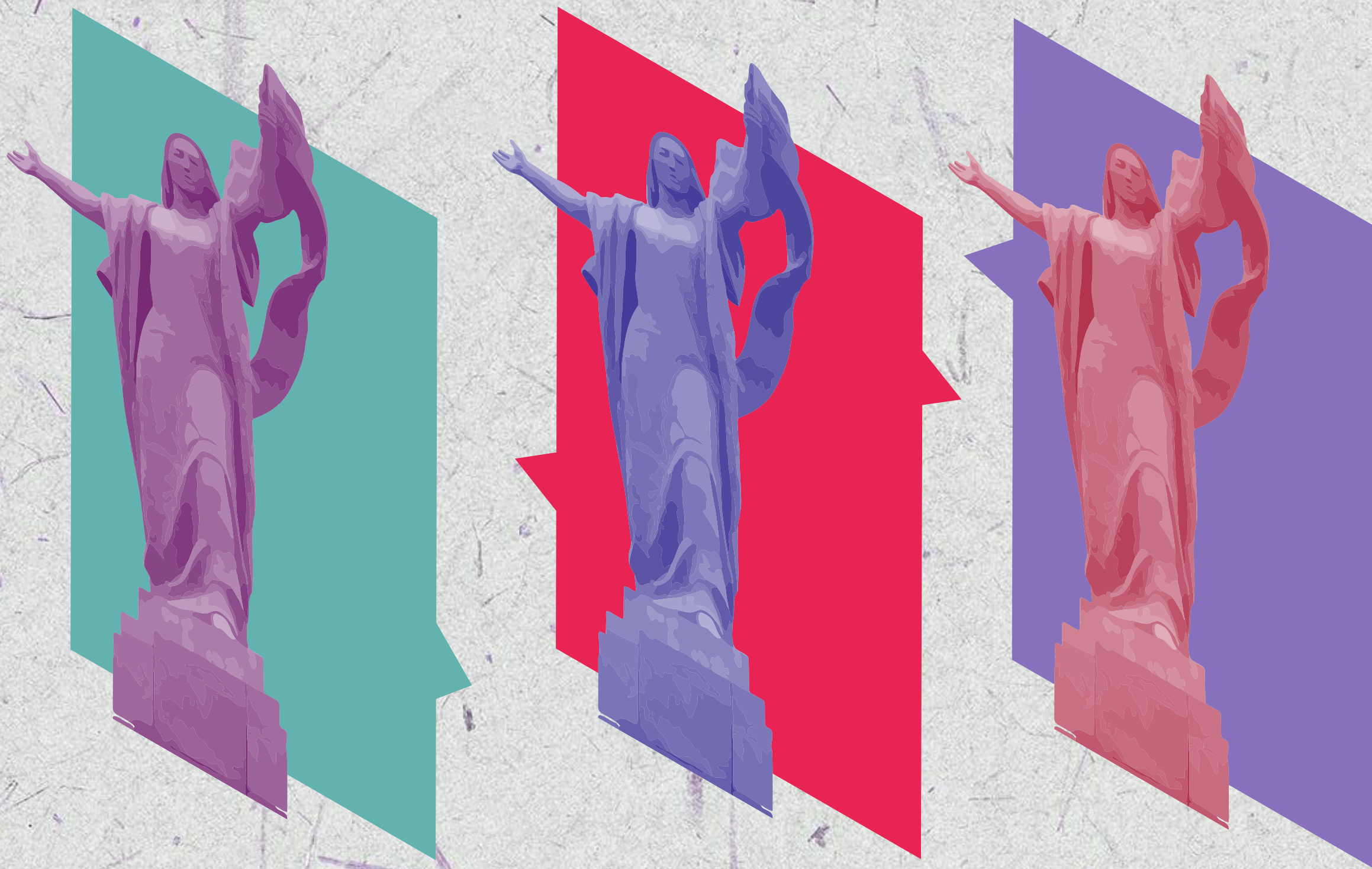


# FEMINIST DIALOGUES

IF NOT US,  
WHO?!



Stories of the Feminist  
and Women's movement:

PAST

PRESENT

FUTURE



# FEMINIST DIALOGUES

IF NOT US,  
WHO?!

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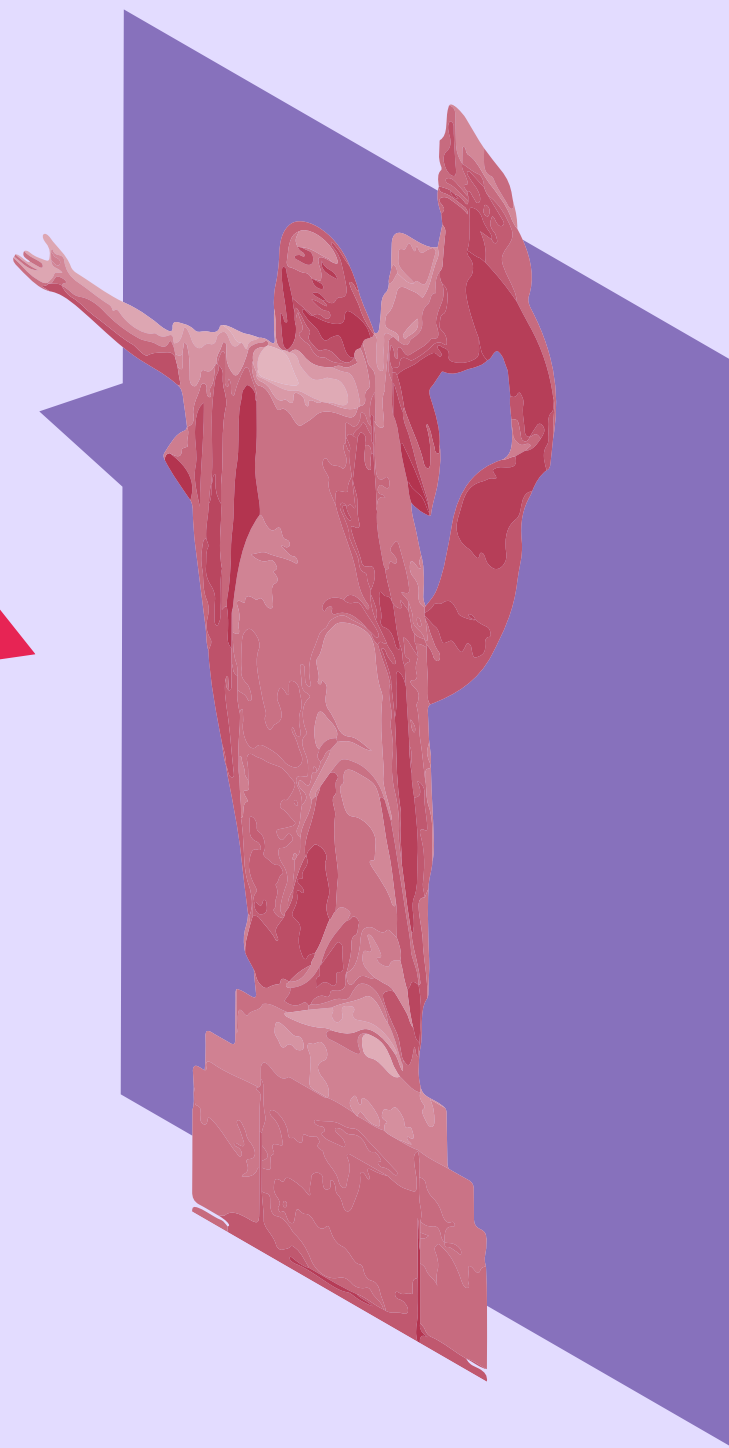
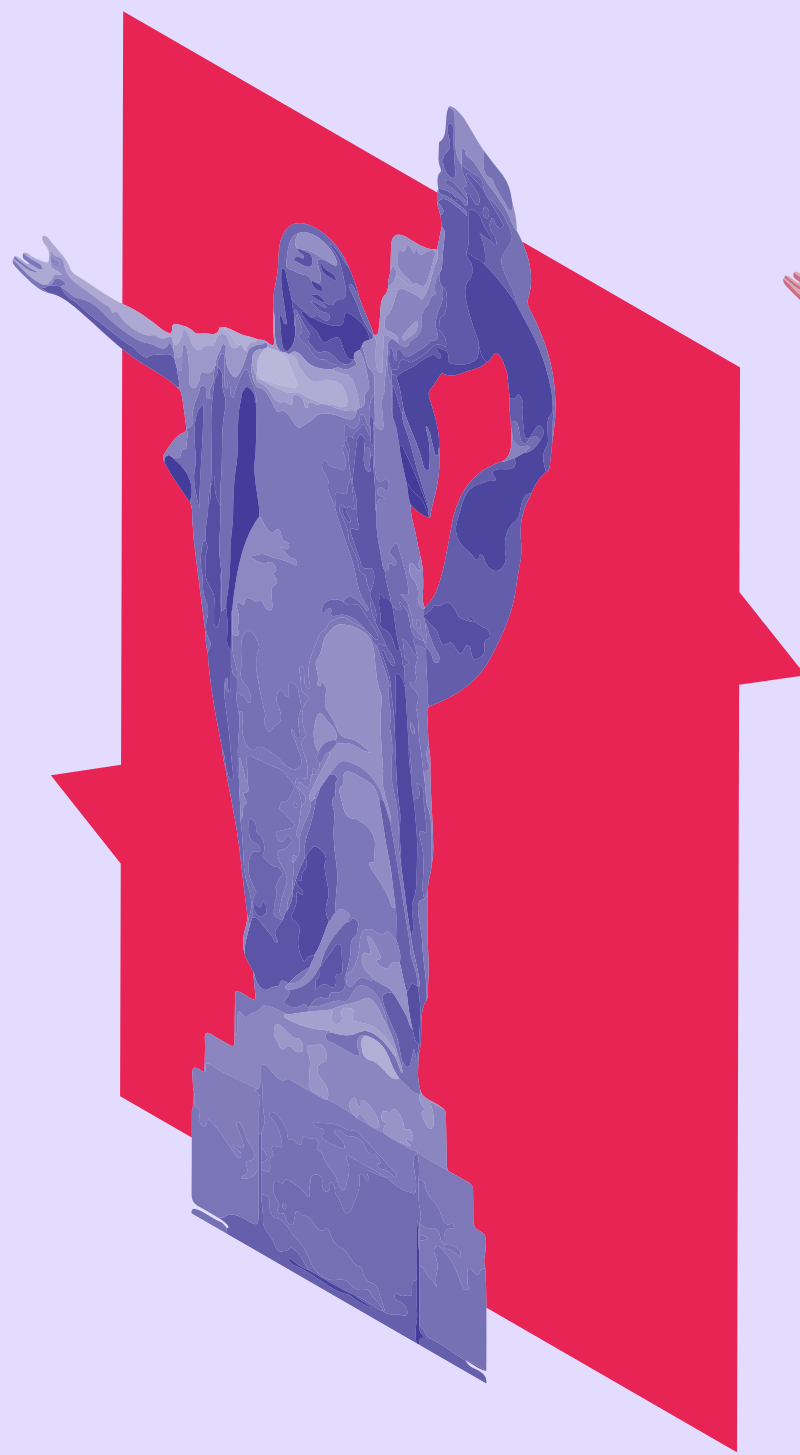
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Stories of the Feminist  
and Women's movement:

PAST PRESENT FUTURE



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## Saadat

This is for my feminist sisters, colleagues, apam<sup>1</sup> and tainem<sup>2</sup> — all the women who are and have been a part of my life!

I love you and thank you all from the bottom of my heart for your support during my childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Thank you for supporting me during times of joy and during the injuries and violence that I experienced and endured as a young woman. You were the people who believed in me, supported me as I tried to find myself and taught me to trust myself. I would like to thank every woman, every young woman and every girl in my life, and especially my feminist comrades who supported me and shared their wisdom, which allowed me to grow into

a self-sufficient person. I cannot imagine my world without your care, criticism, motivation, smiles, tears and commitment.

I also want to thank my partner, who has been with me for many years, supported me and was with me through both the joyous and the difficult moments in my life.

I love you all very much <3

With love and solidarity,

Saadat

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<sup>1</sup> Kyrgyz – “my mother”

<sup>2</sup> Kyrgyz – “my (maternal) grandmother”

# Glossary

- **Bishkek Feminist Initiatives (BFI)** — A public association of feminist activists based in Bishkek.
- **Feminism** — A movement aimed at eradicating all forms of oppression, violence and discrimination against women and underrepresented communities.
- **Feminist and Women's Movement** — While both movement's support women's empowerment and equality, the latter does not always position itself as feminist. We respect the right of a movement to self-identify and include terms that are used by the movement itself.
- **Kelin** — A kyrgyz term for a daughter-in law or wife.  
Women and girls — We consider women and girls to be anyone who self-identifies as such or has been socialized as as a woman or girl.
- **Oblast** — territorial division ala province in Kyrgyzstan and many other former Soviet states.

# Why we felt the need to create this zine

This zine consists of personal stories, thoughts, emotions, essays and dreams of different generations of activists. It also draws from our own reflections on activism, on activist relations, and on BFI.

In order to present the wide variety of initiatives, opinions, and work being done, we decided to collect the stories of girls, young women and women activists from different parts of Kyrgyzstan: Karakol, Osh, Naryn, Jalal-Abad, Chui, and Bishkek. We hope documenting our history will help us understand how the movement developed and changed over time as well as answer questions of why we engage in activism, what role we play in society, where we are, and where we are going.

The zine primarily focuses on the grassroots experience of BFI from 2012 to March 2019. These dates are important, because this is the time period in which we were personally involved in BFI activities. In April 2019, the composition and structure of the BFI changed.

This publication reflects our personal experiences and, of course, does not reflect all the events and opinions that occurred during the timeframe of our own activism.

Everyone, including ourselves, has her own picture of what a decent life without violence and discrimination looks like. Each of us does everything we can to build our own alternative life without violence, and we use different methods to achieve this. For some national traditions played a large role in our search for rights and freedoms, for others the desire to seek opportunities for women was driven by our religion. Some activists were inspired by feminist heroines — writers, activists and the broader feminist movement that influenced their worldview. Activists do not have one single vision of liberation, but we do have one shared mission – achieving justice and equality, a dignified life without violence, the expansion of their possibilities, freedom and peace.



Not everyone who took part in the movement or this documentation are mentioned in this zine. We drew upon our own experiences since becoming activists, so this publication may be appended and edited in the future. For security reasons, some activists have chosen to remain anonymous.

The decision to document our own experiences as activists is inherently political for us. It will allow us to avoid the distortion of our own history, which is more than likely if these events were documented by outsiders.

For example, due to certain deep-seated stereotypes we, and our country in general, are often viewed as simply being a post-soviet, or country in transit or colonized people. Politicians, conservatives and ultra-nationalists deign to speak for us, while academics take our voices to document our stories and our identities. With this zine, we want to share our own personal and political experience of being Kyrgyzstani feminist activists.



