

Development and gender in Kyrgyzstan

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This background paper presents an overview of development intervention in the Kyrgyz Republic since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Drawing on literature produced in the Kyrgyz Republic and in the West, grey literature produced by donors and international organisations, and interviews with key informants working with international organisations, it examines the approach of bilateral and multilateral donors, and international development organisations to engagement in the country, focusing on programmes aimed at strengthening civil society and achieving gender equality.

The Kyrgyz Republic remains one of the poorest countries in the former Soviet Union, as a result of which it has been the focus of considerable development intervention. Indicators have shown some improvement since 2000, particularly in reducing the number of people living in extreme poverty (Asian Development Bank 2008; UNDP forthcoming), but inequality between rich and poor continues to grow, between 40 and 50% of the population continue to live below the official national poverty level, and high levels of corruption limit opportunities for economic growth (Anderson 1999; Cokgezen 2004; DFID 2004; Asian Development Bank 2008). Classed as a low-income country, Kyrgyzstan remains heavily dependent on donor aid and has a high debt burden (DFID 2004; World Bank 2007). Reliance on hydroelectric power for both industrial output and domestic heating and electricity provision makes the country extremely vulnerable to the effects of abnormal weather conditions: droughts in 2007-8 reduced the amount of water available for hydroelectric power, leading to frequent power cuts and the interruption of heating provision throughout the winter, as well as a significant reduction in industrial and agricultural output, leading to increases in food prices and widespread food insecurity as a result (UNDP 2009). Recent years have seen high levels of both male and female out-migration to Russia and Kazakhstan. Poverty is particularly acute in the southern part of the country, which is predominantly rural and also more overtly religious, and where there is a large Uzbek minority (Bauer et al 1997; Anderson 1999), exacerbating the long-existing division between the north and the south (see Roy 2005). It is anticipated that the current global financial crisis will have significant negative impact on the most vulnerable members of society, particular as a result of falling income from remittances as migrant workers return home from Russia and Kazakhstan, whose economies have both been badly affected by the economic downturn (UNDP forthcoming).

The Soviet period

It could be argued that 'development intervention' in the region that is now the Kyrgyz Republic began in the 1920s, with the arrival of Soviet power to Central Asia. Under Russian imperial rule that preceded the 1917 Revolution, Russian military governors across Central Asia had relied on local elites to maintain order, in return for which little attempt was made to alter existing cultural, social, religious or economic practices and institutions (Anderson 1999).¹ However the Soviet period witnessed an extensive programme of 'development' aimed at integrating the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic into the USSR's planned economy and turning the population into Soviet citizens. This included the forced collectivisation of the rural population; industrialisation, particularly in the north of the country; the repression of religious activity and the secularisation of public life; an aggressive and fairly successful programme of 'russification'; and high levels of migration into the Republic from other areas of the USSR² (Anderson 1999). The period saw the systematic ideological instrumentalisation of Kyrgyz women, and Kyrgyz women's bodies, as signifiers of the new Soviet regime, through the encouragement (or in many cases, coercion) of women to abandon the veil, and other markers of their Islamic and cultural identity and become 'new Soviet women' (Kuehnast 1997, referencing Massell 1974; Corcoran-Nantes 2005). But it also saw the successful introduction of universal mass education and the provision of a sophisticated and comprehensive (in principle) system of social welfare - from free or heavily subsidised healthcare, childcare, housing, and public utilities, to generous maternity and sickness benefits and pensions - paid for in part through subsidies received from Moscow. This helped to ensure that despite being the second poorest republic within the USSR, standards of living (in urban areas at least) were equivalent to those in other regions (Bauer et al 1997; Kuehnast 1997; Heyat 2004). As was the case throughout the Soviet Union, women and girls were entitled to the same rights as men and boys in regard to access to education, and women entered the paid workforce in large numbers; in addition, quotas ensured the representation of women at senior management level in workplaces, and in regional and local systems of government. That said, women remained consistently excluded from higher levels of power and, mirroring patterns throughout the Asian republics of the USSR, Slavic women were more likely than Kyrgyz women to hold positions of power and authority (Corcoran-Nantes 2005. See also Anderson 1999).

