Times of Courage: Women’s NGO Movement in Uzbekistan

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This dissertation titled
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ABSTRACT

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The emergence of women’s NGO (Non Governmental Organization) movements within the framework of Uzbekistan’s civil society sector - following independence in 1991 - has stimulated the interest of both domestic and international powers. It has become imperative to understand the conditions under which women’s public leadership flourished following decades of rigid patronage by the one-party system of the Soviet Union. Indeed, despite the marked absence of successfully organized movements in the past, women’s NGOs have nonetheless reached a stage where they have the potential to mobilize unprecedented levels of resources domestically and internationally to advance culturally transformative gender-consciousness and promote social change through gender-based solidarity. Concurrently, the Uzbek State, mindful of the various “Color Revolutions” that have swept through the former Soviet States, and desirous to curb the impact of “Western imperialism” at home, has proceeded to extend a strong legal grip over all voluntary associations and groups, thereby undermining the conception of conventional civil society groups. How has the State’s attempt to bring the civil society sector under its wings shaped present day women’s activism?

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Women in modern day Uzbekistan have served and continue to serve as the reformers and bearers of the nation’s development plans. They constitute an integral component of national reform having served as the backbone of the cultural and political changes that have transformed Uzbek society from feudalism to communism to the present state (Kamp, 2006; Corcoran-Nantes, 2005). With the demise of communism in Central Asia, women’s contributions, sacrifices, and struggles have come to be a much sought after sphere of research in different disciplines of academia.

As nation-building ensued across the Former Soviet Countries (FSC), women were increasingly squeezed out from the political decision making processes and cast into the domestic realm. On the other hand, Western oriented Non Governmental Organization (NGOs) emerged concurrently in these countries, providing free spaces for the realization of women’s political leadership and activism. A shrinking job market and unsustainably low minimal wages in the civil service prompted a small but influential pool of educated women to turn to training opportunities and programs sponsored by international donor agencies. By the late 1990s, women became the dominant force as well as the face of the NGO movement in Uzbekistan and other Central Asian Countries (CAC). Their organizations bridged connections between the State and communities as well as with nations and other NGOs in the outside world (Mendelson and Glenn, eds. 2002).
The women’s NGO movement in Uzbekistan, though short-lived, was very important in that it brought together dozens of women leaders beyond the realm of state control for the first time in history. Although strong solidarity among women leaders on critical issues could not flourish under the NGO banner, Uzbek women leaders adapted their goals to the changing political environment in order to retain their public presence and voice.

Traditionally, the State authority and men took decisions on the needs and wants of women in the predominantly Muslim Uzbek society. Emergence of women’s NGO activism in Uzbek civil society during the post independence period became a critical area of interest for both local and global powers. It became imperative to understand the conditions under which women’s public leadership flourished following decades of rigid patronage by the one-party system of the Soviet Union. Understanding the nature and vision of this movement is indispensable to exploring the new trends of social change taking place in society. Concurrently, the Uzbek State, mindful of the various Color Revolutions that had swept through the former Soviet States, and desirous to curb the impact of “Western imperialism” at home, proceeded to extend a strong legal grip over all voluntary associations and groups, thereby undermining the conception of conventional civil society groups. How has the State’s attempt to bring the civil society sector under its wings during post Soviet period shaped the present day women’s NGO activism? How do women leaders use their experiences to continue their work? This study intends to explore the effects of recent political changes on the work of women’s NGOs and their contribution to development and social change.
Study Background

NGOs support aspects of the ideals of Western democracy in that, in an ideal democracy, all citizens would play an active role in its continuation and development. Hence, a necessary aspect of a democratic civil society is measured by women’s active public and political participation. The contribution of Uzbek women and women’s organizational activism has remained political and significant since the Indigenization of Uzbekistan in the 1920s. This women’s activism has been shaped by a variety of factors including the political environment, external influences and the traditional values that have prevailed over time. Prior to Uzbek independence in 1991, the conception of NGOs, seed grants and international research projects did not exist in Uzbek civil society or in the Soviet Union for that matter. The model of Western civil society and the role of NGOs were introduced and fostered by international development assistance programs. New democratic ideals of international programs operating in the country empowered and nurtured women’s voluntary public activism.

According to Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)\(^1\) 2002 country report for Uzbekistan, from over 2,000 national and local NGOs, approximately 70% were headed by women, implementing development, research, and advocacy projects on various social, economic, cultural and political issues (Mee, 2001). The quantity and quality of NGO work has drastically diminished since then, but the predominant presence of women in the NGO sector is still significant. According to international experts, many if not all of these women leaders come from elite families with strong educational backgrounds and influential social
connections. Some of them held prestigious positions under the Soviet Party administration and most of them received their training on NGO management and projects from Western organizations (Luong, ed., 2004; Mendelson and Glenn, eds., 2002).

The majority of NGOs started off and sustained their activities through financial and technical support from foreign donor agencies that became increasingly popular in Central Asia through the mid 1990s, given strengthening diplomatic ties between the U.S. and Uzbekistan. NGOs primarily focused on “service delivery” programs that dealt with the most pressing employment, domestic violence, health, education and environmental issues at the grassroots level. There were also NGOs that collaborated with other International NGOs (INGOs) and Government Owned NGOs (GONGOs) on political, democratic and cross border human rights issues (Luong, 1999).

However, the end of the Cold War did not end the ‘culture of suspicion’ (Sampson and Kideckel, 1982, p. 162). While the initial growth and activities of the NGO sector were favorably applauded by the government, accepting the definition of Western civil society became problematic. The role and the impact of some independent NGOs in FCSs have been manipulated through the interplay of internal politics and their catering to the regional interests of the West. This has resulted in a growing distrust that has forced many international NGOs that funded or supported local NGOs to halt their programs or leave the countries they were operating in. Many NGOs in Uzbekistan faced the same fate.
The recent Color Revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan where Western initiated civil society groups allegedly supported the political opposition in overthrowing incumbent authorities, caused Uzbekistan to follow the cue of the Russian government and clamp down on international donor agencies (Brinkley, 2005). In summary, political factors such as 1) the political instability within and in neighboring countries, 2) strategic interests of foreign agencies in the country, 3) a post-independence ideological vacuum, and 4) the Soviet inherited corruption, all presented challenges for the work of NGOs and their leaders. Besides the fact that local NGOs are characterized by non-indigenous features, at the local level NGOs have been criticized as grant-based, competitive, inexperienced and small scale. Some government officials also accused them of being political in nature and potentially a serious risk for political instability (Abramson, 1999; Gretsky, 2003; Luong ed., 2004; Ruffin & Waugh, eds., 1999; Sieple, 2005; Wienthal, 2004).

For the abovementioned reasons and events as well as due to the threat of religious fundamentalist groups, the government began enacting laws and regulations to restrict or institutionalize local NGOs. First, in 1998 the Oliy Majlis (Supreme Court of Uzbekistan) enacted the “Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations” to restrict the activities of virtually all religious denominations, including non-state approved Islamic organizations (Pottenger, 2004). This law was not extended to women’s NGOs engaged in addressing socio-economic issues until later, when NGO groups as a whole become a threat to the political stability of the country.
International human rights organizations critiqued the Uzbek State’s human rights record on one hand and political allegations against civil society groups on the other. In 2005, the State increased the monitoring of NGOs, started freezing financial transactions of NGOs involving foreign funds and began requiring re-registration of all public voluntary organizations operating in the country. Many local as well as country offices of major international NGOs and donor agencies failed to pass the re-registration process and had to close down their operations. Although the rationales for re-registration failures were attributed to technicality issues, they were based on political reasons for the most part. (Masaru, 2005; Pottenger, 2004; Sieple, 2005). (USE for Analysis)

As a result, by 2009, only a handful of organizations out of several dozens survived under women’s leadership. A few donor agencies are functioning in the country, the largest among which are USAID, World Bank and United Nations programs based in Tashkent - the capital city. They have either limited or entirely eliminated programs that promote elements of Western style democracy in Uzbekistan but continue to assist the State’s efforts to improve the structural, social and economic aspects of development.

Despite restrictions on local NGO work, Uzbekistan officially encourages the presence of a strong and independent civil society that provides constructive criticism and assists the State to reform the totalitarian structure inherited from the Soviet Era. The Uzbek model of civil society is influenced by Hegelian philosophy which argues that the essence of civil society is centered on promoting the role of the State (Masadu, 2005). The establishment of the Mahalla Foundation, a Government Organized NGO (GONGO), in 1993, served the purpose of uniting all existing Mahalla Committees –
local self-governing community groups - under State control and giving them the official authority to implement government regulations on community life, including, identifying families in need of assistance and acting as mediators in family disputes. Women’s Committees established during the Soviet Union were also re-institutionalized in 1999 to enhance the State’s influence on women’s issues that by and large had been dealt with by multiple NGOs (Corcoran-Nantes, 2005). A number of GONGOs were set up to address issues related to youth, environment and women, and they rapidly expanded their reach to all regions of the country.

Meanwhile, the re-registration process has been filtering out all NGOs except those perceived by the State as non-threatening. To facilitate this process, the National Association of NGOs of Uzbekistan (NaNGoUz) was founded in 2005 to unite all the existing NGOs under its umbrella (Masadu, 2005). In response to the Government’s restrictions on local NGOs, Gulnora Karimova - the daughter of the President and Chair of multiple GONGOs - initiated the establishment of the Association of Social Initiative (ASI), to support local NGOs specializing in social welfare, economic and cultural development work (NaNGoUz, 2005).

Statement of Problem

There exists a general consensus among international experts and feminist scholars that the institutionalization of NGO work will seriously limit the strengthening of democracy in the country. In Uzbekistan, NGOs that remained open and had passed the re-registration process experienced a shift in donor funding from external sources to State controlled budgets. While NGOs can apply for government sponsored foundation
grants, they need to get written approval from local government authorities to conduct educational seminars and work with schools or Mahalla committees. The fate of the remaining local women’s NGOs that have the ability to generate resources from private funds, the local community or international sources should also be explored.

Women’s exposure to international perspectives on socio-economic-cultural-political issues pertaining to women, their lived experiences during the Soviet Era and the challenges faced in the transition period following the collapse of the Soviet Union, have collectively shaped their own positions in understanding and advocating for women’s advancement and social change. As NGO leaders they serve as a medium through which local concerns are interpreted and conveyed in a language understandable to donors. In addition, they carry the message from the donors to the women with whom they work and serve. Despite the marked absence of successfully organized movements in the past, women’s NGOs nonetheless had reached a stage whereby they could have the potential to mobilize unprecedented levels of resources both domestically and internationally to advance culturally transformative gender-consciousness and promote social change through gender-based solidarity.

Women, who have taken a major leadership role in the NGO sector, creating networks and a base for national and international dialogue to raise awareness and address women’s issues, now face difficult decisions about carrying on with their work. Those who were at the forefront of the women’s movement have either moved on to different sectors of the economy, emigrated abroad or are negotiating their place within the new context in which the civil society finds itself.
Under the Soviet Union, women in Uzbek society were trapped under contradictory expectations of gender hierarchy for decades, with public life dictated by the colonial Soviet State and private life dictated by the patriarchal indigenous culture. After the country’s independence from the Soviet Union, leading non-governmental organizations gave some of these women power to represent the interests of their groups and communities in a manner that mattered to them as women and leaders. Women leaders’ experience as women and leaders following the independence of Uzbekistan can be characterized as a post colonial struggle against their status quo. I used the concept of ‘post colonial’ to refer to the lived experience and daily challenges of NGO women leaders of post-independent Uzbekistan.

Imposing hierarchical and bureaucratic guidelines and monitoring of all NGO work has affected these independent local women’s initiatives, for they organized with a goal to support changes in their status quo. Therefore, it is problematic how the definition of civil society is perceived and exercised under the new regulations of civil society in Uzbekistan.

Research Questions

1. How did the change in sponsorship of NGO funding from international donors to the Uzbek State affect the work of women leaders of NGOs?

2. What are the perceptions of women leaders of NGOs about the status of women in their society? What are their perceptions on social change?

3. How do women leaders of NGOs negotiate their political and personal image? How does their background affect their goals and work?
4. How do these women leaders of NGOs meet the expectations of different stakeholders in working towards social change?

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of NGO women leaders regarding the effects of the institutionalization of civil society on women’s movements and their organizational powers, as well as the challenges faced in contributing to social change and women’s advancement in Uzbekistan.

At this critical juncture, taking into consideration international news agency reports on drastic reductions in the number of local NGOs and the Uzbek state’s efforts to regenerate civil society groups to assist in its reforms, I intended to utilize my position as a researcher to undertake qualitative research in Uzbekistan and collect interviews from women leaders whose organizations are undergoing or have gone through funding changes. Recognizing the difficulty of obtaining written records and statistics and access to some of the women who have left the country or have been detained for their political activism, I have used my personal contacts and accounts from former and present NGO women leaders as primary data. Given that women leaders have socialized in the same circles and shared similar concerns, projects and funding, they have critical insights and comparisons of their different organizations and experiences.

In order to examine the problem outlined, I have undertaken a qualitative study that draws upon interviews with both current and former women leaders of NGOs. The study utilized the theoretical framework of feminist post colonial theory. Studying women leaders’ perceptions and experiences contributes to our understanding of where
women leaders in present day Uzbekistan stand and how they interpret and understand the changing political environment in order to continue their efforts towards gender empowerment.

The feminist theoretical paradigm provides a valuable framework for discussing the effects of post-colonial women’s experiences and their quest for a political voice, as it offers a unique perspective on the position of women in society. Combining this perspective with the international post colonial debate on feminism creates a better understanding of how anti-colonial struggles and the post independence search for an authentic national identity affects women and men differently in Uzbek society. Additionally, through interaction with the State, an outcome that has proved to be historically catalytic to nation-building, women’s civic activism resultantly accrued a definitive political component – a uniquely Central Asian phenomenon that merits greater research and understanding.

Significance of the Study

Through NGOs, women have found an alternative agency through which they can express their views and represent themselves as a distinct group working towards the common good of the communities they serve. These are women who have taken the initiative to claim their voice in the public and political sphere. They have made remarkable contributions and brought substantial change to the lives of women and society in general, through literacy programs, seminars and awareness raising campaigns. They are critical actors who have bridged the international women’s community with local women and the State, while bringing local women’s issues to the attention of the
State and the global community by advocating social change in women’s status. The assertion that “Women’s rights are human rights” has been raised in the political arena, and most women leaders advocating in this sphere have faced difficulties in continuing their work. According to the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHR), women are very active in human rights issues, risking their freedom and the lives of their relatives.\(^4\) The significance of the research study is manifold: it opens space for scholarly dialogue about the effects of the politics of nationalization and imported democratization on women’s empowerment; the study intends to contribute to feminist discussion of women’s multiple agencies for the realization of their potential to find ways to voice their concerns. It creates an opening for discussion about the reality of women’s leadership in the NGO sector and how it coexists, challenges and negotiates its place inside the politics of civil society in Uzbekistan.

This research study is unique to the extent that scholarly work and field research on the experiences of women leaders and critical issues pertaining to women’s empowerment through NGOs in Uzbekistan, particularly from a native and feminist perspective, is limited. Current changes in the sphere of civil society, particularly in the NGO sector, might have crucial implications for women’s empowerment in the country, as well as the direction of women’s political activism. Whether women’s empowerment efforts will be strengthened or not, the experience will be unique to the country at this time as Uzbekistan has been transitioning to a market economy since 1991. Currently, several groups are negotiating power and control in the absence of Soviet domination and
this unique historical time period will not occur again. This study aids us to understand the complexities of women’s experiences as leaders in such a time.

Research findings and conclusions serve to better understand the nature of women’s leadership and their contribution to the gender empowerment efforts of the Uzbek State. This qualitative study provides space and opportunity for women’s voices to be heard regarding the impact of social change via the NGO sector on women’s potential, aspirations and activism. It is intended to contribute to understanding the impact of the change in the sponsorship of NGOs from international donors to the State. The findings can also assist the limited number of international agencies currently operating in Uzbekistan and the agencies planning to work there in the future to better understand the political and personal experiences of women leaders managing NGOs, as well as the relationship between the State and women’s local non profit organizations. This will help them to devise suitable approaches to operate within the existent context in their collective efforts to empower women. Parts of the research have been presented at international conventions and conferences and will be submitted to the Central Asian Survey academic journal for publication.

Limitations and Delimitations of Study

A “culture of suspicion” (Sampson and Kideckel, 1982, p. 162) still lingers on in Uzbekistan, a remnant of the Soviet Era. In addition, the proclivity of U.S. foreign policy in recent years to treat predominantly Muslim societies with disdain and suspicion – irrespective of whether they are secular or not - has further reinforced an equally counterproductive perception of Western ideology as imposing, spying and threatening.
This dilemma includes conscious and unconscious assumptions held about the “other”, perpetuated by a limited and ideologically shaped understanding of Western powers. Zanca (2000) explains, that since some degree of scholar-espionage activities within the superpower states has occurred, reasons for local suspicions about spying may not be entirely unfounded (p. 155). The perception that international programs double up as covert intelligence gathering operations was reinforced when the Uzbek Government accused the Open Society Institute/Soros Foundation in late 2003 of aiding oppositional forces in the country to instigate another Color Revolution (EurasiaNet News, 2004). As a researcher conducting fieldwork sponsored by a Western academic institution, I encountered a certain level of suspicion, which in practical terms manifested in the hesitation of potential participants to take part in the study. Subsequently, I selected the snowball sampling method to minimize the possibility of discomfort and distrust among potential participants.

Another obvious limitation is that time spent in the field was dictated by the availability of funding sources to conduct research. Qualitative research is strengthened when adequate time and finances exist to conduct necessary field research and follow-up meetings and interviews with participants. A practical time frame for me included two months in the field in Uzbekistan and an additional month for follow up interviews. I also conducted interviews with the former Uzbek NGO women leaders who have immigrated to the U.S. Based on the emerging themes, questions, and leads, I maintained contact via phone and internet with NGO women leaders for on-going follow up and feedback after the completion of fieldwork.
Interviews were conducted in the two official working languages of Uzbekistan - Uzbek and Russian, while the actual research was written in English. Subsequently, while utmost care was given to accurate translation and interpretation, it is impossible to guarantee against the possibility of misinterpretation of concepts, terminologies and cultural specificities of women’s accounts as they are translated into English.

Definition of Terms

Civil society – independent third sector of the society between the state, the family and the market

Donor assistance – technical and financial assistance lent by large international organizations to implement development projects.

Feminism – refers to the political ideology that leads gender conscious struggle against patriarchy and women’s oppression as perceived and expressed by women themselves.

Gender awareness – conscious attention to issues of equality and justice as relates to gender.

GONGO – Government Organized Non-profit, Non-Governmental Organization registered as an NGO, enjoys tax exemption, is funded by the State, implements State programs and is fully accountable to the State ideology; before 1999 a GONGO was referred to as a social service organization in Uzbekistan.

Hybrid NGOs - organizations that are subcontracting their services to commercial or government organizations in order to provide services to their constituencies and stay within their organizational mission.
**Indigenization of Uzbekistan** – a policy of both appeasing and penetrating the non-Russian nationalities in the former Soviet Union that was enacted in 1923. It included the promotion of native languages in education and publishing, at the workplace, and in government; the fostering of national cultures; and the recruitment of cadres from the indigenous people to the ranks of the Soviet Party.

**Institutionalization** – deliberate process of taking control of independent public institutions, programs and public initiatives by the State or other powers.

**Jadidism** – a movement and a new method of teaching propagated by Muslim reformers within the Russian Empire of the 19th Century to reform Islamic education to incorporate elements of democratization, modernization and gender consciousness.

**Mahalla** – an informal community group incorporating multiple neighborhoods; such units have served as a social space for collective public initiatives for almost a century; recently the Uzbek State institutionalized these units to extend its control and concurrently showcase them as exemplary indigenous forms of civil society groups.

**Nationalism** – concept used to define a shared identity, cultural ties and political solidarity to the State.

**NGO** – a public organization that defines itself as a Non Governmental Organization with a mission to address issues in support of the public good and without a mandate to generate profits for private gain. NGOs were classified as “social service organizations” in Uzbekistan until 1999, when the introduction of a law on NGOs categorized all social service organizations including quasi-NGOs and GONGOs as NGOs, irrespective of whether they received funding from the State or not.
**Patriarchy** – privileging and prioritizing male dominance and authority based on the biological difference between men and women.

**Post colonial study** – critical study of theories of colonial discourse, exploitation of nations in conquest, and imperial representation of the colonized.

**Soviet emancipation** – refers to the political offensive campaign launched by the Soviet authorities in their Central Asian Republics to liberate women from their oppressors and the indigenous people from their “backward” traditions and lifestyle role expectations.

**Transitional economy** – refers to countries that are undergoing economic changes from a centrally planned to a free market economy.

**Women’s agency** – personal or political space through which women find ways to resort to action, self-reflection or resist their multiple oppressions; this reflective space can serve as a step toward empowerment.

**Women’s empowerment** – transformation of power in the process of which women come to realize and start addressing gender issues that keep them disadvantaged and less than equal.

**Women’s organizations** – refers to the organizations working for/with women and/or on various women’s issues with some type of feministic approach.

Organization of Study

The study is organized as follows:

**Chapter One:** Introduction, background of the problem, research questions, purpose and significance of study;
Chapter Two: Literature review of topics relevant and necessary for the research. The topics are addressed under two major headings: 1) Concept of Civil Society in Uzbekistan and 2) History of Women’s Movement;

Chapter Three: Detailed overview of methodology of research study;

Chapter Four: Reporting of data collected via interviewing, participant observation and document analysis; Presentation of data analysis examined against the backdrop of the literature reviewed and the theoretical framework for the study;

Chapter Five: Conclusions, summary and recommendations.
CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

I. Civil Society in Uzbekistan

Introduction

This section on literature review encapsulates international debates and critiques in the field of civil society, particularly as it applies to the case of Uzbekistan. It is important to emphasize that irrespective of the idealization of the concept of civil society in Western literature, it ought to be adapted and negotiated to reflect the socio-economic-cultural-political environment of individual states, even if one has to initially redefine the desirable process of democratization. Such emphasis is particularly critical for the sovereign states that are undergoing political changes at home while competing for power in the global market. Elements of the desired concept of civil society clash with the need for political stability and the desire to build an ethno-cultural national identity in Uzbekistan. In light of this argument, I analyze how the interaction of power relations of foreign and home-grown elements play a role in redefining civic activism and women’s empowerment in Uzbekistan.

Civil society creates a public sphere where citizens are able to participate meaningfully in the political realm, have their voice represented, contributions acknowledged and interests taken into account. It is a realm where informed citizens mobilize around shared interests and share power with the State to affect its policies. Therefore, civil society is ultimately a political concept.
According to Bangura and Gibbon (1992) the conceptualization of civil society proceeds from a particular conception of State and society where the State is associated with power and civil society belongs to the realm of freedom and liberty. Abrahamsen (2000) argues that in this interpretation power and its management become the exclusive property of the State and the public/formal sector, and any reduction of the State and its economic and social services can accordingly be represented as an expansion of democracy and freedom (p. 54). In advocating for state and civil society interaction, theorists suggest that civic actors and state institutions should be autonomous so that each can maintain its comparative advantage. “This is a particularly important reminder for civic actors such as NGOs in developing, autocratic and quasi-democratic countries where financial insecurity or State persecution can undermine the groups’ missions and activities” (Azarya, 1988, p. 5).

The Concept of Civil Society

The concept of civil society has been created and recreated since its inception and became widely used since the late seventeenth century. Modern thinkers of that century characterized it in a broad sense and viewed society and the State as one whole politic. “Civil society was a type of a state characterized by a social contract which was agreed among the individual members of the society” (Kaldor, 2004, p.192). At the turn of the nineteenth century the notion of civil society was reinterpreted as something distinct from the State. German philosopher Hegel defined civil society as “the intermediate realm between the family and the state, where the individual becomes a public person and
through membership in various institutions is able to reconcile the particular and the universal” (Glasius, Lewis and Seckinelgin eds. 2004, p.192).

The revival of civil society in Latin American politics in the 1970s and in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s with the fall of “Berlin Wall” broke the link with the State. Differing from predecessor definitions of civil society, these political movements became synonymous with autonomy and self-organization, whether against the military regime in Latin America or against the totalitarian system in Eastern Europe (Glasius et al. eds. 2004; Naidoo, ed., 1999; Ruffin & Waugh eds. 1999). From these movements, the concept of civil society acquired a global meaning and came to be adopted as an indispensable lexicon in the developmental discourse of international institutions and transnational activism.

The seventeenth century conception of civil society characterized as the collective effort of the state to advance the public good, shifted by the early twenty first century to define a much more complex concept which brought multiple actors together. These actors included global and financial institutions such as the United Nations, International Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, etc. But the common essential meaning of civil society remains the same to date, a “medium through which a social contract is negotiated, pressed for and debated with the centers of political and economic authority” (Glasius et al. eds. 2004, p.194).

Nevertheless, this is a highly politicized concept that developing countries are strongly encouraged to embrace as an essential building-block of democracy that ensures accountability on behalf of the ruling authorities and empowers citizen participation. The
fundamental question about who makes the decision, how it is made and who it benefits is at the heart of what civil society engages in. In simpler terms, civil society can be defined as “a society organized voluntarily as opposed to being organized through the coercive apparatus of the state” (Carbo, 1997, p.30 quoted in Naidoo, ed., 1999).

It is a coalescence of independent associations, representative of people’s organizations, trade unions, women’s clubs, religious groups, NGOs and political parties. It is also a “legitimate public actor that participates alongside – not replaces – the State and market institutions in the making and implementing of public policies devised to address common problems and advance the public good” (Naidoo, ed., 1999, pp. 6-7). “These associations not only aggregate societal demands and articulate them to government officials but also – and, more importantly, in some scholars’ view – instill the habits of cooperation, solidarity, public spirit and respect for legitimate authority necessary for a stable democratic polity” (Putnam, 1993, p. 55).

The effectiveness of the mainstream concept of civil society outside Western democracies continues to be debated, not only by these powerful actors, but also by academics, researchers and scholars, albeit for different reasons. I have mentioned earlier that the West takes credit for the development of civil society which emerged as a “property of democratic states and society” (Chandhoke, 1995, p. 9). Imposition of the Western conceptualization of civil society “which is possible only where representative democracy is the established political order” (Hank, 1999, p. 158) is problematic and does not do justice to the existing elements of civil society in developing countries.
Civil Society in Uzbekistan

In the context of Central Asian countries, the sudden arrival of political independence necessitated the transformation from *Homo Sovieticus* to a more open and democratic society - a process which had to be distinct and contextual to the local political conditions of the nation. The fall of the Soviet empire gave “premature birth” to the newly independent countries of Central Asia with weak political structures, regressing economies, eroding social welfare systems and fast growing populations.

