



# Girl Power: Gender Roles and Women's Empowerment in Kyrgyzstan

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I could hear the *rat-tat-tat* of machine gun fire in the distance. Plumes of smoke billowed over the walls of my host family's house. Before the cable television went off the air, I saw downtown Osh, Kyrgyzstan, ablaze on the Russian-language news: buildings that I had seen standing days before were now reduced to charred piles of rubble. Microbuses and taxicabs had all but disappeared. Osh's citizens cowered in their homes, hoping that the remaining food in their refrigerators would last through this chaos. This small, bustling city suddenly had found itself in the grip of ethnic violence. It was a scene of dusty alleyways and streets that had, in the course of a short time, become a battlefield. And it was this scene that I stepped into this past summer. A Brandeis junior, majoring in International and Global Studies and Anthropology, I came to Osh for an internship which I expected would teach me how non-governmental organizations can use education to combat urgent problems like HIV/AIDS.

Then, after a week on the job, age-old ethnic tensions in Osh reignited, and rumors flew about town in text messages and phone calls that ethnic violence had broken out. There were reports of fighting in the streets. One widespread story claimed that a gang of ethnic Uzbek men had invaded a women's dormitory and raped and lynched three ethnic Kyrgyz girls. This proved false, but, provoked by this and other rumors, mobs of Kyrgyz men soon began marauding through Uzbek neighborhoods, killing residents and burning down their houses. Living with an Uzbek family in one of these neighborhoods, I felt the same fear as Osh's Uzbek citizens. As a young man growing up in a quiet suburb of Phoenix, Arizona, I had no experience to prepare me for a situation like this. I wondered if I would ever see my family again.

However, after a few anxious days, I was evacuated to Kyrgyzstan's capital, Bishkek, where I eventually found the Kyrgyzstani branch of the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX) and a new internship. I began working on "Tech Age Girls," a conference aimed at empowering young women to take leadership roles in their communities. Among my many tasks, I made a short film about the conference participants, asking these teenage women: "Why is women's leadership important in 21<sup>st</sup> century Kyrgyzstan?"

It is a critical question. I can see its importance in the country's current political climate. Just two months before the Osh unrest, mass protests resulted in the deaths of nearly 100 Kyrgyzstanis and the ouster of the country's president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev. In a landmark change, he was replaced by a woman, Roza Otunbaeva.<sup>1</sup> Among the Commonwealth of Independent States, Kyrgyzstan's achievement of a female president was a first.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I make that question my own. I consider what might be the implications of female leadership for this country. I present portraits of the young women I met and interviewed during the course of my summer experience.

1. Michael Schwartz and Clifford J. Levy, "Crowd Mourns Victims in Kyrgyzstan," *New York Times*, April 9, 2010, accessed November 11, 2010, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/10/world/asia/10bishkek.html?\\_r=1&scp=14&sq=Revolution%20Kyrgyzstan&st=cse](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/10/world/asia/10bishkek.html?_r=1&scp=14&sq=Revolution%20Kyrgyzstan&st=cse).

2. The Commonwealth of Independent States is a loose association of countries that were formed during the breakup of the Soviet Union. It is defined here as all the official member states—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, as well as one unofficial associate member, Turkmenistan, and one non-member that participates, Ukraine.

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These Kyrgyzstani<sup>3</sup> women believe that women's leadership can promote stability, peace, and development. Their contrasting experiences and opinions reveal how traditional gender roles continue to hold women back socially. Still, it is important to examine what efforts exist to empower them, and what the current female president of Kyrgyzstan means for their future and for that of their country.

## The Osh Unrest

*The violence in Osh started without warning on the evening of June 10<sup>th</sup>, a day that had seemed completely normal. That evening a large crowd of Uzbeks gathered downtown in response to a few scuffles that had occurred during the day between Kyrgyz and Uzbek men in a casino. Soon, clashes broke out between these Uzbeks and groups of Kyrgyz. The violence continued throughout the night. According to Human Rights Watch, Uzbeks were reportedly responsible for many of the initial attacks.<sup>4</sup>*

*Then, large groups of ethnic Kyrgyz from villages near Osh, fearing for their relatives in the city and angered by the violence, started pouring into the city.<sup>5</sup> For the next four days, the villagers joined locals in acts of arson, looting, and violence directed against ethnic Uzbeks. While the number of dead still remains uncertain due to the Muslim tradition of burying the dead immediately, it seems to stand around 400. In addition, an estimated 80,000 ethnic Uzbeks fled to Uzbekistan as refugees, and thousands more were internally displaced.*

*The Osh unrest was just the most recent incident in the history of instability, corruption, and violence that has haunted Kyrgyzstan since its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.*

