Feminism in Central Asia: more and more voices are being raised

Description

In 2018, Zere Asylbek, a 19-year-old feminist activist and singer, caused a wave of outrage in Kyrgyzstan after releasing the track *Kyz* (Girl), which encouraged women to live freely. With her deliberately provocative clip, she wanted to provoke a social debate that turned against her – and her outfit – even earning her death threats.



In 2021, Zere Asylbek, who has become a symbol of the rise of Central Asian feminism, released several committed titles, including one denouncing domestic violence and another opposing the injunctions made to girls. More broadly, in recent years, in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, women have been mobilizing to make their voices heard by taking to the streets and multiplying their actions on social networks. More and more of them celebrate the critical dates of the feminist agenda, denounce violence against women, or launch projects in favor of gender equality.

The condition of women in Central Asia before 1991

In the patriarchal societies of Central Asia, which are predominantly Muslim, the division of roles between men and women before the Soviet period was particular: only men held positions of power, with women being excluded from many spheres. Women were excluded from many spheres of life. Although they worked mainly in agriculture, they nevertheless played a significant economic role.

During the Soviet era, a policy of women's liberation was implemented, accompanied by a discourse on the "modernization" of the status of women. Gender equality was even enshrined in the legislation of the republics. Despite this wishful thinking and few exceptions, especially in the scientific and artistic fields, Central Asian Soviet society remained male-dominated. The vast majority of women remained confined to the domestic sphere and mother-wives, while men held political and economic power.

1991, independence and the question of women's rights

Gender equality is enshrined in the constitutions of each of the Central Asian countries. Since independence, they have ratified the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and signed the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, promoting women's inclusion in all areas through legislative changes and education. Central Asian states are also signatories to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (4th World Conference on Women, 1995, which aimed to achieve gender equality and empowerment worldwide). Gradually, the principles of equality and women's rights were translated, to varying degrees, into national laws during the 1990s.

However, despite these state commitments, women's participation remains limited. In political life, there are few women in decision-making positions at the national level, although there were women candidates in the presidential elections in Kazakhstan (2019), Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan (2021). Some of them have reached the positions of mayors, deputies, ministers, or regional governors. Women are married at a very young age at the social level, which is an additional obstacle to their access to education (sometimes forbidden after marriage). They have access to less skilled jobs at the economic level, mainly in the agricultural sector or the public sector (education and health), and the wage gap is significant. Finally, there is a high incidence of violence against women, particularly domestic violence. Vast progress

remains to be made in legal protection and access to women's rights.

"Ala kachuu", the kidnapping of fiancées

« Ala Kachuu » (« catch and run » in Kyrgyz) is the act of kidnapping a young girl by a man to marry her (initially, the escape was organized by a couple whose families refused the union; it later evolved). There are competing versions of the origin of this ancient practice throughout Central Asia. The tradition was revived after 1991: today, it is mainly practiced in Kyrgyzstan, in rural areas.

By mutual agreement, the two spouses often wish to perpetuate the tradition. Without mutual consent, this practice is illegal and punishable by Kyrgyz law, which can impose a substantial fine and/or prison sentence (up to 10 years since 2019). Nevertheless, according to UN Women, nearly 12,000 women undergo « Ala kachuu » in Kyrgyzstan every year, the highest number in Central Asia.

A new surge of feminist initiatives in Central Asia

For some years now, Central Asian feminists have denounced the decline in women's rights and mobilized more. On March 8, International Women's Rights Day, they usually receive flowers, according to a Soviet tradition that persists today in Russia and the other former Soviet republics. Still, the question of their rights is not addressed.

Symbolically, the first authorized feminist demonstration in independent Kazakhstan took place on March 8, 2021, in Almaty. According to the group Feminita, one of the march's organizers, it gathered nearly a thousand participants. In Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, the phenomenon is not new, especially in large cities, and the number of participants – mainly women – is increasing.

