GENDERED ETHNICITY

-On the Discursive Limits of National Identity

Swedish Defence University
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Lisa Skoog
ABSTRACT

This thesis provides a feminist perspective on the inter-ethnic conflict between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the city of Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan. The empirical data for the analysis consists of reports describing the conflict and from interviews conducted in the region in the spring of 2016. The concept discourse is used both as theory and method, in order to analyze how hegemonic identities related to ethnicity and gender can be both reiterated and challenged. The thesis recommends alternative methodological approaches including the object of research, in order to construct knowledge relevant to local conditions. This field study suggests that a feminist perspective on the inter-ethnic conflict in the southern region of Kyrgyzstan is necessary for obtaining a perspective on security which is valid for both men and women. Moreover, women’s passive position in the nationalist narrative may provide a valuable perspective on conflict prevention and reconciliation processes due to inter-ethnic conflict.

Keywords: Identity, nationalism, gender, discourse, Kyrgyzstan, ethnicity, conflict, Central Asia
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1. INTRODUCTION

"All we knew about the war had been communicated through ’male voices’. We were all trapped in the ’male’ perceptions and the ’male’ impressions of the war. In the ’male’ words. And the women remained silent.” (Aleksijevitj 2012, 12).

Alexievich’s quote describes how knowledge of war was constructed through the eyes and memories of men. Her collection of women’s experiences of war indicates that women’s absence in war stories are delusional and provides an incomplete understanding of war and conflict. Feminist war studies suggests that the masculine narrative on war fails to comprehend both its causes and consequences, and will therefore fail to prevent conflict and end war.

Feminist studies does not necessarily mean studying women and the traditionally female spheres of society. It rather presupposes a challenge to the spheres and aspects usually designated as male territories. In order to challenge the male norms, a feminist approach has to permeate all parts of research – not just theory and the choice of topic, but also to a large extent the methodology and question what counts as knowledge and truth. Therefore the feminist approach of this thesis presuppose a critique of traditional research, which determine the choice of both theory and method.

1.1. Disposition

Despite the indivisible relation between theory and method in feminist research I initiate this thesis with an introduction to the theoretical background, upon which this research has been conducted. After presenting the research question and the aim of the research I explain in which way I wish to contribute to the valuable tradition of feminist researchers referred to throughout this thesis. With a brief historical overview I wish to situate the reader in the social and political context of southern Kyrgyzstan. Using the theoretical framework of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler I then present an analysis of the ethnic narrative of the region. Finally, by analyzing alternative narratives and challenging identities, I suggest in what ways a feminist approach to ethnic conflict can contribute to a more inclusive security concept.

1.2. Theoretical Background and Previous Research

The perception of women as inherently peace prone is intertwined with the division of society in a private and a public sphere, whereas women are referred to the former while men’s space is located outside of home and related to state- as well as interstate matters. The private/public dichotomy and the idea of “woman’s peace” and “man’s war” cannot only be found in essentialism-feminism, but has also constituted an argument for women’s supposedly natural position as advocates for peace within liberal branches of feminism. (Alison 2009, 85).

As suggested by Hilary Charlesworth, ideas of women as “Peaceful Souls” and men as “Just Warriors” has been used in IR-theory both to provoke women’s participation in war and peacebuilding and to defend the borders of traditionally male and female spheres. In the 2004 article “Women and the Evolution of World Politics” Francis Fukuyama claims that the
proofs that differences between men and women are biologically determined can be found in the behaviors of others species, especially among humans closest evolutionary relative -the chimpanzees (Fukuyama 1998, 25). According to Fukuyama, in no area is the sex-related differences as obvious as in those related to violence and aggression, i.e. war and conflict (ibid, 31). Even though Fukuyama acknowledges that there have been some influential female leaders in world politics he concludes that those women are exceptions and represents women acting out of the conventional female character and implicitly suggests that “feminine” leaders would be less capable of deterrence and protection against “masculine” adversaries. Ideas of women’s inherent peacefulness are also present among essentialist oriented feminists such as Sara Ruddick, who makes a strong connection between women’s supposed resistance to war with the potentiality of motherhood. Though unlike Francis Fukuyama, Ruddick doesn’t claim women’s affinity to peace to be biologically determined (Charlesworth 2008, 349).

While gender stereotypes, manifested in portrayals of men and women in relation to war and conflict, has been widely criticized and contested especially among feminist thinkers such as Judith Butler, Christine Sylvester, Ann Tickner, and Cynthia Enloe, traces of the perception of women as less war prone and more peace oriented than men can still be found in prominent and influential international juridical documents concerning women’s rights, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) from 1979, the Beijing Platform for Action from 1995 and the Security Council Resolution 1325 from 2001 (Charlesworth 2008, 349-350). Charlesworth suggests that the documents shows several explicit or implicit expressions of gender determined relation to peace: an assumption that women are better than men at developing and sustaining peace; the assumption that women are more vulnerable to war than men and thereby has special needs in relation to violent conflicts; the assumption that women’s special affinity with peace is an asset in peace negotiations; and finally the improper use of the word gender as referring only to women, (ibid, 351). Charlesworth concludes that ideas about gender are central to the ways international conflicts are both resolved and identified (ibid, 360).

Like Judith Butler, Miranda Alison, Christine Sylvester and many other feminist thinkers referred to throughout this text, this thesis adopts the view that gender and ethnicity, as well as many other markers of identity, are socially constructed. The idea of research’s ability to reveal an objective truth affects all parts of social science research and how the world is interpreted and presented. Feminist critique of that positivist approach rejects the idea of an objective researcher, and strives for transparency and honesty instead of truth. Since any research is conducted through the filter of the researcher’s bias it has to be interpreted with the notion and understanding of such bias. The question is therefore not if a research report is biased but rather what bias it represents. The same can be said about perceptions of society in general and of the narratives used to make it intelligible.

In the introduction to her book “Bodies that Matter. On the discursive limits of `sex’”, Judith Butler poses the question whether sex -the hegemonic dichotomy of male/female- is to gender what feminine is to masculine. (Butler 2011, xiv). Butler is thereby rephrasing Sherry B. Ortner’s question from her article “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” from 1974, in which she argues that the universal subordination of women is to be explained by the constructed perception that women, as potential mothers, are more related to the nature than men who are instead associated with the concept of culture, and as such able to cultivate the nature (Ortner, 1974). I would like to suggest that the hierarchical scale between the devalued
“natural” and the superior status of the “cultural” is applicable to the reasoning used to evaluate the hierarchical positionings between other socially constructed groupings, for example those based on ethnicity and religion.

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM

There is a considerable raised awareness of women in peace processes, and the number of women taking part in peace negotiations has increased. But despite international conventions and a number of international and national initiatives to support women’s participation in actions for peace and to raise awareness of sexual violence in conflicts, the research on gender and women’s participation in mediation and peace negotiations is still limited.

Even though there are many traces of growing support for women’s participation, I suggest that the understanding of why women’s participation is important is too narrow. As a consequence, there is a limited comprehension of the whole scope of why women’s participation is important and of what is missed out when women are excluded from peace-building efforts and reconciliation processes. Women’s access to the public sphere -whether it is local politics, public administration, or peace processes- is often described as a matter of justice. The category woman, as opposed to the category man, being excluded from public life is rightfully considered unjust and is often described as a loss of women’s specific experiences. Even though feelings of justice and inclusion are crucial for a sustainable society, I propose that women’s participation in reconciliation processes and peace building is not primarily a matter of justice- it is a matter of security. Using the following interrelated questions I wish to shed some light on the implications of a female perspective on ethnic conflict.

Does women’s participation in peace processes matter for the outcome, given that women aren’t more peace prone than men?

Except from the obvious impact on equality, does gender matter for presenting and resolving ethnic conflicts?

If nationalist projects excludes women, how can women’s experience and perceptions provide a contribution to conflict resolution related to nationalism and ethnic conflict?

2.1. Aim

The approach of this thesis oppose the idea that women are inherently peace prone. This position is related to the constructivist view presented above, that there is no natural womanhood at all, but a construction of an ideal femininity against which both women and men are compared and judged.

As pointed out by Nira Yuval-Davies and others, women’s potential child bearer abilities constitutes an important feature in the national narrative (Yuval-Davies, 1993, 628). Still, it is men, through the exclusive position in the public sphere, who has the agency and ability to ‘perform’ ethnicity. By analyzing allegedly objective sources on the ethnically based violence in Osh, I aim at revealing the masculine bias of the national narrative. Through observations
and interviews with women in the city of Osh I intend to explore the ontology of women’s identities and to analyze their discourses. By providing a voice to the women I wish to explore whether the masculine bias of the national narrative hides alternative perspectives on security in the region, and what the implications might be to ignore these alternative perspectives.

3. CONTRIBUTION

3.1. Theoretical and methodological contribution

To overcome the hegemonic status of the masculine perspective on the imagined community of the nation, I am trying to show that the dominant national narrative doesn’t apply to the perceived identity and community for a large part of the population. Thereby this research can provide alternative perspectives on the lives of people in conflict areas and contribute to a better understanding of issues of identity, ethnicity and security for all parts of society. And women’s participation in peacebuilding has, as previously mentioned, for long been considered a matter of equality. Women’s participation in the articulation as well as settlement of a conflict is of course a matter of equality. Moreover, solving the decades long conflict like the one in southern Kyrgyzstan demands a complete and thorough understanding of the complexity of identity, social structures and oppression, which can only be achieved through examining the realities of all inhabitants of the society. Thereby I wish to contribute to a holistic approach to the interpretation of what constitutes and generates ethnically related conflicts and violence.

Further on, I like to think that this thesis can provide a methodological contribution by shedding some light on the impact of such alternative research methods used for example by Aradau & Huysmanns (2014) and Kostovicova et. al. (2014), which I will later refer to as finding “the meaning in method”. By interviewing those whose agency and perceptions are usually ignored in traditional research, focusing on either the acts of states or dominant actors or focusing on problems formulated by those with power, alternative perspectives in social sciences can be revealed. In order to reach marginalized groups this approach usually demands different kinds of field work, such as on site observations, focus group interviews, or in depth interviews.

3.2. Empirical contribution

The former Soviet republics of Central Asia are located in Russia’s back yard, both concerning political influence and media attention. When it comes to conflict- and crisis reporting the countries seem to be overshadowed by the long-lasting civil war in Afghanistan. As the country with the smallest population in the area and lacking famous historical sites as Samarkand and Kokand in neighboring Uzbekistan, as well as violent conflicts as the civil war in Tajikistan in the early nineties and the Andijan-massacre in Uzbekistan in 2005, Kyrgyzstan is likely the country in the region given least international attention. This is reflected in the limited pre-existing material on Kyrgyzstan that can be considered non-biased and providing a general illustration of the situation in the country in general and especially of the ethnic tensions in the Osh-region. The decades-long ethnic conflict in the Osh-province, containing deadly violence, urgently calls for a solution or at least a method for preventing further violence and stop the negative spiral of ethnic tension. Repeated international
assistance and intervention has not yet managed to eradicate the hierarchical and hostile relations between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. UN officials has begun to raise demand for a changed strategy for Kyrgyzstan and calls for a new approach addressing the country’s overall crisis is needed, instead of sector-by-sector aid (International Crisis Group 2012, 16).

The geographic nearness to Afghanistan, the Syrian civil war -with ISIL attracting Muslims from Central Asia and Chechnya, and Kyrgyzstan’s unstable political situation, has made the potential spread of political Islam and jihadism a serious threat (ICG 2015:4). Thus the geographic focus of this thesis is also of empirical importance. The threat of jihadism in the region is also mentioned by the interviewees of this research, witnessing on how radicalization influence family bonds and women’s conditions in the region.

The lack of a vital method for conflict prevention and reconciliation, despite international initiatives, highlights the need for a theoretical understanding of how the concept of ethnic conflict is constructed and how is can be deconstructed to help prevent future tension and violence. As claimed earlier, the conceptualization of the case as the taxonomy of ethnic conflict allows the theoretical implications to “travel” and thus to be applicable to ethnic and nationalistic conflicts worldwide.

In her book “War’s Unwomanly Face” Svetlana Alexievich retells women’s stories and experiences from World War II, thus revealing previously untold and unknown aspects of war. She explains that the ‘female’ war had its own colors and scents, its own lightning and its own emotions (2013, 12). In the same tradition, I wish to contribute to the illumination of the womanly face of the ethnic conflict in Kyrgyzstan.

4. THEORY

4.1. Nation building – a theoretical framework

With reference to Benedict Anderson’s definition of the nation as an imagined community, Yuval-Davies concludes that the concepts ethnicity and nationality are closely interlinked (Yuval-Davies 1993, 623). Without paying any closer attention to the origins, meanings, and differences of concepts such as nation, ethnicity and ‘race’, I agree on the notion of the collective identity as a social construction. Anderson describes the national community as imagined, precisely because the members of the nation never will get to know, meet, or even hear about more than a vast minority of the other members of that same community. Despite this, the image of a community and of a common linking between its members exists in each and everyone’s consciousness an imagination of a community. Further on, Anderson explains that the imagined community is limited in the notion that it, despite its extensions and elasticity, is always limited in its dimensions, since there are no nations thought of as coinciding with all of humanity (Anderson 1991, 22). In fact the existence of other nations doesn’t only limit the scope and range of the extension of the own nation, but actually constitutes a precondition for the own national identity and the existence of the nation. Thus the construction and accentuation of “the other”, no matter how threatening or intimidating, is a prerequisite for the existence and survival of “the self”.

The perception of belonging to a collective - whether based on ethnic or national characteristics - is shaped by both the imagination of a common history and by a belief in a future of mutual dependence (Yuval-Davies 1993, 623). The ‘imagined community’ that I am
referring to while discussing groups of individuals interlinked by a common notion of identity, resemble what is described with the concept *Volknation*, focusing on a community constructed upon the idea of a nationality or an ethnicity (ibid, 624). The concept of ethnicity has been present in Soviet domestic policy in the past as well as in many of the now independent states today. For example the denotation nationality (natsyonalnost) is registered in the Kyrgyzstani national identity cards, as well as in the former Soviet passports, in order to indicate ethnic belonging. To avoid misunderstandings and to avoid confusion of the concept of nation in the aspect of *Volknation* and *Staatnation* respectively I will use the concept ethnicity, ethnic belonging, or nationality without distinction while denoting and describing the imagined communities designating Kyrgyz and Uzbeks (ibid, 624).

In the article *Gender and Nation*, Yuval-Davies concludes that literature on the subject national production and reproduction usually doesn’t relate to women (1993, 621). Even though women plays a symbolic role as potential mothers, Yuval-Davies explains that the exclusion of women from the mission of reproducing the nation traditionally has been assigned the bureaucracy and the intelligentsia, and is explained through the division of society in a private sphere and a public sphere, whereas the former usually has been assigned women. Thus, women’s activities, living conditions, and experiences has not been ascribed any real political relevance.

"Since nationalism and nations have usually been discussed as part of the political sphere, the exclusion of women from that arena has effected their exclusion from that discourse as well". (Yuval-Davies 1993, 622).

Since the perception of the own nation, “the self”, is created in opposition to a standard image of “the other”, neither constructions permit substantial variances from the norm or leaves any room for difference of interest. Thus, the national project also limits the acceptance for alternative gender roles and internal power conflicts based on for example gender or class (Yuval-Davies 1993, 628).

4.2. The Ontology of War

Christine Sylvester rejects Claus von Clausewitz’s traditional definition of war as ‘the continuation of politics by other means’ of which injury is a tragic consequence, and argues that injury is instead the content of war. Thereby Sylvester emphasizes the presence of injury - physical or psychological - as central for the understanding of war and proposes an alternative definition of war as "the politics of injury". She justifies her definition by explaining that everything that is related to war aim at inflicting injury on people or societies - to injure in order to solve disagreements or as a means of encouraging disagreement wherever there is anything to gain from that (Sylvester 2013, 4).

Judith Butler, on the other hand, stresses the importance of understanding war from the perspective of the emotional experiences and especially experiences of grief. She concludes that the senses are the first target of war and explains the framing of the adversary - a nation or a population - as a war target, as an initial action of destruction and a preparation for war (Butler 2009, xvi). To the extent that women are at all present in the official narrative of a country’s war history it is precisely in the depiction of the grieving mother or wife. In that way it can be said that it is through the emotions of war that women’s war history is told. As
in many other places affected by World War II depictions of women mourning their sons and husbands are common in both the Kyrgyzstan’s capital Bishkek and in Osh.

The ethnic conflict in southern Kyrgyzstan has not been defined as a civil war. Instead the outbursts in 1990 and 2010 are usually referred to as ethnic conflict, which is also the concept frequently used in this thesis, referring to the ongoing tensions between the two dominating ethnic groups. No matter how many has been killed or wounded due to the conflict, I believe that the mechanisms of nationalism in southern Kyrgyzstan is relevant for the study of ethnic conflict no matter if the conflict is considered to qualify as war, armed conflict or ethnic clashes.

The other’s inherent weakness in relation to the own nation’s supremacy is an essential feature of ethnic conflict as well as is the feelings of belonging to an imagined community. Descriptions of the Kyrgyzstani conflict undoubtedly reveals a strategy to injure or to kill the adversary. Thus, both Sylvester’s emphasis on “the presence of injury” and Butler’s emotional understanding of war are applicable to the understanding of the ongoing conflict in Osh.

4.3. Power/Knowledge

With the term ‘power/knowledge’ Foucault expresses the constitution of power through established forms of knowledge and accepted ‘truths’.

‘Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true’ (Michel Foucault 1980, 131)

Instead of analyzing power as an object Foucault suggests that power has to be made intelligible through its techniques and tactics of domination (Foucault 2003, 34). Butler embraces Foucault’s analysis of power in her explanation of how identities are constructed and how power both limits the accepted variants of identities and at the same time can challenge normative perceptions of ‘woman’ and ‘man’ (Butler 2011, xix).

From this follows the conclusion that an identity which cannot be reiterated, and that lacks processes, can never be powerful. At the same time, an identity which is constantly being confirmed through repetition will gain power over the knowledge of what it means to belong to a specific category, such as ‘man’ or ‘woman’. Since challenging the norms or ‘the regimes of power’ demands agency this explains why the lack of women’s agency in descriptions of the ethnic conflict in Kyrgyzstan is an obstacle for change norms and challenge the masculine bias of the national narrative. Therefore, alternative ways of obtaining agency are necessary.
4.4. Performativity

In the book “Bodies that Matter. On the Discursive Limits of Sex” Judith Butler elaborates on the concept of gender performativity, described as an act of performativity with the gendered identity of the body as having no ontological status apart from the various acts that constitute its reality (Campbell 1998, 9). The normative category sex is thus to be understood as a regulatory ideal which takes place through certain highly regulated practices. In this normative perception, sex both produces the bodies of ’man’ and ’woman’, and controls them through demarcation and differentiation (Butler 2011, xii). Butler suggests that oppressive gender structures can be challenged through a norm transgressive behavior and uses the concept ’abject’ both as a noun and as an adjective to signify the “unlivable” and the “uninhabitable” zones of social lives which does not conform to the norms, neither that of man nor that of woman (ibid, xiii, xvii).

