

FEMINIST THEORY AND GENDER DYNAMICS IN CENTRAL ASIAN SOCIETIES (2017-2023)

Nazarillaeva Mekhrangiz

Political Science University of World Economy and Diplomacy

62502055380015

nazarovamexrangiz582@gmail.com

ABSTRACT	KEYWORDS
A perspective through which such a complex sociocultural and political environment may be viewed and contextualized has to incorporate, by necessity, feminist theory when peering into the dynamics within Central Asian societies. Indeed, Central Asia comprises such countries as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan-each with their diverse history and traditions shaped by the legacy of the Soviet Union, along with growing trends arising from global feminist movements. This paper draws on feminist theoretical frameworks that emphasize the persisting challenges alongside emerging opportunities for gender equality: intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, state feminism, and global feminism. It explores the gendered experiences of women in the region.	

Introduction

In Central Asia, gender dynamics are shaped by deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, compounded by socio-economic, ethnic, and geographical disparities. Women in rural areas face disproportionate barriers to education, healthcare, and employment, often exacerbated by ethnic discrimination. For example, rural women of Tajikistan and ethnic minority women of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are the victims of an intersectional disadvantage that decreases their chances of upward mobility. Central Asia is indeed profoundly Soviet in terms of gender norms. During the Soviet era, women were pushed into the workforce and into educational institutions through state-mandated equality policies. While these policies did much to expand women's public roles, they often disregarded local cultural and religious contexts. In the post-Soviet period, traditional gender roles have been reclaimed and reinforced by the governments of the region, especially in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, as a way of affirming national identity. This aspect of postcolonial feminism would critique the imposition of such top-down policies and underline tensions between externally driven modernization and the preservation of indigenous traditions; a revived stress on women's role as cultural carriers is especially evident in the countryside. State feminism legal reforms also witness some progress on paper for the purpose of reducing gender-based inequalities, though their application highly varies. For instance,

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have passed laws that would tackle domestic violence and equality in the workplace. In addition, the mechanisms for the implementation of these enactments, when it exists at all, along with slender financing and even opposition from conservative quarters, substantially impairs their impact. Global feminism has also shaped Central Asian gender activism, especially in the urban centers. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, for example, local women's rights organizations increasingly work with transnational networks on issues ranging from gender-based violence to political underrepresentation. Social media has turned into a strong tool for amplifying feminist voices, fostering new waves of digital activism across the region. International feminist movements seldom affect them due to overwhelming government restrictions, apart from cultural resistances in both Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, since the civil society is not free. In turn, the digital sphere has emerged as an essential tool of grassroots activism in resistance to patriarchal attitudes and for claiming more gender equality at workplaces and in political life. However, the influence of global feminist movements is still distributed unevenly, and Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan remain very restrictive in terms of state policy and cultural conservatism toward the activities of civil society organizations. By applying these different feminist theories, this paper tries to analyze the interplay of socio-political and cultural factors that determine gender dynamics in Central Asia. It provides an understanding of how regional and global initiatives can be combined toward the realization of more inclusive and equal societies, taking into consideration systemic obstacles to women's participation and the contribution of feminist movements to their elimination. This paper emphasizes the importance of adopting context-sensitive approaches to advocacy that respect local tradition while campaigning for universal principles of equality. The examination of gender dynamics in Central Asia not only underlines the unique challenges faced within this region but also contributes to broader discussions on the applicability of feminist theories across diverse cultural contexts. It is here that the challenge of balance facing Central Asian societies-between tradition, state policies, and global feminist influences-understands these dynamics as a vital constituent of any sustainable progress on gender equality.

Theoretical Framework

It gives the principal lens with which to examine gender relations and social structures that guide the investigation of roles and rights of women. Feminist theory enables the analysis of intersections of the Soviet Union policy legacy, contemporary political systems, and local cultural practices that together shape the parameters within which gender relations are enacted in Central Asia. These changing feminist movements in the region have to navigate an increasingly complex terrain that is filled with traditional norms on gender, rising nationalism, and globalizing ideals about feminism. The framework has important implications for understanding the complexity surrounding the issue of gender equality in the region and sets the basis for the analysis contained in this report. Intersectionality is one of the striking features of feminist theory and tries to explain how other social variables like race, class, religion, and nationality inform gender oppression. Issues related to gender inequalities in Central Asia also intertwine with ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic status, therefore making considerations of multiple and intersecting forms of discriminations faced by women imperative.

