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Emancipation of the Unveiled: Turkmen Women under Soviet Rule, 1924–29

ADRIENNE LYNN EDGAR

In the Soviet campaign to abolish “backwardness” in Central Asia, some of the fiercest battles were fought over the fate of Muslim women. It was impossible to build a socialist society without freeing women from their subordinate status and recruiting them into Soviet collective farms, factories, and schools, Soviet authorities believed. By doing away with “archaic” and “degrading” customs, the Soviet regime hoped to transform Central Asian women into free individuals and active Soviet citizens.

In much of Central Asia, the effort to transform the lives of women centered on the campaign against female seclusion and the veil. The Bolsheviks viewed the veil as an appalling manifestation of female inferiority, and the veiled woman herself as a potent symbol of Central Asian backwardness. Soviet propaganda vividly and indignantly described Muslim women who were covered from head to toe with heavy fabric, secluded in the female quarters of their houses, and prohibited from speaking to men who were not their relatives. A campaign to promote unveiling culminated in the *hujum* (onslaught) of 1927, in which thousands of women tore off and burned their veils in public squares.¹ Yet the unveiling campaign—and indeed, the veil itself—was generally limited to the urban and sedentary agricultural areas of what are today Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. In Turkmenistan, as in other parts of Central Asia with a recent history of pastoral nomadism, women were not secluded and did not wear the *paranji* and *chachvon*, the heavy veil and cloak that were the focus of Soviet activists’ attention.² How, then, did Soviet

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¹On the *hujum* and the unveiling campaign in Central Asia see Gregory J. Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919–1929* (Princeton, 1974); Douglas Northrop, “Uzbek Women and the Veil: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia” (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1999); and Marianne Kamp, “Unveiling Uzbek Women: Liberation, Representation and Discourse, 1906–1929” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1998).

²Kamp, “Unveiling Uzbek Women,” 253–58. Throughout the Islamic world, veiling is generally less common in rural areas, especially among nomadic and tribal populations. See Nikki Keddie, “Introduction: Deciphering Middle Eastern Women’s History,” in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven, 1991), 4.

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Communists seek to “emancipate” Muslim women who did not wear this potent marker of female inferiority?

In the absence of the veil, officials of the Communist party Women’s Department (Zhenotdel) in Turkmenistan concentrated on legal reform to change women’s status within the family. Through the adoption of new laws outlawing traditional marital practices, they hoped to free Turkmen women from the constraints of custom and draw them into public life. This legal campaign was by no means limited to Turkmenistan; each of the Central Asian republics passed laws identifying and outlawing “crimes of custom” (*bytovye prestupleniia*) in the 1920s. Yet such legislation played a more central role in Turkmenistan than in neighboring Uzbekistan, where the campaign to change women’s status through law gave way in 1927 to the dramatic, head-on assault on women’s seclusion. In Turkmenistan, this shift from legislation to direct action never took place; in short, there was no Turkmen *hujum*.³

The effort to transform family and gender relations encountered strong resistance throughout Central Asia, but the dynamics of this struggle were different in the Turkmen republic.⁴ Despite an initial belief that it would be relatively easy to emancipate the unveiled women of Turkmenistan, the absence of the veil actually made the Zhenotdel’s task more difficult. Because Turkmen women were presumed to be less oppressed than their heavily veiled sisters, not everyone thought that their liberation should be a top priority. It was harder to mobilize activists and launch an effective campaign for women’s liberation without this simple and obvious symbol of women’s exclusion from public life. Moreover, once the veil had been defined as the main obstacle to women’s progress elsewhere in Central Asia, indigenous male Communists could point to the absence of the veil in Turkmenistan as evidence that radical change was unnecessary.

Opponents of far-reaching gender reform in Turkmenistan also used Soviet class policy to bolster their case, arguing that the assault on traditional gender relations would antagonize the very social groups whose support the regime needed. In an influential 1974 work, Gregory Massell suggested that the Soviet regime sought to enlist Central Asian women as a “surrogate proletariat”—in other words, the primary social basis for Soviet power in a region that lacked an indigenous proletariat.⁵ In Turkmenistan, however, there is little evidence that the local Communist authorities viewed women as their most important

³Massell called these two strategies “revolutionary legalism” and “administrative assault.” In his account, the first strategy was pursued in Central Asia from 1924 to 1928, and the second from 1927 to 1929 (*Surrogate Proletariat*, 186–91).

⁴Massell argued that the Soviet attempt to change women’s status through “administrative assault” provoked fierce opposition, eventually forcing the Soviet rulers to rethink their strategy (*Surrogate Proletariat*, chaps. 7–9). More recently, Northrop has argued that the Soviet assault on the veil not only failed to reshape gender norms but actually increased the Uzbek attachment to the veil as a symbol of national identity and cultural authenticity (“Uzbek Women and the Veil,” 6). Historians have noted a similar phenomenon in colonized parts of the Arab world, where the veil became a symbol of national identity and resistance to colonization. See, for example, Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, 1992), 164; and Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York, 2000), 138–39. Kamp has taken a different approach to unveiling, arguing that the campaign had roots in indigenous Central Asian debates (“Unveiling Uzbek Women,” 3, 11–13).

⁵Massell, *Surrogate Proletariat*, 128–82. Northrop reaffirmed Massell’s point that gender replaced class as the central organizing principle in the socialist transformation of Central Asia (“Uzbek Women and the Veil,” 78–79).

constituency. Instead, Soviet officials were inclined to tread cautiously in attempts to undermine the patriarchal social system, for fear of alienating what they saw as the regime's true basis of support—poor and landless male peasants.

THE VEIL AND “NOMADIC EXCEPTIONALISM”

Europeans had long seen the veiled Muslim woman as a unique sign of the backwardness and depravity of Muslim civilization. Not only did they point to female seclusion and veiling as evidence that Islam was inherently antagonistic toward women, but they cited oppressive gender relations as justification for colonial efforts to transform indigenous societies.⁶ Thus, in British and French colonies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the attack on veiling became the “the spearhead of the assault on Muslim societies.”⁷

Nomadic women formed an exception to the bleak European view of women's condition under Islam. Because they were unveiled, women of historically nomadic groups were thought to enjoy greater freedom and higher social status than women in sedentary Muslim societies. In tsarist Russia, the belief in the relatively high status of nomadic women was related to a conviction that Central Asian nomads were “less fanatical” in their devotion to Islam than their settled neighbors.⁸ Imperial Russian officials and ethnographers frequently pointed out that Kazakh and Turkmen women had considerable freedom and were allowed to become acquainted with their future husbands before marriage.⁹ Some concluded that nomadic women were the equals of men; a few even maintained that their status was higher than that of European women. As one Russian traveler wrote of the Teke Turkmen shortly after the Russian conquest of Transcaspia in the 1880s:

The Teke woman does not resemble other Muslim women, who do not have the right to show themselves to a male stranger and who know no life but that of the

⁶Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 151–52.