¹ One significant exception to this was the attempt made in 1916 to introduce conscription, which met with mass rebellion across Central Asia. This revolt was heavily suppressed, resulting in approximately 100,000 Kyrgyz deaths. In addition, a third of the Kyrgyz population is estimated to have fled to China, where a small Kyrgyz minority remains today. (Anderson 1999).

² By 1991, only 52.4% of the population were ethnic Kyrgyz (Akhbarzadeh 2001, quoting figures from the last Soviet census to be conducted in the republic). This proportion has since increased, due to the out migration of many ethnic Russians, and now stands at almost 70% (Human Rights Watch 2006).

International development intervention

Kyrgyzstan declared itself independent at the collapse of the USSR in 1991, and shortly afterwards Askar Akaev was elected president.³ A period of rapid reform followed, and Kyrgyzstan was one of the first countries in the region to introduce macroeconomic reforms to open up its economy to foreign trade, privatise state assets and industries, and overhaul its financial sector and monetary policy framework in line with IMF structural adjustment policy (Anderson 1999; Dikkaya and Keles 2006). This, combined with the withdrawal of subsidies that the Republic had previously received from Moscow and the sudden loss of the intra-USSR export market, precipitated massive rises in unemployment and poverty, and the erosion of social welfare provision and services that had been enjoyed under Soviet rule, particularly healthcare and childcare (Bauer et al. 1997; Kuehnast 1997; Anderson 1999; Cokgezen 2004; Heyat 2004; Asian Development Bank 2005; Baschieri and Falkingham 2006; ACSSC 2006). These developments had a particularly strong impact on women, due to their earlier professional predominance in teaching, healthcare, and local administration, as well as in research roles in the state armaments industry which more or less collapsed after 1991, and their reliance on state-provided childcare (Bauer et al 1997; Hayet 2004; Corcoran-Nantes 2005; Asian Development Bank 2005). Inevitably, this period brought enormous upheaval and uncertainty for the inhabitants of Kyrgyzstan, as it did for all those living in 'countries in transition', throughout the 1990s, as well as new opportunities and rapid social change, which were enthusiastically embraced by some. The early 1990s also saw extensive political reform, with the aim of '[creating] a pluralistic society, in which freedom of expression and views could be protected' (ACSSC 2006: 12). Independent political parties emerged - most significantly the Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan - as did independent media outlets and activist groups (ibid.)

The early 1990s also saw the arrival of foreign donors and international development organisations⁴ to the Kyrgyz Republic, with USAID, the Soros Foundation, the Aga Khan Development Network, the Japanese International Cooperation Agency, and the European Commission, as well as the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and the European Bank for

³ See Anderson (1999) and ACSSC (2006) for a full account of this period.

⁴ '[International development agencies] aren't direct donor organizations but represent a mechanism for managing and implementing policy on providing assistance to developing countries.' (United Nations 2008: 122). Tiessen (2007: 4) adds 'International NGOs are organizations that have a head office, usually located in one of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) countries'. In much of the literature on development and civil society in Kyrgyzstan, 'donor', 'international development agency', 'international organisation' and 'international NGO' are used interchangeably, to denote agencies that support local NGOs and community based groups through grants, training, and technical assistance. See for instance ACSSC (2006); Buxton et al (2007). This is despite the fact that international organisations are themselves dependent on donor funding.

Reconstruction and Development establishing large-scale programmes that continue today.⁵ There is also a considerable United Nations (UN) presence.

