Identity as a strategic resource: a study on alternative gender NGOs in Kyrgyzstan

Photography taken by the author
Abstract

Since national independence many NGOs active in the domain of gender have been established in Kyrgyzstan. Recently, this part of the NGO sector has seen the emergence of alternative organizations, voicing new issues and perspectives. In this thesis, I take a closer look at these new actors: how they differ from the older generation and also in relation to each other. I am especially interested in their understanding of local identities and how identity is utilized as a strategic resource in forwarding progressive gender agendas within the national context. I do this in four different NGOs, qualifying as “alternative”. Data for the thesis were collected during fieldwork in Bishkek, with semi-structured interviews and multi-methodological case studies being the main methods. In my findings, I argue that there are several reasons to view Kyrgyzstani gender-NGO sector as dual. I conclude that the differences among the alternative organizations are mostly a matter of diverging strategies and forms of interventions, while they, on the level of ideology, identity mobilization and gender understandings, are relatively congruent. More often than not, the inherent potential of alternative organizations complementing and strengthening each other is high – to the point of functioning as a unified actor jointly advancing gender-progressive agendas in Kyrgyzstan.

Keywords: Identity, Intersectionality, NGO sector, gender, Kyrgyzstan

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The MFS Scholarship Programme gives Swedish university students the opportunity to carry out fieldwork in a Third World country. The extent of the work can lead to Bachelors or Masters Degree. The studies focus on areas and issues of relevance for development problems, and are conducted in countries supported by Swedish development assistance.

Sida’s main purpose with the MFS Scholarship Programme is to stimulate the students’ interest in, and increase their knowledge about, as well as their understanding for, developing countries and development issues. The MFS scholarships provide the students with practical experiences of the conditions of development. A further aim for Sida is to strengthen cooperation between Swedish University Departments, Institutes and organisations in countries in Africa, Asia and South- and Central America.

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Contents

Acronyms ................................................................................................................. 4
Vocabulary ............................................................................................................... 4
1. Introduction ......................................................................................................... 5
  1.1 Aim of the study ............................................................................................... 5
  1.2. Research questions .......................................................................................... 5
  1.3. Delimitations .................................................................................................... 6
  1.4. Disposition ......................................................................................................... 7
2. Methodology ......................................................................................................... 8
  2.1. Pre-field study phase ......................................................................................... 8
  2.2. Field study ....................................................................................................... 8
    2.2.1. Interviews .................................................................................................... 8
    2.2.2. Case studies of alternative NGOs ................................................................. 9
    2.2.3. Written material ........................................................................................... 9
  2.3. Leaving the field ............................................................................................... 10
  2.4. Various methodological issues ........................................................................ 10
    2.4.1. The researcher ............................................................................................. 10
    2.4.2. Entry points .................................................................................................. 10
    2.4.3. Ethics ............................................................................................................ 11
    2.4.4. Language, geography and other aspects ....................................................... 11
3. Theory .................................................................................................................. 12
  3.1. Framework ...................................................................................................... 12
  3.2. Identity ............................................................................................................. 12
  3.3. Intersectionality ............................................................................................... 13
  3.4. NGOs ............................................................................................................... 14
4. Analysis ................................................................................................................. 16
  4.1. Kyrgyzstani NGO sector as dual ..................................................................... 16
    4.1.1. General characteristics of the NGO sector .................................................... 16
    4.1.2. Definitions ................................................................................................... 17
    4.1.3. Old school women’s NGOs .......................................................................... 17
    4.1.4. Alternatives on the rise? .............................................................................. 19
  4.2. Feminism and activism, Bishkek style ............................................................ 19
    4.2.1. Pioneering organized feminism in Central Asia ............................................. 19
    4.2.2. Activism in post-revolution Kyrgyzstan ....................................................... 21
    4.2.3. Trickle-down feminism and contested forms of intersectional organizing .... 23
  4.3. A critique from within ..................................................................................... 25
    4.3.1. A Central Asian arts institution .................................................................... 25
    4.3.2. Agendas of the neo-liberal civil society ........................................................ 26
    4.3.3. Where to direct the message? ...................................................................... 28
  4.4. The gender emergency of ala kachuu .............................................................. 29
    4.4.1. Bride kidnapping today ................................................................................ 29
    4.4.2. Multiple discourses ...................................................................................... 30
    4.4.3. Ethnic practice, religious solution ................................................................ 31
    4.4.4. Contested strategies against ala kachuu – complementing each other? ..... 34
  4.5. “Surviving straight society” or advancing intimate citizenship? ................... 36
    4.5.1. LGBTQ in Kyrgyzstan ................................................................................... 36
    4.5.2. A balancing act ............................................................................................ 36
    4.5.3. Aligning or clashing with the triad ............................................................... 37
5. Conclusion and implications ................................................................................. 39
5.1. Conclusion ................................................................................................................................. 39
5.2. Implications ............................................................................................................................... 40

Literature ........................................................................................................................................... 42

Acronyms

BONGO – Business-oriented non-governmental organization
CARs – Central Asian Republics
CIS – Commonwealth of Independent States
CEDAW – Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
DONGO – Donor-oriented non-governmental organization
GAD – Gender and development (developmental paradigm)
INGO – International non-governmental organization
LGBTIQ – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer (used in different constellations, such as LGBT, LGBTQ etc.)
NGO – Non-governmental organization
PA – Public association
PU – Public union
SAP – Structural adjustment programme
SIDA – Swedish International Development Agency
WAD – Women and Development (developmental paradigm)
WID – Women in Development (developmental paradigm)

Vocabulary

Adat (kyrgyz) – Kyrgyz customary law
Aksakal (kyrgyz) – Kyrgyz traditional authority
Ala kachuu (kyrgyz) – Bride kidnapping
cis (latin) – "On the side of"; linearity of gender identity, biological and juridical sex
Haram (arabic) – Islamic prohibition
Jogorku kenesh (kyrgyz) – The Kyrgyzstani parliament
Kyrgyz – The majority ethnic group of Kyrgyzstan
Kyrgyzstani – Citizen of Kyrgyzstan
Mufti (arabic) – Islamic authority
Oblast (russian) – Region/province
Sharia (arabic) – Islamic law
Tariqah (arabic) – School or order of Sufism
Ummah (arabic) – The wider community of Muslims
1. Introduction

1.1 Aim of the study
The main aim of this thesis is to investigate specific segments and aspects of the Kyrgyzstani NGO sector, based on data collected during a field study in the spring of 2013. In particular, I will analyze new, alternative organizations working in the field of gender and seek to grasp their perceived raison d'être, situated context and modus operandi. This is accomplished through a dialectic analysis in relation to older counterparts, where nuances are extracted from this dichotomy as well as from intra-generational differences. In the study, I will especially emphasize the inner world of the NGOs; that is, their vision/mission statements, their social context and perceived national gender issues, methodologies, organizational structures, activity formats, projects/campaigns/interventions etc., but also identity, in terms of self-image and the belongings that are actively invoked in the work.

The NGO’s identity-related strategies and underlying societal analysis for achieving social and political ends within this arena is of particular interest for me. Such a focus should be primarily be conceived as intrinsic to the thesis, but also as an adaption, since the limited scope and non-quantitative aspirations of the study required an analysis performed at a rather abstract, ideological level. There is also a secondary, more theoretical ambition of applying certain concepts such as intersectionality, transversal politics, NGO typologies etc., with the purpose of examining its relevance and applicability in this context. Additionally, I am looking at the implications of the analysis on donor priorities and strategies.

1.2. Research questions
For the thesis, I have formulated three research questions. The first question should be conceived as a “zoom-in” on the terrain in which I will travel, while the other two constitutes the actual research questions which my data will permit me to answer.

1. Is it possible to distinguish a new, ”alternative” generation among Kyrgyzstani NGOs working within the field of gender?
2. If so, how are those actors operating, in which way do they differ from older/mainstream NGOs and what are their internal pluralities?
3. How is the aspect of identity invoked and utilized as a strategic resource for forwarding progressive/emancipatory gender agendas?

Already at this stage it should be noted that these three research questions are interconnected or even mutually dependent. Answering question 1 requires a detailed elaboration on questions 2 and 3. Questions 2 and 3 will therefore be dissected into a number of sub-questions related to different aspects of ”operating” as an alternative NGO.

Based on previous academic research on NGOs and civil society in Kyrgyzstan as well as on my own field-based studies, my assumption is that the boundaries of the old/mainstream generation of gender NGOs is rather discretely demarcated, with certain symptomatic defining characteristics. It should be evident that question 1 is not about whether there exists a new/young generation, in terms of age, or not – which would be a trivial question – obviously there are plenty of newly established Kyrgyzstani NGOs within this field. My particular interest is rather to identify and locate substantial qualitative differences in terms of
ontology/ideology, contextual analysis, gender understandings, methodologies, organizational structure, donor relations, identity-related strategies and interventions etc., between the two generations. If substantial differences can be identified, it would motivate an affirmative answer to question 1, exposing a split within the sector that is not about mere age but difference on ideological, organizational, discursive or practical levels.

Research since the 1990s provides a fairly homogenous description of the general characteristics of the Kyrgyzstani NGO sector, although of course differences exist, and rapidly changing political, economic and social contexts have contributed to transforming the civil society over time. Evidently, there are reasons not to equate the sector as a whole with NGOs specifically concerned with gender – nevertheless, I try to determine whether there are overlaps or not between the generations, with an initial assumption is that the defining attributes are similar. The main focus of my field study has been put on the younger Kyrgyzstani organizations that, at least on the surface level, seemed to exhibit some deviations, potentially qualifying them as “alternative” in relation to earlier gender NGOs. This was investigated in-depth during the field study through case studies and interviews: material which constitutes the backbone of this thesis.

Having the ambition to cover an entire generation through the collection of quantitative data was unrealistic with only three months on my hands. The aim is therefore not to provide exhaustive, definitive answers on the research questions, since this would require large-scale and long period research involving a combined set of different methods. Instead, my analysis aims at offering an overview that captures the core topics/questions, and which can function as material for future (hopefully more extensive) multi-methodological research.

1.3. Delimitations
As mentioned in Section 1.2, a wide literature on NGO sector development and civil society in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia is available today. I will occasionally use this material as a point of reference, but not delve into details unless necessary for specific arguments related to my research questions. Connected to this NGO research are questions of how institutional, economical and political frameworks set up by the state and international donors influence the organizations in their work. The Kyrgyzstani state has proven to be very tolerant towards an expanding ‘third sector’ and has the most open legislation in Central Asia regarding organizational freedom, which undeniably has played a key role in producing the sector as it is today. In a few passages I will touch upon state-NGO relations (from the situated perspectives of the alternative organizations), but have no overriding ambition of explaining how nation-building processes, political-economic reforms, policy changes etc. have affected the actors I have studied. This is neither relevant for my research questions, nor compatible with the methods of choice during the field phase. The same applies to issues related to the influential international donors and to what extent they exert economic, political and ideological power over the NGO sector. In several of my interviews and case studies, donor-related issues arose. Sometimes, I incorporated these discussions in this text, and at other times I left them out. However, once again, my ambition is not to use the NGOs as a “stage” where development paradigms, gender agendas and donor priorities operate (a top-down strategy), but on the contrary, to get a glimpse on the dialectical perspectives and understandings on donors, among other things, from the alternative NGOs themselves (bottom-up strategy).
In Chapter 4, I analyze and discuss a range of gender-related issues. The reason for exploring these diverse issues is that they provide us with what I call a set of “prisms” to help us obtain a more profound understanding of how alternative NGOs conceptualize their social role and work in relation to these particular issues, but also in a broader, gender-progress sense. I have paid much attention in removing perceived irrelevant aspects of these gender issues: for example, when discussing bride kidnapping in Section 4.4, I have refrained from including certain historical and ethnological accounts on the practice since this would lead me into peripheral zones of interest. In a similar vein, I have chosen not to provide an extended discussion on gender theory, but rather focused on theory that contributes to an understanding of identity as a tool to promote progressive gender agendas.

1.4. Disposition
In Chapter 4, the first section serves as a combined general introductory framework and analysis of characteristics to the old generation of “women’s NGOs”. This section is based on written academic material and reports, as well as interviews that I conducted in Bishkek. The following four sections in Chapter 4 are based on case studies with four different organizations (which constitutes the “prisms”). In Section 4.2 feminism and activism in Kyrgyzstan is discussed, closely followed by Section 4.3 where one example of an alternative, “systemic” viewpoint on gender discourses is looked into. Kyrgyzstans’ most famous gender issue – bride kidnapping – is dealt with in Section 4.4, being the most extensive case study within this thesis. Finally, Section 4.5 briefly discusses LGBTQ issues.

I have tried to weave these four sections together by continuously relating to previous discussions and perspectives, in a textual structure one may call chronological-accumulative. In general, the analysis in Sections 4.2–4.5 has the purpose of answering the research questions, Section 4.1 serves more as ”setting of the stage“, with discussions about earlier work in the field of gender, NGO sector characteristics etc. Since this thesis is interdisciplinary and touches upon a variety of subjects, I have chosen not to write one single introduction/background at the outset. Such an introduction runs the risk of being too eclectic, voluminous and disorienting for the reader. Instead, I have chosen to integrate minimalist background settings within every section of Chapter 4. Similarly each section of this chapter contains concluding remarks, theoretizations and my own perspectives related to the issues discussed. These conclusions will be integrated into Chapter 5, the final conclusion.

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1 Although travelling through a relatively eclectic terrain, I hope it will be obvious to the reader that this chapter is not about offering a buffet of gender troubles in exotic post-Soviet Central Asia.

