WOMEN UNITED: NEW ROLE FOR WOMEN’S ORGANIZATIONS IN KAZAKHSTAN

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Significant funds have been invested by Western donors in 1995-1999 to build a civil society in Kazakhstan, the country in post-Soviet Central Asia. Yet, civil society in Western interpretation has not lived up to the expectations investors have had for improved civic involvement in newly established professional nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Kazakhstan.

Researchers found that professional NGOs in Central Asia, and in Kazakhstan in particular, are weak and unsustainable (Aksartova 2005; Howard, 2002). Our earlier research (Nezhina, Ibrayeva, 2008) supports this view of civil society failure in Kazakhstan, with exception of a very modest success of women’s grass-roots organizations with support of western women’s organizations. In this study we seek to explain the modest growth of self-help groups through the lenses of government failure theory by Burton Weisbrod (1988), local culture (Hofstede, 2001), and Soviet legacy. Another goal is to explain the ineffective operations of women’s rights organizations imported from the West, and supported by Western donors.

Our earlier research of relationships between the traditions and culture of indigenous people, the practices of paternalistic Soviet state, and the emerging independent sector in Kazakhstan conducted in summer of 2008 revealed a low level of local acceptance and recognition of the newly created nongovernmental organizations. The majority of the respondents demonstrated no knowledge of the civil society as a concept (95%) or the existence of nongovernmental organizations (54%). However, this research also produced a controversial finding: 25 percent of respondents, mostly women and ethnic minorities, still have chosen NGOs as providers of protection and support when it came to gender and ethnic-related issues.

To understand the shifts in Kazakhstan gender policy and the response of nongovernmental actors we conducted a qualitative study in Almaty, the capital of Kazakhstan. We collected perceptions and opinions of local experts on women’s issues in Kazakhstan, of the leaders of women’s NGOs through semi-structured interviews. This study further focused on perceptions of women, recipients of assistance from local nongovernmental organizations, about the utility and effectiveness of new nongovernmental organizations as service providers.

Our findings from interviews with experts indicated that women went through two waves of liberalization reforms that changed gender issues in Kazakhstan in the early 1930s under Soviet regime, and in the 1990s, the early period of country independence.

In Kazakh traditional families, before Soviet liberal reforms, women were family and livestock care providers. They received no education, and had no political rights. After the first wave of liberalization was implemented in the period from 1924 to 1941 by the Kazakhstan Soviet government, women were provided educational opportunities, granted voting rights, and received government support with child care to facilitate their transition into productive labor force. Our interviews with 9 focus groups of women recipients of NGOs services have found that majority of women (67%) maintained that they felt empowered and started feeling equal to men in many respects under Soviet regime.
Interview respondents also reported that their situation changed with sweeping economic reforms in the early 1990s, when country rapidly shifted from state to market economy. In the haste of reforms under the condition of budget constraints, government has terminated most of social support programs to women and children. As a result, single mothers and mothers of disabled children in Kazakhstan who could not afford day care centers, started setting up self-help groups. Local women's NGO leaders reported that support from western donors proved to be timely and helpful to several grass-roots organizations in the period of 1994-1998. However, our respondents from self-help grassroots revealed a low level of awareness about women's rights organizations such as Women's League of Kazakhstan (a local advocacy group) and could not explain its role or mission.

Kazakhstan gender experts argued that western human rights groups, which advocated for women’s political rights, had limited success recruiting human rights activists among local women in the period from 1991 to 1998. This happened mostly because Soviet laws, which were protective of women’s rights, were still effective. The emerging problem of that time was not the lack of legal protection, but the ineffective enforcement of these laws. With little support from government, women in Kazakhstan started to look for support at newly established nongovernmental organizations. Twenty five percent of survey respondents in 2008 indicated that they would choose to apply for assistance with women’s issues to nongovernmental women's organizations.

Our findings suggest that government failure theory (Weisbrod, 1988) explains women activism in Kazakhstan. When government stopped providing social support to its citizens, women started to actively participate in grass-route self-help organizations. And finally, local traditions of tribal support and collective mentality from Soviet past have facilitated formation of grass-routes women's organizations in Kazakhstan and their cooperation with western supporting nongovernmental organizations. However, the women’s rights groups, which advocated for non-discriminative gender laws, found no support for their initiatives because Kazakhstan women did not perceive such activities as contributing to their welfare.


