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Society and Family in Uzbekistan*

Abstract: The article relates to the plight of women in Uzbekistan through an analysis of family life under the conflicting demands of Islamic tradition and Soviet totalitarianism. Interviews with women of different generations and social backgrounds were made by the author. The main findings are that village traditions dominate lifestyles: large families served as a means of survival; the soviet system did not abolish gender inequality in practice but independence has brought back unofficial discrimination into the open, while women remain too disorganized against it.

The family has always been one of the custodians of traditional culture and in order to understand the true status of women in a society it is necessary to look at how women feel about their role within the family, traditionaly regarded as the sphere of women's realisation. Moreover, social phenomena, indeed all the changes which a society undergoes are to varying degrees reflected in the family, where the foundations of the nation's future are laid. Thus a crisis in society is manifested as a crisis in the institution of the family, a fact illustrated by the problems facing the family in Central Asia during the Soviet and now post-Soviet periods.

The emergence of Central Asian women from seclusion under sovietisation in the 1920s and their induction into the production process imposed additional responsibilities on them. In response and in the name of preserving the family as a basic social unit, priority should have been given to addressing the problems created by the qualitative changes taking place in family relationships. But while the state took the multi-faceted socio-economic development of society upon itself, it disassociated itself from the solution of domestic problems and thus a double burden lay on the shoulders of milion of women – from kolkhoz (collective farm) workers to professors. Soviet historians and sociologists, delighted at women's achievemennts, tripped over each other in

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their eagerness to insist that "In the USSR true equality for women has clearly been secured with the state creating all the prerequisites for the blossoming of the indivuduality of women as workers and women as mothers." But surely deceptive figures about the number of women engineers and Ph.D.s, and demagogic arguments regarding the material support provided to single mothers and women with several children could not have blinded them to the primitiveness of women's daily lives. While in bygone ages the home, domestic affairs and children were the basic preoccupations of women. Women in the past lived in multi-generational, patriarchal families sharing domestic responsibilities among themselves. Life was not easy for women. But in today's nuclear family the responsibilities of wife, mother, domestic and working unit all fall on a single women.

Sociologists would prop up their assertins about women's equality with their favourite fact: that women in the USSR spent average forty hours a week on domestic work. I suggest (unfortunately I do not have any statistics) that Uzbek women spend even more time, because 60 % live in districts where there are no gas lines, and 70 % live without municipal heating and water supplies. Apart from that there is the traditional way of life, in which special place is accorded to huge weddings, funerals and even ordinary traditional forms of social interaction, all of which involve the preparation of special dishes either for entertaining guest or to be given as gifts. This squanders a woman's free time and the money she could have utilised for her personal development and relaxation. The shortage of all kinds of goods, including basic necessities, has turned the lives of most women into a perpetual race in which they are doomed to constantly carry loads for great distances. Robbing them of time and energy, this unproductive, monotonous and unpaid domestic work dampens and deforms women's individuality. These colossal physical and physiological burdens have reflected on women's relationships with their family members who, in turn, receive little true spiritual interaction, care, love, involvement and support.

Nevertheless, the family remained the most reliable bulwark in the struggle for survival. Oriented as it was towards a colonial form of agricultural production in the region (which doomed the majority to labouring on plantations producing a crop introduced by the colonialists), the state system alienated the people. Only traditional relationships anabled the people to survive the particularly difficult conditions which prevailed throughout the Soviet period. This also explains why the traditional family, despite all its negative aspects, accorded such high status in the social consciousness of Central Asians. Thus while the sovietisation of Central Asian society rocked the religious and cultural foundations of the family, its basic patriarchal features were preserved.

According to perceptions of Muslim tradition, marriage is regarded as the means of procreation and a person's religious duty; rejecting it is thus perceived as contradicting the world outlook of those who have been brought up as Muslims. An interesting manifestation of this aspect of society is the continuing importance attached to the family as an institution responsible for the socialisation of children; divorce is regarded as condemning children to a life without a father.

The protection of children – regarded as one of the manifestations of the Muslim way of life – was clearly demonstrated during the Second World War.

The slogan "you are not an orphan!" was coined when more than 200,000 orphaned children were evacuated and resettled from the areas of the Soviet Union under German occupation, finding, protection and love in Uzbek families, who shared with them what little they had. Such a large-scale demonstration of resettlement only took place in Uzbekistan. This act of kindness on the part of a people who were themselves poor and deprived, for many revealed the moral strength of their Muslim traditions.

Soviet society, even though it experienced industrialisation and at last superficially bore the markings of urban culture was slow to throw off the powerful remnants of medievalism in the non-productive sphere. This situation is clearly illustrated by conditions within the Soviet family. The strong arm of the state created the shell of an industrial society, but till achieved this the state itself utilised medieval methods of compulsion and manipulation of human relations, preserving in the social consviousness the stereotypes of the past. From this stems the contradictions in Soviet society and its institutions.

These contradictions are also found throughout Central Asia, where the contours of industrial society are even hazier; here the state was unable to achieve a significant mobilisation of the population, secularisation of social life proved to be purely superficial, and the new culture was not born out of an evolutionary process of societal development. All these factors are clearly reflected in the patriarchal Central Asian family.

Despite the breakdown of the family which occured in the later Soviet period, the family is still an institution which defines social values, above all for women who are predestined to live out their role as the nurturer of children, family and husband. An Uzbek proverb says: "If the father is stupid it means a house with someone stupid in it; if the mother is stupid it means the whole household is stupid." From this one can clearly see the double standards for men and for women: from her is demanded account of her conduct and deeds; but men's business is not supposed to concern women. I know of families where the father was a teacher of scientific atheism, while the wife said her prayers five times a day and observed "Ramadan," so as to (as she put it) atone for her husband's sins. Such a "division of labour" was also found in relation to other family duties. Responsibility for all the unseemly mistakes of the family's members lies upon the woman. People still cite another Uzbek proverb: "Who makes a man out of a husband? The wife. Who makes the sea out of a puddle? The wife."