Thus the performance of the norms that regulates and limits acceptable identities in a society can be both interpreted and reiterated through narratives of the common history, traditions and the constituting other. Descriptions of the heroic defense of the nation and its territory constitute a retelling of the performativity of ethnicity – a story of what it means to belong to a specific ethnicity or nation. In the subsequent analysis of the official narrative of the ethnic conflict in Kyrgyzstan, I am applying Butler’s theoretical framework in order to show that these acts are usually performed by an all-male ensemble. Women’s absence or marginal presence in the national narrative provides limited abilities to challenge the masculine domination of the ethnic discourse. In order to influence the way ethnicity is understood and reiterated women need to change their own performance by ’abjecting’ to the traditional roles of women within their certain cultural or ethnical norms.

5. NOMADS, SOVIETS, AND KYRGYZSTANIS – A REGIONAL OVERVIEW

The transition from a nomadic society, through Russian imperialism under Soviet rule, to the capitalist economic system of today during less than a century has meant revolutionary changes in the lives of the inhabitants of Kyrgyzstan. The modern society and economic transition has offered large adaptation challenges for both the Kyrgyzstanis and the state, and for the creation of a stable national administration.

The origins of the Kyrgyz people is a contested question which answer has varied depending on prevailing social climate and political ideology. From the 13th century sources shows that Kyrgyz tribes, consisting of Mongols and various Turkic groups created its own independent khanate. During this time it is claimed that an own language and a sense of national belonging was founded. Despite the tribes’ association with certain territories they continued to live a nomadic lifestyle with a traditional division of work load between men and women (Andersson 1999, 1-2). Due to a lack of written sources from the time little can be said about the lives of the Kyrgyz tribes during this era, though some traces can be found in the extensive national Manas-epic (Liu 2012, 171).

On account of rivalry with the Kokand-khanate in what today is Uzbekistan, the Kyrgyz tribes turned to the Russian tsar for protection. Eventually influences from Russian culture with farming and land owning diminished the nomadic practices (Soucek 2000, 193). Not until 1936 what came to constitute todays Kyrgyzstan was created under Soviet rule. Despite an initially relatively large autonomy concerning local traditions, religion and language, the
Soviet era entailed considerable social and cultural changes (ibid, 226). After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Kyrgyzstan declared itself independent. Thereby the first independent Kyrgyzstani state was created, based on the territorial borders, mainly established under Soviet rule. The sovereignty didn’t only mean independence from Moscow but especially considerable political, social and economic reforms which the young country was ill prepared for (ibid, 303).

In the book “Under Solomon’s Throne” Morgan Y. Liu provides a thorough historical background to today’s city of Osh which illustrates an inherently divided city. Without looking in to the different factors that created the societal divisions the picture provided outlines the actual and imaginary differences between the lives of the city’s Uzbek- and Kyrgyz populations (Liu 2012, 75-76). Despite the Uzbek minority having lived in the region for generations, perhaps longer than many of the nomadic Kyrgyz, the duality of Osh is visible in the division between its low built mahalla-districts, usually inhabited by Uzbeks, and the more modern apartment buildings, usually inhabited by the Kyrgyz majority. The Uzbeks relations with Uzbekistan are very weak and Osh has long been considered a home to activists opposing the repressive former president of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov. Thus there weren’t much hope for any help from Tashkent during the violent events of 2010 (ICG 2012, 14).

5.1. The Spring of 2010

Kurmanbek Bakiyev, the second president of the Kyrgyz Republic after Askar Akayev, was on April 7 2010 overthrown following popular demonstrations and Roza Otunbayeva became the leader of a provisional government. A fight for power between the two strands resulted in public unrest in the capital Bishkek, as well as in the southern cities Batken, Osh and Jalalabad. On June 10 the authorities were unable to control emerging riots in Osh and on June 11 a state of emergency was established by the provisional government. The tensions as well as expressions of violence showed clear ethnic dimensions such as Kyrgyz mobilization from neighboring villages and burning of the Uzbek mahalla-districts. On June 12 the rumors of forthcoming intervention by the military of Uzbekistan is believed to have influenced Kyrgyz withdrawal from the Uzbeks’ mahalla-districts. During the following days outbursts of ethnic violence continued, with hostage taking, sexual violence and killings on both sides, and symbolically the Kyrgyz-Uzbek University of People’s Friendship is set on fire. In mid-June the situation was stabilized in the city of Osh as well as in nearby Jalalabad. (Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission-Report, x-xi).
6. MATERIAL

The empirical data constituting the basis for my analysis consists of both pre collected reports on the ethnic tensions in southern Kyrgyzstan, and interviews conducted during a two weeks field study in Osh in April 2016.

With example from the reports and interviews, I try to show how and in which way the national narrative is masculinist and how outbursts of ethnic violence, for example that of 2010, constitutes an example of the performance of nationalism and ethnic belonging, and how the masculine interpretation is reiterated. In common for the reports used in this thesis the agents of action are almost exclusively men. Women are present almost only as objects – or sometimes as ‘abjects’. Where women are actually given agency in the examples of narratives describing the ethnic conflict, she is understood to act “out of character”.

6.1. Reports

To provide a comprehensive summary of the Kyrgyz/Uzbek conflict in Southern Kyrgyzstan, I am using first hand empirical sources from the International Crisis Group and report on the investigation of the 2010 uprisings from the Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission (KIC-report).

International Crisis Group (ICG) is a reputable, independent, non-profit, non-governmental organization, famous for its renowned board of trustees and with former diplomats, journalists, academics and NGO staff among its analysts, located in conflict areas all over the world. According to the information on the ICG website the organization combine expert field-based research and high-level engagement with policymakers across the world in order to prevent and resolve deadly conflict. The International Crisis Group seek to talk to all sides of a conflict in order to provide fresh perspectives and recommendations (International Crisis Group, https://www.crisisgroup.org/how-we-work).

The “Report of the Independent international Commission of Inquiry into the Events in Southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010” (further on referred to as the KIC-report) is the result of the Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission’s assignment to provide an independent investigation of the circumstances and events related to the violent conflict in Southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010. The mandate given by the president of the Kyrgyz Republic, Roza Otunbayeva, also included qualifying the violations and crimes under international law, determine responsibilities and provide recommendations in order to prevent future ethnic violence (KIC-report, ii). The Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission was financially supported by the EU, the United States, Finland, Norway, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Denmark, Turkey, Estonia and France and led by the Finnish Member of Parliament and Special Representative of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly for Central Asia, Kimmo Kiljunen. The other six commissioners comprised of experts on law and social sciences originating from the supporting countries (KIC-report, 3, 7).

I have chosen the representations of the ethno-national conflict in Osh provided by the ICG and the KIC precisely because of the reliability of its sources, professionalism and the neutral stance in relation to the two ethnic groups involved in the conflict. Though I have no intention and find no reason to question neither the expertise among the analysts, nor the unbiased intentions of the organization, I suggest that reading the reports through a feminist lens can provide an alternative understanding of the role of ethnicity in the society in Southern
Kyrgyzstan, and challenge the general perception of the impact of ethnic belonging for its inhabitants. I do not argue that the representations of ethnic conflict and witness of atrocities on both sides in the reports are either true or false. I merely try to point at the male discourse they represent, and suggest that there are conquering discourses among which the female might be one.

6.2. Interviews

After analyzing the discourse of the available material on the ethnic conflict in Osh, I have had to search for alternative sources of information in order to challenge the ‘power of knowledge’ and detect other identities and national narratives. Since those alternative sources quite naturally aren’t available in pre-existing reports and papers I have had to try to encounter and collect those narratives myself. The interviews are performed in order to try and map out discourses on identity among women of Osh.

The interviews consist of two focus group interviews and four in-depth interviews, collecting twelve women of different ages and occupations. The interviews were all sound recorded and has been transcribed and, when needed, translated to English from Russian. The transcriptions of the six interviews are available in the appendix. They are named with the letter A to F, which is the name I will use in the subsequent analysis while referring to both the interviews and the respondents. The opinions and experiences expressed in the interviews reflects the perceptions of individuals and are neither to be considered representative for the collective of interviewees or for the women of Osh in general.

7. EPISTEMOLOGY, METHODOLOGY, AND RESEARCH METHOD

Despite a wide range of directions within what is labeled feminist theory, in common for most feminist researchers is the rejection of the positivist idea of the objective researcher (Alison 2009, 13). What has traditionally been perceived as an objective and unbiased perspective is in fact a representation of the view of the most influential part of society, of those who exercise the power over knowledge. Usually men of the dominant class and race. This rejection of the idea of the researcher as neutral, detached, and value-free demands the feminist researcher to clarify his or her standpoint, which is in itself grounded in the researcher’s background and experiences. This implies a shift in the understanding of knowledge from something objective and “true” to something changeable and open. While traditional research is based on the experiences of men and focuses on aspects of social life relevant or problematic for men, this approach to knowledge enables new areas of research. While questioning the universality of traditional research feminism introduces the woman as “knower” and claims women’s experiences and perceptions to be just as valid as those of men (ibid, 11).

Thus the feminist critique doesn’t only question the male epistemological bias which encourages inquiry in the life of men or typically male spheres of society. It also highlights the absence of questions concerning women’s lives and experiences, and acknowledges the interest of women’s experiences and perceptions both as a starting point for feminist research and as an important resource for social analysis. (Alison 2009, 14). Aradau and Huysmans
suggests that the concept “feminist curiosity” elaborated by Cynthia Enloe can be deployed as a tool for challenging gender neutrality (Aradau & Huysmanns 2004, 610).

The feminist notion that women’s perspectives in general and especially the perspectives of women of lower classes and suppressed ethnic or racial groups, has been excluded from research has important implications for epistemology, methodology and method (Alison 2009, 12). In political science graduate programs, the focus of methodological training is on the analyzing of data instead of the processes and considerations while collecting data, which probably represents the general perception of data collection as a value-free and unpolitical activity (Kapiszewski et al. 2015, 191). Scholars of critical and feminist social sciences has formulated a critique against the kind of traditional and positivist research which represents the perception of methodology and scientific method as a universal recipe for research and a guarantee for scientificity (Aradau & Huysmanns 2014, 597).

7.1. “Finding meaning in method”

In Kostovicova, Martin and Bojicic-Dzelilovic’s article on human security in Kosovo a practice-grounded approach is proposed in order to challenge existing concepts. By using dialogue as a research tool for investigating human security their approach addresses issues of power in research process and knowledge creation (Kostovicova et al. 2012, 573). Instead of applying predominant concepts and topics on the objects of research, a bottom-up methodology is used in which marginalized individuals and groups are invited to a dialogue as a tool for knowledge construction (ibid, 575). For example, this allows concepts and research questions to be elaborated in cooperation with the local community. Thus the locals are acknowledged as experts on their experiences.

Inspired by Kostovicova, Martin and Bojicic-Dzelilovic’s use of individuals as a resource for reinterpretation of human security, I have tried to employ female local voices of Kyrgyzstan in order to challenge concepts such as ethnicity, nationalism, and gender, and hopefully contribute to a more inclusive construction of identity (Kostovicova et al. 2012, 574). With use of this methodological approach - “finding meaning in method” - I wish to find out for example whether the men and women of southern Kyrgyzstan refer to the same concepts while talking about ethnicity and national identity and whether their identities are constructed in relation to a common “other”. Therefore this approach has had a crucial impact for the construction of interviews as well as choice of topics and phrasing of interview questions.

Since the findings from my analysis of the national narrative manifested in the ICG-articles and in the KIC-report, presented in the subsequent chapter, shows that women lacks agency in the creation of the national identity I have attempted to provide the participating women with an opportunity to create their own narrative. In order not to provide the interviewees with predetermined definitions of ethnicity and nationality I have invited these women to a discussion on how they perceive themselves and what aspects of their identity enable and restrain their prospects and choices in life.
7.2. Focus group interviews

In order to decipher women’s perception of their ethnic belonging and the implications of that belonging I have concluded that focus group interviews provides a suitable platform to encourage “a feminist curiosity”. Besides the obvious benefit of collecting information and opinions from a larger number of interviewees, considering the scope and time frame for this thesis, the form of focus group interviews also provides other benefits for obtaining information from the interviewees that are ideal for the methodological approach selected for this research. Among the most obvious advantages with performing interviews in focus groups is the possibility to create a dialogue among the participants, which allows me as an interviewer to limit my interference and thus restrict the impact of my presence.

Since I wouldn’t want the interviewees to be influenced by my expectations and perceptions, the groups has initially been provided with the main topic of the interview –identity, and asked to describe how they perceive their own identity. This semi-structured interview method has provided opportunities for the respondents to apply their own interpretation of the concept identity in order to elaborate on what aspects of identity matters to them.

The formation of the focus groups has entailed challenges concerning both methodology and practicalities. It is of great importance to consider possible structures of power and subordination within the groups, and to limit the negative effect such hierarchies are likely to impose on the discussion. At the same time, heterogeneous groups representing various ethnicities, age groups, and occupations might result in unexpected discussions and outcome.

I have performed two focus groups interviews with four respondents in each group. The focus group participants were all young women of the age group 17 to 23, and all stated that they defined themselves as ethnic Kyrgyz. Participant collection has been conducted through so called chain referral in which a few initial contacts and respondents recommended further respondents (Kapiszewski et al. 2015, 212). Even though the intention from the beginning was to create focus groups consisting of both Kyrgyz and Uzbek women, I believe that the difficulties I encountered well mirrors the divisions of the society. Because of this division I suspect that an ethnically mixed focus group might have had a limiting rather than an emancipatory effect on the conversation.

Even though I haven’t had the ambition to provide the female perspective on ethnicity, I have supplemented the focus group interviews with in-depth interviews. The in-depth interviews are therefore performed in order to capture as many perceptions and experiences as possible and to exemplify the complexity and multiplicity of subordinated narratives, rather than to add analytical value through triangulation.

7.3. In-depth interviews

The choice of in-depth interviews is not only, as previously mentioned, a result of the difficulties with collecting inter-ethnical focus groups. While focus group interviewing has to deal with confidentiality concerns the in-depth interview provides an opportunity for the respondent to provide her experiences and views without the presence of “witnesses” (Kapiszewski et al. 2015, 203).

The individual interviews were somewhat looser structured compared to the group interviews. Each respondents were presented with the topic “identity” and encourage to elaborate on that
concept with no more involvement from the interviewer than necessary. With the intention to pose open-ended and stimulating questions I have tried to have the respondent doing most of the talking. Thus the in-depth interview has been a helpful tool to understand the social context of the respondent in order to evaluate relevant categories of analysis (Kapiszewski et al. 2015, 196).

Of the four in-depth interviews, performed with women of the age between 18 to 65, two were made with respondents of Kyrgyz ethnicity while two defined themselves as Uzbeks. Symptomatically, among the twelve respondents, focus group interviews included, it was only the two Uzbek women who expressed concerns of confidentiality. Furthermore these concerns were exclusively connected to matters of ethnicity and nationalism.

The difficulties encountered trying to formulate the focus groups and getting access to female Uzbek respondents well illustrate their absence in the public space. This makes them less accessible, with the consequence that their experiences and narratives are less likely to reach an audience outside the own ethnic and social group.

7.4. The Ethics of Research

The question of hierarchies in the interview situation was raised earlier, in relation to respondents in focus groups. But the relation between the respondent and the researcher might be just as influential for the discussion climate and the outcome of the interviews. While positivist researchers strives for neutrality in relation to the object of study in order not to influence the respondents and her or her statements, within feminist research it has been common to regard the researcher’s presence as inevitable in both process and product (Kapiszewski et al. 2015, 191). It is therefore argued that the impact of the researcher should be explicitly included and accounted for in the analysis of research (ibid, 17).

Even though this approach aims at transparency it is not without difficulties. First of all it tend to put too much focus on the researcher. Second, it demands an accurate ability of the researcher to value her impact on the research object, and to determine which of her features are most relevant for the respondents. Instead I have tried to adopt the conceptualization of reflexivity suggested by Alison, which stresses a continuous awareness of the researcher and the research through the whole process (Alison 2009, 18). With this in mind I have tried to constrain my own voice through the choice of interview technique.

Despite that there is no requirement of a female researcher in order to conduct feminist research, I believe that my female gender has been a prerequisite for me in order to carry out the interviews for this thesis. In a society where women’s and men’s societal status to a large extent is determined by hierarchical dichotomy of the sexes, I suspect it would have been difficult for a male researcher to accomplish a productive dialogue with and among the respondents. While power is a relevant factor in all human interaction and meetings, I believe that my presence and status in relation to the respondents has had a limited impact. First of all, each and every one of the respondents have or are in the process of obtaining an academic degree. Therefore it is not likely that I impose power as an academic. Second, since I am not residing in Osh I do not hold a position in the power structures of that local community. In that respect, the respondents should not expect to have anything to either gain or lose from their relationship with me.
In order to break the silence of women I have tried to create interview conditions suitable for
the different respondents. Another important concern has been the question of confidentiality,
which I touched upon earlier. Since this thesis doesn’t make any claims to be able to produce
generalizable results, issues of transparency and valid research processes are especially
important in feminist and critical research.

Confidentiality for a few of the respondents turned out to be a prerequisite for using some of
the most interesting material from the interviews. Since one of the main aims of this thesis is
to provide a voice for subordinated groups it was not difficult to come to the conclusion that
some transparency had to be sacrificed for the access to the experiences of these women.

7.5. Discourse

Discourses can be described as a collection of interrelated perceptions which represents the
accepted knowledge of the world (Bergström & Boréus 2000, 360). The Foucauldian
perception of discourse is interpreted as a rule system, which legitimize some knowledge
while disapproving other considered irrelevant. While the system of rules also has the
authority to decide whose knowledge matters, the dynamic quality of discourses at the same
time enables a constant challenge of the hegemonic knowledges (ibid, 358). Thus, discourses
are always open and therefore threatened by the same performative mechanisms that constitute
them. For Foucault’s concept of discourse the power perspective is central since processes of
inclusion and exclusion provides possibilities for some while it at the same time entails
restrictions for others (ibid, 361). For example, as I try to illustrate with the following analysis
of the national narratives presented in reports on Kyrgyzstan and the country’s ethnic conflict,
the description of the Kyrgyz national practices and traditions acts both in order to mark
inclusion and to accentuate the otherness of the Uzbek nationality. At the same time, the
alienation of the Uzbeks and the emphasis of their differences provides the kind of
demarcation which are necessary for the production and existence of discourses (ibid, 361).
Despite the mechanisms of exclusion, as noted earlier discourses are never closed and stable
entities, but challenged and changed by competing perceptions of knowledge. And it is
precisely this unstable attribute of discourses which provides a possibility of change of power
relations and hope for empowerment among women and other subordinated categories of
society.