## Empowering Women to Change Their World

When I first see them, I feel like I'm back in my high school in Phoenix. They behave just like my sister and her friends when they were 16, nudging each other, whispering, and giggling. Some wear tee shirts with pictures of cartoon characters, others have ribbons in their hair, and a few fashionistas sport large Jackie O sunglasses perched on top

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3. I have purposely chosen to use the word "Kyrgyzstani" in this paper to refer to a citizen of Kyrgyzstan regardless of his or her ethnicity or when referring to a feature of the country of Kyrgyzstan. Sadly, the distinction between "Kyrgyz" and "Kyrgyzstani" is not made frequently enough. "Kyrgyz" is an ethnic group. Thus, referring to an ethnically Uzbek citizen of Kyrgyzstan as a "Kyrgyz citizen" seems strange at best. At worst, it seems to imply that Uzbeks as minorities ought to be subordinate to ethnic Kyrgyz. In light of the unrest in Osh, in which innocent Uzbeks were frequent targets of violence, making this distinction is even more important. The word "Kyrgyzstani" emphasizes the equality of citizenship that all people in Kyrgyzstan legally have and ought to have.

4. Ole Solvang and Anna Neistat, "Where Is the Justice?: Interethnic Violence in Southern Kyrgyzstan and Its Aftermath," Human Rights Watch, 2010, 28.

5. Ole Solvang and Anna Neistat, "Where is the Justice?," 28.

of their heads. They may seem like typical teenage girls, but they're not. They are "Tech Age Girls," a collection of young female community leaders who have already demonstrated their potential by organizing community service projects, interviewing female leaders, and blogging about women's leadership.

"Tech Age Girls" (TAG) is a program of the International Research & Exchanges Board, an American international nonprofit organization that got its start in 1968 administering scholastic exchanges between the United States and the Soviet Union. TAG aims to identify the most promising young female leaders in the seven regions of Kyrgyzstan and train them in information and communication technology. The ultimate goal of the program is to prepare these young leaders to give back to their communities. The program also provides them with an opportunity to practice their English and network with prominent female leaders in business, civil society, and government. But as I get to know and interview these young women, I see that TAG cannot equalize their opportunities, nor can it prepare them all equally to make a difference in their communities. Their opportunities are heavily tied up in geography and ethnicity, factors that TAG cannot change.

When I ask Aigul,<sup>6</sup> a 16-year-old girl from Bishkek, why women's leadership is important in 21<sup>st</sup> century Kyrgyzstan, she responds instantly.

"In the last year in many companies, in the government elite, there are only men. And men think all women should sit at home and they should [take] care of their children," she says. "But it's not true because all men and women are equal."<sup>7</sup>

It is relatively easy for Aigul to make this statement about gender equality because she is from Bishkek, a city that is definitely more liberal than other parts of the country. If men in Bishkek feel that women ought to remain at home, their feelings are probably not as strong as those of men from the villages. In addition, Aigul is advantaged by her status as a city-dweller; she grew up being exposed to many things that are new to girls from smaller, less developed areas.

As a result, Aigul seems more sophisticated and assertive than the TAG girls from rural areas. For example, earlier in the year Aigul had to write a blog about a female leader. She was interested in a leading fashion designer and TV producer, who is a celebrity in Kyrgyzstan. Aigul had the courage and assertiveness to locate this celebrity and talk her into an interview. Upon hearing this at the conference, some of the

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6. I have changed the names of all the people described in this paper, with the exception of political figures.

7. Short on-camera interview in English, July 2010

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TAG girls from smaller towns and villages admitted they wouldn't have even entertained the idea of interviewing the celebrity.

▼ Aigul's opportunities stand in stark contrast to those of Sitora, a 16-year-old Uzbek girl who wears a colorful Islamic *hijab*. She is from a village outside Osh, and she lost a relative during the unrest. That she made it to the conference in Bishkek so soon after that family tragedy is a testament to her desire to improve her future.

Another of Aigul's advantages is that, living in Bishkek, she has always had much greater access to information technology. Today, she has the Internet installed in her home, which is generally unheard of outside of the capital. Aigul is quite aware that, when it comes time to organize her major post-conference community service project, she will have little trouble doing research and partnering with nongovernmental organizations, which are plentiful in the city.

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On the final evening of the conference, I am reviewing the footage of my interviews with the girls when a Peace Corps volunteer, who is helping with the program, calls me over to a table where Sitora is working to come up with a plan for her post-conference community service project.

"She's having some trouble coming up with an idea," he says with some concern. "Do you think you can help?"

