



Women's Narratives: Resistance to Oppression and the Empowerment of Women in Uzbekistan

Zulfiya Tursunova
Algoma University

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Abstract

The article presents women's narratives to understand gendered aspects of socio-economic and political transformations in women's lives in post-Soviet Central Asia. The author considers that narrative functions within a multi-disciplinary theory, research, and practice of livelihood, empowerment and conflict resolution. Given the colonial representations of women in the past and the storytelling ambiguity in misrepresenting women's lives and locating them in marginal spaces in the narrative and society, the Soviet authorities claimed to end the seclusion of women ignoring women's voices and social movements for equality and social change in the society. The article aims to understand gendered aspects of socio-economic and political transformations in women's lives in post-Soviet Central Asia through women's narratives. These narratives, based on oral history and autobiography rather than writings based on Soviet sources, demonstrate a complex picture of women's struggles in their families and communities. Women describe their social, economic and environmental stresses and the ways they learn to live with social changes and empower themselves.

INTRODUCTION

When I come to the market I do not know which work I will carry out – heavy or the light. I even do not think about it. When we are offered 1000 sum (1 dollar) per day, we are simply glad for the fact that there is a work, even if it hard. Sometimes we are told in advance what to do: wash clothes, wash the windows, clean the house or do other household work. Then we even feel pleased: feel proud and start bargaining. But everybody among us wants that she will be particularly chosen, therefore we start reducing the price. It turns out that we create difficulties for ourselves. We are usually hired by young men. They are so prudent...despite of our age they



offer us to sleep with them after the work. Personally I reject the work and the rest and go away. In such cases I think: better to die than to stand humiliation. Sitting and thinking, who I was before, whom I turned into, and in whose hands am I... (Yakvalhodjiev, 2003)

This is a former schoolteacher, Bahtigul, one of the narrators in the film "Hack workers" who reflects about her experience and coping with the new context when the centrally planned Soviet economy collapsed in 1991. In her testimonio, Bahtigul highlights the deep dimensions of poverty, deterioration of values and beliefs that are expressed in gender-based violence, and in general the absence of economic alternatives. It has been ten years since her husband had dropped her off and the four children. He got married to another woman and reregistered the apartment to his new wife. Through the court, Bahtigul was able to receive two rooms of the current apartment where her children live now. However, this decision was not welcomed by her ex-husband and his new wife. In the school where she worked the rumours spread that Bahtigul is a "fallen woman," and her main job is prostitution. She had to leave her job. Her new competitor, the current wife, spreads rumours in the places where Bahtigul was looking for a job. Her life turned into hell. No matter how much she wanted to turn her life to its previous status, the hack workers market was waiting for her (Yakvalhodjiev, 2003). Yet, Bahtigul exercises her agency by her ability to reject the financial opportunities her survival highly depends on and also narrates her experience to demonstrate the rapid increase of poverty and loss of her social status. For the majority of the population in Uzbekistan, the transition to market oriented economy has turned into deterioration of the social and economic life. Income has fallen rapidly and the living costs increased. The unemployment rate is high especially among the rural population, predominantly women. In addition, the strong patriarchal values of women's inferiority increased during the last years. Consequently, women experience discrimination in employment such as unequal pay. One on hand, alarmingly enough many women were forced from public to domestic sphere where women perform traditional role of caretakers. Strong cultural power is based on gender prejudices and stereotypes of gender inequality concerning men and women in regard to their social roles, and responsibilities.

How do women exercise agency to resist oppression and empower other women to act upon in telling their stories? Feminist researchers stress the importance of voice, authenticity, interpretive authority and representation whereby women carry out the role of social actors and interpret events and conditions of their lives in their subjective meaning expressed in stories (Collins, 2000; Haraway, 1991). Stories are helpful for the narrators to describe issues related to the changes in agrarian political economy (Akram-Lodhi, 2013), trauma, oppression, economic injustice (McCall, 2011; Menchu,

1983), power relations and community survival and well-being (Anderson & Lawrence, 2003; Senehi, 1996, 2009). Narratives or stories here, relate to an oral or written form of telling a story. Narratives, or story, can be an autobiography of one's life, a story about divorce, tragedy, illness, war, marriage, a story about discrimination, injustice, colonialism or even humour. Indigenous peoples around the world relate their creation stories to resources such as land, water, nature such as spirits, animals, insects, stars whereby all components including people are connected as equal parts of the whole organic ecosystem. As Smith (1999) points out, "to be connected is to be the whole" (p. 148).