Within discourse theory the subject itself, i.e. the practitioner of power or the holder of
knowledge, is not the object of analysis. Instead the focus of interest is on the subject
positions which can be described as the positions we hold in society, usually represented by
describing denotations whose implications and associations can shift depending on
discourses and on how these subject positions are related to each other (Bergström & Boréus
2000, 371). Marianne Winther Jørgensen and Louise Phillips provides the example of the role
the doctor occupies in the relation to the patient, and vice versa, in order to describe the
function of subject positions. The hegemonic discourse of the doctor/patient-relationship
allows the doctor to make certain statements about the patient whereas the patients actions are
severely circumscribed, irrespective of his or hers position outside the examination room
(Jørgensen & Phillips 2010, 48). The respective subject positions requires each other’s
presence in the respect that the patient for example loses the subject position of the current
discourse when, for example, exercising his or her profession as a teacher, in which he
occupies another subject position in relation to his students. Thus, while the doctor and patient
uphold the discourse by mutually confirming each other’s subject positions, they also have the opportunity to challenge the discourse by acting out of character. This example is applicable to this thesis, for example concerning the relationship between woman and man in a specific social context. Uzbek, Kyrgyz, wife, and student constitute a few other examples of subject positions form the subsequent analysis.

The concept discourse denotes the dual function of both theory and method. While Michel Foucault, focusing on power in relation to discourses, is probably the thinker closest associated with discourse, he doesn’t provide a particular method for analyzing discourses (Bergström & Boréus 2000, 358). Departing from Foucault’s theoretical definition, I proceed with Jørgensen & Phillips’ suggestion on an eclectic strategy in which different discourse analytical approaches and methods are combined (ibid, 412). Since I do not particularly aim at in detail describe the alternative discourse or discourses that appears in the interviews, I don’t intend to provide a comprehensive map of the discourse with all its elements.

Instead, in order to illustrate the prevailing discourse constituting the national narrative of southern Kyrgyzstan I attempt to map up the different subject positions revealed in the interviews in order to describe how that discourse is both constructed and challenged. In order to make the analysis intelligible I will make use of just a few terms and definitions borrowed from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (Bergström & Boréus 2000, 373).

Sign - Designation of a concept, usually represented by a word. The meaning of the sign and the meaning making process is of central interest for the analysis of discourses.
Nodal point - A sign constituting the hub of the discourse.
Chain of Equivalence - The way in which signs are liked with each other within the discourse
Master-Signifier - Sign for hegemonic identities, denoting established subject positions.

7.6. Validity and Reliability

Bergström and Boréus notes that a lack of comprehensive and standardized tools for discourse analysis has raised some criticism of its deficient intersubjectivity, but concludes that the liberal approach to the tools of analysis is interrelated with the constructivist approach, which rejects the idea of a common empirical “truth”. Still, this theoretical presupposition cannot neglect the requirement of a transparent research process and justify lower standards in matters of reliability (Bergström & Boréus 2000, 405-406).

In order to meet the standards of reliability I have made transcriptions of the interviews available in the appendix, for the reader both to have access to the source and to read quotes in relation to context. Further on, I have tried to provide a comprehensive description on the formation and selection of interviewees.

Besides the problem concerning confidentiality, on which I elaborated earlier, matters of reliability and validity are always troublesome when it comes to social science research in general, and feminist and critical research in particular. Since reaching conclusions is a social process and interpretation itself political and contested, Alison suggest that focus in this respect should be drawn to ‘the soundness of research processes’ rather than to the conclusions (Alison 2009, 21). I have tried to reach this standard in previous chapters through
a declaration of my theoretical assumptions, the nature and strategy of the research process, and methods for analysis and interpretation (ibid, 20).

8. ANALYSIS

8.1. Performing Ethnicity

In order to illustrate that the Kyrgyz national narrative is constructed in relation to a masculine norm, in the first part of this analysis I intend to describe both how the norm is reiterated and how the discourse is constituted.

Departing from Judith Butler’s theoretical explanation of how perceptions of sex, and gender normativity is sustained through a constant reiterated performance, I propose that the same theoretical tools can be used to understand nation building, ethnic identity, and inter-ethnic conflicts. Butler challenges the prevailing depiction of the human body as something fully material and fixed. Instead it is an effect of power over knowledge, which denies the gender as a cultural construct (Butler 2011, 2). In similar manners, an appealing national narrative helps to promote regulatory norms of, for example, Kyrgyz ethnicity. By depicting ethnicity as inherently connected to a specific territory, traditions, language and history, it is given the status as something natural and thus undisputed.

In order to map out the discourse of the national narrative I am using the concepts provided by Laclau and Mouffe, presented in earlier chapter. The chains of equivalence, constructed around a master signifier and constituted by different kind of signs, represents the themes in this discourse. In that way these chains of equivalence can be used to highlight what norms and values are represented in ideas of ethnicity and nationalism. The chains can have either positive or negative connotations, depending on their mission in the meaning making process of identity (Bergström & Borèus 2000, 317). A chain that represents the positive features of the own collective identity is construed of signs with positive connotations, while alienating descriptions of “the other” in order to consolidate “the self” will be described using negative sign.

The following interpretation of the national narrative of Kyrgyzstan is based on the two ICG-reports presented earlier, describing the ethnic conflict and nationalistic violence in Southern Kyrgyzstan.

8.1.1. The Uzbek Other

The narrative of heroic Kyrgyz men is an often repeated scene in the descriptions of the uprisings. The Kyrgyz actions in the events of 2010 has in Kyrgyzstani media been depicted as a heroic response to Uzbek aggression, inspired by the spirit of the national hero Manas and the jigit-tradition of heroic young Kyrgyz men on horsebacks (ICG 2012, 4-5, 7). The young men participating in ‘the pogrom’ has, according to a Kyrgyz observer, gained a lot of pride and the villagers referring to those who died in fights as martyrs ensures them a place in the Kyrgyz national narrative (ibid, 9). The frequent references to the Kyrgyz jigit-tradition is an important feature of the national narrative. It is also a way of distance the Kyrgyz self, with its nomadic history, from the sedentary Uzbek other.
Further on, the former mayor of Osh, Melis Myrzakmatov has made repeated references to ethnic Kyrgyz men partaking in the events of 2010 as “patriotic youths”. This depiction has been put in comparison to the Uzbeks accused of separatism and thus as a threat to the Kyrgyz republic. Additionally, Myrzakmatov considers the Uzbeks separatist ambitions as one of the main roots causing the 1990 conflicts in Osh as well (ICG 2012, 6).

Despite the reports’ alleged neutral departure, the absence of active women overall and men’s actions described in terms of performances of ethnic or national traditions, represents an obvious masculine bias. As a consequence, the ethnically colored roles seem to be all-male. Central in the description is the Kyrgyz man, depicted as hero who is given strength through symbols of virility, such as youth. The frequent reference to jigit is another symbol of masculinity, since it is a sport almost exclusively performed by men.

No matter around what an identity is centered, such as religion, occupation or ethnicity, identity is always constituted in relation to difference. As such, identity can only exist in relation to what it is not, i.e. mirrored through “the other”, which in turn is constituted in relation to “the self”. David Campbell describes that any identity is performatively constituted, and Judith Butler exemplifies the act of performativity with the gendered identity of the body as having no ontological status apart from the various acts that constitute its reality (Campbell 1998, 9). Given the geographic focus of this thesis I am analyzing the ethnic identities reflecting the hegemonic dichotomy of Kyrgyz/Uzbek in the region. I therefore intend to illustrate how the Kyrgyz identity is constituted in relation to the “different” Uzbeks and how that identity is being performed.

The fear of Uzbek separatism and accusations of attempts to move the border are important features in strengthening the Kyrgyz ethnic identity in relation to the Uzbek other. Despite long historical roots and the territory for less than hundred years has been considered Kyrgyzstani soil, the Uzbeks of the region are often referred to as diaspora. Myrzakmatov has declared Uzbekistan to be the real homeland of the Uzbek minority in Kyrgyzstan. (ICG 2012, 6)

Occasions related to the ethnic conflict in 2010 has also created so called “conflict legends” among the Uzbek inhabitants. It is said that border guards on the Uzbek sides had said that they would not resist if local residents would try and seize their weapons to protect themselves against the Kyrgyz (ICG 2012, 14) Thus, the Kyrgyz depiction of the Uzbek minority as a diaspora, belonging to the neighbor Uzbekistan, seems to have rooted also among the region’s Uzbek population.

Despite the many similarities between the Uzbeks and the Kyrgyz, what is emphasized in the ethnic discourse is typically what the other is not. Instead of describing oneself as a Turkic nation with a Muslim faith, eating the national dish plov, the narrative focuses on the Kyrgyz nomadic past, conversely to the Uzbeks. And by portraying the Uzbek minority as a diaspora they can never manifest patriotism toward Kyrgyzstan.

Uzbek – Diaspora – Minority – Territory – Separatism

Thus the description of ‘the other’ provides us with a chain of equivalence in which Uzbek constitutes the Master Signifier. Since the ethnicity of the other is what is most important for the formation and reiteration of the ethnicity of the self, i.e. the Kyrgyz, this sign becomes the most important feature of the identity of ‘the other’. Further on, the other signs in the chain stresses the lack of natural right to the area, which helps depict the Uzbeks as aliens in
Kyrgyzstan. By describing what the Uzbeks are not, this negative chain confirms the Kyrgyz historical belonging to the territory and constitutes an example of how ‘the other’ is a precondition for ‘the self’ in matters of identity.

8.1.2. The Kyrgyz Self

By applying Judith Butler’s understanding of sex and sexual identity to the ethnic conflict in Kyrgyzstan we can use the hegemonic dichotomy of man/woman to understand and describe the relationship between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. In which the former, man and Kyrgyz, has a hegemonic status, while the latter, woman and Uzbek, is subordinate. In this understanding, ethnicity is both an expression of normativity in the way that it regulates the actions of the ethnic group, and at the same time the practicing of such normative actions constitutes the essence of the ethnic identity. In the same way as a girl, according to Butler, is “being girled” for example through naming, clothing, and upbringing in accordance to the gender norms, a boy in a Kyrgyz society is becoming Kyrgyz in relation to the prevalent dichotomy of ethnicity (Butler 2011, 7).

Besides frequently depicting the Uzbek minority as ‘the other’, the nationalist former major of Osh seem to play one of the leading roles in enhancing Kyrgyz-Uzbek tensions in the region, through the practice of ethnicity. Myrzakmatov presents his version of the June 2010 events in a 414 page book with strong anti-Uzbek views including his ideological vision for Kyrgyzstan, with little place for the Uzbek inhabitants (ICG 2012, 6). From the vantage point of the Uzbek minority the possibilities of practicing ethnicity, in the sense of representing the Uzbek ethnicity in the public, has been very limited. The increased marginalization and oppression experienced by the group made it neither possible nor necessary to establish the self against the ruling nominal Kyrgyz group. An Uzbek professional recalls how the minority, during the fighting of 2010, without success tried to get help from Bishkek and elsewhere. Eventually the group came to retreat into the traditional Uzbek mahalla-districts and disappointed with the lack of national and international support they turned to Allah (ibid, 12). Both Kyrgyz and Uzbeks are traditionally Muslims even though the ethnicity has always been of larger significance for identification than has religion (ICG 2015, 10). A stricter version of Islam and traditions such as arranged marriages seem to have accelerated since the outbreak of ethnic violence in 2010 and there are signs of organizations such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir and International Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) has benefited from the conflict (ICG 2012, 12-13).

In the context of a new Kyrgyz nationalism in 2013 the government declared knowledge in Kyrgyz language a cornerstone of the national identity and the option of taking school graduation exams in Uzbek was abolished (ICG 2015, 7-8). Thereby the possibilities of taking part in official and political life became very limited for the Uzbek community.

The so called pogroms of Kyrgyzstan -the ethnic conflicts of 1990 and 2010- are both themselves the best examples of ethnicity being reiterated in the region. As the analysis of the both ICG-reports shows, the various descriptions of what happened are filled with references to history and the national narrative. As such, the perhaps imagined, ethnic values and features, practiced during the heat of the conflict confirms the narratives and repeats the heroic epic of Manas and the brave Kyrgyz fighters on horsebacks, which will again be reiterated through the history of the pogroms and the enhanced tensions between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks.
Despite Myrzakmatov’s loss of power in 2013 his interpretation of the recent history of southern Kyrgyzstan has been very persuasive to many of the Kyrgyz inhabitants of Osh and its surroundings. It is thus likely that his ideology and narrative of the ethnic rivalry and the violent conflicts of Kyrgyzstan will endure and inspire future generations to reiterate the ethnic narrative of Southern Kyrgyzstan. Myrzakmatov has to some extent already safeguarded the survival of his nationalist ideology by a program of monumental architecture to emphasize the city’s Kyrgyz roots, consisting of ten-meter high monument to Manas, Kurmanjan Datka and other, either mythological or historical, leaders (ICG 2012, 8).

Thus, departing from the master signifier Kyrgyz, the signs of the following chain represent an empowering depiction of the Kyrgyz national. Thus, constituting a positive chain of equivalence in order to illustrate the natural right to territory and the superiority of ‘the self’.

Kyrgyz – Hero – Fighter – Roots – History

8.1.3. The Masculine Bias

Since words are common tools for describing society and the world around us, words are often what discourse analysis is engaged in. Still, discourse can also be studied with respect to pictures, actions, and by directing attention to what is not expressed. Words describing a person of the male gender, such as man, male, or young men, are frequent in the reports describing the ethnic conflict. But there are also plenty of references to men, in which the gender of the actor is never mentioned. Through our understanding of the Central Asian society we can understand that the denotations Uzbek and Kyrgyz in this context is usually words that, in this context, are not gender neutral but should be interpreted as descriptions of the male representative of each nationality. This perception is somewhat confirmed by the declaration of the gender while describing a woman or a group of women in relation to the conflict.

Thus the sign ‘man’ constitutes the nodal point in the ethnic discourse of southern Kyrgyzstan. Both the frequent description of men’s whereabouts during the conflict and the absence of women, and especially active women, tell us that the conflict is narrated from a male perspective. The national narrative is therefore biased in the respect that women’s perspectives and experiences are neglected. Thereby women are not just excluded from the practices of ethnicity, but become to some extent redundant in the process of ethnic identity itself.

8.2. Challenging the discourse

The discourse represent a certain way in which the world, or parts of the world, is described and understood (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2010, 7). Since the way the world is perceived changes over time and territory, discourses are never completely fixed and there is a constant struggle between discourses (ibid, 13). While the discourse can be said to provide instructions for acceptable behavior, for example instructions on what a woman can wear and say, these norms can be challenged through the appearance of new subject positions (ibid, 12, 48).

In the interviews the women have been encouraged to explain how they look at themselves and to explain their roles in society. Thus their statements reveals what subject positions they place themselves in. Since subject position has the quality both to stabilize existing discourses and challenge them the women can be seen both to confirm the male norm of society and to question the traditional role of women as daughters and housewives. Therefore the women’s
perception of alternative subject position indicates how and to what extent the discourse is contested.

8.2.1. Emerging Subject Positions

While the analysis of the national narrative leaves no room for women’s agency the interviews conducted for this thesis, presents women describing themselves as active members of society.

“I like that I am a girl and I like the way that I can realize my goals even though I am a girl, despite stereotypes.” (A)

When asked about how they consider their own identity and role in society, most women describe themselves as ambitious and career focused, though well aware of prevailing gender stereotypes.

“Nowadays women are more like eh, try to achieve and get a job and try to be successful in a career and stuff like that…” (A)

One of the young women participating in the focus group interview declares that her choice to study and strive for a career is perceived as a threat to the norms of society.

“Yeah, very often. Even now when I am graduating there is a demand that people are saying ’Oh finally. Do you have a boyfriend and are you concerned of getting married?’ And I am like no, I don’t even think about it, maybe you would never want to get married but people expect it from you and being pushed in that direction and you have to justify yourself for example by saying that I am working and therefore I don’t want to get married.” (E)

With few exceptions the respondents seem to be convinced that society’s preconceptions and strict gender roles are based on norms rather than actual differences between men and women.

“If we want to become something and it is restricted because we are women and our religion kind of has some restrictions for us. It is restrictions from the male society, some kind of restrictions that says we women should sit at home to house work, yes.” (C)

“We can work like men are working and we can do anything they do and we do what we want to. We don’t let our sex decide our destiny.” (C)

While both gender and religion are mentioned as factors determining the respondent’s identity, the concept ethnicity is rarely mentioned.
“For my identity it is important that I am a student and that I am still studying. For me religion is not in the first place.” (C)

Even though norms and restrictions are targeted at women as a collective, the gender roles are perceived as having a greater impact on women of Uzbek origin. First after I initiated the concept ethnicity into the discussion some respondents admitted that ethnic belonging were significant for women’s lives and life choices.

“Women in the Uzbek community has less rights than Kyrgyz women. And considering Russians the problems are smaller. They have a different religion, they are Christians. So, ethnicity has a great impact.” (C)

In the discussions on how ethnic belonging affects their lives, the respondents are frequently linking questions on ethnicity to matters of religion and to traditions affiliated with the Islamic faith.

“The social situation for women, we have taken steps toward the emancipation of women but you can see how the culture affects women and their looks.” (B)

Still, even when talking about the presence of an Uzbek vis-à-vis a Kyrgyz community, the respondents usually come back to religion and religious practice in their description of the differences between Uzbek and Kyrgyz women’s access to freedom and power. I find this interesting for two particular reasons. First of all, the Islamic faith and the sunni branch of the religion is something that Uzbeks and Kyrgyz have in common. It is therefore interesting to see how religion is perceived as something that somewhat divides the collectivity of women instead of uniting the ethnic groups. Second, given the impact of nationalism and ethnic belonging in the region, it is somewhat puzzling that the respondents doesn’t seem to consider ethnicity as a relevant factor for identity. Instead, the repeated references to religion indicates their difficulties defining the impact of their ethnic belonging.

“I believe that the fact that we are Muslims, our religion. And also ethnicity, but first of all I would say that it is our religion that plays a large role.” (C)

“I think that religion is often used as way to limit women. And women are told to stay at home and wear certain clothes and accept restrictions in accordance with religion.” (C)

“Concerning women’s position in society it is lower than men’s and it is falling behind because of gender politics and because of the impact of Islam. Women are of course also considered humans but lower than men. According to Islam the woman is, eh, how can I say. Now we have women in higher positions and we had a female president but in general and in the parliament and as lawyers but they are few and most would prefer a man before a woman for those positions.” (B)
“Today people think it is important to get married and to stay at home and this is a consequence of religion, and I think it will continue like that. I don’t think that the situation for women will change much.” (C)

While asked about the factors behind the presence of early marriages - particularly common in the Uzbek community – again, perceptions of national customs are actually linked to religious interpretations.

“The government wasn’t really providing some important things for them and religion was the only way how to say, that created for them at least some opportunities. Maybe this is the other reason, that religiosity makes them get married at a very early age. So, yeah, religious factors is one of the reasons behind early marriages.” (D)

Defining herself as an Uzbek the respondent in interview D explains the situation for Uzbek girls and the obstacles they face concerning obtaining an education.

“It is better for the families to invest in them because they continue the family line. The girls are considered to be kind of second class because they are getting married and will leave and will move to a new family. Therefore it is better to invest in boys than in girls.” (D)

Thus the tendency among Uzbek girls and women to stay at home is described as a consequence of the Uzbek minority being more traditional and more religious than the Kyrgyz community. Thus, the subordination of women in the respect of less access to education and profession, in both the Uzbek and the Kyrgyz societies are to be understood as representations of the same phenomenon, only at different levels of the same scale.