I have my doubts; I am a stranger in this country. Before I can say anything, Sitora tells me that solving the issue of interethnic conflict is too big for her to tackle. I want to help, but don't know what other problems her village has. Since meeting Sitora

on the first day of the conference, I have felt a sense of solidarity with her. Having lived through the Osh unrest, I have had at least a taste of the bigotry that she and other Uzbeks face in southern Kyrgyzstan. But unable to generate any ideas for her, I decide to pose a simple question:

"Haven't you ever seen something in your village and thought, 'I don't like that'?" After a long pause, Sitora's eyes light up.

"I know! I know!" she cries. Then, in staccato bursts of English and Russian, she urgently explains. She says she has never liked how girls from her village often don't get to go to the university because their parents would rather save the money and use it for the marriage dowry. Sitora decides that she wants to organize presentations in villages near Osh to explain the benefits of higher education for women. Specifically, she wants to reach teenage girls and their mothers, and she hopes to get female professionals to speak at these presentations about what they gained from higher education. After we discuss it for a while, we all agree that the plan isn't totally complete, but it's a good start.<sup>9</sup> In the excitement of the moment, I want to reach out and hug Sitora, but then I remember the boundaries. I am a young, American man and she is a conservative Muslim girl. That wouldn't look right in her village, and would seem inappropriate here.

Instead, I just let my smile speak for me.

Though Sitora definitely has a good idea, I can't help feeling that she will have trouble implementing it. First, the area she is from is still in chaos after the riots. Many houses are in shambles, families are still homeless, and businesses that were looted or destroyed during the violence have not reopened. Even if these people can afford to send their daughters to college, at the moment, it's probably not their top priority.

And there are other obstacles. For example, Sitora lives in a conservative, rural community where she may find that people are less receptive to her ideas than she hopes. If she wants to find female professionals to speak at the presentations, she may have to look beyond her village. This will require traveling to Osh by microbus or taxi, which may be too expensive. In addition, if she wants to do research for the presentations, she may have difficulty finding a place to access the Internet. This may be one of the greatest obstacles. A quick perusal of the social networking site that IREX maintains for students and teachers in Kyrgyzstan reveals that Sitora barely posted on it. In contrast, many of the other Tech Age Girls from larger communities posted quite

9. Field notes, July 30, 2010

8. The word "hijab" refers to the headscarf and long, modest clothing traditionally worn by Muslim women.

frequently, stating their opinions on everything from women's leadership to personal hobbies.

Finally, there is no way to rule out the possibility of future trouble in Osh. This could also have an adverse effect on her plans.

Given the obstacles that Sitora and many of the Tech Age Girls may face in the future, I suspect that there is only one thing that the TAG conference can surely do for the girls: motivate them. This it does remarkably well. For the two weeks of the conference, IREX staff, women leaders, and other presenters tell the girls that they can be the next leaders of their communities, bring change to Kyrgyzstan, and achieve their dreams – messages they may not hear elsewhere.

The Tech Age Girls' greatest strength is most certainly their passion. They are very young, but also very determined, and they are not afraid to declare that they will be future leaders of Kyrgyzstan. Most importantly, they have not yet been overcome by the apathy and cynicism that affect many young people here.

## The First Revolution

*Though it has been plagued by instability for most of its post-independence history, there was a lot of hope for Kyrgyzstan immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. During the early 1990s, under the leadership of President Askar Akaev, Kyrgyzstan was viewed in the west as an "island of democracy."<sup>10</sup> Akaev pushed hard for political and economic liberalization. Kyrgyzstan's constitution was based on that of the United States, and it was the first former Soviet republic to join the World Trade Organization. In those early years, Kyrgyzstan even had basic freedoms of speech, press, and assembly.<sup>11</sup>*

*By the mid-1990s, however, Akaev became less committed to democracy, and increased his political power as president through a series of constitutional referendums. During this period, corruption and repression increased significantly.<sup>12</sup> Modest estimates suggest that Akaev and his family were making hundreds of millions of dollars illegally each year.<sup>13</sup>*

*In April of 2005, Akaev was ousted by mass protests after rumors spread that he was planning to have his children succeed him as*

*president and that he had rigged the parliamentary elections.<sup>14</sup> The so-called "Tulip Revolution"<sup>15</sup> swept a new president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, into power on promises to clean up the corruption of the Akaev regime.*

## What Does It Mean to Be a Woman in Kyrgyzstan?

The dinner party is over. Friends and relatives have piled into their cars and sped into the inky darkness down the potholed road to Bishkek. The table has been cleared of all the greasy plates that once held meaty *plov*,<sup>16</sup> chopped tomato and onion salad, and thick, cream-filled pieces of cake. Even the flies that tormented us throughout the meal are gone. My friend Jyldyz's grandmother has gone to bed and left Jyldyz and me sitting out in the courtyard of the house, looking out at the mountains beyond this village on the outskirts of Bishkek.