Village Traditions Dominate Lifestyles

Industrialisation and urbanisation in Central Asia carried the price of the European population's domination in these processes, with both natural and forced migration to the region taking place. Meanwhile, the local population for the most part remained concentrated in agricultural production. Thus the Uzbek village did not become the primary source of labour for Central Asian cities; indeed the state used the villages in their traditional, agricultural role for the development of typically colonial cotton plantations. Such plantations needed people whose way of live prepared them for persistent, laborious work. The long established way of life – which included adherence to the authority

of elders, mutual support – the ruling elite's patronage of the socially weak and the practice of placing faith in one's patrons, women's subjugation, and having several children, was how the nation survived under the primitive conditions of an almost subsistence economy. As a consequence, the pattern of strict religious regimentation of life, which preached submission to one's fate, remained undisturbed.

But Islam, as a constantly evolving religion as a civilisation and culture, began to disappear from the life of the peasantry, preserved istead only in its superficial form. Nevertheless, for the majority of the people of Central Asia, adherence to Islam even in this form was a symbol of cultural identity. Doomed to a demeaning existence on the poverty line and denied the possibility of any spiritual and cultural development, the only means by which Soviet peasants could manifest their national consciousness became not just religion as a philosophy or world view, but also the conservation, nurtured through the routine of daily life, of forms of social interaction, rituals, habits, etiquettes and set of prohibitions, stemming from the pre-Revolution period; work on the land and having several children in effect became symbols of cultural identity. Thus, in spite of the slogans of Communist doctrine, what is identified as the Muslim way of life has been preserved, even if in an incomplete, shrunken form.

Another factor ensuring the preservation of traditional lifestyles was the environment created by the totalitarian state, where the absence of opposition parties, movements and free trade unions restricted the political and cultural horizons of the Central Asia people. Meanwhile the sphere of cultural interaction remained limited, often due to proverty. For example, tourism, the most popular pastime in the second half of the 20th century, was in practical terms beyond the reach of a large part of the population and was available to only one family member out of 1 in 3,000 families per year in the USSR. People's energies and the desire for meaningful social exchange, thus all found an outlet in the observance of ceremonies, rituals, popular holidays and sports competitions; but even these were used by the authorities to their own ends. Knowledge of the interrelationship of the laws of history and the broadening of outlooks did not seep into the people's general consciousness, and turned out to be characteristic of only a very small, and uninfluential, section of the national intelligentsia.

Meanwhile, the working class in Central Asia, including Uzbekistan, appeared weakly developed in the face of the large scale migration from within the USSR. The first generation of national working class, while also adopting aspects of urban culture and superficially interested in the new temptations of the mass culture, had strong social ties to the villages and were psychologically unable to break away from their affinity to village traditions. They had not yet formed into a class aware of its economic, political and spiritual interests, and there rapidly appeared a sorry layer of essentially de-classed and deceived people created by the Soviet political experiment. This experiment both comouflaged the rule of the Soviet nomenclatura (the administrative and Party elite) with the name of the "working class," and also cruelly exploited the worker's labour. This is why, in the eyes of the Uzbek worker, working on the land still seems preferable, and as a consequence the lifestyle of the worker's family in the towns displays a distincly visible attempt to reproduce the stereotypical village lifestyle.

Eastern affairs scholar, Sergei Panarin, made some interesting observations about the influence of the village way of life on Central Asian politics and society as a whole:

"Central Asia is the only region in our country, in which society's basic social structure remained the peasantry. The rural population unquestionably constitutes the majority in the region; in 1985 it formed 60.4 % of the population compared with 59.3 % in 1975. The peasantry gives a nation its human face, and can be the strongest social grouping, if it constitutes half or one third of the population. But for this to happen, this half or one third must preserve its attachment to the land or to agricultural pursuits, so that the immediate environment, network of family ties, dwellings, daily facilitate the (albeit relatively diluted) reproduction of the peasant way of life. If these conditions are fulfilled, then the village will noticeably have a gradual but powerful influence even on the cities.

"For example, through the process of urban migration, what ever little took place, the social environment became "peasantised," establishing between those back in the villages and the migrants innumerable close social ties, and unexpectedly influencing even those who were urban by heritage. The peasantry would not allow the city to break away in terms of its level of civilisation, political culture, pretensions and so on. The position of the peasantry directly or indirectly influences all spheres of Central Asian life; in economics, from the recourse crisis to the failure of techno-scientific cadres to emerge from the provinces; in social development where centuries of feudalism have ensured that instead of providing workers state protection the authorities encourage the social dependence of subordinates; in the political sphere, through the creation of the system of indepedent principalities, run by senior or lower Party functionaries, whose power is based upon their control over the rural economy."

Once the basis of the nationalist freedom movement in the 1920s, peasants in the Soviet era were transformed into cotton slaves. Repression and the kolkhoz, as organised forms of suppressing peasant autonomy, as a means of alienating peasants from economic autonomy, turned them into passive people, incapable of open opposition to the appointed Soviet lords – the presidents of the kolkhoz, the secretaries of the district committees, and senior representatives of the authorities.

This environment cultivated generally negative attitudes towards a person's individual value, even more so when it came to women. Insignificant in society, men sought importance within their own families, to be a master at least at own home.

Large Families as a Means of Survival

For the bulk of the population, which led a village lifestyle associated with work on the land (even under city conditions), having several children was a means of survival, a means of social protection in old age, since throughout the Soviet period state social security provisions for senior citizens were very poor, not even matching minimum living standards.

Nargiz Kasimova, who works as a cook in a hospital, tells about life in a large family with many siblings and the support it offered in times of crisis:

"Our family is very large – there are thirteen of us children. Father was a worker, he spent fifteen years at the factory, and was afflicted by the occupational disease of textile workers – asthma. Now he works as a janitor. Mama was a laboratory assistant in a chemical laboratory and is now retired. Our grandmother lives with us. Seven of my brothers are married, out of which four live with us. Four of my sisters are married, whereas I was widowed two years ago and live with my parents along with my children. Our youngest brother is still unmarried.

