Towards a Reframing of Non-Western Feminisms:

"Coloniality of Being" in the Narratives of Kyrgyzstani Women's Rights Activists

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Abstract

This dissertation focused on studying how women's rights activism develops in "unimportant" localities on the basis of a complex intertwining of multiple agencies, socio-political factors, and histories of neo/colonial relations, which complicate the simplified picture of Western feminism colonizing non-western feminisms often developed by postcolonial critiques of feminism. As such, the goal of this research was, based on the analysis of narratives of 78 Kyrgyzstani women's rights activists received via 28 deep-structured interviews and 13 focus groups, to propose ways in which non-western feminisms may be reframed out of the existential crisis of "coloniality of being" and towards a more productive framework.

To do that the dissertation provided an overview of feminist history and theories, looking at the relationship between the feminisms of the Global North (West) and the Global South (East), focusing on the history of Soviet feminism, which was not included in the annals of the global discourse on feminism. This was followed up by a discussion of the colonial question in gender studies, as well as into the theoretical framework of this research, which focused on postcolonial and decolonial theories as the final iterations of the Critical Theory-spawned anti-capitalist critique of global development. In the theoretical framework a concept of nomadity of being was proposed, which could be viewed as an anti-thesis to the concepts of coloniality of being and hybridity.

The concept of nomadity of being helps see the historiography of feminist activism in Kyrgyzstan as one, where foreign information and requirements, even forced ones, are transformed into an amalgamation of the new and the old, alien and native — like *kurak*, a quilted patchwork blanket, made from scraps. Kurak-feminism is feminism that is half-donor-commissioned, half-learned through interactions (personal, media, academic, professional), unashamed of its borrowed nature, working towards own purpose that is being developed as the blanket is being quilted. Weaving in elements from completely different and, to a Western eye, incompatible approaches 'nomadity of being' might pave the way towards a Central Asian reframing of non-Western feminisms.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Dissertation topic and rationale

Feminisms in non-Western contexts have often been critiqued, from a postcolonial point of view, for their significant degree of dependence on Western feminist thought and practices becoming "watered down copies" of Western originals as a result of intellectual mimicry (Tlostanova, Koobak, Thapar-Bjorkert, 2016). At the same time the image of a "third world woman" in the global women's rights agenda remains uniform, dominated by a developmentalist logic, informed by a paternalistic attitude towards non-western women and their plight in non-western countries, sometimes openly appealing to the civilizing and protective role that the Western democracies must carry with regards to women elsewhere. Even as feminist theorists might be rethinking this (Mohanty, 2003), it has not trickled down into the practice of feminism on the global arena, through development and aid programs, which carry on promoting the educational and enlightening approach from the developed to the developing world. This situation is further complicated by the fact that many non-western countries are dependent on these aid programs, as are women engaged in activism, because these programs are in most cases the sole providers of funding for the rights movements (Hoare, 2015).

The overt financial dependence of some countries on others often goes hand in hand with requirements of reforms in non-financial sectors. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan has clearly adopted and implemented broad socio-political and economic reforms, which were a prerequisite for reception of much needed foreign aid (Pelkmans, 2017). Nowhere is this more pronounced than in the country's non-governmental sector. With the newly acquired independence and dissolution of the previous systems of gendered disaggregation of professions, Kyrgyz civil society was born in a 'big bang', which was filled with women so much that some have described the Kyrgyzstani NGO sector "as having a female face" (Baimatov, Stakeeva and Heap, 2002). They have faithfully attempted to follow the path written out before them by the international donor agencies (Corcoran-Nantes, 2005) with the adoption of the various gender equality programs, following first the "women in development" paradigm, then the "gender in development" framework, then expansion of rights and opportunities approach (Moldosheva et al, 2006) both on the state and civil society levels.

From a decolonial point of view the development programs are a practical example of continued coloniality today, which itself is a result of unfinished decolonization as a political,

epistemological and economic project of liberation from the late 1950s and onwards. It is expressed in coloniality of power, knowledge, gender — resulting in "coloniality of being", all working toward sustaining the dominance of the Global North, where the Global South remains in the position of perpetual subalternity (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). As such, development both as a global process and as development studies, remains deeply intertwined with its modernist Euro-American roots that are based on the idea of a "civilizing mission" of the developed countries towards the developing or "Third World" countries (Grosfoguel and Cervantes-Rodriguez, 2002).

Terms that are widely used in development discourse like "developed", "developing", "Third World", are themselves a language of differentiation, where development is understood only in terms of similarity to the countries of the Global North (and West) world through a number of criteria, and as such "development" is a process of bringing the Global South (and East) into alignment with the former (Ziai, 2013). Certainly, there is no single center of coloniality, but rather several nexuses, all with differing levels of power and influence, as per the world-systems theory (Wallerstein, 2000). Although initially developed to describe on a macro level the world history and social change, the division into core, semi-periphery and periphery countries and their dynamics, shows how even semi-periphery countries may serve as core to their peripheries and be subordinate to the true core countries at the same time.

The case of Kyrgyzstan can provide a good model of a third world or peripheral country that is under both the core and semi-peripheral influence, or in terms of decolonial theory, as a third world country it is under the coloniality of the Global North as the dominant empire and Russia as the secondary empire, which itself is subordinate to European coloniality. Kyrgyzstan can be considered to have been double-colonized, by the Russian empire and the Soviet Union, and afterwards by the neoliberal globalization order. Throughout its history with these external actors that Kyrgyzstan has experienced, as part of the wider region of Central Asia (or Turkestan), the colonial meddling with its gender order. First in terms of simultaneous exotification and barbarization during the Russian tsarist rule, then in terms of Soviet *hujum* mainly focused on forced de-veiling, but also forced education and entry of women into the workforce. Finally, following independence, the country took its chance to re-traditionalize its gender regime, while at the same time getting subjected to the development agenda-based gender equality mainstreaming.

However, not all is so simple as to be explained away in terms of coloniality. While the examples of enforcing outside gender norms all have factual evidence, there is also evidence

that there was agency on the ground, among both women and men. Even before Soviet Union there was a movement of jadidism, mostly working in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, as well as Alash-Orda, which were more prominent in Kazakhstan (Kamp, 2006) — both of which had already started working towards greater gender equality. Then during the Soviet Union many of the emancipation goals and objectives were wholeheartedly accepted and championed by locals (Bagdasarova, 2016; Igmen, 2012), as opposed to the anti-Soviet rhetoric (from both within Russia and outside) of human tragedy and constant suffering of Soviet citizens (Kukulin, Mayofis, Safronov, 2015), especially in Central Asia. All of this indicates that while coloniality of gender and power may exist, they may not be as totalitarian as decolonial theory describes it.

There was and is local agency in emancipatory movements, however, the mechanisms used in development of these movements on the ground, especially in countries of geopolitical insignificance like Kyrgyzstan, remain unresearched. There is lack of analysis of how local women's rights movements are developed in such localities, how they may be influenced by double or triple colonialities, and on whether there are any specific characteristics in the local practices that could expand the general understanding of how feminism is rooted on local grounds. Conceptualizing feminist narratives in Kyrgyzstan, while keeping in mind the complex relationship between ideological borrowing, actualization, appropriation or self-colonization of "feminist" concepts can expand both scholarly and activist understanding of specificities of post-Soviet feminisms from a historiographic point of view.

In this regard this dissertation is interested in challenging the perception that reproduction of "Western" feminist ideologies in non-Western localities as 'watered down copies' (Tlostanova, Koobak, Thapar-Bjorkert, 2019) is necessarily a negative and destructive phenomenon as may be suggested by the descriptive language above. As such the dissertation contends that narratives of the feminist collectives in contemporary Kyrgyzstan, which call for reproductive, sexual and political autonomy of women, can be considered an instance of purposeful "self-recolonization" by the subaltern (Spivak, 1987), who are utilizing processes of ideological colonization in their struggle for equality and furthering of the state-stalled emancipation across different regions of the country and within different temporalities. These narratives are post-national in their essence in that they are re-colonizing the hegemonic traditional masculinity of Kyrgyzstan with ideologies decidedly "Other", and by doing so are pushing towards a creolized version of women's status and gender relations in the country, created from a mix of Soviet, Liberal "Western" and (some) traditional Kyrgyz elements.

1.2 Research aim and objectives

A justified question arises towards the previous section — what is the added value of understanding post-Soviet Central Asian feminisms? While transnational feminism has called for differentiation between the images and statuses of women across the world, there is a continued focus on the figure of women and their experiences that are separate from men, based on the uniformness of a "female experience". This idea that was foundational in the development of feminisms in the 20th century, organized the feminist struggle and its theorizing to oppose the image of women as "fragile, weak in both body and mind, secluded in the private, and sexually passive" (Lugones, 2008, p.13) —but this was an image that only characterized white bourgeois women. Without critically reflecting on this, white feminists have transferred this characterization and the need to struggle against it to all women via manifestoes and theoretical texts. It barely needs justification today, however, that the situation and status of women around the world differ vastly, as does development of feminism or women's rights activism, which are local and contingent upon a diverse combination of local geographical, historical, political, socio-economic, cultural, and religious factors.

This research, as such, calls for de-grand-narrativizing of theories and histories of feminism, giving due credit to local stories and nuances. There is a need for an ever further atomization of feminist knowledge, as it is too early to come up with a unified theory of feminism (to borrow a theoretical physics term), because not all specificities have been studied. Kyrgyzstan's case as such is unique even within Central Asia, because of a different combination of these factors, with more political freedom, but less economic stability than the neighboring countries in the post-Soviet period. While concerns of women's rights activists within the region may be very similar, their mechanics are different.

My research focuses on studying how women's rights activism develops in 'unimportant' localities on the basis of a complex intertwining of multiple agencies, socio-political factors, and histories of neo/colonial relations, which complicate the simplified picture of Western feminism colonizing non-western feminisms often developed by postcolonial critiques of feminism. As such, the goal of this research is, based on the analysis of narratives of Kyrgyzstani women's rights activists, to propose ways in which non-western feminisms may be reframed out of the existential crisis of 'coloniality of being' and towards a more productive framework. To achieve this goal the following two research questions were developed:

RQ 1: What are the characteristics of women's rights activism in Kyrgyzstan?

As the characteristics of women's rights activism, the research understands the following: insight into how women's rights activists became ones, how they joined activism — this would make up the stories of initiation into activism. Roots and goals of their activism, which focuses on how women's rights activists view the causes of the injustices they are struggling against and what is their ideal future. Further understanding of the mechanics of their activism, which questions how their activism is done, which strategies they use, how do they learn about possibilities of strategies and approaches to their activism. The characteristics also include the historiography and cartography of women's rights activism in Kyrgyzstan to see if there are any temporal and spatial differences and convergences. And, finally, they also look at the different internal conflicts that characterize women's rights activism in the country, focusing on the existing clashes between the different groups of activist women.

RQ 2: How are these characteristics related to regional and global feminisms?

The response to this research question is based on the analysis of findings under RQ 1, where the different characteristics uncovered on the basis of narratives of women's rights activists are analyzed in terms of their relation to the trends seen in the wider post-Soviet feminisms, as well as in their relation to the global feminist discourse. Further this comparative analysis is then investigated through a decolonial optics with the purpose of outlining possible pathways in which non-western feminisms can be reframed out of the deadlock of 'coloniality of being' towards a more productive framework.

1.3 Theoretical framework

As the research objectives suggest, I aim to investigate characteristics of women's rights activism in 'unimportant' localities and their interpellation by the women's rights activism from the dominant geopolitical localities on the one hand, and on the other — challenge the totality of the concept of 'coloniality of being' on the basis of this investigation. To this end, I develop a critical analysis of the decolonial option, focusing on the idea of coloniality embedded in the production of racialized differences, and predicated on the concepts of power, knowledge, and being (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2012).

The concept of coloniality — the logic under all forms of colonialism since 1500s and its shaping of the history of Eurocentric modernity — is key to this research, as part of the modernity/coloniality diad, where coloniality is seen as a dark side of modernity. Without coloniality there would not have been modernity as we recognize it today with its globalization and capitalism, (Bhambra, 2014; Tlostanova, 2012; Maldonado-Torres, 2007). While

technically colonialism is over, its affects remain, resulting in coloniality — of power, knowledge, and being.

Coloniality of power today is considered by post-Development scholars to be constitutive of the dominant discourse of development, which itself is considered by development scholars to be a hybrid descendant of the 19th century evolutionism that saw social development of societies in historical stages according to a universal pattern (Nisbed, 1969) and social technology built on the ideas of Enlightenment that advanced the role of expert knowledge holders, coincidentally all hailing from the European continent (Cowen and Shenton, 1996). Development as such puts Europe, or the idea of it, as the ideal mold, mature and complete in terms of historical stages, as opposed to societies that are yet to reach that stage, the "less developed" or "developing".

Coloniality of knowledge is the convenient epistemological positioning of all currently recognized knowledge in the European scientific traditions. It is the most important element of global colonialism, inseparable from all other aspects of modernity. In decolonial thinking modernity in many ways creates and proclaims itself and then launches into the world, ontologizing its epistemological constructs (Mignolo, 2007). As an idea, modernity needs a knowledge system that would legitimize it, and it itself legitimizes this knowledge system, thereby making its superiority and indisputability seem to be eternal. The idea of modernity and the system of knowledge legitimizing it became a mechanism for disavowing all other systems of knowledge and representing other historical processes as having fallen out of modernity.

The concept of coloniality of being is the natural extension of the concept of coloniality, which itself is based in its origin on a certain combination of commercial capitalism, missionary Christianity and the invention of the idea of race for the subsequent taxonomization of humankind. Over the past five hundred years, the constant cultivation and maintenance of epistemological and ontological lack of freedom and subordination have been expressed globally in different forms, which can be reduced to the fact that the West defined the only norm of humanity, and all other peoples were considered as deviations, undergoing various changes in order to bring them closer to the Western ideal of the human (Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

When applying the logic of decolonial critique to women's rights activism in localities like Kyrgyzstan the double colonial pressure towards it becomes apparent — on the one hand there are the regional and global feminist discourses, theories, activism penetrating the local

discourse via the academia and media; and on the other hand there is the women's rights agenda within the development programming in the region, promoted as part of reforms and integration into the global community of values under the paternalist guidance of Euro-centric institutions and agencies. The conceptual apparatus of feminist theory, as well as 'waves' of feminism representative of the historical development of women's emancipation within the Euro-American context, are applied as fundamental throughout the world, in localities both big and small. Oppression, patriarchy, strategic essentialism, gender performativity, intersectionality and transnationality, as well as queer theory are concepts that have surfaced to the top of feminist discourse, surviving numerous analytical challenges from both within and outside of feminist theory.

In conjunction with the decolonial notion of coloniality and its predicates, these fundamental feminist terms make up the analytical tools with which the narratives of Kyrgyzstani women's rights activists are investigated. This combination is especially useful in understanding the hybrid nature of the gender regime in Kyrgyzstan, which is based on the "traditional", "Soviet", "Western liberal" gender regimes that have become intermixed in the country's sovereign years, following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The usage of single quotation marks here denotes the epistemological ambivalence of the terms that are analyzed further in the dissertation in Chapter 4.

1.4 Methodology

The dissertation is built on and incorporates my previous research titled "Analyzing Feminist Narratives in Contemporary Kyrgyzstan", in which I attempted to conceptualize the feminist narratives concerning societal expectations and roles of women in Kyrgyzstan, while locating these narratives in the context of the country's own post-Soviet search for national identity as a transitional democracy catering to both liberal and conservative global and regional agendas. The emancipation of women in Central Asia after the Soviet revolution - *hudjum* - involved rejecting headscarves and burqas, as well as encouragement to study and work, which made the Soviet state trespass the borders of the private and the public (Kandiyoti, 2007). Although there was some resistance to this reach during the Soviet times, this resistance became strongest in the country's immediate independence years following the dissolution of the USSR. With strategic return to "traditional" values, the hegemonic role of males, previously thought trampled, was re-established; only minorly challenged with the gender and

development approach of international organisations and donors, largely representing the liberal 'West' in Kyrgyzstan.

The study's main finding was that the feminist narratives were mainly focused on countering the normative image of *Jakshy Kyz* ('good girl' in Kyrgyz language) that became prevalent in the public discourse of contemporary Kyrgyzstan as a result of a return to traditional values that took place in the country following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. However, different women's rights activists identified different representative images of this "good girl" — to some it was the "Islamic good girl", to others — the "Western" or the "Secular Traditional" and "Secular Modern". The interviewees seemed to suggest different timeframes in which these normative images were born and had grown popular, which sometimes overlapped and sometimes would speak of completely different periods. Some were identifying the early 90s as the period of ultimate freedom for women's rights issues, while others were referring to that same period as one that started off the current trend of toxic traditional masculinity in Kyrgyzstan. All were, however, agreeing that these normative images should be countered by an alternative image of either the 'bad girl' — one who defies all of the social and reproductive expectations of a 'good girl' — or reject any normativization at all.

However, what was lacking in the previous research is wider geographic outreach, as well as a more diverse roster of respondents. The study concentrated only on the capital city of Bishkek and activists centered in the city; and did not pay greater attention to historical narratives of respondents. As such the results are limited to narratives actualized in Bishkek only and in contemporary times. This cannot represent accurately the narratives of women's rights activists from the whole country. To address this shortcoming the fieldwork for the current research covered six cities — Bishkek, Osh, Jalal Abad, Nookat, Karakol, Naryn — roughly covering majority of the regions of the country. The number of respondents was also expanded, reaching 78 overall participants, of which 28 gave individual interviews and the rest were represented as parts of 14 focus groups.

In addition to interviews participant observations (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002, Wright and Hobbs 2006) were used and notes were taken during the central feminist events in Kyrgyzstan. These were: Feminist Marches of 8th March in Bishkek (March 2017, March 2018, March 2019), "Guests from the future: fantasies about feminism" — a theatrical reflection on feminist utopia in Kyrgyzstan organized by the self-identifying feminist activists and initiatives (March 2019). The feminist marches on the 8th of March have become the pinnacle of the discursive struggle between different actors, within and without the women's

rights movement, in Kyrgyzstan, each year causing significant rifts in the public opinion on the issue of gender equality[1]. Field work notes from the three field trips (April 2018, August-September 2018, February-March 2019) were also included in the analysis.

The research is rooted in qualitative research methods, which were chosen because they emphasize the socially constructed nature of reality, calling attention to how social experiences and practices are created (as objects, problems, solutions etc.) and given meaning within particular discursive frameworks. Qualitative research methods open up for substantial interrogations of discursive as well as non-discursive practices and the way they function, especially in politicized areas such as gender equality, coloniality of knowledge, coloniality of being (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). The research is based on a combination of interviews, focus groups, and participant observations about the life paths and encounters of women's rights activists which formed the narrative basis of the analysis.

Interview questions ranged from general introductions and descriptions of significant moments in their lives related to activism to specific follow-up questions, which clarify and add nuance to the life stories (Atkinson, 1998; Morse, 1998). The prompts started with personal introductions, before moving on to the different facets of respondents' activism, their assessment of the situation of women in Kyrgyzstan, and evaluation of the state of women's rights movement in the country in general. Focus groups were conducted with a similar set of prompts, with additional two questions focusing on the work of the organization, as focus groups usually consisted of members of one NGO.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed, which were then analyzed as texts, as were field work notes and participant observations of the researcher. Before the recorder was turned on an explanation of the purpose of the project, as well as the researcher's credentials were presented, together with an informed consent form. Respondents were encouraged to read the document and only upon the signing of the form did the interview commence (Todres, 1998). It was made clear to the respondents that if at any stage of the interview they feel like they cannot continue, they were free to do so without the need for explanation of reasons. Any questions that respondents had about the research topic were discussed prior to the start of the interviewing process.

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[1] "Kyrgyzstan: Women's Rights Protesters Assaulted, By Men", Aljazeera, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/women-rights-protesters-assaulted-detained-kyrgyzstan-200308100513456.html

Focusing on the life paths can be helpful in understanding how both macro-history (societal level events like the collapse of the Soviet Union) and micro-history (individual events such as a bride-kidnapping or discrimination experience) can converge to shape one's personal development (Deegan, 2003; Simons and Thomas, 1983). In terms of the research the respondents' narratives present life experiences, as selected by respondents themselves, which allows an insight into how social and contextual factors, as well as personal events can influence the initiation into activism, as well as influence its course. The narrative analysis allows centering on the respondents' examination of their personal, community of activists, and institutional (activist-state-international organisations, among others) relationship. In the process of doing so, it aids in uncovering the potential trends that may contribute to increased understanding of how women's rights activism develops in 'unimportant' localities in an intertwining of personal agencies, socio-political factors, as well as internal and external dynamics of knowledge production and power relations.

The category of narrative has attracted the attention of scholars within the humanities and social sciences for a considerable period of time since the 1970s, as evidenced by the large number of monographs, as well as programmatic and methodological articles that comprehend the concept of narrative in linguistics (Labov, Waletzky, 1966), philosophy (Bourdieu, 2002;), historiography (Iggers, 2001), sociology (Rozhdestvenskaya, 2012;). In particular, some researchers consider a narrative as an important construct that allows a person to structure their understanding of themselves and their life experience (De Fina, 2003), others use a narrative to understand how subjects build communication (Brockmeyer, Harre, 2000).

Narrative theory is also widely used in feminist studies, with psychoanalytical (Winnet, 1990), post-structuralist (Roof, 1996), and literary (Page, 2007) oriented approaches to gender and narrative. At the same time narrative analysis is considered by some like Saukko (2003) and Lykke (2010) as outdated, similar to structuralism of the 1960-1970s, which are contextually insensitive. As Saukko (2010) suggests :"the structuralist toolkit of methods, such as semiotics and narrative analysis, is good in highlighting certain key elements in cultural texts" (p.105), however, to her it "reinforces the machine-like and Manichean mode of thought it aims to expose and criticize" (p.103). To other scholars, narrative analysis seems to be too personal-focused, unable to theorize and uncover the underlying conditions creating gendered experiences, and to connect the personal accounts of women to larger and more complex contextual logics (Lagesen, 2010; Naples, 2003).

Yet analysis of narratives within gender studies and feminist theory can still serve their purpose when used in conjunction with life path stories, making it possible to look at structural elements that might arise from individual accounts. These structures then can be analyzed from the point of view of interpellation by the narratives that claim a greater or a universal position. By looking at "the stories we tell each other" (Garcia Rodriguez, 2016) as feminist activists and scholars, it becomes possible to analytically deconstruct and reconstitute our knowledge and praxis basis with an aim of decolonizing it. An inspirational example of usage of narrative analysis towards this purpose is Clare Hemmings' *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (2011), in which she explores Western feminist storytelling that is based on three dominant narratives of: progress in how far the theory and activism has come, loss of radical meaning and urgency to act towards social change, and return to the political by bridging the previous two. While far from passing judgement on whether these stories are true or false, Hemmings calls for a relinquishing of these established stories that make up the alphabet and grammar of feminist theory, and for engagement with multiple histories and multiple subjects, or "heroines" of feminist thought and activism (Meagher, 2012) — and away from the universalizing understanding of Western feminist history and subjectivity as the basis for a global one.

Following Hemmings this research bases its understanding of narratives on Jean-Francois Lyotard's "little narratives" concept, which resist any "metanarrative implying a philosophy of history […] used to legitimate knowledge" (1984, p.xxiv). He proposes in a 1995 interview that "if we are vigilant against master narratives, it means precisely that we try to consider the small narratives of specific groups" (quoted in Olson, 1995, p. 401). This falls in line with the paper's decolonial attempt to move away from the meta-narratives of feminism *proper*, such as concepts of 'oppression', 'patriarchy', or 'asymmetrical power relations between men and women'.

1.5 Structure of the dissertation

The dissertation consists of seven chapters, which include also the introduction and a short conclusion. The **introduction** has offered a brief outline of the topic and rationale of the dissertation, its research aims and objectives, its analytical framework and methodology. It explained that the research is focused on studying how women's rights activism develops in 'unimportant' localities on the basis of a complex intertwining of multiple agencies, socio-political factors, and histories of neo/colonial relations, which complicate the simplified picture

of Western feminism colonizing non-western feminisms often developed by postcolonial critiques of feminism.

The literature review in **Chapter 2** provides an overview of main topics and debates concerning the history and main concepts of feminism, as well as their critique over the course of 20th century. Following from this overview of feminist history there is a discussion focusing on non-western feminisms and main debates surrounding the issue, followed by an overview of Soviet feminism in general, as well as the Soviet and post-Soviet gender regime in Central Asia and Kyrgyzstan. This discussion is then enhanced by a discussion of coloniality of gender as applied to the post-Soviet space.

The theoretical framework is discussed in greater detail in **Chapter 3**, focusing on the postcolonial theory and the decolonial option (as well as their precursors) with an overview of the main concepts and authors. As both of the theoretical schools are mostly associated with the colonial matters in India, the Middle East and North Africa, and the Americas, this discussion is complemented by an overview of Soviet postcolonial studies and writings. The chapter analyses the triad of coloniality of power, coloniality of knowledge and coloniality of being, looking at the advantages and shortcomings of the approach, problematizing the latter, but also proposing possible ways out. This is followed by an analysis of feminist theoretical concepts and their universal applicability from the point of view of decolonial theory.

In order to conceptualize the narratives of women's rights activists in Kyrgyzstan it is necessary to localize them within the greater context of the country's status as a transitional democracy that is catering to both liberal and conservative global and regional agendas, and the resulting 'hybrid morality' of the country. This contextual localization is provided in **Chapter 4**, which provides a critical overview of the contested geographies of Kyrgyzstan, ranging from the Russian Tsarist imaginaries, through the "paradox" of Soviet coloniality (Kandiyoti, 2007) to the post-Soviet bifurcation of the country in its geopolitical orientation both towards Russia and the West. The theoretical triad of coloniality of power, knowledge and being are applied in analyzing the external influences, as well as the internal attitude to women's rights in the country, taking into account the contextual background discussed in the earlier sections of the chapter.

Chapter 5 delves into the specific narratives of Kyrgyzstan's women's rights activists on the basis of findings for the RQ 1, which looked into the characteristics of women's rights activism in the country. The characteristics were categorized as: stories of initiation, roots and goals, mechanics of activism, historiography and cartography of women's rights activism, as

well as regional differences. Each of the narrative categories are analyzed using the theoretical framework from the previous chapter.

Chapter 6 provides a comparative discussion on differences and similarities of these narratives with the regional and global discourses in response to RQ 2, focusing on specifics of women's rights activism in Kyrgyzstan, while also applying the decolonial optics. The chapter brings these historiographic, cartographic studies of the narratives of women's rights activism together in an attempt to build a wider understanding of feminism, which is inclusive of knowledge and praxis from 'unimportant' localities.

Chapter 7 provides a conclusive overview of the research with a discussion for prospective research on the topic.

Chapter 2. Literature review

This chapter provides an overview of main topics and debates concerning the history and main concepts of feminism, as well as their critique over the course of 20th century. Following from this overview of feminist history there is a discussion focusing on non-western feminisms and main debates surrounding the issue, followed by an overview of Soviet feminism in general, as well as the Soviet and post-Soviet gender regimes. This discussion is then enhanced by a discussion of coloniality of gender as applied to the post-Soviet space with focus on translation and absorption of Western feminist knowledge, desire for capitalism, class divisions in knowledge reproduction into theoretical 'purely' feminist and non-feminist women's groups that desired acceptance by the males in power, ethnic core-periphery relations within the former USSR and how they reflected in the construction of the feminist discourse.

2.1 Overview of feminist history and critique

> "To many people, inside and outside of the academy, the word 'feminism' continues to inspire controversy and to arouse a visceral response — indeed, even to evoke fear among a sizable portion of the general public. If words and the concepts they convey can be said to be dangerous, then 'feminism' and 'feminist' must be dangerous words, representing dangerous concepts." (Offen, 1988, p.119)

This excerpt is from Karen Offen's essay from 1988, based itself on a speech from a Berkshire Conference on the History of Women held in 1976. The sentiments expressed in the essay remain relevant today, to a varying degree, almost everywhere around the globe — forty-three years later. It is especially true in Kyrgyzstan today, where the country's first Feminnale (feminist contemporary art biennale) in Bishkek was forced to size down over threats from the country's conservative groups of men, who found its content offensive to their worldview.[2] To them, as to many representatives of the general public, feminism is a dangerous concept, one that is not native to the country, one that was exported from abroad, namely — from the 'West'. In their minds, without the external fiddling, the women of Kyrgyzstan would remain subordinate, the very example of a *jakshy kyz* ('good girl'), so these kinds of events must be stopped.

Unfortunately, while the role and status of women around the world and throughout centuries have varied significantly, from domination to total oppression, 'feminism' - both as

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2.https://akipress.com/news:629944:Feminnale_row__Mira_Jangaracheva_says_Minister_asked_her_to_resign_as_director_of_Fine_Arts_Museum/?place=main1

a political and an academic term — originated indeed within the Western political discourse quite recently, with the suffragette movement of the mid-19th century in Europe and the USA fighting for the right to vote and right to education. This later came to be known as the 'first wave' of feminism. Although the struggle took nearly 70 years, it was after the first World War that majority of Western powers, as well as the Soviet Union, extended voting rights to women in recognition of women's contribution to the war effort, which:

> "[…] challenged the notion of women's physical and mental inferiority and made it more difficult to maintain that women were, both by constitution and temperament, unfit to vote. If women could work in munitions factories, it seemed both ungrateful and illogical to deny them a place in the polling booth. But the vote was much more than simply a reward for war work; the point was that women's participation in the war helped to dispel the fears that surrounded women's entry into the public arena." (Hume, 2016, p.281)

Although in some involved countries the interwar and World War II period established the "nationalization of women" (Thebaud, 1996) discourse, which reinforced the traditional imagery of women as mothers and caregivers, in majority of the countries engaged in the war dynamics of the two world wars, women's entry into the workforce and public spheres was welcomed in light of increased demand for more and more worker output. The post-war treatment of women, however, who had been supporting their nations during the war, went 180 degrees around, dismissing them from workplaces to make spaces for the returning men, as well as closing down opportunities for self-expression, such as all-women sports leagues. With their services no longer needed and even rejected, women were to retreat back into their domestic roles.

In the post-war period research in the Western countries on sex roles and sex differences between men and women started gaining traction as a result of this trend, reaching apex in the 1950s, reflecting the interest of researchers in the family as a unit of a stable society and the 'natural' division of labor between spouses. The classic of this research Talcott Parsons formulated ideas about the normative models of femininity and masculinity, characteristic of American society, developing the concept of sexual separation of roles in the family: a housewife and a bread-winner (Parsons, Bales, 1955). For this period of research, essentialism and biological determinism were characteristic, however, further studies revealed the limitations of male and female roles and the potential conflict of relationships in the family, built on a model of rigid separation of sex roles.

These public discourse trends largely inspired the 'second wave' of feminism, which spanned roughly three decades between 1960s to mid-1990s and focused on fighting gender-

based discrimination (Freedman, 2003) in social and economic domains. This wave spawned fundamental concepts and types of feminism that are still valid today, such as androcentrism and patriarchy, standpoint theory, women's and feminist studies, liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist feminism, feminist psychoanalysis just to name a few.

Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex" (Beauvoir, 2009 [1949]) played a special role in the development of feminist thought at that time, presenting an existentialist interpretation of the gender differences enshrined in society and by sex differences research. She formulated the thesis that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman", where the calls into question the biological predestination of female identity. Physicality, sexuality, reproductive abilities, economic status are recognized as the reasons for positioning a woman as the Other, as an object constrained by the borders of her nature (body) and situation. Most feminist ideologies henceforth have somehow positioned themselves in relation to this work. In particular, liberal feminism, which had ushered in an era of "feminisms" — an idea that there were many feminisms, not just one — raised the questions of the hierarchical position of men and women ("second sex"), unjust distribution of resources, dependence on the husband and his status and privacy, societally prescribed role of a housewife.

The agenda of liberal feminism was formed at a time when women's access to education and paid work, political participation was limited by law and existing normative (generally accepted) ideas about male and female destiny. The notion of the normative behavior of a middle-class white married mother at that time extended to all categories of women, regardless of their class, racial, ethnic, or religious affiliation. However, by the end of the 1960s it became obvious that the role of a housewife is unacceptable for many women oriented to a professional career, as well as for those who cannot rely on material support from spouses. The bourgeois normative model is perceived as exclusive and unfair to women. One of the segments of the social base of the feminist movement at that time was made up of women professionals who demanded equality and equal opportunities for all in paid work and political participation.

The political project of the feminist movement led to a rethinking of the gender-role approach. Theses were formulated on the conflict of roles, on the oppression of women by their traditional roles and gender boundaries (Friedan, 1963). Such a cognitive attitude put forward before the movement the political task of changing normative expectations, that is, sexual roles, in particular the role of a housewife. This implied an extensive program of institutional changes in the education system, in the production, political and legislative spheres. All these reforms were aimed at ensuring equal rights and opportunities for women in the public world, at giving

roles “equal status”, at institutional support for the balance of family and labor roles. The epistemological orientation of this area of feminist theory during this period was the orientation toward the production of new, “objective” knowledge about women (and men). Such “true” knowledge was supposed to be obtained by making women “visible,” that is, by integrating their experience in the system of scientific production of knowledge as a subject and object of cognition. To accomplish this task, liberal feminism put forward the academic strategy of “adding women” to research.

By the early 1970s the feminist movement has gained momentum and started radicalizing. This is facilitated by such trends as women's participation in left movements and awareness of sexism, the formation of consciousness growth groups that have drawn attention to interpersonal relationships, body, feelings, sexuality, childbearing, contraceptives, motherhood, parenthood (Jaggar & Rothenberg, 1984). Academic feminism is one of the aspects of the cognitive practice of the female movement of the second wave, the purpose of which was to explain gender inequality and develop means to overcome it. The feminism of differences that took shape in those years comes from the recognition of the special experience and special role of women in society, of special women's rights. At the same time, differences between male and female models of behavior are considered as socially and culturally defined, but due to biological reproductive differences embodied in the bodily experience, which Simone de Beauvoir had written about two decades earlier.

Theories were formed for women developed by women, which formed the basis of studies of women, or women's and feminist studies. According to representatives of this feminism of differences, to change the existing gender system it was necessary to study the special female experience, give the floor to women and speak from the position of women. This was the epistemological principle, which came to be known as the Feminist Standpoint theory. It recognized the difference between female experience and male experience, criticized the silence and humiliation of female experience, analyzed the mechanisms of oppression based on gender. Among the researchers who are attributed to the feminism of differences and radical feminism are Kate Millet, Sulamith Firestone, Germain Grieg, Andrea Dvorkin, Adrien Rich, Katherine McKinnon, Susan Brownmiller, Mary Daly, Kristin Delphi and others (Bryson, 2016; Tartakovskaya, 2008). The subject of women's studies was the actual female experience, understanding the mechanisms of male domination and oppression of women in society (Stacey, Thorne, 1985). Socialist, Marxist and psychoanalytic approaches, as well as

the concept of “patriarchy”, developed in radical feminism, are taken to interpret the differences.

2.2 Non-western feminisms and main debates

From the late 1980s intra-feminist political and academic clashes and criticism give birth to a new approach — that of gender, transnationality, and intersectionality, which became known as ‘third-wave feminism’. Around this time feminists of color and postcolonial researchers formulate their theses about the illegitimate dominance of the Western model of feminism, its ideas about gender differences and the political agenda of the women's movement. In the context of the development of national versions of feminist thought (European, Latin American, African, Asian schools), various aspects of gender differences are problematized. Subjectivity is seen as contextual and nomadic (Braidotti, 1994).

While studying women's experience and formulating tasks of fighting against patriarchies of various kinds, activist researchers sharply criticized the thesis about ontological homogeneity, a single female essence, about sisterly solidarity uniting all women, which was the defining feature of ‘second-wave feminism’. The practices of different groups of women, not reducible to the experience of white heterosexual middle-class women in Western societies, as well as the practices of different groups of men, have become ontologically significant. Colored, homosexual women, women of different races, ethnic groups, non-Western countries declared themselves in various political movements. The feminist agenda was also fragmented and contextualized. The gender approach argues that the differences between masculinity and femininity, male and female roles are set primarily through the structural contexts of age, race, class and sexual orientation. In this regard, attention has shifted to contexts that determine the differences between (female) experience and its meanings. As such the distinction between women’s and gender studies reflects the development and change in the methodology of the feminist approach. In line with social constructivism, they receive an incentive to develop critical studies of men and masculinities, which are considered to be multiple, dynamic and hierarchical (Thebaud, 1996).

The epistemology of gender studies develops the principles of social constructivism in the production of knowledge, which gravitate towards the principles of the postmodern theory of knowledge. According to this position, in the socially constructed world there are no universal “female” and “male” experiences as natural and unchanging entities. This position denies the grand theory of femininity, but at the same time it proceeds from the recognition of group gender experience defined by context. Social and political contexts introduced through

the intersection of categories of race, ethnicity, class, and age are essential for understanding the gender relations of domination and power. Later, socio-constructivist epistemology found its development in an intersectional approach.

Gender studies indicate their interest in different levels of analysis — at the level of the individual, at the level of institutional interaction, society as a whole and at the level of the global picture of social reality. At the same time, the basic interest of gender studies in relations of power — the mechanisms of oppression and resistance, which are carried out in multiple contexts: local, national, transnational, remains. Interpretation of the complex picture of gender organization requires the inclusion of multiple cases in the analysis, the study of political subjectivity, discourse, structure, material conditions, etc. It is recognized that different women can be in unequal conditions; research interest in conservative movements is also growing (Fonow, Cook, 2005).

The ontologically important context for development of the 'third-wave feminism' is globalization of issues and neoliberal politics, changes in labor markets and forms of parenthood, and the complexity of configurations of identities and solidarity. In these contexts, new discourses were bound to arise, new areas of political action, as well as agenda of feminist research (Fonow, Cook, 2005). The political agenda was influenced by women's and men's movements in the context of third-wave feminism, LGBT communities, and postcolonial movements. They criticized the category of "gender", the binary nature of gender oppositions, and introduced new parameters for hierarchies. In the 2000s in feminist sociology, there was an active criticism of a narrowly understood gender approach that reduces complex gender hierarchies to homogeneous models of "femininity" and "masculinity" (Rosenberg, Howard, 2008). The recognition of intersectionality and a transnational approach to multiple gender hierarchies became epistemologically significant.

Feminism of the "third world" became another of the defining characteristics of the third-wave feminism, developed under the influence of theories of globalization and postcolonial approaches, according to which in the postcolonial world the experience of women and goals of their struggle differed significantly from the Western ones (Mohanty, 1988). As borders between nation-states become porous, global cohesion effects are observed when gender shifts in one part of the world affecting gender relations in another (Ray, 2006). Feminism, both in politics and in the academic environment, has been paying more and more attention to transnational processes, developing a transnational approach to gender research (Kim-Puri, 2005; Rosenberg&Howard, 2008; Ray, 2006). The term "transnational" draws

attention to the intersection of national borders, the unevenness and heterogeneity of global circulation of various resources (Grewal & Kaplan, 2002; Zdravomyslova & Temkina, 2007).