"You know, it's good to get married young. It's healthy for women to give birth before they are thirty. The earlier the better," she says. "And we Kyrgyz women are very concerned with our health."

I smile to myself, thinking about the meat and fat-heavy Kyrgyz cuisine we have just consumed, which seems like the antithesis of "healthy" by my American standards. Jyldyz and I are continuing a conversation we started over the video chat program Skype a few months before I came to Kyrgyzstan.

Jyldyz, who grew up in Bishkek but now lives in Moscow as a university student, had just been visited by a childhood friend from Kyrgyzstan, Nurjan. Nurjan had lived in Italy for the past decade, and came to Moscow with her boyfriend. Jyldyz gave the couple a tour of the city, but was increasingly put off by Nurjan's constant, aggressive criticism of her boyfriend. That behavior seemed inappropriate to Jyldyz. However she was stunned by what she found out next: Nurjan and her boyfriend were sexually active.

"She can never live in Kyrgyzstan again," Jyldyz told me emphatically. "Men here want to marry a girl, not a woman."<sup>17</sup>

This reminds me of something my grandmother, who is almost 90, would have applauded, but not my mother, who is a modern American woman.

10. John Anderson, "Creating a Framework for Civil Society in Kyrgyzstan," *Europe-Asia Studies* 52, no. 1 (2000), 79.

11. Peter L. Roudik, *The History of the Central Asian Nations*, Edited by Frank W. Thackeray and John E. Findling, The Greenwood Histories of the Modern Nations, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007, 150.

12. L.M.Handrahan, "Gendering Ethnicity in Kyrgyzstan: Forgotten Elements in Promoting Peace and Democracy," *Gender and Development* 9, no. 3 (2001), 71.

13. Erica Marat. "Extent of Akayev Regime Corruption Becoming Clearer," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, no. 81 (2005), [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=30298](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=30298).

14. Sophie Ibbotson and Max Lovell-Hoare. "Bishkek and the Great Game." *Russian Life*, Sept/Oct 2010, 30.

15. The revolution that toppled President Akaev was named the "Tulip Revolution" due to its association with the series of non-violent, pro-democracy "color revolutions" that occurred in former Soviet states during the early 2000s. The other color revolutions were the Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, which both took place in 2004.

16. Plov is a Central Asian variant of pilaf that consists of rice, onions, carrots, and meat cooked in oil.

17. Field notes, July 7, 2010

▼ In traditional Kyrgyz society both men and women rode horses, herded livestock, and prepared food. . . . This active nomadic lifestyle gave women independence.

However, Jyldyz's reaction to Nurjan's behavior is not surprising. This is Kyrgyzstan. Although men and women are legally equal in Kyrgyzstan,<sup>18</sup> it remains a socially conservative country where, according to researcher Yvonne Corcoran-Nantes, a "strong patriarchal system has exerted considerable pressure on women to prioritize their role in the family, the socialization of children, and the strengthening of cultural values."<sup>19</sup> Traditionally, Kyrgyz marriages were arranged by the parents of the bride and groom, and the groom was expected to pay a *kalym* (bride price) to the bride's family. Chastity was, and remains, "highly valued and expected from young brides in

most Central Asian communities, and traditionally the *kalym* is given only after the wedding night when this is 'confirmed' by the husband."<sup>20</sup> While this expectation probably came about to ensure the continuation and purity of the husband's bloodline, it has now become another example of male dominance in Kyrgyzstan.

Interestingly, the nature of nomadic pastoralism, the traditional Kyrgyz lifestyle, is often at odds with male dominance, making the position of Kyrgyz women very complex. In traditional Kyrgyz society both men and women rode horses, herded livestock, and prepared food. Women, in addition, had critical roles in setting up the traditional Kyrgyz yurt and caring for domestic animals that produced milk and wool. Although the Kyrgyz are Sunni Muslims, and women's lives are relegated to the private sphere of the home, this active nomadic lifestyle gave women independence. This prevented women from being as completely confined to the home as they were in other Central Asian cultures.<sup>21</sup>

During the Soviet period, the government dedicated significant efforts to improving the position of women in Central Asia. To them, this meant eliminating Islamic and "traditional practices of veiling, polygamy, bridal payments,

and prearranged child marriages."<sup>22</sup> Although this process of reforming Central Asia was destructive to traditional cultural practices, it also yielded many positive results for women.