Development as democracy, democracy as development

Thinking in development circles over the past thirty years has seen a move away from considering democracy as an outcome of development, to seeing it as a necessary prior, or parallel, condition to successful social *and* economic development (Mandel 2002). Hence, in addition to the more 'traditional' development aims of alleviating poverty among those sections of the population most affected by the upheavals of market reforms in the 1990s and ensuring access to basic services (such as health, education, water, and housing), donors and international organisations arrived in the region with the aim of supporting the transition to democracy and a free-market economy. In the post-Cold War, neo-liberal political climate of the early 1990s, these were seen as mutually dependent and mutually enabling, and were presented as the only 'natural' path for 'failed' communist states (Buroway and Verdery 1999; Mandel 2002; Sharp 1996. See also ACSSC 2006), to be facilitated by the programme already embarked on by the Akaev administration of rapid economic reform, the selling off of state industries and natural resources, the rolling back of the state and the services that it provided to citizens, and through facilitating the establishment of 'civil society'.⁶

It is for this reason that the inclusion of projects aimed at supporting democratic transition within wider development programmes was justified by donors and international organisations entering the Kyrgyz Republic in the early 1990s (and continues to be a major aspect of many donor programmes today). The main vehicle for this was to be the establishment of, and support to, 'civil society' organisations, within which 'active citizens' could hold their government to account *and* band together into self-help and community-based organisations to help each other in the face of economic transition, and this formed a substantive component of both the democratisation policies *and* poverty alleviation programmes of the main external donors in Kyrgyzstan and more widely in the region (Schulte 2008a, 2008b; ACSSC 2006). Such groups were taken to embody 'civil society' and hence constituted evidence of an emerging democracy,⁷

⁵ Profiles of the major donors operating in Kyrgyzstan can be found at www.donors.kg.

⁶ The concept of 'civil society' is one which is understood very differently across time periods, places, theoretical perspectives, and political persuasions (Woods 2000. See also Giffen et al 2005; Buxton et al 2007; Schulte 2008b). Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, in the context of Kyrgyzstan and the other Central Asian republics the term 'civil society' has come to be associated predominantly with the non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector, and particularly with NGOs that were established and received financial support from external donors through programmes aimed at nurturing and strengthening democracy (Schulte 2008a). It is in this sense that the term is used here.

⁷ The precedent given for this is the key role played by 'civil society' in the overthrow of autocratic regimes in Eastern and Central Europe (and also Latin America) in the late 1980s: '... the close connection between the

whether they existed to provide social services such as health care and employment training that the state is no longer willing or able to provide, or to advocate on women's rights, social, environmental, or legal issues⁸ (Giffen et al 2005; Mandel 2002; Handrahan 2001. See also Chandhoke 2007; Hemment 2007).

However, the 'civil society' that donors envisaged took little account of existing social organisations dating from the Soviet era (ACSSC 2006), and nor did it attempt to rediscover and develop other, more informal forms of social interaction that might also have existed during, and before, the Soviet period (Schulte 2008a). Rather, the model of liberal 'civil society' that was adopted was one of NGOs with paid staff, who were able to access donor funding through applying for grants for short-term projects designed to bring about positive change in limited number of sectors (ACSSC 2006; Schulte 2008a). Legislation passed in 1996 provided an enabling legal framework for the establishment of NGOs, and donor activities included offering training in 'civil society capacity building', which in theory at least equipped participants with the skills to run NGOs (ACSSC 2006). This led to the emergence of a donor-led 'civil society sector' in the Kyrgyz Republic, populated principally by local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) dependent on external aid.