2 In summary, this thesis is not a genealogy of the development/growth of alternative gender NGOs in Kyrgyzstan, with the aim to comprehend underlying structures, processes and contexts. Rather, it is based on field studies on how these actors perceive themselves, their strategies, work and, in particular, gender realities in the national context.
2. Methodology

I primarily acquired the data used in this thesis during a SIDA-financed minor field study conducted in February–May 2013. During this period I was based in the Kyrgyzstani capital of Bishkek, where the vast majority of the research took place. While in the field, I used a variety of mainly qualitative methods, elaborated below, whereas complementary materials and reports have a more quantitative character.

2.1. Pre-field study phase
Prior to the field study phase, a great amount of time was invested in collecting relevant materials, performing literature overview and getting familiar with the theoretical concepts for the thesis. I constructed an analytical framework suitable for my research questions and proceeded from there to outline the methodology. Already at this stage I chose that interviews and case studies which would permit me to obtain the data I needed to answer the research questions. As part of this phase, relevant background data was also collected through Skype/email interviews with donor employees, civil society researchers and NGO representatives in Kyrgyzstan.

2.2. Field study
Almost immediately upon arrival in Bishkek I realized that there were several problematic aspects of my research questions. This insight was both based on difficulties in finding and setting up meetings with the actors I needed to interview, and second thoughts about the contextual relevance of the research questions themselves. I also sensed that my initial framing was too ambitious and difficult to conduct in only three months time. Hence I re-articulated my research domain and built a new theoretical framework for my fieldwork. However, even though the topic of the thesis shifted rather dramatically, my methodological emphasis stayed intact, with interviews and case studies remaining the main methods of the study. Chronologically the interviews usually took place before the case studies, with the purpose of obtaining understanding which was good enough to know in which cases to proceed with more in-depth research, i.e. conduct case studies. Worth mentioning is that in the contexts where I found the case study format relevant and suitable, the initial interviews were integrated as one of many methods used within the case study.

2.2.1. Interviews
During the field study I conducted formal interviews with a total of 21 Kyrgyzstani NGOs, active in the field of gender and qualifying as ”old generation”. The data from these interviews have primarily been used within Section 4.1. The informants were NGO staff/board/representatives, generally with good English proficiency. In a few cases the interviews were spread out over several different occasions, but most usually took place for 1–2 hours on one single occasion. In addition to the main informants of the NGOs, I met university lecturers, researchers, donor employees and public officials for complementary interviews. Besides always preparing myself for every interview by identifying NGO-specific questions, I utilized a standardized set of questions during the interviews. My aim was to remain as open and flexible as possible and allow the dialogue to extend into creative domains, and from there find mutual points of departure and perspectives. This required a high level of intersubjectivity in order to grasp and bring light to all nuances in a relatively short amount of time. In many instances, I used strategies of repetition and reformulation to disclose the exact meaning of a statement. In other words, the interviews were semi-structured in style (Willis, 2006, pp. 145-147) and open-ended (Denscombe, 2009, pp 252.). Both old and new NGOs were interviewed, and all of the interviews were recorded with the agreement
of the informants. Occasionally, the interviews did not provide substantial contributions to my research questions due to an uninformed actor, lack of time, language aspects and difficulties to convey the issues I wanted to discuss. There were also several ethical considerations to be made before, during and after the interviews (Mikkelsen, 2005, pp. 340). When utilizing interviews within this thesis, I use the system of ”informant 1, 2, 3…” etc. (see Section 2.4.3 for explanation).

2.2.2. Case studies of alternative NGOs
The main method used during the field study phase was qualitative case studies. These were conducted in four different new/alternative organizations working with gender issues. The methods employed during the case studies varied to some extent between the different NGOs. This variation also applied to the amount of data I collected within each case studies. Besides the formal semi-structured interviews, I utilized non-structured dialogues/interviews and formal/informal group sessions with persons on all levels of the studied NGO – from chairperson to activist3. I also included several participatory methodologies in the case studies, which often turned out to be very rewarding and gave deepened understanding and richer nuances of the topic. In many situations I functioned as an observer while taking part in projects, campaigns etc. Through participatory methods I was able to obtain more “internal” perspectives, conduct informal talks during activities, study patterns of interaction, participate in meetings and discussions. Occasionally I had to complement or replace the role as a researcher with that of an activist, in order to get ”access” to specific data. In one instance I took the role of a film maker, shooting 17 short movies with the first of the case NGOs (discussed in Section 4.2). These movies consisted of activists voicing their personal opinion about violence against women, and was part of a broader campaign to eliminate this practice. Not only were the actual content of these movies relevant to my thesis, but working as a film maker/director enabled me to build trust and get to know people in the organization better. The four case NGOs are called Fem, Art, AK and LGBT within the thesis (see Section 2.4.3 for explanation).

I appreciated the case study format very much, but also noticed several limitations. Sometimes the accumulated results felt subjective and uncertain, and I would have needed more data in order to assure the validity of my answers. An even more participatory approach from the outset would likely have facilitated this. If I would conduct this type of field study again, I would not frame the research questions myself but rather consider this component as an integral part of the case study, in order to assure relevance and feasibility.

2.2.3. Written material
While in Bishkek I also gathered relevant informational material from the actors below. These materials have been used mostly indirectly in the thesis, functioning more as background information than content used in the actual analysis.

- **NGOs**: organizational documents such as statutes, vision/mission/goal statements, annual reports, project applications and reports etc.
- **International donors**: summary of programmes and priorities, project proposals and evaluations.
- **Kyrgyzstani state**: policies/political discourse concerning topics of NGO sector and gender, newspaper articles, academic literature etc.
- **Academia**: reports and articles about NGO sector development etc.

3 In other words, while the interviews only included formal NGO representatives, the case studies included those as well as informal representatives/members, in addition to written materials.
The material collected from the NGOs was sometimes incorporated within the case studies if I found it to be relevant. Besides these occasions, the other materials were rarely used directly in the discussion and analysis.

2.3. Leaving the field
Upon return to Sweden I finished transcribing the interviews and started writing the thesis, while keeping in touch with the informants in Kyrgyzstan for additional material and clarifying comments.

2.4. Various methodological issues

2.4.1. The researcher
On several occasions prior to the writing of this thesis, I have personally worked, travelled, volunteered and conducted non-academic research in Kyrgyzstan and the other CARs. My main focus has geographically been on southern Kyrgyzstan and thematically on NGO sustainability, minority rights, peace/integration and youth work. Although not very knowledgeable in the field of gender in Kyrgyzstan prior to this study, my knowledge of subjects related to the NGO sector, international donor presence in Kyrgyzstan and nation building processes was very useful. Previous experience and knowledge was obviously a strength for me – but also functioned as an obstacle/challenge, since this study is academic and therefore requires a "non-biased" (not to be confused with an "objective") attitude to a greater extent. In order to assure this I engaged in a continuous process of reflection so as to distinguish my practitioner persona from being a researcher, with all its connotations. This required self-reflexivity, open-mindedness and a certain distance from previous experiences and knowledge. However, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, this distinction was at times fluid and I was functioning more on the basis of an activist than the stereotypical, detached researcher that enters-takes-leaves without influencing the process. Throughout my time in Kyrgyzstan I worked with deepening the awareness of my own positionality and situated gaze as white middle class man with Western background. I developed some strategies with the aim to eliminate potentially Westernized/colonial perspectives in the framing of the research questions, such as actively asking informants about input and local perspectives on the contextual relevance of my research questions and methodology.

2.4.2. Entry points
I had expected my previously established network in Kyrgyzstan to play a bigger role within the field study than it actually did. In reality, I was relatively autonomous in localizing the NGOs I wanted to involve in the study, most of which I had not been in contact with since before. Initially I thought that my contact person in the country would closely assist me with finding relevant NGOs for this study. Instead he helped me more with practical and logistical issues. This was not due to an unwillingness on his part, but rather because of limited contacts among the actors I wanted to get in touch with. In this sense, I did not really have a clearly defined "gatekeeper" (Scheyven & Storey, 2003), which I retrospectively consider as a positive aspect, since it assured a broad diversity among the involved NGOs. Instead I used alternative channels – mostly through local friends, social media and the web – to find and contact the first few NGOs. After every interview I conducted a mini-snowballing session which generated new and diverse contacts within the relevant segments of the NGO sector (Willis, 2006, pp. 148). Throughout the field study, I obtained important support from various

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4 See Mikkelsen pp. 326 for further discussion on this phenomena.
organizations in the structuring process of the field study, valuable input in the form of knowledge, contacts and practical/logistical project advice, among other things.

2.4.3. Ethics
Since the majority of the case NGOs and many of the organizations I interviewed were working with issues that could be labeled sensitive, ethical considerations were a crucial aspect of the methodology. Several actors also openly expressed a desire to not be mentioned by name and avoid discussing certain dimensions of their work. Therefore, I chose to be consistent when applying not only confidentiality but also anonymity for all actors involved in this thesis (Mikkelsen, 2006, pp. 342). Another ethical dimension was the issue of power involved in all field studies – where my privileges had to be continuously encountered and analyzed.

2.4.4. Language, geography and other aspects
The most rewarding interviews/case studies were conducted in English. However, not all informants spoke English and since my Russian language proficiency was very limited at the time of the field study, I had to use an interpreter in some of the interviews. Aside from a couple of interviews outside of Bishkek city I involved the same interpreter during the entire field study. This enabled us to become acquainted with each other and to develop a good working routine together. It was also positive since the interpreter after some time of working together knew the standardized questions by heart and understood the aim of research. The ongoing feedback sessions between me and the interpreter were important for the development of certain types of analysis. Moreover, my interpreter in Bishkek helped me with transcription of reports, articles, literature and other materials in Russian/Kyrgyz, and then made summaries of these transcriptions in English. I was mostly conducting the field work in the capital city of Bishkek and nearby province of Chui. During the latter part of the field study phase I spent some time in the southern parts of the country, in Jalalabad and Osh oblasts. The few interviews conducted in these regions involved a interpreter with knowledge, networks and language skills relevant to the local geographic and cultural context. Although my field study was concerned with exploring issues related to marginalized and underprivileged social groups in Kyrgyzstan, during interviews with NGO representatives the setting was often "researching up". In general I consider this distinction superficial and simplistic, since one person can be in a position of power at a microcosm (for example in a NGO) but subordinated on a macro-level.

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5 Involving a Bishkek-based interpreter in the rural southern areas of Kyrgyzstan could have proved problematic, because of regionalism in the form of stereotypes in both directions, which could have influenced the outcome of the interviews (Bujra, 2006, pp. 173).
6 When interviewing donors, academic researchers and employees of large INGOs the direction was more straightforward "researching up" with all its implications, e.g. lack of time and interest, high demands on understanding the overall purpose of the research and potentially to benefit from it.
3. Theory

3.1. Framework

I will primarily construct my own synthetic analytical framework by utilizing theories within the fields of identity and intersectionality, but also to a lesser extent include relevant facets from the vast NGO literature. Identity has been chosen as the main theoretical domain since I intend to study how NGOs express and mobilize identity/belonging in order to achieve progressive goals in the field of gender. Intersectionality provides us with an understanding both of the "context", marked by overlapping power structures, where identities are played out and in which the NGOs operate – as well as of how positionalities along the multi-vector power grid shape the subjectivities of the actors. Finally, the NGO literature contribute with specific typologies and tools applicable when trying to overview the sector as such. All these three areas will be integrated in a holistic framework for understanding the findings I have done during the field study phase. Neither of the included theories are incompatible, although combining an NGO analysis with the lenses of identity and intersectionality is quite rare.

3.2. Identity

Constructing a theoretization of identity which provides an understanding of identity as such and how it is enacted, performed and used as a strategical resource in the case of a social actor (NGOs), constitutes the main theoretical challenge in this thesis. For these two tasks, I have found sociologist Nira Yuval-Davis’ writings to be exceptional. Material from Manuel Castells’ The Power of Identity has also been used for the latter purpose. Worth mentioning already at this stage is, however, that certain philosophical disagreements I have with Castells, assigns him a more complementary role in the overall framework. Therefore, I will introduce some of my own theoretical constructions in some areas.

In Yuval-Davis notion of belonging we encounter a robust – multi-layered and non-essentialist – theory of identity. This theoretization is also tightly interwoven with the concepts of intersectionality and transversalism which facilitates connecting the threads of my theoretical chapter. According to her theory, belonging is constructed in relation to three facets; 1. socio-economic locations of the subject (in the sense of race, class, sex, ethnicity etc.), 2. identifications and emotional attachments, and 3. ethical and political values (Yuval-Davis, 2012, pp 12). These facets are related but, at the same time, distinct and irreducible to each other. This non-reductionist, interdisciplinary approach appeals to me – although I would claim a higher order of causality between social situatedness and the actors’ cognitive, emotional and moral perspectives on life than Yuval-Davis (ibid pp. 7). Indeed, whereas she suggests flatness, I insist there is relative hierarchy, direction and some sort of "superstructure" in the shaping of subjects’ ontology. The notion of ‘prime identity’ might hold some truth at a mere phenomenological, individual level, where identity usually is perceived as a meaningful and congruent unit – but in the end I understand identity as socially constructed, fluid and multi-layered. Furthermore, prime identity could be criticized as the genesis of mytho-poetical essentialism in the form of identity politics which I am opposed to. My framework is also non-static in the sense of focusing on epistemic communities rather than fixed identities and social positions7 (Yuval-Davis, 1997, pp. 129).

In this context, the writings of Manuel Castells on identity building movements enter the scene. From the point of departure of identity as a social construction within a "context
marked by power relations”, Castells provides us with a relevant distinction of three forms and origins of identity building (Castells, 1997, pp. 7-8):

1. **Legitimizing identity** – expressions of hegemonic institutions which rationalizes and normalizes the status quo and privileges its bearers (in the case of Kyrgyzstan, these identities are nationalism, Kyrgyz ethnicity and Islam, which I often will refer to as the hegemonic triad).