The standpoint of this paper is that narrative operates within a multi-disciplinary theory, research, and practice of livelihood, empowerment, and conflict resolution. Narrative operates in the realm of livelihood related to human (knowledge, skills, education, health, labour power), natural (land, water, trees and so on), physical consisting of basic infrastructure (capital, transport, water supply, sanitation, shelter, communication) and produced good (the tools and equipment to function productively), financial (credits, earned income, remittances, pensions, entitlements, stocks held in cash, livestock and jewellery), and opportunities that arise from access to social networks (kin, communities, membership to groups, access to institutions (Chambers & Conway, 1992; DFID, 2001; Ellis, 2000), and symbolic capitals.

Narratives or stories themselves are a source of knowledge related to the human capital of a storyteller, his or her knowledge, skills and ability to tell a story. Stories connected to the lives of people enacted in stories are located in a socio-political context of power, knowledge and culture. By exploring women's representation in early Soviet ethnographic writings, I intend to demonstrate storytelling ambiguity in colonial misrepresentations of Indigenous women in Uzbekistan. I will also provide accounts of women's voices and struggles in Soviet and post-Soviet periods to demonstrate how women's access to livelihood resources is influenced by socio-economic, environmental and cultural transformations. I argue that women empower themselves to respond to these changes which curtail women's livelihoods by limiting their access to land and crops, therefore compromising their well-being and food security.

DESTRUCTION OF THE WAYS OF DOING: SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS

The Tsarist conquest of the Central Asian region was followed by Soviet military conquest (1918-1922), which later led to the creation of the states in the former Soviet Union by creating territorial divisions. Stalin, the leader of the Soviet Nationalities Commissariat (a unit of the Bolshevik government) deemed that territorial divisions are necessary to permit "nationalities," people who share land, culture, and history, to develop their identity. However, before colonisation, ethnic

groups such as Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kazaks, and Kyrgyz spoke Turkic and Persian languages and had many dialects and also different lifestyles, nomadic, agricultural, and sedentary (Pierce, 1960).

People of Central Asia experienced oppression, their language and culture was denied and considered inferior to the colonizer's culture, their land and sustainable livelihoods were considered primitive and thus were destroyed. With the advancement of colonialism, our resources such as land, water, cotton were taken away by the railroads as if the railroads had been built for modernization. In 1928, the Soviets launched land tenure reform of collectivization entailing the withdrawal of land from ruling elite, *khans and emirs* to set up collective and state farms (Aminova, 1969). With the new land tenure system, agricultural and livestock production shifted from household to state farms and led to knowledge loss of livelihood activities (Wall, 2006). And this was not a phallic oppression or system of economy, "**They** came, **They** saw, **They** named, **They** claimed" (Smith, 1999, p. 80) and their rule of law for their own advantage at the expense of the infringement of the Indigenous peoples prevailed. And when "They came," they used research to write about our knowledge pretending to invalidate it with the aim to own knowledge and thus to hold the power to appropriate resources and diminish the speaking voices of Indigenous people.

All societies have characteristic narrative structures that enable members to construct and maintain knowledge of the world (Cruikshank, 1998). Under colonialism "They named, They claimed" narrative structures and also stories to distance peoples from their ways of thinking, doing, and acting. Linda Smith (1999) points out that the

contested stories and multiple discourses about the past, by different communities are closely related to the politics of everyday modern life of Indigenous peoples. It is very much a part of the fabric of communities that value oral ways of knowing. These contested accounts are kept within genealogies, within the landscape, within weaving and carvings, even within the personal names that many people carried. The means by which these histories were stored was through their systems of knowledge. Many of these systems have since been reclassified as oral *traditions* rather than histories" (p. 33)

that enable narrators or storytellers to interpret events, to take a particular standpoint and to make actions with the communities towards social justice and responsibility.

