

# **Violence Against Women in Kyrgyzstan: A Study in Transition**

## **World Conference on Prevention of Family Violence 2005**

**Linda Light  
Vancouver, BC, Canada**

### **The Tensions of Transition**

In Kyrgyzstan, like elsewhere, gender equality is seriously curtailed by violence against women in all its forms. In this small, relatively progressive Muslim country on the border of China in Central Asia, physical and sexual violence against women and other forms of oppression such as polygamy, bride stealing and payment of bride price, are locked into a complex cause-and-effect relationship with women's inequality.

During three visits to Kyrgyzstan as a Volunteer Advisor for CESO (Canadian Executive Services Organization), working with women to address issues of violence and coercion of women, I learned much about the universality of women's struggle for gender equality and safety. I also learned much about the particular shape that struggle takes when a country is caught in the tide of transition between two worlds.

The women of Kyrgyzstan, a former Soviet Republic, live in a world of exciting, frustrating and often painful contradictions. Independent from the Soviet Union since 1991, the citizens of this nation in transition are caught between conflicting pressures of old and new, east and west, religious and secular. Socialist ideals of collectivism and adequate essentials for all are juxtaposed against capitalist ideals of individualism and super-consumption. The tenacity of their Soviet history of top-down rule where secrecy was a given contrasts with their democratic ideals of freely elected, transparent government. The community-building strengths of the Kyrgyz traditions that were banned under Soviet rule often conflict with the goals of gender equality. Whether the socio-political changes occurring in Kyrgyzstan prove beneficial to its women in the long run will be deeply impacted by, among other factors, how much the 'renaissance' of Kyrgyz national traditions includes traditional practices that oppress women.

Far from universally rejecting the Soviet times that shaped their modern history, the women with whom I worked in Kyrgyzstan were both pragmatic and idealistic in their ideology, espousing what is best from both the former and the current socio-political environment. Like most of the Soviet Republics, Kyrgyzstan voted against independence from the Soviet Union in the referendum that was held during the last days of the Soviet Union. However, the Soviet Union broke up anyway, and Kyrgyzstan was 'cut loose'

along with the other 16 Republics because, as one of my Kyrgyz colleagues told me, “they couldn’t afford us any more.” However, free higher education, meat every day, and two weeks paid-for annual holiday at Issykul Lake remain cherished memories from those Soviet days that are no more.

Trying to understand my colleagues’ feelings about their former political masters, I asked one of my co-workers what she had felt about the lack of freedom of movement outside the Soviet Bloc that existed during Soviet times. She said, “It is no different now. Then we didn’t have permission to travel. Now we don’t have money to travel. What is the difference?”

When I asked another about their new freedoms, she replied mildly, “What is freedom, when you can’t afford to buy enough food to live?”

When I asked my friend, Aigul, about how she dealt with the many restrictions on their freedoms during all those years of Soviet rule, she answered simply with a question for me. “Do you not disagree with many of the things your government does?”

That was when the penny finally dropped. Their relationship with Soviet rule was not very different from my relationship with our provincial and federal governments – most of which I had never voted for and many of whose policies I strongly disagree with.

Support for many of the former Soviet policies and practices aside, in my three visits to Kyrgyzstan, I met no one, except for one elderly gentleman attending a human rights workshop in his small village, who appeared to want to return to Soviet times. In spite of frustrations with government corruption (reported to be among the highest of any of the former Soviet Republics), high rates of unemployment and poverty, and the gender inequality that is embedded in many of the Kyrgyz traditions, the women with whom I worked agreed that things were getting better - and they continued to hold high hopes for the future. Times change and challenges change with them. Women like those with whom I worked in Kyrgyzstan are much more eager to find ways to solve their current problems than they are to mourn the past.