2. **Resistance identity** – expressions of marginalized/subordinated subjects and their struggles against the domination of legitimizing identity.

3. **Project identity** – expressions of a subjectivity aiming to achieve wider structural social reforms/transformations correlating with the dismantling of legitimizing identity, its manifestations and sources (such as patriarchy, hetero-/cisnormativity, neo-liberalism, capitalism and so on).

Although the boundaries between these three categories are porous, and social agents arguably could carry/reproduce all three forms of identity simultaneously, I consider the distinction useful for this text. It fits neatly with the object of my study: namely, NGOs as one particular form of civil society. On the role of civil society, Castells takes a position in the middle between Gramscian and Foucauldian perspectives, as a space for both democratic influence (‘civility’) and state control (‘domination’), with an emphasis on multi-directionality (ibid pp. 9). I have one major reservation in relation to the distinction, which is concerned with the linkage between resistance and project identity – a linkage I view as more tightly paired than Castells (both from a conceptual and empirical/historical perspective). For me the qualitative difference here is not a matter of identity in itself, but rather on a strategical "output" level. A "pure" resistance identity movement might engender the same structural impacts as a project identity, which deems the absolute necessity of a grand narrative for social change dubious. While I might be romanticizing resistance identities, I consider Castells’ definition of project identity to be too idealized and ignoring aspects of situatedness brought up by Nival-Davis and others. Here intersectionality will fill a complementary function, as we will see later.

### 3.3. Intersectionality

*Intersectionality* is a development from feminist standpoint theory which can be utilized as a suitable theoretical framework for explaining processes of social stratification. The metaphoric term is itself relatively young, but the implications of the notion have been understood for a much longer time, primarily by anti-racist and postcolonial feminists susceptible of the many faces of oppression (Yuval-Davis, 2012). My approach to identity framed in Section 3.2, emphasizing multiplicity and non-primacy, is compatible with intersectional analysis since this notion is concerned with how different belongings interconnect and overlap – which correlates to different positionalities in an environ of complex and mutable power structures. In short, intersectionality does not give privilege to one superseding, primordial power structure exclusively based on class, sex, ethnicity, gender, race or ability (Hjerm & Peterson, 2007, pp. 45). At the same time, the recognition of multiple dimensions of oppression should not engender an understanding of the relations of these social categories as additive, but rather as mutually constitutive (Yuval-Davis, 2012, pp. 7). Tiina Rosenberg, among others (echoing Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*), has argued that intersectionality precisely should not be understood as the additive "etc-argument” often quoted by politicians (Rosenberg, 2007).
If one distinguishes between an inter- and intracategorical intersectional approach, I would stress the importance of integrating both of them within the overall framework. The intercategorical dimension is concerned with how intersections of various social categories produce different positionalities, whereas the intracategorical problematizes the boundaries and divisions themselves (Yuval-Davis 2012, pp. 7). Furthermore, I would like to add that whereas the "illimitable process of signification" may produce new social categories it does not follow that all categories are equal in contributing to oppression: a point of departure from Yuval-Davis framing of intersectionality, which insists on not fixating the amount of configurations or their relational hierarchy. On the contrary, I would insist that there are more or less dominant power structures, especially when looking into the specific context that is Kyrgyzstan.

Finally, my thesis is partly concerned with exposing the usefulness/limits of intersectionality as an analytical tool. One might distinguish between intersectional analysis/perspectives and intersectional organizing/interventions where I argue that the latter is relatively free of substance or contextual-independent strategies (or "best practices"), which results in intersectional movements using a wide diversity of strategies, even within the same context.

3.4. NGOs

NGOs and identity

In this thesis, I apply the notion of politics of belonging to the civil society – that is, viewing NGOs as potential actors involved in the process of shaping identities, both in terms of structure and substance. This concept, inspired by Bourdieu and Foucault, is by Yuval-Davis mostly used with regard to hegemonic actors such as the state (Yuval-Davis, 2012, pp. 18), while I have found it relevant in the case of NGOs. So, what is an "identity NGO"? My definition revolves around organizations with a conscious, explicit analysis how identity should be invoked. First, we have the aspect of identity as a "docking strategy", either as inclusion of the a priori identity bearers ("Us") or targeting "Them" in a more instrumental way. Secondly, in the issue of transformation of identity structure and substance, I have constructed two ideal types of reconfiguration and construction by deconstruction, not to be seen as static or mutually exclusive. The first of these ideal types aims at modifying the content within hegemonic identity regimes (often in the form of "Them"), either by creating an internal space where new interpretations and opinions are to infiltrate mainstream understandings, or by "elasticity" – that is, enabling pluralistic tolerance for other viewpoints, narratives and norms (both intra- and interidentity-wise). The second ideal type roughly correlates with the Castellian notion of project identity, but in a radical sense: building new belongings, understandings and consciousness based on deconstruction from different angles – where the disruption of gender identity from being an exclusive property of nation, religion, ethnicity etc., can be done in a variety of ways, most of which include components of historicity, discourse analysis, exposing power structures and so on.

NGO typologies

My work utilizes a NGO typology suggested by Fiona Adamson. She distinguishes between six different NGO types, based on their strategies and working methods (Adamson, 2002):

1. Create and support independent advocacy groups and local NGO sector
2. Expose elites to ideas and education

8 To clarify, I am both using intersectionality as a analytical tool and investigating how the alternative NGOs apply it in their work.
3. Increase public access to information and ideas
4. Change the institutional structure within which civil society operates
5. Transform political culture in society
6. Promote community development at the grass roots level

Evidently, these types often overlap in reality and some of them may be more or less relevant to my study and the issue of identity. Similarly, Paasiaro has conceptualized the different strategies Kyrgyzstani NGOs use in transitional contexts (Paasiaro, 2009). In Section 4.2, I use a chart of different forms of feminism and modes of feminist organizing (Castells, 1997, pp 195). While all these approaches can be critized for essentialism and overgeneralization, I find them useful as a starting point in an overview of the NGO sector in Kyrgyzstan.

**Organizational theory and NGO relations**

To a lesser extent, I will consult the literature of organizational theory, organizational development and capacity building – to obtain the necessary analytical tools for investigating the inner world of the NGOs in this study. Since this literature is often written from a NGO practitioners’ perspective, it requires certain epistemological distancing to avoid basic assumptions to filter into my analysis. I will especially utilize theories concerning organizational culture, social structure, power issues and network theory (for example see Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006; Ubels, Acquaye-Baddoo & Fowler, 2010; Scott, 2003). Additionally, Korten’s scheme of the different ”NGO phases”, framing the the temporal dimensions of NGO building, will be used (Lewis & Kanji, 2009). I have found Terje Tvedts systemic conceptualization of NGO relations suitable for this study (Tvedt, 2007). This theoretical framework is constructed based on the observation that NGO research historically has been uncritical of the NGO phenomena itself, having failed to take questions of power and dominance relations into account. One of the main goals of his DOSTANGO-theory is to expose ”the power of the international and national donors their shaping and contextualizing the work of the NGOs, …, and the way this entire system affects civil society”⁹.

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⁹ As a result, the major distinction is not based on conventional, dichotomized categories such as national vs international NGOs, grass roots vs advocacy and so on, but whether the NGO is financed by donors or not. This aspect is one of the key areas of investigation during my research, but I will nevertheless use other categories as well.
4. Analysis

4.1. Kyrgyzstani NGO sector as dual

4.1.1. General characteristics of the NGO sector

The NGO sector of Kyrgyzstan has been around for more than 20 years and many critical opinions have been raised against the phenomenon and its manifestations during throughout period. At the very heart of the critique lay issues related to the nearly total dependence on international donors. This relation may not only be problematic from an organizational sustainability perspective, but also in terms of the actual relevance (and therefore impact) of the donor programs in local and national contexts. Here the dilemma of dependence operates two-ways: the donors dictate which areas of development that are to be prioritized, while many NGOs simultaneously are founded and maintained based on these priorities – which often makes them de facto functioning as “grant-eaters” or DONGOs/BONGOs (Adamson, 2002). The new urban-based, highly educated NGO elite, that emerged as a result from this process, has been called ’humanitarian aristocracy’ (Roy, 2007) or the ’neo-liberal civil society’ (Frazier, 2005), and questions of actual connections to the underprivileged majority of the population have been posed more than once. The parallel processes of NGO sector expansion and social stratification have, not surprisingly, resulted in a growing alienation and distrust among the majority of Kyrgyzstani citizens, against the professionalized NGO sector and their projects (Paasiaro, 2009). As one of my informants eloquently expressed it: “NGOs are viewed as the muppets in the eyes of the local population” (informant 1).

Connected to this theme is also the issue of Western ideological/cultural imperialism. From the onset of the democratization process after independence, the notion of civil society was hijacked by the neo-liberal agenda by making it synonymous with one specific structure/function: namely the non-governmental organization. As Hemment notes: ”NGOs were sown as seeds for democracy; they were central to the exorcism of communism” (Hemmert, 2007). The dominant discourse that enabled the Western-modelled NGO formation to achieve a hegemonic status as the one and only, universal expression of civil society, was based on the highly questionable assumption that no vernacular civil society whatsoever existed during the communist era. The standard arguments would claim that the strong control exerted by the Soviet apparatus over all aspects of social life rendered expressions of civil society impossible – even to the point of destroying the traditional civil societal institutions of Central Asia. This discourse carries many misrepresentations on Soviet/pre-Soviet life in the region and numerous researchers have shown that the third sector existed well before national independence (Pétric, 2005). Nevertheless, the neo-liberal discourse served to legitimate the import of the specific NGO formation, complete with a perceived static role as social service provider in relation to a retreating state. In addition to being perceived as an alien entity among the local populations, as mentioned above, NGOs are often seen as imperialistic vehicles promoting a specific form of democracy, gender norms, liberties etc. and connected to the strategic interests of the USA or other Western countries.

There is also a more empirically based skepticism towards the Kyrgyzstani NGO sector for having no impact on structural societal change and for never having played an important role in major political events such as the two revolutions that took place in 2005 and 2010, respectively (Paasiaro, 2009). As much truth there may be in the criticisms leveled at the NGO sector, it would be misleading to only offer a decontextualized critique, since the donors
and their priorities often constitute the main problem, as emphasized in DOSTANGO-theory (Tvedt, 2007).

4.1.2. Definitions
Before analyzing the generations I would like define what in this thesis is referred to as NGOs in the field of gender, in order to avoid misunderstandings. This definition centers around NGOs which self-describe as working primarily with issues of gender, but also leaves room for other actors such as Human Rights organizations, women’s shelters, art institutions and activist networks, that through their activities touch upon these issues in various ways and subscribe to a progressive gender agenda. Such a broad approach has only one sharp dividing line of exclusion – it has to be an officially formalized NGO. This is to be congruent with the analysis of the NGO sector/NGO structure and its potential macro-impacts on gendered realities in Kyrgyzstan. What qualifies as a gender related issue then? Gender issues includes topics such as empowerment of women, gender equality, domestic violence, LGBTIQ and so on. Following these two distinctions what below is called ”women’s organizations” are NGOs of the older generation, active in the gender field with certain attributes in terms of both structure and substance.

4.1.3. Old school women’s NGOs
In the case of the Kyrgyzstani women’s organizations the majority were established during the 1990s and early 2000s. Few were founded as a natural continuation of previous grassroots work, outreach and organizing – rather, vision/mission statements and links with the target group were to be formed after formal registration (informant 2 & 3). Formalities such as statutes, official founding and project applications preceded any potential work in the domain of gender. Often the NGOs were founded and run by former Soviet officials, primarily middle aged women, and relatively mono-ethnic, consisting of the majority group Kyrgyz (informant 4). The most common organizational structure was Public Union (which structurally resembles a private foundation) in which power is concentrated to the founder(s) and exercised top-down – a structure where internal democracy and transparency is scarce. In general, these NGOs were professionalized and grassroots-detached, to a small extent including volunteers and local communities, and mostly based on short-term projects (informant 4), mostly within the categories of 1, 3 and 6 (Adamson, 2002).

Despite the general lack of qualitative substance and organizational sustainability, one strength of the women’s NGOs is that they have tended to be well-connected in a network of similar organizations. This has provided fertile conditions for a successful work with advocacy and lobbying, where they have managed to forward their agendas by acting as one voice. However, these networks are problematized by some representatives and during my interviews I noted differences in opinion based on geographical zone of activity (the rural NGOs were more positive, and Bishkek-based organizations more skeptical/negative). One representative of a Bishkek-based NGO that at least partly would fall within this older category concluded that the initially productive and influential network of women’s NGOs over time became ”static, monopolized and hierarchical” (informant 5). According to her, this network deteriorated into having one sole function, implicitly agreed upon by its members: namely, to provide legitimacy in order for smaller, old school women’s NGOs to obtain funds from donors. Most international donors prefer NGOs with wide networks since this is considered as a guarantee for both quality and trustworthiness. However, in this case the network was perceived, somewhat cynically, as something of a systematic grant-eating cartel exploiting global capital flows directed by international donors. This urban perspective (a somewhat extreme, but still representative version) is contested by another NGO practitioner from Karakol, a village in eastern Kyrgyzstan, with an opposing standpoint. She perceives the
network as positive in the sense that its different actors have specific, complementary niches that converge in joint projects and mutual campaigns, enabling political and social change in different levels of society (informant 6).