# The process of writing the zine



## Saadat

I was inspired to write this zine by all the work that BFI and many other feminist and women's initiatives in Kyrgyzstan have done. Thanks to the constant and ceaseless struggle of feminist and women activists for rights, I see that the space for female expression, both public and private, has grown. I see the impact of the work done by the women's movement in how other women feel freer and become who they themselves want to be. Talking with girls and women, I learned about their personal stories of how they refused to live in violence (in their families, careers, etc.) and started new lives. Many of them came into feminist activism to combat the violence they experienced and to support those women who still suffer from violence.

At the same time, there is still a negative reaction to initiatives aimed at promoting feminist principles and women's rights. Open misogyny is common.

They tell us, "no one will come and support you", "Your activity is not needed," there never were and never will be feminists in

Kyrgyzstan", or "What have you actually done? Men have done far more for women's rights than women themselves." Women and their role in this struggle are devalued, deemphasized or ignored.

Despite all this, I see how girls and women determine their own paths and express themselves through music, creativity, sports, and professional development. I see how more and more feminist initiatives appear. For me, writing this zine is not only an opportunity to show what has happened and what is happening, but it is also an expression of gratitude for and recognition of all the work done by the women's and feminist movements, because this work is rarely even recognized. After all, if we do not document and value this collective labor, who will?





We started discussing the project of documenting BFI's activities as well as the feminist and women's movements in Kyrgyzstan back in 2015. In 2017, we shared this idea with other representatives of the movement, who might be interested in joining this research.

## Aizat

I remember that I stopped participating due to disagreements after several internal conflicts among the

first zine research team. I was very hurt by this. One evening Saadat and I met up for lunch, and she boldly stated that she would keep working on the zine, even if she had to write it alone. Her words had a big impact on me. I was inspired, but I really was not emotionally prepared for such a big job. It was also unimaginable for me to think about documenting our history without involving two important people — the co-founders of BFI.

Near the end of 2018, the final zine team had formed and began actively gathering the

In this zine, I wanted to remain myself while also expressing real emotions when describing my own experience. Definitely not only emotions that are deemed by society as being inherently womanly — gentleness, soft smile, and so on. In a society where openness and vulnerability are often punished and used against you, I want to allow myself to just be myself. To be both strong and vulnerable. To

Coordinating the actual research process took quite a while, and the number of people involved was constantly in flux due to time constraints, loss of interest, people moving away, or disagreements.

stories of activists about the beautiful, complex, multifaceted process of grassroots feminist and women's activism in Kyrgyzstan.

During the process of writing this zine, I was unconsciously resisting looking back at my own experience, so this project turned out to be a very long, difficult process for me. Perhaps my wounds from the relationships I had built and lost are still too fresh to analyze them in depth at the moment. While delving into my history of involvement with BFI, I felt embarrassed of the events I coordinated. To be more precise, I was embarrassed by my own naivety thinking, "how could I or we do this?"

show your emotions, joy and anger, without violence and domination over others.

It was really feeling these emotions that freed me from the many restrictions placed on women, and it was these emotions that convinced me not to be afraid to escape violence in order to build my own life.

## Saadat



# Our path to activism

You're just a girl

You're just a kelin

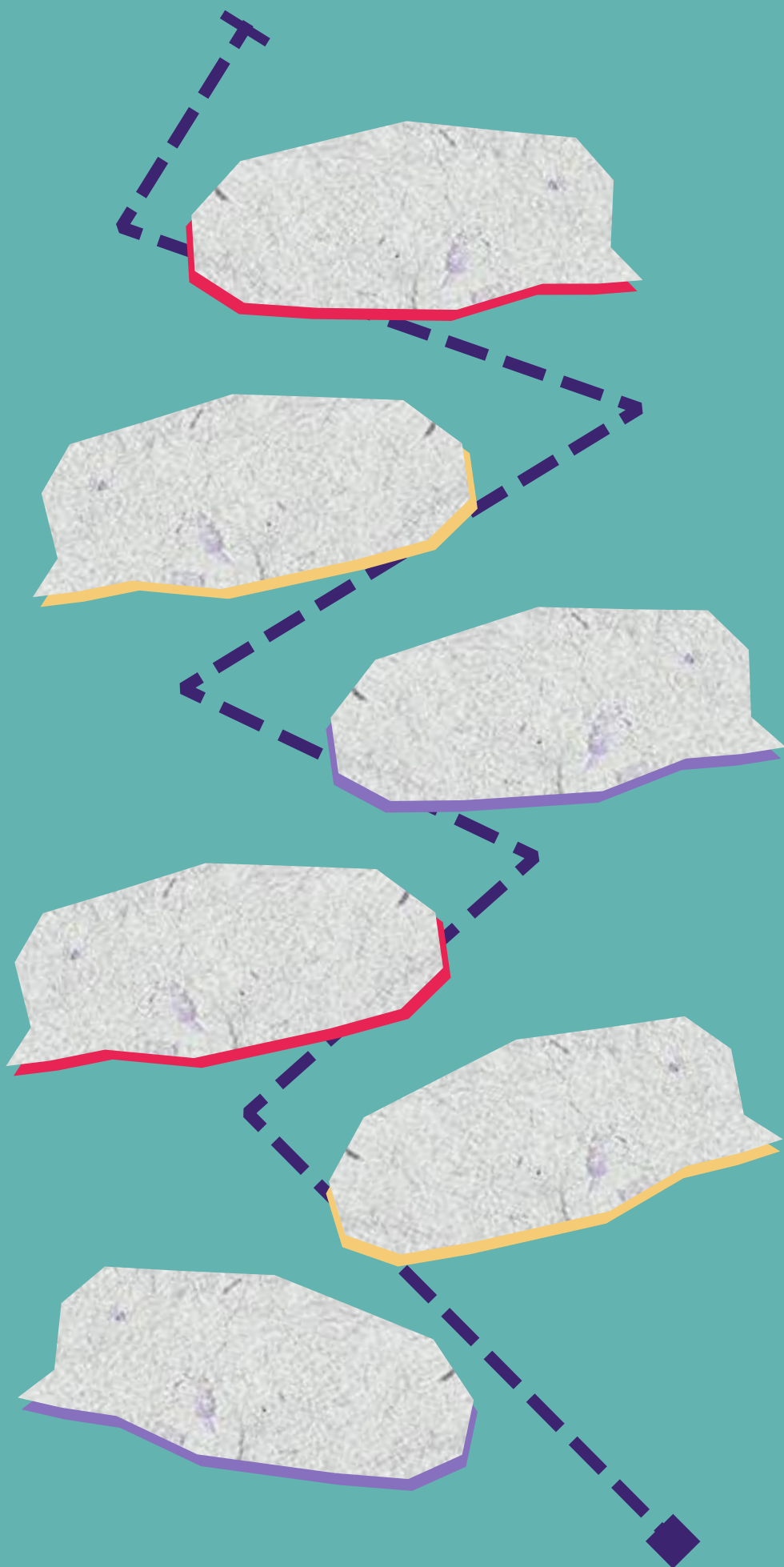
Escaping abuse and violence

Helping yourself and others

Finding safety and like-minded individuals

Defending rights

Women's self-organization has many different roots. Women and girls come into activism from different backgrounds and at different times for a variety of reasons. Some come to activism after experiencing violence, or because they have a strong sense of justice and empathy. Some activists join the cause while facing unemployment or studying at school or university and so on. However, all their stories are united by the fact that women decided to take their fate into their own hands and began to solve their own problems, self-actualize and grow. They do this often in spite of the lack of support from their families, the state, and their local communities.





# You're just a girl

**Aigul**

*BFI team 2019 –  
currently in Bishkek*

“All my life I’ve heard this thing — “you are a girl, be wiser.” I have a twin brother, and my family always threw all the housework onto me. Their argument was that I am a girl. Mom always said that the girl gets married off and she should not stay in the family or else she will be like a “cut chunk of bread”. But the boy will stay in the family. I always argued with my mom, because it seemed terribly unfair

to me. Of course, we divided up the house chores, but my mom always tried to arrange it according to gender. My brother is a boy, so he will take out the garbage, but the girl must wash the dishes, sweep and vacuum. While I was at university, I heard about feminism and realized that I had been a feminist ever since I was a child.”

**Gulyaim**

*BFI team 2019 –  
currently in Bishkek*

“How did I get into feminism? I think this came from a sense of justice, that everything should be equal. Not a boy or a girl, not of a certain nationality. This has always been there with me on an emotional level. There were no problems in my 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 because we had a yard.

As a teenager, I saw that the world was different outside of our home. I started noticing little things when I was visiting my cousins, and the girls in their family had a different attitude and were treated differently. I started noticing that their daughters were not allowed to go certain places. A particular episode has stuck with me. My brother-in-law told his daughters how they should and should not dress. It was all very strange to me.”



## Nadira

LGBT organization,  
*Kyrgyz Indigo*,  
Bishkek

"Since I was a child, I had the desire to change things at school, at university. Everywhere. I always raised a fuss and people didn't really like me because of this. I faced a lot of discrimination and prejudice either because of my ethnicity (I am a Dungan) or because I lived in the village. But the majority of the discrimination that I have experienced is because I am a girl. This has constantly hung over my head. When I was little I used to play with boys all the time, but then they were told: "Why are you playing with that girl?" Suddenly they realized that they should be ashamed of being around me, and after that they chased me away [...]. I truly did not understand how I was different. Why should I receive any less than other children or adults? Somehow, I started to get involved in the work of various organizations. At first, I was a volunteer, and joined the organization as staff."

THEY USED TO  
SAY THAT MY  
BROTHER WAS  
THE BREADWIN-  
NER, BUT NOW IT  
HAS TURNED OUT  
THE OTHER WAY  
AROUND. I'M THE  
BREAD-WINNER.

"Many say that those who become feminists have been victims of violence, or they didn't have a father growing up. I couldn't disagree with this, since I also grew up without a father, but I do not regret it, I'm glad that I grew up without him. I was enraged by words like "woman" or "financially dependent". I was always told, "You belong to another family," but I said that I won't become a stranger's family. I'm part of my family. When I studied gender equality, I felt that it was something truly mine. I want equality. They used to say that my brother was the breadwinner, but now it has turned out the other way around. I'm the bread-winner."

## Guliza

youth organization,  
*New Rhythm*, Osh



# You're just a kelin



## Aizat

BFI team, 2014 –  
spring 2019, Bishkek

“International Day for the Abolition of Slavery is commemorated on December 2nd every year. Here in Kyrgyzstan, this day should also be celebrated as the Day for the Abolition of *Kelinization*, which is basically slavery. Of course I wasn't wearing shackles and chains, but I felt locked up. Every step outside of the house was allowed only 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 and without compensation agreed to labor exploitation. I became a kelin. On top of this all, I had to quickly get pregnant, give birth, and get back to work,

all while remaining happy and well-groomed. However, having a baby brought me to my senses. I left my in-law's house not knowing what I would do or how I would feed myself and my child. But these questions were the least of my concerns back then. I longed for freedom. Gradually, I got involved in social and political life through journalism, and soon I started to learn more about feminism through BFI's internet initiatives. The path to liberation was set, and it continues now.”

## Gulsana

Women's Peace Bank,  
Nookat, Osh oblast

“A village woman is always burdened with work. I also grew up in the village, but I lived in the center of the village so I only had to pick apples. We didn't have any cattle or pick tobacco like other girls. When I grew up and became an adult, the first time I felt like a village woman was when my *kainzhurt*<sup>3</sup> demanded in a very rude way that I pour tea. I was shocked by this demand, because I never

expected this from the family I married into. They were supposedly educated and intelligent people. My husband works in an international organization, but there was still this attitude towards the daughter-in-law, as if I were a lower being in the family. I really did not like the strict control over everything I did including how I walked around in the yard.”


<sup>3</sup> Kyrgyz – “husband's relatives






## Olga

Alga, Kant,  
Chui oblast



SUDDENLY,  
I FOUND  
MYSELF IN  
UNENLIGHTENED  
DARKNESS.  
ALL I HAD WAS  
HOUSEWORK.



“Activism was a rebirth of sorts for me, because I was so psychologically oppressed at home. Before that, I had a very interesting career in science, specifically sociology. We traveled around the country conducting studies. Suddenly, I found myself in unenlightened darkness. All I had was housework [...]. I had to abandon all my aspirations and career prospects and became a village woman. I worked in the garden, baked bread, and took care of the children. Later, while participating in a forum in the city, I learned that the global women’s movement existed and got interested. I read a story about women in Africa who, despite their poverty, organized and engaged in income-generating activities to affect change in their communities. I told this story to the women in my village], and the timing was perfect. In 1994-1995, Kyrgyzstan was implementing land and agrarian reforms. Former collective and state farms were being privatized with plots being distributed among local citizens, and we noticed that women from poor families, widows, single mothers, and large families were being denied the full

plots of land that they ought to receive. Filing complaints and generally complaining was not a tradition back then, so we found our first eleven women and prepared their cases and presented them to local authorities, then the district authorities, finally to the national authorities until these cases had reached the very top. Long story short, the women complainants were finally given the plots of land they were due. For us this was a truly inspiring success. It felt like we could move mountains and build communism. Things turned out to be more difficult than expected with much left to learn.

From 1994-95, we were an informal group. We would meet at someone’s house, in a store, at the post office, or somewhere of that nature. After our success, a local newspaper wrote an article about us. They called us “The Amazons of Kant” as if we were some sort of American sect battling men. Men [husbands] resisted us and did not let their wives attend our meetings. They thought we would spoil them and destroy their families.”



“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 began 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. My mom worked full time, and because she was a kelin, 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 labour, household chores, cooking, cleaning), she would get sick all the time and just a few people cared for her. I also went through this in the family as I am the eldest child, there are five of us in the family. The eldest daughter. They told me that “you need to stay home, look after your sisters and brothers, clean”. We had several scandals when I wanted to go volunteering and engage in activism — I was told that I needed to stay at home.”

**Elvira**

*IDEA,*  
Bishkek



Виктория Ломаско «Үйге отуруга кимге милдеттүүсүң?» Из бишкекской серии

bishkekfeminists.org #16days #feministkg



# Escaping abuse and violence



Bubblz «Күйөңдүн арты, таш дубалдын аркасындай»

“Our organization promotes women’s rights, more specifically we are combating domestic violence. Why exactly this issue? Because it is considered the norm. I am an educated woman, I worked at school for so many years [...]. Despite this, I myself survived violence. My husband worked in law enforcement, and we lived together for 25 years. That entire time, I endured violence at home. In the Kyrgyz mentality there is no space for female solidarity. Hypothetically, if I told my friend that my husband beat me, then this would surely leak out immediately and everyone would

**Nurgul**

*Aruujan,  
Karakol*

know. Violence survivors are rarely supported. Many of the women in the school I worked at experienced domestic violence. I was no exception. I was afraid to divorce my husband, because I was financially dependent on him like so many other women. I thought about what I would do if I divorced him. How would I even support my children? I always had this fear. Then my mind would wander to the future: the children will grow up, they will get married... what will I tell the in-laws? Why don’t my children have a father? *El emne deit?*<sup>4</sup> Then, at some point, I just saw the light, and made a snap decision. Let the children grow up. What will be will be. Then I started to think about how much longer women will be forced to suffer?”