Jyldyz is one of the beneficiaries of these changes. While a high school student, she was allowed to spend a year studying in the United States as an exchange student. When I met her in Phoenix and we became friends, she taught me about her country and sparked my interest in Central Asia. One day she explained to me that in the past she would not have been allowed to leave her family and country to pursue her education. In fact, in traditional Kyrgyzstan, she would probably have been getting married at 18. Now, by studying computer science in Moscow, she is the embodiment of a modern Kyrgyzstani woman. Yet she also has a deep respect for the traditional culture of her country.

"Once I finish the university, I'll get married," she says, leaning back in her chair and staring up at the stars. She pauses for moment, and then adds, "But I'll also have a career."<sup>23</sup>

Like Jyldyz, nearly all women in Central Asia were literate by the time the Soviet Union dissolved, and approximately half of the students in higher and secondary professional education were women. Significantly, 45 percent of government and party officials were women, though men still achieved the highest ranks of their careers much more frequently than women.<sup>24</sup> This high level of female representation was maintained by quotas guaranteeing that women would hold a minimum of 30 percent of elected positions at virtually all levels of the government.<sup>25</sup>

However in recent years women's opportunities have declined. For example, since independence there has been a significant decrease in the number of women in government. A case in point is the Kyrgyzstani justice system, where, between 1985 and 1995, the number of women dropped from 30.5 percent to just eight percent. In addition, with the growth of ethnic nationalism and Islam, practices that were illegal in the Soviet Union, like polygamy and particularly bride kidnapping, have reemerged.<sup>26</sup>

Bride kidnapping, frequently perceived by ethnic Kyrgyz as a traditional practice,<sup>27</sup> is one of the most common ways in which men exert dominance over women in Kyrgyzstan, especially in rural areas. A man and his friends will kidnap

18. Armin Bauer, David Green, and Kathleen Kuehnast, *Women and Gender Relations: The Kyrgyz Republic in Transition*, Manila, Philippines: Asian Development Bank, 1997, 17.

19. Yvonne Corcoran-Nantes, *Lost Voices: Central Asian Women Confronting Transition*, London: Zed Books, 2005, 173.

20. Yvonne Corcoran-Nantes, *Lost Voices*, 150.

21. Armin Bauer, David Green, and Kathleen Kuehnast, *Women and Gender Relations*, 15.

22. Peter L. Roudik, *The History of the Central Asian Nations*, 135.

23. Field notes, July 7, 2010.

24. Roudik, *The History of the Central Asian Nations*, 136.

25. Yvonne Corcoran-Nantes, *Lost Voices*, 165.

26. Yvonne Corcoran Nantes, *Lost Voices*, 150.

27. There is significant debate among people who study Central Asia over the extent to which bride kidnapping is or is not a true Kyrgyz tradition. Regardless, many men in Kyrgyzstan do perceive it as such.

a girl and take her to the man's house, where she is held until the man's female relatives can convince her to put on a marriage scarf. Sometimes the girl will be raped, forcing her "by the shame of no longer being a pure woman" to agree to marriage.<sup>28</sup> While many Kyrgyz will claim that today bride kidnapping is more of a ritual enacted with the consent of the girl, one study of the practice in a rural Kyrgyz village suggests that between 35 and 45 percent of ethnic Kyrgyz women are forced into marriage this way.<sup>29</sup>

The outcome for those women who do not agree to such a marriage, or whose marriages soon fail, is rather bleak. I found this out for myself shortly after arriving in Kyrgyzstan. Before the unrest in Osh, I visited the sacred mountain *Sulayman-Too* (Solomon Mountain), with some friends. As we walked the crowded downtown streets to the foot of the mountain, which sits in the center of the city, I noticed that one of the girls in our group, Maral, gazed longingly at every small child or seemingly happy family she passed. Her behavior seemed strange to me until, later, another friend told me about Maral's life.

A few years ago, Maral was kidnapped by a total stranger. Like many kidnapped women, Maral eventually agreed to marry the man, because rejecting him would bring shame on her working-class, traditional family. But the marriage didn't last. Maral's husband started noticing her "paying attention" to one of his friends, and soon threw her out of the house, forcing her to return home to her family in shame.<sup>30</sup>

As I think about Maral's story, I try to imagine how I would feel if my own sister was kidnapped for marriage. I have no doubt that my parents and I would do anything and everything to stop it. From my American perspective, it is incomprehensible that a kidnapped woman, who doesn't want to marry her kidnapper, would bring shame upon herself, let alone her family. Yet, this is the reality for so many Kyrgyz women.