If we turn our view away from structure to more substance-related issues, we can conclude that the early generation of gender NGOs has, in general, had a very broad horizon of engagement. This applies both for the general domains of activities as well as for the gender issues they touch upon. It is not uncommon with organizations working with topics as diverse as women’s political participation, ecological fertilizers and micro-credits to rural communities, which evidently reflect one central dynamics of the sector as such (discussed in 4.1.1). In terms of gender, this generation has been working with issues such as equal professional/educational opportunities for women, entrepreneurship, land access, rights-based education, bride kidnapping, gender quotas etc. Even though many women’s NGOs from this generation have been working with matters and methods that cannot be said to be politically non-controversial, they have almost categorically refrained from invoking openly gender political agendas and identifications. This, of course, must be understood against the background of the Kyrgyzstani society and the conditionality of donor grants, which limits opportunities to belong to or to be vocal about non-mainstream or radical political agendas. This was most likely especially true during the first years of independence, when donor priority was concerned with the exorcism of communism and NGOs were to play a key role in this process. During this period, as some of my informants claimed, “women [in NGOs] realized the strength of being a women” and found ways to capitalize on this “without any real commitment” (informant 5). This resulted in a largely apolitical women’s NGO sector without underlying understanding of gendered, socio-economic power structures as foundation for their operations. One superficial example of this is that very few women of the older generation self-describe or identify as feminists (leaving unsaid if it is due to ideological or pragmatical reasons), and are even less likely to position their NGO under this headline. The motto "we avoid making our work into an identity” seems to be the normative here (informant 5).

One of the women’s NGOs (a Public Union) that I studied exemplify this non-systemic, apolitical approach quite clearly – both in terms of their perceived structural role and thematic concerns – when explaining how their vision/mission documents were created. When this NGO was formalized in the mid-1990s, their decision to work with women as main beneficiaries cannot be said to have been derived from an understanding of existing gender structures that subordinated Kyrgyzstani women. Rather, the reason for formalization was the urgent status quo of post-Soviet experience: a economy undergoing transition, widespread poverty, unemployment, land issues etc., combined with the “need of someone working with the women” (informant 7). In other words, this instrumental approach to women as one of many "non-situated" target groups could be seen as a sort of almost humanitarian gender approach where the NGO takes the role as the service provider (congruent with the dynamics of a neo-liberal civil society). This type of operation is obviously not about representation and/or giving voice to marginalized women, neither is it concerned with the material and immaterial conditions that construct women in marginalized positions. Clearly, this choice of direction was heavily influenced by foreign donor priorities and paradigms, whose financial support required the NGO to institute these practices and norms from the outset – grant speak and grant practice. In fact, several variations on “our goals are the same as the donors” were openly expressed during interviews (informant 7), which implies dependency in a wider sense (paradigms, structures, norms etc.). Depending on the level of control, monitoring and evaluation exercised by the donors this dependency may function as a simple routine paper
exercise or a real mechanism of coercive ideological power. In summary, my findings seem to verify that the general critique of NGO sector is applicable to this particular segment as well.

4.1.4. Alternatives on the rise?
Since my study does not have a primary focus on the older generation as such, many related questions are intentionally left unanswered here. I acknowledge that the temporal dimensions of the binary distinction of “generations” ultimately is artificial/constructed, but maintains its usefulness for the following analysis. Even if these boundaries are somewhat arbitrary and porous – and various counterarguments could be formulated against the division – Sections 4.1-4.3 have shown some defining characteristics of the old generation, which makes this arrangement pertinent. Here the assumption is a relatively static situation over time, since my study is not concerned with issues of intra-generational transformations correlating to political reforms and shifting donor priorities.

Regardless of questions of suitable analytical tools and definitions, I often encountered reifications on this dual viewpoint from within, in both directions: that is, women’s NGOs positioning themselves in relation to the “young generation” and vice versa, which signifies that there is some form of ontological/discursive basis for the distinction. This dialectic can therefore extract many interesting perspectives on differences and similarities. My in-depth research of the “alternative” segment has been concerned with estimating if there is empirical support for the idea of them constituting an enclave in a wider NGO environment. If so, what are their common characteristics and divergent attributes? Are they to be perceived as resistance movements in relation to earlier expressions of the third sector? How is gender and identity understood and how is the work operationalized based on this awareness? These questions, among others, will be explored in the coming four sections/prisms.

4.2. Feminism and activism, Bishkek style

4.2.1. Pioneering organized feminism in Central Asia
The new gender NGOs I came in contact with tended to have a relatively high network transitivity within Bishkek city. Centrally located within this network one finds a newly formalised feminist group, working with activism based on intersectional analysis and the recognition of multiple, overlapping power structures and marginalized identities. They describe themselves as follows:

   Our mission is to promote feminist values of ending all forms of oppression (sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ageism, ableism, nationalism, xenophobia, islamophobia, class and socio-economic oppression, etc.) in Bishkek” ... “We are aware of the complexities and intersectionality of oppression, and are therefore committed to prioritizing activism needs, voices and issues of the most oppressed and underrepresented communities in our city of Bishkek\textsuperscript{10}.

This is not only the first outspoken, organized and formalized feminist actor in Kyrgyzstan but also in the other CARs, where this would be near impossible due to political, religious and cultural reasons. At an abstract level their work is concerned with functioning as a counterpoint to four ”enemies”: 1. the Soviet legacy, 2. nationalism, 3. neo-liberalism and

\textsuperscript{10} Web resources for case NGO Fem.
4. developmentalism (case study Fem). I perceive this as a conceptualization sprung from an analysis of which ideological illnesses underpin contemporary Kyrgyzstani society. Although this framework undoubtedly connects to several central gender-related dilemmas in the country today, it is not always clear on which level the target is aimed at and how the downward translation process into coherent strategies and activities occurs, as will be discussed later. The group hosts a wide range of activities, for example, conducting web activism, organizing campaigns and lobbying, facilitating the creation of bases for mobilizing, building platforms for feminist initiatives, supporting the founding of a national feminist network in the country, as well as spreading positive views on activism through information on the history of activism in Kyrgyzstan and its achievements (case study Fem).

The group is based in Bishkek – with city residents as their primary target group – and has existed as an informal group of young activists for a couple of years prior to official registration. Many members have previous experience of feminist activism from a variety of different contexts. Several of them have completed academic studies abroad before joining the group. There is considerable internal diversity in terms of ethnic, national and religious background. Most active members are under 30 years and originate from the Central Asian region. There are approximately a dozen of very active members within the group, in addition to a larger circle of activists, members and partner organizations. Their organizational network is primarily connected to other urban, alternative organizations or groups active in the field of gender (some of which will be discussed in the coming case studies) – where many is targeting marginalized communities such as drug users, HIV, sex workers and transgender persons (case study Fem). However, in some cases they are strategically working with more established and mainstream actors, for example, within the UNITE network.

The organizational structure is described as a flat, heterarchical and inclusive structure, visualized in the form of a pancake as opposed to the "traditional" NGO top-down, multi-leveled hierarchy (case study Fem). The group wants to be understood as a collective where everyone involved is a member, regardless of citizenship status, ethnicity, gender identity, religious affiliation, level of engagement etc. In reality, some form of stratification and concentration of power does inevitably exist within the organization, in the form of decision-making units and working groups. In this regard, there is a slightly contradictory organizational self-image and a negative perception of the concept of hierarchy. This tension between theory/practice or image/reality may give rise to certain problematic aspects. I perceive a risk of reproducing norms that otherwise would be claimed to be combated – such as the Soviet leadership style as one obvious example – by making certain realities invisible by obscuring structural nuances. This said, I would like to point out that the group does exhibit the signs of a structure characterized by participation, inclusion, equal opportunities and room for individual initiatives. As such it stands in stark contrast to earlier structures (most women’s NGOs and PUs) where top-down power execution is normative.

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11 This should be contrasted with the four correlating, more radical enemies of 1. "traditions" 2. the nation-state 3. capitalism 4. westernization/white superiority/imperialism/neo-colonialism etc., which the NGO in case study no 2 aligns more closely with.
12 And, indeed, in my view this is a concise and correct summary of the main "stratifiers" of Kyrgyzstani/Central Asian society.
14 Annual meeting of case NGO Fem.
15 The question which needs to be asked here: "Is hierarchy always synonymous with oppression and domination or are there forms of inclusive leveling?"
Another related aspect of structure that will be discussed below is the issue of formalization/registration as a non-governmental organization. This action was problematized prior to an affirmative decision, and is still in many regards (case study Fem). A refusal to "simply be a NGO", with all its contextual and ideological connotations, is palpable. To me this inner conflict seems symptomatic within what I have defined as the alternatives, and constitutes a dilemma that might not have arisen among previous generations of organizations in the country. Reaching the decision to formalize as a NGO was therefore a process of doubting and questioning. In the end the decision was an instrumental one, an act whose purpose was to enhance legitimacy in the eyes of the Kyrgyzstani public. Even though the submitted statutes were uncompromising, they were able to register at the authorities without any problems. The form Public Association was chosen since it resembled the inherent horizontal organizational structure most appropriately and is by far the most democratic. However, even today there is a lingering fear of what Sonja Alvarez describes as:

> [The financial relationship of NGOs to States and donors] may undermine NGOs’ ability to pursue more process-oriented forms of feminist cultural-political intervention—such as conscious-raising, popular education, or other strategies aimed at transforming those gender power relations manifest in the realm of public discourse, culture, and daily life—forms of gendered injustice that defy gender planning quick fixes. (Alvarez, 1999)

This is not only applicable in the sense of financial dependency, but also that becoming formalized easily might slip into "going mainstream", in the sense of the older generation as discussed in 4.1.3.

### 4.2.2. Activism in post-revolution Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan is the only CAR that has undergone two revolutions since independence in 1991. Both coups were to a large extent successful through grass roots mobilization and organizing. Therefore, activism is a sensitive topic in many Kyrgyzstani quarters, especially within the state apparatus. According to the feminist group, even though there has been firmly established movements among the grass roots such as KelKel (an expression of non-NGO civil society) involved in the major political changes in the country, many direct activist interventions have been non-strategical, uninformed and short-term expressions of discontent. This tendency has created a generally negative public opinion and disbelief about the practice and its effectiveness. One core domain of work of the group is therefore concerned with transforming the collective viewpoint into an understanding of activism as a tool of non-violent, informed dissent reflecting and voicing the needs of the people (case study Fem). This is no doubt a challenge, especially when it is coupled to the equally (or more) controversial phenomenon of feminism, with all its local connotations.

Since the target group is residents of Bishkek, core activities are evidently operationalized based on needs in this urban context. This generates a mode of activity more or less explicitly based on the notion of Bishkek being "other" from the rest of Kyrgyzstan. In my eyes this viewpoint has considerable truth to it, with the metropolis differing in many respects from the agrarian, conservative rural sector. Working in a diverse urban environment enables the feminist group to utilize multi-identity strategies. They frequently evoke, include and appeal to cosmopolitan identities, for example by involving expats and backpackers, as well as having a core of activists with experience of living, travelling and studying abroad. This is also reflected in some of the activities which often are part of global feminist/women’s rights

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16 Annual meeting of case NGO Fem.
campaigns such as Vagina Monologues and vDay, as well as working formats such as online activism, frequent usage of social media, flashmobs and parades. These campaigns are fairly easily initiated and the formats provide a potential for broad outreach since it comes "prepackaged". The campaigns are part of a global movement and often touch upon pressing everyday-gender issues in a non-theoretical and emotionally activating way.

Some problematic dimensions, most of which the group is well aware of, are present here. Firstly, engagement in global campaigns enables opponents of feminism, progressive gender politics and LGBTQ to condemn them as an example of 'rootless cosmopolitanism' (Yuval-Davis, 2012, pp. 152) and employ the "external actor/vessel" argument efficiently. The accusation of NGOs as foreign agents aiming to implement various "anti-indigenous" agendas is very common (as discussed in Section 4.1) and has been prevalent at many different societal levels since the first NGOs was founded in the early 1990s. In this case, however, by actively invoking cosmopolitan belongings and joining global campaigns a particularly "visual" proof is provided that the international connections are in place. The Vagina Monologues, although executed on three occasions in Bishkek since 2009, was condemned as cultural imperialism and spread of Kyrgyz-ethnic/nation incompatible norms from the political sector in 2013. Secondly, the feminist group also problematizes the universal ambitions of this campaign by its insistence on invoking idealized morphologies and embodiments that excludes the experiences of transgender, queer and intersex persons (case study Fem). Thirdly, there are issues related to representation, for example the potentially paradoxical equation of representing marginalized groups in solely privileged "rootless" arenas.

At the same time as cosmopolitan belongings are activated and global issues touched upon, there are plenty of examples where the feminist group engages in specifically national gender debates which involves a multitude of "local" identities. One example is the celebration of the Women’s Day on the 8th of March, which since Soviet times has been a national holiday in Kyrgyzstan. The traditional way of celebrating this holiday is by the group perceived as not empowering Kyrgyzstani women, but rather reproducing patriarchal stereotypes of women (e.g. as house wives, passive subjects, disconnected from the public sphere). Therefore, the 8th of March is not a cause for celebration but instead a date worth reclaiming as a potentially emancipatory occasion and awareness raising event about oppression against women (case study Fem). This perspective stands in contrast with older Kyrgyzstani women’s NGOs that celebrate the day in the traditional Soviet mode, elevating the Kyrgyz(stani) woman with flowers and hymns. It may be added that this holiday, among others, is not only patriarchal but subject to an ethnofication of the nation building process which elevates Kyrgyz dimensions. Another example of rootedness in the local context is the campaign against the female parliamentary politician Irgal Kadyralieva’s suggestion of banning Kyrgyzstani women below the age of 22 to leave the country. With regard to this issue, much wider, intergenerational alliances have been formed since an almost univocal repudiation of the bill arouse among gender NGOs in the country.