⁷*Ibid.*, 152. In India, too, native “barbarism” in the treatment of women was used as justification for British colonial rule. See Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, 1993), 118–19. Influenced by their exposure to Western ideas, some indigenous Muslim reformers likewise called for an abandonment of the veil. Such diverse figures as the Turkish leader Kemal Atatürk, the Syrian feminist Nazira Zayn-al-Din, and the Egyptian modernizer Qassim Amin criticized the veil as a hindrance to Muslims seeking to build modern societies. See Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 144–45, 163–68; Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 127–40; and Nermin Abadan-Unat, “The Impact of Legal and Educational Reforms on Turkish Women,” in *Women in Middle Eastern History*, 177–94.

⁸The Turkmen practiced a popular or “folk” Islam typical of tribal and rural populations, centered to a large extent on saintly shrines and lineages. They had few professional clerics, few mosques, and little familiarity with the great textual traditions of Islam. Russian orientalists tended to dismiss folk Islam as superstitious nonsense or as a holdover from pre-Islamic practices, while maintaining that “true Islam” resided in texts and doctrines. See, for example, Fedor Mikhailov, *Tuzemtsy zakaspiiskoi oblasti i ikh zhizn': Etnograficheskii ocherk* (Ashgabat, 1900), 49–50; *idem.*, “Religioznye vozzreniia turkmen zakaspiiskoi oblasti,” in *Sbornik materialov po musul'manstvu*, ed. V. P. Nalivkin, vol. 2 (Tashkent, 1900), 95–96; and Sev, “Zametki o turkmenskom dukhovenstve,” *Turkmenovedenie*, 1928, no. 2:8–9.

⁹Mikhailov, *Tuzemtsy*, 51; A. Lomakin, *Obychnoe pravo turkmen* (Ashgabat, 1897), 32; P. S. Vasiliev, *Akhaltekinskii oazis: Ego proshloe i nastoiashchee* (St. Petersburg, 1888), 17.

harem. Nor does she resemble the European woman. She has equal rights. The Teke does not regard his wife as a slave or solely as a source of household labor, but sees in her a friend, a person equal to himself.¹⁰

This sharp distinction between nomadic and sedentary Muslim women was somewhat overdrawn. The mere absence of the veil did not mean that women had all the privileges of men in Turkmen society; veiling was only the most visible aspect of a social system in which women faced a variety of economic and social disadvantages.¹¹ In Turkmenistan, women faced burdens deriving from Islamic law as well as from the customary law of a patriarchal society.¹² Like other Central Asian women, Turkmen women carried the burden of preserving their family's honor, since shame would taint the entire family of a woman who engaged in sexual activity outside marriage. Women were expected to play a smaller public role than men, show modesty in public and before strangers, and obey their parents and husbands. The Turkmen also accepted various aspects of Islamic law that were disadvantageous to women; polygamy was permitted (although uncommon) and men had the sole right to initiate divorce. In some spheres, such as inheritance law, Turkmen custom was less advantageous to women than Islamic law.¹³

Women's status was shaped in part by a patrilineal social structure in which the well-being of each family and lineage depended on the presence of sons. Sons formed a permanent labor pool, brought wives and future children into the family, cared for their parents in their old age, and provided political support to their relatives in conflicts with outsiders. A daughter, by contrast, was lost to the family when she married, since her future offspring belonged to her husband's lineage. However much daughters might be cherished as individuals, they contributed nothing to the future growth and prosperity of the family.¹⁴

Soviet views of Turkmen women in the 1920s continued to be shaped by tsarist-era notions of nomadic exceptionalism. Soviet ethnographers, like their tsarist predecessors, maintained that unveiled nomadic women were less oppressed than other Muslim women. An influential 1926 guide to Turkmenistan claimed that the Turkmen love of equality and freedom was reflected in the status of women. Men, the author maintained, respected their wives and consulted with them on everything: "The Turkmen woman is not the concubine of her husband or a decoration for his house, but rather his best friend."¹⁵ Even the Zhenotdel, ever the vigilant guardian of women's rights, initially believed that its task

¹⁰Vasiliev, *Akhal-tekinskii oazis*, 17.

¹¹Keddie, "Deciphering Middle Eastern Women's History," 12.

¹²Turkmen groups regulated their communal life primarily by means of a complex unwritten code of law known as *adat*, while Islamic law was of secondary importance (Mikhailov, *Tuzemtsy*, 57–58; Lomakin, *Obychnoe pravo Turkmen*, 1).

¹³Islamic inheritance law stipulates that daughters inherit a share of family property, although this share is smaller than that of their brothers. Among the Turkmen, as among many other tribal groups, women were generally excluded from inheriting. See Keddie, "Deciphering Middle Eastern Women's History," 5; and William Irons, *The Yomut Turkmen: A Study of Social Organization among a Central Asian Turkic-Speaking Population* (Ann Arbor, 1975), 93.

¹⁴Sharon Bastug and Nuran Hortacsu, "The Price of Value: Kinship, Marriage, and Meta-narratives of Gender in Turkmenistan," in *Gender and Identity Construction: Women of Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Turkey*, ed. Feride Acar and Ayse Günes-Ayata (Leiden, 2000), 118–21; Irons, *Yomut Turkmen*, 163–64.

¹⁵O. Tumanovich, *Turkmenistan i Turkmeny* (Ashgabat, 1926), 96.

would be easier in Turkmenistan than elsewhere in Central Asia. As one report on the status of women noted in 1925, "Overall, the woman question in Turkmenia is not as prominent as in, say, Uzbekistan, Persia and other countries. The reason for this is the relative freedom of the Turkmen woman, which is linked to the retention of remnants of tribal life."¹⁶

With the growing intensity of the campaign to emancipate women throughout Central Asia in the second half of the 1920s, Soviet women's activists reconsidered the notion of nomadic exceptionalism and found it wanting. Turkmen women, after all, were not full participants in public life. They attended Soviet schools and joined Soviet organizations in much smaller numbers than men. Their destinies were still controlled by their fathers, husbands, and brothers. Even in their unveiled state, Zhenotdel officials came to believe, Turkmen women were clearly oppressed and in need of deliverance by Soviet law. Advocates of gender reform now tried to separate the issues of Islam and women's oppression, emphasizing instead the ways in which Turkmen customary law denigrated women. By 1927 the official propaganda on Turkmen women could hardly be distinguished from the more general propaganda literature on Muslim female oppression. The Turkmen woman came to be seen as a hapless victim of male domination, her status only marginally better—if at all—than that of her heavily veiled Uzbek sisters. She was a piece of property to be bought and sold at will, a slave subject to the whims of her husband and male relatives, a drudge who worked night and day for her family while her husband relaxed with his friends, drank tea, or went hunting.¹⁷

Despite this new view of Turkmen women, the campaign for women's emancipation remained inherently more difficult in Turkmenistan than in neighboring Uzbekistan. In particular, the absence of the veil in Turkmenistan meant that the Zhenotdel lacked a single highly visible issue around which to rally women's activists. The anonymous figure sheathed in heavy fabric, even on the hottest summer days, and forbidden to show her face to strangers—this symbolized for Soviet activists the restricted circumstances of Muslim women and their exclusion from public affairs. In other parts of Central Asia, discarding the veil came to symbolize a conversion to the Soviet way of life. After unveiling, women would be free to attend literacy classes and meetings, run for the village soviet, and work outside the home. The mass unveilings of the 1927 *hujum* helped to crystallize both support for and opposition to the regime's efforts at social transformation. As Douglas Northrop has written, the Soviet narrative of female liberation in Central Asia relied on the act of unveiling—a "public, even theatrical act of individual emancipation."¹⁸ Moreover, the veil was an important symbol for male party members, who could prove their

¹⁶Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), f. 62, op. 2, d. 440, ll. 106–7.