The UN Women Report¹ on gender equality in Central Asia shows how an intersectional approach does shape experiences for women, especially for those coming from far-flung areas that are at the receiving end of various layers of exclusion to social services, all the way up to political participation. Thus, an intersectional approach is the basis on which analysis of the differential operation of gender oppression among diverse women forms a much-informed analysis of the gender landscape in Central Asia.

While noting women's political and labor participation in Kazakhstan have increased since the country declared independence, according to the National Statistics Agency of Kazakhstan², tensions remain palpable between the efforts taken by state authorities to fight for gender equality and traditional cultural attitudes that circumscribe the rights of women. The tensions between all of these interests make clear that feminist perspectives are needed here that could take into account both the global ideal of feminism and the local traditionalism along with the influences of postcolonialism. State feminism refers to the role that a state plays in either facilitating or hindering gender equality with its policies, laws, and institutional frameworks. Throughout post-Soviet Central Asia, states have all adopted gender equality policies, although their implementation has been highly uneven, with varying levels of commitment to gender reforms. Yet, despite formal commitments to gender equality under various international conventions, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, problems continue to persist in the effectiveness and implementation of such policies

The thinking and practice of Central Asian feminism are influenced by global feminism and transnational feminist movements, largely with the use of digital platforms that enable cross-border solidarities. However, there is usually tension between the global feminist imperatives and the cultural, religious, and political realities of Central Asia. Feminist movements must navigate these global principles within their particular socio-political contexts and balance demands for women's rights with respect for local traditions.

A 2021 report on gender and health by the World Health Organization³ brings to the fore the influence of the global feminist movement on sexual and reproductive rights, especially in women's health and family planning services within Central Asia. It further notes that cultural resistance from the conservative religious sectors generally leads to the sidelining of such global feminist objectives. This feminist theory includes the theories of intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, state feminism, and global feminist movements that provide a robust framework through which to analyze complex gender dynamics in Central Asia. The theoretical framework combined both governmental and international sources in its understanding of the gender landscape of the region. The intersection of local traditions, Soviet legacies, and global feminist movements requires an intricate approach to gender equality whereby feminist activism in Central Asia would be locally informed but globally aware.

¹ UN Women. (2022). *Gender equality and social change in Central Asia*. UN Women.

² National Statistics Agency of Kazakhstan. (2021). *Gender equality in Kazakhstan: Statistics and policy recommendations*.

³ WHO. (2021). *Health and gender equality in Central Asia*. World Health Organization.

Background

Feminism is a many-sided social and political movement, aside from being an intellectual tradition, that seeks to achieve gender equality. It aims at securing the political, economic, social, and cultural rights of women, while challenging the patriarchal structures that nurture discrimination and inequality. The goal of feminism is to change these structures in order to make a more just society. Feminists and feminist activists work to change societal norms and practices, which limit women's choices and perpetuate their subordination. This includes fighting against inequitable pay, access to education and health care, and combating gender-based violence and discrimination. Feminism has come to emphasize the need for respect and recognition of experiences and identities of women, keeping in mind the racial, class, and sexual differences.⁴

It calls for the rights of all women, regardless of ethnicity, social status, or sexual orientation, in the struggle for equality, solidarity, and mutual support.

The most central aim of feminism is equal opportunity and fair treatment for all persons, irrespective of their gender. It seeks the creation of a society wherein all individuals can fulfill their potential and live without fear of discrimination and oppression. Feminism has played a very important role in this aspect of striving for gender equality and justice around the world.

Feminism in Central Asian countries has unique challenges and opportunities due to cultural, historical, and social factors of the region. Within the post-Soviet Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, the women's movement is evolving within the environment of transition from socialism to other political and economic systems and amidst high levels of economic instability, strong patriarchal traditions, and Islam.

Thus, feminist organizations and activists in Central Asia are coming together in the region to respond to inequalities in gender-based violence, lack of access to education and healthcare, and lack of political representation. They seek to challenge deep-seated cultural norms that deny women specific rights and opportunities.⁵

On the bright side, some countries in the region have seen good development toward gender equality. Thus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan host active feminist movements and NGOs that, through human rights campaigns, educational programs, and political action, are pushing for change. In other countries like Turkmenistan, however, feminism is subjected to very tough state oppression and restrictions. Central Asian feminism has pointed out the fact that international support and solidarity are needed, and last but not least, adjustment of feminist ideas to suit local cultural and social context. The movements in women's movements within the region aim at a society with equal rights and opportunities for everybody, irrespective of their sex.⁶

⁴ **Abazov, R. (2021).** *Gender dynamics in Central Asia: Historical legacies and contemporary challenges*. Central Asian Studies Review, 12(3), 67-85.