The most tragic aspect of Maral's story is that she is not a "modern" woman like Jyldyz. In a country where women frequently feel pressured by family to marry in their early 20s and start having children quickly, Maral would like nothing better than to do so. She has no college degree and no desire to advance herself through education; she only wants to be a wife and a mother. Yet, as a divorced woman who is no longer a virgin, she has found herself potentially unmarriageable. In conservative Kyrgyzstani society, she sees her ideal future in the lives of people all around her, yet she has no way of achieving it.

28. Russell Kleinbach, Mehrigiul Ablezova, and Medina Aitieva. "Kidnapping for marriage (*ala kachuu*) in a Kyrgyz village." *Central Asian Survey* 24, no. 2 (2005).

29. Russel Kleinbach, Mehrigiul Ablezova, and Medina Aitieva, "Kidnapping for marriage," 193.

30. Field notes, June 5, 2010

## The Second "Revolution"

*The Tulip Revolution of 2005 failed to bring about the change its supporters had envisioned, and the Bakiyev regime proved to be no more democratic or honest than its predecessor. In less than a year, the regional news website EurasiaNet was already reporting that corruption had increased. Some entrepreneurs even claimed that bribe rates had risen by between 200 and 500 percent.<sup>31</sup> Over the next three years corruption would continue to thrive at levels that Ariel Cohen, a Senior Research Fellow at the Davis Institute for International Policy at the Heritage Foundation, would describe as "mind-boggling." Bakiyev put his son in charge of Kyrgyzstan's development agency, and the Bakiyev family made suspicious business deals. In addition, when opposition figures expressed disapproval, they were summarily arrested.<sup>32</sup>*

*In early April 2010, Bakiyev was finally ousted like his predecessor, after significant hikes in utility rates enraged the nation's poor population.<sup>33</sup> This "revolution" went less smoothly than the last one. As protesters in Bishkek gathered in the main square and around the White House, the headquarters of Kyrgyzstan's president, Bakiyev ordered his guards to fire on the protesters. The result was at least 85 deaths, hundreds more wounded, and chaos in the streets.<sup>34</sup>*

*After the toppling of the Bakiyev government, opposition leaders quickly chose Roza Otunbaeva to serve as interim president of Kyrgyzstan. According to Bruce Pannier, a journalist who covers Central Asia, Otunbaeva is one of the most important and experienced female politicians in the post-independence history of Kyrgyzstan.<sup>35</sup> During the regime of Askar Akaev she served as foreign minister, ambassador to the United States and Canada, and ambassador to the United Kingdom and Ireland. But over time she became a supporter of the opposition to Akaev. After the*

31. "Rampant Corruption Makes Kyrgyzstan a 'Faltering State.'" *EurasiaNet.org* [20 December 2005; cited 24 October 2010]. Available from <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/business/articles/eav122105.shtml>.

32. Ariel Cohen, "Kyrgyzstan's Corruption Instigated Revolution," *Forbes*, April 9 2010, accessed November 7, 2010. <http://www.forbes.com/2010/04/09/kyrgyzstan-revolution-corruption-opinions-contributors-ariel-cohen.html>.

33. The causes of the 2010 ouster of President Bakiyev are significantly more complex than this. Shortly before the protests began, the Russian print, radio, and television news media accused him of corruption and nepotism. In addition, Russia increased the tariffs on gas imports to Kyrgyzstan. Thus, some suspect that the Kremlin may have instigated this ouster for its own gain, although this has not been proven.

34. "Kyrgyz ex-president remains defiant," *Al Jazeera English*, April 21, 2010, accessed November 21, 2010, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/asia/2010/04/2010421133315810271.html>.

35. Antoine Blua, "Who Is Roza Otunbaeva?" *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 8, 2010, accessed November 13, 2010, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Who\\_Is\\_Roza\\_Otunbaeva/2006607.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Who_Is_Roza_Otunbaeva/2006607.html).

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*Tulip Revolution, Kurmanbek Bakiyev nominated Otunbaeva for the position of foreign minister, but she did not receive the necessary parliamentary approval. Within a year she joined the opposition and accused Bakiyev of failing to follow through with the reforms he promised to the people of Kyrgyzstan.*<sup>36</sup>

*Otunbaeva's term as interim president will officially end on December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2011, and she will not have the right to run again in the 2011 presidential election.*<sup>37</sup>

## **What Does a Female President Mean For Kyrgyzstan?**

“Why is women’s leadership important in 21<sup>st</sup> century Kyrgyzstan?” Aizada restates my question. “Just look at Roza Otunbaeva!”

Aizada is a young Kyrgyz filmmaker whose new documentary about the life of a boy from a poor family in rural Kyrgyzstan has just been shown in a film festival in the Netherlands. She has come to the TAG conference to give a presentation on the artistic side of filmmaking. The girls have already been taught to use Windows MovieMaker. Now it is time for them learn to use it well. Aizada spends an hour-and-a-half presenting video examples of close-ups, medium close-ups, and wide shots. She explains the types of storylines and subject matter that interest her. They tend to be about societal ills and development issues.