The house in which we live was part of great grandfather's country estate. Before collectivisation his sons had constructed the house, which is why when the kolkhoz was created the land was not taken away. Later, when Tashkent expanded this household came within the city limits. All of our neighbours are our relatives, which is why we have always helped and supported each other. The land always fed our family and the cattle. We have a vegetable path, an orchard, and livestock. With us, everyone began working around the house when they were small. I remember myself, from dawn to dusk, either working in the orchard, or the kitchen, or garden, or looking after my younger brothers and sisters. All of my brothers are workers and my parents made it their duty before everything else to give theme a trade. Whenever any of the brothers married, the others all got together and constructed him a house; with our family we hardly needed to think of hiring someone! I believe that having several children is very good. My elder sister married into a family where there are only two brothers and the parents. With us all work is shared among many, but with them almost everything is shouldered by one person (my brother-in-law's brother works in another city). In our household, if someone is unable to do some work for the house, then a craftsman is not called in; my brothers can do almost everything: bricklaying, carpentry, ironmongery, and diary farming, and they also know everything about working on the land, with livestock and trees.

My husband's family was also large, we were crowded. I had to do everything in the house including looking after the vegetable patch, and the livestock. My husband died in a car accident and I went back to live with my parents; psychologically I couldn't stay with my in-laws, so father took me in. My brothers support me, are guardians to my sons, teaching them a trade, and I myself started to work as a cook in a hospital.

At present three brothers have separated from father's household and live in a block of flats. It is very difficult for them there without land; whatever they grow around the house, someone either uproots or breaks it; the children only watch television, and are growing up without skills, which is why my sister-in-law send the children to their grandfather for the holidays. Here, they can learn some trade, and even better, here they are also fed and looked after properly. The bad thing about life in town is that they have only their salary to live on, which must also cover clothes and food – the children hardly ever see fruit which is rarely brought from the bazaar. My brothers dream of buying just a patch of land, even if it is outside the city.

Our upbringing was strict. My brothers and sisters got married according to my parents choice. Of course, every family has its problems, but luckily my sisters-in-law are well brought up and good workers, respectful to our parents and are happy with their husbands. My brothers have lived with my parents as an extended family for the past five or six years. In this time my sisters-in-law have come to understand the work routine in our house and they dont find things that difficult. Almost all of them work, but there is almost always one of them at home, either on maternity leave, or paid child leave.

Especially when my husband died, relatives helped and supported me a lot. What would I have done without them! My mother thinks about everyone. I marvel at her energy – she manages to look after the children and keep an eye on the kitchen, and visits one or other of her children. I can barely cope with three, and she has been able to bring up thirteen good, hardworking children, never allowing any of them to stray. All of this is thanks to the strictness of Father and his authority. I feel sorry for women who do not have children or only one. They really have shortchanged themselves. No success can replace the love of someone near, which can only come from one's children. Even at work women are not spared – no matter how much a woman struggles, breaking through is very difficult."

This story confirms my contention about the strong influence of village life. Its values live on even in the city: it is the optimal strategy for survival in our complex conditions. Having several children was also a reaction to the cotton mono-culture. Women and children performed the un-mechanised labour involved in cultivating and picking cotton. Children were a stable, organised mass, spending much of their time meant for study on the kolkhoz fields. Youngsters of 9–12 years old often made a significant addition to the family budget, sacrificing valuable education to the needs of the state. Thus emerged generations of people unprepared for their involvement in modern production and alienated from all that was new and progressive which nevertheless developed in Soviet society.

Just as for the peasantry having many children was a means of survival, also for the ruling elite having several children was a means of reinforcing their existing position. Alliances created through the marriages of their children the preferred method of strengthening their influence, in effect allowing the establishment of a ruling nobility in Uzbek society in the 1970s and 1980s, when power became stabilised. A person's nomenclatura appeared linked not only to their class interests, but also to their ties of kinship. Among the upper layer of society such a structure has been preserved even today.

Lifestyles Among the new Soviet Intelligentsia and the Nomenclatura

During the Soviet period particular distortions appeared within the 'third estate,' which in pre-Revolutionary Central Asia had constitued the bulk of the urban population. The old intelligentsia, which had evolved from the clerical section of society and the trading bourgeoisie, was swept away by repeated waves of repression. Its fragments were scattered: some emigrated abroad, some migrated to the villages, and some became absorbed in the new workers intelligentsia.

Although new intellectuals invariably evolve into social groups which realise their historical destiny and socio-economic role, the weight of the Soviet system provided no such opportunities. From the 1950s onwards, the generation were educated under the Soviet ideological training schools. The new intelligentsia faced a question of cultural identity. While for the majority of the population cultural identity is not an issue (they simply consider themselves Muslims who are Uzbek, Kirghiz, Tajik etc.), for parts of the intelligentsia the propaganda concept of 'the new historic community – the Soviet nation' has proved attractive. And then there is the remaining section of the intelligentsia which experiences a contradiction in its cultural identity; on the one hand, feeling part of the nations of Central Asia and, on the other, using Russian as a medium of social interaction.

Despite the fact that from 1960s to 1980s the national intelligentsia developed into a stable social group, it proved to be split along various lines. Firstly, there was the fact that one section of the intelligentsia was knitted by the ties of kinship, by the clan system, by marriage ties to the ruling nomenclatura and appeared to exist purely for the convenievce of the top cadres; the other section was crushed by the authorities and had practically no links with village life. A further factor for division was that the national intelligentsia

was fed from below by a first generation of intellectuals to emerge from the villages and the lower strata of urban society, and from above by youth from the ruling clique, seemingly second-generation intellectuals. The intelligentsia underwent a stratification, not only on the basis of origin, but also on the basis of level of education, with significant implications for lifestyles and the structure of relationships within the family.