The methodological principles of transnational feminist approach are characterized by a criticism of cultural imperialism in gender studies. Chandra Mohanty (1988) criticizes cultural imperialism, that is, the ideological hegemony of Western feminist approaches that turn "third world women" into a monolithic subject. She argues that Western feminist texts gravitating toward ethnocentrism and discursive homogenization describing all third-world women as uneducated, powerless, ignorant, poor, traditional, religious, attached to the home world, and victimized. They (explicitly or implicitly) are opposed by modern educated Western women — autonomous, who have the freedom to make decisions, who control their life situation and physicality. Overcoming this approach requires taking into account local gender orders, stratification differences, the characteristics of individual biographies and female voices, contextual strategies for struggle and gaining power.

In addition to post-colonial feminisms of India, Middle East, Africa and Latin America, feminisms in Asia came into focus in the late 1980s. One example that stands out starkly is the development of feminist thought and activism in Japan, which bloomed after the cultural encounter of Japan with Europe following into the Meiji period (Flew et al, 1999). Translations of Morgan and Engels with re-working of their ideas to be made applicable to Japanese history and society dominated the first half of 20th century, where feminist historiography remained thoroughly Marxist until the 1980s (Germer, 2003). But regardless of the intense engagement of Japanese feminists with the international theory on academic and activist levels, Japanese efforts in these areas have come to be perceived as being focused mostly on internal Japanese issues. Hiroko Tomida (1996), for example, considered Japanese feminism to be too restricted to national concerns and unable to transfer its local discourse to a global one. However, Germer (2003) argues that this may truly be a problem of transmission, but not because of the Japanese scholars' inability to do so, rather because of the strong self-centeredness of the international feminist discourse on the Euro-American issues and perspectives. Added to this is English as the hegemonic language of the academia (Pennycook, 1998), leaving behind any writing that has not been translated into English as inaccessible, or worse — non-existent.

Similar selective blindness within the international feminist discourse exists concerning feminism and women's rights in the Soviet Union — while there are separate treatments of this issue as part of the Sovietology, this knowledge has not been incorporated into the mainstream discourse. The following section takes a more detailed look at this issue.

2.3 Soviet gender order and women's rights

As with the general scholarly position towards the legacy of the Soviet Union, there exists a division among gender studies scholars in their treatment of the gender order in the Soviet Union and the position and status of women there. Generally, this division can be divided along the lines of 1) Repressive state apparatus regulating the sexual, reproductive, and political citizenship of women, often against their will (Zdravomyslova & Temkina, 2004; Lapidus, 1977; Rotkirch, 2000; Massel, 1974, Northrop, 2004; Tlostanova, 2012, Tschurko, 2016); and 2) Authoritarian state meddling was intertwined with the local aspirations of men and women, but faced societal resistance (Kamp, 2006; Bagdasarova, 2016; Moldosheva, 2015; Tokhtakhodzhaeva, 2008; Peshkova, 2020).

Within the first camp there is general agreement about the strict authoritarian state policy of the USSR since 1917 as being aimed at sexual differentiation of citizens, where the creation of the "new" Soviet gender (and "new Soviet men and women") was undertaken within the framework of engaging women in societal production and political life, state regulation of family affairs, and official discourses on "new Soviet" femininity and masculinity (Zdravomyslova & Temkina, 2004). Within this line of thinking the periodization of the Soviet gender order can be traced on the basis of the party-state politics relating to sexuality and reproductive rights of the Soviet men and women (Kon, 1997; Lapidus, 1977; Rotkirch, 2000) and roughly divided into three major periods.

The first stage encompassing 1918-1930 is identified as the period of the Bolshevik experimenting in the sphere of sexuality and family relations, as well as the period of *jenotdely* ("women's departments"), resulting in de-familisation and political mobilization of women. This is the period when the newly established Soviet Union was promoting establishment of nurseries and kindergartens, which were available to all women and men, as a way of lifting the burden of nurturing from families to the whole society. During this time the role of bourgeois family was deconstructed, instead calling for creation of the new gender order where men and women were foremostly dedicated to the Soviet ideals, free to create temporary sexual partnerships as needed:

> "In the Soviet period, the old family collapses, and this is a natural process. A new family appears, where not a consanguinity, but a community of work, a unity of interests, aspirations and tasks will bind people, will educate true brothers in spirit." (Kollontai, 1920, p.10).

In Central Asia this period can be mostly represented through the *hujum* campaign — an attack on the widely practiced social customs of women's veiling, seclusion, child marriage, bride price, bride abduction (Suyarkulova, 2016) towards the goal of social emancipation of women and their joining of the workforce. Massel (1974) joins the first camp with his idea of women as the surrogate proletariat in Central Asia, who were selected by the Bolsheviks as their main support and campaigning base in absence of an actual proletariat class in the region. Douglas Northrop (2004) furthers complicates this argument with an analysis on whether Soviet Union was a colonial empire (more on this in Chapter 4), concluding that it was a hybrid of colonial and modernizing state, which with its repressive state policies towards the local traditions in Central Asia, specifically the traditional gender order, has cemented their role as national symbols through the struggle for their preservation.

This reading of the Soviet gender regime in Central Asia in the 1918-1930s is challenged by Kamp (2006), who considers that while Soviet state policies in the region did have colonial characteristics the nature of the reforms were welcomed by the local population. She refers to the movement of jadidism in the region, which had already been gaining traction with their pull towards Westernization and liberalization. Marfua Tokhtakhodzhaeva (2008) supports this view in her historical overview of the position of women in Uzbekistan, noting that while *hujum* took a lot of lives and the Soviets' actions in the region often resulted in violent rejection, there was a powerful grassroots movement of women (and slightly less of men), who ardently gave their lives away for the emancipated future of women. Analysis of communication of *jenotdely* workers in Kyrgyzstan by Anara Moldosheva (2016) shows similar passion of women, even in the face of violent persecution on the part of their countrymen.

The overall liberatory politics of the Soviet Union towards the "women's question" came to a halt and reversed in the second stage, which lasted between 1930s and till mid-1950s, and conceptualized as a totalitarian cementing of the 'women as a working mother' model, which allowed their economic mobilization. While in the previous period there was a widespread practice of temporary marriages and easy divorces, free love, sexual hygiene, and state-supported abortions, which were openly discussed in women's magazines such as *Rabotnica*, *Kommunistka*, *Krestyanka* (Zdravomyslova & Temkina, 2004), in the next period the same women's magazines strongly condemned these values, calling for public virtue (Rotkirch, 2000). In 1936, abortions were prohibited throughout the Soviet Union by the Party decree, while in 1944 civil partnerships were outlawed and the procedure for divorces was

complicated. This is the period where women's reproductive function was of paramount importance to the state, which was promoting the image of the Soviet mother. At the same time, women were encouraged to enter previously male-only professions and to work nightshifts. Dallin (1977) describes the attitude of the Soviet state to women in this period as a mix between that as an engine and a cow — on the one hand she was supposed to work at the plants and factories equal to men in burden, but on the other she was encouraged to give birth as much as possible. This period sees the establishment of a discourse of the Soviet super-woman, who bears the double load as a Soviet worker and as a Soviet mother.

In Central Asia this change of discourse was positively accepted by both the society and political establishment, which regardless of the emancipatory politics of the previous decade remained thoroughly family and tradition-oriented (Kandiyoti, 2007). Corcoran-Nantes (2005) notes that even among the highest party functionaries the practices of bride price, marriages with underage girls, violence towards women remained accepted and recognized. So, the return to the traditional family structures and societal values was a welcome development. The discourse on the working mother produced a phenomenon of "mother hero" — mothers who had more than five children and were working — which was rewarded by the state with medals and additional allowances. At the same time, the double load on women was resented by many, who considered the pre-Soviet gender order to have been far more just and convenient for women (Kandiyoti, 2007).

The third period differentiating the Soviet state gender order encompasses years between 1955 and end of 1980s, and starts with the re-legalized medical abortions, indicating liberalization of the state reproductive politics (Zdravomyslova & Temkina, 2004). There is a more critical discourse on the roles of men and women in light of the developing demographic crisis, which was caused by the increased amount of abortions. Considered to be women's reproductive insubordination to the call of the state to produce more workforce these abortions were carried out with the least amount of painkillers, as a means of punishment. However, women used abortions not as a result of their immoral behavior, but rather because of the lack of state infrastructure that could support women and children (Lapidus, 1977). Recognizing this the Soviet state encouraged further widening of maternal welfare and support system throughout the union, at the same time promoting and naturalizing the image of women as mothers first (Zdravomyslova & Temkina, 2004).

This period in Central Asia is characterized by a lack of any specific attention to women's issues, which were proclaimed to have been dealt with. Any publications on the issue

are glorified re-visitations of the "Woman of the East" campaign of the 1918-1930s with focus on *hujum* and individual choices of women (Shchurko, 2016). At the same time from the 1960s there was an increased focus on inter-ethnic marriages, which were promoted as a way of juxtaposing the Soviet family politics as post-colonial in comparison with the Western practices of segregation and racism (Edgar, 2007). However, this politics also followed the logic of developing the 'backward' cultures by introducing Russian modernity into the family:

> "There was a strongly Russo-centric element to the modernity Soviet ethnographers had in mind, since mixed families were more likely to use the Russian language at home and adopt an 'all-Soviet' lifestyle that featured Russian-style home furnishings and foods. A prominent Soviet ethnographer noted with satisfaction in 1962 that domestic life in mixed Kyrgyz – Russian families showed a strong Russian influence, especially among the urban intelligentsia and the proletariat. This was because 'the Russian woman usually exerts a strong cultural influence on the family's entire domestic life'." (Edgar, 2007, p.589)

As can be gleaned from this overview, there were quite a few historical treatments of the issue of women's rights in the Soviet Union, however majority of them were made from the point of view of area studies, as part of analyzing the role of the state apparatus in constructing the Soviet gender order. There is very little incorporation or theorization of the experiences of Soviet women on a level comparable to that of Western women, which is regrettable considering how Soviet women's rights were, in many ways, far more advanced. For example, in the 1960s when Betty Friedan was writing about the unacceptability of the role of a housewife for many women and the need for equal opportunities for men and women in paid work and political participation, women in the Soviet Union had entered the workforce on equal footing with men already in the 1930s-1950s, while universal education, contraception and abortion were available to women even earlier. Included only in the overviews of Marxist feminists like Angela Davis, Clara Fraser or Chizuko Ueno, the Soviet women's experience remained a largely unengaged area within the main international feminist discourse.

Furthermore, following the fall of the Soviet Union, the anti-Soviet rhetoric prevalent within the Western discursive field entered the former socialist republics, flooding them with the dominant feminist theories and ideologies of Euro-American origin. The following section looks at this process in more detail.

2.4 Post-Soviet feminisms and gender studies

In the 1990s a monumental shift in the discursive situation in all of the former Soviet republics took place over the course of the decade. Owing to the country's previously dominant

position in terms of cultural and knowledge production, Russian theoretical discourse continued dominating that of its former subordinates, while itself in a state of assimilation, perception, absorption, translation, "digestion" of many social theories of the most diverse origin (Macaulay, 2010). This discursive omnivory compensated for the discursive deficit of the Soviet period, when many schools of thought that created the basis for critical theory were marginalized (Zdravomyslova & Temkina, 2000a).

The 1990s and early 2000s in Russia and the wider post-Soviet area are characterised by the focus on translation of Western feminist writing. Zdravomyslova and Temkina (2000) published a textbook of translations of classical feminist texts, which included the works of Dorothy Smith, Rosie Braidotti, Nancy Chodorow, Jean Bethke Elshtain, Gayle Rubin and others. Translations of classic feminist texts were published in collections prepared by gender centers: “Anthology of Gender Theory” (Gapova & Usmanova, 2000), “Gender Collection - Foreign Classics” published by ROSSPEN (2005-2006), reading book on the course “Fundamentals of Gender Studies” (Voronina, 2000), “Introduction to gender studies. Part 2” (Zherebkina, 2001). Separate translated texts were also published that are key for feminist thought, such as the works of Simone de Beauvoir (2009) and Betty Friedan (1963).

Reflection on translations shows that the logic of the development of feminist theory takes on a special meaning when feminist texts are transferred to a post-Soviet discourse. “Transferable feminism” is, to a large extent, divorced from its critical foundations. Separation from the ontological base gives rise to rejection of the feminist discourse by the public and conceptual difficulties, including difficulties in translating the type of texts whose thesaurus has not yet been formed (Zdravomyslova & Temkina, 2012). In the 1990s the possibilities of feminist geography to take its place in the self-regulating chaos of modern post-Soviet discursiveness were quite obvious (Zherebkina, 2001). However, it turned out to be much more difficult to go beyond the community of gender researchers and have a significant impact on the rethinking of the basic concepts of social thought, i.e., to become an equal agent in the symbolic struggle of various directions.

In this regard it is important to also look at the connection of gender studies in the post-Soviet with the processes of class formation that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. Gapova (2009) describes the class context of feminist knowledge reproduction in the post-Soviet as having been divided into purely theoretical feminism and non-feminist or often anti-feminist on-the-ground groups that desired acceptance of males in power and entrance into decision-making. Gapova describes how gender (along with other categories, like human

rights, for example) had become an ideological cover for the ongoing economic process, where shunning the Marxist tradition of oppressed classes, gender was used as the new concept for explaining social stratification. While in the "old tradition" social justice and gender equality could be achieved by doing away with class divisions and access to labor for everyone, with provision of childcare and welfare services by the command economy of the state, in the post-communist societies social justice could be achieved through recognition and upholding of women's political rights, their autonomy, independent subjectivity, right to their own bodies and sexuality. As liberal feminist of the late 90s Maria Arbatova wrote, defending women's autonomy: "women's rights exist separately from children's rights" (2003, p.44). The new wording of the women's issue reflected a different social structure. Rights, autonomy and independence are part of the liberal discourse and are associated with property, market and capitalism, which give rise to independent entities, but only among those who are economically successful.

The women's movement, formed with the support of international organizations in the form of staff on salaries, concentrated around new topics that could not be raised in Soviet science, because they contradicted the idea that gender inequality disappears along with classes — violence against women, including sexual, trafficking, harassment, etc. This allowed the introduction of a liberal ideology with its new topics of demanding rights, reforms, decrees, and to follow the "international conventions", but at the same time to escape from the key "issue of property" and to "separate" women and men to some extent by turning them into warring parties.

As a result "feminism" as an ideology in the post-Soviet space has become the property of elites who have preached the market and economic liberalism, as well as successful women who are interested in promotion to the top — in other words, women's rights exist separately from children's rights for those who can hire a nanny. This has led to establishment of feminist rhetoric as something separate from the struggles of women, who were most affected by post-communist differentiation (Gapova, 2006): those living in the provinces, employed in the public sphere and not able to "start a joint business with the Italians". Gapova (2009) further develops this argument by claiming that 'gender' as a concept and a new word was introduced into the public discourse by the "academic" women of capital cities of the former USSR, who were united in an elitist informal club of intelligentsia with access to knowledge that was not widely available to the public.

Related to the issue of post-Soviet feminism and gender studies being separated from the struggles of women on the ground was that of their inherent marriage to capitalism. In other words what Zherebkina (2017) calls the "desire of capitalism", which is the foundational connection between post-Soviet gender studies and their contracting by the *perestroika* states and international organisations with liberal agenda that were funding this work both directly and via these new states. Motivated by the spectral promise of graduating from the "peripheries" and joining the Wallersteinian "core" countries through the shock therapy of economic reforms of the early 90s, majority of the post-Soviet states rushed to include gender equality in the national development programs. They were aided in this by the newly allowed offices of international organisations, both governmental and non-governmental, like USAID or the UN, which ordered one after the other researches on gendered aspects of development - from access to water to economic representation to political rights. That helped establish gender studies in the former USSR as a discipline that studies the order of the given situation, and more specifically, as a study of gender relations in various areas of social reality. It was assumed that if we know how the gender orders are structured / constructed, then we would be able to change them towards gender equality. However, as the number of such researches continued growing exponentially (Gapova, 2009; Shakirova, 2008), the quantity did not transform into quality (Simpson, 2006; Johnson, 2009) — resulting in a lack of gender studies research that has political potential aimed at changing the gender order of the current situation, or as Zherebkina puts it (2017): "at best, we have empirical studies of various gender issues."

Yet, as the aforementioned class connotations of feminist knowledge reproduction and gender studies do have a relevance in the non-European countries of the former USSR, specifically Central Asia, another distinct issue of the post-Soviet feminist discourse is the continuation of the ethnic "core-periphery" relations established during the Soviet Union in the post-collapse period. This discourse followed the East European states in their "unspoken insistence on their whiteness" (Imre, 2005, p.82), being part of Europe that was torn apart from it by the bolsheviks — although more pronounced in the public discourse of the Baltic states (Kelertas, 2006), nevertheless the impetus for 'europeanization' could be observed in Ukraine, where the 2013-2014 revolution was exactly a result of the struggle for association with Europe as well as in Russia before the conservative turn (Husakouskaya, 2019). The societal discourse of the early 90s-00s that was shared by feminists as well followed the 'catching up with the West' logic, where the East European states were to 'return to Europe' through democratic reforms (Suchland, 2011), hesitant to recognize experiential closeness to other colonized

subjects (Kelertas, 2006). This effectively meant that East European (Russian, Ukrainian, Belorussian, Baltic) feminists "ignored the colonial and racialized aspects of feminist struggles and thinking in other regions, seeing them as a 'foreign' experience", irrelevant to their own (Tlostanova, Thapar-Bjorkert, Koobak, 2019).

This is exemplified by the often noted lack of solidarity on the part of East European feminists with the struggles of Central Asian feminists, whereas the Central Asian feminists, especially those following tenets of radical feminism, are always aware and in tune with political processes in Russia (although less so when it comes to Ukraine, and even lesser in Belarus). Only in 2020 in the aftermath of the violently dispersed 8th of March protest organized by the 8/365 feminist movement in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, did East European feminists decide to express their solidarity (Cernat, 2020). Although some post-Soviet feminists could be said as having recognized the importance of race and ethnicity in their current analysis, this understanding is still asymmetrical, as it focuses on their own racialization by the Global North/West, and not on how they racialize the non-European post-Soviet (Tlostanova, Thapar-Bjorkert, Koobak, 2019). There is no reflection on the continued entanglement of East European states, especially Russia, with Central Asian states, which are economically and politically forced to remain in its orbit, represented practically in the attitude to Central Asian labor migrants, 'gastarbaiters', in major Russian cities. As opposed to being incorporated in the agenda of post-Soviet feminists as one of the oppressed groups, labor migrants are seen by the majority public discourse as pestilence — a view that is not challenged by post-socialist feminists, who instead are joining their European counterparts in playing the "white savior" game (Eckford, 2018).

The next section looks at the lack of critical reflection on the cultural imperialist nature of global feminist theory, as well as the experience of its 'translation' in the post-Soviet space.

2.5 The colonial question in feminism and gender studies

At different stages of the post-Soviet transition, the authors of studies on the women's movement in Central and Eastern Europe discussed the theme "Why am I not a feminist?" (Gapova & Usmanova, 2000) and addressed the issue of the unidirectional transfer of feminist practices and discourses from West to East in the context of its discussion. It was in this "translation" that they saw the reason that post-Soviet feminists are forced to speak the language of Western feminism, which does not always accurately reflect and assess the status

of women in post-communist societies (Havelkova, 1997). In the process of knowledge transfer, the “West” often acts as the norm, and the “East” as a deviation from it, which leads to the rejection by the “eastern” feminists of the “inadequate” “western” models (Lang in Scott, Kaplat and Keates, 1997). A variant of such criticism is proposed, for example, by researcher Madina Tlostanova, who views feminism in Central Asia as a double colonization — Soviet and American — and calls for a return to “sources" (Tlostanova, 2010). Another, more abstract version of the same critical discourse addresses the issue of the universality of feminist philosophy, to the extent that the views formulated in the specific historical context of second wave feminism and criticism of liberalism (Pateman, 1988) are applicable to the analysis of the post-Soviet situation. These arguments, of course, are associated with a common criticism of the universality of the modern European subject for feminism and postcolonial studies. Developing this approach, Nanette Funk (2004) argues that in post-communist Eastern Europe, feminism must manifest itself in its original forms, since liberalism, which is largely criticized for the feminist project, also differed from the “western” one in this region.

Critical researchers also dispute the effectiveness of “commissioned feminism” (Ghodsee, 2004) and point out the role that Western donors and international NGOs played in shaping such feminism in post-Soviet states. The main function of women's NGOs in the region is to provide psychological and economic assistance primarily to members of their organization, which is essentially an institutionalized mechanism for the implementation of the female function of care and guardianship in the public sphere (Helms, 2003; Hemment, 2004). The financial dependence of women's NGOs on Western donors is also recognized as problematic, which may ultimately lead to the fact that donors will be able to determine the political and research agenda of these groups. Moreover, the predominant orientation of women's groups in the fight against violence and the provision of social services, especially in those areas in which the state previously dominated, testifies to the spread of so-called “cultural feminism” (Ghodsee, 2004), the purpose of which is not to change the status quo, but to adapt to it.

The emergence of this specific version of feminism is seen as consistent with the spirit of neoliberal capitalism and the interests of international development agencies such as the IMF and the World Bank (Ghodsee, 2004). Donor policy contributes to the depoliticization of female activism and the reduction of civil society to a limited number of professional organizations (Lang, 1997), as well as the emergence of pragmatic groups that compete among themselves and distribute resources within a narrow circle of “chosen ones” (Sperling, 1999).

The latter usually include women with a university degree, who have access to Western organizations due to their knowledge of English, as well as previous experience with foreigners.

The essence of all this criticism, which, as is easily seen, often coincides with the arguments of representatives of government structures of post-Soviet states against NGOs that support Western grants can be presented in a very simplified form as follows. The policy of Western donors to modernize / democratize the former communist bloc is unlawful, since it accepts Western (most often American) experience as a universal reference point and transfers it without taking local features into account on the post-Soviet soil. At the same time, Western donors take the position of civilizational superiority, which puts the countries of the former USSR in the position of the object of development discourse. Within the framework of this model, the appearance of feminism (or rather, its individual varieties) is considered as a manifestation of cultural imperialism.

The role played by women in the biological and cultural reproduction of the nation is even more significant in the context of the confrontation between the colonial authorities and national elites (or between global / local formations). The figure of a colonized woman often acts as a discursive field in which interests clash and a division of power and influence is carried out between the colonialists and the colonized. As Mani (1998) shows on the example of sati in colonial India, the practice of widows joining their husbands in funeral fire was used as a discursive field by the British to form the 'otherness' of the East and superiority of the Western system of knowledge. These discussions totally ignored the real suffering of widows, as well as material factors that forced their families to appeal to this practice. The notorious *hujum* in Central Asia is the subject of such heated debate, not least because of the metonymic relationship between woman and nation. What looks like "patriarchal" resistance to the liberation of women can also be seen as resistance to colonial influence and forced modernization policies by the colonial authorities.

The degree of civilization / otherness of the colonized other was often determined by the degree of freedom of its women. The idea that a woman in a burqa is less free than a European woman serves as a rationale for colonial intervention and a "civilizational" mission aimed at forcibly removing the burqa and emancipating women. At a deeper level, from the point of view of Meyda Egenoglu (1998), a woman in a burqa is a key metonymic figure, representing a different East, closely woven into the processes of constructing colonial identities. Starting from the "Orientalism" by Edward Said, Egenoglu claims that the desire of

the colonial authorities to remove the burqa from the eastern women is part of the ideology of the epistemological project of the Enlightenment, which is characterized by the desire to remove the veil, to eliminate everything that interferes with gaze and surveillance. On the other hand, this desire is also associated with the "threat" posed by the identity of the colonized figure of an unknowable, hiding woman (and, consequently, of the East as such). One of the characteristics of a universal western subject is its ability to see and observe without being seen (and the characteristic of an object is its inability to "return" its gaze). In the opposition "the colonial subject is a woman of the East," this characteristic of the subject is threatened, since the object is not only inaccessible to the gaze, it also has the ability to "return" the gaze, that is, turn the western subject into an object. Given this threat to the formation of a stable identity, one can understand why the emancipation of women of the East plays such a key role in the project of colonization. Seen from this lens there is a great temptation to appreciate the *hujum* in Central Asia, as well as modern projects for the formation of the women's movement, as the desire to control the gender order. Similarly, to this process attempts are being made to abandon the "Western" model of emancipation and find elements of "feminism" in the national tradition in relation to Muslim societies elsewhere (Ahmed, 1982; Yegenoglu, 2002).

This understanding is also possible because a woman plays an important role in national projects, since it is with her that the possibility of preserving the "national" is connected. Thus, Partha Chatterjee (1993) claims that the anti-colonial project was in many respects dual, based on a radical separation of the private sphere and the public sphere. If in the public sphere, the colonial elites sought to reproduce the logic of the colonialist (in economics, technology and the management system), the private sphere was considered as a depository of the national essence, as what distinguishes, say, India with its developed spirituality from Britain (and the West as a whole) with its depressing morality. The localization of women in the private sphere and their close connection with the biological and cultural reproduction of the nation turns them into the guardians of the "national" — that is why attempts to emancipate women from the colonialists were often seen as an attempt on the very existence of the nation. Accordingly, resistance to the *hujum* in Soviet Central Asia and criticism of the activities of foundations sponsoring women's organizations today can be regarded as resistance to the threat of national destruction. But the converse is also true: labeling "imperial" and "colonial" on certain practices of power relations between national and state entities is closely related to the struggle for the right to control gender order. Women themselves are excluded from the race for sovereignty (Mani, 1998; Loomba, 2003; Spivak, 1987).

Moreover, as Laura Nader notes, simplified images of the Other are used by both "Western" and "Eastern" nations to justify the existing gender order: Western — by contrasting an oppressed woman with a harem of "free" Western woman, which limits the analysis of gender inequality in the West; Eastern — by contrasting the immoral woman of the West, forced to work and sacrifice her family with the highly spiritual woman of the East, free from the need to earn money and therefore able to devote herself to the family. Orientalism and occidentalism, however, are not representational systems endowed with equal power: in comparison with the corpus of orientalist texts the corpus of texts on analyzing and deconstructing the "Eastern" views of the West is far smaller, less accessible, and not connected with powerful structures of influence. As a result of this, those women whose environment seeks to incorporate "Western" perceptions of the female problem are influenced by two systems of gender inequality: traditional and commodified Western (Nader, 1989).

Furthermore, in between these two powerfully represented figures of women of the "West" and women of the "East" are the women of the Soviet Union, who incorporated characteristics of both, but also starkly differed, often along the ethnic lines. While all women, regardless of their Soviet ethnic identity, be they from the Caucasus, Central Asia, or the Slavic regions of the country, were engaged in industrial production, and as such were employed on an equal footing with men, the Soviet political and cultural discourse still singled out the country's own "women of the East" (Shchurko, 2016). The "Soviet East" included present-day: Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkar Republic, Adygey Republic, Karachaevo-Cherkess Republic, Chechen Republic, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Bashkortostan, Tatarstan, Kalmyk Republic, Buryat and Yakut Republics. The women of these states and countries were seen as a monolithic figure, who struggled with the same kinds of oppressions, and who needed emancipation. However, in difference with the colonial practices of European countries in the 16-19th centuries, this emancipation was to aid in creation of the 'new woman', the Soviet woman-worker, who would jointly with men build the bright communist future (Gradskova, 2011). In contrast to the "Soviet Eastern" women there were the "European" women of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and the satellite countries, who were tasked with the 'civilizational' mission as part of the *jenotdely* to emancipate the women of the "Soviet East" (Abidova, 1961). At the same time the problems of women that were categorized as "European" were considered as lesser compared to those that women of the "East" faced (Tatybekova, 1975). So, on the one hand, the Soviet discourse towards the "Eastern" republics did often resemble that of the colonial Europe, but on the other

— differed immensely, as it included all women in the workforce equally with men and each other, while also encouraging reproductive obedience in the name of the Soviet Union.

Precisely because women are so closely associated with the cultural and biological reproduction of the nation, multicultural political strategies that favor group rights of a cultural community over the rights of individuals can result in a deterioration of the status of women. What looks like a dominant state's refusal to assimilate the Other and claims to universality, as a result, turns out to be a transfer of authority to regulate the gender order to national communities. In fact, postcolonial criticism of the claims of Western rationality on universality turns into a problem for feminism. The refusal to establish a hierarchy between different gender orders (there is no reason to say that the Western patriarchy is better than the Eastern or the Soviet one) and the recognition of the local nature of subordination of women means surrendering positions without a fight to local national elites and tacit agreement that such infamous practices as clitoridectomy or Chinese foot bandaging is no more depressing than Western fashion or the practice of excluding women from equal participation in public life (Moller Okin, 1999). Feminism turns out to be just a variant of imperial politics (since outwardly efforts to emancipate women cannot be evaluated in isolation from the policy of colonization), because it unifies the stratification systems within the "West" and emphasizes the differences between the "West" and the "East", while simultaneously excluding entirely the experience of the "Soviet".

The starting point of this section was the problematization of the approach in which the development of non-Western feminism is interpreted as a consequence of colonization. It can be argued that those who insist on the absence of non-Western "feminism", its inability to survive without "western" recharge, find themselves embroiled in a debate about the degree of freedom of a woman in a particular community and who is entitled to regulate this freedom. Considering feminism as exclusively Western (or in the variant of the beginning of the 20th century as applied to Central Asia — the Soviet one) phenomenon, one denies the possibility of external intervention in regulating the position of "our" women. At the same time, insisting on the national nature of our "women's issue", on its dissimilarity with Western models, one finds oneself woven into the rhetoric of consolidating a national project with its logic of exclusivity. The model of a nation state, based on the modernist logic of "one nation, one territory, one language," not only justifies xenophobia in relation to external interventions, but also constructs multiple internal "others" that are different in language and ethnicity, whose feminist project may also require the logic of separatism (Chatterjee, 1993). Both of these

alternatives operate in terms of tough binary oppositions “I - Other”, “empire - colony”, “West - East”, at times changing priorities, hierarchical disposition of the members of these pairs, but not challenging the opposition as such.

Summary

The history of feminist theory and activism as globally understood today encompasses three ‘waves’, each with a more progressive agenda, which is also critical of the shortcomings of the previous one. The first wave focused on the right to vote and right to education for women, spearheaded by the suffragette movement of the mid-19th century in Europe and the USA. The second wave spanning three decades between 1960s and 1990s focused on fighting gender-based discrimination of women in social and economic domains, developing concepts of patriarchy, oppression, androcentrism, as well as engendering radical, liberal, Marxist, and psychoanalytical feminisms, among others. The third wave feminism from the late 1980s and to present days (although there is debate on whether the 2000s can be considered as the age of post-feminism, or the fourth wave) brought to the table the concept of intersectionality, transnationality, as well as gender deconstruction.

Around this time feminists of color and postcolonial researchers formulate their theses about the illegitimate dominance of the Western model of feminism, its ideas about gender differences and the political agenda of the women's movement. While Euro-American feminists extend the applicability of their model to women of the rest of the world, there is rejection of this universalizing approach, as well as resentment on the part of non-western feminists as to the selective blindness of the international women’s rights discourse. This includes the overlooking of the Soviet women’s experience from feminist theoretization, as well as focus on translation of the Western models of feminism to the post-Soviet landscapes.

Chapter 3. Theoretical framework

Following the literature review in the previous chapter it is clear that the relational dynamics between the various global and regional discourses of feminism demand a theoretical framework that would allow further analysis of the established power relations. Critical Theory can be considered as foundational for this objective as the school of thought that has engendered the different strands pertinent to the discussion: feminist theory, Foucauldian theories of knowledge and biopower, and postcolonial and decolonial theories, which were influenced by both the Foucauldian analysis and development theories in explaining the discursive formation of colonialism through political, epistemological and economic hegemony. These theories are predicated on the Critical Theory's dissection and analysis of Enlightenment as that singly identifiable point in the history of European thought that binds together the colonization of the non-European lands, production of truths for the sake of disciplinary power, as well as cultural imperialism of Euro-American feminism in the non-Western contexts.

As such this chapter provides an overview of Enlightenment from a Critical Theory point of view, before moving into coloniality and its analysis by postcolonial and decolonial schools, which is complemented by an overview of Soviet postcolonial studies and writings. This is followed by an overview of feminist concepts that are presented as universally applicable to the position of women around the globe. The chapter concludes with an overview of main concepts from the previously discussed theories that are used in the analysis of narratives of respondents.

3.1 Enlightenment ideals at the root of coloniality

Spanning the period between roughly the sixteenth century through the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment began with the scientific revolution, which had overturned not only the physical preconceptions of the world, but also rules and principles of philosophical inquiry (Bristow 2010). It dispelled the myths that have governed the lives of people in the pre-Enlightenment era by explaining the previously unexplainable (and as such attributable to supernatural forces) phenomena with the ease of mathematical and physical formulae. Enlightenment has destroyed the edifice of old beliefs, superstitions, traditions, miracles, things unknowable – and has substituted it with an edifice of Reason. Everything could be explained, if sufficient and *reason*able effort was made in order to understand. If so, then the peripeteia of human life, insecurities and fears, could be dissected, analyzed and, as a consequence –

eliminated. In its culmination – Enlightenment was the belief that human life could be improved by eliminating such obstacles.

The scientific positivism that Enlightenment gave birth to with its principle of *reason* spread further into nearly every sphere of human life. Bristow (2010) in his overview of Enlightenment discusses the influence of Enlightenment in three categories – sciences, politics, and aesthetics, which roughly correspond to "the True", "the Good" and "the Beautiful". Of these three the first two are of interest.

According to this division, the True has to do with the physical and metaphysical reality around us, which is ordered, as opposed to chaotic, and ruled by objective mathematic-dynamical laws. Enlightenment postulated that these laws could be inferred through scientific observation based on rationalism, empiricism and skepticism – three inspirations to Enlightenment popularized by its founding figures – Rene Descartes, Francis Bacon, David Hume to name but a few. These postulates have contributed to the rapid progress of sciences in general, which have, in their turn, influenced the sometimes-radical transformations in the sociopolitical and aesthetic areas of life itself.

In the realm of the Good — Enlightenment reset standards for the political, ethical and religious issues. Whereas pre-Enlightenment politics and ethics, and especially religion were shrouded in "obscurities" such as superstition, myths and the "worst" of them — tradition, Enlightenment sought to rid human life of such anachronisms, and initiated the "re-making [of] the social/political world, in accord with the true models we allegedly find in our reason" (Bristow 2010). Enlightenment originated the idea that it was the consent of the governed that gave authority to figures in power through a social contract by surrendering some of their liberties and natural rights in exchange for security and order. Development of the social contract theory by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau became one of the reasons for the rapid succession of the English Revolution, the American Revolution and the French Revolutions, with the last becoming a culmination and a decline of Enlightenment at the same time (Bristow 2010).

The locus of Enlightenment thoughts and beliefs on the interpenetration of nature and reason – reason is natural and nature is reasonable – which became the basis for the exclusionist belief that such reason and nature are superior to others came under the attack of critics of Enlightenment, foremost among them Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. The two have undertaken an unfinished effort on critiquing the tradition of Enlightenment thinking as futile

and its efforts to improve human condition – a stillbirth (1947) after reason has become unreasonable.

In their famous *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1982) Horkheimer and Adorno undertake a critique of modernity, where they identify its direct link to the ideals of Enlightenment. Initially thought to liberate people from fear, insecurity, disease of the dark ages through progress of modern science, belief in human reason and capacities, industry and revolutionary new approaches in medicines, Enlightenment instead has created a society where extermination of others can become one of the types of routine, a mere bureaucratic work. What has started protruding through the veil of triumph of Enlightenment during the French Revolution, which then devolved into a reign of terror after the revolutionaries faced the necessity of controlling and governing people – became frighteningly apparent after the World War II with the atrocities of the Holocaust and Nazism. Furthermore, Adorno and Horkheimer argued that "what men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order to wholly dominate it and other men. This is the only aim" (Kellner, 1989, pp. 87-88). The Age of Reason proclaimed with Enlightenment progressively saw only a certain kind of reason — European — as the singly recognized, resulting in truth being associated with certain forms of science, logic, and rationality, and them being privileged over other forms that belong to epistemologies of other, non-European cultures. This is closely related to the rise of liberalism, ethnocentric and imperialistic in the times of colonial conquests of the major European powers.

John Stuart Mill, one of the founding fathers of modern European liberalism, is more often seen as a political philosopher, who promoted ideas of utilitarianism and individual liberty, less so a defender of British imperialism, and incomparably less so a political thinker, who espoused ideas of elitism and superiority of one nation over another. The idea of individual liberties developed by Mill (1859) went even further than those of Hobbes and Locke and popularized the concept of freedoms such as:

- freedom to think and to feel as one wishes, freedom of opinion, freedom of speech;
- freedom to pursue tastes and interests as one wishes, regardless of how immoral they may seem to others, as long as they do not harm anyone in the process;
- freedom to unite into groups, or freedom of assembly as we know it today.

However, although it was a general consensus that everyone had such rights, there were some exclusions to them, especially pronounced in Mill's later writings. Bhikhu Parekh (1994) argues, for example, that in the 19th century Mill became the most influential inspirer for a new turn that liberalism took and has been following since — that of ethnocentrism, dismissing

non-liberal ways of life and ideas as barbarian and in need of a liberal enlightenment (in other words — civilizing), which took a form of liberal missionary work in the least and that of liberal imperialism in its most. The following excerpt from Mill's *On Liberty* (1859) illustrates the point perfectly:

> "It is, perhaps, hardly necessary to say that this doctrine [*liberty*] is meant to apply only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties. […] Those who are still in a state to require being taken care of by others must be protected against their own actions as well as against external injury. For the same reason we may leave out of consideration those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage. […] Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement and the means justified by actually effecting that end. Liberty, as a principle, has no application to any state of things anterior to the time when mankind have become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion." (p.69)

Although Mill does use notions such as "civilized" and "barbarous" — it is important to note here that the distinctions he makes between them are not based on political, racial or economic characteristics. In other words, it is not Mill's intention to make value judgments on nations in determining, which are good or bad — such as those present in the ideology of Nazi Germany, for example, where one group of nations was proclaimed superior to all others by racial difference. Instead, Mill's is a moral classification, which is tightly connected to his notion of progress. In describing his classification Mill lends us his philosophy of history — his view of history, which is backed up by historical examples (Jahn, 2005). In his "Considerations on Representative Government" (Mill, 1998). Mill describes what in his opinion constitutes a national character of a non-civilized nation, from which it was possible to infer his ideal of a civilized nation:

Civilized nations	*Non-civilized nations (savage, slave, barbarous)*
- expansive - active - educated - wary - rational - open-minded and accepting of changes	- focused on locality, tribalistic - passive - ignorant, lack mental cultivation - gullible - too passionate - unable to give up old habits

It may be extrapolated here that what Mill considers to be the right thing to do for the civilized liberal nations of the West is to assume the role of a benevolent dictator. Because barbarians will not be able to draw correct conclusions from the right to make bad choices (the second type of freedoms in Mill's writings), they would need to be taught how to draw such conclusions first before they would be allowed the same independence and freedom as the

nations that have "come of age". And if the barbarous nations to be enlightened had any objections to their prospect of being enlightened, they would only be doing so for their lack of understanding of what is "objectively" good for them, which their advanced benefactors do know. In which case it is also morally justified that the advanced counterparts must assume the roles of benevolent despots, as despotism in this case is the only form of governance that may be allowed to such individuals/nations, "provided the end be their improvement and the means justified by actually effecting that end"(Mill, 1859, p.69).