¹⁷For general Bolshevik views of Muslim women see Massell, *Surrogate Proletariat*, 93–123; and Northrop, "Uzbek Women and the Veil," 28–32. For depictions of Turkmen women as victims of gender oppression see D. G. Yomudskaia-Burunova, *Zhenshchina v staroi Turkmenii: Bytovoï ocherk* (Moscow/Tashkent, 1931); N. V. Briullova-Shaskol'skaia, "Na Amu Dare: Etnograficheskaia ekspeditsiia v Kerkinskii okrug TSSR," *Novyi Vostok*, no. 16–17 (1927): 298–99; B. Belova, "Zhenotdely v Turkmenii," *Turkmenovedenie*, 1928, no. 12:34; S. Morozova, "K etnograficheskim kharakteristikam raionov Turkmenii," *Turkmenovedenie*, 1929, no. 1:79; and RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 801, l. 125.

¹⁸Northrop, "Uzbek Women and the Veil," 91.

commitment to the Soviet regime by unveiling their wives and daughters.¹⁹ In Turkmenistan, the absence of the veil not only deprived Zhenotdel activists of a potent symbol of oppression and conversion but also gave local officials an excuse to minimize the need for work among women. This was especially true after the veil became the primary focus of Zhenotdel efforts elsewhere in Central Asia. As a group of Turkmen Communist party members in the Güzilayak region noted laconically in 1927, “Our women don’t wear the veil and therefore we can’t emphasize the question [of women’s emancipation] very much.”²⁰

In 1927 the Turkmen republican Zhenotdel was directed by the Central Asian Bureau to launch a *hujum*—a direct assault on the foundations of women’s subordination. With the *hujum* in Uzbekistan focused mainly on the veil, the bureau offered little guidance as to what such an offensive might look like in the veilless social context of Turkmenistan. The response of some women’s activists in Turkmenistan was to seek a local substitute for the veil, a visible symbol of Turkmen women’s oppression that could become a focus of propaganda and action. One likely candidate was the Turkmen practice known as *yashmak*, the most obvious manifestation of which was a cloth drawn across a woman’s mouth. Some Zhenotdel officials viewed it as functionally equivalent to the veil, a form of symbolic seclusion that prevented women from participating fully in public life.

The problem was that *yashmak* was very different from veiling in its social significance. *Yashmak* was not simply a form of female seclusion, but part of a cultural system revolving around notions of shame and respect for seniority. Extremely complex rules of deference and avoidance regulated relations within a Turkmen household. A new bride was required to avoid all direct contact with in-laws, both male and female, who were older than her husband. In their presence, she covered her mouth with the end of a headscarf and did not speak or eat. With time, and especially after she had children, some of the strictures were relaxed, but with more senior individuals (especially older males) the rules of avoidance remained inflexible. Thus, a woman might experience a lifetime of marriage without ever speaking directly to her father-in-law.²¹ Young bridegrooms faced a similar prohibition on speaking to their elder in-laws, but the burden on women was greater since the young married couple customarily lived with the husband’s family.²²

Zhenotdel officials fell upon *yashmak* as the solution to the problem of nomadic exceptionalism, arguing that it was a heinous manifestation of Turkmen women’s subordinate status and equivalent in its purpose to the veil.²³ Some advocates for women even tried to argue that *yashmak* was worse than the veiling practiced in Uzbekistan. Uzbek women, they contended, at least had the right to behave freely in their own homes, where they were not required to veil. A Turkmen woman, on the other hand, was not even allowed to converse with her husband in her own home if her mother-in-law was present. Because of this, one official argued, a Turkmen woman was made aware of her “slavelike

¹⁹Idem., “Languages of Loyalty: Gender, Politics, and Party Supervision in Uzbekistan, 1927–41,” *Russian Review* 59 (April 2000): 179–200.

²⁰RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 1218, ll. 42–43.

²¹Irons, *Yomut Turkmen*, 104–7; Yomudskaia-Burunova, *Zhenshchina v staroi Turkmenii*, 30–33; Bastug and Hortacsu, “The Price of Value,” 133–35. Similar avoidance practices have been documented among other Turkic peoples (Bastug and Hortacsu, “The Price of Value,” 34).

²²Irons, *Yomut Turkmen*, 109–11.

²³RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 1218, l. 51. See also *ibid.*, d. 2438, l. 101.

position, moral oppression, and absolute lack of rights” every moment of the day.²⁴ Despite these efforts, Zhenotdel officials did not succeed in sparking a mass campaign against *yashmak*. A few desultory articles appeared in the press, and there were periodic proposals to make it a crime to force a woman to practice *yashmak*, but little more. There were no mass burnings of headscarves and no public conversions to a *yashmak*-free life. Perhaps because the practice was so much more subtle and flexible than veiling—and because, unlike the veil, it blurred the boundaries between the public and private spheres—*yashmak* was poorly suited to serve as a rallying symbol for women’s emancipation. Indigenous male Communists argued that *yashmak* was not nearly as onerous as the *paranji*, since women were not required to cover their faces.²⁵ Attention throughout Central Asia was riveted on the veil, and Zhenotdel officials in Turkmenistan were unable to persuade higher-ups in the Central Asian Bureau to support a direct assault on *yashmak*.

THE ASSAULT ON CUSTOM

In the absence of a Turkmen equivalent to the veil, Soviet officials in Turkmenistan concentrated their efforts on crafting legislation designed to transform Turkmen marital and family life.²⁶ The Soviet belief in the necessity of radical intervention to change gender relations was not limited to Muslim Central Asians. It was an outgrowth of debates within Russia about the fate of marriage, the family, and gender roles under socialism. From 1917 through the mid-1930s, the Bolsheviks moved rapidly to emancipate women from the legal and economic constraints that tied them to the household and made them dependent on men, preventing them from realizing their individual potential and participating in the larger society. Early Soviet legislation called for radical changes in marital and sexual practices and the status of women. The 1918 Russian Federation Code on Marriage, the Family, and Guardianship ended the religious sanction of marriage and provided for civil registration of marriage and divorce on demand for either partner. The new code declared that men and women were legally equal, guaranteed equal pay for equal work, and legalized abortion. It equalized the status of children born within and outside of wedlock, set the minimum marriage age at 18 for males and 16 for females, and required the consent of both parties to marriage.²⁷

²⁴Ibid., d. 2696, l. 144, and *ibid.*, d. 2438, l. 101.

