

Regional Dissimilarities of Kyrgyz Women: How Talas is Different

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Background

On April 6th 2010, the arrest of a government opposition leader sparked a massive protest in the north-western city of Talas¹. By the next day, the protests had moved to the capital city of Bishkek. There, a disgruntled population, fed up with rising prices, unemployment, and government corruption, erupted in mass protest and violence. It is no

surprise that poor economic conditions and the resulting citizen dissatisfaction factored heavily into the unrest. Kyrgyzstan's past, present and future is heavily impacted by economic and social woes. As one 2010 BBC report indicated, "Kyrgyzstan's poverty - a root cause of the crisis - will not go away overnight, neither will the high prices which helped bring about such discontent."²



These protests went on for a week and left 78 people dead and hundreds more wounded. In the aftermath of the week-long protests, then President Kurmanbek Bakiyev left the capital city for his home region in the southern province of Osh. This left a new interim government with the responsibility of restoring order and rebuilding the city. While Bakiyev vowed to keep his "legitimate" position as President, the interim government moved forward and soon the former foreign minister and opposition leader Roza Otubayeva took the reigns of the interim government and became the first female president of a Central Asian country a few months later.

¹ *Further Demonstrations in Kyrgyzstan*, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, April 7, 2010. Web. Accessed July 1 2010 at <http://www.rferl.org/content/Kyrgyz_Protesters_Occupy_Regional_Government_Office/2003769.html>

² *Q&A: Kyrgyzstan Unrest*, BBC, April 21 2010. Web, accessed 4 August 2010 at <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/8608870.stm>>.



This is not the first time that protests in Kyrgyzstan have led to a change in government. In the spring of 2005, in what was to become known as the Tulip Revolution, protest stemming from government corruption and economic stagnation erupted throughout Kyrgyzstan ultimately ousting then President Asker Akayev. Mass opposition drew investigation and criticism of Akayev policies, revealing the depth of rampant corruption in his regime. After the protests died down, Kurmanbek Bakiyev was elected as President of Kyrgyzstan.

Introduction

Women in Kyrgyzstan played a vital role in the public protests that led to the ousting of two presidents in the 2005 and 2010 revolutions³. Differences in the conditions and attitudes of women in Kyrgyzstan shed some light onto the causes of their participation in the revolutions. This is particularly the case for women in regional flash points as compared to the other regions of the country. Differences in female participation in government, gender barriers to economic and educational opportunity, and the socio-economic status of women from a personal and familial perspective shed some light on how these conditions may have nurtured the outbreak of a revolution.

Talas played a key role in the 2010 revolution. This paper attempts to shed light on the differences of the lives and attitudes of the women of Talas as compared to the rest of Kyrgyzstan. It outlines who the women of Talas are, how the conditions of women in this region differ from the other regions of the country and how these conditions could have led to the revolution in Kyrgyzstan. These differences help to define the spark that started a national movement and replaced the current government of Kyrgyzstan.

As part of a collective effort to understand the status of rights (in practice and beliefs) of Muslim women around the world, D3 Systems, Inc. sponsors and manages the 26 country Women In Muslim Countries Study (WIMC). The nationwide Kyrgyz survey, the focus of this report, consists of interviews with 1027 randomly selected Muslim women nationwide in Kyrgyzstan. The respondents were interviewed in person by native Kyrgyz, from November 14 to November

³ Marat, Erica. *The Tulip Revolution, Kyrgyzstan One Year After*, Washington D.C.: The Jamestown Foundation, 2006.



26, 2007. With a 95% confidence interval, results from this survey can be expected to have a margin of error of +/- 3 percent.

Using WIMC data, this paper demonstrates the high levels of female political participation in the Talas region of Kyrgyzstan in addition to providing insight into how the attitudes and daily lives of the women of this region differ from their national contemporaries.

