadership. We can observe a great example for our society. Women show an independent initiative in order to save themselves and family in a hard economical situation. Usually these initiatives are popular in small and medium business. It helps women to strengthen their positions in families. Women are also active socially.

On the other hand women were forced out from the decision making sphere. The number of women in national, regional, district executive bodies has been unexpectedly declined. Noteworthy, the number of women in elected bodies has been declined too even though half of electors are women. It can be explained by the fact that several years ago women had quotas in institutions. In reality, men and women never had political equal rights. These quotas were covering the reality of situation.

Different political parties don't want to nominate any female for elections because there is a big chance to lose. Kyrgyzstan has about 90 political parties and none of them has any kind of developed gender policy.

During the transitional period government plays a key role in the formation of public institutes. Unfortunately, Kyrgyz government showed in consequence and contradiction. However, Kyrgyz government does not prevent the development of female movement, and sometimes tries to cooperate. In 2000 was conducted a list of different programs that promoted female rights. It included "Aylzat", "Bilim", "Madaniyat" etc.² As the continuation of this program president issued a decree in 2002 that confirmed the National Plan for achieving gender equality for 2002-2007.

² Gender Statistic for policy monitoring and benchmarking, Italy 2002

One of the main priorities for National Plan is introduction of gender issue on all levels.

In spite of it almost all key executive positions are taken by men. The reason is that government does not have any strategy, priorities and policy that would promote women rights. There is not gender balance in the society.

It is important to note that with the elimination of totalitarian regime national and cultural traditions were revived. Many people prefer to follow these old national traditions. These ethnical and religious traditions promote discrimination and segregation that limit women opportunities. It prevents the development of female leadership in politics.

It is obvious that more and more women participate in improvement of their own economical situation. More than 100 NGO's female leaders are involved in the process of liberalism. Kyrgyzstan has more than 10000 NGOs. These social institutes help to reveal and develop new leaders. If to compare with 90 political parties who has more access to power, non-governmental organizations plays a bigger role in the development of society. Maybe the lack of opposition or good strategy are the reason why parties do not pay attention to very crucial issues that are hard to solve.

In the countries of former USSR informational net was destroyed. Presently, NGOs are channels that spread the information among the population. They not only spread the information, but they also actively share the experience that was gained in other countries in the sphere of gender policy. Different international organizations make a valuable contribution into the development of informative nets. Sometimes international organizations don't take into consideration the real situation in the country and don't work with advanced participants of this process who can be very useful for them.³

When people say that women do not take a proper position in the society they usually mean their poor representation in decision making processes which are very important not only for individual institution, but also for the whole country. The increase of female representation is considered as an end of itself. Many people

³ Women in social history of Russia, Tver, 1997

consider family and children issue only female problems. It is not the best approach, because it stimulates gender polarization that can be very similar to ethnicity, tribe polarization. In reality it can cause group interests to prevail over public interests. It can not justify the unjust attitude toward women concerning financial and power distribution.⁴

The saying “female interests must represent and protect only women” is accepted by many electoral bodies. On the first sight it may seem right. In fact it is wrong. This saying can be compared with “Only criminals deal with crime” or “Planting is only for plants” etc. There are many examples that can be perfect arguments to deny these sayings. Anyway such kind of saying forms people attitude to gender problems that influence negatively on its decision.

Gender balance as well as political or social balance in society is based on the maintenance of support of interests of all social groups. These groups can represent anyone. They should not be necessarily from these groups. That is why the objective is in consideration of all interests. Specific goal formation and timing in gender balance problem can be a very effective solution in the formation of democratic society.

Active public and political female participation gives the best effect when female constantly influence on public consciousness. In many examples only this combination can solve gender problems.

Female leadership can become a political goal especially if women can participate in decision making processes. In this case it is also very important to involve the whole society and not only its parts. Even women’s concept about their position in society is bases on stereotypes under the pressure of masculine society. This is one of the main reasons why voters 53% of who are women still prefer to vote for male leaders.⁵

⁴ Society and reality, Gabrelian N., #6, p. 126

⁵ Promotion of gender equality , <Kyrgyzstan. Unfpa.org>

The formation of female leaders

In conditions of market economy women showed great potential in family provision and leadership. In many families women took the responsibility to be a head during hard periods. It gives men some responsibilities in the kitchen and childcare. Step by step it gives more and more recognition to women. Unfortunately, we can not observe these processes in political sphere since the role of women there has been declined.

It is very necessary to plan female education as in cities as well in villages. They need to gain skills, knowledge that are necessary in decision making processes. Unfortunately, we still don't have a well developed program. This program must be developed and launched in schools and universities.⁶

Women should gradually grow professionally. On every career stage they acquire new skills, connections, ideas, knowledge etc.