²⁵Ibid., d. 2696, l. 144.

²⁶The Soviet regime was following a trend already under way elsewhere in the Islamic world. Reformers and feminists were calling for changes in Islamic personal status laws in Turkey, Egypt, the Levant, and elsewhere in the early decades of the twentieth century. See Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 169–88; Abadan-Unat, “Impact of Legal and Educational Reforms,” 179; and Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 141–42. Soviet authorities apparently felt pressure to be in the forefront of such reform so as not to be outdone by “bourgeois” Muslim countries (RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 1234, ll. 84–85).

²⁷On Bolshevik ideas about women and the family see Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917–1936* (Cambridge, England, 1993), chap. 1; and Gail Warshovsky Lapidus, *Women in Soviet Society: Equality, Development, and Social Change* (Berkeley, 1978), chap. 2. On the 1918 Russian Federation code see Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution*, 50–52; and Massell, *Surrogate Proletariat*, 201–2.

In Central Asia, Soviet authorities believed that the new Russian Federation family code in itself would not be adequate to improve the status of women. It would also be necessary to ban certain customary practices—“crimes of custom”—believed to be hindering women’s entry into Soviet life.²⁸ Communist officials claimed that these practices deprived women of the autonomy and dignity they deserved. Some of the “crimes” targeted for eradication in Turkmenistan were common throughout Soviet Central Asia—the payment of bridewealth (known as *kalym* to Russians and *galing* to Turkmen), polygamy, and underage marriage.²⁹ Others, such as *gaitarma* (the requirement that a bride return to her parents’ house for an extended period soon after her marriage) were less widespread or peculiar to Turkmenistan. The Bolsheviks believed that these customs were the main impediments to women’s progress in Muslim regions where women were not veiled or secluded; they were “remnants of the past,” “socially dangerous,” and likely to “hinder the economic, political, and cultural growth of the republic.”³⁰

Galing, or bridewealth, was the central target of the Soviet assault on “crimes of custom” in Turkmenistan. This was the payment given by the groom’s family to the bride’s relatives when a marriage agreement was concluded. Bridewealth was traditionally paid in livestock, although in the Soviet period money payments became increasingly common. Bridewealth was an essential feature of the Turkmen’s patrilineal, kin-based social structure. Upon marriage, a young woman left her father’s household and moved to her husband’s family’s household, taking her labor and reproductive power with her. As in many patrilineal societies, marriage involved a payment from the groom’s family to the bride’s family, representing compensation for their loss of rights over their daughter and her future children. Anthropologists have argued that bridewealth also reflected the high value placed on women in their roles as wives and mothers.³¹

Bridewealth served other functions in Turkmen society as well. The custom not only created economic linkages between the families of bride and groom, but also served to solidify kinship obligations and authority relationships within the groom’s family. Since the cost of bridewealth was extremely high (families had to begin saving for their sons’ marriages soon after their birth), a young man was financially dependent on his parents and could not marry without their approval. Moreover, the father’s relatives generally contributed to the bridewealth expenses, thereby creating reciprocal obligations among patrilineal relatives. The bridewealth money was used to provide the bride’s trousseau or dowry (known in Turkmen as *atkulak*)—a set of household furnishings, rugs, and other items given to the bride by her family and taken with her to her new home. Thus, much of the money actually returned to the groom’s household and helped the young couple to begin their new life together.³²

²⁸Massell, *Surrogate Proletariat*, 200–202.

²⁹These practices were also targeted in the other Central Asian republics. On legislation against “crimes of custom” in Uzbekistan see Northrop, “Uzbek Women and the Veil,” chap. 7. On the strategy of “revolutionary legalism” in Central Asia see Massell, *Surrogate Proletariat*, 192–212.

³⁰Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), f. 3316, op. 21, d. 100, l. 90.

³¹Bastug and Hortacsu, “The Price of Value,” 120–22.

³²*Ibid.*, 129–31.

The Soviet view of bridewealth did not take into account the social context in which it operated or its positive connotations in demonstrating the high value placed on women. A few Soviet authors and officials were tolerant of the custom, noting that its purpose was to give a bride a certain measure of economic security, pay for her trousseau, and bring prestige to her parents.³³ However, the vast majority of Soviet officials and Zhenotdel activists condemned the exchange of bridewealth as “selling and buying women” like so much livestock. Bridewealth, one said, “is an extremely dangerous phenomenon in the life of autonomous republics and provinces. It turns a woman into an object to be bought and sold, deprives her of basic freedom and human dignity, and makes her into a source of non-laboring income for her parents and relatives.”³⁴ Another called bridewealth “the crudest possible violation of a woman’s freedom, putting her in the position of an object to be bought and sold.” Bridewealth was also condemned on class grounds, since the expense was said to make marriage the prerogative of the well-to-do.³⁵

For a variety of reasons, bridewealth became the centerpiece of the conflict between indigenous Turkmen seeking to defend their customs and Soviets officials seeking to eradicate them. Among the Turkmen, polygamy was relatively rare and underage marriage, while common, was not required by custom or religion. Bridewealth, by contrast, was a universal and mandatory part of the marriage and kinship system; marriages were not valid without it.³⁶ Soviet officials, for their part, viewed bridewealth as the linchpin of a social and economic system that degraded women and the poor; it prevented poor men from marrying, facilitated polygamy among the rich, and perpetuated child marriage by encouraging poor fathers to “sell” their young daughters for a profit. Eradicating the practice, Soviet officials believed, would make it easier to end other “backward” customs relating to women.³⁷

Legislation against bridewealth and other “crimes of custom” began in the Turkestani republic, part of the Russian Federation, before the national delimitation of Central Asia in 1924–25. A January 1923 decree of the Turkestani government banned bridewealth throughout Turkestan.³⁸ An October 1924 addendum to the 1918 Russian Federation’s criminal code outlawed several customary practices relating to women in Central Asia, including bridewealth and polygamy.³⁹ In 1925 the leadership of each of the newly created republics of Central Asia began to formulate laws on “crimes of custom” and to circulate them for discussion by native Communists and the local population.⁴⁰ Party officials in Turkmenistan organized peasant conferences with the dual purpose of publicizing Soviet measures and assessing peasant views. At these conferences, it became clear that of all the

³³Tumanovich, *Turkmenistan i Turkmeny*, 95; GARF, f. 3316, op. 19, d. 855, l. 92.