The education factor divided the intelligentsia according to the quality of education: between those educated in russian schools, and those educated in vernacular schools. People educated in either of these systems can be found both among the top as well as the lower sections of the intelligentsia. Lifestyles above all depend on the type of education, and the lifestyles of that section of the intelligentsia which emerged from below differed little from that of the basic mass of the native population i.e. the peasants, even though they had a better – albeit insignificantly so-standard of living. The power elite and intelligentsia, meanwhile, partially changed its way of life in line with a superficial adoption of the new way of life.

The educational label turned out to be the major factor dividing the intelligentsia, leading to a profound mutual mistrust. This situation has been exploited by functionaries, who count themselves among the intelligentsia and proclaim themselves to be the sole spokespersons of their their people's interests, the 'driving force' behind progress and achievement of national sovereignty.

Inextricably linked with the education factor, the language issue remains an extremely controversial topic in Central Asia as Russian and Uzbek were respectively seen as vehicles for the new Soviet identity and the preservation of national identity. For many centuries multilingualism has been common in Central Asia, and not just among the educated sections of society. At different times and in different areas the region's inhabitants spoke a variety of language combinations: Turkish and Persian or Arabic, Uzbek and Kazakh, Uzbek and Russian. Uzbek-Russian bilingualism became a feature characteristic of urban Uzbek families. There emerged a circle, albeit very small, of Uzbeks for whom Russian alone was the language of communication within the family; this occurs much more widely in Kazakhstan and Kirghizia. Among rural families bilingualism occurred in the form of knowlegde of two local languages and men, having served in the army, have at least some command in Russian. But in most families women seemed to be monolingual.

The sovietisation of society was achieved under the banner of the Russian language. While in the pre-Revolution days there were the beginnings of interest in Russian language and culture, in the post-Revolution period Russian became an important mark of the educated. In the cities bilingualism became imperative for those who wanted white-collar jobs, for those who sought to join the ranks of the powerful or for those who chose intellectual work as their profession. Knowing Russian opened the doors to science, culture and the organs of power, significantly limiting the importance of local languages not only within the field of work, but also within the family. At the same time, while Russian language and culture became associated with technical progress, with Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, it was also associated with the Commissars and Party functionaries, the destroyers of all that was sacred to Islam. Equally, the poor quality of education led to the fact that in the rural areas Russian was perceived as alien, in spite of propaganda claims regarding its acceptance across the Soviet Union.

Later, through the Russian language new forms of social conduct began to be assimilated; among some it was in the form of the negative norms of the lumpen; among others, Russian culture began to open the doors to European civilisation and its spiritual values, which began to influence all aspects of their lives, including the family. The Russian- centered education in the middle and high schools was behind the weakening of contact with the culture of the Muslim East. This situation was detrimental to all of the peoples of Central Asia and specifically their intelligentsia, which broken away from its roots and became acutely aware of its own inferiority. In the Soviet period these developments began to be manifested in the contradictory trends of inordinate and perverse praise for the markers of the national culture and, conversely, in national nihilism and a rejection of one's own culture.

In the family these phenomena began to be manifested within one section as the conservation of the patriarchal family with its corresponding forms of relations also affecting women; and among the other section as the assimilation of the Soviet lifestyle found among Russian families, including the use of the Russian language.

Meanwhile the local nomenclatura, the most of which was from the villages, retained the same old patriarchal lifestyles, despite their adoption of the outer forms of European lifestyles in their dress, furniture, style of conduct on official occasions and the use of Russian as the means of communication between the younger members of the family. Just as among the peasentry, the families of senior officials of Uzbekistan were characterised by tradition and having several children. Going to school with the children of some of the then leaders of Uzbekistan. I remember that their families displayed the very same patriarchal traits and in the majority of cases, the parents arranged their children's marriages , traditionally sanctified throught a religious ceremony. In their homes there were always hordes of poor relatives who received protection in return for serving their suzerain.

M. Gulchekra's recollections about her family and its way of life illustrate the reasons behind the endurance of the patriarchal way of life among the educated sections of modern Central Asian society.

"I am 47 years old, and all my life it seemed to me that many mistakes had been made in it. My father, a known scholar, died not long ago at the age of 80. He was a fantastic combination of the struggle towards the new and an attachment to the old way of life. He came from a religious family, but broke away from it very early. Father was a confirmed Komsomol believer in the new society , but at the same time , as the head of our family, he appeared a strict authoritarian. My mother he met as a 20-year-old girl and married her without a dowry. They began life is not with nothing, then in great poverty. Father loved mother very much, but treated her as if she sere something inanimate, iferior to him in every aspect and was also very exacting towards her. She could not leave the house without his permission, she prepared separate meals for him from the best foodstuffs while she and the children were expected to be satisfied with what remained.

He attained a certain position and influence (at a relatively young age) – becoming director of the largest industrial complex in Uzbekistan. Father was of the view that Mama should learn to live with his new position and with the fact that he lived a life which he thought best, and that she should be a model housewife and mother, respect his parents with whom he had reconciled, carry out their instructions, and help out the many relatives, young and old. This was physically very difficult for my mother, but all her life she loved Father madly and accepted his attitude toward her as a part of life and his demands did not get her down. Her entire life was dedicated to the service of her husband; we children

received care, attention, love from her, but the main person in her life was her husband. Thus she somehow neglected our upbringing.

We studied at the Russian school, and through it learned of other forms of relationship between husband and wife. We were brought up on Russian and European literature, most of which was from the 19th century, and so we spent our childhood and adolescense in a make-believe world, alienated from that which surrounded us. In the end we did not understand much, especially as school instilled one set of values in us while in real life we saw another. This contradiction and our childlike yearning to avoid decisions about life's problems took us into the world of books, which to us appeared more real than the one in which we actually lived.