17 http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66807
18 Notice that I am not taking a stance whether this is an example of what Homi Bhabha calls vernacular cosmopolitanism or not, since it falls outside the domain of this text.
19 http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66640
20 Arguably reaching the tipping point of reproducing sexist views such as the incompetence of the female politician.
Trying to pinpoint the feminist group in relation to various NGO typologies is slippery and, in my eyes, a rather meaningless ordeal. Clearly, the group exhibits signs of the majority of typologies framed by Adamson, although some are more developed or evident than others (Adamson, 2002). In a sense, the group is an example of what Chandra Mohanty has called ”third-world feminism”, but also transcends the definition. According to Mohanty, third-world feminist organizing is built on two core zones of activity, namely: 1. critique of Western feminism, and 2. formulation of autonomous cultural, historical and geographical feminist concerns and strategies (Mohanty, 1997, pp. 79). We can clearly see these two categories at play in this case, however not exclusively, but also attaching to broader global movements, cosmopolitan projects of belonging and Western feminisms. Neither Castells’ analytical typology of different feminisms does full justice to the complexities exhibited on a ideological, methodological and tactical level by the group. ”Cultural feminism” seems to be the closest ideal type (Castells, 1997, pp. 195). I interpret this result both as theoretical shortcomings, lack of attention paid to the Central Asian/post-Soviet ”developmental” context and that the group represents something new.

4.2.3. Trickle-down feminism and contested forms of intersectional organizing

In my view, central dilemmas within this group are connected to questions of education and outreach, which in many instances converge and overlap and in the end is connected to questions of identity. Who exactly constitutes the ”target group(s)”? Is it possible to establish what could be called a ”school of activism”? How is feminist understandings and subversive gender norms to be disseminated in the Kyrgyzstani context? At another level, how does a bearer of an intersectional perspective translate this into concrete actions? The current focus put on Bishkek residents, especially those with marginalized social positions and identities, is thought to be an initial phase of promoting feminist epistemologies and belongings in Kyrgyzstan, which eventually will spread to other areas of the country. Activities in Bishkek are gradually supposed to influence both content and structures of identities in the areas outside the capital, a standpoint based on a center-periphery dichotomy which gives rise to a form of trickle-down feminism. The rejections of this phenomenon can been summarized as:

> Trickle-down feminism doesn’t work, for precisely the reason that external presumptions about a universal feminism, even among privileged members of the group, don’t work. Because other shit matters, too, like whether you live in Brooklyn or next to an endless soybean field.

Translating this critique to this particular context, we are faced with the question if a Bishkek-grown feminism with cosmopolitan connotations are capable of taking root in ”real” Kyrgyzstan? While ”presumptions about a universal feminism” is discredited within the group, the direction of the approach is left untheoretized. In this setting, intersectional analysis seems to me like a tool unable to provide the answers on how to resolve these tensions. My point here is that, while offering a valuable perspective for spotting overlapping power structures, intersectional analysis mostly leaves us empty-handed in relation to the know-how of strategies, methods, alliances, identity mobilizations, interventions etc. The conditions of what may be called intersectionalizing (in terms of action) should obviously always be deeply contextual – nevertheless, my opinion is that extended identity theorizations have much to contribute to intersectionality in this area. In the case of rural Kyrgyzstan this complementary framework could very well give rise to strategies opposed to the trickle-down direction of outreach and which identities are invoked. It might also support this direction, which in the end primarily depends on how it is implemented. I claim that

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21 http://www.shakesville.com/2013/04/femfuture.html
feminism as specific praxis (rather than just theory) aiming to eliminate oppression against women can exist without a corresponding feminist consciousness/identity, however it is unlikely to have any major impact in this atomized, apolitical and proto-organized form. In these cases the feminist group might play an important role in involving, connecting, mobilizing, educating etc. at an individual level, possibly in the rural sphere. In summary, I am not condemning an urban-biased gradualistic strategy per se, which well may be a feasible strategy, especially when seen in a larger setting with other complementary actors operating, but I want to highlight some potential deficiencies with an intersectional approach in terms of operationalization. Functioning as feminist and activist in Kyrgyzstan is, no doubt, difficult in the mainstream, although this does not imply that the potential of impacting gender realities is disqualified. However, the challenges of combining these two controversial "-isms" within the same movement should not be underestimated. In my understanding, the group is not concerned with mere labeling/positioning as feminist but is involved in a significant project identity building process (on resistance identity grounds), which has the purpose of disentangling the static notions of "men" and "women" from solely ethnic, religious and nationalistic discourses, to the point of queering the binary itself. Rather than infiltrating this hegemonic triad, the method of choice is based on building a new politico-historical understanding and consciousness of gender identity, through activism, education and awareness raising campaigns. As we have seen, the older segment of the NGO sector views outspoken feminist interventions as counterproductive in furthering various progressive gender agendas in Kyrgyzstan, since it clashes with the hegemony and therefore will not appeal to the majority of the population (and might even result in a backlash). On a strategic level the dividing lines between the feminist group and older women’s NGO seem to be sharp. The pragmatism and circumspection of many earlier gender NGOs are lacking in the case of the feminist group which takes uncompromising stances in many questions. The group constitutes a rather stark contrast to Castells standpoint: “overall, developing countries explicit feminism still, by and large, elitist” (Castells, 1997, pp. 200) by the inclusion of many marginalized groups, – although their detachment from local identities might not appeal outside the metropolis.

As a final note, in this section, I have mostly utilized the material from interviews with the official representatives or formal meetings. When speaking with the activists of the group it quickly became apparent that a plurality of voices, opinions and experiences is contained within the group, which I perceive as a strength – both in terms of its indirect proof of an inclusive structure but also as an inherent positive aspect for the cohesion and impact. In the short movies I filmed/directed, I encountered expressions which could be categorized within a variety of different feminist positions/belongings (from queer to essentialist feminism), as well as a wide array of gender issues touched upon. The majority, however, did not specifically utilize feminist arguments on violence against women in these movies, but rather Human Right’s discourse or humanistic ethics. With regard to motivating factors for joining the group, one female activist provides a interesting perspective, related to the national NGO sector and its compatibility with patriarchal structures (case study Fem). Her previous, negative experience of volunteering within a "traditional, patriarchal NGO” (described in

22 Another question related to the quote above, which puts the trickle-down approach in doubt, is if marginalized groups of the urban sphere in any sense correlate to the rural subordinate.
23 I might add that this is in no way should be understood as the definitive statement on the driving forces and ideological orientations of the activists. It only gives us a glimpse in one particular question and one specific format of activism. The limitations of these particular methodologies (analyzing short movies and informal talks/interviews) should be clearly acknowledged.
4.1.1) gave her the incentive to find other forms of social engagement. In this NGO the power positions within the organization were held by men, whom also got the “credit” for all the work she and other volunteers did. Women were rarely listened to in this environment. On the contrary, another activist states that she became active because she wanted to combat violence against women actively, although she claims to ”not understand the theory” (case study Fem).

4.3. A critique from within

4.3.1. A Central Asian arts institution

In this section, I have studied an art institution based in the capital, which partly can be included in the alternative cluster, although they remain in many regards skeptical to this generation and even the sector as a whole, as we will see. While not actively working with gender issues as such, their focal point of establishing a socialist school of theory, activism and art with an emancipatory agenda – to ”politicize art, aestheticize politics” (case study Art) – often touch base with feminist theory and share characteristics with other alternative actors. However, they are intentionally not as well-connected to other gender NGOs as the other case NGOs, and retains a selective networking based on joint art projects or campaigns rather than permanent partnerships. They have a history of working as an informal group but are now registered as a NGO in a similar vein as in Section 4.2.

One reason why the art institution is somewhat peripheral within the alternatives’ network might be derived from their self-perception. Rather than viewing themselves as a Kyrgyzstani NGO active in the national or local context(s), they aim at being a professional art institution focusing on the Central Asia region/post-Soviet bloc\(^{24}\). Although operating from Bishkek, many of the active members originate from other CIS countries and the focus is not only put on national issues. A broad social critique holds a prominent position within the institution which functions as a ”platform for solidarity and convergence of research, activism and art” (case study Art). The issues touched upon transcend Kyrgyzstani borders and are concerned with structural, ideological analysis of the post-Soviet, Central Asian predicament and its contemporary links to global trends.

At an activity level, the institution runs a unique library in Central Asia that specializes in regional art from the early 20th Century and onwards, as well as literature in the field of critical studies, marxism, post-colonialism and feminism. The library functions as an open public space where additional events such as book circles, discussion clubs and poetry slam are arranged on a regular basis. Affiliated with this space are several residence artists, researchers and activists mainly from the CARs but also other post-Soviet countries. Aside from managing the library, the main focus is to create and disseminate critical animations and cartoons. These products aim at showing the complexities of contemporary ideological and political debates – where gender-related issues is one recurrent aspect – by utilizing tools such as multiple discourse analysis and situating present-day social processes within historicity and political/economical contexts. In short, the art has the purpose of raising awareness, sparking discussion and activating a “radical imagination” concerning alternative social realities among the target group. Obviously this format requires spreading, which to a large extent is done through online channels, such as their homepage, mailing lists, Twitter and Facebook.

\(^{24}\) Web resources for case NGO Art.
4.3.2. Agendas of the neo-liberal civil society

A critical stance on the regional impact of neo-liberalism is a cornerstone of the operations of the institution. The influence of neo-liberalism has among other things resulted in a degrading of the welfare state, loss of social security, less resources for education and healthcare, introduction of SAPs, and so on. This imported imperialist ideology has also shaped the emergence and attributes of Kyrgyzstani civil society. By knowing the symptoms and the mechanisms of neo-liberalism, the institution is very careful with not to promote this agenda further by functioning as a state-replacing actor. Therefore, their aim is to be a stable institution over time, providing space and information free of charge, and not functioning as a social service provider.

The institution has launched a multifaceted criticism of the national NGO sector. This is a criticism qualitatively different from the common reflexive opinion of mainstream NGO workers: "NGOs should not be required in the best of worlds [the state/democracy should do this job]" (informant 8). Instead, the sector is criticized for adopting models from the private sector and for contributing to a shrinking state by taking over their duties, responsibilities and domains of work. Issues of quality and distribution are usually ignored in this context since donor monitoring and evaluation is insufficient. Furthermore, the neo-liberal development agenda is itself perceived as contributing to the depolitization and atomization of the citizens. One example is given here, of a Kyrgyzstani NGOs arranging trainings for communities to learn "how to solve their own problems", a universalist training methodology in turn obtained by a visiting Indian consultant (case study Art). The result is, of course, deeply acontextual, unreflected and potentially irrelevant for the specific local problems, but more worrisome: this format blurs subjugating power structures which produce subaltern positionalities by placing all responsibility of change and agency merely at the individual level. This variant of empowerment discourse reveals its fundamental compatibility of integration within the neo-liberal agenda (alternatively, its hijacking, depending on perspective). While this form of empowerment in practice might imply provision of certain skills, competencies etc., a substantial effect is, paradoxically, that it disempowers the subject as a political transformative agent. This applies in many domains, not the least with regard to gender norms and structures, which are rendered invisible – both on an activity and organizational level – by the insistence of an individualistic, entrepreneurial approach to reach societal "improvement". Evidently, this should not be seen as if NGO practitioners are consciously aligning with neo-liberal ideology, but this is a macro-outcome of the aggregated effects of NGO employees working in the current hegemonic fields of activity.25

The dominant stereotype that"free market has yet to be established in post-Soviet Central Asia", encapsulated in the notion of transitional economy, is a myth according to the art institution which instead sees the over-establishment of free market (case study Art). The viewpoint of transitional economy is almost always uncontested from the state, donors and civil society in Central Asia. By silently accepting this paradigm, the result has become a widespread sanctioning of libertarian ideas pushed to the extreme in diverse societal, political and economical spheres with the result of growing inequality and poverty. A majority of NGOs uncritically subscribe to this modernist notion and build their activities based on its core assumptions.

25 However, extreme libertarianism, free market fundamentalism and Ayn Randian philosophies is increasingly becoming explicitly articulated/acted upon within the NGO elite in Bishkek, eventually trickling-down to other arenas.
How does the notion of transitional economy function as an ideological support for the neo-liberal policies mentioned above? Here I would like to quote Slavoj Žižek: "we should always bear in mind that one basic operation of hegemonic ideology is to enforce a false point, [in order] to impose on us a false choice" (Žižek, 2012, pp. 801). In this setting, the hegemonic Two should be understood as the glorifying/debasing caricatures of 1. Western capitalist liberal democracy, and 2. Soviet-style bureaucratic communism (the obvious false point), as the only two viable political options. The concept of transitional economy is here introduced as the natural, common-sensical road to the better of the Two – forever leaving behind the exaggerated horrors of Soviet life. As simplistic as the dichotomy is, the real problem is the oppression of any "Third" syntheses, by utilizing tactics of guilt by association with the enforced false point. Concretely this means that contestations of the hegemony is effectively condemned with reference to the artificial false point. The notion of Kyrgyzstan being in the phase of transitional economy (for more than 20 years by now…) hinders processes related progressive gender politics, by giving priority to "more urgent" considerations such as economic growth, trade liberalization and promoting entrepreneurship. Aside from functioning as a vehicle for neo-liberal interests, the notion marginalizes "soft" issues such as gender and Human Rights from the development/state agenda. The NGO sector is perceived by the art institution as indirectly responsible for this process by accepting the set agenda and by their very financial dependency, although I would like to add that we should bear in mind that the flourishing NGO sector could not be sustainable or even survive without the donors. The radical approach of the institution clearly plays an interesting contextual role – both bringing nuance to the historical Soviet period (deconstructing the false dualism between the hegemonic Two by contesting the contrived substance of the false point) and initiating/facilitating dialogue on any Third alternatives (though 'radical imagination'). There are reasons why concepts such as transitional gender structure or gender shock therapy have not surfaced in the dominant development discourse so far (in neither WID to WAD to GAD paradigms26) – due to the direct systemic destabilizing and threatening character of these perspectives.