⁵ **Kudaibergenova, D. T. (2019).** *Toward national feminism: Women's activism in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan*. Post-Soviet Affairs, 35(2), 123-145.

⁶ **Nasritdinov, E., & Esenova, S. (2023).** *Digital feminism in Kyrgyzstan: Mobilizing women through online platforms*. Journal of Feminist Studies in Eastern Europe, 15(1), 87-102.

First Wave

First-wave feminism in Central Asia was heavily influenced by the early 20th-century Soviet policy aimed at changing the traditional structure of society to usher in gender equality. Thus, the Soviet regime embarked on women's liberation, including campaigns against veiling and seclusion. In an effort to do so, there came about the Hujum campaign, begun in 1927, with an emphasis on eradicating veiling among Muslim women. This campaign was part of the broader effort to modernize and secularize Central Asian societies, to mobilize women into public life and the labor force.⁷

These initiatives, however, were frequently opposed by locals, who saw them as an intrusion into the ways of life and religious expression of their respective cultures. The campaigns that were waged, like Hujum, were often so aggressive that the people indeed reacted against what they saw as imposition upon their lives.

Second Wave

The second branch of the women's movement, known as women's liberation, arose from a rebellion of these civil rights and New Left women. It developed a style, constituency, and politics different from those of NOW: these women were younger, mostly in their twenties, and less professional; they insisted on woman-only, autonomous groups; and they were radical in the sense of working for structural change and skeptical that conventional politics could achieve it. Women's liberation sought not just to redistribute wealth and power in the existing society, but to challenge the private as well as the public, the psychological as well as the economic, the cultural as well as the legal sources of male dominance. Emerging from male-dominated grassroots social justice movements, women's liberation groups formed in 1967 and 1968, and soon attracted women without previous activist experience.⁸

This movement's most important organizational and theoretical contribution was consciousness raising (CR), a form of structured discussion in which women connected their personal experiences to larger structures of gender. Through CR women developed the understanding that many of their "personal" problems - insecurity about appearance and intelligence, exhaustion, physical and sexual abuse - were not individual failings but a result of discrimination. These discussion groups, usually small, sprung up throughout the country among women of all ages and social positions, and they were simultaneously supportive and transforming. Women formed these groups by the hundreds, then by the thousands. Mentions of the women's movement in the national press increased ten times in the ten months from May 1969 to March 1970.

Third wave

This new third wave of feminism, emanating throughout the 1990s and extending into the 2000s and 2010s, is inextricably linked with the changed social, political, and economic scenery within Central Asia subsequent to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The Third Wave of Feminism Unlike the two previous waves, deeply informed by state-driven policies within Soviet rule, Central Asian Third Wave Feminism focuses on the search for identity-building both on an individual and collective basis in the newly independent states. It also consists of increased use of international feminist discourses, mainly

⁷ Abashin, S. (2020). *Soviet modernization and its impact on Central Asian women*. *Central Asian Studies Review*, 18(4), 45-61.

⁸ Tong, R. (2009). *Feminist thought: A more comprehensive introduction* (3rd ed., pp. 414–415). Westview Press.

that of intersectionality, set in post-Soviet transition with religious conservatism and the formation of national identities.

While the dissolution of the Soviet Union meant a lot to the countries of Central Asia-independence-some of them faced serious new challenges: issues regarding gender equality, economic instability, and growing nationalism. The 3rd wave of feminism became a part of this complicated political and social arena-women struggled with not only legacies of Soviet policies and pressures to navigate traditional gender roles, but also were influenced by Islam and the local culture. Women began to claim their voices back, starting to speak not only of traditional gender roles but also of equal opportunities in education, employment, and political leadership. Central Asian feminism of the period also focused on women's rights within new, independent nation-state frameworks. Besides, feminists started to contradict the traditional image of women as passive victims who were merely benefiting from the Soviet politics coming from above. This rise in nationalism and Islamic conservatism in general, as Kamp discussed above 2017, has come along with big challenges faced by feminist movements within Central Asia.