Hence, the 1990s saw the creation of a large number of NGOs, led by well-educated, highly motivated, proactive people - the majority of whom were female - who moved into the sector from other professions, having become unemployed as a result of post-Independence reforms (Plakhotnikova and Kurbanova 2008; ACSSC 2006; interview 20.07.09). The emphasis at this time was on 'quantity not quality' in terms of the push to establish NGOs to create 'civil society', and many of these new NGO leaders had little experience of managing organisations or of fundraising and strategic planning (Plakhotnikova and Kurbanova 2008). Many groups lacked defined goals (Schulte 2008a), and 'were rather inclined to operate "from one grant to another", in the absence of their own long-term mission or strategic programme-based activities.' (ACSSC 2006), with some failing to deliver the results that they promised, nor displaying a sufficient degree of accountability towards the social groups they were claiming to represent (Tiulegenov 2008). As a result, NGOs as a whole inspired little confidence among the general population and state administrations (ACSSC 2006), leading to the perception that those running and working in NGOs constituted an urban, aloof elite, concerned only with serving their own interests and accountable only to their donors (Schulte 2008a)

'civil society' argument and the demise of authoritarian regimes came to be perceived by many multilateral and donor agencies as a sure recipe for democracy.' (Chandhoke 2007:608. See also Sharp 1996).

⁸ Indeed, in the early 1990s, many of the NGOs that were established with donor support in Kyrgyzstan did not have any clearly defined goals, as donors were at this stage principally concerned that NGOs existed, rather than with what they did (Schulte 2008).

This is an assessment that ignores the achievements of the sector over the past fifteen years in bringing about positive social change in the Kyrgyz Republic. Service provider NGOs have, for instance, played a vital role over the past eighteen years in providing some degree of protection to the most vulnerable groups and in pressing donors and the government for more resources and better policies on their behalf (Buxton et al 2007). Those active in 'civil society' constitute a very proactive portion of the population, with a high level of competence and expertise (Baktygulov 2007), who with the help of the international community have succeeded in creating a fairly critical public sphere in the country, where citizens are able to express opinions and disagreements with state policies (Schulte 2008a). But that said, building the capacity of 'civil society' has not resulted in significant impacts in terms of poverty reduction. Nor has it acted as the magic formula to bring about the seamless transition to democracy and a functioning market economy, although as Schulte (2008a; 2008b) argues, it is unfair to lay the blame for this failure of the 'democratic project' solely on the shoulders of the NGO sector, given the near total failure of the state to engage in this project, and the role that other actors in 'civil society'. In response to this, since the early 2000s, donors have moved away from funding 'civil society' on the same scale as it enjoyed in the 1990s, with less money available for civil society capacity building and training, and more being targeted towards NGOs that have a proven track record on delivering services, or positive advocacy outcomes, and / or which are in a position to support smaller, newer NGOs themselves (such as civil society support centres) (ACSSC 2006; interview 06.07.2009; interview 20.07.2009). In addition, under the terms of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in 2005, donors are now more focused on providing aid directly to state institutions, and on building the capacity of those institutions to deliver sustainable development and good governance, rather than funding local NGOs, and in theory, aid delivery is now aligned with the priorities set out in the country development strategy.⁹ In response to this (as well as other factors), recent years have seen the maturation and 'professionalisation' of the NGO sector, with a sharp fall in the number of NGOs operating, and a more complex relationship developing between this sector and the state, the wider population, and other actors within 'civil society'.¹⁰

Gender and development work in Kyrgyzstan

The arrival of donors to the region in the early-mid 1990s coincided with a period of great activity around gender and development at the global level, spearheaded by feminist activists from both the 'global North' and 'global South' who had been able to find common ground campaigning

⁹ See www.donors.kg, and IMF (2007).

¹⁰ For a very comprehensive overview of the development of the NGO sector and 'civil society' in Kyrgyzstan, see ACSSC (2006). See also Giffen et al (2005); Plakhotnikova and Kurbanova (2008); Matikeeva (2008); Tiulegenov (2008); and Schulte (2008a, 2008b).

around two key issues – violence against women as a human rights issue, and the influence of gender inequality and gendered power relations on development (see Johnson 2009 and Hemment 2007 for a full account of this period). This resulted in two important documents: the 1993 UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which came out of the Fourth World Conference on Women (held in Beijing in 1995), and which institutionalised the concept of gender mainstreaming in development – that is, (according to one definition) ‘the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programs, in all areas and at all levels (Tiessen 2007: 12, citing a 2002 report of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)).¹¹