It is more than certain that division of people and groups of people into "Us" and "Them" existed always, however, it is during Enlightenment and through writings of such philosophers as John Stuart Mill that this differentiation of people into "Us" and the "Other" became crystallized and has survived until now. The indestructible belief of Enlightenment thinkers in the power of reason, scientific method, positivism and progress — and the immediate material, as well as cultural/spiritual, benefits that were reaped from such beliefs made it hard for anyone to criticize these beliefs. And so Mill, expressing the general sentiment of his generation, described nations that did not uphold the thought and praxis of the civilized nations of the West as barbarous and, as such, inferior to the Western civilization, and most notably — to Great Britain, which he saw as the epitome of Enlightenment ideals.

Mill's moral classification of nations into "civilized" and "barbarian" then allows him to claim that "the only moral laws for the relation between a civilized and a barbarous government are the universal rules of morality between man and man" (Mill, 1874, p.252). This further allows Mill to justify the paternalism that he allows in his theory of liberty on utilitarian grounds — in other words, he argues that all humans deserve liberties that he described in his theory, but if some are denied these liberties based on certain deficiencies (such as immaturity), it is only for a certain period of time, in which it is a moral duty of a more advanced individual (or state) to help eradicate the deficiencies, so the previously denied person may be granted entry into a community of equals, where they all may enjoy freedom, equality and liberty.

3.2 Critical Theory and the pre-conditions for coloniality critique

This conceptualization of liberalism on the basis of Enlightenment is problematized by Michel Foucault in his analysis of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1995), who mentions the Classical Age and modernity starting with 17-18th centuries as the birth of pathologization of those lacking reason — of the "mad". This coincides temporally with the general discussion

of Enlightenment in this dissertation, as both the pathologization of "unreasonableness" and "otherification" of non-Western, "non-civilized" nations seem to have taken place roughly consecutively. It can be contended that the earlier created concept of the barbarian *Other* and the infrastructure of internal and external sociopolitical relations that was established after the conception of the idea of the *Other* made it possible for the power the Foucault analyzes to come to existence. In other words — the system of international relations based on Mill's propositions of dealing with barbarians, as well as the Enlightenment-based Weltanschauung of the liberal-imperialist West became the necessary condition for creation of the disciplinary type of power, which further contributed to the creation and survival of the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being.

In his analysis of power Foucault (Gordon 1980) notes that while the political and legal theorists of the West have focused too much on the figure of the sovereign, they have failed to notice that the nature of power has undergone a fundamental transformation in the past two centuries. Whereas before 19th century it was a monarchical type of power with the figure of the King as the sole sovereign of the state, after the 19th century with the culmination of the Age of Reason and the earlier political transformations that it brought into the Western civilization (the English, French and American revolutions) the previously monarchical power became disciplinary.

Disciplinary power makes use of this overall obsession with the sovereign-based legal system by becoming indispensable to enjoyment and exercise of individual rights encoded in these legal codes that were liberalized in reaction to abuses of sovereign power in the past. In other words, in order to be able to enjoy rights, one must follow certain rules and norms and keep one's self within the general frameworks that everyone else is following. This echoes Weber's view of bureaucracy, which is indispensable to democracy, but in fact can do just as well without having to cover itself up with democracy.

This type of power, Foucault asserts, is more totalitarian than the previous version, as it controlled not just physical commodities of people, but also their time, labor, behavior, bodies and thoughts. As opposed to the monarchical power, the disciplinary power is not personified, although it does have as many faces as there are humans on earth; it cannot be traced down to its center or be analyzed top down. This power is exercised as a net-like organization, where individuals are simultaneously the subjects and objects of power – they are both the subjugator and the subjugated. And as it would be extremely hard to maintain all

of these aspects without having a justifying framework within which it would be legitimized, this power also produces its own “truths”, normative values, and rules of right (Hoy, 1986).

The concept of production of discourses or truths as a necessary condition for survival of the power in domination echoes Antonio Gramsci's life-time study of issues of hegemony. Gramsci (1971) defines hegemony “as a process of domination, whereby one set of ideas subverts or co-opts another”. An example of this would be a process whereby the ruling class would willingly give up its economic power in the face of emancipatory movements among the proletariat and substitute it with “moral leadership”. On a practical level this happens when events or texts are interpreted by those with moral leadership in a way that is favorable to the interests of the ruling group, in a way that perpetuates the class differences in the future.

Similar reflections were happening in Marxist thought, where later generations of Marxists and neo-Marxists took this into account, as they responded to a popular in the 1960s Modernization Theory, which postulated that the better-developed (North-Western) countries carried a moral responsibility to aid the underdeveloped (South-Eastern) countries in their quest for development through modernization (Wallerstein, 2000). A major deficiency of this theory, however, is that it recognizes only one model of development — from traditional to developed societies, and only one model of superiority — Western. Modernization, in this sense, is pure Westernization, which aims at acculturation of the underdeveloped countries to policies, values, and traditions of the developed world.

Contrary to this theory came the Dependency Theory, which aimed at refuting all points of the Modernization Theory (Alexander, 1996). According to adherents of this line of thought, modernization was largely used as a tool for neo-colonialist exploits of the developed countries, which masked their latent intentions behind the manifest aims. Within this framework, the Western world is seen as not willing to let the underdeveloped countries develop fully into their competitors, and thus, instead, willing to deteriorate the capacities of the non-Western world. The tools used for these purposes are more often concealed as economic and cultural aid, which are, indeed, aimed at creating more dependency of underdeveloped countries on their assistance.

Wallerstein’s World-System Theory takes a similar stance to that of Dependency Theory; however, it goes farther and deeper into the issue. In his works dedicated to this theory, Wallerstein proposes four basic categories of various countries of the world (Wallerstein, 2000). The Core countries are the ones benefiting the most from the global expansion of capitalist modes of existing. They are usually the countries, which have developed the notion of capitalism and have historically been intertwined with each other. In opposition to the Core

is the Periphery, which is comprised of the countries lacking in strong central and/or sovereign government and used as cheap raw material exporters for the Core. These countries do not have well-developed industries of their own and depend on the imports from the core. Between the two extremes is the Semi-Periphery, which serves as a Periphery for the Core, and as a Core for the Periphery. Outside of these categories lies the fourth distinct type of countries — the External Areas — characterized by their independence from the rest, isolationism, and concentration on internal markets.

The most significant idea in Wallerstein's theory is the notion of dominance of one type of countries over the others. According to him, there is no logic in core countries promoting equal development in periphery or semi-periphery countries, as it would be more profitable for them if the world preserved the status quo. In order to do so, these core countries employ a number of masked tools, which help them achieve their goals among which cultural imperialism is one of the most important. This line of thinking is taken up by postcolonial, and especially decolonial thinkers, in their analysis of the existing coloniality of being.

3.3 "Coloniality of being": overview of main concepts and authors

The concept of coloniality — the logic under all forms of colonialism since 1500s and its shaping of the history of Eurocentric modernity — is key to this research, as well as distinction of decoloniality from post-coloniality, which is mostly centered on the experience of British India and the Middle East as they were colonized and disrupted by the British and French Empires in the 18th century. Decoloniality, on the other hand, is a concept that highlights the dual nature of modernity and coloniality, where coloniality is seen as the other, darker side of the modernity coin. Without coloniality there would not have been modernity as we recognize it today, hence in decoloniality the chronology starts not with the British Empire's move east and southwards, but with the 1500s and the first colonizing advances of the European powers of that time (Bhambra, 2014).

The decolonial option recently has been gaining traction as the most suitable to analyzing the experiences of the Soviet and Russian "borderlands" (Tlostanova, 2010; Shchurko, 2016; Kravtsova, 2020), although some others still ponder whether the "post" in "post-Soviet" and in "post-colonial" are the same (Pavlyshin, 1992; Moore, 2001; Chernetsky, 2007; Kovacevic, 2008). This research finds such divisions problematic, especially in relation to the analysis of the Soviet in terms of coloniality, as the various regions of the former union could be considered as having experienced vastly different state interventions. While the

Western borders encompassing the Baltic countries are analyzed as having been expanded into with an anglophile model, appropriating an already existing German elite, the expansion into the Eastern borders was more reminiscent of the Spanish model with its civilizing mission and trade interests (Condee in Spivak, Condee, Ram, Chernetsky, 2006). Another line of differentiation is along the applicability of "colonialism" versus "occupation" in relation to the Soviet dealing with the Eastern and Western borders. The term "Soviet occupation" is used much more frequently towards the experience of East European nations — Czech and Slovak republics, as well as the Baltics, Hungary — whereas the same cannot be said of Central Asia. This calls for a hybrid approach when analyzing the experience of Soviet Union, and as such this dissertation incorporates elements of both postcolonial and decolonial theories, while also providing an overview of critiques and oversights within both of these theories.

Postcolonial studies are an interdisciplinary field influential from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s within the humanities and social sciences, mainly associated with analyzing the imperial-colonial aspect of modernity. Geographically and chronologically the postcolonial discourse deals with the cultural products of the Anglophone and partly Francophone world associated with the former British and French colonies from the 18th century onwards, but it often transfers this limited local experience to the whole world, looking for certain universal categories that all human communities that have survived the colonial-imperial complex of relations share. Among such problems, the most common is the study of the experience of the "numb", insufficiently or completely unrepresented cultural groups whose history was associated with political, social, cultural and psychological suppression. For postcolonial theory, emphasis is placed on the complex interaction of culture — a colonizer and a colonized one, which can take many forms — from assimilation to trans-culture (Tlostanova, 2012).

Although postcolonial studies were recognized by the Western academic world as a separate field only in the late 20th century, the ideas that make up the bulk of it had existed long before, such as problematization of imposing the colonizer's ideologies on the oppressed and marginalized cultural groups, problems of cultural assimilation and hybridization, racialization of intercultural relations. Among the first to have raised these issues are Franz Fanon, William Dubois, as well as works of francophone North African intellectuals (Tlostanova, 2012).

The publication of Edward Said's book "Orientalism" (1979) is considered to be the official beginning of postcolonial theory, where he problematizes the Middle East as a discursive construct created by the West on the basis of its fantasies about the "Orient", as a

result of long-standing efforts to differentiate between the West and the East. The former is rational, just, civilized, where the latter is irrational, traitorous and barbaric, but also exotic — and thus desirable. Following the imperialist logic once explicated by J.S. Mill (1998) the East needed guidance of the West in order to leave its barbarism behind. Reflecting on this Said developed another important concept for postcolonial theory — "cultural imperialism" — a multilateral suppression, as a result of which the dominant culture supplants and subjugates all manifestations of a subordinate culture, reducing them to an imitation of the dominant one. Later this simple scheme was complicated in the works of Homi Bhabha (1994), who problematized the phenomenon of "returning the gaze" and the psychologically destructive consequences of mimicry.

The focus of postcolonial theorists is the double or "split" consciousness of the (post) colonial subject (DuBois, 1903), which describes the feeling of incompleteness, of not belonging to either of the cultures — not the colonized one, but not the colonizer's either. The consciousness of a (post) colonial subject is based on an unstable, fundamentally incomplete and often negative self-identification associated with the problem of cultural dislocation. DuBois develops this concept on the experiences of African-Americans, to whom he applies Frantz Fanon's concept of "black skin, white masks" — a state of being born with black skin but being brought up in the "white" dominant culture. He describes this as such:

> "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (DuBois, 1903, p.2-3)

Bhabha (1994) connects this condition with "entrapment" between cultures, non-affiliation to either of them, or to both at once, self-awareness in a peculiar stupor, which arises not because of a personal psychological disorder, but because of a cultural trauma dislocation in which a post-modern personality exists. In the case of African-Americans it is about being imposed with the values of the "white" culture, including its aesthetic and axiological values about that which is beautiful, right, good and others. Looking at the self through the eyes of their colonizer, the "white", the post-colonial subject seems themselves as subhuman, ugly, wrong, wretched, in a bout of self-colonization. Bhabha further develops this into a concept of "mimicry", which sees the colonized subject as desiring to become like the colonizer, internalizing the colonizer's axiology and epistemology.

Contrary to “mimicry” is the idea of “hybridity”, which refers to the creation of specific cultural objects and relations that arise at the juncture between the colonial and local traditions, beliefs, social regimes (Bhabha, 1994). The colonizer/colonized dichotomy is interdependent, constructing and re-constructing each other from each point of contact and mimicry. In this he openly opposes Said, who while emphasizing one of the key ideas of postcolonial criticism — the relative nature of cultural identity — however, recognizes symbolic agency exclusively on the side of the colonizer. In his analysis of imperialism, discursive flows are presented always unidirectionally — alienation, devaluation, stereotyping of the subaltern by the colonizer, through which the latter outlines the boundaries of self. However, to Bhabha this relation is much more complicated, as ". . . the colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its presence as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference” (Bhabha, 1994, p.107). Hybrids are precisely those cultural objects and social subjects that are formed during each act of reproduction of a global, Western, Eurocentric phenomenon by the locals, the colonized, and because of that a phenomenon that is forced to lose its “original” nature and become “nativized”, but not quite either, so that through an endless chain of constant repetitions, the colonial power continues to maintain its final dominance.

It is possible to find a relation of resemblance between the concept of ‘hybridity’ and that of “double-layered mentality” or “second society” (Shlapentokh, 1989), which can be alternatively understood as the colonized’s impetus for resistance. This concept of a two-layered mentality was developed to analyze the Soviet mentality in the 1980s, making a difference between the pragmatic and mythological levels, where the former represents the personal beliefs and the latter — societally accepted ones. For example, in the case of religious policies of the Soviet Union in Central Asia, it was possible to be “active in the fight against religion [… while keeping] religious attachment in their hearts” (Dadabaev, 2014, p.345). This is reminiscent of the split in the colonial presence as described by Bhabha (1994), an ambivalence that leads to a “third space” — an interstitial spatiality between clashing cultures, a “no-man’s land”, where hybridity is birthed. The “second society” of Soviet Central Asia, where people were able to separate “their public functions from their private beliefs and did not consider it a sin” (Dadabaev, 2014, p.345) was such a third space, where both of the moral imperatives were able to co-exist without troubling each other too much.

A decolonial turn or choice is a direction in modern critical theory that arose in the late 1990s and was engaged in a radical rethinking of the modern design inextricably linked with its dark side — colonialism, the wrong side of modernity. Initially known as the

modernity/coloniality school, it emerged mainly from the works of Latin American scholars Anibal Quijano (2007), Maria Lugones (2007), and Walter D. Mignolo (2000), and was strongly linked to Wallerstein's world-systems theory (Wallerstein, 2000), as well as the Frankfurt School of critical theory. From discussions between Wallerstein and Fanon the antithesis of East-West was rethought in terms of North-South, leading eventually to the birth of the concepts of the "core" and "periphery" (ibid).

Geographically and chronologically the decolonial school starts its analysis back in the 1500s, when the "Age of Discoveries" or rather the age of colonization began with Spanish and Portuguese expeditions into the Americas. As such it also expands the physical area that was subjected to colonialism and coloniality — where for the postcolonial scholars their main territories for study focused on the Middle East and South Asia, for decolonial scholars this includes the Americas, Africa, South East Asia, and lately — Central Asia (Bhambra, 2014).

Another point of difference is that in postcolonial theory colonialism is considered through characteristics of its domination in the past, whereas scholars of the decolonial turn view this through the optics of coloniality, where colonialism is a historical phenomenon, while coloniality is its long-term result, in which we exist to this day (Quijano, 2000; Maldonado-Torres, 2007). In this regard decolonial thought does not focus on the historical description of colonial strategies, but rather on the long-term ontological, epistemological and axiological traces that remain after colonialism seems to be in the past. As such decolonial scholars refuse the prefix "post" not only because for them colonialism is alive, as before, but also because the prefix "post" limits them to the framework of vector linear history. According to this framework the movement of history can only happen along the axis of progress and development from archaic tradition and barbarism, whereas for decolonial thinkers it is important to go outside this axis, which represents the Western epistemological zero-point as coloniality of knowledge.

Apart from the formal qualifiers the decolonial turn (Tlostanova, 2010) also differs from postcolonial studies in that it radically challenges the foundations, logic and methodology of the existing system of knowledge and disciplinary divisions, as opposed to postcolonial studies which decolonial scholars see as not questioning the logic of modernity and the Western monopoly of knowledge. The decolonial turn rejects the universalism of postcolonial studies, which pass their local English-French experience as a "traveling theory" — on the contrary, it is seen as reproducing the **coloniality of knowledge**. For example, Mignolo (2003) shows that postcolonial criticism of neo-colonialist Western tactics in the past and present, which is

formulated in terms of Western poststructuralism, neo-Marxism, affect theory, post-Lacanian psychoanalysis (Spivak, 1987; Bhabha, 2004; Said, 1979) or any other way re-establishes leading Western critical theories as indisputable producers of delocalized and disembodied universal knowledge. Mignolo and Tlostanova (2020) describe it as leading to the reproduction of Western monotopic hermeneutics (as opposed to diatopic or pluritopic, which accept existence of two and more points of understanding) with its privilege of controlling knowledge from a position of its own and through the invention of the *Other*, as a foil. Therefore, postcolonial discourse is mainly occupied with interpreting a (post) colonial other for its own occupation in a language that is understandable to its own.

In decolonial terms, this is called the "hubris of zero-point epistemology" (Castro-Gómez, 2007), which represents a special Eurocentric position of the sensing and thinking subject, occupying a delocalized position as the Observing Self, using tools of scientific discovery. It excludes any other possible ways of production, dissemination and representation of knowledge. This leads to building a picture of the world on the basis of a rigid essential progressive model:

> "The coexistence of diverse ways of production and transfer of knowledge is being destroyed, since now all forms of human knowledge are ordered on an epistemological scale from traditional to modern, from barbarism to civilization, from community to individual, from East to West <...> using this strategy, scientific thought positions itself as the only legalized form of knowledge production, and Europe gains epistemological superiority over all other cultures in the world." (Castro-Gómez, 2007, p.433).

As a result, the Western monopoly on the production and dissemination of knowledge and the disciplinary matrix of modern / colonial knowledge remain unchanged, even when postcolonial theorists rethink Western critical concepts and theories. This postcolonial strategy simplifies the dialogue with recognized theoretical schools (by default, created in the Global North), sharing with them the same hermeneutic "gadamerian" horizon and conceptual mechanisms. This leads to a more successful institutionalization of postcolonial research, although it does not prevent the inadvertent reproduction of the coloniality of knowledge. Decolonial theorists in their attempt to reject and to de-link (Mignolo, 2007) from the West are at the risk of losing administrative, financial and other opportunities, as well as of getting lost in isolation and delegitimization of the decolonial turn as a whole.

Coloniality of knowledge is the most important element of global colonialism, inseparable from all other aspects of modernity. In decolonial thinking modernity in many ways creates and proclaims itself and then launches into the world, ontologizing its epistemological constructs. As an idea, modernity needs a knowledge system that would legitimize it, and it

itself legitimizes this knowledge system, thereby making its superiority and indisputability seem to be eternal. The idea of modernity and the system of knowledge legitimizing it became a mechanism for disavowing all other systems of knowledge and representing other historical processes as having fallen out of modernity. Coloniality of knowledge today is reflected in the very fact that in order to be considered a successful scholar one must be published in SCOPUS-recognized academic journals, fight for a higher h-index, participate in conferences conducted in the English language somewhere in the Global North, since institutionalization, and as such, submission into the coloniality of knowledge, is the only way to be legitimized as a scholar.

The concept of **coloniality of being** is the natural extension of the concept of coloniality, which itself is based in its origin on a certain combination of commercial capitalism, missionary Christianity and the invention of the idea of race for the subsequent taxonomization of humankind. In decolonial terms coloniality is the dark side of modernity, without which the latter is simply impossible (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Coloniality manifests itself in all areas of reality — from economic colonialism (capitalism) to the colonialism of power, thinking, being, gender, memory and sensation. Moreover, the rhetoric of modernity, which mankind has been listening to for more than five hundred years, always hides the logic of colonialism and its structures of power, knowledge, perception, being. According to Maldonado Torres (2007), coloniality will survive colonialism because it remains alive in books, in academic criteria, in cultural models, in common sense and in people's self-perception, in their hopes and aspirations, and in many other aspects of modernity.

The term itself, coloniality of being, was developed by Maldonado-Torres (2007) in conversations with other decolonial thinkers, specifically Quijano (2000) about effects of coloniality of power on the matrix of society and in the lived experiences of the (post) colonial subjects. In this it continues the trajectory first set out by W.E.B. Dubois (1903) in his "The Souls of Black Folk", where he talks about the experience of double consciousness of African-Americans, who are taught to look at themselves through the eyes of the colonizer, the holder of the dominant culture. Mignolo (2003) makes it clear in his own reflections on the topic:

> "Science (knowledge and wisdom) cannot be detached from language; languages are not just 'cultural' phenomena in which people find their 'identity'; they are also the location where knowledge is inscribed. And, since languages are not something human beings have but rather something of what human beings are, coloniality of power and of knowledge engendered the coloniality of being [colonialidad del ser]". (p.669)

From the decolonial point of view over the past five hundred years, the constant cultivation and maintenance of epistemological and ontological lack of freedom and subordination have

been expressed globally in different forms, which can be reduced to the fact that the West defined the only norm of humanity, and all other peoples were considered as deviations, undergoing various changes in order to bring them closer to the Western ideal.

These concepts of postcolonial and decolonial critiques often have equivalents within feminist theory, encompassing all three of the recognized "waves" of it. Merely replacing the figure of the "colonizer" with that of the "patriarchal male" might suffice to illustrate the point — both commit oppression of the subordinate, call for "deals" between the oppressed and the oppressor, as well as are deconstructed by the respective theories in an emancipatory attempt to both differentiate and solidarize across the spectrum of colonization/oppression. The following section looks at these equivalents in detail.

3.4 Theoretical foundations of feminism

Radical feminism claims that patriarchy is a gender system that reproduces itself in different forms at different stages of social development. First, women are considered historically the first oppressed group. Secondly, women's oppression is seen as the most widespread and deeply rooted form of human oppression. Thirdly, the basis of female oppression must be sought not only in the capitalist economy, but also in the sphere of private life — the family and intimate sexual relations. Fourthly, heterosexism is one of the basic structures of oppression of women. As such radical feminism is a theoretical and political criticism of universal male domination and the oppressed position of women. The key concept is the patriarchal system of social structures and practices of male domination, which leads to subordination, oppression and exploitation of women.

Radicals often used the categorical apparatus of Marxist theory. Marxist feminism, starting from the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, sees the reasons for the differences in the capitalist system of relations, which excludes women from social production. Women and men were considered as sex classes. Men make up the ruling class, exploiting and oppressing women. The dominance of men is associated with the development of a class society based on private property. The most important mechanism of male domination is the control of female sexuality (sexual harassment, beating of women, violence, pornography, sterilization, abortion, contraceptive laws, forced heterosexuality). "Sexuality for feminism is the same as labor for Marxism" (MacKinnon, 1982), namely, the basis of gender order. Marxist feminism reveals the historical mechanisms of oppression of women associated with private

property institutions. The liberation of women requires their inclusion in social production and is part of the class struggle of the proletariat.

Marxist feminist theorist Iris Young sees **oppression** as a universal structural phenomenon that locates groups in a relationship of subordination and unequal privilege with each other (Young, 1990). She identifies the mechanism of oppression as consisting of: exploitation, marginalization, dispossession, cultural imperialism, which come to form patriarchy. Exploitation here is defined as the process of redistributing the results of labor of one class (social group) in favor of another. Women are exploited to the extent that they are hired workers. Domestic work can also be seen as a form of exploitation based on gender. Women as a social category are subjected to special gender exploitation, in which their work is redistributed in favor of men. Marginalization is the most dangerous form of oppression towards members of the lower class, often racially labeled groups who are excluded from participation in social life and are financially deprived. The mechanism of deprivation of power (dispossession) creates positions occupied by people who have "extremely limited autonomy in their work or do not have one at all, cannot come to work creatively or express their opinion about it, do not have technical knowledge or authority, are poorly able to express their thoughts, especially in public or in public institutions, do not affect respect" (Young, 1990, cited from: McLaren, 2006: 63). These people do not have the benefits that professionals have. Racism and sexism are often manifested towards them. Their position in society is defined by the term "powerlessness".

The main idea of radical feminism and feminism of differences is that the basis of **patriarchy** and its inherent oppression of women is rooted in the sphere of privacy and intimacy. Relationships that have developed in sexual and reproductive life are interpreted as the basis of the gender organization of society, as the basis of the gender order. If sexual life and the reproductive sphere are organized so that the woman in them is an object, used and exploited, then patriarchy is also reproduced in other areas. The slogan of feminism is: "personal is political", since patriarchal mechanisms are reproduced precisely in the private sphere, it should become the object of research and political criticism. The central problems of the study are the characteristics of the female experience: sexual, reproductive, caring and upbringing, oppression by the patriarchal society, the experience of suffering and, finally, the joint struggle in the female movement and the rethinking of the female role.

Patriarchy as a system of male domination is reproduced through the state, family, division of labor, religion, educational system and other social institutions. Researchers point

out that, despite the policy of gender equality and the massive involvement of women in paid employment in the 1980s, their subordinate position is reproduced in a wide variety of contexts. Gender inequality is reproduced, despite the quota policy, the creation of women's parties, equal opportunity programs in various institutions, etc. The secondary status of a woman is preserved, there are cultural contexts in which sexism, control and the prescription of sexual roles are still acceptable and not cause criticism.

Swedish sociologist Goran Terborn, a researcher of global inequality, builds the political and historical geography of the patriarchates, distinguishing them by the criterion of the structure of the private sphere. By “classic patriarchy” Terborn refers to the family structure, which implies the unconditional power of the older man (father) in the family, determining the influence of parents on marriage, the husband’s supremacy over the wife, and the daughter’s secondary status compared to the son (Therborn 2004: 130). Under the classical patriarchal order, the sex-age hierarchy is the organizing structure. From Terborn's point of view, as a result of emancipation and the subsequent conservative renaissance in the modern world (at the end of the 20th century), three main types of gender order can be distinguished, post-patriarchy, neopatriarchy, and the intermediate type.

Post-patriarchal societies include North America, Latin America with some exceptions, Japan, Korea, Oceania, mainly Eastern Europe and Russia. This gender order implies that women have autonomy (the right to vote and independent decision), they are economically and powerfully relatively independent of parents and husbands, equality of rights for men and women in the family is achieved. Women have public power (although inequalities in the public sphere continue to persist). The distribution area of neopatriarchal societies includes most Muslim countries, India, rural China, and some regions of Latin America. In neopatriarchal societies, women are deprived of autonomy and access to the public sphere, they can only use the hidden levers of private power-manipulation. In intermediate type societies — South Asia, South Africa, Turkey, West Africa, Central Asia — different configurations of gender power arise.

To analyze the balance of power and tactics of resistance to patriarchy, the concept of a “patriarchal deal” was proposed by Deniz Kandiyoti (Kandiyoti, 1988). According to Kandioti, relations of dominance-subordination between gender groups are beneficial for both parties, since subordinates receive benefits by mobilizing the resources available to them. Responsibility for organizing community life lies with older men. Confirming their status as subordinates and following gender-specific requirements, women use a variety of strategies in

an effort to maximize their safety and optimize life chances. For example, in some Muslim countries in Asia (where girls are given out to be married to their parents and obey not only their husbands, but also their older relatives), older women monitor the interaction in an extended multi-generational family. Their "resources" are the maternal and conjugal influence that they exert on sons and husbands. The conditions of a "patriarchal deal" in the modern world can be challenged and redefined.

The relative deprivation of women, recognized in the context of the mass democratic movement, has led female students participating in university protests to "consciousness growth groups". Practices of growth of consciousness have become one of the forms of the feminist movement, acting as a mechanism for the collective mobilization of women. In group discussions, latent collective self-awareness was to be awakened. Women discussed their seemingly personal problems — economic and psychological dependence on a partner, experience of sexual violence, forced abortion, frustration in the field of sexuality — which developed into a collective problematization of female roles. Personal experience began to be perceived as collective, intersubjective, as political. Through verbalization and shared dissatisfaction, a female collective identity of "sisterhood" was formed, which found support in the sociopolitical theory of global oppression of women and the fight against it. Such an identity is based on the idea of the unity of experience of all women, which is based on biological (essentialist) foundations, although it takes shape under the influence of patriarchy (Thebaud et al, 1996).

Basing itself on the postmodern school of thought, inspired by Michel Foucault's analysis of the micro-politics of power, cultural production of subjectivity, biopower and resistance, the third-wave feminist postmodernism **deconstructs** the concept of 'woman'. The existence of a single feminist subject is denied, which is recognized as constructed by historical practices (Butler, 2007). Butler argues that gender identity is not a given but is an ongoing process of "citing" gender norms that permeate society. Gender identity only seems to be a natural expression of the subject's position. In fact, there is a constant masquerade — the reiteration and reproduction of a gender performance that never reaches the embodiment of a gender ideal. If the subject does not meet, at least to some extent, the established gender norms, society does not recognize her as a full-fledged human being (Butler, 2007). The French school of postmodern feminism, inspired by the works of Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, also belongs to this direction. Among the most famous postmodern feminists are Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous (Thebaud, 1996).

Postmodern feminism critiques theories which: a) affirm the natural biological origin of the differences between the sexes — men and women; and b) put forward the thesis on homogeneity of experiences of men and women, the inviolability of polarized gender boundaries and gender inequality. From the point of view of postmodernism, "woman" and "man" are categories designed by discourse. Gender is conceptualized as a constantly performed action, which is constituted through endless repetition under conditions of severe structural constraints. Gender becomes a cultural sign, "performative", giving the body the order to behave in accordance with the biological gender within the framework of the heterosexual matrix — heteronormativity. Defined as a set of mechanisms for normalizing heterosexuality as a natural and universal characteristic, heteronormativity often engenders heterosexism — practice of discrimination and social exclusion of experience other than heterosexual (Harris & Leonardo, 2018).

However, not only gender needed deconstruction, but also the idea of universalism in the study of women's experience towards its particularization and contextualization, i.e., understanding its interconnectedness with other dimensions of social experience (Kim-Puri, 2005) As Judith Lorber (Lorber, 1990) notes, researchers were aware that gender and sexual characteristics combined with other characteristics of the social position of an individual or group, producing multiple identities and systems of inequality. This is how the concepts of "intersectionality" and "intersectional analysis" appeared and were popularized (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991).

Among the key figures of the new are Kimberley Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, Nira Yuval-Davis, Sylvia Walby, Leslie McCall. In describing this area, researchers use interchangeable terms such as intersectional approach, intersectional analysis, and theory of intersectionality. Some researchers consider intersectional analysis as feminist research's most significant contribution to social theory (McCall, 2005). This methodology has acquired an umbrella character, combining several versions and levels of analysis. However, the most varied versions of intersectional analysis rely on certain basic principles for studying a complex social structure, which are formulated in modern social theory and are reflected in gender sociology.

The key category — intersectionality (multiplicity of intersections) — is a metaphorical term that refers to the image of a transport hub, an intersection of many roads — the main axes of social separation. It denotes a plurality of overlapping causal conditions of gender inequality, among which class, citizenship, race, ethnicity, sexuality and others are of particular

importance. Proponents of intersectional methodology argue that at the level of micro-interaction, researchers must take into account the interweaving and cohesion of such inequality mechanisms that determine the social position of individuals and groups (Hankivsky, 2012). Social differentiation is permeated by the dynamics of power relations. In this regard, intersectional analysis involves the study of complex mechanisms for the distribution of power. The institutional significance of the various mechanisms of social separation is determined by context. In some societies, the most important are the class and civic parameters of social separation; in others, racial, ethnic, and civic come to the fore. Gender, class and race, ethnicity is recognized as the most significant parameters of differentiation and stratification in society, reproduced in most contexts.

In intersectional analysis gender differences are no longer seen as dichotomous relationships between masculine and feminine, male and female, masculinity and femininity. The meanings and form of class, gender, racial or ethnic relations are created when interacting with each other. Secondly, the sociological focus shifts from the study of women as a coherent category, including individuals with similar characteristics, to the analysis of the production and design of gender practices, in which manifestations of femininity and masculinity are actualized relative to each other (Ray, 2006). Researchers are interested in what men and women do as representatives of various class, racial or ethnic groups.

Social differences between intersectional localities are characterized by an uneven distribution of volume and type of power. The mechanisms of oppression, be it racism, sexism, heteronormativity, or religious fanaticism, do not act in isolation and independently. On the contrary, these forms of oppression intersect and mutually determine each other, thus creating a complex matrix of the distribution of power — a grid of domination-subordination, where a black male from a working class family would be located far below in the matrix than a white woman from an aristocratic family.

The goal of intersectional analysis is not only academic, but also political: research focuses on promoting a more equitable social system, where oppressed and excluded groups gain access to vital resources. As such the intersectional approach is integrated into modern political discourse, used by human rights initiatives at the international, national, and regional levels when it comes to multiple concurrent forms of discrimination against vulnerable social groups. The principle of intersectionality is enshrined in the agenda of international organizations. So, on April 23, 2002, at the 58th session of the UN Human Rights Commission, a Resolution on Women's Rights was adopted, the first paragraph of which reads: "... We

recognize the importance of the study of the intersection of many forms of discrimination, including those that are rooted in gender relations "(Resolution E / CN. 4/2002 / L. 59; quoted from: Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Intersectionality was theorized to go hand-in-hand with the transnational approach, which also criticizes the positional methodology of feminism of the second wave, which is based on the classical cognitive binary oppositions of culture and nature, male and female, and ideas about the epistemological privileges of oppressed women. Simple dualistic thinking, operating in the regime of binary oppositions, discursively corresponds to the hierarchy of power relations of domination and submission, and therefore must be rejected. It is necessary to compare models of gender oppression, rather than constructing a global theory of patriarchy as universal female oppression.

Transnational feminism insists on localizing gender inequality and the political agenda, and in doing so modern feminist thought, including postcolonial feminism (Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Mohanty, bell hook, and others), is moving closer to modern anthropology, developing the concept of "location". Gupta and Ferguson (1997) draw attention to those local "places" within which resistance to hegemony arises. So, for example, the answer to the question of how feminists relate to the sexualization of femininity in media representations involves an analysis of local gender characteristics.

The uncritical acceptance of otherness (whether it is a different way of regulating gender relations or the search for "national" feminism) is problematic because the tough binary opposition between "western" and "local" leads to an underestimation of the degree of contact and influence between these two categories. The next section provides a more in-depth look into this issue.

3.5 Problematics of the postcolonial and decolonial options in feminism

The problem with the insisting on the national differences in treatment and position of women lies in the fact that both supporters of the idea of the Western nature of feminism and adherents of the search for a specific "national" feminism operate within the framework of the same logic, which tends to consider social reality as consisting of a certain set of clearly delineated categories (in this case, national), the interaction and mutual influence between which is insignificant and is not of particular interest for analysis. This view pre-supposes existence of "pure" cultures, which it is possible to dilute or stain with the undesirable elements of another.

Such a division into “West” and “East” and emphasizing the unacceptability of models created in one of two localities for analysis of the other follows from the feminist and postcolonial criticism of the universality of the Western subject. To agree with the assertion that feminism, like any other knowledge, is a universal theory, is tantamount to accepting the basic assumption of modern philosophy about the existence of universal knowledge produced by an incorporeal rational subject. In other words, the premise that the production of a theory is in no way connected with the gender, national, racial and other characteristics of the person who produces it means the recognition of legitimacy is based on the universal values of the colonization policy aimed at “enlightening” the oppressed East. More specifically, this means recognizing that the Soviet practice of emancipation of women in Central Asia (*hujum*) and the post-Soviet practice of democratization and the formation of female NGOs are based on the universal ideals of female emancipation. Accordingly, it is only necessary to precisely “transfer” knowledge and experience from one, more developed, country to another, less developed.

However, as a number of researchers have shown (Harding, 1991; Mignolo, 2003) the very assumption that knowledge exists objectively, that the process of cognition does not depend on the characteristics of who knows, is discriminatory, excluding a number of marginalized groups from the production of knowledge, from the definition that is a worthy object of knowledge and a research topic. The supposedly neutral subject of knowledge is actually a Western masculine subject, claiming universality. As a result, the neutral model of universal knowledge masks theories produced by the masculine subject in the context of colonial expansion and European modernity.

Criticism of such universalist claims of Western scientific rationality can already be found in the work of Edward Said “Orientalism” (1979), which is considered fundamental to the postcolonial research tradition. The term “orientalism” was proposed by Said to describe the particular vision of the East by the West, which can be found in the corpus of texts (from literary works and films to scientific studies of oriental languages and history), created by the West about the East and intended primarily for various groups of readers in the West (from communities of scientists to administrators of colonial possessions). Said argues that all these texts, based on the rigid ontological and epistemological division of “West” — “East”, reflect not only and not so much the “real” East, which exists by itself, as much as Western ideas about it. Thus, supposedly objective knowledge obtained from “neutral” observers is in fact closely

connected with the geohistorical disposition of the researcher and expresses interests specific to the region.

Such criticism of a homogeneous Western subject and "objective" knowledge turned out to be extremely attractive both for researchers of social reality and for governments and elites of those countries that are not considered to belong to the "Western" world. So, in the famous work of Chandra Talpade Mohanty "Under Western Eyes" (1988), feminist studies of patriarchy and oppression of women in non-Western societies are analyzed. The author describes the analytical strategies that the research of Western feminists draws on, including the construction of women of the East as a homogeneous category (very similar to the discursive construction of the "Soviet woman of the East"), the correlation of the degree of oppression with the simple number of women who are oppressed, and the assumption that gender as a category of social research exists before interaction, and is not constructed in it. All this reproduces the I-Other dichotomy characteristic of orientalist identity constructions, and positions Western feminists as the only subjects of resistance and the ultimate goal of "development" of non-Western feminists. Moreover, the situation of women in the East is examined and evaluated through the prism of the Western standard (Ong, 2001), and the very appeal to this problem is only necessary to criticize the "home" systems of oppression (Zonana, 1993). As such the subjective position taken by Western feminists in relation to the women of the East studied by them can be considered a monolithic masculine position (Yegenoglu, 1998).