Main problems in the process of female leader preparation:

- In the past it was possible to attend clubs that taught girls to be good leaders (komsomol, pioneer etc.). They functioned in schools, universities and communist political party
- Communist party promoted women status in the society. Government had a special strategy
- Currently there are no women in Kyrgyz parliament
- Existed programs are limited and poor known among women. That is why they do not have a big impact on present situation
- Different NGOs help to form female leaders, but their influence is limited
- Political parties are not interested in the promotion of female leadership. They don't see many perspectives

⁶ Gender Phycology, Shon Bern, 2001

*Skills women should acquire:*⁷

- Creation of image
- Ability to perform, present and listen to
- Speaking skills
- Idea of running campaign
- Communicational skills and ability to influence the public
- Ability to attract people

Many people realize that the domination of group interests above public interests can be very harmful. People can use power for personal ambitions. Even some voters themselves hope to get some support and personal advantages from candidates they voted for. It is very hard for society to stay united when it has some clan, ethnical, gender and regional division.⁸

When the election system is favoring only male population it is hard define the real attitude of society to different election systems. Proportional elections are reflecting a will of society. Unfortunately, people are not very active and they don't have a very good legal consciousness. This election system has a great potential for promotion of female candidates. They have more chances in cities, and fewer chances in villages. Majority election system gives women less chances to be elected.

There are fewer women in economical and political decision making processes. You can hardly find any women who take part in national decision making processes. This situation can lead to the outcome when the society can lose creative female resources. In general is creates misbalanced decisions. It is widely known that if men had the same responsibilities for family, children as women do and women had the same power in executive spheres, many aspects of life in Central Asia would have been different.

⁷ "Feminology", Zuykova E.M, 2001

⁸ Women as cultural phenomena, Klimenkova T.A, 1996

Statistically, female leaders prevail in those spheres where the majority of workers are women. For example: in trade, nutrition sphere, health care, social sphere, education, utility etc. Enterprise is a new sphere for Central Asia. Usually, you can meet female leaders only in lower and middle echelons. There are only a few in high echelons. People can observe this “pyramid” in all Central Asian countries and it is considered as a normal phenomena.

Why there are only a few women who take part in decision making processes? The origin of this problem has a patriarchal traditional character. Women are not ready for political fights. Despite such great examples of female leaders as Kurmanjan datka, Urkuya Salieva etc. female leaders are still unpopular in the society.

Central Asian mythology has many stereotypes for behavior of men and women. Independent and strong women or passive and weak men are not suitable for traditional Central Asian society. According to stereotypes men must be active and successful, while women must stay obedient and patient. Despite the diversity stereotypes have a big impact on public consciousness. There are many cases when women marry and have children only because traditions require it from them.

The role of women in society is based on the past and has a character of men vs. women. Women are more oriented on the family than men. The society, especially men do not accept a female leader.

The stereotype “politics is not for women” and cliché “she failed because she is a woman” is very popular not only among men, but also among women. Central Asian society prefers to see a male leader. It is known in the society that men have good leadership skills while many female leaders fail because they do not have very good leadership skills. People never hear from others that a leader fail because he is a man, while there are some people who still think that leaders fail only because they are women. Women of Central Asia have many obstacles on their way not only because they have to work for free taking care of families and children, but also because they do not have any credibility in the society as leaders.

The majority of population is convinced that male work is more important than female work. Those who try to oppose this idea are usually experiencing mockery. Usually women do not prefer to stay up late at work, because neighbors and relatives may not accept it thinking that she was not at work, but doing something unacceptable. The society thinks that it is only female responsibility to combine profession and family. Women helps men in their career. They try to do everything around the house so that men have more time. But from decade to decade the society sees more examples that eliminate fixed stereotypes. During the last years there were some examples of successful women in executive and business sphere who could combine very well work and family.

The majority of women are very passive. Women usually are satisfied with their lives in villages as well in cities. Women in villages have harder life than in cities. In villages besides family women must also to take care of cattle, garden and field. Women by doing it show their patience and obedience. Even some female leaders are very patient.

The expression “women must know their place in the house” is wide spread in the society. It puts a limit for women to live, to work, to learn and simply to enjoy the life. This stereotype is connected with the belief that women are created to bring enjoyment for men in the house as well at work. During the soviet period there were special magazines and newspaper for women only about style and cooking. It was one of the ways to brainstorm women consciousness. It was leading women in the direction of traditional lifestyle. The continuation of the brainstorming we can observe today in magazines, advertisement that attract young beautiful girls for office work, beauty contests etc.