As a result of their ratification of these two documents, as well as the later Millennium Declaration¹², UN agencies, as well as bilateral and multilateral donors, are committed to addressing gender as a development issue. In addition, in the fourteen years since the Beijing conference, addressing gender inequality has, in theory at least, become established as a core aspect of development work, on the grounds that: failure to challenge and overcome gender inequality leads to a violation of the rights of women and girls to participate in and benefit from processes of development; gender equality is taken to be a positive development outcome in and of itself, and; as the World Bank will tell you, ‘investing in gender equality and empowerment of women is smart economics’ (World Bank / IMF Development Committee 2007: 1).¹³ In addition, gender-based violence against women is also now accepted as both a human rights and a development issue, given that it represents the ultimate expression of gender inequality, and severely limits the opportunities of women and girls who are affected to realise their right to services such as health and education, and to benefit from economic development (see Hoare 2007).

¹¹ See <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/48/a48r104.htm> for the text of the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, and <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/> for the text of the Beijing Platform for Action.

¹² The Millennium Declaration commits signatories to eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). MDG 3 commits states and donors to promote gender equality and empower women.

¹³ This approach argues that overcoming gender inequality and ‘investing’ in women and girls in terms of enabling their access to education, health, economic and material resources, and participation in decision-making processes improves overall economic growth and development. The typical example given is that of education, i.e. that girls who finish school can get better paid jobs and contribute more to household income (reducing household poverty), go on to have fewer and healthier children (thus decreasing the amount of money that households – and the state – must spend on healthcare), and are more likely to ensure that their own children are educated. It is an approach that has been severely critiqued by many feminist commentators and activists working in development, on the grounds that it instrumentalises women and girls as tools for poverty eradication and development, rather than recognising their *right* to gender equality and to access services such as health and education, and also because it does little to challenge existing gendered divisions of labour in the home and the workplace.

In addition to global level commitments to gender mainstreaming in development policy and practice, the need to address gender inequality as a particular development concern in the Kyrgyz Republic was, and still is, justified by donors and international organisations on the grounds that women in Kyrgyzstan at every level of society were particularly badly affected by the upheavals of the 'transition', and that the last twenty years has seen a reversal of many of the (superficial or otherwise) gains that were made in terms of gender equality during the Soviet period. After 1991, across the former Soviet Union women were often the first to be targeted when state enterprises and institutes 'downsized' to meet the demands of the new market economy, leading in Kyrgyzstan to a reduction of almost 50 % in the official female employment rate between 1990 and 2005 (Asian Development Bank 2005). In addition, the closure of state kindergartens, almost exclusively staffed by women, had the dual impact of removing many women's source of livelihood and forcing others, who had previously relied on state childcare in order to work, to give up work themselves in order to take care of their own children (Bauer et al 1997; Asian Development Bank 2005; Corcoran-Nantes 2005). Making women redundant first was justified on pragmatic and ideological grounds. Soviet legislation enshrining women's rights as 'worker mothers' to generous maternity leave and paid leave to cover children's illnesses, shorter hours, and the opportunity to work part time now served to 'operate against their interests as employees' (Einhorn 1993: 130), as it made them appear as unreliable and expensive (ibid.; Corcoran-Nantes 2005). And, it was argued, the end of socialism meant that they no longer *needed* to work and could return to their 'natural' roles as mothers and housewives (conveniently assuming many of the caring responsibilities that the state could, or would, no longer provide), allowing men to reassert their 'natural' position as head of the family and breadwinner after years of 'unnatural', damaging, state-enforced gender equality (Sharp 1996; Verdery 1996; Haney 2002; Hemment 2007). In Central Asia in particular, this 'backlash' has gone beyond the matter of women's employment, with challenges to the legitimacy of women's presence and activity in the public arena at all coming from both the family and the community, religious leaders, and, in some instances, from the state, serving to reinforce existing gender inequality and prejudice within the private sphere (Handrahan 2001; Corcoran-Nantes 2005; Kandiyoti 2002a; Asian Development Bank 2005; McBrien 2006. See also Tickner 2001; Coyle 2003). Kyrgyzstan has seen a resurgence of so-called 'traditional' practices which harm and discriminate against women, such as bride kidnapping for forced marriage¹⁴ and polygamy, as well as an ongoing failure at community, regional and national level to address gender