The tipping point for Nurgul and her colleagues was a case involving a biology teacher. She was beaten by her husband but was too embarrassed to call the police or her friends. She stayed at home to nurse her wounds, but she eventually died. The case was quickly covered up.

<sup>4</sup> Kyrgyz – What would people say?



Aziza<sup>5</sup>

Jalal-Abad

Aziza joined an organization in search of justice and a decent wage. After her husband died, she was forced to leave her in-law's home with her two children due to constant psychological and economic pressure from her mother-in-law.

"When you get married in the south, you give birth and then sit at home. This was the story of my life, and I sat at home for 8 years. My husband died and I lived with my in-laws for another two years. They constantly provoked me. I couldn't take the pressure after a while, so I left. I came to Bishkek, but I couldn't find any job. I couldn't believe that there were any places where you can work freely without bribing anyone, express your opinion, earn a decent salary, and at least provide for yourself. I was unemployed for a while and sent

my daughter to school everyday. One day I heard from a neighbor that there was some kind of NGO contest, and that this NGO is working on protecting the rights. I had always felt that my rights had been infringed. My in-laws forced me out by psychologically bullying me to the point that I left my husband's house. I was looking for something... they call it rehabilitation now. My husband had died, and I was facing tremendous stress. So I became a volunteer."



<sup>5</sup> Name changed at the request of the respondent.



# Helping yourself and others

**Muhae**

*Positive dialogue,  
Osh*

"We had several cases of women trying to or succeeding to commit a suicide with a child. In my case, the police and court ignored the fact that the defendant was subjected to violence for fifteen years. They ignored her wounds and refused to accept clear evidence. The penalty is twelve years of imprisonment for the attempted murder of a child, even though she had tried to kill herself as well. She and her child jumped out of the window, but the investigators did not take the attempted suicide into account. They also ignored all the factors that led her to attempt suicide. I really want to help women like this."

"I found myself in discriminatory situations, but didn't know it was discrimination or that this shouldn't be the norm. I had no mentor growing up and had to grow up on my own. By the time I turned 20, I realized that no one would decide for me. Even if a defender did appear, they would do what they felt was right. I realized that I had to take my life into my own hands. As a girl and a woman, I had my own needs, and it was time to think about that."

**Ukei**

*Nazik Kyz,  
Bishkek*

**Jamal**

*Mutakalim,  
Bishkek*

"When I was a student, I realized that women at the Islamic University had nowhere to turn to because the mufti was a man, the director was a man, the imams were all men, and the provosts were also all men. We had no one to turn to. Nobody would defend us, and we realized that if we have our own legal organization, we could gradually begin to defend women's rights. This idea was born out of necessity in 1994, and we started working on the project in 1996. This became true wish-fulfillment for me, because I was probably always a defender of sorts from an early age. I loved standing up for people's rights. I have ever since I was a little girl in school."



# Finding safety and like-minded individuals

**Saadat**

*BFI team 2012-2016,  
Bishkek*

“I have been in social justice movements since I was 18. Initially, I joined the disability rights and children’s rights movements, where I was lucky to work with amazing women. They could collectively and individually lead massive campaigns of their organizations, attract like-minded people and jointly advance the interests of their communities.

THANKS TO  
FEMINISM,  
I NOW  
UNDERSTAND  
MYSELF AND  
MY INJURIES  
BETTER...

From the moment of my conscious and purposeful life, I was told that violence is always perpetrated by drunk, inadequate strangers. I can understand where my apam and tainem were coming from. Based on their own experiences and upbringing, they were trying to give me good advice and protect me. Unfortunately, this warning didn’t work in my case. Having survived

a rape, I found myself in a state of cognitive dissonance, because this violence came from people I knew. I endured shock from what happened, things I was told didn’t match with what happened to me. It was a turning point in my life, and I felt that I might not be able to trust anyone for the rest of my life...

This incident made me look for a group that would support and accept me as I am, with the experience that happened to me. And, most importantly, I was looking for a group that wouldn’t blame me for what had happened to me. At that time, I was lucky to find a collective of feminists. After talking and listening to other women, young women and girls, I realized that this is not an isolated incident, but one of the many cases of violence that are often justified by society and rarely brought to justice.

Thanks to feminism, I now understand myself and my injuries better, and I realized that these injuries will not go away. They have become part of my experience, and all I can do is learn to accept myself as I am, fully and completely, and build my life the way I want it to be, based on the principles of non-violence.”



## Zhanna

*BFI, Bishkek*  
2015-2019

“When I became an activist, I was in a period of transition. I probably tried to run away somewhere to not stay at home and to not face violence and injustice every day. I had to surrender to something, so I completely surrendered to BFI.”





# Defending rights

## Kanykei kzyz

trans-feminist activist,  
Bishkek

“I came to activism through my own personal experience. I didn’t plan to become an activist or be an activist. When I started my transition, I faced stigma, stereotypes and discrimination. I started acting against it all because it’s not normal. After my transition, I realized what it was like to be and to live like a woman in this society. I didn’t notice any of these

patriarchal things before my transition, and later, once I was transitioning I experienced everything myself. I started to fight for my life and to fight for my opportunity to live as a transwoman. This is just what I wanted. Because of that people around me started calling me an activist. And I agreed. Okay, I’m an activist.”

## Bella

*Children Help Centre,  
Karakol,  
Issyk-Kul oblast*

“It probably is not right to consider myself as having been a victim of violence as a child. But the children of my generation were to some extent suffering from their absent parents, who spent their whole lives for the good of the state and for the good of the party. And so many children, including myself, lived without the attention from our parents. I think this played a role. It largely determines why I am here now, why this topic is so close and understandable to me, and why I can

understand the children who come to me. Aside from that there was probably also my marriage...the years of my marriage — they were kind of cloudy, but not because my husband was violent. These were the 1990s and, in general, it was a truly frightening, unsafe time. We were young and couldn’t adapt to life in a new society or to our professions at the time.”



**Kanayim**<sup>6</sup>

international  
organization

“We have a policy in international organizations of generally trying to support a country’s efforts to fulfill gender obligations. But if you look at women’s movements in general, this is political, and the struggle for resources is intensely political. It is very difficult. It is almost impossible to be a Gender Specialist while remaining politically neutral. It takes an intense effort to

avoid being political while adhering to your principles. It is very difficult. At some point, you don’t understand what you are doing at all. And you begin to understand that while working in an international organization you cannot fulfill political functions to the end. For example, you can’t go to the White House<sup>7</sup> with a poster saying, ‘my body is my business.’”

For the team members, activism is linked to their experience of discrimination due to HIV status, drug use and gender identity.

**Alla**

**Madina**

**Sveta**

**Tatyana**

**Madina**

*Harm reduction network,  
Bishkek*

“When I started, I did not think about activism, I did not know the word. I just wanted to live. I wanted tolerance for me and my friends, and I didn’t want my rights to be violated. I felt that I was a person with the same rights as any other person, even if I use drugs. Society seems to think that I’m

not worthy to live in this world just because I don’t meet their standards. It was just an inner desire to change something. And to be honest, this doesn’t come out of a desire to help someone else. You just want to start by helping yourself.”

<sup>6</sup> Name changed at the request of the respondent.

<sup>7</sup> The Presidential Office Building in the center of Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.





**Sveta**

“I suffered from this whole system and wanted to start changing something. When I saw that people were trying to change things around them, I also wanted to join. Even if the change we make is only 1%, it will still be a big breakthrough. I know that I have my own opinion, and I can’t live the way others want me to live. This is probably one of the reasons why I want to go against the system.”

“I became a drug-feminist a year ago. The concept of “feminism” is quite new for all of us. It was not popular. I don’t know what happened to make me become a feminist... maybe because I have two daughters? Now I’m ready to talk not only about drugs, but also touch on the topics of violence and harassment that I’ve dealt with and probably we all had to go through.”



**Alla**



**Tatiana**

“I came to help people who need help. This is a personal position. It is impossible to instill this desire in a person. I came to help women like me. When you help, you understand that resources are finite. Activism is never planned. You just start talking about rights. I never considered myself an activist. I’m just talking about things as they are. I want to change the attitude towards women in society.”



# The History of Women's rights in Kyrgyzstan

Historical and political  
overview of the conditions  
of women and girls  
in Kyrgyzstan





## Syinat

The issues of women's rights in Kyrgyzstan have always been at the center of discussions, as one of the most important social problems in the relatively recent history of the country, when it was part of the Soviet Union. We can say that the emancipation of women was the greatest impact of the Soviet Union on the region in a sociological context, which at first led to a strong rebuff and rejection by the male contingent of the region. In this sense, the Soviet Union in Central Asia can in fact be regarded as a colonial power, the main purpose of which was to establish itself, as well as to attract the population of various former imperial territories.<sup>8</sup>

Although usually the issue of gender in Muslim contexts seems to be a contradictory interaction between Islam and modernity, in the case of Soviet Central Asia it was a question of territorial coherence in modernity and all-Union ideological loyalty. The first was important for competition with capitalist democracies on the world stage, and as such, it manifested itself in the desire to modernize and ensure progress in Central Asia, perceived as "backward" — following the legacy of ethnographic studies from the time of *tsarism*.<sup>9</sup> And the party loyalty of Central Asian men was assessed through their attitude towards women and their new, liberated social status.

It is believed that one of the most contested projects undertaken by the Soviet Union in Central Asia in the early years was the "Khujum" (assault or attack), a widespread attack on widespread social customs: covering women, isolation, child marriage, bride pay, kidnapping women for forced marriage.<sup>10</sup> The veil symbolized the "backwardness" of the region, which needed to be corrected by Soviet modernity (modernity), therefore the emancipation of women in Soviet Central Asia became one of the key tasks for the Bolsheviks, who regarded women as a "surrogate proletariat"<sup>11</sup> in the absence of a local working class, which can be considered one of the most exploited and humiliated in pre-Soviet Central Asia.

Kandiyoti believes that the Soviet Union was one of the greatest destabilizing factors in the region: Expanding the state's coverage in the area that the tsarist regime was forced to leave alone, the Soviets aggressively intervened in the sphere of "custom", criminalizing and prosecuting the category of misconduct based on local traditions (domestic crimes).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Deniz Kanditoyi, "The Politics of Gender and the Soviet Paradox: Neither Colonized, Nor Modern?" *Central Asian Survey*, 26, No 4. (2007): 601-623.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas Northrup, "Languages of Loyalty: Gender, Politics, and Party Supervision in Uzbekistan, 1927-41." *Russian Review*, 59, No 2. (2000): 179-200.

<sup>10</sup> Kandiyoti, "The Politics of Gender and the Soviet Paradox"

<sup>11</sup> Gregory Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919-1929*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).

<sup>12</sup> Kandiyoti, "The Politics of Gender and the Soviet Paradox."

In combination with the Khujum, women were offered access to study and work on equal rights with men — unheard of in pre-Soviet Central Asia, and even considered something shameful. Forced disclosure and education for girls often led to devastating consequences for women.

Thus, the emancipation of women in Central Asia became the flagship of the Soviet Union in the region, which allowed the creation of various women-oriented formal and informal institutions, such as women's councils under the auspices of the Committee of Soviet Women in order to politicize women and expand their participation in the workforce.<sup>13</sup> This ensured the creation of a woman-friendly social security system throughout the union (Mamedov and Shatalova, 2014) with free nurseries, kindergartens, kitchens, education and healthcare. Women were more or less represented in heavy and light industry, agriculture, education, medicine, art and science.

The situation in the region, including in Kyrgyzstan, has changed dramatically after the collapse of the Union. While many other post-Soviet countries before the Soviet Union had a history of modern statehood (as understood from the point of view of European epistemology) that they could turn to in

search of a new ideology, Kyrgyzstan did not have such luxury<sup>14</sup> and the country had to reinvent oneself — however, this was not just a return to the “pristine national traditions, interrupted by the Soviet regime, which is now called the “colonial”, but [...] strategic rethinking of the totality of concepts of cultural identity in the service of new ideological goals.”<sup>15</sup> The continuity of Soviet traditions was ensured by current nationalist policies,

## THE EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN IN CENTRAL ASIA BECAME THE FLAGSHIP OF THE SOVIET UNION IN THE REGION...

which were the basis of Soviet nationalism.<sup>16</sup> Elites began to openly exploit familiar structures and tools, praising history and inventing the past, recalling old names and giving them a new meaning, and then imposing them on people. Soviet nationalism has provided modern political leaders and elites with the opportunity to continue to use the familiar ideological instrument of social mobilization, while moreover without the need to support the masquerade of Marxism-Leninism.

<sup>13</sup> Yvonne Cocoran-Nantes. *Lost Voices: Central Asian Women Confronting Transition*. (London: Zed Books, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Eugene Huskey. “National identity from scratch: Defining Kyrgyzstan's role in world affairs,” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 19, No 3. (2003).111-138.

<sup>15</sup> Kandiyoti, “The Politics of Gender and the Soviet Paradox.” p. 602-603

<sup>16</sup> Bert Franger, “Soviet Nationalism’: An ideological legacy to the independent republics of Central Asia”; In *Identity politics in Central Asia and the Muslim world : nationalism, ethnicity and labour in the twentieth*



Thus, the country saw with each of its new presidents (Akayev 1991–2005, Bakiev 2005–2010, Otunbayeva 2010–2011, Atambaev 2011–2017) a parade of mostly national male heroes making their way into history books, lessons of “human and the society ” at school, up to the symbolic capital of public holidays and awards. These heroes were supposed to symbolize the restoration of male privilege, previously unceremoniously interrupted by the Soviet regime in its quest to free women in Central Asia — now the female place should have retreated into the domain of the “private” from the “political”, remaining central only for the biological reproduction of the nation. According to Shirin Akiner (1997, p. 287), “the concept of male guardianship [in relation to society] has been restored as a parameter of both private and public life.” In public terms, this seemed to be the final restoration of national identity, traditions and customs. Socialism is over, it was time for women:

“Return to their “natural ” roles as mothers and housewives (conveniently taking on many of the caring responsibilities that the state could no longer or did not want to fulfill), allowing men to restore their “natural” position as heads of the family and breadwinners after years of “unnatural”, destructive, state-guaranteed gender equality.”<sup>17</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the emancipation of women in Central Asia acquired, although not for long, the status of the flagship of the Soviet Union in the region, which led to the creation of a women-friendly social security system that would ensure a wide representation of women in the workforce. This has changed dramatically since Kyrgyzstan gained independence in 1991, when women were washed away from the general labor market. Thus, Gulnara Ibraeva, Anara Moldosheva and Anara Niyazova (2011) report that between 1991 and 2007, the proportion of women represented in the country’s economic activity decreased from 81.6% to 42.3%, and the situation in rural areas was even worse. A large number of educated women who lost their jobs in those years after the restoration of the “male privilege” in all spheres of life joined the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Kyrgyzstan, which arose in large groups throughout the country.<sup>18</sup> Owing to this, the status and role of women in the newly independent Kyrgyzstan began to increase again — this time by newly created women’s NGOs with external support from international institutions on gender issues and development.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> J. Hoare. “Development and Gender in Kyrgyzstan.” *Unpublished SRC Research Report*. (2009): 8

<sup>18</sup> J. Hoare. “Development and Gender in Kyrgyzstan.”