The lack of financial resources to solve immediate societal problems conditioned the new State to turn to Western societies for assistance (Luong ed. 2004). Through multilateral financial institutions and bilateral aid organizations in particular, the West extended assistance to ensure the State’s capacity and accountability to carry out the functions of domestic governance (Mendelson & Glenn eds. 2002; Weinthal, 2002; Carothers, 1999). But before the influx of Western aid in the early 1990s, Uzbekistan was experiencing the emergence of civil society on its own accord.

Political and Islamic Civil Society Groups (1980s-1990s)

The first autonomous politicized groups to form in Uzbekistan were movements protesting environmental degradation during Gorbachev’s *Glastnost* (openness) period (Carley, 1995; Howell & Pearce 2001; Glasius et al. eds. 2004). Comprised mostly of the educated members of society, these organizations were small scale and urban based. Given that under the totalitarian system the State owned everything including the public sphere, there was hardly any space or condition for independent movements to mobilize nationally.
It was *Glastnost* and a greater reliance on capable citizenry - a concept derived from Western democracies - that was seen by the Soviet leadership as a practical step towards maintaining power while resolving its chaotic budgetary crisis (Pottenger, 2004, p. 59; Ruffin & Waugh eds. pp. 280-29). While the concept of civil society requires that individuals organize independent of the State, the first voluntary organizations in Central Asia were in fact State empowered. This is an important fact to remember, that in stark contrast to other countries, it was the State that had taken the initiative to democratize society in post communist Central Asia. It is reassuring because social pressure groups pertaining to the civil society hardly existed in the public sphere of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, this historical context demonstrates that the State had a great role to play in creating the basis and support for strengthening non-western forms of civil society, particularly in Uzbekistan.

In the post independence period Uzbekistan witnessed a new voluntary public movement. According to many western observers, the organization of the political Party *Birlik* (Unity) in the early years of independence was the “first sophisticated civil society organization to have developed with extensive national scale programs” (Glasius et al. eds. 2004, p.133). The proponents of Muslim cultural renaissance organized under political parties advocating for national reformation, particularly in the realm of language and Muslim identity (Malashenko & Wessel, 1993; Luong ed. 2004; Polat, 1999; Pottinger, 2004).

Restoring national identity has been the foremost goal on the political agenda of Central Asian countries after independence. Edward Shils (1995) has argued that “nation
nation and nationality are in fact, the fundamental underpinnings of civil society . . . nation and nationality are necessary ingredients, perhaps even a precondition for civil society. It is collective self-consciousness which sustains civil society. Concern for one’s nation reinforces the concern for the common good” (p.116), which is what civil society promotes in relation to the State and its citizens. It was particularly true for Uzbekistan in the post-independence period.

In Uzbekistan where Islam has long been the nexus of local tradition and identity, the demise of the Communist system and political independence empowered individuals to mobilize and organize through the Islamic movement. It is important to develop a better understanding of this “large and powerful religious tradition and in particular, it’s social, civic and democratic possibilities” (Ruffin & Waugh eds. 1999, p. 25). While religion remains a crucial element of nation building for the government, however, the rise of religious fundamentalist groups provoked the State to take non-democratic measures to ban home grown Islamic opposition parties.

The role of fundamentalist Islamic elements in the civil wars in neighboring Tajikistan and Afghanistan also made the government of Uzbekistan cautious and justified in its action to clamp down on religious opposition groups. Today opposition political parties, both secular and Islamic, including the Erk (Freedom) Democratic Party, the Birlik (Unity) Party, the Adolat (Justice) Party and the Islamic Renaissance Party as well as independent Islamic mosques and organizations are legally banned by the State (Pottenger, 2004, p. 68; International Crisis Group 2003; Ibrahim, 2000). While the violation of the citizen’s constitutional right to freedom of religion brought the State
under the microscope of international human rights groups, it was also a tough call for the government to balance liberalism with the dire need for political stability. Malashenko & Wessel (1993) argued that this was because “at the same period, a nucleus of fundamentalist forces formed, operating for the most part covertly, and using the emergence of, at the time, independent public organizations, mainly cultural and educative organizations, as a cover” (p.74).

Despite popular arguments in the western media and theorizing by opposition groups that the authoritarian State used the threat of Islamic militarism to rid itself of powerful opposition groups, the reality on the ground suggests that the political situation in Uzbekistan was never entirely black and white; consequently the reaction of the government needs to be carefully considered in light of all the factors that had an impact on its decision.

*Traditional Civil Society Groups: Mahalla*

Earlier mainstream studies about civil society in Uzbekistan have failed to critically analyze the role and importance of indigenous civil society groups. This is perhaps due to the fact that “most studies published to date are those by foreign scholars who romanticize existing societies of modern Western Europe and the U.S. as models of civil society” (Masaru, 2005 pp. 337-338). Voluntary human associations and informal networks existed in Uzbekistan well before the Soviet expansion. These associations and networks that survived were formed in relation to the history, traditions and socio-political relations of the society and State.
The most deeply embedded existing form of civil society in Uzbekistan is the traditional Mahalla community. The Mahalla (derived from an Arabic word) is often described as a “cell of society”, a “neighborhood community or quarter”, a “living unit”, a “voluntary civic group” and a “site of social interaction” which involves its members into a web of mutual responsibilities within a community. As a communal form of civil society, it is composed of “a host of informal group activities and meeting places that connect individuals, build trust, encourage reciprocity and facilitate exchange of views on matters of public concern” (Varshney, 2002, p. 46).

The Mahalla advocates for more inclusive usage of civil society, in which it is not defined negatively, in opposition to the State, but in alliance with it, in the context of the ideas and practices through which cooperation and trust are established in social life (Hann & Dunn, eds. 1996, p.14). This form of civil society is concerned more with relations within society than with the State. “Groups within communal civil society are disconnected from national level politics and tend to move toward communalism and traditionalism” (Freiser, 2004, p.132).

The main difference between the civic elements of Mahalla and the dominant Western concept of civil society groups is that the former does not challenge the State, but serves the interests of its members and is subsequently entrusted by the government with full self-accountability. Traditionally, the Mahalla is neither political nor fully autonomous, serving as an intermediate realm between the public and the State. It has been rightly argued that the Mahalla has the potential to serve as a platform to represent the concerns of its members to the State; however, this potential was disregarded by
Western development agencies as traditional and backward. The Uzbek State recognized this potential and strengthened its connection to the State through the establishment of the umbrella GONGO Mahalla Fund in 1993 and the passage of a number of laws and decrees to delegate the authority of civic responsibilities to Mahalla Committees (Masaru, 2005).

*Imported Civil Society Groups: NGOs*

The form of civil society conceptualized in Western terms was introduced to Uzbekistan in the mid 1990s. Best represented by NGOs, this form of civil society promotes values linked to the “protection of individual human rights and private property” (Naidoo, ed. 1999, p. 6). This definition interprets civil society as being related to the voluntary sector, made up of organizations that are private, non-profit and independent of the State, family and local community bonds (Gellner, 1994, p. 33; Salamon & Anheier, 1996; Glasius et al. eds. 2004, p. 131). It is different from the traditional Mahalla given its varying form and agenda that aims to influence the State and the outcome of political decisions. Most NGOs in Uzbekistan would not have been formed if not for the financial and technical support of the international organizations which belong to external forces.

Foreign assistance for the growth of civil society groups has fostered the establishment of non-profit organizations, religious, public, educational and political associations and independent media outlets, particularly through the medium of the internet and radio. During the transition period, NGOs became essential to undertake a series of functions, formerly performed by the socialist State. Their activities ranged from
service delivery to cultural, political, educational, environmental, human rights and development projects.

Major international donors pouring resources and technical support into Uzbekistan’s NGO development included the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Soros Foundation/Open Society Institute, the U.S. Government through the United States Information Service (USIS) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Asian Development Bank (ADB), the European Union funded program for Technical Aid to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS), the Dutch development agency and others (Human Rights Watch, 2001). They supported NGO activities through seed grants, technical and humanitarian assistance, consultation and training.

According to the 1998 NGO Sustainability Index for Uzbekistan there were 74 officially registered groups and 456 unregistered active local NGOs. In 2002 this figure was estimated at over 2,000. Unlike the organizations under the Glasnost era, these NGOs did not rely on communal civil society to mobilize supporters and engage heavily in service delivery. The NGO sector created employment, offered professional and personnel training and encouraged a volunteer culture in the workplace. Unlike their counterparts in State owned organizations, NGOs enjoyed greater flexibility and autonomy to construct projects that met specific problems of communities and groups. In sustaining their day-to-day operations, they were not dependent on major expenditure from the State budget; rather they attracted grants and contributions largely from international donor agencies and also from private commercial interests (Mendelson &
Glenn, eds. 2002). These funding sources were particularly important in meeting the basic needs of the population given the chronic budget shortfalls faced by most FCSs. NGOs, both political and non-political, have been working to increase their presence and influence in different fields and programs.

Critical but Controversial

“Developmental discourse is caught up in the global power relations of dominance and subordination, where the Third World has been constructed as the First World’s under-developed other” (Abrahamsen, 2000, p. 1). Transnational actors such as international financial institutions and corporations exert both positive and negative influences on State behavior. Upon embarking on the road to new nation building, Western donors prescribed the NGOs to the Central Asian States as essential civil society actors to build a strong and open democratic system. They invested heavily in democracy building and the socio-economic projects pertaining to national development.

Both the volume and flow of financial assistance to Uzbekistan was contingent upon the State’s diplomatic relations with the U.S. and Western Europe. For instance, in the aftermath of the tragic events of 9/11, Uzbekistan became a major ally of the U.S. in the war against international terrorism in Central Asia. In return for the use of the Termez airbase in southern Uzbekistan during the war against the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, financial aid to the country was increased significantly (Lance, 2002). Despite the fact that a major portion of this assistance was allocated to military training, civil society also benefited from the increased aid package.
By 1995, the United Nations, World Bank, ADB, EBRD, USAID, Swiss and Dutch Aid Agencies, British Council, IMF and other international institutions had established a significant presence in the country. They came with financial investment, development “specialists” and “ideas” on how Uzbekistan should develop. They promoted Western “best practices” since in-depth research and disaggregated historical data on Uzbekistan was limited or distorted. With minimal data and analysis grounded on local realities with which to work, the implementation of imported ideals of democracy had mixed results. It may be noted that some elements of civil society as envisioned and promoted by transnational actors have in fact, reaped some positive results, but it also supported the expansion of Western imperialism.

The IMF mandated Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) and stringent World Bank loan guidelines precipitated in neo-liberal economic reforms including trade liberalization, privatization, cutbacks in State subsidies, removal of price controls over essentials, spiraling public utility rates and a shrinking job market – all of which collectively left a heavy toll on the average person, particularly working women. While the transition affected the majority of working class men and women as well as intellectuals and those who held high positions in the Soviet system, the new avenues opened up by Western funded civil society groups were particularly attractive to the latter group, which comprised of the majority of women economists, lawyers, doctors, teachers and scientists among others.

In the early stages of the NGOization of civil society, donors provided money to fund programs that established single-issue NGOs: gender, disability, environment,
health, etc. Within a short period of time, most of the funding for NGOs were project-based with limited timelines, meaning that NGOs had to write grants to carry out specific tasks designed by gender "experts" in grant-sponsoring offices. Some NGO leaders complained about the difficulty of matching the real problems on the ground with the projects available to fund. Funding agencies prioritized the issues and women leaders researched and sensationalized the issues in their proposals to meet guidelines (Mendelson & Glenn, eds. 2002; Ruffin & Waugh, eds. 1999).

The availability of funding and the vast array of issues that needed to be addressed fostered the growth of both genuinely dedicated NGO groups, but also groups that formed to feed off the ‘supply’ system, consequently resulting in major criticisms regarding the integrity of all NGOs. Many expert observers have criticized local NGOs as “grant based”, financially unsustainable, bureaucratic and less likely to reflect the civic character of classic NGOs which embody the idea of civil society - “of citizens taking voluntary action for the causes that concern them deeply” and that as non governmental organizations “they are defined by what they are not rather than by what they are”; (Ruffin & Waugh eds. 1999, p. 12).

To counter these arguments, it is vital to take into account that the loopholes in the NGO sector were bound to exist given the impact of past political ideologies, the costs of economic transition and the one size fits all approach of international donors. Criticism about NGOs being “grant based” and otherwise financially unstable is also partly attributable to the donors’ imported strategies that failed to consider local realities.
Lack of local financial sponsors, non-existent fundraising campaigns and the financial inability of NGO members to pay dues further add to the costs.

*Whose Interests?*

Wienthal (2004) in her article *Transnational Actors, NGOs and Environmental Protection in Central Asia*, argues that “as a result, transnational actors are contributing to the formation of a clear division between State and society, whereby the State is not embedded within society or society within the State” (cited in Luong ed. 2004, p. 269). Not until the late 1990s did international donors start requiring greater partnerships with the local organs of governments and local communities and an increase in the minimum percentage that organization’s needed to contribute from their own resources towards the budget of grant proposals (Zdrav Plus, 2003). INGOs also promulgated stronger networking, partner grant proposals and collaborations with government owned organizations among local NGOs.

Theorizing the impact of the West on civil society groups, Sieple (2005) argues that, “like Lenin’s vision for the vanguard of the proletariat, the aim of Western donors has been to foster a professional elite of civil society activists, workshop trained and clearly versed in ‘what is to be done’ to assume the leading role in transition” (p. 258). Even 17 years after independence, Uzbekistan is still in “transition” and voluntary organizations face difficulties in remaining “voluntary and independent” financially and ideologically. However, despite these challenges, there are notable NGOs discussed earlier that have remained relatively independent and committed to the cause of social change in women’s status.
“The complex relationship of international actors with the NGOs they seek to encourage and the State they desire to befriend often obscures their stated goal\textsuperscript{13} of promoting \textit{good governance} \textsuperscript{(UN, 2003, p. 37). While they argue for a strong and viable civil society, they often turn a blind eye to undemocratic State practices. International donors often consider it strategically and politically expedient to maintain close ties with the administration and bureaucracy of the recipient state and are subsequently willing to compromise programs that promote democratic ideals with programs that further their own economic and national security goals. The entire process is tactfully implemented through a carefully charted course smoothed by diplomatic mediations to minimize the potential for conflict.

Consequently, as long as their overt stated goals appear to champion good governance, they nonetheless compromise on such goals through strategic acts to “shield international organizations and relations from democratic scrutiny and to bestow a world order that is essentially undemocratic” (Abrahamsen, 2000, p. xv). Donors often pre-select the areas in which they will fund developmental projects – undertakings of greatest need and democracy promotion often do not figure among the principal selection criterions. International actors more often than not attempt to strike a balance between maintaining diplomatic ties with the State and funding the advancement of “democratic elements” in society. Accordingly, questions arise as to the actual nature of the civil society they will, in practice, promote, but do not unambiguously expound upon.

The expediency of developing a good working relationship with the host government while remaining loyal to the donor government severely curtailed the extent
to which the local branch offices of international NGOs could foster democratic civil society. Nevertheless, decentralized provincial-level branch offices of INGOs were far more likely than their capital city based counterparts to develop good working ties with local communities, local NGOs and local government offices.

State and Hybridization of NGOs

In the West, there are mixed reviews, critiques and feelings about the current Uzbek State administration. While there is a huge outcry about the dictatorial regime, gross human rights violations (Freedom House, 2005), and lack of true opposition, there are also views commending the State for averting economic crisis, civil war and ethnic conflict during the years of transition. By maintaining health and education expenditures at reasonable levels (United Nations, 2003), providing social safety nets and guaranteeing macroeconomic stability and political peace in the country, the government has demonstrated a certain proclivity for good governance and judicious spending in the economic and social spheres under the given circumstances (Pomfret, 2000).

In critically exploring the politics and power relations of the multiple actors engaged in building civil society, the role of the Uzbek State as a facilitator of the activities of civil society institutions cannot be left out. After the collapse of the totalitarian regime, the government of Uzbekistan developed an Uzbek Model, the distinct characteristic of which places the State as the catalyst of political, economic and social reforms. Western actors and their recommendations on state building were accepted, though with caution so as not to let them penetrate the State’s own ideological nation-building agenda. Its regime type is authoritarian, in contrast to the competitive
authoritarian regimes of Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and Georgia that precipitated in the wake of the respective Colored Revolutions (Levitsky, & Way, 2002, p. 54). According to these authors’ definition, competitive authoritarianisms are hybrid regimes with characteristics of democracy and authoritarianism, where opposition parties can have a real – but not necessarily fair – chance for power (Levitsky & Way, 2006, p. 2). In Uzbekistan, the political party in command maintains a strong grip on power and does not allow competitive opposition groups to grow.

The leaders of the incumbent administration have maintained power since national independence and are products of the Soviet bureaucracy. “President Islam Karimov’s political ideology and leadership style are shaped by his own experience with Soviet absolutism, the economy and his knowledge of the historic role of Islam in contemporary Uzbekistan” (Pottenger, 2004, p. 60). He has proposed the Uzbek model of development where the rule of law and gradual progression towards a market economy are essential principles for developing the base for a vibrant civil society. The civil society he envisions for Uzbekistan has to be complementary to the State initiatives to build democracy. He argues that civil obedience goes hand in hand with civil society freedom under the rule of law:

For us, a civil society is a social space over which the law rules, and which not only oppose but also contributes to the self-development of a person, to the realization of his interests, and to the maximum functioning of his rights and freedoms. But the infringement of other people’s rights and freedoms shall not be permitted. That is to say, legal freedom and legal
obedience act together, complementing and claiming each other. In other words, the laws of the State must not harm the rights …of the citizen, but the laws must be observed by all unconditionally (Karimov, 1997, p. 166).

Consequently, the rule of law has played an important role in determining the formation of civil society in Uzbekistan. As discussed earlier in the context of political movements of the early 1990s, there was a potentially strong independent association under which individuals found a common interest to pursue – the reemergence of Islam. But the organizations went underground and their leaders were imprisoned or fled the country with the State’s official banning of religious fundamentalist parties. After nearly 70 years of Soviet rule, the Uzbek people were voluntarily or involuntarily engulfed in the uncertainties of transformation with the demise of the Great Bear. This was subsequently followed by the rising threat of Islamic extremism that attempted to hijack the nascent State ideology. Given that both of the aforementioned changes were initiated by external forces, it should come as no surprise that the emergent NGO movement was initially viewed with suspicion given the presence of non-native elements.

Only in 1999 were NGO activities officially supported by the State. The “Decree on Non Governmental and Non Profit Organizations” was adopted following a 2002 presidential speech supporting NGOs and inviting them to collaborate in the drafting of a new legislation pertaining to public foundations and guaranteeing support to NGOs, charities and civic organizations (UN, 2003, p. 40). The government also granted tax breaks to NGOs focusing on women’s and environmental issues. Ostensibly, this represented a watershed moment for NGO activism and freedom. One of the United
Nations country reports published that “since 2000, Uzbekistan has seen a 66% increase in the number of registered NGOs, including social organizations, social funds, consumer cooperatives, associations and self-governing bodies i.e. Mahallas” (UN, 2003, p. 41). This action was interpreted as the State taking the NGO sector more seriously and perceiving the need to monitor its activities more closely.

*With Us or Against Us Policy: 2004 -Present*

While it is highly favorable to have foreign investment and the support of development agencies in the reform process, the State views the maintenance of stability in the country as a higher priority. The Orange, Tulip, Rose and Velvet\textsuperscript{14} Revolutions swept across the FCS within a decade after independence. The involvement of voluntary organizations supported by foreign donors in these revolutions raised red flags in the Central Asian States, as well as in China and Russia who called for stricter measures to monitor civil society groups in their own backyard.

The Uzbek government also issued a set of decrees and new regulations to closely monitor the activities of independent civil society groups, particularly NGOs. Consequently, the State response - limiting the scope of civil society, caused much debate in the international community. It has been argued that “while promulgating its vision of civil society, the actions of the Government is breathing new life to the inherited legacy of absolutism” (Pottenger, 2004, p. 72).

Organizations that addressed politically sensitive issues were not permitted to register or function effectively. “The Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan (HRSU) has been denied registration for the past seven years. Earlier in 2001, the National Women’s
Committee attempted to compel women’s NGOs to join a national coalition facilitated by the Government as a means to implicitly control their activities” (USAID, 2001, p.163).

In 2004 Cabinet of Ministers issued decree No. 56 “On Measures for Effective Calculation of Funding for Technical and Humanitarian Aid and Grants Received from International and Foreign Governments and Non-Governmental Organizations”. This regulation came as a fatal blow to all NGOs receiving their funding from foreign agencies as their grant money was kept frozen for months and sometimes returned to the donors without being used for the intended projects (World Organization against Torture, 2005).

Further regulations in 2004, including, requiring licensing of educational programs that included NGOs, requiring a recommendation from the Women’s National Committee for re-registration and requiring licensing of all NGO publication was the beginning of the end to the growing influence of the independent NGO movement. The outreach and effectiveness of grassroots NGOs were further undermined by regulations from the Ministry of Justice limiting the geographic scope of their activities to their immediate district.

The clash of government forces with protesters on May 13 2005 in Andijan changed the global image of Uzbekistan and justified the State to follow the suit of the Russian government to put stricter measures on activities of international organizations (Brinkley, 20005). Uzbekistan did not allow for an independent investigation. The Uzbek State’s reports on the protest is at odds with the testimonies and reports from independent sources that claim that the protest took place “in response to economic insecurity rather
than a manifestation of religious militancy” (Hamm, 2005). The aftermath of the Andijan crisis on Uzbekistan’s foreign relations created “an opportunity to ramp up its repression of Western, religious and other NGOs” (Blau, 2006).

It was widely publicized that most American and European development agencies have been forced out of the country following the highly publicized expulsion of the Soros Foundation earlier in 2004. The International Crisis Group, The International Board of Education Exchange, Internews and Freedom House also had to close shop in Uzbekistan. As a result, only a handful of donor agencies remain in Uzbekistan, including USAID, World Bank and the United Nations country programs. Foreign direct investment has fallen drastically and pressing societal issues still need to be addressed.

To fill the gap in donor funding, the National Association of NGOs of Uzbekistan (NaNGoUz) was founded in 2005. Out of some several thousand NGOs, only about 350 remained in 2007, and those that successfully re-registered through the Ministry of Internal Affairs with a recommendation from the Women’s Committee, joined the Association. This Association has it own Foundation and Board of Representatives. Seed grants released through NaNGoUz are targeted towards specific socio-cultural-economic development fields: women, youth, social, humanitarian, legal, environmental and economic issues. They are non-political in nature and their activities are supervised and advised by the executive board of the Association established by the World Bank and the Government of Uzbekistan. Among the approximately 350 organizations registered with the Association, the number of women directors and chairs remain significant, and women’s NGOs receiving grants are also prevalent (NaNGoUz, 2005).
What Kind of Civil Society is Possible in Uzbekistan?

It would be erroneous to consider Uzbekistan taking two hundred years to build a democracy similar to that of the U.S. Today, the world is much more integrated than the U.S. and Europe were in the 19th Century. Another important factor that can facilitate Uzbekistan’s initiatives to pull alongside its Western counterparts is that the country enjoys universal literacy rates for both genders – one of the positive legacies of the Soviet era. While these two factors are important, they are not sufficient in and of themselves to ensure that Uzbekistan will reach the democratic ideals that it envisions within the span of two decades. Such an outcome necessitates wise leadership to prepare the grounds for a prosperous civil society independent from the interests of the State and Western donor agencies.

“In developing societies where democratic systems have begun to take shape, they usually exist only in an embryonic form and have hitherto lacked the stability and irreversibility which can only be acquired over a long historical period” (Zorina, 1990, p. 3). Political developments in developing countries around the world demonstrate that states need to pursue both stability and liberalization (Polat, 1999). The Uzbek State is attempting to pursue stability with little space for political and cultural liberalization. The situation of civil society in Uzbekistan cannot be explained away in simple black and white terms. Before reaching a conclusion, one must consider a variety of factors including but not limited to the following:

- Uzbekistan is still in transition and as such, political stability cannot be taken for granted;
• The country has no legacy of strong civil society institutions;

• Over 50% of its population is under the age of 23, posing unique challenges to national development;

• External Islamic threats, civil wars and revolutions in neighboring countries like Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have made the Uzbek State cautious of institutions, both external and internal, that attempt to promote laissez-faire democracy and an independent media;

• Russia still considers Central Asia as its hegemonic backyard and is often in direct confrontation and competition with the West to fortify its sphere of influence in the region. In this regard, Russia plays a leading role in ensuring that regional blocs such as the Commonwealth of Independent States continue to play a substantial role. Such factors contribute to Russia exerting a major impact on how Uzbekistan conducts itself in the international arena;

• Following the ban on Islamic opposition groups, strong and viable pro-democracy voluntary associations and institutions have become non-existent, apart from those governed by the State. Western initiated NGOs and civil society institutions are largely donor driven and lack alternative sources of funding at the local level - making their existence highly vulnerable to changes in Uzbekistan’s relations with the international community, particularly donor States.

• Western donors were reluctant to engage traditional communal civil society structures such as Mahallas as they did not immediately conform to the Western values donor States were trying to inculcate.
Abramson, an anthropologist who has studied the region extensively, argues that the Western civil society ideology “does indeed seem to foster a particular hegemony in which ‘civility’ is symbolically opposed to accommodating an Islamic political culture” (p. 20 quoted in Sieple, 2005, p. 258). Islam, as I have argued, is an essential part of Uzbek culture; “being Uzbek is being Muslim” is a popular belief shared by the local population. The State has successfully used this card to discredit Western criticism and recommendations on the Government’s take on different societal issues, including domestic violence and women’s rights.

On the other hand, we cannot overlook the fact that the Uzbek government is ultimately an “authoritarian regime which subordinates civil society, but does not destroy it entirely” (Zorina, 1990, p. 1). In Uzbekistan, where the State remains strong and cohesive, Migdal, Kohli and Shue (1994) argue that the “State should be analyzed as a part of society and not in opposition to it” (quoted in Wienthal, 2004, p. 249). Indeed, as States are incorporated into their respective societies, their capacities will differ depending on their ties to various social forces. The stronger the ties to society, the more likely it is that the State can carry out its goals (Wienthal, 2004, p. 249-50). On the other hand, if power is concentrated in the hands of the State alone, it will be free to abuse it, unless there are checks and balances in place. Societal ties of the State will strengthen when power is shared.

To promote civil society from within, the State has undertaken major administrative reforms to institutionalize the Mahalla as a ‘firm foundation of civil society’ and a ‘national school of Eastern democracy’ (Karimov, 1996, p. 490). In this
regard, Sieple (2005) argues that “if we [international actors] can understand the civil society as it varies locally, then perhaps we can sustain a reliable forepost of rule of law that bolsters democracy in [Uzbekistan] while serving as a bulwark against radical Islam” (p. 259). Connection with these local civil society agencies is what has been missing in the Western civil society agenda, according to some international critics and local governments. The State took the initiative to bridge the gap between local voluntary associations and foreign funded local NGOs under its own control through the re-registration process.