Separatist tendencies in the early works of researchers of postcolonialism and postcolonial feminism were criticized by many (Pfeil, 1994), but the most systematic exposition of this criticism can be found in the work of David Washbrook (1999). The main rebuke to such works is that in the course of criticism of the essentialist image of the East, a no less essentialist image of the West is created. In particular, concentrating on the civilizational mission of the colonial authorities, the colonial discourse analysis (the general name of the trend) criticizes only the rationalistic current of European thought, overlooking the simultaneous existence of other paradigms (for example, romanticism) and the variability of the discourse of orientalism in time (so, features of the perception of the East, criticized by the colonial discourse analysis, are characteristic of the 18th – 19th centuries, but they cannot be found either in earlier or later eras). Thus, the West itself appears as a timeless and internally homogeneous entity. Moreover, presenting the history of colonial localities as a reflection of European ideas and interests, the colonial discourse analysis does not take into account the participation of the inhabitants of the colonies in the production of knowledge (for example, as

informants), nor does it ignore the degree of collaboration of local authorities in establishing and maintaining colonial dominance (as, for example, in case of the British colonial presence in India). Discussions about the imperial nature of the USSR, for example, completely ignore the fact that many transformations were carried out with the support of local elites, and even the *hujum* that caused the most criticism was supported by a certain group of women in Central Asia (Kamp, 2006; Moldosheva, 2016).

Washbrook also claims that by criticizing Western orientalism, the colonial discourse analysis performs an impossible logical operation, since the rejection of the European tradition in interpreting history in this case is based on the European methodology. In addition to the fact that the origins of the colonial discourse analysis methodology date back to European romantic thinkers, the rejection of European modernism and a return to local tradition, which can be traced in some texts from the decolonial option, imitate the logic and values of romanticism to a large extent. Thus, what is happening in the colonial discourse analysis is not a criticism of European thought from the colonial periphery, but the opposition of one school of European thought to another. In addition, the criticism of the civilizational mission is based on the same, albeit unreflective, desire to "liberate" the oppressed peoples and, thus, contradicts the same ideas of poststructuralism that it is repelled from.

Finally, the concept of "culture", which colonial discourse analysis operates with, is a closed one, with clearly defined boundaries. In other words, "cultures" appear to be isolated, incommensurable with each other, and any attempt at cultural dialogue in this situation is impossible by definition. As a result, the conceptual apparatus of European historiography is rejected as inconsistent with the experience of the colonial peoples: the concept of class is replaced in explanatory schemes by "race" and "culture". As a result, serious attempts to analyze material inequality within colonial communities disappear from historiography, and the colonial discourse analysis ceases to represent the interests of those social groups that are the object of its liberation mission. As a result, from the point of view of Washbrook, colonial discourse analysis becomes a direction that largely corresponds to the values of Western multiculturalism. Given that most postcolonial critics teach at the Western academia, the colonial discourse analysis may also be seen as becoming a platform for these critics to assert their epistemological superiority in the knowledge of (post) colonial communities.

Similarly, the assertion that feminism is a "Western model" and the insistence on its exclusively "local" nature suggest that there is a clear boundary that allows one to separate one from the other. This point of view, according to Lila Abu-Lughod (2001), ignores the degree

of contact between different cultures and how habitually the “Western” elements actually turn out to be borrowed from other cultural traditions. Those who insist on the “national” nature of feminism, its radical difference, overlook the influence of colonial expansion on its formation. In addition, a clear division into “ours” and “yours”, “western” and “national” operates with simplified, homogeneous categories. Finally, as Anna Tsing (1997) shows, to argue that feminism is exclusively “Western” in nature is wrong, since the meaning of what feminism is formed in the process of “inadequate translations”. What is considered “Western” is actually a forcibly stopped translation, claiming to be considered the source of a particular movement. Such an act of stopped translation constructs a rigid border between the “West” and other localities, giving the “Western” a priority status in this binary opposition. At the same time, this strict separation leads to a struggle between representatives of other, “non-Western” groups for the degree of otherness and marginality and to the proliferation of identity policies, where some are built not so much around solving a specific problem, but rather under the banner of a particular marginal identity. An example of such competition for the degree of marginality may in some cases be the women's movement in Central Asia, since it is in a position of “double” colonization — by the West and the USSR (Tlostanova, 2010) and, therefore, can claim some epistemological superiority. At the same time, it is overlooked, for example, that gender issues may have supranational or even supra-regional status (for example, cross-border traffic).

In essence, this approach is based on the assumption that there is some homogeneous dominant discourse that, by definition, is not able to adequately reflect the experience of subordinate groups. That is why we are forced to admit that “the subaltern cannot speak” (after all, what, how and by whom can be said, is already predetermined by the dominant discourse). Despite the external difference in the proposed solutions, a common understanding for this group of approaches is, firstly, the concept of cultures as closed entities, which under certain conditions collide, but do not interact with each other. At the same time, it is paradoxical that this approach describes itself as constructivist: the very division into the West - East or North - South, which underlies the colonialist discourse, is considered by it not as really existing, but as closely related to the process of knowing the Other in the course of colonial expansion. However, it does not go beyond establishing the social construction of intercultural division — instead of showing the “porosity” of cultural boundaries and the multiple, non-linear nature of social (colonial) domination systems, critics repel the colonizer / oppressed division as a given.

It is this inconsistent “constructivism” that makes researchers emphasize distinction rather than similarity; to search for traces / epistemology / voices of oppressed groups or

indigenous peoples through the boundaries of the dominant discourse and beyond them for building a decolonized epistemology or non-Western historiography; where hybridity is a clash of two "pure" cultural principles. Of course, such a critic / researcher strategy is also partly due to the belief in the totality of the dominant discourse, in its ability to determine its own content and define a certain type of subjectivity. If the rules of the game are set and determine the choice of actors, resistance can only be thought of as a game according to other rules and the dominant culture is not understood and not accepted.

At the same time, the models described above are not the only possible approaches to the problems of interaction between the dominant and subordinate cultures. The second group of theories is based on the assumption that cultures are heterogeneous, on the one hand, and that there is constant contact and interpenetration, on the other. Domination and submission are considered here to a lesser extent as elements of a binary dichotomy, but rather as network structures, where the subject can simultaneously occupy the positions of domination and submission. Resistance to the influence of the dominant discourse is understood as existing along with the actions of the authorities and is essentially a modality of the functioning of the colonial discourse. At the same time, it is conceived not as an intensification of one of the members of the binary opposition (be it a nation or a woman), but as the destruction of this opposition, as an intermediate thinking. A simple multiplication of the number of national projects does not lead to the destruction of the West-East opposition, since, as Walter Mignolo shows (2003), European rationality, the philosophy of language and the related imperial project also rely on monolinguism, i.e. on the principle of "one language — one state". Liberation, opposition epistemology, which seeks to undermine the hegemony of European epistemology and philosophy of language, from the point of view of Mignolo, should be based on "double translation", on intermediate thinking, existence between languages and not proceed from the interests of the national state, but from the project of a separate locality.

To this group of approaches, it is possible to include both those who talk about the heterogeneity of dominance systems within the "Western" colonial discourse, and those who are trying to comprehend the processes of resistance within the colonial discourse. Representatives of the first group seek to show the unevenness of the ways of interacting with another, depending on the situation within the "western" system of social inequality. Adherents of the second approach insist on the need to conceptualize the process of cognition as a constant displacement between localities. The separation between the two approaches is to some extent conditional: Homi Bhabha (1998), for example, in his concept of "hybridity" shows the

difficulty of drawing boundaries between the colonizer and the colonized, and at the same time analyzes the unconscious mechanisms of resistance to colonial influence. Following Foucault, he argues that resistance is by definition present where there is power, albeit in an unconscious form. So, even if a colonized subject imitates the actions and culture of a colonialist, this imitation due to the peculiarities of the action of the language will never be perfect and identical to the original. Superimposed on the dichotomy inherent in colonial discourse, such imitation, or mimicry, in Bhabha's terms, often produces an unconscious resistance effect. For example, an attempt by "locals" to repeat the Christian doctrine preached by British missionaries leads to undermining the authority of this doctrine when it is understood through the prism of categories of local religions.

This group of approaches offers a more productive way of understanding the interaction between the center and the periphery, "Western" and "Eastern" feminisms. They allow one to explore the creative activity and "resistance" of all those who are otherwise seen only as a victim of the power of the dominant discourse, whose ability to freely choose is limited in advance by the proposed models of subjectivity. In addition, this approach emphasizes the fundamental possibility of understanding and solidarity, an opportunity excluded by those who insist on the idea of cultures as closed entities. The next section attempts to look at possible alternatives to the problematics of postcolonial and decolonial theories in feminism (but also at large).

3.6 In search of alternatives to the coloniality of being

Hybrid models, as discussed in the previous section, are often criticized for postulating the existence of pure cultures, between which there should be a "third space" of resistance. However they do have the potential to be good because, presuming a search for this intermediate space, they simultaneously may be able to preserve the previous history of the interaction and mutual influence of cultures, the intermediate space between which is endowed with epistemological superiority of the dominant or colonizer culture. At the same time, the concept of "hybridity" is critiqued as one that deprives the colonized of identity, leaving them only the option of mimicry, which results in this epistemological superiority in the first place.

Trying to think and act from the space between nations, races, languages (and, possibly, gender), implementing a "double translation" or "transversal" policy (Yuval Davis, 1997) between the two and more participants of the dialogue, giving preference to solidarity over difference, might allow for an ability to critically reflect on historical, gender and ethnic

characteristics of the space from which cognition comes from. Bhabha's "hybrid" seems ill-suited to this task, however, with only the option of exponentially expanding mimicry and echoing available to the colonized — yes, increasing self-understanding each time, but only on the basis of conversation and subjugation by the colonizer and the basing of one's identity on the imprint of the dominator.

However, a "nomadic subject" is engaged in "neither reproduction nor just imitation, but rather emphatic proximity, intensive interconnectedness" (Braidotti, 1994, p.5). Initially developed by Braidotti as a term for a differentiated understanding of the feminist subject, the "nomadic subject" can also be described as postmodern or postcolonial, depending on where the concept is used. This nomad does not have to seek a third space, mimic anyone, resist, or lose its home to become itself, rather it expresses "the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without and against an essential unity" (p.22).

As the very history of ideas can be seen as nomadic, this conception allows seeing their cross-border diffusion as facilitated not just by the concept of a "traveler", but also, owing to the nomadic tradition of oral history, as a way of preserving ideas and knowledge that could be forgotten or forced to be forgotten. At the same time this nomadic subject is not ungrounded, she has a transitory attachment to the earth, in antithesis to the figure of the farmer the nomad "gathers, reaps, and exchanges, but does not exploit" (p.25). As an intellectual style nomadism is not about homelessness or fluidity without borders, but about understanding the porousness of borders, their unfixedness, which allows trespassing, transgressing, as well as recreating the nomad's home base anywhere because her essential belongings are always with her. And finally, the main feature of this nomadic subjectivity is transdisciplinarity, the crossing of boundaries without concern for distinctions, which borders with the Levi-Straussian "bricolage" (1966):

> "It also constitutes a practice of 'theft', or extensive borrowing of notions and concepts that, as Cixous puts it, are deliberately used out of context and derouted from their initial purpose. Deleuze calls this technique 'deterritorialization' or the becoming-nomad of ideas." (Braidotti, 1994, p.37)

Nomad and nomadism— are all concepts and areas that study the culture of cyclically migratory cultures, which according to Khazanov (2002) were widely distributed across nearly all continents with exception of Australia and were characterized as violent people that sacked cities and looted and killed sedentary populations around themselves, doomed to extinction due to lack of civilization (Toynbee, 1948; Gachev, 1988). Other accounts insist on the peaceful nature of nomadic cultures focused on co-existence with others (Karabaev, 2010), as

representatives of border cultures, which incorporated elements of several geographically neighboring ones in relations of either symbiosis or synthesis (Badmaev, 2016; Kokombaev, 2013; Dudchenko, 2013). While differing in their assessment of peaceful or violent nature of nomads, which may very well be simultaneously both, these accounts agree in the specific ability of a nomadic society to absorb elements of another without subjugating or destroying it, but rather incorporating into own mobile structures on the basis of contingency.

It is important to note here that anything related to nomads and nomadic culture, as discussed in main disciplines that research this topic (anthropology, history, oriental studies, culturology) is mostly of a descriptive nature. In theoretical research appellation to nomadic concepts up to a certain time has not been considered, due to the epistemological differences — whereas theoretical disciplines within the social sciences are direct descendants of the Enlightenment rationality, the nomadic culture has a decentered existence with disregard for written knowledge and theory. As such the topic of nomadism only surfaces in ethnographic and historical research, closely linked to state politics of countries that sent these ethnographers and historicists for study and investigation.

This was true until the late 1980s, when Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari developed their concept of "nomadology" or the science of nomads (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) in two-part publication on capitalism and schizophrenia. The treatise on nomadology is part of the second volume — *The Thousand Plateaus*, where they explicate their view of the nomadic lifestyle as being different from that of the settled or sedentary people. This different lifestyle leads to another type of rationality — light and mobile, decentralized, plural and schizoid, offering many options at once. In this sense, the project of nomadology is one that contrasts itself with the project of settledness, cultivating in itself traits that are opposite to that of settledness.

This allows Deleuze and Guattari to go beyond not only the existing studies of nomadism, but also generally beyond the European epistemology, where they find that the European civilization is a civilization of the center and verticality, totality and simulacrum. But at the same time, this approach also reveals the possibility of a different picture of the world — that of multiplicities, decentered, where people do not share space, but are divided in smooth and vast expanses of space, dispersed. These are the precepts of nomadology by Deleuze and Guattari, who rework the numerous ethnographic observations of nomads into a theory designed to describe the nomadic picture of the world, where the "war machine" of the nomads, capable of bristling at any moment, opposes the deadening totality of the Leviathan state.

This dissertation is interested in the further incorporation of the nomadic into the analytical apparatus of postcolonial and decolonial, as well as, feminist thought. Basing on the concepts of Braidotti's nomadic subjectivity and nomadology of Deleuze and Guattari, as well as studies of nomadic philosophies by Kyrgyz (Urmanbetova, Abdrasulov, 2009; Urmanbetova, 2016) and Kazakh scholars (Kodar, 2009; Kodar and Kodar, 2015; Imanbekova, 2019), I propose the concept of "nomadity of being" as an antithesis to the decolonial concept of "coloniality of being". Whereas the former would consider any feminist organizing in non-Western societies as an instance of ideological colonization by the imperialist "West", the latter could create an open and unbridled space for different interpretations. Based not only on Kyrgyzstan's, but whole of Central Asia's, historiography of which suggests nomadic attitude to anything foreign as something that is either temporal or something that can be picked apart and selected in accordance with own needs. Nomadic subjects remain in the interstices between a colonized land and one that was only temporarily subjugated until better times are around. This approach suggests agency and not victimization of non-Western peoples, in this case — of Central Asia, of Kyrgyzstan.

'Nomadity of being' helps see the historiography of feminist activism in Kyrgyzstan as one, where foreign information and requirements, even forced ones, are transformed into an amalgamation of the new and the old, alien and native — like *kurak*, a 'quilted blanket', made from whatever scraps available. Weaving in elements from completely different and, to a Western eye, incompatible approaches, nomadity of being might pave the way towards a Central Asian reframing of non-Western feminisms. This concept can be creatively related to the concept of tricksterism in terms of Donna Haraway (1991) and Chela Sandoval (2000), which as opposed to mythological or folklore meanings, is based on a constant appeal to categories that undermine and call into question modernity from a paradoxical position from the outside, created from the inside. What is important is the rebel nature of any trickster, its tendency to disobey normative rules and conventions. Such qualities as duality, deception of authority, tricks and jokes about power, metamorphism, intermediary function between different worlds, manipulation and bricolage as modes of existence are preserved (Tlostanova, 2012).

The concept of 'nomadity of being' is powerful insofar as it diminishes the problematics of both postcolonial and decolonial options with their inevitability of coloniality of being into something that can be digested and made useful — a productive force that provides a way out of the postmodern condition of oppressive hopelessness. It takes what it

likes, a process that could even be described as plagiarism or appropriation, and forgets to attribute, forgets where it got it from, as the borrowed becomes a part of the living and breathing bricolage, a *kurak*. The narratives of women's rights activists in Kyrgyzstan that follow in the next chapter will provide a colorful backdrop for this concept.

Summary

Critical Theory can be considered as having engendered the different strands pertinent to the theoretical discussion of this dissertation: feminist theory, Foucauldian theories of knowledge and biopower, and postcolonial and decolonial theories, which were influenced by both the Foucauldian analysis and development theories in explaining the discursive formation of colonialism through political, epistemological and economic hegemony. The common uniting point between these theories is their critical approach to Enlightenment and liberalism, and their epistemological turn.

At the same time, it is possible to observe a progression within these theories, where out of Critical Theory came theories of development, as well as a Foucauldian analysis of the politics of disciplinary power with its production of "truth". The combination of these paved way first for the postcolonial theory, and then for the decolonial option. When applying to feminist theory these concepts proved to be relevant, however, they required further clarification and expansion of notions. So, instead of "hybridity", which is shown as a "no exit" situation for the colonized that is stuck without an identity in an ever-expanding echo chamber of reproducing the culture of the colonizer, the concept of a "nomad" was provided, with its further explication into a potential antithesis to the coloniality of being.

Chapter 4. Contextual background

When discussing any contemporary phenomenon, it seems conducive to trace the genealogy of the phenomenon historically and ideologically. In order to identify current feminist narratives in contemporary Kyrgyzstan and understand them contextually, it is necessary to look into what has conditioned this context. In the case researched the context can be dissected and analyzed across the axes of pre-, during and post-Soviet time. The first section looks at the pre-Soviet time providing the region and the country's general historical overview, as well as its first encounter with Russia, by all means colonial. The second section looks at the Soviet and post-Soviet period from the point of view of coloniality critique, setting itself the task of understanding whether the postcolonial or decolonial can be applied to the post-Soviet space, which itself must be based on consideration of whether the Soviet Union was a colonial empire. The last section provides a specific historiography of women's movement in its current post-Soviet iteration.

4.1 Reflections on Central Asian coloniality

Over the course of thousand years, Central Asia faced numerous cultural, economic, political, and military external influences. In the past being a part of the Turkic-speaking nomads, then Mongol, Kokand, Russian and later Soviet empires, Central Asia acquired the unprecedented mixture of "Indo-European (proto-Persian in this case), Turkic and Mongol cultures, and the Russian and then Soviet culture that was imprinted on top of this cultural mosaic" (Olcott, 2001). These influences, though, were not melted in the pot, but concentrated in separate conglomerates within the region, and it is difficult to pinpoint which of them were a result of colonial domination and which — a basic reaction of adaptation for survival.

While the official Soviet historiography did not recognize the concept of Kyrgyz statehood prior to establishment of Soviet rule in Central Asia, attributing it only to the "wise Leninist national policy of the USSR" (Tchoroev, 2002, p.357), post-Soviet historiography of sovereign Kyrgyzstan goes as far back as the period between 11th century BC and early AD to place the ancient roots of Kyrgyz statehood (Borovkova, 1989; Khudiakov 1995; Tchorotegin, 1995b; Tchorotegin and Omurbekov, 1994). This view is based on Chinese archival sources and relates the Kyrgyz to being part of the Turkic-speaking Hsiung-nu empire. Other sources place the roots of Kyrgyz statehood to that of Enissei Kyrgyz, moving back the origin times up to 6th century AD (Malabaev, 1997).

Regardless of where that origin pin shall end up being placed, however, the history of the Kyrgyz or any other nomadic peoples of the region consisted of systematic warfare for expansion or retention of territory. Certainly, this could also be said of sedentary peoples of the region — or indeed, of Eurasia or the world as it is — that relations of war defined the geopolitics of a given region, with the difference being that geopolitics of sedentary people was more stable, while that of nomadic people was highly volatile (Sinor, 1981). As such the nomadic people had normalized the idea of seizing control of others or being subjugated as a result of military failure, and that whichever of these was true for the moment — it could always change with sufficient effort or lack of it. In this regard the question whether nomadic people (which Kyrgyz are) had ever been colonized poses a further question that needs to be looked at closely, such as — what makes colonialism different from conquest?

Although historiography regarding the early to medieval history of the Kyrgyz clans is not very developed, owing to lack of written records by the Kyrgyz themselves and so largely based on Chinese or Arabic archives, the expansion-retraction model of the people's history is clearly traceable. With exception of the nearly 200 years of the great Kyrgyz Khanate (*kyrgyzskoe velikoderjavie)* from 9 to 11th century, the Kyrgyz tribes were constantly in war and subjugated by the Chinese, Hun, Uighur, Mongol, Oirat, Jumgar, Kalmyk, Manchu and Kokand khanates and empires. Even when some Kyrgyz tribal leaders were promoted to important positions in the administrative and social structures of the ruling principalities, sometimes advancing to positions of khans and recognized as such — other Kyrgyz tribes resisted, waging and losing wars against the invaders. This poses another question of differentiating between colonization, compliance and resistance of a people that bears a collective ethnonym, but whose composite parts — *uruu* ('clans') — can be as different in their attitudes to conquest, as that of several different peoples. There could be no one single *kagan* ('khan') who, by surrendering, could guarantee the surrendering of the whole, only numerous different khans who could only guarantee that of his own clan. Effectively, nomadic statehood is most akin to a union of independent states with no central ruler. This did not change even when the Russian rule was established in the region, ostensibly, the most foreign to the nomads of Central Asia.

Russia's advance into its frontiers intensified after the fall of Kazan in 1552, adding an average of 57,000 sq.km every year to its ever-growing empire (Cole, 1984). Its expansion into Central Asia, or Turkestan as it was called, is usually the period that historicists of Central Asia identify as colonial, effectively discarding the previous history of systematic warfare that

nomadic people of the region were engaged in throughout centuries. This period is also usually studied in conjunction with the history of Soviet Central Asia, mostly in comparative research. What makes scholars consider history of Russian expansion into Central Asia, which Kyrgyzstan is a part of, as colonial, while viewing history of the Kokand khanate, for example, which directly preceded Russian control over the region as that of conquest and not colonization? Even though as previously discussed, the different ruling principalities that Kyrgyzstan was made part of, have all left their marks on the culture, social and economic spheres of life, this history is considered through the lens of the "melting pot" concept, and not that of coloniality.

One difference may be in the distance between the center and periphery, with Moscow being far more distant from the Kyrgyz lands than Tashkent, for example, however both the Russian empire and the Kokand Khanate directly bordered the subjugated lands — the vast steppes and mountainous valleys of modern Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan were not an overseas colony like India or Cote D'Ivoire for Britain and France, nor were they completely over-run by the colonizers like the Americas. Both considered the subjugated lands as a physical extension of their borders, granting some level of autonomy to native leaders. The actual difference then may be based on something alphabetic, such as the actual usage of the term "colony" by the Russian authorities upon expansion into Central Asia in 19th century, following example of their European counterparts elsewhere (Uyama, 2012). The previous rulers in Central Asia did not and could not have used this term.

Scholars on Russian rule in Central Asia (Osterhammel, 2005; Vulpius, 2012) pay special attention to the public discourse on the "civilizing mission" of the Russian Empire towards its Asiatic subjects, as expressed by numerous Russian authorities and intellectuals. For example, in 1864 Russian Foreign Minister Gorchakov prepared a circular that justified imperial Russia's advance into Central Asia as motivated "less by ambition than by necessity", acting just like "the United States in America, France in Africa, Holland in its colonies, England in East India" — that is bringing "civilization" to the uncivilized (in European understanding) lands bordering Russia (Crews, 2009). Fedor Dostoevskii wrote in 1881 in his diary: "In Europe, we were Tatars, yet in Asia we are Europeans as well. Our mission, our civilizing mission in Asia will tempt our minds and pull us there, if only the movement has started" (Minihan, 1967, p.646). Later this was echoed in 1900 by Governor-General Dukhovskoi, who claimed that Russians had opened up the "path to universal progress for the

numerous peoples of Central Asia" by abolishing "with the one hand the coarse, arbitrary rule of petty despotic rulers, with the other smashing the fetters of slavery" (Crews, 2009, p.80).

According to Vulpius (2012) although the discourse within imperial Russia on the country's superiority towards its Asian territories only established in 19th century, its basis was developing already in the 18th century with Peter the Great's change of discourse following his engagement with Europe. Vulpius notes how this sense of superiority in Russia was expressed through the adjective *politichnyi*, as opposed to "civility" or "civilized" that refer to citizenship. This term then developed into *liudskost* — politeness, human kindness, modesty — initially used to describe social behavior that Peter the Great demanded of nobility, and later used as an antonym to barbarism. Vulpius takes this to indicate that Russia developed its idea of civilization and of a "civilizing mission" not from Western Europe, but from the neighboring Slavic state of Poland and their word *ludzkość*. And while it is up to debate whether Russia realized it had a mission of developing *liudskost* out of its barbarian Asiatic subjects independently of the West, or on the contrary as a result of the ever-expanding game of catching up and surpassing Europe, the definition of this mission depended on fulfillment of two criteria (Osterhammel, 2005): 1) a clearly expressed conviction of the civilizers in their own superiority towards their subjects, and 2) expectation on the part of civilizers of receptivity by those to be civilized.

Although the actual discourse reflecting these two criteria did not manifest itself in the official doctrines until the 19th century, already in the 18th century it was clear that the Russians had been developing a sense of superiority towards the nomadic peoples that inhabited the neighboring lands. In his official correspondence, governor of Astrakhan from 1718 to 1725 Artemii Volynskii referred to Kalmyk people as "my children" (Khodarkovsky, 2006). This paternal attitude is later repeated and further explicated by the governor of Orenburg Dmitrii Volkov in 1763 in his discussions with guest, the Kazakh Khan Nurali, who provides an evolutionary overview of people's development, comparing nomadic state to that of childhood, while that of the civilized nation like Russia — to that of an adult (Vasiliev, 2014; Mominova et al, 2019). This rhetoric is quite reminiscent of J.S. Mill with his paternalistic differentiation of nations into civilized and barbarian from Chapter 3, section 1.

Although Volkov later does mention that Russia in earlier times was similar to the nomads of the steppes, migrating from one place to another, he notes that "wise rulers and God's providence led the Russian people into such a state that it has now acquired the luck of being in complete calmness" and that a "suitable obedience helped them to achieve this"

(Vulpius, 2012, p.24). Another example of this paternalism can be traced in reports on the situations of the Junior and Middle Juz in the steppes provided by Major General Aleksei Tevkelev and high-ranking civil servant Petr Rychkov in 1759, who reported that:

> "particularly among the possessors of land and among the elders, one can find people who have come to such a state of reason (*razum*) by their short-lasting contact [with the Russians] that it could be seen to them to have acquired civility (*liudskost'*) and common sense (*dovol'noe razsuzhdenie*)" (Vulpius, 2012, p.23)

As the sense of superiority towards Russia's Asiatic subjects spread among the elites, they increasingly started comparing themselves to their European counterparts, which may explain the initial similarity in this imperialist paternalism. The Russian intellectuals celebrated modernizing interventions in Turkestan such as infrastructural developments in transportation (railroads), agriculture and irrigation, Europeanized medical and hygiene standards, as well as push for the settling and urbanization of the spaces, perceiving them as evidence that Russian influence in the region had motivated the local people to leap out of their "medieval condition of apathy and anarchy" (Tcharykow, 1931, p. 159.).

The idea of a state having a "civilizing mission" is not new in terms of historical studies, as Osterhammel (2005) explicates, and not uniquely Western, although Western Europe was most successful in propagating its cultural mores. A close match, however, is China with their philosophy of *lai Hua* — 'coming to China' that the barbarians were expected to, with their minds and hearts turned towards the brilliance and righteousness of the culture that was the Middle Kingdom. The definition that Osterhammel gives to such a mission then is:

> "The 'civilizing mission' is a special kind of belief with, sometimes, practical consequences. It includes the self-proclaimed right and duty to propagate and actively introduce one's own norms and institutions to other peoples and societies, based upon a firm conviction of the inherent superiority and higher legitimacy of one's own collective way of life. Note that 'mission' here is not restricted to the spreading of a religious faith. It denotes a comprehensive *Sendungsbewusstsein*, a general propensity to universalize the Self." (Osterhammel, 2005, p.12)

This definition simplifies the task of understanding what differentiates the conquest of Central Asia by the Russian Empire from that by the Kokand khanate — the latter, while recognizing the differences between the settled and the nomadic peoples of the region, itself belonging to sedentary, and as such, to "civilized" cultures, never had proclaimed itself as having a right and a duty to propagate their own way of life. The nomadic peoples, as well as the other settled states in the region, were mostly left to their own faculties, as long as they were paying the taxes and following the generally agreed rules. The former — believed in their

own superiority and saw it as their duty to "enlighten" the region, a task that was picked up by the Soviet Union, even as it presented itself in opposition to the image of the Russian Empire.

4.2 "Paradoxes" of Soviet coloniality in Central Asia

Soviet Union was the largest, but not the only, party-state that was established in the 20th century espousing communism on the basis of Marxist ideology. These communist state projects were fundamental in their uprooting of the economic, political and social underpinnings of societies, bringing total social transformation. However, as Cheng (2009) writes:

> "Behind the ideological, political, and social changes was a more ambitious and comprehensive goal: to remold the mind, psychology, and even character of individuals by means of various party and state policies designed for a 'new man' and, through this 'new man', to make history and perpetuate the revolution." (p.1)

This 'new man' in our case was the 'Soviet Man' (*Sovetskiy chelovek*), sixty years after Leon Trotsky's musings about "harmonizing man" as the ultimate purpose of communist revolution proudly identified as having evolved into "a new and higher type of Homo sapiens: Homo sovieticus" (Cheng, p.3). Presented as morally and psychologically superior to all other humans, 'Homo sovieticus' was seen as the perfect machine — rational, fair, hardworking — that could be tasked with ensuring that Soviet Union is glorified in all areas of comparison. Women were as much part of the Homo sovieticus as men were, gaining universal education, healthcare, reproductive freedom, as well as equal rights to work much earlier than their Western counterparts, as discussed in Chapter 2 (subsection 3).

It is easy to see the traces of Enlightenment in this idea of the Soviet Union in creating a principally "new man", as the next step of evolution. This relationship becomes even more pronounced when considered from the point of view of Soviet handling of Central Asia, which it approached with paternalism of the "enlightener", seeing the region as backwards and oppressive, uncritically taking over the legacy of the Russian colonial attitude. Although other regions of the nascent Soviet Union were also not too far ahead, requiring emancipation as well, imperial Russia's borderlands in Central Asia and the Caucasus were considered the final frontier, the *tselina* that were to be raised to show the transformational prowess of the communist ideology.

Two ways of looking at the meeting of the two territorial and political entities is to consider it as either a colonizing encounter or a modernizing one. In line with the latter line of thinking are scholars like Oliver Roy (2000) and Terry Martin (2001), who argue that Central Asian states owe their legal inception, state boundaries, languages, ethnicity, and other dividing

lines to the complicated mechanism of nation building invented by Joseph Stalin. Martin (2001) describes the Soviet Union as the world's first "affirmative action empire", which in response to rising nationalism in its borderlands promoted a policy of *korenizatsiia* ('nativization') as a way of ensuring compliance of local elites. This policy saw inclusion of representatives of titular ethnicities of each of the fifteen republics into the lower levels of local governance, effectively "decolonizing" these republics in contrast with the Tsarist Russia, while cutting off attempts at full decolonization by the local intellectuals and leaders (Martin, 2001).

The real thrust of the Soviet project in Central Asia was structural. The Soviet Union a) easily speculated with ethnicity as a dividing counterbalance to pan-Islamism, b) used borderlines to separate groups from one another, c) forced politics of russification d) while still employing vocabulary of the Tsarist administration to ensure stability. The Soviet policy attempted to abrogate religion and eliminate tribal division by creating artificial ethnicities and institutions with invented pasts, accentuated languages and established administrative entities (Fragner, 2001). As fairly noticed, "under the auspices of the leading Soviet political class, a specific ideological model of nationalism came into existence" (Fragner, p.14). The modernization processes went hand in hand with the Sovietisation that included direct pressure on traditional society.

But where the Soviet Union has made its biggest impact is women's emancipation, which has later resulted in extreme pushback from the aggrieved male contingent of the region. And in this sense Soviet Union in Central Asia can be seen as a post-colonial power, whose main focus was to establish itself, while also incorporating the populations of the former diverse imperial territories (Kandiyoti, 2007). Although typically the question of gender in Muslim contexts is usually presented as a conflicting interplay of Islam and modernity, in the case of Soviet Central Asia this was an issue of territorial consistency in modernity and union-wide ideological loyalty. The former was important for the competition with capitalist democratic states on the global arena, and as such was manifested through the drive to modernize and ensure progress in Central Asia perceived as 'backward' owing to legacy of Tsarist area studies (Northrop, 2000). And party loyalty of Central Asian men was assessed through their relation to women and their new, emancipated, social status.

Ostensibly one of the most contested projects undertaken by the Soviet Union in Central Asia in the early years was *hujum* ('assault'), a large-scale attack on the widely practiced social customs of women's veiling, seclusion, child marriage, bride price, bride abduction (Suyarkulova, 2016). The veil symbolized the region's backwardness that needed curing with

Soviet modernity, so women's emancipation in Soviet Central Asia became one of the key objectives of the Bolsheviks, who saw women as a 'surrogate proletariat' (Massell, 1974) in the absence of a local working class that could be enlisted as the most exploited and humiliated in pre-Soviet Central Asia.

Kandioyoti (2007) considers Soviet Union's entanglement with women's emancipation in Central Asia as one of the greatest destabilizing factors in the region:

> "Extending the reach of the state into areas which the tsarist regime had been content to leave alone, the Soviets intervened aggressively in the realm of 'custom' by criminalizing and prosecuting a category of misdemeanors based on local traditions (*bytovye prestupleniia* or *byt* - literally 'way of life' - crimes). (p.604)

Among these crimes were the aforementioned practices that *hujum* was against — bride price, bride abduction, veiling, seclusion, child marriage, among others. Coupled with *hujum* was invitation to learn and work on equal footing with men — unheard of in pre-Soviet Central Asia, and something considered shameful even. Forced unveiling and education for girls often led to murderous consequences for women. At the same time, there were many women that stood up for their right to education and work, who joined the Soviet *jenotdely* ('women's departments') and carried out activities aimed at enticing other women to join, to emancipate (Tokhtakhodzhaeva, 2008).

Although Central Asian societies responded negatively to Soviet meddling with the established gender order, they were able to adapt the new offered/forced economic, social, political and cultural codes to this same order. For example, owing to specifics of the Soviet planned economy, which categorized Central Asia as primary commodity producers, as well as Soviet nationalities policy, the region was able to incorporate the old customary ways of social organizing into new conditions, such as *mahallas* (neighbourhood) or *uruu* (nomad lineages) becoming the basis for *kolkhoz* (collective farm) formation. This ensured that such conditions were created, which allowed for practices of custom and tradition to remain and be re-enforced, resulting in the 'Soviet Paradox' of "high literacy and labour force participation rates against the background of high fertility rates, large families and relatively untransformed domestic divisions of labor" (Kandiyoti, 2007, p.607).

Aiding in this 'paradox' was also the aggressive reproductive regime of the Soviet Union, which considered population its main means of retaining and expanding power. It promoted motherhood by providing welfare, as well as instituting various awards like Heroine Mother or Motherhood Glory for women with ten and seven and more children respectively. As the large family aspect of Central Asian societies found a new state-supported outlet,

domestic labour division did not change — leaving Central Asian little choice: either family control or lack of professional development. Hence the Soviet project of women's emancipation in Central Asia turned out to stop just short of penetrating the surface of the gender order in the region. As Kandiyoti notes (2007):

> "Women had a clear preference for occupations that were optimally suited to fit in with domestic chores and routines by providing shorter hours, longer holidays and easier access to consumer goods that were in limited supply." (p.609)

The analysis of the Soviet regime specifically in Central Asia as colonial is contentious along two lines: 1) there is debate on whether this regime can be considered colonial/imperial at all, and 2) the positions of those defending either sides of this debate seem to be aligned based on their positive or negative assessment of the Soviet Union. Those representing the positive Soviet alignment (Etkind, 2001; Khalid, 2006; Kalinovsky, 2013) describe the Soviet Union as ideologically postcolonial. Soviet Union recognized and supported the post-colonial trend in the academia and international relations, which allowed the country to challenge the Western perceptions of it as an imperial entity. Contrary to that view Soviet Union promoted its image as a post-colonial state, which was recognized by the anti-colonial liberatory movements of the post-World War II period in Africa, Latin America and South Asia, who saw in the Soviet Union a source of inspiration and a model for development of social relations (Khalid, 2006).

Furthermore, the political support of these postcolonial movements by the Soviet Union when referenced by the party leaders of Central Asian countries in relation to lobbying of greater socio-economic development of the region resulted in positive decision-making. Kalinovsky (2013) notes this agency on the part of the regional authorities to invoke the desire of the Soviet leadership to uphold its image of the postcolonial ally, by comparing the inadequate infrastructural development of Central Asia with that of "some British colony in Africa", which in the case of construction of the *Nurek* hydro-electric power station and its service town resulted in an expanded infrastructure for residents of the nearby villages. Initially the plans for the service town did not include development of anything outside its limits, however the plans were modified upon argumentation that such a situation would be too reminiscent of typical colonial industrial settlements, which provide everything for the white settlers, while leaving the local population without access to basic amenities.

Those representing the anti-Soviet spectrum are authors like (Kulski, 1959; Sahni, 1997; Slezkine, 2008; Tlostanova, 2012; Kukulin, Mayofis, Safronov, 2015) that defend the rhetoric of Soviet Union being a colonial empire that subjugated smaller peoples. Within this

view, the alleged post-coloniality of Soviet Union is a contested subject, which by some authors is described as "colonialism in camouflage" (Annus, 2018, p.13). For example, the Soviet Union is represented in Soviet and early post-Soviet science as a liberator of the subjugated peoples, opposing itself to the Russian Empire. At the same time, clear signs of their continuity and close ties, including in the forms of rapid recolonization in the first years of Soviet power, were carefully hidden (Sahni, 1997). Outwardly, the USSR supported the theatrical forms of multiculturalism and other options for negative discrimination, advocated creolization instead of racial and ethnic segregation. However, there is data that most of this rhetoric was a false front, which was hiding racism, orientalism, progressivism, structural inequality and other familiar flaws of modernity / colonialism, even though in the forms of state socialism (Tlostanova, 2019). In addition, there were a number of specific and often extremely contradictory features that were characteristic only of Soviet modernity. Among them, the most characteristic feature was the impressive variability of relations between the mother country and different colonies in accordance with the degree of their proximity to Europe.

