

# Unpacking East/West Tensions: Women's NGOs and Islam in Contemporary Kyrgyzstan

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## Abstract

As new forms of identification and affiliation emerge across post-Soviet Central Asia, the rise of Islam and Islamic radicalization in particular receive growing interest – if not concern – within the international policy community and among researchers seeking to understand the course of post-socialist “transition.” In contemporary Kyrgyzstan, transition is often qualified with reference to the country’s robust and Western-oriented civic sector. While among non-governmental organizations, women’s groups are abundant and active on a range of issues, in increasing numbers, few explicitly deal with gender roles and Islam or represent Muslim women. Meanwhile, women appear to be playing a more visible and public role in radical Islamic groups, which have harshly criticized the government for, among other things, pandering to the West. This article seeks to unpack and challenge the dichotomy between Kyrgyzstan’s ostensibly Western-oriented women’s NGO sector and women’s involvement in Islamic social or community outlets. Making use of research with members of Kyrgyzstan’s civic sector and international organizations, among others, this article addresses pertinent historical and contemporary factors that shape modes of social affiliation, social networks, and accompanying gender formations in Kyrgyzstan. It considers commonalities and differences across different forms of women’s organizing, and considers the social and political implications of current trends. Namely, women’s own reflections show that religious practice and NGOs both provide women with a sense of identity and belonging, social networks, guidance in daily struggles, and in some cases, outlets for rebuking the shortcomings of the post-Soviet state. To understand contingent processes, the article advocates an intersectional approach that highlights the complex entanglement of different facets of identity, including gender, socio-economic status, religious affiliation, and place of habitation.

“Is there a way to make the case for the rights and empowerment of women in ways that do not become ground for arguments about the ‘clash of civilization’ and the associated political, economic, and military agendas?” (Abu-Lughod 2009:83)

“Gender activities initiated or funded by ‘Western’ and international aid actors in majority Muslim contexts remain controversial as they touch upon fundamental cultural and social issues that are, in one way or another, linked to religion and religious actors and institutions” (De Cordier 2010:2)

The global aid environment has been influenced by a climate of geopolitical polarization in the past decade (De Cordier 2009, 2010) and before.<sup>2</sup> Since Kyrgyzstan’s independence in 1991, substantial Western and international attention has been paid to, and monies pumped into, supporting the trajectory of its post-Soviet, post-Cold War transition. A quantifiably significant amount has flowed into growing the country’s civic sector and, in particular, non-governmental organizations (NGOs). As in many post-socialist and so-called developing contexts, women’s or gender issues have been an important component of Western assistance. Within Kyrgyzstan’s civic sector, which is robust in size and in terms of the range of activities and issues organizations address, women’s groups and gender activities are numerous. There are also multifarious ways in which women are newly experiencing and practicing their religious faith, such as through informal activities organized within communities and social networks, rites, and rituals, as well as mosque attendance and religious education at registered institutions. Taking into account the fact that the vast majority of Kyrgyzstan’s population claim a Muslim identity, can we speak about diverging women’s movements—one Western-leaning, another Islamic in nature? Are there inherent tensions between Western-funded women’s groups and women pursuing their religious faith? Are controversies inevitable?

Recent reports and academic literature would have us believe that indeed, Western gender concepts have met their limits in Muslim contexts. In the contemporary polarized global environment, aid actors, including donors and local NGOs, have been accused of harboring hidden political agendas. What is more, women and women’s issues have been and continue to be centered at the heart of geo-political struggles (Abu-Lughod 2009). Such accusations have

been rife not only in the so-called “Muslim World,” but also in post-Soviet Eurasia. These concerns call into question the social, economic, and political “trajectory” of transition in post-socialist countries like Kyrgyzstan, and the structuring of gender formations therein. Growing attention paid to Islamic radicalization and women’s participation in it has effectively juxtaposed women’s NGOs and the Islamic “revival” across Central Asian states (e.g. ICG 2009; UNIFEM 2005).

An examination of women’s reflections from within Kyrgyzstan tells us differently. There is a range of understandings of the “West” and manifestation(s) of “it” in the projects and activities of women’s NGOs, as well as various ways in which women experience and participate in their religious faith. In this article, I focus on NGOs and informal forms of religious association, such as through activities organized within social networks, rituals, and rites, as opposed to formal religious education or registered or illegal religious groups. I parse out the historical and contemporary factors that shape women’s public self-presentations, their understandings of gender and other pertinent issues, and their collective struggles to address these issues in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. In particular, I aim to elucidate that women’s self-presentation and the social networks or outlets they pursue say more about the personal background and perceptions of those involved, the multifarious resources available to them, and general societal changes as shaped by post-socialism than about tensions between the “West” and “Islam.”

Research for this piece was conducted within my doctoral project on women’s involvement in non-governmental organizing in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>3</sup> Following a multitude of studies that investigate women’s or gender issues in the context of global/donor and local/beneficiary dynamics in post-socialist and in so-called developing contexts (Alvarez 1999; Bagic 2006; Ghodsee 2004; Hemment 2007; Henderson 2003; Ishkanian 2003; Phillips 2008), I aimed to study how diverse women, through their involvement in NGOs, negotiate the resources and constraints of international assistance. Data were gathered over two long-term periods of participatory research with women’s groups in Kyrgyzstan in 2001-2002 and in 2005, as well as through shorter visits to the region, and on-going communication with women’s activists, representatives of international organizations, and friends and colleagues in the country. Through my research, I was able to visit NGO members in their offices, attend meetings and conferences, and take part in project planning and development. Women and men very generously included

me in their work and social circles. I observed, participated, and asked questions about the NGO community and how it relates to other aspects of daily life in Kyrgyzstan. This multi-sited research allowed me to document and explain how women “used” NGOs not only to provide social services, advance issues, and promote leaders, but also to solidify alliances, forge relations of trust and reciprocity, and share economic means.

My research sample for this paper is admittedly biased, in that much of my fieldwork was conducted with and organized around NGOs. However, throughout my research, I cultivated personal relations and came to understand the interconnections between NGOs and the importance of social networks to these organizations. Understanding that NGOs were not “black boxes,” but that members maintained a vast array of social, economic, and political connections that shaped their involvement in the (women’s) NGO community, I began to question why and how a particular facet of contemporary life—religious affiliation—interfaced with NGOs. This inquiry is particularly interesting, considering the recent attention to Islam, Islamic radicalism, and women’s involvement in radical Islam in the broader, Central Asian region (Collins 2008; De Cordier 2010; ICG 2009; Kim 2004). In addition to my work with women’s NGOs, I pursued women who associate in formal and informal ways with Muslim community life across the country.<sup>4</sup> Despite this admittedly piecemeal approach, the information gathered allows me to discuss relations between women’s NGOs and, to put it broadly, manifestations of Islam in contemporary society. I begin with the pertinent historical and contextual background, presented in broad strokes, before turning to a discussion of women’s organizing, networks, and Islam in present-day Kyrgyzstan.