The worsening of the socio-economic situation after Independence in 1991 went along with land restructuring and transforming Soviet collective and state farms into cooperative enterprises and later on into private farms. At the beginning of the 1990s in rural development, the land restructuring led to the migration of men for paid labour

work (Kandiyoti, 2003). The public sector of employment shrank. Men with higher education went for construction work, taxi driving, agricultural work, or any kind of service work in Russia, Kazakhstan, Arab Emirates, Turkey, and Korea. Women who had been working in teaching, medical, engineering, economic spheres, had to do shuttle trade. They traveled to Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Korea, Turkey, Turkmenistan and Iran to purchase clothes, fabric, shoes, and equipment and then resell at home or in markets (Kamp, 2005; Tursunova, 2012b, 2013). With the loss of employment and social welfare benefits during the transition process, women became dependent on the husband's or father's income and lost cash and bargaining power. Due to the migration of seasonal male workers, the feminization of agriculture deepened (Kandiyoti, 1999). Yet, women and men resisted being the victims of the situation, but rather became agents coping with a socio-economic situation. Both men and women, but sometimes only women, began running small entrepreneurial activities such as baking, sewing, making sweet corn, and raising chickens on the household plot of lands.

COLONIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN

Power relations between and within communities are encoded in knowledge and language (Foucault, 1972). During the early Soviet times anthropologists and ethnographers collected life histories to study cultural facts about local people. The Soviet anthropologists draw attention to "traditionalism" of everyday life of people in Uzbekistan. Snesev indicates that despite the cultural and atheist education, the latter mostly dealing with issues of natural science, failed to deal with religious consciousness, ideas and rituals from the past. Snesev argues that despite the triumph of the Soviet ideology and the belief that orthodox Islam and the whole complex of survivals, including the "primitive kind," had decayed, the ethnographer notes different sets of religious ideas and practices existing alongside Islam preserved by women. He called them "preservers of survivals" with their own "female religion" practicing animism, magic, the cult of ancestors and nature, the cult of saints and their graves, and shamanism. The survival of these acts are due to a "certain cultural lag in the female half of the population, and deficiencies in cultural enlightenment work" (Snesev, 1974, p. 226).

Beyond the ethnocentricity and diminishing the role of women as "preservers of survivals," Snesev (1974) explains the cause of the survivals is due to historically developed seclusion of women based on "patriarchal-feudal family relationships and in the continual property-holding ideology of the male-half of the population" (p. 226). Snesev suggests that scientific-atheist propaganda should be expanded through cultural-enlightenment work; the new settlement of collective and state farms should be reinforced with medical stations with staff that fight against any

kind of survivals. In the work of Snesev, women are objects of the study rather than subjects who possess and negotiate power through rituals in their lives. The voice of the ethnographer and his interpretation prevails over the experience and views of women that have become invisible in the text.

Who is speaking? Foucault asks when he points how the bodies of knowledge function as instruments of power. In particular, these bodies of power are linked to systems of social control and thus to regimes of power. To support power, the regimes give rise to bodies of knowledge about the object they control (Foucault, 1972). In describing traditional life of Uzbek people, Snesev (1974), Poliakov (1992), Bikzhanova, Zadykina, and Sukhareva (1974) indicate that everyday life of people and life cycle events were centered on mahallas and elats (local communities) where gender and age hierarchy were established in extended households, with the predominance of arranged marriages, and the payment of kalym (bride price). Snesev (1974) writes, that

elats have favourable conditions for preserving animistic survivals, magic, and the cults of ancestors and saints; it is precisely in them that the traditional wedding and funeral ceremonial is supported; they fetter the social and political activity of women and promote the retention of remnants of the property-holding ideology of men. (p. 233)

Precisely because of shallow analysis of gender relations embedded in socio-cultural life of women that created a body of knowledge for those who are in power, Soviet regime targeted women in order to emancipate them to pursue the goals of social transformation.