³⁴Dosov, “Bor’ba s bytovymi prestupleniami,” *Kommunistka*, 1928, no. 5:30.

³⁵RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 1234, l. 125. See also G. Karpov, “Kalym i ego sotsial’nye korni,” *Turkmenovedenie*, 1930, no. 2–3:29–33.

³⁶On the rarity of polygamy among the Turkmen see Mikhailov, *Tuzemtsy*, 52; Briullova-Shaskol’skaia, “Na Amu Dare,” 299; and Tumanovich, *Turkmenistan i Turkmeny*, 96.

³⁷G. Karpov, “Raskreposhchenie zhenshchiny-turkmenki,” *Za Partiiu*, 1929, no. 3–4:80–81.

³⁸GARF, f. 3316, op. 21, d. 100, ll. 79, 90, and op. 19, d. 855, l. 102.

³⁹Massell, *Surrogate Proletariat*, 199, 204.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 206.

activities of the Soviet regime, measures designed to emancipate women and transform Turkmen family life aroused the most passion and controversy. Party officials reported that peasants who were passive throughout the conference proceedings, dozing through discussions of soviet elections and land reform, “came alive exactly as if shot from a cannon as soon as the woman question came up.”⁴¹ In Central Asia, as in other European-ruled Muslim countries, the assault on traditional family practices and gender roles provoked a visceral reaction.

At a series of district conferences held in August 1926 in Leninsk province (formerly Chärjev in the Bukharan republic), Turkmen peasants and nomads were asked to approve the government’s proposals banning “crimes of custom.” Some of the delegates resisted. The proposed ban on bridewealth was particularly controversial, with two districts refusing to approve the ban. In Farap, the delegates simply declared they all would continue to give and receive bridewealth because their ancestors had done so.⁴² Turkmen peasants said bluntly that they regarded bridewealth as compensation for the expense of raising a daughter, who would contribute nothing to her own family’s future growth. As one peasant in Leninsk province defiantly said, “If the authorities want to ban *galing*, then let them prepare a place for girls [to live], and we’ll send them there from the day of their birth.”⁴³ Another declared, even more dramatically, that “from the day of their birth until the age of sixteen, girls are dependent on their parents. It’s not possible to give them in marriage without receiving *galing*. If we have to give them away without *galing*, then our wives will kill their daughters at birth.”⁴⁴

While the official Soviet position maintained that *galing* was harmful to the poor and should be abolished on class grounds, resistance to banning the practice was strong among poor peasants, many of whom saw the marriage of a daughter as an opportunity for a financial windfall. As one ethnographer noted, “every poor man who has daughters looks on them as a unique source of income.”⁴⁵ Thus, Soviet authorities in Turkmenistan faced a clear conflict between their desire to end a practice viewed as demeaning to women and their aim of appealing to poor rural men. Indigenous Communists pointed to this contradiction as they expressed their opposition to an outright ban on bridewealth.

Given the constraints of public opinion, leading Turkmen Communists argued, there were limits to how quickly they could move against Turkmen customs. While they expected that the decrees on polygamy and underage marriage would provoke little opposition, Turkmen Communists were convinced that the practice of bridewealth was so deeply ingrained that an outright ban would be pointless. In a discussion of the proposed legislation at a meeting of the Turkmen Central Executive Committee (TsIK) on 4 October 1926, Sovnarkom chair Gaigisiz Atabaev called bridewealth “the crudest sort of assault on the person and freedom of a woman,” but noted that previous experience had shown that a ban on the practice “cannot lead to practical results.” Despite the efforts of the former Turkestan republic to outlaw it, the population “continues to exchange bridewealth to the broadest

⁴¹RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 440, l. 110.

⁴²Ibid., d. 630, ll. 36, 38, 44–45, and d. 1237, l. 278.

⁴³Ibid., d. 1237, l. 277.

⁴⁴Ibid., l. 278.

⁴⁵GARF, f. 3316, op. 21, d. 100, ll. 79–78.

possible extent.”⁴⁶ Others agreed with Atabaev that a ban on bridewealth would be ineffective. The commissar of education, Bāshim Perengliev, noted that the 1923 Turkestanian ban had simply caused the practice to go underground. Families began to pay bridewealth in cash, which was more difficult to trace than the traditional payments of livestock. Perengliev predicted:

Galing will be banned as such, but it will continue to exist as a secret transaction between two parties in dark corners. You won't find a single peasant who will marry his son without paying. Our judicial organs won't know who is or isn't taking bridewealth, since this affair will take place in a narrow circle between two parties. We will have great difficulty learning who gives or receives bridewealth, even if we have hundreds of agents in the village.⁴⁷

The legislation adopted by the Turkmen TsIK in October 1926 banned polygamy and set the marriage age at 16 for girls and 18 for boys, but took a more equivocal position on bridewealth. The TsIK decree on bridewealth did not ban it outright, but merely declared it to be “enrichment at the expense of another person, not sanctioned by law.” Individuals who paid bridewealth had the right to sue for its return in a Soviet court. Neither the giver nor the recipient faced criminal sanctions.⁴⁸ This contrasted sharply with the legislation passed in the Uzbek republic, which had outlawed bridewealth entirely in July 1926.⁴⁹

Almost immediately, problems emerged with the implementation of the new laws. Peasants, not viewing their customary practices as crimes, naturally failed to report them to Soviet authorities, and few cases were brought to court. Local officials refused to enforce the law and covered up “crimes” in their jurisdiction.⁵⁰ The situation with bridewealth, in particular, was just what some Turkmen officials had predicted; the half-hearted declaration that it constituted “enrichment at the expense of another person” did not deter many Turkmen. A 1928 report by the Commission on the Improvement of Daily Life and Labor among Women (KUBT), a women’s advocacy organization under the auspices of the TsIK, noted that the new law had been ineffective in the battle against bridewealth and that “the number of demands for the return of bridewealth has been minuscule.”⁵¹ One thing the convoluted wording of the law did accomplish, however, was to convince many Turkmen that paying bridewealth was illegal, so that the population began to exchange it surreptitiously.⁵²

In part because of enforcement problems, officials soon recognized the need to revise the 1926 legislation. Pressure on the Central Asian republics to strengthen the new laws increased in April 1928, when the all-union TsIK enacted a supplement to the Russian Federation criminal code, “On Crimes Constituting the Relics of the Tribal Order.” The

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, op. 19, d. 855, l. 102.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, ll. 88–89.

⁴⁸RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 1234, l. 125.

⁴⁹Massell, *Surrogate Proletariat*, 205.

⁵⁰The republican Zhenotdel, the informational/statistical department of the Turkmen TsIK, and the Turkmen KUBT all complained that the laws were not being enforced (GARF, f. 3316, op. 21, d. 100, ll. 78–79; RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 1237, ll. 8–10, 263).

⁵¹GARF, f. 3316, op. 21, d. 100, ll. 78–79.