President Karimov has stressed that the Mahalla is an indigenous form of self-government that might constitute a part of the foundation of civil society (Pottenger, 2004). While, for the World Bank, this action is perceived as empowering Mahalla bodies through the decentralization of centralized authority to local institutions, others view it as hijacking local voluntary institutions in order to exert stronger control over the lives of the citizenry (Kudat, Peabody & Keyder eds. 2000; Wienthal, 2004; Corcoran-Nantes, 2005; Kamp, 2006; Polat, 1999; Koroteva & Makarova, 1998). This State action has been highly debated among Central Asian scholars and international development workers. It is worthwhile to explore the questions such as, what kind of public space does this enforced collaboration between NGOs and Mahalla Committees provide for their communities? While both groups have their strength and weaknesses it will ultimately depend on each individual partnership case whether they can use their coping strategies to serve the real needs of their constituents.
Summary

The web of complex state-society relations is healthy and complements the advancement of democratic societies; consequently such relations need to be viewed as a whole rather than as separate distinct entities. Whether the government of Uzbekistan is exerting more influence on civil society organizations to protect them from neoliberal democratic elements or to maintain its power, we should remind ourselves that Western democracies were neither built over fifteen years, nor had they a lengthy history of colonialism as was the case in Uzbekistan.

Additionally the distinct cultural underpinnings of Uzbek and Central Asian societies must be kept in mind when the application of Western democratic ideals is discussed. Western conceptions of democracy and civil society when exported to countries such as Uzbekistan often ignore critical indigenous elements that buttress local civil society as they do not fit the mold of the Western concept of development.

As long as the prevalent actors - be it the State or the governments of multilateral and bilateral donor agencies - have a vested interest in maintaining their power, the strength and influence of democratic civil society can and will be compromised. Many civil society institutions in the U.S. and Europe receive government funding - faith based initiatives being a case in point, where “government and civic groups are each seen as having unique comparative advantages, that, when combined, provides “complementarity” (Evans, 1997a; Sanyal, 1994). This complementarity facilitates the “co-production” of services for the population (Ostrom, 1997). Western democracies perform the delicate balancing act of channeling the comparative advantage of these two
entities in a constructive manner in their respective countries. But when they feel it concerns national security, Western democracies have also curtailed activities of certain voluntary groups.

In the realm of state-society relations - as pertains to the construction of civil society- both sides can contribute to the development of a healthy public sphere. The government can offer a legal framework, legitimacy, market regulation, long-term funding and the ability to increase the scale of projects. NGOs can provide links to society, localized knowledge, specialized skills and volunteers (Evans, 1997a pp. 182-83; Fox, 1997; Ostrom, 1997, p 102; Sanyal, 1994, p. 41). Civic groups are incorporated into the State (Azarya, 1988) in the sense that they are engaged with it and are dependent upon certain resources from the local government.

Today, the Uzbek State has taken firm measures to tacitly institutionalize civil society institutions and their leaders to exhibit loyalty to the nation and conduct themselves within the parameters of *civil obedience*. While it is impossible to construct the Western *ideal* of civil society under the current internal and regional political situation, it is also unrealistic to expect it to be constructed from the outside. The shift in dependency from Western donors to the State for funding and resources, can potentially promote greater trust and collaboration between the State and society. However, at the same time, such a shift also holds the potential to crush grassroots activism as pressure is placed upon civil society actors to conform to the whims of an increasingly omnipotent State.
The coalition of women’s NGOs which illustrated elements of the ideals of democratic progress and the international women’s movement was replaced with a coalition of women’s groups with views and goals that closely reflect the nationalist propaganda of post colonial movements. Unless the State really means what it says in promoting constructive opposition, the grassroots actors - particularly the emergent NGO leaders of the post-independence era - will fade into obscurity without the full extent of their potential contribution to societal advancement ever being realized.
II. History of Women’s Movement

Introduction

In this section I revisit the literature on cultural attitudes about women and the evolution of women’s organizational movements since the Soviet occupation of Uzbekistan. Utilizing the post-colonial feminist standpoint, I theorize the coalescence of various forces and processes that shaped and gave rise to women’s leadership in the NGO sector following political independence at the threshold of the 21st Century. Despite the fact women could not organize independently, I have argued that women negotiated their existence under varying socio-political-economic circumstances and developed coping strategies to mediate between different powers while bringing change to the lives of women.

With all due respect to women who are continually demonstrating astounding leadership in many different spheres of society, my research is focused on new women’s initiatives and leadership in the NGO sector. The rationale for selecting this specific sphere lies in its politicization as a space in which the women’s movement emerged as a distinctive group, started affecting political processes, and connected with the network of other women’s organizations in FCS.

Uzbek Woman’s Struggle

Women possess extraordinary inner strength to survive the oppression that tests their will and resistance. Historically, women mobilized in times of crisis. Regardless of its origin, impact or the name by which it is referred to around the world, mobilization of
women as an organized movement played a crucial role in international wars, national politics and social development.

From the time the Soviet Party denounced feudal gender relations and brought Uzbek women to the “light”, and up to the period when the political birth of the new state of Uzbekistan created a free space for the emergence of the local women’s NGO movement, the woman’s question had always remained on the State’s agenda. The ideological and economic colonization of the country had a greater impact on women themselves: their identity, role in society and self-identity. This new movement embodied women’s past and present struggles to voice their concerns as a distinctive group.

Western feminist theory has been, and to some extent, continues to be, viewed as alien and incompatible to the experiences of Eastern women. This is mainly due to the misconstruing of the multifaceted layers of feminist discourse, but also because women’s concerns in Uzbekistan are closely allied with the collective preoccupation of women’s groups such as social benefits, employment benefits, and less concerned with questions of individual choice such as sexuality, the right to abort or sexual orientation. On the other hand, scholarship work on women’s questions, concerns and issues that affect them on a personal level was not given due attention during the Soviet Union.

It is much debated in feminist scholarship that women articulate their oppression and desires from their specific experiences, which does not always coincide with the dominant feminist discourse of the North. Yet, it is crucial to understand that feminism, regardless of whether it is used in the name of nationalism, womanism, activism or gender struggle – symbolizes a battle against women’s oppression of all kinds. I use the
terms feminism and leadership interchangeably throughout the study to theorize about women leaders’ initiative, struggle and activism\textsuperscript{18} in their efforts to bring about change in women’s status in Uzbekistan through organizing in the third sector.

Women’s organizational and social movements in Central Asia demonstrate key elements of what Kandioti (1991) and Jayawardena (1988) found in their analysis of the so called “Third World” women’s movements. “They emerged during periods of invasion and anxiety, playing instrumental roles in the nation building process through the Soviet Era and after. Their leaders were mostly educated women from privileged backgrounds with vision and drive. They organized in response to the changes in the world around them” (Stienstra, 1994, pp. 145-147). It is vital to give credit to women who, in full knowledge of the life threatening consequences, defied their prescribed silent role to organize themselves and mobilized resources to challenge the status quo.

Kandioti (1991) emphasizes the importance of remembering the fact that women’s movements are responses to similar sets of contradictions by the political cultures of their societies. She argued that “ultimately, feminist movements in Muslim societies as elsewhere take their place alongside the social forces struggling for civil and democratic rights in their respective countries” (p.18). In an expansive survey of feminism in the “Third World”, Jayawardena (1988) links the emergence of feminist movements to anti-imperialist and nationalist struggles, as a general move towards secularism, a new concern with social reform and modernity and the ascendance of an ‘enlightened’ indigenous middle class (also see Kandioti, 1991, p. 3). During the Sovietization period of Uzbekistan in the 1920s, the women’s movement took off to
“liberate” women from religious patriarchy and educate them to become public citizens. In post independence Uzbekistan, the women’s NGO movement flourished in response to deteriorating economic conditions after the collapse of the Soviet system, exacerbated by the structural reform programs of the IMF and the World Bank which pushed both working class men and women to the bottom rungs of the economy.

Unlike the mainstream women’s movements around the world, the mobilization of women’s organizations in Uzbekistan was fundamentally shaped by the interests of ruling powers. To better understand women’s activism and political mobilization, it is essential to reflect on the interaction of cultural, political and external forces, whose convergence contributed to the inception of women’s formal organizations starting in the 1920s with Soviet modernization.

Because of the lack of data on women’s organized movements in pre-Soviet Uzbek society, it is fair to say that the discourse surrounding organized women’s movements is tied to the legacy of Soviet expansionism. The feminist struggle and the formation of women’s movements and organizations in Uzbekistan came about in relation to the fight against native patriarchal oppression or the support for traditional lifestyles and women’s role as preservers and perpetuators of native culture.

Several historical analysts support Stites’s (1978) argument that the “ideological campaign for the emancipation of Central Asian women grew out of Russian Marxist feminism, drawing inspiration and moral support from leading activists such as Nadezhda Krupskaya (Lenin’s wife), Klara Zetkin, Inessa Armand and Aleksandra Kollontai (who is sometimes credited with being the impulse behind the movement in Central Asia)”
(p.132). It is safe to assume that dominant feminist concepts came to Uzbekistan with the foreign invaders and form part of the cultural campaign to legitimate the Soviet presence there.

Despite Russia’s own deficiencies in the realm of gender inequality issues, these women came to Uzbekistan with the intent of transforming gender ideologies that they viewed as repressive to women. It is appropriate to mention here, that Mohanty (1991) calls for “challenging the notion of Western feminist assumption about non-western women as victims” because their view of “eastern” women’s practices as “feudal residues” or labeling them “traditional” also portray [Uzbek] women as politically immature women who need to be versed and schooled in the ethos of Western feminism” (cited in DeSoto & Dudwick eds. 2000, p. 87). Yet even if Uzbek women had voiced their concerns, they would most likely have been disparagingly reinterpreted from a Soviet ideological standpoint that would seek to strengthen and justify the ongoing offensive against the core of Uzbek culture.

The question arises therefore, whether it is possible to elicit and act on the cultural specificity of women’s experience during or after the Soviet period without considering the role of State patriarchy? In Uzbekistan, where women’s organizing never blossomed without government patronage or blessing, can women consciously mobilize their efforts to make or demand change?

*Holding the Cradle of the Nation*

In traditional Central Asian cultures, women have similar practices of kinship as in indigenous African and Asian communities. Gender relations in the family have
always been dichotomous: women have been the honor and the slave of their families. Only by reaching the status of a mother in law and a grandmother do they gain considerable status within their family and society; however, even then, their rights are not equal to that of men. Marfua Tokhtakhodjaeva, a gender specialist from Uzbekistan has written extensively on the social and economic inequalities of women in the country. She has argued that everyday popular aphorisms such as “a woman is created from a man’s left rib”, “the girl child is a guest in her own home” and “keep salt in your home instead of a daughter” undoubtedly mirror the general attitude that shapes expectations and restrictions on women (Tokhtakhodjaeva, 1996).

Building a family through marriage is a decisive factor in how a woman in a typical Uzbek society will feel about herself, her value to her family and society. The collective life of women centered on family events, traditional practices and extended family relations. They have a strong presence in the decision-making processes concerning child nurturing and the organization of their private lives - all of which were heavily influenced by their respective age structure. As secluded and as invisible as they are in public life, women play a key role in guarding and keeping alive traditional customs and rituals (Kurbanova, 2005, p. 17).

The importance of mentioning these elements of pre-Soviet cultural gender relations is paramount not only because these attitudes outlived Communism, but also because there has been nostalgia for the past and revivalism of traditional gender practices during the post-independence period as part of the nation building process. More importantly, with increasing glorification of motherly, virtuous, pure, patient and
subservient characteristics of female role models, the younger generation of girls and women today are more likely to hold more patriarchal perceptions about their ability and value in society. The 2002 survey conducted by the Gender program of the Open Society Institute of Uzbekistan in the Tashkent region and city (Open Society Institute, 2002), as well as field research analysis I conducted in the Ferghana region in 2004 yielded worrisome results about the younger generation’s attitude towards egalitarian values in family and society (Kurbanova, 2005).

Prior to the Soviet invasion, women’s traditional space was strictly limited to the ichkari (indoor) or the private domain. Full veiling was more prevalent among wealthier women, although it became mandatory for all women with the expansion of Russia into Turkestan following the politicization of the veil by the Soviets. Veiling, once a sign of class, served as a tool for local men to control women, or as some may argue, to protect the honor of their culture – the heavy burden of which naturally fell on women. Ironically, after independence in 1991, it was again wealthier and/or religiously educated families that started separating household quarters for their women to shield them from the gaze of unfamiliar males; subsequently, some women started covering themselves in public places or avoided mass public events altogether.

‘False Consciousness’?

Some Muslim feminists argue that going back to a strict conservative dress code or embracing ideal motherhood is a cultural norm in Muslim societies and is not oppressive but liberating for many women who choose to veil. The magic word is choice, which feminists of all ranks deliberate at length. In Uzbekistan, while embracing
traditional Islamic values was enlightening and empowering for some women, for others, these values were preconditioned to their gender and prescribed upon them lower status as citizens.

These traditions may seem utterly oppressive to outsiders - particularly for some Western feminists, but the average Uzbek woman would probably feel otherwise. Uzbek women learned long ago to negotiate, survive and bargain for their access to power while staying within the realms of the gendered space ascribed to them by Islamic and pre-Islamic customs. It may be noted that these are the customs that the women themselves have helped to reproduce and keep alive. But whose interests these customary traditions serve is another crucial question to ponder.

Have Uzbek women really lived in false consciousness? It is not my intent to question the silence of their gendered struggle, for there are many definitions of women’s resistance, struggle and coping strategies. How different would it be if traditional culture did not prescribe such a defined gendered role and identity in society? It would be some other form of patriarchal power. Hence, it is not surprising that women opt for traditional space to reclaim their belonging; it is also the agency through which they can express themselves.

Despite public invisibility, self-confinement to the domestic realm, and the lack of an equal voice with male members, women had their own ways of dealing with the problems they faced and have worked hard to increase their status within their kin. Family laws and gender roles were reproduced within spaces that were not open to
outsiders. So, women had their network within this space which they used to understand their environment, educate themselves, and to a certain extent, negotiate their status.

Informal gatherings among women served as cultural conduits and information exchange channels. They provided a safe space for developing new relationships, sharing experiences and passing on oral customs to the next generation. Usually held once a month in one of the participant’s home, such gatherings continue till present day and are looked forward to with a great deal of anticipation. While the principal activity usually entails congregating over dinner, the event itself carries far greater significance to the lives of its participants. This rare space, exclusive to women, allows them to momentarily relinquish their ascribed demure and subordinate roles. Even before the October Revolution of the early 20th century, women dealt with their stress and problems through such informal circles.

Informal women’s gatherings are differentiated from modern women’s organizations in that the former is not recognized as having the necessary goals and the vision to qualify as an official group working towards the enhancement of the status of women; rather such gatherings are seen as fluid, unstructured and spontaneous. It is perhaps because most women shared similar problems including social discrimination that they grew tolerant and acceptant of social gender roles. Consequently, their networks never spawned into organizations seeking substantial change. Such an attitude is often misinterpreted as false consciousness and passivity by some Westerners who studied other cultures.
Nevertheless, such networks and gatherings “served as the means through which help, support, new ways to access resources and challenges to hierarchy have been often enacted” (Purkayastha & Subramaniam eds. 2004, p.122). Such traditional gatherings today known as “gap”, continued well into the 21st century and monthly meetings are organized voluntarily by women themselves. Other forms of women’s organizing were starting to form as new educational enlightenment started spreading and could have led to significant positive changes in women’s lives at its own pace, if not for the Soviet’s forced liberation of indigenous women.

Islam and Enlightenment

Traditionally, education, be it enlightenment or conscientization as named by Paulo Freire (1993), serves as an essential element of social development. In order to glorify its universal educational achievements in Uzbekistan, Soviet literature tends to underplay the type of education women (and men) in Turkestan received before their mass emancipation during the Soviet era. Marianne Kamp (2006) a history professor at the University of Wyoming in her book the New Woman in Uzbekistan argues that “the informality of Islamic education for girls and its removal from the public eye, are factors in its absence from colonial literature and in the Russian administration’s impression that Sart (Uzbek) girls were all illiterate”(p. 81).

Prior to the Tsarist invasion, there were many religious schools for boys and informal home schools for girls (specific data is unavailable). The high proportion of clerical personnel – a ratio of about one cleric [religious teacher] for every 24 individuals – reflected the heavy investment by Muslims in religious culture and education (Medlin,
Cave & Carpenter, 1971, p.11). Observers in the 19th century noted that in Bukhara alone, every street had its own *maktab* (school) (Landsell, 1885, p. 120). In the gender segregated Muslim societies of Turkestan, girls were taught by *otins* (female religious teachers) in closed communities. *Otins* served as educators and religious leaders to local women. They formed their own chain of knowledge transmission and in the gatherings involving religious practice, women’s separation from men allowed for the creation of women’s religious authority (Kamp, 2006, p. 77). Even today, *otins* are regarded as religious leaders and educators for women in many communities. Women’s customary ceremonies and religious prayers gain significant energy with their presence.

Only a handful of women, mostly from better off families, were able to continue their education. Education gave them an intrinsic value for marriage, but it also armed them with the motivation to advocate for improvements in the status of women. Written records about women’s activism and social groups before the Revolution are close to nonexistent. This is due to the negligible attention given to women’s contribution to society and literature. Great figures among women in old Turkestan were poetesses and *otins* who also happened to come from well-to-do families. They advocated for women’s liberation within Islam as an integral part of Central Asian culture and tradition. Their efforts in the public realm were without impact until the late 19th Century when cultural changes in men’s attitudes started taking place with the influence of Ottoman and Tatar reform movements.

Men who called themselves *Jadids* (modern thinkers) came from families of merchants or the educated that lived mostly in the cities of the Russian Empire. The
Jadidism movement was influenced by the interaction of Ottoman and Tatar reform movements and the influence of Russian colonial institutions (Kamp, 1998). Their discourse highlighted a more egalitarian interpretation of Islam than what had been practiced in Turkestan. Although they did not call for women’s universal rights in the socio-economic-political spheres, they did advocate for girls’ education. This movement reflects the voice of today’s Islamic feminists, who, unlike their Western counterparts, seek women’s liberation within Islamic law and traditions. The Jadidism movement was a milestone in women’s access to public education - previously reserved for the benefit of men only.

The Woman’s Question on the State Agenda

The Jadidism national intelligentsia movement created a platform for women to raise their voice in the public sphere. Tatar reformers in Samarqand formed women’s societies and schools for girls where they hoped to attract Muslim women in the early 20th century. The 1916 uprising against Russian colonial authority marked the first instance of public demonstration by Uzbek women. Kamp (1998) writes that “modern Uzbek historians characterized this uprising as the first that had the character of a “national-liberation” movement… which also included significant participation of Muslim women (of Turkestan) for the first time” (p. 96). What triggered such activism among women is not well documented, but women’s accounts and cultural explanations explored in Kamp’s (2006) research suggests that women’s motivations were rather personal. Making the “personal political” is what Western feminists advocated with regards to women’s rights throughout the second half of twentieth century. What would
bring women together to the streets if they were not incited with the will to resist what they considered oppressive?

Women’s struggle stemmed from their collective concern for their family members – in other words, for the breadwinners who were called upon to serve in the army. It has been well documented that women’s participation in nationalist movements had a significant impact on many anti-colonial struggles globally; for the Uzbeks, their struggle was against the Russian empire. It was the indigenous women’s way of making their personal issue a political one by publicly organizing, protesting, joining violent attacks and suffering consequences, such as being exiled to Siberia (Kamp, 1998). In contrast to their image as underdogs in Muslim Turkestan, women’s political activism started gaining attention. While one could place this movement within the context of the general women’s movements in Russia during that period, Kamp (2006) parallels it with women’s political participation in Muslim societies including the Iranian uprising in 1911, and women’s demonstrations in Egypt in 1911 demanding participation in parliament.

The Revolution of 1917 promised changes in women’s lives in the public domain. But like the nationalist movements in other Muslim countries, including Egypt, Iran and Pakistan, women’s issues were used as instruments for reform and nation building. For instance, the advancement of women in the political sphere through their accession to voting rights became a source of contention between Jadids and conservative Islamists. 

Jadids wanted to secure more votes for their progressive nationalist program by allowing
women to vote, while conservative Islamists wanted to exclude women to increase their chances of electoral success (Adeeb, 1996).

Consequently, the real voices of average women were not taken into account even though the theme of women’s liberation figured prominently in the national agenda of many countries. Two important elements should be factored in when discussing the “noble” initiative of the Soviet agenda to improve Uzbek women’s status: 1) the use of modernization theory in building a new colony required the participation of all citizens in public life to maximize economic exploitation, and women represented a good half of the able-bodied workforce; 2) the imposition of top-down culturally insensitive “women’s empowerment” Soviet policies within a short period of time created a double identity for many women and failed to penetrate the deeply rooted traditional gender ideologies of men and women; subsequently, these values and customs continued to survive in the private lives of indigenous communities in the form of family traditions.

**Empowering Soviet Women**

The 1920s marked an important period in the development of women’s formal political agency, including Muslim women’s conferences and societies with agendas addressing the impact of socio-cultural-political issues of women. Male authority in determining and defining the scope of women’s rights was strongly challenged, particularly in the arena of women’s education and voting rights. Additionally *Jadid* women started seeking a more egalitarian interpretation of *Shari’a*²⁴ law.

In the international arena, Muslim women’s associations in Russia started developing networks with Turkestan women, inviting them to conferences, training
selected women in leadership roles and publicizing Central Asian women’s issues in newspapers and magazines. Particularly, noteworthy was the establishment of the *Yangi Yo’l* (New Path) magazine for Uzbek and Tatar women by the Soviet Women’s Division of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan.

Though part of the broader women’s movement in Russia, *Yangi Yo’l* was distinct from other women’s magazines in that it was geared towards the socio-cultural experiences of Uzbek women and echoed Islamic modernity as promoted by the Jadids. The editorial and management board of the *Yangi Yo’l*, including its contributors, was comprised of female Uzbek activists who came from Jadid schools and shared the vision of the movement: they wanted women to be educated, know their rights, participate in public life and politics and be liberated from forced veiling. Although their views seemed radical to many traditional Uzbeks, particularly clergymen, their standpoint was far more culturally attuned than the programs targeted towards women that would be advocated by the Soviets (Kamp, 2006).

*Backlash of Soviet Emancipation*

From 1917 to 1926 Turkestan was divided into administrative republics to efficiently control and administer Soviet colonial rule. The borders of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) were drawn into the heart of all the other Central Asian SSRs. Central Asia - also referred to as the “Virgin Lands” - needed to be explored, exploited and its people modernized from a “backward” lifestyle. To develop and accentuate the conception of nationhood, the Soviets identified Central Asian women as an underclass among the citizenry - oppressed under patriarchal despotism and religious canons. In
other words, the Soviet patriarch wanted to liberate indigenous women from their local oppressors to bring them under its own power and domination. A bureaucratic and gendered hierarchy nonetheless persisted in the Soviet Party system throughout its existence.

The “Soviet’s call to a new life was couched in terms that clearly echoed the Marxist dictum about the makings of revolutionary class-consciousness: it was necessary not only to cause people to be frightened by their own image but also to give them courage” (Massel, 1974, p.126). Islam was thus labeled as the principal “backward” element hindering the cultural advancement of Central Asian Muslims; as such, to bring women into the “light” and liberate them from the yoke of oppressive traditions - the religion needed to be eliminated. Motivations for propaganda promoting the “unveiling” of women were also straightforward: once empowered, politicized and turned into “Soviet proletariat” (Massel, 1974), women would constitute the party’s principal grassroots artery to develop the culture of communism in Uzbekistan. It was tantamount to strategic violence against Uzbek culture where women symbolized its colors and their bodies the sacrificial battlefield.

In 1927 the Communist Party launched an offensive attack against Islam aptly titled Hujum (attack) in the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). The centerpiece of this program was public, theatrical rituals of unveiling whereby women demonstrated their loyalty to the Communist State. It was as a reaction to this deliberate aggression, that the paranji (full veil) attained political significance. Otherwise, even before this massive political agitation, progressive Jadids - both indigenous men and women - tried
to popularize the practice of unveiling and were gaining some influence; however progress was slow and faced resistance by religious leaders.

Consequently, the Communist party concentrated on the legal route to women’s emancipation. Even before this campaign began, women had already developed contacts with the interventionist state through schools, meetings, land reforms, cultural cooperatives, literacy courses and voting (Kamp, 2006, p.146). Therefore, the Party expected a relatively smooth transformation. Instead, Hujum resulted in the outbreak of violent resistance and backlash against women - both veiled and unveiled, claiming the lives of thousands of women who died in the hands of their own kin (Massel, 1974). In the name of “honor killing” local men sacrificed their daughters, sisters and wives for participating in the Soviet propaganda of women’s emancipation.

What was once a simple outfit for some women, the paranji came to be defended as the bearer of sacred traditions. Through the resultant struggle, it rapidly gained the status of an Uzbek national emblem - by and large the consequence of the Party’s efforts to eradicate it (Northrop, 2004, p. 31). After a century, veiling, both as a political tool of resistance to the regime, and as a symbol of oppression of the religious patriarchy, would echo in modern Uzbek society again, but without Communism or the Soviet agenda. It would be in the form of a nationalist struggle searching for its authentic identity in which women would become signifiers of a new transformation. Whether it was Soviet colonialism or the nationalist State, it was patriarchy that women had to deal with.

The modern Uzbek State’s own campaign to discourage women from going back to veiling after independence unconsciously repeated the history of the 1920s. Once
again, veiling was portrayed as a symbol of the struggle between the State and women. Both the Soviet and the current Uzbek state used local religious leaders to disseminate their policies on veiling; however, while the Soviets saw to the strengthening of \textit{Jadidism}, the Uzbek State faced growing resentment among economically struggling and ideologically confused masses. Both resorted to harsher methods of ensuring implementation of their policies which had adverse physical and psychological effects on women.

Despite the Party’s good intentions to free women from what they considered oppression, their strategy and mode of implementation victimized and exposed women. They left the very women they wanted to empower in between two dominant forces: the coercive state and the conservative society. Kamp (2006) compares this violence with the racial lynching that used to take place in the U.S. in the pre-civil rights era and Akiner calls it the “defeat and brutal rape” of a culture and a “monstrous violation of the honor and dignity of the community” (1997, p. 271).

Kamp (2006) argues that under the Soviet campaign, women themselves greeted the unveiling campaign with a blend of resistance, fear and uncertainty. This was mostly due to the hasty and coercive nature of the transformation and the lack of consideration for local customs and women’s own feelings. Given that prostitutes did not traditionally wear the veil, discourse on the topic was politicized in such a fashion that, to a certain extent, it strengthened the association between unveiling and prostitution.