Today, Central Asian feminism is the continuous struggle for equality, freedom, and the right to self-identification in a rapidly changing world.⁹

Fourth Wave

In this sense, the communication space opened in the last decade by young bloggers and twitters constitutes what Munro has called “Hashtag Feminism”, or feminism of the fourth wave, based on the “culture of call-out”, which has been able to radically question the misogynist and sexist culture that pervades both public communication and the microphysics of everyday relationships in the experience of each one, in which the speech is immediately political and recognizable by all. Without ignoring the doubts raised by many parties, both internationally and locally, on the risks of prêt-à-porter justicialism, the emergence of a new form of Puritan moralism, and the risks of the raising of new forms of feminist punitivism, what emerges is the profound interconnection between the feminist political texture and its form of communication, the codes it uses and the relationships it manages to redevelop. In other words, of course, media is not neutral or neutralizable, but deeply situated in a field of conflict. Hashtag feminism, with its intersectional, intergenerational, and transnational attitude, opened the way to a new questioning of the relationship with the law, the state, and citizenship rights. As the opposition to the ban on abortion mobilized women in Poland in order to prevent the approval of the prohibitionist bill and in South America women struggled to make the parliaments approve constitutional amendments and laws in favor of free reproductive choice for all women, the international strike radically questioned the sexual nature of the capitalistic exploitation of women, and the hashtag movements moved the risk of slipping into a punitive drift to the cultural, economic, social and political field, claiming self-defense and solidarity instead of the state's protection.

In this direction goes the paper of Martins, which analyses several hashtag campaigns launched since 2015 in Brazil against sexual harassment, gender-based violence, and the “naturalized representation of white masculinity” symbolized by the election of Bolsonaro in 2018. Martins, on one side, analyses the non-neutrality of the “call-out” feminist technopolitical mobilizations, which avoided the classical

⁹ Kamp, M. (2017). *The new woman in the Soviet Union and Central Asia: A historical study of gender, politics, and the changing role of women*. Routledge.

(feminist) criminological individualization of victimhood by focusing on vulnerability as a “socially shared condition” and constructing a collective conscience from a victim. Moreover, the campaigns aimed to overcome criminalization and the risk of a punitive drift, by creating connections between women and tools for mutualism, solidarity and trans-feminist alliances. These became the grounds for the massive movement #EleNao against not only the election of Bolsonaro, but the neoliberal and heteropatriarchal violence he represents(ed).¹⁰

Gender Dynamics Complexity

Central Asia is an integral part of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. It presents a complex landscape for gender equality. In addition, feminist theories, including those on intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, state feminism, and global feminism, help to explain the regional gender dynamics. Its rich cultural history, Soviet legacy, and post-independence challenges have created a complex context for feminist movements. Empirical Evidence: In Central Asia, gender inequality cannot be regarded in isolation from other factors like ethnicity, socio-economic status, geography, and religion. Of course, women in the countryside are in a worse situation compared to city women. In addition to their low access to education and low employment, ethnic minorities in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan face broader discrimination because of their ethnic status, represented by the Uzbeks and the Karakalpak's.

Postcolonial feminism provides insight into how the governments of post-Soviet Central Asia have resuscitated patriarchal interpretations of gender roles and positioned women as emblems of cultural authenticity while at the same time circumscribing their involvement in public space and political life. Soviet legacy can still be seen in how gender roles are perceived and enacted today in Central Asia. Soviet policies encouraged women to engage in employment and higher education, but their programs were frequently insensitive to the local culture and religious expression. The majority of Central Asian countries have moved after independence to meld together the Soviet-era policies regarding gender with renewed nationalism and a more conservative approach. For example, in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, there has been an Islamic conservative revival where women are generally relegated to traditional positions, and the turn to nationalism is most energetic in Uzbekistan where women are increasingly seen as playing the main role in preserving cultural identity while Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have much less resistance to women in public life. It looks critically upon the imposition of alien structures and frameworks, such as Soviet gender policies, on indigenes. Ever since independence, Central Asian countries like Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have grappled with how to balance Soviet gender equality with their religious and national values. The reassertion of traditional women's roles, in particular, has been associated with the countryside as a means of maintaining national identity. Postcolonial feminism provides insight into how the governments of post-Soviet Central Asia have resuscitated patriarchal interpretations of gender roles and positioned women as emblems of cultural authenticity while at the same time circumscribing their involvement in public space and political life. Several Central Asian governments have in the recent past carried out various legal reforms, presumably aimed at achieving better gender equality. For example, Kazakhstan has pursued policies for greater women's education and employment. Nevertheless, most such legal

¹⁰ Peroni, C., & Rodak, L. (2020). Introduction: The fourth wave of feminism: From social networking and self-determination to sisterhood. *Oñati Socio-Legal Series*, 10(1S), 1–9.

changes often fail to actually provide real-life benefits to the citizens, particularly women in the rural countryside. Kyrgyzstan passed a law in 2020 against domestic violence, but implementation has been problematic due to a lack of resources and police training, along with societal tolerance for patriarchal norms. In the case of Tajikistan, some policy efforts have been initiated to address gender equality, but these are poorly implemented in rural areas where women face both social and economic marginalization. State feminism refers to the role of the state in advancing gender equality through legislation and policy¹¹.

