

# Intellectual Discourse

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2019



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**Religion, Culture and Governance**



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# *Intellectual Discourse*

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Volume 27

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2019

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**Intellectual Discourse**  
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*Theme*  
***Religion, Culture and Governance***

*Guest Editor*  
***M. Moniruzzaman***

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## **Religion, Society and Gendered-Politics in Central Asia: A comparative analysis**

**M. Moniruzzaman\***  
**Kazi Fahmida Farzana\*\***

**Abstract:** Women political participation is understood to be a part of civic rights but their participation is hindered by various factors. Numerous researchers have claimed that Islam as a religion, Muslim social culture and tradition inhibit women from political participation in Muslim societies. However, there are a number of Muslim majority countries where women occupy the highest public offices and head ministries. How can this contradiction be explained. This article examines women political participation in Central Asian Muslim republics by looking at socioeconomic, parliamentary representation and informal participation factors. The study argues that socioeconomic factors in the republics still do not allow much liberal public space for women to take part in politics; however, in terms of parliamentary representation the republics maintains a record that sometimes are better off than many mature democracies. In terms of informal participation the region records better visibility of women in politics.

**Keywords:** Politics, Gender, Women Political Participation, Central Asia

**Abstrak:** Umum mengetahui penglibatan wanita dalam politik adalah sebahagian daripada hak sivil namun ianya sering diketepikan atas alasan beberapa faktor. Banyak dapatan kajian menunjukkan Islam sebagai agama, tradisi dan budaya sosial Muslim yang melarang penglibatan wanita dalam politik di kalangan masyarakat muslim. Namun pada hakikatnya, ada diantara

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negara majoriti Muslim yang mengalakkan penglibatan wanita dan golongan ini memegang jawatan tertinggi sebagai pegawai dan ketua menteri di sektor awam. Bagaimanakah perbezaan ini dapat dijelaskan? Artikel ini mengkaji penglibatan wanita dalam politik di negara republik Muslim di Asia Tengah dengan melihat kepada faktor-faktor sosio-ekonomi, perwakilan parlimen dan faktor penyertaan tidak formal. Kajian ini mendapati sosio-ekonomi di negara republik muslim merupakan antara faktor yang menyekat ruang liberal awam untuk wanita lebih terlibat didalam politik. Walaupun begitu, penglibatan wanita melalui perwakilan parlimen adalah lebih baik berbanding dengan negara demokrasi yang lain. Selain itu, negara di rantau Asia Tengah ini mempunyai rekod yang lebih menyerlah dalam konteks penyertaan tidak formal wanita didalam politik.

**Kata Kunci:** Politik, Jantina, Penyertaan Politik Wanita, Asia Tengah

## **Introduction**

Women's participation in politics- is it defined by citizenship, by religion or by culture? Any reference to modern civic state and constitution would offer an affirmative answer to the question in favour of the first criterion- citizenship. Indeed the modern state system does not differentiate the people based on gender, religion or culture. The only criterion applied in offering rights to the people is universal citizenship. This is a development that has dismantled the traditional boundary, perception and belief about space, role, rights and duties of gender in the society. All the modern and civic nation-states today are based on standard constitution that gives equality between men and women citizens in every sphere of life. Invariably women's right to political participation is universal in any modern constitution.

However, in practice women's political participation is constrained by religious beliefs, traditional values and social taboos in many countries including advanced democracies (Anderson, 2007). In mature democracies where religion takes a backstage and social and traditional values of affectivity, diffuseness, particularism, ascription and collectivity orientation (Parsons, 1951) are overcome by modern values of affective neutrality, specificity, universalism, achievement, and self-orientation (Parsons, 1951), women's public presence in politics is largely overshadowed by male dominance. Even though women occupy certain high public offices in those countries their proportionate

presence in political sphere is arguably negligible. A particular indicator used to measure women political empowerment is their number in the legislative assembly. Data for this indicator show that even in mature democracies in modern civic states women political participation is far below the expected level (Barber, 2003 [1984]). This is not necessarily due to systemic exclusion of women from politics, but it could be due to women apathy to politics as well. However, apathy could be influenced by social values, customs and beliefs.