⁵²RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 1237, l. 68, and d. 1218, l. 43.

supplement prohibited bridewealth, polygamy, child marriage, and other practices sanctioned by religion or custom. In Turkmenistan, a new criminal code and a series of decrees adopted during 1928 made existing statutes more strict and added new crimes to the list.⁵³ This legislation ended the ambiguous status of bridewealth, making it a crime punishable by up to three years in prison. One of the newly identified “crimes” was *garshlik*—the exchange of brides between two families.⁵⁴ The republican authorities viewed *garshlik* as a loophole that allowed the Turkmen population to evade the ban on bridewealth. By exchanging daughters as brides for their respective sons, the families concerned were able to avoid paying all but a token bridewealth.⁵⁵ To bolster the new anti-bridewealth legislation, a Turkmen TsIK decree of 1 August 1928 prohibited *garshlik* and made its practitioners subject to a three-year jail sentence.⁵⁶

In the aftermath of the 1928 legislation, the number of “crimes of custom” brought before Soviet courts grew significantly. In the first half of 1928, Soviet courts in Turkmenistan had heard only 162 such cases, with 106 resulting in conviction.⁵⁷ In the first seven months of 1929, the courts heard 1127 cases of customary crimes.⁵⁸ Yet this surge in enforcement was hardly grounds for celebration. Nearly half of those convicted of “crimes of custom” were poor and landless peasants, furthering the impression that the campaign was incompatible with the effort to win the support of the “toiling masses.”⁵⁹ Moreover, there is no evidence that this legislation had any significant impact on popular practice or public opinion, or that the values represented by the new laws had been internalized—or even understood—by the Turkmen population. In order to enforce the new legislation successfully, the Soviet regime had to persuade the population that the way of life they had followed for centuries was harmful and wrong. Turkmen were naturally attached to their customs and unlikely to accept the opinion of outsiders that their way of life was “socially harmful” and destined for history’s rubbish heap. Yet little effort was made to explain the reasons for the new laws to the population. The Zhenotdel engaged in agitation and propaganda, but most of its employees were European women incapable of communicating with the overwhelmingly non-Russian speaking Turkmen population. There was little opportunity to explain Soviet policy in written form because most Turkmen, especially women, were illiterate: in any case, there was a severe shortage of written material in the Turkmen language.⁶⁰ Convincing the public of the need for the new laws was complicated by the reluctance of many local Soviet officials and Communist party

⁵³Ibid., d. 1237, l. 273; GARF, f. 3316, op. 21, d. 100, ll. 82–83.

⁵⁴The other Turkmen marital customs newly outlawed included *dakilma* (the marrying of a widow to her husband’s brother), and *gaitarma* (the return of a bride to her parents’ house for an extended period after marriage). See RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 1237, l. 273; and GARF, f. 3316, op. 21, d. 100, ll. 82–83. See also N. Karaje-Iskrov, “Brachnoe pravo Turkmenskoi SSR,” *Turkmenovedenie*, 1930, no. 2–3:25–30. For more detail on the Soviet campaign against Turkmen marital practices see Adrienne Edgar, “The Creation of Soviet Turkmenistan, 1924–1938” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1999), chap. 4.

⁵⁵In such cases a small symbolic payment was made in order to validate the marriage (Irons, *Yomut Turkmen*, 136). Among the Yomut studied by Irons, bride exchange was called *chalshik*.

⁵⁶GARF, f. 3316, op. 21, d. 100, l. 159

⁵⁷Ibid., ll. 188–202.

⁵⁸RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 2438, ll. 65–66.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid., d. 1237, l. 274.

members to enforce them—or even to obey them. Communists who paid bridewealth, married young girls, or took more than one wife were periodically reprimanded and expelled from the party. Ordinary Turkmen villagers pointedly asked why they should abandon their customs if government officials failed to do so.⁶¹

As the main focus of legal efforts to change women's status in Turkmenistan during the *hujum*, bridewealth was highly contentious and endlessly discussed. It was widely condemned at all levels of Soviet government as the purchase and sale of a human being, a practice akin to slavery. This argument appeared to have the necessary simplicity and moral starkness to rally Soviet activists, even if it did not persuade the Turkmen population. Yet *galing* lacked the inherent drama and visual symbolism of the veil. Unlike the veil, it could not serve as an obvious signal of female commitment to the new Soviet life or male loyalty to the regime; it was an economic transaction between the families of the bride and groom in which the young woman herself played no role. Moreover, as a crucial feature of the patrilineal social system, it could not be abolished without profound changes in the nature of kinship relations—changes which even the most ambitious of Soviet social engineers were incapable of imposing. As some Turkmen Communist officials had predicted, the practice simply went underground when it was outlawed; the exchange of *galing* continued to validate Turkmen marriages throughout the Soviet era.⁶²

Apart from the banning of bridewealth, the most controversial aspect of the new Soviet marriage and family legislation was the policy on divorce. The Russian Federation family code adopted in 1918 allowed a marriage to be dissolved at the request of either partner, without any grounds.⁶³ The Soviet regime's liberalization of divorce, and particularly the granting of equal rights to women in this sphere, was perceived by men as a direct assault on the Turkmen family. Ultimately, the rising rate of female-initiated divorces aroused the impassioned defense of tradition that the veil had aroused elsewhere, underscoring the difficulty of freeing Turkmen women from the constraints of custom while winning—and maintaining—the support of Turkmen men.

Under Koranic guidelines, only men were permitted to initiate divorce. In theory, a Turkmen man could divorce his wife unilaterally by pronouncing "I divorce thee" three times, as prescribed by Islamic law. In practice, the Turkmen frowned upon divorce except in cases of impotence, a husband's refusal to support his wife, or incurable disease in one of the partners. It was unheard of for a woman to initiate a divorce.⁶⁴ A Turkmen proverb put it succinctly: "A husband's death is a wife's divorce."⁶⁵ Yet Soviet authorities seemed to be actively encouraging Turkmen women to divorce their husbands. Many Russian Zhenotdel officials believed that Muslim marriages were *ipso facto* oppressive to women, and they sought to deliver as many women as possible from these unequal unions. The Zhenotdels spread the news about the new divorce law in the early and mid-1920s,

⁶¹Ibid., II, 6, 267, 280.

⁶²In contemporary independent Turkmenistan, the custom reportedly enjoys widespread support among the population, including women (Bustag and Hortacsu, "The Price of Value," 128).

⁶³Russian Federation laws at the time applied to Turkestan, including the Turkmen oblast' (Massell, *Surrogate Proletariat*, 202).