The Women of Talas

Our observations are of women of Talas from the ages of 18-68. These women are primarily “middle-class” Sunni Muslims, primarily of the Kyrgyz ethnicity (96%) with the remainder being ethnically Uzbek. In Talas, there a moderate amount of women who completed a university degree (43%), which is comparable with the regions of Jalal-Abad (42%) and Batken (41%). However, this portion is significantly lower than the regions of Bishkek (76%), Issyk-Kul (62%), and Chui (57%). Furthermore, no woman from the Talas region has less than a secondary level of education.

In terms of income, this region has the largest number women in the highest monthly household income bracket as compared to the other regions of the country. Thirty-six percent of the women of Talas report monthly household incomes between 6,001 and 12,000 *soms* a month (approximately between \$117 and \$335 USD). The next highest region is Bishkek where 28% of women make between 6,001 and 12,000 *soms* a month. In addition, Talas has the largest middle class population (87%) followed by Chui (81%), Issyk-Kul (80%) and Bishkek (79%). This higher level of income may be attributed to the close proximity of Talas to the border of Kazakhstan and the traditional use of the region as a commercial hub between the two countries. Finally, Talas possesses a unique socio-economic feature: it is the only region where all of the women reported having a household in which some level of income is being saved.

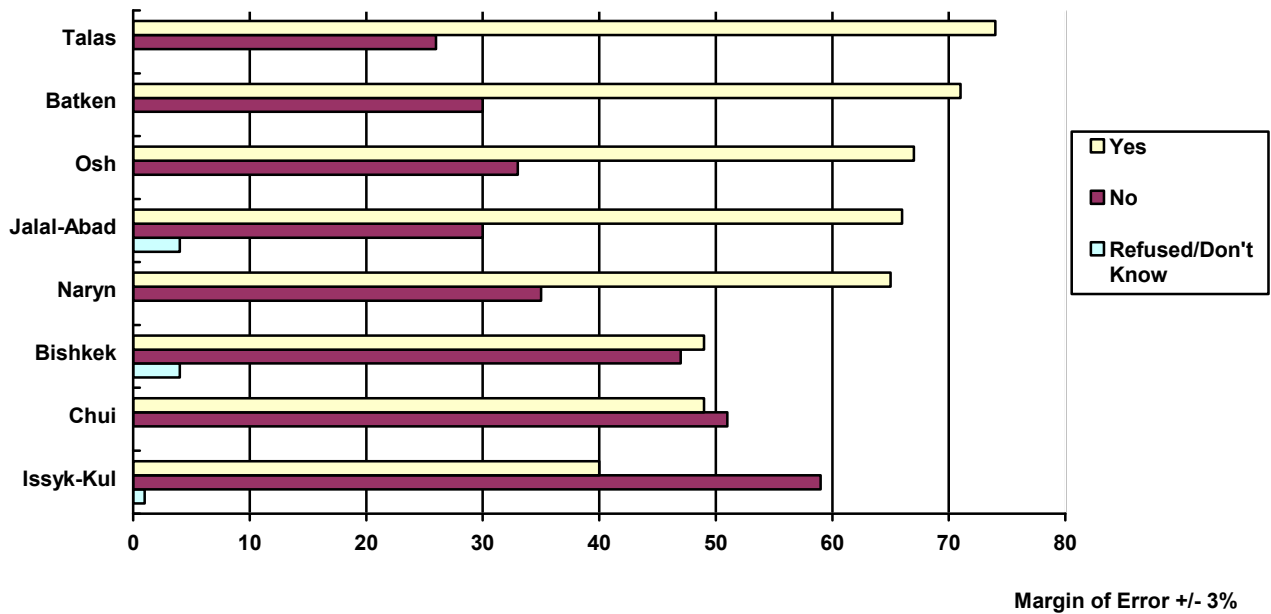
Though the women of Talas reported higher levels of monthly income than other areas, this region also contains the highest percentage (23%) of women reporting that they are unemployed. The women of Talas also report having the second lowest level of employment (26%) matching that of the Jalal-Abad region, but a higher level of employment than that of Osh region (18%). The majority of women in the region self-identify as housewives, in fact 51% of women in Talas serve in this domestic capacity.