“I consider it is in fact not a matter of Uzbeks and Kyrgyz. It is a matter of our political representatives who are in parliament. I exactly don’t know but I think that they have created a situation in which people, both Uzbeks and Kyrgyz are suffering… Yes, suffering…” (C)

“I have heard that 30 people provoked this war and from this the conflict started. Lots of people died. To me it is just a matter of conflict between individuals but is has had the consequence that some Kyrgyz don’t like Uzbeks and people killed even close friends and relatives. Kyrgyz killed Uzbeks and also Uzbeks killed Kyrgyz.” (C)

When asked about whether there is a general acceptance for the Kyrgyz tradition of bride kidnapping one young woman answers,
“Yeah, because it is considered a tradition. Otherwise all would be against it and it just wouldn’t happen. It is just like a brain wash, you are being told from the childhood that it is ok to get married like that and as long as the boy is alright you can live there. It is kind of shameful if you get kidnapped but returns home, it is a shame. And people tell about it and the young people accept it.”

and adds that

“…girls don’t want to lose their reputation as a good girl, they don’t intervene or say that it is not ok.” (E)

Thus this woman’s perception of the practice of bride kidnapping well represents the narrow path for women within the borders of accepted womanhood.

It is in relation to these master-signifiers that alternative identities are constructed. While the Uzbek minority of Southern Kyrgyzstan define themselves by emphasizing the otherness of the dominant Kyrgyz nationality the perception of the self is strengthened. In the interview with D a couple of examples are given of the need and practice of othering from the Kyrgyz community after the ethnic conflict of 2010.

“I think that how the young generation of girls interpret the ethnic identity and ethnic belonging is related again to this conflict. I often make a link to this conflict because it was a conflict on interethnic base you know. After that conflict many people, even small girls at school. I have observed them playing outside and if something happens they blame each other saying like ‘You’re Uzbek!’ Or ‘You’re Kyrgyz so…’ ” (D)

Some of the subject positions emerging in the conversations with the respondents are similar to what Butler refers to as abjecs. It is these subject positions which are not accepted identities, but which might challenge existing discourses and perceptions of what a woman can be and do.

“It seem to me that nationality doesn’t matter. It is the economic situation that matters. If women are having an education and a job, that will also give them some independence. There are many women who don’t have an education and don’t have a profession and then they don’t have any independence from the husband. So in that sense nationality doesn’t matter.” (F)

At the same time, the respondent reveals her position as an abject.

“I am Uzbek and I am a lawyer and I am the only lawyer wearing a head scarf.” (F)

“So, I think that is an example of discrimination both because of my gender, that I am a woman, and that I am Uzbek.” (F)
“But sometimes they think that I am just a young girl and perhaps an intern and they don’t know that I am a lawyer. Probably both because I am a woman and Uzbek they don’t expect from me to be a professional.” (F)

The Uzbek respondents are well educated professionals and it is obvious from their statement that they doesn’t consider themselves as typical representatives for the group of Uzbek women in their society. Their difficulties to fit into the norms of society constitutes a good description of the emergence of an abject, as a challenge to the female Uzbek norm.

“Because of my education and there are some other issues. I don’t feel that much embedded. If I go to a party in a pure Uzbek neighborhood I feel myself, not neglected, but feeling uneasy. Even if I dress in something long and if I would wear a scarf. Maybe it is my attitude from which one can easily differentiate. Maybe appearance, manners, behavior. Maybe the way I talk.” (D)

Once women are achieving agency they will create their own narrative, and through reiterative ‘abjective’ practices they will be able to challenge the prevailing discourse. Thus the abject may eventually become a subject.

“Even though I am Uzbek I don’t really belong to that community so I am in a huge dilemma concerning where to put myself. I am somewhere in the middle.” (D)

The Kyrgyz and Uzbek female discourses interact to the extent that all the interviewees describe themselves in one way or another as outsiders. Either as revolting against patriarchal values on what women can or can’t do, becoming role models by taking on roles usually not perceived as accessible for women of the own ethnic group, or as an outsider of the hegemonic discourses of both gender and ethnicity. It is obvious that all the respondents perceive themselves as taking active part in society. As mentioned before I do not suggest that the respondents are representative for the whole collective of women of Osh. Instead it is probably a reflection of the fact that women that voluntarily or involuntarily aren’t active in the public life, are rarely accessible for these kind of interviews. The inaccessibility of Uzbek women for the interviews for this thesis are expressed by one of the respondents.

“But these Uzbek girls are more hidden and they are not open for any kind of conversation you know. They just avoid it. While as Kyrgyz girls, they are sociable, they are active, and they have their certain positions and struggle to get an education.” (D)

The women that have agreed to contribute to this thesis with their thoughts and experiences all have in common that they, in different ways, seem to perceive themselves as exceptions from female stereotype. These exceptions are in fact fragments of alternative discourses that challenge the masculine discourses represented in the national narrative.
The discourses are revealed not only through what is being said or done, but also through what is not said and done. It is therefore of interest to note that ethnicity or nationality is rarely used as a way for the women to describe themselves, unless I consciously introduced the concept in the conversations.

“Really this conflict has had really negative consequences on the future of young people from minority background. Because many of them are now living in Russia, doing black work you know while the girls are engaged in religious groups and going with their families to Syria to fight or many other cases like early marriages has become widely spread. I don’t see any other, any positive prospects for the youth coming from minority backgrounds. Of course people talk about the peace building efforts that international organizations and local NGO:s are doing and they are doing great efforts and investing a lot in peace building but I haven’t seen any real results from that so far.” (D)

The respondent’s difficulties expressing what it means to be either Uzbek or Kyrgyz might reveal that ethnic belonging is less important to them than to their male counterparts. While talking about their conditions and describing what limits and decides their choices in life – what determines their subject positions - they are rather referring to religious customs and rules imposed by the male representatives of their families or communities. Thus, while the masculine national identity seem to be constituted by “the other” defined as representatives of the competing ethnic group, Kyrgyz and Uzbek respectively, women’s identities a constructed against the other sex rather than in relation to the other ethnicity.

With reference to Judith Butler’s concept “abject”, I suggest that women in patriarchal societies are to a large extent excluded from the performativity of ethnicity. Thereby, in the position of an outsider in relation to the concept of ethnicity, the woman can be compared to the abject-concept in the man/woman paradigm. As such, women of both ethnic groups are given a position from where they can challenge the norms and practices that are constructing ethnic identities and enhancing hierarchical dichotomies.
9. CONCLUSION

Through the analysis of the descriptions of the conflict of southern Kyrgyzstan I have tried to illustrate that the male norm of nationalism and nation building overlook women’s perspectives. The interviews with Kyrgyzstani women of both Uzbek and Kyrgyz nationality reveal descriptions of women’s lives as less determined by ethnic belonging than by gender norms and religion. Their freedom is instead limited by society’s narrow understanding of what it means to be a woman, and their security is to some extent conditional to their allegiance to the gender stereotypes.

To get back to the initial questions of this thesis I will comment on whether women’s participation in peace processes related to inter-ethnic conflicts matter, given that women aren’t more attuned to peace than men.

First of all, I do by no means reject the notion that women are and have been used as weapons in inter-ethnic conflicts. I also do not argue that ethnicity and nationalism is an all-male matter. But, referring to Judith Butler’s concept “abject”, I do suggest that women in patriarchal societies are to a large extent excluded from the performativity of ethnicity. Thereby, in the position of an outsider in relation to the concept of ethnicity, the woman can be compared to the abject-concept in the man/woman paradigm. Analogous to Butler’s suggestion that oppressive gender structures can be challenged by norm transgressive behavior, the masculine hierarchic structure of ethnicity can be questioned by women acting as abjects and thus creating new subject positions, through reiterated acts of performativity. In that capacity women might be able to produce alternative narratives.

While women’s participation in peace negotiations and reconciliation processes is important both in matters of equality and for the inclusion of the female perspective, this thesis implies that women are just as important for the interpretation of the conflict and thus for a correct perception of security. Therefore, to understand women’s participation in crisis prevention and reconciliation processes related to ethnic conflict, there is a need to interpret the conflict from a feminist perspective, and to rethink women’s roles in relation to ethnicity and nation building.

I have suggested that men and women of Osh to some extent have different “others”. While Uzbek and Kyrgyz men respectively constitute each other’s “other”, women’s identities are to a large extent determined by the opposite sex. As long as different groups in a society have different “others” they will not be fighting the same wars. Since it is the group with the dominant position that has the ability to exercise ‘the power over knowledge’ that dominant group will also determine what wars to wage, what qualifies as security threats, and whose perception of security matters.
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In-depth interview B, 19-04-2016. Osh, Kyrgyzstan

Focus group interview C, 19-04-2016. Osh, Kyrgyzstan

In-depth interview D, 20-04-2016. Osh, Kyrgyzstan

In-depth interview E, 20-04-2016. Osh, Kyrgyzstan

In-depth interview F, 21-04-2016. Osh, Kyrgyzstan
Appendix

Transcripts of interviews performed in Osh in April 2016

I indicates the interviewer while R indicates the respondent or the respondents.

A. Focus Group Interview, 18-04-2016. Osh Nuru hotel, Osh, Kyrgyzstan

I: I would like you to describe how you perceive your own identity and if you believe that your perceptions of your identity differs from others. When you usually talk about identity you usually refer to words like gender, civil status, occupation, education, nationality etc. but you are free to talk freely about your understanding of the concept.

R: I am a person, despite my gender ethnicity, occupation etc. Sadly in society a lot of people judge other people according first of all to gender and then I would say ethnicity. Occupation also play a significant role in our society. It plays a significant role in our society. First of all for now I identify myself as a person. And then as a student. I don’t tell people that I am a girl or that I am Kyrgyz. I never tell people about my ethnicity. Before I like until anyone shows interest. I also do not just tell that I am from Osh. It doesn’t matter where I am from.

I: Do you think it matters for other people?

R: Yes. Of course. Recently I have been to Bishkek. Our capital. I have never been interested in that town but due to my studies I have started going there frequently. And when they ask me where I am from and I tell that I from Osh, they’re like ‘Oh, you’re from Osh’. They think about Osh, I don’t know how they think about Osh but when I speak about Osh and I speak English and Russian they are surprised that I speak those languages despite the fact that I am from Osh. Ok. Osh is the second capital we also live in modern timers. I don’t know but it happened three times that people reacted like that and once when we were in a bar a boy whom I knew came and greeted me and then he told his friends that I am from Osh and was like so what and he didn’t say anything. Later they were dancing and invited me but I said I didn’t like the music so he started saying that I was now representing Osh and if you don’t dance people will be judging you. So I was like, ok. You see?

I: Yeah.

R: As far as I am concerned it seems as if now in society it is difficult to define our identities. First of all people are judged on appearances. We should have quite like some outfit and external look and there they can communicate with us. Mostly I think people first of all starting to communicate with someone if they think that he or she is attractive. For example males in our society, in our city, they are just thinking of females as being a little bit below males. I have some friends who are boys and they can just be kidding about girls but we are friends and sometimes they still have opinions that girls shouldn’t be active in our society. For example, we are active in some organizations and also they judge all and say like we are feminists. But we have some boys also in our organization. But mostly they just use to think that it is not a good idea to be feminist. We are thinking about ways to involve these people and show them to demonstrate that we are in need and should consider all women’s rights also. I have a little bit, I am shy that some boys are judging us.

I: From what I understand, the fact that you are a woman defines lots of things in your lives. Is there anything else that is important for the life choices you make or would it be the same thing if you were in a different age, if you for example were old women or if you had a different ethnicity. Or do you think that you share your experiences with all women of Osh?

R: Maybe for example age also has some impact. Because my father also prohibited me to do something, like to go abroad and now when I am older my father say that I am grown up and can make my own individual choices. I am now an adult. I am nineteen and can do what I want to do. Before some things were prohibited. Also he always asks me why I visited some organization or why I am so active. But I am thinking not so active maybe just interested in these issues. If women will realize some things we can prove that our rights are also important.

I: Mm. Would you like to add something?

R: I consider myself as a person who mostly is dependent on the judgements of society. But I also understand that I am a part of society and I want to live in a developed society where everyone understand that all humans have equal rights. It is very important to develop the minds and make improvements and I hope we will be independent in the future. I also face problems as all young. Your opinions are so different and I think it is a problem to solve. But I don’t think that everything is so bad because we also have a lot of active young people in our country and our city and we can make achievements.

I: Do you think that your lives, the way it looks now, would be different if you were boys?
R: I never wanted to change my gender. I never saw that, imagined myself as a boy. I like that I am a girl and I like the way that I can realize my goals even though I am a girl despite stereotypes. In our society women are seen as future mothers. Like, ok she studies now but she will get married one day and give birth. But at the same time they like people don’t take into consideration that this girl is not limited only to get married, to give birth. Maybe she doesn’t want to do that, maybe she wants to like handle the government, maybe handle the like country… So yeah.

R: I have never wanted to change my gender but since my childhood I like fighting as a boy and every time boy says that I am acting like a boy and told try to be more polite and try to be more attractive, like wear makeup and stuff like that. I remember times when even my class mates said like, you’re beautiful but you should just take care a little bit and use make up and loose a little weight, like a girl and you will be good. But I don’t want to be like that. It depends.

I: Do you have brothers?

R: No. I have brothers, I also.

I: Would you say that their lives are different from yours? Do you have the same possibilities?

R: Maybe a little bit, yes because for example my little brother. My parents were eager to give birth to my brother because he is alone. He is like a boy. We are four, and I have two sisters and the little one is my brother. He also just can take our surname, it is also important in our society to have a son in the family. I think in this case maybe males are in a good position. They have some advantages.

R: In my family I think we have little differences. In which cases? My mother gives me freedom and I can do whatever I want and go wherever I want and she never make some prohibit me and say why you study bad or something like this, but my little brother she give him to the hand and has a strong relation to him because she says that he is the future and he must be very good educated and because when he is grown up he will take care of us of my mother and our family and have responsibility. Yes, he is the future and me maybe after five or six years I will get married and it is not so important that I must be someone like.

I: Interesting.

R: Also, boys in our society can take the parent’s house.

I: According to the law or according to tradition?

R: According to tradition also. In this case it’s just females are suffering. According to the law both girls and boys are allowed to get the land which was given by the parents but when a girl gets married like they usually don’t get the land they were given by the government and when they ask why people say like, you got married and it’s not your land anymore. So it’s still kind of a problem nowadays, like a lot of organizations that work on women’s rights are trying to encourage people to follow this law.

I: You talked about how boys look at you and how your father think about your lives and your future. I ask all of you, do you think that there are differences between how boys in your own age look at women and how men in your parent’s generation look at women?

R: I just remember the interview I took from one singer. He is not like a real singer but he is pretty good and when we were making a social leader and we asked why he is against gender equality and he was saying that like a lot of strange things, he was like nowadays the modern girls are totally different from the girls in other decades. He was like, we would like to respect them but they have lost their like they don’t deserve to be respected and we were like why and he said that they are going to night clubs and dancing and wearing like clothes and they are smoking and drinking and some decades, or not decades but some years ago women understood that they are future mothers and have to take care of them. Nowadays women are more like eh, try to achieve and get a job and try to be successful in a career and stuff like that so, like as a boy he has his own understanding of women and of elder generation of women.

I: What do you think about that? Do you think it is accurate that there has been such a change? Do you think that your mother lives, when they were in your age, was very different from yours?

R: I don’t think so. My mother is a woman leader in our society and she has always worked and she has achieved a lot in her life and my dad is just like proud of her and I think in our family there is an existence of gender equality and both my mother and father works. For example my father a little bit can just cook some delicious food for us and it’s ok. But, let’s consider that we have our religion, Islam, and in this case it can also, the issue that women are just used to sit at home and give birth and that’s all. And for girls there are no opportunity to work, like and to have some real occupation, but just to sit at home and it really bothered us but mostly people they have some wrong thoughts that women should be in this way.

R: I think that there are some differences in opportunities. In older years there were also the same requirements and opportunities but nowadays most of women don’t want to make to be dependent on men and most girls understand that they should be more dedicated and more independent and in this case it is not really good for boys in their opinion. I think yes, nowadays we have more opportunities than what they had.
R: I just want to make the point that we simply have some meeting in UN Women office and we have good statistical data that shows that women in our society they have more privileges they are not like living, they are just surviving in our society. They need to work and to earn money. Because men didn’t become so able to earn money so efficiently.
I: I would like to ask you if you all define yourselves as Kyrgyz?
R: Sorry?
I: Are you all Kyrgyz girls?
R: Yes.
I: Do you think it would be different if you were in the same age living in Osh but if you were Uzbek or Russian?
R: Like, if I was Uzbek it would be like. I can’t say anything since it would be better if a representative of that specific ethnic group would say something. But, since we live in Osh, you know that there are a lot of nationalities for example Uzbeks and if you compare for example gender equality is widely spread in Kyrgyz community rather than in Uzbek community because they are more religious. From a religious point of view there is gender equality in Islam too but people just don’t understand it. It will take a long time to understand it. It is different actually. In our religion men also need to be polite to females and care about the and never make something bad to them and also in the real Islam women are higher than men. For example I have one girl who is Uzbek but we are at the same position we have no gender equality in our society but she is just sitting and home and go to study and then back home. But maybe if I was Uzbek I would suffer a little bit because after some revolution in our city in our country in 2010 we had some conflict between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz nationalities. That’s why ehm… eventually we had some conflicts in the relationships.
I: Has it changed after 2010?
R: Yes, it changed yes.
R: In my community I also have a lot of Uzbek friends like I say that before I didn’t even talk to them because I didn’t like to meet them and I didn’t have any opportunity to meet and talk to them, but after that revolution I used to work at a beauty salon where there were only Uzbeks and I was the only Kyrgyz and I get to know that they are just as polite as we are and not like as … not so different as our elder generations are talking. Also, I know that 80 percent of the population are Uzbeks but in this case we also can speak in Uzbek language in the street and no one can prohibit them to speak their own language. It’s free.
R: There are many possibilities when someone is speaking to me like in Uzbek and I speak Kyrgyz and we understand each other. Its ok in our society and we got used to it.
R: For example if you see a Russian person you just say like that you should speak Russian with that person. But when we approach an Uzbek person we don’t speak Uzbek. But we understand each other and they are like we don’t speak Kyrgyz but we understand each other.
I: So, do you mean that language is not a problem?
R: No it’s not a problem, and culture also some like eh strange, kind of like traditions, like early marriage is widely spread in Uzbek society and bride kidnapping is pretty common. They think that it is our tradition and we think that early marriages is their tradition. It is not like that.
I: Is it important for you that you are a woman, your ethnicity etc for your identity and perception of yourself?
R: I identify myself as a girl. It is not important for me but for my society it is.
I: How do you know that it is important?
R: Even at school we have some situations when we are divided into groups based on gender. Like that is for boys and that is for girls.
R: Do you think that your life would be different if you were a boy? Would you choose a different education or would you work for example.
R: If I were a boy there would be some change but in matters of education there wouldn’t be any differences. And my interests would also be the same as now.
I: Would you like to add something?
R: I would like to add that if women would have some more opportunities than now maybe it would be worse because women don’t know some restrictions, for example men are more sustainable maybe because my father says that if women were a little more on a higher level. Could one say that women might destroy some rules.
I: You said that is what your father says. And what do you think?
R: We are women and we are not so stable.
I: Really?
R: Say I!
R: Yes, I.
I: In what ways do you think that women are not so stable?
R: Just not stable. We will just want more and more and don’t want to stay in one position. In this way men are more stable than women I think.