Some scholars used Soviet sources based on top down politics and ideologized content to study cultural facts and the impact of cultural change brought by contact between different groups or as a result of revolutions. Gregory Massell (1974), in his book *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919-1929*, explores the goals and ways of the Soviet political power used in radical transformation of women's lives in "traditional" societies where political structures and traditional solidarities are grounded on kinship, custom, and religion. Massell explores how Soviet revolutionary attempts aimed to create reliable access to Central Asian societies, to weaken native solidarities and lay the groundwork for an efficient mobilization system: one approach "from above" – use of coercive power to subvert obstructive elements, especially rural elite and another approach, a search for a weak link in society, and critical actors.

So, how did Soviets try to develop female roles to engineer social change? Massell (1974) suggests that the Soviet unorthodox approach was based on the breakdown of the traditional family structures and kinship system achieved through the mobilization of its women. In the Soviet imagination a structural weak point and for this reason

subversive stratum were Muslim women, “the lowest of low,” exploited, degraded, and constrained, a surrogate proletariat where *proletariat* had not existed at all. The Soviet regime did not consider women as agents of revolutionary transformations, but vital to their approach because these exploited women would provoke upheaval in a traditional system of values, customs, relationships, and roles starting with the extended patriarchal family. I argue that the Soviet policy was based on Western feminism, which as Chandra Mohanty (1988) considers a deliberate and ideological standpoint of discursive colonialism aimed to develop a certain mode of scholarship about the women in the Third World as a monolithic subject of knowledge who codified as Other, “Third World difference.” The notion of “Third World difference” portrays women as a homogeneous group of victims experiencing shared oppression, denies them agency and contributes to the oppression of women in their countries.

Colonial history is the “story of a specific form of domination, namely of patriarchy, literally his-story” (Smith, 1999, p. 29). This his-story with Marxist class emergence considers women as constituents of a class that lack sexuality, voice and ability to reflect and speak up. The female characters are Other, secluded, veiled, living in a harem with a despotic husband but exotic, tempting, alluring to some extent. The American missionary to Central Asia in 1926 describes women in Bukhara:

As conspicuous by her absence. No man ever sets eyes upon a lady not his own, for in the street she is nothing but a perambulating sack with a black horse-hair screen where her face is likely to be. The women live in a strictly separate part of the house, often having its courtyard and its pond. Only now and again one meets them at dawn or nightfall, stealing out furtively to fetch water. They shrink at the sight of a stranger and veil them-selves in all haste. The children, of whom the usual quantity abounded, were suffering from sore eyes, a result of the all-pervading dirt amid which they live and the pestering flies that take advantage of defenceless babies.

In the whole, women make the impression of children, and in the outlying districts, of savage children. They are inexpressibly filthy in the villages and are everywhere on a far lower social grade than the men. One may say that the highest woman in the land is inferior to the lowest man (cited in Northrop, 2004, p. 33).

This image fits into the traditional paradigm of male dominance focus of female sameness in phallogocentric society, whereby absolutely woman have sex organs more or less everywhere...her geography of pleasure is far more diversified, more manifold in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than it is normally imagined (Irigaray, 1977). How could Soviets recast women's identity if Indigenous people are the “Indigenous problem” of Western obsession similar to Maori in New Zealand and

other people (Smith, 1999)? In exploring Uzbek identity, mainly a Soviet creation constructed by Bolshevik efforts, Northrop (2004) writes that Soviet success does not indicate “Uzbeks today are merely nationalist patriots or Muslim believers; they are neither simply Sovietized nor Russified nor Westernized.” Northrop (2004) asserts that “they are, in complicated, individual ways, all of these things, and more” (p. 34). Northrop’s writings based on Soviet literature exclude women’s voices in reflecting their experiences of upheavals.