### **Historical Events and Legacies**

Contemporary debates over gender roles and “Muslimness”<sup>5</sup> are tied to a longer story of the shaping of cultural and religious diversity and of ethno-national identity in Kyrgyzstan. These debates have become pronounced since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and reflect both historical continuities as well as more recent events. Although it is impossible in this article to provide a detailed account of all contingent factors, a brief history of the past century and, in particular, the impact of the Soviet regime on gender roles, Islam, and forms of social

identification are crucial for understanding women's engagement and self-description of their organizational pursuits.

Prior to Soviet rule, the vast majority of Central Asians practiced Islam in widely varying ways. Across much of the northern territory of what is now Kyrgyzstan, pastoral nomadic groups practiced a form of Islam that had incorporated shamanistic or pagan rites and was adapted to inhabitants' non-sedentary lifestyle, which also reduced the rigid gender segregation in roles and expectations that was common elsewhere in the region. In southern, more sedentary areas—namely, what is now Kyrgyzstan's multiethnic slice of the Ferghana Valley—the practice of Islam was pronounced and, as frequently described, its implications for gender relations significant (Poliakov 1992). Women's access to mosques, higher-level schools (*madrasas*), and other public spaces was restricted; veiling was also prevalent. Still, there was a tradition of women serving as spiritual leaders, and leading ceremonies and rituals; wealthier women also had access to education, though often provided within extended family or social networks (Peshkova 2009:8). Although many Muslim women in sedentary areas of Central Asia “led relatively secluded lives, they had highly developed social networks,” and “there were many occasions on which women could gather among themselves” (Fathi 2006:207). By the dawn of the twentieth century, Jadidism, and its emphasis on educational and cultural reform, provided a space for debates about gender equality and women's participation in a Muslim society (Khalid 1998, 2007).

This movement, however, was effectively quashed by the onset of Soviet rule in the region in 1918. As is well documented, “from its inception, the Soviet state was envisioned as a secular union of republics” (Peshkova 2009:7). Islam was not merely shunned, however, but cast as a backward cultural form and viewed as a threat to Soviet legitimacy (Shahrani 1993). As Svetlana Peshkova (2009:7) notes, “In order to imprint this vision of the state onto its diverse subjects in Central Asia, the Bolsheviks (later known as the Communists) sponsored a socio-political campaign against overtly expressing one's religious identity.”

As has been described by Peshkova (2009:11), the campaign relied upon an essentialized Islam, which was defined as an oppressive socio-political system that molded its subjects through restrictive practices, notably veiling of women and gender segregation (e.g. Northrop 2004). Aspiring towards a secular union, Soviet intervention was thus endowed with “the uncontested ability to exercise power over its Central Asian subjects” (Peshkova 2009:11). With

all the tools it could muster, the campaign defined normative religious practices, targeted legal religious institutions such as *Sharia* courts and *waqf* property (religious land endowment), and forced the closure of mosques and the arrest, exile, or execution of clergy (Peshkova 2009:11). It also positioned gender relations at the center of radical social change. According to this model, Islam could be uprooted through the unveiling of women (Kamp 2006; Peshkova 2009: 11; see also Kamp 2004; Northrop 2004).

This is not to say that Islam was “erased” from the region. Rather, scholars continue to debate attempts to produce a Soviet state as a secular union and the accompanying process of altering gender roles (Kamp 2006; Tokhtakhodjaeva 1995). As part of the process of societal transformation, some religious activities were formalized and effectively co-opted by the state; “under state political control [they] required registration and state-run economic management” (Peshkova 2009:11). Mosques in the Soviet Union existed, for instance, but were heavily regulated; state-approved Mufti were sanctioned to “properly guide” the devout into correct interpretations of the Qur’an vis-à-vis the principles of Communism. Other activities, namely the range of rites and rituals that primarily took place in the domestic space, persevered informally. The latter, which were not or “could not be effectively persecuted or controlled by the state, became conduits of cultural and religious knowledge and practice for the local population” (Peshkova 2009:11), as I will address later.

Unquestionably, large-scale, state-run processes undertaken by Soviet planners dramatically affected social structures and opportunities available to men and women. From the early days of the Soviet regime, the largely pastoral-nomadic society of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic was remodeled to accommodate rapid industrialization, collectivization, and urbanization. Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan’s capital city, transformed from a rural outpost under the Russian Imperial rule to a “Russified” city in a short span of time, home to a well-educated population proficient in a range of professional fields. Among other impacts, these processes played a role in transforming the structure of extended families, opportunities available to men and women, and gender roles and expectations.

Another relevant effect of the early Soviet period on gender roles relates to the realization by the Communist Party that the excessive use of force only alienated local populations (Keller 2001, in Peshkova 2009:11). By the end of the 1930s, the Party “realized its inability to uproot Islam completely and adopted definitions of certain expressions of religiosity as “national

traditions” (Peshkova 2009:11-12). In effect, religious identity and ethno-national identity were fused. National traditions, moreover, were maintained by discourses of “differences in gender roles” (Peshkova 2009:12), the importance of sexual honor, family values, and “views of marriage ... [as] companionship more than equality”<sup>6</sup> (Kamp 2006:230, in Peshkova 2009:12); these traditions were cast as integral to indigenous nations and thus “tolerable” within the secular state.

As elsewhere in the Soviet Union, meanwhile, the state proactively targeted and promoted women as model Communists, organizing them through a range of gender-specific policies and associations. Local *zhenotdely* or *zhensovety* for instance, were set up by the state for women to eradicate illiteracy and provide job training, as well as to “liberate” them from customary practices deemed detrimental, such as child marriage, bride price, and polygyny (Akiner 1997; Boldzhurova 1990:14-23). Councils, professional associations, and myriad other organizations specifically for women provided new outlets for women in urban and rural areas to associate amidst the rapid pace of ongoing change.

Some scholars have argued that women’s participation in Soviet social life in certain areas centered heavily on “inner values of the community” that were nurtured through social gatherings and religious ceremonies taking place in domestic space (and at sacred sites), thus giving women a central place in religious leadership (e.g. Kandiyoti & Azimova 2004). Amidst unfolding transformations, gender roles and social networks were maintained and cultivated throughout the Soviet period through preparation for and participation in a range of social practices and rituals (*toi*), specifically within indigenous communities. Elderly women in particular had (and continue to have) a large role in maintaining ethno-religious practices (Kuenhast 1997:182-215), which persist in daily life in Kyrgyzstan and the broader Central Asian region today. Despite at times stringent restrictions on religious practice, particularly in the early Soviet period, identification with Islam continues for many in Central Asia, albeit in varied and altered ways.