B. In-depth Interview, 19-04-2016. Fine Arts Museum, Osh, Kyrgyzstan

I: First of all I would like to ask if you can say how you would describe your identity.
R: My identity. How?
I: Often it is considered to be, gender, religion, nationality or perhaps it is something completely different that determines your identity.
R: I understand. My nationality is Kyrgyz but you can say that we make a difference between the concepts Kyrgyz and Kirgiz. Kirgiz is those who speak the Kyrgyz language and who know the Kyrgyz culture. During the soviet times when we were part of the Soviet Union the official language was Russian language and we studied in Russian at school and the Russian culture was dominant. Jag är etnisk Kirgiz men jag är skild från den kirgiziska kulturen eftersom in Kyrgyzstan there are many who study Kyrgyz but I have left the Kyrgyz culture. I studied in Moscow and from there I know Russian well, and I both think in Russian and speak Russian. But I can speak Kyrgyz also but I speak Russian better. What can I say? I am of course Kyrgyz but there are differences in psychology. I think it is important to know your culture and language but also to know culture of other countries and to be kind of a cosmopolite. For example I have visited Bulgaria and Chekoslovakia during the soviet times and it is interesting for me to know about other countries, Sweden for example. There are of course more opportunities for this in Moscow, there are more exhibitions, theaters museums of course. Here there are not so many opportunities but today for example a Russian film festival starts here and for me that is very interesting.
I: Are you born here?
R: Yes, I am born here in Osh oblast, in Suzaki. I finished school here and then I went to university in Moscow, MGU. I finished university 1979 and worked but the system changed so I couldn’t use my education when Marx was no longer fashionable. Of course, our generation who grew up during the Soviet era we had the possibility to study languages and for example to study in Moscow where there were more possibilities and more modern. But of course it was sometimes very hard to come back here where my colleagues all spoke Kyrgyz and I had been alienated from the Kyrgyz culture and language. Sometimes we don’t understand each other because we might have different understandings and perceptions of things. I consider that people should not be judged because of their nationality and should not be enemies based on ethnic belonging. The situation today is of course hard due to living conditions. I started working here for a low salary and for people in my age it is hard. Our previous president for example Otunbaeva, I am not sure that she was the most suitable but a person’s status in society and who his or her parents are matter, and the structures from the Soviet times are still relevant. What more can I say about identity. When talking about ethnic identity there is as I said a difference between Kyrgyz and Kirgiz, and what else. We also have a division between the north and the south. Also we Kyrgyz people are divided and for example in art the north has their style and here in the south there is another style. Concerning language there are also differences. Perhaps because there are many Uzbeks here and in the north they are considered more civilized and there are more Russians there influencing the society. The social situation for women, we have taken steps toward the emancipation of women but you can see how the culture affects women and their looks. For example I love art and culture and soulful things but people are now becoming more and more interested in material things. How can I say, richness, status in society and so on has become more important. During the Soviet Era that didn’t exist but now we have changed and I think that the material richness of people are related to the poverty of the soul. Therefore the materiality and status. For pensioners it is not possible to live on the pension. We can see tourists and even pensioners coming here and they can live a good life on their pension but for us it is of course very hard. Of course in west 3000 euro perhaps they receive and we get 3000 soms.
Concerning women’s position in society it is lower than men’s and it is falling behind because of gender politics and because of the impact of Islam. Women are of course also considered humans but lower than men. According to Islam the woman is, eh, how can I say. Now we have women in higher positions and we had a female president but in general and in the parliament and as lawyers but they are few and most would prefer a man before a woman for those positions. What else…
I: Can I ask what you think that the situation for women or girls has changed from the Soviet Era when you grew up compared with their situation today?
R: Yes, without a doubt. Because when for example during the Soviet Union then they were thinking/planning for possibilities for women and more things were financed by the government and the social security was better.
Nowadays we have a problem with early marriages which influences women’s possibilities to get an education and now we have some sort of a baby boom in Kyrgyzstan in order to increase the percentage of Kyrgyz people in the society. I think that quality is more important than quantity. It is also a matter of money because according to the law it is free to give birth but of course children needs daycare which costs money. That was also free during the Soviet Union and also medicine and so on. Not now. Children are getting weaker and are getting less food and nutrition it is worse than before and chemical products are also affecting children’s health. And in school they are sitting in front of the computers and doesn’t exercise as much as before. Of course, the education has also become worse. They learn more languages but in general it has become worse. The social situation has become worse. 25 years ago when we had Akayev I think that if people were honest and worked for the best it would have been different. It has to do with corruption of course. The law should be the same for everyone and not applied differently to different people, for example for politicians and certain groups. It seem to me as it isn’t changing and the one who has status and rights in society can use the law for his or her own purposes. Therefore there are big differences in society today. I don’t like the current developments. People used to be open to each other and talk to each other but it is not like that now. People are keeping with their own social group or sphere of people and doesn’t want to get involved with others. Of course the number of cars, telephones and nice homes but that doesn’t make rich not in the soul. Just, I don’t know it seems to me that…I don’t want to say that this didn’t exist at all before but people has become more individualistic and there is no sense of being a part of a common society. I am sad that there are now many young men that are emigrating, for example to Russia to work because there are no opportunities here and then people forget their culture and their language. They don’t work here for such small salaries and of course it happens that young men go to Russia and other countries to work and leave their children without looking after them. Children need their parents and this together with the early marriages affects the lives and the society. Before, the social differences between people, between rich and poor didn’t exist. People worked and lived together in the kolkhozes for example. What else can I say? Young people of today’s society reads little. They look at their phone and interests only in material matters. Well, that’s the way it is.

I: May I ask you eh, of course it is a difficult question to answer, but do you think that if you were a man would your life have been different?

R: I understand. Of course. I can say that when my mother gave birth to me my father sent my mother away out to the street. I am born I April and it was still cold outside. And he did this because he wanted a son and she gave birth to a daughter. All wanted to have sons but she had a girl. I feel that I don’t have a wish for children in general but especially a son. I believe this has affected my character. I have become more masculine rather than female which has affected my life. Of course, if I were a man I would have had more opportunities. The fact that my character is more masculine has also affected my choice of education and I have sometimes easier to interact with men than with women and I haven’t had so many female friends. Anyway, men have more possibilities than women.

I: Both before and in today’s society?

R: Yes, in general. It is a matter of biology. Men and women are biologically different. When I started working they said that I would be married in three or four years. Vot I tut mne ostalos. Because women are expected to be housewives and give up their careers and they are expected to devote their lives to motherhood. They are perceived as care takers and men are perceived as hunters and such things. Of course now women are also very influenced by the social situation. I see children who are not properly cared for by the parents. They are not looked after and their material needs are not met. It is very dangerous because those children will not know what is right, you see?

I: Yes.

R: Therefore children don’t have the same relationship to their parents as children used to have and they don’t listen to and obey their parents. Children are left to themselves and they become drug addicts and left to their own destiny, you see. What I mean is their possibility to become independent. Kyrgyz people can easily adapt to new things. But also to things that are not so good. Drugs, alcoholism, and prostitution is now not unusual in our society but people didn’t hear about it during the Soviet Era. Now it is normal and might be a part of life and people don’t want to work for 3000 soms it is too little. It is said that people are used to it. Before people were also not rich but also not poor. Now young people aren’t able to build a future, to get a good education and, eh. Even who gets a degree it doesn’t help and work doesn’t pay enough.

I: And what do you think, what if you had a different nationality. If you were for example Uzbek or Russian. Would your life had been different do you think?

R: Yes. I understand. You know, to tell you the truth it is such a saying. I originate from the soviet times and I usually spent time with Russians and mostly spoke Russian. One Of course I speak Kyrgyz. From the Baltic states a girl, Valeria, came to live at my dormitory. It was many different people of different ethnicity. It was
very interesting and as I told you I consider myself more of a cosmopolite, rather than a special ethnicity. There are also other important divisions in our society today, like family clans, social classes, money and other things which has a big influence and definitely peoples abilities were decided by this. Of course these things were to some smaller extent influential also earlier but we didn’t think about it. We were thinking about being a part of and living for the communist society and we were thinking about what possibilities the soviet system gave us for the future. It was a very painful change for us, we were brought up with a strong feeling of patriotism and belief in the country. Now it is different and a lot of young people want to go to the west. Today people are striving for earning money. I think it is very sad and I think it affects people’s lives. I hear how people are arguing about money, saying you have to make money and so on. Even though I don’t have money one cannot think about that all the time. You get used to that situation also and the richness of the soul is more important and there are more interesting things in life. Why, I don’t know why it is so but it scares me and it’s like who gets somethings always wants more, that’s also how children has become and I think it is very bad. I guess some people think it is good to make money for the society.

I: Do you think that the question of nationality is more important for men than for women?
R: Nationality. Nationality is of course of great importance. I told you there is a difference. If, how can I say it, if someone is from the Baltic countries, or in Central Asia earlier women...
I: I am asking because I have read some of the conflict between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks here. And there is written, eh, in reports and articles and so on, mainly from a masculine view, what did men do and there is little written about women.
R: Yes, of course. Because it is said that among Uzbeks women are not active and Uzbek women are not considered to be allowed to work. She should take care of the children and the man should only think of earning money for the family. Among us Kyrgyz is it not so much like that, because women are not completely independent from men but they are more independent and usually better educated than Uzbek women. A bit more modern. But among Uzbeks women’s place is still considered to be in the home. And men should only work and bring home money. Therefore it is like that, more Kyrgyz children are getting education and can get a career. Among the Uzbeks they are devoted to learning how to cook and take care of the home or they are having their businesses. Not more sophisticated occupations because they are less educated and they don’t have that traditions. Of course that cannot be said about all Uzbeks, but about the majority. If they have their private business the sons continue the business after the fathers and so on. It is a family business.
I: Can you say about this conflict eh has it had any impact in your life? Has your life changed in any way after this?
R: For example I was in Tashkent when the first violence happened in 1996. Then it was of course dangerous for me to be there and I wanted to leave. No men went there then and I also didn’t want to go there. Perhaps since I was a women I wasn’t a target in the same way as men, but I felt fear. The relationship has of course been affected. There are no bad nationalities or ethnicities, there are bad individuals within all national groups. There are after all many mixed people and often for example the father is Uzbek and the mother is Kyrgyz, and during the soviet times nationality was not a question. That kind of differences, nationality, social situation, and so on, we didn’t even know about people’s backgrounds. Now that has become important for people. Who is mom dad and what are they working with. We didn’t know that and for example if a friend was tatar or burjat it didn’t matter and you were making friends with any one, Russian for example and I was even more interested in making friends with other nationalities because it was interesting for me. Of course after these events the relationship has become worse. When I studied in Jalal-Abad I was staying with an Uzbek family and that was not a question of nationality. I was living and after a month I was like a daughter in the family. I brought them money but they didn’t accept it because I was like a daughter. Of course after these events things changed a little bit and the relationships changed. This was in 1996 but still then it was better because people understood that we were living and building a society together and the Uzbeks constituted a large part of that society. Right? If your neighbor was Russian or Uzbek or Tatar it didn’t matter. By then, even if Kyrgyz were dominating certain parts of society there were also for example Uzbeks in the parliament and then they opened Kyrgyz-Uzbek university. We had recently become an autonomous country and that was more important to build up that country as soon as possible. But eventually the ethnic groups became more divided. Earlier there had been a lot of mixed marriages. Now Kyrgyz are keeping for themselves and Uzbeks are keeping for themselves.
I: How did that situation evolve do you think?
R: What?
I: Why did it happen?
R: Because of the events, of course. People turned to themselves. In the beginning of the independence new political movements started and new parties were born and people started to be build they own houses. Uzbeks built they houses and the Kyrgyz had their apartments. There were problems than and there are problems now.
with finding an apartment. There are long waiting lists for apartments. Money became more important. The Uzbeks built their own private homes and then it was many Russians living in apartments. I waited for an apartment for two years and now it is also very hard for young people and the rents are very high in comparison to the income. If I have an income of 3000 soms, how is it possible to pay 12000 in rent. What is built now no one can afford. During the soviet times many people were living together.

I: If I have understood you, you mean that during the Soviet Era women were more equal to men, despite if a woman was Kyrgyz, Russian or Uzbek for example. But after the Soviet Union…

R: No, during the soviet era the situation was that all should be equal. Education was for free and day care was for free. It could be hard to get a place but the society was striving for make the condition for women better. By then the state took responsibility for the children. Now it doesn’t. Therefore, for example it depends of if the parents are rich. Day care costs 10 000. But also there are also no places and there are different classes of day care and schools. But only those with money can afford it.

I: But would you say that, when we talk about Uzbek women for example, there isn’t only the access to money that decides their conditions in life, but also their culture? I mean if they go to university or so on.

R: It has to do with them being very family oriented. If they are working they would pay less attention to the family. The Uzbek woman should be at home and give the children food and the man has to work.

I: Was it like that also earlier?

R: Not so much earlier, but nowadays it is like that. Before women were also required to work but now they are referred to the home and to take care of the family. I have seen that girls are more affected by Islam and are very influenced by religious factors. Women are wearing long dresses and scarves. Kyrgyz women’s lives are not limited like that. They live and work among men and they are more independent.

I: Can you say something about what you think of the future here? For example, in 20 or 30 years.

R: The future?

I: Yes, for women or in general.

R: The first time, when Akayev became president and I was in Tashkent of course it was worrying but I still had a belief in the government. But now, many years later I don’t have that trust. Why? Because people are now thinking about the percentage of Kyrgyz and are trying to have more children to increase the percentage of Kyrgyz, and I don’t think that’s good. How can I explain? Well, what happened everyone has a part in. During the Soviet times, even if everything wasn’t available we still had sausage and we had socialism. People were poor but we believed in the future and everyone could expect help from the government not to be put on the street. Now there are no guarantees. The pensions isn’t enough to survive and the young people don’t have a path in life. Even if they get an education they don’t know what they can do with it. And corruption is of course nowadays a big problem. Therefor young people are quite disenchanted. Before we had the dream of communism and a bright future. Now it is completely different. No wished. I don’t know. The government used to be rich a we didn’t have to worry about that. Now the country’s wealth is thought to be measured in telephones and cars but it is in how children are being treated. A government which cannot help and provide for the inhabitants is not to be considered a government. We are a small country and we are dependent both on the US for example and on Russia. For example I can’t say how it will be. I can say that it will be good but I don’t know. The social situation may change to the better, it has happened in other countries, therefore I think that the people in power should try to live on the salary of ordinary people, like 3000 soms and they would perhaps understand. Many of the people with power and influence are very rich. Very rich. Where does all these money come from? From the people of course and that is why there are so little left for ordinary people. How can 3000 soms in pension be enough for one month? Well, that is how it is.

C. Focus Group Interview, 19-04-2016. “Novi Ritm”, Dzhinna Street, Osh, Kyrgyzstan

I: I would like you to talk about if you how you could describe your own identity and if you can describe how you think that other people look at you. And what parts of your identity is important for you. Do you understand?

R: So you mean thinks like my age, sex, if I am married or not and what that means to me and to other people?

I: Yes. How would you like to describe your own identity and if something would change would that impact your life?

R: I am a student. I study the third semester at the university. And… what else. I am not married.

R: I can say that according to our religion and mentality girl should marry when she is about 20-25. So other people say that she is old enough. About occupation there are some occupations that girls can’t have. Men thinks
so. For example, let’s take medicine. It will take around six years and mostly people think that she will be too old.
I: So, do you think that your gender is important for your choices in life?
R: Yes. This is what they think so but I am against that thinking.
I: Do you think that your life would be different if you were a boy?
R: Ahm, I don’t think so I would be the same because I think that I will decide for myself. If I am a boy or a girl it doesn’t matter. But, when I was a small girl I thought that it would be better to be a boy than to be a girl, because sometimes it is hard to be a girl.
I: Because of expectations and rules?
R: Yes. Exactly. But now I have some other thoughts.
I: What do you think?
R: I want to be respectful to our traditions but I don’t agree with them. It is our destiny. If we want to become something and it is restricted because we are women and our religion kind of has some restrictions for us. It is restrictions from the male society, some kind of restrictions that says we women should sit at home to housework, yes.
R: We can work like men are working and we can do anything they do and we do what we want to. We don’t let our sex decide our destiny.
R: There is something that I would like to say. Because women are the weaker sex.
R: I don’t think that women are the weaker sex and men the stronger sex. Who says that?
I: You think so?
R: Yes I think so. Because there are thinks we can’t do. Male stuff, for example… Eh, hard work. Heavy work that men can do but not women. For us it is, I don’t know how to say but it is hard for us, because it is hard or dangerous.
R: I don’t really agree. You talk about dangerous jobs, but it is not dangerous only to women but it can be hurtful for men also to do that kind of work.
R: It is people in general that says that women are the weaker sex. And people believe in that, but a lot of women are doing very hard work, which is also hard for men and which some men can’t do.
R: Women themselves don’t want to have those kind of jobs. Men’s job. Women don’t want to because they, for example don’t want to ruin their figure.