With regard to the particular contours of neo-liberal civil society in Kyrgyzstan, the art institution exhibits clearly divergent characteristics and exemplifies that progressive interventions need not be small-scale and alternatively funded, and that NGOs potentially has voice to influence the priorities and agendas of donors. They are acquiring grants from several international donors, both private foundations and national aid organs, in the form of activity/institutional support. The recipe for success is a mutual emphasis on transparency and clarity of intent, in addition to not compromising ideals or conforming to standards other than their own. A "subject-to-subject-relation with the donors", beyond the obviously inherent power relation, is the goal (case study Art). Being an openly socialist actor has not been problematic due to a clear, reciprocal and honest communication. However, as for any other NGO, the aspect of sustainability is a real challenge, especially when considering that the aim of the art institution is to function as a stable, qualitative institution with a specific niche, which can therefore not be run on project grants (a solely project-based institution is contradictory). On the same grounds, alternative modes of financing such as crowdfunding is also dismissed as a viable solution. Moreover, crowdfunding is viewed as being opposed to their commitment to "fight the precarious situation of neo-liberalism" (case study Art). Crowdfunding is understood as an expression of a creativization discourse which functions in alliance with hegemonic constructions of civil society. In practice the creativization discourse removes the highlight from long-term, qualitative structural critique of dominant norms and

26 See The women, gender, and development reader (1997) for descriptions on these developmental paradigms.
strate surgical, informed interventions, by dislocating it to the gap in between projects – in other words, the NGO spends the majority of time and energy “creatively” trying to obtain short-term project funding from diverse sources, in diverse areas of work. This very structure renders a radical and coherent critique unlikely, which can be seen as a specific ideological twist on the common criticism against Kyrgyzstani BONGOs (see 4.1.1). In the field of gender, this perspective can explain the short-term, often inadequate, interventions which since national independence has been norm rather than exception.

4.3.3. Where to direct the message?
One of the reasons why I chose to conduct a case study based on the art institution is that they are the most radical in terms of internal critique of the NGO sector, as well as their approach on how belongings are invoked and targeted. Through acts of activist citizenship (as opposed to the prevalent Thatcherite notion of active citizenship within the NGO sector) they aim at raising awareness about the grassroot effect of neo-liberal structural reforms among the public (Yuval-Davis, 2012, pp. 59). Their polemics with other alternative actors also give us enriching perspectives on the particular context and related strategies. If we compare this case study with the one on the feminist group discussed in Section 4.2, we find obvious similarities at the level of analysis/ideology, but also differences worth exploring. The feminist group, whom the institution is well aware of, is considered to be bearers of a radical transgressive discourse, but problematized at the level of form/expression/working methods

27 The use of activity formats such as flashmobs is viewed as a “message lost to the expression”, a compromise that “kills intention” – which ends up being a merely consumeristic display (case study Art). While positioning the ideology of neo-liberalism as an “enemy”, the feminist group is claimed to parallel reinforce its logic through affiliating with the creativization discourse (at the level of form). According to the institution, form must be radically uncompromisable at a cognitive, ethical and imaginary level, which in turn will enable the production of “discourse and bodily experience of the opposite, by acting differently… which involves sacrifice… honest gestures can produce change, send vibes that are not corrupted” (case study Art). This quote is congruent with the transversalist insistence on putting the main focus on the message rather than the messenger (Yuval-Davis, 1997, pp. 131) – consequently diverting from an identity politics-based standpoint.

In my own terminology, this is an example of construction by deconstruction, without explicit docking strategy. It seems to me that they successfully avoid lapsing into identity essentialism or functioning as a monolithic voice, but in the process looses the rootedness which potentially can involve subjects with a variety of identities. Undoubtedly, the major challenge for the art institution, similar to the first case study, is the aspect of where to direct the message and whom to involve. Both the ambition to build a autonomous movement and to function as an open space for anyone interested in co-existing, but no definitive resolution of this apparent tension seems to be in sight. In this light, their methodological criticism of the feminist activists may be paradoxical. I would concur with the opinion that “pop-interventions” such as flashmobs tend to obfuscate the intended message(s) through its consumistic/Westernized connotations, but still, as a way of initial mobilization and involvement, it can be rather effective as it provides an initial ”docking zone” with recepible belongings. In my mind, it seems that the uncompromising approach of the institution, theorized above, might be partially responsible for these related difficulties. While clearly

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27 This also relates to opinions on funding, where the feminist group is against external monetary support (at least in larger amounts and on a regular basis) while the art institution applies from the donors, but without compromising their vision and mission.
rooted in local historicity and contextuality, the question that needs to be addressed is: if mobilization on the grounds of the diverse, situated experience of neo-liberal policy among Central Asian subjects is feasible? To me it is unclear if this strategy has any actual embodied recipients. Lacking an identity-informed outreach/impact strategy and only targeting a disembodied public is, in my eyes, bound to leave no substantial effect. The difficulties to reach out is explained by themselves by an uninterested media combined with a lack of professional, long-term fora, which effectively silence actors that want to promote progressive structural changes. Also, certain generational aspects is mentioned in this regard: seeing themselves as squeezed in between "a conservative past and a neo-liberal youth". Where the old ones do not understand them at the level of form, the young ones perceive them as slow, complicated and unsexy (case study Art).

4.4. The gender emergency of ala kachuu

4.4.1. Bride kidnapping today
In today’s Kyrgyzstan the practice of bride kidnapping, known in the lingua franca as ala kachuu, is very common. Although this practice exists in the neighboring CARs, it is by far the most widespread in Kyrgyzstan. This applies not only to the rural areas but also the bigger cities, including the capital of Bishkek: hinting that this is not a matter of old traditions or "backwardness", as we will see later on. Statistics of ala kachuu are controversial – ranging from more than half of all marriages in the country (Kleinbach & Salimjanova, 2007), to considerably lower numbers\(^{28}\). It should be noted that ala kachuu is a phenomenon that has ethnic connotations and is almost exclusively performed by the country’s majority ethnic group Kyrgyz. Ala kachuu is both illegal according to the national law and in the traditional Kyrgyz customary law adat (ibid). Additionally, Islamic sharia condemns the practice. A lot can be said about the legal (non-)consequences facing men that have committed the crime, but I will not extrapolate on these details in this text\(^{29}\).

The dominant national discourse on ala kachuu constructs the practice as a Kyrgyz 'cultural tradition' which is supposed to be deeply embedded in the ethnic sense of belonging. Variations and justifications within this discourse can be found in all levels of society, from village people to politicians in jogorku kenesh (ibid). The Kyrgyzstani government has frequently used this cultural argument in response to CEDAW reports as an explanation for high levels of bride kidnapping and lack of progress within this area (in addition to excusing it with the political turbulence caused by the two revolutions) (case study AK). Regardless of the widespread popularity of this viewpoint, there are hardly any empirical facts supporting it\(^{30}\). If the deconstruction of ala kachuu as an invented tradition is relatively accepted among

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\(^{28}\) Based on the statistics of case NGO AK and others.

\(^{29}\) In short, the crime is rarely reported or prosecuted, and even if so, the case is almost always dropped during the juridical process where bribing of officials and the police often is involved. Even if some progress has been made in the last years, there are few if any incentives for men to change based on the legislation and juridical practices.

\(^{30}\) Convincing historical and cultural arguments have been brought forward by scholars why ala kachuu is not a proper 'tradition' in the sense of a sustained social practice over time within a group of people. For example, this has been demonstrated by historical evidence showing that the practice was extremely rare before the 1950s in Soviet Kyrgyzstan, and that ethnic Kyrgyz in China and Afghanistan never considered bride kidnapping part in their culture (and never practiced it) (ibid). Furthermore, in the rare cases when ala kachuu was performed before the 1950s, the function and perception of the social practice was radically different compared to today – ala kachuu was associated with romantic love between a couple and was used to bypass the coercive family-arranged marriages. It also functioned as an economic practice to reduce costs related to getting married, which was, and still is, an expensive deal in Kyrgyzstan.
scholars, the opinions on why it has increased since the last decades of Soviet rule and independence are more diverse, and a plurality of explanations are available. Two popular examples abound; some see it as a backlash of once successful Soviet equality policies and some view it as integral to the ethnic nation-building process after independence.

Although there is little support for the notion of ala kachuu being a 'tradition', it is important to note that the social practice for the vast majority of ethnic Kyrgyz(Stanis) is perceived in exactly this way. It is considered as an integral part of Kyrgyz identity, even though many might dislike and condemn it. This distinction is crucial for the discussion below in which I will relate to Kyrgyz ethnic identity – or to be more precise, ethno-nationalistic identity – as the primary symbolic site for sanctioning and legitimizing ala kachuu. I have acquired this viewpoint through conversations with ethnic Kyrgyz citizens of both gender around the country, where the vast majority offer variations on this discourse, regardless of personal opinion about the practice\(^\text{31}\). Obviously this does not apply to the NGO practitioners, donor employees and researchers that I have interviewed as a part of my field study (with some notable exceptions). Also worth mentioning is the aura of inevitability and naturalness that seems to surround the phenomenon even if one strongly dislikes it. In this setting, I have chosen not to delve into issues of what material conditions, political processes and socio-economic structures have created and perpetuated this particular form of Kyrgyz ethnic identity, since it falls outside the aim of the thesis. Rather, I will look at one striking example of how a newly formed NGO has developed preventive strategies based on an understanding of contextual identities.

4.4.2. Multiple discourses

In my view, ala kachuu may be the ultimate "prism" for glimpsing the wide array of gender discourses, developmental paradigms and working methods that exist within the Kyrgyzstani NGO sector. These differences exist side by side but not often without tensions, controversies and contestations. During my interviews with different NGOs in the field of gender, I have found the conceptualization of the social problem, and resulting operationalization of the work, especially telling and interesting. At the level of how to understand/describe the social practice, there is a broad range of perspectives that inevitably give rise to radically different methodologies and interventions. Although the understandings of ala kachuu may overlap partially and appear in hybrid forms, I have sought to construct a generalized matrix of the different modes of analyzing the social phenomenon below. I have come in contact with the following five anti-kidnapping discourses during my field studies (there might exist additional ones or variations):

1. An “invented tradition” guised as Kyrgyz cultural/ethnic identity.
2. A criminal act within the Kyrgyzstani legal framework.
3. Immoral behaviour (haram) according to Islamic behaviour and law.
4. A Human and/or Women's rights violation.
5. A particularized expression of patriarchal/heteronormative gender structures.

In addition to offering a set of specific arguments and rhetorics, some of these discourses can be used as strategic tools to connect with dominant identities in Kyrgyzstan and potentially contribute with change from within in relation to ala kachuu (and possible other related issues). This strategy primarily applies to discourses no. 1–3 that connect to the hegemonic triad of ethnicity, nationalism and religion. On the other hand, more marginalized discourses, most notably no. 5, requires the creation of fresh new perspectives, understandings and

\(^{31}\) Formal/informal interviews and talks conducted by me between 2009-2013.
belongings in order for the discourse to become performative at a larger level and transform social realities. Some examples of these two different discursive categories/strategies will be provided later in this chapter. Regardless of whether the NGO’s work falls in the mainstream or subversive category, when considering identity-related aspects of changing public opinions, norms and practices connected to ala kachuu, several interesting questions arise which an NGO needs to address. For example; what is the level of inherent contestation and flexibility of substance within a particular identity regime? Is the identity usually constructed/construed as fluid, non-fixed and even pro-reform among its adherents? If so, in which domains of social life? Are there potential areas of conflicting interests between different identity regimes?

It is clear that without a thoroughly informed and contextually aware analysis of the backing material power structures of the identity regimes, social intervention can produce counterproductive results. While these perspectives need not necessarily be explicit in the actual activities, I conceive them as a definitive analytical requirement prior to operationalization. An identity-informed intervention can not be performed in a vacuum, without including an analysis of the social, political and economic contexts that produce and reproduce certain identities as static, monolithic and ahistoric givens.

4.4.3. Ethnic practice, religious solution
During the last decade a plethora of NGOs started to address the issue of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan (Kleinbach & Salimjanova, 2007)\footnote{This has correlated with a fertile soil established by international donors over the same time period. At first ala kachuu was a marginal issue by both donors and civil society, but by pioneering research and awareness raising efforts it gradually became a national issue considered important. Today there are many organizations tackling the problem – at an individual/community level, mainly within the older generation of women’s NGOs, in a broad network connecting all the oblasts in Kyrgyzstan.}. One of my major case studies was conducted together with a newly founded NGO, that started working against ala kachuu at the end of the 2000s, initially with a “mainstream” analysis/methodology. By this time preventive work had solidified in best practices and standardized, routine activities. However, by conducting independent research on the phenomena, they gradually realized several limiting aspects in mainstream understandings, methods and interventions. As a result their current work can be seen as partially constructed from counterpoint perspective in relation to earlier analyses and practices. Their critique is primarily aimed at a methodological (both practice- and research-wise) and informational/statistical, complaining about the ineffectiveness and lack of tangible results of previous work in the NGO sector (case study AK). Earlier modes of preventive work against ala kachuu is stereotypified as endless discussions, trainings and roundtables for small rural communities led by non-local NGO representatives without contextual knowledge, repeating the mantras of ”it’s bad… it’s criminal… it’s not good” (case study AK). While this can be seen as a criticism of the choice of activity formats and outreach channels, there are deeper and more substantial insights to be found here as well, as elaborated below. Their own research challenged both the quantitative knowns (e.g. statistical prevalence of ala kachuu in Kyrgyzstan) and contributed to new interpretations of the underlying cultural, political, economic and identity questions involved through qualitative investigations, involving the perspectives of both men and women. Insights from this research generated two innovative main areas of work in relation to many earlier strategies; involving and invoking religious authorities/identities and participation in court processes.