These processes of societal change since before the formal establishment of Soviet rule necessitated the recasting of cultural norms, traditions, and gender roles by ethnographers, policy actors, and others in ways that resemble discourses in colonial contexts: women in particular were described and targeted as “the preservers of survivals” and representatives of “a certain

cultural lag [...] and deficiencies in cultural-enlightenment work” (Snesarev 1974:226, in Peshkova 2009:7). As Peshkova (2009:7) notes:

Several scholars writing about post-Soviet Central Asia have criticized such essentialized assessments as being driven by ideological incentives and political expediency and argued that such accounts ignore the women’s differing histories, social and class contexts and levels of religiosity (e.g. Kamp, 2006; Keller, 2001; Northrop, 2004). Despite recognizing a tapestry of women’s religious lives as a critically important element of social transformation in the region, the binary of “tradition” vs. “modernity” is still used by some scholars to explain complexities and contradictions in women’s lives in general and their religiosity in particular (e.g. Akiner, 1997; Alimova & Azimova, 2000).

Following Saba Mahmood (2005) and Svetlana Peshkova (2009), throughout this article, I pursue an understanding of women’s engagement with Islam that does not rely on *a priori* categories, but shows its on-going entanglement with the contingent socio-cultural milieu.

### **Contemporary Context**

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the relatively weak, impoverished state that coalesced in its wake allowed for a relatively open civic arena and, concomitantly, a rush of ideas about and opportunities for civic engagement and religious practice in newly independent, ostensibly democratic Kyrgyzstan. As in other post-socialist states, the processes and effects associated with “transition” have been decidedly gendered (Ashwin 2000; Bridger and Pine 1997; Buckley 1997; Einhorn 1993; Funk and Mueller 1993; Gal & Kligman 2000a and 2000b; Kuehnast & Nechemias 2004; Scott, Kaplan & Keates, 1997). Economic decline, the dismantling of state services, a changed public sector, the “revival” of ethno-cultural or religious practices, the ascent of civil society, and new geopolitical configurations, among other transformations, have affected men and women both, albeit in different ways. Over the past two decades,<sup>7</sup> conceptualizations of Islam that incorporate ideas of regular prayer, mosque attendance, covered forms of dress, leadership, and strict gender roles, and that focus on written sources for



establishing religious orthodoxy, have slowly and unevenly expanded. Their spread has occurred alongside the perpetuation of Soviet-infused models of gender roles and equality, culture, and religiosity, as well as more recent material and ideational resources from the West, Middle Eastern countries, and elsewhere (Peyrouse 2007). The result is a complex *mélange* from which young and old inhabitants appropriate ideas about self and community.

Currently, approximately 80% of Kyrgyzstan's population of five million are self-described Sunni Muslims. While the vast majority of the population claims to follow Islam, many are engaged in self-conscious struggle over the meanings of their religious identity and practice. These struggles tend to be marked by the on-going production of national identities (Khalid 2003; Peyrouse 2007) as well as value-laden East/West discursive distinctions, which—in their application to different facets of social life—often operate in a kaleidoscopic fashion (Richardson 2008).

The appellation “Muslim” is used by inhabitants in both urban and rural areas of Kyrgyzstan, and is generally understood to be an inherent part of the identity of indigenous ethno-national groups (Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, and others). Yet, due to historical as well as contemporary factors, followers and the infrastructure of Islam are less readily or clearly discernible in northern territories than in rural areas and cities in the South. This is particularly the case in the capital of Bishkek, which—despite emigration since the early 1990s—is home to a sizeable Russian-speaking population. This population includes ethnic Russian, Ukrainians, Germans, and other European communities, as well as ethnic Kyrgyz and others who grew up in predominately Russian-speaking environments. Bishkek, with its relaxed, urban setting, brims with new developments and building projects, international companies and investors, foreign researchers, and aid workers, a growing and largely western-oriented indigenous middle class—as well as an expanding population of domestic migrants and urban poor. In southern areas, economic growth and post-Soviet reconstruction have been slow to take root. This is certainly the case in the diverse, fertile, and densely populated Ferghana Valley, a historic center of Islamic practice and debate, where communities and connections are divided by the contentious national borders of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

During my research, I commonly encountered the view that, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, society has fallen victim to an “ideological vacuum” and “spiritual crisis” that have presented new challenges as well as opportunities for Kyrgyzstan's populace. In a time of

great social, economic, and political flux, many have felt that society as a whole has lacked the guidance and resources that would help in responding to difficulties encountered in post-Soviet life. In this context, the recent revival of Islam has been cast as an indicator of reaction to the endemic anarchy in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union. Recent reports warn of the rise of politically-active and potentially destabilizing Islamist<sup>8</sup> movements like the Hizb-ut-Tahrir<sup>9</sup> which, as I will discuss in the following section, has attracted the disaffected members of the society and the individuals opposed to the current government—men and women, in rural and urban alike—and has been a source of great concern among national and international observers and policy-makers (ICG 2005, 2009).

Beyond its expression in certain visible movements, the rise of Islam must also be understood through its more fundamental appeal and significance to the contextually-embedded individual. Islam, more so than other faiths, provides a moral compass for negotiating what is acceptable, “good” and virtuous, such as regarding social mores and the importance of the family and community. Its historical prevalence in the broader Central Asian region makes it something of a relevant and continuous reference point in a time of turbulence and flux. Additionally, it offers a socio-cultural framework through which resources—material, moral, social and others—are distributed and relations among individuals determined. These resources are crucial at a time when public services are scarce and inadequate in quality, trust in government is low, and political and economic instability are endemic.

Many women experience Islam through informal avenues, such as participation in customary rituals and rites, or through women-only community or family circles organized to discuss the Qur’an. Women are widely documented to serve as leaders and transmitters of socio-cultural and religious knowledge (Fathi 2006; Peshkova 2009), often within extended family or community networks. They pursue and continue “traditional” religious practice, handed down by previous generations and acquired through experience, such as through collective ceremonies or rituals. Elderly women in particular often maintain customary practices and are treated with considerable reverence. Though most lack any formal religious training, they play an authoritative role in family and community life. And, as Habiba Fathi describes, women religious practitioners and leaders<sup>10</sup> do not organize the religious life of an exclusively female clientele. Rather, “[t]hey also play a fundamental role in managing collective ritual practices” and the “religious networks created by these women have contributed to a revival in Islamic practice

among the female population in Central Asia” (2006:303). Their leadership shapes the life choices many younger women (and men) feel are available to them. In rural areas, particularly in southern areas of the country, religious practice can facilitate participation in social networks, and thus access to resources and respect that are crucial in a time of flux and uncertainty. Moreover, many young women feel their chances of finding a suitable husband—and thus, their life prospects—will improve if their community (and most importantly their potential mother-in-law) regards them as pious. It is thus understandable that among younger (in addition to older) women, there has been growing interest since independence in Islam and informal religious practice and education—as well as a dearth of information about Islam in public schooling other mainstream avenues (ICG 2009:7).