⁶⁴Tumanovich, *Turkmenistan i Turkmeny*, 96; Irons, *Yomut Turkmen*, 142–43; GARF, f. 3316, op. 21, d. 100, l. 86.

encouraging Central Asian women who were unhappy in their marriages to get divorces and helping them to navigate the Soviet bureaucracy.⁶⁶ While precise statistics on the incidence of divorce are lacking, anecdotal evidence suggests that numerous Turkmen women took advantage of the new law.⁶⁷

Male peasants protested the Soviet sponsorship of divorce at conferences and sent complaints to provincial party committees. In Kerki province, local officials warned in 1925 that the large number of women filing for divorce was threatening to cause a violent uprising.⁶⁸ Many local officials claimed that the policy of easy divorce was affecting mostly poor and landless peasants, whose wives were leaving them in order to marry wealthier men. In a number of cases, parents were said to be encouraging or even compelling their daughters to divorce impoverished husbands in order to marry more well-to-do men.⁶⁹

There was disagreement within the Communist party over the divorce issue, with opinion dividing to some extent—although not exclusively—along national lines. Many native Turkmen officials believed that divorce should be strictly regulated within the republic. Given the possibility that young women would be forced into divorce by their parents, they argued, a number of restrictions should be introduced to prevent possible abuse. European officials, more influenced by the Bolshevik rhetoric of sexual equality, tended to maintain that women's freedom to divorce should not be limited for any reason. The opponents of divorce in Turkmenistan ultimately won the battle, introducing harsh new restrictions at a time when women elsewhere in the Soviet Union had unprecedented freedom to end their marriages.

At a session of the Turkmen TsIK on 4 October 1926, Atabaev argued that Soviet-style free divorce was against the interests of poor peasants. In the view of the local population, he said, the new divorce laws were bringing about the destruction of the family and the household economy. Moreover, they were giving rise to new practices of questionable legality. Atabaev described cases in which the wife of a poor man would ask an acquaintance to help her obtain a divorce. The acquaintance would then arrange her "sale" to a new husband for bridewealth, and the woman and her acquaintance would split the proceeds. Atabaev also claimed that some parents had become "repeat resellers," marrying off their daughters five or six times in the course of two or three years.⁷⁰

In Atabaev's view, the upsurge in divorce could be explained by the typical Turkmen woman's flightiness and lack of class consciousness:

⁶⁵Cited in *Turkmenko-russkii slovar'* (Moscow, 1968), 615.

⁶⁶Assisting women with divorce proceedings was one of the main activities of the Zhenotdel in Turkmenistan between 1921 and 1924. RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 1234, l. 49.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, d. 440, ll. 3, 93–94. The new freedom to divorce was taken advantage of by other Central Asian women as well (Massell, *Surrogate Proletariat*, 209–11). Northrop reports that in 1927 in Tashkent, 91 percent of divorce petitions were filed by women ("Uzbek Women and the Veil," 391). There was also an upsurge of divorce in Russia in the 1920s, although Russian divorces tended to be initiated by men. See Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860–1930* (Princeton, 1978), 370–71.

⁶⁸RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 440, ll. 93–94, 109–10.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, ll. 3, 93–94, and d. 1237, ll. 68–69.

⁷⁰GARF, f. 3316, op. 19, d. 855, ll. 103–4.

The Turkmen woman is not yet a mature individual; her understanding is extremely limited and she is still ignorant and benighted. It is not at all difficult to tempt her with the good life, with jewelry or trinkets. Wealthy men take advantage of these circumstances to lure away the wives of poor men. This is generally why the Turkmen woman asks for a divorce—she imagines better prospects for her personal life, and she marries a wealthy or prosperous man as his second, third, or fourth wife.

Since Turkmen villages were not yet “sovietized” and harbored many opponents of Soviet power, Atabaev continued, the free application of Soviet divorce laws risked provoking anti-Soviet violence. Thus, both class equity and the security of Soviet power in the countryside demanded an end to divorce on demand.⁷¹

The first steps toward limiting divorce were taken in 1925. A special commission of the Turkmen Central Committee reviewed the work of the Zhenotdel in mid-1925. After meeting with leading Turkmen officials, who argued persuasively that the rising divorce rate in Turkmenistan was dangerous, the commission suggested that local courts should be more cautious about approving divorces among the native population.⁷² On 3 November 1925 the Commissariat of Justice sent a circular to local judicial organs and prosecutors, urging them not to grant divorces unless they were certain that the wife was seeking a divorce of her own free will.⁷³

A decree of the Turkmen TsIK adopted on 6 October 1926 imposed even more stringent restrictions on divorce. The decree repeated Atabaev’s claims about the repeated “reselling” of brides and the frivolity of Turkmen women who were lured by the promises of rich men. It maintained that easy divorce worked exclusively against the interests of poor peasants, justifying restrictions on divorce as necessary to keep the peace in Turkmen villages, where a woman’s demand for divorce often led to bloodshed due to “peculiar notions of honor” among men.⁷⁴ The TsIK decree stipulated that divorce suits among the native population must be decided in courts, not in administrative or civil registry offices. Only in the more formal environment of the court could officials ascertain that a petition for divorce reflected the sincere desire of the husband or wife, rather than the influence of others.⁷⁵ In cases where there was “insufficient justification” for divorce or a suspicion that parents or other relatives were pushing for dissolution of the marriage, the courts should deny the petition. Atabaev insisted that this decree would limit only “groundless” divorces. A Turkmen woman who had a good reason for wanting a divorce—for example, one whose husband had taken a second wife or had an incurable disease—would still be eligible.⁷⁶ However, local judges tended to interpret both the TsIK decree and the judicial commissariat’s instructions to mean that they should deny all petitions for divorce, even

⁷¹Ibid., ll. 102–5.

⁷²RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 440, ll. 92–94.

⁷³Ibid., d. 1237, l. 270.

⁷⁴Ibid., d. 1234, l. 124. There was concern about the high number of divorces in Russia as well, but officials there worried about the fate of abandoned and destitute women, not the effects of divorce on poor men (Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution*, 241–46).

⁷⁵GARF, f. 3316, op. 21, d. 100, l. 84.

⁷⁶Ibid., op. 19, d. 855, ll. 100–101.

those technically considered justified. The era of easy divorce for Turkmen women was over.⁷⁷

The contrast between Turkmenistan and other Soviet republics is instructive. In March 1926, just a few months before the promulgation of the Turkmen TsIK decree limiting divorces, the Uzbek Commissariat of Justice declared that female-initiated divorces should be processed as expeditiously as possible. Moreover, a new Russian Federation family code adopted in 1926 further liberalized divorce by transferring authority over it from the courts to the civil registry office. An unhappy spouse could now receive a divorce without the presence or approval of his or her partner—a practice known colloquially as “postcard divorce.” As a result, the divorce rate continued to increase rapidly in Russia in the late 1920s.⁷⁸