¹⁴ The practice of bride kidnapping, or *ala kachuu*, involves the abduction of a woman by the 'groom' and a group of his male friends and relatives. The practice has become widespread in rural areas since 1991. There is considerable debate as to whether non-consensual bride kidnapping (as opposed to consensual, staged 'kidnapping', arranged by the couple themselves to avoid having to obtain parental consent for the marriage, and the cost of the wedding) is actually a traditional, pre-Revolutionary Kyrgyz practice. See Kleinbach and Salimjanova (2007) for a fuller discussion of this.

discrimination, high levels of domestic violence, and other forms of gender-based violence against women (Human Rights Watch 2006).

Making gender equality a reality is a core commitment of UNDP globally. [...] By applying two complementary approaches to achieving gender equality - 'mainstreaming gender' and 'women's empowerment' - UNDP, in close collaboration with other UN agencies such as UNIFEM, UNICEF and UNFPA, has played a significant role in creating an enabling environment for gender equality in Kyrgyzstan. [...] Since it is a cross-cutting issue, gender is an indispensable part of all UNDP activities in the country and is integrated in the work of the Poverty Reduction, Democratic Governance, HIV/AIDS, Environment and Peace and Development programmes.' (<http://www.undp.kg/en/what-we-do/cross-cutting-themes/gender> - last accessed August 2009)

In this context, the dual approach adopted by UNDP and detailed in the statement above of 'mainstreaming' gender into activities, combined with projects targeting women as beneficiaries often aimed at eliminating violence against women, alleviating poverty amongst women, particularly in rural areas, and increasing women's participation and representation in decision-making processes, is one that is fairly standard among donors and international organisations operating in Kyrgyzstan.

Working with 'women's NGOs'

As in other areas of development in the Kyrgyz Republic, international organisations and donors work extensively with, and provide considerable support to, local NGOs working on women's rights and gender issues in both service delivery and advocacy (often somewhat lazily - and inaccurately, given the wide range of people who work for them, and issues on which they work - referred to as 'women's NGOs'), in their role as part of 'civil society' and as implementers of development programmes.

NGOs working on gender and women's rights issues constitute one of the most active and vibrant sectors within 'civil society' in Kyrgyzstan, both in terms of the provision of services, and advocacy and lobbying (ACSSC 2006; interview 06.07.2009; interview 07.07.2009). But they remain marginalised within wider 'civil society' (ACSSC 2006; interview 06.07.2009; interview 20.08.2009), and perhaps more so than any other area of development work in the Kyrgyz Republic, donor priorities have determined the activities these organisations.

One of the most visible examples of this is the large number of women's crisis centres that were opened in Kyrgyzstan in the late 1990s, offering women victims of violence psychological and legal support (ACSSC 2006). In contrast to the rape crisis centres and battered women's refuges established in Western Europe, North America and Australasia in the 1970s, which were the product of grassroots, radical feminist activism, the crisis centres established in the Kyrgyz

Republic, and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, were the product of donor programmes aimed at eradicating violence against women within a development framework (Moldosheva 2007; Hemment 2007; Johnson 2009). As a result, '[i]n many cases the crisis centres are projects or programmes of various NGOs, so their capacities are limited by project frameworks' (United Nations 2008: 40), meaning that the continued existence of these centres and the services that they offer are jeopardised every time their funding bodies reassess their priorities. It also means that such centres do not necessarily work to a feminist agenda, in terms of challenging the dominant gender regime in Kyrgyz society, and the role it plays in perpetuating gender discrimination and gender-based violence (Moldosheva 2007). To date, only one crisis centre - Sezim, based in Bishkek - has managed to achieve sustainability, and is able to offer a refuge for women fleeing violence, trafficking and forced marriage, as well as advocating on women's rights and gender equality issues (ACSSC 2006; interview 07.07.09).