Concurrent with the expansion of religious association among women has been the explosion of women in civil society and, in particular, NGOs. From the early 1990s, a palpable enthusiasm for civil society in Kyrgyzstan swept the country and the many Western donors who arrived with myriad forms of assistance. Faced with a crippled economy, Kyrgyzstan’s post-independence government welcomed aid and assistance from abroad, particularly from the West (Aksartova 2003; Huskey 1995), and its civic sector exploded. Among NGOs, diverse women leaders and women’s organizations are numerous and active on a wide range of issues across the country (Corcoran-Nantes 2005; Kuehnast & Nechemias 2004; Simpson 2009). Over the last 20 years, donors have poured significant resources, including monies, in-kind contributions, technical assistance, and moral support, to grow the women’s NGO sector, with effects that resemble those described in other post-socialist contexts of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (Abramson 1999; Hemment 2007; Henderson 2003; Ishkanian 2003; Ghodsee 2004; Phillips 2008). Many NGOs have focused on social and cultural spheres, though a select few have become powerful players in policy-making circles. Rectifying gender imbalances in various fields of employment, political participation, land ownership, violence, and political participation are increasingly issues of concern. A number of experienced and entrenched NGOs and NGO leaders in Bishkek and, to a lesser extent, in the regions, regularly collaborate with various feminist, human rights, and other transnational advocacy networks and international agencies and donors. They encounter and deploy international norms on gender equality, adeptly use and train other women and NGO members in topics related to gender equality, and research and report on gender issues for the government and international actors.

In short, leaders in the women's NGO sector have couched their work in the secular language of democracy and human rights. Though many do consider themselves Muslim, at least nominally, they typically have not framed their arguments for equality as Islamic feminists elsewhere have, by reflecting on the possibilities of reconciling religious law and "Western" ideas of gender equality. With only rare exceptions, NGO leaders do not openly associate themselves with Islam or play a visible, public role as "Muslim women" in influencing gender policy. To understand better why this is the case, understanding debates on Islam—broadly understood—in public life in contemporary Kyrgyzstan is key. Following this discussion, I return to gender initiatives and women's NGOs in Kyrgyzstan, and then, to relations between women's NGOs and Islam as experienced and practiced by women in daily life as explained by a selection of my research participants.

### **Islam in Public and Political Debates**

To put it bluntly, the socio-political landscape in the country in recent years has been such that engaging in a tempered discussion about the role of Islam in different spheres of daily life has proven to be contentious. This situation is unquestionably shaped by conjectures fueled by the onset of the US-led "War on Terror"—that the post-Soviet Central Asian region is a strategic area and potential hub of Islamic radicalism (Chaudet 2008; Cohen 2003; Rashid 2000; Rotar 2006). The Ferghana Valley in particular is cast a site where a "clash of civilizations"—between East and West—is inevitable. In addition to a range of political scientists, historians, and public officials of the global "West" (Huntington 1996; Johnson 2002; Lewis 1990), Islamist groups, too, invoke an inherent civilization conflict in their attempts at social mobilization. The regionally active Hizb ut-Tahrir, which strives toward the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in the region, has proposed that the "clash of civilizations is an inevitable matter" and promises that it will "open the eyes of faithful Muslims to the destructive aspects of Yankee activities" (HT 2002).

As touched upon previously in this paper, in practice, the revival of Islam in contemporary Central Asia can be described as having several manifestations, including: public associations, such as legal (registered) organizations that engage in charity or community work; illegal associations like the Hizb-ut-Tahrir; regular mosque attendance and religious education; a

range of informal, unregistered associations connected to rituals, community life, and social networks; and an (essentially passive) acceptance of religion and ethnicity as fused. The number of religious institutions in Kyrgyzstan, as in other areas of the former Soviet Union, has grown significantly over the past few years, with some financial assistance and guidance from abroad, including Islamic faith-based development organizations, foreign governments, and other actors from the Middle East and elsewhere (De Cordier 2008; Peyrouse 2007). According to the State Agency for Religious Affairs, there are some well over 1,500 registered and legal Islamic entities, including mosques, foundations, *madrasas*, and a small number of institutes for higher Islamic teaching, as well as NGOs of a “religious nature.”

By and large, state-supported religious structures have failed to respond to new demands for religious education or guidance. First, the Islamic organization in Kyrgyzstan that currently enjoys the longest enduring and uninterrupted history is the muftiate, or the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (the Russian acronym for which is DUMK). Established in 1993, it oversees all Islamic entities (International Religious Freedom Report 2008). Ostensibly independent, it closely coordinates with the government, such as when certifying Islamic educational establishments, like *madrasas*, and approving religious literature for publication. Beyond being endorsed by Kyrgyzstan’s president, central to the muftiate’s perceived moderate nature is its long history as the official, Soviet institution representing Islam that coexisted comfortably with secular elites. In many ways, it continues to operate not only in name but also in function much as did its Soviet predecessor. Thus, it is not wholly unsurprising that the country’s recent political leaders have expected—if not required—the muftiate to continue agreeable relations with them—a dynamic that has, at times, led to tensions with Kyrgyzstan’s imams.<sup>11</sup> Together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyzstan, the muftiate also manages valuable hajj visas for men and women. Additionally, it educates the clerical elite and draft weekly sermons with an eye to state interests. It does not have a formal strategy for reaching out to adult women.

As previously discussed, women are prominent in the informal practice of Islam in Kyrgyzstan; they are visible in formal arenas, including religious education, as well. In modest numbers, women attend mosques, study at legal and private religious schools,<sup>12</sup> have studied Islam abroad, or enter the recently-established Islamic University of Kyrgyzstan, which offers several non-religious courses such as Kyrgyz and Russian languages, the history of Kyrgyzstan,

and the history of religion. Women can also pursue theological studies at a number of secular universities, like the National University in Bishkek or the Theology Department of Osh State University in southern Kyrgyzstan

Many who have pursued religious education or training, however, contend that authorities have done little to support their learning and entry into the labor market, let alone recognize their criticisms of the status quo.<sup>13</sup> They note that officials routinely misinterpret interest in Islam as a sign of radicalism—and thus, political opposition. Indeed, often noting that historically, ethnic Kyrgyz were not zealously religious, officials have said that an Islamic revival is now being “forced” upon Kyrgyzstan’s populace. A draft law, “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations,” initiated by the government in 2001, raised eyebrows in its emphasis on concerns about terrorism and other illegal activities committed by groups “disguised as religious organizations” (US Department of State 2008). The initial draft included compulsory registration of religious bodies, a prohibition against unregistered religious activity, and tight control over religious activity deemed “destructive”; it was later revised under pressure from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) (Ibid.). A subsequent “Extremism Law,” which left open the possibility of its being applied to peaceful religious activity and communities, was adopted in 2005 (Rotar 2005). Political leaders have also warned of the rise of political Islam, manifesting in movements like the Hizb-ut-Tahrir, whose followers are labeled as destabilizing and potentially violent “Wahhabis”—in this case, Islamists vocally opposing the government (Peyrouse 2007:249). These Islamists, officials contend, seek to overthrow the secular government and establish an Islamic theocracy (US Department of State 2008). Local human rights observers and others have disputed these claims, alleging the intent to discriminate against Muslims (as well as the Uzbek minority), shore up power (particularly in the restive South), and to legitimize repression of any group that poses a potential threat to the existing regime.<sup>14</sup>

As one report put it, “[m]any individuals are attracted to associations like [the Hizb-ut-Tahrir] because they offer concrete solution to the problems that many face in their daily lives” (ICG 2009:10). The movement has also been particularly adept in mobilizing resources and responding to certain issues, such as the disintegration of social services, falling living standards, corruption among Kyrgyzstan’s political elite, and growing social and regional disparities.<sup>15</sup> Many men and women may find their criticisms of what is often seen to be a failing Western system of government compelling. In southern areas of Kyrgyzstan in particular, coupled with a

history of relative religious conservatism, anger about the central government's reluctance to support economic growth or recognize the specific ethno-cultural diversity of the region has fueled involvement in alternative, anti-establishment movements.