WOMEN’S VOICES: SOVIET NARRATIVES

An Uzbek feminist scholar Marfya Tohtahodjaeva (1996) reflects about “women’s question” by listening to the narratives of her family members by examining the relationship between the production of knowledge and hegemonic authority: history, gender, and culture. The author states that Sovietization changed society and served as an impetus for its modernization. The Soviet authority acknowledged legal rights of women, provided free education at all levels, health care, and ended seclusion providing space for women in public. As Tohtahodjaeva describes the segregation of women was eradicated in the fires of *Hujum*.¹ However, the Soviet state failed in transforming Uzbek ideals, nor did it even attempt to do so. Women’s Division suggested new gender relations but Uzbek activists adhered to traditional concepts of sexual honour and views on marriage that emphasize companionship more than equality (Kamp, 2006). In revolutionized society there was no stable social basis to support and encourage women’s equality. The Soviet policy positioned women mostly in subordinate roles as cotton labourers and in professional spheres, thus segregating them (Tohtahodjaeva, 1996). The life regulated and limited by the state and family put a lot of barriers in front of women. Women’s labour was intensified as their responsibilities to her household duties has not changed (Kamp, 2006). Thus, women were entrapped between meeting goals of five-year planned economy and expectations of being good housekeepers.

Agency, one of the central pillars of empowerment, relates to people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a situation where this ability was previously denied to them (Kabeer, 2001). Feminist scholars emphasize that empowerment entails women’s autonomy, self-reliance, control over resources and power structures (Batliwala, 1993; Johnson, 1992; Kabeer, 1999). How did Uzbek women embrace empowerment in their own lives? Marianne Kamp conducted oral histories in 1992-1993 with women who lived through the 1920s and 1930s exploring the range of responses to Soviet modernization and *Jadidism* (movement of modernization led

1 Hujum [Uz.] is attack. The Soviet campaign was aimed to liberate and emancipate women in Central Asia and Azerbaijan from traditions. The campaign to unveil women began in 1927 and lasted until the 1930s.

by young male intellectuals) gives several important arguments. Kamp argues that women developed their own understanding between the Soviet goals and *Jadidist* (local reformists) goals of modernization bringing the new concept of the New Woman to Bolshevik's program of women's equality. Women believed that education was a key to ending women's seclusion and inequality and veiling as incompatible with modernity and thus made wearing *paranji* illegal. Secondly, Kamp views Hujum and the counter Hujum as an illustration of lasting cultural conflict among Uzbeks, and not as a project ordered by Moscow and resisted by anti-colonial Uzbeks. Thirdly, unveiled women tried to overthrow an oppressive patriarchal structure, but failed to mobilize the government support because the state subordinated men and women to itself. Thus, balance of power moved away from patriarchal dominance to state dominance, and women's bargaining power changed (Kamp, 2006). Women's efforts to overthrow and gain control over the structures of patriarchy did not succeed so fully as the ambitious economic goals of the Soviets. Yet, they also made strategic choices of deciding to unveil, making their life more public and also resisting to patriarchy. Despite being betrayed by the state, they made their voice heard and also brought a new vision of gender equality.

WOMEN'S POST-SOVIET NARRATIVES, LIVELIHOOD AND AGENCY

Climate change and various environmental factors impacted women's livelihood strategies and their access to food security. Women observed that growing garlic became difficult because of ecological problems. Garlic is an important cash crop for the livelihood strategies that women engage in. Strawberries were also a particularly vulnerable crop as they were exposed directly to acid rain, which frequently ruined crops. A woman who plants strawberries described her experience with the crop:

Now we have acid rains. When acid rain falls, the strawberry looks okay, but it is impossible to eat. The leaves become dark. The crops are spoiled. It happens from time to time, more often than every two years. As a result, we have losses.

Women's income generating strategies are hindered when strawberry production is compromised because strawberries are a cash crop that catch a high price in the market (Tursunova, 2012a). Climate change in recent years has also threatened agricultural productivity, therefore limiting women's income-generating activities and their well-being.