Additionally, Russian culture was viewed as corrupt and impure and unveiled Russian women did not serve as role models for local women. The impetus to rape,
mutilate and murder women for unveiling reflected the intensity of local opposition against the State’s intervention in cultural matters. The reluctance of many women to unveil and the tendency among others who had never worn the veil or who had already publicly unveiled to re-don the veil, came from the genuine fear of the consequences of social persecution (see discussions in Corcoran-Nantes, 2005, Kamp, 2006).

First Women’s Organization

Male domination in pre-Soviet Islamic Uzbek society negated any realistic possibility for women to develop credible organizational movements on their own accord without some support from external forces. It was the Soviet State’s drastic policies that empowered women’s organizational movements in Uzbekistan through which their voices could be represented in public. Despite the Soviet state’s economic motivations behind the mobilization of women, it did provide them with the opportunity to gain public education, state employment and economic bargaining power. The problem with this emancipation was that the women’s liberation campaign was a tool to efficiently exploit the “Virgin land”.

It was Russian and Western influenced Muslim women, such as Tatars, who instigated and advocated for women’s organized movements in Central Asia in the early 1920s. These women leaders faced immediate challenges with their mission to empower Central Asian women: they did not understand the language, nor did they have experience with the local women’s culture. A need to identify and train home grown female leaders played a role in the emergence of Uzbek female activists. Uzbek activists came from mainly two contrasting sources: educated progressive Jadid families and
broken families. Nonetheless, their goal was the same - they wanted to see their women educated, unveiled, and aware of their rights. Affirmative action positively discriminated for local women to ascend the Communist Party hierarchy and lead women’s sections of state programs (Kamp, 2006, pp. 98-108).

Several Women’s Committees and government organized and funded organizations were set up throughout Central Asia. Their role was to transmit Communist ideology and implement the Central Party’s programs in the field. Even though campaigns and programs to empower women were administered with a top down approach, it was grassroots organizations and local women’s leadership that served as the bridge to reach out to the masses of women.

These organizations acted as watchdogs monitoring and ensuring that local officials and employees fulfilled legislative obligations towards women. With official power granted by state committees, they provided legal, educational and employment services to women, lobbied on their behalf to Party organs, and publicized both problems and success stories dealing with women’s lives and their transformation. Their roles as advocates for women’s issues caused some Party members to criticize these organizations for promoting feminist values rather than socialist ideology (Corcoran-Nantes, 2005; Kamp, 2006).

“Yangi Yo’l” Women’s Magazine

Yangi Yo’l became an important news magazine and a critical news outlet for women, particularly during the Hujum campaign. They publicized women’s experiences, voices and the tragic consequences of patriarchal oppression. Based on these activities,
Women’s Committees pressed the Party and head offices in Moscow to provide better protection for unveiled women, as well as for women seeking state support from their abusive families. They lobbied the government to increase punishment for acts of violence against women, demonstrating elements of the voluntary public activist Western feminist organizations of present day. Such women’s magazines do not exist in Uzbekistan even today.

At the local level, women’s committees organized various activities to involve women in public life. One such activity that proved to be highly effective was the establishment of social clubs exclusively geared towards women’s issues. The effectiveness of these clubs could be attributed to an informal environment, to membership being restricted to women, and to outreach in the most remote rural areas. A safe and unthreatening environment provided women with a sense of belonging to these groups.

These social clubs offered consultations on nutrition, child care, health care, legal and educational services (Alimova, 1987; Aminova, 1977). They were a remarkable innovation given the conventional environment in which women lived. They represented the first tentative step towards women’s full participation in public life (Buckley ed. 1997, p. 269) and served as a “nexus of self-help and mutual support for women and their families throughout the Soviet period” (Browning, 1992, p.102). This was not the first support network for women, but unlike traditional women’s gatherings, they offered an organizational structure, wider networking opportunities and connections with public offices.
Overall, women’s participation in political movements geared towards socialism grew with the support of the State. Women’s groups were especially active in promoting literacy among women. Trade Unions, Young Communist Leagues and other socio-political organizations were also seeing rapid increases in female membership. Alimova (1987) notes that local women constituted eighty percent of anti-religious circles (p. 55). Special women’s cooperatives and shops were set up to enable women to work outside the home and generate an earning. Akiner (1997) notes that by 1937 women were involved in almost all aspects of production of the cotton crop (p. 275). By the 1950s, women outnumbered men as active members of the kolkhoz (collective farms) labor force in Uzbekistan (Kamp 2006, p. 223). Women constituted cheap and efficient labor at the collective farms. They were also less likely than men to move out of their villages in search of new opportunities in the cities.

In 1930, the central apparatus of the Women’s Division was dismissed and its workers reassigned to different places with the allegation that their goals did not align with that of the Party. Official explanation for their dismissal was that all women’s issues were resolved, and women had successfully been “liberated”. While the State was still interested in women’s political integration and women’s divisions in state offices continued, the coherent voice and unified representation of women’s issues were lost. The Yangi Yo’l journal was turned over to the Division of Agitation and Propaganda and was no longer primarily concerned with women’s issues (Kamp, 2006, p. 217). During the cleansing of nationalist anti-government groups, many prominent Uzbek female activists were purged and sent to exile along with their male counterparts (Northrop,
2004). In many ways, the Soviet agenda presents the classic case of colonial oppression which effectively and violently used the cause of women to maximize the exploitation of land and labor in Central Asia.

Women’s organizations and groups continued to appear and function under Soviet rule, but they did not have the importance, weight or influence in society and State that the Women’s Division had before the 1930s. The State strictly controlled all activities of its branches and non-political organizations. Policies on social welfare appear to have been planned and implemented by the State without pressure from organized women’s groups (Aminova, 1977; Kamp, 1998; Massell, 1974). Bureaucracy, corruption, hierarchy, fear of purges and loss of Party membership collectively reined in the activities of existing organizations.

Uzbek women could “own” the process of emancipation and lead organized activities to improve the lives of women – as long as they did not challenge the official state ideology. Women’s organizations that emerged to struggle against patriarchal subordination were themselves subordinated by the Soviet regime. Kamp (2006) argues that “the state itself was a patriarchy, thus women’s equality was a symbolic transformation” (p. 232). Consequently, women’s organizations responded, first and foremost, not to women but to the interests and demands of the Soviet State.

Women’s organizational movements that started out with bold and revolutionary visions during the 1920-30s transformed a small segment of women. Women’s lives and gender relations outside of urban and central areas continued in the same fashion, at least tacitly. Akiner (1997) argues:
Central Asian women did not in fact assume the role of a revolutionary force to destroy traditional society. Rather, they colluded in its preservation: by accommodating external pressures through the adoption of additional identities, appropriate to the public sphere, they deflected intrusions into the private domain, thereby protecting the integrity of the older disposition of family roles. (in Buckley ed. 1997, p. 276)

During the 1960s, emphasis on women’s councils reactivated some elements of women’s active organizations. Nevertheless these councils merely served as ad-hoc groups and did not have an independent organizational movement. They were adjunct organizations to the Party, trade unions or other Soviet bodies and served the purpose of drawing more women into political life and the labor market (Buckley, 1989, pp. 149-50).

Contacts with the Western world were not established until the mid 1980s under Gorbachev’s reformation. From the period of their inception women’s councils promoted an ideology that focused on women’s biological roles. During Gorbachev’s presidency, women’s councils in Uzbekistan gained permanent status within the branches of the State. They were headed by women of certain category who held positions within these branches. Women’s councils had the power to advocate for the collective interest of women by lobbying to the State. However, the totalitarian environment of the political structure limited their scope of work to distributing assistance to needy women (Abdurazakova, 1986, pp. 188-89). After independence, these councils were renamed as Women’s Committees; however, their scope of work did not change significantly for a long time.
The Communist Party announced that the full integration of women had been achieved region-wide in all spheres of social, political and economic life. The attainment of universal literacy for both men and women was one of the most notable socialist reforms. Women were represented in politics and administrative offices, albeit very marginally in the case of indigenous groups. Working mothers were entitled to generous social benefits, particularly those with more than four children.

*Paranji* disappeared from the public domain and second generation Soviet women did not question its disappearance from public life. Ironically, the veil was relegated to the confines of traditional homes until it became a symbol of Islamic renaissance after independence. “While the indigenous population may have begun to pay lip service to the regime in actions and words, there was no legislation that could dictate what went on in their hearts and minds” (Tokhtakhodjaeva, 1996, p. 64). People, especially in the rural areas, continued to observe religious customs [mostly underground] and consequently preserved unofficial Islamic practices and cultural traditions. The anecdotal recollections of my mother who was born (1958) and raised in the conservative community of the Ferghana Valley is a testimony to how women dealt with conflicting expectations in their daily lives:

I always covered my head with a scarf, and wore traditional trousers under my dress. But every time I went to attend school or college or to work in the city, as soon as I left my Mahalla, I would stuff the headscarf in my purse, lift the trousers all the way up under my dress, and put on make up to look like a modern Soviet woman (Azizahon, 49 y.o.).
The clash of Soviet modernization and local cultural traditions deprived many women of self fulfillment and completeness as individuals. They had to compartmentalize their selfhood and their efforts to negotiate with both the public and private domain. It was “a catch 22” situation. For some women, while fully embracing the modern Soviet woman’s image promised them a successful public career, it came at the cost of rejecting and being cast out from their cultural roots.

On the other hand, Muslim women who were encouraged to be politically active, who had been recruited to serve as agents of change – were not completely embraced by the ethnocentric and discriminatory communist regime. Many of these “Muslim women who had risen to the highest echelons of the party in the region noted the ‘conservatism’ that prevailed even among the most politicized and intelligent members of the Communist Party” (Massell, 1974, p. 302). They always remained inferior to Russian women, because they were not European; consequently, even successful career women (among Uzbeks) were confronted by sexist and racist attitudes and structures both inside and outside of the party system.

Such attitudes left many indigenous Uzbek women between two conflicting identities of the modern emancipated Soviet woman and the traditional Muslim woman, making them feel like outsiders in both the public and private space. “The debate over the costs and benefits of the Soviet revolution pertaining to the emancipation of Uzbek women was deferred until after independence - some sixty years later - when the question of nationalism and cultural identity re-emerged and ‘outsiders’ became ‘insiders’ once again” (Corcoran-Nantes, 2005, p. 59). It is noteworthy that Women’s Committees
initiated by the Soviets laid the foundation for an associational culture where agencies were created to act as pressure groups and respond to and publicize women’s concerns.

Women in Post Soviet Uzbekistan

After the sudden collapse of Communism, Uzbekistan gained independence in 1991 and has been in economic transition ever since. The nation inherited a number of problems from the Soviet Union, including - but not limited to – an inefficient economic system, internal and cross border ethnic conflicts, corruption and drastic environmental problems. Almost 50% of the entire population was estimated to be under the poverty line in 1998 following the Russian economic crisis (Aslan, 2008).

Women were affected the most, directly through the labor market and indirectly through the erosion of social protection benefits. According to a 2002 World Bank report, financing for social services in Uzbekistan decreased by more than 60% (World Bank, 2002). Women faced discrimination in the socio-economic, educational and political fields, and were encouraged to leave the work force as they were losing the Soviet-era privileges that enabled them to work outside the home while raising their children (Carlson, 2000).

State subsidized preschools were eliminated and replaced by informal family daycares. The pattern of familial preference for the boy child in formal schooling has become increasingly evident. Enrollment and literacy rates were no longer universal, partly due to reforms in the educational structure and the changing of the official written language from Cyrillic to the Latin script, which particularly impacted older age groups.
as adult education courses were not offered. School dropout rates are on the rise and more prominent among girls than boys in the rural areas (Tokhtakhodjaeva, 1996).

In the political sphere, the representation of women in Parliament dwindled from 36% in 1985 to 7% in 2000 (Alimdjanova, 2002). Thousands of rural women - once transformed into the principal source of unskilled labor in the agriculture sector\(^{25}\) became heavily dependent on government support. In the cotton industry - Uzbekistan’s principal cash crop - manual cotton picking still remains a primarily female domain\(^{26}\) with 50%-75% of family income in this sector coming from female labor (Alimdjanova, 2002; Melvin, 2000).

The material bases of traditional patriarchal controls to which women are subjected are being eroded by the processes of socio-economic transformation and existing authoritarian thresholds are being tested by the emerging demands of modern life (Kandioti, 1988; Kandioti, 1991). Well trained professionals from social service industries have left their jobs in droves to try their luck in the high-risk albeit lucrative growth sector of informal trade and commerce. Women reign supreme over the informal inter-regional trading sector which earns them bargaining power and economic independence on one hand, and the loss of the privileges of social safety nets that accompany state jobs on the other (Corcoran-Nantes, 2005, p. 101). Rural poverty necessitated large masses of unemployed women to try their luck as *mardikors* (daily laborers) in the *bazaars*\(^{27}\) and migrants workers in big cities and neighboring countries.

In his book *“In Defense of Globalization”* Bhagwati’s (2004) description of women’s situation in many developing countries is appropriate to apply to the current
state of many Uzbek women. He argues that “women are replacing men - as employers seek the cheapest, most reliable workers. In such cases, women are getting temporary jobs but (typically) under conditions that exacerbate their vulnerability and exploitation as cheap labor” (p. 83). A UNDP conducted survey showed that respondents hired at mardikor-bazaars complained of insults (49 percent), non-payment of wages (34 percent) and sexual harassment (19 percent) – much more often women in other migrant labor categories (Abdullayev, 2007).

The result of women’s active participation in the informal sector, such as trade, domestic work and agriculture as mardikors is also partly due to the massive out-migration of men to other countries in search of jobs (Moscow News, 2007). The official website of the U.S. Department of State notes that: “Estimates range from lows of 3 million to highs of 5 million Uzbek citizens of working age living outside Uzbekistan, most in neighboring countries or Russia” (Aslan, 2008). Women in these households are left without their male breadwinners and sometimes forced to work in terrible conditions, often being lured as sex workers in other countries.

Concurrently, the rise of renewed interest in Islamic customs after independence made it even more difficult for women to gain employment outside the household without being harassed or abused. Analysis of female unemployment shows strong correlation with their level of education - the majority of unemployed are those with a secondary or lower level of education (Gah, ed. 1996, p.8). Even though male to female ratio in primary and secondary education is fairly equal, an overwhelming number of girls in rural areas discontinue their education after the 9th grade.
Since independence, the gender inequality gap in the public and private sphere is widening. Men as guardians of their female kin are held more responsible for women’s morality and honor. The status of women in Uzbek society has also been affected by the official promotion of an “idealized role for women as self-sacrificing wives and mothers, a patriarchal concept of women as people in need of protection, and the de-emphasis of women's public role” (Cooper & Traugott, 2003, p. 9.). Press, radio and television programs are romanticizing the female role in the household - emphasizing devoted Muslim motherhood, while down-playing the importance of women’s achievements outside the home (G’ulomova, Abduraimova, Ashirova, et al. eds., 1999).

Pukhova (1988) noted that this message was echoed even during the late 1980s, partly as a backlash to the Communist idealization of women as workers and partly in response to a rising rate of unemployment (Kamp, 2006, p. 45). One can observe that the current state’s approach to women’s issues reinforces women’s value and societal role as a group, and not as individuals. It is hard when women’s reality and individual concerns are not discussed in public, let alone given a voice when they do rise up to speak. Only issues deemed important and compatible with the state, in this case patriarchy, are given consideration.

Regardless of the motivations and experiences of individuals, state policies and Islamic revivalism have incited and intensified concerns about female sexuality, space and action. By means of a complex system of intimidation and persuasion, women have been reconciled to retreat from the modern economy and compensated with the honor due to committed Muslim mothers. On the other hand, single mothers and women in the most
poverty stricken areas were forced to take the double burden of performing the role of the exemplary Muslim female at home while scrabbling to make a living in poorly paid jobs.

Cooper and Traugott (2003) argue that economic pressure also led women to be involved and exploited by drug mafias tied to fundamentalists across the borders, the profits of which go to fund terrorist operations in the region. Jobless, impoverished women are being used as "drug mules" to transport drugs, sometimes within their bodies, and the number of such women in Central Asian prisons as a whole is increasing (p. 3). Some women who hold jobs in high positions of the government offices often face the duality of being westernized, independent woman, and exemplary housewives. The dichotomy of expectations on women is a result of the lack of women in important decision making processes and the lack of gender awareness in society.

Women’s Organizations in Uzbekistan

Post independence activism of women’s groups can be divided into three different types: 1) political parties, 2) centrally controlled women’s organizations such as Women’s Committees and GONGOs and 3) non-governmental women’s organizations (NGOs).

From 1991-92, a small number of political women’s movements made a fleeting appearance, the most notable being the Uzbek-based Tumaris (the female wing of the opposition party Birlık). The Muslim Women’s League’s fared a little better but eventually proved to be unsustainable (Buckley ed. 1997, p. 292). These movements emerged at the outset of the new national ideology and consequently threatened the authority of established rule. While little is known of their structure and goals, their
efforts to organize themselves within the political juggernaut was short-lived but nonetheless noteworthy.

*Centrally Controlled Women's Organizations*

The new Uzbek State, whose leaders are the remnants of Soviet era bureaucrats, adopted a number of measures to give legal and political support to women’s organizations. Traditionally, there existed only a single kind of women’s organization(s) as inherited from the Soviet system: government funded Women’s Committees that continued functioning after independence, renamed as National Women’s Committees. On the eve of the first UN Global Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, President Karimov elevated the head of the Central Women’s Committee to the role of deputy prime minister. She was also made chairwoman of the Committee on Women’s Affairs thereby greatly enhancing their profile (Mee, 2001, pp. 12-13; Sirojiddinov, 1999, p. 25). This organization continued to have the same structural base, with branches set up in all provinces of the country. At the grassroots level these committees have offices located in Mahalla units where:

According to a decree of President Karimov on March 2, 1995, a female vice-chair is compulsory for each administrative unit, thus providing women with much more authority. The Mahalla Women’s Committees are linked to the Rayon (province) or City Women’s Committees (composed of ten to fifteen Mahalla Committees) which are in turn linked to the Metropolitan Women’s Committees. Finally, all Metropolitan Women’s
Committees are linked to the Central Women’s Committee in the capital Tashkent (Saktanber & Ozatas-Baykal, 2000, p. 234).

In contrast to the Soviet era, Women’s Committees were not initially expected to operate as semi-independent institutions given that the government no longer financed programs and operating costs. While they functioned as an administrative body of the government, they did not have strong political influence as a pressure group on behalf of women. Their official role was limited to promoting and implementing government policies pertaining to women’s social welfare issues and answering to the central office. Corcoran-Nantes (2005) argues that in this way, the “official” women’s organization was sidelined from institutional politics, forced to adapt to new circumstances and redefine its role as a Government-Organized Non Governmental Organizations (GONGOs) (p.177).

Women’s committees in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan had similar readjustments. Similar to the Women’s Committee, GONGOs had considerable networking capacity and an established presence at the state level; consequently they were able to secure humanitarian assistance and faced fewer problems in maintaining their operations to present day. This privilege may have contributed to the antagonism among certain independent non-profits that often competed with GONGOs for funding and assistance (Handaran, 1999).

Others have presented the argument that Women’s Committees – once their official status was reinstated by the government - became hostile to women’s NGOs due to the competition to secure grants from international donor agencies. The relationship between these two types of organizations has complex political and social implications;
their inability to work together undoubtedly reflects the challenges that need to be overcome in order to represent the women of Uzbekistan in their entirety.

*Women’s NGOs*

The rollercoaster transition period since 1991 created an urgent need for international assistance to deal with the immediate socio-economic problems in Uzbekistan. International development agencies started supporting the creation of an independent civil society where NGOs would take an active role in assisting the government to build a democratic society. The State embraced the ideals of democracy and civil society with caution, deliberating on the consequences of Western imported concepts on the political stability of the country. President Karimov welcomed such progressive movements by calling upon NGOs to provide assistance and “constructive” criticism.

Corcoran-Nantes (2005) argues that the formation of women’s NGOs emerged from a long standing institutional tradition of women’s organizations initiated by the Soviet State. Faced with the challenges of the transition period, educated indigenous women played a critical role in the growing influence and presence of NGOs in society. These NGOs focused on issues central to the socio-political-economic status of women, including human rights, literacy, health and vocational training programs, assistance to women with disabilities etc.

Some of the first women’s NGOs in Central Asia started out by researching and defining the problems that their groups would eventually develop programs to address. One such group was the Uzbekistan Women’s Resource Center which drew its member
from the scientific and higher education communities (Luong ed. 2004, p. 205). The Centre published a number of research based articles, reports and books on critical issues surrounding women and gender relations in Uzbekistan.

The nature of women’s organizations and movements started changing when the government seemed to be willing to allow these groups to use foreign aid as well as an international approach to dealing with women’s issues. Their approach to women’s issues was different from the traditional state-run women’s organizations of the Soviet period: they started networking with international women’s organizations beyond their own regional bloc, drew from international gender critiques, developed programs that were distinctly more feminist than those of the Soviet period and in some ways presented counterarguments to the state promoted ideals of womanhood (Ikramova & McConnell, 1999; Luong & Wienthal, 1999).

Many women’s NGO leaders traveled abroad to participate in international leadership trainings, conferences and cultural exchange programs (Adamson, 1999). The experience and perspective gained from such programs allowed them to envision and construct the socio-political agenda of their organizations. Some of these NGOs have also been strongly influenced by the agenda of the Committee on CEDAW (Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women) to which Uzbekistan has been a signatory since 1995. As a key player in civil society, these organizations de-monopolized the role of the National Women’s Committee through the development of international networks and partnerships. Both independent women’s NGOs and Women’s
Committees were engaged in improving the status of women - though the actual program they implemented sometimes contradicted each others goals and lacked coordination.

Owing to its co-optation by the State, the work program of the Women’s Committee tip-toed around the official dogma by heavily emphasizing women’s traditional roles, whereas independent women’s organizations countered such arguments by pressuring the government to uphold its obligations to international conventions emphasizing the empowerment of women and the establishment of their rights. The state-run Women’s Committee retaliated with the counter-argument that given the overdependence of independent women’s NGOs on foreign assistance, they promoted goals and visions that did not necessarily match with the local needs (Abramson, 1999, pp. 17-19; Corcoran-Nantes, 2005, p.186). Despite these conflicting positions and exchanges of criticism, both the Women’s Committee and independent women’s NGOs have made attempts to coexist as to do otherwise would “severely weaken the position of both” (Corcoran-Nantes, 2006, p. 185).

*Women’s NGO Movement and Their Contributions (1995-2005)*

One of the most notable achievements of the NGO sector is the mobilization of educated women into a circle of relatively independent, empowered activists. Feminization of the NGO sector was partly due to the disappearing outlets for educated women to participate in genuine socio-economic-political decision making processes and partly due to the space created and supported through the gender mainstreaming efforts of American and European democracy programs.
The focus of most women’s NGO activities and projects encompassed the areas central to women’s economic, social and political status, including business and vocational training, legal literacy, counseling, health and domestic violence programs and assistance to women with disabilities. Other spheres where women’s NGOs have had success in varying degree include projects targeted towards the youth, environmental protection and cross border conflict resolution.

In the field of research and scholarship, the Women’s Research Center (WRC) established in 1995 conducted and publicized a series of research papers, manuals, reference-books and journals addressing the socio-economic-cultural-political challenges that women face during transition. Notably, one of the collections titled *Women of Central Asia* is a one of a kind reading for post Soviet era women. It initiated dialogue for Central Asian women to express their views and concerns about everything political and personal. It differed from mainstream women’s journals and magazines of the post Soviet era with its boldness and hard facts supported by uncensored and critical analysis of patriarchal oppressions. The views of this collection reflected elements of the pioneer *Yangi Yo’l* women’s magazine which played a critical role in raising awareness about women’s oppressions during the early Sovietization period.

These activities represent only a fragment of the successful contribution made by women’s NGOs to society. The expansion and strengthening of the NGO sector has helped the State to address one of the most pressing challenges of transition: unemployment. In an effort to support women’s entrepreneurial activities, several NGO projects designed after successful initiatives like the Self Employed Women’s
Association (SEWA) in India began making a significant impact on the lives of rural women.

One such initiative is the Business Women’s Association (BWA) (Tadbirkor Ayol) focusing on micro financing and entrepreneurship. Since its inception, BWA has created thousands of jobs, and trained over seven thousand unemployed women. One of its integrated project initiatives on poverty reduction through micro credit lending and vocational training for women resulted in the successful lobbying of the State to enact measures to develop micro financing activities, adopted by the Cabinet of Ministers on August 20, 2002 (Best Practices, 2008).

Women’s NGOs also actively participated in governmental and international conferences, conventions, campaigns and trainings. To name just a few, one of the prominent Uzbek scholars, the former director of the Women’s Resource Center, Marfua Tokhtakhodjaeva, was recognized in the Roll of Honor during the Civil Society meeting of the UN General Assembly in 2000. She has published a number of analytical and scholarly articles and books on women’s status in Uzbekistan. UN-Habitat listed the Business Women’s Association NGO of Uzbekistan in the category of Best Practices of Women’s Empowerment in 2008 (Best Practices, 2008).

The Director of the NGO Center “Perzent” Oral Ataniyazova won the Goldman Prize in 2000 for her activist work addressing the Aral Sea crisis (Women’s Earth Alliance, 2005). Muborak Tashpulatova, the former director of the Tashkent Public Education Center NGO received the National Endowment for Democracy’s ‘Democracy Award’ from the US First Lady in 2002 for her outstanding work on cross border conflict
prevention and leadership in women’s regional networking (World Movement for Democracy, 2002). Mo’tabar Tadjibayeva, a founder of the Fiery Hearts Club in Ferghana that worked to promote women’s rights and who was subsequently jailed for her activism and criticism of the regime, was named as a laureate of 2008 Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders (MEA, 2008); in 2009, she received an International Women of Courage Award from senator Hillary Clinton at the White House in Washington DC.

Foreign Assistance

Foreign assistance for the growth of “civil society” has fostered the creation of as many as 200 women’s NGOs since 1995. While women’s movements are home grown, due to the lack of a “local donor or corporate support base”, most receive their funding, training and organizational structure from international NGOs and foreign donor agencies (Ruffin & Waugh eds. 1999, p. 199). This has led to developmental theorists arguing that – as elsewhere in the developing world - NGOs in Uzbekistan tailor their projects to the demands of these international donor agencies given their dependence upon them for financial and technical assistance (Abramson, 1999; Ruffin & Waugh eds. 1999; Corcoran-Nantes, 2005). Although the validity of this argument can be extended only to some organizations, the impact of women’s NGO work began garnering the attention of the public, State and international community.

Women have been able to formally organize under these circumstances to affect public opinion and social development. At the organization level, most NGOs are staffed mainly by unpaid or minimally compensated volunteers - particularly women. Given their
time commitment with little or no monetary compensation, their concerns and initiatives are indeed genuine and merit attention, particularly in light of the struggles posed by the transition period (Corcoran-Nantes, 2005). Nonetheless, this does not take away from the fact that international donors have their own set agendas for establishing a presence in the region.