National level advocacy

Donor priorities also dominate at the national policy level. A recent gender assessment carried out by the United Nations (United Nations 2008) makes the argument that international organisations and donors are at present the main 'stakeholders' in terms of determining the national policy agenda relating to gender issues, as well as implementing and evaluating 'gender programmes', pushing the government to integrate gender into national development policy as part of aid conditionalities, and supporting women's rights organisations to lobby for legislation that promotes gender equality and protects women's rights. This is in no way to denigrate the energy or achievements of activists and groups working to uphold women's rights and achieve gender equality in the Kyrgyz Republic, who have mobilised successfully to campaign for the introduction of a 25% quota for women in the Kyrgyz Parliament, to resist legislation that would have criminalised abortion for non-medical reasons and an attempt to legalise polygamy, and, perhaps most significantly, for the introduction of legislation on domestic violence in 2003 (United Nations 2008; ACSSC 2006; interview 06.07.2009; interview 20.08.2009). However, visible support from donors, international organisations and transnational feminist networks to such campaigns has played an integral role in keeping gender issues on the national policy agenda (United Nations 2008). In addition, advocacy groups working on women's rights and gender equality in the Kyrgyz Republic remain dependent on the support of donors, international organisations, and transnational feminist networks, both in terms of material and technical resources, but also what could be classed as 'moral support' in an environment that sees them and the issues they work on marginalised both by the state and within wider civil society (interview 07.07.09; interview 20.08.09; ACSSC 2006; Moldosheva 2007).

But the result of this is that 'gender issues' are seen as something that has come from outside, and state-level engagement and policy formulation is based not on political or ideological commitment, but rather with the goal of accessing 'ideological and financial donor resources' (United Nations 2008: 24), meaning that 'the issue of gender equality is currently kept in the public domain not through a critical engagement with the past but via the technocratic packages of international aid agencies promoting capitalist markets and democratic governance.' (Kandiyoti 2007: 614, with reference to Central Asia more generally). And yet this external support on gender and women's rights issues is itself inconsistent. For despite the stated commitment of international organisations and donors to overcoming gender inequality and promoting women's rights, in practice the design and implementation of 'gender policy' by donors and international organisations is often haphazard, under resourced, and poorly managed (Tiessen, 2007; United Nations 2008), in the Kyrgyz Republic as elsewhere. As a recent gender assessment carried out by the United Nations notes: 'In spite of many declarations, it's difficult to achieve well-balanced integration of a gender approach into international programmes, because donor agencies and international organizations often don't have their own consistent policy towards gender development aspects' (2008: 25-6). And despite fifteen years of gender mainstreaming, gender is not systematically considered as an influential factor within development in the Kyrgyz Republic, but treated as a separate issue, and one that only relates to women, rather than to relations of power *between* men and women (interview 07.07.09; interview 20.08.09).

Both the dependence of organisations working on gender equality and women's rights issues on donor funding, and the fact that the national level 'gender agenda' is determined by international organisations and donors have serious implications for the future sustainability of organisations working on gender and women's rights and of advances that have been made in gender equality at the legislative level, should donor priorities change to the extent that gender equality is no longer considered to be a development priority, and/or the Kyrgyz Republic witnesses a large-scale withdrawal of donor funding. It remains to be seen whether the 'women's NGO sector' would be able to survive in its current vibrant and active form, were such a reassessment of priorities to take place.

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