In the Muslim world, defined here as countries with majority Muslim population, the scenario is not exceptional as well. There are 47 Muslim majority countries and many of them are modern civic states with modern constitution that offers equal rights to all citizens. Only a handful of monarchies lack behind in constitutional development and in creating a standard framework for women to take part in public life. However, despite many of the Muslim countries being modern nation-states they are non-democracies by international standard as well. Rather they are called semi-democracies where many of the democratic rules, values and practices are constrained or manipulated. Under such circumstances women political participation is expected to be further limited by the religious and social values. Indeed, women's right to politics is considered to be the lowest in the Muslim world (Afkhami & Erika, 1997; Baden, 1992; Kandiyoti, 1991). Not only that, even the fact of non-democracies in the Muslim world is often ascribed to the factor of religious subjugation of women (Fish, 2002). However, at the same time there are certain Muslim countries where women have maintained dominance in politics in terms of heading the government and party for decades. How can this contrast be explained? Is it an exception? Or is there enough public space available for women to take part in politics? Or is religious factor over-simplified in the Muslim world?

This article explores the relationship between society, gender and politics in Central Asian Muslim republics which are Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

### **Literature Review**

It is generally perceived that women's public place and role in the Muslim world is severely undermined and undersubscribed by religious, cultural and patriarchal values (Fish, 2002). As such women in the Muslim majority countries are secluded from and marginalised in

politics. Numerous studies suggest that Islam prescribes rather a docile domestic role for Muslim women leaving the public political space for men only (Pipes, 1983; An-Na'im, 1990; Donno et al. 2004; Ehteshami, 2004; Hoffman, 2004; Karatnycky, 2002; Kedourie, 1992; Lewis, 1996; Midlarsky, 1998) . Indeed the visibility of women in public and especially in political sphere in the Muslim world is arguably smaller compared with non-Muslim countries (Tessler, 2002, 2003; Lu, 2013). This provides an immediate linkage between Islam and its attitude towards women's political participation (Rowley et al., 2009). However, on the ground there are contrary realities that legitimately question the popular perception as well as academic findings.

Looking at five indicators namely: percentage of female nominees on party's electoral lists for parliament; share of women in decision making bodies; interaction of female leadership and female membership; internal party quotas for women, and electoral quotas for women, a recent study by Lu (2013) on 20 Arab and non-Arab Muslim majority countries shows that 83.03 per cent of political parties do not have an internal quota for women, and 63.20 per cent of political parties employ quotas for women to increase their share on electoral lists. This is far below than 95.05per cent in non-Muslim countries. These and other data made Lu to conclude that the population of Muslim majority has lower electoral participation for women compared to that of non-Muslim majority countries.

While this proves a general picture of women's status in politics in the Muslim world, there are improving as well as favourite trends too. A number of Muslim majority countries have seen their highest political offices occupied by females, and in many cases women occupy high party positions and public offices. A number of evidences are in order. A number of countries saw female elected prime ministers such as Tansu Çiller in Turkey (1993-1996), Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan (1988-1990, 1993-1996), Mame Madior Boye in Senegal (appointed, 2001-2002), Khaleda Zia (1991-1996 and 2001-2006) and Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh (2009- at present). The Speaker of the parliament and a number of ministries too are headed by females in Bangladesh. A number of other countries saw their presidential office occupied by women such as Megawati Sukarnoputri in Indonesia (2001-2004), Roza Otunbayeva in Kyrgyzstan (2010- 2011) and Atifete Jahjaga in Kosovo

(2011-present). In many these cases they were political party leaders too such as Khaleda Zia, Sheikh Hasina and Megawati.

Similarly, women's share in parliament seats has also seen upward trend in the Muslim countries. Senegal, with 42.7 per cent parliamentary seats occupied by women, ranks seventh globally; Tunisia ranks 41 with 31.03 per cent, Sudan ranks 46 with 30.05 per cent ahead of UK raking 47. Similarly Afghanistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan score better in women representation in parliament than many other established democracies. Therefore, it is difficult to rate the status of women in politics by looking at certain indicators only. However, it is undeniable that women's scope for political participation in Muslim countries is constrained by unequal access and opportunities.