Research has also discussed the growing participation of women in radical associations like the Hizb-ut-Tahrir, which appears to be most active in southern regions of the country. Membership in the movement is estimated to be between 7,000-8,000 as of May 2008, of whom some 800-2,000 are women (ICG 2009:6). According to interviews conducted by International Crisis Group, in a report on women and radicalization in Kyrgyzstan, several women who admitted that they are drawn to the Hizb ut-Tahrir used the word "honesty" to describe its attraction (ICG 2009:11). For many, as political space becomes more tightly controlled, and informal media censorship makes criticism of the government rare or perfunctory, the Hizb ut-Tahrir appear to "speak truth to power" (*ibid.*). Indeed, as Kim demonstrates, the Hizb-ut-Tahrir offers particular advantages to women beyond helping improve living conditions and bringing spiritual satisfaction: it provides an entrance into the male-dominated arena of political struggle—which, in turn, gives women an opportunity to gain more power, autonomy, and authority within certain social parameters.<sup>1</sup>

## **Gender Initiatives**

Kyrgyzstan has passed substantial progressive legislation, including a wide range of laws on fundamental guarantees of religious freedom and gender equality, social and legal protection against domestic violence, and on reproductive rights. Despite the persistence of civic groups, however, practical implementation of this legislation is weak. The National Development Strategy for 2007-2010 devotes substantial space to promoting gender equality: through increasing women's participation in government services, eradicating disparities in educational opportunities, and ensuring that gender issues are considered in state planning documents. It calls for pursuing gender issues "with a new vision and a new impulse, basing their implementation on public institutions and mandating state authorities to actively support their implementation."<sup>16</sup> Yet as many NGO leaders challenge, the document speaks only broadly about solutions and provides almost no specific prescriptions.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, it admits that major, national initiatives on gender equality have been under-funded, impeding full implementation, though this situation

has yet to be rectified. Some major points, for example whether the state commits to fully pay for the initiatives this time or whether the costs will have to be met by bodies such as civil society groups, remain unclear. *De facto*, women's NGOs have stepped into the spotlight to name and respond to social problems where the state fails, with financial support and encouragement from international donors.

The strategy does cite a tension between "gender equality" and "Islamization," stating that "enhanced Islamization has adverse effect on women's status... It is essential to oppose... attempts of conservative political forces to curtail gender equality achieving, to veil women's contribution into the development of society and state."<sup>18</sup> This explicit mention of Islam or of religion is the only one in the entire National Development Strategy. Meanwhile, a growing number of authoritative leaders—official and unofficial—have brought Islam into public debate. Despite the lip service paid to the importance of gender equality and its relevance to national development, deliberations recur during which Parliamentarians and other political figures deploy selective and essentialist ethno-religious claims to make their arguments—such as to garner support for the legalization of polygyny.

With the institutionalization of a 30% quota for women in state and local authorities, Presidential Decree No. 136 on measures to improve gender policy (adopted on March 20, 2006) has provided one of the more concrete mechanisms to assist female representation.<sup>19</sup> As a result, women in Parliament increased from zero in 2005 to 25.6% after the 2007 elections.<sup>20</sup> Critics, however, have deemed gender quotas "mechanical," arguing that the mere presence of women in state bodies does not constitute meaningful representation. The quota system also fails to ensure representation of Kyrgyzstan's diverse women in decision-making:

"Many moderate Muslims complain that the women in government cannot properly represent them, since they have succeeded in the secular system and have difficulty understanding those women who see a return to Islam as a life-altering decision that improves their well-being."<sup>21</sup>

Clearly, the policy has failed to reach a growing number of women who have embraced Islam as a central part of their life.



The issue of representation also plays out with regard to the strength and visibility of a number of strong women's NGOs and NGO leaders, who have played an important role in formulating and realizing current gender- and equality policies. Despite the robustness of the women's NGO sector, in terms of the number of organizations, the geographical distribution, and the range of topics addressed and activities pursued, it is difficult to say that women's NGOs can boast credibility and general support among the public at large. Rather, there is a certain degree of skepticism of NGOs and perhaps, women's NGOs in particular. At first glance, this may seem confounding, considering the pervasiveness of NGOs—with an approximately 2,500 registered—and the importance they play in the lives of members and their extended personal networks (Simpson 2009).

Many gender initiatives both proposed by the state and by NGOs are phrased in terms of gender equality and in the neologisms—or “dev speak”—characteristic of international assistance. Though there is extensive data from and regular reporting by domestic and international actors on the problems and challenges that women in Kyrgyzstan face, the discourse of gender and gender issues has dominated by a language that has not yet been effectively related to local norms (Zwingel 2005) or explained. For instance, a prevalent view I encountered was that “special” activities or support for women was superfluous because “women have all their rights” and even that “there is no discrimination against women.” Women's NGOs were commonly seen to advocate not equal rights but “gender similarity”—that is, that women are identical in all capacities and functions to men. Not only is the language of gender equality and women's rights misinterpreted by most, but also, it has been off-putting to women and men in more conservative parts of the country who retain a “traditional” understanding of their role in society. It is not uncommon, for instance, to encounter the view that the Qur'an grants equality to women and men, but that the inherent roles of men and women are fundamentally distinct. In ways that resemble dynamics explored elsewhere, this language has been viewed as foreign, incompatible with indigenous beliefs, and even condescending (Ghodsee 2004; Hrycak 2006).

This tension is shaped by the fact that gender language is often and most skillfully deployed by urban, Bishkek-based, NGO leaders who are well-educated, well-traveled, and often Russian-speaking. Many in contemporary society see them as updated versions of the Soviet woman—“minus the ideology and with more pragmatism about money.”<sup>22</sup> Leaders of prominent NGOs appear not only socially distinct from most women in the country, but also preoccupied

with concerns that are not—or at least not effectively made relevant to—those most salient among Kyrgyzstan’s population. Discussions of gender equality, the Beijing Platform for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and intersectionality, or gender budgeting and setting gender-sensitive indicators, appear far apart from the problems many experience in their daily lives, associated with poverty, poor infrastructure, corruption and political disenfranchisement, and the availability of social services. Many maintained that women needed moral support and assistance in carrying out their familial duties and in making ends meet financially, rather than advice from “man-hating, feminists.” In other words, women needed help to overcome the everyday trials of daily life. Finally, an overwhelming view of NGOs, even within the sector, is that they are secretive, competitive “grant hunters,” unable to cooperate among themselves, let alone interested in “helping” society at large, and preoccupied with appealing to the whims of donors.