Organizations such as the OSCE\textsuperscript{32}, Soros Foundation / Open Society Institute, USIS\textsuperscript{33}, USAID, TACIS\textsuperscript{34} and the ADB\textsuperscript{35} have provided significant levels of support to women’s empowerment initiatives. USAID alone has provided more than $1 million to fund gender development activities since 1995 (Human Rights Watch, 2001). In addition to the provision of direct grants to support NGO activities, USAID and OSCE have also sponsored numerous training workshops for Uzbek NGO leaders on international theories and methodologies in the field of gender development. Grants that focused on women’s entrepreneurial skills and reproductive health education have had considerable effect at the national level. Women’s NGOs have become active agents to support socially and economically disadvantaged women and families through training, building new facilities and initiating income generating activities.

Denis Kandioti’s (1991) critique encapsulates the general concern of international experts pertaining to present day women’s movements in Uzbekistan: “measures for the emancipation of women did not as a rule coincide with a drive for democratization and the creation of a civil society where women’s gender interests could be autonomously represented” (pp.12-13). To this, Kamp (2004) adds that “women’s NGOs have not challenged the revisions of the state welfare system and have not yet established a
discourse that would encourage women to organize for their own interests” (Luong ed. 2004, p. 56).

Considering that Western donor agencies implicitly co-construct what these organizations should do, and the government controls where, how and to what extent they can do it, it is fair to argue that women’s organizations in Uzbekistan have historically struggled to exist and function as entities exclusively dedicated to the advancement of women. They have negotiated their existence under varying socio-political-economic circumstances and developed coping strategies to mediate between different powers while bringing change to the lives of women.

*Government Influence on Women’s NGOs*

“We must always remember that the way society treats women shows the level of the culture and the spirituality of a given society and the results of the society’s movement towards democracy” (President Karimov quoted in Shog’ulomov, R., Do’st, M., eds., 1999, p. 143).

President Karimov declared 1999 as the *Year of the Woman*. In addition, the government started compiling statistical data on gender indicators after signing a number of international agreements to improve the status of women. The State introduced a number of legislative changes and legal reforms designed to guarantee support for women and encourage their participation in the public sphere. In 1999, the decree on the empowerment of NGOs women’s activities was one such initiative, encouraging the emergence of new NGOs throughout the country.
Activist women’s NGOs opened branches and actively collaborated with international NGOs in other parts of the world. The government invited them to State conferences, roundtable discussions and major political events. State officials were encouraged to work with donor agencies in identifying developmental areas for the allocation of funding and resources.

Initially, NGOs activities were not controlled by the State but they had to meet certain conditions in order to be officially registered and function as non governmental non profit organizations. As in other Central Asian countries, women’s NGOs in Uzbekistan attempted to build partnerships with state-run entities including the Women’s Committee, Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and other local government offices. However, conflicting views and varying work ethics often hindered these partnerships from being realized. “While leading NGOs have been invited to act in an advisory capacity in these areas [of women’s issues in politics], National Women’s Committees have been essentially sustained as a buffer zone between the State and [local] women’s NGOs” (Ikramova & McConnell, 1999, p. 207). Although women leaders of both types of organizations come from the same communities and work with the same Mahallas, it was their affiliation with the ideals and rules of their respective organizations that placed them in conflicting situations.

The positioning of these kinds of women’s agencies created a political division inhibiting effective challenges to the status quo at the national level. Overdependence on foreign financing necessitated women’s NGOs to concentrate substantial efforts on developing ties with international donor agencies – efforts that could have also been
invested in strengthening ties with the communities and local government agencies and
expanding activities to high-need areas such as rural communities.

Dependence on foreign organizations for financial and technical assistance also
fueled the suspicion of local governments that curtailed the implementation of projects
that they deemed to be politically confrontational. Consequently, “NGOs are registered as
social and philanthropic rather than political entities, and as such can be subject to legal
sanctions if they choose to operate outside their specified jurisdiction” (Luong &
184). The confluence of tensions between State entities and external aid agencies, as well
as internal political wrangling between women’s organizations, exacerbated the dilemma
of effectively addressing the “women’s question” and uniting forces to represent women
in the political arena.

Feminism in Uzbekistan

Women who assert their rights to have their own personality in public or professional
work are feminists, even if they don’t want to acknowledge themselves as such. Much
that is now seen as normal has only arisen because of the struggle for women’s
rights. That women now have an occupation, are educated, are public figures – all
this is the result of feminism (Marfia Tokhtakhodjaeva, 2008, p. 240).

Contemporary literature on Uzbek feminism as well as women’s movements in
the context of Uzbekistan is sparse. Based on the existing written materials different
levels of organized activism which emanate elements of feminist discourse can be put
into three phases or waves 1) pre-Soviet wave (Jadidism) 2) Soviet wave (Women’s
formal organizations and associations 3) post-Soviet wave (hybrid organizations); all three forms of organizations were discussed in the previous sections of the chapter.

In Uzbekistan, feminism as a concept is widely associated with radical feminism and only mentioned in the context of foreign-funded non-profit organizations (Tokhtakhodjaeva, 1992; Corcoran-Nantes, 2005). As a concept it is alien to the average Uzbek woman. Elite and progressive women also tend to avoid associating their achievements and goals as feminist. Even those working for women’s NGOs prefer not to class themselves as “feminists” because the term is widely seen as a Western concept, not suitable for the so-called oriental world (Jones, 1999, Corcoran-Nantes, 2005).

For the majority, feminism is a negative term that constitutes countercultural qualities that an Uzbek woman should not embody, i.e. she should not be aggressive, disobedient, ambitious, challenger of male superiority and above all amoral, which are all taboo stereotypes of feminists. The alternate interpretation of the feminist struggle in Uzbekistan is conceptualized in what Alice Walker terms as womanism, which is defined as “committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Tong, 1998, p. 226). Most of the gender related materials and discussions by both the State and international organizations such as ADB and UN programs stress men and women’s equal participation in gender struggle and avoid utilizing the term “feminism”. This approach, while culturally sensitive and sound does not challenge the status quo of women in relation to patriarchal practices of everyday life. What it does create is the space to start talking about women’s equal rights in the society with respect to their roles and responsibilities in the family. Women’s NGOs and Women’s Committees have a
critical role in using these spaces appropriately to help women get informed; feel supported and empowered to make the changes they want to see in their homes and workplaces.

Sandwiched between modernity and traditionalism women’s identities are constantly redefined across age, class and socio-economic status. However, power exists at all levels of society (Foucault, 1991) and cultural conflicts that emerge in the process of nationalist movements contribute to new conceptions of self and society (Touraine, 1989). While the public/private divide is exacerbated by the nationalist discourse, subjugating the private to the public, where power and control of the public space is in the hands of the male patriarchs, some women interpret their gendered space in different terms. Feminism exists in Uzbekistan but not in its generic form and often is not called by its name.

Expansion of Western imperialism in the region resulted in strengthening of interest in Islam as an ideology of anti-colonial resistance. It also conferred a different kind of empowerment upon younger women, both wealthy and working class. Despite the fact that religious practices are heavily tinted in patriarchal hue and serve to preserve male dominance over women, some Uzbek women found in religion agency through which they can resist and contest male State patriarchy. Their conformity to the traditional practice of Islamic tenets is often viewed as weakness and ignorance by some feminists and progressive elites who inherited their power from the colonial past. However, in post-colonial feminism, these different forms of resistances are interpreted as creative tools to question multiple forms of oppression and dominance. Whether some
women are embracing stricter Islamic practices [to reappropriate their space or to claim a new difference in defiance of genderless, hegemonic, centered standardization], depends on the contextual social experience of women (Minh-ha, 1997, p. 416). Chandra Mohanty (2006) is useful here stressing that we need to develop a complex understanding of agency, resistance, and oppression as agency and agency as oppression. She goes on to argue that, for the agency to be revolutionary and subversive it needs to liberate itself from a male-defined context of oppression. It is a space in which individuals or groups of people are able to create a culture of resistance (Mohanty, 2006). For women this is a particularly powerful concept as it gives them the ability to find their voice and opportunity to confront the dominant oppressive norms. However, to what extent Islamization raises these women’s consciousness and awareness about their individual rights and choices should be analyzed from women’s contextual experiences with the Islam they embraced vis-à-vis Islam promoted by the State. This can be another good dissertation topic for women’s agency in Uzbekistan.

In contrast, women’s NGOs networking and forging relations and ideas with international women’s organizations and movements illustrated, if not explicitly claimed, feminist public struggle in their work. The emergence of non profit organizations in the third sector created a new agency for some Soviet educated women to realize their potential and influence in some aspects of development. Within a decade after independence the network of such formal and informal organizations grew rapidly making transformations towards higher awareness of gender roles and women’s rights, albeit in small steps.
Not all women’s NGOs emerged as a response to the deteriorating status of women. But they were all incorporated into one NGO category. Their activities and organizational goals were affected by Western feminist concepts of struggle, indirectly reflecting the ideological views of development agencies supporting these organizations. They quickly enriched their dictionaries with terminologies of feminist organizations, such as “gender consciousness”, “lobbying”, “mainstreaming”, “traditional patriarchy”, “women’s rights – human rights” etc to adapt to the development discourse of donor organizations and transnational feminist networks.

A summary of content analysis of the Central Asian Women’s collection that was published quarterly with contributions from different women’s organizations in Uzbekistan and abroad suggest that independent women’s NGOs aligned their views and concerns about women’s status in opposition to conservative cultural and State patriarchy. They (local women’s NGOs) seem to have found their allies and supporters not within but outside of Uzbekistan, i.e. international women’s organizations, foreign donors and transnational feminist networks. This disconnection with local interests could have been a crucial reason why their efforts to challenge women’s oppression at the State level did not materialize beyond their own circle.

Summary

Soviet policies on women’s organizations and overall status had a significant impact on development. Women genuinely welcomed some of these changes, including, but not limited to, the attainment of a public voice and the elimination of patriarchal practices such as bride price, underage marriage and polygamy. The fact that the Soviet
State could not break through to the private domain and the corresponding gender relations prevalent in family ties is largely due to women’s own resistance to state patriarchy. Culturally, neither men nor women desire to challenge gender roles prescribed by familial customs and traditions handed down over generations – given that this is what defines their identity as Muslims.

The rise of women’s NGOs after independence has had a similar effect on women, albeit on a larger scale. Women who held prestigious posts during the Soviet era have played leading roles in NGOs advancing women’s empowerment. These are women with power who have the skills and expertise to organize their efforts to advocate for change in the status of women. However, power relations and the politics of international aid have had a crucial influence on the work of these organizations in Uzbekistan.

Women’s Committees enjoy an established presence with a rich history, reliable state support and expansive community outreach; women’s NGOs enjoyed funding from donors with deep pockets, advanced technical expertise at par with global norms and practices and an extensive network of links with NGOs worldwide. If these two entities are to strengthen their influence and bargaining position relative to the State and Western donor agencies, their best option lies in combining their efforts – irrespective of their stance on contentious issues and proximity to the incumbent administration. As Purkayastha & Subramaniam (2004) argue, such networks are essential foundations of movements for social change, and their form and action are unique to the context within which change is sought (pp. 1-23).
As long as women’s formal organizations existed, they had to operate under the whims of some regime and were heavily influenced by the ruling ideology; as a result, they have been shaped embodying the elements of such an environment. One should not equate the lack of far-reaching initiatives by women to independently organize and lead movements with submissiveness. On the contrary, it would be more prescient to consider such a reaction as a “sophisticated coping strategy” (Akiner, 1997) and a symbol of the steadfastness of Central Asian women to maintain continuity and preserve their cultural identity.

Two decades after independence women’s groups are yet to learn to work together to realize their potential for bigger social, economic and political changes. Literature analysis suggest that NGOs need to find ways to improve the effectiveness of their activities by building long term relations with their communities and government agencies such as Mahallas and Women’s Committees.
CHAPTER THREE

Research Methodology

Conducting fieldwork in Uzbekistan, which is both a Former Communist State (FCS) and a Muslim society, is an opportunity and a challenge at the same time. One needs a reflexive approach, cultural knowledge and an understanding of the complex interaction of socio-political forces in the society to grasp the reality of this region. The confluence of my research and academic work at Ohio University, the lived and shared experiences of my [Uzbek] people’s lives during the pre and post independence period, as well as my solidarity with the perspective of feminist women of color have collectively shaped my position as I undertook this journey as a researcher.

Before I received a Fulbright scholarship to pursue a graduate degree in International Development Studies at Ohio University I lived and worked in the city of Ferghana in Uzbekistan where I was also born. I went through a school system that experienced shifting ideologies. First came elementary school with Communist indoctrination; as the country awakened to independence, the school curriculum changed practically overnight to emphasize on the nascent Uzbek nationalist ideology. However, during the final year of high school, I was exposed to a completely different education system when I became a finalist of the Future Leaders of Exchange (FLEX) program and attended a public high school program in the U.S. Despite the critical lessons I gained from these changes, the most crucial lessons I took away came from the strong women I had met in my life.
As the oldest of three siblings, I grew up witnessing and sharing the domestic violence experienced by my mother who endured it as a daughter-in-law. Such treatment came with a marriage package that my mother did not know she had signed up for until the day she entered her husband’s home. In 2009 my parents celebrated 30 years of married life. Years of abuse have aged her beyond her years, taken her health and broken her dreams. While her resilience to save her family from falling apart is seen as a duty in the eyes of the traditional patriarchy, it is interpreted as false consciousness in the eyes of modern societies. I know many Uzbek women like my mother who are in an endless cycle of selfless sacrifice. I often question myself what I would do if I were in my mother’s shoes. Despite not wanting to leave her abusive marriage, my mother dreamt a different life for me.

When I returned to Uzbekistan after a year of high school in the US in 1998, I became involved with the educational clubs organized by Peace Corp Volunteers (PCVs) and helped co-found the Youth Leadership Center in Ferghana for students who wanted to learn English and be involved in community activism. It was my first exposure to NGO work as a participant. Later on, in 2001, I started working as a translator for various USAID funded local projects that dealt directly with international and local NGOs working on and funding different community projects in Uzbekistan and neighboring countries.

Whenever INGOs organized leadership trainings, meetings or conferences for local leaders or communities, women participants were always in the majority. Women were also the ones who came with ideas to start new projects. They would seek projects
to tackle the problems facing their communities. Women were the most active participants and more willing to talk about the issues that plagued their communities. Despite the odds, women’s presence grew noticeably in all levels of NGO work. My lived reality, educational background and work experience brought me to graduate school in Ohio University in 2003.

As a graduate student I took courses and training in Women’s Studies and the non-profit sector, participated in international conferences and met many like-minded academics and researchers interested in the stories of women in Uzbekistan. Over a period of five years, I went back and forth to Uzbekistan as a researcher to explore women’s issues from an academic standpoint. Despite my awareness and training as a qualitative researcher, in the field I encountered challenges of how to approach certain taboo topics with research participants, and how to translate their answers into English literally without losing the real meanings. My mentors at Ohio University guided me to find my own voice and give priority to the voices of women as I carried out the research and continued my work writing about the women of Uzbekistan.

Qualitative field research on how people make meaning of their private experiences and lived realities was unconventional during Communist rule. However, the growth of recent ethnographic research in the FCS provides new understanding of how individuals deal with multiple ideological projects (De Soto & Panzing, 1995; Funk & Mueller, 1993).

I proposed to conduct a qualitative research project grounded in institutional methodology utilizing a post-colonial feminist framework. The purpose of my study is to
explore the perceptions of NGO women leaders regarding the effects of the institutionalization of civil society on women’s movements and their organizational power, as well as the challenges faced in contributing to social change and women’s advancement in Uzbekistan.

Qualitative research was a suitable method for this study, particularly because it is primarily used by researchers to explore the meanings of social processes. It offers a comprehensive perspective on social phenomenon. Listening to the stories of women leaders directly involved in the NGO movement provided insight in understanding the larger picture of women’s NGOs as gleaned from their private reflections and shared experiences.

The results of this study are intended to contribute to scholarly literature about the experiences of women in NGO movements in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. The study sheds light on how women leaders negotiate with different power structures to continue their work as women and leaders, and how current policy changes have affected women’s movements in Uzbekistan. This chapter provides a discussion of researcher positionality, research design, methodology and its rationale, and sample population and procedures for data collection and data analysis.

Research Design

My interest in the effect of large institutional structures on women’s movement through women’s personal experiences informed my decision to use an ethnomethodological approach for qualitative inquiry. Ethnomethodology is a qualitative method used to understand characteristics of a social system, such as power relations,
conditions of subjugation and social experiences of people living in that system. Originally this approach was developed by Dorothy Smith (1978) who studied women’s everyday experiences by revealing existent power relations that shape their experience. Today it has developed into an exploration of the ideologies, power structures and social conditions that shape peoples experiences.

Smith writes that the “institutional ethnographer works from the social in people’s experience to discover its presence and organization in their lives and to explicate or map that organization beyond the local of the everyday” (Smith, 2005, pp. 10-11). As I explored the stories of women participants, I looked for the emphasis and reflections they gave in describing their work as NGO leaders. I built accounts of their situation and of what they, as women leaders of NGOs, experienced. For Smith (2005) this is “making visible how [people’s experience] connected into the extended social relations of ruling and economy and their intersections” (p. 29).

This approach aids in teasing out the impact of changing conditions, roles and efficacy of the women’s movement in Uzbekistan, through reflections derived from the personal knowledge and experience of women leaders of NGOs. Their experiences then defined the direction of my research investigation, because, for the institutional ethnographer, “the emphasis is always on research as discovery” (Smith, 2005, p. 2). As Campbell (1998) describes, this method “relies on interviewing, observations and documents as data, but departs from other ethnographic approaches by treating those data not as the topic or object of interest but as “entry” into the social relations of the setting. The idea is to tap into people’s expertise.” (p. 57). This approach can help link the “micro
level” of the day-to-day lived experiences of NGO leaders with the “macro level” situation of NGOs following the politics of Uzbek civil society.

The qualitative research design for this study utilizes triangulation for the collection of data. I have collected my data mainly through intensive interviewing with women leaders of selected NGOs, along with participant observation and document analysis. Fielding and Fielding (1986) suggest that the important feature of triangulation is not the simple combination of different kinds of data, but the attempt to relate them together so as to neutralize the threats to validity in each (p. 31). Spradely (1979) calls it creating an “ethnographic record” – a combination of elements such as direct observation, various types of interviewing, listening and document analysis (cited in Berg, 2001, pp. 5-6).

This research focused on data collection through interviews. Thanks to a reliable network of contacts developed over the years within Uzbekistan’s civil society sector, I had personal access to conduct in-depth interviews with local women leaders who have overseen and continue to lead NGOs in Uzbekistan. My former colleagues who are working in international organizations in Uzbekistan served as primary sources to locate potential participants.

Interaction with participants was conducted on a one-to-one basis during interviews and follow-up contacts. Interview questions were developed to guide the conversation with the participants to solicit their understanding and personal views. In addition, employing field observation ensured the validity of the meanings attached to the women’s narrated experiences. I also reviewed print resources that document and
elaborate upon the work of NGOs and their corresponding changes in status and organizational discourse pertaining to women’s empowerment. Online newsletters for and about women’s NGOs in Uzbekistan and small circulation booklets published by NGOs served as useful secondary resources for data analysis.

Sample Population

Glesne (1999) states that qualitative researchers generally neither work with populations large enough to make random sampling meaningful, nor is their purpose that of producing generalizations (p. 29). Due to time constraints coupled with the financial and security implications of traveling large distances to access women’s NGOs in other corners of the country,36 I concentrated on women NGO leaders in the Ferghana Region. The first hand information I gathered from this sample was of great significance in analyzing situations particular to their NGOs and allowed me to draw some connections to the broader phenomenon of civil society and NGOs in Uzbekistan.

The sample size of my research study was limited to 21 women and two male participants who have led or are currently leading NGOs that focus on women’s issues. For the purpose of this study NGOs are defined as public organizations registered as non-profit organizations. Women’s issue can be defined as any area that has a direct impact on women and their status; these areas include but are not limited to: domestic violence, reproductive health, entrepreneurship, career training, hygiene, environment, crisis centers and education.

Based on my personal experience and informed knowledge about the characteristics of women NGO leaders, it was safe to suggest that the sample population
is mostly educated and middle aged – between 30 to 60 years of age. In addition, many of them may have had Western training on organizational management and administration. While most of the sample population lived in Uzbekistan, some former women NGO leaders presently residing in the U.S. and Canada were also interested in participating in the study. Gaining their perspective on the NGO movement and women’s leadership added greater perspective to understanding the phenomenon from a variety of angles.

I obtained oral informed consent prior to interviewing. While written/signed consent forms would have been ideal for research studies, in some cases it is more important to be mindful of cultural or political sensitivities if the goal is to attain valid and honest responses. In Uzbekistan, given the sensitive NGO politics, people in general are afraid of signing any papers.

In order to give potential participants the information they need to make an informed decision to participate in the study, I explained and read to them the purpose, procedures and risks, if any, of their participation. Next, each participant was asked if s/he understood and agreed to participate in the study interview. A copy of the consent form in Uzbek and Russian with the purpose, procedures and the interviewer’s contact information were provided to the participant prior to the interview. I asked permission to take notes and when possible audio-tape the interview. When participants agreed, interviews were recorded on a digital recorder and transcribed verbatim and stored on a laptop. Taped interviews were erased at the end of each transcription. While the length of
the interviews depended on the answers of the participants, each was expected to be between 1-2 hours.

Selection of Participants

I utilized the snowball sampling method which is a type of non-probability sampling defined as “a process of accumulation as each located subject suggests other subjects” (Babbie, 2004, p. 184). Sometimes referred to as “convenience sampling” or “accidental sampling” this method is more suitable for studying sensitive topics and difficult to reach populations. Overall “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in the selection of information-rich cases for in-depth study” (Patton, 1990, p.169). The information rich cases are those from which I learnt a great deal about issues of essential value to my research questions. Utilizing the snowball sampling method, I followed the network of contacts developed by the women with one participant referring me to the next potential participant. Using their acquaintances as referrals, I was able to minimize the fieldwork dilemmas I have outlined above.

The rationale for the choice of this approach lies in the historical, political and qualitative nature of the time, place and population involved in the study. Historically, to varying degrees, personal relations in socialist societies were based on a strong demarcation between trusted “insiders” and distrusted “outsiders” (DeSoto, ed., 2000, p. 4). There is an ignorance of the legal system and a fear of participation (Slater, Fain, & Rossatto, eds., 2002, p. 1). Therefore, the ideal random sampling method that ensures unbiased and reliable data was not possible to employ in this case.
Politically, the general topic of NGOs and civil society is taken up and monitored by the current State administration and the international community. It is of paramount importance that the safety and privacy of research participants are not violated. Randomly approaching prospective participants could have compromised the validity and sincerity of their responses or generated outright suspicion of my intent. Those who agreed to interview with me were briefed about the purpose of the study and a consent form was provided in the local language.

Research Site

The Ferghana Region of Uzbekistan was selected as the research site for the study. Historically, Ferghana has been home to many political activists and opposition groups. Only a few hours drive from the capital, it stretches along mountains crisscrossing the borders and the accompanying ethnic-national tensions of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Not only is this region the most densely inhabited in Central Asia, encompassing a third of the Uzbek population, it is also the center for many international donor agencies’ activities and grassroots women’s organizations and the epicenter of Islamic practices.

My personal familiarity with the region allows me access to and knowledge of the area in general and women’s NGO activism in particular. Women’s activism and NGO movements have also been documented in the southern parts of Uzbekistan where Khorezm, Surhandarya and the autonomous Republic of Karakalpakistan lie. These areas are in turn impacted through unique geographic and socio-economic conditions.37 My research findings largely reflect the realities and concerns of women’s NGOs in the
Ferghana Valley and are not necessarily generalizable to all women’s NGOs in Uzbekistan. However, there are spillover patterns that resonate with the situation of women’s NGOs in other regions.

Method of Data Collection: Interviewing

To ensure anonymity and confidentiality of the participants involved in the study, names and other identifiable information were coded. Written and recorded data about participants were identified by arbitrarily assigned initials in the final paper. All interviews were combined in an aggregate format. The laptop on which most data was collected was secured with a password and each research document was password protected. A nominal data method was used to keep track of the number of participants interviewed.

The language of the interview was either Uzbek or Russian, and only the researcher and the Committee members had access to interview materials and audio tapes. I translated and analyzed the interviews in English. At the end of the study all interview materials were kept with me to be destroyed eventually. In addition, I made sure that all policies and procedures mandated by the Ohio University Institutional Review Board (IRB) in dealing with human subjects were adhered to.

Interviews provide a way of generating empirical data about society by asking people to talk about their lives. It is a form of conversation, but unlike casual conversation interviewing has a purpose directed to the central research question of my study (Miller, 2000). For Patton (2002) the purpose of qualitative interviewing is to “capture how interviewed participants view their world, to learn their terminology and
judgments, and to capture the complexities of their individual perceptions and experiences” (p. 348). Guiding interview questions were formulated bearing in mind the complexities of participants’ views and experiences with the current politicized nature of civil society.

While conducting interviews in a research study, the conversations may vary from highly structured, standardized quantitatively oriented survey interviews, to semi-structured, semi-formal guided conversations and free-flowing informational exchanges; all interviews are interactional (Holstein & Gubrium, 2002). Semi-structured interviewing is a “guided conversation” often used in qualitative data collection. This approach has proved to be a strong methodological tool for gathering “rich talk” and experiences of a person’s life.

In any semi-structured interviewing researchers are guided by the essential questions of the research, and my questions were:

1. How did the change in sponsorship of NGO funding from international donors to the Uzbek State affect their work?
2. How do NGO women leaders negotiate their political and personal image? How does their background affect their goals and work?
3. How do women leaders of NGOs meet the expectations of different stakeholders in working towards social change?
4. What are the perceptions of women leaders about social change and the status of women in their society?
While research questions may be focused on understanding a specific social phenomena or proving a theory, the interview questions are developed with interviewees in mind. Therefore, the question order, content, style and wording of questions are necessary considerations in designing a set of guiding interview questions. Patai (1991) has said that respect and trust cannot develop if we “utilize the interview as an occasion for forcing on others our ideas of proper political awareness, however we understand that,” for to do so is “to betray an implicit trust” (p. 148). Based on context, situation and timing, I let the participants lead the conversation to make the process more natural. When necessary, I went back to unanswered questions or used probing questions to extract more information. The guiding questionnaire developed for this study consists of demographic, closed and open-ended questions. Questions are divided into three themes that flow into each other: 1) about the organization, 2) on feminism, and 3) on leadership (see Appendix A).