Central Asia is the geographic landmass encircled by Russia on the north and northwest, China on the east, Afghanistan on the south and the Caspian Sea on the West. There are five states in the region all having Muslim majority population. The republics became independent immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The five states remained under the Soviet system since early 1920s.

Islam advanced into the region during 9<sup>th</sup> century CE. During the subsequent 1000 years the region turned into a majority Muslim area. For many centuries the region remained the seat of many Muslim dynasties including the Mongols who later turned Muslims. During ninth to twelfth centuries the region was the intellectual fertile land for Muslim scholarship that borne the majority of the most celebrated Muslim thinkers, philosophers, religious scholars, jurists, scientist, poets and literary giants. Since Islam advanced into the region through Iran (then Persia) the socio-cultural system that developed in Central Asia had overwhelming Persian influence. Later, the region remained under close relationship and influence of the Ottoman Empire. Before the takeover of the region by the Soviets, the region had no national geographic identity; rather the people were known by the cities and localities. The ethnic mixture in the region is so much cross-cutting that developing clear-cut boundaries for the people was impractical. However, the regions had certain administrative boundaries since the time of the Muslim Sultanate (Bregel, 2003).

By the time the Russian Revolution occurred in 1917 the central Asian Muslim regions fall into backwardness and remained much traditional

and agrarian still. Even though there were certain Islamic reform and revival movements which tried to keep the Islamic mainstream alive and strong the gradual rise of secular and modern educated elites tried to steer the people and the regions towards modernity influenced by the West. It was during this context when the Soviet Red Force expanded eastward and took control of the region. The secular elites were incorporated into the socialist system and socialism was established in the region.

Following the 1917 Russian Revolution, uprising, turmoil and resurgence from different political ideals and ideologies forced Central Asian leaders to put on the cloak of communism to gain power. Seventy years later nationalism grew intense as civil wars of ethnic groups occurred. In December 1991, the collapse of the USSR resulted in the formation of five new independent states in Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Women and politics in the five republics is a complicated issue. Legislation and political life of the five Central Asian countries are highly influenced by the Russian or Soviet legacy as the countries remained under the Soviet system for long. Despite the 70 years of Soviets' modernization and secularization, traditional Islamic practices were practiced secretly; later it became a dominant way of life after the Islamic Revivalism in 1990s (Rashid, 1994; Khalid, 2007). Secularization and rediscovery of Islamic identity often found clashing each other during the post-Soviet era making political contestation for women highly difficult and contending.

### **Data and Method**

There are various indicators used by researchers to assess the rate of political participation. Among the most direct indicators are voting turnouts (Verba et al, 1995); participation in campaigning, contacting, and protesting (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Verba et al, 1971). However, there are other indirect factors that indicate political participation. These indicators are classified as micro, macro, and meso-level interactions. Micro level factors include wealth, status, and education (Almond & Verba, 1965; Bennett & Bennett, 1986; Lipset, 1960, 1994; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Verba et al, 1971, 1978); macro-level include design of power sharing and state institutions, (Duverger, 1954; Jackman & Miller, 1995; Joseph, 1997; Linz, 1994; Linz & Stepan, 1996;

Mainwaring & Scully, 1995; Moore, 1966); and finally, meso-level indicators include community groups and social networks which are also known as social capital (Laitin, 1995; Newton, 1997; Putnam et al, 1993; Putnam, 1995, 1996; Seligson, 1999).

While all these indicators are important, these are not necessarily mutually exclusive; rather they considerably overlap. As such it is better to combine some from each of these classifications. This study takes certain micro, macro and meso-level indicators into consideration to look at the greater socio-economic environment that enables or hinders participation; and secondly, it takes the parliamentary representation as a concrete measure to identify the rate of participation. Therefore, social identity and role, party politics and parliamentary representation, and NGOs/feminist movement become the three important indicators for this study. The relevant data for this study comes from government statistics and such primary and other secondary sources. The data for parliamentary representation is compiled from Inter-Parliamentary Union's online databank.