Our mother had only very basic education and saw nothing wrong about, in fact very much respected, our attraction to literature. But even though she had a womans real-life experience it never occured to her that she should sometimes turn our attention to the realities of Uzbek women's life. There was only one and a half to two years age differnce between us sisters and brothers and when we grew up then it seemed as if we and our parents spooke different languages (in the real sense also – they in Uzbek and we in Russuan) and looked at the world with different eyes.

Father understood this when we were almost grown up, and decided to take us in hand. The first thing he did was to choose a wife for his eldest son. We looked upon this marriage with fear and misgiving, as the bride chosen by father was not only not a good person, but was also completely different to Brother both in education and areas of interests. And most importantly, he did not love her. But Father's will was unbending. My brother, even though he suffered for some time, ultimately accepted his fate – men easily adapt to double standarts in their lives at home and outside. It needs to be said that this marriage was a stable one, even though not a very happy one.

Father said he was deeply worried about his son, who was to be his heir (not in the material sense – how much could a Soviet person make! – but in the spiritual sense), the future head of the family, the protector of us younger siblings. Father worried that he would break away from the relatives, having married according to his own choice. Knowing our brother's gentle character, Father was afraid that he would choose a girl who was russified – just like himself – and that this would lead him to relegate ties of kinship to last place. And he was right!

My sister got married early choosing for herself a person who shared our education and outlook on life. She is lucky! But she lives in Moscow, a completely different life and in different surroundings, completely broken away from us. Sister's marriage made Father give considerable attention to the upbringing of us younger ones. He was strict, we were unable to go anywhere at night and he demanded an account of everything we did. Father took control over what we read, our circle of friends, our clothes and our expenditure. He thought that even though there had been lapses in our upbringing, there was still time to put things straight. Mother did not allow us to even think about the possibility that we could marry according to our choice. She concidered that we, as well-brought up Muslim girls, should wait until someone knocked on our door and selected one of us and then the orther; but for our younger brother she herself would go knocking on doors.

But when they knocked on our door, my younger sister and I ridiculed this method of constructing our fate, and we refused to be introduced to the prospective bridegrooms, and thus I was in danger of becoming, as my parents perceived it, an old maid; I was then 23 years of age and had graduated from the Institute. Even though, according to everyone, I was beautiful, I was also very proud and boys were rather afraid of me. As I saw it, not one of my contemporaris matched up to my imaginary ideal. I was not particularly concerned about getting married, dreaming instead of a career as a great scholar, about discoveries and so on. Father felt that I was either commiting some foolishness, or would become an old maid, hindering the marriage of mu younger sister. He took to solving this question himself – in a characteristically dictatorial manner. Tell me truthfully, he asked, if you have someone in mind, and hearing a negative answer, suggested a candidate, my present husband. I hadnt expected someone like him at all. Father said "You will learn to love him, and your career can wait. Even better, you could support your husband's career."

"When I got married, it seemed like I had landed in prison. The never-ending duties of the young bride oppressed me. I did not love my husband, which is why everything in this

house, including the numerous relatives, was doubly burdensome. I understood that I had not been prepared at all for marriage. Even though my husband and his relatives respected me, life itself in their house did not resemble life at home, where there was plenty. Here poverty ruled, with which I did not want to reconcile myself. For me it was difficult to speak in Uzbek, not simple speak, but observe that nuance of etiquette – this I simply was unable to do. Thus, at the age of 23 concluded my extended childhood and began a difficult life. I understood that this was how all women lived: in search of one's daily bread, torn between work and home, caring for the husband's relatives, going on visits to newborn relatives, attending the innumerable weddings of third cousins, funerals of fourth aunts, and anniversaries of the husband's colleagues. And each time the obligatory gifts, for which one had to spare resources from the sparse family budget. I thought I would die of exhaustion, that I had become incapable of anything except baking interminable cakes and pastries. I had only one dream: not to see anyone, not to go anywhere and for once have a full night's sleep.

From my point of view, this marriage was unequal. My husband had his own interests in the marriage: to become the son-in-law of a famous scholar, with all the benefits this would bring. Yes, and I attracted him. If it had not been for Father, my marriage would have not lasted long. Here he used his power, and now I am grateful to him. He effectively became my husband's father, helping him as much as he could, pulling him along – all this he did because of me. Father bought us an apartment, which lifted me out of a medieval existence. Of course, my husband was a person not without talent, but could he have become the academic he is today without Father? To rise from the depths and particularly to become a Ph.D. is not possible withoute backing. And this made our marriage endure, in spite of the fact that for about ten miserable years our marriage was childless. Only when I had children I was happy and my life took on colour, meaning and hope.

Now my elder daughter is 14, the younger one 12 and my son is 5, and I live in the hope that their life will be happier than mine. At present I teach at the institute, as a Ph.D and an associate professor; here too my father and brother helped me. In spite of my many domestic duties, I, on my brother's insistence, succeeded in writing my thesis and became a member of the Communist Party. My career would have continued successfully, but the birth of the children relegated everything else to the backseat. Thus I did not achieve anything particular in my profession, because in our routine life a career is not a synonym of freedom and independence, in fact quite the opposite – it is a synonym of even greater dependence.

My wages were not the main family income; the basic household expenditure was done by him. I spent my wages on myself and the children and my husband did not require an account of how I spent my money. As Father had said, over the years of living together we developed an attachment to each other, full of respect and warmth – and this, in fact is true love. Particularly with the birth of my children my eyes became opened to the better side of my husband. And then the plenty which has appeared in the house ironed out the contradictions which were there in the early years of our marriage."

Such unions , which remained stable out of necessity, were the rule rather than the exception in cases where the marriage was arranged by the parents. Gulchekhra's story illustrates the sources of conflict within many families: an absence of love, and the failure to prepare girls psychologically for the unending labour of married life. The primitive conditions of domestic life in Uzbek families – the lack of space, the absence of elementary comfort in traditional homes and poverty – combine to sap women's beau, strength, youth and health. The battle against poverty denies women the opportunity for self-development; women do not have the time for reading nor the energy to look after themselves. Moreover, the traditionally Central Asian pursuit of conspicuous consumption is an additional factor exhausting women; they, and their families must not fall behind others in the quality of their home decor, their clothes and especially in the celebration of family occasions, on which all their savings, collected over years of work, are spent. And today, when the

concept of women staying at home and being only housewifes and mothers has become popular, there are in reality few men who are able to support their wife and children alone. Without the income of women the already impoverished Uzbek family would simply become beggars.