There is a third, emerging, line of analysis of the Soviet regime in Central Asia, coming from the region itself, which prefers to describe it as both — colonial and immanent, desired by the peoples that were part of it (Tokhtakhodzhaeva, 2008; Mamedov, 2016; Bagdasarova, 2016). While the Tsarist rule of nearly 50 years had been unanimously described as colonial, the way that Soviet regime followed up on some of the practices exercised by the Russian governors suggests that it was a hybrid regime. Ideologically it denounced the treatment of Central Asian indigenous population against the Russian and Ukrainian settlers moved there by the Tsarist administration, but at the same time upheld some of the very practices that created these differences, as well as engendered new practices necessarily arising from the impetus to modernize. Some established tropes in describing the Soviet Union in Central Asia as a colonial empire are recognized in this line of analysis, such as the Soviet authorities' attempts to ban religion, criminalize established domestic practices, force women's emancipation against the will of the majority of society, neglect local languages and promote Russian as the lingua and culture franca, as well as on the economic categorization of Central Asia as resource republics, which lacked industrialization.

At the same time, while these practices have undoubtedly violated and forced some groups of population into humiliating subordination, this cannot be applied to the whole of the experience. And so while Soviet state policies in the region did have colonial characteristics the nature of the reforms were welcomed by the local population and have had their local

predecessors and supporters among the activists such as the movement of *jadids*, who had already been gaining traction with their pull towards Westernization and liberalization. Marfua Tokhtakhodzhaeva (2008) supports this view in her historical overview of the position of women in Uzbekistan, noting that while *hujum* took a lot of lives and the Soviets' actions in the region often resulted in violent rejection, there was a powerful grassroots movement of women (and slightly less of men), who ardently gave their lives away for the emancipated future of women. Analysis of communication of *jenotdely* workers in Kyrgyzstan by Anara Moldosheva (2016) shows similar passion of women, even in the face of violent persecution on the part of their countrymen.

As such the Soviet hybrid of modernity and colonialism and what came to replace it cannot be fully interpreted through postcolonial optics with its typically delocalized universalism. The complex intersection of post-socialism and postcolonialism needs its own discourse and its own critical optics, intersecting, but not coinciding with either postcolonial high theory or more applied postcolonial studies. This discourse should take into account the broader relationships of dependence and post-dependence related to a critical analysis of modernity as a set of epistemological attitudes and patterns created for its self-legitimation and reproduction. It becomes especially clear when analyzing what is described as subalternization of women in post-socialist countries (Burcar, 2012, p.108), where women in the post-Soviet societies find themselves re-enslaved and forcibly returned to the patriarchal traditional models of overexploitation. This is in stark contrast with the position of women during the Soviet times, which provided imaginary or real socialist emancipation and empowerment, as well as state support. While it allows to compare the situation of post-socialist states with post-colonial ones, it also makes it clear that in the case of the post-socialist states the root of the re-traditionalization is associated with the failure of the Soviet modernity project as a whole. According to Boris Groys:

> "the post-Communist subject travels his route not from the past to the future, but from the future to the past; from the end of history [...] back to historical time. Post-Communist life is life lived backward, a movement against the flow of time" (Groys, 2008, p.154)

The Soviet modernizing project was over with the collapse of the Soviet Union, so the societies that were in an ideological void were re-colonized by the other remaining alternative — the neoliberal modernity. As soon as Soviet Union was over, liberal and market economy-offering 'West' as a contested category, appeared on the horizons of the former Soviet countries represented by various international donor-funded agencies. Although initially optimistically

greeted by governments in the majority of the newly independent states these agencies soon were more distrusted than trusted (Buroway and Verdery, 1999) — with an exception of Kyrgyzstan, which remained open to foreign governmental and non-governmental aid through today. The attitude to such aid continues to shift, however, and the next section will provide an overview of the post-Soviet trajectory of women's rights activism in the country.

4.3 A brief historiography of women's activism in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan

On the brink of economic collapse in the early 1990s, Kyrgyzstan welcomed support of international organisations in finding a way out of the crisis. Driven by the country's first President Askar Akaev, the first economic reforms were drafted in cooperation with international financing institutions and multilateral development organisations, such as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Liberalization of the market, property privatization and drastic cuts to the welfare system composed the 'shock therapy' of these reforms (Pelkmans, 2017). With over 50% of bills drafted by international organisations passing through *Jogorku Kenesh* (Parliament) of Kyrgyzstan, the country was described by a US diplomat in 1994 as:

> "Politically, Kyrgyzstan is light-years ahead of the other new republics. Economically, it is carefully and methodically preparing the way for a market economy". (Cranston and Green, 1994)

In the first decade of its post-Soviet independence Kyrgyzstan came to be known internationally as the "Switzerland of Central Asia" or "Island of Democracy", referring to the neighbouring countries, which on the contrary, took turns towards authoritarianism and conservative political policies, while partially liberalizing their economies. President Akaev was considered to be ideologically neoliberal and in his first years of presidency was seen as someone, who truly saw full-out liberalization as the only way to move forward after seventy years of being commodity producers in the geopolitical backyard of the Soviet Union.

It is during this phase of total freedom that majority of non-governmental organisations have sprung up in the country with an aim of promoting democratization, human rights, market economy — with generous support of international funding agencies. The status and role of women in the newly independent Kyrgyzstan started once again being raised externally — this time by the international donor-funded gender and development institutions (Corcoran-Nantes, 2005). Donors and international organisations saw it necessary to mainstream gender equality in Kyrgyzstan, seeing women as being particularly damaged by the transition of the 1990s, and provided stable funding to these proto-feminist organisations.

However, as the promised economic investments did not pour into the country, magically relieving it of its transition pains, and as the President's family started privatizing and appropriating successful businesses, popular dissatisfaction with the regime grew and solidified, led by civic activists and leaders that were trained in NGOs established in the formative years of the independent Kyrgyzstan. This resulted in the first revolution of the country in 2005, which ousted President Akaev, replacing him with President Kurmanbek Bakiev. After this revolution trust towards foreign-funded NGOs and initiatives subsided intensively.

As is historically recorded, Kyrgyzstan was not among the countries that voted for the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and after the collapse the people were left with a sense of abandonment, uncertainty and insecurity — during which nationalism gained momentum (Handrahan, 2001; Ismailbekova, 2016). Unlike Baltic or Caucasian states, at the dissolution of the Soviet Union the Central Asian countries had to actively reconstruct their past to justify the legitimacy of their states. As Oliver Roy (2000) fairly noticed "Their [Central Asia states] achievement of independence was sudden, and not necessarily wanted. There was no historical memory of a nation lost, nor had there been nationalist movement preparing the ground."

Despite the rapid ideological change, the old identification as homo Sovieticus — Soviet person, remained hence, providing a common platform for elites to talk during the transition period. A certain grief and nostalgia about the Soviet period were still present among the post-Soviet leaders:

> "If I were to generalize – we felt frustration and confusion [about dissolution of Soviet Union], we were afraid of uncertainty. We were born in the Soviet state and our Soviet identity was strongly inside of us…" (Roza Otunbayeva, former President of Kyrgyzstan, in Dubnov, 2011)

The political elites of Central Asia being bonded by Russian language, being the alumni of Soviet educational civil and military institutions with the unified curricula all over the country, having common memories, and using old structures as Soviet nationalism, were the bearers of the collective Soviet identity. The sophisticated Soviet social experiment succeeded in certain aspects in eroding traditional patriarchal and Islamic society, and turned it into a solidarity group circled around the Soviet idea:

> "I am a Soviet product. Twice I went to Artek [the international camp for youth in the Crimea]. (..) I was good at school and therefore was accepted to Moscow State University [the most prestigious university in the Soviet Union]. (..) I am an example of how the social lifts have worked – I come from a big family from provincial Osh, but I have studied in Moscow University together with professors' kids.(..) We were

> those who formed the forefront of that large Soviet country." (Roza Otunbayeva, former President of Kyrgyzstan, in Dubnov, 2011)

The continuity of the Soviet tradition was ensured by the current nationalist policies that are the blueprint from Soviet Nationalism (Fragner, 2001). Elites openly exploit the familiar structures and toolbox, praising history and inventing the past by awakening old names and giving them a new birth, and then imposing them to people. To contemporary political leaders and elites, Soviet nationalism offered the possibility of continuing to use a familiar ideological tool of public mobilization without maintaining any debt to Marxism- Leninism, to vanished Soviet ethical standards.

Often nationalist discourses represent themselves in debates about women and their role in the society, starting from what they should wear, how they should act, what should they do, all the way to whom they should marry (Suyarkulova, 2016). Sociology of gender and nationalism concurs that women more often than not are considered to be the markers of ethnic and national uniqueness, thus bearing responsibility for the nation's destiny (Yuval-Davis, 1997). In studying this connection sociologist Yuval-Davis develops a classification of all modern nation-states based on their 'myth of origin' and how it treats the subject of women. The *Volknation* considers its women to be responsible for the biological reproduction of the nation and as such for the preservation of the purity of the nation. The *Kulturnation* sees women as bearers of ethnonational culture and intergenerational education 'in the spirit of the nation'. The *Staatsnation* personifies the nation as a woman, i.e. 'Mother Russia'.

While many other post-Soviet countries had a history of modern statehood before Soviet Union to which they could turn in search of a new ideology, Kyrgyzstan did not have such a luxury (Huskey, 2003) and had to reinvent itself — however, it was not simply a return to the "pristine national traditions, interrupted by a Soviet regime now recast as 'colonial', but [...] a strategic redeployment of notions of cultural authenticity in the service of new ideological goals" (Kandiyoti, 2007, pp.602-603).

And so, the country saw — with each of its new Presidents (Akaev 1991-2005, Bakiyev 2005-2010, Otunbayeva 2010-2011, Atambayev 2011-2017) — a parade of mostly male national heroes making their way into history books, community classes in school, all the way to symbolic capital of state holidays and awards. These heroes were to symbolize the reinstatement of male privilege, previously unceremoniously interrupted by the Soviet regime in its quest to emancipate women of Central Asia — now women's place was to retreat to the domain of the 'private' and out of the 'political', being central only to the biological

reproduction of the nation. As Shirin Akiner (1997, p. 287) argues, "the concept of male guardianship has now been re-established as a parameter of private as well as of public life".

As previously discussed, women's emancipation in Central Asia enjoyed, however brief, a status of the flagship of Soviet Union in the region, resulting in establishment of women-friendly welfare system that allowed for wide representation of women in the workforce. This changed drastically after Kyrgyzstan's independence in 1991, which saw women being washed away from the general labour market. As such, Ibraeva, Moldosheva and Niyazova (2011) report that in the period between 1991-2007 percentage of women represented in the country's economic activity dropped from 81.6% to 42.3%, with rural areas hitting it even worse.

At the same time the 1990s saw establishment of a large number of non-governmental NGOs in the post-Soviet space, including Kyrgyzstan, many of which worked on gender issues one way or another, with financial support from the international donor community (Bauer, Green, and Kuenhast, 1997). While reflective of the increased understanding on the part of the donors that gender inequality was a development issue itself (Molyneux and Razavi, 2006), this focus also provided new fields of activism for highly-educated and professional women that lost their jobs in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's dissolution, following the reinstatement of 'male privilege' in all spheres of social life (ACSSC, 2006). Partially funded by international donor agencies and even supported by the government for a while, these organizations were able to participate in the Fourth World Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995, which became a watershed moment in the history of women's movement in not only in Kyrgyzstan, but the whole of Central Asia (Corcoran-Nantes, 2005). It was the first time that women were able to raise both formally and informally questions on the status of women in transition societies, and even to speak up for themselves. Following the Beijing conference, the number of women's NGOs doubled, all of which collectively can be identified as the 'first wave' of women's rights activism in Kyrgyzstan.

According to Ikramova and McConnell (1999) the strongest women's NGOs that were able to gain sponsorship and grants regionally and internationally were ones led by professional and highly educated women, who were strongly influenced by Western feminist movement, coupled with trust in the agenda of international and intergovernmental organisations, such as the UN with its Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Although their range of activities was very broad, it mainly concentrated on providing independent research data on the situation of women in Kyrgyzstan, focusing on

issues of female entrepreneurship, political representation and domestic violence. These issues became dominant issues in the work of this 'wave' - quite reflective of the general trends in gender studies and feminist knowledge reproduction in the post-Soviet discussed in the previous subsection.

As the number of NGOs in Kyrgyzstan increased, the country's civil society had been described as "having a female face" (Stakeeva, Baimatov and Heap, 2002), and as "vibrant" and "robust" (Matikeeva, 2008; Human Rights Watch, 2010). Where at some point more than 80% of NGO directors and senior staff were women, it was seen as testifying to the influential role that women had in the country's development (Moldosheva, 2007). International observers were also quick to note the role of civil society in the coup against the first President of Kyrgyzstan, Askar Akayev, in 2005 (Buxton and Abraliev, 2007). This was especially evident in comparison with how emergent foreign-funded civil society was treated in other countries of Central Asia, where in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan the work of NGOs was accused as working against the state interests and as such totally repressed (with exception of governmentally funded NGOs), and in Tajikistan and Kazakhstan faced restrictions in terms of obligation to report the sources of their funding to the government (Ilkhamov, 2005; Cummings, 2012).

However, with further economic instabilities and precarious balance in the political life in Kyrgyzstan that followed the ousting, trust towards foreign-funded NGOs drastically diminished. It was exacerbated by what was perceived as obvious cajoling of the donor community by the women's rights organisations and gender research groups (United Nations, 2008), who were seen as prioritizing the interests of their funders via development of project proposals aimed at fitting advertised grant requirements, and not the needs and interests of their main beneficiaries — women on the ground (Schulte, 2008). Once again this is highly reflective of the processes that were taking place widely throughout the post-Soviet space, as discussed in Chapter 2 — the ever increasing divide between "gender experts and professional "gender activists" from the "ordinary women" from rural areas (Simpson, 2006; Tiulegenov, 2008). Kyrgyzstan saw an emergence of "well-educated, well-connected, well-traveled, Russian-speaking (and in some cases English-speaking) "professional" women's rights activists" (Hoare, 2016), who the general public saw as being more interested in presenting at a foreign conference or securing a new grant than in actually changing the lives of women on the ground.

At the same time the plight of ordinary women, who had no academic or professional preparation for the age of donor-funded gender activism, has not received much attention from researchers. One of the rare studies that looks into the characteristics of women's entrepreneurship, budget planning and general aspirations of women is a research by Rano Turaeva (2017), who draws attention to the simplification of the post-Soviet re-traditionalization, often described in terms of demodernization of the region, automatically implying that women do not have the right to vote or the ability to make decisions. The post-Soviet realities brought with them difficulties for women outside the academic and professional realms, but also brought with them new opportunities for the male and female population of Central Asia. Women took advantage of opportunities created by opened borders, increased mobility and globalization, the study says. Based on the data collected over a long period from 2005 to the present time, the study shows that in the region there have been changes in gender roles, where more and more women began to take leading roles in economic life. The predominance of women in the markets was not something completely new in post-Soviet Central Asia, although the number of women who traded goods in the market increased dramatically at a time when even teachers and educated women had to leave the public sector in order to find "real money".

Aksana Ismailbekova (2016) further argues that as opposed to the general public discourse in media and academia (often promoted by gender studies) that women in Kyrgyzstan are the new disenfranchised class with lack of access to authority and power, the role of women in the country is more complex. Strategically using the tools of "patriarchal bargaining" (Kandiyoti, 2007) Kyrgyz women navigate their life cycles from being powerless brides (*kelin*), to mothers (*apa*) and finally the mother-in-law (*kainene*), who is the ultimate head of the household overseeing organisation of lifecycle events and wealth distribution within the family (Ismailbekova, 2016). On the example of representatives of each of the stages of a woman's life cycle in a Kyrgyz family Ismailbekova shows how the promise of "inheriting the authority of senior women" (Kandiyoti, 1988, p.279) encourages women to embrace and internalize the patriarchal principles by following the clearly prescribed traditional route for ascension to "domestic" power. It presupposes production of progeny for the family that the bride joins, at which point the bride changes her status from being a powerless newcomer to a member of the household — a mother. The next stage is acquisition of full identification with the family at a point when her sons marry and expand the family. And third stage is when the woman, as part of her joined family, is able to "creatively manipulate her kinsmen and extended

kinship networks during life-cycle events to maintain her position both inside and outside the household" (Ismailbekova, 2016, p.4). As such the societally recognized and accepted practice of traditional authority construction and ascension to power for women in traditional Kyrgyz households, which represent more than 80% percent of the country's population, consists of "processes of manipulation, negotiation, and strategizing" (Ismailbekova, 2016, p.4).

Majority of gender studies research commissioned by donor agencies and international organisations do not look into the needs of women engaged in these traditional life cycles. Questions of upward political mobility and bodily autonomy are an issue for academically and professionally engaged women, who have been exposed to international travel and exchange of knowledge (Petric, 2005; Simpson, 2006), and not to women on the ground. This has increased the criticism of women's rights activism in Kyrgyzstan as going where the money is, to projects on gender equality and domestic violence. Coupled with the nationalistic rejection of Soviet paternalism in women's emancipation in the country, this led to further rejection to consider women's issues on equal footing with other transition issues. Add to that what Kyrgyz public deemed as a 'domineering' influence of first President Akaev's wife on his decisions, as well as his family's financial well-being — and an anti-feminist public discourse is ready to go. Once Akaev was ousted the new government decided to get rid of the statue of *Erkindik* — 'freedom' — that seemed to bear a likeness to Akaev's wife. Additionally, the statue was considered to be un-Kyrgyz, as it held a sacred part of the Kyrgyz national yurt in its hands - an act traditionally reserved only for the respectable elderly men. Some feminists saw this event as the moment, when misogyny became public in Kyrgyzstan.

History did not keep anyone waiting — the year of 2012 saw a string of grisly attacks against migrant women from Kyrgyzstan by their own compatriots, filmed and posted online by the attackers. According to their own anonymous statements (the faces of the men are never on the videos), the self-described "Kyrgyz Patriots" had been organized by Kyrgyz migrant men in the Russian Federation, with an aim of "re-educating" Kyrgyz migrant women for their sexual relationships with other men, which they consider 'betrayal of the nation' (Botoeva, 2012). In their view, the Kyrgyz women "publicly dishonored them and made Kyrgyz men feel the loss of self-respect in the eyes of others" (Botoeva, 2012, p.5). In the videos the Kyrgyz-speaking men would verbally, physically and sexually abuse women for allegedly dating non-Kyrgyz men:

> "A naked woman lies sobbing as a group of Kyrgyz-speaking men brutally cross-examine her. They punch and kick her, pull her hair, and curse at her. Sometimes, the

> aggressors shave their victim's eyebrows or threaten her with a knife." (Bigg, 2012, in RFE/RL article)

But however ghastly the videos may be, it is the country's reaction to the videos that is more symptomatic of the country's attitude to women. Although there has been massive public outcry against the violence in these videos, Kyrgyz public discourse was dominated by opinions that matched that of the "Patriots". In a dissertation covering representation of Kyrgyz migrant women's sexuality by Kyrgyz media, Syrgak Kyzy (2015) concludes, based on a robust discourse analysis of media, that Kyrgyz media devalued and marginalized sexual violence faced by Kyrgyz women at the hands of the "Patriots", presenting their plight as 'punishment' for their 'immoral' sexual lifestyles, making them responsible for the violence faced.

Public discourse was unanimous, with few exceptions on the part of feminist initiatives in Bishkek, in identifying a solution to this problem — limiting the freedom of movement of unmarried women under the age of 22 to leave the country without permission from parents (Suyarkulova, 2016). A draft law proposing exactly that was submitted by a female MP Yrgal Kadyralieva in March 2013 and passed a parliamentary review in August of that same year. Even though in the last moment the gender and age limits were lifted, the Kyrgyz Parliament and public discourse continues entertaining the possibility of introducing the draft law with age and gender limits back (Syrgak Kyzy, 2015).

At the same time in the last few years amidst this state-revived 'traditionalist' discourse on the roles and status of women and men a small number of dissenting voices has become clearly audible. Starting with 2012 a group of feminist initiatives have organized marches and media campaigns against the conservative mold on women, inevitably causing further reactionary attempts at limiting women's personal and social freedom, which by now have created visible rifts in the Kyrgyz public discourse. As their messages find their way into the few liberal-minded media, attention — often negative — of the nationalist forces to their activities increases, resulting in physical attacks (Arykbaev, 2014). Although their numbers are still relatively low, the media strategies employed by these feminist initiatives allow them access to wide online coverage throughout the country.

However, on the opposite end from the both the foreign-funded "professional" gender experts and theoretical feminist initiatives is socio-political activism of "ordinary" women that is relational and on the ground, concerning immediate needs of those around them (Peshkova, 2015), and who do not feel that the previous two groups address their problems well enough. These needs concern child-care, organisation of home life, while struggling to make it without

access to electricity, gas, heating in most rural areas. This is exacerbated by violence that many women face from their relatives or villages in the way they are brought into a family — bride kidnapping, rape, beatings by their husbands or in-laws, disregard on the part of law enforcement agents towards any reports of such violence (Werner, 2009; Ibraeva et al, 2015).

These issues are reflected in the "professional" feminism by gender experts and activists, however the distrust towards institutionalized women's rights activism coupled with often inaccessible terminology, or far too radical external attributes of this feminism as perceived by the general population, have led to a complete breakdown and standstill of women's issues. The political feminist march on 8th of March 2020, marking the International Women's Day, was the most violent of the last eight that have taken place since 2012. The illegal dispersal of feminists with slogans against domestic violence, for women's rights, bodily autonomy was welcomed by both men and women in the online public sphere. Furthermore, these slogans were bastardized into provocative "*chai kuibaim*", "*men toroboim*" — which are translated into "I will not pour tea" and "I will not give birth" (Kaktus Media, 2020), in an attempt to further pump up negativity against the march and its organizers.

The reaction to the march in 2020 is an escalated version of the reaction to the march in 2019, when although not disrupted by the conservative nationalist bands it was heavily criticized in the media and public sphere, as well as within the women's rights circles throughout the country (see for more Chapter 5, section 5.6). The opposition between ordinary women's rights activists and professional feminists was already at the highest level in 2019, when calls for separation from the "feminist agenda" were made by women doing activism in the rural areas of the country. The difference is made along the lines of reproductive or "domestic" power (Ismailbekova, 2016) and whether it is embraced or rejected as a hand-me-down restriction on women's political subjectivity — the ordinary groups embrace their "domestic" power, seeing the feminists as ones that reject it and by doing so, threatening whatever small allocation of authority that the first group was able to bargain out of patriarchy. The activism of these ordinary groups of women in the rural areas of the country, spanning women's councils (*jensovety*), NGOs, research firms, focuses on strategic compliance and conflict mediation, negotiation with the authorities, or substitution of state responsibilities of providing for the weak and poor (Satybaldieva, 2010; Murzakulova, 2015; Sultangaliyeva, 2015). As such the varieties of women's rights activism in Kyrgyzstan (and generally in Central Asia) cannot be explained through a single analytical framework (Peshkova, 2020), but rather through a hybrid of several with a side of nomadism.

Summary

Central Asian history of conquest and colonization is wide and varying, ranging from Mongol, Kokand, Russian and Soviet empires to encountering directly the Western liberal coloniality. However, regardless of the previous history of conquests in the region it is Russia's expansion into Central Asia, or Turkestan as it was called, that is the period that historicists of Central Asia identify as colonial. This period is also usually studied in conjunction with the history of Soviet Central Asia, mostly in comparative research. The difference between conquest and colonization is in the self-proclaimed duty to civilize the people deemed as lesser. In conquest the nomadic peoples, as well as the other settled states in the region, were mostly left to their own faculties, as long as they were paying the taxes and following the generally agreed rules. However, in colonization, the Russian empire believed in their own superiority and saw it as their duty to "enlighten" the region, a task that was picked up by the Soviet Union, even as it presented itself in opposition to the image of the Russian Empire.

The analysis of the Soviet regime specifically in Central Asia as colonial is contentious along two lines: 1) there is debate on whether this regime can be considered colonial/imperial at all, and 2) the positions of those defending either sides of this debate seem to be aligned based on their positive or negative assessment of the Soviet Union. Although scholars adhering to either positive or negative lines of assessment provide convincing data to support their claims, the reality of the Soviet Union was that of a hybrid of colonialism and modernization, which resulted in the Soviet paradox of women's "high literacy and labor force participation rates against the background of high fertility rates, large families and relatively untransformed domestic divisions of labor" (Kandiyoti, 2007, p.607).

With the failure of the Soviet modernizing project the societies that were in an ideological void were re-colonized by the other remaining alternative — the neoliberal modernity. As soon as Soviet Union was over, liberal and market economy-offering 'West' as a contested category, appeared on the horizons of the former Soviet countries represented by various international donor-funded agencies. Although initially optimistically greeted by governments in the majority of the newly independent states these agencies soon were more distrusted than trusted (Buroway and Verdery, 1999) — with an exception of Kyrgyzstan. However, with the foreign funding of civil society, especially gender mainstreaming, which were part and parcel of international aid to the country itself, a gap between ordinary women's needs and professional feminists / gender experts continued, leading to dissatisfaction and distrust towards women's rights activism on the part of the general population.

Chapter 5. Characteristics of women's rights activism in Kyrgyzstan

This chapter provides an overview of narrative trends that resulted from the analysis of life stories and responses of Kyrgyzstan's women's rights activists, responding to RQ. 1, which looked into the characteristics of women's rights activism in the country. As the characteristics of women's rights activism, the research understands the following: insight into how women's rights activists became ones, how they joined activism — this made up the stories of initiation into activism. Roots and goals of their activism, which focused on how women's rights activists viewed the causes of the injustices they are struggling against and what is their ideal future. Further understanding of the mechanics of their activism, which questioned how their activism was done, which strategies they used, how did they learn about possibilities of strategies and approaches to their activism. The characteristics also included the historiography and cartography of women's rights activism in Kyrgyzstan to see if there were any temporal and spatial differences and convergences. And, finally, they also looked at the different internal conflicts that characterize women's rights activism in the country, focusing on the existing clashes between the different groups of activist women. Each of these characteristics is presented under a separate sub-section.

5.1 Field work and data summary

The fieldwork was conducted over three periods in April 2018, August-September 2018, and March 2019 in Kyrgyzstan. Below is a short summary of data and methods employed:

1) Recruitment of respondents was organized using a combination of snow ball sampling and an open invitation via the largest women's rights mailing list (Google group) in Kyrgyzstan. The snow ball sampling was based on interviews of the two then staff members of Bishkek Feminist Initiative, who shared an initial list of potential respondents from different regions of the country. However, that list was too Bishkek-centric with only a few names and organisations listed from the rural areas of the country. In order to diversify the pool of respondents an open invitation in two languages — Russian and Kyrgyz — was sent out via the Unite Campaign mailing list, which yielded additional 5 candidates, one from each region. These regional interviewees further provided contacts of other potential respondents from their towns and villages, expanding the pool.

2) Interviews with 28 individual activists and 14 focus groups with women's rights groups from six cities of the country: Bishkek, Osh, Jalal Abad, Nookat, Karakol, Naryn. The

overall number of women that participated in the research is 78. The average interview time was 1 hour, and average focus group time was 1.5 hours. Interviews were used as a tool for gathering information related to narratives of women's rights activists in Kyrgyzstan regarding their own activism and situation of women in the country expressed across the chronological and spatial axes, their relationship with regional and global feminist discourses, and towards understanding whether any of these narratives were specific or unique to the country and how they could be explained (for details see Appendix 1 and Appendix 2). Prior to starting the interviews, the research goal was briefly introduced and any questions regarding the topic and choice of respondents were answered. Respondents' names were anonymized using their initials or when requested assigning random combinations (for details see Appendix 3).

3) Participant observations (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002, Wright and Hobbs 2006) were used and notes were taken during the central feminist events in Kyrgyzstan. These are: Feminist Marches of 8th March (Bishkek, March 2017, March 2018, March 2019), "Guests from the future: fantasies about feminism" — a theatrical reflection on feminist utopia in Kyrgyzstan organized by the self-identifying feminist activists and initiatives (March 2019). The choice of the first was based on the significance of the marches in the public discourse of Kyrgyzstan, which especially in the last 3-4 years has become especially harsh and unaccepting towards any equality messaging in the country. For example, the last feminist march on the 8th of March 2020 became the most violent of the past decade with physical provocations and violence against the women's rights activists by masked men. Although two days later another meeting was organized to protest the disruption of the march, the actions of the provocateurs received broad support from the general population, uncovering an ever-expanding axiological gap between the values of the so-called capital city intelligentsia and the new mostly rural-raised residents of Bishkek. The second event, a theatrical reflection on feminist utopia, was not initially planned, but it followed from participant observation of preparations for the feminist march — I was invited to take part in the development of the production from the very start.

4)Field work notes from the three trips (April 2018, August-September 2018, February-March 2019). These were brief notes written at the end of each trip to different localities within Kyrgyzstan, accentuating some details of the interviews or focus groups, as well as capturing my overall impressions from the interactions both with respondents and the localities. Most of the notes were handwritten and are kept in the research diary, except notes from the fieldwork to the south and north of the country, which were typed up and used as text in this dissertation.

5.2 Stories of initiation: on becoming a woman's rights activist

Stories of women's initiation into activism in Kyrgyzstan can be roughly categorized into three: 1) becoming a women's rights activist through own, lived experience of discrimination and/or violence; 2) having witnessed discrimination and/or violence towards someone they knew; 3) entry through professional engagement (hired into a mainstream NGO).

In the first category were stories that relayed how the respondents realized that only they could help themselves, that no one else — not society, not government, not universities would step up for them. Many described feelings of hopelessness before discovering feminist or women's rights activism. Others described how witnessing domestic violence between their parents or having experienced such cases themselves in their married lives, brought them to a lowest point in their life, from where only feminism was able to help them out.

> Yes, I define myself as a feminist. And I think that for me feminism played a huge role in preventing violence against myself. That is, any forms of violence that I had experienced before, I thought it was normal to be raped. I thought it was normal to harass a girl without asking if it is okay to touch the girl. And for me, feminism brought the concept that you deserve better, violence is not your present, past or future. (Respondent S.B.)

> When I was a student, I realized that women at the Islamic University had nowhere to turn to because the mufti (a spiritual head of Muslims) was a man, the director was a man, the imams (the highest spiritual person among Muslims) were all men and the vice-directors were also all men […]. We had no one to turn to. Nobody could defend us, and we realized that if we create a legal organization, we can gradually defend the rights of women. But we are not feminists. (Respondent J.)

Many of the women also referred to their married lives as oppressive or as slavery, knowingly or unknowingly repeating the radical feminist concepts of oppression and patriarchy as enslavement of women. They described feelings of desperation, unfairness, being forced to work against their wishes. Some of them had to sacrifice their successful careers or education in order to fulfil their "female duty" by getting married and producing progeny for their husbands' families. Others had to endure years of domestic violence from their husbands in fear that they might not be able to provide for themselves afterwards. These fears were related to the fact that some were not allowed to continue their education, especially those in the South of the country, where religious and traditional values are kept up stronger than in the more cosmopolitan North. But even in cases when they were allowed to complete their education, many were not allowed to work according to their degrees, forced to return to families and tend to the elderly members of the kinship.

> December 2nd of each year marks the International Day of the Struggle for the Abolition of Slavery. Here in Kyrgyzstan, this day should also be celebrated as the day of the struggle to abolish kelinization, which is basically enslavement. Of course, I wasn't wearing shackles and chains, but I felt locked up, every step outside of the house was only possible with the permission of several family members. They expected me to work 24/7. I was forced to do this, because I kind of voluntarily agreed for labor exploitation without any payment – I became a kelinka. […] However, having a baby brought me to my senses. I left the house of my husband's relatives, not knowing what I would do, how I would feed myself and the child, but this question was of the least concern to me back then. I longed for freedom. (Respondent A.I.)

> I was so psychologically oppressed at home. Activism became a revival for me. Before that, I had a very interesting job in science, and had prospects in sociology. We traveled around the country, conducting studies. Suddenly I found myself in darkness without rest, all I had was a household [...]. I had to leave behind all my aspirations, career growth, and I became a village woman. I needed to do something. (Respondent O.)

> Our organization deals with women's rights, more specifically we are working on combating domestic violence. Why exactly this topic? Because it is considered the norm. I am an educated woman, I worked at school for so many years [...]. Despite this, I myself suffered from violence. My husband worked in the law enforcement agency I lived with him for 25 years and put up with everything for all these years. […] I was afraid to divorce my husband, because I was financially dependent on him, like so many other women. I was thinking what would I do if I divorced him, how could I even support my children? I have always had this fear. Then you think about the future: the children will grow up, they will get married, what will you tell the in-laws? Why don't they have a father? What would the people say? (Respondent N.)

Majority of the respondents indicated that their initial acute sensitivity to gender-based inequality developed in their childhood, when the gender-based division of domestic chores and social roles were first introduced to them. Some were lucky to have been born in families that did not endorse such divisions, and others were, on the contrary, subjected to this to an unfair degree, where they could compare how they were tread differently from their male siblings. This is reflective of Kyrgyzstan's position as an intermediate type of patriarchy. Nevertheless, their childhood experiences have left an indelible mark on their sense of justice — once they noticed that the treatment was different for boys and girls, they started noticing this differentiation everywhere, not only within their own families, but in the extended families and friends.

> All my life I heard "you are a girl, be wiser". I have a brother, we are twins and I have always had homework thrown at me, arguing that I was a girl. Mom always said that the girl would marry, and she would not be in the family - a cut chunk as she said. And the boy will remain in the family. I always argued with mom and it seemed terribly unfair to me. […] In general, it is when I got into the university that I heard about feminism and realized that I was a feminist since childhood. (Respondent A.K.)

> […] the majority of the discrimination that I have experienced is because I am a girl. It has constantly haunted me in the background. When I was little, I used to play with boys all the time, but then they were told: "Why are you playing with the girl?" And suddenly they would realize that they should be ashamed of being around me, and after they kicked me out. [...]. I sincerely did not understand why I was different. Why should I receive any less than other children or adults? (Respondent N.)

> How did I get into feminism? I think because of a sense of justice, that everything should be equal. Not a boy or a girl, not a nationality. It has always been there with me on the level of feelings. And there were no problems in the family. We were four sisters and one brother. My brother never asked us to do something for him, nor did he wait for us to cook something for him to eat. He also took part in household chores, although he still did all the yard work in the house. As a teenager, I saw that the world was different outside of the house. I started noticing those little things when I was visiting my cousins. And in their family, the girls had a different attitude and were treated differently. I started noticing that their daughters were not allowed to go certain places. A particular episode remained in my memory - my brother in-law told his daughters how they should and should not dress. It was strange for me. (Respondent G.)

In the second category the stories were related either to friends or members of their family that had experienced violence or discrimination because of their gender, or they had heard these stories via their professional activities. These cases inspired the respondents to try to change the situation for other women in the country, because the stories were so similar to what they read was happening in the mass media. Some of the respondents reflected on the experience of their mothers as *kelin* ('bride' in Kyrgyz), which they had witnessed from their childhood. As discussed extensively in Chapter 3, Section 3, young *kelins* in the family hierarchy of the Kyrgyz people occupy the lowest position on the scale of social mobility and authority, and before they can gain any recognition and respect from the extended family the brides must bear with domestic oppression from their in-laws to a significant degree.

> My sister got married early, she lived in Moscow, married a student of a different nationality. I was studying in Yekaterinburg. Back home their relationship was not accepted, but she was completely in love with him. And then in the summer she arrived pregnant before childbirth and gave birth here. He was a Tajik, and the war had just started there, he went to war and did not return. When I called home, I was told that my sister was married off. I bought a ticket, flew in, went straight to that village behind Baitik. The house was so small, and, on the street, there was a gazebo and a bald man was sleeping, he seemed so unpleasant to me. My sister saw me, as she was sitting on the sofa in the house with a child, she began to cry because she was married off by our own mother. (Respondent M.)

> My mom is the youngest *kelin* in the family, my dad has eight brothers and sisters, and he is the youngest. My path to feminism took a start when I refused to accept and struggled against what my mother was going through. The issues weren't even within the family; they were mostly related to family-social roles. It always bothered me - she worked full time, then comes back home from work and due to the fact that she is a

> *kelin*, she had to go to weddings or funerals and work there too (manual labor, household chores, cooking, cleaning), she would get sick all the time and just a few people cared for her. (Respondent E.)

> We had several cases of women trying to or committing suicide with a child. In my case, the police and the court do not pay attention to the fact that the defendant was subjected to violence for fifteen years, they do not look at the fact that she had wounds, they do not accept clear evidence. The penalty is twelve years of imprisonment for an attempt to kill a child, although she wanted to kill herself as well. She and her child jumped out of the window, but the court investigation does not take into account the attempted suicide. They also ignore all the factors that led her to take the decision to commit suicide. I want to help such women. (Respondent M.)

In the third category were stories of initiation into activism via a professional engagement or being hired into a position at an NGO. Often these women had prior experience that helped them in the recruitment process, some were teachers with interest in social issues, or academically engaged. All of them indicate they first came to the job or established an NGO and applied to a grant before understanding what gender and gender equality is, which correlates with Ghodsee's concept of "commissioned feminism" (2004). Their knowledge developed as they became part of the NGO system in Kyrgyzstan, which was dominated by international funding, while local funding is limited or non-existent. Many of them also do not identify themselves as feminist.

> I came to the UN Women, I realized that I came there as communications. I didn't know where to start, what gender means, and that's why I somehow had to hang out with NGOs, with SQ, and then I slowly started to do such things. I realized that it turns out to be cool, it slowly happened due to the fact that I was engaged in this field. (Respondent U.)

> Well, we have a lot of women who need help, in the beginning we didn't really think very much about what we want. We drew up the Charter in order to receive a grant, and then, when, after a long time, we began to realize that we should fulfill our mission. That in society there is a very large category of women who need help, especially nowadays. (Respondent GI)

> I am the director of a center for assistance to children affected by violence. I have been working here from the day it was founded, this is already the fifth year. Well, I got here by competition, I just passed the competition, and became the director. In general, I have experience working in NGOs, I worked in the Reproductive Health Alliance. […] Since my earliest years I was drawn to work in the social sphere or with children. (Respondent B.K.)