(Laughs)
R: Maybe it is not about what women want to do or don’t want to do but it has to do what other people thinks. For example parents tells you that you are a girl so you have to stay at home. Sit at home, don’t work because you are a girl. Don’t wear trousers, you are a girl so you should wear a dress. It is not what women want or don’t want it is just the expectations of other people. Like, women are in that situation, but in fact women are also free people that should decide for themselves. If they are only listening to other people they start to think for themselves that they are weak and that they cannot do anything.
R: Yes. I would like to say something. I agree with this that a lot of girls think like that in town but it is more spread in the country side.
I: Despite that most men might be physically stronger than women there are many other kind of jobs all over the world in which men are in majority. I am thinking about higher politics for example and if you look at the police force you actually don’t have to be particularly strong to be a police man or a police woman. You might have to be fit but that doesn’t contain any physical restriction for women. What do you think about that? Why are there for example so few women in these positions?
R: Because women are referred to the home.
R: I think it is because of a lack of knowledge. Before it was forbidden to, not forbidden, but women preferred to stay at home and they didn’t think about careers. When they are home they are at home and when they don’t take care of the home and family they sit by the computer or watch TV. They are concerned with cleaning and washing and that is also something which limits women.
R: Men have more time than women, I think.
I: And what do you think about, eh. Gender is something that at least seem to influence your choices in life, even if it doesn’t stop you from studying it might stop some women from studying and keep some women at home and so on. But there are also other parts of identity that might influence what choices you make or what choices you have in life. I am thinking about, for example, your ethnicity. Does it matter to you? Are you all Kyrgyz?
R: Yes, we are Kyrgyz.
I: Does that influence your lives?
R: I think so, yes.
R: When you say that you are Kyrgyz some people think that you are Muslim. And somethings are forbidden to you to go places and to go out. When I had just graduated school I wanted to study law and my father said that it is not a job for girls.
I: Mhm.
R: And, that Muslim girls must sit at home and not even to study. That is why I entered the faculty of foreign languages because my father said that I shouldn’t study law. So now I am studying at the faculty of foreign languages and I am allowed to go out more. But matters of gender inequality shouldn’t influence our choices. Maybe after graduating, eh from the faculty of foreign languages I want to study law.
R: In our city in Osh, religion and if you are a man or a woman it has a great influence for our choices.
I: If I understand you, it has to do more with traditions that are related to religion, rather than with your ethnicity?
R: Yes. When you say that you are Kyrgyz. People think that you must be Muslim, not Christian or something else. I think that your ethnicity is interlinked with your religion.
I: Do you mean that it is more or less the same for you?
R: Yes.
I: But if you were for example Uzbek girls or Russian girls, or of some other ethnicity. Because there are lots of different ethnicities here in Osh.
R: Yes.
I: How do you think that would affect you? Do you think that your lives would look different?
R: If I would be an Uzbek girl, they think that girls should marry earlier than we do. And if I were an Uzbek girl I would be married and have children now and I wouldn’t study. I think so. And if I was a Russian girl, I don’t know…
R: Ethnicity has a large impact. As was said, Uzbeks girls marry very early. Women in the Uzbek community has less rights than Kyrgyz women. And considering Russians the problems are smaller. They have a different religion, they are Christians. So, ethnicity has a great impact.
I: So, of course your identity consists of lots of different things. It is a collection of things in life that affects who you are, how you understand yourselves and how other people understand you. What part of your identities do you consider most important for you? Gender, religion, occupation, or so on.
R: I believe that the fact that we are Muslims, our religion. And also ethnicity, but first of all I would say that it is our religion that plays a large role.
R: For me my occupation is important, that I am student or what I am working with. For my identity it is important that I am a student and that I am still studying. For me religion is not in the first place. I am 23 years old. Religion is not important for me and I consider myself non-religious. I am not Muslim and I am not Christian. I am just a person who wants to live my life and I know what is right and what is not right. All religions say how to live life and what to do and not to do, and I don’t need that.
R: For our society people how to say, people are dependent on religion.
R: In our society when you say you don’t have a religion people will judge you, perhaps even in this room. I don’t know, that’s why sometimes I am afraid of saying that I have no religion. People would say, you are Kyrgyz so you must be a Muslim, eh.. why don’t you have a religion they will ask.
I: Are you all born in Osh?
R: Yes.
R: No, I was born in Bishkek and we moved here.
I: Do you think that your lives now, as young women, are very different from what your mothers’ lives were like when they grew up?
R: Yes.
I: In what way?
R: Because, what can I say, we have become aware of matters of equality and that women also has to work, just like men. And that women also has rights, to do what men does. We have started to work and we are already aware of that we can do whatever men can do. When our mothers grew up there were also these ideas, but less than know. The number of women who are working now has increased.
R: I don’t agree. During the Soviet Union our mothers didn’t just sit at home. A lot of people were influenced by Russia and got an education and started working. In our society the mentality has changed. Both men and like grandmothers now tell us to sit at home and not to study. Get married. But during the Soviet times if someone had fourteen children, seven girls and seven boys and they were all told to get an education and build a future. Today people say that girls should just get married. It seem to me that when our parents grew up women were to a larger degree getting education and were working. Unfortunately, today women get married early and drop out of school and don’t work.
R: There are both many girls and boys that drop out of school, but while boys start to work the girls just sit at home. Why, if they aren’t going to work.

R: Today parents themselves say that girls should have children. Getting an education is just a matter of status. Of course it isn’t always like that but there is people who think like that and parents that say this, that girls has to get married and have a family.

R: But not all of course, there are parents that say that first of all women has to become independent. That is what I try to achieve.

I: Do you have any more thoughts?
R: No.

I: How do you think it will be in the future, for women or perhaps for your generation in general, in perhaps ten or twenty years? Do you think that when you get children do you think that the same things will be important to them, for example when it comes to religion…

R: There are people who think that religion is at first place. People don’t change so easily.

R: Today people think it is important to get married and to stay at home and this is a consequence of religion, and I think it will continue like that. I don’t think that the situation for women will change much.

R: I don’t agree with this. Lots of people are turning away from religion today and I believe that religion will not play an important role in the future because as I said lots of people are rejecting religion or even changing religion.

R: I don’t know because a lots of women are also turning to religion and when they get married they start do dress differently and start to listen and do only what their husbands tell them.

R: It seem to me that in ten years things will change. Because today there are organizations that work with girls and gender equality, and lots of students are traveling abroad to study or for vacation and when they return they are influenced by how people live in different countries and they don’t want to live like they used to live. I understand that religion plays an important role but those who travel or gets an education they start to think different and step by step, but slowly, thoughts of that it shouldn’t matter if you are man or woman start to spread and we teach our children not to think that women should just sit at home. If I will sit at home, and if I don’t get and education and work and become independent then what can I teach my children. It is usually women who teach the children and not men, and it seem to me as if women gets education then men could also take a larger part in taking care of and foster the children.

R: It is also true that when a women is not at home and take care of the children and the men are also working who will foster the children.

R: Therefore it is strange to say that women are the only ones that has to stay at home and take care of the children. Both men and women can work and help each other both with earning money to the family and to take care of the home and the children. That’s all!

I: In Osh you had a conflict between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz for about six years ago.
R: Yes.

I: You are not so old, but I assume that you all remember this.
R: Yes.

I: Can you say something about how you perceived what happened and how you think. Did it affect you as being Kyrgyz or the fact that you are living in a society with different ethnicities.

R: I consider it is in fact not a matter of Uzbeks and Kyrgyz. It is a matter of our political representatives who are in parliament. I exactly don’t know but I think that they have created a situation in which people, both Uzbeks and Kyrgyz are suffering… Yes, suffering…

I: So would you say that is more of a political conflict than a question of ethnic belonging?
R: Yes. It is a political conflict.

R: We don’t know exactly what happened but it is claimed that they did this and then we did this and then they did etc. I don’t know. It is not a matter of nationality but of politics.

R: There are different information and different views on this. Some say that the Uzbeks are very many and that they are in majority and wants to make the city an autonomous Uzbek region. I have heard that 30 people provoked this war and from this the conflict started. Lots of people died. To me it is just a matter of conflict between individuals but is has had the consequence that some Kyrgyz don’t like Uzbeks and people killed even close friends and relatives. Kyrgyz killed Uzbeks and also Uzbeks killed Kyrgyz.

R: It is very serious that this hostility has occurred. I wouldn’t say that I am Kyrgyz and I don’t like Uzbeks because the want to create an autonomous region. No, I don’t like racists and I am not racist. And I think that more people think like me than who hates.

I: Has the conflict affected your private lives? Did your lives change in any way in relation to this conflict?
R: Before Uzbeks and Kyrgyz were more mixed, but as I said Uzbeks and Kyrgyz both killed each other. Before it was common that Uzbeks and Kyrgyz got married to each other, but now it is simply not possible after the war.
I: When you say it is not possible, do you mean that for example if you met an Uzbek boy, wouldn’t you have to possibility to marry him?
R: If I talk about myself, it wouldn’t be possible.
R: In my private life, all my friends and relatives moved to Bishkek. Here I don’t have any relatives anymore, but because of my father’s work we stayed here. So, I think that my life greatly changed. Because my close friends moved to Bishkek and my boyfriend also moved to Bishkek and I stayed here.
I: Did they move because of the conflict?
R: Yes. Because they didn’t feel safe here.
I: Would you like to add something?
R: No, it is the same. I agree.
I: So, we have been talking for a while and in the beginning I gave a few examples of what identity could be or what could constitute an identity. Is there anything else, that I didn’t mention or that we haven’t yet talked about?
Silence.
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I: Would you consider yourselves being feminists and is that an important part of your identity?
R: Yes, I would say that I am a feminist. I have come to become more aware of questions of gender equality and for example when you read a book it is always specified if it is a man or a woman, but often I consider that irrelevant. And in humor shows it is always women that are made fun of. Why isn’t it possible to laugh at men but only women and why does women always have to be depicted as inferior to men.
R: I don’t think that I am 100 percent feminist. I don’t agree that it should always be 50 % so I shouldn’t say that I am feminist.
R: But you are considering yourself a Muslim, right?
R: Yes.
R: I think that religion is often used as way to limit women. And women are told to stay at home and wear certain clothes and accept restrictions in accordance with religion.
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I: Do you think that men in your age has a different view on girls and women and on what is allowed for women to do, than what your fathers generation has?
R: Hm.
I: Did you understand the question?
R: Yes.
R: I don’t think it has changed. The young generation think like the older generation. It is not profitable to change the view on women. They think that women should be in a certain way and they have nothing to gain from women to be more equal to men. Even if they might think different they say that they are behaving according to what they have been taught and in accordance with their right. I think so, and that therefore it hasn’t changed.
I: Mhm. So at least you to some extent seem to consider yourselves being feminists. Is that an important part of your identity?
R: No, I don’t think it is important part of my identity.
I: Would you say that it is just your point of view?
R: Yes.
I: Would you like to add something?
Silence.
I: Would you say that people on the street can tell, just by looking at you, what nationality you have. Can they tell whether you are Kyrgyz or Uzbek or Uighur or perhaps Tajik?
R: Yes.
R: No I don’t think so. They always ask for my name and when I tell my name they look at me and say are you Kazak or are you Uighur. They never think that I am Kyrgyz.
R: They think that I am Kyrgyz.
R: Usually it is easy to tell. For example that I am Kyrgyz and if someone is Uzbek, it is easy to tell.
I: How?
To look at the person, what he or she looks like.
R: If I go to another country people always guess that I am from China or from Korea but here people can usually tell if someone is Uzbek or Uighur but they can ask. And sometimes people can’t tell.
I: I believe that it shows how you are perceived how your identity changes, depending on how people perceive you. If I go to another country in Europe I am Swedish. When I come to Central Asia I am European. Is it important for your identity that you are from Osh? Do you think that people would look at you in a different way if you were from Bishkek for example or from a very small village in another part of Kyrgyzstan?
R: Yes. I think they would look differently because when I visit Bishkek and I tell that I am from Osh the expect me not to know Russian and they think that I should speak Uzbek and look like an Uzbek and that I don’t know normal Kyrgyz language. These kind of stereotypes.
I: Do you think so too?
R: Yes. If I would come from a village people in Osh would also think that. That they don’t know Russian and that they will not know how internet works.
R: I agree.

D. In-depth Interview, 20-04-2016. Osh, Kyrgyzstan
I: Would you say that there are big differences for women and girls in general in their lives depending on their ethnic belonging? Concerning opportunities?
R: Yes, concerning opportunities and restrictions. Actually, there are not that huge differences between like the Uzbek ethic group and the Kyrgyz. Kind of like German and Dutch, in terms of language. And these two languages they have much in common, in terms of tradition and in terms of languages but if..eh there are some differences as well. If for example the girls coming from minority backgrounds, mainly from Uzbek background they are quite, how to say, more conservative compared to the girls coming from Kyrgyz background. Maybe this is again due to the mode of life that Uzbeks and Kyrgyz’s have. Kyrgyz have had kind of more nomadic way of life, moving from one location to another location and Uzbek communities have a more settled way of life. Maybe this has influenced the families’ upbringing of their girls. In Uzbek families girls, few opportunities are provided for girls coming from Uzbek backgrounds and more opportunities are provided for boys because they are considered to be eh, how to say, because they are considered to be the heir. It is better for the families to invest in them because they continue the family line. The girls are considered to be kind of second class because they are getting married and will leave and will move to a new family. Therefore it is better to invest in boys than in girls. And unfortunately parents, maybe this is the influence –and this is my personal opinion, in 2010 we had a serious conflict in Osh. Maybe this is a consequence of this conflict, the spread of the tradition of early marriages. I think that at that time many families were concerned to get their daughters married because of security concerns. There were many cases of gender based violence, many cases of rapes, under reported and a lot of people neglected to report because it is considered a disgrace for the family to report about the cases of rapes among the Uzbek families.
I: Mm.
R: Maybe one of the reasons for early marriages is related to the security concerns of the families. The parents prefer for their girls to get married at an early age so they can just give the girls to another house and they pass her and think that her husband and her husband’s family will take care of the daughter. The other reason I relate with how to say, again compared to Kyrgyz there are fewer educational and professional opportunities for girls from minority backgrounds in Kyrgyzstan, because of the maybe poor knowledge of the official languages and they, the girls, not only girls but in general, it is considered that government officials are not creating equal possibilities for young people. And many girls, and boys as well, got a dissatisfaction with the way the country is governed. And in recent years we have seen example of girls joining radical movements like Hizb-ut-Tahrir, and some others that are really active especially in the Fergana valley. We observed that many girls are going to Syria to fight but we can’t say what is the real reasons, are they going because of religious values or because of financial means.
I: Yes.
R: It’s really, I don’t know, what is the real motivation. But, the real factor. The government wasn’t really providing some important things for them and religion was the only way how to say, that created for them at least some opportunities. Maybe this is the other reason, that religiosity makes them get married at a very early age. So, yeah, religious factors is one of the reasons behind early marriages.
I: Eh, would you think that the differences between, if we only talk about Kyrgyz girls for example, would the differences between Uzbek and Kyrgyz girls larger, than the differences between Uzbek and Kyrgyz men? Can you understand my question?

R: Yes, exactly. Eh, compared to Uzbek girls, Kyrgyz girls are...they feel sometimes as more confident. They struggle to get an education and they are more empowered, while the Uzbek girls are like more conservative and prefer to stay at home rather than to obtain an education. Again because of the traditions and cultures that exist in the Uzbek families where the families prefer to invest in boys rather than girls. But in Kyrgyz families it is really different. Even the way they dress up. For example if you just walk around the streets in Osh city you observe many Uzbek girls are just simply covered. They wear long skirts and dresses and they wear a scarf on their head. I: Yeah.

R: And you can observe that Kyrgyz girls are wearing stylish clothes like jeans and more westernized, you know. And they are studying at university while Uzbek girls are maybe just finishing secondary education. In exceptional cases they can obtain higher education. Unfortunately there is a stereotype that even if they finish education and after eleventh grade continues with higher education they will still not obtain a good position in the state, and this is kind of a how to say bad way of thinking. There is no trust in the government you know. Because in recent years we have observed drastic changes in matters of representation. This is also influencing the minds of the younger generation so that Uzbek girls think it is better to sit at home and take care of household issues and then get married and take care of children, the extended family, you know. Because in recent years the girls who are educated who is working is considered to be spoiled. She is outside talking to people and so on. And they prefer pure girls who are not spoiled by external issues and who doesn’t have a job and doesn’t talk to other men outside the family. Uzbek men have more radical views on women. However in Islam the roles of women are really high, for example even in the Koran women are described as someone important, she should be educated and Islam supports the education of women, and there are some other aspects that speaks in the support of women. But unfortunately the local men doesn’t think like that. They consider themselves being religious but they don’t really follow up by the holy book, you know.

I: Yes. Would you say it is more a matter of tradition than of religion?

R: Yes, exactly.

I: Do you think that there are big differences between how Uzbek and Kyrgyz live their lives?

R: Hm.

I: Do they educate themselves equally, independent of their ethnic identity and do they choose the same kind of jobs for example or can you see big differences between those groups also?

R: Hm, well again, I will divide my answer into two parts. The lives of men before the conflict and the lives of men after the conflict, the interethnic conflict, because it led to drastic changes. In Southern Kyrgyzstan there has been two serious ethnic conflicts. The first happening in the early 90ies, again between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, as a result of this more than 200 people died. And then exactly 20 years later, in June, the interethnic conflict took place again and again the same number of casualties and a large number of displaced people in the south. Before this conflict I am sure that men coming from Uzbek and Kyrgyz backgrounds had kind of more or less the same opportunities in terms of employment and so on, education, but things has changed tremendous after the conflict. Many young male Uzbeks migrated to Russia or to other countries like Kazakhstan, to seek for employment. Not only employment but also to feel themselves secure, because here they felt humiliated and discriminated and there were many cases of men just walking around the street can be beaten. Because there is a mistrust among these two ethnic groups. You can see this happen often, in public transport and in the local markets. So the same facts that young people eh they don’t really see a justice in the employment and there are many cases of discriminatory practices in universities. For example they got poor marks. Not only because of their ethnicity but they were in fact discriminated because of their ethnic back ground. The government created a room for major migration and many boys just gave up to study. Many of them and another discriminatory practice is that they have abolished Uzbek language. Here we have a special system, we call it ORT (?), kind of final examination, like entrance examination, which you were entitled to do in your mother tongue, for example the Uzbek language or Russian. But after the conflict they have eliminated the Uzbek language so you can imagine. A kid is studying for eleven years at school in his mother tongue, then how can he pass the exam in another language. It is total bullshit honestly speaking. And we considered, the human rights activist, local leaders, it is real discrimination of human rights, to deny access to education in your mother tongue. And consider the fact that the southern part is mainly dominated by the Uzbek population and there has been made so many appeals to the ministry of education but nothing has come out of it, so the educational opportunities is an important matter, not only for men but as I told you, Uzbek families tend to invest mostly in men. So what happened, eh, men are not continuing higher education and are getting more involved in practical apprenticeships like in construction or car repair, and so on. It is better for them to start earning money than to
try and invest in an education and get a diploma after five years. So instead they try to make money and go to Russia for example and start fixing stuff, not only in Russia but here also. Again, this kind of activities far for example some arrogant Kyrgyz guys can ask an Uzbek to fix their car but once it is fixed they just run away. So the men really lost their positive hopes for the future because of this injustice existing especially in the southern part of Kyrgyzstan. This is of course related to ethnic issues, and there is a total impunity.