A considerable number of NGOs rely on external support to sustain or expand their activities, carry out projects, or acquire and maintain office space and office supplies. For almost two decades, this assistance has arrived from Western donors in respectable amounts. However—with some exceptions—donors have displayed very limited interest in the topic of women and religion or Islam, and local women’s groups have carried out few projects that explicitly deal with religion (Islam) or target religious women. As one NGO member put it, “donors are not interested in work with religious women, so for whom can we do a project on that?”

At the same time, many NGO leaders have been disappointed with the weak response by Muslim community leaders to particularly sensitive gender issues, including polygyny and “bride kidnapping.” In a news article, one well-known and respected NGO leader in Bishkek, who regularly appears in public to advocate for women’s rights and runs a busy crisis center for victims of domestic violence, voiced her hope that Muslim NGOs or community leaders would show a greater interest in focusing on the aspects of Islam that are beneficial for women. “Faith is a very good thing,” she said. “It’s unfortunate that women are being negatively affected because of it, due to the fact that our mullahs are poorly educated” (Djumataeva 2010). In our conversations, many members of prominent NGOs also explained that they simply did not know any Muslim NGOs or community leaders, and that they lacked a reliable, vocal partner who endorses their view of women’s rights or gender equality. As one report put it (ICG 2009 24), the

two communities—NGOs and religious women—appear to exist side by side but worlds apart in thoughts, needs and perceptions of each other. Is this in fact the case?

### **Whither the Women of Kyrgyzstan?**

My primary critique is of the perpetuation of a rigid distinction between the interests and activities of Muslim women and women's NGOs. At the crux of my argument is, simply, the affirmation that the line between these "groups" is not clear. It is the case that many members of prominent NGOs reside in Bishkek, and have personal histories and opportunities that differ from those of women in rural or southern areas. It is also the case that they, as well their partners and counterparts in the civic sectors, the state, international organizations, and elsewhere, have not done the work to bring the language of gender closer to local norms and process, as discussed previously. That said, it would be a mistake to assume that NGO members and Muslim women, including conservative women, inherently in tension.

First, it should be clarified from the outset that there are legal and registered NGOs, the missions and activities of which explicitly reflect Islamic principles. These organizations, for instance, offer materials and free courses on the teachings of Islam, and have been involved in widely publicized policy debates. The leader of the Progressive Public Union (NGO) Mutakallim, for one, voiced her support for allowing some politicians to allow polygyny in Kyrgyzstan. She also lodged a campaign, known as the "*Hijab* Process," to protect the rights of women and girls to don headscarves in passport photos and in public schools. An estimated 40,000 supporters joined Mutakallim's efforts. In addition to concerns about "Islamization" and a turn away from "Western democracy," however, skeptics have voiced concerns about Mutakallim that resemble those of "non-Muslim" NGOs: that it is heavily influenced and funded by outside forces—vaguely, as some cite, from countries of the Middle East—and serves as a vehicle for "foreign intervention" (Namazaliev 2007).

Within non-Muslim NGOs, many women self-identify as Muslim, though perhaps they do not make this statement explicitly or publicly. For one, "Muslim" is inherent to the ethno-national identities of many; it continues to be passively understood to be part of one's identity. Yet, the fact that many women's NGOs do not publicly speak to or engage with Islam might also be a strategy to not deter donors or elicit condemnation from the state. It speaks to the limited

space, which has been structured by a state and international donor community wary of anything smacking of “Islamic activism,” in which to generate the kinds of Islamic feminist discourse and argumentation that has appeared elsewhere (e.g. Badran 2002, 2009; Mernissi 1996); and might inform local debates. This is not to say that writings by local and foreign scholars and research on women and Islam do not exist. They do, accompanied by the guidance provided through rituals or family or community leaders. Yet, they have not been a significant component of local women’s activists’ work. Rather, women’s NGOs and the “women’s movement” at large has been supported by glossy reports and guidebooks supplied by international agencies. Gender Studies, which might create a space for a tempered discussion on Islam and feminism, has only recently become an intellectual pursuit (Kamp 2004), and it has been heavily informed by Soviet and Western perspectives.

In our discussions, women presented a range of reasons for establishing or participating in women’s NGOs. Many were clearly concerned about problems and needs facing their communities or specific groups, and joined or established a women’s organization to “make a difference.” Others saw NGOs as providing a new outlet for professional advancement or economic gain. Many women also described the participation in NGOs in terms of “finding oneself” or helping women on a similar path. This essentially comprised the process of self- or women’s empowerment. As Aichinar, an older woman with an NGO in Bishkek put it:

“As for me, I am a patriot of my country and my people. During my [previous] work in the field, I spent a lot of time in the regions and was shocked by the life of village people. Sometimes, I felt heartache. I wanted to help them. [...] I provided consultations, sent them guidebooks, told them about laws [. . .] Mostly, I did it free of charge [. . .] When I told some of my friends [about my work], they didn’t understand me. My family is proud of me. It is good that I have my own bread and butter and I can do some good and useful things for people. I want to be useful and help others.”

Asel, a young NGO member from Bishkek, suggested people join with:

“the intention to change the current situation in some sphere (ecology, gender

equality). But it is also part of professional development for many people – and an opportunity to gain money as well. In Kyrgyzstan's that just of kind of a job in many cases.”

From a different angle, Gulsana, a young woman from Jalalabad who lived and studied temporarily in Bishkek, discussed her views on the plurality of women's NGOs:

“In Bishkek, I had friends in NGOs. They were working women and wanted a kind of career that was not in the bazaar. But they did not really work for women. They never went to the South. Some of them didn't even speak Kyrgyz. Here [in Jalalabad] my friends in NGOs are different. I see that they work hard, but they also listen to different women and about what is needed. That is real help. It is clear that there are different kinds of NGOs, I guess, just like there are different kinds of women. [Maybe we all want to help, but there are different paths.”

For Gulsana, understanding NGOs and their function in society necessitated understanding the context that shaped members' participation. Differences between life in Bishkek and other regions, in her view, put NGOs in the capital city at a disadvantage when it came to their legitimacy among diverse women, and compromised such women's trust in them.

Certainly, the spiritual and practical infrastructure of “doing civil society” differs from that of religious practice, with the former's emphasis on trainings, mission statements, proposal writing, and grant reporting. However, many of the key explanations women provided about their participation in the civic sector effectively resembled those offered by women who began to associate with Islam more ardently. Elmira, a middle-aged NGO member who had relocated to Bishkek many years ago explained that women are becoming more religiously active because of “poverty, social inequality, and dissatisfaction with life in general.” Another, focusing on the differences between women's involvement in NGOs and religious circles, phrased her views in the following way:

“NGOs are rather formal, a business way of making contacts, doing some important activity together with ‘partners.’ Writing projects. Technical work. But

also about realizing hopes and values. I suppose [the difference] is that religious groups require more and deeper involvement. At least, it seems so.”