While there are formal commitments to gender equality, the actual implementation of such policies is weak and, moreover, especially weak in rural areas. There is much domestic violence and sexual harassment that the governments are late to attend to. Despite the problems being more and more recognized, traditional societal attitudes about gender roles drive the policy environment. Global feminist movements have increasingly set an agenda for the gender discourse in Central Asia. Women's rights groups in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have joined global networks to combat gender-based violence and advance women's political participation. Digital activism, especially via social media platforms, has enabled women to speak out against discrimination and violence in these two countries. Nevertheless, global feminism faces opposition in the traditional value settings of a nation and the barriers a government imposes on civil society. In Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, more controlled civic spaces present obstacles to the free and full operation of women's organizations. Global feminism brings domestic violence, workplace inequality, and underrepresentation of women in politics to the forefront. Global feminist movements, generally, hardly affect Central Asia due to rigid state control and conservative attitudes towards women's rights.¹²

The international drive for gender equality has, for example, instituted several positive legal changes both in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, yet such movements often contradict local perceptions of women's roles in society. The gap between international feminist ideals and local realities underlines how global feminist movements have to work closely with local actors in reimagining their approaches.

Conclusion

From a feminist perspective, an analysis of gender dynamics in Central Asia suggests a region of turmoil and struggle consequent upon very deep-rooted cultural, social, and political problems. Using frameworks such as intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, state feminism, and global feminism, this article demonstrates that such challenges may be multilevel in nature and molded by the interaction both between traditional and Soviet legacies and influences of globalization. These frameworks not only light up the structural inequalities that remain across Central Asia but also offer ways to address them. Intersectionality shows how such intersecting factors as ethnicity, socio-economic status, and geography increase gender inequalities, especially for rural and minority women. Such accumulation of disadvantages in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and elsewhere underlines the relevance of nuanced and targeted interventions which may affect such specifically marginalized groups. This thought is further deepened by postcolonial feminism, critiquing Soviet-era imposed policies on gender equality without consideration for local traditions. The return of traditional attitudes during the post-Soviet era,

¹¹ Snyder, R. (2020). *State feminism in Central Asia: Policies, implementation gaps, and the role of civil society*. Central Asian Studies Journal, 34(2), 120-135.

¹² Global Fund for Women. (2022). *Transnational feminism in Central Asia: Advancing women's rights in Uzbekistan*.

especially in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, underlines how culturally driven the construction of gender has been. State feminism has indeed appeared quite promising in introducing progressive legal frameworks, such as anti-domestic violence laws in Kyrgyzstan and gender equality policies in Kazakhstan. However, deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes, resource shortages, and weak mechanisms of enforcement mean that the actual practice is often incomplete. Such a disjuncture of policy and practice underlines the important role of civil society and grassroots activism to bridge this gap and bring about substantial change. In its invaluable support and transnational networks, global feminism often becomes limited in many cases in the region to state control and cultural conservatism, such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, where feminist voices may hardly be able to push through. Digital activism on the rise and engagements of local women's organizations into international movements create expectations of continued progress for the future of gender equality. What will finally help achieve gender equity in Central Asia is an approach sensitive to context, respectful of the local cultural values, yet addressing the systemic inequalities. Policies and initiatives are to be designed keeping in mind the peculiar socio-economic and cultural features of the region. This shall be done through voices and experiences from the women themselves. Such a sustainable development will require collaboration between governments, civil society, and global organizations for its nurturing. It is for this reason that the position places feminist theory at the center, making it the most powerful tool of explanation and agent of change within the character of gender dynamics in Central Asia. By situating the challenges within the broader theoretical framework of the region, not only has one underlined a number of different barriers to attaining gender equality, but inspired strategies for overcoming those very same barriers. It is a complex, multilevel road to equality in Central Asia; this informed, intersectional, culturally attuned effort will shift the region closer toward that future where gender equality would be the goal, but it will become a reality.

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