I: Would you say that the conflict was in fact an ethnic conflict or is it something else?
R: This is definitely an ethnic conflict and it is also proved by a number of international commissions that investigated, even the head of this Kyrgyz Inquiry Commission, the Finnish guy mr Kiljunen, was pronounced Persona Non Grata, so he cannot enter Kyrgyzstan no more because he mentioned the fact that the Uzbeks were the victims of these ruptures you know. And the Kyrgyz officials of course didn’t like that result of this commission. Really this conflict has had really negative consequences on the future of young people from minority background. Because many of them are now living in Russia, doing black work you know while the girls are engaged in religious groups and going with their families to Syria to fight or many other cases like early marriages has become widely spread. I don’t see any other, any positive prospects for the youth coming from minority backgrounds. Of course people talk about the peace building efforts that international organizations and local NGO:s are doing and they are doing great efforts and investing a lot in peace building but I haven’t seen any real results from that so far. Only symbolic activities. Even if you observe the statistics, you can see that in 2010 huge numbers of Uzbeks applied for asylum in Sweden for example. There are even many Uzbek politicians who are now based in Sweden. Many of them are coming from Osh, including renowned journalist and highly influential decision makers from ethnic backgrounds. Even young people who just didn’t feel secure here and who were more or less involved in politics. It is how to say, really sensitive to talk about two things here. Ethnicity, identity related issues, and religion. Even the projects in this year for example “Freedom House” are, not rejected, by the local offices of the intelligence services are active and they allocated some guys in human rights organization to see how they were working on interethnic issues. So they were really pressed by local police officers and intelligence services. So I myself was also active in these issues but I gave up. Now I have moved from interethnic issues into gender, more or less neutral. Because I felt pressured and I often made interventions in Switzerland in Geneva, in UN, regarding the situation of interethnic minorities. It is very sensitive. But to get back to your question, yes there are huge differences. In Kyrgyzstan unless men kind of how to say…the Kyrgyz also invest a lot in education of boys and the boys coming from ethnic Kyrgyz background have very good positions everywhere, even in the capital and they have the feeling of superiority. They are the citizens of this country and I don’t know. They are coming from the titular nation and have more opportunities. Because also corruption is widespread in Kyrgyzstan. If you are coming from a rich family you can just pay and get any position you want. Or, you can just pay and get your diploma. You know, it’s really. There is no, how to say…the officials really don’t do anything to stop this corruption or to stop this impunity. Therefore, Kyrgyzstan is famous for its demonstrations and if somethings happen people are gathering to express their dissatisfaction. It became really popular in recent years when a group of women gathered, we call this group ‘obon’ –it means like a woman but in a negative way. They are women who are being paid by politicians. They receive money to go and do some demonstrations and can even beat people. I am scared of this group of women. They are active during some political events or activities.

I: In general, if we talk about women and women’s identity or whether ethnicity is important part of their identity –do you think there are differences between older women and younger women? Can you see a difference between age groups?
R: In matters of identity?
I: Yes, concerning ethnic identity. Do you think that ethnic belonging is more important for younger women than for older women?
R: The older generation lived during the soviet times, and by then frankly speaking ethnic identity didn’t matter very much. I for example, if I am talking about my mom. She was brought up during soviet times she was educated during times and worked during soviet times. So the soviet ideology is in her mind fully. And this can be easily observed among other elderly women. And at that time people really didn’t think about the ethnic belonging. In the air it was a feeling of internationalism and not nationalism. People were kind of more tolerant and they never felt the ethnic division between themselves. Maybe after the breakup of the Soviet Union there were such feelings. But concerning differences between younger women and older women, I think that how the young generation of girls interpret the ethnic identity and ethnic belonging is related again to this conflict. I often make a link to this conflict because it was a conflict on interethnic base you know. After that conflict many people, even small girls at school. I have observed them playing outside and if something happens they blame each other saying like “You’re Uzbek!” Or “You’re Kyrgyz so…” This is a very negative trend that needs to be
stopped. Children are being brought up in a bad atmosphere in which their families are talking about identity belonging at home so of course they will apply this outside. Right now I think identity matters a lot for girls.

I: I am a little bit surprised when I interviewed young women and, I should add that they were Kyrgyz which might matter, when I asked them what or how they identify themselves or how they would explain their own identity, I was surprised that no one automatically mentioned ethnicity or nationality.

R: Mhm. That’s an interesting observation.

I: Do you think that it would have been more important if I had been interviewing Uzbek girls? Do you think that it is more important to them since they represent a somehow discriminated group?

R: Again I think I think it depends on the level of education of the girls. For the girls that are well educated I think they would mention this. For girls less educated I think they would perhaps mention other things, except the ethnic background. But in general, perhaps it is better to make a small survey and talk to these girls. For me it is also interesting. But these Uzbek girls are more hidden and they are not open for any kind of conversation you know. They just avoid it. While as Kyrgyz girls, they are sociable, they are active and they have their certain positions and struggle to get an education. But, once I asked a girl what is identity for her she said that identity is her citizenship, that she is a citizen of Kyrgyzstan. I was quite happy when I heard that. She said this is the place that I am coming from and this is my motherland and she was talking about these citizenship issues. Eh, for me personally when I talk about identity issues, I stick to my ethnic identity.

I: Mm.

R: For me it is really important. My ethnic roots, the way I am treated here the way that I have equal possibilities and anything related to equality.

I: Mm.

R: So. Equality and identity are somewhat interlinked.

I: Would you say, have you always been aware of your ethnicity?

R: Yes. From my early childhood. Because I don’t know. For example at kinder garden it was asked from my parents what is my ethnic background and that questions were asked everywhere. I come from an Uzbek minority and even though I don’t really have a typical Uzbek appearance my name reveals that I am Uzbek and I feel kind of discriminated concerning public positions, you know. For example if I go to some state institution, like hospital or university or I need to talk to a state official. I can speak in Kyrgyz language but as soon as introduce myself and mention my name I see the immediate change. You like “Ah…”, and I feel really humiliated. Just because of my identity and because of this distrust existing between two groups. It will take years, fifteen or perhaps hundred years to get rid of these negative feelings.

I: You mention your name, but from your appearance could people tell? I cannot say what you are from your appearance, how is it for people living here, can they tell?

R: No. In my particular case it is my name. In my family perhaps we look more Kyrgyz and not so typically Uzbek. If I go somewhere to an Uzbek village they will not think from my appearance that I am Uzbek, but when I introduce myself and say my name they say “Oh, you’re Uzbek and they get more open and try to speak to me. I was accompanying a group of researchers just after this conflict and people were very reluctant to speak but when they understood that I am Kyrgyz they got more open and they felt attached to me. Yes, to me identity is really dependent on ethnic issues and ethnic belonging.

I: Mhm.

R: But, before when I was younger I was thinking that my identity is that I am girl, you know. With my age, as I get older my identity is also changing. Maybe in five or ten years I will say, I don’t know, maybe that I am a grandmother or something.

I: Yes.

R: It is really changing depending what you are. If you are for example a housewife. Not a position but a kind of identity.

I: Yes, of course.

R: So but regarding this it is related to ethnicity.

I: Are you born in Osh?

R: Yes.

I: Eh, from what you look like and from what I have got to know about your job and so on, you don’t seem to have a particularly Uzbek traditional way of life.

R: Mhm.

I: Why did your life turn out differently?

R: Good question. I don’t know. From my family background. My family is well educated and my father is a well known journalist here in Kyrgyzstan. My mom is an architect so we are kind of a well educated family. All our relatives are educated to, and maybe this had an impact of our lives. My brothers are also educated and got
the best education. All of us, my sisters and my brothers struggled to get a good education. We really wanted to get a nice position and to get to change the lives of people. Especially for our community. I don’t know this is my idea from my student years. As I told you, unfortunately a lot of young people coming from Uzbek community don’t really get an education. So for me it was kind of a challenge to get an education and to work for changes in the lives of my community. And to be a role model for other girls, for them to get an education. Education had an influential role for me becoming different from my counterparts in the Uzbek society. I feel kind of, I am Uzbek, but I am different from other Uzbeks in my community because I am perceived differently from other Uzbeks in my community, you know.
I: Because of your education?
R: Because of my education and there are some other issues. I don’t feel that much embedded. If I go to a party in a pure Uzbek neighborhood I feel myself, not neglected, but feeling uneasy. Even if I dress in something long and if I would wear a scarf. Maybe it is my attitude from which one can easily differentiate. Maybe appearance, manners, behavior. Maybe the way I talk.
I: Interesting. I am happy that you are willing to share your own experiences on this matter.
R: Yes. Because I don’t really feel comfortable. Even though I am Uzbek I don’t really belong to that community so I am in a huge dilemma concerning where to put myself. I am somewhere in the middle.
I: Yeah. I understand that it can be confusing and in that way negative, but can it also be kind of positive and give you an opportunity to choose?
R: You know I was about to change my passport because it is expiring. I was talking to my parents saying, maybe I should take away my ethnic background because it is written in the passport by you can just make a request to take it away on the id-card, but not from other documents. Anyway, for me I would feel more comfortable if I wouldn’t be judged from my ethnicity, but at the same time I have an Uzbek name. I don’t know I don’t really like people asking about my ethnic background. Because for them it matters, also in matters of getting employed or if you need to get some medical service and it is discriminatory. If I tell I am Uzbek they will change their behavior, ask for more money and you will be the last in the queue.
I: Do you get that question only here in Osh or is it also something you are being asked in Bishkek for example?
R: In Bishkek compared to Osh. Here I hear that question often but in Bishkek it depends. I go there often especially to attend conferences or for presentations of state officials. I hear it from time to time, but not as much as here. It is not only here, but there as well, everywhere in the country.

E. In-depth Interview, 20-04-2016. “Novi Ritm”, Dzhinna Street, Osh Kyrgyzstan

I: I would like to start with asking how you would describe your own identity.
R: Mhm, like generally.
I: Yeah, identity can be anything of course. For example as a sports woman, but what I usually come to think of is your gender, level of education, age etc. or your job, at as I said it can of course be anything. What would you say?
R: It’s actually interesting. I am 22 and I was born in Osh in a village, and grew up here and lived here until I was 16 and then I moved to school here in Osh because we have a national school until 10th grade and then in tenth grade it is in Kyrgyz and people get really lazy and people start to drop off school because of the language. I had so far been doing all my school in Russian and suddenly I had to change and that was really hard for me so I moved to the city of Osh and I started here and now I study at the university and I am graduating in June hopefully. And I am Kyrgyz. My parents are Kyrgyz but on my mother side there are also Uzbeks and they live in Uzbekistan and she has a hard time meeting them and she hasn’t seen them in two or three years since she was there last time. And I am a student. When I talk about myself I think that first of all I say that I am student and I am working half time at Novi Ritm, and that is basically what I do.
I: Is that an important part of your identity, that you are in that way active in society?
R: Yes I think my level of education, if you are studying or has finished. And also age, people are a little bit kind of like if you are presenting yourself you are required to talk about that and if you are working.
I: The fact that you are Kyrgyz, is that important to you? Do you think that it is something that kind of decides what possibilities you have and what choices you make in life?
R: I don’t really think you. I’s not as if when I meet someone I ask, are you Kyrgyz, are you Uzbek, or are you Russian. It might have a bit of importance, or interest when I meet some foreign people and they ask me if I am Kyrgyz or Uzbek. Then I can think about it but otherwise I never think of myself that I am Kyrgyz and therefore I need to be in a certain way. When it comes to gender identity I am a woman and I kind of because of stereotypes and requirements that come with that, so then I can reflect on that.
I: Do you think that the fact that you are a woman has limited your possibilities?
R: Well…
I: Do you have to challenge the stereotypes?
R: Yeah. Very often. Even now when I am graduating there is a demand that people are saying “Oh finally, do you have a boyfriend and are you concerned of getting married?” And I am like no, I don’t even think about it, maybe you would never want to get married but people expect it from you and being pushed in that direction and you have to justify yourself for example by saying that I am working and therefore I don’t want to get married.
I: Mhm.
R: Or, I wanna travel and that is why.
I: Is that coming from anyone in particular? Is that from your friends or family, the expectations on you to get married?
R: Eh, in my family. Well, my mom is worried about that I will never get married but we had a huge discussion about it, and she stopped. She weren’t exactly pushing but saying that I should really think about it, but then I have had a talk with my parents and they don’t really push for it. I think it is society in general and if someone ask me how old I am and when they find out my age they are saying like, oh so you should get married soon. Even if it is perhaps said like a joke it is still like…
I: Do you think that your parents wanted you to get married only because they were also influenced by the stereotypes of society or do you think there are also some other reasons for them wanting you to get married?
R: I think, if society and their friends would be different, they would also think in a different way. Because even though they think they are doing it for my sake it is still coming from somewhere else. For example when my mother goes to meet her friends they tell about huge wedding parties and this ad that and talking about the whole wedding thing and relations between people, the old stereotypes are still… My parent’s generation and my generation are quite different from each other. Even my friends are different, some thinks in one way and some thinks just like their parents. It depends on the level of education and experience and other things and influences by the parents if that is who they meet every day and there is no new information.
I: Would you say that your parents are more traditional than you are when it comes to family life and ideas about gender stereotypes and so on?
R: Mhm, my parents or my mom she is, well they are kind of traditional when it comes to family life. For example my brothers are married and they have children and my youngest brother lives with my parents. In our tradition the youngest brother should get all the property and live with the parents and that isn’t even questioned. For example my older brother wanted to live with my parents and proposed my younger brother to move to Bishkek to work there and he would help him. But my mom and dad said that they wanted my youngest brother to live with them, so my older brother got offended and was like, ok when my son grow up my first son will live with me. So he was like kind of offended and felt like what is the difference. But they never considered us wanting to live with them. It wasn’t a question. That is also unfair. I mean, I don’t want to live with them but maybe some people want to and for the families with only girls and no boys this is a huge question. They might completely forget about their seven daughters and people are like, poor you for not having a son. That is like eh… My neighbor has seven daughters and people are suggesting her to adopt a boy or like. But she has seven kids so what the problem. My brothers are quite religious. They weren’t religious like before when I was a child they were like completely without religion.
I: Are they both older than you?
R: Yes. The youngest is 30, not old. And my oldest is 36 or 37. And they are now really religious and sometimes I have had debates with them on what I should wear and they are like saying where I should go and if I should live with them or not. But my mom is really cool and she is telling them that they have their own lives and own families and that they should mind their own business, and she is like I will suggest her what to do and it is my business. So she was kind of defending me and now they don’t talk to me in that way anymore. I have experienced that they have changed a lot these couple of years because the religion has become like, pushing to be more religious. Since here all men go to church to pray but women never go and it is completely different level of religion to. Men are, they know a lot an women don’t and then men teach women how to be religious, what to wear and what to do. So they interpret.
I: What does religion mean to you? Is it at all important to you?
R: Eh, well I question that a lot. I am born Muslim but I don’t practice for example and I don’t go and tell a Muslim what to do and I don’t like when people tell me that. It is a very hard question. I cant say that I am religious, but I believe that there is something but I don’t believe that there is just one true religion and that you should push someone else to be religious and if you want to believe in a god.
I: Is it an important part of your identity?
R: I usually don’t tell about it but if people ask here I just say yes I am Muslim, to avoid any questions, but that is it.
I: Mhm.
R: If there wouldn’t be a demand I wouldn’t even consider that, but hm, in our family for example my parents were never religious like, during the Soviet period religion was completely banned and they were taught that there is no god at all. My brothers suggest my dad to go to the mosque and he is like ok, that is to much. They can’t just step up on that and tell someone else what to believe. Maybe that affected be, because we never really talked about religion and for my brothers were influenced by their friends, but that didn’t happen to me. We don’t really talk about it. I want to laugh and I want to question them but I don’t want to have this, how can I say, tense kind of debate with them. I just avoid it.
I: I understand. What do you think, it is not about you, but still, what do you think influenced your brothers to become more religious? Is it something that happened in society or where does it come from?
R: It is hard to say. My older brother studied in a Turkish gymnasium and he was in that kind of society where people pray and they say that you are a good person if you pray and do certain things. But also I think their friends kind of influenced them a lot. It is certainly not our parents that told them to do this or that.
I: Do you think it is some sort of revolt against other things in society?
R: Hm, also like a lot of my brothers for example they work and watch and read a lot about religion and they try to find their position.
I: Their identity?
R: Yes. And when one questions it he becomes very serious about it. He is completely sure that this is right and you have no right to doubt and even be unsure about life after death, and he is like. How can you even ask questions like these? And I am like, how can you be so sure? We are so different when it comes to this.
I: Interesting. And when you think about you ethnic belonging, as a Kyrgyz. What does it mean to you to be Kyrgyz? What part of the national narrative or whatever you want to call it is important for you?
R: Mhm, eh…
I: What things when it comes to traditions and things like that do you share with other Kyrgyz people in Kyrgyzstan, that you don’t share with people from Kyrgyzstan with a different ethnic belonging?
R: I think that when it comes to ethnic belonging it is more about language for example, and I studied in the same language as other Kyrgyz. And I think that here in Kyrgyzstan of course where I was born is also connected with that and I am also kind of like eh, kind of negative stereotypes that my mother pushes. For example if I don’t want to eat meat, my mother says that Kyrgyz people has been eating meat for ages and they lived until 90 or 100 years, so you have to eat it! Like, only because I am Kyrgyz I have to eat it. And things like that. I think certainly language, and history maybe.
I: Yeah. Do you think in general that ethnic belonging here in Kyrgyzstan is more important for men than it is for women? Or is it the same, or perhaps the other way around?
R: Oh, it depends. Hm, I don’t really know. It depends more on the person I think, how much you care about that you are Kyrgyz and how much you care about for example your friends nationality.
I: Mhm. Do you think that ethnic belonging is more important for other ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan, than it is for Kyrgyz people?
R: Hm, mm, I don’t know. But certainly when people talk about it they say like, yes I am Uzbek for example and don’t want to be associated with Kyrgyz people for example. Because Kyrgyz people can say like, if being asked if they are Uzbek, “No, I am Kyrgyz!”: And also my surname sound a bit like an Uzbek name so people ask me if I am Uzbek and I am well I am Kyrgyz, but why are you asking.
I: So, people want to know?
R: Yes. If I say, last time I was in Astana. We were three girls going and we were talking about girls and boys. And this girl was like so educated and she knows many languages, but then she was like, oh I don’t like Uzbek people. And I were like, what?! She said, I know it is not about the conflict or something like that I just don’t like them. But you speak Uzbek, and her friend is Uzbek so we were like, what’s the problem. The other girl said, I am half Uzbek. Would you hate me if I say that? She was like, no but you’re not. People are talking like that a lot and even if you don’t have a reason you are getting influenced from hearing that. And also like in our group we have a girl who is half Turkish, half Tatar. Very mixed. And she speaks perfect Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Turkish and people thought that she is Uzbek and once she said I am mixed and people were like, are you seriously not 100% Uzbek. Because they have some kind of stereotypical understanding of who is Uzbek, who is Kyrgyz and so on.
I: So in some ways it is important?
R: Yes, some people really care about it.
I: But, would you say that, if you see a person can you tell if she or he is Kyrgyz or Uzbek? Is it something that you at all think about and try to figure out for yourself?

R: Hm. Well, yes I think so. Once I was somewhere and whenever I got to meet a person I asked where are you from. Then I realized that I had certain prejudices for people depending on where they are from. For example if a person is from Germany I am thinking, well then you might like this and work with this or that. And if it is a Chinese person I am like ok have other images. I analyzed my discussions with those people and then I was thinking, what if I didn’t ask where are you from, then I might have some even more interesting discussions. Like, what are you doing and what is your interests. But when it comes to identities here, if I know that person and is talking to that person I will probably think about it.

I: And what stereotypes do you think that, or what kind of ideas or expectations do you think that people and society has on you? We talked about the fact that you are a woman and that you are expected to get married and have a family. Is there anything else, does society have any special expectations on you because you are Kyrgyz?