### **Women in Central Asia: Social Identity and Roles**

A cursory look at the basic statistics shows that women in all states in this region outnumber men. On an average there are 104 women for every 100 men. Thus, women and men in every region almost equally share 50% of the population, with the exception of Kazakhstan (which has the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest population in the region after Uzbekistan) where 52.41% of the population are women.

#### *Family Institution and Marriage*

The family institution in Central Asia of nearly 70 years reflected USSR's "the Soviet man" and the "New Communist Women", to claim loyalty to communism that aimed to be pertinent even at the most fundamental levels of society. However, ancient tribal loyalties were stronger than the artificial loyalty to Communism that was claimed, where even individuals who lived in cities had knowledge of and affiliated with their tribe and family lineage.

Women gender role in family and society in central Asia is conspicuous but at the same time subjugated one (Acar & Gunes-Ayata, 2000). Women in this region have now more control over the selection of spouses than they did in pre-Soviet times, although certain so-called

traditions such as bride kidnapping is practiced. Arranged marriage is a tradition that is being revived and recreated in the post-Soviet period where this type of arrange marriage is initiated by the young couple and then more formally arranged by parents (Werner, 2004). In an ordinary family institution, if the eldest child is a son, he is expected to care for his younger siblings with considerable decision making power.

According to the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Law on Marriage and the Family (17 December 1998) establishes the following principles as the foundations for marriage: voluntary agreement of the man and the woman on marriage; equality of spouses' rights within the family; inadmissibility of outside interference into family affairs; settlement of domestic disputes by mutual agreement; families as the preferred setting for raising children, taking care of their development and welfare; defence of the rights and interests of underage and disabled family members as a priority; guarantees of the rights of family member and possibilities of judicial defence of these rights.

Women in Kyrgyzstan and in most Muslim societies are expected to be homemakers, but in order to ease domestic burden of their families, Kyrgyz women have been known to perform chores that are usually performed by the men, where women even led Kyrgyz tribes in warfare. In an ordinary family, women enjoy equal status and responsibility with their husband, such as performing manual labour. In most cases, women in Kyrgyzstan are subjected to unregistered marriages and bride kidnappings, while polygamy becomes an increasing number. Statistics show that as many as 70% of the men in the south have multiple wives; usually the husband acquiring a woman over the age of 25 as their second wife (Gydell, 2010).

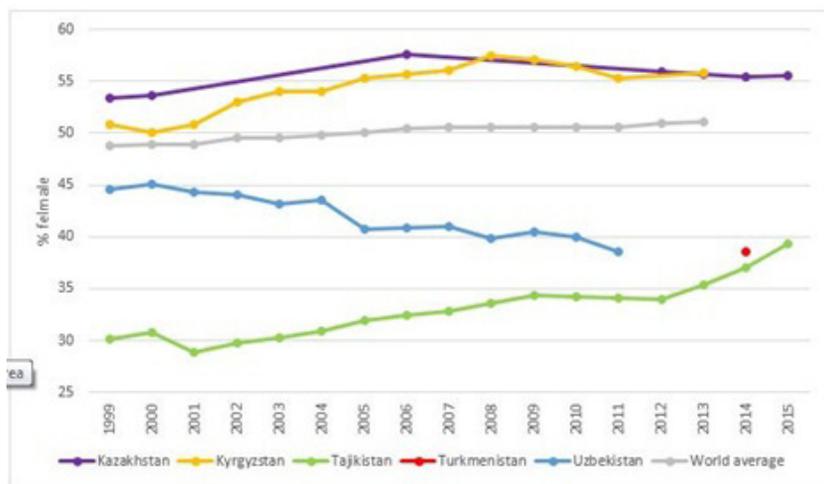
Most of the Uzbek population consists of those who are in the rural areas, where secularization remain superficial. This is generally the widespread case in Central Asia. The family institution in Uzbekistan, like its neighbouring countries, is central to the society and for survival. Family roles in Uzbekistan strictly adhere to Islamic *Shariah* and *adat* from generation to generation. Each role has been clearly defined and disobeying them would be seen as disobeying the religion.