The transition to a market-oriented economy opened new opportunities and had an impact on gender roles and expectations. There was an underlying instability in gender understandings and perceptions. This instability is evident when reflecting on the story of Nargiza opa, a 63-year-old widowed woman. I met first met Nargiza

when I was doing my doctoral fieldwork in Uzbekistan. She invited me to visit her and consented to share her story. Nargiza opa receives a pension in the amount of 130,000 *so'm* (U.S. \$73). She used to work in a dressmaking atelier making lots of money. At that time she did not know that she would have such a small pension. In 1990, Nargiza opa stopped and then restarted planting strawberries because she took care of her adopted daughter who became sick. She borrowed money from friends to cover the medical expenses which amounted to 300,000 *so'm* (U.S. \$167). She started planting strawberries in September on two *sotka* (200 square meters) of *ogorod*, which gave her a bad yield. She found out from neighbours that she should plant strawberries during *chilla*² instead of in September. In 1994 she became seriously ill with breast cancer at the time when coupons were introduced and all money was devalued.³ She was able to withdraw money from the bank to use for her operation. She reflected on how difficult it was for her to maintain the well-being of her household with her health conditions when her son-in-law, Temur, does not bring enough income and does not care about the household. In her personal story, Nargiza opa described her struggle with complex processes of power negotiation and bargaining with Temur who lives with Nargiza opa as *ichki kuyov* in her house instead of living in his own or parents' house like other married men. In traditional marriages, the groom is responsible for providing accommodation for a new family to live in. Because Temur is not able to provide accommodation, he lives with his bride's family. Nargiza opa told me:

I live with an *ichki kuyov* and he does not have any sympathy towards me even though he is my nephew. Surprisingly, he does not have any sympathy towards me even though he is my sister's son! The young generation is like that! He does not understand that I am half dead! He got married to my daughter and he is very young. Both of them are young. It is just inappropriate to sit on his wife's shoulders and other women. Everything is turned upside down. If before men worked and brought money home, presently women do all the work. Men used to do a lot of agricultural work; now women do it. Men come to the wife's house and have neither a job nor work in the house.

It is hard to say something to him. He is lazy! He does not want to work! I told him several times to do this or that. He got upset. He also went to his parental home several times. He stays there for two months, then he does not feel comfortable there and comes back. He left in the winter for two months and we were having such a difficult time feeding ourselves. My son-in-law does not do anything. If I ask him to do something, he takes ten days to do it. Now he is on sick leave,

2 *Chilla* [Uz.] is the hottest forty days of summer.

3 In 1993, the new Uzbek currency (*so'm* coupons) was introduced temporarily.

which means he will not have money. I asked him to cut a poplar branch and he did when Kamola (her adopted daughter) told him. He did only after ten days. It is so difficult to live with this *ichki kuyov*. Your whole nervous system breaks!

Nargiza opa pursues a set of resilience-building strategies by engaging in small-scale trade of strawberries that reach a high price by contrast to other fruits. She sells bundles of corn at a rate of 500 *so'm* (U.S. \$0.27) to neighbours who have cattle. She plants a few tomatoes and pumpkins in her small *ogorod* of two *sotka* (200 square metres). She plants strawberries and garlic in between to protect the garlic from snails.⁴ She sells these strawberries at the roadside for 8000 *so'm* (U.S. \$4) per kg and buys basic food for the household consumption. Nargiza opa is the woman who keeps this family – including her two year-old grandson – alive.

Nargiza opa had her goals, hopes, and expectations that Temur, whom she took in, would provide financial support and be a breadwinner. She thought that her nephew, as her relative, would be of greater help than anybody else. Instead, as a single woman, she still works and supports the household. Nargiza opa is in her 60s, a time when women retire from work and, as in the role of mother-in-law, have more time for rest.