<sup>19</sup> Cocoran-Nantes. *Lost Voices*.

Partly funded by international donor agencies and even supported for some time by the government, these organizations were able to attend the Fourth World Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995, which marked a turning point in the history of the women's movement not only in Kyrgyzstan but throughout Central Asia.<sup>20</sup> For the first time, women were able to raise both formal and informal questions about the status of women in transition societies and even speak out for themselves. After the Beijing Conference, the number of women's non-governmental organizations doubled, and all of this can be called the "first wave" of human rights activities in Kyrgyzstan.

According to Ikramova and McConnell (1999), the leading women's NGOs that were able to receive sponsorship and grants at the regional and international levels in the early years of independence were professional and highly educated women who were heavily influenced by the Western feminist movement combined with trust in the agenda of the international community and intergovernmental organizations such as the UN with its Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).<sup>21</sup> Although the scope of their activities was very broad, it mainly focused on providing independent research data on the situation of women in Kyrgyzstan, with particular attention to issues of women's entrepreneurship, political representation and domestic violence. These questions have

become the dominant questions in the work of this "wave".

Nevertheless, since the promised economic investments did not come into the country after the "shock therapy" of the economic reforms of the early 90s introduced by the first president of the country, Askar Akayev, and the president's family began privatizing and appropriating successful enterprises, popular discontent with the regime grew, destabilizing the country, and eventually resulting in two revolutions in 2005 and 2010.<sup>22</sup> Since the last revolution, confidence in non-governmental organizations and initiatives funded from abroad has declined sharply. In combination with the nationalist rejection of Soviet paternalism in the emancipation of women in the country, this led to a further refusal of the public to consider women's issues along with other problems of the transition period.

History did not make anyone wait — in 2012 there was a series of terrible attacks on migrant women from Kyrgyzstan by their own compatriots, which were filmed and posted by cyber-criminals on the Internet. According to their own anonymous statements (the faces of men are never shown on video), Kyrgyz migrants in the Russian Federation organized the so-called groups of "Kyrgyz patriots" with the goal of "re-educating" compatriots from relations with men of other ethnicities, which they consider to be "betrayal of the nation".<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *ibid*

<sup>21</sup> Kathryn McConnell and Ula Ikramova. "Women's NGOs in Central Asia's Evolving Societies." In *Civil Society in Central Asia*, ed. M. Holt Ruffin and Daniel Clarke Waugh (Seattle: University of Washington, 1999): 198-213

<sup>22</sup> Mathijs Pelkmans. *Fragile Conviction: Changing Ideological Landscapes in Urban Kyrgyzstan*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

<sup>23</sup> Gulzat Botoeva. "Kyrgyz migrant workers: does national pride mean violence against women?" openDemocracy. 12 September 2012. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/kyrgyz-migrant-workers-does-national-pride-mean-violence-against-women/>





According to them, Kyrgyz women “publicly dishonored them and made Kyrgyz men feel a loss of self-esteem in the eyes of others.”<sup>24</sup> In the videos, Kyrgyz-speaking men verbally, physically and sexually insult women for allegedly dating non-Kyrgyz men: “A naked woman cries when a group of Kyrgyz-speaking men brutally interrogates her. They kick her, pull her hair and scold her. Sometimes aggressors shave their victim’s eyebrows or threaten her with a knife.”<sup>25</sup>

But no matter how terrible the video was, the public’s reaction to the video was more symptomatic of the country’s attitude towards women. Despite the fact that there were mass protests against violence in these videos, the opinions prevailing in the Kyrgyz public discourse coincided with the views of the “patriots”. In a dissertation highlighting the representation of the sexuality of Kyrgyz migrant women in the Kyrgyz media, Syrgak Kyzy (2015) concludes, based on a thorough discursive analysis of the media, that the Kyrgyz media have discounted and marginalized the sexual violence faced by Kyrgyz women by “patriots” presenting their position as a “punishment” for an “immoral” sexual lifestyle, making them responsible for the violence they encountered.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time, over the past few years, during this “traditionalist” discourse revived by the state about the role and status of women and men, voices of those who disagree with this discourse have become clearer. Since 2012, a group of feminist initiatives in Bishkek has been organizing media marches and campaigns against conservative influence on women, which has led to further reactionary attempts to limit women’s personal and social freedom, which now expresses itself as noticeable splits in Kyrgyz public discourse. A recent example of this state of affairs has been the attitude to the First Feminale of Contemporary Art in Bishkek. The opinion of people was strongly divided regarding the censorship of the exhibited works. As the information about the exhibition gets into several liberal-minded media, the attention — often negative — of nationalist forces to it increases, which leads to physical attacks (Arykbaev, 2014). Although their numbers are still relatively low, the media strategies used by these feminist initiatives allow them to access broad online coverage across the country.

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid*

<sup>25</sup> Eleonora Beishenbek Kyzy. “Kyrgyz Migrant Women Brutally Assaulted In ‘Patriotic’ Videos,” trans. Claire Biggs. RFE/RL. 31 May 2012. <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyz-migrant-women-brutally-assaulted-in-patriotic-videos/24599390.html>

<sup>26</sup> Zarena Syrgak Kyzy. “Exploring the Discourses about Sexual Education in Kyrgyzstan: the Case of Government, Non-Government and Political Institutions.” Student dissertation, American University in Central Asia (2015).

# Women's self-organization and the focus of activists

Organizing work

Belief in oneself



Women's self-organization in Kyrgyzstan is multifaceted — from registered non-governmental organizations to informal initiatives and solitary activists. They acquired and are in the process of acquiring a different form depending on the type of activity, personal and political views, place of residence, language, ethnicity and a number of other factors.

In this chapter, we want to show all the visible and invisible work of activists and show how their daily work in promoting the rights of women are bringing attention to these issues and pushing change at the local and national level.

Self-organization is often voluntary and dependent on external financing and hierarchies. For example, some organizations have leaders that are considered bosses and spoken to with the respect accorded to a boss. At the same time, there are also grass-roots initiatives that rethink the structure of self-organization and abandon this traditional NGO model.



## The experience of activists in forming and coordinating their own organizations.

**Cholpon**

*Aruujan,  
Karakol*

**Nurgul**

“How did we create our organization? We first wrote the organization’s charter and registered it ourselves. We started to attend training and seminars which were pretty common for NGOs at the time. After 2010, NGOs became quieter, and we seemed to wake up and do everything intuitively. We wrote our charter as best we could, and we drafted contracts in much the same way. We did not have much knowledge or experience, but we did it... we wrote all of these documents ourselves, can you imagine that? We did

everything intuitively, and signed up for any training we could find. I personally learned a lot at trainings held by the US Peace Corps. Somewhere in 2014 or 2015, we passed an audit by USAID. We were overjoyed by the smallest thing and rejoiced at the smallest grant. We were constantly increasing the organization’s potential. Even now, Cholpon is 57 years old and I am already over 60, but we go to any training we are invited to. We have many partners, they are waiting for us everywhere.”

**Tursnunai**

*Gulmaidan,  
Nookat, Osh oblast*

“Gulmaidan is already 20 years old. Despite our attempts to win grants to cover salaries for our employees, they often end up working as volunteers. The main activist work is done by Tursunai and the activist accountant N.N.

On March 5, 1990 we organized a large fundraising marathon together with the ayil okmotu. I was working as the head of the village council at the time and made good of the opportunity it afforded (smiles). We collected 6366 som (approx. 85 euros). This was considered to be a large sum of money. We went to the Ministry of Justice many times to register and finally started our work after several attempts to register the organization. With the money from our first grant, which we won from the Global Fund, we opened a carpet manufacturing workshop, a bakery and bought books. That’s how we took our first steps.”

## Avazkan

*Women's Initiatives,  
Osh*

"I needed to decide where I saw myself. I could go into communications or, for example, ecology. But I suffered from a trauma (due to being kidnapped and forced into marriage) and decided that working on raising issues of women's rights was nearer to my heart. That year, 1996, was officially declared to be The Year of Women. At that time, women became very active. A large international conference was organized in the Ferghana Valley; women from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan participated in it, and I realized that, regardless of country or nationality, we have the same problems that they voiced during the conference's report. This was true in Kyrgyzstan as well, and we had to work on it. So a group of enterprising women gathered. We discussed organizational things for a year, and in 1998 we gained legal status as a women's organization."

"I started working as a taxi dispatcher for people with disabilities and elderly people. In 2011, we met, talked, and formed a club. They pushed me a little, and we quickly registered. Look around... how many people with disabilities were just stuck at home, degrading, afraid and ashamed. If not us, then who? We invest our money and our pensions in the organization. At home, they tell me, "come on, quit this job already!" But how can I quit? What about other people?"

## Marina

*The Integration Fund  
To Support People  
With Disabilities, Osh*

## Elmira

*Gender center,  
Karakol*

"Our organization was formed in 2007. On January 22, we registered as an association of women's communities in Issyk-Kul. From that time on, we are either rising up, falling down, or even just invisible. Our mission is to promote gender equality in the Issyk-Kul oblast and nationwide. We are part of the UNiTe campaign and are generally trying to stay aware of the many events happening around us. We are trying to keep pace with the times. Additionally, we participate in the "16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence" campaign. We have a lot of women in the city who are subjected to violence and remain on the street with their children. We don't know where to put them."



# Organizing work



**Diana**

LGBT organization  
*Labrys*, Bishkek

“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. I observed in some organizations a horizontal system. And it seemed quite chaotic to me, I thought it was scary. We fairly openly discuss issues in the organization, but when it comes to responsibility and who will bear it eventually, who will be held accountable, then you realize the other side of this system. 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.”



**Bella**

*Children Help Centre*,  
Karakol

“We are sponsored by Karakol City Hall. This is probably all thanks to the efforts of the Child Rights Defenders League. There was great resistance at first, but nonetheless, we succeeded. We are now registered as an institution. We’re considered to be an NGO, 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.”



## Elmira

*Gender center,  
Karakol*

“UNDP often invites us to all kinds of events. But the UNiTE campaign is more focused on Bishkek and Chui oblast for some reason, but with the lack of finances we often cannot get there [...].

“I don’t have any tools at all. My main tool is my Facebook page, but people are telling me I need to be on platforms I didn’t even know existed. I signed up for Facebook a long time ago, probably, I think, because an employer at the time asked me for improved and more active communication. I think I need to set up other pages. Outside of this, because I write children’s stories, I get invited to different TV and radio programs, where I am expected to just talk about my stories... but I push my gender line. When I post things on social media, I do it very intentionally

We will be promoting women’s entrepreneurship through our courses and seminars. Additionally, we will teach them self-esteem. It turns out that violence is also associated with women’s low self-esteem. When they do not value themselves, they look into the eyes of their husband and are not self-sufficient. Therefore, it is necessary to increase the potential of these women so that they praise themselves and value themselves, and do not just look to their husbands. We are slowly moving towards the creation of a gender center with training courses so that women in difficult situations can learn a profession and earn money.”



## Altyn

*activist-writer,  
Bishkek*

and draw on my own personal history and experiences. It is not very effective if I write a post on the statistics of how many people suffer or simply repost something. Everyone does that. But it seems to me that it is more impactful when I write about some personal suffering.”



"We are only organization in Osh working to protect the rights of sex-workers. When I was out in the field, I often saw sex workers getting beaten up. They were beaten by clients, pimps and policemen. It happened every day. They would come to me and complain, and this was when we realized it was necessary to write a grant proposal to protect their rights. We planned to work with the police, because they were wreaking havoc. Everyday police forced girls into their cars and raped them. They held *subbotniks*.<sup>28</sup> We once had a case where a sex worker was raped by 15 men. The police refused to take her statement, because "who does this prostitute think she is by coming in here and ranting about her rights." It was as if they said, "sorry, she's the one to blame".

## Bella

*Children Help Centre,  
Karakol*

"Our goal is to fully protect children. We have a child protection system in our country, with a good legislative base, but the enforcement mechanism is under-developed and often slowed down by the human factor. We see our mission as debugging these mechanisms locally, so we often establish dialogue with government agencies. We offer them training, show them problem areas, and demand that

## Nadejda

*Podruga,  
Osh*

Over the years, we managed to change the attitude of the police towards sex workers. Now they accept their statements. Police officers stopped detaining them and don't beat them up anymore. We recently had another case of gang rape. The police quickly found the rapists, put three of them behind bars, and took the woman's statement. This is a breakthrough, because in the past they would create outrageous obstacles and force sex workers to withdraw their statement. Now the situation is much better. They say, 'well, look at that, the prostitutes have a lawyer now.'"

everything is in accordance with the law. We educate them. There is very low sensitivity among government officials in relation to this problem. We have to nurture and wake up this sensitivity, so that every child is noticed by the structures in place to protect them."

<sup>28</sup> Russian (slang in this context) – the gang rape of sex workers by police.

# Belief in oneself

Self-organization came about for a variety of reasons: from the need to protect their own rights and live without violence, to fight for freedom, or to be able to develop and fulfill themselves, because the state could not cope with the problems facing by women, didn't care, or simply did not pay enough attention to the needs of women. Self-organization has also helped many activists to grow and gain self-confidence.

"I used to be indecisive. I thought I couldn't do certain things. Things just wouldn't work out. Do I have enough intelligence, strength and capabilities? But it was the rights of women that created such conditions and opportunities for me to think and bring those ideas to fruition, take your life into your own hands. You build your own life — not at someone's direction, not at someone's instruction."

**Ukei**

*Nazik kyz,*  
Bishkek

**Zhanna**

*BFI, 2015-2019,*  
Bishkek

"It was empowerment. Activism, I mean. It was physical, moral and material independence. My life improved when I came into activism, with the exception of awareness... that can be difficult."

**Aigul**

*BFI*

"We know how history is made, all these political technologies,<sup>29</sup> but consciousness is changing anyways. I thought that I probably should start by bettering myself. It sounds pathetic, but I mean it. I had a thought, what if I start doing this (activism) myself? And I started to get involved. Right now, I have a little daughter, and she also calls herself a feminist. She asks me, "mom, that is sexist, and, and... is this racist? Is this ageist?" I want my girls to have a different life. Perhaps different from how I lived when I was young, and certainly not like the life of my parents and grandparents."

<sup>29</sup> Common term in the former Soviet Union for orchestrated political manipulation.



## Saadat

*BFI*

“Engaging in feminist activism became a process or stage of healing my own trauma. Healing trauma in my case meant reimagining my vision and, therefore, my life in general and all relationships I have — especially work related. There were new possibilities to learn how to build working relationships that were not based on dominance and violence.

My personal life is built differently. By no means do I allow my partners to be violent. I am trying to build relationships without violence. Growing up, I was taught that using violence in the family is normal. Being in BFI, I realized how terrible this is, and I will never allow myself to live in a violent situation again. I learned that it is possible to find myself in relationships that work for me. Thanks to the feminist movement, I have support in terms of my home life and career.