In the absence of real social institutions, stagnation and hierarchy reduced the people to replicating the habitual old Muslim norms in their conduct and way of life. While these placed tremendous burdens on working women, those who rejected such norms were doomed to isolation. Nafisa Akrimova's personal account illustrates the problems confronting women who understood that there was a world beyond tradition:

"I got married when I was 23. In the villages, an unmarried woman this age is considered an old maid. I am a graduate, but my husband does not have higher education. We were betrothed from childhood, which rarely happens these days. However, if such a betrothal is made, it is strictly observed; breaking the engagement is a great sin. Even though in my own home I did not shy from work, in the beginning it was very hard for me in my husband's family. I had to do everything. My mother-in-law was a person with oldfashioned ideas (and there are many like her). She spends her time attending weddings, religious gatherings, often going to nearby holy places. She reasons that if she was in the service of her mother-in-law and her husband's relatives, then I should do the same. She has nothing to do because I work. Also in the accounts department where I work, one has to stay the full working day.

Now that my children have grown up, things have become easier for me both spiritually and physically. I now have someone to talk to. With my mother-in-law and husband the only form of conversation was orders from their side and "Yes" from my side. They do not understand the words "No" and "Cannot," "Not this way." They have only one contention: that I am to listen and respect them. It is better them to talk with them as little as possible, as any refusal on my part is taken as an insult, with any valid reasons being ignored. When I was a student in the city, I read, went to the cinema, to concerts – all of this I now remember as if it was a dream.

Our domestic life is ruled by laws which are left over from the olden days and which nothing can ever change. Soviet rule, no matter how it struggled to free us women, in the end failed to do so. We women have little desire to be free , because we are not allowed to cultivate such a desire. And now things are getting even worse: times are hard, which is why at home I have cattle, birds, a green house and a vegetable garden. The children help, but mainly I am alone. My husband is a driver and works at the bus depot in the city. Sometimes he does not come home at all; in the village there is unemployment.

Most alarming is that we live a dull, spiritless life, with every step regulated by some custom. All of this is called the observance of religion, faith. I think the tenets of Islam are more then just a set of prohibitions. But in the village there are few who know what true Islam is – there is simply nowhere for them to find out about it."

Saodat Tursunkhodjaeva, by education an economist but at present not working, makes a forthright assessment of the role of tradition in Uzbek families and has some particularly acerbic comments to make about life with one's in-law's:

"I got married in 1985. It was only when living with my husband's family that came to understand how much influence the surroundings have on family life. My husband, an engineer, is a wonderful person, independent and the father of our three children. We share the same outlook on life. I grew up in an intellectual family; my father and mother were college teachers and considered education our sacred duty.

But here in my husband's house, an educated daughter-in-law is treated like some perverse, coarse and insignificant creature. I never thought that our nation had such a strong cult of wealth. My husband's family highly respects, for example, the daughter of a butcher or some

small trader. They consider us educated people little better than beggars because we work for our living, just like our parents did. In contrast, the butcher's daughter does not work, and the husband is forever bringing home things, sometimes foodstuffs sometimes gifts, from the mother and father. My parents would also have gladly done the same, but they cannot allow themselves to do so – they don't get anything for free, they have to earn everything through hard work. My mother-in-law is always visiting our neighbours and naturally makes unfavourable comments about me. She is forever going on about how she should have had a daughter-in-law from a rich, respectable house; no one, neither my husband nor I, can change her psychology. At my in-laws little value is given to true goodness and tenderness, tactfulness and loyalty to the family. Here the most important thing is wealth.

I sometimes wonder why such people consider themselves true believers; how they respect those with power, and disdain the poor because they are poor, irrespective of their individual qaulities. This is a manifestation of a complete lack of religious faith. Is it really a sign of faith to make the pilgrimage to Mecca using stolen money for the air fare or to hold extravagant celebrations with hundreds of quests? Why do they push their children along the path where fortunes are made due to one's relatives, and not on account of knowledge and expertise? Is this the path along which the people will flourish? One can generalise that today a wealthy family is not evidence of real work or education, but that one of their members was one of those involved in distribution, someone who managed to rob us, we who are poor even though we work and work well.

When you live with your in-laws, you can't live as you would like to. Whether you like it or not, you have to take part in all of their celebrations. In this house, the young daughters-in-law are also obliged to wait on everyone. If someone comments to my mother--in-law that her daughter-in-law refues to do something, or did not do something the way she was told to, there would be no peace in the house. Such social interaction does not provide the spirit any sustenance; it is just a duty. One gets little happines from all this except that you can show off your new dress. When I listen to the conversation at such gatherings, I am always amazed at its narrowness; gossip about relatives, acquaintances, spicy rumours about crime. More recently, stories about extra-sensory perception, extra--terrestrials and like nosense have become especially popular. It is a pity that time is wasted on such socialising, time which is the essence of life. Sometimes I want to wash my hands of everything and not go where I do not want to, but we Uzbek women are taught that the most important words for women are 'You have to.' So that my mother-in-law doesn't get on my nerves, I submissively do everything that is demanded of me. This is a contradiction that I come up against every day, making my life in the family very difficult; I am content.

I often ask myself: what type of mother-in-law will I become, won't I also become slave to custom, like my husband's mother? I want to say to myself No!, but I am not convinced I won't become such a mother-in-law; the surroundings and social pressures can gradually crush anyone. I am very sad that even among women the opinion reigns that women are objects, without any value what so ever. They themselves firmly state this and even instil the same view in their daughters. When I socialise with such women, then I too start to think the same way.