Voter Participation in Government

Although women comprise a relatively small portion of the national parliament, the study shows that women had a relatively high level of turnout in the voter referendum in Kyrgyzstan. On a national level, 59% of women reported that they voted in the last national election or referendum⁴. However, when this figure is analyzed at the regional level, it is revealed that voter turnout varies substantially across regions.

Did you vote in the last national election or referendum? (n=1027)



As the above graph shows, the region of Talas has the highest level of female voter turnout (74%). Also, the region of Osh, epicenter of the 2005 Tulip revolution and a region plagued with

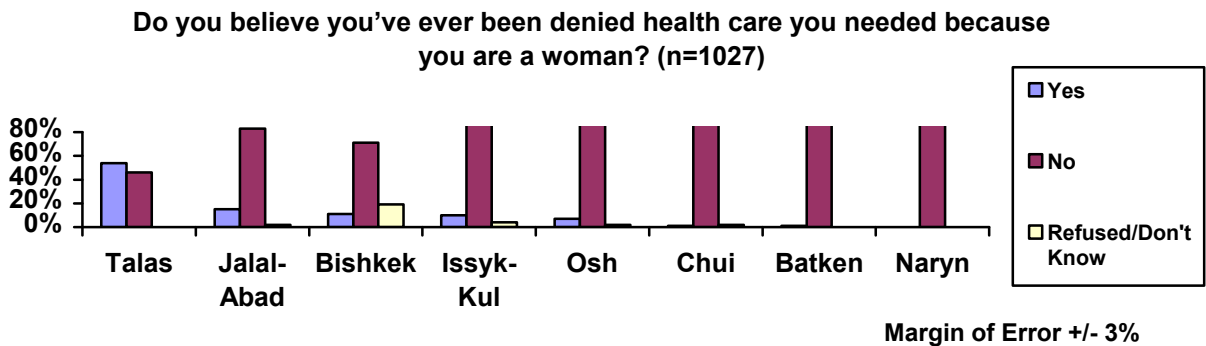
⁴ The most recent national election or referendum is referring to the October 2007 constitutional referendum that sought the approval of the constitution and a change in voting laws.



current ethnic violence, reported voter turnout of 67%. The regions of Bishkek and Chui have considerably lower voter turnout than other regions of Kyrgyzstan.

Healthcare and Desired Change

A stark difference between the women of Talas, compared to their national counterparts, appears to be the access to adequate healthcare. In fact, the data indicates that the majority of women of Talas see gender as an obstacle to receiving proper healthcare. The majority (54%) of women report that they believe they have previously been denied healthcare because they are women. This percentage is the highest reported across all regions in Kyrgyzstan. Next to Talas, Jalalabad has the second-largest percentage of women who believe they have been denied healthcare due to their gender at only 15%.⁵



There may be a variety of reasons why the women of Talas feel that they have been denied healthcare, but one glaring factor that appears to play a role in access to healthcare is the socio-economic status of the household. Case in point, the socio-economic status of the households appears to have a strong inverse relationship to respondents' perceived access to healthcare. Therefore, as the socio-economic status of the household decreases, the percentage of woman who report being denied health increases.

Of women who are considered "upper class" in Talas, none reported ever being denied healthcare compared to 56% of the women who are "middle class" who believe they have been

⁵ In the regions of Bishkek, Issyk-Kul and Chui, 11%, 10% and 1%, respectively, of women report that they believe they have been denied healthcare because they are a woman.



denied healthcare due to their gender status. An even greater percentage of working class women, 67% in fact, believe they have been denied healthcare as a result of being a women.