> We all started together with researches, but now we are divided, Ibraeva has her own organization, Moldosheva her own. I looked at them as at gods, they knew everything. And so they had all the projects, all the research, and then they had grown so well that they were writing scientific works. Another question is whether their language will be understood by those beneficiaries or not. (Respondent M.U.)

5.3. Mechanics of women's rights activism in Kyrgyzstan

In reconstructing the mechanics of women's rights activism in Kyrgyzstan the research focused on the following issues: what was the process of decision-making on directions of work, what were the strategies and tactics employed in reaching changes in these directions, how did the respondents learn about these strategies and tactics. In terms of processes of decision-making and establishing the organization respondents mentioned learning about the work of NGOs at trainings that were being organized around that time by international organisations, and then establishing their own. In terms of starting the work of a women's rights NGO by far this was the most numerous category.

> How did we create our organization? We first wrote the statute of the organization ourselves and then registered it. We started doing trainings and seminars, at that time there were a lot of trainings for NGOs. After 2010, their numbers subsided. And we seemed to wake up and we wrote the statute to the fullest of our abilities and knowledge, we wrote the contracts ourselves – in the same manner, without much knowledge, but we did it…we wrote all the documents ourselves, can you imagine that? (Respondent N.)

> We did everything intuitively and signed up for any training. I personally learned a lot of things at the Peace Corps trainings. Somewhere in 2014 or 2015, we passed an audit by USAID. We got happy even at the smallest thing and rejoiced at the smallest grant. We were constantly increasing the organization's potential. Even now — Cholpon is 57 years old, I am already over 60, we go wherever we're invited to trainings. We have many partners; they are waiting for us everywhere. (Respondents N., Ch.)

> Ermek and I entered the USAID "Aimak" program, our organization passed the competition and we are now studying local self-governance (LSG), everything you need to know about LSGs. And ultimately, they plan to make consultants out of us, we are going to training in Naryn, in Talas, in Bishkek. They are very active and overloaded, well, they promised to train us until September, and then we will be experts / consultants in the field of local government. (Respondent G.I.)

Fewer organisations and initiatives started up on the basis of partnership between the local government and active female citizens of that village or region. This is an interesting point, as although it seems as if though Kyrgyz government was also interested in the development of the NGO sector, particularly women's rights, in fact these governmental programs were all sponsored by international funds and organisations, like UNDP, UN Women, GIZ, USAID through initiatives like peacebuilding, access to water, land reform, electoral participation and others (Hoare, 2016). This illustrates clearly the point of "commissioned feminism" (Ghodsee, 2004), as promoted by the non-native actors.

> On March 5 (1990) we organized a large fundraising marathon together with *ayil okmotu* (Kyrg. village/local/community organization), I took the opportunity and worked as the head of the village council, and we collected 6366 soms (approx. 90 USD). Such money was considered a large sum, and we had to go to the justice department a couple of times and only after several attempts we managed to register the organization and started our work. With the money of the first grant, which we won from the Global Fund, we opened a carpet manufacturing workshop, a bakery, bought books - that's how we started our first steps. (Respondent T.)

> We are on the balance of the city hall. This is probably all thanks to the efforts of the League of Child Rights Defenders Foundation. There was great resistance at first, but nonetheless, we succeeded. We are now registered as an institution, we're considered as NGOs, but our property is municipal. It is good that we are sitting on the local budget, and there are some guarantees, at the same time we have some freedoms, wider than state ones. We can ask for help somewhere and develop projects. I think this is a very good example of symbiosis. (Respondent N.U.)

> We do not work during the election, but rather, after the election and before the election. For example, we identify candidates, activate them, train, prepare and tell them about us. We made a gender budget in so many local administrations. Last year, we even got additional municipal services to help victims of violence. Standards have already been adopted at the local level, they don't have them anywhere else in Kyrgyzstan, but we worked to get them. When a woman is politically savvy, she will speak. (Respondent A.)

And the least populous category is that of grass-roots or community-based organizing, which is defined as activism that is based on individual activists' relation to changes they want to stipulate — in other words, it is activism towards changes that directly affect the activist (Petrova and Tarrow, 2007). Examples of such organisations are groups that work on the rights of vulnerable groups of people like people with disabilities, survivors of domestic violence, rights of orphaned and foster children; or on the rights of marginalized communities like LGBT, sex workers, drug users. In order to be considered a grassroots organisation, however, these organisations must be staffed in majority by representatives of the social group that the organisation represents, and better yet — must have been organized by them. However, although they are grassroots groups, respondents indicated they still followed the hierarchical system within their organisations; not because it was about power or respect, but rather because it had to do with legal responsibility for the actions of activists.

> We are the only organization in Osh working on protecting the rights of sex-workers. When I was out in the field, I very often saw sex workers getting beaten up. They were beaten by clients, pimps, policemen. And it happened every day. They would come to me and complain and that was the time when we realized that it was necessary to write a project grant in order to protect our rights. (Respondent N.A.)

> We have a hierarchy, and it is important for me. This is not a matter of respect, fear of someone, but rather it is a matter of who will eventually go to jail if someone in this organization messes up. If an outreach worker does something during his or her work, then the director will be legally responsible for this. […] For example, during large events like March 8, there are things that can go wrong, and people who might be jailed for it, so it is then up to a responsible person to bear the weight of it all. (Respondent D.)

While all of the respondents identified themselves as working on women's issues or women's rights, be it bride kidnapping, domestic violence, electoral participation, political rights, or freedom from societal pressures, there was no single understanding of feminism, as well as no similar introduction to it. Some had learned about it from other activists, or from social media, or their university lectures. Many had started their women's rights activism as a resistance to discrimination and violence they or someone close had experienced, but they had not realized that it was related to feminism or could be analyzed through a feminist analytical framework. A lot of the respondents were not very clear as to the recognized types of feminism, like radical or intersectional feminism.

> I do not know what types of feminism we have in Kyrgyzstan. There is for example radfem [radical feminism]. That in its pure form is still nothing. It is all the same, mixed somehow, in places. When I'm watching someone, I'm watching in networks. For example, oh, look a pure feminist approach and right then and there they dip into a completely patriarchal area. I don't think we have any kind of feminism in its purest form, even I myself sometimes find it difficult to say that I am a feminist. Because patriarchal moments often slip through me, some habits and then I reflect on myself, and I think what a horror. (Respondent U.)

> Well, like people began to talk about radical, intersectional, Marxist feminism. And I was like - what? What is it all, what kind of words are they? It was difficult, I tried to read, I have no patience to honestly read some long books on theory, even articles. I usually read excerpts or it's easier for me to take information from people. (Respondent Z.H.)

> We initially thought that this was not a Western approach, based on personal experience, not on theories. We just did not know when the girls from Kazakhstan came to visit us and asked, and what kind of feminists do you have in Kyrgyzstan? Liberal or intersectional, and I say, what is it? We did not even know these concepts. And this is very connected with my experience, I would say that in a globalized world, it is sometimes very difficult to determine where it came from. And we have a big exchange going on. We cannot say that this is only a western concept. You see, this is a little difficult in our feminism. There are some interesting things that we borrow from each other, but we would not particularly celebrate those things that are celebrated in the West. And for us, when the women's march took place in the USA, it was much more important for us here to help people after the plane crash. (Respondent S.)

There were some respondents who indicated that international organisations, especially the UN structures, which have the best remit to work with the government on gender mainstreaming, were not interested in finding solutions to the actual problems of women on the ground in Kyrgyzstan. There were several respondents who indicated that in their experience the staff members of international organisations that promote the gender equality agenda in Kyrgyzstan often are not feminist-minded at all. This concerns both the local staff and international career professionals. One of the respondents was herself a staff member of a UN agency and she reflected on how the absolute majority of her local colleagues, even within the gender mainstreaming department, were patriarchally inclined and would make fun of feminism and "genderists" during informal breaks. This could be considered an example of "double-layered mentality" on the part of these local staff members in international organisations, who are combine their patriarchal personal beliefs with their gender equality work objectives.

> Bishkek feminists don't go there [rural areas] at all, and then again there are all sorts of UN agencies and other organizations doing projects on women's entrepreneurship there. And it is very artificial, the feminist agendas, it's just mobilization. They themselves do not have it [feminist thinking], even in the office. There was a GIZ project, and there were three priorities, and there was support for women's entrepreneurship, which I was hired to monitor. We had a dispute with another expert from Ukraine, because the projects were like becoming a nanny, cooking, the beauty industry. I say no, don't do it, come up with something else. I tell them that we have the same task, at least to combat gender stereotypes. And GIZ are like, continue normally, it's okay. In principle, they do not have the feminist understanding themselves, so it's not surprising where do they take such gender specialists. (Respondent A.)

Another concern that respondents raised was that the vision of gender equality that international organisations were promoting and working towards was different from that of the grassroots activists themselves, indicating existence of a pre-defined agenda in these organisations that does not correlate with the actual needs of women on the ground.

> Well, it seems to me like UNovtsy [UN workers] and all sorts of UNDPovtsy [UNDP workers], we won't point fingers, they deal with some topics and problems […] that are not close to our real problems. It's more like life-saving, like pro-Western thinking, such as saving our women, saving our children, so I'm not even looking at what they are doing. (Respondent D.A.)

> UN Women in Talas, they hired me to make the femscanner of speakers. And there they chose very cool women, but more than half of them would finish their presentations with: "do not forget that you are a woman". […] Working with speakers, I realized that it's impossible to kill that shit in just two weeks. There was a woman working as a car mechanic, […] and a man so adequate stood up, said, here I am looking at you with respect, maybe we are not raising girls like we should, and she said don't look at me, I am a terrible example. […] And UN Women were fine with this. (Respondent A.L.)

When talking about strategies and tactics that the respondents used in achieving their activist goals many referred to learning about them from other activists or from international organisations, once again reflecting the involvement of foreign-funded democratization and human rights foundations that invested heavily in the development of civil society in Kyrgyzstan in the early 90's, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Some remembered that it was their donors that provided the framework for their initial activism, others mentioned participation in overseas trainings or advocacy events, where they picked up some ideas like "consciousness-raising groups".

> […] Our first donor was OSI, Aida came, and she had this book in her hands, it was called an information and human rights design. And, so, I looked at it, leafed through, there was information about how organizations in Europe use information and human rights design. And we had our first infographic born after that first book about how to use maps and information. And I said it is such a cool book, can I have it? She says I only have one, we're going to the regions, and there's no access to anything at all. We want to give it to them, and you will find it on the Internet. (Respondent M.U.)

> Then we got advocacy actions. In the last one, countering the draft law on criminalizing *nike* (religious weddings that do not require state registration) we were giving out sets to our members of parliament. Here is a ball and here is a letter from a mother, in which she tells the legislator, I want to give you my son's toy, because we don't have a place to play now. We were kicked out of the house we took credit on together with my *nike*. Take our son's toy, because he has nowhere to play, and before you reject the bill on criminalizing *nike*, think how many such toys you could get. And the deputies had a different reaction, someone said, these NGOs are crazy, someone said, you are manipulating and that's it. The most important thing is that after an hour when we got out, we learned that it was voted in - and before that during the 1st and 2nd readings they were all against. (Respondent M.)

> The format itself is the growth of self-awareness, which we adopted from other activists who also do it for themselves. It is very important because many teams grow when this exchange takes place. Because when women get together, they exchange a huge amount of information and we then thought that it was worth trying this method. (Respondent S.)

> Well, again, I will speak as part of my experience, if we are invited to seminars, then we will go, get to know each other, and expand our networks. Once we got to participate in CEDAW and that's what the impact on me was, I saw and always thought to myself that I was speaking quietly, not screaming. And there I saw African women, their energy, I thought how greatly they can articulate, through the voice of emotion, what a strong voice of the movement and thought that we still do not have it, we have separate women, but not yet the movement. (Respondent M.)

Reflecting on fellow feminists and women's rights activists in the country, respondents tended to make a differentiation between the older generation, those who are 40 y.o. and above, and younger. The first group is more often associated with Soviet-style feminism, with its focus

on political and economic rights. This is the group that developed gender expertise conducting researches for international organisations and internationally funded state programs on gender equality and gender mainstreaming. They are also the activists most closely engaged with the state agencies and local governances, choosing to run in local elections, or join local women's councils, spearhead village-level initiatives against domestic violence or economic rights of women. Women's rights activists that are younger than 40 seem to align more closely with theoretical foundations of feminism, especially from within the human rights paradigm.

> In this regard, this period, this Sovietism, it greatly influenced, in general, Kyrgyz feminism, too. So, they also very often say, oh, we Kyrgyz women never wore a hijab or a scarf. We always had such free women or *elechek* [traditional women's headwear], it was not to cover our head, to be submissive. There were practical goals. It was necessary to store coins there. It was necessary to store all sorts of other jewelry there, this was done with the help of *elechek*. And when we moved from one place to another, it was easier to do so. Otherwise, it would be lost somewhere in things, lost somewhere along the road. And, so, the practical meaning of the *elechek* is this. (Respondent A.I.)

> In the regions I know only women activists, I never saw that it was some kind of organization. Moreover, these active women are divided into two, one goes to local self-governance, occupies a post and does simply incredible things. They live in some kind of patterns, but intuitively they understand, they do cool things. And the second type is more of such NGO activists, and it seems to me that their activation was made artificially by international organizations. (Respondent A.L.)

> […] I always tell the case of Zhida ezhe, she was the principal of the school and now she is a member of the local parliament. […] And she says that when she decided to become a deputy, to change something in her city, she started to go around the homes herself, because she had neither people nor money, she was self-nominated. She came to some house, knocked, and a man came out, who looked at her and said: "What, you think you can be a deputy?" When she was elected, she came to him exactly, and she said: "They chose me, what kind of problem you have?" And he laughed, said we were missing a water pump, we have to walk 500 meters away to get it. She agreed and organized a water pump nearby. He then says that we don't have enough lighting, she changed that too, and then she went again and he opened the door, he laughed and said: "Now I'll run for you, I will work in your election campaign, next time you are nominated I will work for you." (Respondent Z.A.)

> For example, there are women over 40, for some reason in my head they are all called genderist women. Although maybe I'm wrong. And they probably have such an applied approach to women's rights. We are all right here and let's live in peace. Then there is a generation of 30-year-olds, they were the first to adopt a scientific base, they speak not with opinions, but with real theoretical research. They own the subject. And the 3rd generation, these are people younger than 23, younger than me, many of them are pop-feminists. This is the feminism of social networks, which is distributed through short posts, pictures, memes, this is also a form of perception of knowledge. (Respondent L.U.)

Although not asked, some respondents reflected on the specifics of Kyrgyz feminism, apart from the age and ideological differences between women involved in activism. They indicated that thanks to their participation in civil society trainings both inside and outside the country they were able to notice a difference between Kyrgyzstan-based activists and foreign ones. Although in Kyrgyzstan women are oppressed by the patriarchal standards of society and state, they are able to exercise a lot more freedom of opinion and expression, compared to even European ones. Although it was difficult for the respondent to pinpoint what exactly was the reason, but it seemed it had to do with the widespread culture of political correctness, which keeps many from voicing their opinions openly. A smaller number of respondents were more skeptical about the specifics of Kyrgyz feminism, by indicating an absence of identity, which causes the omnivorousness of the movement in terms of strategies, ideologies and fundraising.

> I would simply characterize us, unlike the whole other context, we have some specific freedom with us. And that this specific freedom is much freer compared to the West, not even comparable in freedom. We have some kind of natural freedom and openness, or I don't know [….] I think we are open to new things. We are still able to accept something new and someone else. And even my experience in Prague showed that it is a stereotype, that there is such direct freedom in Europe and such people are open minded. On the contrary in Prague it seemed to me that people are very closed, they are afraid of something new. We have it. And maybe not only openness, we have such frankness. That we can freely talk about our problems, freely criticize our country, criticize each other. And I used to take it for granted, but in their eyes, I saw such amazement, surprise, sometimes such a confusion on their faces when we talked. (Respondent A.I.)

> I think that in our country this is connected to the phenomenon of absent identity, we would have it, but in reality, it does not exist. It is built from debris, because Kyrgyzstan is really a country that has been destroyed several times throughout its history. The first time is the Russian Empire, by the Soviet Union, when it began, then when it ended. And now on these fragments, we are trying to collect and build something, and therefore it looks like patchwork. (Respondent L.U.)

5.4 Historiography and narrative cartography of women's rights activism in Kyrgyzstan

On a warm evening of 28 July 2011 a statue of a winged woman perched atop a globe and holding a *tunduk* — the criss-crossed top of a traditional Kyrgyz yurt, symbolizing the nation — was dismantled from its central location on the Ala-Too Square in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, despite some resistance from civil rights groups. The statue was that of Erkindik or 'freedom', erected in Lenin's place in 2003, to commemorate the country's independence from Soviet Union.

The initiative group that proposed the dismantling, consisting of politicians and historians, claimed that the female statue was an ill omen, as women in Kyrgyz tradition were never allowed to hold the *tunduk* (Diener and Hagen, 2013). Some religious activists also saw the statue as immodest with her "short-sleeved dress that revealed too much bronze skin" (Pelkmans, 2017, p.20), which made her un-Kyrgyz and un-Islamic. And to top it off, still others saw in the statue a resemblance to the ousted President Akaev's wife, Mayram Akaeva, widely disliked as the 'domineering captor' of the President (Olcott, 2005), found too active for a Kyrgyz woman. Many saw her as the cause of Akaev's failure as a president, considering her the mastermind behind "family power" that terrorized the businesses of the country (Aidarova, 2013). The statue of Liberty was succeeded by that of Manas the Magnanimous, the country's legendary hero, thought to have united its many tribes against outside forces.

To some feminists in Kyrgyzstan this otherwise bland event signified, in retrospective, a turn towards public misogyny. Women's place from now on was to be in the kitchen, not the White House (local name for the presidential office building next to the Ala-Too Square):

> I asked myself when did this all start? In 2010 after the second revolution, when the 'Erkindik' statue was removed - a statue of a [winged] woman holding a *tunduk* - it was taken down for reasons like: 'women are not allowed to hold a *tunduk*'![...] Of course in and of itself the statue was a bit absurd - some unknown woman is sitting on a ball, which was supposed to represent the planet. [...] It is difficult to identify the artistic meaning behind the statue, but anyway the thing is that the statue was not taken down for being meaningless or silly, but for very traditionalist and patriarchal reasons. So then 'Erkindik', which symbolized Kyrgyzstan's democratic aspirations in the early independence years, was replaced with a statue of a man, who is a hero of our ancient epos, a warrior, a direct symbol of our history and the heroism of our nation. So the symbol of democracy was replaced with a symbol of patriarchy. (Respondent A.)

Going back to the earliest days of post-Soviet sovereignty, a following narrative historiography can be developed based on responses of the research. Majority of respondents start their narratives on gender activism from the mid-1990s, when the first programs by international organisations started promoting gender equality goals. At the same time local women's demand for gender equality becomes more pronounced as well, as women in the previous years have massively entered the small and medium business market as *kommersanty* and were dealing with economic hurdles and obstacles that needed an outlet. However, due to backlash that was generally developing against civil society and foreign-funded NGO's in particular, coinciding with the increasing re-traditionalization of the country, women's rights activists and initiatives notice that the country seems to be moving in two parallels, the gap between which is increasing exponentially. While there is greater awareness of women's rights among women, there is also greater pushback.

> Now if you look, as I started 10 years ago, I can say that now there is a very clear gap between the situation of women then and now. Some topics began to be introduced sharply, people began to understand and at the same time there was a very big decline in the sense that radicalization is pushing very hard. And one of the first symptoms of radicalization is, as it were, discrimination against women, it is precisely what this is built on, oppression, and so on. If we see Zere, for example, who goes out to sing a song in a bra, and at the same time, we see home schools for little girls who are wrapped up. And we don't even have access there and don't know what the girls are being taught there. Such a sharp gap, powerful, that is, we see a sharp trend of feminism and at the same time somewhere this happens. It wasn't so sharp before. (Respondent U.)

> Compared to 2008, polarization is even greater now, because of capitalism, someone is getting richer, and someone is even poorer and falls to the bottom. This is the situation. But anyway, you go out across the villages and you will find out how people live. A very big problem of migrant women is sticking out. (Respondent G.I.)

> You probably also noticed that the term gender equality is very perceived negatively in many ways, especially in the regions. They always say *gender-mender*, *muna ayaldar tigi munu kildi* [those women did this again]. I connect this with the Soviet Union, then women were freer, more impudent, and then the crisis, which provoked this inflation of the ego of men, brought nothing. Now I think men have recovered, now there are more businessmen, when, as in the early 90s, there were more women who worked and extended their families. And this reverse balance of the social economic has led us to the fact that the patriarchy rises more and becomes higher. (Respondent Z.A.)

Activists of the older generation described what was it like during the Soviet times — stability. They were nostalgic that there was work, and in contrast there is only a mess now. When talking about an ideal future when feminism was victorious, they imagined cultivated and practiced ideals of a woman — independent, she has freedom of action, she has equality in partnership, she is listened to as a citizen, and the state helps her with reproductive functions. Access to nurseries, kindergartens, schools and medicine, all while keeping her 'nature' — preserving family and household values. Some young and less conservative activists imagined matriarchy or absolute equality, which would make it impossible to distinguish women from men, there would be no gender identities, sexual orientations, statuses, and so on.

> All women know their rights, live together and happily with their families, everyone has a job, many new manufacturing enterprises are working, there will be no problems, there will be kindergartens and schools for children. (Respondent T.)

> Respect for adults, multinationality, and to preserve our traditions in a good, rich, cultural heritage - so that our children and grandchildren enjoy their lives. Behind every woman is not one, or two dozen, but hundreds of women, thousands of women who are represented here. And each of them empowers others, and not just women. When we empower a woman, we empower a generation. I would like to see a complete family where children can grow up healthy, where there are no punishments. When a child is born, they are welcome, they are loved, and naturally the family is prosperous and the

> society as well. Therefore, whatever one may say, we return to the family and a good state. (Respondent M.K.)

> Woman president, 50/50 women and men in parliament, and the ministerial corps also 50/50. Education is being built differently, textbooks, and the approach in kindergartens is completely changing. I don't quite remember whether it was Ireland or Norway, but they no longer determine the gender of the child and give equal pay, the idea of equality is beginning to prevail. I don't even mind if there will be more women in power than men. Because let them also try themselves in the overwhelming role of the majority, because we do not know how it is. When we say "30% quota", for some reason they immediately say by default that this is a female quota. It is not written there. It says one of the sexes, why do we mean women? Why shouldn't men be under the 30%, and 70% be made up by women? They can. Even the law says so de jure. (Respondent K.)

> I'll go along with radical feminists. I think that there will be different people doing and looking different. All identities will be erased, I am not only talking about LGBT identities, but also about race, ethnicity, because now there are divisions. But someday this will not happen, people will just do what they want. The planet will not be garbage. Will not be overpopulated. (Respondent N.)

Women from six regions of the country were interviewed, with localities ranging from city to town to rural area villages and small outposts. Four of the country's regions are considered 'northern' — Chuy, Issyk-Kul, Naryn, Talas; and three as 'southern' — Osh, Jalal-Abad, and Batken. The division is not administrative; however, it is widely represented in the public discourse. The 'southernness' of regions is most likely defined by the regions' previous relation to the Kokand empire and geographical proximity to the Ferghana valley. Trends across spatial axes reveal slight differences in topics and approaches to activism.

In cities and towns of southern Kyrgyzstan (Osh, Jalal-Abad, Nookat) the narrative of respondents identified as the priority issue the rise of fundamentalist Islam and its influence on the position of women, massive labor migration as second, and forced marriages as the third priority. Many expressed their fear for their activism in the face of fundamentalists, nostalgia for Soviet times, vision of future based on this nostalgia. The researcher herself during the fieldwork in these cities and towns experienced a sense of totality of religion in the area, where majority of women are covered, and there is a palpable sense of physical threat for wearing jeans and not covering head.

> Religion influences our work quite a lot — women are banned from participating in our events by someone in their families, communities, or villagers. We think about how to get out of this situation. If the state or other responsible bodies are not responding and reacting accordingly to the growth of religion, negatively affecting the status of women, then after 10 years they can calmly remove the status of a secular state from the constitution, and after 20 years, I am afraid we will become a religious country. [...] I am afraid that this will affect us all, we cannot live safely in such a society. If I lived in

> Bishkek, I would have a different life, but I live in Karasuu. Every day I am surrounded by other people, other thoughts, customs. (Respondent A.V.)

> They opened madrassas in our places, the mullah in this madrassa has raped more than one person, there is systematic violence [...]. Our children are intimidated, they are afraid — both girls and boys. We have Islamization to the highest degree. We've encountered it ourselves — they began telling me that I should cover myself according to Islamic tradition. They say it directly to my face, or through my father-in-law, or through my husband. Boys all go to mosques. We see a 4-year-old girl walking wrapped up, she could easily get tangled in these rags. My daughter, a fifth grader, was nearly beaten for riding a bicycle. They point at her if she goes to gymnastics. (Respondent M.U.)

> We fight violence against women and girls. The last two years we have been working with early and unregistered marriages. Now the big problem of unregistered marriages is that it is just a religious marriage, as a result, women and children suffer from this. When we say that it is necessary to register a marriage, men immediately say - why do you want to take my property? (Respondent A.)

> Women perceive this as the norm. Second, third wife — this is all normal. Marriage is not legal, if it's not registered and the woman can get thrown out after some time. Women are so vulnerable, I have so many cases, girls have nowhere to live. In the parental home they are not welcome, they also do not need extra mouths with their children. We demand alimony, and the man either leaves, or shows a meager salary. And the fact that our students leave and study in Islamic states is also not good. Now we are not celebrating the New Year, we are not decorating the Christmas tree, we are not celebrating birthdays — people are turning into zombies and this is being supported from the outside. (Respondent B.)

In cities and towns of northern Kyrgyzstan (Bishkek, Naryn, Karakol) — migration was the first priority, religion — second or third, with domestic violence as a consequence of migration being sometimes second between migration and religion; bride kidnapping was less of a priority for a while due to active media coverage, however it was report as coming back again. Respondents expressed nostalgia for Soviet times, family was identified as important, patriarchy was not seen as a problem, although its constituent parts were. Notes from fieldwork noticed that women's activism was much stronger in the northern regions with greater municipal support, new structures of mutual support rising in the face of migration, and where the religious threat was not overblown.

> And what's interesting, there are a lot of problems, husbands and children remain abandoned, then there [in migration] they start new families after getting divorced, there are many divorces. Then we get at-risk children, women are mainly unemployed. […] And in most cases, people are miserable. Here children are thrown at anyone, we recently held a seminar on guardianship, social educators and social workers. Whoever gets left, and from here comes the abuse of migrant children. Suicides are increasing. Recently there was such a noise in the Jeti-Oguz region with the case of a 2-3-year-old

> boy who peed himself in his pants and who was beaten by his aunt or stepmother to death. (Respondent G.I.)
>
> Well, yes, of course we raise the theme of kelinization. Abduction of girls and a 30% quota, we fought for a 30% quota, although in theory we should have fought for 50%. This is not even a struggle for equality, but just a little give. This is generally in the context of Central Asia, and not only in Kyrgyzstan, the trend that women work against the abduction of girls. Especially in the regions, it is clearly expressed that girls and women are treated as things. Here is a girl for you, you're welcome! (Respondent Z)
>
> We mainly keep the shelter and conduct trainings. We usually work on requests. For example, someone can ask us to conduct a training on early marriage among schoolchildren. There is always a demand on such things. We conduct trainings only on relevant topics. It doesn't work the way they do it in the city – you get invited, you arrive, and you listen. In the village, if people are not interested, they just get up and leave, and will throw an insult in the end. They often ask: what is your purpose? What is your benefit in this? Have you been paid millions by the west? (Respondents ZH. And N.)

There was also a visible core-periphery direction in knowledge transfer (tactics and strategies), but no centralized hierarchy, only traceable during conferences or national conventions organized by organisations in the 'core' — Bishkek city. Women from the peripheries traveled with pleasure, learned from trainings, but only took what would be relevant within their contexts. Not unlike core states in the Wallersteinian world order respondents from organisations located in Bishkek indicated they were aware of all local issues and could provide technical support to organisations and activists there. They seemed to lack awareness of local entanglements, and on the contrary were confident that it was in their remit to tackle stereotypes and fight harmful traditions without consulting the locals.

> Inside Kyrgyzstan, for example, Bishkek sets the topics more often. For example, quotas, elections, women's participation. Then violence, these calendar dates, 16 days, and immediately we begin to adapt it down the regions, let's conduct our events. The principle is like large blocks, we are all identical. But local ones are also voiced here, for example, early marriage and you immediately say it is Suzak region. It turns out that there it is still relevant, but how to get there for us the Bishkek folks into the Suzak community, only Avazkan probably knows. (Respondent M.U.)
>
> We can see on the spot what women need. I read regional development programs – it's well written, but in real life we have what we have. Nevertheless, more rural parts of our country don't really have a great situation, but we're trying to work everything in small steps. There are women who do not have education, there are women without professional skills, and we train them and include them in women's social entrepreneurship. We do not conduct questionnaires or surveys, we just see them right there, communicate with women, look at their private preferences and think about how we can help. We are trying to motivate them to develop themselves. A lot of psychological work. (Respondent M.)

> We understand that we need to change the masses. Because it is there that the wrong information is given. There are stereotypes and traditions. Very tough, and deeply rooted. We have to host advocacy events to get the attention of the general public. And to show where women can get help. Any person, faced with the problem of violence and inequality, begins to focus on herself, and delve into herself. The broad masses need to be given the right information directly from the people who have faced injustice, it is important to do so in order to minimize the risk of increased incidences of violence, gender inequality, and get them understand ay that there is punishment, there is help, there is consultation. (Respondent A.)

Activists residing outside the capital are more loaded with household chores, family services, hierarchical relationships between *Kainene-Kelin* (Kyrg. Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law). Although many women identify as practicing Muslim women — reciting prayers, fasting — almost all of the respondents were concerned about the radicalization of Islam, as one of the most difficult challenges in society today. According to them, over the past ten years, the status of women in religion has been deteriorating. Women do not feel free and safe. The 2010 interethnic conflict in the south, of course, had its own impact, and this topic slipped casually, but activists tried not to touch on it. The conflicts between 1990 and 2010 were completely unreflected; activists have not been psychologically rehabilitated. Women's activism in the south has been becoming more partisan in order to ensure its security. However, all of them remain interconnected, reaching out to each other for support, visiting each other's offices and community centers throughout the country, or meeting at conferences in Bishkek. When asked how many other women's rights groups they knew, an overwhelming majority of respondents listed up to 30 different NGOs and activists from the different regions of Kyrgyzstan.

> Oh, there are a lot of us around the country. In the Issyk-Kul region Azdeknur and Ainura Omurkanova are very active. Then, here in the Jeti-Oguz region, "Rural Life" Bigul Bigeeva works. Then in Balykchy we have the Resource Center for the elderly. Then, there are a lot of NGOs in Karakol, but Ulukman Dariger, Aruujan work for us on gender, then there are unemployed women, OO Shayezhe. In the region with whom I tried to cooperate and wrote joint projects, we had Alga in the Chui region, Olga Dzhanaeva, then it means we have Dia and Avazkan in Osh. Then there is Oktomkan Abdulaeva in the Alai region. In Naryn, we have Turbubu Sharmuratova, don't remember the name of her organisation. In my opinion, we still have a lot in Bishkek. In Bishkek, Elena Tkacheva. Here she has a crisis center, by the way they use our brochures. There is also IDEA who work with LGBT people, Elmira Kalmurzaeva, then I remember in Bishkek there's Marat Aliaskarov's organization "Men Against Violence", the Forum of Women's NGOs, we initially learned from them. UN Women train us, UNDP. (Respondent G.I.)

5.5 Stories of women's role and status in Kyrgyzstan

Reproductive Autonomy

As discussed in the theoretical framework, often nationalist discourses represent themselves in debates about women and their role in the society, starting from what they should wear, how they should act, and all the way to whom they should marry, thus bearing responsibility for the nation's destiny (Yuval-Davis, 1997). In studying this connection Yuval-Davis classifies all modern nation-states based on their 'myth of origin' and how it treats the subject of women. The *Volknation* is especially interesting in the framework of the research results, as it considers its women to be responsible for the biological reproduction of the nation and as such for the preservation of the purity of the nation.

> Growing up it was always a fight with my mother over my personal choices, whether I want to play football or something else. So, when I became independent, I started talking to my mom about not wanting to get married. I told her that I am not a 'birther' or 'incubator' for you. She was like - what do you mean? I told her well you did not give birth to me so I would just have to give birth, be beaten up by a guy, and have to live through constant insults and oppression. She did not understand and got suspicious. And she seems to have remembered my words very well about not wanting to give birth. So when she learned about my partner and his gender identity, she was like - is that why you told me you did not want to give birth? And I said - no, I do want to give birth to a child, I just told you this so you would stop expecting from me that I would act like society wants me to act. I have my own life and I will do what I see fit with it. (Respondent D.)

Here these experiences of women can be interpreted as representative of Foucauldian disciplinary power, that started gaining ground since the seventeenth century with the shifting of sovereign or monarchical power over life and death of subjects. This disciplinary power manifested itself along two aspects — the "anatomo-politics of the human body" (Deveaux, 1994, p.227), which is disciplined and useful ('docile'), and the "biopolitics of the population" (ibid), where the state is interested in the reproductive capacities of bodies, their health, birth, and mortality.

> From early childhood girls are programmed to become mothers when they grow up, so they are told not to sit on concrete — as one might catch cold to her reproductive organs, to not do the splits, or her vagina might get ripped, which could lead to inability to give birth. And if a girl cannot give birth to a child, she is nobody. And that is the worst punishment anyone could have — to not be able to give birth. (Respondent R.D.)

> I was renting an apartment once, there were five of us. I was the youngest of them. So, one of us, after we all have separated and started living independently, she told us that she has an adult son. We first thought that maybe she adopted someone, but she said he was hers. We were very surprised, because at the time when we were living together, she had never talked about him. Turns out she gave birth to him when she was 17, and

> of course her parents were embarrassed, were shaming her, saying it is *uyat* [shame], so she had to leave the village and gave birth to a child in the city. Her sister was already married at that time, but with no children, so they adopted the child. So, their parents told everyone in the village that because the couple still had no children, they decided to adopt a child, so no one in the village found out about this. People may have had their own suspicions, but they had no proof. Then time goes, but my roommate does not get married, she becomes older and older, and so at some point they decide that the kid should be given back to his mother, whom he always thought was her aunt — all because of this idea that someone has to take care of you when you are old. She is already 40 years old, not married, and needs someone so she is not alone. And this is what is strange — back then this was unacceptable, but now all of a sudden this is okay. (Respondent A.)

> Now the age of marriage for girls has gone down again, although in early 90s it went up. I thought I was very early when I gave birth to my daughter when I was 26, but now this age is already considered as a bit too late for a firstborn, and it is definitely super-late to give birth after 30. At this age you are already supposed to be a mother of a few and pretty well established in the traditional Kyrgyz system. Which is actually so annoying — a woman there will never become the one that is respected enough when visiting some collective gatherings of relatives. Unless you are 80, at which point you can no longer be useful. Until then you are still a *kelin*, even if you maybe over 50 and with three grown-up children of your own. My mother is like that and I always feel sorry for her that whenever we are invited as guests, this does not apply to her, because she is the younger *kelin* in the extended family. (Respondent G.)

The Sexual Self

Reminiscent of cases with "patriots" in the Contextual Background, the honour of Kyrgyz women of reproductive age often becomes a quality that needs protection by the paternalistic 'Kyrgyz male'. MP Yrgal Kydyralieva, who had initiated the draft law on limiting the rights of women under 22 to travel along and without permission, mentioned in one of her interviews that because women "give birth to the nation" they are also the "bearers of the nation's honor" (Sultanbekova, 2013).

> I had a friend once and he told me that when he sees Kyrgyz girls with Indian or Turkish men in the club, he beats them up. I asked him why - she is not your girlfriend, she is not going to date you, what is the point of beating this Turkish guy up? And he says - I do not need her to date me, I just do not want the Turkish guys to think that our girls are so easy to get and that they can do whatever they want to them, that they do not have no one to protect their dignity. On one hand one would think how noble this is. But on the other hand - the girl has her own agency and freedom, and she should be able to choose for herself whom she is dating. The motive here is the same - I am the man, I must protect women, plus the nationalist pride, when it comes to men of other ethnicities. (Respondent D.)

This serves as an indication of the paternalistic attitudes in the country, which were unfurled in full force with the country's independence from the Soviet Union. Societally this

was justified as the final reclaiming of national identity, traditions and customs. Socialism was over, it was time for them to:

> "return to their 'natural' roles as mothers and housewives (conveniently assuming many of the caring responsibilities that the state could, or would, no longer provide), allowing men to reassert their 'natural' position as head of the family and breadwinner after years of 'unnatural', damaging, state-enforced gender equality." (Hoare, 2009, p.8)

Now is the time to control the female sexuality and protect the 'purity' of Kyrgyz women, which is manifested through imposition of certain formal and informal dress codes (Suyarkulova, 2016), such as (failed) attempts at policing the dresses that female employees of the *Jogorku Kenesh* (Kyrgyz Parliament) wear, who according to nationalist and religious politician Tursunbai Bakir uulu were distracting him from important legislative work with their miniskirts.

Picture 1[3]

The Political Self

Respondents indicated that they were aware of the social and political changes happening in the country, proposing their own historiography of major events that may have impacted the situation with women's rights in Kyrgyzstan today.

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3. "Nobody questions what the rapist was wearing or drinking..." (Poster from 2017 march of 8th March), author's photography

> I think that since 2010 we have this discourse becoming stronger and stronger that a woman must conform to some traditions or religious prescriptions. And I think this is connected to political forces. After 2010 different political forces started thinking that they can have a claim on power. This is also geopolitical, of course, with Russia extending its reach back into the region. They may have developed some kind of a strategy of opposing the Western influence on the region, so they came up with these 'spiritual braces' and family values and started promoting this throughout the whole area that they would like to see in their zone of influence. I know for fact, for example, that these national-patriotic movements are supported by the "Zamandash" party, which had among its main organizers Stanislav Epifantsev, who represented six different Russian organizations in Kyrgyzstan, and they just took what was being applied in Russia and applied it here in Kyrgyzstan. (Respondent B.)