Thanks to feminism, I have a better understanding of society. The way society is structured with gender playing a significant role in our lives. Society is dominated by a strict concept of the division of public gender roles of male and female. Only these two genders are recognized, and your whole life depends on which of the two you are.

And to top it all off, there is a fairly clear checklist for every woman to complete. That list looks something like this.



MUST

A woman must:

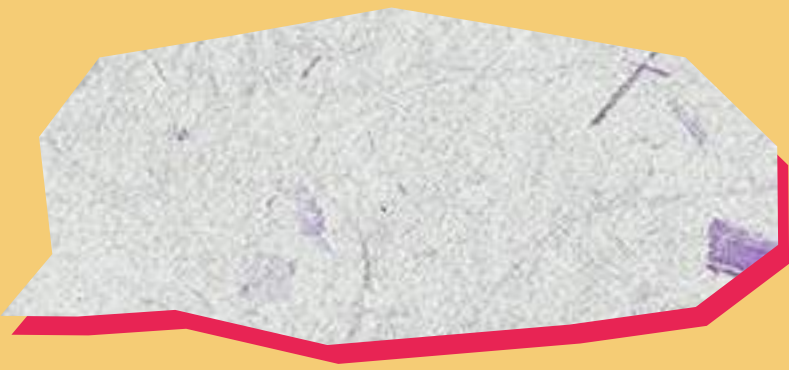
1. Be able to cook well
2. Clean the house
3. Get married
4. Have children

And so on ad infinitum.

This to-do list is not written down anywhere. It is not presented as a contract for us to sign when we are born in this world, but everyone knows these requirements by heart. Our family trained this into us throughout our childhood. This list may vary depending on family and culture, but in most cases, many items remain unchanged (at least for now).

I realized that patriarchy would never be pleased with a woman. For example, if I got married, then I have to give birth to a child. Then they will ask about the second, and then about the third... and these demands will never end. And if I gave birth to a girl, why not give birth to a real heir, a boy? And you see, this is where misogyny takes root. Baby girls are not valued when brought into a family, instead they are brought up as a servant for the family. Feminism made it clear to me that the promises patriarchy makes are not good for you. You will always be living in prison if you're planning to follow the instructions of patriarchy instead of following your own choices and desires."

# Main areas of activity: protection against violence



Combatting early  
marriages and bride-  
kidnapping;

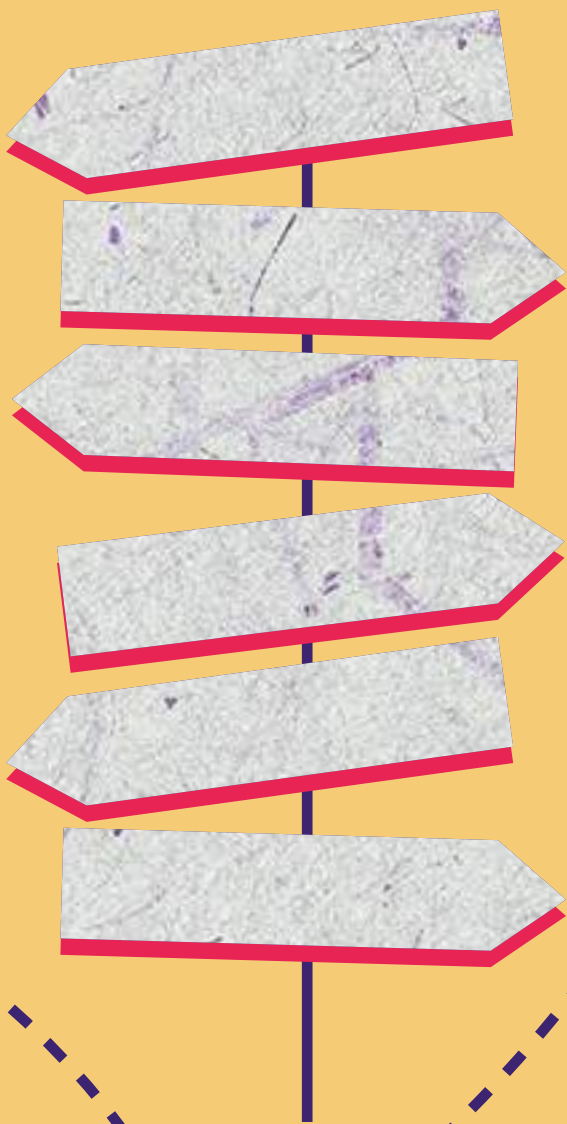
No to violence;

Advocacy;

Education for girls and  
women;

Expanding interests of  
activists;

Changing legislation and  
societal reactions.





# Combating early marriages and bride-kidnapping

"We worked in the areas of preventing early marriages, worked with schools and conducted educational work. Many people think that if the girls get married, then all their problems will be solved. We taught women the skills of self-employment and making money through the manufacture of bakery products so that they could feed themselves."

"MANY PEOPLE THINK THAT IF THE GIRLS GET MARRIED, THEN ALL THEIR PROBLEMS WILL BE SOLVED."

**Cholpon**

*Aruujan,  
Karakol*

**Nurgul**



Дар «Он для нее» «Эркек аял үчүн»

bishkekfeminists.org #16days #feministkg

# No to violence

**Women's Initiatives** work in four directions: combatting violence towards girls and women, defending women's economic and political rights, and combatting human trafficking.

## Avazkan

*Women's Initiatives,*  
Osh

"We fight violence against women and girls. For the past two years we have been working on early and unregistered marriages. Now the big problem with unregistered marriages is that it is just a religious marriage, as a result, women and children suffer from (the lack of official legal protections). When we say that it is necessary to register a marriage, men immediately say, 'why do you want to take my property?'"

WHEN A WOMAN IS TRAINED IN POLITICS,  
SHE WILL SPEAK.

"We do not work during campaign season, but rather before and after the election. For example, female candidates are identified, activated, trained and prepared. We prepared gender budgets for many, many ayil okmotu. Last year, we even succeeded in having more funding directed at municipal services to help victims of violence. We worked to get standards adopted at the local level that do not exist anywhere else in Kyrgyzstan. When a woman is trained in politics, she will speak."



# Advocacy

"People in other organizations carried out their initiatives, but they needed technical, fiscal, advisory and sponsorship assistance. They began to turn to Labrys, because it was a fairly well-known organization in Kyrgyzstan and throughout Central Asia. At first we randomly provided what they needed, but then we realized that we probably needed another program that would regulate and describe the work in this program. If we're providing consultations, then what kind of consultations and how much time do we give them?"

**Madina**

*Harm reduction network, Bishkek*

"We understand that we need to change the masses, because that is where the wrong information is spread. That is where you deal with deeply-rooted stereotypes and traditions. We have to host advocacy events to get the attention of the general public and to show where they can find help. Any person facing with violence and inequality begins to focus on herself and retreat into herself. The broad masses need to be given the right information by the people who have faced injustice, and it is important to do this to minimize the risk of increased incidences of violence, gender inequality and get the public to understand that there is punishment for perpetrators and help and consultation for victims. Therefore, if we want to change something, we must talk about it openly and broadly in collaboration with other partners so that our approach is not aggressive but positive. It is necessary to talk about this."

**Diana**

*Labrys,  
Bishkek*

If there is technical support, then how can we respond to requests, and what requests can we respond to at all? Labrys understood the need for a program like this. Now this program is engaged in partnerships and communication with initiative groups and organizations registered in Central Asia as well as building internal partnerships."

**Alla**

"Of course, there must be a strategy. Suppose we take advocacy. To advance our interests, we must advocate everyday. Everyday, we must declare that we exist, that we are cool, but the methods can be different, depending on the situation and who you are talking to."

**Madina**

"We use different instruments to influence different spheres of society. We can convey information to some officials only by advocating our interests."

# Education

## for girls and women

**Maya**

*Ulukman Daryger,  
Karakol*

“We can see on the spot what women need. I read regional development programs — it’s well written in theory, but in reality we have what we have. The situation facing the more rural parts of our country leaves a lot to be desired, but we are taking baby steps. There are women who do not have any formal education or professional skills, and we train them and engage them in women’s social entrepreneurship. We do not conduct questionnaires or surveys, we just see what needs to be done. We talk with women, look at their private preferences, and think about how we can help. We are trying to motivate them to develop themselves. It is a lot of psychological work.”



**Zhamilya**

*Aruujan, Karakol*

“Our main areas of activity are maintaining shelters and conducting trainings. We usually work upon request. For example, someone can ask us to conduct a training on early marriage among schoolchildren. There is always demand for such things.”

**Nurgul**

“We conduct trainings as needed. 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 out an insult on their way out. They often ask, ‘what is your goal? What do you get out of this? Are you getting paid millions by The West?’”



# Expanding the interests of activists

**Nadira**

*Kyrgyz Indigo,  
Bishkek*

BUT THIS ALSO  
TOOK SOME  
TIME FOR US TO  
UNDERSTAND  
AND REALIZE  
HOW CLOSE  
THE LGBT  
COMMUNITY  
AND THE  
FEMINIST  
MOVEMENT  
ARE.

“When Kyrgyz Indigo was first formed, it was registered as a GB initiative group — gay, bisexual and trans men. We worked in the HIV field, and then the organization began to develop. Many years passed before the advocacy department appeared, and after some time Kyrgyz Indigo transitioned to be a full LGBTIQ organization. Why did the it become pro-feminist? Because people began to appear in the organization who introduced feminist agendas and began to develop and expand the activities of the organization. But this also took some time for us to understand and realize how close the LGBT community and the feminist movement are.

The highest body in our organization is our General Assembly. This is a group of people who have control in our organization. Within the General Assembly, there are two other bodies — these are the Board and the Oversight Committee. They both have chairpersons.

The Oversight Committee conducts a mandatory annual audit and writes a report on how we deal with financial issues, whether it is clean and transparent. The Oversight Committee can come and check our work at any time, and we are required to provide them with any financial documents they require.

Our Board is involved in fundraising, helps with the organization, and consults with the Executive Director on super important issues facing the organization. The Executive Director is the next in the hierarchy after the Board. Then we have various departments — the Administrative and Financial Department, Advocacy and Human Rights Department and the Partnership Department. Below each Department Head there are specialists, coordinators and outreach workers. Our Orgchart does not change, and we also have a reporting hierarchy.”

# Changing legislation and societal reactions



**Alla**

*Harm reduction network*

“13 years ago we did not talk about the situation of women at all. Policy does not change in a day or even a year. Where are we now? Now we work at the level of national programs. They respect us, and we are called when they begin discussions on or planning of national programs. Let’s take the plan on achieving gender equality as an example. We haven’t reached the point of being invited as women who use drugs or women living with HIV, but we are there nonetheless. They want us there because they understand that without receiving feedback, they will not be able to plan further.

It truly is progress, when we are able to participate in the planning of documents like this. On the CEDAW Committee, we receive recommendations and the government addresses them. Like it or not, they meet with us to discuss and plan national policy. I feel that this is great progress. The government calls us and asks for our input and perspective. We are needed not only to speak for ourselves in gender structures but are also invited to participate and share our experiences and work with other partner gender organizations. What are we striving for? We strive to ensure safety for our women, so that the national policy doesn’t consider us helpless. We want to be given tools to be able to solve our problems ourselves, because we know better. We must move away from the post-Soviet influence.”



**Nadira**

*Kyrgyz Indigo,  
Bishkek*

“Everyone knows about LGBT people now, and they don’t use homophobic and transphobic rhetoric as often. There is also less hatred in their words, and that is good. The situation with partner organizations has also changed. Many who didn’t want to work with us before are now ready to do so behind the scenes and some have already begun to cooperate openly and position themselves as allies. People used to be afraid. Now, after the March 8th demonstration

in 2019, we are facing hatred again. Hatred towards us has become open and apparent. Things that people used to think to themselves are now spoken out loud. Generally, things are trending in a positive direction. Civil society is ready to find common ground. Even if they are not ready to accept LGBT people in their organizations, they are ready to include them in general reports against discrimination.”



# Behind the scenes at Bishkek Feminist Initiatives (BFI)

The Birth of BFI

BFI in action

Activism and  
emotional burnout

Self care and collective  
care as a radical practice





# The Birth of BFI

The ideas behind Bishkek Feminist Initiatives (BFI) were born in 2009 as a small initiative group of students in Bishkek who began organizing themselves around public actions such as performances of the Vagina Monologues. By 2010, this unofficial group of students had become SQ, which by 2011 had officially registered as Bishkek Feminist Initiatives SQ. and by 2013 the organisation BFI had its own space. Over time, the name of the organization was shortened to just Bishkek Feminist Initiatives (BFI).

BFI's mission was to strengthen the solidarity and collective strength of the feminist movement while living, building, promoting, documenting, and applying the variety of community activist (queer, trans \*, girls and women, grassroots, local) practices, processes and principles in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, and Central Asia.



Aizat

Saadat



We practiced intersectional feminist activism. We promoted feminist education experience exchanges, held protests and street art actions, and conducted campaigns against all forms of violence, oppression and hatred both publicly and online in our efforts to promote feminism.

We had a house: a safe and cozy learning space. Various initiatives were started in that house that were aimed at meeting our own needs like a library, a “do-it-yourself, do-it-together” workshop, a garden and an office. It was a place where we studied, worked, discussed, relaxed and had fun.



## Topics and initiatives that were relevant at different times

- Feminist actions and campaigns;
- Open Feminist School;
- Multimedia art initiative;
- HOUSE: Workshops and gardens;
- Sexual and gender education;
- Against sexual and gender-based violence;
- Parent and Child Initiative;
- Health, sports, outdoor activities;
- TY4JE (Teenagers and Youth for Justice and Equality created their own website Buktukorgon);
- Girls Activists of Kyrgyzstan (DAK);
- Initiative 20.1 Инициатива 20.1;



While our work was focused on Bishkek, we also worked in the other regions of Kyrgyzstan and abroad. We collaborated with activists from throughout Central Asia as well as the Caucasus and Eastern Europe.

BFI's structure was flexible and often changed and transformed as needed. It consisted of

members of the BFI General Assembly, the Working Team, the Organizing Group, the Solidarity Group, advisers and participants. We maintained a horizontal organizational structure and tried to follow those principles in our work at BFI. Below we also set out some of the challenges we faced while building feminist self-organization.

## BFI in action



This slogan says that we speak on behalf of ourselves and for ourselves. We have no beneficiaries. We have ourselves, and we are our own community. We are building activism to improve our own lives, rights and freedoms. For example, we cannot speak on behalf of abducted women and manage projects related to their lives when no one in our community was a victim of that. But we are building solidarity with them by involving them in our activism while sympathizing and supporting each other. This is not a problem of just one person, but for all of us. We are all oppressed by the same system.

Most activists work on a volunteer basis (at least 30% of all activists, but on average 70%), and some are paid such as authors, organizers and coordinators in the Working Team and Organizing Group. Participants had to adhere to the principles of responsibility, flexibility, accountability, mutual assistance, and collective care, however people often neglected with the reporting.