Anna, an NGO member and an ethnic Russian who had been engaged in a range of policy-relevant projects to improve inter-ethnic relations and the prospects of minority groups in Kyrgyzstan for several years, offered her analysis of why women appear to be becoming more religiously active:

“In the first phase of this process – a search for some kind of support or protection [that was] lost with the [post-Soviet] transformation of the government. Now, inasmuch as Islam has been established, it is less about ‘choice’ than a person’s surroundings, including their classmates, relatives, region, and so on.”

She continued that at their core, both NGOs and religious groups are rooted in social networks, which serve as conduits for distributing resources, sharing ideas, and providing support. This view is synergistic with findings presented in my own doctoral research, which addressed the entanglement of social networks, or extended personal networks, and NGOs (Simpson 2009). In addition to moral guidance, religious practice provides individuals—who participate by choice or as a result of their surroundings—strong social networks and a respite from turbulence and uncertainty. In a similar vein, beyond the “work” they do, NGOs must be seen as part of, if not anchors for, the extended personal networks of members, who both contribute to and take from these organizations in various and important ways. NGOs often rely upon their leadership for guidance, make use of meager substantive literature to better understand the work they do, and require unpaid, “volunteered” contributions from members and their family members to stay afloat. In turn, they provide variegated resources that far surpass the monies and brochures supplied by Western donors.

The important social aspects of women’s religious involvement, through informal community networks or other opportunities, was emphasized by research participants not involved in NGOs. In some cases, women explained that their social standing and approval in their communities improved as a result of their association with religiosity and being active, providing cultural guidance, and promoting Islam. For instance, offering free classes to younger

women on Islam and its canon was considered to be a noble activity that brought about social respect and admiration. In the spring of 2005, I sat with three generations of women of an extended family near Osh city, in southern Kyrgyzstan. Ainagul, an elderly woman, explained:

“I have seen so many changes. We had a different life during the Soviet period. Everything was different, how we bought food, the books we read, how we dressed. Everything was different. Who understands what is going on now? It is painful for me, to see our society like this.”

“How can I give my daughters and sons and their daughters and sons guidance? My responsibility is to my children [...] I started to learn about Islam and God. [...] We get literature from Hizb ut-Tahrir, yes, and some from [neighbors], some from [the mosque]. I know how to teach my daughters and granddaughters so that they hold up their families, they hold up all of society, they must know how to behave and be right.”

During the same discussion, Aisulu, a younger woman with school-age children offered:

“Yes, we respect our elders. I am also learning about the Qur’an, and I see that my friends see a difference. Some don’t understand or don’t care. But many respect me, they see a new light in my eyes. They ask for advice, for example, about their children, husbands, or their work, their studies. Even my [former] classmates at the university are interested and we talk about all kinds of things. There are certain things that women should know and know how to do. And, I don’t know, I think there is a lot in the Qur’an, to help ourselves and to help each other.”

She continued:

“I have a lot of friends who work with [NGOs]. Sometimes I visit them and help around the office, or I keep them company. Once I went to a training with other

women and we talked about, I think, women's leadership. Sure, we also discuss the Qur'an. Why not. But why would an NGO work with the Qur'an? Maybe the members are interested but an NGO is about, I don't know, it's a job, I think. You can have an NGO and do your job, help women through, I don't know, trainings and papers and those kinds of things, and also you can develop yourself from within. Why not."

Spiritual satisfaction was evident in this conversation and many others, as women explored and developed new values, meanings, and goals in their lives. For this young woman, participating in and organizing networks around religion and religious exploration was part of her cultivation of a sense of self-worth and belonging. Whereas many women in prominent NGOs in Bishkek had very limited access to or information about Islam in Kyrgyzstan, this woman's social surrounding provided opportunities for her to move between "the NGO" and "Islam" almost seamlessly; I also encountered many women who had had few encounters, or limited knowledge of, NGOs. While some women, it should be said, were skeptical of "NGOs" or "Islam," the vast majority were tolerant of the choices and negotiations women made. In sum, both NGOs and religious practice offered women resources and arenas for making sense of the immediate environment, as well as individual life-courses, and were seen by the vast majority to coexist unproblematically.

## **Conclusion**

The structure of gender roles, community life, and religious practice and authority in pre-Soviet Central Asia was altered by the establishment of Soviet rule and later, by its collapse. In the name of progress and liberation, "the [Soviet] regime aimed to eradicate the 'weight of tradition and of religion' as a prerequisite to the emergence of a Soviet socialist society" (Fathi 2006:314). Paradoxically, however, just as Soviet rule provided education, paid employment, and social services for millions of women across Central Asia, its secularization policies "also limited the scope of male-dominated religious authority" (Fathi 2006:314). This ultimately created opportunities for women's participation in religious institutions and life. At the same time, Islam and ethno-national identity were fused. Signs of the revival of Islam within society today can be seen to be both continuations and innovations in gender roles, community life, and religious practice in society.



Islam is not monolithic, and there is no single definition of “real” Islam or authentic “Muslimness.” Rather, following Marranci (2008), Islam can be understood as a composite of discourses on experiencing and acting a Muslim identity. In contemporary Kyrgyzstan, Islam and its revival produce “competing interpretations of religious belief and practice” (Fathi 2006:314). They are also part of the emerging Kyrgyz civil society and growth in nationalism (Kim 2006: 2). As such, as Fathi (2006:314) notes, “Islam is experienced on multiple levels;” many in Central Asia designate themselves as Muslims, and “religion remains inseparable from their identity.” Yet, society and religion “do not coincide” (Makris 2007:7), and “being Muslim” is expressed in a variety of ways. Some are devout, while for many, religious observance is limited to certain religious holidays or rituals. There are also self-described Muslims who question the existence of God or are skeptical of any institutionalized religion, but who identify as Muslim because they were raised in a Muslim society.

Faced with the changes put in motion during the Soviet era and recent transformations generated after independence, men and women, practicing and non-practicing alike, “have had to re-define the ways they relate to religion,” to the state, and to society at large (Fathi 2006:314). For all women, post-Soviet independence has shaped the opportunities available to them, expectations of them, their responsibilities within community and public life, and their access to various local and global resources and transnational alliances. These opportunities, however, must be contextualized. As with “being Muslim,” they have been influenced by a confluence of domestic and global factors, including assistance from Western actors and actors from Islamic countries, an increasingly authoritarian state, and formal and informal structures and norms that in many cases privilege male authorities.