Age is another factor in explaining women's access to healthcare in Talas. First, older women appear to be the most likely group to report being denied healthcare as a result of their gender. In this study, 83% women of Talas over the age of 60 believe their gender barred their access to healthcare followed by women between the ages of 18 and 29 years (75%). Interestingly enough, the oldest and youngest age groups of women in Talas feature the highest percentage women who see gender as an obstacle to receiving healthcare. Majorities of middle-aged women of the Talas region report similar problems. Fifty-eight percent of women between the ages of 40 and 49 reported being denied healthcare, as well as 50% of the women between the ages of 50 and 59. However, the percentage of women who report being denied healthcare in the Talas region drops dramatically for women between the ages of 30 and 39, as only 25% of these women report being denied healthcare.

These findings are particularly important because it reveals that a high percentage of older women, who may be more prone to health problems, believe they have been denied healthcare. It also shows that a high percentage of women who were raised during or after the fall of the Soviet Union believe that they have been denied healthcare based on their gender, with the exception of women between the ages of 30 and 39 who would have reached adulthood as the Soviet Union collapsed.

This may be part of the phenomenon. As noted by Dr. Djanaveva, "Under the Soviet system...[there were] no problems with access to the available healthcare - the quality was sometimes very good, sometimes not very good - but **everyone** had free access to medical centers in every village⁶." It is possible that older women are dissatisfied with today's access in comparison. Younger women may be dissatisfied with what they understand to be the rights of greater socio-economic status and privilege in a free society.

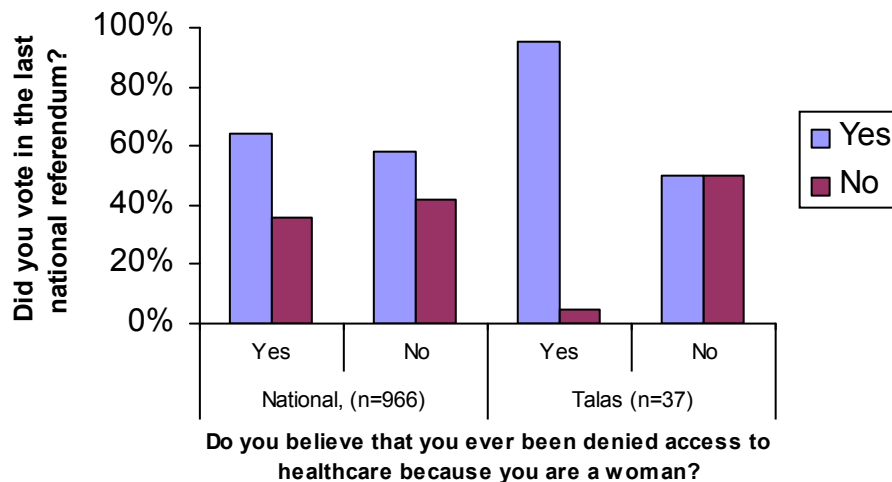
Access to healthcare is also important as it pertains to voting habits within Talas. At the national level, access to health care is not a statistically significant contributor to the voting habits of women. This, however, is not the case in Talas, as 95% of the women in Talas who believe they have been denied health care because they are a woman also reported voting in the last national

⁶ Djanaeva, Nurgul, Awid Women's Rights, 11 April, 2010, *What is the status of women in Kyrgyzstan*, Retrieved August 13, 2010 from: <http://www.awid.org/Issues-and-Analysis/Library/What-is-the-status-of-women-in-Kyrgyzstan>.



referendum. When looking at the women of Talas who say they have not been denied healthcare, the number of women who voted in the last national referendum drops to 50%. No other region demonstrates such stark differences in voting behavior vis-à-vis perceived access to healthcare in a more substantial fashion than in the region of Talas.