### **The Tulip Revolution**

The future in Kyrgyzstan recently took a somewhat surprising turn, as the so-called Tulip Revolution of March, 2005 thrust Kyrgyzstan suddenly into the international spotlight. In true Kyrgyz form, the juxtaposition of the old ways and the new continues to provide a unique shape to modern Kyrgyz history. In March, then President Askar Akayev was forced out of office and out of the country, and in July, for the first time in modern history, a leader of a Central Asian country was selected by ballot rather than by Soviet masterminding or by civil war. Fed up with widespread corruption, broken promises, unemployment and underemployment, the women of Kyrgyzstan took to the streets and played a significant role in the largely non-violent Revolution.

Also in true Kyrgyz form, my colleagues, when I contacted them as soon as I heard media reports of the revolution, were mild and understated in their reactions. Two weeks earlier, excited about what was happening in their country, they had already emailed me pictures of themselves and their NGO colleagues marching through the street in front of their capital building (referred to locally as the “White House”). When what had begun as protest became a full-scale revolution, minus the usual widespread violence, my colleagues’ response to my email query about their well-being was, “Our work is not directly affected, we are happy that there has been little violence, and we think this is just part of building a democracy, is it not?”

## **Women’s Work**

During my three visits to Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, I worked with a group of women in three different NGOs on prevention of violence against women and children, and on mental health issues. These women’s priorities were not so different from the priorities of women everywhere: family, work for survival and for the betterment of their people, and love of country.

But these women of Kyrgyzstan – Kyrgyz, Russian, and ethnic minority women such as Korean, including both Muslims and non-Muslims - were also different in a number of ways from many of the women I have worked with in the West. They are highly educated – many have more than one degree and many think nothing of working for a second or third degree in their middle age. They are grossly underpaid – a psychiatrist in a state mental hospital, for example, earns about \$30US a month and NGO salaries of \$100US per month from an international grant are routinely divided amongst several staff. And they are passionately committed to social justice work, whether or not there is money to pay them for their work.

The first crisis centre I worked with in 2001, SEZIM, was receiving no government funding at that time. Sometimes the seven professional staff got paid and sometimes they didn’t, depending on whether they had a grant or not. But, whether or not there was any money, they worked day and night running their crisis services. Highly trained teachers, psychologists and psychiatrists took their turns doing overnight duty in the small, stiflingly hot two-room office. Working through the night to provide clients with crisis services 24 hours a day, seven days a week is not something that most Canadian NGOs can manage, even with relatively stable government funding. But these women do it, for no other reason than it has to be done.

At the office where I worked during my next two volunteer assignments, in 2003 and 2004, I worked with two NGOs that shared both their space and their staff in order to survive. The larger and more established of the NGOs, working on mental health issues, shared its one-room office in a state medical centre with a smaller, fledgling NGO addressing issues of violence against women. The two principal staff of the fledgling NGO, Action for Family Support, were also key staff in the mental health NGO, Mental Health and Society.

### **Three Women of Kyrgyzstan**

Natasha, a Russian, is a psychiatrist working with SEZIM. She has her highest medical qualification, is married to a doctor, has no children, and during the time I worked at SEZIM she worked at three jobs just to survive. She was a staff psychiatrist at a state mental hospital; she worked at SEZIM, taking her turn at staffing the crisis lines on a 24/7 basis; and on Saturdays she sold clothes in the market. While I was there she was excited to report to us that she had just passed her entrance exams to study law at one of Bishkek's several universities. She didn't want to become a lawyer, she explained in her halting English, she just wanted to have some legal knowledge so that she could better help her clients. Many mental patients, she explained, do not know what their rights are, and are vulnerable to losing those rights when they are in a mental hospital. Her legal studies won't provide her with any material advantage – in fact, unlike in Soviet times, they will cost her money – but they are necessary, she says, so that she can do her job better.