When I finally sit down in private with her for an on-camera interview, she seems like an entirely different person. Gone are the frenetic gestures and enunciated explanations of someone used to presenting her ideas in front of a large audience. Now, she looks away from the camera, chuckles nervously, and speaks quietly but precisely in the English she mastered during a year in Oregon as an undergraduate exchange student.

“You know what really makes me appreciate Roza Otunbaeva at the moment?” she asks. “I see several minuses to her current politics as well as her previous political affiliations, but when I see her giving a live interview to Al Jazeera via Skype, wearing headphones, that makes me think of Kyrgyzstan as a very modern place, a place with a future, a place that can talk with the world in modern language. And it makes me proud.”<sup>38</sup>

I think about Aizada’s perspective. She is a worldly, educated woman from a tiny, underdeveloped country that most Americans can barely pronounce, let alone locate on a map. Growing up in Arizona, I long felt isolated from the thriving international and intellectual community I sought out when I chose to attend college in Boston, Massachusetts. I suspect that Aizada feels a more extreme version of this. As a young, creative, and liberal woman, she longs for a day when Kyrgyzstan will be able to enjoy the fruits of a western-style democracy: stability, peaceful transfer of political power, and a greater focus on development and education. I try to imagine what it would be like if each time the United States elected a new president, the people had to expel the old one by force. It’s an interesting thought exercise. I come up blank. I have no precedent on which to base this scenario.

Until I went to Osh, I had no experience at all with civil disorder. Aizada has had multiple experiences with situations like this growing up in turbulent, post-independence Kyrgyzstan.

Now Kyrgyzstan has a female president, something even the United States has yet to achieve. Furthermore, President Otunbaeva and her interim government seem focused on steering the country towards democracy.<sup>39</sup> In almost any country in the world, this would be considered progressive. But this combination is especially remarkable in Central Asia, a region dominated by authoritarian male leaders.<sup>40</sup> I can understand why Aizada sees Otunbaeva’s presidency as the harbinger of progress. It is the culmination of what women like her have been striving for over many years.

Interestingly, it is not only the women of Kyrgyzstan who feel this way. During a walk through downtown Bishkek with Azimbek, my friend Jyldyz’s father, I hear similar sentiments. However Azimbek views the new female-led government through the lens of nationalism. As we pass the gates of the Kyrgyzstani White House, still pockmarked with bullet holes from the turmoil that brought Otunbaeva to power, he explains to me that other Central Asian countries lack the level of gender equality necessary for a woman to be president, suggesting that Kyrgyzstan is the most democratic country in the region.

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39. “Democracy’s Hero: Roza Otunbaeva,” The International Republican Institute, accessed November 21, 2010, <http://www.iri.org/news-events-press-center/news/democracy-s-hero-roza-otunbaeva>.

40. The five former Soviet Central Asian states all rank relatively low in the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index (<http://graphics.eiu.com/PDF/Democracy%20Index%202008.pdf>). Of these countries, Kyrgyzstan ranks the highest, and is the only one categorized as a “hybrid regime”—a country that has elections, but lacks civil liberties. It is followed respectively by Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, which are all classified as “authoritarian regimes.”

36. Antoine Blua, “Who is Roza Otunbaeva?”

37. “Kyrgyzstan’s interim leader named president until end of 2011,” *Xinhua News Agency*, May 25, 2010, accessed November 13, 2010, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/world/2010-05/20/c\\_13304393.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/world/2010-05/20/c_13304393.htm).

38. Short on-camera interview in English, July 2010

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“This would not work in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, or Tajikistan,” he says in a mixture of Russian and English supported by emphatic hand gestures. “Here it works.”<sup>41</sup>

When a pair of women in Islamic *hijab* passes us on the street, he gestures in their direction and says, “This is not our culture.”<sup>42</sup>

Hearing Azimbek’s perspective, I realize that the meaning of Otunbaeva’s presidency may be interpreted to support many different viewpoints, even among her supporters. His comment about the women in *hijab* makes me worry that

the idea of “progress” for women and for Kyrgyzstan may not be interpreted as increased equality between the sexes in a democratic state, but as the requirement that women adopt the relatively secular belief system prevalent in northern Kyrgyzstan. I strongly believe in cultural pluralism and do not think that this would be progress. Worse, I worry that it would lead to more discrimination against ethnic Uzbeks, who tend to be stricter Muslims than ethnic Kyrgyz.