Another respondent disagrees:

> I think this may have started even earlier, when first President Akayev (1990-2005) started manipulating the public discourse by promoting the "Manas" epic and his seven commandments as national ideology. This may have resulted in the return to traditionalism and nationalism. Additionally, you and I missed it, and our generation missed it - but schools had introduced in the late 1990s and early 2000s a required class into the school curriculum called "Lesson in Morality" ('Iyman Sabaq'). A friend of mine, who is younger, was among the generation that was introduced to this class the first, and he says they literally had mullas coming into classroom and talking about Islam. So these generations that have been taught the *Iyman Sabaq* have now grown up with these ideas about women's role and status in Kyrgyzstan that is very limiting. I guess President Akayev, despite his democratic leanings, did not realize what his flirtation with religion and traditions could result in. And now we are reaping the 'fruits' of his decisions. (Respondent A.)

Picture 2.[4]

4. "8 March is the Day of Solidarity with Women's Human Rights Defenders!" (Poster from 2017 march of 8th March) Author's photography

Standing up to their own beliefs and defending their visions of self (reproductively, sexually, politically) was reported as difficult.

> It was not so difficult, you might be scared someone hits you in the head for your articles, but not too much. In personal relationships standing up against the oppressive narratives is not difficult at all — you can always find some common ground with people you know. But when you are doing something public, it is more dangerous. And when it comes to that I would say you should not be afraid of "Kalys" or "Kyrk Choro" — they are traditionalists, but they are not Islamic, they are not fanatics. But when you are dealing with the fanatics, I think this is scarier. So, when I am writing an article for a newspaper I sometimes think, what if Hizb ut Tahrir see my articles, put me on some kind of a blacklist of their own, and then when they come to power, I will be the first they hang. Of course, sometimes a thought comes across that someone might beat me up, but that never happened. (Respondent A.)

> In my experience it is very difficult — I had to sacrifice my time and communication with family. I had to leave my house constantly, so other relatives would not see me. I saw how my mother was silently glad when I would tell her that I better leave before the guests come, because of course she did not want them asking all the same questions — when are you getting married? When are you going to have children? So that is why I have stopped attending any of the extended family meetings and celebrations, communicating with them. At some point I have to leave my family because of the constant barrage of questions — why do you have to have short hair? Why do you like such aggressive sports like soccer and rugby? Why do you only have girl friends? Why boys never call you on the phone — only girls? So, for me it was very difficult. (Respondent N.)

> It is very difficult to defend and stand up for the image of a strong and independent woman. When a woman is trying to say to a man (husband, partner, brother) that they do not have a right to yell at her, to beat her up or dictate what she needs to do, she will meet even greater aggression, both physical and psychological. And, of course, after several attempts to stand up for her and getting the violent response, a woman will decide to silence herself to avoid any damage. (Respondent E.)

Alternative Images Proposed by Feminists

The respondents saw ways out for girls and women from the restrictive roles that there are given upon entering the social world. Some of these options proposed an epistemic disobedience, a trickster-like realization of one's own freedom from all of these burdens, the moment one realizes that they do not matter, and what matters is how one positions one's self. This allowed for the respondents to rise above the circumstances, become a Braidottian nomad in terms of relational dynamics, unhindered by borders and rules.

> I think the alternative image of a girl should be independent and free, independent from frameworks (like a girl has to be like this or that) posted by society or herself (like I have to have long hair and other stuff). And free from other people's opinion, in her own thoughts, freedom to think and decide for yourself. (Respondent F.)

Picture 3[5]

I can share my personal experience when I realized that I do not have to be patient — the whole 'you are a girl and you must bear it'. When I was a little girl, my father would beat me up very often. I had this image of him that whenever he comes back home, I must leave the room and find somewhere to hide. Then one time I got tired of this. He came to me and started yelling at me for whatever that was wrong at home, so I just told him it was not me, not my fault — and from that point on I just was not afraid of him anymore, even if he was stronger than me. Same thing with neighbor boys — they would not want to play with me. When I asked them why, they would say it is because I am a girl and weaker. I would show them I am not weak and from that moment on they started accepting me. So, it is all around this time that I understood — it does not matter whether you are tall or physically strong, what matters is how you position yourself, how you present yourself before the others. (Respondent A.L.)

However, in my experience it was pretty easy to be who I am at work and in sports - there everybody respects you for being that. They respect my blue belt in karate, that I have travelled for sports competitions, that I am strong enough to fight a guy. All the male colleagues I had would talk of me as a 'sister', they were very accepting. In the neighborhood where I grew up, I remember I was the storm of the streets. Everybody was sort of challenging me whether I could play football with that guy or keep up in a running race with another guy or beat up someone else for an insult. It was this respect for everything that was shameful back home. When I was working in a security agency, my boss was a former police officer, would speak of me as one of his most valuable workers, that he could rely on me. He would say: 'if anything this small girl can overcome a two-meter tall guy'. So, in this sense in sports and security agencies, and other places like these, the same qualities that are unacceptable for a woman otherwise, are respected and valued. (Respondent N.)

5. "Do not cook, do not lose weight, do not obey!" (Poster from 2017 march of 8th March), author's photography

Self-colonization of Feminists

The narratives of feminists and women's rights activists of the second Kyrgyz 'wave' can be summarized as influenced by Western feminism (just like activism of the pre-2005 women's NGOs, as indicated in the Conceptual Framework). When it comes to analyzing the feminist narratives in Kyrgyzstan against the global feminist narratives, it seems as plausible that Kyrgyz feminists are constructively engaging with global feminist thinking in order to challenge the 'strategically redeployed' post-Soviet traditionalisms and nationalisms. In doing so narratives are borrowing from a mix of second and third waves of global feminism:

> We think differently, I guess, because we know that it is possible to live differently, because there was information available in our childhood that we do not have to live the only way. And maybe this was not only because of Labrys — for me it was when I was in soccer, for Marina it was when she was in martial arts. And in some parts of our life we realized that we do not have to be like our mothers, like our neighbors, or necessarily do what our families tell us to do. And I guess the reason I think we are an alternative to the 'good girl' is because we were able to understand that it is possible to live differently. And for me this is the reason we exist - to let other people understand that there is a different life. That if someone is beating you, you do not have to live with that person. You can like giving birth to children, you can like washing clothes or cooking, but you have to understand that a different way of being is also possible. That is why I think we exist - to talk about women's dignity, that we do not have to be patient about insults and beatings, and that it is possible to walk away from this. (Respondent D.)

But additionally, Kyrgyz feminists of the second 'wave' are also developing approaches that are native to the region, such as narratives. Emotional experience is not just a tool, which is an addendum to understanding or is parallel to it. Gadamerian emotional states (Malpas, 2009), which are caused by an influence of a narratively organized object are at the core of the object's further understanding and legitimization by the gazer, by the feeler. Everything that is 'ours' has in the past been 'alien' and has acquired its closeness to us only when it found the required resources within us. A narrative, which is organized as a compelling story becomes the universal conductor between those, who have no agreement concerning various matters. Exerting influence on our feelings, it makes us change our attitude to spheres of life that previously only caused fear or aversion in us.

So then using compelling narratives can be the most effective method of understanding in the toleration relations – in order to be able to change the attitudes of the *Other* (or the *Other* of us), we must first catch their attention, invoke an emotional response within with a narrative metaphor, to which they would be able to relate later after the emotional experience, when they start analyzing the incongruence of their previous averse attitudes with the emotional responses

received after the narrative experience. Bringing about an emotional shock through narrativization of the toleration relation becomes the impulse for further understanding and decoding the metaphor, which also allows the gazer, the feeler to retain the otherness of the *Other*, while still recognizing the *Other's* independent worth and equality to us as human beings.

> It is also important to change your environment, at least start with your family. My relatives were pressing on me very hard. And because of this pressure my dad would keep on telling me that I need to get married, even if not for love, just for yourself, so that nobody shames you. I would ask him — why would I need to do that? I do not care about their opinion. I want to live the way I live, who are they to me — did they breastfeed me? Why must I live my life as if it was a cinema to satisfy their needs? And the more I talked about this with my father, the more he started understanding that this is really my life, and no one gets a say in it, because it is for me to live. Of course, it has been difficult for me to change him, but talking openly has helped — they accept the way I live and what I want from my own life. (Respondent N.)

5.6 The 'good' and the 'bad' girls of Kyrgyzstan's civil society

There is a clear division between grassroots organisations (girls helping girls, domestic abuse survivors, rural women, marginalized groups of women) and mainstream organisations (women's political rights, economic rights, crisis centers for women). Where the first ones work with groups that are represented in the staff and leadership of such organisations, the second ones usually do not have their beneficiary groups represented in their staff. Many respondents from the second group reflected on the "righteousness" of their work, possibly unaware of the selectiveness of their approach, using words like 'true women', 'poor women', 'dignified women' (*достойные женщины*).

This was very clearly articulated when respondents from this group were referring to the 8 March protest of 2019, which has caused quite a backlash in the general public and media discourses. Celebrated as the International Women's Day mostly in the countries of the former communist bloc, in the post-Soviet period the day had been reduced to be a lighthearted holiday aimed at complimenting women and gifting them with small presents, however over the last decade the women's rights movements in the region have been attempting to re-politicize the day. In Kyrgyzstan the political march on International Women's Day had been organized since 2014, and had always included a diversity of slogans, ranging from women's political rights to protesting against beauty standards to queer representation. However, it is the march of 2019 that was for the first time condemned as a 'gay pride' because of participation of LGBT organisations of Bishkek. To many this march had discredited the whole of women's movement in Kyrgyzstan.

> Everyone knows about LGBT people now, and they don't use homophobic and transphobic rhetoric that often. There is also less hatred in words, and that's good. Also, the situation with partner organizations changed – many of those who didn't want to cooperate are now ready to so "in a quiet manner," and some have already begun to cooperate openly, saying that they are allies. People used to be afraid. Now, after the march (in 2019), we are facing hatred again. Hatred towards us became apparent. Things that people used to think are now spoken out loud. In general, the trend itself is improving. Civil society is ready to find common grounds. Even if they are not ready to accept LGBT people in their organizations, they are ready to include them in general reports against discrimination. (Respondent N.)

In this section I analyze the concepts of 'bad girl' and 'good girl', where being queer — lesbian, bisexual or transgender — in the Kyrgyzstani public discourse is the ultimate expression of a 'bad girl'. Main reason being that she is not interested in men (or at least not exclusively), and so not interested in marrying them and providing them with all the accompanying services expected of a wife. In the contemporary setting this definition of a 'bad girl' seems to have expanded to include also feminists, who question the hegemonic role of males in Kyrgyzstan, re-established after the fall of the Soviet Union as the country grappled with its unwanted sovereignty (Kandiyoti, 2007). The reactions of the public and officials alike to the recent feminist march of 8th March in Kyrgyzstan, where a few slogans were LGBT-themed, indicate that in the mainstream discourse feminists are now equated to lesbians. This has caused a whole host of other intra-movement clashes within the women's rights circles, many of whom were horrified at the thought of being conflated identity-wise with the radical lesbians, whom they consider as the true 'bad girls'.

Homosexuality is legal in Kyrgyzstan, having been decriminalized in 1998. However, the society continues to be homo- and transphobic, including the religious communities. Respondents of the research, queer women-activists of the LGBT organisation "Labrys" in Kyrgyzstan, noted that throughout their monitoring of the situation of LGBT people in the country from 2004 till 2018 they would not able to say that the religious authorities have a structured approach to the issue of homosexuality or transsexuality:

> The attitude is definitely negative, there was even a fatwa issued [in 2014, see below for more details] which called for every Muslim to kill LGBT people. But I don't think they have a special anti-LGBT program — what I mean is they do not have a whole plan of eradicating us, which they would execute every Friday during *Juma namaz* [Friday prayer]. They usually just respond to some kind of news from the society. (Respondent A.)

The fatwa that Respondent A. is referring to was issued at the end of January 2014 by the SAMK (Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan — the official Muftiyat) and

head Mufti, Maksat Haji Toktomushev, in response to a press conference organized by Human Rights Watch with participation of a gay activist on results of their research on the situation of gay and bisexual men in the country. The report informed that gay and bisexual men are regularly blackmailed and threatened, arbitrarily arrested, battered and sexually abused by the Kyrgyz police.[6] This press conference triggered a host of negative and extremely homophobic reactions from the public and religious authorities alike, resulting in the fatwa, which read:

> "If you see a community of luts [eds.: a reference to the Lut tribe (also Lot), described in the Koran as practicing sodomy] doing their deeds, you should kill the one who is doing it and the one to whom it is being done."[7]

Although later the SAMK revoked the *fatwa*, in fear that people might understand the call literally, whereas it is claimed it was only a reminder of the gravity of the sin of homosexuality, the fatwa itself, as well as the public outcry against the HRW's press conference and the public coming out of a gay activist at that conference have directly predated the introduction of a homophobic "anti-LGBT propaganda" draft law in March 2014 (Bonheur, 2016). Following these events, it has become much harder for LGBT people to be open about their identities, forcing them and their organisations to go underground:

> Compared to early 2010s that I think of - it is like a golden era, when we could organize rainbow flashmobs in the city center, or hold candle vigils for Transgender Day of Remembrance in the central square, or do "hug me, I have an HIV"/"hug me, I am a lesbian" etc. campaign right next to ZUM [central shopping mall]. We had three thematic clubs, and we could choose which one we feel like going to. Today? It's just meager bits, here and there - no longer public flash mobs or public actions. How could we? With that draft law still not gone anywhere, even though it's 2019 already. (Respondent S.)

Together with the draft law, which did not pass beyond two parliamentary readings, but has still not be struck down officially (Jacques, 2018), respondents indicate the tightening of social control on the bodies and expressions of girls and women, especially if they are unmarried. This disciplining power is exercised by people and religious authorities alike by referring to the traditionalist norms of Kyrgyz society, which while not codified textually anywhere, are transferred from generation to generation - modified according to each different

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6. Human Rights Watch, "They Said We Deserved This: Police Violence Against Gay and Bisexual Men in Kyrgyzstan", 2014: https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/01/28/they-said-we-deserved/police-violence-against-gay-and-bisexual-men-kyrgyzstan
7. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Kyrgyz Fatwa Against Homosexuality Debated", 2014: https://rus.azattyq.org/a/fetva-protiv-geev-kyrgyzstan/25261350.html

chronotope in which they are referred to, but always with the same absolute confidence that 'this is how it used to be and this is how it should be'.

The Disciplinary Power of *Jakshy Kyz* and *El Emne Deit*

One of the main narratives on societal expectations and the role of women that the queer-feminist respondents of the research identified as having intensified in the recent years was the patriarchal image of the *Jakshy Kyz* — the 'Good Girl' in Kyrgyz, which is a well-prescribed way of staying within the required 'norm'. The first time women come across this concept is when they are little girls, in response to an act committed, which is seen by the adults as unseemly for a girl. In the recent comprehensive research commissioned by GIZ (Moller-Slawinski, Calmbach, 2015) on youth in Kyrgyzstan, where more than 150 youths aged 14 to 24 from all regions and capital city of the country were interviewed, the subject of "Jakshy Kyz" came out most often in response to questions on the role of women. Almost all of the respondents mentioned that a Kyrgyz girl must be "good", and the good was conceptualized on three levels: emotional, domestic and intellectual:

> "On the soft emotional side, a woman should be kind, respectful, tender, polite, affectionate, friendly, humane, simple, friendly, understanding;
> On a domestic level, a woman is expected to be orderly, conscientious, neat, a good housekeeper, taking good care of husband and children;
> On the intellectual side, especially (but not exclusively) for young people in urban centres a woman should be clever, educated and intelligent." (Moller-Slawinski, Calmbach, 2015, p.25)

Interviewees of this paper in a focus group discussion further developed the concept of "Jakshy Kyz", identifying this normative image as non-monolithic, separating into composite parts:

- The Islamic 'good girl' — reading Quran, obedient, compliant, second to husband;
- The traditional 'good girl' — Kyrgyz, rural, not especially Islamic, domestic, respectful towards elders and husband;
- The cosmopolitan 'good girl' — sexually attractive, glamorous, preferably connected to show business, while also able to be a good wife and mother;
- The secular 'good girl' — higher education, diploma, good paying job, but not too high positioned, good wife and mother.

Often nationalist discourses represent themselves in debates about women and their role in the society, starting from what they should wear, how they should act, and all the way to whom they should marry, thus bearing responsibility for the nation's destiny (Yuval-Davis, 1997). In studying this connection Yuval-Davis classifies all modern nation-states based on their 'myth of origin' and how it treats the subject of women. The *Volknation* is especially interesting in the framework of the research results, as it considers its women to be responsible

for the biological reproduction of the nation and as such for the preservation of the purity of the nation.

> I would say having a child, just as it was before, is a very important criterion of 'goodness' as a woman. You do not have to have many children, at least one. What is interesting is that this idea is promoted in the first place by medical specialists, that my clients visit [respondent is a practicing psychologist] or which I visit myself. They translate the idea that any and all health problems that a woman of a reproductive age might be encountering are due to unrealized reproductive function of her body. (Respondent R.)

> In my experience a woman is considered 'good' when she is married, and the earlier — the better. To be 'good' this woman should be willing to obey orders of her husband, the husband's parents and other relatives, and be this calm, servile, caring, nurturing woman, who also is bringing up children. She has to be very respectful towards her husband's parents, which is manifested in her doing all the housework alone and always on time and to the best of expected. And if you do not like something or express your opinion - you are not 'good', you become a 'bad' woman. (Respondent N.S.)

> I think the most normative image is that of the celebrity — many girls want to be beautiful and sexy, wearing high heels. Many men also want these kinds of girls. But the currently strongest image is also the hijab girl, because of the growing islamization of our country and I think girls themselves understand that men are more attracted to these types of girls — subservient, servile, who allow the men to control and dominate over them. And I think some girls wear the hijab so they can get married quicker. As for the sexy girl image — even though men want to marry the 'pure' ones in hijab, they also want someone sexy. Maybe they will not marry them, but they will go to their concerts, watch their moves and so on. (Respondent A.)

Foucault's concept of disciplinary power and of docile bodies argues that individuals are under constant surveillance and regulation in ways that are often subtle and thereby seemingly invisible, leading to normalization and acceptance of such systems (Gordon, 1980). Foucault focuses on the body specifically as the sight of regulation, or more specifically "as object and target of power" (136) historically. The notion of 'docility'—the point at which "the analyzable body and the manipulable body" are joined—is employed to illustrate how individuals within their bodies are subjected to institutional regulation (136). He continues by stating that "a body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (136).

The docile body that is *jakshy kyz* is regulated by the ubiquitous concept *of el emne deit* ('what will the people say', translated from Kyrgyz). It is the question that every girl and woman is asked by her parents and family whenever there is danger of falling beyond the prescribed norms and as such — bringing shame unto the family and stigma to the girl in question. Daring to be different or to be one's self, a queer woman, is complicated:

> In my experience it is very difficult — I had to sacrifice my time and communication with family. I had to leave my house constantly, so other relatives would not see me. I saw how my mother was silently glad when I would tell her that I better leave before the guests come, because of course she did not want them asking all the same questions — when are you getting married? When are you going to have children? So that is why I have stopped attending any of the extended family meetings and celebrations, communicating with them. At some point I have to leave my family because of the constant barrage of questions — why do you have to have short hair? Why do you like such aggressive sports like soccer and rugby? Why do you only have girl friends? Why boys never call you on the phone — only girls? So, for me it was very difficult. (Respondent N.)

Some choose themselves over family, while others are suffocated by this inhumane choice:

> I am depressed by the impossibility of loving my girlfriend openly. No, nothing horrible will happen, should I ever come out, especially to my parents. But I just do not even want to think about how my mother might look at me. Father would not even learn about it, she would never tell him, and neither would I. And I wish I could share with my mother how much I love her and how much fun we have together, and how we achieve so many things, how passionate we are about feminism and human rights and contributing to our country. But I cannot, it is as if this body is not my own, my desires are not important. What is most significant is to not let my mother down, at whatever cost, so that she never has to feel ashamed for me in front of others. And so, I stay silent, even though my heart aches. (Respondent S.)

The concept of *el emne deit* is itself based on two notions deeply embedded in the Kyrgyz culture — those of *uyat* (shame) and *namys* (honour) — where the worst nightmare of any person or family would be to lose one's face (Satayeva, 2017). Although theories about the guilt-shame-fear spectrum of cultures seem to have limited empirical evidence for such distinctions (Cozens, 2018), these concepts are used as tools of the disciplinary power. Their influence becomes all the more significant as these concepts do not have clear demarcations as to what exactly constitutes a shameful action, or one that tarnishes someone's honor — most likely this is where *el emne deit* comes in, in how these shameful or dishonoring actions may become public and be subjected to public scrutiny:

> As long as I don't mention to anyone that I'm queer, as long as I keep on joking my way out of all these marriage questions — I should be fine, my family should be fine. But it is tiring, so tiring! I am tired of always being the one that is 'bad', even if I have several higher education diplomas, I have lived abroad, I help my parents, I am doing something good for my country — and still I am the 'bad' one, whereas my cousin, who has been married three times now, is the 'good' one. (Respondent NS)

It is interesting that several of the paper's respondents mentioned their financial stability as a key factor in keeping off the *el emne deit* disciplining, at least within their

immediate families, as it seemed like an excuse that their families could use when defending against the extended family's questioning of their daughter's or sister's singleness, or strange short hair, or masculine appearance:

> My brothers used to be proud that none of their sisters is divorced, that they are all married, well, except for me — but me they could say as the one that lives in London now, so this adds them some level of coolness, as well as lets them off, because I am helping my family. Even before London I was always helping my family financially, as if I was buying my way out of this pit, and my parents would stop badgering me. (Respondent Zh.)

But for those who could not boast such accomplishments and who did not have the activist backbone like the respondents of the paper, a voluntary or forced coming out (reportedly practiced by disgruntled ex-es within the non-activist queer women's communities in Kyrgyzstan) resulted in the women being submitted either to psychiatric wards (less common) or to a Muslim imam, who would perform some kind of religious rituals to 'purify' the girl:

> This has not happened to me, thankfully, as my family is not so much into religion, but ever since I am with my girlfriend, who is not an activist at all and actually dislikes us for always standing out in the crowd, I have learned of experiences of other queer girls who are not from the city [capital city Bishkek] and who are not activists themselves. What happens is that their families take them to an imam, who can keep them in a closed-off room without food and water for prolonged periods of time, forcing them to read and recite Qur'an. For many the only option to be let out was to pretend they were cured. (Respondent A.)

Compared to the situation of women in the Soviet Union, who were forcefully de-veiled and encouraged to join the workforce, study, and join the Party — the emancipated 'Women of the Soviet East' (Schurko, 2016) — the ideal of the 'good girl' is opposite. In most cases she is everything that was supposed to have been lost throughout the decades of Sovietization of Central Asia — docile, compliant, home-sitting, religious, pious, married, significant only inasmuch as she is part of a man. Remembering the inversion of Von Clausewitz by Foucault, where power is a continuation of war by other means, we see how religious and traditional norms of the Kyrgyz culture that were once considered mere "vestiges" by a high-ranking Soviet official in the 1980s, have been wrestling their power back from the Soviet culture in Kyrgyzstan, using a kind of speech warfare - the tools of disciplinary power here, which subject everyone into a panopticon of *el emne deit*.

Insights into Some Chronotopes of Being a Queer Woman in Kyrgyzstan

As queer women struggle to find their place in the increasingly homophobic and conservative public spaces of Kyrgyzstan, their self-narratives identify several chronotopes that allow them to shift in and out of the 'good/bad girl' dichotomy, often at will. For majority of the respondents the spaces where they felt like they were 'good girls', accepted and recognized for who they are, were their activist organisation:

> I felt most at ease when I joined my organisation and started writing alternative reports, speaking at roundtables, meeting with our local decision-makers. Once they saw that I was for serious, that I was not just some small girl, they would recognize me and they would shake my hand. I finally felt like I was not the 'bad girl' I was back home for my family, who kept on waiting that I would settle down and get married and leave this public life. (Respondent A.)

Many of the respondents shared similar experiences. Some mentioned that spaces that used to be safe, have turned unsafe due to increased conservatism and the recent crackdown on LGBT rights in Kyrgyzstan:

> Previously I would have said — the club, but not anymore. It is no longer a safe space, although it is the same space we used to attend before. Nowadays we only have one club, when before we used to have several. And even this club is a nomad, just like us, hahah, it keeps on moving from one place to another because the landlords of the space ask them to go once it becomes clear what kind of clientele comes to this club. Before? Before it was great - it was the only space we could relax and stop worrying about not being the way our families want us to be. (Respondent K.)

In many of the self-narratives of the queer women interviewed or relayed during focus groups the issue of agency cropped up constantly, as these chronotopes — where a queer woman's identity was 'bad' or 'good' — were open for escape or joining. They were not aware of the possibility of escaping from the 'bad girl' identity while staying true to their queerness, but as they joined activism or befriended activists or simply hung on to their lives as they were, these options became apparent, also showing them that these options could be shared:

> We think differently, I guess, because we know that it is possible to live differently, maybe this was not only because of Labrys — for me it was when I was in soccer, for Marina it was when she was in martial arts. And in some parts of our life we realised that we do not have to be like our mothers, like our neighbours, or necessarily do what our families tell us to do. And I guess the reason I think we are an alternative to the 'good girl' is because we were able to understand that it is possible to live differently. And for me this is the reason we exist — to let other people understand that there is a different life. That if someone is beating you, you do not have to live with that person. That is why I think we exist — to talk about women's dignity, that we do not have to be patient about insults and beatings, and that it is possible to walk away from this. (Respondent D.)

The English-speaking activists among the respondents also indicated that traveling outside or meeting with foreigners allowed them to escape the labeling of 'bad girl' and to bask a little in the identity of a 'good girl':

> I remember my first pride, it was in Berlin actually, in 2008, on Christopher street I think it's called. I was there for an IGLYO[8] event and it was basically my first ever encounter with international LGBT organizing. I felt joy at finally being somewhere where I was accepted, where people could whatever way they wanted, and I was appreciated for doing the work I was doing back home. Nobody was asking those stupid questions about marriage or when would I have a child, no one was interested in these material things that I hated for so long. I met with representatives of various European institutions and I could not imagine having the same kind of meetings and discussions back in Kyrgyzstan. (Respondent S.)

What unites these narratives is the sense of constant shifting — identities being identified as either 'good' or 'bad' depending on the years (the setting of clubs), locations (inside and outside the country), spaces (family/work or sports) or people (parents/activists or foreigners) — all the same identities assessed as different depending on the socio-spatio-temporal context of the interaction.

Summary

The characteristics of women's rights activism in Kyrgyzstan along the axes of stories of initiation, mechanics of the activism, historiography and cartography of their activities, stories of women's role in the country, as well as the clashes between the "good" and the "bad" girls/women of activism indicated close resemblance to globally accepted feminist discourses, such as oppression, patriarchy, consciousness-raising groups, grassroots activism, commissioned feminism, deconstruction of gender and tricksterism. At the same time currently salient feminist issues like intersectionality and transnationality did not surface. Further analysis of these characteristics is presented in the next Chapter.

8. IGLYO - International Gay and Lesbian Youth Organisation

Chapter 6. Towards a reframing of non-western feminisms

Based on findings discussed in the previous chapter, which responded to RQ 1, this chapter provides a comparative discussion on differences and similarities of the characteristic narratives of Kyrgyzstani women's rights activists with the regional and global discourses in response to RQ 2, focusing on specifics of women's rights activism in Kyrgyzstan, while also applying the decolonial optics. The chapter brings these historiographic, cartographic studies of the narratives of women's rights activism together in an attempt to build a wider understanding of feminism, which is inclusive of knowledge and praxis from 'unimportant' localities with the purpose of outlining possible pathways in which non-western feminisms can be reframed out of the deadlock of 'coloniality of being' towards a more productive framework

6.1 Kurak-feminism: Specifics of women's rights activism in Kyrgyzstan

Pulling together the narratives of respondents on their initiation into women's rights activism and its mechanics, historiography and cartography, based on stories of women's role as perceived in the Kyrgyz society with its division of women into "good" and "bad", it becomes possible to create a portrait of a Kyrgyz women's rights activist. However, it is not a portrait made in a single technique, rather a bricolage, a patchwork, a *kurak* — just like Kyrgyzstani feminism itself — as women that make up this picture are both similar and different from each other, as well as from the normative image of a feminist or feminism.

The head of this *kurak* portrait consists of women over 40 years old, wearing their hair Soviet-style, uncovered, focused on the political and economic rights of women. The women that make up this group developed their gender expertise thanks to research commissioned by international organisations. They are the ones that have organized gender schools since the early 90s and they are the ones that have participated in the Fourth World Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995 — better known as the Beijing Platform for Action — which had become a watershed moment in the history of women's movement not only in Kyrgyzstan, but the whole of Central Asia. It was the first time that women were able to raise both formally and informally questions on the status of women in transition societies, and even to speak up for themselves. Following the Beijing conference, the number of women's NGOs in Kyrgyzstan doubled, all of which collectively can be identified as the "first wave" of women's rights activism in Kyrgyzstan. Although many of them have since parted ways with each other and have established separate NGOs, think tanks or research agencies, they are still active on the

women's rights scene in Kyrgyzstan, seemingly exempt from the most cursed of NGO-related maladies — a feminist burnout.

The torso of this protean portrait is made up of women's rights activists that work in the rural areas, in the regional cities and towns, in villages and small localities. Those that run for local elections and have started winning against their male competitors — not because of any positive discrimination that puts women above men, but because of their own initiative and eagerness to find solutions to problems of their fellow villagers, which has earned them the voters' trust. They are the women that spearhead rural initiatives against domestic violence or economic rights of women, that organize local competitions for small enterprise initiatives without discrimination — be it a strategically flawed business of producing home-made noodles that cost more than industrially produced pasta or a beauty salon. They are strong local women that attribute their strength and success to their husbands, which enrages some younger researchers and activists, who want to teach them to love and accept themselves more. But the women that make up the torso are certain that segregation and excessive focus on women versus men cannot bring the desired changes and will only wreak havoc into any advancement that has been made in women's rights in the country. They sincerely believe in the value of marriage and family, in keeping up the long-held traditions of their people, and in ensuring their peaceful co-existence with women's freedoms.

Grassroots feminist initiatives make up the legs of this portrait, initiatives that work with the most stigmatized groups like LGBT, sex workers, drug users, girls and women with disabilities, or initiatives of young feminists, girl-activists, who self-organize with or without external funding or support, either online or in real time. A lot of them can also be lone activists, not representing any group or organisations, openly agreeing and disagreeing with each other and others. Activists representing the legs of the portrait are the ones that make up the bulk of feminist or women's rights marches in the country, carrying posters with radical and provocative slogans that cause backlash in society, but also quiet admiration in the hearts of women and men alike. Their numbers are small, but they are growing. They run fast, but they can also stand long hours in the district police offices, where they are detained for exercising their constitutional right to freedom of assembly and freedom of expression. They withstand physical altercations with misogynistic and nationalist instigators like during the 8th of March protest in 2020, where the instigators were able to scatter away right in front of the police, who instead went for arresting women. This group of activists is very well versed in feminist theory, uses English words freely, has international grassroots connections and long-stretching plans

for the country's future, which they see as celebrating matriarchy or absolute equality between men and women, which would make it impossible to distinguish one from the other, as there would be no gender identities, sexual orientations, as well as ethnicities, races, or any differences in social and economic statuses.

The arms in the portrait are represented by professional NGO-ites, women that learned about gender-based discrimination and violence in Kyrgyzstan after getting their first grant. They do not appear to particularly share the ideals of gender equality, especially outside of their job places, combining their personal patriarchal views with gender equality that is part of their professional duties. Similar to Communist party officials in Uzbekistan during the Soviet time tasked with eradicating religion, while in the domain of their private lives following the tenets of that same religion (Dadabaev, 2014), these women do not find it confusing or difficult to allow these two imperatives to co-exist in their lives. They do value the financial aid from international organisations, which have allowed establishment of such NGOs in the first place. Part of the liberalization reforms in the post-Soviet republics, the strategy of foreign funds to invest in local self-organized groups in hopes of developing civil society resulted in the inflated numbers of NGOs that were registered — according to some estimates that number is somewhere between 8000 to 12000 (ADB, 2012). Although more than half of these organisations are now defunct, this number is a good indicator of how donor funding was perceived as an opportunity to earn and to survive in the extreme poverty that followed the shock reforms in the economy undertaken in the early 90s. It is not surprising that such direct dependence of NGOs to foreign funding was widely known, leading to a popular perception that the activists were only interested in the cajoling of the donor community. Women's rights organisations were seen as prioritizing the interests of their funders via development of project proposals aimed at fitting advertised grant requirements, and not the needs and interests of their main beneficiaries — women on the ground.

To establish their organizations the different parts of this giant portrait of a Kyrgyz feminist mentioned learning about the work of NGOs at trainings that were being organized around that time by international organisations, and then establishing their own. Some other parts started up organisations and initiatives on the basis of partnership between the local government and active female citizens of that village or region. This is an interesting point, as although it seems as if though Kyrgyz government was also interested in the development of the NGO sector, particularly women's rights, in fact these governmental programs were all sponsored by international funds and organisations, like UNDP, UN Women, GIZ, USAID

through initiatives like peacebuilding, access to water, land reform, electoral participation and others (Hoare, 2016).

While all of the women's rights activists that were interviewed identified themselves as working on women's issues or women's rights, be it bride kidnapping, domestic violence, electoral participation, political rights, or freedom from societal pressures, there was no single understanding of feminism, as well as no similar introduction to it. Some had learned about it from other activists, or from social media, or their university lectures. Many had started their women's rights activism as a resistance to discrimination and violence they or someone close had experienced, but they had not realized that it was related to feminism or could be analyzed through a feminist analytical framework. A lot of the respondents were not very clear as to the recognized types of feminism, like radical or intersectional feminism.

In cities and towns of southern Kyrgyzstan (Osh, Jalal-Abad, Nookat) the narrative of respondents identified as the priority issue the rise of fundamentalist Islam and its influence on the position of women, massive labor migration as second, and forced marriages as the third priority. Many expressed their fear for their activism in the face of fundamentalists, nostalgia for Soviet times, vision of future based on this nostalgia. The researcher herself during the fieldwork in these cities and towns experienced a sense of totality of religion in the area, where majority of women are covered, and there is a palpable sense of physical threat for wearing jeans and not covering head.

In cities and towns of northern Kyrgyzstan (Bishkek, Naryn, Karakol) — migration was the first priority, religion — second or third, with domestic violence as a consequence of migration being sometimes second between migration and religion; bride kidnapping was less of a priority for a while due to active media coverage, however it was report as coming back again. Respondents expressed nostalgia for Soviet times, family was identified as important, patriarchy was not seen as a problem, although its constituent parts were. Notes from fieldwork noticed that women's activism was much stronger in the northern regions with greater municipal support, new structures of mutual support rising in the face of migration, and where the religious threat was not overblown.

There was also a visible core-periphery direction in knowledge transfer (tactics and strategies), but no centralized hierarchy, only traceable during conferences or national conventions organized in the 'core', Bishkek, by women activists that make up the 'head' of the portrait. Women from the peripheries, mainly from the 'torso' part of the portrait, traveled with pleasure, learned from trainings, but only took what would be relevant within their

contexts. The 'head' activists in Bishkek indicated they were aware of all local issues and could provide technical support to organisations and activists there. They seemed to lack awareness of local entanglements, and on the contrary were confident that it was in their remit to tackle stereotypes and fight harmful traditions without consulting the locals.

It is clear that activists residing outside the capital and making up the 'torso' are more loaded with household chores, family services, hierarchical relationships between *Kainene-Kelin* (Kyrg. mother-in-law and daughter-in-law). Although many women identify as practicing Muslim women — reciting prayers, fasting — almost all of the respondents were concerned about the radicalization of Islam, as one of the most difficult challenges in society today. According to them, over the past ten years, the status of women in religion has been deteriorating, and women do not feel free and safe. The 2010 interethnic conflict in the south, of course, had its own impact, and this topic slipped casually, but activists tried not to touch on it. The conflicts between 1990 and 2010 were completely unreflected; activists have not been psychologically rehabilitated. Women's activism in the south has been becoming more partisan in order to ensure its security. However, all of them remain interconnected, reaching out to each other for support, visiting each other's offices and community centers throughout the country, or meeting at conferences in Bishkek. When asked how many other women's rights groups they knew, an overwhelming majority of respondents listed up to 30 different NGOs and activists from the different regions of Kyrgyzstan.

There is a clear division between grassroots organisations (making up the 'legs') and mainstream organisations (making up the 'head' and 'arms', and sometimes the 'torso'). Where the first ones work with groups that are represented in the staff and leadership of such organisations, and can claim direct representation of their beneficiary groups, the second ones usually cannot boast that. Many respondents from the second group reflected on the "righteousness" of their work, possibly unaware of the selectiveness of their approach, using words like 'true women', 'poor women', 'dignified women' (*достойные женщины*). This was very clearly articulated when respondents from this group were referring to the 8 March protest of 2019, which had caused quite a backlash in the general public and media discourses, although incomparable with the backlash of the march in 2020. In Kyrgyzstan the political march on International Women's Day had been organized since 2014, and had always included a diversity of slogans, ranging from women's political rights to protesting against beauty standards to queer representation. However, it is the march of 2019 that was for the first time

condemned as a ‘gay pride’ because of participation of LGBT organisations of Bishkek. To many this march had discredited the whole of women’s movement in Kyrgyzstan.

However, this is also an example of what one of the activists from the ‘legs’ part of the portrait called the specifics of Kyrgyz feminism — its openness and frankness. Although in Kyrgyzstan women are oppressed by the patriarchal standards of society and the state, they are able to exercise a lot more freedom of opinion and expression, compared to Europe. It could have had something to do with the widespread culture of political correctness in Europe, which keeps many from voicing their opinions openly. This is different from the culture of communication in Kyrgyzstan, where activists are often frank about their opinions of each other, but are also quick to support each other during times of crisis — like when the conservative parliament of Kyrgyzstan had initiated a “foreign agents” draft law that would limit and control the activities of NGOs, or the “homosexual propaganda” draft law that was the exact replica of the Russian law that came into power in 2013. In both cases all the different parts of this giant portrait, representing different groups of women’s rights activists, often with opposing views and strategies, came together to stand up against these authoritarian and discriminatory draft laws. And in both cases — they prevailed.

6.2 Nomadity of being: a response to the colonial question and feminism

Coloniality of being in me was the reason I as the researcher was initially disappointed with results of my field research, with what I was hearing my respondents say when answering my questions. I was expecting them to present this picture of a feminist struggle in the face of oppressive patriarchy, to hear stories of heroic opposition, of self-sacrifice, of going against the order of things in Kyrgyzstani society. I expected to see lone female-warriors standing up proudly for their bodily autonomy, economic and political independence, for their right to be different from others. I wanted to see this united front of women that was educating, enlightening other women, who were still in the dark cabal of patriarchy. Because this is how a feminist was painted for me throughout books, stories, movies, and countless articles on feminism. Certainly this portrait of a feminist, however widespread and influential it might be, cannot be the only one, but it was in my mind.