The 1992 Constitution of the Republic of Turkmenistan states that men and women have equal rights, whose law advocates women with the right of inheritance—though rare in traditional societies— and gives

women the same marriage rights as men (Habeeb, 2005). In Tajikistan, women are treated with different degrees of equality, depending on where they live and their family background, and just as in the other Central Asian states, money and valuables are offered for an exchange of the bride’s hand in marriage (O’Dea, 2006).

Probably the social identity and role are also associated with the level of education of women in the region. In general, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan maintain better record of women education (much higher than global average even), but the other three countries record much lower profile (Graph 1). In Uzbekistan the level of women education is on decline since 1999; however, Tajikistan has been recording steady growth since 2001. Turkmenistan has apparently maintained steady level below 40 per cent. The low level of education of women certainly creates obstacles to move to higher social status and role in the region.

*Graph 1: Level of Female Education in Central Asian States*



Source: UNESCO indicator: Percentage of students in tertiary education who are female

A look at family institution, marriage and education tells much about the role and status of women in the central Asian society. Even though legally they are given much of the universal rights and roles, in practice they much bound with traditional mind-set and role prescription. Such status and role of women are expected to reflect in their political participation.

## Politics and Gender Role

Politics is overwhelmingly dominated by male gender in the central Asian republics (Rose, 2002). The Soviet era politics attempted to dismantle the gender barrier in politics but remained largely unsuccessful. However, women were successfully integrated in economic life. Furthermore, political competition during the Soviet era was insignificant in the absence of party politics. Therefore, women did not develop such civic sense of political activities and competition. It is probably due to this that during the post-Soviet era women's formal participation did not become widespread. However, gradually their involvement became more apparent, institutional and formal over time. Three formal and informal indicators - representation in the parliament, involvement in NGOs, and feminist movement, which can suggest women's political participation, are discussed here.

### *Party Politics and Parliament*

According to Falkingham (2000), the decline of the economic sphere after Central Asian states gained their independence also contracted women's participation in politics. In 1989, 30% of parliament members were women, but by 1998, the numbers fell to a low 5%. The average percentage of parliamentary seats in single or lower chamber occupied by women increased in the last year to 19%, which has been at its peak since 2008. This trend remained strong and upward in 2017 as well (Table 1).

“In the current post-Soviet period, nation-state building in each of the former republics have led to the elimination of certain previously held rights as women have lost representation in local and national governments,” Ishkanian (2005, 30) states. She further adds that “although women had been crucial in the independence movements, immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, women in all of the former Soviet states found themselves excluded from the new governments ... Removal of the quota system of representation used in the Soviet Union, however, can explain only part of the decline in female representation. Other factors including the strain of the double burden, gender role socialization, the commonly shared belief that politics is “men's work” and is inherently corrupt and dirty have contributed to the small number of women in public office and to the low levels of

women’s participation in political parties...” (45). This is probably universal throughout the region.

Even though the general visibility of women in the political sphere is low, each republic has adopted universally recognized standard electoral and political rights. For instance, according to the Article 1–2, Freedom of Election, the elections in the Republic of Kazakhstan is based on the principle of a free implementation by the citizen of the Republic of Kazakhstan of his or her right to vote and to be elected. Therefore, it means that every citizen has the right to take part in the administration of public affairs and secures the right of all citizens to vote upon reaching the age of 18, regardless of social status, sex, race, religion, or any other conditions.

During the 2003 *maslikhat* elections in Kazakhstan, there was observed a growth in women’s public and social activity. An impressive 1,484 women were nominated for the deputy positions; about 20% of the total number of candidates registered. A total of 568 women won in the intensive competition making up 17.1% of the total number of deputies elected. All in all, the women in Kazakhstan is no longer restricted to the traditional mentality that women’s place is at home and in the recent years, are more equal to men in terms of job prospects.