“Language is verbalized thought” (Lyn, 1990, p. 245), and through it we gain new understanding about the meaning of our surroundings, shared common experiences and the resolution of conflicts. With this approach we can learn about people’s behavior and the meaning they attribute to it through language that is rightfully defined as “the mode of access to meaning…of not only text…but signs and symbols of all sorts, social practices and historical actions…” (Warnke, 1987, p. 8). Sociolinguists such as Ochs (1983) and Moerman (1988) share Warnke’s view that language both reflects and constructs cultural values. Analysis of word usage, and word meaning enables the researcher to answer “why” questions behind the observed behavior (Lyn, 1990, p. 245;
Gilbert & Abell, 1983). Close attention to language use helped me understand how the issues and attitudes about current NGOs are framed by women and how they vary depending on their experiences.

**Participant Observation**

Sociologists emphasize the mutuality of participant observation and intensive interviewing as central techniques in qualitative studies of social science (Berg, 1989; Bernard, 1994; Emerson, Fretz & Shaw eds., 1995). We should seek space within which participant observation, or “witnessing” fits in as “an involved, informed, caring yet critical form of spectatorship” (Taylor, 1997, p. 125). It is a social process that rests on careful attention – “listening” (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 70). While interviewing was the main source of my data collection, body language, silence and emotional expressions also added richness to my data and helped validate emerging themes from the interviews. Throughout my field research I utilized direct observation methods both during interviewing participants and during women’s NGO meeting. I kept a notepad to write down my observations after meetings with potential interviewees, retyped everything on a word document and coded it with the same assigned initials given to each interviewee.

**Data Collection Procedure**

I traveled to Uzbekistan with my twenty month old son on 30 June 2008. It was my son’s first trip to Uzbekistan and my first since I left home to join the PhD program in the US. As I had two busy months to gather as much data as possible, I set out to do my research on the very first week I arrived in Ferghana. By then, I had already received my IRB approval and translated my interview questions and consent form into Uzbek. I had
several contact numbers for NGOs given to me during my field research during the winter of 2004, but none of them were reachable, either because the offices had closed down or had moved to another place or the phones were disconnected. I felt it was a bad sign since most of the women NGO’s I had known were closed down.

My first contact with potential participants was set up through former University course-mates who worked at the local office of the international water project (SWP) in Ferghana. This organization itself had created six local NGOs in the districts of Ferghana that were self-financed and received only technical support from the office personnel. The office staff, most of whom I knew from the University, had worked with other organizations and/or stayed in touch people who worked in local NGOs.

There was also a former University professor who had written scholarly articles on local gender and education issues, serving as a project coordinator on the SWP staff. He and my former course-mates took keen interest and assured me of their support in getting me in touch with potential participants. The French expatriate director of the project also extended his interest in my research and shared his contacts - both local and international experts working with NGOs in Tashkent. He also gave me important contact numbers of researchers in the area working on civil society issues and recommended me to meet with them. Before I knew it, this office became my entry point from where I would operate to find my research participants.

Probing Interview Tools

The first step before starting the interviews was to test my research tools. In the process of developing my interview questions I had consulted with a number of people in
the US, including my committee members, a senior-level UN director with the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, and an Uzbek friend who is a former NGO leader currently living in the US.

When I shared the translation of my research questions and consent form with my former course-mates at the SWP, they commented on the language of my documents and helped me to reshape it to make it more practical and less ‘threatening’. For example, they pointed out that most of the NGO leaders would prefer the consent form to be in Russian even though they speak Uzbek because that is still their working language. Another technical but interesting comment was that even though it is translated into formal Uzbek, it is best to write it up in Cyrillic letters. These technical comments gave interesting pieces of information about my research participants which are discussed later in the Data Analysis chapter.

In the development of the research questions, I was very conscious of what is culturally appropriate. However, the most challenging part was to use “less threatening” language in my questions. Even though the research questions were as practical and non-political as possible, I was warned that actual words such as “feminism” and “women’s movement” can be perceived as political and may turn participants off. After probing my questions with my female colleagues who worked with NGO women, I replaced the words “feminism” with “gender struggle” and “women’s movement” with “women’s public activism” in my Uzbek language interview questions. Apparently the word “gender”- although it does not have a direct literal translation in either Uzbek or Russian, is more acceptable among women’s NGO groups and local politicians.
Taking off

After learning that most of my original contacts who I wanted to interview were not reachable or did not live in the area, I relied on my former course-mates and project coordinator’s contacts. I took permission to use my contacts’ names in order to initiate first contact with the participants. Although it worked many times, there were a few occasions when I received overt signals that they were not interested. So most often it was useful when my former course-mates called potential participants and gave positive introductions about me before I spoke to them to arrange interviews.

For most of the interviews I traveled to the participants’ homes, offices or neutral public places such as cafes and restaurants of their choice. I took with me copies of the consent form in all three languages (English, Uzbek and Russian), copies of my research questions, note pads, my IRB form, a cell phone loaded with emergency contacts, participant contact sheets, a digital voice recorder and extra batteries and a big but cautious smile.

Conducting Interviews

Virtually every interview started with questions about me, my background and my purpose for coming, for which I would explain my research purpose and recite information from my consent form. Since it was expected that participants would be reluctant to sign off on the document, I offered them to keep a copy of the consent form. I rarely got the opportunity to use a digital voice recorder - even though I expected that there would be some level of cautiousness from participants, I had a lot more objections for its use than I expected. Subsequently, I relied on note-taking and rephrasing the
participants’ accounts back to them to confirm my understanding. Later on the same day, I would type up my notes. If a digital recorder was used, I would transcribe the interview. If I had any additional time, I would translate the transcription into English the same day, and send it to my two secure email accounts before erasing the interview from my laptop and digital recorder.

The interviews lasted from 25 to 120 minutes. During the interview, if a participant mentioned another NGO name or contact, I noted it down and asked them if she would recommend anyone for this interview. Most of the participants knew about each other, but often they could not give me their contact information apart from their names and the organization in which they worked. So, a number of times, I came back to the SWP staff, through whom I found the contacts for the recommended participants.

The entire period of my fieldwork in Uzbekistan took about two months. I traveled to the town of Kokand, Kuva district and the capital city of Tashkent to conduct interviews with recommended potential participants. Only three potential participants refused to grant me an interview once they learnt the purpose of my research.

While I was interviewing a participant in Tashkent city, she recommended that I attend an NGO women’s meeting on CEDAW (United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women) which was to take place in two days. It was a great opportunity to meet NGO women leaders from all over the country. I stayed longer in Tashkent with the hope to get access to the meeting. My contact whom I had interviewed a couple of days earlier met me at the NGO meeting venue and introduced me to all the participants.
During the CEDAW meeting breaks, I talked to women leaders about their work and listened to their conversations which I could not fit into my interview format. But I managed to exchange contacts and asked their permission to contact them in the future for possible interviews or information about their work. During my visit to Tashkent, I also got in touch with a young researcher from Denmark who was conducting interviews on the structure of civil society in Uzbekistan. We met at a café and talked about our research interests and exchanged emails for future contacts. Ironically, he thought I was a spy probing him about his intentions researching in Uzbekistan. After I returned to the US, I interviewed three former women leaders of NGOs who had immigrated to the US after their offices had been shut down by the government.

Document Analysis

The fieldwork tradition in the social sciences places a premium on flexibility. It is a simple fact that some questions, research locations, topics or methods logically necessitate other questions, locations, topics or methods (Deutscher, 1973). Document analysis or the analysis of human artifacts, including memos, decrees, newspaper articles and other forms of written texts, provide another vital strategy for collecting data and completing the triangulation of multiple methods of data collection used in this study (Hodder, 1994). Document analysis of existing texts assisted in bringing out a wide range of perspectives, arguments and critiques that offered comparison, agreement and/or a new dimension in order to explore the phenomenon. Anderson, Armitage, Jack and Wittner (1990) argue that document analysis provides the first step: “It tells us what is there, what themes dominate the interviews. But the step that allows us to challenge existing
formulations and to uncover what women are feeling and saying is the step of exploring the dynamics of a person’s thought through the use of language” (p. 103).

Document analysis is also an unobtrusive methodology that is economical, practical and accessible without time boundaries. The fact that the topic is current in Uzbekistan necessitates following news media programs and online publications as much as possible. Given that a number of internet news sites and foreign news outlets reporting on Uzbekistan are either blocked or censored inside the country, comparing local and international news on civil society bears interesting leads and questions. The Uzbek State has its own portal where news and upcoming events in the field of civil society are updated regularly.

On the other hand, some of the happenings and events are not widely published or they are ignored in light of other news information. During my prior field research in Ferghana, women participants provided me with many unpublished and small circulation conference papers, research studies, decrees and NGO library resources for Uzbekistan which were not easily accessible otherwise (Kurbanova, 2005). In addition, I intended to use my student privileges at Ohio University to access different online journals and scholarly articles, as well as web-resources of the United Nations and World Bank.

Position and the Role of a Researcher

For most of the 20th Century, the Central Asian region remained largely inaccessible due to its repressive past, and current post-independence authorities in Uzbekistan remain suspicious of external influence, greatly limiting the access granted to foreign media, academia and international donor agencies that finance local NGOs. My
position as an insider with the native cultural and ethnic background puts me in a privileged position to conduct fieldwork. I approached this particular research agenda with an “attempt to theorize from the locations of multiple and hybrid identities”, and keep in mind that, for either the insider or outsider researcher, “there is no easy or comfortable in-between location that transcends these dualisms” (Lal, 1996, p. 199).

In politically authoritarian countries, it is essential to be aware of the consequences and risks to research participants and collaborating informants, and do as much as possible to avoid and minimize the risks to them. Confidentiality, thoroughly explained informed consent, anonymity and sincerity are often cited in research books as indispensable tools of an ethical approach to research (Berg, 2001; Babbie, 2004; Harding, 1991; Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Miller, 2000). Depending on the sensitivity of the topic, research site, subjects and the circumstances, these tools are used in different scales by different researchers. In this study, the confidentiality and anonymity of the participant’s information was of utmost importance.

Trusting people is the “indispensable precondition for revolutionary change” (Freire, 1993, p. 42). In order to communicate effectively with people we must understand the structural conditions in which they think as their language is framed according to their lived and experienced reality. Our learnt scientific and urban language can be inaccessible to some women participants. My ethnic and linguistic roots as well as my background experience of having worked with development programs and women in Uzbek NGOs aided in building an effective egalitarian relationship with women participants based on trust and dialogue. To remain committed to the ethical questions of
our research, we may at times have to endure inconveniences, resistance and/or unexpected reactions and circumstances that we are not trained to expect. Being a patient, empathetic listener and having an adventurous streak can make even such difficult situations a lifetime learning process and add important threads to our research.

Bailey (1996) has argued that those who are familiar with a setting may already have a rapport with members, understand the nuances of language and behavioral expectations, and have analytical insights into the working of the setting. Using Abu-Lughod’s (1991) “outsider within” position as ‘halfie’—a person whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education or parentage, I intended to ease the tension of being suspected as a spy. As a feminist researcher, I intended this study to be “contextual, inclusive, experiential, involved, socially relevant …complete but not necessarily replicable, inclusive of emotions and events as experienced” (Nielsen, ed., 1990, p. 6).

On this feminist approach Peter Loizos (1994) has argued that to the extent anthropologists base their research relationships on non-judgmental friendship or “negotiated trust” they risk the loss of both if they disagree with the informants or cease to be a “reliable advocate” of their cause (Dudwick, 2000, p. 24). For my research in Uzbekistan, it was also imperative to create a safe, balanced and non-threatening environment for women participants to talk about the real issues that concern them with regards to recent changes in the NGO environment. To maximize credible and sincere responses I employed Oakley’s (1981) “friendship model” – to be engaged and share women’s experiences. Behar (1993) in agreement with Abu-Lughod, calls for a feminist
ethnographic practice in which research principles foremost require a focus on a “relationship to other women” (p. 301). For McBeth (1993) this practice concretely means forming a “collaborative approach” in which both the woman telling her story and the ethnographer recording it are working intimately to interpret a woman’s experience (p.146, quoted in De Soto, 2000, p. 86).

While the researcher has to become an instrument of the research, s/he is also a human being through which information is processed; therefore, to a certain extent, s/he is subjective. Glesne (1999) explains that “part of being attuned to your subjective lenses is being attuned to your emotions” (p. 105). Therefore, the goal is to explore such emotional feelings to learn what they are telling us, who we are in a relationship, and what we are learning from our study. Having worked with NGOs and researched civil society politics in Uzbekistan from a predominantly Western perspective, I was challenged to be perceptive to women’s accounts as they view the situation. The moral and political character of ethical dilemmas in the research raise the ‘whose side are we on?’ question in a particular form which relates to the study of women (Finch, 1993, p. 177). According to Miller (2000), we should keep reminding ourselves that the research undertaking is not merely a pure academic exercise for the enrichment of social science literature. He stresses that our research should eventually be beneficial to those who have volunteered their time, knowledge and experience to be a part of the project. We should also remember that the voices we are representing are theirs (the women interviewed). This happens by sharing this process with them from the beginning to the end. By doing so, we can maintain our ethical responsibility in our research work.
It has also become commonplace in discussions of research ethics to pay particular attention to familiarizing powerless social groups with their right to privacy when using them for research, as they might not be fully aware of their rights and the implications of making private information public knowledge. Such steps may not be necessary in the case of conducting research on powerful well-to-do actors who are likely to be knowledgeable of their rights and have the necessary means to protect themselves; this is all the more true for political figures who have exposed themselves to legitimate scrutiny by standing for public office (Bulmer, ed., 1982; Finch, 1993). Oakley (1981) argues that the only morally defensible way for a feminist to conduct research with women is through a non-hierarchal relationship in which she is prepared to invest some of her own identity.

The relationship between the researcher and the researched is a social act with immediate short-term goals that might also result in a long-term relationship based on friendship. The creation of relationships based on mutual respect and openness is essential for ethical fieldwork. There is a large body of literature that argues for the relationship between the researcher and the participant to be non-competitive, less guarded and genuine, rather than symbolic given that such processes affect research outcomes and bring about greater credibility, allowing us to learn the unlearnt.

Data Analyses Techniques

The goal of data analyses is the discovery of patterns and emerging themes among the data and patterns that point to a theoretical discernment of social life. Analyses of data attained through interviews, observation, and document analysis start from the time
of entering the field as a researcher and not at the end of the interviews. It is a process of analyzing the encountered, recorded and observed that might necessitate re-interviewing or exploring more on certain aspects of the studied phenomenon. Therefore we cannot separate the process of data collection and analyses into separate time periods because something important might slip away unnoticed or unexplored.

When data collection in the field is complete, thorough analyses of the entire data will complement the analyses that have already been initiated through the notes. Levine (1985) and Wolfe (1992) argue that data analysis and data management are interrelated. Field notes, interview transcripts, translation of these transcripts and documents can become very time consuming and exhausting. Hence breaking the data into a manageable order and structure, organizing a filing system for computer based documents and/or for paper documents will help give meaning to the volumes of data. Interview transcripts in Uzbek were long and dense, but I coded and summarized analytical themes, grounded themes and theoretical explanations into categories. Berg (2001) notes that this “data reduction and transformation process occurs throughout the span of research” (p. 35).

The key process in the analyses of qualitative research data is coding. This is also important in keeping the anonymity of study participants with assigned code names and numbers. Although the language of the research was mainly Uzbek, I translated and coded the transcripts in English. As follow-up conversations provided additional information, I kept a log of email correspondences with my participants.

Cultural specificity and the meaning women attach to their accounts need in-depth qualitative analyses. Revisiting the literature was helpful in understanding some of the
emergent issues in my study and aided in eliciting a meaningful understanding of the potential, changes and survival strategies of women’s NGOs. Since this is not a quantitative study using numerical data, John and Lynn Lofland’s (1995) proposed theory of six different ways of searching for patterns in a research topic, such as frequencies, magnitude, processes, structures, causes and consequences were of practical use in data processing. In the fieldwork, I began coding frequencies and patterns of participants’ references to: a) specific practices and responses of NGOs to the recent political changes, b) the degree of the State’s impact on their effectiveness, c) women’s perspectives on the causes of State reaction to the NGO community, c) types and effectiveness of development work NGOs are undertaking, d) consequences of current state intervention in NGO development work, etc. When analyzing data, I kept in mind the central research questions and at the same time tried to stay flexible and let the data dictate the direction of the research outcomes. Findings from data analyses created the possibility for opening further discussion and debate about the reality of women’s NGO experiences and their potential in bringing about social change within current changes.

One of the key advantages of field research is the possibility for the researcher to conduct ongoing thinking and analyses on the research site. Although recording the interviews had been a great use, in the final analyses of interview content, field notes about empirical observations were also essential. Babbie (2004) argues that noting interpretations of the observations are of vital importance, but they should be coded differently from the interpretation of the recorded interviews. In my previous experience conducting qualitative interviews among women of varying ages and socio-economic and
educational backgrounds in Uzbekistan, I had to sometimes limit my note taking to sketching, even though I had originally intended to take extensive notes during the interviews. Debriefing with my interview participants was helpful in clarifying, following up and sharing the process of analyses with them (Kurbanova, 2005).

Due to the present day sensitivity and importance attached to the research topic I have chosen, I believe it is crucial to keep my participants anonymous and their information confidential. In order to avoid and minimize confusion and misinterpretation of their accounts, I debriefed them after the interview meeting and offered to provide a copy of the raw transcript of the interview in the Uzbek language. It was also imperative to stay in touch with the interviewees in the course of writing my analysis as some of them showed interest in on-going contact. In this way, I attempted to equalize the ownership of this research from a feminist standpoint as well as increase the dependability of the findings. Many qualitative researchers are concerned about the reliability threat of their study and it has been addressed in different ways depending on the researcher’s selected methodology and research topic. To some extent sharing my findings with my committee professors, and the women participants who have shared their stories will minimize the threat of the reliability of this study.

There is also much debate among feminist scholars on the issues of authorship, authority and representation of the participants. Feminist researchers have struggled with “decentering their own power by listing the subjects as coauthors of their texts” (Wolf, 1996, p. 32; Billson, 1991). This is less practical in my research study because providing them with on-going analysis of my findings in the process of writing will entail
continuous translation from English into Uzbek and vice versa. This is time consuming and subject to details of translation errors in meaning and language context. Nevertheless, I made an effort to share my final analysis with my participants after interviews to obtain their feedback on what has been discussed and revealed during the interviews.
CHAPTER FOUR

Data Analysis

Context of the Research

The Government of Uzbekistan appeared to be very supportive and interested in the growth of the women’s NGO sector until the Government itself appeared to be in jeopardy. Within a decade of the fall of the Soviet Union, three “Color Revolutions” took place across the FCS, bringing down the ruling political parties. It is plausible that these events may have inspired the leaders of a mass political demonstration in Andijan on May 13, 2005 against the political status quo. Provoked by a group of armed men who broke free from prison where they were held on political charges, masses of people gathered in the Square of Andijan to listen to speakers demanding political and economic change. Subsequently, the accounts of these events by witnesses, government spokesmen, international journalists and refugees who fled across the border to Kyrgyzstan contradicted each other.

These events tarnished the image of Uzbekistan in the international community, among donor agencies, independent human right activists and Western allies. In the aftermath of the Andijan events, the Government adopted policies against the alleged perpetrators of the mass protest, restricted international media and political critics, and rejected the international community’s official request to conduct an independent investigation. A decree requiring all local and international NGOs to re-register with the government that had been passed in May 2004 was also enforced in the aftermath of the Andijan events.
When the NGOs were closed down, leaders of women’s NGOs were called “American spies,” “criminals,” “traitors,” “queens of barefeet,” “saviors of the poor” (with a negative connotation) and “enemies of the people” (derived from interviews). Almost half of the people I approached for interviews wanted to know whether the government knew about my research. They asked how I had found them and whether I was followed or threatened. This demonstrates the level of fear and suspicion many women NGO leaders live with. The Soviet policy of suppressing those who seem more resourceful and critical of the State is still well and alive. This may be one reason that women’s NGOs failed to unite and support one another when they were threatened with being disbanded.

The government decree requiring NGOs to re-register expanded the influence of the Women’s Committees over women’s NGOs. According to the decree, only those women’s NGOs recommended by the Women’s Committee would be allowed to re-register. The Women’s Committees are state-led, quasi NGOs sustained and regulated by the Government. The National Women’s Committee in Tashkent has hundreds of Women’s Committee branches across the country. Local Women’s Committees report to and receive orders down the chain of command from the center. They are housed in government offices, such as the mayor’s office (hakimiyats) or Mahalla Committees. As Saktanber and Ozatas-Baykal (2000) explain:

The Mahalla Women’s Committees are linked to the Rayon (province) or City Women’s Committees (composed of ten to fifteen Mahalla committees) which are in turn linked to the Metropolitan Women’s
Committees. Finally, all Metropolitan Women’s Committees are linked to the Central Women’s Committee in the capital Tashkent [which is a National Women’s Committee] (p. 234).

According to a Women’s Committee representative, 432 women’s NGOs were closed down; “others are cooperating with government programs in order to function” (informal interview, July 2008). Existing women’s NGOs now work closely with local offices of Women’s Committees and other relevant government offices to conduct their activities with communities and schools. NGOs are restricted to conduct their work within their district and in accordance with their specified organizational mission. Although the events of Andijan seem to have been forgotten and are not spoken about in the media and official speeches, one Andijan NGO representative I met mentioned with grievance that the NGOs are “allowed to exist, but are not allowed to work as yet, because no one has forgotten Andijan.” (Tashkent CEDAW meeting, August 2008).

Description of the Sample Participants

During two months of fieldwork in Uzbekistan, I conducted 20 interviews. Three additional interviews were conducted in the US after returning from the field in the fall of 2008. Some of the information used in the analyses also comes from a meeting of women’s NGO leaders in Tashkent. This three day meeting took place from 9th-11th August, 2008 and was organized by the local UN country office in Tashkent for women leaders of NGOs. The meeting was intended to provide an opportunity to discuss the Uzbekistan country report for the CEDAW session.
Interviewees come from various professional and educational backgrounds: doctors, teachers, professors, librarians, musicians, scientists, architects, factory workers, politicians, technicians, government officials, lawyers and businesswomen. Five of the women have or are working on their doctoral degrees and another four are graduates of Komsomol, the youth wing of the former Communist party which was the heart and soul of the entire Soviet Party system. The following tables show the characteristics of my sample participants.

Table 1. General Information about the sample participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Information</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Twenty-one women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Two men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Median age for women in the sample: 49</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Thirteen out of the twenty-one women are married. Eight divorced/widowed, one never married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- All but one have one or more children</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Six out of the ten women currently operating NGOs are women’s GONGOs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Five out of the six leaders operating GONGOs are currently working on their PhD dissertations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Eighteen of the women leaders have a bachelor’s degree or higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Out of the thirteen women leaders currently operating NGOs, seven of them also work in their original profession and two of them are retired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- One female participant passed away due to health complications in 2009.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. NGOs in the Sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location where interviews were conducted</th>
<th>Status of the NGO at the time of Interview</th>
<th>Area of NGO work (of all interviewees)</th>
<th>Area of NGO work (still operational)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-Ferghana region (14): Nine in Ferghana city, One in Kuva district, Four in Kokand town</td>
<td>-Closed down (7)</td>
<td>-Domestic violence</td>
<td>-Entrepreneurship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Open (10)</td>
<td>-Reproductive health</td>
<td>-Rehabilitation for disabled women and children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Reopened under a different name / mission / affiliation (3)</td>
<td>-Conflict resolution</td>
<td>-Youth Engagement</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Leadership training</td>
<td>-Women in crisis</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Tashkent city (6)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Uzbek women in New York City (2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>-Phone interview with an Uzbek in Prague, Czech Republic (1)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additional Sources

While the research sample population was originally limited to women, I also interviewed two men who worked with women’s NGOs in Ferghana. One of these men took over his sister’s NGO during the period of political pressure to close down all NGOs in Uzbekistan. He continues to conduct NGO activities while his sister, who maintains a low profile, was not available for an interview. As the leader of an independently operated NGO that has survived to date, he was strongly recommended by several research participants. Another male participant was a former employee of a foreign donor agency’s small grants program. He handled NGO grant distribution, trained and helped chart out seed grants and conducted seminar programs. These two men had insightful
comments to share about the feminization of the NGO sector, as well as NGO activities and prospects.

Another unplanned but extremely important data source was a Women’s NGO meeting held on August 9-11, 2008 to prepare Uzbekistan’s country report for the CEDAW convention. The meeting took place while I was conducting research in Uzbekistan, and I was invited by one of my interviewees to observe and meet leaders from all over the country. Participants in the meeting included approximately twenty women leaders of NGOs from around the country, UN officials, and a head of republican Women’s Committees. Following speeches and a formal Q&A session about the role of NGOs in the preparation of the CEDAW report, participants took a coffee break. I took the opportunity to introduce myself to several NGO women leaders in person and asked if they would be interested in participating in my research. Responses were mostly diplomatic and superficial. I was assured that despite my insider knowledge that should have made me known and unthreatening, the issues I was investigating in my research raised red flags.

When I re-entered the meeting after the break, I found myself in a completely different environment. I had not realized that the representative of the Women’s Committee had left the meeting after the break. The meeting was transformed into an exuberant and active participatory debate. Speakers were relaxed and very vocal as if they were speaking to a mass rally in a street demonstration.

Women leaders spoke with zeal and passion about their problems: tarnished image of NGOs in the society, financial difficulties, lack of partnership and bureaucratic
loopholes. The mood in the meeting fluctuated every few minutes. The room was filled with ironic laughter when speakers shared anecdotal stories describing their coping strategies and experiences with various patriarchal attitudes and expectations in their work with the local state officials.

An atmosphere of anger and tension arose when two activists raised very difficult questions about the lack of strong support for NGOs that were closed down. One of the leaders suggested that the lack of cooperation and solidarity was one of the excuses officials used to re-register NGOs under the umbrella of NaNGoUz. According to the state officials, women leaders argued, NGOs were running wild and needed to be tamed and central organization like NaNGoUz was the answer. Among other concerns, speakers talked about the brain drain from the NGO sector and the importance of involvement of more young people and experienced NGO workers whose organizations were closed down. In the meeting there were only two young women in their late 20s representing an NGO sector, and they never spoke.

 Speakers covered a wide range of issues pertaining to women’s status, and each NGO representative in the room talked about programs they had or continued to have that supported women’s education, employment, health and legal rights. It appeared that all of the NGOs had conducted one or two similar programs before, but most projects seemed to stand idle, i.e. organizations did not always seek ways to coordinate their activities. For instance, there could be a series of seminars being conducted by one NGO in a particular town, while another NGO was conducting a different type of activity on the same subject matter in the next town. Basic strategies of work included researching the community of
interest and working with that specific location to develop solution through educational
trainings, competitions, development and distribution of hand out materials.