Not all Communists in Turkmenistan agreed with the new restrictions. Leading Russian advocates for women within the republic took issue with the portrayal of high divorce rates as the product of ignorant women, unscrupulous and greedy relatives, and professional “resellers.” The republican branch of the KUBT disputed the claim that divorce was mostly affecting the poor. According to 1928 statistics on divorce petitions, only 25 to 30 percent were from the wives of “poor peasants.” The most common reasons for divorce were not the desire for “trinkets” cited by Atabaev but much more serious complaints: polygamy, “sexual deviancy,” abusive treatment and beatings, a large age difference between the spouses, or a husband’s refusal to allow his wife to attend school. Only an insignificant number of divorces were instigated by outsiders, according to G. I. Karpov, head of the KUBT, and in such cases the outside influence on a woman most often came from a “more cultured” Turkmen man who wished to marry her.⁷⁹ The view of many Turkmen officials that divorces were affecting exclusively poor peasants was not a reflection of reality, but was based on “prejudices rooted in custom.” The reason why most divorce petitions were from women, Karpov added, was that men did not bother using Soviet legal mechanisms—they simply threw their wives out the old-fashioned way.⁸⁰

Karpov maintained that Turkmen men were falsely claiming to be poor peasants in order to block their wives’ perfectly legitimate divorce suits. In one case investigated by the Ashgabat provincial procuracy, a divorce was granted to the wife of a man named Durdiev. Durdiev appealed the decision, and the chair of the district party committee provided an affidavit stating that Durdiev was a poor peasant. Twelve citizens also provided affidavits testifying to Durdiev’s excellent treatment of his wife. However, an investigation found that Durdiev was a well-to-do middle peasant, and that he had made several violent assaults on his wife. His illiterate fellow villagers had been coerced into signing the declaration (which they did by making marks with their thumbs). According to Karpov,

⁷⁷Ibid., op. 21, d. 100, ll. 44–45; RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 1237, l. 270.

⁷⁸Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution*, 212, 297–98; Stites, *Women’s Liberation Movement in Russia*, 369; Massell, *Surrogate Proletariat*, 211. Massell argued that there was a general retreat on the promotion of divorce in Central Asia in the late 1920s; however, his examples of anti-divorce legislation all were drawn from the Turkmen republic. It is not clear that any of the other Central Asian republics followed Turkmenistan’s lead (*Surrogate Proletariat*, 296–98).

⁷⁹GARF, f. 3316, op. 21, d. 100, l. 45.

⁸⁰Ibid., ll. 43–44.

“Three of the signers candidly admitted that, although they knew about Durdiev’s crude treatment of his wife, they had signed ‘so as not to set a bad example for other women.’”⁸¹

In the absence of comprehensive statistics on divorce in 1920s Turkmenistan, it is hard to know which side’s views more closely reflected reality.⁸² Was there really a “mass divorce” problem, or was there merely mass hysteria among Turkmen men who saw their control of their wives and daughters threatened? Did divorce really affect the poor disproportionately? The European officials of the KUBT spent much of their time advising Turkmen women on their rights and helping them to navigate the Soviet legal system. They were advocates for women seeking to escape the constraints of custom, and they naturally tended to impute the most noble motives to their protégées. Turkmen officials such as Atabaev, on the other hand, had themselves been shaped by Turkmen gender and family norms and were more sensitive to the popular reception of Soviet policies. These officials believed that the liberal divorce policy would undermine support for the Soviet regime among men in the countryside, and they knew how to make the case against divorce in terms that European Bolsheviks could understand. This meant shifting the debate from the terrain of gender oppression onto that of class conflict. By claiming that women’s desire for divorce was harming the poor, they could force the regime to choose between support for women and support for “class-friendly” elements. The effectiveness of this tactic became clear almost immediately; as we have seen, the measures adopted by Turkmen republican authorities in 1925 and 1926 restricted divorce even as Russian and Uzbek women were enjoying unprecedented freedom in this sphere.⁸³

The retreat on divorce, like the half-hearted attempt to ban bridewealth, shows the limitations of the “surrogate proletariat” argument when applied to Turkmenistan. According to Massell, the Bolshevik leaders believed that they would make women into the strongest supporters of the Soviet project by breaking down traditional family structures and freeing women from the constraints of custom.⁸⁴ In Turkmenistan, however, the requirements of women’s emancipation were carefully weighed against the larger imperatives of class policy. Soviet officials within the republic indicated unambiguously that they intended to rely on the poorer segments of the peasantry—that is, poor men—as the regime’s main social basis. In this scheme, women were at best a “supplementary proletariat”; they were expected to support the regime that liberated them, but they were not its primary concern. As the first secretary of the Turkmen Communist party, Halmirad Sähetmiradov, told a gathering of Zhenotdel officials in 1927, Communists should not seek to appeal to women through policies that antagonized poor and landless male peasants. Instead, the party had to reconcile its mandate to liberate women with its task of winning the loyalty of

⁸¹Ibid., l. 44.

⁸²The Turkmen state archives, which may contain this information, are closed to foreign researchers.

⁸³Only in 1936 did the Soviet regime reintroduce restrictions on divorce throughout the country, as part of a new campaign to promote stable families and increase the birth rate (Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution*, 331–32).

⁸⁴Massell, *Surrogate Proletariat*, chap. 4.

poor men.⁸⁵ The Zhenotdel's efforts to achieve women's emancipation received the party's support as long as they did not conflict with efforts to win the allegiance of *male* peasants. In cases where the two imperatives conflicted, as with the new divorce law, women's advocates were forced to yield.

At the time of the creation of the Turkmen republic in 1924, Zhenotdel officials believed that it would be easier to emancipate the unveiled women of Turkmenistan than those of neighboring Central Asian republics. They imagined that Turkmen women would be able to leap directly from the state of nomadic freedom to socialist emancipation, bypassing the feudal and bourgeois stages that led to the oppression and segregation of Muslim women. Instead, the Zhenotdel found it exceptionally difficult to mount a vigorous campaign for women's emancipation in Turkmenistan, largely because of the lack of a simple and obvious symbol around which activists could rally. In the absence of the veil, indigenous Communists were able to resist the pressures coming from above for the transformation of women's status and family life. To a greater extent than in neighboring Uzbekistan, Turkmen Communists were able to argue convincingly that radical measures to emancipate women were dangerous, particularly since they risked alienating the "masses"—by which they meant the male masses. Indigenous Communists and officials were able to push for a more conservative, gradualist approach to women's emancipation. They put a halt to divorce on demand long before such a reversal was considered in Russia, resisted calls for a campaign against *yashmak*, and hindered the adoption and enforcement of a ban on bridewealth. In short, by framing the veil as the consummate symbol of female oppression, Zhenotdel activists had undermined their ability to be advocates for Muslim women who did not wear the veil.

⁸⁵RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 1234, l. 82. For this reason, some Communists favored an approach to women that was less divisive than the direct assault on Turkmen family life. They argued, for example, that the party should concentrate on promoting women's economic self-sufficiency through the establishment of cooperatives for producing and selling handicrafts. Such measures would help women and boost the rural economy as a whole, while winning the support—or at least the grudging acquiescence—of Turkmen men (RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 1234, l. 78).