I will mainly discuss the first of these two strategies, since it is more connected to the overall concern of this text. For the NGO, Islam was in this context viewed as the symbolic site for
changing norms and mindsets of individuals with Muslim identities, particularly men regularly attending the mosque. Their strategy can be dissected to a four step process, summarized below:

1. The first step is concerned with identifying various ethical arguments against ala kachuu and creating relevant materials based on these (such as leaflets and short movies). The arguments are not initially dressed in religious language/reasoning and kept "universal", but must be framed so as to be compatible with contextual Islamic thought and practice.

2. The completed material is spread within the ummah in Kyrgyzstan with the aim to reach a broad Muslim audience. This step is made possible by a close collaboration with "official" Islamic religious and spiritual authorities such as the Kyrgyzstani mufti and imams in different oblasts across the country, which gives legitimacy to the project by virtue of their institutional positions. They also contribute with the process of Islamizing the moral substance by connecting it to sharia and Quran. By mobilizing the most influential Islamic figures in Kyrgyzstan the idea is to establish one univocal Islamic voice/movement which inherently is anti-ala kachuu, thus marginalizing potentially pro-kidnapping opinions that might exist among local Muslim identities.

3. After the material has been disseminated through various Islamic channels/institutions (primarily mosques), the content is gradually incorporated into sermons, religious discussions and other religious activities. This stage of integrating an active stance and negative perception on ala kachuu into Muslim identity is absolutely crucial, otherwise it will only be a curiosity, external to the phenomenology of belonging. Repetition of the arguments, discussion within the religious community, continuing to invoke authority and reintroducing the topic on the agenda over and over again is key tactics to succeed in this phase – that is, to root a new understanding among potential perpetrators belonging to Muslim communities.

4. In the final phase, a qualitative shift of understanding and practice is expected to be reached among the Muslim population. This will result in major implications for the prevalence of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan, and supposedly contribute to "moral" spill-over effects in regards to ethnic Kyrgyz without strong/active Muslim identities and the broader culture.

To me this process seems like a form of inverted strategic essentialism (Spivak, 1987) – not in the sense of an internally heterogenous group representing itself as a unified Other, in order to achieve social goals of interest for all members – but rather, reaching out with a message to a diverse group of individuals with multiple identities by invoking the convergence of one single Muslim identity. The aim is here to monopolize questions of ala kachuu within the domain of Islam. In my eyes, this strategy might be appropriate considering the historical background of Islam in Central Asia. Since the introduction in the 10th century, the Central Asian version of the religion has been syncretic and integrative – often giving rise to various hybrids with local tribal and ethnic identities as well as incorporating, or at a minimum accepting, the existence of other pre-Islamic beliefs found within Tengrism. Furthermore, different tariqahs of Sufism, known for their pan-religiosity and tolerance, have had a strong presence in the region since their introduction (Roy, 2007).
Although radical movements such as Hizb-ut Tahrir and imported extremist Islamic schools of thought (most notably Saudi Wahhabism) have gained ground in recent years\textsuperscript{33}, the dominant form of Islam in Kyrgyzstan and most parts of Central Asia remains tolerant and to a large degree inclusive (Rashid, 2002). As such, the general Muslim opinion on ala kachuu is negative although explicit comments by religious authorities have been rare until recently. Even the more fundamentalist versions are not necessarily incompatible with a critical stance on ala kachuu, where the practice can be potentially discarded by playing the ‘primitive/pre-Islamic’ card. On the contrary, one might argue that the growing religiously and organized faith in Kyrgyzstan might deem other questions, considered more important or urgent, to be prioritized within the national Islamic agenda. To me it seems that the largest risk when trying to integrate an anti-kidnapping social mobilization within Kyrgyzstani Islam, is if the practice will be condemned publicly but internally constructed as a peculiarity or even a non-issue. In this scenario, Islam will not function subversively in the sense of undermining the identity-related, ethical and social foundations of the practice. Rather, a massive collective silence and ignorance will persist.

If we return to the case study of the NGO and their strategies of choice, Islam is, in short, perceived as a relatively fluid realm where change of substance is possible, compared to a much more monolithic Kyrgyz ethnical identity regime. One could even say that Islam is perceived as the primary identity in questions of ethics. The NGO hold a deeply skeptical view about actively working against bride kidnapping by directly targeting the "source" – trying to change ethnic identity from within, for example by de-essentializing culture and disseminating the historical arguments of the scholars mentioned in the first section of this chapter (case study AK). The marriage of ethnicity and nationalism is what makes 'Kyrgyzness' unsuitable for a head-on targeting. Neither, dissecting/exhibiting the underlying economic and political structures is considered as a feasible path to achieve an impact at the grass root level. In a similar vein, they also criticize a trend that might be defined as a universalized, disembodied and imposed Human Rights discourse (or a corresponding identity of 'rootless cosmopolitanism') – which lacks deep contextual knowledge and understanding of local identity formations. This discourse is bound to produce few if any tangible, long-term results, according to them (case study AK).

To summarize their strategy: even if ethnicity is the symbolic nexus for producing ala kachuu and providing the practice with cultural capital in the form of legitimacy in today’s Kyrgyzstan, this fact does not simplistically and mono-causally point to identitary interventions based on ethnicity. Instead, other belongings with higher level of moral performativity and substance-flexibility are to be mobilized in order to effectively establish an anti-kidnapping-oriented cultural perception and practice. I assume that, form their perspective, the goal could be considered achieved if the majority of Kyrgyz men at some stage would say: "Ala kachuu is our cultural tradition but it is haram and therefore we do not perform it anymore."\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{34} The four-step process could be further theoretized, and more generalized observations and conclusions could be drawn concerning potential outcomes. In this setting, however, I will limit myself to frame a few open-ended theoretical "follow-up questions", with the aim of reconnecting to them later in this and subsequent chapters. Of major concern and interest is the broader impacts of this strategy in relation to other progressive gender developments. Also, the question is whether the strategy will result in other legitimizing identities, being substantially changed from within or not (potential loosing influential their voice in matters of gender).
The strategy outlined in this section can be found among other Kyrgyzstani NGOs and related to other social issues. For example, another Bishkek based NGO, working with integration and tolerance, is regularly involving imams in peace building and interethnic "normalization" processes in the southern oblasts of Kyrgyzstan (informant 9). Within this particular case study, I saw examples of not only religious belongings being invoked, but rather the broader aim to construct work based on other national identities that would qualify as ‘rooted’ (Yuval-Davis, 2012). For example, in public campaigns against bride kidnapping various celebrities and authorities – such as politicians, pop stars, business persons, aksakals – was involved to jointly condemn the crime. This was done from a variety perspectives and an amalgamation of personal identity and societal position. These campaigns are not uncommonly flirting with Western-gazing, liberal democratic citizenship and cosmopolitanism. The acclaimed short films of the NGO available for the Kyrgyzstani public on YouTube aim at the following broader target groups with different contextual messages:

- **Parents** – "there should be no stigma in saying no to your daughter being kidnapped!"
- **Communities** – "we can change this if we start caring and acting."
- **Youth** – "if you see bride kidnapping going on in the street, don’t accept it, it’s not cool, only you can make a change!"
- **Girls** – various preventive and post-kidnapping instructions

### 4.4.4. Contested strategies against ala kachuu – complementing each other?

Of course, the seemingly pragmatist (or undercover) operations described above are not met without contestation among other Kyrgyzstani organizations in the field. Aside from questions of effectiveness and impact, a main issue is what an empowering of the Islamic institutions in the domain of gender will result in long-term. There are worries that the process of transferring legitimacy and power to Islam within this domain will obstruct progressive gender politics in the country. For example, the opinions on LGBTQ rights among Islamic authorities are overwhelmingly negative and an increased influence will create new barriers to traverse (barriers which would converge with ethnic and nationalist homo-/transphobic politics of belonging). In Section 4.5 we will explore this in more detail.

Although not themselves directly working against bride kidnapping as such, the socialist art institution discussed in the previous case study, would understand the practice from within discourse no. 5. This structural understanding does not easily convert itself to specific interventions focused on the actual perpetrators and victims, but is a discourse thought to inherently carry the capacity to expose and challenge material and immaterial conditions perpetuating the practice. The strategy of historicizing/politicizing/mobilizing as a way to deconstruct and demystify underlying power structures is thought to give birth to new awareness and new belongings, centered around the critical investigation of society. This, in turn, will result in legitimizing identities of ethnicity, nationalism and religion gradually.

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35 Where some of the films also were spread throughout the national ummah with the help of important Islamic figures.
36 Some final reflections related to the case study are appropriate here. As we have seen the NGO deploys innovative and well-conceptualized working methods, activities and materials, based on an informed contextual understandings on the different identities at play in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. Another interesting dimension is that the collaboration with non-NGO civil society actors is central to their work (especially religious institutions). This is clearly an innovation for the majority of donors. What also has struck me is the natural sense of relating to gender in a way which includes both men and women. In the projects which deal with ala kachuu, men/masculinities as well as entire communities are constantly mobilized, which can be seen in stark contrast to other developing countries and gender issues (Sörnmo & Areskoug, 2012; Bannon & Correia, 2006 etc.).
loosing influence (in a broader sense). In short, it is an emancipatory project which aims at decoupling gender/sexuality from the hegemonic claims. This structural approach refutes the common notion that ala kachuu is just a matter of "bad" or "backwards" traditions\(^{(37)}\). A rhetorical question (although posed in response to gender issues in general) is raised to drive home the point: "if 90 % of rapes/domestic violence in Kyrgyzstan are domestic ones, 8 % among acquaintances and only 2 % between strangers – is not the problem the family as an structure/institution itself, rather than the practice?" (case study Art). This radical stance constitutes a unique position in the NGO sector, even among the alternatives, which are pro-family at the structural level and directs their criticism exclusively at the substance ("traditions", "customs" etc.).

The feminist group has had a higher profile in combating the practice directly and been involved in cross-generational NGO networks, lobbying, advocacy etc. against ala kachuu. While sharing a prime focus on the need for education, awareness raising and empowerment with the art institution, their respective spaces function quite differently. Here, the feminist activists provide an example, somewhat simplified, of what Homi Bhabha has called 'subaltern secularism' (Bhabha, 1994) – that is, a secular space in which marginalized communities can coexist and struggle together while still retaining the autonomy to choose which elements/interpretations of their tradition they want to keep. This is clearly a dividing line between the feminist group and the art institution – where the institution as a space does not primarily promote a process of hybridization, but rather a zone for total deconstruction and unlearning of subjectivities. What could be defined as intersectional organizing or "epistemic community"-building is definitely aligned with the earlier strategies. The NGO studied in this third case study exhibits signs of so called 'post-modern feminism' (which within transversal politics is considered dialectical to subaltern secularism) – where the struggle for women’s rights is conducted by involving religious and indigenous channels (Yuval-Davis, 1997, pp. 124)\(^{(38)}\). I would agree with Yuval-Davis that no general answer can be given whether subaltern secularism or post-modern feminism should be invoked in a particular context. Rather, it is a matter of balance and knowledge of local conditions from historical, political and social perspectives. While not necessarily subscribing to the concepts of "progress" and linear directionality, there might be certain truth to the statement of subaltern secularism first becoming feasible outside privileged circles at a particular stage of development (Yuval-Davis, 1997, pp. 125). My final answer, in the case of ending the urgent problem of widespread ala kachuu, would give priority to the strategies of post-modern feminism as the most effective ones – simply because of the internal dissonance within the triad and the potential of mobilizing on the grounds of Muslim identity. This resonates with Castells: "it is plausible that most societies will have to reconstruct, or replace, their patriarchal institutions under the specific conditions of their culture and history" (Castells, 1997, pp. 221). However, crucial here, as in other situations, is the informed solidarities of different progressive actors, which more often than not is complementary. The paradox of one actor embodying multiple strategies renders necessary a well-connected, well-informed network of gender NGOs of different types.

\(^{(37)}\) This Marxist-sounding argument should not be confused with the historical, empirical argument outlined in 4.4.1.

\(^{(38)}\) In an interesting parallel to the discussions in Section 4.2, the notion of post-modern feminism is often paired with a contextual analysis claiming that in “developing contexts” this form is an requirement if one wants to reach outside the educated urban middle-class and avoid association with Western imperialism.
4.5. "Surviving straight society" or advancing intimate citizenship?

4.5.1. LGBTQ in Kyrgyzstan
LGBTQ persons in Kyrgyzstan today face a very difficult situation, although less so than in the other CARs. While the national legislation is not criminalizing or directly stigmatizing the expressions of non-heterosexual identity, the actual life conditions are very harsh, especially in rural communities. Police violence, public harassment and ignorance concerning their social situation/political representation remain common experiences for LGBTQ persons. This is a relatively new issue within the NGO sector, which has escalated only the last couple of years. To this day, the majority of LGBTQ informed NGOs are primarily aiming at safe spaces, protection, security and so on, as opposed to campaigning for sexual/gender rights as an integral component of citizenship ("intimate citizenship") (Yuval-Davis, 2012, pp. 60-61).