At the moment, it is extremely difficult to say with any certainty what Roza Otunbaeva’s presidency means for Kyrgyzstan. Certainly, she seems dedicated to democratization. But that’s what people said about Askar Akaev in the early 1990s, when Kyrgyzstan experienced a false start on the road to democracy. Furthermore, the unrest in Osh and the interim government’s inability to quell the violence suggest that Kyrgyzstan is still unstable, and there is no guarantee that another round of protests will not force Otunbaeva and her administration out of power. All I know for certain is that many of the Tech Age Girls have told me that Roza Otunbaeva is an example of what they can achieve. It is an interesting time to be a woman in Kyrgyzstan.

## Facing the Future

President Roza Otunbaeva has opened a door for women in Kyrgyzstan. A philosophical precedent is set: theoretically, women can aspire to the same careers as men. However, in reality it isn’t quite that simple. Since independence from the Soviet Union, women have lost much of the ground they gained under the forced gender equality of communism. The number of women in positions of political power has fallen. Roza Otunbaeva is simply the exception to the rule.

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41. That Azimbek fails to mention Turkmenistan as a country where a woman could not be president may be telling. The Economist Intelligence Group’s Democracy Index ranks Turkmenistan as the third least democratic country in the world, and laws in Turkmenistan are often repressive in arbitrary and bizarre ways. In Azimbek’s mind, putting Turkmenistan and female leadership in the same thought may seem ridiculous.

42. Field notes, June 17, 2010

But she doesn’t have to be.

On the final day of the conference, I film the last scene of my short film about the Tech Age Girls. After a long evening of planning their community service projects, the girls are visibly dragging, yawning, and looking around the room with drooping eyes. When I ask them to give me a few minutes to film one last scene, quite a few pretend not to hear me or understand my Russian.

“I want to record you all standing together and shouting that you are the future of Kyrgyzstan,” I tell them. Suddenly, everything changes. The girls’ eyes open wide. They look at each other, exchange a few words in Kyrgyz, and then excitedly begin lining up. Soon I have them waving their arms in the air, shouting, “We are the future of Kyrgyzstan!” At that moment, all the obstacles that stand in the way of women as they try to chart a path for themselves seem to disappear. The Tech Age Girls are pure enthusiasm, pure unbridled passion.

I can’t help feeling that if programs like TAG can continue to motivate and empower young women to actively pursue leadership roles in their country, there may be a way to buck the trend of decreasing gender equality in the post-independence period. Yet, the reemergence of traditional attitudes and practices such as bride kidnapping has made it harder to achieve this in Kyrgyzstan. Pressure to marry and have children in one’s early-to-mid 20s means that many young women will have to juggle the responsibilities of marriage and childrearing before they are established in their careers. Despite these challenges, there is no legal obstacle to women taking leadership roles in Kyrgyzstani society. Motivated women, unrelenting in the pursuit of their dreams, may be just what Kyrgyzstan needs.

▼ I want to believe in Otunbaeva’s presidency and the prospect of democracy for Kyrgyzstan. But then I remember my experience in Osh, and I realize that democracy may not be able to soothe the ethnic tensions tearing this country apart. However, there is one thing I do have faith in: the Tech Age Girls.



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It is more difficult to say definitively what Roza Otunbaeva will mean for Kyrgyzstan. She has only been in power for eight turbulent months, so it is too soon to make a judgment. We will have to ask this question again in five or 10 years. I want to believe in Otunbaeva's presidency and the prospect of democracy for Kyrgyzstan. But then I remember my experience in Osh, and I realize that democracy may not be able to soothe the ethnic tensions tearing this country apart.

However, there is one thing I do have faith in: the Tech Age Girls. I maintain hope that they can be a force for change in Kyrgyzstan and that they can pass on their knowledge and passion to others like them. There is already some evidence that this is indeed possible: a few weeks after the conclusion of the conference, five of the girls collaborated with the United Nations Development Program and trained female representatives of Kyrgyzstani political parties to use Skype and video editing software as tools for communication.<sup>43</sup>

43. "TAG Alumni Train Political Party Representatives in Kyrgyzstan," In *Global Connections and Exchange Program - Kyrgyzstan September Newsletter*, edited by Global Connections and Exchange Program - Kyrgyzstan, 2010, 4.

This may seem minor, but improving the ability of women to disseminate ideas can do a great deal to promote political debate in a country where politics has been dominated by men, and is frequently polarized between the regime in power and the opposition. It is an excellent first step for the Tech Age Girls. With luck, it is the first of many.

This reminds me of something my father has often told me: "If you can dream it, you can do it." These girls are definitely dreamers, and that is hopeful.