Nargiza opa, like other households with an *ichki kuyov*, regards this situation as worse for herself than if her daughter had gone to live at the husband's house. Nargiza opa must take all the financial burden to feed the family. If she had a married son with a daughter-in-law living with her, they would be the main providers and supporters of the family. When Temur is upset with her, he goes to his natal home and stays there for some time. Daughters-in-law usually go home when they feel oppressed and voiceless. These women know that they may not come back to their in-laws' house. Temur resists the power of Nargiza opa who has a major voice in the decision-making of the household. The *ichki kuyov's* strategy of going to his natal home is similar to that of daughters-in-law, but also different in this family in terms of outcomes. Nargiza opa still takes him in for the sake of her daughter and grandson. The *ichki kuyov* negotiates power with his mother-in-law by moving in and out from the family, but still he cannot balance it. Nargiza opa felt that her *ichki kuyov* did not have much interest and motivation to support his mother-in-law and perhaps even his own family.

In narrating her life story Nargiza opa addressed several epiphanies. Epiphanies are the moments of calamities, transformations, turning points in the experiences of individuals, which result in shifting perceptions of their lives (Denzin, 1989). Nargiza indicated the epiphanies that took place in her life such as cancer, and marriage of her adopted daughter to the nephew. Some women in post-socialist countries like Uzbekistan experience difficulties in sustaining their basic needs, desire to have

4 How to plant strawberries with garlic is based in indigenous knowledge that has been passed from one generation to another.

enough food, employment, and a safe future for the children. The key aspect of her story is the narrator's voice speaking in the form of an "I" that insists to be recognized, that wants people to draw attention to the expressed concern. Nargiza opa's story is indicative of radical transformations in gender roles and expectations that are influenced by socio-economic changes.

CONCLUSION

The Soviet narrative history from the moment when "They came, They saw, They named, They claimed" (Smith, 1999, p. 80) demonstrates a common unifying theme of modernizing backward people of Uzbekistan through everyday life practices, from rituals to gender relations in society. Representing women's lives shows storytelling ambiguity in misrepresenting women's lives and locating them in marginal spaces in narratives and society. Narratives show power relations between the colonizer and colonized with its privileged position in the centre of the reformation of women's lives. Clearly, colonial narratives were sexist with no space for women's voices to be heard. Women's Soviet accounts based on oral history or autobiography rather than writings based on Soviet sources show complex nuanced pictures of women's struggles in their families and public spaces. Some women bought into the Soviet agenda and thought that they would change patriarchal relations but later were betrayed as the state subjugated women and men to its own interests (Kamp, 2006). In spite of conceived liberating idea of Soviets, women turned into a massive army of the surrogate proletariat working in cotton fields, factors and plants that enriched Russia but not the local population.

Narrative research shows how the Soviet state impoverished the population by subtracting its resources, enforcing women's engagement into the labour force which brought new dimensions of gender relations that reinforced his-story and strengthened inequality among men and women. Women had multiple burdens of meeting the state-ordered plans and still being good mothers, housekeepers and companions of their husbands. These profound changes had an impact on gender roles and identities in post-Soviet times.

The deterioration of the socio-economic situation and land tenure changes redefined gender relations, roles and identities leading to new livelihood activities such as migration. Narrative of some Uzbek women describe far more difficult situations beyond the rupture of social supports and economic infrastructures, and the growing problem of poverty. Yet, they recast themselves and their livelihood activities by their ability to make strategic life choices that had an impact on their self-esteem, pride, and self-assertion.

Women's resilience demonstrates their choices, decision-making, and ability to negotiate with households and markets in this complex socio-economic situation in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. Women's stories demonstrate that the individual and collective agency of women was expressed in maintaining and accumulating financial resources and social capital. Climate change constrained women's choices to plant specific crops and gain income from harvest. In spite of different livelihood strategies, many women used their social networks, knowledge of seeds, markets, and economic powers to strengthen their livelihood resources to maximize profit and improve their well-being. Women became the purveyors of food security as they built a solution to the new post-communist reality by building greenhouses, participating in social and economic networks, planting, and planning harvesting to take advantage of market conditions.

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Author Note

Zulfiya Tursunova, PhD

Assistant Professor, Community Economic and Social Development (CESD)

Contact:

Room SH500A

Algoma University

1520 Queen Street E

Sault Ste Marie, ON P6A 3Y1

Telephone: (705) 949-2301 ext 4754

Facsimile: (705)-949-6583

E-mail: zulfiya3@gmail.com