### Collective decision making within the Working Group

If even one member of the Working Group was unable to participate in a given meeting for any reason, a final decision would not be reached. Firing, written warnings or other degrading practices enshrined in the Kyrgyzstani Labor Code were never employed at BFI.

We only had minimum resources and conditions available for working in our House, and they were used to cover traveling, communication and food expenses, medical expenses, rehabilitation and evacuation expenses (as much as our financial capabilities would allow).

BFI participants were given the opportunity to create their own initiative groups, to gain experience as organizers, to build solidarity and fundraising, to maintain institutional membership in various networks, and to participate in conferences, seminars/schools, exchange programs, residences and mentoring.

Our work is difficult to measure by traditional results and indicators. Existing methods for monitoring and evaluation rarely account for the invisible and visible societal impacts of our daily efforts then and now

Several initiatives are described below. Please note that we're not listing them in order of importance or priority given to them in the BFI, but in order that is more comfortable for us, as authors, to accurately describe the initiatives that we coordinated, rather than describe the initiatives in which we were least involved.



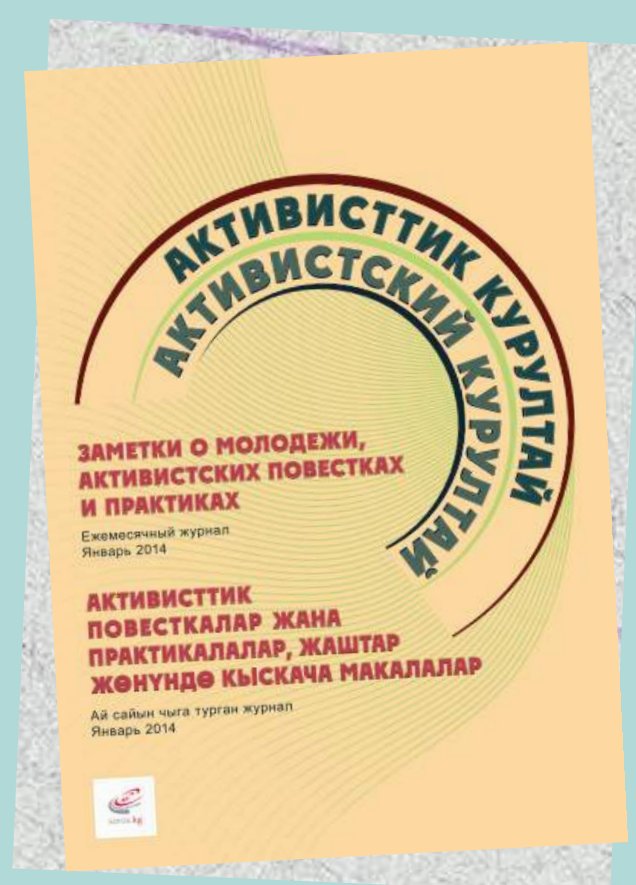
## Saadat

As the Youth Activism Initiative coordinator, I would like to tell you why this initiative was close to me starting with a few core facts:

1. “Nothing about us without us!” is a slogan used in many movements, where the people from communities represent their own interests, and young people are no different.
2. Young people are a heterogeneous group with different privileges and vulnerabilities. We are all different, and the only thing that unites us is our age category.
3. Young people are not only the future but are also the present.

The main focus of this initiative was the strengthening of youth advocacy and building a youth activist movement to advocate for human rights, justice and equality. The initiative promoted the building of equal partnerships with decision-makers, as well as the pushing for significant participation and representation of different groups of youth activists at all levels in decision-making processes in both civil society and state structures.

We would like to see ourselves free from patriarchal prejudices and hierarchies in all spheres, structures, institutions and communities. For this reason, we decided to write our experiences, thoughts and vision in a publication called *Activist Kurultai*<sup>30</sup> which is available online in both Russian and Kyrgyz.



“Activist Kurultay”  
(in Kyrgyz)

Read

“Activist Kurultay”  
(in Russian)

Read

<sup>30</sup> A *kurultai* is a common term for a congress, council, assembly or other type of official gathering in many Central Asian nomadic cultures.

## Reclaiming music

As a person who adores music, our musical initiative was truly close to my heart.

The music industry in our country is dominated by truly patriarchal songs created by patriarchal musicians and producers. Often sexism and discrimination in this sphere make it impossible for us to develop creatively, build a career, or simply participate. Moreover, most music produced in Kyrgyzstan, particularly mainstream music, tends to be very patriarchal that objectifies our communities while praising aggression and violence.

Most of the lyrics of popular songs in Kyrgyzstan objectify women while pushing invented standards of beauty. Moreover, these songs use the image of women to achieve greater control and popularize the notion that women are not people but rather a national resource.

Many songs victimize women. Women are shown to be weak, fragile, and in need of men's protection. Based on my own experience, the musical sphere did not really consider women's contributions and participation as being on par with men. This sphere is truly toxic and does not allow women to develop as musicians but rather forces them out. I am glad that in recent years more and more songs and singers like [Zere Asylbek](#) have appeared on the scene with feminist songs while promoting the equal rights and visibility of young women.

One of the core ideas of our musical initiative was that everyone can compose, write and play

music and express themselves. This is especially important when there is no music that reflects the diversity of experience of those who are unheard and unseen more often than not. This was an opportunity for residents and activists of Bishkek to express themselves, reflect, describe their experience and respond through various texts.

Feminist forms of protest music were sang and played during the March 8th feminist march where participants set the march's pace by playing on homemade musical instruments.

In 2016, we decided to create our own trans-feminist music camp that aimed to liberate, emancipate, unite our women, girls and T\* communities by writing and playing feminist music, recording videos, and becoming more aware of our own personal political positions. We sought to reclaim music! As part of this camp, our group published some of our work in the Russian-language zine "Стихи и проза из транс-феминистского музыкального кэмп" (Poems and Prose from the Trans-Feminist Musical Camp)".



Read

Watch



Aizat

HOW DO WE ENSURE THAT CHILDREN WON'T RENOUNCE THEIR MOTHERS, BECAUSE HER OPINIONS, ATTITUDE, VALUES AND BEHAVIOR ARE DIFFERENT FROM OTHERS AND ARE CONSIDERED INCORRECT?

## Parent and Child Initiative

I coordinated this initiative, because we saw the need to raise the issue of feminist parenthood, to discuss the challenges that we as parents face in raising children or in interacting with the educational institutions teaching our children. This initiative was created for activist mothers, BFI participants and their children as an alternative education for children with a feminist approach. This was a space where our children could be supervised while their parents were busy with activism or simply needed time to run errands. It was a space of solidarity and mutual support where children were free from gender norms and the dull activities at their schools. We held discussion groups for parents about sexual education, violence prevention and gender stereotypes.

As a group we tried to discuss and find solutions to issues facing us as a group. How do we ensure that children won't renounce their mothers, because her opinions, attitude, values and behavior are different from others and are considered incorrect? How do we teach our children the necessary language and skills to say when



they feel uncomfortable or to simply say “no” in a society where children are taught to obey adults and not talk back. In April 2018, as a result of our discussions with children and adults, the parents, children, adolescents and young people of the BFI, with the help of a children's specialist, developed an internal policy for relations with children that protects their interests and rights.

This initiative helped me reeducate myself as a mom. I try not to build hierarchical relationships with my child. I work on myself in order to act in the interests of the child while upholding my responsibility as a parent to protect her when it comes to issues of her safety or health. The thin line between honesty and openness, freedom and boundaries.





## Aizat



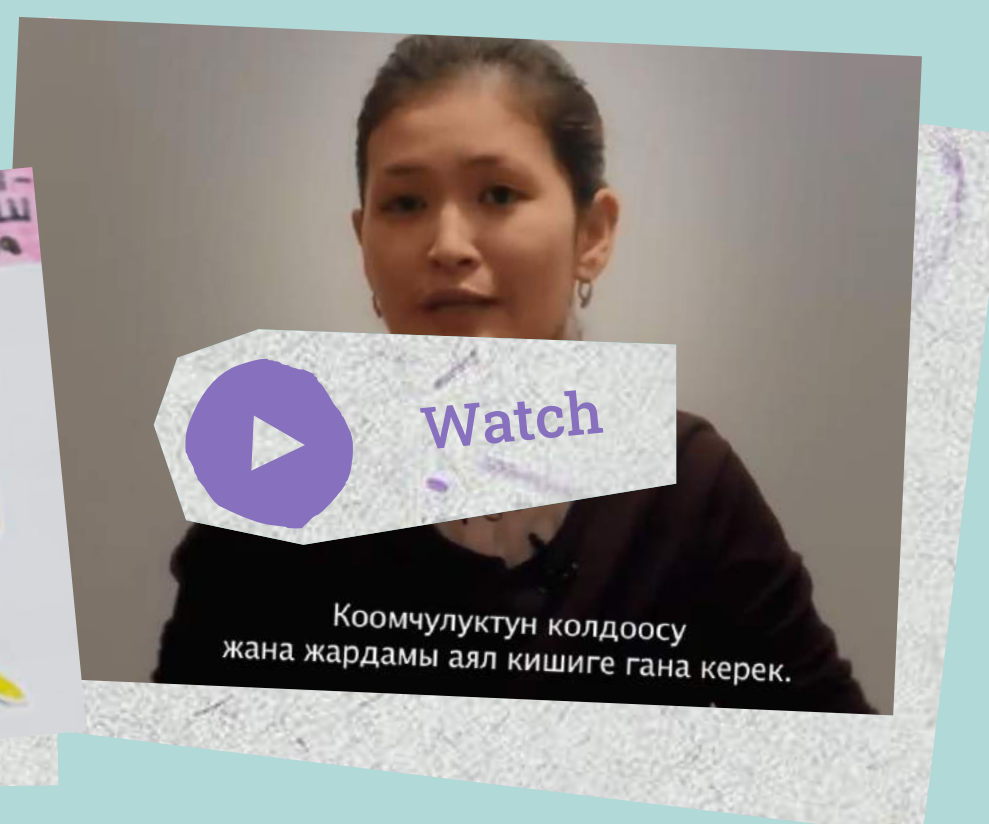
### Islam and feminism

As a practicing Muslim woman, I have never felt that I was committing a sin by engaging in feminist activism or that these were two disjointed or contradictory ideologies. For me, Islam is system of belief and not an organized religion. Everything in Islam is done in the name of peace and love, and the same is true in intersectional feminism. I see many general principles shared between them. Feminism and Islam are not polar opposites just as feminism and secular society are not necessarily one and the same.

I coordinated this initiative and was limited by scanty literature and discussions that presented more questions than answers. Basically, all literature on Islam and feminism was available only in English. In the discussion groups, we touched on the principles of social justice, the patriarchal interpretation of the Quran, issues of diversity, and SRHR (sexual and reproductive health and rights). It was a amazing for me to learn that there are groups and movements around the world that draw on both Islam and diversity. I discovered that I am not the only “abnormal” person who reads namaz and fasts while also being a feminist. In 2015, through

BFI I learned through about the activities of the CSBR (Coalition For Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies). As part of the Coalition’s events, we conducted various online campaigns dedicated to the international campaign “One Day — One Fight”. The campaign raises issues of SRHR and physicality in Muslim communities with posts like “Learn my opinion and don’t wrap me up (2013)”, “Uniting for sexual and bodily rights (2015),” and “Hijab and short shorts (2017).” In July 2017, the annual CSBR Institute was held in Bishkek in partnership with BFI with participants from 17 countries for the first time in the feminist history of Kyrgyzstan.

As I reflect on this initiative, I realize that it has freed me from the orthodox Islam that controls women, our bodies, and our lives in all areas. We criticized the institutionalized structures of patriarchal, secular and religious principles while upholding the individual aspects of faith and spirituality. We discussed our path to religious freedom. I needed a faith that did not punish me and accepted me as a free and independent individual, and I found it.





# Activism

## and emotional burnout

Saadat

Feminist activism in BFI became a constant practice of self-reflection, weaning myself off of the caustic habits instilled in me by a patriarchal society while searching for feminist alternatives to life (living + being) in self-organization.

HOW CAN WE AVOID BECOMING TRAPPED IN THE ETERNAL DRAMATIC TRIANGLE OF AGGRESSOR, VICTIMS, RESCUER WITH OUR LIVES TRAPPED CIRCLING THESE THREE ROLES?

Coming into feminist activism became a process of rethinking of work processes as well. Knowing that control, domination and violence are cyclical in nature, I was worried about how to avoid reproducing violence and dominance against ourselves. How can we build our relationships with friends, romantic partners and colleagues without falling into the patterns of domination and violence? How can we avoid becoming trapped in the eternal dramatic triangle of aggressor, victims, rescuer with our lives trapped circling these three roles? I tried to find answers to these questions by engaging in feminist activism. I learned from the experiences of other feminist activists who documented their experiences, and this inspired me to look for alternative approaches to collaboration.

To start with, I wanted to unpack the idea of women's work. For my entire life, I

never really realized how much the work done by women was ignored and undervalued. The domestic work in my family was almost always done by women and was completely unnoticed by everyone else including me. Of course, the men in the family also had chores, but they were often outside in the yard or fields, but their work was more visible, more praised and sometimes paid. From an early age, I was taught that women must do the cleaning, cooking and other household chores. Even mentioning the idea that we could swap roles or share work equally among family members would simply end in an argument. Nothing would change. Everything would just fall back into the same old patterns.

I was programmed by this so-called tradition and often failed to share credit with other women regardless of their contributions to me throughout my life. Conversely, I would ignore the women that had helped me while I invested my time and energy in other girls and women. As always, women's work remained invisible and unrecognized. I have also noticed this trend in our society. The contributions of the women's and feminist movements towards the advancement of women's rights is often devalued, which has allowed for the spread of ridiculous myths about men advancing women's rights. It was as if everyone else was striving and achieving progress except for us. Women's work remained invisible in activism just as it did at home.



To construct a feminist alternative of our own to the patriarchal depreciation of female labor, we worked to increase the visibility of our labor through direct actions. We strove to shine a light on the invisible women's affairs by documenting our own experiences in projects like this zine. When we worked to build our own internal processes, it was always important to do this through the prism of our dreams and values.

Our efforts to build a horizontal structure reminds me of the importance of constructing alternatives and realities for ourselves as opposed to simply responding to what is happening at any given time.

It is also important to question the existing hierarchical structure by creating alternative ways of interacting in all spheres of life. This is the way to truly achieve a more equal and egalitarian society that denounces total dominance of power within a certain group of people. It was precisely this approach that many people liked when they came to BFI. Once I became a part of the team I learned that it was possible to build a structure where the dominance of one over the other is not allowed, where the decision-making process and the distribution of responsibility are more or less equal. One has to work to grow their own self-awareness to adhere to those principles. This approach seemed like a dream to me. Building and maintaining one's own understanding of relationships between friends, colleagues and partners. I saw a fairer distribution of power, decision-making, labor and resources. This is something I would like to

achieve one day, while also remembering the realities of today and practicing the reality in which I would like to live.