Aigul, a Kyrgyz former teacher in her 50s, is a widowed mother of four daughters in their 20s, one of whom suffers from schizophrenia. A fluent English speaker, she was my friend and translator through three visits to Kyrgyzstan. I first met her at SEZIM, where she had written the funding proposal that brought me to Bishkek. During my next two visits, she worked at both Mental Health and Society and Action for Family Support, where I assisted with organizational development and funding proposals. She was working on a second degree, in psychology, not because it would bring her a better job or more money, but because it would help her to better help women who come for assistance. Women come for help because their families are forcing them to marry against their will, or their husbands are beating them or forcing them to sell their babies to pay outstanding debts – and Aigul thought that a degree in psychology would better prepare her to serve them.

When I asked her how she manages when she is not getting paid, she said, “I have daughters who are working.” Aigul and three of her daughters live together in a small flat in Bishkek, where they sleep two to a small bedroom with a small sitting room and kitchen. “It is very fine,” Aigul says, with her trademark smile.

Sharing, both at home and at work, and a deep and sincere satisfaction with the modest seem to be the norm in Kyrgyzstan – one of the positive legacies of Soviet times, perhaps. While the women I came to know in Bishkek craved sufficient resources to feed, clothe and house their families without constant worry and stress, they were quite clear that they did not wish to embrace the ways of the West that are so shaped by over-consumption.

A modern, educated woman and a moderate, secular Muslim, Aigul was a “stolen bride”, deceived by her equally modern, educated university boyfriend into a marriage she had not intended. Her oldest daughter was “given” by her husband, against her will, to her mother-in-law after their second daughter was born, because the older woman was alone

and needy. More than 25 years later, Aigul still feels angry and sad and powerless when she tells me about how these traditional Kyrgyz practices affected her own life.

Burul is a mental health advocate, director of Mental Health and Society, an NGO gaining increasing profile both within and outside of Kyrgyzstan, in the struggle for human rights for mental health system “users”. With a PhD in psychology, Burul is an articulate and outspoken critic of the current mental health system in Kyrgyzstan – a formidable opponent of the Soviet-style psychiatrists and senior administrators who have a vested interest in the often repressive, often corrupt mental health system. A striking, well-dressed wife of an officer with the Special Police for Drug Enforcement, and mother of three, Burul appears in many ways an unlikely rebel. But listen to her on the phone talking to the General Director for the Ministry of Health of the Kyrgyz Republic Republican Centre of Mental Health and you don’t need to understand Russian to know that he is squirming at the other end of the line.

These three women, and many others like them in NGOs springing up all over the country, are engaged in a struggle for human rights. They are struggling for women’s rights and for a culture of human rights that extends not only to women but to all those whose rights get trampled in the rush for power under any regime, old or new – children, the poor, the homeless, the disabled, and the mentally ill.

### **Increased Focus on Violence and Coercion of Women**

It is impossible to discuss women’s rights and violence against women in Kyrgyzstan without discussing Kyrgyzstan’s renewed nationalism and return to its Islamic roots and traditional Kyrgyz practices, because many of these traditional practices oppress women. The women in Kyrgyzstan talk in the same breath about “violence and coercion of women”. It is also difficult in Kyrgyzstan, without a history of social research, to determine whether violence against women is on the rise or whether it is simply more likely to be talked about or reported to police or to journalists or researchers.

Andrew Byrnes, Professor of Law at Australia’s University of New South Wales, in his 2000 Report on the *Compliance of the Kyrgyz Law with International Standards on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality*, points out that:

“Violence against women in the family and in the community is accepted by the governmental bodies responsible for gender issues and non-governmental organisations as a major problem facing Kyrgyz society. Some commentators have suggested that the incidence of violence against women has increased since independence and with increasing economic difficulties (while others attribute this to higher levels of reporting of violence).”

### **Dangers Inherent in the Resurgence of Traditional Practices**

With the demise of Soviet control in Kyrgyzstan came freedom of religion and freedom to re-embrace its own history and traditions. Islam, a cloak that Kyrgyzstan has always

worn lightly, was, along with other elements of the Kyrgyz cultural identity, seriously discouraged by the Soviets. Insofar as this resurgence embodies freedom of religion and a pride in their national and cultural heritage, both women and men view it as a positive force. It will assist Kyrgyzstan during this period of transition from being under the protective, often stifling wing of the Soviet Union to being an independent nation capable of standing – and thriving - on its own.