R: No. Because I am Kyrgyz is not that. I don’t think that society has any huge expectations at all for girls. On the other hand it is good. In that way girls have complete freedom since they are not expected to build a house to take care of the family and be the one earning money. You are free and if you are expected to get married and have children and perhaps work somewhere in the village and to lead an average life. And for parents it is like, of our daughter is successful because she is not living with us and she is not divorced and she is not coming to ask for money. But society, from childhood, you are not being told that you should become a great writer or something, you are a girl and you have to do it. It is good if you get some kind of education. But for boys, if a boy is not working and kind of has a girl friend who is paying for him his level of authority is very low and people are thinking, poor girl.

I: If you would have decided not to continue studying at college or university and instead decided to get married at 18 or something.

R: No...

I: But would your parents have agreed to that?

R: Maybe they would have agreed if I had said that I wanted to get married, but I don’t know. When I was eighteen or actually from my early childhood I thought that I would get married really old, or never. Laughing. My sister got married at seventeen. She and her boyfriend just decided to get married and they got married and she gave birth and because it was a very hectic thing that they just wanted to do they ended up divorcing and maybe that also influenced me because my parents talked a lot about it and said that she could have studied and she could have done this or that. How they were talking influenced me.

I: How does people look at the fact that your sister got divorced? Is it something that neighbors and relatives talk about?

R: Yeah. Maybe they don’t talk to.

I: Is it shameful?

R: My father thought it was very shameful that she got divorced because her husband was like drinking and doing nothing and like they were the same age. He was really a boy and didn’t know how to deal with things.

I: He was also seventeen?

R: Yes eighteen almost then. My father thought that she should live with him anyways because he was her husband and my mom said it was her life and she should decide for herself.

I: When you were talking about your own life and saying that you don’t want to get married young or at least not yet because there are things you want to do. You want to complete your education and you want to perhaps be able to travel and have a career. If you would get married now would you not be able to do those things, once you are married?

R: That is the thing, and that I also question. Like, some people say that she is married and still working or studying and I am saying so what, she is just married and living with someone else. She still can be free to do those things. Maybe for me I don’t wanna be like. Once you are married you get this label that you are married and you have to be working for the family. Have to do all the things at home.

I: Do you mean that those expectations limit your possibilities?

R: Yes, you want to be a nice person to that family and you have to be all those things, and I am feeling like no.

I: Does that also have to do with the expectations of the society and how you are supposed to be once you are married.

R: Yes.

I: Just some example. If you would get married to a man who would allow you to travel or to educate yourself and says that you don’t have to spend so much time at home but more on the career, would that be fine or would he also be constrained by the expectations of society?
R: Hmm. I don’t know it might be a stereotype but most Kyrgyz guys are very much influenced by their parents. It’s like they have huge expectations from them, as a boy, and from their wives to be like “oh you’re my husband and I do whatever you want”. Those kind of things and the fact that you have to ask your husband can I do this or that it is like, no. But, it depends on the person. If a person is like, if they both share this understanding and if both have their own lives and can combine it with their family life then it is easy but, eh, yeah.

I: This is perhaps a difficult question, but can you think of any specific situation when your identity whether it is you gender or ethnicity or religion has affected how people are treating you. You are talking about this in general but can you tell of an anecdote or something like that.

R: Ahm, like if some people make bad jokes about girls. Like stupid jokes that aren’t even fun and only used to provoke. For example about bride kidnapping and telling a story about when this girl got kidnapped she was doing this and this. And I am like, that is not funny. I can just say that I don’t like that and then people might think that this is a tradition and you are against that. Probably when you see a girl you think that all girls are the same but when you speak up and talk then people might think that you are crazy and will not be a good girl. The fact that you are a girl matters. Actually my aunts son told his mom that you have to tell her that she has to get married because she has been abroad and who knows what has she done, and when it comes to girls it is a lot about your virginity. He was like, she might have done some things abroad and some boys might not like to marry her. But it is completely different for boys and for them it is even good if you have done a lot of things.

I: Would you call yourself a feminist?

R: Hmm, well yeah. Actually I call myself feminist but it is not something that I talk about.

I: But you think of yourself being a feminist?

R: Yes.

I: Is that and those ideas something that is important for who you are, for your identity? Do you think it affects how you think of society and the choices you make?

R: Yes, I think so. It effects a lot. And like, before the time I considered myself a feminist I think I already had those ideas because I was always defending girls and trying to, I was doing that during my school time but told that just because I am a girl you can’t do this but now my mom for example she reads about feminism and women’s rights and she is the director of a kinder garden where there are so many women and the is saying like, no matter what your husband does you have to do things for yourself and you have to be financially independent from your husband and work. And she is like really empowering them.

I: Do you think that your mother would call herself a feminist?

R: I think so. Because she has been like that, like a feminist, for all her life and she has been working a lot and she has. Yeah she has her own voice and if she wants to go travelling she just does it, and my father is also fine with it.

I: You are mentioning the tradition of bride kidnapping. Is that considered being a part of the Kyrgyz tradition or is it a tradition you can see also among other ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan?

R: Eh, actually I thought that this happened all over Kyrgyzstan but apparently, when I spoke to my Uzbek friends they say no it doesn’t happen in our society. And then I realized that it is only among Kyrgyz and it is part of a national identity if you can say so.

I: Mhm. Is it something, you said people are joking about it, but do you think that it is something that people in your age actually think is ok and that they accept as part of tradition?

R: Yes, they think so.

I: Do you think that is a general perception?

R: Yeah, because it is considered a tradition. Otherwise all would be against it and it just wouldn’t happen. It is just like a brain wash, you are being told from the childhood that it is ok to get married like that and as long as the boy is alright you can live there. It is kind of shameful if you get kidnapped but returns home, it is a shame. And people tell about it and the young people accept it.

I: Hm, not only in the villages and also in the towns. And girls don’t want to lose their reputation as a good girl, they don’t intervene or say that it is not ok.

I: So a good girl is supposed to accept being kidnapped?

R: Perhaps not accept but she shouldn’t complain too much and start talking about the law and some things like that. Once I was going from Bishkek in a taxi and there was a man with his wife and their child. And was constantly making her be sorry and excuse herself for him and he was really rude to her. At some point he started talking to me and asked how old I was and asked me if I had a boyfriend and I thought it was none of his business, but he started saying that he has a nice brother like, I can make you connected and he can kidnap you and we can have a wedding. I was so angry of him and about him being rude to his wife but also angry with her because she didn’t tell him to stop. I was like, why are you even obeying his behavior. Then I started to talk to him about laws and what would happen if this happened and he just looked at me like, ok young people are
weird and affected by western society and so on. The woman probably thought that I was really bad and a woman started talking that she got married like that and that her daughter got married like that and that it is fine. It is just young people and especially girls who think like you. I was just hating that man all the way.

I: Is it something that you have been afraid of, to be kidnapped?
R: No, I don’t think so. I actually wonder what would happen (laugh). Because, not really. It is like the way other people talk to you and accept you it depends on how you present yourself. If you let people think that you will accept being kidnapped then they will do it.

F. In-depth Interview, 21-04-2016. Lenin Street, Osh, Kyrgyzstan

I: Can you explain what kind of problem women in Osh might need and what kind of problems women here encounter? I understand that women might have various problems but would you say that the problems vary depending on for example women’s age or whether they are Kyrgyz or Uzbek or another ethnicity?
R: Mostly women who need help are suffering from domestic violence. It is they who are not working, and don’t have an education. The majority are Uzbek women because they leave school early and get married at an early age. Early marriages are very common among this group. And the islamization of society affects them in the way that women are told not to get an education and not to get a profession, only to work at home and I think that these women are suffering the most now. They get to learn very early that they don’t have to study and that they only have to get married. Girls are taught not to worry about anything else but to get married. And once they get married they marriages are sometimes not registered, and because in case of divorce the women have no rights to get allowance if they have children and they don’t have any rights and if they are not officially married the child will not get registered with the fathers name and then the child cannot get allowance. To get allowance women has to go to the court, and these women don’t have an education and don’t have a profession. And she doesn’t have any money so how will she be able to go to the court and get help from a lawyer. First the father has to confirm that it is his child and only then can there be a question of allowance for the child. If the marriage is registered with the authorities and the couple are getting divorced, it will be much easier to get the allowance if they how a child and no lawyer is needed.

I: Hmm.

R: That is some of the problems that affecting women’s lives. Then there are also women who I am working with, sex workers, drug addicts. They are suffering from their problems, from problems with money, with the police and with their families. Because their husbands both hit them for working with this and they hit them if they can’t earn money. So it is a very hard situation for them. They might go to another town to work so that no one will recognize them and then when they will have to leave their children and they might lose they documents and often they don’t know what to get documents neither for themselves and for their children. There is also a discrimination against women who doesn’t have a family. Without a family she cannot rent an apartment because no one wants to let these women rent their apartments. If someone finds out that they are sex workers they might be told that they will tell the police and demand money from them. These women are often offended.

I: Do you think that the possibilities for women in Osh varies depending on if a woman is Kyrgyz, or Uzbek, or Russian for example?
R: It seems to me that nationality doesn’t matter. It is the economic situation that matters. If women are having an education and a job, that will also give them some independence. There are many women who don’t have an education and don’t have a profession and then they don’t have any independence from the husband. So in that sense nationality doesn’t matter. I am Uzbek and I am a lawyer and I am the only lawyer wearing a head scarf. The religion doesn’t matter, only women has to be active and to take advantage of their rights. The most important thing is to get an education, no matter if a woman is Kyrgyz, Uzbek, or Russian. Here there are working many different nationalities. I am the only Uzbek, and we have a Kyrgyz, a Tatar, and a Burjatian women. There are different nationalities working together and only the education matters to us. Therefore we want to encourage people to give their daughters an education.

I: Is it only the access to money that decides whether a girl will get an education or not?
R: It is money, and tradition. There are also wealthy families that don’t give their daughters an education. They are thinking that is not just a tradition but that it is according to the religion Islam. But when they think that Islam says that women shouldn’t get an education they haven’t properly interpreted the content of the Quran.

I: Do you think that it has been harder for you to become a lawyer, as a woman, than if you were a man?
R: No, in fact not to get the education, but I worked for another organization for many years but I didn’t manage to make a career there so I decided to start my own organization. There were lots or lawyers and assistants
working there and the male employees wants to employ other men. Even if they don’t have the proper education for the job. I am a lawyer and we were working with judicial issues. For example the coordinator took a man who yet hadn’t finished his degree and he had no experience. I was a lawyer with working experience and I had applied for that job. I had been doing a good job for that organization for many years and felt like what is the point continue working here if my job and my knowledge isn’t appreciated. To me that seem like discrimination based on the fact that I am a woman.

I: You think that it is because you are a woman and not because you are Uzbek or for some other reason?
R: It might have had some impact that I am Uzbek. At another organization where I applied for job I was the very last person they invited to the director and all were Kyrgyz. I understand and can speak some Kyrgyz and I also know some English. The director told me that I fulfilled the requirements and that they wanted me but I had already heard from someone else that they had chosen another person with lower qualifications than me. So, I think that is an example of discrimination both because of my gender, that I am a woman, and that I am Uzbek. I started to work at another organization so it didn’t matter but I felt that there was a matter of discrimination because of my gender and my ethnicity and it is like that also in other parts of our society. In the police force there are very few Uzbeks. And Uzbek women in the police force are of course very rare. I have been working for many years with issues relating to the police and therefore I have had a lot to do with the police and many of them know about my work here. But sometimes they think that I am just a young girl and perhaps an intern and they don’t know that I am a lawyer. Probably both because I am a woman and Uzbek they don’t expect from me to be a professional. Once I went to the police and for any reason and some employers came out and started to talk to me. They were saying some words in Uzbek and giving me some compliments but in a disrespectful way. So, I went to the guard who are working for the police and who knew me from my work and he told them off and put them in place and told them not to speak to a woman like that and not to show respect no matter of nationality.

I: Interesting. How would you describe your identity? What parts of your identity are most important for you?
For example, that you are a woman, Uzbek, a lawyer, or mother and so on?
R: For me all of those things together constitutes my identity. That I am a mother - I have a daughter- that I am a lawyer, well-educated and that I know Kyrgyz language and I am able to talk about important juridical things. I believe that a woman should be able to be all those things.

I: Yes. I met with some young women here and talked about these issues of identity and so on. And when I asked them about what constitutes their identities and how they prefer to describe themselves they very rarely mentioned their nationality. Do you think it is like that for most people, that nationality is not considered very important? I know that there are many different nationalities here and that you have had an ethnic conflict here some years ago.

R: In my own family we have many different nationalities. In my parents families there are for example Tajiks, Uighurs, and Uzbeks. I am married and my husband is Tatar and Russian. My brother is married to a Tajik my younger brother is married to a Kyrgyz. We are a mix, by I consider myself being Uzbek and that is what is written in my passport, despite I am of mixed blood, and for example one of my grandmothers is Uighur from China. For example my daughter has very light colors and she only speaks Russian, she poorly knows Uzbek, everyone asks if she is Russian. And I am obviously Muslim. She looks Russian and speaks Russian and I look completely like an Uzbek and people can’t understand why my daughter speaks Russian and looks Russian when I am Uzbek. People thinks that she is not my child.

I: Do you speak Russian at home?
R: Yes, at home we speak Russian and on the street.
I: Has nationality and ethnic belonging never been a matter of discussion in your home?
R: Well, my little brother married a Kyrgyz girl for eight years ago. She is a pure Kyrgyz from Issyk-Kul who talks Kyrgyz and their children looks Kyrgyz like their mother, but doesn’t speak any Kyrgyz. They also don’t consider nationality to be important. If someone asks me I answer that I am Uzbek. We are aware of that we are a family of many different nationalities and that is something we can joke about. My husband’s father is Tatar and his mother is Russian.

I: What does he consider himself to be in matters of nationality?
R: He is very light with blond hair and blue eyes and people thinks that he is an American. They ask him if he is from the US. He doesn’t like to be asked about his nationality. He don’t want to have to say or choose whether he is Tatar or Russian. What difference does it make, he says.
I: Even if it doesn’t matter within your family there was a conflict here in Osh for about six years ago.
R: Mhm.
I: How do you think about that? Do you consider it to be an ethnic conflict or do you think that it was actually a conflict over some other matters?
R: It seem to me that it was a conflict between nationalities, an ethnic conflict. Still, it has to do with mistrust between nations, which has also to do with political decisions concerning infrastructure and constructions that has led to feelings of discrimination among people. Therefore I think that the state has government itself has a responsibility for what happened. Not only the state but the political interests in motion then and who was major here then has a responsibility. Ordinary people became tools for the conflict. In my family we don’t have a problem with nationalities and we can never say that one ethnic group is better than the other, we can’t. We are all mixed and have relatives in Bishkek and Issyk-Kul and they called us to make sure that everything was fine with us. People became tools for different interests.

I: Do you think that people here in general thinks more about nationality and ethnic belonging today, compared to before the conflict? Or do you think it hasn’t changed?
R: I don’t know. Maybe for some people, perhaps the police has noticed that. It is said that extremism and religious fundamentalism has grown among the Uzbek community. It is also said that the need for bribery among the Uzbeks has escalated. But it don’t know, perhaps it just seems like that. I don’t know.

R: In my job as a lawyer I meet people who talk about these things. And I can notice an awareness among the clients I meet. We can communicate no matter of ethnicity but often an Uzbek client might prefer a Kyrgyz lawyer, because they believe that it might be disadvantageous for them to have an Uzbek lawyer when they are themselves Uzbeks.

I: Local people on the street, can they tell just form looking at you that you are Uzbek?
R: Yes, they can tell that immediately.

I: How?
R: I have dark eyes and they can tell from my skin and from the way I look simply.

I: But, how can they tell that you are for example not Kyrgyz?
R: Well, if I speak Kyrgyz they probably can’t tell that I am Uzbek. If I speak in Russian or Uzbek they will immediately tell that I am Uzbek. But if I speak Kyrgyz they can’t tell but will ask about my nationality. If I am silent they will think I am Uzbek, if I start talking in Russian they might also think I am Tatar. If I speak Kyrgyz they always ask about my nationality. But in general it is hard to tell if I am Uzbek or Kyrgyz. If a person from Bishkek is coming here to Osh, he or she will think decide just depending on what language I speak, otherwise they can’t tell. So I can kind of choose sometimes how to be perceived.

I: Do you think that there are important differences between generations, for example between the generations brought up during the Soviet Union and the generations that are young today, concerning questions of gender and ethnicity? Do you think that the society has changed with respect to these issues?
R: There are of course people who are very influenced by the soviet way of life. That women should work and so on. There are also people who lived during that period of time, but for some reason has changed their views and religion has become more important and now considers that women should only stay at home and only perform house work. I don’t know what to say about that.

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I: You said initially that often marriages aren’t officially registered.
R: Yes.

I: Doesn’t women know what kind of problem it might entail not to register the marriage?
R: First of all it might be because the woman is too young and because she doesn’t have a passport. It is not possible to register marriage without a passport. If a woman is under 16 years she is not allowed to get married so in that case it is possible to officially register the marriage.

I: What reasons might there be for a woman not to have a passport?
R: She has to be sixteen to get a passport. So, the main reason is that the girl is too young, but there might also be other reasons. For example that the husband don’t want the girl to be able to invoke any legal rights in case of divorce, like her right to property or to allowance. And there might also be so that they register the child only with the mother and then the mother can get financial help from the government, as a single mother, despite there is a present father. But in fact it is no money to talk of and in the end it is always the women and children that are the losers of this arrangement.

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I: Do you think that the situation for women in Osh has become better, compared to about ten years ago?
R: No, on the contrary it has become worse. I don’t know exactly because for ten years ago I worked only with human right in general, and then I also noticed women seeking help concerning allowances and so on, but now I
see that the situation for women is getting worse. It has to do with the islamization of society and the increase of early marriages. Early I hadn’t heard of women in our society getting married at fifteen.

I: What do you think is the cause of the islamization in your society?
R: Islamization take many different expressions. For example women are covering themselves in long dresses and so on.

I: Why is that?
R: Hm, women for example where I studied it was free and the books were free. Now it is not like that. Universities are expensive and the fees has increased considerable. It is very expensive. While the Islamic institutions for education are all free of charge. All Islamic institutions are free. Therefore I believe that when everything costs money, language courses and computer courses, the Islamic institutions will gather more people and people will be able to study for example Arabic for free. Therefore people go there. Especially many men turn to religion. There is of course also many good things with this, for example it tells men not to drink and not to smoke, but in relation to women it has had negative impact. According to Islam women should be respected and should be educated and get a profession. But today women has been put in a situation where she always has to ask her husband for money and in which she is dependent on him.

I: So is it possible to say that it is the access to money that decides on her limits or possibilities in life?
R: How can I say this… I can say that people in general nowadays thinks more about money than education. Of course who knows language can go abroad to work for that no education is necessary. And women are thinking about getting a husband, and once married with a husband that can provide for her there is no need for an education or a profession. I don’t know…

I: What do you think about the future for your society? It is hard to say of course, but what do you imagine your society will be like in about ten years?
R: Hard to say. In 2010 we had hopes for the future but time flies. Besides from our own problems there is conflict everywhere and war. And this influences our society also.