I came to BFI with my own understanding of how teamwork is possible and how activities should be arranged. I imagined that a leader is someone who has the most responsibility and makes most decisions alone. Due to my patriarchal education, I unconsciously practiced the habits of domination of and careless attitude towards my colleagues. I began trying to unlearn these bad habits while drawing only on this broken model. From the expectation that someone should give us an assignment and I can't take the initiative, from the fallacy that horizontal means chaos and less responsibility, that people are not smart enough to organize themselves and solve their problems on their own, to the concept of expertise and who can be an expert.





BFI employed an organizational structure in which each person had the opportunity to engage in activities that interested them and to raise issues that concerned them personally. All BFI activists had a voice in the decision making process. We felt that the personal is inherently political. My personal experi-

ence is not necessarily a special case but rather a continuation of the systematic oppression of underrepresented groups.

In our efforts to build a horizontal structure, the role of BFI

Coordinators was obviously important. This role was our attempt at re-imagining what leadership would look like from a feminist point of view. One practice that managed to consolidate over the years is the annual or biennial transfer of organizational coordination, which has given an opportunity to BFI activists interested in trying out a leadership position. This practice gave the team a more dynamic structure, which also lent more stability to the movement as a whole. It also means that BFI's methods, tactics and approaches evolve and change as one generation of activists passes the torch to the next.

For me, BFI is an experimental project that is not afraid to constantly grow, make mistakes, learn and move on. This is an inspiring example of how to continue the feminist legacy and build the present and future ourselves — here and now.

BFI's horizontal and non-hierarchical structure was an attempt to confront the dominant model of NGOs. Civil society and its activities in Kyrgyzstan are mainly represented by non-governmental organizations. Due to legal requirements imposed on BFI as a registered NGO, a certain official hierarchy was required on paper, which did have an impact on our internal structure and the relationships between people. BFI wanted to try a different model of activity that struck a delicate balance between our values as a horizontal organization with the externally imposed requirements of a legal hierarchy.

FOR ME, BFI IS AN  
EXPERIMENTAL PROJECT  
THAT IS NOT AFRAID  
TO CONSTANTLY GROW,  
MAKE MISTAKES, LEARN  
AND MOVE ON.



As in any process, especially those involving self-organization, BFI did face some internal challenges:

- The practice of horizontal organizing meant that people involved in the process should be ready for active participation and responsibility. This was necessary for BFI's self-organization to remain vibrant and sustainable. Some people simply could not break out of the old habits of hierarchical systems. Activists would at times not take personal responsibility, which meant that much of it landed on the shoulders of the coordinator who was legally required to sign the paperwork. Sometimes decisions were made by those who bore responsibility for reporting, which later led to conflicts with other members of BFI. There was a fear that this could cause BFI to become an organisation dominated by the authoritarian practices of a single person.
- The periodic lack of communication and feedback affected both working relationships and friendships. Sometimes, if these issues were not resolved, worked out or discussed, the atmosphere would turn from one of a collective to a group of individuals not collaborating.
- Usually it was the issues of communication, speaking, internal reflection and agreements that were a stumbling block in collective work, and subsequently affected the emotional level of relationships.





- Negligence led to the fact that we did not fully listen to our fellow activists and put each other in difficult positions. There were disagreements, personal hostility and non-compliance with our own principles, which once again underlined how important it is to constantly return to our core principles and help each other go through this stage of growth together;
- Careless attitude to feminist resources, which were gathered at great cost and with difficulty. The feminist movement at the local, national and global levels required more resources. This long-standing, continuous activity to promote the rights and interests of feminist activists was sometimes not appreciated or noticed in the movement itself. Sometimes

the resources did not even reach the grassroots feminist and women's organizations but ended up in the hands of large organizations that had the infrastructure for the grant development.

At the same time, there were external challenges and the local situation influenced our activities. Anti-feminist statements and actions led to self-censorship out of fear of attack.

## Aizat

Women have been socialized, in a way, that we've been taught to think badly of ourselves since childhood. This is a feeling of guilt and a sense of duty that we should always give and sacrifice something to someone. If we are lucky and were not particularly traumatized at home, the patriarchy will still find us in our kindergartens, schools, universities and social institutions. Usually people who end up as activists bring their own traumas. I came to heal mine. My relationship with my girlfriends at the BFI transformed over time and gradually became toxic. I saw that we, including myself personally, projected a model of family onto our relationships with each other. This was observable among the teenagers at BFI. What they could not openly say to their parents, they could say to us. Transference and projection of certain roles happened often. For example, I may have wanted to see someone as a sister, because I have not been able

to build healthy relationships with my own sisters. Others at BFI may have seen me as a surrogate mom.

Since I coordinated the organization for three years, I had a lot of responsibilities. I was in a position of asking and demanding because the system requires such a model. We cannot escape accountability to each other and to the state. There is money involved. There are contracts on the conditions to which we agreed, signed, but did not fulfill. We had beautifully designed memos and policies that we did not follow. Sometimes I felt that a person in a leadership role, in BFI's case it was the Chairwoman of the Board, would often ignore the person responsible for money and documentation. It took me a lot of effort and energy to deal with it as the huge burden of responsibility was on my shoulder alone.

BURNOUT IS SOMETHING  
THAT ALMOST ALL OF US  
HAVE EXPERIENCED.



In the end, our Work Team grew tired of the constant resistance in our internal relationships, and people gradually drifted away. The geography and the scattered nature of our group played a role, too. It was difficult to support the activities of the BFI online. Each of us had our own path to follow, and it was rather hard for me to accept this. It was as if I wanted the BFI to remain the same, with the same people in it. I romanticized our feminism. Sometimes I feel that we could have moved mountains if all of us were able to deal with each other in a healthy manner. After all, a revolution must start eventually, but who will lead the revolution if everyone is preoccupied with their problems?

Burnout is something that almost all of us have experienced. It is when a person feels that she was undervalued, insulted or humiliated. She is left empty and without the wherewithal to even check her email, read, keep abreast of events, or get involved in activism with the same enthusiasm and faith that she had before. At some point, I decided to leave BFI. I was the last person left in the last Work Group. I decided to take control of the process of transferring the organization to another group at the end of 2018. In the spring of 2019, our BFI began a new herstory with new people.



# Self Care and Collective Care as a Radical Practice

## Aizat

What did I learn at BFI? It taught me transformational processes and radical self care for oneself and others.

And it is politically important to learn how to treat yourself well in order to treat others well in turn. Society very rarely allows us to talk about our emotions, our feelings and experiences, and we are filled with these things every single second of our lives. But this is a long process that never ends.

We often regard conflicts as something bad, something that should lead to some kind of disaster. People don't want to speak of, discuss or remember conflicts. We do not know how to accept them or give them space to exist. We do not know what non-violent communication is. Our anger, disagreement, rage can be beautiful too. It is the path that led us to feminism and to the betterment of humanity.

I want to share an example that I remember very well. Once we were having an online call with my colleagues, and an argument started among the participants. I was neutral in this situation, but I couldn't take it anymore and told them to get lost. I regretted it right away, because I hadn't practiced such an attitude at work before and thought that I would be fired. But in response, I received a caring letter from the team, which recommended that I rest. I was shocked and did not know how to express my gratitude. We are used to being punished for uncomfortable behavior and emotions. BFI never fired anyone and never punished anyone.

AND IT IS POLITICALLY  
IMPORTANT TO LEARN  
HOW TO TREAT  
YOURSELF WELL  
IN ORDER TO TREAT  
OTHERS WELL IN TURN.





## Saadat

There were times in the collective that your activism wouldn't necessarily guarantee protection in your activities. The activist's work is a conscious and deliberate construction of her life in her own way, consisting of resistance to the patriarchal requirements for women. Attacks and threats against activists and human rights defenders occur regularly. Sometimes they are large in scale and impact. In my case, this took the form of a direct attack on myself and my colleagues on March 8th by an aggressive mob. I did not want to stop even though my life was under threat. I had nothing to lose but my freedom. My desire to be part of the feminist movement and support other women was only strengthened.

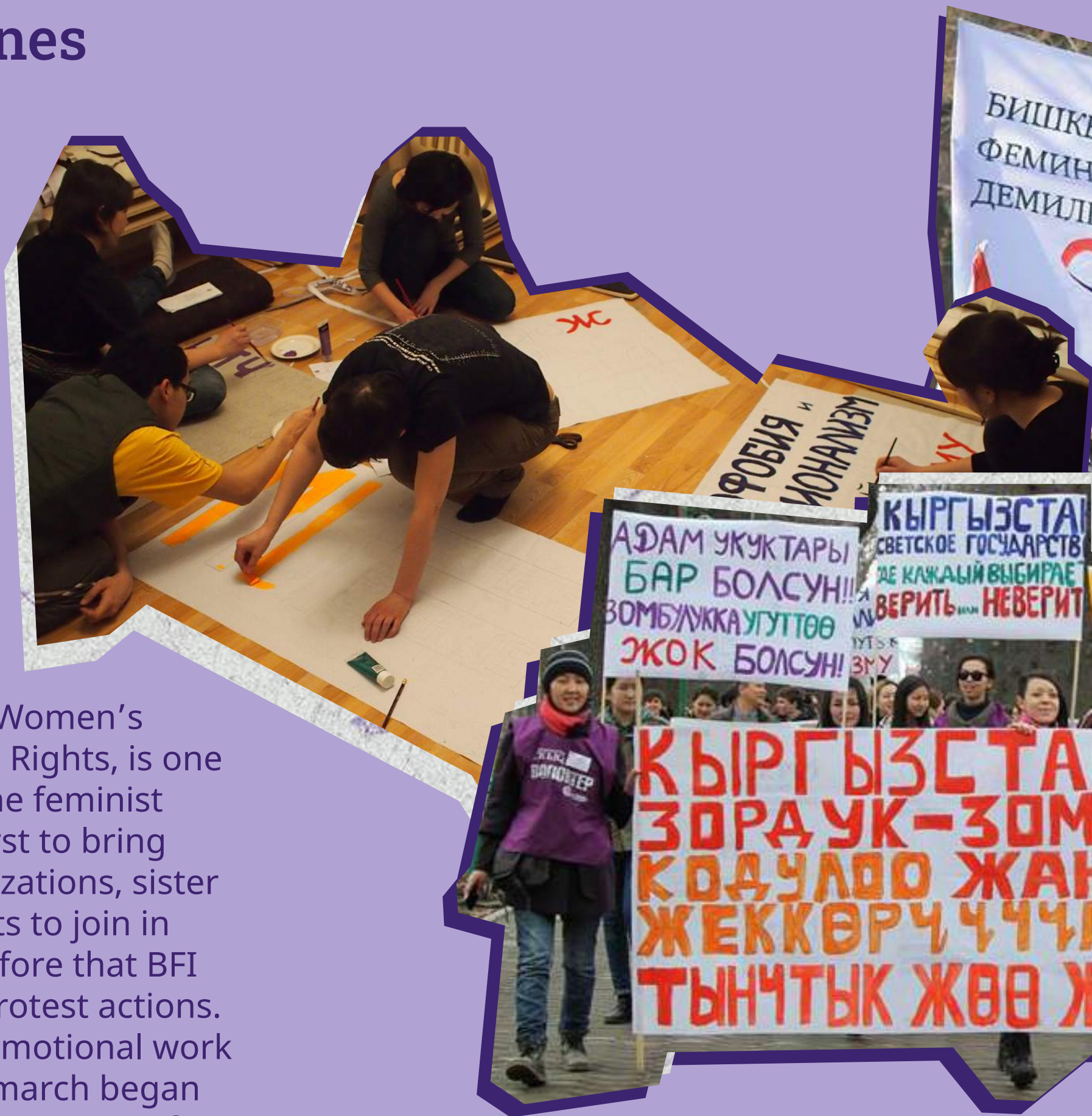




## March 8 – not/behind the scenes

Aizat

Syinat



March 8th, International Day of Women's Solidarity and Struggle for Equal Rights, is one of the most significant days in the feminist calendar. In 2016, BFI was the first to bring together interested LGBT organizations, sister organizations, and fellow activists to join in organizing a peaceful march. Before that BFI organized small informational protest actions. A ton of logistical, creative and emotional work went into each march. The first march began with an ordinary conversation over a cup of tea. Each year we formed a working team, distributed responsibilities and resources. The march was usually coordinated by one or two activists.

The preparation process generally looked something like this — we would stay until midnight to finish the posters, distribute the press releases, translate texts and slogans, prepare our equipment and musical instruments, and develop a security plan in case haters decided to provoke or attack us. We organized awareness raising groups, conducted screenings of

current femfilms, held exhibitions, and participated in events of other fem and women's groups. This was all done to unite us in feeling empathy and our collective strength and power in spite of the sad and tragic events that had pushed us into activism. We encountered different provocations before, during and after each march. The threats, bullying and harassment often occurred online. During the 2019 march, they tried to tear down a LGBTQ flag.





TO PROMOTE THE INTERESTS AND FREEDOMS OF INDIVIDUALS WHILE SIMULTANEOUSLY INFRINGING UPON THE RIGHTS OF OTHERS IS A KEY PARADOX OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN KYRGYZSTAN.

Gay Pride march. These allies seemingly had absolutely no idea about the purpose of the march. The march was condemned as being anti-Kyrgyz and pro-Western... let's not try to unpack the concepts of "Kyrgyz values" or "Western values" with any level critical analysis in this zine. The omnishambles that swept social media showed that there can be no real talk of any established mutual understanding.

Intersectional feminism is inextricably linked with the rights of all underrepresented groups. To promote the interests and freedoms of individuals while simultaneously infringing upon the rights of others is a key paradox of civil society in Kyrgyzstan.

Moreover, they accuse us of conducting our march upon the order and financing of the US State Department. They conjure a myriad of myths and conspiracies to justify provocation. In reality, the people who are actually involved do so at personal expense. They take time off of work or school to participate in BFI events or to help prepare food for our team of volunteers that work without breaks and late into the night.

If we talk about relationships within the movement, then 2019 put everything in focus as that solidarity turned out to be mostly an illusion. A split broke out within the women's human rights community regarding the March 8th demonstration. That year, the march led to a very negative reaction in society. The gender experts and women human rights activists had been happy to march alongside us. But suddenly Bishkek City Hall and many of the participants from other organizations began worrying that we had set them up to participate not in a Women's March but in a



March 8th is the only holiday when we remind the society writ large of the historical and political concepts at the core of this day. This is reason enough to be visible and scream what changes we want. This is an opportunity to hug friends, acquaintances, and old friends we have not seen in a long time. An opportunity to stand in solidarity with those with whom you wouldn't be in solidarity in your daily life. The fact that they came out to march with us shows that we are more united than divided. This is a rare public space where we simultaneously promote our rights while defending ourselves against local authorities and pseudo-patriots.

MARCH 8TH IS A RARE CASE WHEN WE PROUDLY AND PUBLICLY WANT TO DECLARE OURSELVES AS WOMEN, BUT UNFORTUNATELY WE SPEND MOST OF OUR ENERGY AND RESOURCES TO WIN THE FREEDOM TO SIMPLY BE OURSELVES.