I want to say something more about this; in the name of the family a women actually sets out to look both stupid and submissive, to be a humble creature. If she doesn't to this then the family is easily destroyed, which for the woman would be even worse. Consequently, the institution of family itself is a means of suppresing women's individuality. But rejection of the family means condemning oneself to loneliness. Would it perhaps be more humane not to give women good education so that they suffered less? I believe that as long as men rule the world, nothing will change about the position of women, whether in the family or in society."

The Family in the Post-war Years

By the 1930's the urban family had begun to experience a change in the old patriarchal way of life. During the Stalinist years of repression the burden of being the head of the family fell on the lot of many women. Indeed, some women took charge of their fathers and brothers while their children were supported by

male relatives, or in extreme cases, were sent to orphanages – a phenomenon previously unknown to this society. Women greatly resisted this development as the children lost all contact with the traditions of family life. But parents, even fathers, went along with what was from the point of view of devout Muslims a sacrilegious step in the name of their physical survival.

Zarif Turgumbekov relates:

"I was brought up in a children's home in Tashkent. Our father brought myself and my brothers from Kirghizia. There, just as throughout the country, collectivisation was taking place. My father was threatened with dispossession – he was from the Manapskov family (nomadic Kirghiz feudals who owned pastures and livestock). Mother was in despair, she ran after us for as long as her strength allowed. We never saw each other again..."

The Second World War substantially changed the structure of the urban family by either temporarily or permanently transferring the role of the head of family to women. Forced to take responsible decisions on their own regarding their children's future, many women became independent. In the post-war period education standards among women rose, while the experience of life outside the home broadened their moral outlook and increased their mobility. Thus urban families began to display the characteristics prevalent in families of industrialised societes with a tendency towards fewer children and modern forms of relationships. But even here women did not attain independence, just greater economic freedom.

There was a flip side to these essentially positive developments: the gradual disappearance of traditional support mechanisms whereby male relatives provided protection and support for their widowed sisters, daughters and nieces, weakened the socialisation of children. The tremendous burden of productive labour, coupled with the responsibility of bringing up children virtually single-handed had a severe psychological impact on Uzbek women.

While the structure of urban families began to undergo substantial changes, in the villages, patriarchy has retained its hold over family life. Architect Khairinso Khadieva has spent many years planning village settlements in the Ferghana Valley area, and has observed the life of village women:

"Although general standards of living in the villages have risen, this is basically in areas where there is vegetable farming. Condition facing women kolkhoz workers are still very tough in the cotton-producing areas. No one anywhere is interested in the feelings of women who are obliged to toil without a break. Women are constantly suppresed as individuals. The authorities and their husband's don't give a damn about them; in patriarchal families women are dependent on their in-laws and their own parents. Their single joy is their children, and they have some power over them, but women themselves instill the same patriarchal attitudes in their daughters. Village boys are given preference in the family and, as far as possible, the road to education remains open for them. Women physically age early, but remain infantile all their lives. For the majority it doesn't even cross their minds to think about their rights. It is the women who become the big traditionalists.

I often saw women working in the fields while the cafes were full of men. Many of their little fancies and their favourite pastimes – taken as proof of their manliness – are at the cost of women's labour. Men, so as to win respect among their friends, throw away hard-earned money on having a good time, while the family is literally living on bread and water. And there is so much hidden polygamy, especially among the village leaders. In more than twenty years, I have never come across a single case of someone being prosecuted for polygamy.

Work did not give village women economic independence; their labour is appropriated, and they remain materially dependent upon men and therefore, even if they wanted to they

couldnt demand their rights. Although there are women in high posts in the village authorities, few of them are really concerned about their sisters. Unfortunalety it is not the best women who are in these leadership positions; they are more concerned about their rosy reports about the prosperity of kolkhoz women. That is why in the 1970s and 1980s this trend of suicides among women developed; in despair, denied even the possibility of complaining about their desperate financial situation, and not finding protection among their parents and their nearest, they took this extreme step. (...)"

Thus the new ideologues of national identity regard a return to Islam as being embodied on the resurrection of the ideal Muslim woman: a believer, protected by and submissive to her husband. The wife's self-effacing attitude, her submission before her fate, and respect for her husband is manifested both publicly, and, in the majority of families, in the daily reality of wife's life. On the streets you can see the husband, walking ahead with raised head, and then the wife who follows the husband two steps behind with her head bowed, as if bearing some heavy load. Therefore for the majority of educated women it is understood that a return towards the Muslim way of life means not a return to spititual values, but an open form of suppressing women's individuality.

The Practice of Polygamy Persits

While sovietisation introduced civil laws, civil society in the Soviet Union and especially in Central Asia was a fiction, largely because these written laws were always poorly implemented. Denied protection by the statute law, people had to fall back on traditional norms. Thus those who reject the family, be it through divorce or through remaining unmarried, are regarded extremely negatively by contemporary Uzbek society. The condemnation of the single has in turn led to an unspoken acceptance of polygamy, which is found in a variety of forms. Although the practice is banned by law, over the last ten years not once have polygamous men in positions of authority been prosecuted. The most widespread form of polygamy, more commonly found in the rural areas, is where a man, officially married to one wife, enters into practical married relations with another. The second wife usually lives in the same village or city, even though in a different place. The man differs from an ordinary adulterer in that he takes responsibility for the children from both marriages, providing equitable maintenance to the wives and support for the children. Such marriages, especially the second marriage, are solemnised through a Muslim ceremony. Although family law lawyers found themselves coming up against questions linked with the acknowledgement of paternity, the division of inheritance, etc., since polygamy was a taboo topic, this question was never discussed wthin the framework of the public media. Even discussion about it in private conversation is problematic; among women brought up as Muslims there is something of a ban on talking about certain topics with outsiders. Nevertheless I was able to record a conversation with a woman who talked about position as a second wife. I shall call her Khalida.