The stories of women’s rights activists on the ground in the rural areas of Kyrgyzstan, who are doing this in addition to their workload as state employed teachers, or doctors, or village councils, as well as mothers and wives to large families dependent on their housekeeping prowess, painted a different picture — one that is equal parts prosaic and

intriguing. And one that in being so stands in stark contrast with the romanticized image of a feminist, albeit only in the eyes of hybridized post-colonial creatures such as myself, native but educated in the "Western" academic tradition. For such ideologically inclined the stories of women's creative "manipulation, negotiation, and strategizing" (Ismailbekova, 2016, p.4) in the context of Kyrgyzstani society sounded almost cynical and mercantile — however, upon deeper analysis this reaction can be understood as a result of coloniality of being with its Christian axiology. According to it any activism must be done purely out of altruistic motives, unpaid, logical, in the straight vector teleology from archaic traditionalism of unmodern societies to the progressive enlightenment of Western modernity.

The stories of women's rights activists in Kyrgyzstan provided a different story for someone willing to step outside these analytical frameworks, one that gives hope, as it diminishes the problematics of both the postcolonial and decolonial theories with their inevitability of coloniality of being into something that can be digested and made useful — nomadity of being — a productive force that provides a way out of the postmodern condition of oppressive hopelessness. It takes what it likes from global feminism and neoliberalism, a process that could even be described as plagiarism or appropriation, and forgets to attribute, forgets where it got it from, as the borrowed becomes a part of the living and breathing bricolage, a *kurak* (traditional Kyrgyz patchwork).

Postcolonial and decolonial theory, however, which have described coloniality of being on examples of lived experiences of colonized peoples and lands in the Middle East, South Asia, the Americas and Africa, and which claim ability to deconstruct the coloniality of modernity, cannot provide a constructive exit from it. Looking at feminism and women's rights activism in Kyrgyzstan through the framework of these theories one comes back to coloniality of being in that the value judgement that is made about this feminism as being secondary, a hodge-podge of Western thought, or perhaps as being an inevitable result of this coloniality of being where the colonial subjects, which women's rights activists are (just like the rest of their compatriots), are unable to think any other way because the "Western" colonizer's culture and epistemology are inculcated in them. As such, the concept of "coloniality of being" (Maldonado-Torres, 2007) is a victim and oppressor of itself, locking non-Western and post-colonial cultures within the vicious cycle of blame and guilt.

It is undoubtedly a model case of coloniality of knowledge and coloniality of being that it took European scholars like Braidotti with Deleuze and Guattari to first theorize about nomads before the concept of a nomadic subject or being-nomad could enter the academic

discourse outside ethnography, anthropology and history. Not only are they established European scholars and theoreticians, they are also not representatives of historically nomadic cultures — their nomadism is of an abstract kind, pulled into the realms of high theory. I, on the other hand, as the author of this research, am a representative of a people that historically has been nomadic and till present time practices nomadic lifestyle, albeit altered with the advent of the Soviet total reordering of the social life in Central Asia.

There are feminist critiques that the referencing of the "glorious nomadic past" of Central Asia when women and men were allegedly equal is romanticizing the past and not factual, however that accusation again is an example of the European zero point epistemology — the value judgement of such referencing as "not factual" or "romanticizing" are founded on the basics of European epistemology, which requires objective and quantifiable data, not symbols and emotions. So, only referencing my nomadic roots would not have been accepted in the global knowledge production system without the founding of my conceptualization on the shoulders of these giants — Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Rosie Braidotti — or any other, for that matter, as long as I could justify the connection.

There is no resentment, however, as this fits exactly with my conceptualization of nomadity of being as bricolage thinking that is interested in the essence of the ideas without getting caught in the quagmire of bibliography, politics and geography. What matters is if an idea can respond to the local needs, be modified to a local context, or can be developed further — if any of these are true, the idea is accepted without fixation on where this idea came from and who developed it. These details get forgotten, only the idea remains. That is the main difference of nomadity of being from coloniality of being — while recognizing the prevailing coloniality of knowledge and power, nomadity of being makes a volitional choice to let go and let it be, making productive existence a priority. In this existence ideas get spread, they can influence people — both positively and negatively — but such is life, the *qöch* ['nomadic caravan'] must continue its journey.

Nomadity of being defined in such a way may also resemble Bhabha's postcolonial concept of hybridity. In an example from India, where native missionary Anund Messeh encounters locals reading the Christian scripture in Hindustani language, he notes how the locals refuse to accept that the book was printed in their language by a white man, as they believe they were given the book by an angel in human form at the bazaar. They base their refusal on the simple fact that white people eat meat and that makes them automatically ineligible for any kind of sacred privity in Hindu religious logic. Here the scripture becomes a

hybrid object — it is no longer an original British book, nor is it fully local — stuck somewhere in the third space of reconfiguration and re-interpretation. However, even if a colonized subject imitates the actions and culture of a colonialist, this imitation due to the peculiarities of the action of the language will never be perfect and identical to the original. Superimposed on the dichotomy inherent in colonial discourse, such imitation, or mimicry, in Bhabha's terms, often produces an unconscious resistance effect. For example, this attempt by "locals" to repeat the Christian doctrine preached by British missionaries leads to undermining the authority of this doctrine when it is understood through the prism of categories of local religions.

This is a false resemblance with the nomadity of being due to the inherence of an unconscious resistance to colonial influence in the idea of hybridity. Following Foucault, Bhabha argues that resistance is by definition present where there is power, even in an unconscious form. In nomadity of being there is no resistance — there is pragmatic absorption without interest as to the geopolitics of the knowledge. Although in recent years the backlash against women's rights, democracy and general human rights activism in Kyrgyzstan, a country for the longest period known as the most progressive in Central Asia, seems to have increased, negating the point about nomadic indifference towards the source of ideas, the backlash on the contrary supports it. While there is definitely an ideological struggle happening in the public discourse of Kyrgyzstan with seemingly clear sides to each — "Western-funded and commissioned feminists and human rights activists" Vs "the indignant people on the guard of traditional values" — outside of the media, in the domain of the regular lives of ordinary people these struggles are emaciated, yielding to the more immediate matters at hand.

It is the clearly defined sides, however, that show the most pragmatic assimilation and adoption of foreign ideas and methodologies. Their pragmaticism is defined not only by the materialistic needs fulfilled by external funding on either side, but also by the axiological configurations of their identity — they make a choice which of the camps to join based on their personal beliefs, which are influenced by a mixture of their personal lived experiences and consumption of biased media. Once the side (or sides, as they may be plural) are chosen, however, it does not matter whether the ideas and methodologies of that side are local-grown or foreign imported. As long as they are helpful in achieving their axiological objectives anything goes. This is in stark contrast with the unconscious resistance of Bhabha's hybridity and of coloniality of being. Nomadity of being is a pragmatic orientation focused on absorbing the most needed and effective, discarding the rest.

Another characteristic of nomadity of being is the absence of futurity. As discussed in 5.4 many of the respondents could not identify a clear future where their activism had prevailed — they either regurgitated the ideals of the Soviet gender order or the ideals of the third wave of feminism with its intersectionality and deconstruction of gender and sexuality. The responses were almost formulaic all across the spectrum of the respondents — from the professional genderists to grassroots activists. The former leaned closer to the Soviet image, the latter to the third wave. When prompted to think outside of these boxes many women stuttered, unable to come up with anything, simply repeating what they had already said.

As Kodar (2009) theorizes, the nomadic mind does not burden itself with teleology, it functions within the strategy of self-evidence. All that exists creates itself, the world exists because it exists. Following this logic there is no need to try and understand the initial roots, as well as try to predict the end-state of a process. This explains the inability of my respondents to describe an image of the future where their activism had prevailed. It was not so much a matter of not knowing what their goals and objectives are as activists — on the contrary, the reciting of these from their mission documents and brochures was the most common response. When pressed further they came up with the images of Soviet and Western feminist ideals. However, they could not translate these images into the lives on the ground in Kyrgyzstan: Q: *— how exactly would life change if female presidents would become the norm in Kyrgyzstan?* A: *—Women would have more rights and more equality with men*. Q: *—But how would you know this was happening? What are the examples?* A: *—Oh, women would just be happy*. There was a visible discomfort at the necessity to rationalize and visualize. What does not yet exist, does not exist.

In addition to pragmatism and no futurity, nomadity of being presupposes decentralization, following Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualization of nomads as distributed within space, open and smooth, as opposed to the State, which distributes space, making it striated with artificially erected borders and demarcations. The nomads spread across the vast expanses, often uncaring about the other, free to leave an alliance if needed, but always able to mobilize in the shortest of time into a "war machine" when necessary to protect the smooth space they inhabit. Applied to respondents of this research, this decentralization is visible in the lack of systematic women's rights activism or any long-term joint agenda, which objectively could have made achievement of the goals easier and faster due to it being structured. What we see on the ground, however, is a disperse network of activists in various localities doing their own versions of women's rights activism without much attention to the

others, apart from some sporadic national conferences and gatherings that are themselves a project of one or another bigger women's rights group. Often there is conflict, both internal and external, disagreement with each other, competition for funding, however when there is a threat to the common open space of activism by the State — as in the case with the "foreign agents" draft law, these organizations were able to quickly mobilize into a metaphoric "war machine" and defend their space.

So, women's rights activism in Kyrgyzstan takes what it likes from the Soviet gender order, global feminism and neoliberalism, in a process that could be described as plagiarism or appropriation, and forgets to attribute, forgets where it got it from, as the borrowed becomes a part of the living and breathing bricolage, a *kurak* (traditional Kyrgyz patchwork). This can also be considered an example of constructive engagement with global feminist narratives with an aim of challenging the strategically re-deployed post-Soviet traditionalisms and nationalisms — specifically aiming at liberation of girls and women from the bondage of reinstated male privilege. Even as borrowing or outright appropriation, such copying and following of the grand narrative of Euro-American feminism, serves an emancipatory purpose — creatively assembled from bits and pieces of translated articles read, or discussions heard, or movies watched.

As opposed to being considered an instance of ideological colonization by the neo-imperialist "West", as coloniality of being would have it, it may be useful to consider the historiography of feminism in Kyrgyzstan and the contemporary feminist narratives in it as examples of 'nomadity of being', where foreign information and requirements, even forced ones are transformed into an amalgamation of the new and the old, alien and native — like a quilted blanket made from scraps. This was the case of transformation of old communal lifestyles (*mahallas* and *uruus*) into the Soviet 'kolkhoz' — and similarly we could look at adoption of global feminist narratives to local struggles.

So while Alka Kurian does succinctly summarize the issue with domination of Euro-American feminism around the world with discussion of the "customary division of the history of feminism into "waves" [standing] as a good example of [...] the "grand narrative" of feminism [that] becomes the story of western endeavor, and relegates the experience of non-western women to the margins of feminist discourse" (1999) — it does not take into account how insignificant this marginalization of non-western women's narratives in the "grand narrative" is to the very non-western women, precisely because the obsession with a "grand narrative" is a characteristic of Euro-American-centric epistemology. Non-western feminists

and women's rights activists, at least in Kyrgyzstan, could not be less concerned with academic power struggles, when such struggles are not rooted in the daily lived experiences of women in the country.

Nomadity of being helps see the historiography of feminist activism in Kyrgyzstan as one, where foreign information and requirements, even forced ones, are transformed into an amalgamation of the new and the old, alien and native — like *kurak*, a quilted blanket, made from whatever scraps available. Weaving in elements from completely different and, to a Western eye, incompatible approaches nomadity of being might pave the way towards a Central Asian reframing of non-Western feminisms. This concept can be creatively related to the concept of tricksterism in terms of Donna Haraway (1991) and Chela Sandoval (2000), as opposed to mythological or folklore meanings, it is based on a constant appeal to categories that undermine and call into question modernity from a paradoxical position from the outside, created from the inside. What is important is the rebel nature of any trickster, its tendency to disobey normative rules and conventions. Such qualities as duality, deception of authority, tricks and jokes about power, metamorphism, intermediary function between different worlds, manipulation and bricolage as modes of existence are preserved.

The concept of nomadity of being diminishes the problematics of both postcolonial and decolonial options with their inevitability of coloniality of being into something that can be digested and made useful — a productive force that provides a way out of the postmodern condition of oppressive hopelessness. It is pragmatic in the creation of its bricolage of ideas, decentered and void of teleology as a principle, focusing only on what is here and now. What exists — exists, there is no need to endlessly rationalize and project. As the space unfurls both physically and metaphorically, the nomadic caravan continues its journey, weaving in elements from its surrounding, open to additions, all of which become the individual and the collective nomad.

Summary

The narratives of women's rights activists in Kyrgyzstan paint a picture that is familiar across the wider Central Asian region — separation along the professional/grassroots lines, geographies of activism, "good" versus "bad", learning of feminism from media or recognizing they were always one. There may not be nothing new in the stories they tell, however changing the analytical lens through which their narratives are analyzed can provide insights that are helpful in exiting the totalizing oppression of postcolonial hybridity or the coloniality of being.

One such analytical lens is nomadology of Deleuze and Guattari, which was explicated into nomadity of being in this research as a framework that provides a more constructive and productive dynamics between ideas, cultures, peoples.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

My research focused on studying how women's rights activism develops in "unimportant" localities on the basis of a complex intertwining of multiple agencies, socio-political factors, and histories of neo/colonial relations, which complicate the simplified picture of Western feminism colonizing non-western feminisms often developed by postcolonial critiques of feminism. As such, the goal of this research was, based on the analysis of narratives of Kyrgyzstani women's rights activists, to propose ways in which non-western feminisms may be reframed out of the existential crisis of 'coloniality of being' and towards a more productive framework.

To do that the dissertation provided an overview of feminist history and theories, looking at the relationship between the feminisms of the Global North (West) and the Global South (East), focusing on the history of Soviet feminism, which was not included in the annals of the global discourse on feminism. This brought me to a discussion of the colonial question in gender studies, as well as into the theoretical framework of this research, which focused on postcolonial and decolonial theories as the final iterations of the Critical Theory-spawned anti-capitalist critique of global development. In the theoretical framework I proposed a concept of nomadity of being that could be viewed as an anti-thesis to the concept of coloniality of being (decolonial) and hybridity (postcolonial). I followed this up with a discussion of the contextual background of Kyrgyzstan's history within the region, under the Russian and Soviet rules, as well as how all of that had influenced women's rights in the country. This prepared groundwork for description of research findings in Chapter 5, as well as their analysis in Chapter 6. In the following paragraphs the most significant parts of the dissertation are reiterated for an easier comprehension of the whole.

Although Kyrgyzstan's case in studying transition democracy, civil society, market economy, and post-communist international relations has been sufficiently covered, it remains as a testing site for application of various theories, and never as a site for origination of a theory based on the country's specificities. This is due to the predominance of Euro-centric academic traditions prevalent in sociology, anthropology, international relations, political theory, philosophy that Europe and its specificities are the sufficient originators of theories that are applicable and universalized. While learning based on exchange of opinions is a virtue in itself, not a vice, it is the lack of reciprocity that is of concern in the critique of Euro-centric academia, where the direction of scholarly inquiry is singular: east- and southwards. This usually means employment of the argument of universality, which implies that certain values and concepts -

such as those concerning gender and sexuality — are universal to humanity as a whole. The claim of universality, however, has been shown as early as Edward Said's "Orientalism" (1978) to be an "analytic bifurcation" of the world into "European/Good" and "Other/Bad", as well as an omission of this bifurcation from the discourse, allowing the European intellectual to claim "universality" of his projections, simultaneously removing the "Other" from production of history of modernity, where "history" is the product of the West in its actions upon others (Bhambra, 2014).

Feminisms in non-Western contexts have often been critiqued, from a postcolonial/decolonial point of view, for their significant degree of dependence on Western feminist thought and practices (Aguilar 1995, Moller Okin 1999, Kandiyoti 2000, Saunders 2002), becoming 'watered down copies' of Western originals as a result of intellectual mimicry (Tlostanova, Koobak, Thapar-Bjorkert, 2016). And although in Kyrgyzstan the area of gender studies seems to be well-covered, there is criticism of this scholarship and activism as lacking critical reflection and analysis of the self-colonizing practices, where Kyrgyz feminists and activists become a kind of 'native' informants or agents of Western feminist imperialism.

However, following this 'testing site' logic it is possible that the inquiry itself falls victim to the European "zero-point epistemology" (Tlostanova, 2012) that studies of coloniality critique, as a phenomenon that sees Europe as the originator of all contemporary theories of society and politics, among others. While the postcolonial and decolonial projects are of high significance on their own and are applicable throughout numerous localities around the globe, their application to some other localities requires care and ability to retract — as in the case of post-Soviet Central Asia, specifically — Kyrgyzstan, whose historiography, the dissertation suggests, can put forward the concept of "nomadity of being" as an alternative to "coloniality of being" (Maldonado-Torres 2007).

It is important to note that the post-Soviet experience in general has remained largely untranslated into the language of postcolonial discourse. For example, the Soviet Union is represented in Soviet and early post-Soviet science as a liberator of the subjugated peoples, opposing itself to the Russian Empire. At the same time, clear signs of their continuity and close ties, including in the forms of rapid recolonization in the first years of Soviet power, were carefully hidden (Sahni, 1997). Outwardly, the USSR supported the theatrical forms of multiculturalism and other options for negative discrimination, advocated creolization instead of racial and ethnic segregation. There is data that most of this rhetoric was a false front, which was hiding racism, orientalism, progressivism, structural inequality and other familiar flaws of

modernity / colonialism, even though in the forms of state socialism (Tlostanova, 2019). In addition, there were a number of specific and often extremely contradictory features that were characteristic only of Soviet modernity. Among them, the most characteristic feature was the impressive variability of relations between the mother country and different colonies in accordance with the degree of their proximity to Europe, which was associated with the inferiority complex characteristic of Russia as a second-rate empire that is forever catching up with the West (ibid).

At the same time an emerging line of analysis of the Soviet regime in Central Asia, coming from the region itself, describes it as both colonial and immanent. Incorporating elements of coloniality, expressed in the forced reordering of the gender regime, as well as abrogation of religion, and cultivation of the Russian culture as a lingua franca among all of the Soviet republics, the Soviet regime still succeeded in being desired by the local population because of the promise of the *Homo Sovieticus* and the inevitable rise of communism (Cheng, 2009). Marfua Tokhtakhodzhaeva (2008) supports this view in her historical overview of the position of women in Uzbekistan, noting that while *hujum* took a lot of lives and the Soviets' actions in the region often resulted in violent rejection, there was a powerful grassroots movement of women (and slightly less of men), who ardently gave their lives away for the emancipated future of women. Analysis of communication of *jenotdely* workers in Kyrgyzstan by Anara Moldosheva (2016) shows similar passion of women, even in the face of violent persecution on the part of their countrymen.

The Soviet modernity/colonialism and what came to replace it cannot be fully interpreted through neither the postcolonial nor decolonial optics with their typically modernity/colonialism delocalized universalism. The complex intersection of post-socialism and postcolonialism needs its own discourse and its own critical optics, intersecting, but not coinciding with either postcolonial high theory or more applied postcolonial studies. This was attempted in this dissertation with introduction of the concept of "nomadity of being", which responds to the epistemological dead-ends of both the postcolonial "hybridity" and decolonial "coloniality of being".

Postcolonial and decolonial theory, which have described coloniality of being on examples of lived experiences of colonized peoples and lands in the Middle East, South Asia, the Americas and Africa, and which claim ability to deconstruct the coloniality of modernity, cannot provide a constructive exit from it. Looking at feminism and women's rights activism in Kyrgyzstan through the framework of these theories one comes back to coloniality of being

in that the value judgement that is made about this feminism as being secondary, a hodge-podge of Western thought, or perhaps as being an inevitable result of this coloniality of being where the colonial subjects, which women's rights activists are (just like the rest of their compatriots), are unable to think any other way because the "Western" colonizer's culture and epistemology are inculcated in them. As such, the concept of "coloniality of being" (Maldonado-Torres, 2007) is a victim and oppressor of itself, locking non-Western and post-colonial cultures within the vicious cycle of blame and guilt.

Nomadity of being, on the other hand, provides an unbridled space for creative bricolage of ideas and relations, unfixed, transdisciplinary, engaging in "neither reproduction nor just imitation, but rather emphatic proximity, intensive interconnectedness" (Braidotti, 1994, p.5). It does not pose any moral or theoretical conundrums, but rather describes what exists, and what exists — exists, it does not require rationalization. In this it is the antithesis of coloniality of being, which would consider any feminist organizing in non-Western societies as an instance of ideological colonization by the imperialist "West". In nomadity of being any influence is taken as it comes, considered for its pragmatic application, used as needed by actors dispersed within space, independent of each other, but always ready to come together as one to defend against the totalizing machine of the State.

According to coloniality of being we would expect that feminists and women's rights activists are following Western models without much agency or reflectivity of their own positions, or perhaps with exaggerated reflectivity, but unable to change anything because of their deep embeddedness in this coloniality of being. However, what we see on the example of Kyrgyzstan (which may be replicated in other Central Asian countries as well), is that there is a split response to this, or as Shlapintokh described a multiple societies existing within one, there can also be pluriversal activisms, which are characterized by a multiplicity of actors. There are of course those that were nurtured by international development aid, and those that studied outside of the country, those that learned about feminism through media, and those that through either of these, using any opportunity available, have been working on improving their own position in life — and by doing so, improving the positions of other women in the country. They may not necessarily share everything that feminism has to offer and have their own opinions, but they are using tools of this feminism to achieve their own goals.

Hybridity (postcolonial) and coloniality of being (decolonial) seem to be inevitable and without exit only for those post-colonial subjects who are embedded in the dominant colonial structures of power, of knowledge, of culture. In other words — those subjects, like myself,

who, via the study of the language, of traveling and learning in Western universities, or being exposed to global/foreign media (both academic and entertainment) even without traveling, but being engaged in circles comprised of such subjects, like the professionals and experts from among the respondents of this research. This does not stand for those that are not engaged in these circles, even when they are watching foreign films or reading those books, they remain grounded in their lived realities. It allows them to take something they might find useful from this global knowledge and use it on the ground, but without any sense of being dominated. So, it is possible to say that coloniality of being and hybridization happen only when we are trying to engage with the global structures, where power and knowledge are colonial (North and West oriented). But this desire to engage with it and to challenge it is not uniform, it is also an example of European 'zero-point epistemology' of these post-colonial subjects (including myself and the professional feminists) to aspire to be included in the recognized (by whom?) canon. The desire to be recognized by the "Core" discourse exists only within those who recognize this relation of power between the core and the peripheries. Those that lie outside these relations do not have the need to be recognized. Their world does not include whatever is happening in the core, they are indifferent to it.

When it comes down to the Soviet Union, however, established in the dissertation as a hybrid of modernity/colonialism, even though the women on the ground could be said as being outside of the European coloniality of being, they are still embedded in the Soviet (and later in the post-Soviet time — Russian-fueled) epistemological and ideological structures. But this is where it becomes different from the postcolonial/decolonial subjects — even though the post-Soviet Kyrgyz women's rights activists may be embedded so in the Soviet structures, the embedding was not a physical, but an ideological one, which was aspired to, shared by the Soviet population to a great extent (dissidents notwithstanding). So, there was an agency there, an element of choice, of faith in the ideology, which travelled with them afterwards into the post-Soviet, to a greater or lesser degree. What we are seeing then is an uneven layering of the global/western coloniality of being in the post-Soviet period unto the uneven layer of Sovietness of Kyrgyz women's rights activists, which itself was a mixing of local practices with the higher-register faith in the Soviet ideal of communism. The resulting mixture is the *kurak*-feminism we see below.

To establish their organizations majority of the interviewed women's rights organisations mentioned learning about the work of NGOs at trainings that were being organized around that time by international organisations, and then establishing their own.

Some others started up organisations and initiatives on the basis of partnership between the local government and active female citizens of that village or region. This is an interesting point, as although it seems as if though Kyrgyz government was also interested in the development of the NGO sector, particularly women's rights, in fact these governmental programs were all sponsored by international funds and organisations, like UNDP, UN Women, GIZ, USAID through initiatives like peacebuilding, access to water, land reform, electoral participation and others (Hoare, 2016).

While all of the women's rights activists that were interviewed identified themselves as working on women's issues or women's rights, be it bride kidnapping, domestic violence, electoral participation, political rights, or freedom from societal pressures, there was no single understanding of feminism, as well as no similar introduction to it. Some had learned about it from other activists, or from social media, or their university lectures. Many had started their women's rights activism as a resistance to discrimination and violence they or someone close had experienced, but they had not realized that it was related to feminism or could be analyzed through a feminist analytical framework. A lot of the respondents were not very clear as to the recognized types of feminism, like radical or intersectional feminism.

In cities and towns of southern Kyrgyzstan (Osh, Jalal-Abad, Nookat) the narrative of respondents identified as the priority issue the rise of fundamentalist Islam and its influence on the position of women, massive labor migration as second, and forced marriages as the third priority. Many expressed their fear for their activism in the face of fundamentalists, nostalgia for Soviet times, vision of future based on this nostalgia. The researcher herself during the fieldwork in these cities and towns experienced a sense of totality of religion in the area, where majority of women are covered, and there is a palpable sense of physical threat for wearing jeans and not covering head.

In cities and towns of northern Kyrgyzstan (Bishkek, Naryn, Karakol) — migration was the first priority, religion - second or third, with domestic violence as a consequence of migration being sometimes second between migration and religion; bride kidnapping was less of a priority for a while due to active media coverage, however it was report as coming back again. Respondents expressed nostalgia for Soviet times, family was identified as important, patriarchy was not seen as a problem, although its constituent parts were. Notes from fieldwork noticed that women's activism was much stronger in the northern regions with greater municipal support, new structures of mutual support rising in the face of migration, and where the religious threat was not overblown.

There was also a visible core-periphery direction in knowledge transfer (tactics and strategies), but no centralized hierarchy, only traceable during conferences or national conventions organised in the 'core' –- the city of Bishkek. Women from the peripheries traveled with pleasure, learned from trainings, but only took what would be relevant within their contexts. The activists in Bishkek indicated they were aware of all local issues and could provide technical support to organisations and activists there. They seemed to lack awareness of local entanglements, and on the contrary were confident that it was in their remit to tackle stereotypes and fight harmful traditions without consulting the locals.

It is clear that activists residing outside the capital are more loaded with household chores, family services, hierarchical relationships between *Kainene-Kelin* ("mother-in-law" and "daughter-in-law"). Although many women identify as practicing Muslim women — reciting prayers, fasting — almost all of the respondents were concerned about the radicalization of Islam, as one of the most difficult challenges in society today. According to them, over the past ten years, the status of women in religion has been deteriorating, and women do not feel free and safe. The 2010 interethnic conflict in the south, of course, had its own impact, and this topic slipped casually, but activists tried not to touch on it. The conflicts between 1990 and 2010 were completely unreflected; activists have not been psychologically rehabilitated. Women's activism in the south has been becoming more partisan in order to ensure its security. However, all of them remain interconnected, reaching out to each other for support, visiting each other's offices and community centers throughout the country, or meeting at conferences in Bishkek. When asked how many other women's rights groups they knew, an overwhelming majority of respondents listed up to 30 different NGOs and activists from the different regions of Kyrgyzstan.

There was a clear division between grassroots organisations (girls helping girls, domestic abuse survivors, rural women, marginalized groups of women) and mainstream organisations (women's political rights, economic rights, crisis centers for women). Where the first ones work with groups that are represented in the staff and leadership of such organisations, the second ones usually do not have their beneficiary groups represented in their staff. Many respondents from the second group reflected on the "righteousness" of their work, possibly unaware of the selectiveness of their approach, using words like 'true women', 'poor women', 'dignified women' (*достойные женщины*). This was very clearly articulated when respondents from this group were referring to the 8 March protest of 2019, which had caused quite a backlash in the general public and media discourses, although incomparable with the

backlash of the march in 2020. In Kyrgyzstan the political march on International Women's Day had been organised since 2014, and had always included a diversity of slogans, ranging from women's political rights to protesting against beauty standards to queer representation. However, it is the march of 2019 that was for the first time condemned as a "gay pride" because of participation of LGBT organisations of Bishkek. To many this march had discredited the whole of women's movement in Kyrgyzstan.

However, this is also an example of what one of the activists called the specifics of Kyrgyz feminism — its openness and frankness. Although in Kyrgyzstan women are oppressed by the patriarchal standards of society and the state, they are able to exercise a lot more freedom of opinion and expression, compared to Europe. It could have had something to do with the widespread culture of political correctness, which keeps many from voicing their opinions openly. This is different from the culture of communication in Kyrgyzstan, where activists are often frank about their opinions of each other, but are also quick to support each other during times of crisis — like when the conservative parliament of Kyrgyzstan had initiated a 'foreign agents' draft law that would limit and control the activities of NGOs, or the 'homosexual propaganda' draft law that was the exact replica of the Russian law that came into power in 2013. In both cases all the different parts of this giant portrait, representing different groups of women's rights activists, often with opposing views and strategies, came together to stand up against these authoritarian and discriminatory draft laws. And in both cases — they prevailed.

Nomadity of being allows a researcher to change gears, change the framework through which a certain issue is analyzed. For example, in the case of women's rights activism in Kyrgyzstan, which is a non-entity within not only the global feminist discourse, but even within the larger regional discourse on the post-Soviet space, due to its perceived inability to engage with and produce high theory, as well as due to the unimportance of Kyrgyzstan as a geopolitical locality, nomadity of being helps see the historiography of this activism as something that absorbs and transforms disparately available pieces of feminist knowledge and methodology to weave together. Often there is not even a "to" in this activity, there is no certain futurity towards which these activists are developing their bricolage of activism. Nomadity of being points towards a possibility of zero teleology, even if on paper there are all these missions and objectives written out — who are they written for? The donor community, whom the majority of women's rights activists and their organizations depend on. The link between these objectives and the reality on the ground, however, is often quite weak. This is not to say that the women's rights activists are misusing the funds they receive, but rather that the requirement

itself for a rational teleology is exactly that — a requirement. On the ground what happens most of the time is women hear stories and react to them, as the stories happen. How can one prepare for something that is not yet there? What exists — exists, and what does not yet exist? Self-evidentiary.

Implications of nomadity of being can reach farther, covering not only the experiences of women's rights activists in Kyrgyzstan, but as a paradigm, as a way of thinking that evades the totality of coloniality of being, allowing groups in similar positions the constructive agency of making a choice to let go, to free one's self from the mental cabal. It is possible to enjoy the feminism of the 2019 *Captain Marvel,* debate with Judith Butler and Luce Irigaray, and tune-in to an all-Russian zoom webinar on Monique Wittig without feeling epistemologically oppressed. Because after all of these, we, the non-Western feminists, activists and scholars, can go out into the city that is ours, meet with our friends over a cup of cappuccino in a trendy coffee place with bearded baristas, and discuss what we found inspiring or inadequate. But then we might find an article by a Kazakh ethnographer, who writes about the sacred status of nomadic women in comparison with that of women in monotheistic religions as reminiscent of the symbolic transition from a "lupine" paradigm into a "canine" (Kodar and Kodar, 2015). In the nomadic, lupine paradigm a woman is a warrior, a valkyrie, a comrade in arms to a man, whereas in the monotheistic canine paradigm a woman becomes servile, taking on the roles of a homemaker, a mother Mary. We read this and we become filled with excitement about how to use this in our engagements with the public discourse, realizing the strength of this symbolism — far beyond that we could glean from anything out of Western epistemology. Our insights will most likely not find a place on the shelves of university libraries in Europe or the United States, but does it really matter to us?

The concept of nomadity of being as discussed in this dissertation is far from being fully developed and theorized. It is only a sketch of an idea that could become and by its pronunciation even at such an incipient stage I hope to have sown together the initial pieces of a new *kurak* — made from a very simplified overview of existing knowledge on global and regional feminism; different strands of Critical Theory, starting from Enlightenment to Mill, to Foucault, to Bhabha and Braidotti; adding in elements of the Soviet gender regime and the paradox of its modernity colonialism; before decorating with stories of women's rights activists in Kyrgyzstan on their initiation into feminism, mechanics of their activism, historiography and narrative cartography, as well as their understanding of the role of women and the clashes that come about it. A limitation of this *kurak* is that it is quite ambitious, written in an academic

language that is recognizable, but on a topic that might be of interest to only local readers, while taking a swing at a rather grand goal of reframing non-Western feminisms out of the deadlock of coloniality.

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Appendix 1. Questions for semi-structured interviews

Personal

- Please, introduce yourself
- Please, tell us about the most significant moments of your life*
- How and why have you started your activism?
- Has it had any influence on your life?

Activism

- Please, share about your decision-making strategies in your activism - how do you know what topics to work on?
- What kind of strategies and tactics to you use in your activism?
- How did you learn about them?
- What have you achieved as a result of your activism?

Regional connections

- If you participate in regional/republican-level activities, what themes do you see emerging as dominant at different levels and in different regions?
- How are they different from themes you work on in your own context?
- What kind of feminist and women's rights 'actors' do you know or see on the regional and republican level? Please, list all that you know.
- In your perception, what are the relations between them (and you)?

Situation in the country (narratives of the past/present/future)

- How would you evaluate the situation of children, girls and women in Kyrgyzstan today?
- Why do you think we have this situation? What were the roots of this?
- Where do you think is the feminist/women's movement of Kyrgyzstan today relative to its goals?
- How do you see the future of the country if you and other feminists are able to reach your common goals?

Appendix 2. Questions for focus groups

Personal

- Please, introduce yourself
- How and why have you started your activism?
- Has it had any influence on your life?

Activism

- Please, briefly introduce your group
- Please, share about your decision-making strategies in your activism - how do you know what topics to work on?
- What kind of strategies and tactics to you use in your activism?
- How did you learn about them?
- What have you achieved as a result of your activism?

Regional connections

- If you participate in regional/republican-level activities, what themes do you see emerging as dominant at different levels and in different regions?
- How are they different from themes you work on in your own context?
- What kind of feminist and women's rights 'actors' do you know or see on the regional and republican level? Please, list all that you know.
- In your perception, what are the relations between them (and you)?

Situation in the country (narratives of the past/present/future)

- How would you evaluate the situation of children, girls and women in Kyrgyzstan today?
- Why do you think we have this situation? What were the roots of this?
- Where do you think is the feminist/women's movement of Kyrgyzstan today relative to its goals?
- What else should be done? What will your organisation do?
- How do you see the future of the country if you and other feminists are able to reach your common goals?

Appendix 3. Consent form (RU)

Форма согласия на участие в исследовании «Документирование феминистских движений в Кыргызстане и анализ феминистских нарративов о роли женщин в Кыргызстане"

Сыйнат СУЛТАНАЛИЕВА, кандидатка философских наук, Университет Цукубы совместно с Бишкекскими Феминистскими Инициативами

Большое спасибо за согласие участвовать в этом исследовательском проекте, касающимся документирования истории и географии феминистских движений в Кыргызстане с фокусом на нарративы активисток о роли женщин в стране, об их активизме, а также о своей личной роли в активизме. Это исследование проводит Сыйнат СУЛТАНАЛИЕВА, студентка докторской программы Высшей школы гуманитарных и социальных наук, Университет Цукуба (Япония), совместно с коллежанками из Бишкекских Феминистских Инициатив (БФИ).

Пожалуйста, внимательно прочитайте эту форму и задайте любые вопросы, которые могут возникнуть перед подписанием. Подпишите две копии формы; вы можете оставить один экземпляр себе.

Подписывая данную форму вы соглашаетесь на следующее:

1. Мое участие в этом проекте является добровольным. Я понимаю, что за участие мне не будут платить. Я могу прекратить участие в любое время без последствий. Если откажусь от участия или выйду из исследования, никто в моем профессиональном или социальном окружении не будет про это проинформирован.
2. Я понимаю, что большинство респондентов_ток найдут дискуссию интересной и продуманной. Тем не менее если во время интервью я почувствую себя некомфортно, я имею право отказаться от ответа на любой вопрос или завершить беседу.
3. Мое участие включает интервью с Сыйнат СУЛТАНАЛИЕВОЙ из Университета Цукубы. Интервью длится примерно 45-90 минут. Во время него будут вестись заметки. Будет сделана цифровая аудиозапись диалога.
4. Я понимаю, что исследовательница не будет идентифицировать меня по имени в любых отчетах, используя информацию, полученную из интервью. Последующие виды использования записей и данных будут подчиняться стандартным политикам использования данных, которые защищают анонимность отдельных лиц и/или их организаций.
5. Я понимаю, что Сыйнат СУЛТАНАЛИЕВА может использовать мои ответы на вопросы интервью как часть данных для ее докторской диссертации и последующих публикациях только в анонимной форме для защиты моей личной информации.
6. Я прочитал_а и понял_а объяснения, предоставленные мне. На все мои вопросы я получил_а ответы и я добровольно участвую в этом исследовании.

7. Мне была предоставлена копия этой формы согласия.

Подпись и имя участника_цы: _____Дата: _____

Подпись исследовательницы: _____Дата: _____

Appendix 4. Consent form (EN)

Consent form for participation in the research titled "Documentation of feminist movements in Kyrgyzstan and analysis of feminist narratives on the role of women in Kyrgyzstan"

Syinat SULTANALIEVA, Ph.D. candidate, University of Tsukuba

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this research project related to documenting the history and geography of feminist movements in Kyrgyzstan with a focus on activists' narratives about the role of women in the country, about their activism, as well as about their personal role in activism. This study is being conducted by Syinat SULTANALIEVA, a doctoral student at the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Tsukuba (Japan), together with colleges from Bishkek Feminist Initiatives (BFI).

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions that may arise before signing. Sign two copies of the form; you can keep one copy for yourself.

By signing this form, you agree to the following:

1. My participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for participation. I can stop participating at any time without consequences. If I refuse to participate or leave the study, no one in my professional or social environment will be informed about this.
2. I understand that most respondents may find the discussion interesting and thoughtful. Nevertheless, if during an interview I feel uncomfortable, I have the right to refuse to answer any question or end the conversation.
3. My participation includes an interview with Syinat SULTANALIEVA from the University of Tsukuba. The interview lasts approximately 45-90 minutes. Notes will be made during it. A digital audio recording of the dialogue will be made.
4. I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports, using the information obtained from the interview. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data usage policies that protect the anonymity of individuals and / or their organizations.
5. I understand that Syinat SULTANALIEVA can use my answers to interview questions as part of the data for her doctoral dissertation and subsequent publications only in anonymous form to protect my personal information.
6. I have read and understood the explanations provided to me. I received answers to all my questions and I voluntarily participate in this study.
7. I was provided with a copy of this consent form.

Signature and name of participant: _____Date: _____

Signature of the researcher: _____Date: _____