But insofar as these traditions are seen to reinforce women's position as one inferior to that of men – to perpetuate a view of women as the property of men – they are raising the red flag for women activists. These practices, including polygamy, bride stealing, and payment of bride price, are recognized by many women – and by some men – as a means to maintain women's inequality and prevent women's equal participation in Kyrgyzstan's governance and development during this crucial time of transition. These practices are reportedly on the rise, especially in the rural areas. Polygamy, strictly forbidden by the Soviets and still against the law, is reportedly regaining popularity, especially outside the larger urban areas. Sanctions against bride price and bride stealing are reportedly weaker than they were in Soviet times.

Even some of the most progressive and modern men I met argued that bride price and bride stealing, being integral parts of the return of Kyrgyz traditions, are important components of Kyrgyzstan's transition, as the country struggles to define itself again after generations of Soviet rule. They are “symbolic” rather than “real” practices, one educated businessman argued, with little apparent understanding of this symbolism as that of gender inequality. Kyrgyzstan's Islamic tradition is a moderate, secular one, they argue. And, in general, comparatively speaking, it is.

However, the assurance of Kyrgyzstan's embrace of moderate, secular Islam appears to be showing some worrying signs of threat from outside influences. One of our informal guides, for example, pointed out village schools that are being built by Uzbek Muslims to “educate” village children in the ways of Islam – a more fundamentalist Islam than is characteristic of the Kyrgyz people. If there are no government-funded schools in the village, he explained, the parents will welcome any school, even if it is run by Uzbek Muslims.

### **Activists Respond**

In response to the mixed blessings of the resurgence of Kyrgyz tradition, women activists and others concerned with Kyrgyzstan's economic and political transition are developing strategies to contain, or at least shape, this resurgence, so that only those traditional practices that dignify both women and men are sanctioned and encouraged. Women activists and their strategic partners are striving to identify the problems, to document the trends, and to educate their government, the public and international donors about the enormous negative impact such a return to oppressive practices will have – indeed, is having - on women.

Research into violence and other forms of coercion and oppression of women is being encouraged in a number of reports on women in development in Kyrgyzstan. Professor Byrnes highlights “the need to carry out research into the extent and impact of discriminatory traditional attitudes and practices, especially in rural areas, and to develop strategies to address those practices” and recommends “conducting research....to provide accurate data on....the extent and nature of the practice of kidnapping and forced marriage [and] levels of all forms of violence against women in the family and community.”

Although there are some signs that violence and oppression of women has increased since independence, at the same time, with greater freedom to question and criticize, and some limited financial support available from international aid agencies, violence against women and other forms of gender oppression can be researched and written about more openly. Women’s groups are beginning to undertake research into these issues and starting to build partnerships with research organizations and government departments to not only ask the questions but also work toward developing effective responses.

What research has been done indicates both high levels of violence against women and high levels of concern about violence and oppression among women.

The tug-of-war between the nation-building aspects of Kyrgyzstan’s renewed freedom to embrace its cultural heritage and those aspects that oppress women is one of the struggles taken up by women such as Aigul, Burul and Natasha. The challenges are enormous: lack of funding; opposition from conservative, Soviet-style bureaucrats; entrenched sexism; lack of government and institutional infrastructure; and widespread corruption. But the passion and commitment, knowledge and skills of women like these three and their NGO colleagues, provide a formidable force for social change that works for women and children as well as for men. These women are highly educated, highly motivated, and committed to helping women cope with the huge changes that have occurred in their country over the past decade and a half. They are acutely aware of the power of national and religious tradition to build and to destroy, to set free and to oppress. And they are determined to help their country get the balance right.