While I could not get many women NGO leaders to participate in my research
interviews, participatory observation and the opportunity to speak with some of the
participants in the CEDAW meeting about their work added richness and confidence to
my research data.

Research Findings

This chapter is organized in terms of the four research questions posed in Chapter
One. Following the report on the findings, I discuss the data, applying the critical lens of
post- colonial feminist theory.

1. How did the change in sponsorship of NGO funding from international donors to
the Uzbek State affect the work of women leaders of NGOs?

“When they were asked to cut and bring the hair, they cut and brought the head” - one of the participants’ used this proverb to describe the post Andijan political
environment when police and KGB officers used all possible fear tactics and measures to
close down NGOs regardless of the nature of their work or whether or not they received
funding from outside. As a result, all financial transactions of NGOs were frozen;
leaders’ of the organizations were served official court letters requiring itemized budgets
of all their financial books, lists of all affiliated names and organizations they had worked
with and reports on all activities conducted by the organizations. NGO workers were
questioned and some were accused of being traitors of the nation.
While only one quarter of all NGOs recorded in 2002 were women’s NGOs, the public presence and influence of women in the NGO sector was felt in all different areas of civil society (Tokhtakhodjaeva, 2008). Women-led NGOs faced the same fate as the rest of the NGOs when the Uzbek State took measures to reorganize the civil society sector under one umbrella. Some NGO leaders did not fight back against the decision, others tried to hold on to their organizations as long as they could, yet others went door-to-door to every office to save the organization with letters of support, requesting the protection of influential people in order to survive the re-registration process.

Many NGOs were in the middle of implementing community projects and seminars that had to be suspended; others were waiting for bank transactions from donor agencies to clear, which were subsequently frozen. One of the interviewees recalled how she opened nine different accounts with different banks in different cities hoping that the transfer of funds from an international donor would clear in at least one of them. Another leader remembers how sympathetic the officials who closed her organization were. They told her, “Our hearts are bleeding to see your organization go, but we do not have a choice, our hands are bound too. With the first chance to reopen we will help you” (BO, interview). Later this organization was reopened under the paperwork of another organization. They had a different name, different charter, but the same dedicated staff who continued helping vulnerable women.

Another very brave woman leader recalled how she was tricked into closing down her organization with the promise that she could reopen it again; she applied six times to reopen her organization over a period of three years, but her application was rejected.
each time before even making it to the relevant official’s desk. Her son was arrested and sentenced to prison. She believed that the reason for her son’s arrest was to silence her work. He was teaching at one of the prestigious universities in the capital before he was “accused and sentenced for several years on charges of spying for foreigners, because he was involved in my work,” she said in agony and tears. When I asked her if she would continue to do her NGO work if she had the chance, she did not hesitate to say yes.

Her organization’s name had the word “democracy” in it, which, she notes, raised concerns from the time of its conception. The NGO offered legal, social and education support to local communities and conducted cross-border conflict resolution projects. The latest project on a border conflict resolution was left unfinished. Unfortunately this NGO leader died of health complications while I was writing this dissertation. She was 54 years old.

Today, through re-registration, NGOs in Uzbekistan are undergoing steady integration into the structures of the government system. NGOs not only have to ask permission for each step of their activities from every relevant government office, but they also have to work with officials in order to carve out their space in the government-led civil society. Living and working in a culture where social status and networking are keys to the accomplishment of any work, NGO leaders have been creatively adapting to the new political environment. Here I grouped responses to the effects of their institutionalization into government-led political, economic and social integrations as follows:
Political Integration: Five of the women leaders of local NGOs talked about their successful partnership with one of the new and growing political parties called UzLiDep (Uzbekistan Leadership Party). These women provide the party offices with necessary methodological tools, assist them in gathering information about the local population, conduct political recruiting seminars and participate in party events. In return, the party backs them with necessary signatures, recommendations, or passes to conduct their activities. It is a two-way collaboration, where NGOs are part of the mechanism for political parties to advance their community outreach, while the party provides protection and facilitates passage through a variety of bureaucratic processes allowing the NGOs to conduct their work. Other existing women’s NGOs are also indirectly connected to the activities of the leading party through collaboration with local Mahalla and Women’s Committees.

Economic Integration: Due to very limited funds available through the state-funded NaNGoUz grants and inaccessible foreign donor funds, some NGOs skillfully converted their offices into semi-businesses. Some of them converted their organizations to LLCs (Liability Limited Companies), while others that maintained their NGO status began renting out technical resources to business and community or provided unofficial paid services in order to stay afloat. These technical resources originated from grants secured in the past from foreign donors to purchase computers, printers, cameras, video appliances and medical equipment among other things. Upon the completion of the specific projects for which the technical resources were designated, some of the NGO
leaders claimed the equipments as personal property, which they subsequently used for private or personal gain.

One of the NGO leaders talked about how her NGO had two official missions, one being environmental and the other being health related. When her NGO did not have any grant projects to work on in the realm of environmental issues, such as clean water, recycling or trash disposal – areas that they had worked on in the past - she maintained her paid staff through the provision of at-cost medical services on the side by way of a small business that she had opened using medical equipment secured from previous foreign-funded grant projects. Other NGOs offered services like computer training and skills-training classes, charging small membership fees. Some NGO leaders also worked freelance as trainers for other NGOs or government organizations. While these measures do not help the NGOs to strengthen their base or grow, they do help in keeping them afloat until new avenues are discovered.

Many successful women leaders of NGOs were connected to the Business Women’s Association (BWA), which is one of the few organizations functioning today. In the early years of independence the president of Uzbekistan gave special emphasize to BWA as a force for development. As a participant in the CEDAW meeting recalled, “When the president was looking at the list of all the areas of development the country needed in the first years of independence, BWA was on the list, but at the bottom. He took out his pen, circled the BWA and with the arrow brought it to the top of the list. That’s how important our work is” (CEDAW meeting, August 9-11, 2008).
Needless to mention, some of the women leaders from the NGO circle who have previously secured large quantities of technological equipment for computer literacy and skill learning purposes come from BWA women’s group. When NGOs started closing down under pressure, small internet cafes appeared in different corners of the towns.

Social Integration: Most of the NGOs moved their offices to the home of the NGO leader when their foreign-funded projects were stopped and they could no longer afford the rent for their offices. Such shifts brought some of the NGOs closer to the communities and neighborhoods they served. Under the new grant programs of NaNGoUz, NGOs need to show close collaboration with local government institutions in order to secure a seed grant. Working closely with Mahalla Committee members, Women’s Committees and local officials is very important in the work of today’s NGOs. Embeddedness of NGO work in the everyday life of communities and local structures of Government is emphasized as a necessity of civil society as envisioned by the Uzbek State. Forcing this envisioned NGO connection to local bureaucratic structures takes away the independence, flexibility, and voluntary spirit of the organization. Unless NGOs are allowed to operate in a level playing field and not become subordinate to every state structure they work with, they will merely become an ineffective part of the political process.

Women, who lost their NGOs either returned to their old professions, went into business, went abroad or turned to religion by cutting off their public career and resorting to the teachings of Islam. One of the NGO leaders who went through the list of NGO leaders names in her file, pointed out: “several of these leaders who I knew dropped
everything and returned to their homes and turned to religion in order to escape this mess” (SM, interview). The form of Islam these women are turning to, as one former leaders explained, is where they devote themselves to prayers, seek pilgrimage and stay out of politics in the public sphere.

Talking about their NGO activities, women leaders seemed to yearn for the past, which excited and empowered them, gave them a public role and most importantly, made them feel personally important. One of the NGO leaders in her late 50s, single and childless, expressed her feelings about her work in a poem, where she called her NGO work her child, her husband, her everything. She recalled how she hugged the telephone for years calling every single office and business in the city to raise funds for the renovation of an old building she opened as an office to help people with disabilities like herself. Today, her NGO is still open and received a small grant from the NaNGoUz in 2008, which was the year of Social Welfare and Protection in Uzbekistan. She seemed to be deeply concerned with the future, wondering how she will carry on with her organizational work solely on small membership fees and in the context of stronger restrictions on every aspect of organizational activities. She had severed her overseas contacts from which she used to receive updates on different international conferences, trainings, opportunities and resources for people with disabilities (from an interview with a leader from CEDAW meeting, August 9-11, 2008). Today, she is not sure what the future will hold for the NGO.

“When personal relations are good with our local officials” says one of the interviewees, “we have fewer complications in paperwork” (SK, interview). Bureaucracy
and hierarchy pose the next biggest issues for these NGOs following an acute shortage of sources of funding and donors. As a survival mechanism many NGO women leaders stated that they had to invite representatives of the Women’s and Mahalla Committees to participate in every step of their project activities. By building close relations with these local officials NGOs are working around some of the bureaucratic requirements. For example, some of the NGOs in Ferghana have moved closer to Mahalla Committees after re-institutionalization and meet each other almost everyday.

2. What are the perceptions of women leaders of NGOs about the status of women in their society? What are their perceptions on social change?

In the winter of 2004 I conducted qualitative field research among Uzbek women on the changing status of women in post Soviet Uzbekistan for my Masters Degree program. During my field research I raised the issue of women’s status among women of different age groups, background and social status. There were distinct differences in responses that reflected age as an important factor. The older women expressed grave concerns about eroding social and economic benefits for women and the devaluation of women’s public participation by both men and women in post-independent Uzbekistan. Younger women, on the other hand, expressed stronger support for traditional patriarchal values in the public and private realm, emphasizing motherhood and the responsibilities of women in the family. However, there are two important factors that need to be taken into account when discussing this data.

First, there are the different phases that an Uzbek female goes through in performing her socially expected gender roles and responsibilities. As a young female,
societal pressure and gender expectations in the family prioritize a girl’s honorable yet subordinate position and her duties to her family. As a young female, involvement in activist work, conducting public speeches, traveling and campaigning, does not make her desirable for marriage in traditional communities. Girls must perform their duties as daughters-in-law, wives and mothers. Their place in the family and community strengthens as they prove themselves worthy of the honor given to them. In the later stages of their lives, their active involvement in the public sphere is less threatening to their role in their families and communities.

Second is the political and economic change since Uzbekistan’s independence in 1991. The first generation of women who grew up in the Soviet era was molded in the image of a hard-working public woman entitled to social, economic and political benefits. These women are now nearing their 50s and 60s. Here I should mention, the mean age for interviewed women is 49, the oldest being 65 and the youngest 30. Younger women who woke up to the demise of a Communist ideology followed by failing market reforms are trapped in a cynical state of mind with regards to opportunities for meaningful public participation by women. Therefore age difference has an important impact in this study.

In the study conducted during the summer of 2008, questions about women’s status were particularly provoking for women leaders of NGOs. The remarkable stories and experiences they shared illustrated their optimism and the different survival and adaptation strategies they used in the transition period. Most commended the State for passing laws that protected women’s social and economic benefits and guaranteed their rights, but pessimism was common regarding the execution, implementation and
transformation of the laws into daily practice. One of the women leaders said that there were 70 different legal documents since independence on the protection and provision of rights of mothers and children. She added that NaNGoUz has allocated funding to support “women’s issues” projects. Women’s committees, political parties and local government offices have positions reserved for women to deal specifically with women’s issues. These policies are in tune with the political rhetoric of the national development plan. But when the government allocated a 30% quota of seats in parliament for women candidates, only about half of these seats were filled by women.

Not even developed countries have such quota systems like ours encouraging women leaders into political decision making. But we face the reverse side of the problem of this decree; we don’t have many qualified candidates among women. Last year only 5% of the 30% quota was filled in Ferghana. I think only 15% at a national level (RK, interview).

Women leaders point out that at the grassroots level, traditional gender values prevent these legal opportunities from being effectively utilized. Those women who hold an official position walk a fine line between family and public responsibility. Interviewees also pointed out that even if a woman reaches high public office, she is not allowed to be effective in influencing government policies because decision-making power is still reserved for men:

Most of the important decisions about work are not made inside the office, they take place in the dacha’s (resort areas) where office men gather to
drink, eat kababs and spend the night. How am I supposed to participate in
decision making if the place is not accessible and acceptable for me? Of
course most of us here [women in official positions] are here for a check
mark that wasn’t the case when I was an NGO leader” (RB, interview).

Her response resonates with comments of several other former NGO leaders who now
work in government positions. While positions and opportunities exist for women to
improve their status, reach high public office and achieve public prominence, the
patriarchal culture embedded in the social fabric of public offices disempowers women
and ultimately discourages them from pursuing a successful public career as individuals.
As a leader, a woman has to have a model family in order to reach the hearts of the
people she leads because her professional capabilities and intelligence are weighed
against her role and responsibility as a wife, mother and a daughter. Literature review of
women’s status in the Soviet period sheds light on how women coped with the dichotomy
of expectations as leaders. While more and more women are entering business and
politics today, the core traditional gender stereotypes are slow to change and continue to
hinder women leaders’ full participation in decision making. I had discussed in the
literature analyses that the current State’s approach to women’s issues reinforces
women’s value and societal role as a group, and not as individuals. The legal framework
to improve women’s status at all levels of society is inadequate if the cycle of patriarchal
attitude persists without women’s own resistance.

The increasing presence of women in decision making positions is not sufficient if
their voices are ignored, misunderstood or silenced in public offices. There should be
more women in the higher offices that talk about the gender specific issues they face as individuals and support each other when someone speaks out. There is a need among women leaders of NGOs and women leaders appointed to government offices to build solidarity and a network of women’s leaders.

Another former NGO leader who was forced to quit her job as a public official at the time of the interview bitterly complained about the narrowness of ‘women’s issues’ she had to handle in her job. She added with exclamation: “why can’t women run for higher office to manage departments of finance, corruption, public safety, building management or other things? Allocated positions in the higher offices for women deal only with women’s issues” (SZ, interview).

There is an unspoken belief at the official level that women are best suited to deal with women’s issues, which are defined within the framework of the family. Without proper groundwork involving both Mahallas and NGOs to empower more women in public participation, the artificially created positions at the top level of government may contribute to further disempowerment of women in society. Younger women may not grow up to want to serve in public office if the public space remains selectively open for the advancement of women’s status. Fifteen years ago, the news of the Central Women’s Committee head being promoted to the position of prime minister was viewed as promising by many women in leadership roles. However, the reality in communities across the regions of Uzbekistan has not improved for women in general. The introduction of the 30% quota for parliamentary seats, the participation of a female candidate in the latest presidential elections and the issuance of dozens of decrees on
women’s issues over the past two decades are not enough if today’s younger women do not show interest in public leadership. Lack of interest among younger women in NGO work is a concern that was brought up during the NGO women leaders’ CEDAW meeting in Tashkent and during interviews with the participants.

3. How do women leaders of NGOs negotiate their political and personal image?

How does their background affect their goals and work?

While this research cannot do justice in explicating the many rich facets of women’s leadership experience, it reveals how some women who succeeded in the public space dealt with stereotypes of women through their NGO work. Women leaders came to this sector from all walks of life. Some joined for monetary reasons, others became involved for the opportunity to travel, to learn and build a career. In the end NGO work became part of their personal identity because it empowered them as individuals. Leading an NGO required the ability to adapt, learn and work in the new conditions of NGO politics. As one of the male interviewees commented, feminization of the NGO sector in Uzbekistan was inevitable: “Women in general are underestimated as professionals in their workplace and in our culture. So no matter what they did for a living, at the brink of the collapse of communism, they were the first professionals who lost their jobs or the incentives to work” (FV, interview). On the other hand, foreign donors encouraged active women’s participation and leadership in NGO grant competitions. The abundance of funding for NGO projects brought many women and men from all walks of life to start their organizations. Their background and personal knowledge about the issues in their communities helped them choose the type of organization they wanted to establish.
Women with medical backgrounds opened NGOs with missions related to health and development issues and applied for grants that covered health issues in their communities. Teachers used their educational backgrounds to establish non profit organizations that provide educational services. Foreign donors agencies such as Counterpart Consortium provided tools and training on how to establish and run an NGO, apply for small grants and write reports. In a few years, dozens of NGOs were running small grants projects in every town in the Ferghana Valley.

Undoubtedly, there were NGOs, as both government and some international experts reported that vanished after the grant money was finished. During the field research I found several NGOs that fit that profile. However, what was interesting was that even though such organizations had a name and a female director, they had been created by another existing NGO under its umbrella in order to secure specific grant money announced by a donor. In reality, these female directors served as employees of the original organization. Such small grant-based organizations were set up to support the original NGO and when the grant money dried up, the organization vanished with it. The leader of a large NGO explained that she had helped dozens of organizations to start off and considered them as the ‘children’ of her own big organization and their leaders as her apprentices. She referred to some of the leaders of these small scale grant-based organizations as “dilettantes” in contrast to NGO leaders who were social activists:

Doctors stayed doctors, teachers stayed teachers, and they didn’t grow with their organization to become public activists. These organizations tarnished the name of real working NGOs. The Government could see it,
and it rightfully made a decision to close them. As a result we also suffered, because NGOs did not have a strong enough presence and trust in the local communities. So no one came to our rescue (SF, interview).

This leader continues her work despite the difficulties of conducting an NGO work since post Andijan events. She proudly talked about her strong roots in the community and in the local government of the town. Her power stems from her local knowledge of the systems both old and new, strong personal connection to the local government offices and ability to garner support for the NGO projects from local income generating businesses. She does this work because it allows her to develop and design project activities that make difference in the communities’ lives.

Many leaders interviewed in this study consider the NGO work as their call. Women described how their NGO work gave them a space for self-realization of their potential as leaders:

> It gave us space to realize our creativity, our ideas, to improve the life of our communities, and we wanted to do something essential. I know how much of our women are self-sacrificial; they don’t value themselves as they should. So when I opened my NGO, my goal was to help women raise their self-value through literacy classes (RB, interview).

One of the youngest NGO leaders’ talked about the overwhelming joy she felt when she saw the effectiveness of her work with communities, and the respect in people’s eyes when she walked into a room full of people, despite her young age and gender. She managed large scale projects, handled intense work loads and earned the respect and
attention of people in leadership positions though her NGO work. Her public image and leadership, however, conflicted with her traditional role and responsibilities expected of her in the marriage. When she fled the country soon after the bitter divorce, she ran not from the fear of the government but from the consequences of failed marriage (MS, interview).

4. How do the women leaders of NGOs meet the expectations of different stakeholders in working towards social change?

Behind the Iron Curtain of the Cold War, women in Uzbekistan were not aware of feminist movements nor the on-going international dialogue about women’s issues. The word ‘gender’ does not have an Uzbek or Russian translation; it is written as it is with a slight variation in pronunciation. Many democracy-related concepts imported from the West often face challenges in attempting to translate them into the local language and politics. The concept of NGOs was also perceived in a negative way by officials who transmitted a negative image to the masses through the media. The concept of gender equality was also problematic among politicians. The concept of feminism is not very well understood even among some of the NGO leaders. As Tokhtakhodjaeva (2008) writes, “there’s a low level of political consciousness in Uzbek society – this is attributable not only to women, but also to men. In this sense, the NGOs are the only source of liberal values in the whole country” (p. 202). Interviewees’ responses support Tokhtakhodjaeva’s argument that non profit organizations provided a space for more egalitarian and democratic participation and decision making. They attributed this factor
to the financial and ideological independence from the politics and bureaucracy of the local government before the institutionalization of the NGO sector.

Promising women NGO activists did not want to align themselves with feminists, because feminism was viewed as alien to Uzbek culture. However, women leaders of NGOs found ways to negotiate through delicate political diplomacy a relationship with both the State and the international community. As one interviewee commented, NGO work required not only punctuality, trustworthiness, and reliability, but also the ability to speak donor language and the language of officials:

When we write a report to the donor organization on our research results, for example on women’s status, the headline may say “gross violations of women’s rights”; but in our report to the local officials or local media we write “improving women’s status.” It is important in our work to be able to negotiate between two different approaches (ME, interview).

NGO women knew well how to speak the language of both centers – on one hand donors that are providing large amounts of funding, often with strings attached and expecting effective results; on the other hand, the government that is overprotective of its international image but also expecting effective results.

For most women leaders, NGO work was not the only job they did for living; it was a secondary activity to their primary job in the state structure. Some of the women leaders brought their NGO work to their primary workplace and recruited people from their office to work on NGO projects. When the project was completed and grant money was finished, the NGO staff would go about doing their primary jobs until they were
invited to work on the next project. That way, the experienced NGO staff was mostly available when needed. NGO work offered flexibility with time. Women seemed to feel a stronger commitment to their NGO work than they did to their primary job.

Every interviewee described using their personal connections and the social networks of their kin to gather support and reach out to their target population, arrange meetings, increase membership, and involve others in their activities. One former NGO leader stated that when needed, she could ask her mother’s friends, co-workers, and her sister’s and aunt’s co-workers to participate in NGO trainings. Other NGO leaders stated that they provided small incentives in exchange for participation, such as free internet connection, help with an application for study abroad, and references for jobs. Ledeneva (1998) identifies the “practice of using personal networks to get things done as one of the pillars of socialist governments. She calls the informal economy of exchange networks the reverse side of an over controlling system” (p. 3). As residents of FCS with authoritarian rule, women leaders have mastered the reverse side of the strictly controlled center. An NGO leader’s account of how she managed to register her organization is a vivid example of this argument:

We had to go through massive hurdles to register our organization, just because of its name. Finally when I got to the top of the chain, I thought I would have it easier because I knew the regional Hakim (Mayor) and he knew me, my work, my credibility… But it was he who grilled me: “Why such a name? Do you want to imply that we don’t have a democracy, so that now you will teach us democracy?” He refused to sign off on the
paper. I was running around for seven months to register my organization. I did not want to give up here, so I had to use a lie… I dropped an influential person’s name who sits in the Tashkent office… and the paper was signed right away (RK, interview).

NGO women talked about how often they had to use the names of influential people to bypass the excessive amount of bureaucratic hurdles dealing with project implementation. They also used the foreign donors’ lack of full understanding of the local realities and peculiarities to justify securing funding for items or services that would not be needed or otherwise would be free of charge. Some of the interviewees confessed bribing or knowing someone who bribed the local officials to accelerate the process of registering their organization or getting permission for specific project activities. They explained that manipulation of the budget was needed in order to have extra money for extenuating situations which can not be explained in donor reports.

The women I interviewed also reflected on ways in which they had failed to respond adequately to the expectations of different stakeholders. An abundance of foreign donor funding with inadequate coordination of projects and NGO training on management and monitoring contributed to the mushrooming of short term grant-based NGOs. Four of the interviewees said they knew nothing about NGOs before coming to these trainings. By the end of the week long training they had some ideas for project proposal and a rough draft of the NGO charter to apply for registration.

Another problem was the relationship with Mahalla committees, or the lack of it. As I have described in the Literature Review, Mahalla Committees are the oldest
community-level civil society groups in Uzbek society. However they did not fit the profile of NGOs that donor organizations wanted to fund. As a result, NGOs established with the best of intentions with committed leaders did not always connect with the communities they wanted to serve. One of the interviewees recalled the lesson she had learned in the 2008 presidential elections:

When presidential elections were announced, our team went door to door to collect signatures to push for one of the representatives from the civil society sector for presidency. People were scared of us and did not trust us, although we all live here and worked in these communities for years. They know who we are. Finally, we had to go through the Mahalla Committee which was much more efficient. That’s when I realized that NGOs have not penetrated to the hearts of the communities here (SK, interview).

This comment once again brings the importance of Mahalla Committees and the rooted trust communities have in them to light. Only late in the period of international assistance did donors require greater participation from Mahalla Committees in decision making, in preparing grant proposals and in the implementation process. Foreign donors, such as the USAID-funded Counterpart Consortium (CC), were mentioned by many NGO leaders as having placed emphasis on NGO collaboration with local Mahalla Committees. However, one of the NGO leaders pointed out another donor shortcoming: “they [CC] focused on the structure of NGOs and failed to develop an organizational culture and a strong organizational base” (MI, interview).
In general, interviewees stated that donors rarely left their offices in Tashkent so they assumed that the work was going well based on the official reports and short field visits for project evaluations. In addition, several interviewees commented on the donor reporting system as new, complicated and in need of better adaptation to the local language and cultural realities. Many NGO women noted that they had received more than one grant from the same international donor agency. This had improved their rapport and helped to build on previous projects to increase their outreach and effectiveness. One third of the organizations discussed in this study also received more than one grant at a time. Leaders used this type of overlapping to increase their membership and open new branches of their organization. One of the leaders noted that this overlapping in funding allowed some of the NGOs to manipulate their budgets more easily.

According to two NGO leaders, in one extreme case, donor-appointed local coordinators embezzled large sums of foreign donor money for themselves and their favored NGOs, which contributed to growing mistrust among local NGOs in one specific town. During the CEDAW meeting and in person interviews women argued that had the NGOs worked more closely together and supported each other, more NGOs could have survived the re-registration process. Women leaders’ ingenuity and resourcefulness helped them through many difficulties, but the lack of strong support for each other led to their failure. Those that survived face a challenging task to improve their effectiveness and influence in the communities while negotiating their role and place in the politics of the State led civil society.
Revisiting Post-colonial Feminist Scholarship

From the beginning, feminist theory had a fundamental point of contact with post-colonial discourse as both are predicated upon the definition of oppression and struggle against hegemonic power. However, early feminist studies mostly focused on the role of white, educated middle class women in the West and their interpretation of the lives of women of color, rather than the struggle and achievements of women subjected to imperialism as a whole (Burton 1994; Callaway 1987; Chaudhuri & Strobel 1992; Davin, 1978). One of the most debated feminist conceptions was the idea that women outside the West need to be saved by benevolent Western feminists (Midgley, 1998). Hooks, Mohanty, Spivak and others have interrogated assumptions that liberal positions which may be progressive for women in the West are necessarily the best for women elsewhere (Hooks, 1997; Mohanty, Russo & Torres, eds. 1991; Spivak, 1987; Young, 2001, p. 377).

Over the past twenty years, the discourse of Western feminism about women in colonized nations had been questioned on the ground of its homogenization of women’s oppression and Western feminists positioning themselves as spokespersons of all women. Kumari Jayawardena’s (1988) *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* and Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid’s (1989) *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* initiated the non–western feminist critique based on the accounts of women of color in colonial and anti-colonial States. As Jayawardena (1988) argues, women’s mutinies around the world predated Western feminism or occurred without any contact with Western feminists (p. 208). Women across the globe directly and indirectly
organized and participated in anti-colonial struggles and faced the consequences. Women led armed rebellions, military campaigns and raids in Malaysia, Cuba and Nicaragua (Jayawardena 1988, pp. 208-9; Taylor, 1999), public political protests in India, Bangladesh and other Latin American countries (Young, 2001, pp. 362-4) and formed Radio Congresses and commanded underground movements in Singapore, Burma and Vietnam (Forbes 1996, pp. 121-56; Franda, 1971, p. 17; Kaur 1968). In Uzbekistan women were at the forefront of building the national identity of the Uzbek Soviet State during the early years of Soviet Communism.