Positive sides of female leadership⁹

- Responsibility
- Ability to make decisions that very useful for others
- Good vision

⁹ Creation of gender balance//Gender notebooks, Social St.Petersburg University, 1997

- Capacity for work
- Good organization
- Flexibility
- Good adaptability
- Patience

Negative sides of female leaders

- Ability to be active socially depends on family and relatives support
- Opportunity to become a political leader comes at 30-40 years after getting married. Young female leaders don't have any credibility
- Sacrifice of personal life (female leaders are single)
- Negative influence of relatives that support traditional and patriarchal way of living.

Ways to promote women into politics

Many people think that female deputies and officials can better sense social problems and they are more responsible for their actions. They are more economical. Women can be very active and practical. In villages they can be heard only due to their loud voice. Still there are a lot of negative opinions. These opinions are popular among women themselves. All these examples create no balance in the society.

Cultural and religious traditions can be a reason why women stay away from the politics. It is very important to analyze all traditional, cultural, clan and stereotype barriers. Government must protect young women from discrimination. It must inspire Muslim leaders to interpret Koran in a right way that would protect women from discrimination. The implementation of these obstacles can help to promote women into politics.

Enhancement of political and legal education among voters is one of key factors that could promote women in the political sphere. It is impossible to have gender balance when there is a lack of political ethics among deputies and voters. The

violation of rules along with poor political ethics can be favorable to infringe on women rights. Excessive rely on quotes that used to exist in former USSR is a serious barrier for democratic reforms in Central Asian countries.

Currently existed elections system does not promote women into political processes that exist in the country. Election system and political structure is oriented on men. Moreover there is no support from men side that lower women's self-appraisal.

Unfortunately there are no enough trainings and educational programs on women leadership. These educational events are important not only for women but also for men. It is important to develop educational programs that would be oriented on female political rights. It is important to work with young generation and to explain the value of women participation in political life of the country. The society needs to teach them leadership skills and community service that would included work with different NGOs.

In order to unite women, to give them some political skills people can use methods of active participation such as debates for young women. People need to support and to develop leadership schools and camps for different age groups using international experience. It is necessary to open an institute for women leadership. Women need recognition. As recognition can be used different scholarships and seminars in foreign countries for active women in politics.

Noteworthy is the fact that there is no conducted work with men who are involved into decision making processes. The tactic to exclude them if they don't fit is not efficient. It is necessary to work together if people want to achieve gender balance in the society. In Kyrgyzstan it would be worthwhile to organize some educational and explanatory training in the South of Kyrgyzstan since there is more traditional society.

Unfortunately, there is no support from political parties. They don't have a goal to protect women interests. That is why parties need to organize their work. The selection process of candidates must be clear and open. Women of Central Asia need to be organized as a specific group not only in the party, but also outside.

One more problem that goes against women is a lack of media support. On-air broadcasting is very important especially for those who live in villages. Women need to learn how to use media for promotion of their rights and participation in political life of the country. Special emphasis must be given to enhancement of gender consciousness through realization of abilities of village women, the expenditure of women network locally, nationally and internationally with different organizations and media.

The expenditure of women abilities in political life must be realized through cooperation with different NGOs, local administration, research centers and international donors.

A lack of connection between female deputies and public organizations is obvious. Women who have some experience working with parties and conducting political work are not united and not interested in changing professionals on executive sits. It is essential to conduct united trainings and create long lasting ties with different social groups that can be used in the promotion of women into politics.

Institutional support of NGOs, educational institutes and governmental programs must be well coordinated. The promotion of women should not be a temporary campaign.

One of the key factors why women do not participate in politics is a lack of finance. A necessity to take care of family and household is limiting women from political participation. Unlike the third world countries women level of education in Kyrgyzstan is not very different from men. That is why education is not the main barrier. Women who are running for office need financial support.

The analysis of gender balance problem and their participation in decision making processes is an issue of the day. On one hand this problem is an indicator of democratic processes in the country. On another hand the analysis of this problem helps to find a solution to improve social and economical position of the country in general including some social groups such as women. It is important to explain society that a normal democratic functioning of the state is impossible without gender balance in decision making processes dealing with society and government.

During the transitional period with many changes in executive sphere there are also many complicated processes that include ideology transformation and political clashes. Only a minor part of population of the country adequately understands the reality of the situation. This is a reason why it is important to gather, to sum, to analyze and to generalize the ideas, experience and to share them not only with officials but with the whole society in general.

The further development of gender balance must be conducting starting from legal sphere and continue with different seminars and trainings. In general, the aforesaid is proving that Central Asian society in general has high potential for conscious participation in democratic processes. Meanwhile, we can observe some cultural and religions tendencies that lead to washing out the idea of democracy. Resistance and neutralization of negative tendencies, progress and strengthening of democratic movements in many aspects depends on gender balance in the society and is essential for further progressive development.