

## Being a Girl in a Post-Soviet State

By Ferdona, 1,372 words

Section: Themes / Central Asia

Editing by "Thinking-East.Net"

Copyright © Ferdona 2005. Published on 25/04/05 by "Thinking-East.Net".

*Ferdona (20, from Uzbekistan) tells us about her life -- a life that is not easy, living in a country in which women's rights are becoming ever more difficult to retain.*

Sometimes mistaken for Afghanistan or Pakistan, Uzbekistan is also often being confused with other countries bearing a -stan in their ending. Of course, I don't really like this, but being from a country that is to many Westerners distant and obscure, there is so much more that needs to be discussed rather than the mix-up of names.

Although I am 20 years old and to some of you it may seem that I have little experience, I feel prepared enough to debate and express my opinion on some of the hot topics of today's Uzbekistan. Most of them are "taboo," and while they linger in everyone's mind, they rarely come to the surface within personal accounts.

I want to draw for you a descriptive picture of the present-day situation in my country. I'll touch upon issues which are a pain in my neck, but I must share them with you. Yet, while negative shades shall dominate my picture, there are so many positive colours that are obscured but are really there. (After all, it is *my* country.)

### Different traditions?

I am originally from the Ferghana Valley, of which most parts are considered to be very "pious." Though I don't read the *Koran*, can't learn by heart all the holy words said by Our Prophet *Muhammad*, and don't usually dress in traditional clothes, I always keep my faith in *Allah* and know where I belong to-and what my duties are as a Muslim girl.

But apparently, there are different interpretations of what it

means to be a Muslim girl.

Some of my friends have stayed in Ferghana due to the prejudice of their parents. Their belief is that it is not appropriate, and even shameful, for a "real" Uzbek girl from a family with a dignified and respectful name to live and study on her own in another city, far away from her home. I overcame these social stereotypes and anachronistic beliefs, deciding to enrol in the University of Tashkent in the capitol of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

As a silent protest against the traditional social fabric that has the "woman's place" only in the house with her children and chores, I came to a city totally alien to me and started my own life. In Tashkent, I discovered that I wanted to pursue a career, and which path I should follow.

My decisions are tightly connected with the issue of gender equality, which is something immensely contentious in Uzbekistan. Developments during the Soviet period gradually offered women more choices than they ever had before. Today, these gains are becoming ever more difficult to maintain.

### Just being a girl

Women's rights have become so important in human civilisation that they are intricately connected to basic human rights. In contemporary Uzbekistan, the opinion of a woman as well as her wishes and desires are secondary-they come only after those of a man. This is intolerable to girls like me. Hence, we try to become involved in NGOs that work on gender issues and women's

rights.

In truth, there is another reason why I am so concerned about this: my own family. In an allegedly "democratic" and free household, I personally faced violence from my father's side. ... Against which I didn't fight; I escaped.

Whenever there is a discussion about the role of women in Uzbek society, it's essentially done to deceive the international community. The creation of new laws and new legal procedures, offering more seats for women in parliament, etc., are parts of a rouse.

Every Uzbek woman expects to be discriminated against due to her marital status, education, social position and so on. When the government tries to involve women in the bureaucracy, even occasionally offering high positions, a woman may simply (and probably) ignore or refuse such opportunities in the fear that she won't be able to hold onto her gains for a long time. Her family, especially her husband, may disdain her decision to carry this sort of responsibility.

What is this? A matter of religion, gender equality, human rights or just social concerns?

### **Changing women's perception**

We have already reached the 21st century and the world is changing radically. Yet, it is getting extremely difficult to change women's attitudes of life, to make them think differently, persuade them how much they can do despite feeling so fragile, to become strong inside themselves.

Thankfully, there are many such girls and women who strive for a better future, who have great expectations from life and are eager to occupy a worthy and dignified place in society and achieve their lives' goals. I am one of them!

This is due to my mother. Despite her failures with my father, she created a healthy environment for me to continue my education and supported me in my dream of becoming a career

woman and attaining financial independence. She made me stand up for my rights and the freedoms she was deprived. *Her life was my first teacher!* I wish there were more mothers like mine to provide their daughters an opportunity to choose what and when, why and with whom.

This is what girls like me want to change: the ongoing Uzbek social stereotypes that women cannot be a powerful branch in the building of a democratic society in Uzbekistan.

### **Speaking out**

In Uzbekistan, people live with the permanent concern that it is dangerous to get "too" involved in something contentious. Everyone fears getting "warned" for every little criticism made. One example: while researching within the framework of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), my university administration suggested me to change my topic, "Media Freedom in Central Asia," for my own "sake and security."

All five Central Asian states are suffering human rights violations in one form or another. There is a ubiquitous lack of freedom of speech, no free and fair elections, and everywhere authoritative governments that are actively preventing any step in the direction of more democratic systems.

Some people even argue that democracy is something which will never be achieved in Central Asia. Despite the region's fourteen years of independence, there is still a smell of the Soviet period in these countries.

Personally, I sometimes doubt that the idea of "Democracy" is applicable to Central Asian states. If democratization is possible, then it can only be a long-term process, and it will take many years for Central Asia's nations to cultivate a clear understanding of the necessary principles for a free and open society.

### **Foreigners in Uzbekistan**

An interesting fact is that many foreigners coming to Uzbekistan for the first time always say that Uzbekistan is very "inte-

resting“ and a ”challenging place to live in.“ They tend to stress the country’s sightseeing places, national heritage and our rich and multifarious history, not to speak of the diverse culture and nature.

However, what I would like to hear from these visitors is their real opinions, and maybe even suggestions, recommendations about what could be done better. They see our life from a very different perspective and therefore are likely to be more aware (in some respects) of many things which are still unclear to us, the Uzbek population.

You may say people can obtain the latest updates from local TV, radio or newspapers. Unfortunately, the very sad truth is that none of these news-sources provide us with strong, objective and reliable information on current events in our homeland. You will find no independent media in Uzbekistan besides the Internet (though even then some websites are banned by the government).

You see there are so many questions that remain unanswered for Uzbeks who want to shape the future development of our country and set Uzbekistan free from social stereotypes and dictatorship.

We, the youth, are eager to lead Uzbekistan towards prosperity and establish a real democratic and liberal society, not only for our own sake but also for the sake of future generations.

I am firmly convinced that all threats and problems presently faced by Uzbekistan are a matter that should always be on the agenda of the international community. The world’s part in the future of Uzbekistan is integral.

I would be endlessly happy to know what some of you, my readers, think about my words.