Access to Healthcare vs. Voting in Referendum

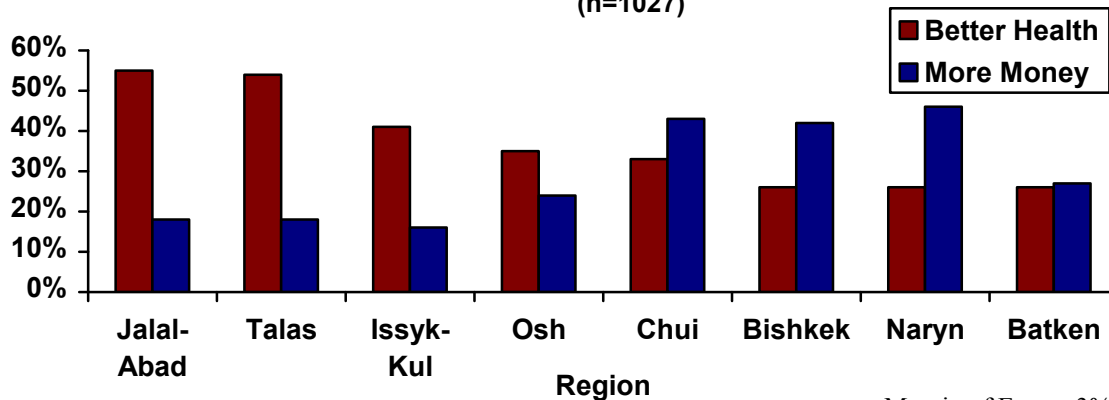


Desire for change

When the women of Kyrgyzstan were asked what one thing these women would want to change in their lives to make themselves happier, 36% say they would like better health, 30% said that they would like more money or greater income and 8% said they would like better education. However, it was not surprising that when the women of Talas were asked what one thing they could change to make their lives happier 54% of the women desire improved healthcare. This percent is the second highest of any of the other regions of Kyrgyzstan, following closely behind Jalalabad at 55%.



If you could change one thing to make your life happier, what would it be?
(n=1027)



Margin of Error ±3%

Conclusion

The women of Talas possess many unique social, economic and cultural characteristics separating their needs, desires and views from other regions of Kyrgyzstan. Factors that separate them, such as access to healthcare and voting behaviors, may have been a contributing factor in the onset of the national revolution. Of the factors that differentiate the women of Talas, nothing appears to be more unique to them than their perceived access to healthcare. This may be shaping their perceived status as women.

The impact of these attitudes on events occurring this April is hard to gauge from the available data. Further studies should be conducted in these volatile regions to further understand how the status of women in these regions has contributed to the recent events throughout Kyrgyzstan. Because of the high amounts of youth commonly involved in revolution and social change, emphasis should be placed on the high numbers of female youth in Talas who feel they are being denied healthcare. These women should be examined further as a potential factor in causing the 2010 revolution. Furthermore, research should be conducted on Kyrgyz women's opinions of the government's role in providing social services and healthcare and how these views and access to these services affect political participation and the shaping of political views.

In countries where there is dramatic social change or revolution, women are frequently the group within society that is most vulnerable to the loss of rights, social status, and freedom. The situation in Kyrgyzstan has been intensified by the recent violent clashes in the region of Osh.



Ethnic violence stemming from this region has led to a large refugee population and a stark increase in violence and rape against the women of the region. Following these events, multiple Non-Governmental Organizations, such as *Interaction*⁷, have emphasized immediate action to protect the women of Kyrgyzstan, provide them with services to assist them in rebuilding their lives and shield them from further violence.

This call for further action by government and non-governmental organizations should be supported with in-depth research on the current status of women throughout Kyrgyzstan. Further studies in Kyrgyzstan should focus on how the rights, freedom and social status of women in Kyrgyzstan, particularly in Osh and Talas, have shifted since this research.

⁷ *NGO Statement on Action Needed to Promote the Safety and Well-Being of Women and Girls in Kyrgyzstan*, Interaction, July 2010, Accessed July 23, 2010 at <<http://www.interaction.org/sites/default/files/17/2010.7%20-%20GBV%20SWG%20Statement%20on%20Kyrgyzstan.pdf>>