*Table 1: Position of Central Asian Women’s in Parliament*

Global Rank	Country	Lower or single House Seats	Women Members	Women %	Upper House Seats	Women members	Women %
58	Kazakhstan	107	29	27.1%	47	3	6.4%
63	Turkmenistan	124	32	25.8%	---	---	---
101	Kyrgyzstan	120	23	19.2%	---	---	---
105	Tajikistan	63	12	19.0%	32	7	21.9%
123	Uzbekistan	150	24	16.0%	100	17	17.0%

Source: Women in national parliaments (as of 1st January 2017) available at <http://www.ipu.org/WMN-e/classif.htm>

The number of women parliamentary candidates in Kazakhstan has increased from 2004 to 2007. In the previous Mazhilis election held

in 2004, 24 women were nominated through 8 parties, and 87 women were nominated in a single member constituency. The 2007 elections witnessed 56 women nominated through 7 parties. The percentage of distribution of women seat in 2004 election was around 10.39% and the 2007 election went up to 15.89%. Thus, in the 2007 election two women (4.3%) were in the 47-seat senate and 19 women (7.8%) were in the 107-member Mazhilis. From 2000 to 2007, women occupied eight seats (10.4%) out of 77 seat of parliament (Maartee, et al., 2010). Naturally, state or public service employees increased from 54% in 2000, to 57.4% as of January 1, 2005. According to 2017 data, Kazakhstan's Lower House is represented by 27.1% and the Upper House is represented by 6.4% of women (Table 1).

One of Kazakhstan's amendments made by the government to its national legislation since the beginning of 2010 is a Law of State Guarantee of Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for men and women whose aim is to prevent all forms of gender discriminations, create condition to gender equality in all spheres of public life. The legislation also regulates the implementation of guaranteeing equal rights and opportunities for women and men.

Throughout the modern times in urban areas, women especially with a Western (European) background have been among Kyrgyzstan's leaders in publishing, banking, and in a variety of government departments and institutions including education, welfare, law enforcement and foreign diplomacy. Thus, there has been a new era of women appearing in Kyrgyzstan to take part in the politics of the country before and after the Revolution of 2005. Most of their activities include organizing protests, rallies, marches and other such collaborations. There have been numerous political groups who have helped the women gain a political standing and have taught them the machinations and structure of politics in Kyrgyzstan. These groups of women have had a tremendous influence on Kyrgyz society and have come to be known as a force to be reckoned with in the political arena.

In Kyrgyzstan, women head a significant part of non-governmental organizations and a number of political parties. But despite obvious activity of representatives of women organizations, women are presented very poorly in higher authorities or posts in the Government. At present time, some representatives of women, who have been involved in state

management, are Chairperson of the Constitutional Court Cholpon Baekova, Minister of Labour and Social Development Ukhtomkan Abdullaeva, Chairperson of Migratory Service KR Aygul Ryskulova, Chairperson of Social Fund Olga Lavrova, Chairperson of City Council of Bishkek Nurjamal Baybolova, the Head of Financial Investigation under Government N.Tazhimamatova.

During 1990s Kyrgyzstan had almost no female representative in the parliament. Although three women were selected, their right to remain in the parliamentary seats was challenged by their main opponents and those challengers were then recognized as winners. The President has tried to include in structure of the Government some of women after the presidential elections in 2005, but none of the three-presented nominees have been supported by the present Parliament- Rose Otunbaeva for the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ishengul Boljurova for the Minister of Education, and Alevtina Pronenko for the Minister of Labour and Social Protection. But in the next one decade the situation improved tremendously. The republic has now 23 female parliament members out 120 representing 19.2 per cent.

In December 2009, Uzbekistan held its elections under the new electoral law. President Islam Kamirov stated that unlike previous elections, candidates who are to run for elections need to be endorsed by a political party, although independent candidates or candidates from citizen initiative groups would also be allowed to run. According to him, this amendment would enhance the role of political parties in the government; however, women in the state are more inclined to be involved in NGOs rather than political parties.