# Regional specifics and issues raised by the movement



Reflections from the field

Legal challenges women face in other oblasts



# Reflections from the field

## GOOD GIRLS

Aizat

Syinat

During our field work in cities and villages, we reflected a lot on the gap between Bishkek and the rest of the country. Activists residing outside the capital are more loaded with household chores, family services, and the hierarchical relationships between *Kainene* and *Kelin*. Although many women identify as practicing Muslim — reciting prayers and fasting — almost all of our respondents considered the radicalization of Islam to be one of the most difficult challenges facing 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, left its own mark. This topic sometimes slipped into the conversations, but the activists tried not to touch it. Neither 1990 Uzgen events nor the 2010 Osh events have received adequate reflection; the activists are not psychologically rehabilitated. Being Bishkek activists ourselves, we felt privileged in everything — both in relative freedom and in terms of access to living conditions. Our conversations felt like psychological consultations with activists desperate to talk. Women activists in Southern Kyrgyzstan are becoming more like underground partisans in order to ensure their security. We saw unrecognized heroines helping others more than themselves.



Коко «Мага бул чынынын тиричилигининен көбүрөөк мейкиндик керек»

<sup>31</sup> Kyrgyz – mother-in-law





# RARELY MAKE HERSTORY

Here we would also like to mention the side of women activism that is rarely talked about and often completely unnoticed. In the academic literature on gender studies, one finds the concept of a “patriarchal deal”, which suggests that women in patriarchal societies adopt, support, and strengthen gender rules that infringe upon the rights of women in order to survive. But often this is done in exchange for some degree of power in the system of which they are a part of. In the case of survival, this can be understood, but when this deal is for the sake of power then it can only be considered as a betrayal of the very goal of female activism.

Some heads of organizations say that women in Kyrgyzstan are oppressed. They are not given the opportunity to develop, but they immediately add, with a condescending smile, that the most important thing for women is “to have a happy happiness and to be behind the strong back of a man, because we are all so fragile.” A quote from one of the activists in the south emphasises this dilemma:

*“It doesn’t matter what you do, politics, business or activism, you have to have order in your home. This is the only way you can earn respect and authority. You cannot be a leader until you have a husband and children.”*

Guardian activists make sure that activism does not become too radical, unkempt, and tries not to anger the *baikes* and *akes*<sup>32</sup> in high positions. Here one can no longer hide behind the necessity of survival as these are women in high positions. They are the heads of various women’s NGOs and projects, deputies on a local *kenesh*<sup>33</sup>, and representatives of Women’s Councils. They are all very kind. They always treat us with tea and sweet cookies when we go to their offices to talk, but the aftertaste after our conversations is always bitter. When will everyone understand that only “a free woman can advance the country”?<sup>34</sup> She may be a mother, wife, unmarried, widowed, childless or planning to have children, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, a drug user or someone struggling to be sober,, engaged in sex work for the survival of her family, activist, mainstream or radical feminist, short or long-haired, full-figured or thin, smiling or gloomy, neurotypical or neuro-diverse, maybe comfortable or true to herself. Only when we understand this can we say that our country (or any country for that matter) has any chance for development. As long as we are controlled by quite obvious patriarchal forces through our agents of the patriarchy, we must continue the struggle. We must continue to be different, bad, disobedient, *zhaman kyz*.<sup>35</sup>

Good girls rarely make herstory.

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<sup>32</sup> Kyrgyz – the former is term for a older male in Northern Kyrgyzstan, while the latter is the southern equivalent

<sup>33</sup> Kyrgyz – parliament or council

<sup>34</sup> Nazipa Kulzhanova. “Жалпы айел мейрамы — Всеобщий женский праздник (Women’s Day).”

*Krasnii Kazakhstan*, №15 1923. <http://feminita.kz/2018/03/свободная-женщина-сможет-продвинуть/>

<sup>35</sup> Kyrgyz – bad girl

# Legal challenges women face in other oblasts

Gulnur, Jalal-Abad oblast Director of the International Fund for Tolerance says that the situation of girls in rural Jalalabad oblast differs that of girls in Jalal-Abad City.

**Gulnur**

“The girls themselves don’t know their own rights. Parents command, and they obey.

There is an unwritten rule among girls, that the most prestigious achievement a girl can reach is to get married. If a girl goes to university, then there is less of a chance that she will be proposed to and get married. The girls even show off, feel elevated and proud that they are engaged. Perhaps there are no other examples to be seen. Parents also prefer to bet on the success and life of their sons. If a family is facing the choice of educating only one of their children, the preference will be given to educate the boy. There’s a popular opinion in society that if a girl studies in the city, she will get spoiled.”

THE GIRLS THEMSELVES  
DON’T KNOW THEIR OWN  
RIGHTS. PARENTS COM-  
MAND, AND THEY OBEY.

**Zhamal**

*Mutakalim,*  
Bishkek

“Women and girls have rights prescribed to them by law. But, unfortunately, girls and women do not know that they have these rights. They do not know how to defend them, and they don’t want to defend them because they have no education. Habits, stereotypes, and misinterpretations of religion influence this perception.

We are trying to train them to defend their rights and to voice their opinions, so that they become deputies in local councils and

the national parliament. We know we need to work on this. We show which professions are most profitable, so that they don’t study to be seamstresses, but are trained to become nanotechnologists, the electricians, and cellphone repair techs. Why not teach the girls physics? That pays well. We want to break stereotypes, so that women will learn such things and provide themselves financially. I traveled all over the country, and heard women say that there’s no point in talking about rights if they can’t even earn their own keep.”



## Avazkan

### *Women's Initiatives,* Osh

"Religion influences our work quite a bit. Women are banned from participating in our events by someone in their families, communities, or villages. 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 in 10 years they can calmly remove the status of a secular state from the Constitution. In 20 years, I am afraid we will become a theocratic state.

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, other customs."

**Muhabbat<sup>36</sup>, an activist from Osh, works with HIV-positive women and children, children with disabilities, women whose partners and husbands are drug users, single mothers, and women whose husbands are in prison.**

"They opened a madrasa in our area. The mullah at the madrassa has raped more than one person, and there is systematic violence there... Our children are intimidated. Both girls and boys are afraid. We have Islamization to the highest degree. We've encountered it ourselves. They have started to tell me that I should cover myself according to Islamic tradition. They say it directly to my face, or through my father-in-law or husband. Boys all go to the mosque. We saw a 4-year-old girl walking covered head to toe. She could easily have gotten tangled and tripped in those rags. My daughter, a fifth grader, was nearly beaten for riding a bicycle. They point at her if she goes to gymnastics.

Women perceive this as the norm. Having a second or third wife — this is all considered normal.

## Muhabbat

Marriages are not registered, and if a marriage is not registered then a woman can be thrown out at any time. Women are so vulnerable. I have so many cases of girls with nowhere to live. They aren't welcome to return to their parents, because they do not want to feed the extra mouths of the woman and her children. If we demand alimony for the woman, then the man either leaves or shows a meager salary. And the fact that our students leave to study in Islamic states is also not good. Now we are not celebrating New Year or decorating a tree anymore. We are not celebrating birthdays. People are turning into zombies, and this is being supported from the outside."

<sup>36</sup> Name changed at the request of the respondent.

Another activist from the region, who wished to remain anonymous, said that many activists and human rights activists have unhealed traumas sustained during the interethnic conflict in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010.

“I still have dreams about the things I have experienced in 2010. During the conflict, I was beaten. There was a curfew, no one went into the city. We worked behind closed doors.

It was scary to leave the city, because you do not know who you will encounter and what will happen to you.”

Naryn activists from Nadezhda are more concerned with the issues of ala-kachuu<sup>37</sup> and women’s self-realization.

**Kyzzhibek**

“When I was in 11th grade, many girls in my class had to get married because of ala-kachuu. They didn’t leave because of their own free will. When I entered the first year of university, many also got married in my class because of ala-kachuu. I thought that something needed to be done.

We decided to start by teaching girls how to behave in the case of ala-kachuu, to be more alert when such things happen to them, and to defend their rights themselves.”

The Tenir-Too and Tynchtyk organizations in Naryn have been dealing with various problems of their community for about 20 years such as nutrition in schools, tree planting, prevention of emergency situations, promotion of the rights and interests of people, local infrastructure, and many other social issues. Now, both organizations feel that it is more important to work in the field of HIV prevention.

**Anarkul**

“We are now in the AIDS Alliance, which has 42 organizations that work on AIDS. How can we prevent it? We can not prevent it. We are trying to prevent it, but HIV rates just keep on rising.

When we started our activities in Naryn, this was not a big issue, but we’re having more migrants now, and more cases of infection too.”

<sup>37</sup> Kyrgyz – bride kidnapping



# Feminist futures in Kyrgyzstan

Dreaming out loud – the role  
of nostalgia in forming our future.



# Dreaming out loud – the role of nostalgia in forming our future.

When we asked a question about a feminist future and the ideal situation of women in Kyrgyzstan, their answers of our respondents were often so unexpected as to leave us dumbfounded.

Older activists talked fondly of the stability of the Soviet era. They were nostalgic that there was work in contrast to the perceived mess of today. They imagined the cultivated and practiced ideals of a woman as being independent with freedom of action, equality in partnership. This ideal woman is listened to as a citizen, and helped by the state in dealing with reproductive health. Access to a nursery, kindergartens, schools and medicine, all while maintaining her feminine '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. A total lack of gender identities, sexual orientations, statuses, and so on.

**Tursunai**

*Gulmaidan,  
Nookat*

"All women will know their rights, live together and happily with their families. Everyone will have a job, and new manufacturing jobs will be created. There will be no problems. There will be kindergartens and schools for children."

**Muhae**

*Positive dialogue,  
Osh*

"Confident, happy girls in their lives and careers. They will be educated. There will be something that many girls don't have a chance to have – a life. Before she gets married, she lives for her parents, and after she gets married, she lives for her husband. She does not have her own life."



**Kanayim**<sup>38</sup>

International  
organization

“There will be a Woman president. 50/50 women and men in parliament and in among the various ministers. Education will be built differently with completely new textbooks and approached in kindergartens in particular. I don’t quite remember whether it was Ireland or Norway, but one of those countries no longer determines the gender of the child and gives equal pay. The idea of equality is beginning to gain ground. I don’t even mind if there will be more women in power than men. Because let women also have a chance to be in the place of being the overwhelming majority, because we have never known what that is like. When we say ‘30% quota’, for some reason, they immediately say by default that this is a female quota. This is not written anywhere. If the law says, ‘one of the sexes,’ why do we mean women by default? Why shouldn’t men be that 30%, and women — 70%? According to the law, this is totally possible de jure.”

**Marina**

*Integration,*  
Osh

**Zhamal**

*Mutakalim,*  
Bishkek

“I want a women’s coalition made of 10 women from each oblast. Leaders who really want to change things. I would like women to vote for women, but when a woman comes to power she changes. She forgets that she was elected thanks to the women’s movement. She does not give feedback and support when she gets to power. We are also training Muslim women leaders. We are working building on the fact that we are all women, in a hijab or not, we all have to support each other. If we women are not in solidarity, then we will come to nothing.”

“When all is well. When there is harmony between all individuals of all sides. When the economy is at its peak, smart people work in politics, and the president comes to us not by coup and revolution, but in a civilized manner.”

<sup>38</sup> Name changed at the request of the respondent.

**Muhabbat**<sup>39</sup>

Southern  
Kyrgyzstan

“Respect for adults, multinationality, and our traditions are preserved in a good, rich, cultural heritage so that our children and grandchildren could enjoy their lives. Behind every woman is not one, or two dozen, but hundreds of women, thousands of women who are represented, 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 and there are no punishments. When a child is born, they are welcomed and loved, and naturally the family and society are prosperous as well. Therefore, whatever you say, we have to come back to the family and a well-functioning state.”

“I’ll go along with the radical feminists. I think that there will be different people acting 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 these divisions will disappear. People will just do what they want. The planet will not be a garbage heap or be overpopulated.”

**Nadira**

*Kyrgyz Indigo,*  
Bishkek

**Diana**

*Labrys,*  
Bishkek

“LGBT people will be just normal people who can do all kinds of things. Yes, we will all be human. Women will be human, and not beautiful creatures in classy bras who advertise burgers. People will think about how to fight for resources on equal terms or not at all.”

<sup>39</sup> Name changed at the request of the respondent.



“Equality, full access to all services. As the world evolves, there will always be challenges. We will be able to consolidate our efforts in order to confront new risks. Can you imagine how many resources will open for female creativity? How many new artists, writers, poets, musicians, and culinary specialists will spring forth? A person will be able to find all of her hidden talents, develop, enjoy life, bring happiness to others and then pass all this on to their children.”



**Olga**

*Alga, Kant*



**Elmira**

*Gender Center,  
Karakol*

“Well, we actually held a debate on equal rights between men and women. I thought it was necessary at the time. Sometimes I want to be a weak woman, and that the man next to me will always protect me, take care of me, and make me happy. Overtime, everyone begins to want this. So I believe that the strength of a woman is in her weakness. This is such an old saying, but I believe that if she is very strong and very active, then men will be afraid of her. I think that all women deserve to have a woman’s happiness... All women.”

# List of laws and initiatives of the feminist / women's movement since 2000

In this section, we tried to compile a list of laws and initiatives dating back to the 2000s that were adopted by the efforts of the women's/feminist movement.





**Mandatory quota of 30% for women in local governments (June 2019);**



In 2012, thanks to the systematic work of women's organizations and the National Campaign "155", a law was passed in Kyrgyzstan that tightens the punishment for abducting a woman for marriage against her will for up to 7 years in prison (Gender Encyclopedia). According to the new Penal Code, which entered into force in 2019, articles 154 and 155 have changed. Now the imprisonment for abduction of a person for the purpose of marriage is punished with a minimum of 5 years, up to 10 years;



**Law against domestic violence (April 2017);**



**Prohibition of religious marriage of minors**



In July 2012, MDG 5 "Reduce Maternal Mortality" became the main target of the MDG Acceleration Framework in the Kyrgyz Republic, the situation which is critical in terms of attainability. This initiative led to the *Den Sooluk* national program for reforming the health system of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2012-2016;



With the help of international organizations and its own resources, Alga Public Association was one of the first initiators of the Day of Rural Women in Kyrgyzstan in Chui Oblast and Bishkek. As a result of the efforts undertaken by the activists, the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, recognized the role and contribution of rural women to the development of society and in order to further improve the economic, social, legal conditions for raising the social status of rural women, adopted a Resolution on June 18, annually celebrated as Rural Day. It is annually celebrated on June 18 in Kyrgyz Republic;



The National Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic to achieve gender equality by 2020, approved by Decree of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic dated June 27, 2012 No. 443, which is the first long-term document in Kyrgyzstan in the field of achieving gender equality; and the National Plan of Action for Gender Equality.



**FEMINIST  
DIALOGUES**

**IF NOT US,  
WHO?!**