The post-colonial feminist theoretical paradigm provides a valuable framework for the discussion of Uzbek NGO women leaders’ experience and women as a whole in the context of national identity building in Uzbekistan. Both feminism and post-colonialism are theoretical frameworks that seek to end cultural, patriarchal, neocolonial and imperialist oppression. Without questioning and challenging patriarchy in all its forms, we cannot liberate women. As Amanda Harris writes, “the heart of this fragmentation and the real obstacle of anti-hegemonic theory and practice is the inability to see the raced and classed aspects of Patriarchy and the focus on only one line of oppression” (Harris, 2006, p. 30). As a political philosophy, post-colonial feminism is defined and redefined as a contestation of hegemonic economic, political and cultural imperialism both at the national and the international level. It is a “dialectical concept that marks the broad historical facts of decolonization” and the “realities of nations and peoples emerging into a new imperialistic context of economic and sometimes political domination” (Young, 2001, p. 57).
For the purpose of this study, I used the term post-colonialism to refer to the struggle of new States, such as Uzbekistan, that have been granted official independence from colonial empires and regimes and are still engaged in throwing off the ideology of post-colonial hegemony. Signifiers, such as the “other”, “marginalized” and “subaltern,” used in post-colonial women’s writing emphasize their position in mainstream feminist discourse. Mishra and Hodge (1994) comment, “since postcolonial women are like a fragment, an oppositional system, within an overall colonized framework, women therefore function here as burdened by a twice-disabling discourse: the disabling master discourse of colonialism is then redirected against women in an exact duplication of the colonizer’s own use of that discourse vis a vis the colonized in the first instance” (p. 284). For instance, women leaders of NGOs in Uzbekistan can be seen as simultaneously enabled and disabled by the same signifier of status. Their leadership in public organizations as a female enables self-development, individual growth and increased bargaining power; at the same time this public activism marginalizes them in a patriarchal cultural sense.

My interviewees spoke of this contradiction in their lives as a constant struggle. Only one of the interviewees focused her life on career and education and did not build a family of her own. Now in her fifties, she is well-traveled and well-known at home and abroad for her leadership qualities and work experience. She herself as well as other interviewees described her as straightforward, competitive, vocal and very dedicated to her career. From our brief encounter she came across as an intelligent, stern, and independent woman with a very high self-esteem. Moreover, she possessed all the
negative stereotypes of Western feminists, i.e. unfeminine qualities such as dressing like a man, unsubordinated to men either through marriage or work, and childless. But when I asked her opinion about feminism, she hesitated a bit, and then another part of her personality came through as she talked:

No matter what kind of work or leadership position they have, our women know their place in their families…women are the color of the nation…. I think feminists are way too out of line… I think the more I know, the more I don’t think I am a feminist. In Uzbekistan, *women are first women, then they are human beings* (DT, interview).

I have heard this saying so many times, and I did not question its meaning until I was sitting in front of this woman leader talking about the concept of feminism. Feminism is generally associated with being single. The word “single” here carries a deeper meaning than merely unmarried, divorced or widowed. It reflects the loneliness women feel in their daily struggle.

Another very charismatic and charming middle aged woman leader who led a large scale NGO project and had an impressive record of government work seemed to have everything going for her as she talked about her work, happily married life and beautiful children. As the conversation carried on, I decided to ask her about feminism. She spoke with an irony in her voice:

Feminism!? I always laugh when I hear that word! We have struggled so much fighting for this, fighting for that, and in the end we have put all the sacks on our own shoulders... We have fought for our rights so much, now
we have to do everything ourselves! Women’s leadership, movements…
forget it (she shook her head); sometimes… I would like to have a strong
shoulder to lean on… I would like to have someone who will care for me
as a woman (RB was married at the time of the interview. She later said
that her marriage was falling apart due to her career requirements).

When asked about their leadership, most women I interviewed looked humbled and a
smile crossed their face as they told me some of their life stories and experiences doing
NGO work. They often mentioned “workaholic”, “selfless leadership” and “non
hierarchal leadership.” Most identified themselves as leaders “in the eyes of their children
and communities” but also mentioned the hardships of being a woman leader in the eyes
of the society. While all the legal rights and political rhetoric about gender equality are in
place, in reality the cultural experience reflects the double standard of gender politics.

I always had crises in my personal family life, but I had to take and bear
them for the sake of my public reputation…because if you want to rise in
your position they will ask you, “Why did you get divorced?” As a leader
you can be questioned, “What can you teach us if you can’t even handle
your own family?” Do you have any idea what kind of struggles we have
to go through to be where we are as leaders? (RK, interview).

These voices resonate with multiple oppressions women in Uzbekistan experience as they
enter the public space or men’s world. Resentment of Western feminists also appeared in
comments such as the following:
What we have achieved in sixteen years, Western women fought for over many decades. Our women have 40 souls, what one Uzbek woman does in one day, any Western woman cannot even survive an hour of her work. If they are feminists, then we are “iron women” (DT, interview).

Women’s responses about feminism in this study illustrate that as a concept feminism is misunderstood, rejected and critiqued by women leaders. Some of them were frustrated trying to explain why they do not want to be called a feminist, others simply shook their heads in surprise how feminism is connected to their work as leaders. As a study, feminism is not well explored in Uzbekistan, at least not in a positive light. International organizations in the country also use very subtle language with no reference to the word feminism in their local gender equality programs.

Post-colonial feminists argue that mainstream Western feminism views the experiences of women from non-Western cultures in terms of concepts and criteria that do not resonate with their multiple oppressions. Trin T. Minh-ha calls it:

…abiding by ethnographic ideology…which depends on the representation of a coherent cultural subject as a source of scientific knowledge to explain a native culture and reduces every gendered activity to a sex-role stereotype. She argues that in this context, feminism becomes an ethnocentric practice (cited in Young, 2001, p. 96).
This study suggests that by virtue of being trained and having received grants from Western donors, the activities and approaches of women’s NGOs to women’s issues reflected a Western feminist agenda. For instance, raising sensitive issue such as domestic violence as a violation of a woman’s human rights and sex trafficking issues were taboo topics in Uzbekistan, which were first raised by women NGOs financed by various international feminist and development donors. NGOs were accused of creating more problems than solving them, because society was not ready to discuss private issues of domestic disputes, and the government did not acknowledge the gravity of sex trafficking in Uzbekistan (CEDAW meeting, August 9-11, 2008).

Post-colonial feminism challenges the privileged feminists who do not recognize their own racial and class power. With respect to feminism, the politics and theory of post-colonialism can be largely identified with the goals and practices of so-called ‘Third World feminism’ (Park & Sunder Rajan, 2000; Young, 2001, p. 58). (The categorization of women into first, second and third world is another issue debated in post-colonial studies, given that everything in history, text and media has been defined and categorized in relation to the West, which is in and of itself a colonial influence).

According to Loomba, “postcolonial women’s movements have increasingly begun to articulate both the specificity of women’s issues and their profound interlinkage with the community at large” (2005, p. 192). These movements must negotiate the dynamics of globalization on the one hand and the post-colonial nation-state on the other. Globalization tends to reproduce the oppressive effects of colonialism, while the nationalist discourse of states reiterates patriarchal gender-based oppression. The post-
modern approach recognizes multiple identities and multiple oppressions, pushing feminists to dismantle hierarchies within feminism and build political solidarity across differences while deconstructing common oppression. Bell hooks argues that “there can be no mass-based feminist movement to end sexist oppression without a unified front – women must take initiative and demonstrate the power of solidarity” (1997, p. 396). From a post-colonial perspective, this means that Western feminists must recognize and combat the oppression that globalization imposes on women in non-Western countries. Under current circumstances, for international donors supporting women’s NGOs in Uzbekistan, the abovementioned argument translates into a better understanding of the local realities of women by directly working with women before proposing development projects. It means creating spaces from where local women can find empowerment to build their own local groups and networks and own the process of social change women want to see. Monitoring and evaluation tools need to reflect the local reality of the NGOs and the communities. There is a need to support effective NGO strategies to help them remain independent from government funding. NGOs need help improving NGO management and fundraising skills. On-going management trainings, partnership projects, and information networks with access to resources and responses to specific inquiries, social research analyses and surveys are essential in strengthening and empowering the civil society sector to serve the people’s needs.

The State led civil society in Uzbekistan needs reinforcement of the existing legal framework of empowering women in leadership positions. This reinforcement can be realized by creating more accessible and egalitarian decision making processes, providing
educational incentives abroad and adapted leadership and gender trainings for the State
and NGO leaders. NaNGoUz can serve the purpose of uniting all NGOs to improve
coordination and communication between NGOs, donors and communities, but its power
over funding allocation and control over all civil society actors will mute the vibrancy
and effectiveness of the NGOs and further create a brain drain of experienced leaders
from the civil society sector. Women leaders of NGOs or what is left of them in
Uzbekistan today need financial and technical support.

Conclusion

The cultural aphorism “Uzbek women are first women, then, they are human
beings” is often quoted when one brings up the topic of Uzbek women’s rights. This
aphorism reminds women of their place in Uzbek society. As globalization places a strain
on the Uzbek economy, polity, societal and familial relations and cultural values, the
strain is especially felt by women. The pressure to survive each day is mounting, and at
the same time, violence and discrimination against women are escalating, requiring new
approaches to address women’s issues. In Uzbekistan it is a feminist struggle to be able to
feed one’s family. Culturally, there is no liberation for a married woman without her
family. Feminist women leaders of Uzbekistan do not need to be saved from their men,
but from the pressures of globalization and the loneliness that activism entails when they
step up to represent women’s issues.

While the NGOs established by foreign donors at the onset of the country’s
independence gave some women leaders a space to realize their potential and have an
impact on their society, it also alienated and isolated them in their struggle. Nevertheless,
the emotions and feelings interviewees expressed attest that the women’s struggle is well and alive in Uzbekistan. It needs to be recognized, nurtured and allowed to grow independently from the hierarchal order of the State.

With no organized independent women’s movement in the history of Uzbekistan, no local expertise in democratic civil society organizations and specialized non-profit work, the foreign donor-funded NGO sector was seen as promising the birth of a new civil society in Uzbekistan, where women’s groups would be a visible force and a voice of civic activism. This voice for women was represented mostly by Soviet-educated professionals in different fields who found new roles for self-realization and contribution to society through NGOs.

Before NGOs were required to comply with re-registration regulations under the control of State and quasi-state officials, the NGO sector was the lone public space where women’s activism flourished, transforming development and women’s status in their communities. However, due to the “Color Revolutions” in other FCS and political changes in Uzbekistan, an independent women’s NGO movement did not have enough time and opportunity to address internal inadequacies and unite.

The fear and suspicion of new ideas and independent thinkers inherited from the Communist regime lingers on, while corruption and favoritism hinder the State’s efforts to meet its developmental objectives. Despite the numerous laws and quotas introduced to increase women’s political activism and presence at the decision making tables, the organizational culture of public office remains largely a male domain.
After the re-registration, the general perception of research participants about the fate of women’s NGOs can be described as hopeful yet cautious. Despite international criticism, NGOs that continue to exist in Uzbekistan are successfully integrating with the structures of the government, building hierarchal and horizontal relations. Some of the NGOs discussed in this research demonstrate social, political and economic integration with official institutions in the Ferghana Region of Uzbekistan. While Western style NGO ideals did not survive in the current environment, the methodological tools and expertise NGO activists received from their international schooling are being adapted to local gender programs that women’s NGOs undertake. However, it is important to address the brain drain which is already occurring in the NGO sector.

In this research, I intended to explore NGO women leaders’ perception regarding the effects of the institutionalization of civil society on women’s activism and their organizational powers, as well as the challenges faced in contributing to social change and women’s advancement in Uzbekistan. I have argued that women leaders’ experience following the independence of Uzbekistan can be characterized as a post-colonial struggle against their status in traditional Uzbek society and against the effects of globalization that undermined the Uzbek economy and political stability and marginalized women, especially poor women. Women’s exposure to international perspectives on socio-economic-cultural-political issues pertaining to women, their lived experience during the Soviet Era and the challenges faced in the transition period following the collapse of the Soviet Union, shaped their understanding and the possibilities of advocating for women’s advancement and social change.
As NGO leaders they serve as a medium through which local concerns are interpreted and conveyed in a language understandable to donors. In addition, they carried a message from the donors to the women with whom they worked and served. Through the circle of women’s NGOs, the assertion “Women’s Rights are Human Rights” was brought to the political arena, although many women leaders advocating in this sphere faced difficulties in their work. But the struggle continues, and women leaders continue seeking out new channels to raise their concerns.

Four years ago, when I conducted field research on changing women’s status in post Soviet Uzbekistan, I asked my interviewees if they believed that there could be a female president leading our country. Many women could not imagine this happening in their lifetime, but in just the last presidential elections in January 2008, one of the contenders for the presidential seat was a female candidate.

Is there a vibrant civil society in Uzbekistan today? No, but it is wrong to underestimate the potential and the intellectual resources that were built up in this society over the last eighteen years. This might be another transition period for women leaders of NGOs, but it is a critical one in terms of time and the political environment. Lack of support and the demonization of independent NGO activities will discourage younger activists from joining the public sector for development and social change. The government needs a vibrant civil society sector with active NGOs to build a strong base for its envisioned eastern democracy.
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APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE

Questionnaire:

Part 1: About organization

1. Your Name:
2. Your position in the organization:
3. Name of the organization:
4. The year of establishment of the organization:
5. Is the organization registered with the government:
6. What is the mission of the organization:
7. What are its main activities:
8. How are these activities funded:
9. What is your role in the organization:
10. What motivated you to join the organization:
11. What selection process did you go through to get this position?
12. Your Age
13. Marital status
14. Children if any
15. Ethnicity
16. Urban or rural residency?
17. Education:
18. Original employment if any?
19. Can you please tell me about your organization? How did it all start? When and why did you decide to work in this sector?
20. What is/was the objective of your organization? What kind of services does/did it offer?
21. Who are/were your constituencies?
22. Who are/were your employees?
23. Has the objective, type of services, programs, or scale of project changed since its inception? How did it change? If your organization ceased working can you tell me why?
24. How do/did you reach out to your constituencies?
26. Do/did you choose your own partners? If you had more choices who would you work with more closely, or more independently, why?
27. How do/did you choose your projects and programs?
28. How often do/did you participate in the national and regional women’s organizations meetings? What is/was the main goal of such meetings? Who organizes these meetings? How do/did you participate in them?
29. Which women’s organizations have you worked with? How do you describe this partnership?
30. Which governmental organizations have you worked with and how do you describe this partnership?
31. What are the challenges in implementing successful projects? What changes would you like to see in order to realize the full potential of your organizational goals? At the grassroots level? Media? Government level? Donor level? Personal?
32. Which year / project was the best for your organizational success and why?
33. Which projects geared towards women’s empowerment/gender development get the most attention from NGOs? Media? Donors? Why do you think so?
34. In your opinion, which areas of women’s empowerment/gender issues should be stressed more and why? What is needed for that?

**Part 2: On Feminism:**

35. Is this your secondary job? If yes, how do you juggle between two jobs and a family? What do you do for fun?
36. Do you have ideals? Do you have an ideal project yet to be realized? How would this project be realized?
37. How did you learn how to run this kind of organization? What resources do you use to stay up-to-date about news in this field? Where do you get them?
38. What does this work give to you personally? How did this work affect you?
39. What would you want people to know about you as a leader? Are there many women who share similar qualities in this field?
40. How do you describe men’s attitude towards women’s activism in public sector?
41. How do you describe your personal relationship with other women leaders in this sector? How can it be improved even more?
42. Do you think women’s movement is effective in Uzbekistan? How? Why do you think so?
43. In your opinion, how is it different from the women's movements of the past? How is it different from women's movements in other parts of the world?
44. In your opinion, how did this movement contribute to the development of Uzbekistan? Women’s empowerment? Women’s image in the society?
45. Do you consider your organization as part of this larger movement? Why or why not?
46. How would you describe this movement in one word/adjective/metaphor, why?

**On leadership**

47. What/Who inspires you to be in this line of work?
48. How do you motivate your staff to participate in the work of your organization?
49. How many staff do you manage/supervise?
50. How many of these are male/female?
51. How do you make decisions in your team (through directives/group consultation)?
52. How do you motivate the beneficiaries to participate in your project/s?
53. How do you monitor the impact?
54. What are the challenges you face in the implementation of the mission of your organization?
55. How do you overcome the challenges?
56. What more should be done to build capacities of women in Uzbekistan?
APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM

Ohio University Consent Form

Title of Research: Times of Courage: Women’s Movement in Uzbekistan

Researcher: Mohira Kurbanova

You are being asked to participate in research. For you to be able to decide whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected.

Once you have read this form and have an opportunity to ask any questions about the study and the procedures, and these questions are answered, you will be asked if you agree to participate in the study. This will allow your participation in this study. If you decide to participate in this study, you retain the right not to respond to a particular question, or you may request to terminate the interview if you feel it necessary. In addition, at this time I will provide you with a copy of this document to take with you.

Explanation of Study

My name is Mohira Kurbanova, I am a doctoral student in the Cultural Studies in Education program, Department of Educational Studies, College of Education at Ohio University, in Athens, Ohio, USA. I am conducting this research project on women leaders experience in the NGO movement in Uzbekistan. I am specifically interested in understanding how women negotiate their leadership under changing environments in their organizational work. To that end I have selected the Ferghana Region as the main geographic location to interview for this study.

In this study, I plan to interview approximately 25 women leaders from the NGO sphere. At some point in the research process, I may be asking you if you would like me to follow up with you for the purposes of clarification. If you agree to participate you do not have to answer any questions with which you are not comfortable, and you may choose to withdraw or terminate the interview at any time.

The results of the study will be used in my dissertation work in the Cultural Studies in Education program at Ohio University and will be presented to my Dissertation Committee. Please know that the activities I observe during my meetings and your responses to interview questions are for my educational purposes only. All information will be held in strict of confidence. All interviewees will remain anonymous after their interview, and in the written results of this research project. The interview process is informal and relaxed, and will take place in a private setting so that your responses will be confidential. There are no right and wrong answers to the questions that
will guide our interview; you need only answer to the best of your knowledge and your own experiences. The length of the interview should take about 1-2 hours of your time.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664. My personal e-mail and phone number are mk101503@ohio.edu and 740-274-9006. For those of you who might want it, I am happy to provide you with contact numbers for my academic advisor and/or department chair.

Risks and Benefits
No risks or discomforts are anticipated as a result of your participation in this study. There is no financial compensation for your participation, but your participation is significant to this research and can further contribute to understanding women’s movements and NGO work in Uzbekistan.

I certify that I have read and understand this consent form and agree to participate as a subject in the research described. I agree that known risks to me have been explained to my satisfaction and I understand that no compensation is available from Ohio University and its employees for any injury resulting from my participation in this research. I certify that I am 18 years of age or older. My participation in this research is given voluntarily. I understand that I may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of any benefits to which I may otherwise be entitled. I certify that I have been given a copy of this consent form to take with me.
The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, is often described as an international bill of rights for women. Uzbekistan has been a signatory to CEDAW since 1995.

Established during the Soviet Era, Mahallas are self governing communal bodies that are led by well-respected elderly men from within each community; the Mahalla is a form of a self-help group that preserved most of the cultural traditions and religious practices during the Soviet period.

Mahalla - self-governing voluntary institution in the communities with elderly person elected as a head deals with communal, religious issues within that community. They were mostly based in urban areas during Soviet period, later became institutionalized by the state and set of responsibilities to carry out on behalf of the official state.

In the report presented to Human Rights Defenders (Vienna, March 28, 2006), the IHF presented the cases of 13 women human rights activists from Uzbekistan who were beaten, detained and tortured.

Zanca mentions that she was approached by both the CIA and the KGB in connection to her Central Asian Studies. “It is therefore almost only natural that Soviet bureaucrats and officials (also academics) should suspect us since they have long been in the alert for shrouded spies” (p.169).

6 Homo Sovieticus (from New Latin) is a sarcastic and critical reference to a category of people with a specific mindset that were allegedly created by the governments of the Soviet bloc. The term was coined by well-known Soviet writer and sociologist Aleksandr Zinovyev.

In 1989 when the Soviet Union was at the verge of collapse with Baltic States demanding independence, the Central Asian political leaders still hoped to remain in the Union.

He was the last leader of the Soviet Union from 1985-1990; his attempt to democratize the system through encouragement of responsible and conscious citizenry aided in dissolving the already crumbling Soviet system without bloodshed.

Glasnost is a Russian word for "transparency" or "openness". M. Gorbachev used the term to describe a program of reform introduced in the Soviet Union in 1985 whose goals included combating corruption and the abuse of privilege by the political classes. In the broadest sense, it aimed to gradually liberalize freedom of the press, and to allow for freedom of dissent; source: www.tamu.edu/upress/BOOKS/1999/gibbs.htm

To control the influence of Islamic militancy, in 1998 the Oliy Majlis (Supreme Court) enacted the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations to restrict the activities of virtually all religious denominations, including non-state approved Islamic organizations.

Mark Lance reports in the Guardian that under new economic aid packages “Uzbekistan received $64m in US assistance and $136m in US Export-Import Bank credits in 2001.

For example, the ZdravPlus small grants program required 30% organizational input towards the program budget in 2000, compared to 10-15% in pervious years. This 30% was usually in the form of voluntary work, free venue or transportation provided either by the community or the organization to implement the project.

“Governance is the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country’s economic and social resources for human development, and good governance is the exercise of power by various levels of government that is effective, honest, equitable, transparent and accountable” – Definition of the World Bank Group (Source: UN country common assessment, 2003, p. 37)

10 Former Czechoslovakia

For example, the commission at the National Bank refused to give funding to 10 NGOs (NGO Society “Mehr”, “Women and society” etc.) whose projects were supported by the Eurasia Foundation. 2 NGOs could not receive funding from UNIFEM and the Global Fund for Women, because these donors have no registration at the Ministry of Justice of Uzbekistan. 80% of the funding of projects that were supported by IREX could not reach the recipients in 2004 (World Organization Against Torture, 2005).

Decree of the President of Uzbekistan No VII-3434 of 25 May 2004 "On additional measures for the support of the activity of Women's Committee of Uzbekistan" followed by another document "On the program of measures aimed at the implementation of the decree of the President of the Republic of
Uzbekistan No VII-3434 'On additional measures for the support of the activity of Women's Committee of Uzbekistan'" adopted on 29 June 2004.

17 In Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine, American-financed groups gave training and assistance to opposition groups that ousted the existing leadership. In November 2005 the lower house of the Russian Parliament gave preliminary approval to a law that would, if put into effect, severely restrict, if not close down, many non-governmental organizations working in Russia, including pro-democracy groups. American officials and other experts said Russia was pushing Central Asian states to enact similar laws. According to these officials, among the countries debating restrictions like Russia's were Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan (see Brinkley Joel, Pro Democracy Groups Harassed in Central Asia, New York Times. (late edition East Coast), December 4, 2005 p.1.3

18 In my preliminary discussions and meetings women leaders suggested that if their activism and struggle was named other than feminism, they would name it women’s leadership

19 Turkestan (in Turkish, which literally means "Land of the Turks" in Persian) is a region in Central Asia, which today is largely inhabited by Turkic peoples. The region became part of the Russian Empire in the 1860s, and is thus sometimes called Russian Turkestan or the Turkestanski Krai. After the Russian Revolution, a Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of the Soviet Union was created, which was eventually split into the Kazakh SSR (Kazakhstan), Kyrgyz SSR (Kyrgyzstan), Tajik SSR (Tajikistan), Turkmen SSR (Turkmenistan) and Uzbek SSR (Uzbekistan).

20 Data collected from personal observations and informal conversations with women in Ferghana, Uzbekistan

21 Turkestan is the old name of the geographic land where today’s Uzbekistan and other “Stans” are situated.

22 Similar to current Muslim feminist discourse

23 The Tatars descended from a variety of people and cultures ranging from the Huns, the Bulgars and the Mongols and resided in various parts of Central and Southern Russia as well as Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Given their widespread Diaspora, they were more “Russian” or “European” compared to indigenous Uzbek women and adapted more easily to Russian and Soviet dictates during their conquest of Central Asia.

24 Wikipedia.org definition: Shari’a law is interpreted as Islamic law which deals with daily lives of Muslims including sexuality and social issues. Since there’s no strictly codified uniform set of laws pertaining to Shari’a, it is more like a system of devising laws, based on the Qur’an (religious text of Islam) and Hadith (traditions relating to the words and deeds of a prophet) and centuries of debate, interpretation and precedent.

25 Agriculture sector still remains a key economic sector accounting for 34.2% of GDP and employs 60% of population.

26 In the 1980s cotton farmers in Uzbekistan received 16 kopeyks(coins) an hour. The monthly wage for cotton pickers in Uzbekistan was 50 roubles(Soviet currency), four times less than the national average (Melvin, 2000, p. 92)

27 The mardikor-bazaars are strictly divided into ‘male’ and ‘female’ parts: the ‘male’ bazaars provide manpower for hard physical labour, while the ‘female’ bazaars offer workers for such unskilled tasks as weeding and grading of fruits and vegetables. Since such work is labour intensive, employers prefer to deal with a crew (brigada) rather than with individual employees. They typically negotiate with a female crew-leader (brigadir), who gets a ‘bonus’ for each member of the crew, and who guarantees the quality and timeliness of their work. However, employment as crew members does not protect women from violations of their rights; definition retrieved from http://www.developmentandtransition.net/index.cfm?module=ActiveWeb& page=WebPage&DocumentID=665

28 In 2006, according to Moscow News, a total of 500,000 Uzbek migrants went to work in Russia. Uzbekistan is third largest migrant work supplier to Russia. Retrieved June10, 2008 from: http://mnweekly.ru/cis/20070705/55260865.html

29 Gender Mainstreaming involves ensuring that gender perspectives and attention to the goal of gender equality are central to all activities - policy development, research, advocacy/ dialogue, legislation, resource allocation, and planning, implementation and monitoring of programs and projects. Source: www.un.org
Grassroots NGO organization in Nukus, Uzbekistan coordinates a women's support network addressing environmental health problems resulting from toxic pollutants, conducts research studies on reproductive health issues, organizes environmental education programs for school children, and coordinates a breast cancer information campaign; source: http://www.womensearthalliance.org/article.php?id=296.

The Aral Sea, once a large inland sea in Uzbekistan, is on the verge of disappearance causing drastic environmental and health problems in the region.

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
United States Information Service
Technical Aid to Commonwealth of Independent States funded by the European Union
Asian Development Bank

The region of Surhandarya, for example, borders Afghanistan and until recently served as a base for US military operations in Afghanistan.

Women’s NGOs in the Republic of Karakalpakstan are engaged in sectors that directly impact on the region’s population, such as the environment, health and water issues. The proximity of the drying Aral Sea which borders Karakalpakstan has had a disastrous impact on the overall health conditions in the region.