According to the Uzbekistan government statistic, 16% of Lower House and 17% of Upper House members are women and each hold a 5-year term. A 30% quota of seat in the parliament was enacted in the Uzbekistan Constitution. In March 1995, a presidential decree known as Enhancing Women's Role in the State and Social Development of Uzbekistan was established. This decree set in place a formal political structure designed to encourage women's participation in public life. This political structure established the position of Deputy Prime Minister for Women's Affairs, responsible for monitoring and enhancing women's participation in society (at times held by Ms. Dilbar Gulyamova who is also Chairperson of the Women's Committee). Similar positions

at the deputy *hokim* (deputy governor or deputy mayor) level were concurrently established for women at three administrative levels of government, that is, at the provincial (*oblast*), regional (*rayon*) and city levels. It was hoped that not only would this enable better targeting of issues affecting women's status but that this might also offset the decline in the number of women at political decision-making levels (Mee, 2001).

However, in formal political structure in Uzbekistan, women's participation is less promising. Despite the presidential decree that introduced the position of Deputy Prime Ministers for Women's Affairs associated with deputy judges, its representation in government has fluctuated. In 2000, women politician held only 7% seats in the Oliy Majilis (Uzbekistan Parliament). This was due to the abolition of a quota system for women in the 1980's after the fall of Soviet Union. Similar happening were noticed in the local government. The abolition of a quota system for women in the 1980s produced a sharp decline, where the proportion of women in the highest administrative and management positions such as deputy ministers and deputy directors of enterprises fell to 17.5. This dramatic drop is said to be one reason for the establishment of the position of Deputy Prime Minister for Women's Affairs in 1995. In response to this drop, the reintroduction of a parliamentary quota has been set as an objective of the National Action Plan. By 2016, women representation in the parliaments seen remarkable increase standing at 16 per cent at the Lower House and 17 per cent at the Upper House.

Women's politics in Turkmenistan is similar to the other five Central Asian countries. It reflects the family and tribal structure of Turkmen history and society. The current administrators in the Turkmen government previously held posts in the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic. There is a clear definition of the "separation of powers" in the Constitution, but such justice towards organizations and individuals have been ignored. Thus, women participation in Turkmenistan has been one of the lowest of the region, with 17% representation in the parliament (Habeeb, 2005). However, during the following decade the situation improved rapidly. In 2017 women representation in the parliament consists of 25.8% which is second highest in the region, Kazakhstan being the first.

Being relatively a more conservative society in the region, the social attitude to women is an obstacle to wider participation of women

in politics. Apparently, women are given deputy position even so the highest positions in the cabinet as women are seen as second class to men. Furthermore, women are located in Ombudsman and humanitarian position as they are more able to work directly with the executive and draft out and pressure in order to fight for legal and humanitarian rights for the status of women.

Although it can be concluded that the women participation is still at low rates, however, with the new political reform in the legislation structure on gender discrimination, it can be said that the women involvement in politics will be wide spread in the future. The latest political representation in the legislative assemblies in these republics show that women political participation is increasingly on the rise and these republics are far better off in women political representation than many other democracies.

*Informal political participation: NGOs and Feminist movement*

An alternative avenue for political participation is involvement with informal politics such as interest groups, protest movement, rights activism and NGOs. In mature and developed democracies overall participation in formal politics has declined over the past few decades and informal political participation has taken a strong root. In new democracies citizens go for informal participation when formal participation is constrained by legal or socio-cultural limitations. The central Asian Muslim republics are known as authoritarian regimes where politics is tightly controlled for even males. In such an environment informal political participation especially by women has taken a strong root. Seen as low profile political risks the regimes are mostly tolerant to many NGOs run by women.