"Nobody compelled me to become a second wife; I was fully aware when I am took this step and sure I did the right thing. I met my current husband two years after divorcing my first. I had a six year-old dughter. From my second marriage I have a daughter and a son.

My husband already had a wife and four children. He is a highly placed person and has considerable opportunity to help me and my children.

I won't say I married him for love. I was thirty two, had a degree, had and still have good work and was able to feed myself and my daughter. But it is very difficult for single women to live in our society, especially in the provinces – people look at you as if they somehow suspect you are dishonest. In practical terms you are excluded from society, you are not invited anywhere, even by your married girlfriends. And then relatives condemn you as an outcast, even though my husband was to be blamed for everything; I found out that he had started using narcotics and was an addict. Coming home under their influence, he was capable of doing absolutely anything. After my divorce I got some proposals but the men were all very elderly. My second husband offered a marriage according to Muslim custom, promising to support my daughter, which played no small part in my decision. Among our people, a girl without a father usually doesn't get any proposals and they have great difficulty in getting married well. I do not even expect her to be given higher education – this costs a lot of money. My parents did not object, even though initially they didn't want to hear of such a marriage. My husband promised to buy me a house. His first family lives in the village. He said that he was married very young to his cousin, at his parents insistence; that he respects her as the mother of his children and would never leave her. He said he had noticed me long ago, and now finding out that I was divorced he suggested a union about which I would never be sorry. We had a simple wedding, after which my daughter and I went to the new house. Now I have been introduced to his eldest son, who sometimes comes to our house with his father. I think his first wife also knows about me."

In 1992, the parliament of Kirghizstan took up the issue of polygamy. The inclusion of a clause about polygamy in the law on marriage and family fell short of just twenty votes – really very little; just a few more now...

The continuing influence of tradition is also felt in the upbringing of children. The preference for male children is found everywhere: with a son is linked the future of the family, its success and prosperity. On the other hand, parents consider marriage the main event in daughters life and there is considerable pressure for daughters to marry early, and avoid becoming old maids. According to the law, the minimum age of marriage for girls in Uzbekistan was one year lower than the Soviet standard of 18. This was what was behind the large numbers of girls who dropped out of school, reflecting on the general educational and cultural level of young women. In Central Asia, for every 10 girls graduating from secondary school, there are 16 girls graduating in the Ukraine and Russia; and 17 boys of the same age graduating in Uzbekistan. Even then a significant portion of girls graduating from local secondary school are of European origin. This is the true reason behind the social passivity, the immaturity of Central Asia women, and ultimately their growing social inequality.

Unable to break the vicious circle of discrimination within the family, in the social consciousness of the majority of Central Asian people, women are considered to differ from men in their roles, their potential and abilities. Women have long hair, but are short on wisdom is an old proverb, yet such thinking is characteristic of all layers of Central Asia society; according women negative qualities is the result of not only the general psychology, but also family upbringing. From this also stem the different attitudes towards immorality in women and men, placing the burden of guilt only on the woman, even where both should be held responsible; and similarly, there is the very strong tendency to identify women purely with their biological and especially sexual fuctions. Freud's beloved maxim, 'anatomy – this is fate,' is a reality present in the principles governing the lives of Central Asian families, depriving women of the

opportunity to consider themselves truly a person. This situation has always been a feature of Muslim civilisation, beginning with the Qur'an. Woman as an object of delight existed both in poetry and in life, in the harems of the rulers and so on. Meanwhile for its own part, Soviet society, which preached repressive and extremely strict morals, was bigoted. In the absence of honest, objective academic studies of gender issues, conservative and sometimes simply reactionary stereotypes about women were circulated through the mass media.

An example comes from a contribution by journalist Sharifa Salimova – "The Single Woman – Who is She?" – which appeared in a 1990 edition of the women's journal *Saodat*, read by millions of women in Uzbekistan. Instead of analysing the by no means simple social phenomenon of the single woman, identifying its causes and effects, the author directs the full force of her anger against the women themselves. She equally fails to draw a distinction between two independent social phenomea: loneliness and prostitution.

This article is characteristic not only of a woman's journal; a similar attitude towards the solution of society's problems is to be found in the mentality of the majority of the national intelligentsia, who fail to see behind each separate phenomenon the general and profound social causes. Unfortunately, the intelligentsia furthers the preservation in the social consciousnes of patriarchal, medieval attitudes towards women, reinforcing discrimination against them and taking society towards the idea of a return of women above all to their biological destiny. One is forced to recall the unforgettable author of the ideology 'Kitchen, Children, Church' – this is women's destiny. Corrupted elements of *nouveaux riches*, with little education and an aggressive attitude towards the progressive tendencies had begun to permeate the life of modern Uzbeks through interaction with European value systems. These elements strengthened traditional societys impatience with the alien culture and its manifestations in the life of Central Asian Muslims. In particular they opposed the education of women and their desire for economic independence. They cultivated the ideal of a patriarchal family with a secondary position for women. And the realisation of such an ideal in real life led, at the end of the 1970s, to the phenomenon of a rising number of suicides among women, notably among poor, rural families. Caused by their repression within family,such suicides took a most terrible form: self-immolation. Is this not a retort to those who call for the type of family where the ideal is an authoritarian, steely head of the family whose will is indisputable? According to statistics given by Rozia Mergenbaeva and Shukhrat Kadirov, the makers of the powerful film 'Plamen,' (The Flame), in 1991 the number of suicides through self-immolation was 788. Is this not an evidence of the crisis within the urban-style, semi-patriarcghal families?

Despite these very real problems, the family has still not appeared on the social agenda, and is especially unlikely to do so given the current preoccupation with the economic crisis. Today not every woman can find in the family a refuge from the inclement economy. The Soviet state failed to provide equal opportunities for growth and self-realisation of the individual, both in society and in the family and was unable to do so for the reason that this necessity must formulate the social agenda regarding women. But the absence of women's organisations which could work for the protection of their interests in society does not permit an optimistic prognosis; gender will remain a factor in discrimination.