At the same time, mobilizations against gender-based and sexual violence are increasing. In May 2020, following the assault of a 17-year-old girl, Evelina, in the street in Uzbekistan, the criminal proceedings initiated were quickly interrupted because the young woman and her primary aggressor had reached an amicable agreement. This decision triggered an unprecedented wave of feminist protests on social networks, a kind of « Uzbek #metoo » if we refer to the scale of mobilization with the hashtag #Iamyevelina. In Kyrgyzstan, 27-year-old Aizada Kanatbekova was found strangled in April 2021 after being abducted for a forced marriage: her murder also aroused widespread anger in the country, first on social networks and then in front of the principal organs of power in Bishkek, where demonstrators demanded the resignation of law enforcement officials, in vain.

Civil society is also organizing to create and develop projects for gender equality. In April-May 2019, a feminist anti-discrimination camp was held on Lake Issyk Kul in Kyrgyzstan. This event, named « Fight Like a Girl," allowed exchanges and training actions between the 35 young participants, representing seven countries (the three from the South Caucasus and four from Central Asia), to fight more effectively for the improvement of the situation of women in their respective countries.

Feminist groups are growing. The Bishkek Feminist Initiative, for example, brings together feminist activists in Kyrgyzstan who advocate collective empowerment, solidarity, mutual support, and non-violence. In May-June 2021, 94 activists and representatives of Central Asian associations participated in the Generation Equality Forum organized by UN Women to demand change in Central Asia.

As elsewhere, the Covid-19 pandemic has helped raise awareness of the resurgence of violence against women. Aliya Suranova, a journalist, specializing in women's rights in Kyrgyzstan, points out that violence against women increased by more than 65 percent during the lockdown. Feminist groups denounce a significant discrepancy between national laws and their application and demand the criminalization of all forms of violence against women and better support for victims.

The role of the foreigner in the recent growth of feminist movements

Western support is multiple, via international associations and NGOs present in the region such as UN-Women since 1999 in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan and since 2012 in Kyrgyzstan, and UNDP, WHO, or OSCE programs... These organizations fund feminist projects and groups, train on gender equality issues in schools, help organize events, and support states in implementing laws favoring women's rights. One example is the funding by UN-Women of the Bishkek-based NGO Open Line, which provides legal support to women who have been abducted for forced marriage.

However, Central Asian women activists want to create their movement. Feminists from the four countries meet regularly online to share experiences and brainstorm future actions. The mobilization is significant among the urban youth who have more access to the internet and other models than those imposed by tradition and the family.

The reaction of society and governments: an intense polarization

In Tajikistan, President Emomali Rahmon announced in 2009 that March 8 would be renamed Mother's Day. However, dozens of women wanted to gather for the first time on March 8, 2020, but faced pressure from the police; the meeting never took place. A year later, in Kyrgyzstan, masked men attacked the women's gathering, and the police arrested about 70 demonstrators, but not the attackers. The March 8, 2021 demonstration in Kazakhstan was not officially banned, but participants were summoned to court a few days later. Two of them were fined, including violating the law on peaceful protests. The Human Rights Watch organization recently called on the Kazakhstan authorities to allow the March 8, 2022, march, which has just been banned.

In 2019 in Kyrgyzstan, a feminist contemporary art festival, La Feminnale, organized by the Bishkek Feminist Initiative, caused an uproar over the exhibition of pro-LGBT rights works and others depicting naked women. Part of the exhibition was censored, and the director of the Bishkek Museum of Fine Arts, Mira Djangaracheva, was forced to resign due to the scandal.

Many feminist activists report being followed, and some have even been assaulted. In Tajikistan, many NGOs have had to close in recent years in the face of state repression. The political authorities continue to exert much control over society and watch movements that challenge the existing order.

Nevertheless, the cause is progressing, and some feminist demands are beginning to be considered. In Uzbekistan, for example, the local NGO Sharpa negotiated with the transport service in the capital, Tashkent, to launch a campaign to raise awareness of harassment on public transport on 25 November 2021, the International Day Against Violence Against Women. Prevention messages were printed on bus tickets, and an emergency button was created.

Thumbnail: March in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, as part of the UN Women's « Orange the World » campaign, 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence, 12 December 2020. Sign on the left: « End 'slut shaming' and victim-blaming »; Sign on the right: "Don't be silent!" (courtesy of @Bishkekfeminists).

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Back to the top of the page

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