In this fourth case study, I analyze a newly-founded LGBT organization, previously an initiative group within the biggest Kyrgyzstani LGBT organization. At the end of 2010 it was registered in the form of PA, expanding from an earlier exclusive focus on HIV/AIDS preventive work. Today, the NGO is active in the sphere of Human Rights and LGBT, researching and documenting the situation in the country, reporting to the UN and other international actors, as well as conducting advocacy towards the national political sector. Additionally, educational and sensitizing activities are carried out for the police, journalists and officials (case study LGBT). Aside from the generally very exposed situation for LGBTQ persons in Kyrgyzstan, the NGO is specifically singled out because of its particular area of work. The dangers of working with these issues are very real and several precautions have to be taken, e.g. operating from a hidden office. The NGO has been a target of several hate campaigns online and "religious persons" are threatening to beat them up if they find them. Even though they are not very vocal/visible in raising LGBT issues in the public debate, change attitudes and norms etc. – but rather works with protection (case study LGBT) – the Kyrgyzstani public is overwhelmingly negative in their response to non-heterosexual lifestyles, identities and sexualities, which is sanctioned by the vast majority of Islamic, ethnic and nationalist authorities. These voices also connect with the, by now very familiar, stereotype of the NGO as a vessel of Western proselytizing; in this case claiming that the foreign intrusion has the ultimate goal of "all citizens of Kyrgyzstan becoming homosexual".

4.5.2. A balancing act
Due to the controversial nature of LGBTQ issues as such, the NGO has constantly to compromise with hegemonic norms and legitimizing identities. For example, to make the educational/sensitization programs for officials possible, a delicate balancing act is required where strategic partnerships represent one crucial component. Within these programs it is impossible to have a too explicit focus on LGBT rights – rather, this perspective has to be "sneaked in". Practically this often means forming strategical alliances with organizations targeting other marginalized nation communities that are situated within a "more accepted form of social exclusion" (case study LGBT). Therefore, partners in their network include NGOs working with persons with HIV/AIDS and disabilities. Obviously, this should not be seen as a one-way, Machiavellian tactic but rather a mutually benefitting win-win situation for all actors involved.

40 This connects to various popular ethnonationalist fantasies and the Malthusian and "people as power" discourses on reproduction (Yuval-Davis, 1997, pp. 29).
The NGO holds that the network of alternative gender NGOs is strong, and several relatively autonomous organizations have their own niches (case study LGBT). For example, they are the only ones working with providing free HIV/AIDS tests; another LGBT organization offers legal and psychological counseling; the feminist group discussed in Section 4.3 is working with activism and challenging norms, and so on. The network is not seen as intrinsical to their work as counterparts from the old generation often state – rather it is a platform for complementing each other when needed. Nevertheless, they are passively supporting and in “solidarity with” many older organizations, for example by joining a national campaign against ala kachuu. A more extensive and deeper collaboration is viewed as problematic since the majority of these NGOs ignore, trivialize or even disapprove of LGBTQ perspectives penetrating into the mainstream NGO or governmental agenda. For example, while they took part in a national conference on gender they hosted a seminar on the situation of LGBT persons in Kyrgyzstan, which was received with the silent treatment from the old generation. Homo/transphobia is perceived to be rife within the traditional NGO sector, which even includes explicit gender and Human Rights organizations (case study LGBT).

Furthermore, the donor priorities of the gender mainstreaming paradigms, constructs alternative sexualities and gender identities as non-issues in developing contexts. One method of discrediting LGBT NGOs is through the dubious claim that “it is easy to get international grants for LGBT projects” (which in turn easily fits with the conspirationist ideas discussed earlier). There is little truth to this statement. In reality obtaining funding for this type of projects is described as a time demanding puzzling to match diverse donor priorities and project announcements. Only a handful of donors in Kyrgyzstan provide support to projects specifically concerning LGBTQ, HIV/AIDS, sexual and reproductive rights etc. Aside from these limited funding opportunities, one has to apply within the broader framework of “Human Rights projects” which can be limiting. In addition to the lack of funding opportunities within the field, the donor focus is almost exclusively put on the “humanitarian” aspects of sheltering and security, as opposed to changing affluent hegemonic positions and underlying power structures.

4.5.3. Aligning or clashing with the triad

The NGO exhibits a will to initiate more structural interventions as well, e.g. fighting for the right to same-sex marriage, even if the road is long (and dangerous) in changing institutions, norms and attitudes. Increased tolerance is seen as a requisite in order to enable extroversion. However, besides the balancing act described earlier, an increasingly extroverted/visible role might give rise to internal tension between functioning as a safe space and activist space.

One example of a recent LGBTQ related controversy, involving a clash with hegemonic identities, was the planned screening of the Dutch documentary *I am Gay and Muslim* during a national film festival in 2012. The movie was stopped and banned on religious grounds (although the political dimensions should not be underestimated) – in fact, the mufti of Kyrgyzstan intervened in order to ensure that the film would not be showed. The argument was that the movie was immoral and “Islamophobic”, with the slogan of Muslim gays as non-existent and contradictory. This unified, reactionary position requires other strategies than

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41 In this case we encounter a viewpoint of the new generation as really operating as a relatively unified social force, not only in terms of demarcations but also alternative impact.
43 http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/10/04/kyrgyzstan-film-ban-violates-free-speech
44 Parallel condemnations exist from other dominant identity regimes, which discursively constructs LGBTQ as fundamentally incompatible of with “their” identity. In this regards, the mainstream Islamic discourse is
the ones deployed by the NGO studied in the previous section, since the triad in its contemporary configuration is exclusively negative to LGBTQ. Although, the tactic of "changing the substance from within" might be feasible in theory, it is not realistic at this moment in time since the authorities are against advancing related issues and rights (as opposed to the case of ala kachuu). Here the specific interventions of case-NGO no 3. (or this particular expression of post-modern feminism) arguably is in direct conflict with the advancement of LGBTQ rights in Kyrgyzstan, by empowering the Islamic authorities as the authority in issues of gender, while the same persons can hold homo/trans/queerphobic views and opinions. What is lacking here is famous LGBTQ persons or allies in the national context, backed by a wide popular support, which could function as "pioneering" role models within the mainstream – and eventually create increased space for tolerance and diversity within hegemonic identity formations. Due to this situation, I consider the radical-activist "autonomous" gender identity-building processes, exemplified in the first two case studies, as the most suitable strategies for promoting LGBTQ rights at the moment. These processes may gradually result in a spill-over effect (or "infiltration" from a reactionary viewpoint) in how ethnicity, nationalism and religion is understood in relation to gender. This could enable actors to work within the confines of the hegemony as well, as in Section 4.4. Even if the NGO sector has a limited role to play in the advancement of LGBTQ, I perceive this chronology of strategies to be the most suitable45.

45 Two particularly pressing civil societal aspects is the current modus operandi/priorities of international donors and the lack of a strong Kyrgyzstani LGBTQ umbrella association which could forward this agenda more effectively (informant LGBT). In the end, of central importance is of course geopolitics and the flows of global capital, which to a large degree decides the fate of Kyrgyzstan. Whether the country will take the Russian path or not therefore remains to be seen. In many of the interviews I conducted, NGO practitioners voiced their worry that extreme nationalism and/or radical Islamism would destroy the progress made in LGBTQ issues.
5. Conclusion and implications

5.1. Conclusion

There are substantial reasons to make a distinction between old and new/alternative segments of the Kyrgyzstani NGO sector. Although the demarcation is not entirely solid, I have provided several illuminating examples of qualitative difference in terms of ideology, contextual analyses, gender understandings, strategies and methodologies, organizational structure, and more specifically how identity has been mobilized within the framework of the particular NGO’s activities. Moreover, I encountered plenty of situations where representatives of both generations spoke about each other as existing social objects. In many cases their organizational narrative was to some extent constructed in relation (be it loosely or sharply dichotomized) to the Other, often stereotypified. Based on these observations and analyses I would therefore give an affirmative answer to research question 1.

More interesting and complex is constructing/construing answers for research question 2 and 3, which are concerned with the internal pluralities within the cluster of alternative organizations. In Sections 4.2-4.5 we saw a relative, intragenerational homogeneity at the level of ideology, preferred organizational structure, values, gender paradigms, and so on (with a few notable exceptions). We also encountered a prevalent systemic critique of gender-based discrimination and certain recurring issues of the alternatives, such as LGBTQ. Contestations and divergence is mostly taking place in relation to the analysis of the context and the translation of ideology/developmental paradigm into concrete strategies, projects, actions and solidarities. In short, the alternatives exhibit relative agreement in “theory” – disagreement on praxis.

This begs the question: are the alternatives, seen as an integral system, successful in advancing progressive gender issues in today’s Kyrgyzstan? In Chapter 4 we have seen examples of both complementary and conflicting strategies/actions. For example, the feminist group and the LGBT organization examined, can be seen as mutually reinforcing each others work, regardless of the divergent tactics of activism and “safe spaces”, respectively. In rarer scenarios we see the opposite: such as the strategy adopted by the anti-kidnapping NGO which might obstruct the realization of LGBT rights, by supplying hegemonic identities with authority in gender issues.

In general my standpoint is that ”collective goals with diversity in application” is a strength rather than a weakness. This view is summarized by Florynce Kennedy as:

Unity in a movement situation is overrated, if you were the Establishment, which would you rather see coming in the door: one lion or five hundred mice?46

Here I interpret unity in the sense of unidirectional action/resistance, while relative ideological consensus is a requirement in my eyes. In other words, although we are talking about mice with different attributes and special powers, they are informed and analytical mice: well aware of each others existence, the establishment and a broader context. I see the inherent potential of the alternative cluster functioning in this sense – both as a pluralistic progressive civil society with specific niches, and a united movement against patriarchy and

oppressive gender norms. Without the multiplicity of autonomous actors embodying different strategies a systemic impact can not be expected, mostly due to the perceptions of the public. What was described in Section 4.5 as networking based on impact and different complementary niches is therefore crucial. Particularly crucial is the importance of informed solidarities and collaborations to reach the mutually wished for goal\textsuperscript{47}.

It is not possible, nor part of my aim, to claim knowledge of the optimal identity-related strategy in relation to such a broad field as ”gender”, and broad context as Kyrgyzstan. As we have seen in Chapter 4, different modes of action have been adopted for particular gender issues, more or less successfully and suitable. However, I think that the two strategies of reconfiguration and construction by deconstruction framed in Section 3.3 more often than not complement and strengthen each other, perhaps a naive Hegelian view, but at least a view which this text would support.

5.2. Implications
My findings give rise to contextual and theoretical implications that potentially may be converted into recommendations. One recurrent topic in the case studies is the problematic influence of international donors and the irrelevance of current developmental paradigms. For example, donors have no appropriate vocabulary to conceptualize this type of gender-progressive actor. As a consequence, they rarely support such NGOs since they fall outside the frame of reference. I noted the following aspects:

\textit{Dominant developmental gender paradigms} are problematic since they are not operating from a structural (or intersectional) understanding of gender-based oppression. Their focus on gender mainstreaming de facto function as ”quick fixes” and renders certain issues invisible – a criticism common among the alternative NGOs.

\textit{Donor priorities} are not always contextually relevant and suitable for actual Kyrgyzstani conditions. There ought to be more openness and flexibility for local actors to influence the priorities.

\textit{Identity as an important strategic resource in advancing progressive gender agendas} should be acknowledged and integrated with the donor activity, always with firm contextual analysis. Identity-strategical theoretizations, as developed in this thesis, are largely absent in the dominant donor perspectives\textsuperscript{48}. This would include both understandings on the hegemonic and the marginalized identities – and their specific history, function as well as inter- and intracategorical dynamics. Of course, the knowledge about local identities should not be conceived as an end in itself, but as an important starting point in outlining an effective gender-developmental direction. This knowledge is also crucial for understanding how the NGO sector, with all its differences and contested modes of operation, which can function as a unity-in-diversity-based ”system” promoting gender-progressive agendas.

As for the theoretical implications of this thesis, I would conclude that the NGO typologies proved to be rather meaningless. The four case-NGOs were hard to pinpoint and even when

\textsuperscript{47} A standpoint which should not be limited to just the alternatives but also older NGOs; what is their particular strategical role within the system? Intersectionality provides an inclusive tool in this regards for appreciating diverse micro-agendas, cross-generationally, and thus to prevent identity politics (although it does not give much support in generating the actual strategies and interventions as discussed in Section 4.2.3).

\textsuperscript{48} For example, the lack of an informed ”identity perspective” became clear to me when interviewing the national representative of UNWOMEN (informant 10).
this was possible, the typologies provided little, if any, additional theoretical substance to the discussion table. On the contrary, the specific strategies conceptualized and described by the NGOs themselves, were more rewarding to analyze. The irrelevance of the typologies could be ascribed to different factors, where I perceive the de facto innovation that these actors constitute, to be central. There is also serious bias in development studies as an academic discipline, mainly related to geography, where theory seems to be developed for other contexts than post-Soviet/post-communist countries. In the literature of gender and development I rarely encountered discussions on "alternative" actors such as the ones examined in this text. Intersectionality, one of my cornerstone concepts, was useful as an inclusive analytical tool both for me as a researcher and the case-NGOs which themselves deployed a more or less intersectional perspective. However, I realized that intersectionality is void in terms of preferable strategies and modes of action, which the diversity of contextual analyses, strategies and interventions among the case-NGOs entailed. Here, developing identity-informed strategies/theories could play a key role in providing the contextual substance of intersectionality and initiating informed action against gender-based oppression.
Literature


**Web resources**
http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66807
http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66640
http://www.shakesville.com/2013/04/femfuture.html
http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2013/country-chapters/kyrgyzstan
http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66529

**Material from fieldwork**
Four case studies (Fem, Art, AK, LGBT), including material from:
- Semi-structured interviews
- Group interviews
- Participatory observation in meetings, projects and activities
- Informal talks
- Own film materials
- Web resources

Semi-structured interviews with 21 Kyrgyzstani NGO representatives (mainly older generation)
Formal/informal interviews and talks conducted between 2009-2013