As a final point, to take this discussion full-circle, what can be discerned and is troubling in recent literature and commentary is a pitting of West against East, with essentialized views of Islam, women, and NGOs (as well as the “West” and “East”) deployed strategically. While most US policy interventions for the past several years have aimed explicitly to reform political systems, combat corruption, develop economies, or assist governments with their participation in the War on Terror, there are different ways of influencing not only what goes on in religious institutions, but also how these institutions and other social processes interact. This might include, for instance, supporting a Gender Studies curriculum that reflects the local contexts, or supporting the development of curricula in religious institutions with the introduction of civics

courses. With regard to the latter, some initiatives are being undertaken. The American Bar Association's Rule of Law Initiative Program, for one, trains legal scholars to teach interactive, participatory legal classes in an estimated 25% of Kyrgyzstan *madrasas*. In neighboring Tajikistan, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation is funding a new type of *madrasa* for boys and girls that will offer 30% secular courses and 70% religious courses, in accordance with the requirements of the Ministry of Education. Recognizing that many in Central Asia are eager to learn more or are misinformed about religion and democracy, such initiatives would be a welcome and valuable addition to the current resource milieu, ideally creating space for indigenous knowledges to flourish.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Researchers have also explored the ways in which the geopolitical climate has affected global aid in violent contexts, such as through the deliberate targeting of humanitarian aid workers and organizations as "vulnerable representatives" of Western intervention (De Cordier 2009: 675-677; Fontaine 2004). A rise in violence against aid workers in various fields has also been documented by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Humanitarian Aid (ECHO) in a report published in 2004.

<sup>3</sup> I have chosen not to publish the names of my informants in order to protect their anonymity. While I discussed my research on multiple occasions and in various venues with members of some NGOs, in several cases I was unable to return to an informant for her or his comments on my notes, or discuss my project and its implications in great depth. At times, informants explicitly requested to not be mentioned by their real names. I have chosen to use pseudonyms that reflect the ethnicity of research participants, understanding that these labels do not necessarily reflect an individual's primary sense of identity.

<sup>4</sup> My contact with women in radical or fundamentalist religious groups, like the Hizb-ut-Tahrir, however, was limited. For a rich discussion of women's involvement in the Hizb-ut-Tahrir, see Kim (2004).

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<sup>5</sup> I use this term as shorthand for the complex and context-specific debates unfolding over Islam and Muslim identity in contemporary society in Kyrgyzstan and neighboring countries.

<sup>6</sup> Khalid similarly documents that men were expected “to go out and engage in the rough and tumble of the world, whereas women were to guard the chastity of the home and of the community” (Khalid 2007:103, in Peshkova 2009: 12).

<sup>7</sup> More precisely, by the late 1980s, religious restrictions began to be incrementally relaxed, as part of broader social and political reforms associated with glasnost’. Specifically, the normalization of relations between the Kremlin and the Church in 1987 made religious practice officially permissible.

<sup>8</sup> I follow Haleh Asfer in understanding “Islamist” in terms of those actors that seek to return to the original sources of Islam and re-interpreting them (1998: 17-18).

<sup>9</sup> The Hizb-ut-Tahrir is an Islamist group that advocates a non-violent approach to achieving its goal: the establishment of an Islamic political order—a utopian Caliphate that would embrace all Muslims. Since its inception in the 1950s in Jordan, Palestine, and Syria, it has established its headquarters in London and set up offices and clandestine cells in countries across Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Though officially banned throughout Central Asia, the organization has been enlarging its base in southern Kyrgyzstan over the past two decades. It regularly disseminates on-line and printed materials and organizes meetings. More recently, the group has rallied opposition against and harshly criticized the western-supported Kyrgyz State (see ICG 2009). See also the official website of Hizb ut-Tahrir, at: <http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/english/>.

<sup>10</sup> Peshkova (2009) provides an overview of the various ways in which women religious leaders are described in academic literature as well as referred to in daily life in post-Soviet Central Asia (see esp. p. 8).

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance: Koran Test Reveals Kyrgyz Imams with “Extremist” Links, *Kyrgyz Television 1*, May 21, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> By law, the state allows for freedom of religious practice, but expressly forbids the teaching of religion (or atheism) or the donning of religious garments in public schools.

<sup>13</sup> Many students who have studied religion, and particularly those who attended private Muslim religious schools, have complained that they struggle to find jobs: they are unable to teach in state schools, because their diplomas are not officially recognized. Moreover, the vast majority of private religious institutions lack qualified theology teachers. One local theologian at the Institute for Strategy, Analysis and Theory in Bishkek warned about the “acute lack of an intellectual group among the clergy,” estimating that only 30 or 40 percent of imams or prayer leaders in Kyrgyzstan have received a formal theological education. As he put it, “[t]he influence of religion is increasing in the country [but] the danger of social unrest stems not from Islam itself but from ignorance of the basics of religion on the part of believers” (Namatbaeva 2008).

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<sup>14</sup> Recent years have been marked by tragic events that exposed states' eagerness to exert force on presumed displays of political opposition. For instance, in Andijon, Uzbekistan, located in the Ferghana Valley, the government of Uzbekistan brutally suppressed an uprising in March 2005. The uprising began with protests of the trial of two dozen local businessmen accused of involvement in Islamic extremism and acts against the state, though other sources explain that they were part of a community of entrepreneurs that, although motivated by religion, had shown no inclination to violence (ICG 2005). In southern Nookat, Kyrgyzstan, a protest in October 2008 erupted following the cancellation of festivities at the end of Ramadan (*Orozo Ait, or Eid al Fitr*). The protest demonstrated the readiness of women to take a more public part in asserting the interests of religiously motivated groups; it prompted a harsh government reaction that was unexpected by many observers and participants. The resulting "Nookat incident" is widely regarded as a turning point in the state's response to Islam and, specifically, its tendency toward religious oppression (ICG 2008:3).

<sup>15</sup> While approximately one-fifth of the Kyrgyzstan's population resides in Bishkek, the city and the surrounding region provide production of over half the gross domestic product of the entire country (in 2005 – 50.2%), as well as the highest rate of production of gross regional product per capita (2 and 1.2 times higher than the average rate in the country). The growth of income in Bishkek is 1.5 times higher than average in the country (2005). A range of indicators of disparity between Bishkek and other parts of the country are presented in the *Kyrgyz Republic: Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper—Country Development Strategy (2007–2010)*, published by the International Monetary Fund (IMF Country Report No. 07/193, June 2007).

<sup>16</sup> *Kyrgyz Republic: National Development Strategy 2007-2010*.

<sup>17</sup> For instance, it rightly states that extensive migration processes raise the danger of human trafficking and require assistance for women victims, but the response it vaguely suggests is only "comprehensive measures ... on preventing and decreasing gender violence in society."

<sup>18</sup> *Kyrgyz Republic: National Development Strategy 2007-2010*: 21.

<sup>19</sup> See *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*. 2007. Policy on Achieving Gender Equality (January 30); *National Development Strategy 2007-2010*, Section 4.8.

<sup>20</sup> *Kyrgyz Republic: National Development Strategy 2007-2010*. Second Periodic Progress Report. p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> Interview, law enforcement officer. cited in ICG 2009: 23.

<sup>22</sup> Interview, former official and political analyst, cited in ICG 2009: 24.

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