*NGOs*

The growth of women's NGOs is the one of the most positive achievements in terms of women's political participation (Abdusalyamova, 2002). In comparison to 1990 until present there is an increasing number of newly established women NGOs. Due to their multitudes an exact estimate is of NGOs is difficult to come by. However, one estimate suggest that during the first decade of independence Kyrgyzstan had the highest number (1,001), while Kazakhstan had 699 and Tajikistan 595, Uzbekistan had 465 and Turkmenistan had 138 NGOs. Women's

organizations are numerous and they recruit regular members, exchange information and build strategies for mutual cooperation. The Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe (IDEE) launched a program in Central Asia entitled “Civic Bridges: Networking Women in Central Asia” for women leaders in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Thus, there has been an increase in women’s participation in NGOs, which help women reaffirm the ascribed gender roles and gender-based divisions of labour and avoid the criticisms that they would face if they enter political parties or government. Whilst there exists NGOs all over the world, the similarity of NGOs in Central Asia and other post-socialist countries is that women overwhelmingly run them, which what some scholars have called the “feminization of the NGO sector in the post-Soviet countries” (Ishkanian, 2005). There could be few reasons for this “feminization” of the NGO sector. Firstly, women are traditionally excluded from the spheres of government and business; secondly, women’s networking and linguistic skills are particularly important in establishing ties with foreign donors; thirdly, women’s traditional interest in and responsibility for social problems, including disabilities, health, and children’s issues are high; fourthly, women’s secondary status, a situation that leaves avenues of participation that lack monetary award or “prospects” open to women due to men’s lack of interest and their preference for the worlds of business and formal politics; and finally and most importantly; and finally, a preference among donors in supporting women’s initiatives and empowerment.

### *Feminist movement*

For women to be politically active feminist movement is another avenue. Feminism is both a political ideology and a political movement. This ideology and the movement are not stranger to the women of central Asia. However, the post-Soviet central Asian republics have turned more towards Islamic ideology and culture. Feminism and feminist movement in central Asia has seen a growing opportunity to flourish during the post-Soviet era (Khanam, 2002). Even though these are officially secular the revival of Islamic values in the society pushed feminist attitude towards women’s issues at the periphery. But it differs across the countries.

There is very little or no discussion of it in most of the countries. Because the Westerners coined the word “Feminism”, and the current

orientation in the region is anti-Western, no NGOs directly or officially associate themselves with the feminist movement or call themselves “feminists”. Rather, NGOs are more comfortable in upholding human rights under the more neutral advocacy of women’s organization. “People have a very definite idea of what a woman should be like. She must be domestic, attractive, subordinate ... Given such prevailing views; feminism cannot be strong for many years” (Tokhtakhodzhaeva, 2008). In the media and public space, feminism is referred to as something radical. Talking about feminism and women movements, which are associated to feminism, there is a negative connotation attached to it, and are sometimes suppressed by the government (Shakirova, 2008).

Central Asia over the past two and a half decades has gone through a democratic development which political analysts refer to as a transition democracy, one that develops from the ashes of dictatorship. In a transition democracy the scope for women’s political participation widens, but when it comes to central Asian women, although their political representation is on the rise the statistical indicators can only reflect numbers, if compared to the rest of the world.

## **Conclusion**

Women’s participation in politics is now considered to be a part of inherent civil rights. New and transition democracies tend to widen the scope for women to be politically more active. Besides, governments being committed to various international conventions are obliged to ensure women’s political participation and institutional inclusion and representation. As such governments adopt various socio-economic and political strategies that enhance the process of women’s political participation. However, country-specific or regional context or socio-cultural environment sometimes do not allow women political empowerment easy and smooth. The case in point in central Asia is constrained by such social and cultural realities. However, the countries as newly independent might be progressing well in a short period of time compared with other Muslim countries in different regions.

Women and politics in this region are an interesting and dynamic mix that continues to shape the lives and events of not only women but the rest of the peoples in Central Asia. It is not only politics that treats women differently, but women in general reflect and react to opposing and supporting political actors in unique manners. Political participation

of women in central Asia is a contentious issue as it involves the question of power, gender role, and contestation over public space. Yet due to modernization and development creating space for women's political participation has become obvious over time. In central Asia both governments and the society in general are slow to allow such a public space for women in the political arena, but increasingly the trend shows a positive development. If the parliamentary representation of women is a strong indicator, then obviously the present data are indicative of improvement of women's political participation across the five central Asian republics.

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